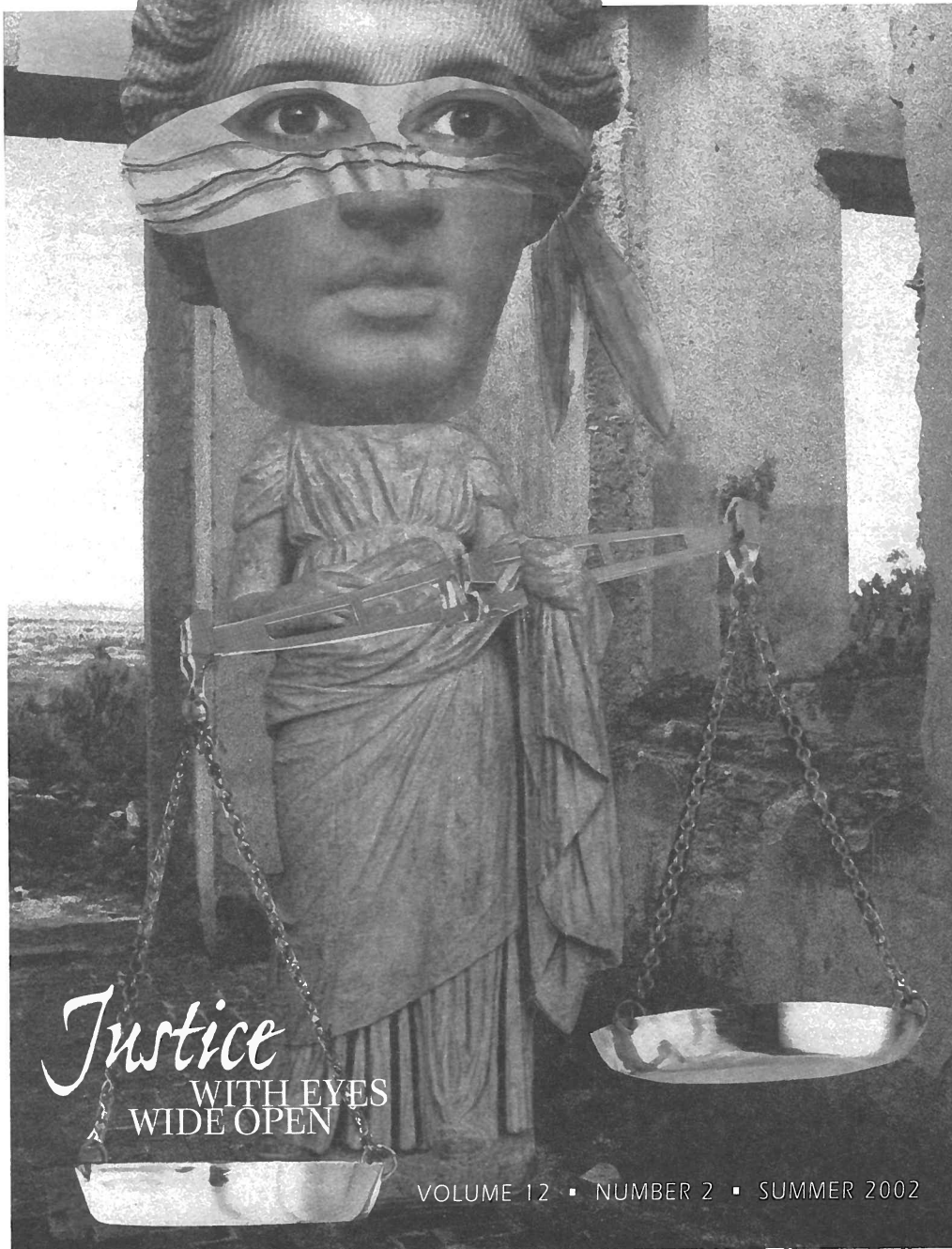


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SOPHIA

W I S D O M

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



Justice
WITH EYES
WIDE OPEN

VOLUME 12 • NUMBER 2 • SUMMER 2002

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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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Printing

Regehr's Printing Ltd.

Subscription Rates

\$15 for 4 issues • \$28 for 8 issues
\$4 single issue

Outside Canada

\$18 for 4 issues • \$30 for 8 issues

Please address subscription forms, correspondence and manuscripts to:

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October 2002: Regional Issue

December 2002: Africa

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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).



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What is Justice?

by Lori Matties

J pulled up behind a Cadillac;
We were waiting for the light;
And I took a look at his licence plate—
It said "JUST ICE."
Is Justice just ice?
Governed by greed and lust?
Just the strong doing what they can
And the weak suffering what they
must?"
(Joni Mitchell, "Sex Kills," *Turbulent Indigo*, Crazy Crow Music, 1994).

Joni Mitchell's song is a lament about the destructive things people are doing to each other and to the earth. It reflects not only the evils around us but also a cynicism about the possibility of justice: that people are not interested in acting or judging in fairness and truth; rather, what is "fair" is governed by those with the most power exercising it over those who are weak.

Similarly, recent world events such as September 11 and its aftermath and the Israel/Palestine conflict seem to say that justice is a matter of retaliating against "terrorists" for their unjust attacks. And victims of murder or sexual abuse seem to be satisfied only when perpetrators receive long prison sentences with no chances of parole. Justice in these contexts seems to be simply a matter of punishment for wrongdoing.

But "wrongdoing" is no longer such an easy thing to define. The recent example of the man who was allowed by the courts to keep pornographic poems and drawings of children in his possession on the

basis of their "artistic value" is a case in point. In societies that no longer have a common understanding of what is fair or true, justice is reduced to the strength of one opinion over another, and cynicism about the possibility of achieving it is understandable.

For me, two things mitigate that cynicism. One is Jesus' refusal to allow the "justice" of the systems around him to undermine the truth. Though not guilty of their claims, he submitted to the punishment of human authorities and willingly gave up the one thing most costly, his life. Paradoxically, by his action he proclaimed that justice is not subject to the power of the strong over the weak. In his death and resurrection he empowered others to follow him in embodying the justice born of love — a justice that is inextricably linked to mercy and humility before God. In this justice it is God's love for the dis-

"Wrongdoing" is no longer such an easy thing to define.

empowered that motivates positive acts of mercy and liberation rather than revenge (see Luke 4:18). Unjust systems and acts of evil we will always have, but they need not overpower us or lead us to cynicism.

The second thing that mitigates cynicism for me follows from the first. I see around me every day, small acts of justice being done by people in the ordinary circumstances of their lives. A nurse in an inner-city clinic helps her clients set up a community garden, a stay-at-home

mother nurtures all the kids on the block, an artist shares her vision of world peace. Another uses her hands in massage therapy to love the wounded, and another teaches English to refugees, learning their stories and sharing her resources with them. Another teaches conflict transformation and mediates disputes while still another cuts her neighbours' hair, hearing their stories and calming their fears. These and many others are acts of courage. They are what women do to respond to the call to "do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [their] God" (Micah 6:8 NRSV). These acts bring us to a different understanding of what the world might become. They are what the Bible calls "righteousness"; justice as setting things right, restoring them to God's intended wholeness.

The stories in this issue are definitions of justice. Whether by bringing good news to First Nations people, by working toward inclusion rather than exclusion or simply by surviving with grace in difficult circumstances, the tellers of these stories offer us new ways to understand the call in our own lives. As we need Joni Mitchell and others to mirror for us the realities with which we live, we also need these stories of hope to reveal a different reality. And with every small act, "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream" (Amos 5:24).

Have a great summer.

Jesus and the Young Aboriginal Woman

An Adaptation of John 4 by Anna Penner

Jesus and his friends were travelling from one town to another. His friends usually took the detour around the reserve, but Jesus insisted on taking the road through the First Nation. They noticed the KFC sign in the Northern Store window and decided to stop for some Chicken-to-go. Meanwhile Jesus walked down the snow-packed footpath by himself. He met a group of girls, laughing and chatting together as they carried water up the steep path into the village.

Then he saw another young woman coming up the path, alone, with her eyes down. She was carrying two pails of water and gave no indication that she had seen Jesus, yet she intentionally chose a fork in the path to avoid meeting him.

"Tansi," Jesus said, "That looks like good water. Could I have a drink?" Without looking at him she said, "Why would you ask me for a drink? I am an Indian, what do you want from me?"

Jesus said, "If you knew who I am, you would ask me to give you living water."

"Really?" she said, "but how could you do that? Are you greater than Chief and Council?"

"I am the Son of the Creator of all the world."

"If you are the Son of the Creator, tell me. Our ancestors taught that all of creation is spiritual and must be taken care of. Your people believe that only the Creator must be worshipped. What do you say?"

Jesus said, "The time is coming when all peoples will know the truth of God, and will worship God in Spirit and in Truth."

"We have many preachers from different churches come to our village. Their teaching does not agree. Then some of our elders say that we should only follow the traditions of our ancestors. How can we know which is the right path to walk? Which is the path that will help us to be strong, and to go to a good place after death?" she asked.

Jesus replied, "You have the Bible. It has the words from me. In it you will see that I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life [see John 14:6]. No one will go to that good place except through me. Read the Bible for yourself, and ask my Spirit to help you to understand it and to walk the Jesus path." Then he added, "Take me to your parents' house."

"I have no father, and my mother is never home."

"You are right," Jesus said, "Your father left before you were born, and your mother 'runs around' and drinks a lot. You live with your *Nookum* and there is never enough food for all her grandchildren, and your uncle abuses you."

"Your spirit must be powerful. How do you know all about me? I have never told anyone about my uncle...he said he would hurt Granny if I told." Her eyes filled with tears. Here was someone who understood her shame and loneliness.

Dropping her water pails into the soft snow she now ran after the other girls. "Hey, wait up!" she called. "Did you see that man over there? He talked to me and he knows all about me. He is the Son of Creator God!"

The girls ran from house to house, and quickly the news spread through the village. The Creator's Son had come to their community!

Meanwhile Peter and his friends returned from the Northern. The delicious smell of hot chicken wafted around them.

"Here, Jesus, have a piece of chicken," Peter said.

Jesus responded, "I'm not hungry anymore. I am satisfied just to be doing the work that my Father has for me." Peter

wondered whether someone had brought him food while they were gone. Then he looked up and saw all the villagers coming toward them.

Jesus said to his friends, "When will you be ready to bring the Good News to these people? Look they are ready now to listen and believe. Now is the time to reach them."

Then Jesus taught all the people about God. The Chief and Council came to him and said, "We are honoured that you came to our village, and your teaching is strong. We invite you to stay with us for awhile to teach our people."

