

A teal-colored garment with a circular pattern hangs on a wooden door handle. The garment is draped and folded, showing its texture and pattern. The background is a light-colored wooden door with vertical panels.

SONS ^{AND} *Mothers*

STORIES FROM
MENNONITE MEN

EDITED BY

Mary Ann Loewen

SONS AND *Mothers*

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STORIES FROM MENNONITE MEN

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University of Regina Press

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This book is dedicated first to the men who give us their mothers as children, as wives, as girlfriends, as parents, as women. As stalwart Christians, as vulnerable migrants, as disease-ridden seniors, as reluctant rebels, as trendy fashionistas, as vicarious musicians, as caring nurturers, as open-minded supporters, as women who “do not go gentle into that good night.” Thank you, men, for your honest stories.

And second, it is dedicated to all mothers, who are both bulwarks and fascinating, many-faceted, non-stereotypical human beings.

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Introduction

Mary Ann Loewen

Every culture has its way of telling a story. Every culture has its notion of what a family is, what a mother and a father are. This collection represents stories and poems written by men about their mothers, and although these men write about their Mennonite mothers, anyone who opens this book will come to understand that although a particular culture offers a certain way of seeing life, for all of us “our life stories are not merely *about* us but in an inescapable and profound way *are* us” (John Paul Eakin, x). This anthology is a set of narratives about the significant mother-son relationship and, as such, has to do with the identities of both the son and the mother.

In their introduction to *Mothering Mennonite*, a collection of essays in which women write about their Mennonite mothers, editors Rachel Epp Buller and Kerry Fast suggest that “various directions for future research on Mennonite mothering remain open” (14). During the Q&A of the Winnipeg book launch of this ambitious, imaginative, and successful collection in June of 2013, a variety of

questions were asked, but one in particular caught my ear: “We see that women have had a chance to write about their experience as daughters of Mennonite mothers, but have men had a similar opportunity?” The answer, as far as the editors knew, was no. So that evening I decided to take up the challenge of crossing the gender/generation divide and allow men to share their stories about their Mennonite mothers. I decided to become the “coaxer,” to use a term coined by Ken Plummer, soliciting stories from these men (21).

Indeed, Buller and Fast’s encouragement to keep exploring the area of mothering is an incentive to think outside of the familiar gender box. To consider that not only women, as Virginia Woolf suggests, “think back through their mothers” (88), but that perhaps men do, too. And clearly they do, if the enthusiasm from the writers I approached to be a part of this project is any indication.

This anthology includes both prose and poetry, in which male writers share their memories—both good and bad, happy and sad, ordinary and profound—of their mother-son relationships. The pieces evoke a variety of occasions: conversations—both casual and momentous; significant historical events—both pleasurable and traumatic; remembered moments—both tender and harsh; and experiences—both quotidian and life-changing. The looking back affords the contributor an opportunity to observe his mother as both a woman and a mother, and to consider his life as a son; to remember when his mother understood him, and when she did not; to recall occasions when time stood still, so magical was the mother-son moment; to realize how proud his mother was/is of him; to reflect upon how his mother has impacted him as a son, a friend, a father, a wage-earner, a professional, a husband, a grandfather.

As the writer writes, his story *becomes*; memories beget memories; stories beget stories. Certainly the perception of what has transpired years ago shifts over time. As Judith Summerfield affirms, “There is no return to the event, except ‘virtually’” (185), and of course all writers “play *at* and *with* subject positions” (Spigelman, italics mine, 126). But that is not to say that the stories here are not true. In fact, I suggest the very opposite. I strongly believe that sentiment and memory are as valuable—if not more so—to a memoir, as are the facts, and I agree with Smith and Watson who maintain that reducing “autobiographical narration to facticity . . . strip[s] it

of the densities of rhetorical, literary, ethical, political, and cultural dimensions” (13). Surely *the act of remembering* deepens the original experience, for over time the story takes on a meaning that was not possible at the time of the specific event, the particular occasion; the story gradually unfolds itself as it becomes a part of a life’s (indeed, a son’s) greater narrative.

