

**FROM REFUGEE TO SUBURBANITE: THE SURVIVAL AND ACCULTURATION
OF NORTH KILDONAN MENNONITE IMMIGRANT WOMEN, 1927-1947**

by

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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ABSTRACT

The history of the immigrants who belonged to the Mennonite Brethren congregations in North Kildonan, Manitoba, during the 1930s and 1940s has not been told in its entirety. While it is true that there have been many Mennonite renditions of stories related to men's achievements and church struggles, very little has been disclosed regarding women's struggles of survival during their first pioneer years. Women's history has been a well-kept secret. We do not know how these women bore the burden of resettling in desolate prairie homes after leaving their organized life in Ukraine, nor what their everyday lives were like in the first year of their diaspora. We do not know how arduous their work loads were, nor how they skimped and saved to make a future for their daughters that was better than working as domestics. We do not know how courageously they stood behind their husbands in daring new business ventures. But we do know that it is time to study and inquire about such issues. Therefore, this thesis tells an 'inside' story about the ordinary lives of Mennonite immigrant women in North Kildonan. It must be noted that there were two options available to these women, namely, that they live in segregation from the rest of society and in a continuum of their old traditional ways, or that they acculturate to a new cultural reality in their new homeland. They opted for the latter.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades some historians have concluded that the exclusion of women from historical writings has created gaps distorting the historical panorama. These historians are adamant that women in their everyday setting must be an integral part of history.¹ Vigorously supporting an inclusive history, Veronica Strong-Boag emphasizes that "history must incorporate the collective experience of past generations of women, men and children and how they brought about and coped with change and how they achieved stability in their lives."² Franca Iacovetta also reiterates the fact that all too often historians have obscured women's lives even while they extolled struggling immigrant families. This practice, she believes, has reified the family as a unit without identifying women in their active roles in immigration and resettlement.³ Iacovetta emphasizes that history should be gender specific, as men and women do not experience history in the same way.⁴ Furthermore, she is adamant that because men and women have different roles to play and experience daily life in different ways, historians should be observant of these distinctions and write history accordingly.

When we consider Mennonite historical writings, we soon realize that the same problem of non-inclusion of women is prevalent. When Frank H. Epp first published his books in the "Mennonites in Canada" history series, they were well received as thorough, well-researched accounts of the Mennonite story. He informed his readers that the Mennonites came to Manitoba from southern Imperial Russia in three waves, namely the so-called "Kanadier" from 1874 to 1879, the so-called "Russlaender" from

1923-1930, and the so-called "Fluechtlinge" or "Displaced Persons" in the third wave from 1948 to 1952.⁵ There is hardly any evidence, however, of the women of these immigrations. Only several pages within his 600 pages of Mennonite history note the obligations Mennonite women had during the difficult time of pioneering and resettlement. Even T.D. Regehr's book, the third and last book of the "Mennonites in Canada" series, subtitled *A People Transformed, 1939-1970*, and published as late as 1996, mentions very little of Mennonite women's activities in the home or the community. In his review of this book, A. Ross McCormack comments that while Regehr examines the urbanization of the Mennonites in Canada, he nonetheless omits the Mennonite women's roles in this transformation process, offering no insight as to how women acculturated and facilitated accommodation in the cities.⁶

This exclusion of women in Mennonite history has been rectified to an extent. Some historical studies have focused on Mennonite women of the first wave⁷ and also the third wave of immigration.⁸ Very little, however, has been written about Mennonite women of the second wave of immigration, that is, the *Russlaender* Mennonite women. Their arrival in Canada during the late 1920s and their integration into the Canadian society is missing from the Mennonite historical record. It can not be generalized that the women of the second wave of immigration responded to their respective environments in the same way as those of the first and third waves. This was primarily due to the fact that differentials such as geographic locations, socio-economic conditions as well as indigenous cultural climates played an enormous part in shaping the unique history of each group. Therefore, the history of each particular Mennonite immigrant group must be told independently of the other groups.

In response to the incompleteness of this or any historical portrayal of women, Joy Parr asserts that the writing and rewriting of history is fundamental to all inclusive history. Parr believes that the historical record is never complete as definitive answers will always elude historians.⁹ Reflecting this assertion is the incompleteness of Mennonite women's history. This lacuna must be addressed by rewriting Mennonite history to present a better view of women's contributions and involvement in family life, church life and society.

This thesis focuses on one small segment of unwritten Mennonite history, namely that of the settlement of immigrant women. And more specifically, it examines the lives of the women who were part of the *Russlaender* migration wave, and who were members of the Mennonite Brethren (MB) church in North Kildonan, a suburban district just to the north of Winnipeg.¹⁰ Their history begins in the early 1930s and shows the hardships these women endured, and the way in which they gradually chose to become acculturated to selected norms of the host society. An examination of these women's past history identifies the lifestyle they enjoyed before the 1917 Russian Revolution in Ukraine, and shows how they coped in their diaspora here in Canada. Their consequent history reveals the search of these immigrant women for higher status in the home, the pursuit of meaning in their church environment, and the work to secure economic survival in the temporal community.

As already indicated, these immigrant women were members of the Mennonite Brethren or MB church, a splinter group that seceded in 1860 from the established general Mennonite church, (also known as the *Kirchliche Mennoniten* in Ukraine) and a group that joined the General Conference (GC) Mennonites upon immigration to Canada

in the 1920s). The 1860 a church schism was the consequence of moral laxity and religious apathy within the existing church challenged by the influence of an outside pietistic group led by evangelist Eduard Wuest.¹¹ However, MB historian John B. Toews remarks that “in later decades neither side clearly understood the original nature of the quarrel” and insists that “distorted memories split the Russian Mennonite community for generations.”¹²

Members of these two clearly distinctive denominations, namely, the GC Mennonites and the MB Mennonites lived in very close proximity to each other in North Kildonan. While the MB church was considered to be the more conservative of the two denominations because activities such as drinking, dancing, smoking, theatre attendance and the playing of cards were prohibited, the GC church was often considered to be the more tolerant and ‘worldly’ of the two churches as it was more lenient in these matters. Despite these differences, they nonetheless shared the church facility of the MB church on Edison Avenue in North Kildonan during the years between 1929 and 1935. In 1935, however, the GC group built its own house of worship on Devon Avenue in North Kildonan.¹³ In an interview, Mary Enns Ediger reflects, “In the beginning we were all together. It didn’t matter which branch of Mennonites you belonged to. We were all together”.¹⁴ Inadvertently the children of the two groups became friends, some of them for life, and the women shared the same problems of poverty and hardship, regardless of religious denomination. In both instances these women had little or nothing to say in church administration, as they lived in a patriarchal society at home and at church. Furthermore these women had equally difficult roles to play as immigrant mothers and

housewives as their families always came first before they even considered their own needs.

Acculturation:

The early Mennonites in North America were skeptical of social change and, therefore, called themselves nonconformists. They lived in isolated communities, and believed their home, or kingdom, was not of this world but in heavenly realms. Hence they practiced a sense of *otherworldliness* instead of *worldliness*. In the light of this, any adaptation of modernity as well as social and religious change was considered to be a compromise of their religious faith. Furthermore these early Mennonites advocated a "Christ against culture" stance as they stressed their separation from the 'world'.¹⁵

Over the centuries, however, cultural adaptations did occur as Mennonites moved from country to country. In most places, such as the Netherlands, Prussia and Ukraine Mennonite women adopted the dress and food practices responding to the country of their sojourn. In Ukraine, Mennonite women wore Ukrainian 'babushkas' and cooked Ukrainian borscht and drank 'Kvas' (a Ukrainian drink).¹⁶ Patterns of cultural adaptation were similar in Canada, where Mennonite women aspired to acculturate to the host society. For the Mennonite women, acculturation became a way of asserting themselves as women within the ethno-religious community. However, the church scrutinized these changes very closely, always wary lest these adaptations to the new country's culture would result in secularization or even assimilation with

the host society. It is important to note, however, that the change these women experienced was one of acculturation and not assimilation.¹⁷

In the early 1930s Professor C.A. Dawson of McGill University in Montreal undertook a study of group settlements, in which he included the question of Mennonite assimilation on the Mennonite West Reserve in south central Manitoba. He concluded his report with a statement that:

The Mennonite group as a whole has ceased to struggle against the world, and has to a large extent even forgotten its own distinctive group character...through many channels the world is insinuating itself into the community life and breaking down the distinguishing characteristics of a peculiar people. Whether this assimilation will be complete fifty years hence, hundred years or more is impossible to predict.¹⁸

Sociologist E.K. Francis, however, argued in the 1950s that acculturation among the Mennonites in Manitoba did not always result in assimilation. He believed that minority groups had traditions of mutual support that protected them from the need for assimilation.¹⁹ In the 1980s Mennonite sociologist Leland Harder agreed.²⁰ He noted that acculturation should be distinguished from assimilation, which refers to the fusion of two or more cultures. Furthermore he also states that assimilation is usually a one sided process by which the members of a minority group are integrated into the host society with some permanent loss to the group accepting the majority culture. Harder also noted that acculturation is simply the acceptance of culture traits by one group from another.²¹

Scholars of immigrant adaptation have used various terms for this process. In 1995 American historian Russell A. Kazal resurrected the term "assimilation" to describe the process by which ethnic groups selectively adjust to new cultures. He, however, qualified the term "assimilation," noting for example, that the core, to which newcomers were assimilated, was not permanent or static. Up to the 1960s it was generally believed among

scholars that European immigrants would assimilate to an Anglo-Saxon “core” American society, but in more recent years that core for assimilation was diversified into a class related labour core, and a ‘whiteness’ core, around which immigrants rallied. Kazal also argued that “understanding assimilation requires understanding how ethnic groups relate to one another within the larger society.”²² He concluded that a new pluralism had surfaced in America along racial lines and that a process of class formation in separate melting pots had occurred.²³

Various terms thus can be used for what occurred in the lives of the North Kildonan women. In this thesis I use the term “acculturation” as E.K. Francis does in his work on Mennonite immigrants.²⁴ Acculturation, therefore, is interpreted as a process whereby Mennonite women adopted selected cultural traits inherent in the culture of the Anglo-Canadian host society. This act is sometimes referred to as ‘culture borrowing’ and must be distinguished from ‘assimilation’ which calls for a full acceptance of the majority group culture as well as well as that of a new identity for the minority group.

To reveal the process of acculturation in the lives of the Mennonite Brethren immigrant women in North Kildonan, this thesis focuses on three aspects of their lives. First, it provides the historical background of these immigrants and the reasons Mennonite women embarked on a path of acculturation to an urbanized and modernized host society. Second, it examines the ethno-religious based social support networks of the immigrant women, especially their local *Verein* or women’s auxiliary. Third, it investigates several areas of everyday life in which this adaptation to the new society occurred, namely home management, clothing procurement, and food preparation. Each of these three themes reveal instances when the Mennonite immigrant women of North Kildonan were drawn

towards acculturation to the host society and aspects that restrained them from such social integration. In addition such issues as the church's stance on acculturation, the single girls' work as domestics and the women's status in home and society will be referred to from time to time.

Methodology:

The method of this study was shaped by the three themes outlined above. Secondary sources such as books, periodicals and other writings, both of Mennonite and non-Mennonite orientation on immigration were consulted, and in many instances used as models for this study. Some of the early North Kildonan MB church records, including year end reports dating back to 1932, available at the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Winnipeg, were taken into account. Furthermore, back copies of the *Mennonitische Rundschau*, a Mennonite Brethren Church periodical also available at the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, was a valuable source of information.

Oral history was utilized to a great extent, and interviews with fifteen first-generation Mennonite immigrant women were undertaken. In addition, many random conversations were held with second generation immigrant women, who were quite familiar with circumstances during the early years in North Kildonan. These informal conversations verified some of the information that was gathered at the interviews. Of further great significance for this study was the unpublished oral history information collected by the late Heidi Koop in 1998-1999 and available at the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg. This information consists of random interviews with approximately twenty first-generation Mennonites of North Kildonan. Furthermore, several women of the third wave of

Mennonite immigration to Canada (1948-1952) were interviewed to determine the extent to which the acculturation of Mennonite immigrant women had progressed by 1948. Several memoirs of immigrant women also were available for this thesis. In addition, the City of Winnipeg Archives were consulted regarding the records of North Kildonan council meetings in the early 1930s and 1940s, specifically those pertaining to land development and community services such as road development and water pump services available for the early Mennonite immigrants.

To make this study as comprehensive as possible, every avenue of information, including that of my own experience was explored. I came to North Kildonan as a three year old in 1930, was a teenager in the 1940's and a young mother in the 1950's, and well remember the depressing feelings of poverty and deprivation during the early years in North Kildonan, as well as the hard work my parents performed to provide financial stability for the family. In addition I distinctly recall how the Mennonite Brethren women initially lived in isolation from their host society counterparts, thus preventing 'worldliness.' However, I also remember the way in which the church's segregationist attitude eventually reverted into a fervent desire by the women for progress and adaptation to the host society culture, thus procuring a better future for their daughters. Moreover, I noticed that in the attempt to comply with the culture of the host society, Mennonite women became more independent and began to question certain principles of the church organization. Questions began to surface as to why it was 'wrong' for women to cut and curl their hair and to wear pants. Furthermore women wanted to know why it was unbiblical for women to be heard at church meetings, and why they could not have a greater share in church activities beyond teaching Sunday school, singing in the church

choir, cooking for church events and attending women's groups or *Vereine*. Slowly, as the women began to assert themselves, the church began to relinquish its severe stance, and women began to forge ahead in their endeavor for acculturation. These vivid memories of mine were crucial in the interpretation of the story of the second wave of Mennonite Brethren immigrant women to North Kildonan.

Central to this thesis, however, is oral history. And even though it is believed at times that oral history may tend to over-emphasize and romanticize the past, historian Franca Iacovetta believes that it is a democratic way of exposing the past. Furthermore, Iacovetta believes that oral history is a way "of moving beyond the biased accounts of the 'outsiders' into the private and public arenas of immigrants (be it household, church or union) from the perspective of the 'insider'." ²⁵

To make my own project as democratic as possible I took several steps. First I sought to be open minded about the first generation experience of the Mennonite Brethren immigrant women in North Kildonan. My intention was simple, to study the everyday lives of these women, seeking to document and interpret the way in which they weathered subsistent living conditions in their diaspora, and how they eventually adapted to the host society. But I soon realized that the word "acculturation" was more appropriate than merely "adaptation", as the former encompassed not only the women's everyday life, but also their interaction with the host society's lifestyle, way of thinking, and culture. My questions to the women were broadly conceived. They focused on the three themes outlined above, namely the women's background, their social support systems, and their everyday lifestyles, especially their housing, clothing and food (See copy of the questionnaire in appendix "A"). There was thus no special sociological model that I sought

to demonstrate; rather the model of acculturation arose from evidence collected during the interview process. Furthermore, to detect any special bias in the material collected from the interviews, I had random conversations with some of my second generation immigrant friends, thus cross-referencing some of the gathered material, and I also compared my own experiences with those related by the women in the interviews.

Second, to obtain an 'insider' grassroots and 'democratic' view of the immigrant life in North Kildonan, I undertook the interviews in a particular manner. I interviewed all able first generation Mennonite Brethren women I could locate in Winnipeg, in total twelve first generation women. Each of these women was interviewed on a one on one basis, in the confines of their own homes. In addition, four second generation women were interviewed to substantiate and verify some of the older women's responses to the questions. All women were notified a day or so prior to the interview, and all accepted, except two; one declined on the basis that God knew her good works and nobody else need to know, and the other due to ill health. All interviews followed the questionnaire (Appendix "A") that had been approved by the University of Winnipeg's Joint-Faculty Research Ethics Board (JFREB) and after the consent of the women who were involved. Women who had left North Kildonan and had moved to British Columbia, Ontario and other parts of Canada during the war years for financial and personal reasons, were not pursued. This was not feasible as most of them would have by now been in nursing homes, and it would have been impossible to obtain ALL their addresses. Therefore, I had no way of ascertaining their positive or negative stance on acculturation.

Previous Work in this Field:

This thesis depicts but a small segment of the Mennonite women's immigration history, and an even smaller segment of writings on immigrant women as a whole. This study seeks to be in conversation with a broad historiographical field, especially the field of women's history. Such studies support Miriam Cohn's observation that "historians of women and the family have persuaded us that analyzing the connections and intersections between public institutions and private lives leads to a fuller understanding of everyday life."²⁶ Cohn believes there is a definite interaction between the public and private spheres in immigrant acculturation, even though this nexus is not always readily discernible. She argues that schooling patterns and church principles are helpful in determining change or continuation in immigrant lifestyles. This argument of interaction is also noted in such works as Iacovetta's *Such Hardworking People*, Francis Swyripa's *Wedded to the Cause* and Ruth Frager's *Workshop Strife*. Each of these case studies, examining Italian, Ukrainian and Jewish women respectively, help illuminate the Mennonite struggle to adapt to a new culture.

In her book on Italian immigrants in Canada during the postwar period and their struggle for survival, Iacovetta relates three aspects of the immigrant experience, namely class, gender and ethnicity.²⁷ She states that changing from a peasant class orientation to an industrial working class system was not easy for these women. To survive this change required much ingenuity, hard work, and a family work cooperation system heretofore practiced in southern Italy. In workplaces, especially for women, gender discrimination, wretched working conditions and 'cultural chauvinism' were rife and at times led to strike situations. Iacovetta believes that these aspects disciplined women to cope and fend for

themselves in their new environment and produced difficult but meaningful lives. Furthermore, she contends that these women were not really victimized by these adverse conditions but formed a path that ultimately led the Italian community to integration with the Canadian society.

Francis Swyripa's book *Wedded to the Cause*, also links women's private and public worlds, placing women at the center of a Ukrainian Canadian collective consciousness and purpose.²⁸ In this multi-generational and national study of Ukrainian-Canadian women's organizations, Swyripa examines both right and left wing ethnic women's groups, and shows how they were influenced by class, gender and ethnicity.²⁹ At first the close ties with the homeland evoked an acute sense of nationalism and Ukrainianess in these early immigrant women, resulting in stereotyping by their Anglo-Canadian neighbors. But this stereotyping was reinforced by the immigrant's allegiance to Great Women models from the homeland and by the familiar *Baba* enshrined by their women's organizations. During the post Second World War period, however, when younger and more educated Canadian schooled women models came to the forefront, *Baba* became mythologized, and Ukrainians hailed a gender-informed multiculturalism as a foundation for uniting Ukrainianess and Canadianism. Thus these marginalized women had challenged their own ethnic community, their Anglo-Saxon neighbors and their own women's organizations to accept the modern assimilated Ukrainian-Canadians. Their collective consciousness had changed from a Ukrainian nationalistic one to a Ukrainian-Canadian nationalistic one along a gendered trajectory.

Ruth Frager's book *Sweatshop Strife*, describes the political dynamic inherent in the needle trade unions in Toronto from 1900 to 1939, and also focuses on the

experience of immigrant women within both the ethnic community and a wider urban world.³⁰ Frager questions the reasons why Jewish women's demands for improvement in the needle trade sweatshops were never fully considered or met. She finds that an interaction of class and ethnicity in these unions was important in undermining these women's aims for improvement. She also believes the main objective of these left-wing Jewish leaders was that of eradicating class and anti-Semitism, not of structuring change in the workplace. Furthermore, these leaders assumed that giving in to women's demands could fragment the existing, often fragile fabric of the union, or jeopardize male worker's demand for action. Frager faults women for not being critical enough of their working environment, and capitulating to the idea that feminist attributes could prove divisive within the union as well as in the Jewish community. To be active and militant in the union would require a challenge, namely a stretch of the traditional gender role, which these women were not prepared to do.

When I compare the Mennonite immigrant women with their Italian, Ukrainian and Jewish counterparts of the depression years, I note that in many ways the Mennonite women faced similar challenges as those encountered by their immigrant contemporaries. Such commonalities as being stereotyped and marginalized by the host society plagued most immigrant women, and this discrimination coupled with poor language and work skills usually resulted in low paying and very laborious jobs for the so called 'foreigners'. Factory jobs with long strenuous hours or domestic jobs (mostly live-in positions) exerted a great physical strain on these women. Despite the women's heavy workload they cultivated both a strong interest in issues of acculturation and in the persistence of old traditional

lifestyles that thwarted cultural change, a situation to be reversed only when economic times recovered.

Clearly, even though these immigrant women faced similar obstacles impeding acculturation and change, it would be impossible to equate the hardworking Italian immigrant women, the nationalistic agrarian Ukrainian women, or the unionized Jewish women with the more pacifist and sectarian Mennonite women. For example, the immigrant women handled the issues of financial and social improvements in diversified ways. The Italian women of Toronto believed that arduous factory work, coupled with the occasional strike action, would eventually alleviate their poverty. The Ukrainian women of the prairies relied on primitive living conditions and hard farm work to pull them through difficult financial times. The Jewish women labouring in Toronto factory sweat shops relied relentlessly on their unions for financial and working improvements. And the Mennonite women of North Kildonan relied on frugality and hard work (especially as domestics) to alleviate their poverty and improve their lifestyle. Thus, while all of these women's groups struggled desperately to achieve social change in their life, each group handled this endeavor in a unique way.

Another basic aspect, the interaction of the women's domestic sphere and the public sphere should not be overlooked. An examination of the women's home, workplace, their children's school, and the local church identified a valuable asset that determined the women's bias toward either social continuation or social change. Interaction with the host society came in various forms for these marginalized women. For the Italian and Jewish women it meant working in factory sweatshops where they interacted with their staff and superiors thereby learning new host society trends; for the Ukrainian women it meant

shedding their peasantness by learning indirectly from their daughters' Anglo-Canadian teachers and social workers, and for the Mennonite women it meant learning from their daughters employed in domestic work.

The inter-relatedness of class, ethnicity and gender is an issue prevalent in all three books.³¹ Iacovetta comments, for example, that not only has there "been a growing interest in immigrant women," but also "an emerging awareness of how ethnicity and gender mediate the class experience."³² All three books note how ethnicity shaped both class and gender. A problem, evident in all these books was that the reason women's interests were never fully met stemmed from the fact that these immigrant women were still steeped in their established culture, and living in a continuum of their old traditional ways. They clung to their old ethnic institutions such as unions, clubs or churches that oftentimes were maintained by patriarchal leadership, which was seldom fully partial to women's interests. Iacovetta notes, "men and women experience their class position in gender-specific ways."³³ Therefore, a reprieve for these women came only when they themselves embraced acculturation or selective assimilation. Then they became aware that they too could speak up in their unions, organize their clubs or lead women's auxiliaries to benefit their own interests.

Another major influence on this thesis is derived from the writings by Mennonites on Mennonite immigrant women's issues, even though these writings do not directly relate to second wave of Mennonite immigrant women in North Kildonan. An example of such works is Royden K. Loewen's *Family Church and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and New Worlds, 1850- 1930*, written with regard to the family life of the Mennonite *Kleine Gemeinde*, part of the 'first wave' Mennonite migration to rural Manitoba as well Nebraska

and Kansas in the 1870s.³⁴ Loewen writes an inclusive history of how the lives of Mennonite farm women related to the Mennonite history in general of that time. He notes that the Mennonite farm women of the Kleine Gemeinde worked alongside their husbands and were part of both the production and consumption units of the family, a phenomenon unlike that of city life, where the two spheres often were strategically divided. It was because these women were included in the production system, mostly through an intense cottage industry, that they had an interest in the farm business and became part of it. Loewen also notes that through the established Mennonite partible inheritance system, (an old inheritance practice of the Mennonites known as *Teilungsverordnung*) the inheritance was not merely left to the oldest son, but was divided equally among both the male and the female children of the deceased. This inheritance system empowered women to a great extent within the Mennonite families.

Loewen also argues that in the late nineteenth century continuity was greater than change in southern Manitoba Mennonite communities. He notes that this was the case as Mennonite farm households were self-sufficient in food, clothes and medicine and, therefore, maintained their ethnic social boundaries. Loewen states however, that this cultural continuity was checked at the turn of the century by land shortages, fuller farm commercialization and rising urbanization. This seems to coincide with the Mennonite immigrant experience in North Kildonan thirty years later. When living conditions were economically difficult during the depression, the North Kildonan Mennonites adhered to the old traditions and were ethnically confined by their own religious, ethnic and social boundaries. However, when the economy strengthened, and urbanization expanded into rural areas, the Mennonites became ready to accept change. This phenomenon is also evident in the North Kildonan women's encounter with acculturation.

Two books, one by Pamela E. Klassen, *Going by the Moon and by the Stars*³⁵, and the other by Marlene Epp entitled *Women without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War*,³⁶ underscore the theme of Mennonite women without men who were involved in the third wave of Mennonite immigration to Canada from Russia or Ukraine. Both writers note how these women adapted to their new Canadian Mennonite social and religious environment (although Epp also deals with the immigration to Paraguay). In doing so, both Epp and Klassen juxtapose these women's early traumatic life experiences, such as the terrorizing Soviet purges and the horrific refugee trek from Russia to Germany with the women's challenging, and often confusing, chore of resettling in Canada and adjusting to an established patriarchal Mennonite church. Both authors assert that the church congregations showed only moderate consideration for these women without men, even though it was in the church environment that these women sought support and comfort as they told their difficult stories of family fragmentation, homelessness and loneliness. Furthermore, both writers berate the patriarchal church for being somewhat inconsiderate, uncompassionate and often merely paternalistic towards these newcomers.³⁷ Thus, while the newcomers were accepted, they were often merely tolerated and not fully included in social circles.³⁸

It was against this background that many third wave immigrant women assumed the necessary role of becoming the breadwinner of the family, thereby averting the possibility of becoming a liability to the established Mennonite church society. These women, however, were treading a fine line when they became hard working and assertive in dealing with the welfare and survival of their own family. In this situation they frequently were seen as overly aggressive and independent and thereby a threat to the normative Mennonite status quo in which a woman's dependency upon her husband was expected. On the other hand,

when the new immigrant women were too dependent upon their immigration sponsors, the women were considered to be a burden to society. Epp concludes, "Immigrant widows were in the demanding position of being heads of their families, and of having control and decision-making power over their family finances...yet they were cast in the powerless and stereotypical role of the burdensome widow in Canadian Mennonite communities".³⁹ Epp faults the church for being biased against the necessity of these women's role reconfiguration (so basic to their family's survival) and berates the church for being inconsiderate. In addition, Epp believes that this role reversal caused a sense of inferiority among immigrant women living in an environment where the nuclear family was normative and the man was labeled the basic provider for the family.⁴⁰

Some of 'second wave' immigrant members of the North Kildonan Mennonite Brethren church had undergone similar periods of tribulation in the Soviet Union only twenty years prior, and could therefore appreciate the "D.P." women's difficulties. The more conservative male leaders, however, often misjudged the piousness of these new immigrants, and were suspicious of their religious sincerity. Both Epp and Klassen note that these immigrants had practiced an informal 'domestic religion' in Ukraine and en route to Europe, consisting of "stories, relationships, and informal rituals".⁴¹ Epp remarks that "Soviet Mennonites came to rely on the most foundational rituals, such as prayer, song and Bible reading as manifestations of their religious belief".⁴² For some immigrants, however, activities such as dancing, drinking, smoking and going to movies had also been a part of their former social lives. While some of the less conservative church leaders condoned these activities as given aspects of society, the more conservative condemned these activities as being 'worldly' in essence. The conservative church's response often resulted

in much sermonizing directed at the new immigrants, urging them to conform to established church rules and regulations.