So Jesus stayed a few days and the people loved and accepted him. Many came to hear Jesus because of the girl's testimony. They began to walk the "Jesus path" because they believed in him.

*The time is coming
when all peoples will
know the truth of God.*

.....
Anna Penner and her husband, Bill, are missionaries to the Canadian Native people in northern Manitoba. This article, previously published in *The Messenger*, the Evangelical Mennonite Church periodical, was written to encourage others to consider the spiritual needs of the Native people.

G O D

by Cheryl Denise

She sways the fields
with whispers,
caresses your prayers,
as her arms reach down
through the trees.

She will cry when you mourn
kiss your scars
with aloe lips,
soak your chest
in pools of perfume.

When you are tired
and think you can no longer
live for her,
she will rub your arms, shoulders,
like she is making new bread.

You who work for justice
will see children
red, black and pale
naked and chaste
in thick gardens
bordered with grape vines
and emerald rivers.

And you the poor,
in heaven, she will dress
in long red strips of silk
and let the whippoorwills teach you to fly
draping the world in evening sunsets.

And you without good mothers or fathers
she will someday
gather on her back,
let you run and hide in her
long soft hair.

She will tell you the peacemakers
ride elephants, eat mangos,
rest on the very peaks of paradise.

Someday you the meek and merciful
will see her face
etched with laughter,
her strong arms wrapped in woven blankets,
legs covered in printed skirts
from braided women in Zaire.

She will take your hands
in her big gardenia scented palms
and swing you through
ten thousand dizzying dances.
Then she will rest you
beneath bedtime stories,
till you want to dance again.

.....
*Cheryl Denise works as a nurse in
Philippi, West Virginia, where she and
her husband, Mike Miller, are currently
part of Shepherd's Field Community.*



GORDON MATTIES

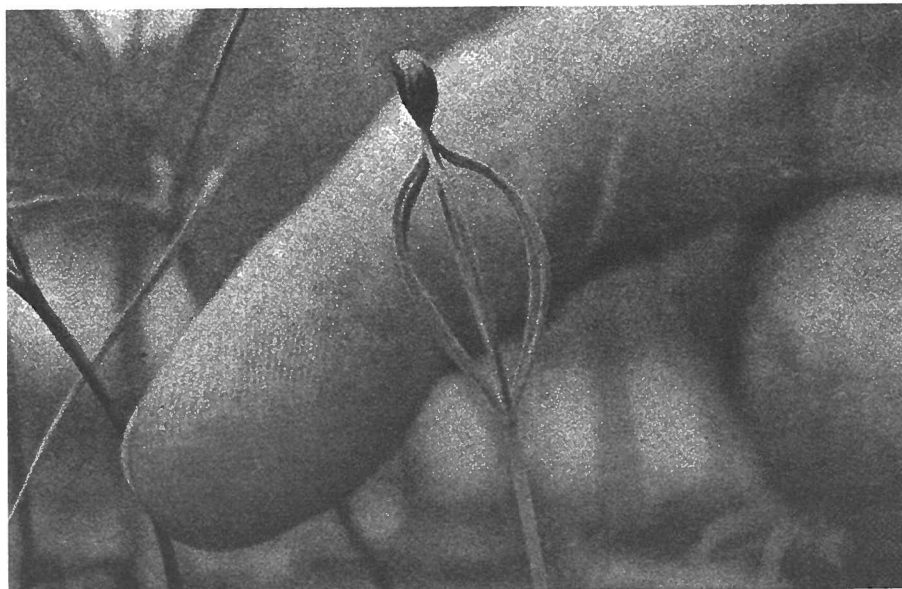
ARCTIC SOJOURN: Salvation as Hope

by Mary Henkelman

My nephew spent two summers working on a research project in the high Arctic. In May he would fly to Iqaluit on Baffin Island, and then north to Resolute. From there a small bush plane would take him hundreds of miles even farther north, up the east coast of Ellesmere Island to a small outpost called Alexandra Fjord. There he would camp until the plane picked him up again in August, preferably before the snow flurries started in earnest.

As I look at his pictures of Alex, I see a land that is hard and inhospitable. In the background enormous granite mountains rise amidst the glaciers. In the foreground, the waters of the fjord are dark and broken ice clogs the shoreline. The only signs of human endeavour are two tiny wood-frame cabins. They were built some years back as a police post, but are now unoccupied. Even so, the RCMP still come once a year to make repairs – an annual attempt by the Government of Canada to assert sovereignty over the area. But the landscape is far too large, too raw, too much itself. And these small specks of cabins are, above all, insignificant.

Yes, it is a desolate landscape. But as I look at my nephew's pictures, what strikes me more is the beauty. It is something in the light – the slant light of Arctic summer as the sun sweeps low on the horizon and twilight stretches seamlessly into dawn. In that angle of light, whole cliffs of rock turn rose and



russet. And the edges of things stand out so sharply that it's hard to tell how far away the mountains are. Instead, all is here and clear in the crisp air, alive in light.

My nephew's job, for four months each season, was to count and measure the shoots of vegetation that have begun to grow as the glaciers recede. It is a project related, of course, to studies of global warming. But what has stayed in my mind is not the research, but the wonder of these small shoots of greenness. Delicate, tentative, almost fragile, and yet fierce enough to have wintered an ice age – they seem to me an image of hope.

The hope I want to consider is more than just a natural optimism, a sunny feeling about the future, a surge of energy as we make new plans. We all need this ordinary hope, of course, and I would never belittle it. It is, in fact, quite wonderful stuff that sees us through to some amazing achievements. This everyday hope is based on the belief that we have the will and the way to accomplish our goals. It comes from a whole host of psychological skills and intellectual strengths that we develop in childhood and well beyond: resourcefulness and flexibility, charting new routes and even redefining the destination if need be; our various problem-solving strategies, including hard work; and finally the ability to reassure ourselves in a tight spot and spur on our energies when the challenge gets tougher. Such is the stuff of human hope. It's made up mostly of plans, our plans that light up the future, making the way ahead bright.

There have been times, however, when my plans have gone so badly awry, and circumstances moved so far beyond my control, that I know I can't manage, and won't make it. No matter how hard I try, I cannot lighten the darkness. And so hope fades. For me, it has usually been illness that has left me pathless, although I'm well aware that any number of disasters can hit us and extinguish the light. I'm always amazed how quickly my options – that luxuriant vegetation in my life – can wither and leave me with a future that is sparse and forlorn. In other words, my human hopes – my own plans and purposes, even my daring and dreams – do not always hold. I have been left looking for a larger hope.

I began to learn about this larger hope when I discovered the writing of Vaclav Havel. He lived in difficult times. The 1968 Prague spring in Czechoslovakia was bitter, and the Soviet repression that followed put the country into endless winter. Nor was his personal life less bleak. As a playwright he saw his plays banned, and as a human rights activist, he was sentenced in 1979 to four and a half years in prison. Even after his release, there were ongoing

periods of harassment and imprisonment. From such experiences, Havel doesn't speak lightly about hope. And yet his ideas on hope were formed well before those who would-have-thought events in late 1989 that took him almost overnight from prison to the presidency.

For Havel, true hope remains alive even when the future holds no promise; in fact, the more unpropitious the situation, the deeper the hope. Such hope does not rely on human plans to light the way ahead. Rather, despite the future's unrelenting grey, this hope illuminates the present, infuses it with life. In this way we are enabled to work for something simply because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. And what is the source of such unusual light? Havel's answer is that it comes from "elsewhere."

To use another of Havel's touchstone words, hope comes from the light of *transcendence*. For him, this universe, this history, this life, do have meaning; goodness and truth do exist. But such transcendent meaning does not come from some overarching philosophy. Like most post-modern thinkers, Havel is rightly suspicious of ideologies. After all, he spent most of his life under Communism, and in those years he and his countrymen learned only too well how an encompassing world view could oppress and destroy the human spirit. Perhaps for this reason, Havel is likewise ner-

My human hopes – my own plans and purposes, even my daring and dreams – do not always hold. I have been left looking for a larger hope.

vous of explicitly Christian thinking; he fears that it too may turn out to be yet another freedom-withering system. Even though at one point he admits that his views have taken him closer to his Christian colleagues, he prefers to keep his sense of meaning undefined and unnamed. It is simply transcendence.

In keeping with the current scientific interest in complexity, Havel's transcendence is dynamic, singular and interconnected. His is a world of local, decentralized meanings, tiny fuzzy freedoms, as open-ended as the lift of a butterfly's wing. Yet the consequences are far-reaching, more interrelated than the internet and more unpredictable than global markets. Such views provide obvious encouragement to the work of a dissident. In *Disturbing the Peace* (New York: Random House, 1990), Havel shows how small, seemingly inconsequential, acts of goodness and truthfulness can puncture the status quo, and can, even within an all-controlling authoritarianism, let in the light of other realities. This is also the theme of *Living in Truth* (London: Faber, 1987). Truthful lives not only have inherent value, but may perhaps, in unforeseen ways,

eventually topple the totalitarian tower of lies.

Havel comes to know this transcendent meaning primarily through living it and experiencing it. I get the feeling in reading his books, that he has kicked away at the falsehoods of Communism so strenuously that in the end he has stumbled into truth. In the same way, his bitterly comic plays cut so fiercely into the absurdity of life that underneath they expose, perhaps bleed, meaning. Havel practises the paradoxical – *The Art of the Impossible* – and it is in this context that I hear his comment that perhaps one only learns to hope when it is hopeless (Paul Wilson, trans., New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997). The day-to-day texture of such a hope involves humility and patience: humility because the future is not under human control; and patience, not in the sense of resignation, but rather an active waiting, living in truth regardless of what might result. Although one can never count on a Prague Castle conclusion, there is always the possibility that someday, somewhere, a seed once sown might take root and send forth a shoot. There might grow greenness.

I like his ideas. His hope has helped me in hard times. His transcendence stays in my mind, like a smooth stone that has been weathered by winters. Yet when I reach for it, the feel is a touch hard and a little bit cold. Or, changing the metaphor, his hope, like the hope-against-hope of a castaway seed, always seems to me forsaken and somewhat forlorn.

After Havel, my reading turned toward other writers with similar experiences. And so I read a number of books, autobiographies for the most part, telling of long years spent as political prisoners in various parts of the world.

Unfortunately – and to the shame of our age – there is no shortage of prison literature. Now the reason I turned to these books was to find out about hope. It seemed that if hope could live in these most dire situations, then it could live anywhere, for all of us, and for me. But the books are not easy reading. Often I was glad that living in the sheltered West I lacked the imagination to fully enter into their accounts. Even so, at times the darkness seemed overwhelming.

