

Eating My Father's Island

Excerpts from a Novella

Andreas Schroeder

[Two]

My father was a pessimist who'd come by his pessimism honestly. According to Mennonite tradition, the firstborn son inherited the entire estate. The second son became a minister. All daughters and subsequent sons were out of luck. My father was the last offspring of a family of four sons and three daughters, ten years younger than his next-youngest sibling, and an excessively shy, reclusive boy in a loud and rambunctious household. Throughout his youth he invariably found that whenever he finally arrived anywhere, everyone was already packing up and heading somewhere else.

It didn't help that he was also the only member of the Niebuhr clan who refused to worship at the sacred altar of farming—a pursuit specifically and historically designated for the Mennonites by God. He dodged his chores and summer farm-work whenever possible, spending all his time and money on darkroom photography. At age seventeen, rummaging unhappily through the small bag of career options his family had made available to him, he chose—because he assumed it would leave him plenty of time for his darkroom—to apprentice to a cabinet-maker. He was wrong. His master kept him hard at work from morning till night, and considered his photography a counter-productive distraction. The apprentice reports filed under REINHARD, YOUNGEST in Elder Niebuhr's filing cabinet—in a drawer that also contained the fertility reports on each of his thirty-five Holstein cows—were terse and unenthusiastic.

In 1944, at the age of twenty-one, Reinhard Niebuhr astonished everyone by managing, after a lengthy courtship that seemed to be going

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nowhere, to convince the lively and popular Margarete Klassen to marry him. Margarete was the sixth daughter of the Elder Guenther Klassen, a rich landowner from neighbouring Heuboden County.

Margarete was an accomplished musician and a nursing apprentice. They had met ten years earlier at a Mennonite Youth Camp on St. Christoph's Island, where both had been attending a religious retreat. Tall, blonde and artistic, Margarete seemed the very opposite of the short, meticulous, taciturn Reinhard, who spent half his spare time photographing rocks and buildings and the other half printing them again and again, in endless variations of tone and contrast, in his darkroom. Though their talks and walks around this island had been awkward and inconclusive ("You should try photographing people too, Reinhard," Margarete had urged), Reinhard had remembered only her eventual promise to see him again in Berlin, where she was completing her apprenticeship. In his recollections over the following decade, the island had become for him an increasingly idyllic and symbolic place, and he had returned there often, alone on his bicycle, to retrace their walks and imagine a life with Margarete.

But in 1939 the Second World War had stomped into everyone's life "without even taking its barn boots off" as Elder Niebuhr had put it. When the Nazis rejected the Mennonites' claim of historical Conscientious Objector status, Reinhard was given three months' training as a cook and herded, like thousands of other insufficiently dedicated German citizens, out to the Russian Front.

In the years that followed, both the Niebuhr and the Klassen clans suffered many casualties. The first wave paralleled Germany's offensives; the second its collapse. Sons, fathers and brothers died in uniform; mothers and daughters died when the Russian army over-ran their farms and turned them into refugees. Reinhard himself was wounded twice, and during one of his brief medical furloughs, he finally managed to convince Margarete to marry him. He spent his entire accumulated army pay to rent a cabin on St. Christoph's Island for their weekend honeymoon, and much of Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning photographing Margarete on walks and benches all over the island. By Monday noon he was back on a troop train, bound for Poland.

How he survived that slaughter, Reinhard never confided to anyone but Margarete. His unit was flung at Partisan irregulars in Kracow, chased down

through Czechoslovakia by Cossacks and hounded back west by the rapidly advancing Red Army. He arrived in Germany just in time to be corralled by the already occupying Americans, who penned him in a prison camp in Essen and nearly starved him to death.

On his release in 1947 he took one look at his bombed-out, ruined country, gathered up Margarete and his year-old son Peter whom he'd only just met—that was me—and applied for emigration to Canada.

But Canada didn't need any nurses or cabinet-makers. The labour market in the West had been decimated by the war, and Canada's farmers were clamouring for cheap farm help. Ruefully, and despite the fact that Margarete was mortally terrified of cows, Reinhard registered them both as farm labourers and joined the throngs of emigrants jostling for position at the docks in Bremerhaven. Once again, he felt as if he was arriving just as everyone else was leaving.

[Four]

After a supper of bread and borscht, which Mother heated in the kitchenette of a small nearby motel, Father surprised us all by starting to talk about Prussia.

“This stuff was really cheap and easy to come by,” he remembered, examining a package of tinfoil drip liners someone had left on the stove. “We used it in our chicken barns back home to make reflectors.” He turned it this way and that to catch the light. “For the chicks, right after they were hatched. To keep them warm. And when they called me up for duty in Russia—it was the middle of winter, everybody was freezing to death over there—I sewed whole lengths of it into my coat.”

We were nonplussed for several reasons. First, Father hardly ever talked at length about anything. Second, he virtually never talked about his past—even when we pestered him about it. That's why we were a lot more familiar with Mother's stories, her people, her own Prussian childhood on the huge Klassen estate, with its many maids and barn-servants, its barnfuls of fine horses and its far more than thirty-five purebred Holstein milch-cows. To us children it seemed that all our customs, history and heritage came from our mother's side.

“That comes from drowning in Klassens,” Father had once grumped. “In Agassiz, if you throw a rock at a Klassen it'll bounce off him and hit two

more before it ever reaches the ground.” In our local Mennonite church, founded in 1951 by my grandfather Guenther Klassen, every single one of its sixty-one members was related to us on our mother’s side. You couldn’t find hide nor hair of a Niebuhr anywhere in B.C. All our father’s people had settled in Manitoba.