Asking men to write about their mothers is a potentially controversial undertaking, both because men and women represent different genders and because a good portion of the narrative could be seen as a kind of appropriation of another’s voice. The past few decades have seen women write for themselves, about themselves, and finding within that action an agency they had not previously been privy to; is it then politically correct to give the “driver’s seat” back to the men? And what about appropriation: Can a white person write authoritatively about an Aboriginal person? Can a heterosexual write knowingly about a gay man? Can a woman who has not had a child write convincingly from the viewpoint of a mother? And to the point, can men, who are both male and unable to bear children, write justifiable stories about females who have borne children? My answer to all of these questions is yes. So, in fact, it is not only *politically correct* to allow men to tell stories about women; it is imperative that both genders tell their life stories, for only when women and men work together is the gender divide likely to dissolve. And yes, it is okay for men to write about their mothers because what makes these particular narratives legitimate is that they are written from the sons’ perspectives; although they relate stories about their mothers, both the memories and the voices are inherently their own.

We tell our stories in order to make sense of our lives, and we read the stories of others in order to know and understand what it is to be human, what it is to struggle, to love, to weep, to laugh, to rejoice, to grieve. Certainly “that magical opportunity of entering another life is what really sets us thinking about our own” (Ker Conway, n.p.). Indeed, writers and readers need each other if stories are to make a difference in our lives, for it is within that particular exchange that truth “outs” itself, that a shared understanding begins to emerge.

Every ethnicity has its particular way of calling the past to mind. Certainly Mennonites, as a community, “develop their own occasions, rituals, archives, and practices of remembering” (Smith and Watson, 25), and certainly the culture of Mennonites plays into this collection in a significant way. From young men surprised by incorrect assumptions about the Mennonite church they grew up in, to older men realizing the momentousness of a mother who stayed home from her Mennonite church on a Sunday morning—this specific culture dictated a certain code of behaviour within each of its distinct communities. And so when a young woman chooses to bypass these presuppositions, there is a story. But when a young woman chooses to abide by these assumptions, there is still a story. And when a mother experiences conflict between the community’s assumptions and her natural bents, the story is fascinating. Both the “sons” who write these stories and the sons and daughters reading them identify with some kind of cultural setting. And while this particular collection chooses as its focus the Mennonite tradition, regardless of the specific custom, for all of us story and remembering are ways to recognize our shared human experience. And so, just as Miriam Toews’ *A Complicated Kindness* (2004) found resonance in the hearts of young women of all kinds of ethnic and religious backgrounds through the narration of its protagonist, Nomi, so too these stories will move not just the Mennonite “child,” but also the Muslim, the Jew, the atheist, and the agnostic, the Catholic, as well as the secularist, child. We are all children born of mothers, and all of us seek to understand one another in an attempt to make sense of our own lives.

In the past decades, life writing has gone through various stages. While perhaps as recently as twenty years ago “autobiography consolidated its status as a . . . discourse that served to power and define centers, margins, boundaries, and grounds of action in the West” (Smith, 18), today personal narrative and/or memoir is seen as an undertaking that seeks to recognize the ordinary person, that looks to understand the importance of the everyday life. Thus life writing is recognized as legitimate in the academic world because, as Richard Miller points out, “all intellectual projects are always, inevitably, also autobiographies” (50), but it is also recognized more generally for its role in helping us sort out our individual and collec-

tive identities, our past and our present lives. Thus life writing has, in essence, become necessary.

A variety of fairly specific threads are probed in this collection. The Russian revolution of 1917 and its lasting psychological effects are crucial to several contributions. As Paul Tiessen talks lovingly about his mother, he discloses her intentional absence from the institution of church in her early forties, an absence quite possibly due to traumas experienced in Russia. John Rempel recounts how his mother's firsthand experience with the anarchy of Machno and his henchmen resulted in an insistence on daily, monthly, and even yearly rhythms to family life in Canada—as a way of slaying demons and exerting a modicum of control in a world of uncertainty. These narratives suggest that the sudden, traumatic events in Russia shattered the women's assumed protected and secure lives, and resulted in repression, in an incumbent inability to share their pasts with others. Although they managed to create a safe and economically sound life for themselves here in Canada, their difficult history remained a part of who they were. And as Susan Brison argues, “attempting to limit traumatic memories does not make them go away; the signs and symptoms of trauma remain, caused by a source more virulent for being driven underground” (58).