But beyond the horror – and what kept me reading – was the fact that I also met some amazing individuals. In particular, I came to know, through my reading, three women who have become for me symbols of hope. One is European, one Asian, and one African. All are very strong in their own right. And without doubt their fighting spirits are crucial to their survival. But they are also women of

faith – Christian faith – and it is this, they claim, that gave them hope. They believed that the God who shares human suffering accompanied them. God's hope is the hope that lit their lives, strengthened their strength, and saw them through.

First of all, I met Irina Ratushinskaya, a Ukrainian woman. The title of her book, *Grey is the Colour of Hope* (Alyona Kojevnikov, trans., London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), was what first drew me to her. She was only twenty-eight when she was sent to a Soviet labour camp. It seems that her poetry, her Orthodox faith and her human rights advocacy were threats too great for the Communist regime. Locked away for the next three and a half years in a women's prison camp, she and a dozen other political prisoners continued their struggle, often through hunger strikes that nearly cost Irina her life. And yet this bedraggled little group, dressed in the distinctive grey uniforms of political prisoners, possessed hope, a hope forged in desolate greyness, and in whose vision, Irina became convinced, lay the future hope for her country. How did this hope stay alive? What gave her the strength to keep going? "Well," she says, matter-of-factly, "strange things happen when you have nothing to depend on but God's help" (p 182).

I met the second woman, Nien Cheng, through her book, *Life and Death in Shanghai* (London: HarperCollins, 1995). She was not a political activist but rather a Chinese businesswoman whose life, like so many others, got caught in the turmoil of Mao's Cultural Revolution. As insanity swept through China in the decade following 1966, Nien Cheng was accused of spying and locked up in a Shanghai prison. During the next six and a half years, despite solitary confinement and torture, she insisted on her

innocence. Why did she not just bend with the wind? Many good people did – complied, signed false confessions, and contributed to the web of lies used to ensnare yet higher ranking victims in the nation's power struggles. But Nien Cheng held out, and held on to her integrity. One doesn't come to understand the reason for her

strength – other than a natural feistiness – until well into her book, and then, almost casually she admits she is a Christian. It's not a faith she wears on her sleeve. And it's not an easy faith. Yet at key points in the book, she acknowledges its power. In one moving passage, when prolonged solitary confinement seemed to be inexorably dragging her down into desolation, she tells of noticing a small spider spinning its web between the bars of her cell. In the slant light of evening, the web was lit in a dazzling rainbow of colours. That vision, along with her tiny com-

The eyes of political prisoners undergo a noticeable change, and eventually the guards find their scrutiny impossible to bear ... for me, they are the eyes that speak of truth.



"suffering." It is with these various meanings merging in my mind that I remember my three women, standing like icons in consoling light. And in its glow I can almost see that fourth One standing with them. Meanwhile, their golden haloes are flowering and their patient eyes are shining, as they reflect, past hatred and bitterness, even beyond suffering, the brightness of hope, God's hope, for all of us.

For me, hope began to falter when I became ill. No, it was not a life-

panion, brought consolation and a renewal of hope. "A miracle of life had been shown me," she writes. "It helped me to see God was in control. Mao Tze-tung and his Revolutionaries seemed much less menacing" (p 181).

Vera Chirwa was the third woman. I know her only from a brief newspaper article (Toronto Star, June 7, 1994), published when she came to Canada to receive an honorary degree, and so my relationship with her is slight, tenuous, and as with the other two women, a one-way friendship. But perhaps it is fitting that they will never know anything of me, nor of the ways in which their courage has strengthened my life. For after all, it is part of hope not to have the full picture. Of the three women, Vera Chirwa's ordeal was by far the longest – twelve years in an African jail. She and her husband had been working to establish a fledgling democratic party in opposition to Malawi's dictatorship, and for that reason she was sent to prison in 1981. She was not released until 1993. When asked what nourished her hope throughout those long years of solitary confinement, her reply is immediate: "My dreams. The Lord Jesus. And the angels." In one dream, Jesus himself consoled her, took her by the hand, and said, "Vera, don't be afraid."

Three unforgettable women. I study their pictures. It is their eyes that stand out. Fierce bright eyes. In her book, Irina Ratushinskaya comments that the eyes of political prisoners undergo a noticeable change, and eventually the guards find their scrutiny impossible to bear. I can believe it. But for me, they are eyes that speak of truth – a truthfulness too costly for most of us. Their eyes also speak of courage. Although once again greater than most of us possess, their courage nonetheless enlarges what it means to be human, encourages. As I think of their lives lived in passionate patience, I am reminded that the word "passion," no matter how alive and alight its modern meaning, always retains something of its old Latin root, *passio*,

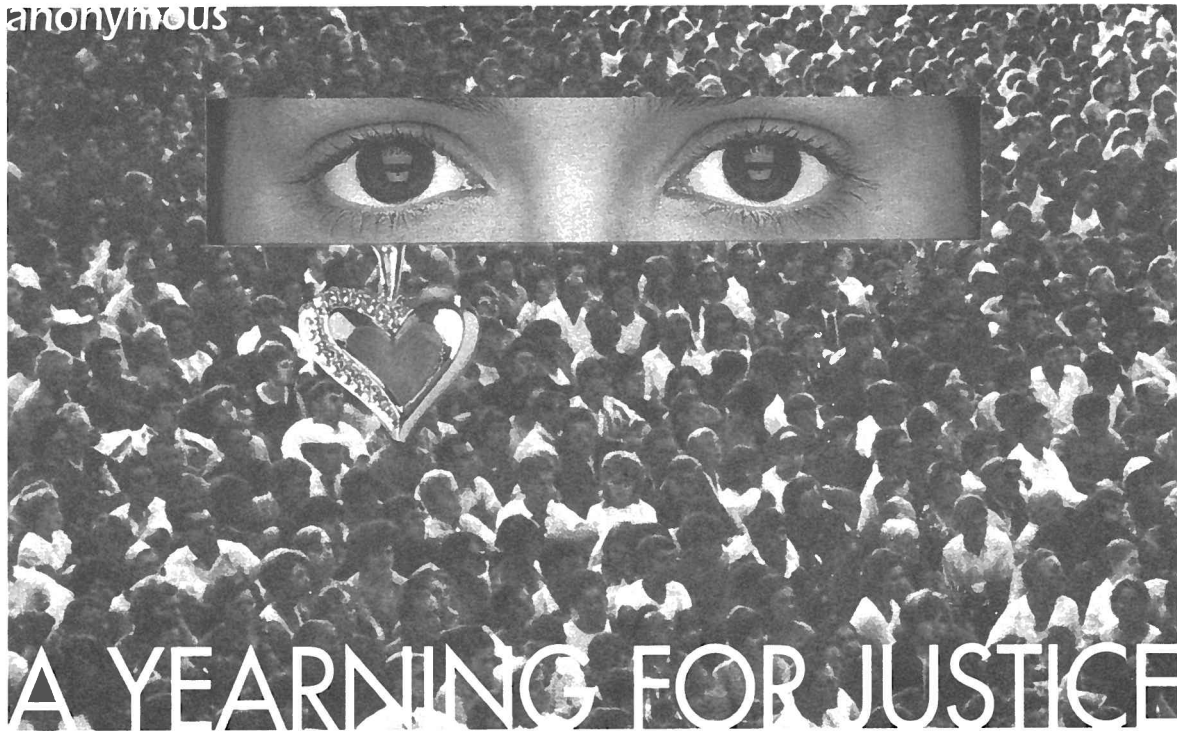
threatening disease, just slow and chronic illness, life-leaching. While I am well aware that compared to my three strong women, my sufferings were a mere mole-hill, and don't merit bemoaning, still initially I felt as if the rug had been pulled out, the lights switched off. I was no longer able to create for myself a life, as my generation had been taught, rightly or wrongly, to do. I needed new meaning – not the kind of meaning for which someone could hand out easy answers, or any answers, for that matter. I needed my own meaning. As Havel says, "The only solutions, the only hopes that are worth anything are the ones we discover ourselves, with ourselves, and for ourselves" (*Disturbing the Peace*, p 199).

For me, the search began by folding up my shiny dreams and plans and packing them away in some safe and now forgotten place; in any case, they were worn out. I remember the greyness of that empty-handed beginning. But one's hands are never totally empty. There's always something, some small touchstone or a little seed-like faith. For me, I did believe the Christian stories: how a dark Saturday once was transformed; and there was light, yes, who-would-have-thought light on an Easter morning. And I did believe that that light was stronger than darkness, and could shine still and always. But the problem was how to find that light, now and here, in my particular darkness. I sympathize with John the Baptist in prison, who, with his whole life wrapped up in the question, demanded to know: "Are you He who is to come, or do we look for another?" (see Luke 7:20). The answer was gentle – that the blind now had sight – and I like to think that John too found light, at least some, though he wasn't rescued. Because it is there, the light, even before dawn, there in the darkness, hovering.

And sight is given – a gift though we work very hard to find it. For me there was sight, or at least a small sight-

Continued on page 14 ►

anonymous



"Now let the fear of the Lord be upon you. Judge carefully, for with the Lord our God there is no injustice..."

2 Chronicles 19:7 NIV

My earliest recollections of injustice are from my formative years in a Roman Catholic Elementary School. The priest from the church next door taught us in our weekly catechism class about mortal sin, purgatory and limbo. Mortal sin was the worst – our soul went to hell for this sin. In purgatory our soul hung around until enough prayers were said for us and then our soul could rise up to heaven. Limbo was worse. This was for babies who died before they were baptized. None of it sounded very fair to me. Of course I wasn't able to articulate my sense of injustice, but I felt it nevertheless. I didn't understand the sins I was expected to confess in the confessional. Mostly, confession caused me anxiety and puzzlement.

Because I was extremely shy, I tried to be invisible. I spoke to authority figures only when asked. The principal was very strict. He shouted all the time. He used the strap frequently. Boys and girls had separate entrances into school. When the bell rang you'd better get to the door quickly, no excuses were allowed for being late.

One cold winter day, some children had to stay in school during lunch hour because of the long walk home. We could not talk or get out of our seats. The principal came in at regular intervals to see if we were behaving. Someone started running about. I was terrified to disobey,

but for that one time I joined the others. All we did was romp about and laugh. The principal came, and I was the one sent to the office! Standing in the corner until the bell rang, I was sick to my stomach with fear, shame and anger.

As a child of a low-income family, it was apparent to me that some of the teachers favoured the richer kids, whose parents sat in their special pews in church. One nun made a huge fuss over a girl in my class who dressed beautifully and always got the top marks. The girl thought she might have to leave the school because her family was moving, but she didn't have to leave after all. The nun hugged her several times in front of the class. I remember feeling embarrassed and angry at the spectacle because she

never hugged any of the rest of us kids.