Klassen and Epp give us a sense of the change and adjustment these third wave immigrants (mostly women) had to undergo in the secular society as well as in the established church. Epp remarks that it appears that these women had to change continuously. First, they had to adapt to their new life in Russia as immigrants, then to their refugee life en route to Germany, then to their life in Germany during and after the war and, finally, to their new life here in Canada.⁴³ Thus, immigrants constantly had to conform to established norms.

A final relevant study to be considered here is Gloria Neufeld Redekop's 1996 book entitled *The Work of Their Hands: Mennonite Women's Societies in Canada*.⁴⁴ Redekop outlines the inception of the Mennonite women's societies or *Vereine* in Ukraine in 1874, and traces their existence in Canada until 1988. Redekop's survey of two of the largest Mennonite denominations, namely, the Canadian Mennonite Church (also known as the General Conference or G Mennonite Church) and the Mennonite Brethren Church supports her idea that women's *Vereine* or organizations were parallel churches to the established church.⁴⁵ This concept is based on the premises that the three foci of 'service, fellowship and worship', predominant imperatives for the established Mennonite churches were also primary parameters for Mennonite women's *Vereine*. Furthermore, the general arrangement of the *Verein* meetings were also modeled on the format of the church worship program, including prayers, scripture reading, singing, a sermon and an offering.⁴⁶ She further argues that the women opted for this parallel church because they had no voice in church administration, and were permitted to perform only limited tasks in the church, such as

teaching Sunday school, singing in the choir, helping in youth programs, and preparing food for church festivities. Redekop believes that the women felt excluded from some of the major aspects of church work and, therefore, turned to their own societies to perform missionary work and provide fellowship for each other according to their needs. She concludes that "Mennonite women's societies became a context where Mennonite women could be full participants in every aspect of worship, and at the same time become involved in missions and service in their own way"⁴⁷

While these books written by Mennonites on issues of Mennonite immigrant women focus on different immigration periods, they nonetheless function as significant sources of information for the writing of this thesis. These are 'inside' stories that engender Mennonite history and promote an inclusiveness of women's experiences. Loewen's work has been seen as a good example of how the history of ordinary Mennonite women can be included within a larger history of Mennonite people.⁴⁸ In it "women's roles as mothers, gardeners, and farm workers during the settlement years" are described and "the importance of 'ordinary' tasks women usually performed as a matter of second nature" outlined;⁴⁹ still the work is integrated into a more enhanced and inclusive Mennonite history.⁵⁰ Klassen and Epp similarly give us an informed 'inside' view of the many grievances Mennonite immigrant women harbored while they settled in Canada during the post-Second World War period. While these books also might have offered the 'inside' perspective of their hosts, the adjustments they had to make to receive these numerous immigrant women and children,⁵¹ and also the changes resulting in the attitudes of both immigrant and sponsor groups due to their interaction with each other, both take the reader into the women's lived experiences.⁵² Redekop's book also offers an 'inside' account of Mennonite women,

especially of their societies or *Vereine* and their function within the Mennonite church society. Even though their own matriarchal leadership mirrored the leadership of the institutional patriarch church and promoted the same parameters for women's roles (*Kinder, Kueche, Kirche* or children, kitchen, church) as the Mennonite church did,⁵³ Redekop does note that in the 1960s when the wider Canadian women's movement flowered, some Mennonite women also began to question and debate their rights as women within the church society.⁵⁴ It was then that some of the more intellectual and opinionated women began to leave the *Vereine* in the belief that these women's groups had merely become channels for the church to disseminate its restrictive stance on the roles of women in both home and church.⁵⁵

As in the aforementioned books, this thesis also reflects on the 'inside' stories of Mennonite women. The focus, however, is on the acculturation of the MB immigrant women of North Kildonan during the 1930s until the 1950s – a topic that has never been historically acknowledged and, therefore, is absent from history. In this thesis the historical background of these women is introduced, their social networks or *Vereine* are considered, their homes, clothes and food ways are reflected upon, and their work evaluated within the framework of how things were when these immigrants landed in North Kildonan, how acculturation was initiated and progressed, and what perspective the church took with regard to these changes. It was an acculturation that also involved ideological as well as attitudinal changes. For this reason work concepts, work habits and social skills underwent changes, resulting in revised mindsets capable of coping both with modernity in general and consumerism in particular. These immigrant women aspired to become *Damen* or 'ladies' instead of being chore-women, and they made efforts to dispatch their household duties

more efficiently in order to have time available for gracious entertaining. While these immigrant women did not randomly accept all changes, especially those contrary to their religious beliefs and cultural practices, they nonetheless advocated for changes in their attire, deportment, style of entertaining and their way of rearing and nurturing families. All this transpired in an effort to adjust to the norms of the host society.

This thesis relates an optimistic and significant story about change, a change that happened to these women out of necessity, but also according to their own desires. This story is not a tirade of grievances, nor a story of the women's intent to leave their religious-based community, but a story of the hope they felt for themselves and for their daughters. Upon their arrival in Canada, these women saw a chance for change, a change from the centuries-old established women's role in isolated Mennonite communities regulated by patriarchal expectations. As these women worked alongside of their husbands in North Kildonan, they discovered they could be adept and creative at changing things, and as women they were not merely the 'weaker vessels.' With great determination, hard work and frugality they not only changed their own domestic environment, they also became aware that they could think and fend for themselves. After only several decades of life in North Kildonan, significant acculturation became evident within the world of Mennonite immigrant women.⁵⁶

By examining the life and acculturation of the Mennonite Brethren immigrant women of North Kildonan, I hope to make a small but essential contribution to Mennonite historical writings, making them more inclusive and complete. It is an account of women leaving their closed, class-ridden communities in the Soviet Union and making a new start in Canada, amid hardship and a commitment to survival. But it is also an account of how strategic

acculturation to new conditions in Canada, by a group of immigrant women, brought them purpose, meaning and agency.

NOTES:

Introduction.

¹ Such historians as Franca Iacovetta, Francis Swyripa and Veronica Strong-Boag, are adamant that history is incomplete without women's contributions.

² Veronica Strong-Boag, "Writing about Women" in *Writing about Canada: A Handbook for Modern Canadian History*, ed. John Schultz (Scarborough: 1990), 176.

³ Franca Iacovetta, *The Writing of English Canadian Immigrant History*, Canada's Ethnic Group Series, Booklet No.22 (Ottawa: 1997), 15.

⁴ Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People, Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (Montreal and Kingston: 1992), xxvi.

⁵ These books are Frank H.Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920: The History of a Separate People* (Toronto: 1974), and *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival* (Toronto: 1982). The final book in this series is T.D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada 1939-1970: A People Transformed* (Toronto: 1996).

⁶ A. Ross McCormack, "Mainstreaming Mennonites: T.D Regehr, Group Identity and Ethnic Studies," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 15 (1997), 108-115.

⁷ Royden Loewen, *Family Church and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Toronto: 1993). Loewen gives the readers a blended insight on Mennonite women, gender and community.

⁸ Marlene Epp, *Women without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto: 2000), recalls the tribulations and hardships women of the third wave of Mennonite immigrants to Canada had to endure.

⁹ Joy Parr, "Gender History and Historical Practice," *The Canadian Historical Review*, 76 (1995), 354 - 376.

¹⁰ Leo Driedger, *Mennonites in Winnipeg* (Winnipeg: 1990), 29, claims that North Kildonan was close to a "ruban" [both rural and urban-like] Mennonite village.

¹¹ Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus, The Rescue and Resettlement of the Russian Mennonites Since the Communist Revolution* (Altona: 1962), 21.

¹² John B.Toews, *Czars, Soviets & Mennonites* (Newton Kansas: 1982), 23.

¹³ Victor Schroeder, "Die Nord Kildonan Mennoniten Gemeinde," *25 Jahre Mennonitische Ansiedlung in Nord Kildonan, 1928-1953* (Winnipeg: 1953), 10.

¹⁴ Interview of Mary Enns Ediger by Heide Koop, ca.1998, unedited material, Mennonite Heritage Center [hereafter MHC] Winnipeg, Manitoba, 110.

¹⁵ Richard H. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: 1951).

¹⁶ Norma Jost Voth, *Mennonite Foods & Folkways from South Russia*, (Intercourse, PA, 1990), pp. 19-30.

- ¹⁷ These women were 'culture borrowing' and not being totally assimilated to and immersed in the culture of the host society.
- ¹⁸ Professor C.A. Dawson as quoted in E.K. Francis in *Search of Utopia The Mennonites in Manitoba* (Altona: 1955), 216.
- ¹⁹ Francis *In Search of Utopia*, 275-277.
- ²⁰ Leland D. Harder in "Acculturation," *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, (Waterloo, Ontario), Vol.5, 1-4.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Russel A. Kazul, "Revisiting Assimilation" *The American Historical Review* 100(1995): 437.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Francis, 275-277.
- ²⁵ Iacovetta, *The Writing of English Canadian Immigrant History*, 5.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 15.
- ²⁷ Iacovetta, *Such Hard Working People*.
- ²⁸ Frances Swyripa, *Wedded to the Cause, Ukrainian-Canadian Women and Ethnic Identity, 1891-1991*. (Toronto: 1993).
- ²⁹ Iacovetta, *The Writing of English Canadian Immigrant History*, 18.
- ³⁰ Ruth A. Frager. *Sweatshop Strife: Class Ethnicity, and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto, 1900-1939* (Toronto: 1992).
- ³¹ Frager, *Sweatshop Strife*, 8; Swyripa, x.
- ³² Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*, xxiv.
- ³³ Ibid., xxvi.
- ³⁴ Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market*, 44-47.
- ³⁵ Pamela E. Klassen, *Going by the Moon and by the Stars: Stories of Two Russian Mennonite Women* (Waterloo: 1994).
- ³⁶ Marlene Epp, *Women without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto: 2000).
- ³⁷ Ibid., 167.
- ³⁸ My own conversation with a 1948 immigrant woman verifies this concept. She said she was accepted but often not included in social activities.
- ³⁹ Epp, *Women Without Men*, 147.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 166.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 175.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 184.
- ⁴⁴ Gloria Neufeld Redekop, *The Work of Their Hands: Mennonite Women's Societies in Canada* (Waterloo: 1996).
- ⁴⁵ Redekop, that out of the 304 surveys mailed out, 188 were returned (return rate for CMC women's societies was 61% and MB women's societies was 63%) The data from these questionnaires produced the central information for Redekop's book. 111-126.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 114.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 74.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 14.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market*.
- ⁵¹ This woman wishes to remain anonymous.
- ⁵² During interviews with some of the immigrant and sponsor women, it became evident that they at first did not understand each other. However, after several years, women of both groups became friends and 'sisters' in the same *Verein*.
- ⁵³ My own experience during the time that I was a member of a women's group or *Verein*.
- ⁵⁴ Redekop, 103.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid.
- ⁵⁶ Interviews with Mary Klassen, Susan Werschler and Elvira Derksen, new immigrants in 1948, indicated that the Mennonites who settled in North Kildonan in 1929 had become substantially acculturated by 1948.

CHAPTER ONE

Historical Background: From Ukrainian Colony to Canadian Suburbs

In order to obtain a comprehensive view of the acculturation of Mennonite women in North Kildonan, a brief history of Mennonite society and culture prior to their immigration to Canada must be considered. At this point it must be established what living conditions prevailed in Russia for the Mennonites while they sojourned there, what impact these conditions had on the everyday lives of Mennonite women, and what circumstances finally prompted the Russian Mennonites to leave their homeland and immigrate to Canada. Those experiences provided the immigrant women with a particular perspective on gender, ethnicity and religion, that in turn informed their lives during the first years in Canada.

Upon the invitation of the Russian government, approximately fifteen to sixteen thousand Mennonites emigrated from Danzig and West Prussia to Imperial Russia within the years 1789 and 1810. This migration was undertaken primarily for two reasons. First, the living conditions for Mennonites in Prussia under Frederick William II had become substantially restrained. This constraint was attributable to severe land acquisition restrictions, as well as to the imposition of onerous government subsidies to offset Mennonite military conscription. Second, the Mennonites in Prussia found it difficult to resist the generous *Privilegium* or Charter of Privileges, complete with military exemptions and free land attached to the Russian Government's offer for Mennonite resettlement in Russia. James Urry states that "in 1785 the Mennonites heard of the possibility of settling in Russia with guarantees of freedom of religion, acquisition of rich agricultural land, and the right to live their own way of life. As the situation in Prussia deteriorated, the promise of settlement in Russia offered the possibility of a new existence."¹

In late March of 1788, the first Mennonites, consisting of artisans, craftsmen and numerous working poor, commenced on their perilous and lengthy journey to Russia from Prussia. Two Mennonite colonies were initially established. The first colony was founded in 1789 in the Ekaterinoslav area on the Khortitsa River (a small creek flowing into the Dnieper just inside the big bend), and the second colony in 1803, on the Molochna River in the Grubernia of Taurida area.² Two other main colonies, namely Tract (1854) and Old Samara (1859) were later founded in the North Eastern Samara region. After intensive population growth, the first settlements did not expand in area, but daughter colonies were established to complement the existing colonies. This promoted extensive geographic mobility. Some of these new colonies were Crimea (1862) Cuban (1863) Fuerstenland (1864) Borozenko (1865) Schoenfeld (1868) Sagraadowka (1872) and Memrik(1885). These new colonies spawned further colonies.³ In all there were fifty larger and smaller such colonies consisting of 385 villages.⁴

This new colonization movement was mainly the result of intricate inheritance practices. While all children, regardless of gender, had equal rights to property inheritance, the existing land property, could not be subdivided due to government regulations. Therefore, the land inheritance could only be allotted to one child, and Urry notes that in practice this inheritance usually went to the youngest son.⁵ To accommodate the remaining landless progeny, the community or the family bought or rented suitable land where ever it was available, and established daughter colonies.

Within approximately three decades following 1820, many Mennonites prospered and became model farmers. Under the leadership of Mennonite reformer Johann Cornies, new farming techniques were initiated including crop fertilization, summer fallow, four-crop rotation and animal husbandry.⁶ Furthermore, as agriculture became increasingly more commercialized, ports were located to enhance the shipping of agricultural produce abroad. In addition Cornies saw the

necessity of improving water supply sources, sanitation facilities and fire protection equipment. Items such as social welfare and education were high on his list and he set up primary schools paving the way for secondary schools or so called *Zentralschulen*.⁷

Thus, when Cornies was chair of the Agricultural Society in Molochna colony (1824-1848) and Khortitsa in 1847, he controlled the Mennonite societies with great fervor, and brought about many reforms producing great wealth within the Mennonite communities. Urry remarks "that by 1850 a number of individual Mennonites were already wealthy beyond the dreams of the first settlers in Russia".⁸ E.K.Francis comments "when Cornies died in 1848, the Mennonite colonies were on the way of becoming the most prosperous and economically balanced rural communities in all of Russia, the prize exhibit of the colonization authorities."⁹ Urry argues that this Mennonite wealth, educational interest and special privilege linked the Mennonites with the Russian bourgeoisie, and ultimately with the ruling elite.¹⁰

As Mennonite prosperity increased due to lucrative grain sales, some land owners became very progressive and augmented their properties by purchasing or renting additional parcels of land and establishing an estate or *Gut* (khutor in Russian). Thereby these landowners became known as *Gutsbesitzer* or 'estate owners'. Some of the earliest estate owners initially came from Prussia with financial resources, agricultural expertise and entrepreneurial backgrounds, and once they became established in Russia they relied greatly on these attributes to progress financially.¹¹ To demonstrate their ingenuity, numerous landowners initially purchased low priced grazing land for raising livestock; however when it became more profitable to grow grain rather than herd cattle, this inexpensive pasture land was cultivated and converted into excellent grain growing soil.¹²

By 1914 Al Reimer notes that the total land owned by these estate owners represented roughly one third of the three million acres of farmland owned by the Mennonites in Russia. In Reimer's estimation this amounted to approximately 400 to 500 estates, although Rudy P. Friesen believes there were well over 1000 estates at that time.¹³ Furthermore these estates were spread throughout the Ukraine and as far northeast as Siberia.¹⁴ The largest landowner, Wilhelm Martens cultivated between 200,000 and 270,000 acres of land (although some of it may have been rented). Urry comments that these estate owners consolidated their holdings and were joined by Mennonite industrialists and merchants to become the upper middle class or the 'elites' in Mennonite society.¹⁵

The Mennonites arriving in Russia from 1820 to 1850 also had previously experienced preindustrial adjustments in Prussia, as Prussia at that time was well on the way towards becoming an industrialized society.¹⁶ Therefore, when the demand for new machinery escalated in Russia due to enormous agricultural demands, these former Prussian craftsmen and industrialists were willing to take entrepreneurial risks by establishing small businesses manufacturing threshers, mowing machines and durable wagons for grain transport.¹⁷ These factories eventually produced six percent of all the machinery manufactured in Russia, and it is estimated that the eight largest of these factories employed just under a total close to two thousand employees.¹⁸ In addition to the expanding machinery production, brick manufacturing plants emerged and flourished upon the onset of brick constructed houses and factories. Furthermore, large flourmills appeared when extensive grain farming demanded the milling of wheat for domestic as well as export consumption.

These expanding enterprises spawned affluence among the Mennonites, and many import merchants emerged. In the late nineteenth century the wealthy Mennonites began to

demand foreign luxuries, such as European made fine furniture and expensive clothing, and in the early twentieth century imported automobiles became greatly in demand.¹⁹ Francis comments "these Mennonites prospered economically and had largely accepted the ways and values of a capitalistic society."²⁰

The wealth of these affluent estate holders was furthermore augmented by intermarriage practices. Carefully planned marriages between wealthy families were greatly sought after. Urry states that "like married like, so by 1914 the wealthy married the wealthy; rich farmers married members of rich farming families; teachers married teachers or well educated spouses; the poor married the poor."²¹ In her article "The Mennonite Industrial Dynasties in Alexandrovsk," Natalia Ostasheva Venger realizes that the interaction of some Mennonite family and business groups formed a "specific clan system of financial and social activity, a system of Mennonite dynasties."²² Venger argues that these dynasties came into being mainly because of good markets, timely specialization, as well as a joint-stock system that fostered an intergenerational commitment to family business. In addition Venger notes that these business dynasties also influenced and modified the standard of living in Mennonite settlements.²³ Reimer endorses this last comment as he states that the wealthy did much to enhance village life. He observes that the estate owners and businessmen supported and made large donations to the *Zentralschulen*, the orphanages, the deaf-mute school in Tiege and the Bethania mental institution. Besides those numerous donations they paid their fair share of taxes.²⁴

In keeping with their considerable wealth, the homes or manor houses of the estate holders were grandiose and promoted elegant living. Architect Rudy P. Friesen, who researched old Mennonite homes in both Russia and Ukraine, notes that estate or manor houses "ranged from modest two-story dwellings of brick to elegant, architecturally distinctive

mansions of quarried stone, with 15 to 20 or more rooms".²⁵ In fact Friesen states that the *Reimerhof* manor house boasted seventy four rooms.²⁶ In addition, there was a well-laid out garden and orchard in the rear of the house, stables on both sides of the yard, and often a fountain to embellish the landscape. Friesen further notes that descendants of the Kornelius Heindrichs estate describe the estate as possessing "beautiful carriages, liveried chauffeurs, matched trotting horses, large stone buildings, shade trees lining the street, cherry, apple and pear trees surrounding the homes and vast grain fields and quality cattle to support the estate."²⁷

Commensurate with the opulent lifestyle, changes in women's drab and dark colored attire became evident. From photographs taken over the years it becomes apparent that the clothes of the more affluent women became lighter in color and included some floral patterned material. Also here and there a white starched lacy collar or a fine piece of jewelry was visible.²⁸ Furthermore, these affluent women became style conscious as they traveled abroad, and designed their clothes according to European fashions. At times these women also obtained their fashion directions from German magazines such as *Frau und Mutter*, which displayed pictures of then modern women's fashions. These publications were then conveniently labeled *Modeblaeda*, or fashion magazines, by the Mennonite women. In addition the majority of these affluent women relied on traveling tailors to create and tailor their wardrobe.²⁹

Education had great priority in the lives of upper middle class Mennonites who considered education mandatory for boys in order to carry on the family enterprise, and for girls to become good estate wives with genteel mannerisms. Therefore many affluent Mennonites sent their teenagers abroad or to Russian Universities to obtain an adequate

education. Anna Reimer Dyck remarks, "Aunt Tina, together with her oldest sister and niece went to girl's finishing school (*Maedchen Schule*) in Germany. Here she learned various handicrafts, painting, cooking and caring for a home."³⁰ Urry also comments that young women went to study beyond the colonies to become kindergarten teachers, nurses and midwives.³¹ Even for the many who remained in the colonies, there were the *Zentralschulen* (high schools) which were substantially subsidized by the estate owners.³² John B. Toews also notes that "in the field of education the Russian Mennonites privately supported a vast educational complex beginning on the elementary level and culminating in two teachers colleges and an eight-year business college."³³

For the less affluent, and especially for the very poor, higher education was hardly affordable. However when it was available, perhaps due to the benevolence of some relatives, it was mostly geared to benefit boys in order to achieve upward social mobility in their lives.³⁴ Even so, for few lower class girls, whose parents saved diligently to afford advanced education in nursing and teaching, education became a preferred tool to 'marry upwards' into wealthier and more influential families than their own, and hence move upward in society.³⁵

Times were pleasant for the women of the upper middle class Mennonites during the early 1900s. Novels such as Al Reimer's *My Harp is Turned to Mourning*,³⁶ and Sandra Birdsell's *The Russlaender*,³⁷ attest to this statement. Both writers note that times were enjoyable for the prosperous Mennonites who lived an affluent lifestyle which afforded novel amenities such as electricity, hot and cold water, separate washrooms and some sort of telephone communication. Reimer mentions especially the coming of the automobile into Mennonite circles.³⁸ Sandra Birdsell stresses the friendly relationships affluent families such as the Sudermans, the Vogts and the Wiebes enjoyed abroad.

In his recent book, *A Mennonite Family in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, 1789-1923*, David C. Rempel outlines the everyday duties of middle class women according to his childhood experiences. He notes that his mother had seven children (three stepchildren) to care for. As his father had a general store but was also a grain broker, his mother was left to fend for the family, and also tend to the store when he was gone on business trips. This meant that she had to cook and sew for the whole family, look after the garden, can all the preserves for the winter, and also tend to the store in her spare time. Rempel comments that his mother made all their clothes until they reached high school age. While his mother had a Ukrainian woman to help her with her housework, and at times a traveling tailor to help with the heavy sewing, his mother's duties still seemed overwhelming. In addition his mother was very frugal, practiced perfectionism in her household, and still maintained a pleasant disposition both towards family and guests alike. These were all attributes women were expected to display at that time without showing any dissatisfaction.

Rempel further notes that even though they were a very close, loving family their father nonetheless made the major decisions. In addition the father liked to see his children neatly dressed and the house tidy and orderly. Rempel remarks, "the Mennonite world was strictly a man's world. Only men congregated outside the store, while women remained at home, occupied with their manifold duties or visiting friends and relatives." ³⁹

Against these wealthy factions, concentrated in the established colonies, in certain prosperous villages, and on the best building sites, Urry contrasts the landless Mennonites. They were usually located in poorer, older villages or in newly established daughter colonies. Here they lived in small houses on the outskirts of the community with only limited gardening space. They had little or no say in local politics and church administration. Urry emphasizes

that the very poor were often the invisible element in village life.⁴⁰ John B. Toews supports Urry and remarks that because representation on village assemblies was based on land holding, wealth only added to the power of the already privileged. Toews further notes that by the mid 1880s a large landless proletariat emerged.⁴¹ C. Henry Smith observes that the differences between well-to-do Mennonites and less prosperous Mennonites were greater in Russia than is the case in North America. In Russia the Mennonites were in danger of developing extremes on economic levels.⁴²

As the very poor did not own land, and in most cases did not possess the proper skills and crafts in demand by their local communities, they had merely their labor to sell. Therefore, compared to the upper middle class Mennonites, these poorer counterparts fared badly. Urry states that by 1841 the Molochna Mennonite farmers not only owned land but had a yearly income of close to twice that of craftsmen and exceeded by ten times that of farm laborers. However, this varied from year to year according to the farmer's harvests.⁴³ Therefore, many of the poorer Mennonites subsisted on the periphery of the Mennonite society, and were classified merely as shop assistants, petty clerks, factory supervisors and workers, carriers and boatmen. By 1914 ghettos of poorer Mennonites had begun to form in the more industrialized areas.⁴⁴

This social stratification resulted in the differentiation of the Mennonite women's lifestyles in Russia and Ukraine. Albeit, while all Mennonite women had the same essential roles to fulfill, namely those of bearing and rearing children, being in charge of the household and being subservient to their husbands both at home and in church, the upper middle class women nonetheless had substantially greater assistance in accomplishing these tasks than their less fortunate counterparts.⁴⁵ The upper middle class women often received this assistance

from the hiring of peasant maids and from the development of new technology (electricity, hot and cold running water in the house).⁴⁶ Al Reimer notes that the average upper middle class estate house hold, consisting of a house with fifteen to twenty rooms, was able to accommodate a fairly large family, a live-in cook, a nursemaid and several domestics.⁴⁷ In her memoirs, Liese Peters, a wealthy factory owner's daughter, remarks "we had a large estate and employed three or four domestics within the household. 'Auntje' was the head cook. I cannot remember my mother ever standing and cooking at the stove. She had to preside over the whole household and see to it that all went smoothly."⁴⁸

To attest to these tedious, yet presumed necessary household activities prevalent in the estate residences, a daughter of the former Apenlee Estate remarked that her duty in the home was merely to check the décor of the dinner tables set by the hired help. She believed that proper table etiquette had to be observed prior to the numerous large family gatherings.⁴⁹ Al Reimer also refers to the large family gatherings and notes that there was much visiting back and forth among the estate families. Communal outings such as skating on the estate ponds, playing ball games and in some cases attending private theatrical performances were often planned and well attended. In addition to these activities, weddings lasted many days during which time the numerous guests had to be fed and lodged. Furthermore, seasonal farm help, consisting from twenty four to one hundred workers during harvesting days, had to be fed at least twice a day. All this required much attention to food preparation and its distribution by the wives of the estate.⁵⁰

In contrast to the upper middle class women who had considerable help in performing their designated duties, their less affluent counterparts were expected to perform their everyday chores exclusive of any outside help. In addition these poorer women were usually involved in

some sort of cottage industry as well as in assisting their spouses during the hay making and harvesting seasons.⁵¹ Urry remarks that in addition to this arduous workload, many men “exploited the labor of their daughters and wives to produce silk, which could be highly profitable.”⁵² He notes that many of these families labored far into the night preparing silk and flax to earn a little extra. Supplementary to this excessive workload, poorer women often bore the burden of caring and supporting their elderly parents or handicapped siblings. In times of severe health crisis these women had only family and close friends to rely on.⁵³ The families of the less affluent Mennonites tended to be larger than those of their wealthier counterparts. Urry notes that the fall in family size among the Mennonite elite could be attributed in part to later age at marriage.⁵⁴

Not only was the lifestyle of Mennonite women determined by class differentiation, but the women’s social status also depended greatly on class standing. A woman’s social status was solely derived from her husband’s social status. Already at the altar a Mennonite woman relinquished her name identity, thereby accepting both her husband’s surname as well as his given name. A good example of this would be that after the nuptials Mary Klassen who wed Johann Reimer became Frau Johann Reimer or *de Johann Reimasche*. Mary’s given name was used only in the most familial state, namely in family circles or among very close friends. This naming practice tied Mary in with either Johann’s low or high status within the community, thus making it more prestigious to be called Frau Johann Reimer, the estate holder’s wife than Frau Johann Reimer, the laborer’s wife. Very often, therefore, it was the intention of girls to “marry up” to improve their position through a strategic union with a wealthy or influential family.⁵⁵ James Urry notes that when a poor young woman would marry

farmer's son of moderate standing, her status would have been transferred to that of her husband's clan.⁵⁶

This situation was difficult for older single women, or spinsters, as they had no husbands to rely on for status. These women simply endured a humble status within the community, and were mostly relegated to performing menial tasks such as helping out in their extended family by baby sitting, assisting mothers after childbirth and caring for the elderly and the infirm. Perhaps this was one of the crucial reasons for girls to get married early in life, as being a spinster aunt was often the brunt of crude humor.