Also examined is the spiritual fervour of mothers who believed they were doing the right thing by insisting on strict religious devotion. These mothers' evangelical zeal—though sincere and positively motivated—often left the sons feeling stifled, lost, and sometimes confused. Josiah Neufeld's difficult conversations with his mother about his choice to take his wife's surname reflect his and his mother's polarizing views on gender roles; Nathan Klippenstein's descriptions of countless mandatory prayers of penitence reveal both his inability to “measure up,” and a religion plagued by judgment; and Byron Rempel's poetic unveiling of his mother's worldly priorities exposes a faith afraid of what is on the inside. The sons' eventual responses to these influences were to leave the religious path of their mothers to explore a faith, a way of being in the world, that allowed them to be true to who they were, to who they were becoming.

In contrast to the conservative, evangelical mother is the less traditional mother. In the case of Lukas Thiessen, it is a mother who

not only allows her son the freedom to experiment with “worldly” practices, but also freely acknowledges her own earlier exploration in matters such as dating and sexuality. Thiessen’s interviews with his peers and their mothers are both surprising and revealing. While the age of the mothers may partially account for their openness, their answers are nonetheless enlightening and serve to build bridges between the generations. And Christoff Engbrecht’s contribution, the poem “*heritage*” offers a unique perspective: while his father is Mennonite, his mother is Irish. This conflation of faith traditions, combined with a common interest in poetry, makes for an unusual mother-son relationship.

The response to a lack of educational opportunity, of exposure to ideas taught in institutions of higher learning (perhaps related to the patriarchal underpinnings of the Mennonite faith, particularly fifty years ago) is also examined in this collection. Howard Dyck writes of his close connection to his mother through a common love of music; his achievements in the professional world of choral conducting were lauded and experienced vicariously by his mother, who silently rued her own lack of education and opportunity. And Andrew C. Martin poignantly works through his difficult past as he describes a life of passive-aggressive role modelling, an inability on his mother’s part to work through conflict in a constructive way due to a restrictive social environment.

Several authors speak of the difficulty in seeing their mothers become not only dependent, but significantly changed, when illness and/or old age exacts its toll. Lloyd Ratzlaff offers a moving account of his mother’s losing battle with a sudden case of meningitis at age eighty-five, and Nathan Klippenstein recalls his mother’s tortured attempts to speak after a brutal stroke betrays her once alert and intelligent mind. Michael Goertzen shares the effects of his mother’s cancer and its treatment as he simultaneously tries to make sense of his relationship with her. Patrick Friesen shares the agony of having to break the news to his mother—a woman who chose “a romantic fram[e]” for her life—that her independent days are over, that it is time to move into a care home.

Woven through these stories of frustration, of loss, of gradual or sudden understanding, of heartbreak, of tenderness, of celebration, of everyday events is a thread that speaks of a gentle, adult

awareness of what a mother has meant to a son. An awareness, too, of mother as child, mother as young woman, mother as writer and gardener and spouse and nurse and chorister and seamstress and patient and sibling and lover and church member. Mother with interests and loves and insecurities and disappointments and talents and inabilities and strengths and weaknesses. Mother as human being.

What to make of a mother who has to have her hair done, even on her deathbed? What to make of a mother who insists on one more church service when all of her children are overtired and enormously hungry? What to make of a mother who suddenly stops going to church in mid-life? What to make of a mother who recycles long before it is cool to do so? What to make of a mother who is kind and gentle one minute and fierce and angry the next? What to make of a mother who dislikes her husband? What to make of a mother who has the “trickster” in her? What to make of a mother who laments the lack of education and lives vicariously through her son’s accomplishments? What to make of a mother whose eye leaks because of cancer treatment? What to make of mothers who love their sons unconditionally?

These contributors “make of” their mothers what their mothers tell them in person, or posthumously, what they tell them with their voices and, more importantly, with their spirits. Mostly these sons make of their mothers through their own memories, through their own eyes. They create, re-create their mothers, and their intense, difficult, easygoing, and beautiful relationships with these women. Everyone has a story. Everyone has a mother. Here are a few stories of sons and mothers.

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Helen and Paul

Things My Friends Did Not Know about My Mom

Paul Tiessen

L.