I also remember a Native girl. Her name was spoken with derision. To this day I can picture her in the schoolyard. She was chubby, with black, stringy hair, and she

wore a faded cotton plaid dress and a shabby cardigan sweater. I remember feeling guilty that I avoided her because I knew how it felt to be different.

My grade 8 teacher, however, saw something in me. He asked me to give the valedictorian's address. I was thrilled and nervous. Later that evening in the church hall, a boy actually asked me to dance. I was terrified, but somehow I found the courage to get up and dance. When it was over at last, the priest came to me and said, "I don't think you should twirl around so much, your slip shows when you do!" I wanted to die.

I felt I was on the outside looking in, trying to fit into this life.

The high school I attended was not Catholic, but again I had few friends and didn't participate in activities. My friend and I were considered part of the "brainy" crowd. We studied hard and got good grades. We were the stereotype of "good little Catholic girls." Now we wish we could have had more fun.

In grade 9 we were asked if we wanted to pursue a trade or go on to university. Because our families couldn't afford to send us to university, we chose the secretarial course and got jobs immediately after graduating. By then I had come out of my shell a bit. I was pleasant looking, tall and slim and wore clothes well. I remember my family suggesting I should go into modelling.

In hindsight I still feel a sense of injustice regarding those school years. Why didn't I try harder to break out of my shell? Why didn't I speak up and ask questions about things I didn't think were fair? Why did I have to be a shy, frightened mouse, while so many others were having fun?

I took my shy and naive nature into my adult life. My first marriage at 23 was a disaster from the moment I walked up the aisle of the church I had attended. I was pregnant, but I'm thankful I didn't find out until a month later. I don't think I could have dealt with the shame. My husband and I moved to another province a few days after our wedding. I was totally unprepared to be a wife, much less a mother!

The marriage was empty and lonely. Again, I felt I was on the outside looking in, trying to fit into this life. My fears and insecurities were developing into self-destructive behaviours, anorexia and bulimia, which I hid from everyone. The marriage ended. I had a nervous breakdown. My six-year-old son went to live with his father's parents. My life spiraled down into suicidal depression.

I gave up custody of my son because I wanted to shield him from my confusion and anxiety. He needed a secure home, which I felt totally incapable of providing. But my family was saddened and outraged at my decision. I felt the sting of their anger when they said, "You'll regret this for the rest of your life!"

For several years I visited several male psychiatrists. One who handled my dilemma coldly said to my sister while I was in his office, "Not all women are meant to be mothers."

My despair was deepened by a history of sexual assault. I was about eleven when a security guard molested me in a museum. The second time, at the same age, it was a brother-in-law who molested me. Most horrific for me was when my son's paternal grandfather assaulted me when I was thirty-seven. My favourite aunt was very upset, but she said to me, "Why do you keep letting people do

these things to you?" What she didn't know, and what I didn't know for many years, was that I thought I deserved to be treated badly: I needed to be punished for my sins!

Medical and psychiatric help have enabled me to live through three major clinical depressions and to survive three serious suicide attempts. Part of my depression and anxiety were finally diagnosed as having been triggered by the symptoms of Graves Disease, a thyroid deficiency. The woman doctor who specializes in this field says I've likely had it all my life. I wonder how different my life would have been if this had been discovered years ago!

My husband of eight years suffers with a debilitating physical disease and an anxiety disorder. He also has suffered injustices. Medical bureaucracy and government politics often disallow him the financial and medical help he needs.

I work part-time in a shoe store, and our financial affairs are governed by social assistance. If someone had told me when I was young that at 53 I would be living on welfare I certainly would have laughed at them! And yet, here I am.

I used to have a nice little house, a nice car, a good job, nice clothes, nice furniture. Now I have some nice clothes. Most of them were purchased years ago when I could afford to buy good clothes. Some were given to me; some were bought at second-hand stores. My discount at work enables me to buy good shoes. But there are times when a quiet voice condemns – what right do I have to look nice?

It's taken a long while to get over my feelings of shame, anger and self-blame. I try hard to see the positives, and harder still not to let the negative attitudes of others get to me: "People on welfare are bums! They're lazy! Shiftless! Why should we have to look after them! I worked three jobs, why can't they? They can afford cigarettes, TVs and VCRs, but they can't find a job! People who are depressed should just pull up their socks instead of feeling sorry for themselves!"

My church community was there for me during my last and, God-willing, final clinical depression. They've accepted me for who and what I am: a sinner saved by grace. I have overcome many of my childhood fears and feelings of inadequacy. I'm thankful for each new day; I'm especially thankful for emotional well-being and a deep sense that a greater power is in control.

The most precious gift I have is the love and respect of my son. He still lives with his grandmother. To her credit, he has grown into a fine man. He has suffered through his own journey as an "abandoned child." He's said to me, "I love you." He's said to me, "I'm proud of you." And I believe that's to my credit.

*They've accepted me for who and what
I am: a sinner saved by grace.*

Look Intently

by Shadell Permanand

Inclusion enables all the parts of our global and local communities and families to be complete – not perfect – communities. A brief glance at the world and those around us shows how sadly wholeness is missing and how desperately we are struggling to achieve it. In our fractured, fragmented and impersonal world, God shows us the way to wholeness and inclusion through Jesus Christ's words and life.

I am sure that each of us at one time or another has felt the warmth, familiarity and security of being included – the feeling that I *belong*. And each of us has undoubtedly felt moments of exclusion – the insecurity, isolation and rejection of I *do not belong here*. Human beings have a way of creating divisions and promoting stratification.

Even as a four-year-old I picked up on this idea. *Sesame Street* on TV was the big thing back then, and one day I was inspired by one of the *Sesame Street* segments. I got my parents' attention and announced, "Daddy is brown, Shadell is brown, Jason is brown, and Mommy is..." I looked at her closely, puzzled for a moment, because I couldn't quite place her colour as any that I had learned yet. I finally deducted "nothing." And I then began to sing, "One of these things is not like the other, one of these things does not belong!" That's innocent enough when you are talking about fruits and vegetables but a little dicey when referring to humans. Luckily my mom had a good laugh and thought it was cute.

It's interesting that as a four-year-old I was already socialized to see difference and identify what apparently doesn't belong. It's not quite so funny when we do that as a church or as individuals, excluding people based on gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and so on. To me the Gospel is clear: Jesus, God, is about breaking down the dividing walls. God is about love. God is about inclusion.

Before we can talk about inclusion we need to spend some time reflecting on exclusion, which unfortunately happens a lot in the church. It is interesting how the Gospel of Mark turns exclusion on its head. Throughout that book, those who think they know and understand (for example, the Pharisees) don't really and can't see the key

to God's kingdom, which is being revealed to them. It is those who are on the fringes of society (for example, the blind man) whom Jesus heals and gives the keys to the kingdom of God.

I have a vivid memory of an upsetting encounter with a modern day Pharisee when I was fourteen. I went to a church youth event that involved sports and games and then a speaker. This was one of the few hellfire and brimstone sermons I had encountered, and I was really mad at the end of the session. The speaker's main point was that salvation was for Christians, and Christians alone; all those other heathen religious people were going to hell. It may be helpful for you to know that my father grew up as a Hindu; his parents – my grandparents – were Hindu, and half of my Dad's 13 brothers and sisters are practicing Hindus.

When my friend's mother arrived to pick us up, she asked us how the evening had been.

"Terrible," I said. I explained that I didn't like or believe the idea that people from all these other religions are going to hell. "Well they are!" she said. I started to argue with her: "Mrs. Blank, my grandparents were Hindus and they were really good, faithful people! I really don't believe that they've gone to hell!" She turned around to face me and said in a soft, patronizing tone, as if she were

being comforting, "Sweetie, you're just biased because of your family. I'm sorry to tell you that your grandparents are in hell." I was speechless. Exclusion.

Of course there are many forces that divide us in the church: negative or demeaning attitudes toward women, exclusion of marginalized groups of people, judging our youth by their brightly-coloured hair and body piercings or because of their age, exclusion based on ethnicity and/or race. North American Mennonites have long had a tradition of ethnic "in" and "out." It is important to celebrate our ethnic heritages, but those must stop short of excluding others. The majority of Mennonites in the world today do not have white skin, and have probably never had borscht. Are they out? Are we out? Or is everybody in?

I am enthralled by the story of Jesus' healing the blind man in Mark 8:22-26. Note some details: people bring the blind man to Jesus. So the blind man has some help in

The Gospel of Mark turns exclusion on its head ... It is those who are on the fringes of society whom Jesus heals.

finding his way to Jesus. Jesus lays his hands on the man's eyes and asks him if he can see anything. The man says, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking" (v 24 NRSV). The man cannot see clearly; his vision is blurry. Jesus lays his hands on him again, and the text says the blind man "looked intently and his sight was restored." *He looked intently and his sight was restored.*

This is Jesus' challenge in our life. Just as this man knew he needed to be healed, we first have to acknowledge that we need to be healed before God can make things right. This is where we may fall short in the church. We may not recognize our need for healing, and this very thing prevents us from hearing, understanding and seeing God's message, God's kingdom. We do not recognize that it is not our strength that made the church what it is, it is not we who bring revelation to others. We need our brothers and sisters from all around the world, and those excluded because of gender, sexual orientation, race and class, to help us to see God revealed through them, to bring new life and spirit into the church community. We are not helping them; they are a gift to us, and we have the opportunity to be a gift to each other. We need some help to see that it is sometimes we who take on the characteristics of the Pharisees, keeping people out but essentially keeping ourselves out of the experience of knowing and understanding God's all-inclusive love.

I experienced a powerful example of inclusion this last year through my work. I have been working in the areas of restorative justice, conflict resolution and anti-racism for the past few years. I am (along with three other colleagues) currently in the middle of a contract with MCC Canada to train all the staff and boards in an introductory "dismantling racism" training. Recently, I was elected to the Board of Directors of Victim Offender Mediation Association (VOMA), an international organization dedicated to restorative dialogue processes. Before my first meeting I began to worry. What if I were the only person of colour on the board? What



kind of pressure would I feel? I began to dread the experience.

The day of the first meeting arrived, and I walked into the room and noticed two African-American men. I felt an immediate sense of relief. I am interested in working on issues concerning diversity, race, and culture, but I don't feel safe or supported as the only person of colour in any given group. I know I alone cannot represent all the concerns of people of colour. I didn't know these men, but their presence was a comfort to me and I felt more included in the group.

Later that year, Dale and Drew took me aside. Dale said he was concerned because the board was making all sorts of strategic planning decisions and there was not a person of colour on the executive. We agreed that one of us should be on the executive. I didn't want the position because I was new, and neither did Dale, but we both agreed that Drew would be a good candidate. Dale said, "OK, don't tell anyone about this. I'm hoping that our colleagues will realize this themselves and invite one of us to participate, and then we can elect Drew."