However, already by the early 1900s Mennonite women's roles in affluent homes were beginning to change somewhat. By that time some women were given substantial roles in the business enterprises of the husbands. Venger notes that several women were engaged in managing businesses. She stresses that modernization influenced many communities and that women were an important element in the expansion of Mennonite entrepreneurship. For example, Katherina Jantzen, the wife of Jakob Jantzen, was in charge of a dairy plant and Margaritha Harder was in charge of an inherited textile plant. Furthermore Venger notes that three women, Maria Hermanovna Lepp, Justina Hermanovna Lepp and Eva Henrikhovna Lepp were actively involved in managing the production of their enterprises from 1912-1915. They all held technical positions at the Lepp and Wallmann factory and received well deserved wages.⁵⁷ Another woman, Elizabeth DeFehr managed a hospital for wounded soldiers at the so called *American Mill* in Millerovo during World War I.⁵⁸ Elizabeth DeFehr was by no means a token woman in hospital management, as she managed her position well.⁵⁹

In response to this, Urry argues that Mennonite women's roles were changing due to the higher education they were receiving compared to that of the past. Urry comments that from

1895-1913, 1167 girls attended the Khortitsa Girls School and then went to study in European or Russian schools to become kindergarten teachers, nurses, midwives and to attend classes in music and arts. These young women then returned to take over positions long dominated by men.⁶⁰ However, Urry also notes that in the households of the older conservative Mennonites women knew their place, namely that of being subservient to their husbands.⁶¹

Acculturation with the Russian host society was not encouraged by the Mennonite society. This was substantiated by the fact that the majority of Mennonites lived in segregated societies, mostly far removed from large urban centers. Under these circumstances Mennonite women practiced little interaction with their Russian peasant counterparts, other than perhaps the daily contact with the Russian hired help. Furthermore, besides some Russian or Ukrainian food preparations such as cooking borsht, preparing perogies, making cabbage rolls, and baking paska, Mennonite women had little cultural affiliation with their Russian or Ukrainian neighbours. This becomes very apparent from the fact that most of the older Mennonite women did not even bother learn to speak the Russian or Ukrainian language, but had the younger women, who could speak the language, interpret for them when the necessity arose. At times the hired help had to learn to speak Low German to communicate with their employers.⁶²

In addition, the Mennonites generally perceived themselves as the dominant society and looked down upon their Russian and Ukrainian workers and peasant neighbors with condescension.⁶³ This feeling of superiority by the Mennonites was partly due to the fact that the Mennonites in general had a higher education than the Russians. In 1897 most Mennonites in Russia were literate, while only 28% of Russians were literate. By 1914 Russian literacy rates increased to 50%, still under the Mennonite literacy rate.⁶⁴ While these workers were

often negatively stereotyped as being idle, dirty and dishonest, Urry nonetheless remarks that not all Mennonites looked negatively upon their workers.⁶⁵

By 1914, the Mennonites in Russia were well established and formed a kind of Mennonite welfare state sponsored mostly by the communities and a benevolent upper middle class.⁶⁶ Frank H.Epp remarks that "as a state within a state the Mennonites attended to all the civic, church, economic, welfare, cultural and educational needs themselves".⁶⁷ Furthermore Epp claims that "by the early 1900's the Mennonite colonies in Russia had become the most prosperous and well-developed rural communities in all of Russia. For half a century they had been the prize exhibits of Russian colonization officials".⁶⁸ Epp describes this prosperity, noting that there were well planned villages, rolling grain fields, millions of cattle and progressive industry establishments augmented by a splendid school system and a group of welfare institutions.⁶⁹

Al Reimer, however, notes that as early as 1905 estate owners became aware of the discontent and threats of violence from their workers and surrounding peasants. As many estate owners feared that their days of prosperity and privilege were over, some retreated to nearby villages and left the handling of their factories and estates to their managers. By 1917 hostilities to the Mennonite estate owners escalated and after the German army left Ukraine in 1918, many estate owners were gruesomely killed, their wives and daughters raped, and their beautiful properties destroyed.⁷⁰

Both Al Reimer and Sandra Birdsell describe the times of death and carnage that followed 1918 in their novels. Whole families were ruthlessly murdered and possessions destroyed by roving bands.⁷¹ Wally Kroeker has recently popularized this image by noting that "ravaging bands of anarchists laid waste to many villages in the two major colonies

(Khortitza and Molotchna), raping and pillaging as they went. Hundreds of Mennonites including infants and old men were murdered. Some were gruesomely decapitated".⁷²

Anna Reimer Dyck also recalls that unpleasant time in her memoirs:

Only once again did I see my grandfather's farm. In 1918 Aunt Tina decided to see if the family estate could be recovered, so she went to Prochiadnaya and took me with her. Soon we were at the old estate. How desolate and forlorn it looked. Bandits from the surrounding hills had ransacked the once beautiful house. Windows had been shot out, some boarded up or simply stuffed shut with anything available. The farmyard was almost deserted, all the proud animals gone. The fruit trees were almost breaking under the weight of unpicked fruit. The roses were still blooming, but no one was making bouquets. I was overwhelmed with a feeling of sadness and disappointment; what once had been a scene of beauty and happiness was now desolate and deserted.⁷³

E.K. Francis notes that the Mennonite colonies experienced the terrors of civil war three more times. This occurred when the regular Red Army replaced the Machnov bands in 1920, when General Wrangle's White Army was in power from June to November of the same year, and when the Red Army came to stay.⁷⁴ In addition, every time the military front passed through a village, a large number of the soldiers had to be billeted in private homes. This brought about significant problems as many of the soldiers were afflicted with disease and vermin thereby infesting the clean homes. Francis notes that this deplorable situation was further exacerbated by famine (1921-1922) and that approximately ten per cent of the Mennonite population perished from disease and famine.⁷⁵ Had it not been for the American Mennonite Relief organization feeding stations, many more lives would have been lost.⁷⁶

Furthermore, Mennonite institutions, such as the Muntau Krankenhaus (hospital), Bethania Mental hospital and the Tiege School for the Deaf, establishments that had been the pride and responsibility of estate owners, now lay ransacked and looted.⁷⁷ Private Schools and churches were taken over by the government for functions other than for which they had originally been designed. In addition, teaching religion in schools was forbidden, and John B. Toews notes that "by 1927 the arrest and exile of many religious leaders became alarmingly

common".⁷⁸ As the communists took over, the whole infrastructure of the Mennonite Commonwealth crumbled simultaneously with the wealth of the estate holders.

While the economic situation improved slightly with the formation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1921, the policy had drastic ramifications for the Mennonite colonies. C. Henry Smith explains how this new policy demanded:

Complete nationalization of the land, thorough liquidation of the large landowners, and redistribution of the land of the smaller farms. It included nationalization of all church property, complete state control of the educational system, atheistic propaganda designed to root out all consciousness of God and religion from the minds and the hearts of the youth of the land, and the elimination of the religious leaders.⁷⁹

The typical Mennonite was unable to cope with the revolutionary demands of change outlined by the NEP, as it meant not only the collapse of the Mennonite economic world, but an end to local autonomy, capitalism, educational independence, as well as cultural separation, and the termination of religious freedom. Furthermore Toews says that this change was demanded amid intensifying violence and brought about great starvation.⁸⁰ In 1921, B.B. Janz, the chairman of the VMSR (Union of South Russian Mennonites) commented "we have only one class in our society: the poor!...The beggars staff for all! An entire land of beggars and sufferers...And where shall we go to beg? No where is there a fruitful field or a full pocket."⁸¹ Not only had the Mennonites become poverty stricken, they had also become anxious about their lives and feared total religious annihilation. As early as 1922 the Mennonites believed it was time to leave the *Red Paradise* due to political and religious persecution.⁸²

This exodus was accomplished in the years 1922-1930 and constituted the second wave of Mennonite immigration from Russian or Ukrainian lands. Over that period of time 21,000 Mennonites were admitted into Canada and 2,600 went to South America, together constituting about 20% of the total Mennonite population in the Soviet Union.⁸³ While Urry believes this

immigration was a mainly a matter of economic survival,⁸⁴ John B. Toews, nonetheless argues that it was a matter of both physical and religious survival.⁸⁵ Certainly in Canada these new comers sought not only to find work and sustenance, but also to create close-knit ethno-religious communities and thus sought to replicate old ways.

This chapter has related how the Mennonites ventured forth from Prussia into Imperial Russia between the years of 1789 and 1810. All that the Mennonites had ever hoped for, namely, freedom from religious oppression and freedom to prosper economically and progressively had been promised to them by Catherine 11 of Russia. This agreement was carefully crafted and designed by Johann Bartsch and Jakob Hoeppner to deter any pretext by the Russian Government to disregard its initial commitment.

Reality, however, turned out differently. The Mennonite immigrants endured many difficulties and hardships as they worked ardently to provide for their livelihood with only meager financial results. This devastating situation improved in 1806, when Johann Cornies settled in the Molochna colony. Agriculture began to profit greatly under his leadership. He initiated new farming techniques, commercialized agriculture by locating good sea ports conducive to a lucrative grain trade with foreign markets. Cornies was also an ardent advocate for good education and community improvement. The farmers prospered under his leadership and became very wealthy.

This extreme wealth promoted a diverse class structure – an hegemonic upper class composed of estate holders and wealthy business men juxtaposed with the poor lower class, consisting of craftsmen, artisans and laborers. A substantial aspiring middle class emerged straddled between the two classes.

This class differentiation also asserted itself on the everyday lifestyle of the Mennonite women. The wealthy women had more help to complete their household tasks than the poorer women who had to rely on their own strength to raise larger families. Furthermore this class difference also affected women's status, a status was dependent on the wealth of their husbands.

Times changed and during the Russian Civil War, many of the wealthy upper class Mennonites forfeited all their possessions and many gruesomely lost their lives. It was then that the Mennonites believed it was time to leave this land of promises and move on. Many of them immigrated to Canada, thereby constituting the second wave of Mennonite immigration to Canada. Here they agreed to live without being a burden to the government and to till the soil as agriculturists. These experiences in the old homeland would shape the immigrant women's gendered and ethnic identities and inform their initial responses to their new homes in Canada.

Notes:

Chapter One.

- ¹ James Urry, *None But Saints, The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia 1789-1889* (Winnipeg: 1989), 49.
- ² Francis, 19.
- ³ William Schroeder and Helmut T. Huebert, *Mennonite Historical Atlas* (Winnipeg: 1990), 90.
- ⁴ Horst Gerlach, *Die Russlandmennoniten Ein Volk Unterwegs* (Kirchheimbolanden, Germany: 1992).
- ⁵ Urry, *None But Saints*, 61.
- ⁶ Ibid., 109.
- ⁷ Francis, 123.
- ⁸ Urry, *None But Saints*, 143.
- ⁹ Francis, 23.
- ¹⁰ James Urry, "Prolegomena to the Study of Mennonite Society in Russia, 1889-1914," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 8 (1990), 67.
- ¹¹ Al Reimer, "Peasant Aristocracy: The Mennonite Gutsbesitzertum in Russia," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 8 (1990), 78.
- ¹² Urry, *None But Saints*, 141.
- ¹³ Rudy P. Friesen with Edith Elizabeth Friesen, *Building on the Past, Mennonite Architecture, Landscape and Settlements in Russia/Ukraine*, (Altona: 2004), 594.
- ¹⁴ Reimer, "Peasant Aristocracy," 77.
- ¹⁵ Urry, *None But Saints*, 143.
- ¹⁶ James Urry, "The Social Background to the Emergence of the Mennonite Brethren in Nineteenth Century Russia," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 6 (1988): 20.
- ¹⁷ Toews, *Czars, Soviets & Mennonites*, (Newton, Kansas: 1982), 6.
- ¹⁸ A. Ehrh, *Das Mennonitentum in Russland*, (Berlin: 1932), 92. as quoted in Toews, *Czars, Soviets & Mennonites*, 6.
- ¹⁹ Toews, 6.
- ²⁰ Francis, 194.
- ²¹ Urry, "Prolegomena," 64.
- ²² Natalia Ostasheva Venger, "The Mennonite Industrial Dynasties in Alexandrovsk," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 21 (2003), 89-107.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Reimer, "Peasant Aristocracy," 81.
- ²⁵ Friesen, *Building on the Past*, 596.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 625.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 612.
- ²⁸ James Urry, "Through the Eye of a Needle," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 3 (1985), 22.
- ²⁹ David G. Rempel, *A Mennonite Family in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, 189-1923* (Toronto: 2002), 91.
- ³⁰ Anna Reimer Dyck, *Anna From the Caucasus to Canada*, (Hillsboro, Kansas: 1979), 261.
- ³¹ Urry, "Prolegomena," 63.
- ³² Reimer, "Peasant Aristocracy," 83.
- ³³ Toews, 14.
- ³⁴ Urry, "Prolegomena," 64.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Al Reimer, *My Harp is Turned to Mourning*, (Winnipeg: 1985).
- ³⁷ Sandra Birdsell, *The Russlaender*, (Toronto: 2001).
- ³⁸ Reimer, *My Harp is Turned to Mourning*, 61-63.
- ³⁹ Rempel, 87-110.
- ⁴⁰ Urry, "Prolegomena," 61.
- ⁴¹ Toews, 11.
- ⁴² Smith, *Smith's Story of the Mennonites* (Newton Kansas: 1981), 271.

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- ⁴³ Urry, *None But Saints*, 144.
- ⁴⁴ Urry, "Prolegomena," 61.
- ⁴⁵ Urry, "Through the Eye of a Needle," 21.
- ⁴⁶ Urry, *Prolegomena*, 63.
- ⁴⁷ Al Reimer, "Peasant Aristocracy," 83.
- ⁴⁸ Memoirs of Liese Peters, 6-13. Unedited material, original now in possession of Hildegard Isaak, Winnipeg.
- ⁴⁹ As Katherna Epp as related later on in North Kildonan to her son.
- ⁵⁰ Reimer, "Peasant Aristocracy," 84.
- ⁵¹ Urry, *None But Saints*, 89.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 144.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 145.
- ⁵⁴ Urry, "Prolegomena," 62. Urry notes that the fall in family size among the Mennonite elite can be attributed in part to later age at marriage. He bases this statement on a brief analysis of over 300 Mennonite Brethren marriages in 1913, which states that 24% of women married under the age of twenty compared with only 3% of men. This analysis was publicized in "Die Mennonitische Generationsdauer", *Friedenstimme*, 88 (9.November, 1913), 8. See *Prolegomena*, 74 for notes.
- ⁵⁵ Urry, *Prolegomena*, 64.
- ⁵⁶ Urry, "Gender, Generation and Social Identity in Russian Mennonite Society," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 12 (1999), 101. Also common knowledge among Mennonites who emigrated from Ukraine during the first and second waves of immigration to Canada. Furthermore, obituaries, letters and articles in the *Rundschau* in 1928-1930 often address women by their husband's given as well as his surname.
- ⁵⁷ Venger, 100 -101.
- ⁵⁸ Friesen, 703.
- ⁵⁹ In conversation with some of Elizabeth DeFehr's relatives, who said she was a very capable organizer, hard worker and suitable for this job.
- ⁶⁰ Urry, "Prolegomena," 63.
- ⁶¹ Urry, "Through the Eye of a Needle," 21.
- ⁶² Urry, "Prolegomena," 67.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 57.
- ⁶⁴ Many conversations with my mother during my teen years taught me otherwise. My mother always emphasized that the workers on her step-parent's estate in the Crimea were clean, hospitable Tartars – their linens were dazzling white, the residences were kept clean and the tea they always offered to strangers was excellent. They were also good workers. Hence, in many cases, they were paid wages above those they would have received had they worked for a Russian Estate owner.
- ⁶⁵ Urry, "Prolegomena," 68.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.
- ⁶⁷ Frank H.Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 203.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁰ Reimer, "Peasant Aristocracy," 85.
- ⁷¹ Birdsell, 251-265.
- ⁷² Wally Kroeker, *An Introduction to the Russian Mennonites*, (Intercourse, PA: 2005), 44-45.
- ⁷³ Anna Reimer Dyck, *Anna From the Caucasus to Canada*, (Hillsboro, Kansas: 1979), 26-27.
- ⁷⁴ Francis, 200.
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁶ Toews, 113. Toews notes that the American Mennonite Relief fed all people in Mennonite villages, whether they were Mennonite or non-Mennonite. In Halbstadt volost for example the agency fed 58.5 percent of all Mennonite children and 64.2 percent of non-Mennonite children besides many adults.
- ⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.
- ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.
- ⁷⁹ Smith, 321.
- ⁸⁰ Toews, 114.
- ⁸¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁸² Francis, 200 – 201.

⁸³ Kroeker, 47-48.

⁸⁴ James Urry, "After the Rooster Crowed," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 13 (1995), 29.

⁸⁵ Toews, 118.

CHAPTER TWO

The Early Days in North Kildonan

This chapter focuses on the early Mennonite immigrant settlement in North Kildonan, Winnipeg, Manitoba. The emphasis on the establishment of the settlement, the physical hardships endured by the immigrant women, and the realization that not only the men but also the women would have to be engaged in projects promoting the survival of the settlement.

E.K. Francis notes that the permission of Mennonite immigration to Canada in 1930 hinged on an agreement between the Mennonite Board of Colonization and the Canadian Government. This agreement stated that Mennonites who were accepted by Canada would be obligated to find shelter and support among their brethren, would be placed on the land as farmers, and would not become public charges. It was further understood that the privilege of complete military exemption granted to the earlier grouping 1873 would not apply to them.¹

To comply with the agricultural restrictions in this agreement, the immigrants to Manitoba settled in farming areas. E.K. Francis notes that:

30 per cent settled on land and villages abandoned by the *Auswanderer* group in the West Reserve, and another 10 per cent in the East Reserve. Perhaps 25 per cent were settled in about a dozen larger blocks near Arnaud and St. Elizabeth, Culross, Boissevain, Manitou and the Turtle Mountains, Starbuck and Springstein, and Oak Lake and La Salle.²

Once they had landed in Canada, the 'second wave' immigrants, or so called *Russlaender*, stayed either with relatives or hospitable Mennonite farm families to fulfill their agricultural commitment. Here these immigrants, especially those with larger families, could repay some of their travel debts while the men performed farm chores and the women worked as domestics in the area. Some new immigrants even their single daughters to work as domestics in Winnipeg. Here the girls undertook some live-in positions while staying at the Mary Martha

Home (a Mennonite sponsored hospice for single Mennonite working girls) during their days off work.³

Eventually in 1927, these immigrants began to search for land near Winnipeg to establish a Mennonite community. Real Estate agents Jakob Neufeld and Frank Isaak located a twenty acre parcel of land in North Kildonan, a rural community about two miles north of Winnipeg, which was in the process of being developed by Wilson & Co. This land was located on River lot #59, ward 4, east of Kildonan Road (now Henderson Hwy) and Steedman Avenue (now Edison Avenue). Dietrich Klassen notes that "21 building lots were set up by surveyor H.A. Bayne, and organized in the following manner. The first fifteen lots, mostly 184 feet wide and one acre in size stretched one half mile east of Henderson Highway where the five acre lots began. This was to be the 'Chicken and Garden Village' of Winnipeg. It was believed that the Mennonite immigrants could establish themselves as small farmers making a livelihood by engaging in chicken farming, dairy farming as well as market gardening."⁴

To promote this land development, a lengthy advertisement was placed in the *Mennonitische Rundschau* by realtors Frank Isaak and Jakob Neufeld, which publication described the land in the new proposed development as flat, black loam, excellent for vegetable gardening and favorable for chicken farming. The writers of the ad noted the land had the propensity of good economic return, as it was located in the prime vegetable growing area of Winnipeg. Furthermore the ad maintained that with several cows and sufficient chickens the Mennonite settlers could make a comfortable living.

The ad further noted the nearby location of two established schools: one school with classes up to grade eleven was a quarter mile away from the proposed settlement, and the other school instructing classes up to grade twelve was situated a little further away. Good sidewalks

and a highway connected the schools with the settlement. The ad also commented that a three acre parcel of land would be set aside free of charge to locate a church building.

The ad also noted that other egg producers in the surrounding area of the new settlement realized their income from chicken farming as follows: that each hen consumes approximately two dollars worth of purchased feed annually, resulting in approximately twelve dozen eggs a year. In turn the eggs could be sold at forty-five cents a dozen, resulting in five dollars and forty cents gross profit a year, thus leaving a net profit of approximately three dollars per hen. However, the ad stipulated that the eggs to be sold must be fresh – no older than three days, to fetch a good price.⁵

This promotional emphasized that the house constructed by Wilson & Co. was to measure 22'x 26' (572 sq ft in area) with an attached verandah, and built of first class material. A forty to fifty foot-deep well was to be dug for every four homes. Building material for a fourteen foot-long barn was also included in the price of \$3,575.00. Furthermore, Wilson & Co. noted that the land would be cleared and ready for use. Later on however, a contract was made with the Company that each settler could clear his own land and work on the building of his house for credit towards his debt with Wilson & Co.⁶

Financial arrangements were to be as follows: The debt was to be paid off in seventeen years at an interest rate of 7½ per cent. A \$300 deposit was required from each purchaser to initiate the deal. This deposit was then to be kept in trust by the immigrants' notary, A. Buhr, until final arrangements in the land deal had been ratified.⁷ The payments that had to be met were as follows: the first three years there were to be payments of \$300 per year, the next two years \$350 per year, the next five years \$375 per year, the next two years \$400 per year and the last five years payments were to escalate to \$450 per annum. A.C. DeFehr believed that these

payments were exorbitantly steep for the Mennonites, as most of them were destitute and without jobs.⁸

The adversities facing the immigrants at that time were considerable. First, A.C. DeFehr, a spokesperson for the Mennonites, remarks that as far as he could ascertain, Wilson & Co. became insolvent after it made a \$500 deposit to the Municipality of North Kildonan for the purchase of River Lot #59. DeFehr notes that Wilson required a further injection of capital to prevent the project from failing in its entirety, and was searching desperately for investors to finance the deal. As none were located, Wilson & Co. called a meeting with all the purchasers asking them to sign a waiver releasing the deposit money entrusted to notary A. Buhr.

DeFehr remarks that after many hours of negotiations in English by Mr. Wilson, of which the Mennonites understood very little, the immigrants became exhausted and signed the document. This freed up the money for Wilson & Co. to use. A.C. DeFehr notes that in addition Wilson & Co. borrowed another \$500 from him to keep the project afloat.⁹

Soon after these incidents Wilson & Co. left town without a trace – no clues of the company's whereabouts or forwarding address was left behind, and the Municipality of North Kildonan had to take over. The immigrants felt devastated and betrayed by the company they had trusted, and the forfeiture of \$300 was a considerable loss during the depression.¹⁰

In desperation the immigrants negotiated with the Rural Municipality of North Kildonan, and found they were not bound to the contract with Wilson & Co. Each depositor was asked to sign an affidavit of his payments made to Wilson & Co. and the Municipality gave them credit towards their land debt. In addition, the immigrants were then permitted to construct houses according to their own financial means.¹¹ Gerhard Lohrenz notes that these immigrants then settled in home-made sheds and small primitive houses, with the hope to call them their own in

the future.¹² Nonetheless the immigrants were relieved as they had lost only five per cent of their deposit, and were not indebted to Wilson & Co.¹³

A second problem arose for the immigrants with the clearing of the land. During the winter of 1927-1928 the immigrants cleared the brush and bush manually, using only axes to cut down the trees while wading through knee-deep snow. When spring came early that year it brought about the problems of slushy, rainy weather and hordes of mosquitoes. These conditions substantially impeded the progress of the clearing work.

It was of utmost importance that the clearing of the land be accomplished in haste to provide the required space for the construction of chicken barns. These barns were to accommodate the arrival of pre-ordered baby chicks on a specified delivery date.¹⁴ Furthermore, the frantic scramble to erect chicken barns hinged on the fact that the chickens were to become the livelihood of the chicken farmers.