One thing that my friends did not know about my mom, Helen (Reimer) Tiessen, was that in 1950, when she was forty-two and I was six, she became something of a social recluse. We had just moved to Kitchener and were starting to attend the big Kitchener Mennonite Brethren church. She did not withdraw from my dad or my sister or me, but—and over the years I started to think to myself that this was peculiar—she started to withdraw from the ongoing and vigorous activity of church life.

Another thing was this: as though to accompany her emerging diffidence within church circles, she and I began a more or less private conversational relationship that we kept going with increasing intensity for seventeen years, until 1967, when I moved away from home to go to graduate school. Especially as I grew older during my

high school and on into my undergraduate years, we would pursue extraordinary late-night conversations, perhaps once a month, plus ordinary give-and-take everyday conversations. We were both nighthawks anyway, and she, as much as any two or three of my closest friends, became my confidante, at least at some level.

I always benefited from her endless forbearance and sweet gentleness and (though I did not know it at the time) her incredible experience of life. In the face of my critical impatience with certain church matters as I grew older, I sorted out a range of questions with her: about identity and ambition, family and relationships, sports and pop culture, church and religion. She helped me think about my life at the huge public elementary school that I entered in 1950, where I thrived—"with God's help," as my mom would ceaselessly remind me—in the hands of a series of excellent teachers. When she and I differed, she never tried to convince by argument; she simply endorsed the positive.

Simultaneously in 1950 she found a space outside our immediate family that was for her a stimulating and rewarding extension of our home, and one that served as an alternative to church attendance and involvement. She began visiting her own mom and her siblings, in a house right across the street from the church. My mom enjoyed her wise, gracious, and magnanimous mother, and her four unmarried siblings—a brother and three sisters—showing interest in their successes at jobs and, perhaps too frequently, their loss of jobs in the city, their illnesses and cures, their adventures and misadventures with friends, their encounters, both good and bad, in church life (where her one sister, Clara, sometimes sang solos).

With other relatives often visiting too, I spent many Sunday afternoons at that house, witnessing my mom and my dad among my aunts and uncles, cousins and grandma, engaging in spirited talk, playing piano, singing—and enjoying *zweibach* and much else that made up the wonderful spread that was *faspä*. My grandma's conversation kept up with everyone's and, to be sure, stimulated a wide-ranging view and astute observation of national and international political and religious situations. Indeed, my grandmother's perspective had developed broadly by the time she was twenty, because from 1902 to 1904 she worked as a seamstress in the estate household at Steinbach, Molotschna, regularly joining the

community-minded Peter Schmidt and his family for meals and the conversations around the table there. With her worldly wise intelligence, my grandma—always showing interest in all of us—consistently gave my mom and others an optimistic yet pragmatic way of seeing and feeling the world. For example, one day during the 1940s she went to the Kitchener City Park to meet Prime Minister Mackenzie King on a visit to his hometown, to thank him face to face for his social policies involving family welfare, and his vigorous support for and high view of Mennonites. She energized many people who came for visits in her little house which, by the 1960s, due to failing health, she only infrequently left. And so she energized my mom, who visited that house almost daily.

For my mom, our church—lively and, by all appearances, very successful—was too much to put up with in terms of its social and psychological expectations. She seemed cowed by the apparent absolutes of its well-oiled social apparatus, its programmatic approval of presumed and, to be sure, occasionally enforced, behavioural normalcy, and its operating at full throttle on multiple fronts in the here and now. Certainly it had developed enormous strengths of its own over its twenty-five-year history that had run through the Depression and the Second World War. Perhaps, missing the “pioneering” spirit that gave energy to so many phases of her life before 1950, she found our church too settled in its ways, too established. While I found plenty of great people and lovely action there—from involvement in choirs, quartets, drama groups, study groups, committees, and charity work, to attending youth events, parties, banquets and guest lectures, and even a bus excursion to the Shaw theatre in Niagara-on-the-Lake—on Sunday mornings my mom simply stayed at my grandma’s, where she could listen in to the church service through a closed-circuit hookup. And no one seemed to mind. My dad—a regular at church who loved its social and institutional life, and who held all kinds of attendant responsibilities—did not object. Members of the congregation also said nothing about her absence from most events. Meanwhile my friends’ mothers (some of whom were part of the “village” of mothers involved in raising all of us kids) carried on in the church: confident and energetic, happy and assured.