The meetings went on for two days, and despite Dale's little hints during the discussions no one identified a concern or a need. Finally, at the eleventh hour, after an exhausting meeting, Dale finally put up his hand and said, "I'm sorry to bring this up at the end of our meeting, but I have a real concern about the make-up of the executive. Given the kinds of decisions the executive will be making over the next few months and that diversity is a priority for the organization, I really think it is important to have a person of colour sit on that committee." There was silence. I backed him up and said, "I agree, I think it is really important." Then someone asked, "Does one of you want to sit on the executive?" Dale and I said we thought Drew would be a good candidate. Again silence. "Oh no," I thought to myself, "We're going to be here forever! This is going to be very contentious!" And then an amazing thing

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Unspeakable Issues

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happened. Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz, a member of the executive and the Director of the Office on Crime and Justice for Mennonite Central Committee US, the woman I perceived to be the most powerful person on the board, put up her hand and said, "Yes, that is important. I would like to resign from my position on the executive, and I nominate Drew for the position." It was seconded and passed right away. It was an amazing gesture of respect, acknowledgment and ultimately inclusion.

Later we had a go-around, and when it came to Lorraine, she began to cry. She said that she had not always understood racism and sometimes felt that fighting it was competing with working against sexism within our churches and institutions, but today it was her own experience of exclusion as a woman that allowed her to see and empathize with the exclusion of people of colour from leadership and decision making. Then she turned to Dale and said, "Dale, I'm so sorry that you had to bring this obvious fact to our attention. I'm ashamed. Thank you for your honesty and challenge to us all." It was such a powerful moment of grace and inclusion, and empathy. It felt as though we could not see clearly, and then through some powerful words and actions we "looked intently and saw."

When we're willing to understand and learn, marvelous things can happen by the grace of God. We need to be in touch with our experiences of exclusion to understand those who are being excluded. We need to be in touch with our experiences of inclusion to motivate ourselves to include others. I know I sometimes unwittingly exclude others, and I too work to follow Jesus' example of inclusion and seek to restore my vision, to look more intently.

"[Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us...that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace" (Ephesians 2:14-15). And, "In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free, but Christ is all and in all!" (Colossians 3:11)

God, Christ, the Spirit is inclusion. Amen.

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Shadell Permanand is the Director of Conflict Mediation Services of Downsview (CMS-D), which serves a Toronto community where over 100 languages are spoken. Shadell has White Russian-Mennonite and Indo-Caribbean roots. She attends Toronto United Mennonite Church. This article is adapted from a sermon she preached there on World Fellowship Sunday, January 27, 2002.

Salvation As Hope

Continued from page 9

ing, that came after a long stretch of illness, out of the blue. It took the form of a bright summer day when I felt unexpectedly well and alive – as if I'd been granted a glimpse of that country called salvation. The experience faded, of course, but the memory remained to give sense to my search. Afterwards, waiting in the greyness, the focus was less on the future. Instead, with eyes fixed intently on now, it was a time of discovering small things – the splash of spring rain, a breeze a little less cold, the smell of earth. Small joys. Small kindnesses given and received, and cherished. Seeds that might bring purpose and meaning, but not yet, and maybe not ever. Still they were gifts.

There were also gifts of friendship. Although the temptation in illness is to become enmeshed in one's own suffering, Irina Ratushinskaya speaks truly: "You must always care more about another's pain than your own. And you must not, under any circumstances, allow yourself to hate. Otherwise you destroy your soul" (p 212). And so I tried hard not to become entangled in my own anger or pain since I might miss the opportunity to see in other lives the meaning that had slipped out of my own. Recovery, I believe, is a quiet time of paying attention to small graces given, and reading stories, like those of my three icons who, in living the impossible, raise possibilities for all of us.

I cannot explain exactly how or when, but gradually my life began to change. The grey light of early dawn grew warm with colour. A few shafts of sunlight, slantwise, lit up my way. And lit up me. George Herbert's poem says it beautifully: "Who would have thought my shrivel'd heart/ Could have recover'd greenness?" ("The Flower"). It was only then that I found myself planning new schemes and dreaming new dreams. Not big proud agendas, but gentle ones, growing more clear and present in the rising light. And in that light I think I am beginning to discover that country of wholeness called salvation.

Above my desk hang three pictures, enlargements of photographs my nephew took on Ellesmere Island. Each picture frames not only greenness, but even more amazingly, some tiny yellow blossoms. These are Arctic poppies that bloom in the far north. In my favourite of the three pictures, an early dawn light skims the rough terrain, gently outlining each detail of the delicately curving stems, and filling with sunlight each small flower full-to-overflowing.

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Mary Henkelman lives in Toronto. While she is regaining health, she is working on a collection of essays called "The Country of Salvation."

Where Good and Evil Mingle

by Will Braun

Every day I pass by the corporate headquarters of Manitoba Hydro. The irony of this is that I go by on the way to my work with a First Nation that is fighting the oppressive practices of that same billion-dollar public utility. Each time I see the "Manitoba Hydro" sign on that building there is a volatile part of me that is instantly aroused; a part of me that takes ill-found gratification in hostile thoughts toward the corporate oppressor.

The dilemma that so frustrates that dark part of me is that the first thing I do when I arrive at my office – that bastion in the war against economic exploitation – is to turn on a computer run by electricity faithfully provided by the corporate enemy I cursed ten minutes earlier. Every minute of the day, as I work for justice and equity, I use power from Manitoba Hydro.

Furthermore, Manitoba Hydro is a publically-owned utility, and I happen to be a member of the public, even if I may sometimes consider myself more righteous than the rest of them. I cannot deny that I am not only a beneficiary of the utility whose practices I decry, but also a co-owner. Sometimes the "good guys" and the "bad guys" are more difficult to differentiate than would be convenient.

On my way home from work I again pass by my company's headquarters, my work bracketed by this intersection of "good" and "evil." As I

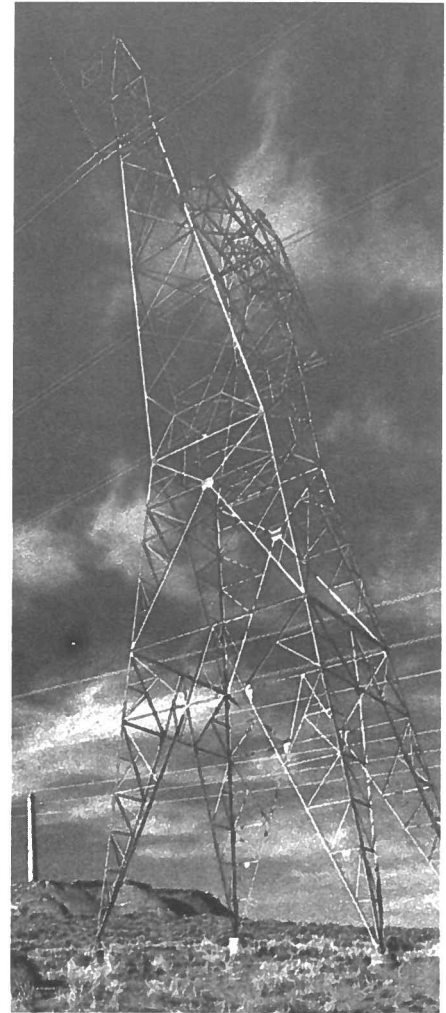
arrive home and walk in the door, I call to mind the traditional Orthodox prayer "Lord have mercy on me a sinner," then turn on the light. The light illuminates the room, the prayer illuminates the dark part of me that needs an enemy to condemn. The less busy I am creating and condemning enemies, the more capable I am of rooting out those things in my soul that prevent divine love from flowing through me. It is a gradual movement from hostility to love.

In seeking a world of fairness and wholeness, surely it is more helpful to nurture love than animosity. Surely it is not anger and demonization that will bring the equity and healing of economic relationships for which our world yearns. To be drawn by love, rather than driven by hostility....

The less busy I am creating and condemning enemies, the more capable I am of rooting out those things in my soul that prevent divine love from flowing through me.

(those affected by hydroelectric development) – rather than disdain for those who wear the masks of power – that motivates our action. Strident revolt may be more "sexy," but it lacks the integrity and liberating power of honest and humble striving

I am decreasingly interested in banging governments and Manitoba Hydro over the head, and increasingly interested in building a spiritually-rooted sense of connectedness between peoples at either end of the transmission line. It must be this sense of love for our northern neighbours



for wholeness.

When I pass by Manitoba Hydro headquarters I interrupt the negative tendencies by recalling to mind Gandhi's desire to demonstrate to Indian Hindus and the rival Pakistani Muslims that "the only devils in the world are those running around in our own hearts, and that is where all our battles ought to be fought."

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From 1998-2001, Will Braun worked at the Mennonite Central Committee office in Winnipeg, doing advocacy and public awareness work regarding the impacts of hydroelectric development on Pimicikamak Cree Nation (PCN) in northern Manitoba. He now works for PCN and lives in Cross Lake, Manitoba.

A Story Sampler From Siberia

by Katie Funk Wiebe

I learned to know my Aunt Aganeta Block Janzen in person in her daughter's home in Moscow in 1989 while on a tour of the former USSR. After listening to her life experiences for several days, I asked her to write her life story. "I'm too old," she said. The project looked too big. I asked her then to tell her stories in letters to me. She felt drawn to this biographical project and wrote about 50 letters to me and my sister, always including an account of some aspect of her life as a young married woman on the Great Trek to Poland or in forced labour in Siberia. Here's a sampler of a few stories from various times in her long life. She died in 2000 at the age of 94.

Poland, fall, 1944: My husband was conscripted into the German army. Early in the morning, about four a.m., we knelt and prayed together. He had said his farewells to the children the night before. Now he only kissed their heads before we both went to the train station. It was still dark, with a little rain. How difficult the road to the station was! I will never forget that walk.

When we arrived, the officials were already waiting for him. Hans said good-bye to me quickly, and the officers pushed him onto the train before it quickly chugged off.