Upon the urgency to meet the delivery date, a phenomenon similar to an old fashioned barn-raising began to evolve. DeFehr remarks that in 1928 everyone helped each other in the barn construction. His notes, cast in the patriarchal language of the time, record the quick succession with which the barns were constructed. The Langemann family's chicken barn construction began on April 27, 1928 and was completed by May 1, 1928, and the chicken barns of Abram Wittenberg and the Abram Toews family were completed by May 5th. By May 15th the buildings for Widow Wittenberg, Gerhard Ens, Johann Siemens were constructed and the barns for John Spenst, Gerhard Spenst and Johann Klassen were ready to be occupied. Lastly the house for Abram DeFehr was ready by May 24, 1928.¹⁵ Dietrich Klassen notes that "eight chicken barns were built on Edison Avenue in May 1928."¹⁶

As the Mennonite immigrants in North Kildonan were poverty stricken they could not afford to build a chicken barn and a house simultaneously. Leo Driedger remarks that many immigrants built a chicken barn first and lived in it until they could afford a house.¹⁷ Such was the case when the first chicken barn was built for the Jakob Langeman family. Upon the completion of the barn, a wooden partition was hastily constructed to divide the human habitat from that of the chickens. This meant settling the Langeman family on one side of the barn and the chickens on the other. This accommodation had to suffice until a house could be built.¹⁸ Ike Redekop remarks, "for years many (immigrants) lived in chicken barns converted into residences. They scraped and scrubbed and scraped. Sometimes they even put a cellar underneath. Sometimes they added to it. There was poverty."¹⁹

When the houses were ultimately built or purchased, they were unpretentious small structures. Elizabeth Dyck mentions that her family's first house built in 1932 was a mere 252 square feet in area.²⁰ Peter Koop notes that the house he and his wife built in 1933 was only 280 square feet in area, with an additional lean-to or summer kitchen of 112 square feet.²¹ Jakob Spenst remarks that his family's house, constructed in 1929, was merely 400 square feet in area.²² Other immigrants bought their homes. Anne Regehr Dueck notes that "Dad bought this little shack on McKay Avenue for \$300. It was just a shack, with three little rooms. It was just terrible. Dirty! So I know we had to clean it as it was just full of bedbugs. We had to fumigate it a couple of times so that we could live there."²³ Mariechen Langeman Klassen reflects: "We lived on Edison Avenue at the John Klassens. They had four boys and six girls in a small house and we lived on the yard in a garage with an upstairs."²⁴ Thus everyone lived according to their own means.

While most of the homes constructed were merely rustic buildings, without running water and electricity, the work of construction was nonetheless strenuous and back-breaking. For example, the dugout cellars or half-basements under the homes had to be dug by hand, and all the construction had to be done without power tools, as there was no electricity available in the area at that time.²⁵ Furthermore, as some men had daytime jobs such as shoveling coal or cutting wood,²⁶ much of the barn and house construction had to be carried out in the early morning before work or in the late evening after work. Elder Daniel Loewen remarked, "North Kildonan has been built up in the twilight hours of the mornings and evenings".²⁷ Sunday was always a day of rest.

The first Mennonites who settled on the north side of Edison Avenue (Lot # 59) Ward #4, each identified in the sources by male designations; they were a group of seven families, namely the J.J. Klassen, Johann Siemens, Johann A. Klassen, Jakob Langemann, Widow Peter Friesen, Jakob Neufeld and Abram DeFehr families. This group constituted thirty adults, all members of the North Kildonan Mennonite Brethren Church. In 1929 the first members of the General Conference Church of North Kildonan settled on Devon Avenue. This group, again listed in the sources with reference to male headship, consisted of the John Redekop, Heinrich Redekop, Gerhard Redekop and Peter Voth families.²⁸ Until 1935 they shared their church services with the Mennonite Brethren group who had already constructed a church building on Edison Avenue. Then, in 1935, the General Conference Church constructed their own church facility at 258 Devon Avenue.²⁹

The livelihood of these immigrants in North Kildonan during the depression was greatly diversified. Many who aspired to follow the 'small farming' aspect outlined in the *Mennonitische Rundschau* January 24, 1928, could not afford to do so. While these immigrants

were eager to fulfill their commitment to the Canadian government as farmers, the initial cost of setting up a 'small farm' was too costly.

The chicken farming, vegetable gardening and dairy farming presented so attractively in the *Rundschau*, turned out to be greatly overstated and inaccurate. What the ad failed to underscore regarding chicken farming was the initial cost of purchasing the first batch of baby chicks, the cost of providing a warm environment for the new brood (constructing chicken barns), and the cost incurred by the loss of animals due to disease, inadequate accommodation and inexperience of the new egg producers. Furthermore the price of the eggs was highly inflated,³⁰ and the delivery of eggs to the customers was not considered.

Market gardening also posed problems, such as inclement weather scorching the crops in the unusually hot summers of the early thirties, and great hoards of grasshoppers following to finalize the act of destruction. The mentioned lure of dairy farming also diminished when the health inspector diagnosed several cows in the community with tuberculosis. The cows had to be disposed of, which not only imposed terrible financial losses on the families while the disease itself imposed a horrible danger on the consumers of the milk products.³¹

Furthermore, it turned out that all these lines in 'small farming' (chicken care, garden maintenance and dairy farming) proved to be very labor intensive. With reference to chicken farming, the chickens had to be watered and fed, the eggs had to be gathered, candled, and delivered to the customers. The delivery aspect turned out to be problematic as only a few households had horses and wagons to do the same.³² For this reason Mr. J. Klassen, who possessed neither, delivered two dozens of eggs on foot from North Kildonan to River Heights, a distance of approximately eight miles one way.³³ John Dyck delivered eggs (often in wintertime) from North Kildonan to Fort Rouge on an old rickety bicycle, and then sold them door to door.³⁴

The commercial vegetable gardening was no less laborious than the chicken farming. In early spring the seeds had to be planted in containers which were stored in the small, already over crowded homes. This initial stage of gardening was then followed by a lengthy process of replanting the growing seedlings into wooden slats in the greenhouse, transferring them within several weeks to a 'cool frame' to establish some hardiness for the cool outdoors and ultimately planting the sturdy plants into the well prepared soil of the garden. In addition to this time-consuming work, the dry arid summers of the early thirties demanded that the plants be watered every day to avoid plant loss. This had to be done manually as there was no running water available at that time. Furthermore the garden had to be hoed and weeded throughout the summer and the vegetables had to be harvested and bunched in season. Only then could the produce be sold to the customers in East Kildonan and the inner city.³⁵

What was often not realized was that the women carried a significant load of this gardening due to the fact that their spouses often worked at part-time seasonal jobs for established market gardeners in the area to augment the meager income derived from their own market gardens. This meant that the women at home had to help as much as they could. One evening I noticed my mother Sara Dyck crying while she was bunching carrots for the next day's delivery. She was so exhausted from the day's heavy workload and very depressed by the futility of it all. So much work for so little pay! But she always noted "*We motte to waut komme*" or "we have to get somewhere" and diligently worked on.

The dairy marketing also created much work. It was mostly the women who milked the cows, separated the milk from the cream, and delivered the products to the nearby customers. Furthermore, the communal pasture had to be fenced for the cows in summer, and shelter and feed had to be available for them in winter. As it eventually became apparent that chicken

farming, market gardening, and milk production were all labor intensive undertakings associated with high financial risks and producing only minimal financial benefits, many immigrants turned their attention to other modes of financial survival. Elizabeth Klassen Dyck Mirau reflects that her parents a cow for selling milk, and tried chicken farming. However as the eggs were cheap, and the chickens ate more than they brought in, the parents gave up. She further notes that there were several others that did the same.³⁶

It is difficult to determine just how many of these newcomers initially made their livelihood by engaging in 'small farming' in North Kildonan. The North Kildonan archival tax assessment rolls for these early years are very confusing and somewhat incomplete.³⁷ There are many questions that remain to be answered. Nevertheless in 1929, the North Kildonan by-laws state that there were only four Mennonite immigrants who purchased land on River lot #59, ward #4, with the intention of engaging in chicken farming. Most of the other Mennonite purchasers were classified as laborers or carpenters. The assessment records of the same year, however, indicate that there were no chicken farmers, but all the men who had qualified as chicken farmers were now identified as laborers and carpenters.³⁸ These records indicate that the men turned to manual labor jobs when 'small farming' was no longer financially viable, and when cash in hand appeared of greater value to them in urgent insolvent situations than larger profits further down the line.

The going rate for manual labor jobs was only ten cents an hour. However, even that low rate was a god-send as during the depression all jobs were very scarce.³⁹ Agnes Koehn Schmidt remarks, "my mother told me as the 1930's progressed things became very hard again – very little work, no money and very little food. My dad would walk uptown hoping to find an empty milk bottle or something he could cash in."⁴⁰ Schmidt goes on to say that one Christmas

Eve in the morning her father had gone downtown to look for work. He had gone from door to door to see if anyone needed anything fixed, wood chopped or snow shoveled. But nobody needed anything done. He had tried all day, and finally came home frozen, hungry, and very discouraged. However, this story did have a happy ending, as while the father was gone, the mother had sold an old rusty stove for three dollars to a peddler who just stopped by. The three dollars were enough money for a Christmas feast.⁴¹

Furthermore, the jobs that were available were usually seasonal, such as working in spring, summer and fall for the Dutch gardeners in the vicinity. This resulted in long winter unemployment without any income.

In addition to the depression with its low wage earnings, there was also the high 'transportation debt' or *Reiseschuld* for the immigrants to contend with. The majority of immigrants coming to Canada in the second wave of immigration (1923-1930) were indebted to the Canadian Pacific Railway (C.P.R.) for their transportation costs from Europe.⁴² As credit passengers paid \$164 per adult at 6 percent interest, large families were heavily indebted to the C.P.R.⁴³ This situation weighed heavily on the immigrants settling in North Kildonan, as Susan Unruh notes "they were poor, bitterly poor. They came out of Russia and now had the C.P.R. *Reiseschuld*. But they still had to earn a living."⁴⁴

The urgency of the debt repayment lay not only on the high interest accruing on the unpaid debt, but also in the promise the Mennonites had given to the C.P.R. to repay the debt in installments. The agreement called for a full payment of any one contract within two years. When these payments failed to be paid, due to the hardships of the depression, the C.P.R. became anxious, and reminded the Mennonites of their promise. Frank H. Epp notes that "top officials exerted constant pressure and sent regular reminders that payments were in arrears."⁴⁵

Epp further remarks that "every passing month increased the Reiseschuld burden, and when its full weight was felt simultaneously with the depression and drought in the 1930's it very nearly crushed the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization and discredited the Mennonites."⁴⁶

The Mennonite immigrants in North Kildonan saw no other way to alleviate their financial difficulties other than to send their single daughters to work as domestics in Winnipeg, where there was an abundance of placements. Marlene Epp notes that "in the city girls could potentially earn enough to repay the debt and help their family to get established".⁴⁷ While the girls earned only as little as five to fifteen dollars (plus room and board) per month until they had learned the language and were trained in their jobs, the work and income nonetheless was constant. Thus over time the girls earned more than boys of their age, whose income was often inconsistent and seasonal.⁴⁸

Marlene Epp comments that some of these domestics were merely thirteen years of age, but notes that most were somewhat older, namely fifteen to twenty-three years of age. However, regardless of age, the work they performed was very demanding and strenuous.⁴⁹ The girls were hired as live-in domestics and thus became nannies, chore women, and cooks and at times even served as waitresses at cocktail and dinner parties. In a recent conversation one woman remarked that as a young girl she had tried domestic work for only a few days, just to earn some money. However, as the work consisted of being on her knees and scrubbing wooden floors with steel wool all day, she had quit her job. The work was just too hard.⁵⁰

Not only was the work strenuous, the girls had only Thursday afternoon (Maids Day Off) and Sunday afternoon off. But most of these girls felt it as their duty to work and aid the family in its survival and sometimes these girls felt quite proud of themselves, especially when they

could offer some culinary advice to their family at home, and when they were photographed in their uniform – white lacy headpiece and white frilly apron.⁵¹

However, not all these girls wanted to go and work: some wanted to get an education. One woman remarked that she had wanted to stay in school and become a nurse. But her mother could not grant her that wish as she was a widow. The family needed the daughter's income to survive.⁵² Another woman remarked that her mother wanted her to go to school, but her father was adamant that she had enough schooling (grade six) and he needed her to help at home on the farm.⁵³

Even though there was a necessity for these girls to work, the parents, as well as the church community, were concerned about the working girl's physical and spiritual welfare. Marlene Epp notes that many Mennonites felt that cities undermined morality and stable family life, while being havens for every unimaginable vice.⁵⁴ In response to these concerns, two girls' homes or hospices were established at first in Winnipeg, namely the Mary Martha Home directed by Anna Thiessen, and the Ebenezer Home run by sisters Helen and Agenetha Epp. Further homes for the working girls were also established in Vancouver, Saskatoon, Calgary, Regina and Toronto. All of these homes served approximately 4,500 girls in total.⁵⁵ In these homes the girls could congregate on their afternoons off, air their problems, fellowship with each other, and have a place to stay when they were ill.⁵⁶ It could be stated that for many working girls it was like an oasis in the desert.

It should be noted, that the North Kildonan working girls stayed at the 'girls homes' prior to the establishment of the Mennonite settlement in North Kildonan, as their parents lived on farms remote from Winnipeg. Yet, once their parents resided in North Kildonan, there was no need for the girls to do so as their work was in close proximity to their parent's homes.

Mariechen Langemann Klassen remarks, "We girls all worked in Winnipeg. A whole row of girls! But we came home on Thursdays and Sundays in the afternoon."⁵⁷ She remarks that because they had stayed at the Mary Martha Home prior to their families settling in North Kildonan in 1927, they at times returned to the home for festivities and the renewal of old acquaintances.⁵⁸

Even though the Mennonite community did what they saw fit to provide for the working girls, neither the Mennonite society nor the Mennonite church was fully aware that this seemingly insignificant and inconsequential situation of sending the girls to work as domestics would spawn colossal effects in the lives of the Mennonite women and the Mennonite society in general. These domestics had, in many cases, become the bread winners of the family. In an interview, Elizabeth Klassen Dyck Mirau notes that she belonged to a large family of eleven children, eight girls and three boys, and that "dad and mom lived mostly on the money we girls earned and gave to the parents".⁵⁹ Erica Epp Koop also notes that "when dad was laid off, I was the only one supporting the family."⁶⁰ For once many families could count themselves lucky to have not only boys but also several girls.

In addition to supporting the family while the men were unemployed, these girls were also helping to liquidate the travel debt or the *Reiseschuld*, and assisting their younger siblings to attend schools of higher learning, such as nurses training and teachers college.⁶¹ In working away from home they had become 'bread winners' in the family and entered the public sphere mostly dominated by men.

Not only had these working girls obtained earning power with which they could support their families, but they also acquired an outlet into the cultural world beyond their own small sequestered and restrictive society. By working as live-in domestics they became completely

immersed in the culture of the host society, and thereby experienced that culture first hand; they witnessed how Canadian women dressed, what food they ate, how they cared for their families and how they interacted socially. Wally Kroecker notes that some of the women who had worked as domestics looked back in later years on this experience as participating in a Mennonite finishing school, where they learned 'city manners' and sampled upscale living.⁶²

Much of this culture was foreign to the girls, but they realized that an alternative way of house keeping existed in comparison to their own traditional way. They weighed all new information carefully, always comparing it with their Mennonite lifestyle, and when they returned home on their time off, they shared all their new findings with their family.⁶³ Often their mothers would try to duplicate these new ideas, or at best simply adapt them and fit them into their own modest lifestyle. Marlene Epp notes that these single, hardworking girls initiated substantial changes within the Mennonite society. Hence, it could be argued, that these working girls established the initial stages of the acculturation process within the community of immigrant women in North Kildonan.

Epp is also adamant that these girls were actually pioneers in the urbanization process of their people. She remarks that the girls who went to work in the city, alone and often quite young, nonetheless overcame the fears of urban living so often harbored by the Mennonite society.⁶⁴ She argues that these girls did not become empowered to earn exceptional recognition by the Mennonite society, and that little has been written about them.⁶⁵

This chapter has outlined the beginning stages of the lives of the Mennonite immigrants of North Kildonan: how they lived; what their occupations were; and how they, due to their poverty, could not fulfill their promises to the Canadian government as agriculturalists. As the initial cost of setting up a small farm was too costly for most of them, they turned to manual

labor to eke out a livelihood. But here too, due to the depression, jobs were low paying, seasonal and very scarce. In addition the immigrants had their big travel debt to consider, and as there were rumors that they would be repatriated back to Russia should they default in debt repayment, they saw no alternative but to send their single daughters to work as domestics in the city. Here all-year-round jobs were plentiful even though wages were very low.

These young women, performed well and with dedication, even though the work was arduous and the working skills were difficult to learn. These domestics provided for the livelihood of their family, helped in paying down the travel debt and assisted in their younger siblings education. By being the breadwinners in the family, these women invaded the public, money-earning domain, mostly dominated by men, and experienced the Canadian culture first hand. In doing so, they established the initial stages of acculturation challenging immigrant women in North Kildonan.

Notes:

Chapter Two

- ¹ Cf. Toews report of 1926, 292, as quoted in Francis, 203.
- ² Francis, 213. He also notes that approximately twenty per cent settled in Winnipeg. However this number does not include the ones that settled in North Kildonan after 1928.
- ³ Interview with Mary Klassen, January 2002. She relates her story and claims that a family with three or four girls working as domestics in Winnipeg could comfortably repay their travel debt.
- ⁴ D. Klassen "The Establishment of the North Kildonan Mennonite Settlement," *Fiftieth Anniversary of the Mennonite Settlement in North Kildonan*, (Winnipeg: 1978), 30.
- ⁵ One of several ads placed in the *Mennonitische Rundschau*. This ad was January 4, 1928, 11.
- ⁶ A.C. DeFehr, "Kleine Gartenfarmen bei der Stadt" *25 Jahre Mennonitische Ansiedlung Nord Kildonan*, 29.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 25-28.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ North Kildonan Council Meeting Minutes, October 1, 1929, City of Winnipeg Archives and Records control, 380 William Ave., Winnipeg Manitoba.
- ¹² Gerhard Lohrenz, "The Mennonites in Winnipeg," in *Mennonite Life*, January 1951, 17.
- ¹³ A.C. DeFehr, "Kleine Gartenfarmen bei der Stadt," 28.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 28-29.
- ¹⁶ D. Klassen, "The Establishment of the North Kildonan Settlement," 34.
- ¹⁷ Leo Driedger, *Mennonites in Winnipeg*, (Winnipeg: 1990), 29.
- ¹⁸ DeFehr, 28.
- ¹⁹ Interview of I. Redekop by Heidi Koop, ca 1998, Mennonite Heritage Center [hereafter MHC] Winnipeg, Manitoba, 300.
- ²⁰ Elizabeth Dyck, Memoirs, non-published memoirs, in possession of Irmgard Regehr, Winnipeg, 37.
- ²¹ Peter Koop, "God's Marvelous Leading," *Fiftieth Anniversary of the Mennonite Settlement in North Kildonan*, 112.
- ²² Jakob Spent "Der Anfang war Schwer," *25 Jahre Mennonitische Ansiedlung Nord Kildonan*. 51.
- ²³ Interview of Anne Regehr Dueck by Heidi Koop, MHC, 319.
- ²⁴ Interview of Jakob & Mariechen Langeman Klassen by Heidi Koop, 207.
- ²⁵ Interview of John & Mary Suderman by Heidi Koop. John Suderman notes that there was no hydro in this area until 1934, MHC, 388.
- ²⁶ Gerhard Lohrenz, *The Mennonites in Winnipeg*, 6 (1951), 16.
- ²⁷ Karl Fast, "The 25th Anniversary of the Mennonite Settlement of North Kildonan," in *Fiftieth Anniversary of the Mennonite Settlement of North Kildonan*, 40.
- ²⁸ Carl Driedger "The Formation and Growth of the North Kildonan Mennonite Church," in *Fiftieth Anniversary of the Mennonite Settlement in North Kildonan*, 73.
- ²⁹ Rev. Victor Schroeder, "Die Nord Kildonan Mennoniten Gemeinde," in *25 Jahre Mennonitische Ansiedlung Nord Kildonan*, 10.
- ³⁰ From my own experience as a child I remember that the price for eggs was approximately 25 cents a dozen and not 45 cents a dozen as noted in the advertisement.
- ³¹ I believe it was in 1934 that my grandfather's three dairy cows were condemned with tuberculosis.
- ³² Memories of my childhood prompt me to say that only five households in the Mennonite Community in North Kildonan had horses and wagons by 1934 to deliver vegetables, including eggs, to their nearby customers in East Kildonan. These families were Is. Dyck Sr., Is Dyck Jr. John Dyck, the Jakob Langeman family and perhaps also the Wittenberg family. The other families relied on travel by foot, bicycle and city transit to commute from place to place.
- ³³ Interview with Mary Klassen, January 8, 2002.
- ³⁴ Elizabeth Dyck Memoirs, 38.

- ³⁵ As a child I witnessed these ritualistic steps in gardening for many years because my family was engaged in market gardening for approximately 6 years.
- ³⁶ Interview of Elizabeth Klassen Dyck Mirau by Heidi Koop, MHC, 193.
- ³⁷ The property tax assessment rolls of 1929 can be located at the Winnipeg Archives at 380 William Ave., Winnipeg, MB. However, the property assessments for 1930 and 1931 are missing. Probably no assessments were done in those years. Furthermore, while there are columns available for the number of animals per household, none are noted. It is not certain whether the numbers of animals prevalent during that time were negligible or whether the numbers simply were not tallied.
- ³⁸ This was perhaps due to the fact that people had to work at jobs to earn enough money to engage in chicken farming.
- ³⁹ Heidi Koop, *Peter, a Man of Stamina and Courage*, (Winnipeg: 1993), 96.
- ⁴⁰ Agnes Koehn Schmidt, MHC, 214.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, notes that out of 20,201 immigrants coming to Canada between the years 1923 to 1930, 13,354 immigrants came as credit passengers.
- ⁴³ David Toews report to the Mennonite Brethren conference in Herbert Saskatchewan, June 2, 1930 as cited in Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 281.
- ⁴⁴ Interview with Susan Unruh by Heidi Koop, MHC, .406.
- ⁴⁵ Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 283.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 281.
- ⁴⁷ Marlene Epp in "Mennonite Girl's Homes," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 6 (1988): 101.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 102.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Conversation with Agnes Dyck, May 11, 2006.
- ⁵¹ Noted when I was a child. I always took them to be great authorities on cooking and cleaning.
- ⁵² Interview of Tilly Regehr by Heidi Koop, MHC, 362.
- ⁵³ Interview with Olga Dueck, February, 2002.
- ⁵⁴ Epp, "Mennonite Girl's Homes," 101.
- ⁵⁵ Epp, *Exodus*, 186.
- ⁵⁶ Epp, "Mennonite Girl's Homes," 104.
- ⁵⁷ Interview of Mariechen Langemann Klassen, by Heidi Koop, MHC, 205.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid.
- ⁵⁹ Interview of Elizabeth Klassen Dyck Mirau, by Heidi Koop, MHC, 191-193.
- ⁶⁰ Interview of Erica Epp Koop, by Heidi Koop, MHC, 152.
- ⁶¹ Interview in 2006 with a woman who wishes to be anonymous. She noted that her sister went to work so that she herself could become a teacher.
- ⁶² Wally Kroeker, 73.
- ⁶³ As a child I remember how one working girl came home and baked a cake from scratch, much to the delight of the family. She had been taught this art by the woman she worked for.
- ⁶⁴ Epp, "Mennonite Girl's Homes," 101.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE

Social Support Networks Among Immigrant Women:

The Women's *Vereine*

The previous chapter outlined the beginning of the Mennonite immigrant settlement in North Kildonan, the financial hardships these settlers endured, and the way in which their single working daughters established the basis for Mennonite women's acculturation with the Canadian host society. This chapter focuses on the Mennonite women's support networks, the women's auxiliaries or *Vereine*, and note how these networks supported the women spiritually and socially in their every day life, as well as in their quest for acculturation.

The two challenges facing the North Kildonan Mennonite women in their diaspora were their preoccupation with their traumatic past, and their reluctant adaptation to a realistic present and future. When changes were in the offing the women would protest by muttering "*so hav we daut doch emma yehaut*" or "but we always had it that way."¹ From these remarks it is evident the existing norms of women's everyday lives would be exceedingly difficult to shake in a new environment that encouraged progressive innovation and change.

Like most transplanted immigrant women, these Mennonite women resumed their early life in a continuum with their pre-migration life style, fulfilling their domestic tasks at hand and looking toward to an unchanging future within a closed Mennonite community. While it is true that as immigrants from the Soviet Union these women had been bereft of their financial well-being and their social status, nonetheless, they retained their traditional qualities such as veneration of hard work, frugality, perfectionism and a

dogged commitment to survive from day to day. They believed these latter attributes would support them in their contention with poverty and marginality. Thus, these women were constantly attempting to reconcile the past with the present, without involving significant change.

Nonetheless, encouraged by their working daughters, these women slowly and pragmatically began to adapt to the new life style of the Canadian host society. For this reason Royden Loewen believes immigration was not a transplanting but a re-grafting, fostered by a gradual and cognitive adjustment process. He notes that "migrants constantly struggled not only to insert old vines into new branches, but to determine which of the old vines were worthy of being inserted into which of the new branches. Immigrants chose old inherited viewpoints, practices and symbols to make sense of new realities in North America."² Some similarity of 'regrafting' existed in the experience of Italian immigrants settling in Toronto of whom Franca Iacovetta writes:

These were not uprooted peasants who abandoned their value systems, cultural rituals and institutions on arrival in Canada. Neither did the Italians preserve their traditional ways completely intact amid the new material circumstances. Instead, the encounter between the immigrants' pre migration traditions and the realities of the new society gave rise to a pattern of adjustment that incorporated elements from the immigrants' past and present.³

But acculturation or adjustment to the host society was not a novel concept for the Mennonite immigrants or *Russlaender* when they settled in North Kildonan. Frank H. Epp notes that Mennonites had undergone significant changes during their four centuries long sojourn in the Netherlands, Prussia and Russia, and had developed strong economic, sociological and religious characteristics.⁴ To endorse this stance, C. Henry Smith remarks that wherever the Mennonites trod throughout the centuries, they could not remain totally unchanged. He says that "in building houses, tilling the soil, choosing seeds and plants to sustain their life and animals to assist them, and in marketing their

products, they had to acquire the linguistic skills of their neighbors, and get acquainted with new habits and ways of doing things.”⁵

When the Mennonite immigrants first settled in North Kildonan in 1928, they realized that they also had major adjustments and changes to make to survive and progress economically and socially. They became aware that their initial adjustment was to each other, as they were a diversified group geographically, demographically, economically and educationally. The second adjustment was to their impoverished life style which was attributable to their financial insolvency, their hefty travel debt and the depressed economy prevalent in Canada at that time. A third adjustment was systemic in the adaptation of the Canadian culture, or to their acculturation to the culture of the host society.

First, there was the adjustment to each other. Geographically, these *Russlaender* came to North Kildonan from various parts of Ukraine, namely from the main colonies of Molochna and Khortitsa, and from the daughter colonies such as Memrik, Fuerstenland, Millerovo and Crimea. They had lived geographically distant from each other in the Soviet Union, and were in most cases, unknown to each other.