Tonight, over a hundred miles from Agassiz, a circle of tinfoil was all it took to put Father in a reminiscing mood. “Oh ja, right in between the shell and the lining. That kept me warmer than anybody could understand. In Moscow, at the Leningrad offensive, I was the only one without frostbite. I even sewed it—laugh if you like—into the lining of my hat.”

“Tinfoil?” Onkel Jacob snorted, caught between admiration for ingenuity and a four-centuries-old contempt for war and anything associated with it. “Tinfoil!”

Mother laughed. “It’s true—when he came back on furlough, he rustled in the most alarming way.”

“You sewed it all by yourself, Father?” Gutrun marvelled, never having seen a man anywhere near a sewing machine except to fix it.

“Oh yes, your father was a very accomplished sewer,” Mother said. “And a photographer, and a carpenter, and . . . so on.”

“A cabinet-maker,” Father corrected automatically, but let it pass. “Oh ja, I had that coat for over a decade, and I’d still be wearing it today if the CPR hadn’t lost one of our trunks.”

“The CPR” Onkel Jacob snorted, lifting his hand and letting it fall onto the table in resounding agreement. “My God yes, the CPR!”

“I was wearing that coat when I met Margarete on St. Christoph’s Island. At our youth camp,” Father said, apparently to Onkel Jacob. He seemed to be seeing an evocative depiction of this on the kitchenette ceiling. “I always felt that God was . . . particularly close to us in those weeks.”

“St. Christoph’s Island,” Onkel Jacob nodded uneasily, unclear where this conversation was going. “Ja ja, St. Christoph’s Island.”

Mother blushed slightly. “There were always so many gulls,” she remembered quickly. “They were very beautiful; great flocks always wheeling and diving.”

“Where was I, where was I?” screeched little Heidi, giddy with all this intimate history.

“You didn’t appear until we’d been in Canada for almost two years,” Mother said fondly, poking her in the stomach.

“And *still* living in a dirt-floor shack, hoeing corn and beans by hand to pay off our passage,” Father grouched, though he didn’t say it with his usual rancour. “If Edgar Friesen hadn’t been so busy counting his profits, he might have saved us that, at very least.”

“Oh oh, I believe I smell a whiff of sulphur,” laughed Onkel Jacob, who was distantly related to the Edgar Friesens and thus duty-bound to defend them against all slander. “I’m going to see what I can do about that piece of plywood you wanted. There’s still enough light outside that I can scrounge around a bit.”

“Ach, Reinhard, it wasn’t true that Edgar was being stingy,” Mother said when Onkel Jacob had left, though I was pretty sure she was saying this primarily for our benefit. “It was just that we were the last of our people to arrive. By the time we got here, everybody’s credit had been used up.”

“Only twenty-five acres,” Father complained, rocking back on his chair’s hind legs—something he never did at home. “And there wasn’t even enough left over to buy a tractor or machinery.”

“Herman and Juergen offered to lend us theirs,” Mother pointed out carefully.

“Your brothers live twelve miles away, Margarete,” Father said. “They’re farming over two hundred acres. When has their machinery ever been available to us?”

“I’m just saying,” Mother said.

She sighed and glanced uneasily at us children, all three agog at the frankness of the discussion we were unaccountably being allowed to hear. It wasn’t that we weren’t aware of these accusations -- we’d heard them in bits and pieces over the years—but this sudden promotion to temporary adulthood, something that never would have happened at home, felt deliciously risky and unreal.

“Twenty-two acres of grass cut by hand,” Father said. “I even had to make my own scythe. The hay had to be turned every twenty-four hours. We pitched from dawn till dusk. Day in, day out. For weeks.”

“I know,” Mother said. “I was helping you.”

“I was helping too,” I threw in, taking a chance.

“Under the willow tree, by the slough,” Mother agreed. “Every day. Taking care of Gutrun in her cradle.”

Gutrun snorted. “I bet you didn’t even,” she said.

I threw the tinfoil I’d been squashing at her head.

“Totally unfenced land,” Father continued. “Seven hundred and nineteen fenceposts, and every one of them dug in by hand.”

Now he was talking about something even I remembered clearly. Having to stand under the blazing sun, hour after hour, steadying the posts while Father dug, pounded, stretched wire. The day he’d become so obsessed with his digging and pounding and stretching that he’d stopped listening to me entirely and I’d come home with a spectacular sunburn, my back covered with huge, seeping blisters. Mother had been horrified.

“*Um Himmel’s Willen!* How is it possible to abandon a child that’s standing less than fifteen inches away from you?!”

Father hadn’t answered. He’d looked like he didn’t even know the answer.

And we still didn’t have a tractor. Instead, Father had negotiated an arrangement with the Hoogendoorns on the much larger farm next door whereby, in exchange for his labour during their major ploughing, seeding and harvesting periods, they extended their operations to include our twenty-five acres. But anything smaller that needed to be done during the rest of the year still had to be done by hand.

We had no car either, nor much hope of getting one. I’d always thought this bothered me more than the rest of the family—the pitying looks from my cousins as they moved over to let us poor church-mice into the back seat on Sunday mornings, where I invariably became car-sick—but it obviously bothered Father too, because he made some remark I didn’t catch about “providing work for the Samaritans,” which had Heidi shrieking with laughter the way kids do when they’re trying to ingratiate themselves over something they don’t understand. A sharp look from Mother shut her up.

“They don’t mean it, Reinhard,” Mother sighed, in a way that gave me my first glimpse of the load of sorrow she carried all her adult life. “They don’t mean it, and you know that.”

“They may not mean it, but they do it,” Father shrugged, almost complacent now because he was winning the argument. “They do it! and

they've done it from the day that you and I met. I've never been good enough to marry a Klassen, and they've never missed a chance to make sure I got that message. Deny that, if you can."

Mother didn't say anything for quite a while.