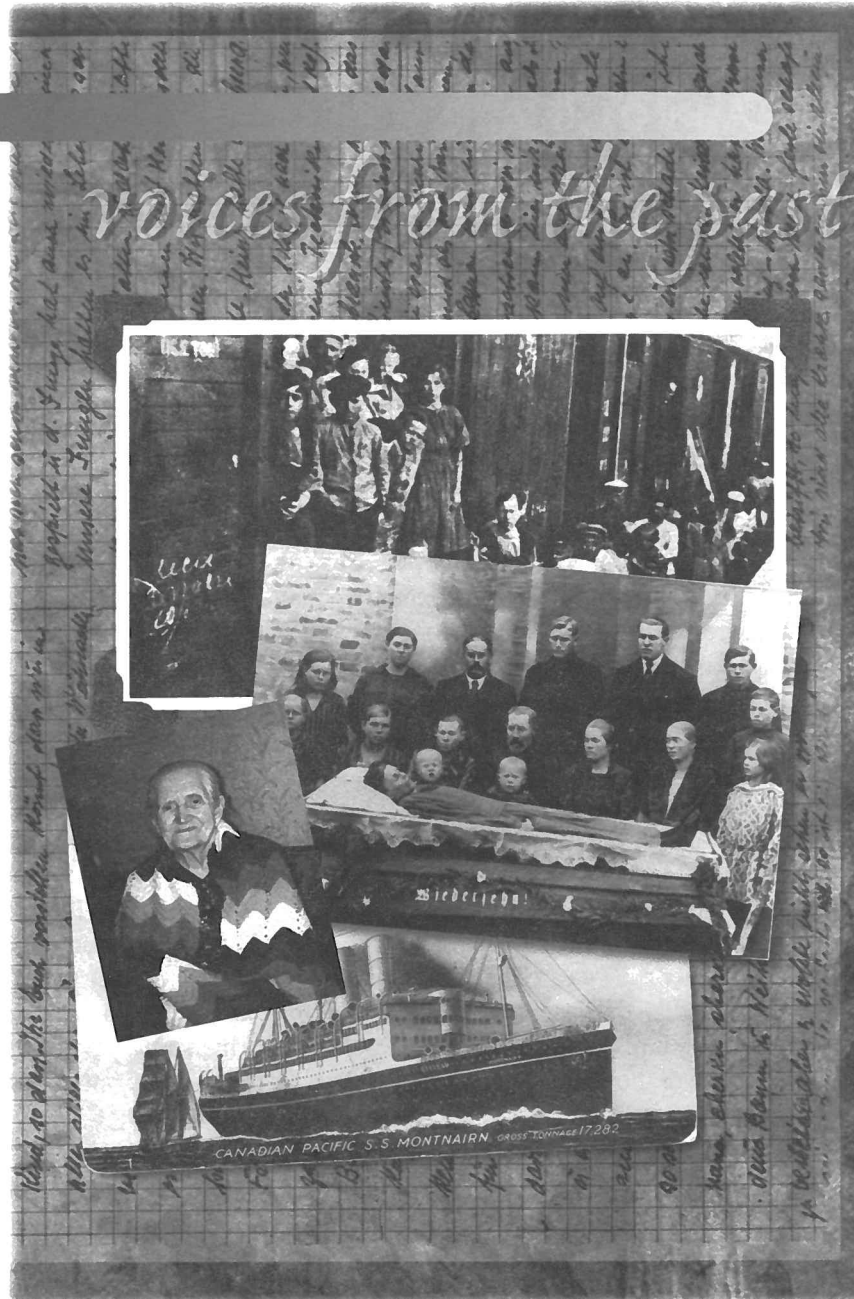
I stood alone in the dark rainy night, a stranger, and cried. How long could I stay away? At home, our four children were sleeping and waited for Mama. I never saw my husband again. *[Hans Block was shot during the Battle of Ardennes in February 1945 and is buried in Belgium.]*

Siberia, 1945, in forced labour: [This is one of several stories that show her skills as a leader and peacemaker.] In the morning about 15 to 20 women had to come to the barn where a ladder wagon was already harnessed to horses. Off we went to the field. We were all Germans, Mennonites very few. As we drove along, you should have heard us. The Swiss were mostly Catholic. There were also Lutherans, whom we could understand better.

As we drove along, the women bickered and criticized. I thought to myself: How can I help things to change? One morning, as we rode on the wagon, I said, "Let's sing the song, 'Grosser Gott, wir loben Dich.'" Then someone suggested a song the Swiss also knew. Our thoughts were directed along different lines.

At noon on the field, during our lunch break, the criticism continued, often of one another. One day I asked them if they would like me to tell them the story of a book I had read. They agreed gladly. I probably inherited the art of storytelling from my father. He could tell a story in such a way that you were actually there. I started a story one day and continued it the next to keep the women interested. Their criticism stopped. In the evening we always drove home very late. Now they quarrelled about which wagon I would ride home on.

Several years later, while working in a forest: We were not for-



est workers. We earned only enough to pay for our daily allotment of 500 grams of bread for me and my oldest son Johannes and 300 grams each for the other children. Now and then we received some barley and soup bones.

Johannes usually walked with other young people to our workplace, a distance of about 8 kilometers. An old man often questioned Johannes about finding a short cut through the forest.

We built a fire as soon as we got to the work area and cooked our food on it. As I think back, what did we have to cook? Four of us worked together: two women, my son, and the other woman's daughter.

Often this young girl asked me, "Tante Block, will we ever again eat something else besides this? It just doesn't look like food." I said to her, "Yes, I believe we will; even if the good Lord is punishing us now, he has not forgotten us."

One evening when I came home, Johannes was missing. The next morning I got up very early, and went to the man over us, a Russian. I told him that Johannes had not come home. The man was horrified and asked if he carried an axe and matches with him. "No," I replied. He asked me why I hadn't come to him the night before. A search would have been started immediately, for there were many wolves and bears in the forest, and the temperature dipped very low. He told me to go home, and he would get some others to start looking.

As I came toward our place, I saw a cat at the window with both feet against the pane, dead. Had Johannes died in the same way? I could only cry. Whether I promised God something or prayed, I don't know. We went to work.

Many people were working in the forest, but silence reigned. All at once someone said, "Johannes is alive. See, he's coming there." How happy I was. Again, all I could do was cry. We asked him many questions. He said he had tried to take a shortcut through the forest, but had walked the whole night and finally made it out. In the Russian village some people had warmed him and given him something to eat. When they went to work, they had taken him along and brought him to the right road.

In Siberia, 1950s, working in a tannery: [By this time Aunt Neta's daughter Nesa also had to work. Young Victor stayed at home alone. He had to take little Ellie to the kindergarten each day and bring her back, and buy bread. Johannes received 600 grams one day and 700 grams the next. Nesa received 500 grams and Victor 300 grams.]

That is very little food when nothing else is cooked and added to it. We had no money. We had been working only for our food, and in the tannery we hadn't earned

anything as yet. When we could earn something Victor went to the marketplace to buy something for soup. In exchange he could eat the crumbs and part of my bread. Often the children went to the fields where the potatoes had frozen and we baked a Kuchen from them. Life got better for those who could work and wanted to.

When I arrived home from work, I cooked some soup without meat or cream. How good it tasted. God helped us wonderfully. I am amazed how we managed. How often I sensed God's presence. To him be the glory. A number of times I could bring home more bread than usual. When I said, "Today you can eat until you are full," Victor looked at me big-eyed and asked, "Mama, until I am full?" "Until you are full," I replied. But my heart ached. I feel the pain today.

Kirov, Siberia, 1956: We were finally free to travel. My sister Tina Klassen and her husband had been exiled in the early 1930s to the northern Urals. We found one another by letter. Tina invited me to visit her. I earned my travel money by sewing. It was hard to sleep because after so many years I was actually going to see

*I stood alone in the dark
rainy night, a stranger,
and cried.*

my sister again.

In the city of Perm where she lived I had to cross the bridge over the Kama River. The street was a little uphill. I walked slowly and looked at the house numbers. All at once I saw a woman, tall, thin and very erect, walking on the other side of the road. It had to be Tina and I decided to call her name in German. If she stood still, it had to be Tina. I called out, "Tina." She stumbled slightly but kept walking. I called again, "Tina." She stood still and looked around. I went across the street and said, "I'm the one who called you. You are my sister," and hugged her. Tina said I was the first relative she had seen since their exile in 1931. "After 25 years I can put my arms around you." She said that the first time I called her name she thought it had come from within. Here no one called her by her first name because no one knew it. Her husband was dead. Her children called her Mama. Her whole being was shaken, disturbed.

Love as long as you can love, because it is very painful when you can no longer do so. I visited Tina twice. She invited me to come again, but it never happened, and I often regret it. We take nothing with us when we die.

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Katie Funk Wiebe is a well-known Mennonite Brethren author. After teaching English at Tabor College for 24 years, she is renewing her interest in church and family history. This is the second of three articles about her aunts who were exiled to Siberia following World War II.

The women of the colony were planting tomatoes, Sarah, the garden woman, supervising. It was a sunny day of light breezes in early June. "Look! We're getting closer to the end," called Rebekkah, leaning on her shovel. She was one of the four younger girls digging holes a few meters ahead of the others.

Straightening her back momentarily, Sarah turned to appraise the steadily-lengthening rows behind them. "*Jo es gett geherig guet heint.*" (Yes, it's going quite well today).

Thumping an empty flat on the ground to get the last of the black soil out, Mirriam paused, gazing earnestly at Sarah. "We should easily finish by suppertime, don't you think?"

"Ye-e-s, I expect so."

"Whoopee! Then we can play baseball after supper!" Cotton print skirt billowing about bare legs, she whirled in the opposite direction calling, "Rebekkah, make sure you bring Jake's glove down. He promised I could borrow it."

Smiling slightly at the girl's youthful enthusiasm, Sarah continued gazing at the young tomato plants. Tiny leaves rippling, they were swaying like newborn calves in the breeze. "And if John can irrigate them tonight yet, they'll be off to a good start," she mused aloud, "despite the late spring."

"Four years ago we also had a late spring," began Kate, halting in mid-sentence. Glancing uncertainly at Sarah, she finished quietly, "the year Sarie...."

"The year Sarie...? Oh. Yes," Sarah reflected, "spring was late that year. I recall cleaning the attic and packing away winter things on a lovely warm day in late May just in time for an unseasonable cold spell."

Oh how well she remembered that day of attic-



And Ye Visited Me

A Short Story by Dora Maendel

DRAWINGS BY ALEXANDRIA MAENDEL

cleaning. Sarie was helping her but kept running to the window in high spirits exulting in signs of spring. "Mother," she sang out, "some robins are building a nest in the smallest spruce tree!"

"Sarie, if you keep wasting time at that window, we'll never get done here."

"Oh Mother," she chided with gentle exasperation, "you're not interested in the world!" Casting a final rapt look out the window she returned to sorting shoes.

After school the next day Sarie was coughing and had

a rasp in her voice. Two days later she was impatient to return to school and Sarah agreed. Only slightly less boisterous than usual, the young girl went about all her daily activities.