While it is true that most Mennonites readily traced their ancestors and discovered family linkages from way back, most of these immigrant kin groups were, nonetheless, complete strangers to the other kin groups settling in North Kildonan. E.K.Francis comments that “while most of their leaders may have known each other personally, many of those that were thrown together by the migration actually had been strangers in the Old Country.”⁶ Moreover, the immigrants in North Kildonan became aware that even

though often times they were complete strangers, they nonetheless had to adjust to each other in order to survive and move ahead.

The second aspect of adjustment to each other entailed the demographics of the migration to Canada. The *Russlaender* in North Kildonan came in various family groupings, namely, as small two or three family kin groups, as individual families and single persons without next of kin, the latter having left their extended families behind in Russia. Some of the first kin groups were the families commonly known only by their patriarchal designations, namely the Jacob Neufelds, the Herman Neufelds, the Johann Klassens, the Isaak Dycks, the Gerhard Epps, the Abram Wittenbergs, the Johann Spensts, the Gerhard Spents, the Jacob Langemanns and the Abram DeFehrs.⁷ Furthermore, there were the widows Wiens, Friesen, Wittenberg, Suderman and Balzer, all with adult unmarried children.⁸ There were also individual families, such as the Rempel family, the Toews family, the Regehr family to name but a few of the families which were unrelated to other families in the settlement. Lastly there were some single people namely Peter Koop⁹ and Victor Wilms,¹⁰ who came to North Kildonan by themselves to get married and start a new life.

Although larger extended families had attempted to immigrate to Canada, there were certain conditions that splintered these families en route to Canada. First there were stringent medical restrictions regarding such diseases as trachoma, tuberculosis, mental disability and physical handicaps that prevented disabled people from entering Canada. During the second wave of immigration, no one entered Canada without a doctor approved certificate of medical fitness, and thus many extended families became divided, with the healthy family members immigrating to Canada and the ill remaining in Europe

to convalesce or immigrate to South America where immigration accessibility was not so severely screened as in Canada.¹¹ In addition, these kin groups became further divided in 1929, when more than 8,000 Mennonites were rejected by the Communist government to receive visas, and therefore could not immigrate to Canada.¹² Finally, the very old and infirm stayed behind, due to their incapability of making the long trip abroad.¹³

These *Russlaender* settling in North Kildonan not only immigrated from different districts in Russia; they also originated from various economic backgrounds. For example, the Jacob Neufeld and Isaak Neufeld families came from a wealthy clan that had owned a large implement factory, namely the I.I. Neufeld & Co. as well as a steam powered flour mill in the village of Waldheim, Molochna.¹⁴ The Abraham DeFehr family owned a large flour mill and partnered in operating a farm machinery factory in Millerovo.¹⁵ In her memoirs, Liese Peters notes her father started his implement factory in Sergeyevka, Fuerstenland as a poor man but had become wealthy due to his hard work and business capabilities. Eventually the family owned a beautiful home with all the amenities available at that time.¹⁶ Katherina Dyck Epp's family had owned the Appenlee Estate in the Molochna.¹⁷

On the other hand, another woman remarked that her family home in the Crimea had been humble, consisting merely of four walls, a roof and earthen floors.¹⁸ Thus, among the immigrant women in North Kildonan there were those who had been daughters of wealthy estate farmers and large mill owners, as well as women who had been poor in Russia even before the revolution.

To make the situation even more diverse, these North Kildonan immigrants came from dissimilar educational backgrounds. For example, in her memoirs one woman

stated that she grew up under the tutelage of private school instructors,¹⁹ while another woman remarked that as an adopted orphan she had enjoyed only two years of schooling.²⁰ The former woman said she had become well read due to their large family library; the orphaned women on the other hand commented that she had no access to books until she came to Canada. Still other girls had attended high school (*Zentralschule*) and received a good education. Some girls had even attended a Girls Finishing School (*Maedchenschule*) where they were taught the genteel qualities of estate life.

Clearly, the Mennonites immigrating to North Kildonan came from different areas in Ukraine, in different family groupings and different economic and educational backgrounds. In remarking on the situation of the *Russlaender's* diversity, E.K.Francis argues that these immigrants came from many different settlements and walks of life, and had to adjust to each other once they landed in Canada just to survive.²¹

This adjustment from a diverse background to a unified presence among the *Russlaender* settling in North.Kildonan was not immediately accomplished. A problem arose when each kin group tended to nucleate into a very private cohesive group, distinct from all other extended family groups.²² As most homes of the kin groups were in close proximity to each other, there was a tendency to socialize mainly within their own boundaries, and thereby discouraging interaction with other kin groups, excepting perhaps at the Sunday church meetings.

Perhaps this group differentiation was somewhat standoffish, but it clearly seemed to be the result of the diversity among the *Russlaender* before settling in North Kildonan. According to James Urry a similar situation developed when the Mennonites emigrated from Prussia to Russia in 1788. He notes that at that time Mennonites migrated and

settled in family units varying considerably in size, and lived in cramped conditions, separated from their neighbors by a strong fence.²³ Isolation also seemed to be prevalent at that time in the face of unknown circumstances and unfamiliar faces.

Kin group isolation presented difficulties for the lives of individual families as well as for single people. Susan Unruh remarks that she and her husband came to North Kildonan in 1932, and notes that "at Christmas time it was usually a very lonely time because we were the only ones who had no relatives here...The others all had families. There were the Klassens. They had several families. The Langemans had several families. I had just my two children and Husband."²⁴ It appears that not only kin groups, but also individual families, had the problem of interaction with other individual families.

After a few years, however, with the prevalence of devastating poverty looming over them, this aloofness dissipated somewhat, and as the immigrants became more familiar with each other, the interaction tended to flow more spontaneously. By then they realized they were all strangers in a new land, they were all destitute, and there was no turning back. In order to survive they had to help each other out, as in the already mentioned chicken barn building in 1928. Furthermore, they became aware that they all had to go to the same chiropractor, (Mr. Jakob Rempel) to have their aching back fixed, to the same building expert (Mr. Jakob Spenst) when they needed building advice and to the same grocer, (Mr. Victor Wilms) when they needed credit for their groceries during their low income winter months. They seemed to be one big displaced family.²⁵

To demonstrate this new more hospitable attitude, there was the case of a single North Kildonan immigrant woman with tuberculosis, who was transferred to Ninette

Sanitorium, Manitoba, for treatment. She was very poor and could not pay her medical expenses, nor could the government be of assistance to her because of her immigrant status.²⁶ As there appeared to be a real danger that she could be deported if she defaulted on her payments, all Mennonite immigrants in North Kildonan rallied together and came to her aid. They all agreed to collect fifty cents per family each month to liquidate her debt, as well as all other future debts of this nature.²⁷

The Mennonites knew they had to adjust to each other and cooperate as a group in order to survive. This helped them through the difficult depression years. While many non-Mennonites depended on relief allowances from the government, there were only two or three Mennonite cases (and these were due to serious illnesses) that depended on government assistance, or 'relief'.²⁸

In addition to the adjustment to their diversities, the Russlaender also had to face the reality of their dire poverty. The women were especially affected as they faced the long cold winters in Manitoba relegated to their drab lackluster homes by both tradition and poverty. They felt isolated and lonely.²⁹ In their diaspora they sang 'songs of home' or *Heimatlieder* and nostalgically remembered the homeland they had lost to the Revolution and the loved ones they had left behind.³⁰ Liese Dyck recalls, "we often visited our parents and then we talked about our homeland."³¹ And the situation became even more depressing when they read letters in the *Mennonitische Rundschau*, written by their Mennonite counterparts in Ukraine, pleading for help and assistance to prevent starvation and death.³² One family from Fuerstenland, in Ukraine wrote that their recent visitors had not eaten bread for three weeks, and that their other food was almost non-existent.³³ Another *Rundschau* correspondent gave a list of all the people in their

neighborhood that had hardly any food. They were starving. The writer notes that because the village of Lepaticha had to pay great sums of money to the Soviet government, many people had but little food, and in most cases no bread to eat. In addition, some people had only tattered clothes to wear in the cold wintertime.³⁴

The North Kildonan women were willing to help alleviate such suffering, yet they were destitute themselves, barely having the basics, such as food, clothing and shelter for their families. Nonetheless, they realized that there were also the needs of the new church and its missions to be considered. As these women had always been taught to be good stewards even of the little they possessed, they felt a great need to share even this paltry amount with the less fortunate. But they could not do so by themselves, as the little they could afford would not amount to anything. They surmised however that they could be more effective as a group.

Last, the adjustment or acculturation to the host society was a final hurdle to be crossed, which became a constant issue among Mennonite immigrant women ever since their working daughters initiated inroads towards acculturation. The mothers became aware that acculturation was a necessity to promote social mobility and economic stability. And as the Mennonites lived in close proximity to a large city, the women further believed that a certain amount of acculturation, such as learning the English language, was mandatory for their survival.

The Mennonite immigrant women believed acculturation was a social necessity for both themselves and their daughters. When the immigrant women compared their shabby dark clothing with the bright, trendy clothes of the host society women, they became aware that a drastic change in their own clothing styles would be in order, lest

their daughters become embarrassed in public by their mother's outdated wardrobe.³⁵ Even more so, most mothers urgently wanted acculturation and education for their daughters, so that they could enjoy a better life than that of just being domestic servants or 'scrub women'.³⁶ Perhaps a good education would even enable their daughters to marry 'upward' within the Mennonite society.

But then there was the church to contend with. The MB Church felt concerned that acculturation could lead to complete assimilation with the host society, and eventually result in the loss of Mennonite religious as well as ethnic life. The church based its apprehensive stance on the premises that acculturation was synonymous with a 'love of the world'. In the church's view this could be substantiated by scripture found in John 2: 15 -17, as follows:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world --the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and boasting of what he says and does -- comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desire pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

For many years, this passage was repeatedly preached from the pulpit and stymied the women's attempt at acculturation.³⁷ The women were mostly in favor of acculturation, but not at the expense of the church. Therefore the women weighed every cultural change they made with great care, always questioning how the MB Church and its congregation would respond to it. The question frequently reiterated was: *Oba want wore de Lied sajye?* or "but what will the people say?" Change was welcomed by the women of the MB Church, but they believed that such change should not be decided upon in haste without the church's consent.³⁸

Therefore, whether it was for fostering fellowship among women, helping women to endure everyday poverty, assisting them in their efforts to support missions, or for

supporting them in their acculturation process, these women were seeking a strong women's support network within the church structure, namely a women's *Verein*, to aid and guide them through their labyrinth of difficulties. According to Gloria Neufeld Redekop this concept of women's *Vereine* was not a novel idea in Mennonite history, noting that in Ukraine there had been women's organizations called *Vereine* since their 1840 inception in Gnadenfeld, near Molochna colony. She notes that these Gnadenfeld meetings were held regularly at various women's homes, where the women made articles for the mission and had fellowship with each other.³⁹

The North Kildonan Mennonite Brethren women initially joined their counterparts, the women of the *Tabea Verein*, a support group of the North End Mennonite Brethren Church in Winnipeg. However, this arrangement was not very feasible for the women in North Kildonan, as it was very time consuming to commute to the downtown meetings via street car. There was also the expense of the street car tickets to be considered; four tickets for twenty-five cents or ten cents for a round trip. It seems like a paltry amount today, but when the husbands were only earning ten cents an hour during their temporary summer employment, ten cents was not a negligible amount.⁴⁰

In response to these difficulties, on September 21, 1932, a group of fifteen Mennonite Brethren immigrant women gathered for the first time in North Kildonan Mennonite homes to organize a support system, namely a women's auxiliary or the so called *Verein*.⁴¹ This group met every other Wednesday in different homes to study the Bible, fellowship with each other, share problems and grievances and to solicit prayer when needed. They also did handwork such as knitting or embroidery to sell at their yearly mission auction. A collection was held at the close of every

meeting to which the women contributed whatever they could afford, be it three cents or ten cents. Coffee or tea was always served by the woman who hosted the meeting.⁴²

The structure of this group, or *Verein* was very basic. There was an elected president, vice president, secretary- treasurer and perhaps a pianist (if there was a piano available). It was a rudimentary form of hierarchical leadership, which, in later years, became somewhat more complicated when various committees and sub committees were involved. In the early years, however, everyone rallied around the president or *Leiterin* who enjoyed a revered status.⁴³ It was stressful work for the *Leiterin*, as she had to perform the bulk of the work involved in the operation of the organization. The first *Leiterin* of the *Verein* in 1932 was Anna Neufeld.⁴⁴

No formal membership was required to attend the meetings, but women who attended regularly had a voice in establishing some of the trends for women within the Mennonite church community to follow. A good example of how the *Verein* became the trend setter and the so called 'model' with which to comply is when one woman wore a lace collar on her otherwise drab dress and all women began to wear lace collars; when one woman wore some jewelry all other women wanted to do the same. Nonetheless, all new norms and trends in the *Verein* were always established within the church parameters. At times when dress codes changed within society, and women followed suit, the *Verein* leadership acted as an unofficial liaison between the male church officials and its female members. Through the reading of Bible passages or discussions the *Verein* women made each other aware of the Mennonite stance on women's clothes and whether or not new dress styles were

discreet and proper for 'Christian' women to wear publicly or during church services. Nonetheless, as the *Verein* was an auxiliary of the church, it endorsed church regulations, albeit at times with a little twist.⁴⁵

The *Verein* set its own agenda regarding the goal for the year and how the income from collections and missionary sales was to be dispersed. The women of the *Verein* also established thematic programs to be followed during the year, be it serving the family, supporting mission work, engaging in fellowship with each other, or a combination of the three. Programs for the by-monthly meetings, consisting mostly of Bible readings, prayer, meditations and singing were arranged.

Redekop argues that due to the format and content of these by-monthly *Verein* meetings, the women's *Vereine* functioned as a parallel church to the larger Mennonite institutional church.⁴⁶ She also notes that most women endorsed a women's society where they could voice their opinions, organize meetings, lead meditations and acquire leadership skills, options which they could not perform at church meetings.⁴⁷

While it is true that in 1932 the primary intent in organizing a *Verein* was for fostering fellowship among women, helping them endure their everyday poverty stricken lives, assisting them in their efforts to support missions and aiding them in their desire to adjust to the culture of the host society, there was nonetheless an atmosphere of a parallel church at the meetings. The *Verein* had the attributes of a redundant women's parallel church, its objectives were neither conflicting with, nor divergent to MB Church theology. It was simply an organization conducted by women, to address the needs of women within the institutional church society.

However, some of these positive aspects of the Verein were often eclipsed by the negative, namely, the emergence of a hierarchical organization consisting of the *Leiterin*, the secretary-treasurer and various committees. These committees became very controlling. Nonetheless, Mennonite women were great followers and revered their leaders as though these leaders were superior to the membership. While different issues were discussed over coffee, the role of the leadership was never questioned. This often meant that a very dominant or incapable leadership was difficult to shake.⁴⁸ Furthermore, even though there was a quasi vote for leadership each year, women were hesitant to change leadership roles lest the *Leiterin* be offended and hurt by such a move. The only way leadership changed was due to illness of the *Leiterin*, or due to the resignation of the *Leiterin* for various reasons. Eventually a term of office (three or four years) was established and the situation was resolved.⁴⁹

The women of the *Verein* formed a sisterhood and greeted each other as 'sister in the Lord' or *Schwester im Herrn* belonging to the *Schwesterverein* or *Verein*. Over coffee many new household ideas were aired, new recipes copied, and new dress codes criticized or approved. Some women gleaned new housekeeping concepts from their daughters in the domestic service, and in turn would pass these new ideas on to their *Verein sisters*. Plant cuttings of geraniums, gloxinias, cyclamens and African violets were swapped, crochet patterns written down and dress patterns exchanged. The *Verein* women were anxious to beautify their homes to the best of their ability, which aided the women in their attempt at acculturation.

At the same time, mission needs and church requirements were not neglected, as the *Verein* held a large annual auction sale to support the church and its missions. This auction sale was open to all who wished to attend. Beautiful items such as tea towels and pillow cases were fashioned from lowly flour or sugar sacks. One woman picked blueberries in summer, washed, packaged and froze them to be sold at the mission auction sale in fall. Other women crocheted doilies and runners. Some made preserves and baked breads and cookies. In this way these women were busy all winter, warding off some of their loneliness and thereby benefiting both the church and its missions.

Financial statements for the Frauenverein (ladies *Verein*) were encouraging. Even though the income of the *Verein* seems negligible today, this revenue was acquired during the depression years from 1932 to 1935, when work for husbands was seasonal and often paid only ten cents an hour. At that time church income was also low. For example, during 1934 church membership dues were only fifty cents per person, and the annual church income was a mere \$269.75.⁵⁰

The total annual collections for the *Verein* were as follows: in 1932, \$5.47; in 1933, \$20.84; in 1934, \$17.56; in 1935, \$16.95.⁵¹ Furthermore, there was also the intent of the *Verein* to support the Church and its mission projects by the proceeds derived from the annual handicraft mission auction sale sponsored by the women.⁵² The annual proceeds from this sale varied from year to year. In 1932, the first year in operation, the proceeds from the mission auction sale were \$32.53, in 1933 the proceeds amounted to \$98.45, in 1934 the proceeds were \$119.15 and in 1935 the proceeds were \$94.40.⁵³

Expenditures involved areas of utmost importance to the women, such as home missions, foreign missions and help for relatives left behind in Russia. In 1932 \$10.00 was allotted for Russia, and in 1933, \$25.00 was sent to Russia. After that no funds were sent to Russia, as its borders were closed. It appears that after 1933 the women turned their attention to home and foreign missions. In 1934, \$24.01 was allotted to home missions, and \$25.00 was given to the foreign missions.⁵⁴ In 1935, \$86.13 was allotted to foreign missions and \$58.16 was given to home missions. Preceding the organization of the women's *Verein*, the women had been anxious about their inability to give to the poor in Canada, their loved ones in Russia and the church missions abroad, as they had no funds to do so on their own.⁵⁵ Now, due to the *Verein's* auction sales, women could do just that: those who could not afford to buy goods at the sale, crafted and sewed items before the event, at which time the more affluent women could buy them. Together, all had a part in giving to the poor and to the church and its missions.

Foreign Missions were high on the agenda for material aid. Dresses and other clothing were sewn and knit for outgoing women missionaries, especially when they were from the same *Verein*. In the case of Ann Ediger, who went to India, the women sewed approximately twenty shift dresses, as well as donated other clothing items to last her until her next furlough home.⁵⁶ When the Mennonite Central Committee asked for baby layettes for Africa, the women went to work creating them by the hundreds, and home-made soap and tied and quilted blankets were produced en masse and shipped to third world countries. Disaster kits, including necessary items for survival, were donated and forwarded via Mennonite Central Committee to designated countries.⁵⁷

But both the *Verein* meetings as well as the interactions between the *Verein* members were made possible due to several aspects. First the family sizes were on the decline,⁵⁸ freeing up the women to be more involved and more active in *Verein* activities. Second, all these women lived within a five minute walking distance from each other, namely on three streets, McKay, Edison and Kingsford Avenues.⁵⁹ This close proximity gave the women the flexibility to communicate with each other without depending on any source of transportation. The few horses and buggies that were found in North Kildonan were only used for delivering vegetables and eggs to customers on a weekly basis, and were never used for human transportation.⁶⁰ As a rule, the immigrants relied on the street car to get downtown. However, some men commuted to work on bicycle as soon as they could afford to purchase one. Liese Peters remarked that her husband rode his bicycle to work for many years. When Edison Avenue was muddy in the summer he would simply carry his bicycle on his shoulder for approximately five to ten minutes up to the then graveled Henderson Highway, and proceed from there downtown to his work.⁶¹ However, as money was scarce many people simply walked the distance. Mary Langeman Klassen, Mary stressed that the Mennonites walked long distances during their early years in North Kildonan. She mentioned that her father had walked from North Kildonan to River Heights just to deliver several dozens of eggs.⁶² Anne Regehr Dueck reflects that her dad walked to Gretna from Winnipeg. "We didn't have any money but he was determined to send me to high school in at the Gretna, at the Mennonite Collegiate Institute. He had to get me a place to stay, and he had to pay the tuition."⁶³

Walking, therefore, was not an unfamiliar exercise for the Mennonite immigrant women in the early 1930s, and it provided these women with a sense of independence, as they could perform activities at their own time and as they saw fit. It was not uncommon to see a woman walking with knitting bag in hand to her friends' home, just to visit or to offer some spiritual and physical support.⁶⁴ In addition to friendly visits, items such as chicken soup and fresh baked bread were usually hand delivered by the *Verein* sisters to their bedridden counterparts just down the street. On occasions, able bodied women were seen walking, broom in hand, to help some physically handicapped woman with her housework, and perhaps to chat a bit. The women believed that it was their duty to help other women in need.⁶⁵

For some women this extended practice of benevolence created a status symbol of being very pious and charitable. To be able to assist others and alleviate suffering was considered Christ-like and well worth emulating. On the other hand, to some women such neighborly closeness created a reluctance to participate in these friendly endeavors. There was always a fear that the code of privacy could be jeopardized and that malicious gossip could ensue.⁶⁶

To support the MB Church, these women served at all church food functions such as weddings, Thanksgiving celebrations as well as at funerals. As all the food was homemade, these food preparations required intensive work. Mary Langemann Klassen remarked "every wedding, every thanksgiving. Oh, that was lots of work...so often only a few to do all the work, but it was worth it."⁶⁷ Agnes Dyck remembers her mother, a deacon's wife and a member of the *Verein*, being very involved in serving and preparing food for church functions.⁶⁸ In addition, these women attended to the needs of foreign missionaries on furlough who required accommodation and assistance in overcoming

their culture shock. Visiting Mennonite preachers and their wives were also billeted and made welcome.

The bonding between *Verein* sisters was sincere. When a sister of the *Verein* passed away, the surviving members would form a choir and sing at the funeral. This resulted in a high-pitched plaintive funeral dirge, lamenting the parting of the deceased; consoling the surviving family and admonishing all present to set their house in order. One song in particular, *Der Schwester Geist entfloh, Sie ging Heim* (The sister's spirit departed, she went home)⁶⁹ was a great favorite. Usually tears flowed during the rendition of this emotional song. While these women were not remunerated to perform, their intent was simple, namely to facilitate the grieving process.

As women's support networks, these *Vereine* could be labeled as the precursors of acculturation. Helping others within the greater community was a common practice within the host society and there were numerous auxiliaries to facilitate this. Several years after immigration this volunteerism also became a well established practice within the Mennonite community. These *Verein* women volunteered in Red Cross blood donor clinics and knit for the Red Cross.⁷⁰ Help was also offered to hospitals and schools. Therefore the volunteerism that was practiced here in Canada was readily adopted by these immigrant women and was a step in the direction of acculturation.

Individually, women experienced difficulties acculturating to the new host society, yet together as a *Verein* it was possible. The *Verein* was not only the trend setter of the women's community but also a regulator. It brought about patterns of continuity and change; uniting the past with the present, the traditional with the novel and unknown.⁷¹ To demonstrate the above mentioned concepts, the incident of the "hats" becomes vital.

Upon arrival in Canada, married women wore their traditional black bows, approximately three by five inches in size, at the back of their head. These bows were a token head covering as well as a symbol of marital status.⁷² Anne Enns Braun states that older women like her mother "had their hair in a bun. They had one long braid in the back of their head and it was twisted around to make a bun. They clipped it together with hair pins and then they would have a bow that they put just above the bun, at the back of the head and that sufficed as a head covering to go to church."⁷³ However, within two or three years these bows became replaced by hats – black, navy or brown in winter and white or beige in summer. These were insignificant small pill box type hats, usually with a flat bow attached at the back. As a group the women decided the hats were more stylish than the old black bows, signifying the same aspect. The Mennonite women noticed the women of the host society, namely the Anglican and United Church women, wore hats during their church services, and agreed to do likewise.⁷⁴ In this instance the *Verein* integrated the traditional bow with the modern hat and thereby demonstrated the continuity and change concept within an immigrant society.

The incident of the red hat is very indicative how the women had to act together to achieve a desired end. During a Sunday morning church service one woman appeared, quite unannounced, in a stunning tall red hat. It was a modern hat decorated with roses and bows. Heads turned. It was considered to be rather indiscrete and inappropriate for woman to wear such a daring hat to a conservative MB church service. It is not known whether this woman was reprimanded, yet due to frequent whispering conversations by the *Verein* women condemning such a flagrant disregard for the established norm of wearing small hats only, no other woman of the congregation dared to wear a bright

colored modern hat for several years. Together they could make a change but as individuals it was very difficult.

The *Verein* also aided the North Kildonan immigrant women to become more independent and self confident. This becomes evident from their *Leiterin's* signature. A plain "Anna Neufeld" and not "Frau Cornelius Neufeld", as it would have been in Ukraine, sufficed for a signature. Using the woman's given name and not her husband's given name was practiced here in the Canadian host society. This pronounced women's independence. Furthermore, these women developed organizational as well as leadership skills⁷⁵ and thereby learned how to record meetings, account for money, and organize teas and lunches. It seemed surprising that the very women who had always been relegated to home and household could now speak up before an audience.

This chapter has demonstrated how the Mennonite immigrant women of various Mennonite backgrounds initially had to adjust to their new Mennonite society, and eventually to their host society. Support for this gigantic task came by way of their women's support group or *Verein* which they organized in 1932. As a group these women could overcome their diversity, their loneliness, their inability to help others, and gain the ability to adjust to the culture of their host society. Thus, the *Verein* encouraged and facilitated change, a concept foreign to Mennonite tradition where everyday lives were constant and predictable, and change was often associated with disrupting established social norms and religious practices.

Notes:

Chapter Three.

- ¹ I myself have experienced hearing this phrase many times in my younger days. It seemed that the immigrant women relied on their past for validating their unchanging attitude.
- ² Royden Loewen, *Hidden Worlds, Revisiting the Mennonite Migrants of the 1870*, (Winnipeg: 2001), 6.
- ³ Franka Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*, xxv.
- ⁴ Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 11.
- ⁵ Smith, 511.
- ⁶ Francis, 206.
- ⁷ *25 Jahre Mennonitische Ansiedlung Nord Kildonan*, 31. In the patriarchal society of 1953 women's names were seldom mentioned.
- ⁸ The tax rolls and assessment rolls of 1928 do not show most of these widows as owning property. That is perhaps because the property was registered under their son's name.
- ⁹ Heidi Koop, *Peter, a Man of Stamina and Courage*. 88.
- ¹⁰ Interview with Victor Wilms and Ann Klassen Wilms by Heidi Koop, MHC, 417.
- ¹¹ Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 140.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 262.
- ¹³ My own great grand parents well into their eighties, remained in Russia as they dreaded the long journey to Canada.
- ¹⁴ Friesen, *Building on the Past*, 380 & 381. Also from the conversation with one of the descendants Edith Neufeld. May 30, 2006.
- ¹⁵ Friesen, 703 & 704 . Again no women's names available. Perhaps this is because properties were always registered under the man's name..
- ¹⁶ Liese Peters, 5.
- ¹⁷ In conversation with her son, Fred Epp in 2004.
- ¹⁸ Conversation with my mother when I was a child.
- ¹⁹ Liese Peter's Memoirs.
- ²⁰ Conversation with my mother.
- ²¹ Francis, 206.
- ²² I remember clearly from my childhood that there were distinct family groupings. While the children played together, as they went to the same school, the parents nonetheless often felt more secure in their own private family support group settings.
- ²³ Urry, *None But Saints*, 60.
- ²⁴ Interview with Susan Unruh by Heidi Koop, MHC, 403.
- ²⁵ My own observations as a child.
- ²⁶ Francis, 203, notes that one aspect of the agreement in 1923 between the Canadian Government and the *Russlaender* was that none of the immigrants would become a public charge.
- ²⁷ Interview with Susan Unruh by Heidi Koop, MHC, 407.
- ²⁸ Re North Kildonan council meeting minutes, 1930 -1935, City of Winnipeg Archives and Records control.
- ²⁹ As already noted, in summer these women were extremely busy providing for the winter. However, in wintertime there was more leisure time.
- ³⁰ I remember my mother singing softly to herself as she sewed clothes for us. With great distress she remembered the family she left behind and the mother who had died of starvation.
- ³¹ Elizabeth Dyck memoirs, 38.