I realize now that my mom could not see a role for herself in this church, after having for most of her forty-two years been a highly involved and even favoured participant with lots of connections at significant levels of previous church life. It may be that she sensed a sudden loss of position in 1950 when my dad—known by then as *Lehrer* Tiessen among Russian Mennonites in Ontario, having ended a high-profile job as founding principal of the Mennonite high school in the Niagara Peninsula—took on an ordinary and less visible position in a public elementary school near Kitchener. It may be that she lacked the support of her older and gregarious sister, Lydia, who had moved away from Kitchener with her husband just one year before, to work with the Mennonite Central Committee in Japan; had she been around in 1950, she could have made sure my mom was “connected.” But by the time Aunt Lydia returned from Japan in 1952, speaking to enthusiastic audiences and showing off her kimono, her flamboyant public presence only made me more aware of my mom’s reclusive public persona. My mom’s timidity seemed to me a kind of lack, a kind of public formlessness, though she was quick to applaud and rejoice at her sister Lydia’s bold public presence. Indeed, Lydia and my mom were dear to each other, and my mom did not seem to mind the discrepancy that developed during the 1950s in their individual social expressions and interactions.

2.

... I vividly recall playing Snakes and Ladders with Aunt Helen. She would always have a sympathetic sigh whenever I slid down a long snake, and when her luck sent her for a slide she always had a good-natured laugh. She never displayed a competitive edge. Instead she only wanted the best things to happen to her family and friends. . . . (From her nephew Phil Reimer’s recent recollections of my mom during the early 1970s)

Whenever I asked my dad about my mom’s reticence in public spaces, he would speak of her personal traumas in Russia and Canada,

and of post-traumatic anxieties and lingering effects of those difficult experiences that tended to surface from time to time. But also, he insisted that during their earlier years of married life in Canada she had done her part, had played her role, had successfully performed with zest and zeal in the give-and-take of the social and cultural configurations that had been open to her. Indeed, during their first year of marriage (1935–36) she was involved in the United Church adult Sunday School classes in Stratford, Ontario, where my father attended Normal School; during the next eight years (1936–44), when they made do on a muskeg-dotted tract of land “up north” near Kapuskasing, she hosted countless Sunday guests in the tiny teacherage near his first school; in the winter of 1943, when he took on a neighbouring school, she—though without formal training beyond high-school studies in Winnipeg—with great aplomb took over his one-room school. And during those same years she conducted the school’s senior girls’ choir while he accompanied on the piano, performing in schools and in churches; she founded and led the Young Girls Club on Sunday afternoons; she helped organize the Ladies Fellowship Group at the Reesor United Mennonite church. Subsequently, too, she was active, during the five-year period (1945–50) when we lived on the campus of Eden, the Mennonite Brethren high school in Niagara-on-the-Lake, where my dad held the position of principal.

Indeed, I have my own recollections of my mom in that postwar world leading up to 1950. During that five-year period she still lived with enthusiasm, taking pleasure in her public persona. She socialized widely in the Mennonite community. She happily attended the school’s cultural events, involving music or art or drama. Because we lived in a grand old house on the historic Locust Grove estate that in 1945 became the Eden campus, we ended up having to share the house with female students, for whom my mom was constantly on call; she helped them on various occasions, available especially to help or advise those girls who stayed in residence on weekends. And, of course, she looked after me, during what were for me my preschool days during the late 1940s.

But over the years I came to sense that my mom certainly “had been through a lot” (an expression used often in the Kitchener church about its members, including those who had once been ex-

tremely wealthy and then suffered greatly during the years of the violent Russian Revolution and its aftermath, and those who arrived after World War Two). In withdrawing from larger and more public spheres after 1950, she chose to experience them vicariously through her loved ones, as she remained actively engaged in conversations around both our table and my grandma's. But during the 1950s, she also drew deeply from her memory, unlocking the years that had come before: the magical era in Russia that preceded the violence, as well as some of the later (mid-1920s) years in Russia, and her first quarter century of Canadian experiences that she now treasured. But despite her withdrawal, the world of the 1950s, in Canada, in Ontario, where she lived, was a "good" world. Although it was not a space in which she could adequately create a plausible cultural identity for herself through telling her story, she saw it as "good" for me, and she entrusted me wholly to that world's institutions: the public school, the Mennonite church, organized and casual sports, the city's streets—all of these absorbed me fully, and she rejoiced in that.