"When I've finished ironing these aprons," she asked late one afternoon, "can I play *Blinda Kuha*?" (Blind-man's Bluff). "Upstairs. With Deborah and Paul? We won't make much noise - I promise!"

"Not this time, Sarie. I want to finish this Sunday shirt for Dad and I'd like you to play with Baby for awhile. She isn't feeling well."

Briefly they played. Then came Sarie's voice singing:

On the other side
treasures there have I,
Treasures that the world
With all its wealth could never buy.
When I reach that city
And the gates swing open wide
I'll find my treasures waiting -
On the other side!

"I can't sing to her with my hoarse voice. I'm stopping!" came her complaint from beside the baby's crib.

Several days later Sarie's cough preceded her down the laundromat stairs. Grey eyes grave with concern, Sarah looked up anxiously. But her daughter's face was its usual rich olive color, her brown eyes dark with excitement. "Mother! You know what! Baby said 'Tata!' Oh, I'm so glad! Hannah Marie says 'Mama' for a whole week already. Matilda told me." Gleefully she swung her arms above her head.

"Yeah! We're done!" Mirriam's lusty cheer brought Sarah out of her reverie, back to the tomato patch. With some surprise, she noted that they had indeed finished and the girls were energetically gathering up shovels, knocking the dirt off and heading for the trailer. From across the wooded ravine, peals of the first supper bell reached their ears as they bounced gently home behind the tractor. Sarah settled back to enjoy the relaxed ride and the good feeling of having the tomatoes planted at last. It seemed like she'd been nursing them in the old hatchery-turned-hothouse for ever so long. They were a little on the tall, spindly side. She prayed they'd do well.

Surrounded by girls' chatter and laughter she couldn't help wondering what it would be like to hear Sarie's vigorous voice among them. And though the longing was strong, bittersweet, there was no rancor, no resentment. Once again she felt a sense of humility and gratitude toward the young teacher who had enabled her to conquer that anguished anger.

She remembered vividly the afternoon he came to her

house for tea. Not feeling up to entertaining anyone, let alone an educated city person she hardly knew, she had agreed to it only at John's urging. Home from teacher's college for the weekend he'd told her, "Be sure to invite Arthur Wiebe for tea some time. His mother is very good to me and this would be a way of returning the hospitality. He likes homemade jams. And brown bread. Nothing fancy."

Now the young man was sitting at her table and they were having tea. The children had had their snack and returned to school for the "evening" period of German and religious instruction, so she had a good undisturbed hour with him.

In keeping with the Hutterite practice of saying grace even before snacks, he asked, "Shall I say the blessing?" She nodded, impressed by his courtesy, because it was also the custom for the oldest male present to do it. To the child she said simply, "*beten*." Folding her hands, the little one prayed along in her own language ending with a distinct "amen."

"*Komm, Herr Jesu, sei Du unser Gast, und segne was Du uns bescheret hast. Amen*," (Come Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let what you have given, by thee be blest. Amen.) Arthur Wiebe prayed, and Sarah warmed to the feeling of kinship effected by the sharing of this simple ritual. Helping himself to another Zwieback, he looked at the baby girl.

"How old is she now?"

"Eighteen months."

"Then she was only thirteen months last June..."

"Yes."

Both were silent for a minute. Then he continued, "That must have been a very difficult time for you."

"Yes." She averted her eyes. "It still is!"

"John told me what an exuberant

person she was."

"Oh my, yes! And it was so senseless, so unnecessary! If only that doctor hadn't been so unreasonable and stubborn. She might still be here. Singing. Making rag dolls. Helping me." A brief chuckle escaped her as she went on, "Cooking toffee while baby sitting! Sometimes still, I return from Vespers half-expecting the smell of a fresh batch of toffee as I open the door."

"It is sad. Fortunately there is a balm in Gilead. Life eternal through Christ our Lord."

She nodded. "Yes. I try to find comfort in those words. But when I recall how patiently Sarie bore those days of coughing here at home, how valiantly she struggled that last night in hospital, I'm overcome with anger. And bitterness. That doctor might have known better. If only he had taken me seriously! He insisted it was only a bad cough."

"Well, you know spring is a hectic time for doctors, with colds, measles, flu and even diphtheria cases to deal

"If only that doctor hadn't been so unreasonable and stubborn. She might still be here. Singing. Making rag dolls. Helping me."

with," the young man responded. "That's the mistake this doctor made, isn't it? Failing to detect that Sarie was not another case of flu or bronchitis, but seriously ill?"

"Suffering from double pneumonia, as it turned out. And he sends us home with a bottle of antibiotic capsules! Give her one of these every two hours," she imitated. "Sarie could hardly swallow the one he gave her!"

"Her throat must have been very sore at that point."

"Oh yes! I suggested the impracticality of capsules, but he brushed it aside. A cocksure young intern. Substituting for old Dr. Rannsome." Sarah spoke with rising vehemence. "He simply refused to take me seriously. He felt Sarie was acting sicker than she was and would duly swallow them once we were home."

"And she couldn't?"

"No. The idea of her acting sick!

He just didn't like us and didn't care whether she died or not. I'm sure!"

"No, Mrs. Maendel. Don't say that! Go on. What happened then?"

"We had a horrible night. The only relief I could achieve for Sarie was to set up a cubicle around her bed and fill it with steam. I massaged her chest and throat continuously. With mentholated ointment." Sarah paused to refill her guest's teacup and then sat down again, ignoring her own half-empty cup. "Sarie just couldn't swallow those capsules," she continued. "I even tried dissolving some in camomile tea."

"It didn't help?"

"No. Her breathing became laboured and she seemed only half-conscious. In the morning my brother-in-law drove us to the hospital where John joined us from the city."

"She didn't improve, even in hospital?"

"She appeared to rally a number of times that day and fought bravely all night. But eventually even our presence and encouragement proved futile, for finally she lay back in our arms and said, 'I can't anymore!' On her face we saw only disappointment at her own inability to do us the favour of continuing to breathe. But she was simply too exhausted. And I heard John's broken voice saying, 'Look Sarah! Her eyes are breaking!' Then his hand moved slowly toward her face, and tears rolling down his cheeks, he gently closed the eyelids."

"How tragic. I can imagine how badly that doctor felt



over his error. I'm surprised he didn't apologize."

"Oh, he apologized. Several times. John tried to comfort him. He seemed genuinely distressed, John said, and wondered how I could fail to respond kindly. But I was shocked with grief. And misery. Grappling with one fact: our impetuous, energetic Sarie was no longer breathing. In the days and nights just past, I had hung on every rasping breath. Praying for that laboured breathing to ease. Now it had stopped. I wanted to go home where I could weep in peace. With my family."

So engrossed had Sarah become with telling her story that she appeared oblivious to the now-fretting child beside her. Eager to hear more, the young man got up gingerly and reached for the child himself. On his lap, she quieted immediately, staring wide-eyed into his face as he listened.

"I didn't know it was possible to cry as much as I did in the next few days. After the funeral, John went back to the city to study for his finals. My mother stayed with me, helping put away Sarie's things. Her brusque, kind-hearted presence was a boon to us all. She mended and darned and sang."

"And it helped your grief?"

"Somewhat. Yes. But I still blame that doctor for not listening. He didn't care! To him we were only stupid Hutterites," she concluded bitterly.

Taken aback by her vehemence, the young man cried impulsively, "Oh no, Mrs. Maendel, you mustn't say that! You could be doing him a grave injustice."

Struck by the earnestness of his tone, she lifted

questioning grey eyes to his blue ones.

"You've heard of the hippocratic oath?"

She shook her head, slowly.

"Oh. Well, Hippocrates was a great physician in ancient Greece. He practised and taught high standards of medical ethics. And so, in an effort to emulate the spirit of Hippocrates, today all medical school graduates take the hippocratic oath, committing themselves to caring for and preserving human life irrespective of race, color or creed."

Listening intently, Sarah was awed by his fervour.

"Why - that's beautiful," she faltered, "Like our baptism vows." He nodded as she continued half to herself, "And we don't always live up to them, do we?"

Shaking his head and pausing briefly he said, "So you see, it's probably not fair to accuse the doctor of not caring. Inexperienced and overworked, yes. Even arrogant perhaps. But not uncaring."

Once again, Sarah saw the young intern rapidly scrawling a prescription and hurrying off to see his next patient. She saw him thirty-six hours later removing the stethoscope from Sarie's chest, shaking his head and murmuring, "I get no heart beat." Only now she allowed herself to dwell on the look of compassion and regret in his eyes as he told them, "I'm sorry." Yes, it was wrong to think he hadn't cared, and it shamed her that she had thought so.

She looked up to see the teacher standing with her baby in his arms. Placing her on Sarah's lap he said, "I must go now Mrs. Maendel. Thank you for the tea."

"You're very welcome," she responded as he left. "I hope you come again."

Sarah heard the tractor throttling down and felt the slight jolt of the trailer as they rounded a corner to park in front of the community kitchen. They were met by a number of children running toward them, each squealing, "Mother, Mother!" Looking up, Sarah saw a little boy with golden blonde hair and her own grey eyes walking shyly over. "My little Arthur," she murmured as she picked him up and kissed his dusty face. "My beautiful reminder of bitter anger resolved."

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Dora Maendel is a member of Fairholme Hutterite Colony, near Portage la Prairie, Manitoba. When she was in her mid twenties, while assisting the minister of her colony in teaching German, she discovered anew a love of storytelling and singing. Later she obtained an Education degree from the University of Manitoba. She still lives and teaches at Fairholme.

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Back Issues

Back issues of Sophia are available for sale for \$2 each, plus postage (\$1, Canada, \$1.50, US).

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12:1 - *What is Spiritual Guidance?*

The Russländer

by Sandra Birdsell

(Toronto: McLelland & Stewart, 2001),
350 pp.

Reviewed by Elenore Baylis

On the opening page of Sandra Birdsell's *The Russländer*, we read a newspaper report of a massacre that has taken place at Privol'noye, the estate of Abram Suderman. Eleven people belonging to two families have been murdered. What follows is an exploration of life on the estate, the catastrophe, and its aftermath.

The story is told from the point of view of Katherine Vogt, second eldest daughter of the overseer of the estate. It begins in 1910 when she is eight years old and traces her life to 1923, when she immigrates to Canada.

In this book Birdsell intertwines the coming-of-age novel with the historical. She gives a detailed description of life in Mennonite settlements in the Ukraine and the effects of World War I, the Russian Revolution and the ensuing anarchy on the Mennonites who endured those troubled times. She slips in sufficient history to explain why the Mennonites formed colonies in Russia and what happened to them subsequently.