- ³² See the many letters in the *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 1929 to 1933. The Mennonites during the great famine in Ukraine were dying in large numbers due to disease and starvation. Prior to this unrest and anarchy in the country robbed them of their possessions, such as clothing and food.
- ³³ *Mennonitische Rundschau*, May 2, 1928, 13.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ My mother's sentiments were always to dress so that her daughter would not feel ashamed of her in public.
- ³⁶ Whenever I sulked about doing too much homework after school, my mother often queried whether I would rather be a 'scrub woman' instead of being a teacher when I grew up.
- ³⁷ I heard this text preached about for years in the church and I always had the impression it was preached to women and their 'lust' for new and modern clothes.
- ³⁸ From my teenage memories.
- ³⁹ Redekop, *The Work of Their Hands*, 30.
- ⁴⁰ Interview with Mariechen Langeman Klassen, by Heidi Koop, MHC, 208.
- ⁴¹ Year end North Kildonan Church reports, 1932, 30, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, [CMBS] 1310 Taylor Avenue, Winnipeg Manitoba.
- ⁴² North Kildonan church report of the Verein, 1932, CMBS, 31.
- ⁴³ Approximately seventy years later I interviewed one of these early *Verein* women, Mariechen Langeman Klassen for this paper. She was by then approximately 92 years of age. She told me with a smile on her face that my grandmother had been one of the first leaders of the women's *Verein* here in North Kildonan, and that and she had enjoyed my grandmothers leadership and devotionals very much. Interview January 8, 2002.
- ⁴⁴ Annual church report 1932, CMBS, Anna Neufeld used her given name, and not her husband's given name when she wrote the Frauenverein report for the church. She signed her report Leiterin A. Neufeld. In those days this was a sign of high self esteem.
- ⁴⁵ This 'twist' was arguing at times from a woman's perspective. However, as I attended *Verein* for many years, I became aware that the women hardly ever commented negatively about a *Verein* Leiterin's opinion, which was always in agreement with church rules and regulations.
- ⁴⁶ Redekop, *The Work of Their Hands*, 31.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 12.
- ⁴⁸ My own experience during the time while I was a member of the *Verein*.
- ⁴⁹ I am not quite certain, but I believe this occurred in 1948, after Maria Dyck, who had been in leadership for several years had to resign due to illness.
- ⁵⁰ Year end church financial report, 1934, CMBS, 29.
- ⁵¹ Annual church treasurer's reports for years 1932-1935, CMBS, 39.
- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵⁵ See p.73 this thesis.
- ⁵⁶ Conversation with Irma Epp, Verein member, 2006.
- ⁵⁷ Conversation with my mother when I was a teenager.
- ⁵⁸ From my interviews done in 2002, the 16 women mostly had smaller families than those of their mothers.
- ⁵⁹ The first streets in existence were Edison Avenue and McKay Avenue, as described in Driedger, *Mennonites in Winnipeg*, 30.
- ⁶⁰ I remember going by wagon with my dad as he delivered vegetables and eggs to his customers in East Kildonan, but we never went to church by horse and buggy, as the church was only two minutes walk away from our house. I also know that there were never buggies parked at church, nor were there any facilities available for parking buggies.
- ⁶¹ Liese Peters, *Memoirs*, 52.
- ⁶² Interview with Mary Langeman Klassen, 2002.
- ⁶³ Interview with Ann Regehr Dueck by Heidi Koop, MHC, 321.
- ⁶⁴ Liese Peters "The Way it Was," *Fiftieth Anniversary of the Mennonite Settlement in North Kildonan*, 106.
- ⁶⁵ My childhood recollections.

⁶⁶ In conversation with Sara Dyck.

⁶⁷ Interview with Mary Langeman Klassen by Heidi Koop, MHC, 210.

⁶⁸ Interview with Agnes Dyck by Heidi Koop, MHC, 79.

⁶⁹ In conversation with Mary Kasper, the organist of North Kildonan M.B Church, January 6, 2003.

⁷⁰ I still remember a group of several women, led by Elizabeth Unruh volunteering regularly every week for the Red Cross in the late 1940's.

⁷¹ Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*, xxv.

⁷² When I asked my mother why she wore a black bow at the back of her head, she answered that it was a token of her marital status. Only married women wore black bows in their hair.

⁷³ Interview with Anne Enns Braun by Heidi Koop, MHC, 91.

⁷⁴ I remember the frequent discussion by women of the Mennonite churches regarding the changing of the bows for the hats. Especially significant was the fact that they primarily took the host society women as models for their own actions. It appeared as a significant step toward acculturation. And after the small hats appeared the church never even flinched! Nothing was mentioned. The church seemed to respect the women's choice.

⁷⁵ Redekop, *Work of Their Hands*, 12.

CHAPTER FOUR

Designs of Transition: Houses and Clothes

The previous chapter dealt with support networks, namely the women's auxiliaries or *Vereine* that enabled Mennonite immigrant women in North Kildonan to overcome their diversity, their poverty and adjust to the host society. This chapter will discuss how the poverty stricken living conditions in North Kildonan influenced the women's process of acculturation. Questions about housing and clothing design are taken into consideration, as these indicate the roles the immigrant women and their adolescent daughters played in the domestic sphere during the early years of settlement in North Kildonan. The fundamental religious values that guided Mennonite immigrant women in their every day life are also considered, as the Mennonite church expected women walk in the humble and unpretentious way of *Gelassenheit*, devoid of complaint and in complete resignation to their Christian fate in life. As in the past, the old adage of *Schlicht und Einfach* or 'plain and simple' became the initial leitmotiv dominating the women's lifestyle here in Canada.

Once in Canada, these women were additionally pressed to lead a self-denying life style by the financial deprivation of the depression, and their hefty C.P.R. transportation debt, which was a constant reminder that Mennonites were in Canada on borrowed money. In most cases, both men and women believed it was their duty to remedy this situation by paying off as much of the debt load as possible, even though it meant forgoing the purchase of anything that was not absolutely necessary. The frugality they had been taught during childhood stood them in good stead at this

time. Nothing was wasted and everything that could be of any future value was saved and put aside. One could never be sure when the opportunity of future use would emerge.

The Homes:

The first evidence of this unpretentious and austere practice of the Mennonite immigrants was manifested in their homes. Much to the immigrants' distress, a building contract with Wilson and Company that had promised them comfortable homes with electricity and a pump on every yard failed to materialize.¹ Nonetheless, after some negotiating with the municipality, the immigrants were able to build homes according to their own financial means.²

Needless to say, these homes were less elaborate than the ones prescribed by Wilson and Company, and were without electricity, and without water pumps on every yard. Water had to be hauled from a pump five to ten minutes away, creating great hardship in winter when the pumps froze up and needed priming.³ Kerosene lamps were used for lighting and wood and coal used for heating until the hydro lines for the Edison, Kingsford and McKay areas were put in during 1934, at the cost of five dollars per month.⁴

The streets were also an inconvenience for the immigrants in their daily lives. These streets were only sixty-six feet wide, including the boulevards as well as the ditches that were excavated along either side of the roads to absorb rain water.⁵ The stagnant water in the ditches became smelly and conducive to producing mosquito breeding grounds. After a rain in summer, the streets were a thick black mud, and hardly navigable. Susan Martens Unruh remarks "then we had to walk to church.

Streets mud! There was no street, no sidewalk. Later on the sidewalks were gravel.”⁶

Irmgard Dyck Regehr recalls how muddy streets could even bring fear to small children:

In spring the road was such gumbo. I was a little three-year-old girl when we moved here. It [the mud] would just suck me down, and so I remember as a three-year-old standing in mud. I don't know why I had gone quite such a distance from home, but I was stuck in the mud and I couldn't move and I was repeating to myself that I would have to stay here all night and probably a wolf would come by and eat me. I was just comforting myself when an older friend came along. He saw this little girl stuck in the mud and pulled me out.⁷

Erna Klassen notes that at times people left their muddy shoes on the side of Kildonan Road (later Henderson Highway) and put on their clean ones before they caught the streetcar to go downtown. Upon returning home the episode was reversed.⁸

Mariechen Langeman Klassen reflects, “It was mud, deep mud. Whoever had a car and got stuck remained stuck for quite along time.”⁹

Not only were the streets wet and muddy after a rain, the basements of the houses were also damp and gave the entire house a musty, stale odor. The melted snow on the cook stove in winter, added additional humidity to the already damp air of the home. This humidity was further enhanced during the winter when most of the weekly laundry was hung to dry on hastily strung up wash lines in the kitchen. These factors iced up windows and door openings considerably during the winter months, and constant heating was required to dry out the air.¹⁰ As the house was roughed up from the cheapest material available, the sash windows were constructed with single-pane glass, which was not at all conducive to heat retention and easily froze up from the condensation within the house.

The damp, cool, hand-dug basement cellars, with mud walls and cement floors

were amazing places for storing things.¹¹ All preserves canned in fall for winter use were stored on wooden shelves around in the cellar, in order to keep the jars dry. The cellar was used to store some of the pickled meat after butchering, as well as clay pots filled with sauerkraut, pickled watermelon and pickled tomatoes. Vegetables such as potatoes, onions, cabbages, as well as carrots stuck in sand-filled ceramic pots, were kept here for winter consumption.

Ann Enns Braun explains that her cellar was exceptionally cold, and was thus used to assist in solving a community dilemma regarding a crib death of a four month old child. Enns Braun relates:

People questioned where to put the baby until the funeral. Well, the Ennses have a very cold basement. So they wrapped the baby in a blanket and asked if they could put it there. Soon after that a car pulled up, which was very rare. There were no cars that came down our streets. And Mr. 'B' got out of the car. Mr. 'B' was the local undertaker. He said he had been told that there was a baby here and he had come to pick it up. Mr. 'B' in his stately black clothes and his bowler hat, always looking the gentleman, picked up the dead child, put it into a container similar to a suitcase, and explained to my folks that we weren't allowed to do that: we could not keep dead people in our houses.¹²

It was never known why this situation happened. Some people were very poor and could not afford an undertaker, so they buried their 'own' in homemade coffins. It was never investigated whether this was just a business ploy or a legitimate claim. The irony of it all became apparent after a few years when it was strongly rumored that Mr. 'B' had the mortuary for his undertaking business in the basement of his very own house.¹³

Even though these cellars were cool all year round, the houses as such were drafty and cold during the winter and unbearably hot in summer, which became significant because all the daily meals and canning had to be done on wood burning

stoves. Consequently, most houses were built with attached lean-tos or summer kitchens, that had doors separating them from the rest of the house in order to keep the heat out, especially during canning season. Enns Braun notes, "there was a back shed. It was sturdy, not just a shanty. It was a part of the house under the regular roof. That was a summer kitchen. It was heated all year round." ¹⁴ Peter Koop also built his family's house with a lean-to, and while the Koop family home was only 240 square feet, his lean-to added another 112 square feet to it. This addition kept the house cooler during the summer cooking and canning season. ¹⁵

The completion of these houses, often took several years. For example, the exterior painting of these houses was frequently delayed for several years until money for such an undertaking became available. By such a time the siding on the houses had often become quite weather beaten and rough, and required special expensive paint to cover up the cracks. ¹⁶ Nonetheless people endured such trivial inconveniences, because they were happy to have their own privacy and shelter from the elements. Liese Peters, a young woman in the 1930s sums up the newly constructed homes thus:

Our homes were small and very unpretentious, but how we loved them! Hardly ever a house was fully complete before it was occupied. We cherished our homes because they were our own. After the inside boards were applied we merrily moved into the house even though the blue sky and the green grass could still be seen through the cracks and knot holes. We comforted ourselves with the thought that winter was still far off; and surely when winter finally arrived the most necessary provisions would be made to keep out the frost. ¹⁷

Heidi Koop also notes that her parent's house took six years to complete due to lack of finances. However, her parents lived in the house even though it was not quite finished. ¹⁸

The furnishings of these houses were very basic. In the center of the kitchen stood the kitchen table surrounded by sufficient chairs to seat every member of the family. On an outside wall of the kitchen stood a wood burning cook stove and in the living room there was a space heater. Liese Peters remarks in her memoirs that a heater for the living room was necessary, as only one stove in the kitchen was not sufficient to keep the house warm and the walls from freezing up.¹⁹ Make shift shelves lined one side of the kitchen to hold dishes as well as cooking utensils required for daily use. All this paraphernalia was discreetly hidden by flimsy cotton curtains to ensure an atmosphere of tidiness or so called *Ordnung*.²⁰ The large kitchen stove had an attached boiler utilized for heating dish- washing water, while the kitchen sink, if there was one, had a pail under it for drainage and easy removal of gray water. All was very basic and functional.

As a rule, there were no wooden doors in the house except to the summer kitchen, but every aperture was enclosed by a cotton curtain to ensure minimal privacy. The trap door to the basement was usually situated in the kitchen to allow easy access to the underground food larder. The wooden floors of most houses were covered by cheap congoleum similar to linoleum, but some houses featured plain painted softwood floors, with the accent of some small scatter rugs.²¹ The interior walls were wallpapered to hide unsightly cracks and blemishes acquired from the 'winter's cold snaps.'²² Many houses were wallpapered many times over before the paper was finally removed in preparation for an additional application of wall paper or perhaps even a coat of paint.²³

Windows in the houses were usually graced by homemade curtains, and roller

blinds were purchased as soon as possible to keep out the summer heat and the winter cold.²⁴ Elizabeth Klassen Dyck Mirau describes their house furnishings:

On the table we had oil cloth. On the windows, well, there were curtains. Sometimes they were just made from flour bags. The flour bags had print on them, but they were bleached and we made them and hemmed them. If nothing else it was just half the window and we had to have light too. We didn't embroider them. Some people might have but we didn't. They were not lace curtains or drapes. We didn't have blinds. We didn't even have screens. Mosquitoes and flies.²⁵

As the rooms and furnishings in most Mennonite households were similar, Liese Peters concurs with Mirau's description by noting::

The rooms were not elegant but the necessities for life were there. Simple curtains were hung on the windows, plants in lard pails were placed on the window sills and a piece of linoleum was installed on the floor.²⁶

Quite ironically, in some of these rustic households, the most delicate chinaware, hand painted and produced by such noted manufacturers as Vilroy and Bosch graced the tables. This was because many families had transported their good china, securely packed between clothing items, from Ukraine to Canada.²⁷ One person noted "we always ate out of these dainty dishes, until we could afford to purchase plainer ones for everyday use."²⁸

Not only were the tables adorned with fine china, but the walls of the houses also displayed the best decorations these immigrants could muster. Every home displayed several religious plaques, as well as family portraits, hung up high so that children could not touch or break these treasures. In some homes musical instruments, such as guitars or mandolins, tied with large red bows or ribbons were hung up on the walls to keep the instruments out of harms way.²⁹ Numerous doilies, hand crafted by the women, covered almost every table and chair in the house, while flower plants

stood on the wide window sills to make the drab place somewhat more cheery. In some instances the old 'Kroeger' clock, (transported painstakingly from Ukraine), adorned the somewhat bleak walls. The kerosene lamp, which functioned as an indoor light in lieu of electricity, always stood on the table or nearby shelf in readiness for reading, playing games or doing handwork on long winter evenings. Those were times when evening *Feierabends* or 'leisure times' were observed, and no work was done during that time.³⁰ Even though the homes were unpretentious, they were usually functional, clean and hospitable, engendering an atmosphere of welcome and *Gemuetlichkeit* or comfortable hominess.

To comply with this economic hardship, the women adapted some ingenious ways to cope. For example when dust accumulated in the houses due to the dry ground in the front yard, the women planted long stem flowers such as cosmos, larkspur, petunias and bachelor buttons to keep both the weeds down and absorb some of the dust. When the houses became unbearably hot in summer the women planted seedlings of fast growing poplar trees around the house, to eventually protect and shade it from the heat. Some women washed their kitchen floor every day to provide a cool spot for families to take afternoon naps, and later work in the garden when the air cooled off. As they could not afford an ice box, the milk, as well as perishable products, were placed upon shelves in their dug-out basements to prevent the food from spoiling, which also eliminated the problem of drafty and cold floors to some extent. They melted snow in large boilers on the stove to create soft water for washing clothes and bathing, which was superior for doing these chores than the hard water from the pump. By their endless innovations, these women adapted to the

conditions with which they had to live, and attempted to make their life somewhat easier and more comfortable.³¹

These poor living conditions greatly affected the lives of the immigrant women in North Kildonan. Some of these women had been daughters of estate and factory owners in Russia, and had enjoyed all the amenities of life available at that time. Here in Canada they had to adjust to a new social class and to a simple life style. Water no longer came from a tap in the kitchen or bathroom but from a pump five minutes walk away, or from the rain or snowflakes that had to be collected or melted on wood burning stoves. The beautiful opulent mansions and homes that graced the estates were no longer theirs, but had been replaced by ugly structures that needed much work to make them livable. And yet the women were content with the little they had. Liese Peters, who had been the daughter of wealthy factory owners in Ukraine remarks "there was no reason for jealousy in the [North Kildonan] community because we were all in the same dire financial situation."³² Anne Klassen Wilms reflects, "We didn't think of hard times then. That was life."³³ Elizabeth Dyck notes in her memoirs that "we were so thankful that we could sleep in peace and were no longer persecuted."³⁴

Soon after the war when economic conditions became more financially viable, North Kildonan Mennonites began to upgrade their homes and build larger houses. These new homes were not modeled after the old houses with the attached chicken barns, but were modern one and a half story bungalows. It became evident by that time, that the Mennonites were beginning to follow the trend set by the host society. Anne Enns remarks that in 1944 her father decided to build a larger house. It was not

a painted neutral beige or white as most other houses were, but it was a 'yellow house'.³⁵

Their Clothes:

The Mennonite immigrant women had brought only a minimal amount of clothing with them during their immigration from Ukraine. Here again the motto *Schlicht und Einfach* or 'plain and simple' prevailed. Very often this simple wardrobe consisted of one Sunday dress, one everyday dress and perhaps a blouse and skirt. The latter was necessary, as there was no dry cleaning available in North Kildonan at that time, and a blouse could be easily washed while the skirt was always protected by an apron. Aprons were very popular and were worn on most occasions excepting during church attendance, festivals and funerals. Sunday dresses were mostly black or dark in color, and were always immaculately looked after.³⁶ The women always changed into everyday clothes after church services, to prevent good clothes from soiling during the preparation of Sunday meals for the family. This practice prevailed because the Sunday dress ultimately became the woman's funeral attire. For those who could afford it, a whole set of clothes, at times even inclusive of a new black dress, was surreptitiously laid away in a chest in readiness for the occasion of death. Other women's accessories consisted of a pair of black oxfords, cotton or wool stockings – at times home knit – and everyday homemade slippers or *Schlorre* sewn together of remnants of heavyweight cloth or felt. Sweaters and light shawls were abundantly used to keep comfortable in the drafty homes during the winter, and heavy

shawls or babushkas were worn as outerwear head coverings to brave the inclement Manitoba weather.³⁷

The geographic location, with cold winters, hot summers and marked weather seasons demanded that women procure more and varied clothes for the family. This presented a real hardship for the Mennonite families of North Kildonan, as in the early years their daily income was sparse and they lived a subsistent lifestyle. Thus, it became the mother's task to sew clothes for the whole family in order to accommodate the four distinct seasons evident in North Kildonan. One Mennonite woman remarks, "Mother sewed and so we had homemade clothes. The only things we bought were boots and shoes. Coats she made. She was a good seamstress. That was the way it was in most families."³⁸

It was the mother's duty to see that all children were appropriately clothed and warm on their daily half-mile hike to school. Initially this meant knitting two or three pairs of socks, mittens and scarves for each member of the family, as well as doing all the sewing of coats and other clothes. Hilda Redekop Lage remarks, "Mom had to knit us all two pairs of woolen stockings every year because we all wore woolen stockings to school. Oh, you had woolen underwear so the stockings weren't so itchy. Otherwise we would have frozen because we had a long way to go to school".³⁹ This knitting was followed by a series of patching and mending of socks and mittens. As these were often made of recycled wool, material which was more prone to disintegrate than the synthetic yarns of today, the articles required much attention.

In Ukraine, Mennonites often employed a traveling tailor to sew the families heavier and more intricate clothes, but in Canada the responsibility of the sewing fell

solely to the housewives. Not only did these women sew for their own family, but they also saw it as their duty to sew for their aging parents as well as for some of their in-laws. The latter meant more work for the women which was seldom remunerated

⁴⁰ There were also Sunday clothes to be sewn for the entire family, as no one went to church in their everyday clothes. Most of these clothes were sewn with great proficiency and perfection as well as with the intent to fit into the apparel world of the host society. Nobody, especially the children, wanted to be different from the children they associated with in school.

In Ukraine, women's frugality demanded that the children's clothes be passed on from generation to generation. For this reason children in large families always lived in hand-me-down clothes. Here in Canada, however, the sophisticated host society focused on children's individuality and the disposing of old clothing was at times sanctioned. In keeping with this practice the older Mennonite children often demanded (or wished for) more stylish clothes in order to keep up with other children in school and mothers often obliged their daughters by sewing new clothes. One daughter related an incident where she had seen her friend wearing a beautiful new sweater. She went home, described the sweater to her mother and in no time her mother had knit her a beautiful look-alike sweater.⁴¹ All this meant that much time and effort was made to dress the children as stylishly as possible to fit into society.

In the first years all dresses were home sewn or more specifically altered second hand clothes. As the women were good seamstresses but were financially unable to buy new material for family clothes, they began fashioning the entire family's wardrobe from used donated garments. This second hand clothing was

presented to them either by Mennonite Central Committee or by host society individuals sympathetic to the immigrant's plight. At times the girls in the domestic employment had their meager wages augmented by gifts of used clothing. The recycling of these used garments meant wearing what was salvageable while disposing of the rest as the women saw fit. As there was much that was unusable in the original state, the remaining garments were ripped apart and the resulting material cleaned by washing or by merely brushing thoroughly with strong cold black coffee.⁴² Often this material was turned inside out to give the new garment an unused appearance. In addition, at times, the children's garments were pieced together from two or more pieces of different patterned material, thus giving them a unique appearance.⁴³

Old woolen sweaters which had holes and runs in them were washed, unraveled and stockings and mittens were produced from this recycled yarn for the whole family. In this thrifty process of recycling, every button, every hook and eye, and every snippet of lace was saved. At times even the used thread was salvaged. Donated clothes that seemed completely unsalvageable for immediate or future wear were washed, cut in strips and hooked into floor rugs or used as floor and dust rags. There was nothing that could be utilized in the present or in the future that was ever discarded. Needless to say this produced boxes and boxes full of trinkets awaiting their usefulness in future days, which never seemed to come.

To show the frugality of the immigrant women, undergarments were often fashioned from flour bags. Such 'lingerie' was worn despite the associated cultural stigma. One woman offered the following descriptions of her feelings:

I remember my mother. We would buy flour in those big hundred-pound bags and when they were empty we very carefully bleached them, washing out all the coloring that said "Five Roses" or what ever it was. And that became our lingerie, those flour sacks. I know one of my young friends at that time, guess we were half-grown teenagers, would say "Well, all the other kids at school, they have such nice figures. You know why I think we don't have them, because we have to wear this flour sack underwear. How can we have a good figure with all that bulk?"⁴⁴

This dire situation improved somewhat when more and more teenaged daughters became employed in the domestic service, and could earn money to afford new material for their clothes. However, these clothes were still sewn according to old patterns. Mary Sudermann, who was in her 40's during the depression years, reflected that these young girls felt awkward wearing such outlandish clothing at that time. But she also remembered being quite oblivious to the state of her clothing until some one behind her whispered, "she seems to be a wonderful person but look at her clothes!" After that remark Mary bought new shoes and clothes as soon as she had enough money saved up.⁴⁵

The most profound medium for promoting Mennonite women's acculturation during the 1930s was the Eaton's mail order catalogue. When it was delivered to the doorstep of every home it introduced women to a new lifestyle, and eventually facilitated change and integration with the host society. Everything necessary for the home was displayed and described, and the smiling women in their bright colored attire seemed very intriguing. Even though the Mennonite women could barely read English at that time, the pictures were usually self explanatory and the price tags were comprehensible. Consequently, when the immigrant women compared their clothes with the alluring and colorful fashions of the catalogue, the 'plain and simple' wardrobe of the women took on a dowdy and drab appearance with minimal appeal.

The catalogue displayed something new and fresh to think and dream about. Hence this dream maker was revered and handled with great esteem. In most homes it lay on the kitchen table or on a wall shelf, as if it were some sort of 'coffee table book'.⁴⁶

Not only did the Eaton's catalogue disseminate information regarding its products, it also propagated consumerism, a concept very foreign to most thrifty immigrant households of that era. Although Mennonite women did not read Canadian magazines, the Eaton's catalogue with all its colored illustrations did just fine in the "Canadianization" of Mennonite immigrant women while presenting to them the *Recipes for Democracy*.⁴⁷ Suddenly every Mennonite immigrant daughter wanted to possess a so called 'store bought' dress, even though the mothers argued that the bought dresses were not sewn as well as those sewn at home. Little did this matter to these teen aged girls who believed that owning a 'store bought dress' had a status symbol attached to it. They simply wanted to be 'in' with the 'crowd'. One woman, who was interviewed, remarked that when they came from Saskatchewan to Manitoba in the early 1930s her mother gave her a special surprise. She bought her a new dress. As the mother had not known what size to buy, she had bought her daughter a size eighteen dress in keeping with the daughter's age. The daughter, a petite size eight or ten, nonetheless tightened the belt, pinned the dress up and altered it somewhat just so she could wear a 'store bought' dress for years to come.⁴⁸

All this spun a consumerist continuum – in order to wear a new dress, new and more fashionable accessories such as handbags and shoes seemed to be proper. New undergarments would have to be acquired to promote a sleeker look, as the old home sewn lingerie made from cotton, and at times even flour sacking, was definitely in

appropriate. To acquire a figure more akin to the ladies pictured in the catalogue, new foundation garments had to be purchased.