3.

... In her extended family Aunt Helen was as an older, very loving sibling. She would sometimes act as a peacekeeper or mediator if I recall correctly (usually involving Uncle Hardy). ... (From her niece Carol Goossen's recent recollections of my mom during the early 1970s)

But there was one other thing that my friends did not know about my mom, and this one was the most significant for me. Indirectly linked to her reclusiveness and to my conversations with her, during those baldly pragmatic 1950s she carried within herself remarkable unpragmatic truths regarding her life story, mysteriously beautiful memories that she did not quite know what to do with. The church of the 1950s, she would have felt, would have viewed with suspicion anyone giving expression to the kind of romantic enchantments of, and attachments to, the past that she so valued. Thus, in the social environment of the church, her personality was in an ongoing state

of collapse after 1950. But occasionally with me she revealed reflections of those memories, during what I have come to realize were privileged moments. She could break off bits of narrative from her past and transform them into tiny glimpses of her earlier selves, selves that once had lived in the carefree brilliance and innocent hopefulness of her long-lost worlds.

Once in a while, perhaps on some Saturday afternoons or weekday evenings when both my mom and I were visiting at my grandma's, I sensed rather vaguely that those glimpses were but bare notations hinting at, or maybe even hiding, a vaster account. By a kind of accidental and, at most, occasional eavesdropping I came to realize that those fragmented intimations of her enigmatic world—a panorama filled with interlocking webs of people in high and low places in some incredibly fascinating corners of Russia and, during the late 1920s, in Winnipeg, and of fateful moments that swung between modest opulence and dire poverty—were an integral part of her normal discourse with her extended family. Indeed, while I did homework or read one of my books in the kitchen, my mother would converse animatedly of an exotic past in the living room. It was a past in which she, her mother, and her siblings had been players. In that friendly and relaxed environment where my unintentional eavesdropping was indiscernible to her, she endlessly retold a story—her story, of things now invisible—that she was chafing to tell others, but without anxiety or embarrassment. In that setting, I could tell that she and her family were speaking freely and happily with each other. It felt to me as though they were observing encyclopedic and primarily “Mennonite” details like those of a Proustian novel, with people, wealthy and less wealthy, well-known and less well-known, carrying out the ambitions of their profoundly optimistic motives and enacting events that involved grand gestures.

But sadly, with me she could only hint at that magic, for my ears—perhaps like the ears of many others at that time—were too dull, too inexperienced, too seduced by the attractions of the immediate present to be interested in what she had to offer. Nonetheless, now and then, she drew on her inner eye to train my heart, to affect my way of seeing. Her perhaps unselfconscious attempt to convey to me those brief yet vivid images of worlds far beyond the everyday

world of our life in Canada in the 1950s, with its practical demands and religious orthodoxies, was one of her great gifts to me, as I finally see now. In small portions she made palpable for me delicate and subtle readings—ever clothed in her expansive expressions of gratitude—of the world’s fragile and fleeting offerings of goodness and beauty, whether epic or minute in their dramatic scope. Her vivid recollections and projections made room for what eventually developed into some of my own presuppositions and affirmations: for example, my community-based interest in supporting energies and efforts that attempt to make space for the production and appreciation of visual and literary art at local and regional levels.

Here is an image that left me with a sense of wonder: that of my mother, without feeling any need to contextualize, offering up sweet evocations of Muslim calls to worship as she once heard them in Russia during her childhood, melodious and melancholy calls to prayer that expanded outward from the minaret of a mosque five times a day. Those sounds blended with her blissful memories of her parents and a few of their friends imagining and then, with financial support coming from sponsors in the south, bringing into actual existence their own vast and ambitious estate in the distant “north,” in Ufa, just west of the Urals, on property belonging earlier to Russian nobility. She heard those calls to prayer, too, during her long and terrifying flight with her family by boat down the Volga River and by train through revolutionary Russia, calls that left her more fascinated than fearful. With her family’s barely established estate having had to be abruptly abandoned as violence mounted at their gate, the goal suddenly was to find someone back home in the Mennonites’ Molotschna Colony in “the south” who would give them shelter.