Initially, young Katya observes life on the large estate in the Choritz colony. Her simple, direct honesty and naivete in recording what she sees creates some irony. She notices how the rich Sudermans show off their wealth – turning chandelier lights on and off to impress their workers with the wonders of electricity, putting a prized red stallion through its paces for visitors or travelling to church in the large

“back-loader coach hitched to six matching black stallions” because, “He likes to be noticed.” And noticed he is. Again and again the deprived send warnings that “one day soon, everything you own will belong to us.”

The reader anticipates the tragedy lying ahead, but Katya feels that “Because she was born female she could expect to dwell safely within the circumference of her privileged world.” To complete the picture that Katya's limited point of view cannot show, Birdsell uses stories Katya hears or overhears and letters between various family members – particularly between Katya's father and Abram Suderman's brother David.

The wealthy landowners adhered to a fairly rigid class system that bred resentment within those who worked to manage their properties – the overseers, the servants – who were often poor relatives – the farm labourers and the Russian peasants – the “outside” workers. These *Gutsbesitzer* maintained a patriarchal, exalted, often self-righteous and even cruel dominance in the community. “The Russian peasants see what we have in comparison to what little they possess, the poor souls, and that is all they see. However, we Mennonites could set an example by paying higher wages. Make more of our schooling available to them,” says David Suderman. And Vera, the *Haulftan*, grudge-bearer, who is instrumental in instigating the massacre, says early on to Katya, “You people. You think

we're no better than the oxen.” When marriage between Katya's older sister, Greta, and the Suderman son is prevented and Greta is left broken-hearted, the hot-tempered Katya can barely refrain from shouting, “...you, you, you. You hard and cruel people. You self-loving and selfish people. You fat people.”

While the opening page, of course, creates dramatic irony, Birdsell increases tension as the story unfolds with a premonition Katya has one day when her companions have all gone. Silence surrounds her, and it is “as though everyone, the town itself had vanished.” In another incident, the children notice a moor hen calling to her chicks when they are

endangered, and they dive below the surface of the lake to remain submerged until she signals that all is safe once more. Here we find an analogy for Peter Vogt who, aware of escalating violence, plans for the safety of his daughters by digging a hiding place for them should they be threatened. Katya and

one of her sisters, through his careful foresight, survive.

Katya is guilt-ridden for a long time, believing she is responsible for the massacre because of her theft of a silver cup belonging to Lydia Suderman. She had thrown the cup into the butter well in jealousy and anger when Suderman broke his long-standing promise to sell her father property, which would have made Vogt an owner as well, rather than a mere overseer.

She apologized and worked to pay for the cup. Ironically, she was told that “The cup isn't worth risking life and limb to get out of the well”;

*B*irdsell increases tension as the story unfolds with a premonition Katya has one day when her companions have all gone.

but it was the retrieval of this hidden treasure that inflamed the bandits and precipitated their attack, first on the Sudermans and then on the entire Vogt family who had been witnesses. And so Katherine, a survivor, blames herself for the deaths, seeing them as a consequence of her actions. Though she "had confessed before God and man...still, she'd been punished. She'd been punished with silence."

Similarly, Birdsell suggests, Mennonites who survived the horrors ask themselves what their role might have been. Why were Mennonites made scapegoats for the evils that existed in Russian society? Why were they made to suffer so? Throughout the novel Birdsell seems to present reasons, but gives no definitive answer. The Vogt and Suderman story is only one, albeit fictional, of thousands. In all, we read near the end of the book, "disease and violence took nearly three thousand lives." So other Mennonites in other villages "wanted to point fingers, to find reasons, to take the blame for having brought on the end of their world. They had somehow caused the Russian Revolution and the ensuing Civil War with their piety, their high-mindedness, greed and worldliness. They had either been too arrogant, or too timid. They had eaten too much crackle and fatted calves." We know, however, that there were people like Peter Vogt, who were fair and reasonable, or like Katya's grandmother Schroeder, who was able to suppress her feelings against those who had violated her family and minister to the worst offender, saying, "But do unto others."

What was God's role in permitting these events to occur? Birdsell's answer, like most, is ambivalent. Katya, hearing the night watchman, considers the words, "Lo, I am with you." Yet prayers were not always

answered. For her to question the existence of God is "unthinkable," for she is "a representative on earth of God's gentler side," but had she been a man, "she might have thought to blame God for being uncaring, or asleep."

Finally it is the redemptive power of love that prevails. Lydia, writing to Katya, quotes from the Song of Solomon, "many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it." Katherine is brought out of her trauma-induced "far-away" state by the love of a man who has twice been there in the times of her greatest need. A third time, severely wounded himself, he manages to take her away from an unbearable and dangerous situation. He also helps her place blame where it belongs. His words warm her when he says: "It's not your fault that you're alive, and they're not. Put the blame where it belongs, on the shoulders of evil men." With him she can begin a new life, in another country.

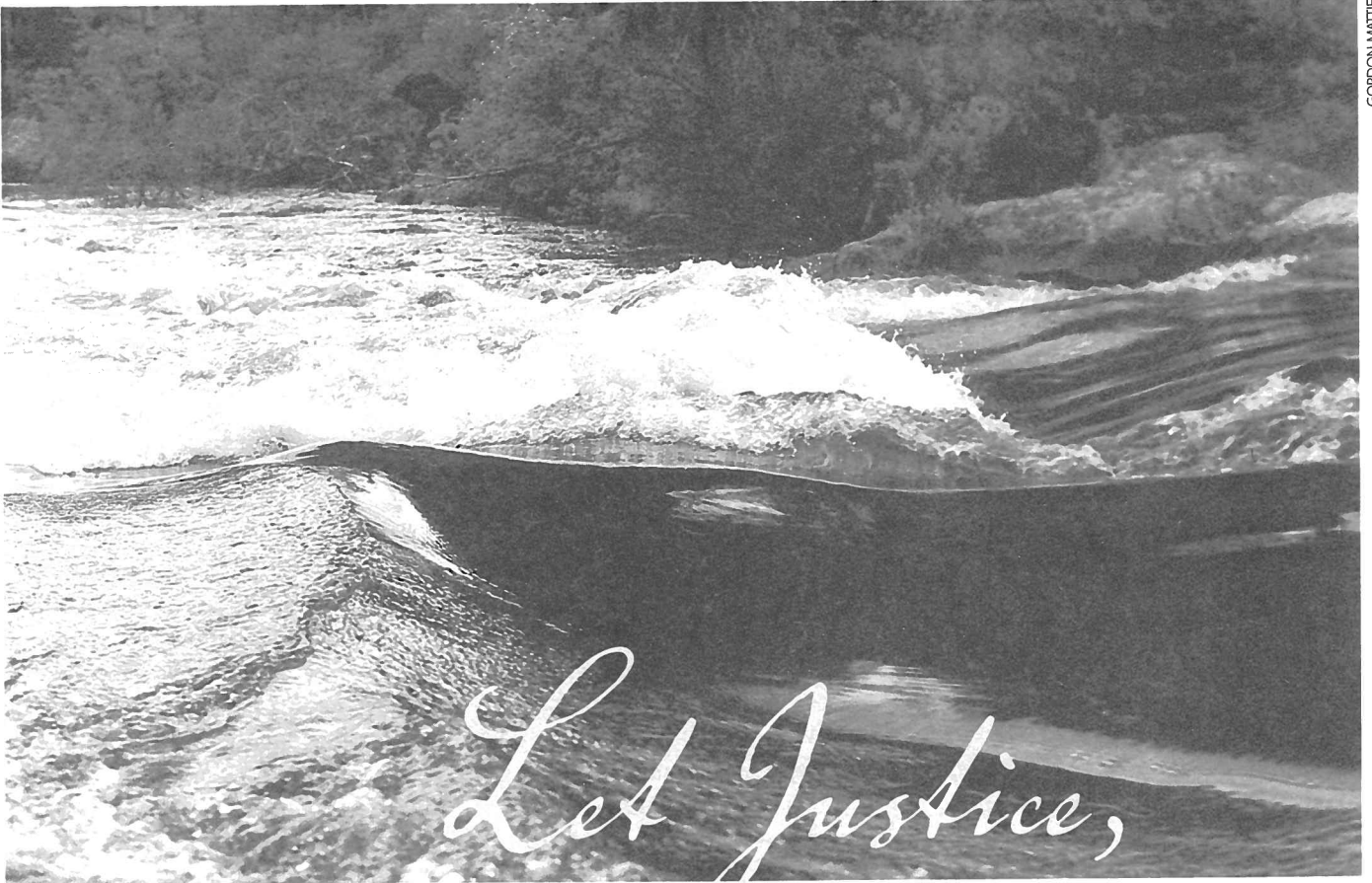
Gradually we discover that Katherine is telling her story to a young man who is recording stories like hers to give to the Mennonite Heritage Centre. She is now an old woman, living in Bethania, a personal care home in Winnipeg. Till this point she has delayed telling what happened, not wanting to harm her children "lest the spirits of the story pollute the air." Even now there are details of atrocities she feels need not be divulged. "God knew what had happened" and that is enough. Katherine asks the young man what he hopes to get from her story. His answer underlies Birdsell's purpose as well: "Dwell on the past and you'll lose an eye...; ignore the past and you'll lose both of them." Katherine too believes that the *Russländer* women have a responsibility to live long lives in order to "remember . . .

and so those who [have] not come through [are] resurrected to continue their lives." She herself is about to "disappear into the past," but by telling this story, someone will "discover her burial mound, her name."

For anyone brought up in the Mennonite tradition this book is a wonderful, though harrowing and thought-provoking, evocation of the life of our immediate forebears. Birdsell's descriptions are full of details, recreating the scenes vividly for her readers. Reference to many Mennonite dishes, even recipes for *Gruznikie* or *Krejeklmoos* help capture the flavour of Mennonite life in Russia. Characters and events come alive and haunt readers long after they close the covers of the book. Even the language helps authenticate the story. German language structure in dialogue, German, *Plautdietsch* and Russian expressions are sprinkled liberally throughout, as are German proverbs, songs and Bible verses. Low German words such as "old nose," "Mr. Cow-Eyes," "*Dommkopp*," or *Hots-ducent* elicit a chuckle.

I had the privilege in 1998 of being on a Mennonite Heritage Cruise to the Ukraine, on which I met Sandra Birdsell. She, like most of us, was searching for "roots" and at the same time doing some research for this novel. She has told a story that had to be told, to a larger audience, so that what happened might be remembered. And she has told it so well that her novel was nominated for the 2001 Giller Prize for Literature.

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Elenore Baylis lives in Toronto, where she attends Yorkminster Baptist Church. She and her husband are avid hikers.



*roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an
ever-flowing stream.*

AMOS 5:24 NRSV