Eventually, this consumer impulse led the women to consider the message of traveling corsetieres, willing to sell a good figure for good money. One such company, the Spirella Company, had agents who came directly to the home to measure and distribute their merchandise. This not only provided a convenience appreciated by many women, but it also produced a measure of status and respect among the women towards those who wore such garments. It was the status they acquired that mattered, even though the women looked rather stiff, unnatural and even grotesque in this lingerie. In observing a row of women outfitted in such a way, one husband commented "they sit there in a row like pigeons."⁴⁹ Furthermore, these Spirella garments all too often became conversation topics at many women's as well as family gatherings for quite some time.

The adeptness of these Mennonite women as seamstresses was remarkable as they were able to duplicate almost any dress illustrated in the catalogue. At times hand drafted patterns, according to measurements were duplicated on brown wrapping paper, cut out, and then transferred onto the material in use. Fine gowns were sewn on clunky heavy-weight treadle sewing machines. Sara Dyck, for example, sewed a fine white satin wedding gown, complete with a long train and intricate bodice on her old treadle sewing machine.⁵⁰

The phenomenon of the apparel acculturation was a slow process. Initially, there were two outstanding features that stymied that progress. First there was the depressed economy which was unable to accommodate women's desires for

fashionable clothing. Furthermore, the Mennonites were very family oriented, and the children's needs in general always took precedence over the parents' needs, and women's apparel usually came in last. One woman writes in her memoirs:

The early years were difficult times. I remember the time when I was asked to be a speaker on a special topic at a Sunday school conference. My clothes were all shabby, and there was no dress which I could call a "Sunday" dress. Finally after much deliberation, my husband scraped up two dollars from which I bought a gray voile dress.⁵¹

As already mentioned, when money became more readily available from teen aged daughters working as domestics, women were tempted to try new fashions. After comparing group photographs of these immigrant women living in North Kildonan, it becomes evident that the fashions changed only moderately during the 1930s, but really evolved to reflect the fashions of the host society during the late 1940s. Furthermore the photos show that the daughter's dresses changed more rapidly than those of their mothers, and that by the post-war period the daughters had become almost fully acculturated in their apparel styles.⁵²

However, not only did the stagnant depressed economy prove to be a deterrent in the acculturation of women's dress apparel, but the patriarchal element in the Mennonite Brethren church community also inhibited the progress in women's dress acculturation. However the North Kildonan Mennonite Brethren church was not ultra conservative. Unlike the more conservative and rural Mennonites, including the Holdeman church community of California, the North Kildonan Mennonite Brethren church never expelled women for wearing inappropriate dress.⁵³ As long as the skirts were mid-calf in length, sleeves were in place, the necklines not too low and pants were not worn, little was said. The church believed that appropriate dress apparel

should be worn (both by men and women) during worship services in church, as the congregation stood in the presence of the 'Almighty'.

Any discrepancies in women's apparel not consistent with church's suggestions were always dealt with via the women's gossip line or directly through some elderly women's reproach.⁵⁴ Even so, inappropriate dress infractions were usually handled very tactfully. In one instance, when the skirts became somewhat skimpy and would not quite cover the knees of the women who sat in the front row of the choir, a deep valance was merely added on to the banister, which ran horizontally across the platform. When this wasn't adequate to cover women's sleeveless dresses, everyone in the choir was asked to wear a choir gown, thus covering the multitude of women's apparel sins.

It must, nonetheless, be noted that whatever disapproval there was by the Mennonite patriarchal church, it usually addressed younger Mennonite women, namely the future mothers in the church, as well as those who would train future generations in church practices. In a preemptive stance to avoid future disruptions of established church norms, the church disapproved of women wearing inappropriate clothing, cutting their hair, as well as wearing pants. In some instances women had to promise, prior to baptism (adult baptism) that they would never wear pants/slacks.⁵⁵ It was questioned by some church members whether the church was apprehensive that this manly attire (pants) and manly haircuts (short hair) and the disappearance of hair bows (the sign of insubordination to husbands) could be indicative of women's desire for encroachment on the realm of patriarchal control, especially in church leadership. Furthermore, could this 'inappropriate' women's attire ultimately lead to the

usurpation of men's authoritarian hegemony over women?⁵⁶

This male disapproval of fashionable female attire also pertained to many households. Many husbands objected to women wearing short hair or pants, and many wives who were subservient to their husband's wishes, acquiesced, and wore dresses and long hair styles all their life. On the other hand, some wives simply waited for a more benign time to arrive until they stylishly trimmed their hair, attended church without hair coverings and wore pants.

A further conflict between male church leaders and women emerged when women began wearing costume jewelry, earrings, curling their short hair and wearing makeup. This was strictly in conflict with the *Schlicht und Einfach* or 'plain and simple' principle. The Mennonite leadership reminded all of the biblical passage: "I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds".⁵⁷ The church leaders believed that while some jewelry had been permitted in Russia, novel additions such as earrings accompanied by make-up and hair curling should be avoided by Christian women. In a preemptive stance, such activities of the women were frowned upon by the church and at times preached against.

Conversations, with Mennonite Brethren immigrant women who arrived in North Kildonan during the third wave of immigration (1947-1952), found that their earlier counterparts of the 1930s had by then acculturated to the extent that the majority of them wore apparel compliant with the host society – very long dresses or skirts with slits in the back for comfortable walking, and short hair. These styles were trendy at that time. The church did not object to this attire; however the wearing of

pants by the women was still frowned upon by the church leadership.⁵⁸ It took approximately another eight years until this 'questionable' item of women's apparel was simply ignored, even though it was not completely condoned by the church leadership.⁵⁹

The old adage and leitmotiv *Schlicht und Einfach*, or 'plain and simple' observed in the early days of settlement in North Kildonan became more difficult to follow as time went by. This was especially so when the immigrant women heard all about new clothing designs from their working daughters. In the women's minds a dichotomy seemed to arise: either they stay with the traditionally approved leitmotiv *Schlicht un Einfach* or 'plain and simple' or move on to the new adage, *we motte to waut komme*, or 'we have to get somewhere'. This meant that either Mennonites stayed with the 'plain and simple' or acculturated to the host society and got 'somewhere'. The North Kildonan MB women opted for the latter. According to the third wave of immigrants who came to Canada in the 1947 and 1948, the second wave MB immigrants to North Kildonan had acculturated a fair amount to the host society by 1947.⁶⁰

Notes:

Chapter Four.

¹ As outlined in Chapter Two.

² Karl Fast, "Kleine Gartenfarmen bei der Stadt," *25 Jahre Mennonitische Ansiedlung (North Kildonan: 1953)*, 28-31.

³ My grandfather had a pump which our extended families and all the neighbors used. It must have been a private pump, as the North Kildonan municipality dug only two pumps to service the people on Edison and McKay Avenues.

⁴ Interview with John and Mary Suderman by Heidi Koop, MHC, 389.

⁵ According to the City of Winnipeg Public Works, Zoning, Mapping Department, phone conversation June, 2006.

⁶ Interview with Susan Martens Unruh by Heidi Koop, MHC, 400.

⁷ Interview with Irmgard Dyck Regehr by Heidi Koop, MHC, 56.

⁸ Interview with Erna Klassen by Heidi Koop, MHC, 201.

⁹ Interview with Mariechen Klassen by Heidi Koop, MHC, 207.

¹⁰ My own childhood memories.

¹¹ Interview with Anne Enns Braun by Heidi Koop, MHC, 88.

¹² Interview with Anne Enns Braun by Heidi Koop, MHC, 88-89.

¹³ This was very spooky for us children, as the house was on Kildonan Drive, and we frequently walked by it. In later years I visited in that house and wondered if there were still ghosts of the 'departed' present.

¹⁴ Interview with Anne Enns Braun by Heidi Koop, MHC, 85.

¹⁵ Peter Koop, "God's Marvelous Leading," 12.

¹⁶ My parent's house was not painted for approximately ten years, and had a really weathered look. Then it was finally painted. This is reminiscent of John Grisham's novel, *The Painted house*.

¹⁷ Liese Peters, "So War es Einmal!" 55.

¹⁸ Koop, *Peter a Man of Stamina and Courage*, 93.

¹⁹ Liese Peters Memoirs, 53.

²⁰ Interview with Anne Enns Braun by Heidi Koop, MHC, 103.

²¹ Interview with Mary Enns Ediger by Heidi Koop, MHC, p. 101. Ediger remarks that there were congoeum floor coverings over wood floors in some houses, while other houses had painted soft wood floors.

²² Interview with Elizabeth Klassen Dyck Mirau by Heidi Koop, MHC, 102.

²³ My memories of my parent's house.

²⁴ My own experience is that our house had screened windows and a screen back door to keep out mosquitoes and flies.

²⁵ Interview with Elizabeth Klassen Dyck Mirau by Heidi Koop, MHC, 193.

²⁶ Liese Peters "So war es einmal!" 57.

²⁷ Many of these items can still be seen among the heirlooms of these original immigrants.

²⁸ Interview with Peter Wiens June, 2004.

²⁹ Interview with Anne Enns Braun by Heidi Koop, MHC, 102.

³⁰ Interview with Hilda Redekop Lage by Heidi Koop, MHC, 288.

³¹ My own recollections of my childhood days.

³² Liese Peters, "So war es einmal!" 57.

³³ Interview with Anne Klassen Wilms by Heidi Koop, MHC, 420.

³⁴ Elizabeth Dyck Memoirs, 39.

³⁵ Interview with Anne Enns Braun by Heidi Koop, MHC, 85.

³⁶ Ibid., 91.

³⁷ This is how I remember the women in my childhood.

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- ³⁸ Interview with Hilda Redekop Lage by Heidi Koop, MHC, 281.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 289.
- ⁴⁰ Conversation with my mother who said she frequently had to sew for her in-laws and extended family.
- ⁴¹ Conversation in 2005 with a Mennonite woman who wishes to remain anonymous.
- ⁴² My mother often used this procedure before recycling old garments to sew new ones for the family.
- ⁴³ I saw my mother going through this procedure many times when I was a young child.
- ⁴⁴ Interview with Mary Enns Ediger by Heidi Koop, MHC, 109.
- ⁴⁵ Interview with Mary Suderman, April, 2002.
- ⁴⁶ My own observances as a child and in later years.
- ⁴⁷ In her article, "Recipes for Democracy? Gender, Family and Making Female Citizens in Cold War Canada," in *Rethinking Canada*, 299-311, Franca Iacovetta argues that magazines such as *Chatalaine* were determined to commercialize and politically motivate immigrant women to Canadianize.
- ⁴⁸ Interview with Erica Epp Koop August, 2002.
- ⁴⁹ An old conversation topic that still comes up at times at women's gatherings, when the subject of a 'good figure' comes up.
- ⁵⁰ Conversation with my mother Sara Dyck.
- ⁵¹ Liese Peters, memoirs, 51.
- ⁵² My own observations of family and school photos.
- ⁵³ Linda Boynton Arthur "Clothing is a Window to the Soul: The Social Control of Women in a Holdeman Mennonite Community," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 15 (1997): 11-30.
- ⁵⁴ This was the time of 'party' telephone lines, and they became quite busy at times when new dress infractions became visible.
- ⁵⁵ In conversation with Agnes Dyck, January 15, 2004.
- ⁵⁶ As I remember this issue often came up in women's conversations even in later years.
- ⁵⁷ *The Bible*, 1 Timothy 2:9 and 10.
- ⁵⁸ Interviews in 2005 with Mary Klassen who immigrated to Canada in 1947 and Susan Wershler who immigrated in 1948, as part of the 'third wave' of Mennonite immigrants (1947-1950).
- ⁵⁹ Ibid.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid..

CHAPTER FIVE

Food Ways: A Nexus of Acculturation

The Mennonite immigrant women, who came to North Kildonan in the late 1920s and early 1930s, arrived with a substantial treasure, namely a collection of cooking and food preparation recipes gathered over the centuries. These recipes were an accumulation of culinary tastes acquired during the Mennonite sojourn in several European countries, such as the Netherlands, Prussia and Ukraine, going as far back as the Reformation in 1530. Marlene Epp notes that “the kitchen is quite often the setting in which particular traditions are transformed through the introduction of ‘outside’ cultures to the act of food preparation.”¹

Nonetheless, while the basic recipes initially hailed from various countries, Mennonites constantly modified these recipes to become indicative of the Mennonite unassuming *Schlicht und Einfach* or ‘plain and simple’ lifestyle. Over the years this culturally modified food, void of epicurean frills such as fancy desserts and gourmet dishes, moved towards a closer harmony with the Mennonites’ unpretentious households and their modest apparel, and took on the ethnic identity of Mennonite cuisine. Furthermore, over the years the Mennonites had found that this hearty food had served them well in their rigorous work of harnessing the waterways and tilling the land, and expected that it would do so in continuum. This chapter, therefore, will examine some of the origins of the ‘plain and simple’ Mennonite cuisine, outline some of the culinary aspects of this food and endeavor to establish what led to the disruption of the Mennonite food continuum, and ultimately to acculturation.

In her book *Mennonite Foods and Folkways from South Russia*, Norma Jost Voth outlines some of the origins of this 'plain and simple' traditional Mennonite cuisine. She notes that the Dutch influence in Mennonite food consisted of thick, hearty lentil soups, stews of meat (sausage, beef or mutton) and root vegetables, which were eaten on a daily basis. In summer also, leafy and tuberous vegetables were grown and consumed in large quantities. Because grain and cereal crops were poor in the Netherlands, the everyday bread was coarse and often uninteresting. This shortcoming was counterbalanced by the fact that Holland was mainly a dairy product producing country, and therefore dairy products such as milk, butter and cheese abounded and constituted a main part in the Dutch diets. Fish were also plentiful. Furthermore, in the seventeenth century the East India Company promoted the importing of all kinds of fruit, which readily found its way into the Dutch kitchens. The influence of Dutch foods on the Mennonite cuisine consisted mainly of vegetables, dairy products, fish and imported fruit. The Prussian influence consisted more of pork, lard, (sour) rye bread and after the 1770s, potatoes – the use of the latter being greatly promoted by Fredrick the Great. Fruit soups, dumplings and crullers (Rollkuakjes) also became very popular. Furthermore, after these Dutch Mennonites became settled in Prussia, they continued a trend initiated in the Netherlands, namely that of dairy farming. It was when milk products were again plentiful that the Mennonite women began cheese production, namely that of Tilsit cheese. (Danish Tilsit cheese still being available in specialty stores today) Historians are not unified whether the Mennonite Zwieback (double bun) originated in Holland or in Prussia. It has also been surmised that there may be a Swedish influence, dating back to 1626, when Swedish troops over quartered in the

Vistula Delta during the Polish Swedish wars, which resulted in the Mennonite acceptance of fruit soups and peppernuts. On the whole, however, Mennonites in Prussia added a hearty, fatty and starchy element to their existing leaner Dutch cuisine.

In Ukraine the Mennonites added Russian cabbage soup (borscht) dill pickles, verenyky, pirozhki, Holubtse (cabbage rolls), crusty white bread (Bulkje) and Paska to their existing Dutch and Prussian cuisine. Bread became a staple food served at every meal. Kvass, (a Russian almost-alcoholic drink) made from old rye bread, berries or apples became a welcome beverage for the summer.²

Even though these recipes were modified over the years to accommodate both special taste as well as food availability, the basic recipes for this Mennonite cuisine were passed on for generations by word of mouth and rote. Seen as a necessity that all women be able cooks prior marriage, mothers and at times grandmothers, taught their daughters and granddaughters how to cook as well as to appreciate the significance of texture, taste and smell in the duplication of traditional Mennonite food.³ Even youngsters four and five years of age could be seen sitting on a little stool in the kitchen playing with their toys while being initiated to the smells and often the tastes of traditional Mennonite food. Marlene Epp notes "women have always been the conveyors of ethnic culinary traditions, passing their knowledge through generations of daughters."⁴ This pragmatic instruction in food preparation insured the survival of an extensive roster of early traditional Mennonite cuisine until the recipes could be documented on paper.

Even though, hand written recipes began to appear in the early nineteenth century, they were difficult to follow, as they lacked definite baking or cooking

instructions. For example what does three kopeks of ammonia mean, as prices could differ in every store? Or of what consistency would a 'soft dough' be? These ancient recipes were therefore very unsatisfactory and confusing. Yet, once the Mennonite women settled in Canada, some started their own recipe collection by saving and documenting newly found recipes in little note books or even plain scribblers.

A little black handwritten notebook of Sara Dyck is an example, as it includes many early North Kildonan recipes. Most of these recipes are difficult to decipher, as some are written in old Gothic German script, some in new Roman German script, some in German interspersed with English words, and some are written only in English. For instance, one recipe is headed in English as *Chili Sauc*, but the remainder of the recipe is written only in German. A progression of acculturation appears to be evident here by the use of different languages.⁵

Not only were these handwritten cook books for recipes, they also contained family information such as addresses of friends and relatives as well as other family interests. Norma Jost Voth mentions that Agnes Braun recorded her cooking recipes in a blue account ledger which also held the every day handwritten receipts of her cottage industry dealings. Reflecting the changes in Anna Braun's life, many of the German handwritten receipts over the years began to include sprinklings of English words. Voth also notes that "the old handwritten cookbooks are true family treasures – for collectors and cooks alike. They reveal much about our past: what was cooked in the home, our eating culture, something of the social class of the family and the dishes which were popular at the time the book was recorded."⁶ In later years some of these early recipes were edited and published in Church cook books interspersed by more

modern North American recipes.⁷

The interaction of Mennonite women with their neighboring ethnic counterparts for recipe exchange was minimal. This was partially due to geographic location, as each ethnic group lived in isolated enclaves. The social divide created by Kildonan Road (later, Henderson Highway) was significant. The Mennonites lived on the east side of the highway; the Ukrainians lived north along the highway; the Dutch settlers lived on the west side of the highway opposite of the Mennonites; and the English resided on the west side of the highway south of the Dutch settlers. There was little connection among these individual groups, except for community council and school meetings. The early immigrant Mennonite women were not fluent in English and had difficulty communicating with the other ethnic groups. Ironically, Mennonite food already contained much of the early Dutch and Ukrainian diets.

This established a multicultural element in Mennonite foods. For example, the Mennonite cuisine promoted many ways of preparing potatoes. There were boiled and fried potatoes and potato salad (Prussian) potato and apple pancakes (Dutch) and the addition of potatoes in many soups such as bean soup and borscht a Ukrainian specialty. The variability created versatility which enabled the Mennonite women to choose food to accommodate the season on the availability of produce. For example in summer when leafy greens were plentiful, a summer borscht containing beef stock, sorrel, onion greens, fresh carrots and potatoes was mostly served, whereas later on in the year cabbage borscht instead of summer borscht was on the menu. Another example was the popular bean soup. In the summer green bean soup was prepared while in winter navy bean soup offered a hearty meal.

It was often assumed that Mennonite food was bland, and rightly so. For example the Mennonite farmer sausage made of pork and beef was seasoned only with salt and pepper-no garlic or onion spiced up this traditional food. Yet, garlic, dill and red hot chili peppers spiced up cucumber, watermelon and tomato pickles. In addition herbs such as parsley, bay leaf and peppercorns were present in almost every savory soup; while summer savory enhanced the flavor of all bean soups. Garden sorrel was used in summer borscht and also made delicious and nourishing salads when combined with sour cream and some sugar. These salads were often served with fried potatoes and pieces of fried or boiled farmer sausage for a mid-day meal. Therapeutic and medicinal teas were brewed from peppermint leaves and chamomile flowers grown in the garden. At times these herbs were dried and set away for use during the winter when fresh herbs were not available.⁸ Spices such as cinnamon, allspice, and nutmeg, as well as peppermint oil were necessities in baking. Furthermore, anise seed was used to flavor baked chicken and goose.

Much of the food consumed by early Mennonite immigrants in North Kildonan was high in fat and carbohydrates, due to the high pork and pasta content. Hogs were butchered, and the resulting products which included hams, sausages as well as rendered lard products – such as cracklings and crackling lard – were stored in cool places to last for the winter. These fatty foods were supplemented by starchy, high carbohydrate foods such as noodles, verenyky (often called perogi) bread and potatoes. In the interviews of sixteen Mennonite women done in 2002 for this thesis, all of the women recalled that during the 1930s they lived on this diet of staple Mennonite food, excepting when they worked as live in domestics. They found the Mennonite food to

be rather greasy and heavy. Nonetheless, some said they had supplemented the greasy food with chicken, eggs and garden products.⁹ However, a diet of hearty carbohydrate based food filled the required provision of warmth and energy for men who were mostly outdoor working laborers, as well as for women who were left with the drudgery of heavy yard work and arduous housework.¹⁰

The low sugar component of the Mennonite diet during the early 1930s counter-balanced or somewhat offset the high caloric intake of the prevailing fatty and starchy diet. Early pictures showed that very few children or women were severely overweight and obese.¹¹ Candy was not available to children excepting during Christmas and Easter. The desserts such as fruit Platz (yeast based fruit squares) and water based fruit soups were prepared for mostly for Sundays and special holidays. Hardly any week day meals offered desserts, with the exception of milk based fruit soups and low sugar content cookies. As sugar was expensive, it had to be used sparingly, even in tea. During the Second World War sugar was rationed, thus inhibiting its use to a great extent.

With all this staple Mennonite food consumption women would sometimes add a few inches to their girth and become very weight conscious. Physicians would constantly admonish them to refrain from consuming too much smoked pork products, as these could lead to hypertension and possibly a stroke. Sugar was seldom pronounced a health issue. Dieting was greatly stressed by physicians as a preventative, and successful dieters were applauded or jealously looked down upon by the fellow compatriots. As a result, the art of dieting became a favorite topic in the late thirties among the Mennonite women at women's functions as well as at extended

family gatherings.¹²

On the whole, early Mennonite food was wholesome and nourishing. The vitamin 'C' factor was addressed by serving sour kraut, fruit soups, dried, canned or fresh fruit, canned tomatoes and dilled pickles made from cucumbers, watermelon and tomatoes. Children's food was augmented in winter by a good dose of vile tasting cod liver oil to supplement the vitamin 'A' and 'D' factors. In addition, Mennonite produce grown in the early thirties was almost completely organic and always grown in their own gardens. These domestic gardens involved intensive work, but provided much nourishment for the families. Elizabeth Klassen Dyck Mirau reflects;

we had a garden of course, and in the garden we had rhubarb, sorrel, dill, parsley, onions, carrots, beets, watermelons, muskmelons, gooseberries and currants. We had corn. We had vegetables if we wanted to eat them, and Mom would make different vegetable soups.¹³

Hilda Redekop Lage remembers that in the North Kildonan Mennonite community everybody was very poor, but nobody starved because most families had a cow, chickens, a pig and a very large garden.¹⁴

Most often, Mennonite women cooked food according to the availability of their own garden produce. With the meager income of their husbands and a looming travel debt at hand, there was little money available for purchasing luxury food such as fresh fruit or canned goods. Only staples such as flour, sugar, rice and tea were purchased. Coffee was considered a luxury, and a home made beverage called *Prips* concocted from rye, cooked in buttermilk, then roasted and ground was served as a substitute for coffee.¹⁵ When some staples were required from the local grocery store, prices were reasonably low. This is demonstrated by a flyer of the Victor Wilms grocery store

dated December 17, 1933 which notes that round minced steak was ten cents per pound, sirloin steak was fourteen cents per pound, a box of Japan oranges was ninety-two cents and one pound of Red Rose coffee was thirty-five cents. Roger's syrup was forty-two cents for five pounds.¹⁶

Henry Redekop, a proprietor of the Roadside Store, notes that for five cents you could buy a bottle of soft drinks, for eleven cent you could buy two loaves of bread and for eleven cents you could buy a quarter pound of ham. This would make sufficient sandwiches for four people. He also notes that people did not buy many groceries because they all had big gardens.¹⁷

To avoid buying too many groceries, vegetable and meat canning was done in an impressive way for the winter. After canning the processed products were stored in a pantry, usually situated in the basement. One woman remarks

We canned all the vegetables and stuff out of the garden for three hours. If you think of it today, three hours for a jar of beans. Well we did a boiler full at a time.

And mostly they kept well. We even canned meat. So we had everything in the basement. I remember that we had a couple of pails of sand, dry sand, and we buried the carrots in the sand and they kept all winter.¹⁸

All spreads were homemade, as were the bread and 'zwieback', onto which these spread were applied. There was the home-churned butter, reserved for Sunday and holiday use; the crackling lard for consumption during weekdays; the jams cooked in late summer for everyday use and the *Dwoj*, a caraway cheese spread, used whenever available.¹⁹

While Mennonite food showed evidence of inter-ethnic influence and adaptation to new geographic locations over the centuries; these established food ways

nonetheless also evolved to form a tradition, which ordered primary social relations and predictable cultural routines of these people. For example, meals were prepared three times a day with the whole family having their meals at the same time. Mealtimes served as a time of bonding, reinforcing family roles as well as church practices. Table grace was always said before meals as a sense of gratitude for God's bountiful provision in a new country, while simultaneously remembering the family members left behind in Ukraine, who were enduring a period of severe starvation.²⁰ All women interviewed agreed that in North Kildonan Mennonite households no food on dinner plates was left uneaten; the odd leftovers that were gathered were given to yard animals, to cats that kept the mice away and dogs that alerted their master to visitors

The Mennonites offered quite a predictable fare. For example, breakfast consisted of white or brown bread with spreads such as crackling lard or butter and jam, or merely a bowl of porridge. The noon meal was the most substantial and consisted of traditional Mennonite dinner dishes, such as *Borscht*, noodles, *Vareneky* to name but a few. The light meal called *Faspa*, or tea time, was eaten at about five o'clock in the afternoon and consisted of leftovers and other easy to prepare foods. However, these designated mealtimes changed once the men had jobs away from home. Then the main meal was served at six or seven o'clock in the evening, and lunch at noon consisted of a *Faspa* menu²¹.