How she would have loved to have told me how these calls to prayer fit into a finely woven narrative of her life, how these and ten thousand other memories when set side by side could be made to fill in the finely observed texture of her dramatically lived days in Russia, her early days in Canada, all those days before the 1950s came along, had I only stood still long enough to listen. But—for all the contact we maintained in my years of growing up—she and I too often eluded each other, and I heard only the patter of fragments. She might have felt that, described in any sustained detail,

her world would seem too incomprehensible to me, too incommensurate with my own, too complicated to explain.

4.

... Of all the siblings, Aunt Helen was most like my dad. She never said an unkind word. ... / When I was visiting I would walk with her to Grandma's and we would take a short cut in behind Zehr's down the wooden steps through the grove of trees. ... / When she and Uncle Henry moved to the condo I remember seeing her sporting a new hairstyle; ... she started wearing her hair in a pony tail which would swing back and forth as she walked. She looked so cute. I had been so used to seeing her with the traditional 'bun.' ... (From her niece Janet Payne's recent recollections of my mom during the early 1970s and the early 1990s)

My mother was born in 1908 in Russia's Ufa district, where since the 1890s Mennonite farmers and mill owners from the south had made quick cultural and material gains in education and commerce. After six years (1906–12) in the settlement of Jelanskaya, her parents began to establish themselves with two other families on the large Russian estate of Kusnezowo. It was already laden with cattle and horses—an echo of her mom's congenial experience of 1902–04 at the Steinbach estate. But after only five idyllic years (1912–17), their fortunes were swiftly overturned with the revolution. The Reimer family with its five girls fled, temporarily managing to keep one male servant and one maid, one horse and two cows. They first landed back at Jelanskaya, and then in 1921 they headed south amidst famine and cholera. It was a complicated five-week journey along the Volga and then via a reluctant train that at times they had to get out to push. Back in Ukraine, in the Molotschna colony, they lived on the yard of Mom's dad's brother until 1924, surviving with help from the "American Relief Kitchen." With her dad wanting to join the first post-Revolution Mennonite migrations to Canada in 1923–24, it was my mom, suffering from trachoma, who ruined their chances. However, after that things got better for a while,

and my mom experienced some of her favourite years: from 1924 to 1926 she got to study in the Mädchenschule in Tiege-Orloff, the prominent settlement where her father had been selected as leading minister of the Mennonite Brethren church. And by then my mom also had two little brothers, Bill and Hardy.

In 1926, when my mom was eighteen, another opportunity to emigrate arose. Although it was accompanied by a huge sense of loss and temporarily complicated by setbacks, including a delay in my mom's dad receiving his passport, they managed to leave their Russian home. Years later my mother would describe in bits and pieces some of the details of the terrors of travel through Moscow and to the border, and then of the lush beauty of the English countryside between Southampton and Liverpool. And of the Canadian Pacific steamship carrying one of those magnificent Canadian names forever a part of my mom's lexicon—the *Montroyal*—on which she with all of her family made the Atlantic crossing to Saint John, New Brunswick.

With luggage marked accordingly they were destined for Kitchener, but (according to an unhappy family legend) in a train-station episode manifesting the kind of intrigue that was possible among Mennonite church leaders not keen on the liberal attitudes of my mom's dad, things changed. His intention to join his minister brother in Kitchener was slyly sabotaged. Instead, the family was forced to travel by train to Manitoba, arriving in Winnipeg on December 1, 1926. They spent their first three very cold nights in Arnaud, where my mom's dad's friend, a Mennonite Brethren minister, took them in. He was unable, however, to provide them with the farmland that the messenger in Saint John had promised was awaiting them. So, shortly before Christmas, they moved to Winnipeg, into a house on William Street. Winnipeg was for my mom a gift, a godsend. She found it a golden metropolis, a deliciously English city offering jobs at Eaton's and within the homes of the wealthy. This was work that gave her and many of her friends a renewed connection with material well-being and allowed them to absorb a pleasurable sense of the kind of elegance possible in Canada. And Winnipeg also provided a warm setting for choir practice and church gatherings among her many Mennonite friends, old and new. She went to high school there, taking courses in English, adding this new language to her fluent German and Russian.