The food menus for special holidays and festivities were also simple, plain and predictable. Christmas dinner as a rule consisted of ham, cold deep fried meat balls, dill pickles, *Zwieback* and potato salad. For dessert there was a water based dried fruit soup complimented by a rice pudding, coffee or tea and cookies and platz (a yeast

based dough square topped with fruit and sugar). Some Christmas dinners, served at noon, also added baked chicken strewn with anise seed and a sweet cake-like dressing called *Bobbat*. Candies, nuts, oranges and apples were consumed in large quantities, and halvah *Halvah* was a special treat for Christmas. Some women baked small (dime sized) cookies called peppernuts or *Paepanaet* in preparation for Christmas. Easter had very much the same dinner pattern as Christmas, but *Paska*, a Ukrainian Easter bread was served with butter or cheese spread. Plain eggs were boiled and colored to be eaten on Easter morning. Chocolate sweets were bought for the children, and weather permitting, were hidden in the grass for an Easter egg hunt. New Years offered a specialty called *Portzelkje*, a raisin filled fritter coated with icing sugar. It was a 'must' to have one or a dozen of these delicacies with friends and family to wish them a Happy New Year. A little Mennonite rhyme captures the sentiment:

<p>Ekj wensch, ekj wensch, Ekj sie en kjleena Mensch; Ekj hab nich fael jeleat. Ne <i>Portselkje</i> sie ekj doch noch weat.</p>	<p>I wish, I wish, I'm only a little man, I haven't learned much. But still I'm worth a <i>Portselkje</i>!</p>
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The meals at weddings celebrations and funerals were also very simple, and understandably so, because the whole church congregation was invited to participate at the end of the events. The food at both events consisted mainly of *Zwieback*, cold meat balls, ham and dilled pickles. The dessert menu consisted of cheese, sweet or raisin buns, and cookies, complimented by real coffee. Sugar cubes were always on the tables but frequently disappeared into the pockets of little boys, who would later on boast of their acquisitions²³

Over time, however, these traditions began to change. The acculturation of

Mennonite food ways in North Kildonan appeared as early as the mid 1930s, primarily due to the fact that single Mennonite women entered the domestic service in the early thirties, and were initiated to the cultural as well as culinary practices of the host society. It was here they discovered a whole new world of culinary experiences. Delicious desserts as well as other novel recipes indigenous to the host society now became available to young Mennonite cooks. It was then that the progressive mindset of the Mennonite women became evident. Even though the Mennonite women were good cooks in general, they nonetheless desired perfection and expansion of their cooking repertoire. They believed that the addition of host society recipes to their existing recipe collection would achieve this end.

Especially attractive to these young women were the desserts of the British Canadian host society. Sweet desserts such as whipping cream topped chocolate cakes, pies and other delicate foods were offered at dinner almost every day in the affluent households where these girls served. On their days off, these girls would go home and try to duplicate this novel way of preparing food. Mennonite cuisine began to take on the new taste of the host society when economic times improved for the Mennonites in the late 1930s, partially due to the earning power of the young women's involvement in domestic work and the waning of the depression.²⁴

Some obstacles stood in the way to the adoption of the new food ways. An early drawback for the older women to utilize these new recipes, for example, was their inability to read the English language. This small deterrence was easily overcome by translation. Daughters and friends relatively fluent in English translated the recipes which were then entered into the exiting handwritten recipe booklets.

Other obstacles consisted of early and primitive cooking tools and implements. To bake a chocolate cake in a wood burning stove without a proper temperature gauge, could be problematic. Furthermore, new recipes at times demanded novel ingredients which were costly.

Mennonite women quite freely adopted new food ways as the Mennonite church did not intervene in food acculturation. It believed, for example, that while all cooking occurred in the women's domain, it did not threaten the patriarchal church establishment. Hence, the church as such, was not only oblivious to culinary changes that occurred, but it even encouraged new foods such as cakes, pies and dainties to be sold at food sales held annually in the church basement. Unlike the Ukrainian settlers of the early 1900s, who attempted to vindicate their Ukrainian nationalism as well as their Ukrainianess by maintaining their indigenous food habits and rituals, the Mennonites had no nationalistic ties to uphold when they settled in Canada.²⁵ Mennonites also differed from the Irish immigrants who settled in the United States in the early twentieth century. Hasia R. Diner states that "the poor rural Irish had no desire to copy the food habits of the despised Anglo-Irish Protestant elite, who were believed to be the architects of the potato famines of the 1840s".²⁶ Mennonites on the other hand had no political issues to contend with, as they had no nationalistic views to uphold.

Thus the Mennonite families in general, enjoyed eating something new and different – as long as the entire Mennonite cuisine was not altered. Children begged for and enjoyed hot dogs and bologna sandwiches. Pork and beans derived from a tin were a real treat. When times improved financially due to the waning of the depression,

Mennonite cuisine took on the new flavor of society. It was then that electric cooking ranges with proper temperature gauges, as well as other small cooking appliances such as mixers began to emerge in Mennonite kitchens.²⁷

Changes such as introducing novel ways of food preparation and food processing fostered a great interest in food acculturation as well as acculturation in general in Mennonite women's circles. In addition, much of this acculturation became feasible when Mennonite women became English literate and could fluently read the *Five Roses* and the *Robin Hood* cook books as well as newspaper and magazine recipe clippings. With the abundance of newly found recipes, inclusive of precise ingredient and baking instructions, the old sketchy handwritten recipe books were no longer necessary. These treasures would now be filed in archives or would become valuable keepsakes for families or scholars. For the Mennonite immigrant women in North Kildonan there was nothing during the late 1940s to impede food acculturation. The church did not object to this food modification, the family endorsed it and the progressiveness of the women advocated for it.

Mennonite women who were increasingly relegated to the domestic sphere, especially the kitchen, realized they could now fully utilize their competent cooking potential and introduce host society food into their kitchen empire unimpeded. By the 1950's Mennonite women also realized that given the opportunity, as well as the means, they could rival their host society counterparts in culinary achievements. They didn't have to be second best any more. For Mennonite women this freedom to acculturate in culinary achievements was an act of empowerment, proving that they too could achieve something worthwhile. While one male guest speaker at a *Verein*

meeting stated that women could achieve much by performing mundane everyday tasks cheerfully, some women inwardly entertained loftier desires such as excelling more aesthetically in the manner of entertaining, carrying on a more elegant lifestyle and achieving satisfaction. Furthermore, for many Mennonite women this act of acculturation was paramount; they believed that embracing a more genteel life style was linked to social progress and ultimately social mobility and provisional for a better future for their daughters.

For these and many other reasons the Mennonite tables for entertaining in the late 1950s began to gleam with crystal stemware, damask table cloths, Royal Albert china and well polished silverware. It was now not the kitchen table but the dining room table that was deemed necessary for good and proper entertainment. This was very trendy at that time. It also became very appropriate to serve new host society cuisine at dinner occasions, and every Mennonite hostess attempted to be first at doing so. No longer was the motto *Schlicht und Einfach*, or 'plain and simple' applicable in the 1950s. A change in attitude fostered the intent to emulate the more affluent group within the Mennonite society. Even the social custom of visiting a neighbor's house unannounced for coffee or Fasma on Sunday afternoon and enjoying home made bread, butter, jam and Prips or coffee, was frowned upon.²⁸ According to a new more formal norm, an invitation for lunch or dinner was required to affirm the guest's welcome. With this new practice the old age of *Gemueticlichkeit* faded away, giving rise to a more structured formal art of entertaining.

Some of the less affluent women found it difficult to keep up with these changes and as a result new and different friendships emerged. In this light, the division

between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots, initiated social stratification and became a difficult schism to bridge. Some married women, who were financially unable to achieve a more luxurious lifestyle went to work outside of the home, either on a full or part time basis, in an effort to advance to more sophistication at home. This had once been unheard of, as it was fundamental in Mennonite circles that a married woman with a husband, children and a household should not have to work outside of the home at the expense of the family. These working mothers were often looked down upon as exchanging their own desires for that of their family. In this sense, two groups of married women emerged: those that worked outside of the home and those that did not.²⁹

Marlene Epp notes that women's role in food preparation was signified both by ethnicity and gender. While women were relegated by the patriarchal society to dominate the domestic sphere, they were also designated to uphold and provide a contribution towards the ethnic cohesion pertaining to that sphere. Epp believes many women found their self-identity in fulfilling that designated role.³⁰ When, however, during the 1930s and 1940s the ethnic roles of women became somewhat blurred due to acculturation, women were often blamed for neglecting their families and forfeiting their ethnicity.

Food and food preparation constituted a predominant aspect in the lives of Mennonite women all through the centuries. Once these women were in Canada, they had a fervent desire to progress and not lag behind the achievements of the host society. This intention was sanctioned by acculturation. It could well be surmised then, that food practices became the initial nexus of the old and new food culture of the

Mennonites, hastening the acculturation of Mennonite women in general.

NOTES:

Chapter Five.

- ¹ Marlene Epp, "The Semiotics of Zwieback; Feast and Famine in the Narratives of Mennonite Refugee Women," *Sisters or Strangers? Immigrant, Ethnic, and Racialized Women in Canadian History* (Toronto, 2004), 315.
- ² Norma Jost Voth, *Mennonite Foods and Folkways from South Russia*, 1 (Intercourse, PA: 1990), 19-34.
- ³ My own experience in learning how to cook Mennonite food.
- ⁴ Marlene Epp, "The Semiotics of Zwieback."
- ⁵ This booklet is a treasured personal recipe booklet left to me by my mother. It shows me the difficulties she went through in an attempt to acculturate.
- ⁶ Voth, 274.
- ⁷ See *Mennonite Treasury of Recipes* (Steinbach: 1961). One of the earliest Mennonite cookbooks published in Manitoba.
- ⁸ Voth, 460-463.
- ⁹ Interviews with 16 women for this thesis in 2002.
- ¹⁰ Irma S. Rombauer, Marion Rombauer Becker and Ethan Becker, *Joy of Cooking* (New York: 1975), 5.
- ¹¹ Hardly any Mennonite children were obese or overweight as seen from school class pictures of the 1930's.
- ¹² According to my mother who always seemed to be on a diet.
- ¹³ Interview with Elizabeth Klassen Dyck Mirau by Heidi Koop, MHC, 195.
- ¹⁴ Interview with Hilda Redekop Lage by Heidi Koop, MHC, 281.
- ¹⁵ Voth, 1: 404-405.
- ¹⁶ Heide Koop "North Kildonan Grocery," unpublished manuscript, MHC, 454.
- ¹⁷ Susan Hiebert, *A Place of Kindness*, (Steinbach: 1990), 316.
- ¹⁸ Interview with Ann Enns Braun by Heidi Koop, MHC, 88.
- ¹⁹ Voth, 417- 420.
- ²⁰ Most Mennonites in North Kildonan became aware of the 1933 famine in Ukraine via the occasional letter that escaped Soviet censorship. My mother lost her, at one time very wealthy, stepmother to starvation during this famine.
- ²¹ A daily routine I remember well from my childhood.
- ²² Voth, 105.
- ²³ My own remembrance of weddings and funerals.
- ²⁴ Mennonite women who believed that this host society cuisine would merely augment the existing Mennonite food roster were badly mistaken. In approximately sixty years the treasure of recipes they had brought with them to North Kildonan would be replaced by North American food, fast food and junk food. While today some of the second generation Mennonite women still cook traditional Mennonite food to some extent, the third generation enjoys eating Mennonite food but does not prepare it. The

fourth generation is quite unfamiliar with Mennonite dishes. The treasured recipes the Mennonite women had accumulated for centuries and brought with them to Canada had vanished within three generations. It was a cultural loss that swept by almost unnoticed.

²⁵ See Swyripa, *Wedded to the Cause*.

²⁶ Hasia R. Diner, *Hungering for America Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration*, (Cambridge: 2001), xvii and 292.

²⁷ Epp, in "Mennonite Girl's Homes," notes that already by the 1920's an array of electrical appliances had become cheaper, more reliable and more commonly used in city homes. However, she believes that these would still have been new to the Mennonites, but were introduced in Mennonite homes later on when they could afford them.

²⁸ One woman I interviewed in 2002 said that during the early 1930's she and her husband had dropped in unannounced at my parents house. As Faspa, or afternoon tea time neared, my mother invited the guests for Faspa. All that my mother served was fresh homemade butter, homemade jam and homemade fresh white bread together with tea or coffee. Now this woman chuckled at this scanty meal. But she also acknowledged that they had enjoyed a very good time.

²⁹ According to my mother, married working mothers were often looked down upon as women who neglected their families.

³⁰ Epp, "Semiotics of Zwieback," 315.

CONCLUSION

While many aspects in the Mennonite immigrant women's lives underwent change upon arrival in North Kildonan, their social status was especially altered; it was greatly reduced by the host society to a much lower status level than the immigrant women had previously enjoyed in Ukraine. This was understandable, as the immigrants were illiterate in the English language and unaccustomed to Canadian cultural values. Even though some of these immigrant women had enjoyed higher education such as business school, teacher's college or women's finishing school in Ukraine, or other parts of Europe, this education was not recognized in Canada. The North Kildonan Mennonite women felt classified as 'immigrants', degraded to the status of unwanted people who were ready to seize jobs originally designated for the host society. Such were the feelings of discrimination that many Mennonites experienced when times were economically depressed, stock markets crashed, and unemployment was soaring. This is when newspaper cartoons shouted: "No more European Settlers for the present – The English Speaking Residents Are to Be Considered."¹

During the early years of immigration, women of the host society and women of Mennonite identity kept mainly to themselves beyond uttering a friendly greeting to each other as they passed by. Each of the groups traveled on a different trajectory; the host society women being mainly involved in wider civic activities and the Mennonite women being predominantly involved in their ethno religious community and committed to their

family's survival. Initially, the social status in the secular society was not a considerable issue for Mennonite women, as they were absorbed in coping with their own problems of survival. Nonetheless, the Mennonite women were aware that they would eventually have to acculturate in order to achieve upward financial and social mobility.

In Ukraine, the women's status within the Mennonite community had always been dependent upon the status of the husband, evident by the fact that married women were always known by their husband's names.² The husband's status, on the other hand, was dependent on his possessions, progress and achievement. When, however, during the Russian Revolution and prior to their immigration to Canada, the husbands forfeited most of their former status due to the loss of wealth and possessions, the women also experienced a downgrading and loss of status. Upon arrival here in Canada, women were in a favorable position to gain back their status, not as Mrs Peter Dyck or Mrs Isaak Klassen, but as Mary Dyck and Anne Klassen. The women gained this new status based on their own ability to enhance the husband's meager income by helping with chicken farming, gardening, performing cottage industries, or at times, engaging in part or full time factory work. To support her family financially, Sara Dyck took in sewing during the winter months to tide the family over until spring when gardening work became available for the husband.³ Mary Klassen said her mother had done some preserving of jams and pickles for Mary's employers in River Heights.⁴ Susan Unruh started a Kindergarten to garner some income.⁵ Other women who did not have their daughters employed in the domestic service, worked as temporary workers in the summer for the Dutch market gardeners, west of Henderson Highway, to augment the family income.⁶ Being able to contribute financially to the family income boosted the self esteem of the

women and escalated their status within the family. However, within the women's society these women were often criticized for their work involvement outside of the home. The question that surfaced repeatedly was *haft se daut nedich*, or is there a necessity for the woman to work outside of the home?

Occasionally women also gained status for providing emotional support for new business ventures promoted by their husbands. In the 1930s and 1940s several small businesses and manufacturing plants emerged in North Kildonan and in most cases the wives were an encouraging factor in these risky endeavors.⁷ An example of this can be seen in the development of Palliser Furniture Ltd. When Abe Defehr, the founder of the firm quit his job at Safeway in 1944, he questioned his wife Mia, "but what if we fail?" Mia responded "go right ahead and give it a try. I have no doubt you will make it work. If it fails you can no doubt go back to work as before."⁸ Women like Mia DeFehr also worked manually side by side with their husbands, elevating their woman's status within the family and making women more independent.

In church the women were always third on the hierarchical ladder; first there was the church leadership, then the men of the congregation, and lastly the women. In the first years women were not allowed to attend church business meetings, but several years later women were permitted to attend but not voice their opinions. One woman said she dared to stand up and speak at a meeting, but she received such a drastic look that she did not wish to repeat her act.⁹ On the other hand women were permitted to teach Sunday school, sing in the church choir and attend *Verein* meetings. Gloria Redekop argues that these social outlets provided women with some status in the congregation.

Mennonite women also attained status as homemakers; it was important that they

were not merely housekeepers. As in Ukraine, women ran the household in an orderly and authoritarian fashion and were often strict taskmasters.¹⁰ One woman remarked, "my mom was strict. She had very little patience. When she said something, that's what she meant. If you didn't listen you had to duck when you passed her. She had a very loose wrist."¹¹ On the other hand mothers seldom neglected their children: food was always ready at mealtimes and clothes were always ironed and mended, available to the family when required. Mennonite mothers were known to be loving and sharing, and the mother's welfare was always last to be considered. Therefore the mother's status as an orderly and fair keeper of the home was well respected by both the children and the husband. As the women had such a high status in the home, acculturation within the parameters of the women's domain was usually not debatable, as long as it did not conflict drastically with tradition and church values.

The Mennonite immigrant women did not accept acculturation lightly upon settling in North Kildonan, as they were bound by tradition and were still living in a continuum with their past. However, despite their lives within their boundaries of the North Kildonan community and their Mennonite households, the women in this study were also aware of their status in the wider society. Their proximity to it and indirect interaction with it invited them to consider acculturation to its ways and fashions. Several social nexuses existed.

First, North Kildonan was in close proximity to Winnipeg. The Eaton's store at the city center was relatively easy to access: only a ten minute walk followed by half an hour street car ride brought North Kildonan customers right to the Eaton's door. While street car fare was five cents a ride, women sometimes saved up until they had the available

fare, and then went to Eaton's at times just to 'window shop.' For large purchases both parents would head off to Eaton's and for the Santa Claus parade the whole family would start off early in the morning and after the parade would gather in Eaton's basement for hot dogs and a soft drink.

This was all quite comfortable and relaxing for the newcomers, as urban areas and city life were not completely foreign to all Mennonite immigrants in North Kildonan. E.K. Francis explains, "the majority of Winnipeg Mennonites were of the *Russlaender* group (second wave immigrants) a considerable portion of whom had belonged to the urban rather than rural classes in the Old Country."¹² Therefore for many of these immigrant women it was refreshing to get out of their little houses and go to the city to see or learn something new. The impact of these small trips often enticed women to acculturate or even just adjust somewhat to the culture of the host society.

Second, immigrant mothers learned social skills vicariously from their children enrolled in public schools. Children brought home stories and incidents of what they had experienced at school, while mothers listened and then attempted to improve the family's lifestyle accordingly. In addition mothers also attended 'parent and teachers' meetings where they observed how the children of the British-Canadian host society were dressed and how they behaved. The mothers would then attempt to improve on their daughters clothes and make them more up-date. But money was scarce. A great boost came for the mothers when the dress code for girls was implemented in 1938. This dress code consisted of a navy blue serge tunic (jumper) accompanied by black stockings and a white blouse. This was affordable and solved the girl's clothes problem. When the boys in turn asked for various new items other boys had, the mothers would evaluate the need

and comply at times. Thus, slowly through their children, the mothers became initiated into the everyday life of the host society and thereby gained a sense of acculturation.

Third, these women learned to adapt novel housekeeping skills through the domestic employment of their teenaged daughters. These daughters were always asked how things were done in the 'rich peoples' homes. Could some of these aspects be adapted in the immigrant's own circumstances? Could chocolate cakes be baked in a wood burning stove without a heat gauge? Mothers then experimented and learned new aspects of house keeping from their daughters. Wally Kroeker notes:

At work these girls learned 'city manners' and sampled upscale living. They developed a taste for new foods like scones and marmalade. They learned how to prepare roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, and how to set a refined table. When they returned to their farm families or started their own households, they brought along their new exposures and perhaps an emerging fondness for finery.¹³

Fourth, acculturation was facilitated through the media. The Eaton's catalogue, magazines, the radio and later on the television provided new stimuli for acculturation. Franca Iacovetta's study of reading the *Chatalaine* magazine notes that articles under the guise of health and welfare surreptitiously confirmed the "white middle-class ideal as the only sanctioned model of family life."¹⁴ In addition she argues that this subtlety in magazine advertising frequently led to a change in food consumption.¹⁵

Ironically, the women's *Verein*, certainly boosting the Mennonite traditional background, nonetheless became very conducive to affirming acculturation. During coffee time women often discussed novel ways of doing things, and invariably compared their own lifestyle with that of the host society. This promoted competition among the women, each seeking to come up with first with the latest gadgets and information. This greatly fostered acculturation.

While the Mennonite women were willing to embrace acculturation, certain aspects nonetheless impeded this process. Language was a primary factor. In the early 1930s there were no English classes in North Kildonan, and the host society did not exhibit much interest in teaching immigrants the English language. Therefore, most working girls learned English at work.¹⁶ The radio, English newspapers and magazines were difficult to obtain, and television was not yet available. As conversing with the English speaking neighbors in sign language became somewhat cumbersome, some immigrant women turned to their children's *Dick and Jane* elementary school readers. Some of the mothers learned to read and write along with their children at night. The only effort, by the host society, to foster Mennonite women's acculturation, was in the way of an invitation given to the immigrant women to join a school auxiliary. However, as the Mennonite women could not speak English and because they were penniless, this item was soon forgotten by all that were involved.

Institutional completeness often also produced institutional isolation. In many cases women did not find it necessary to learn the English language. They had grocery stores where German was spoken and they had physicians who spoke German. Furthermore, they had German church services and conversed in German with family and friends. Many Mennonite men even worked for German speaking business establishments. There seemed to be no urgency to learn the English language unless they went beyond their Mennonite settlement. Sociologist J.W. Fretz visited North Kildonan in the 1940s and observed the Mennonites' linguistic boundaries. He noted not only "a solid settlement of Mennonites, on three city street, about half-a-mile in length," but that the "people use the German language and have their own social and religious activities apart from the

surrounding community.”¹⁷

The church also took a prohibitive stance on change to tradition, as this was often believed to be affiliated with assimilation and eventually secularization. The congregation was often warned that one thing could lead to another, and eventually the church would lose its potency, or its biblically sanctioned role as the ‘salt’ of the earth. This attitude stymied acculturation, especially acculturation that was initiated by women.

Therefore, the adjustment to the culture of the host society was a well weighed and pragmatic process for these women. For most Mennonite immigrant women unconditional adjustment to the culture of the host society appeared to be somewhat of a betrayal of their own heritage. For them such a change went contrary to the teachings of their ancestors who frequently had emphasized a stringent work ethic and a considerable amount of frugality in a setting of simplicity. However, the phrase, *we motte to waut komme*, or “we have to get somewhere”, was frequently reiterated and meant that if they wanted to survive and attain upward mobility they would have to exchange their *Schlicht und Einfach*, or “plain and simple” for a culture foreign to them. So they opted for the latter.

This is an historical study, from the grass roots up, an ‘inside’ account, based on interviews and conversations with some of the very women who experienced life during these early years in North Kildonan. Some have passed on since then, and others have become too frail to answer any questions. However, those who spoke of the past did so with much pleasure and nostalgia in their eyes. They still remembered the *Schlicht und Einfach* or ‘plain and simple’ life with its *Gemuetlichkeit* that bound families together, and a community that supported those who would not otherwise have survived.

It is true that most of these first generation Mennonite women never made it out of their private domestic sphere into the work places and educational institutions of the wider society. However, due to their moderate pace in adaptation to the new culture and their gradual adjustment to the new society, they established a pattern of continuity and change, in which they neither broke with tradition completely nor embraced the new totally. Nonetheless, through their careful acts of acculturation they were able to pave the way and establish the groundwork for their daughters to go on to college and to become full fledged members of suburbia.¹⁸

NOTES:

Conclusion.

¹ Editorial page cartoon in the *Toronto Mail and Empire*, November 27, 1929, as shown in Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 246.

² Even here in Manitoba in earlier years deceased women's obituaries were always referenced by the husband's name.

³ My mother's experience during the early 1930's.

⁴ Interview with Mary Klassen, January, 2002.

⁵ Susan Unruh, "Der Kindergarten," *25 Jahre Mennonitische Ansiedlung Nord Kildonan*, 42-43.

⁶ My mother worked on a temporary basis for the gardeners, where she gained some experience for the time when she partnered with my father in operating a market gardening business.

⁷ Isaak Neufeld, "Die wirtschaftliche und kulturelle Entwicklung," *25 Jahre Mennonitische Ansiedlung Nord Kildonan*, 31-33.

⁸ Mary Enns, excerpt from "Mia, The Story of a Remarkable Woman," *The Band Plays On*, unpublished manuscript, MHC, 18.

⁹ Conversation with Susan Unruh circa 1995.

¹⁰ Remple, *A Mennonite Family in Tsarist Russia*, 85-101.

¹¹ Interview with Anne Enns Braun by Heidi Koop, MHC, 87.

¹² Francis, 248-249.

¹³ Kroeker, 74.

¹⁴ Iacovetta *Rethinking Canada*, 300.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Interview with Sara Goertz Driediger by Heidi Koop, MHC, 40.

¹⁷ J.W.Fretz as quoted in Francis, *In Search of Utopia*, 249-250.

¹⁸ Some of the daughters and granddaughters of these women have become prominent Canadians. There is Wanda Koop, the granddaughter of Katherina and Johann Epp, and the daughter of Erica Koop, who was named by *Time* magazine as one of the four most important contemporary artists in Canada. Then there is Gathie Falk, another well known artist in Canada who is a daughter of Widow Falk, one of the early residents in North Kildonan. Gathie Falk received numerous awards including the Order of Canada in 1997, and is recognized as one of Canada's most respected senior artists. Then there is Sara Klassen, educator and poet, granddaughter of Katherina and Johann Klassen (first settlers in the North Kildonan Mennonite settlement). She is followed by Cindy Klassen, Olympic speed skater, great granddaughter of Katherina and Johann Klassen. Heidi Koop, the daughter of Peter and Mariechen Koop, was one of the first few Mennonite women to receive the Master of Divinity degree, but unfortunately was unable to practice her profession due to her illness. Furthermore, there are numerous nurses and teachers, therapists and foresters and engineers who became valued Canadian citizens aided by the first steps in acculturation their grandmothers made to embrace a new culture and an alternate life style.

Appendix "A"

Questions:

1. When did you come to Canada?
2. Married or single?
3. How old were you when you came to North Kildonan?
4. What was your lifestyle like when you settled in North Kildonan?
 - A. Food
 - B. Clothing
 - C. Cleaning
 - D. Sewing
 - E. Child care
 - F. Health Care
 - G. Children's education
 - H. Shopping
 - I. Church involvement
5. How did these aspects compare with corresponding aspects of the host society?
6. When did things begin to change for the better for you?
7. Were you happy to be in Canada even if life was difficult during the depression?
8. Did you ever work outside of your home?
9. Was there an opportunity for adults to learn English?
10. Did your mother want you to get an education beyond high school? (why or why not)?
11. What was your status in the home a) mother, b) daughter ?
12. What was your status in the church society?
13. What was your status in society (host) at that time?
14. At what point, in your opinion, did you become fully acculturated with the Canadian way of life?
15. How many children were in your parents family (in total) . How many children did you have?

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