Literary Refractions

The poems published here are selected from an unpublished suite of poems entitled "Tante Tina-Little Haenschen Dialogues." Tante Tina, who is – along with Rudy Wiebe's Frieda Friesen and Armin Wiebe's Yasch Siemens – undoubtedly one of the most memorable characters in Mennonite literature, first appeared in 1983, in a volume of David Waltner-Toews's poetry entitled *Good Housekeeping*. There "Tante Tina's Lament" was published alongside two poems spoken by Tina's son, Haenschen, and another called "Roots" which, like the first poem here, features a character identified as Rudy Wiebe.

"Tante Tina's Lament" appeared again in 1986 in the Waltner-Toews section of *Three Mennonite Poets* and once again in 1995, in the "Mennonite Blues" section of *The Impossible Uprooting*. In the latter volume, this first Tante Tina poem appeared alongside other poems featuring Tina's inimitable voice: "Tante Tina Talks About Her Man," "Tante Tina Calls in to a Radio Show," "A Request From Tante Tina to the Mennonite Women's Missionary Society to Put Salman Rushdie on the Prayer List," "Tante Tina Returns From Visiting Her Cousin in Mexico and Goes to the Grocery Store with her Grandson Little Haenschen," and "Tante Tina Puts the Gulf War into Perspective."

Here, in "Tante Tina and Little Haenschen: How Rudy Wiebe saved the Communists," Waltner-Toews once more blends English and German in Tina's endearing code-switching (so typical of her generation of Russian Mennonites). The poem/dialogue confuses more than language, though. Here the Molotschna and the Chortitza, Tolstoy and Trotsky, the Anabaptist martyrs and the victims of the Russian Revolution, fiction and history, the living and the dead are made indistinguishable. These conflations throw into question the very process and substance of Mennonite memory and myth-making. The poem ends playfully with an image and an evocation that further question the nature and texture of the Russian Mennonite story: a provocative photograph of Tina's mother, already dead yet handsomely attired and propped up for a family photograph, and a teasing reference to the Mennonites' principal story-teller/myth-maker, Rudy Wiebe.

Perhaps what literature allows, and conventional history is compelled to eschew, is the play and playfulness of tone. Tante Tina's "Bible Stories,"

published here, for example, display layers of both irony and emotion as they address what were regarded for most of the past century as unspeakable questions about Mennonite immigrant women's experience. The ironies persist in "Tante Tina and Little Haenschen: What was Uprooted," where disruptive references to the Russian Mennonites' colonization of others' land (another unspeakable subject) are casually swept aside and, in effect, suppressed by Tina's mischievous reference to grandchildren.

Tante Tina's last comments in this suite of poems (published here are four of the fourteen poems comprising the suite) question the Mennonites' persistent pursuit of a "Promised Land," a trope that seems to underlie so much of the Russian Mennonite collective memory. Just after two wonderful novels by major Canadian novelists have offered re-creations or readings of the Russian Mennonite story (Rudy Wiebe's *Sweeter Than All the World* and Sandra Birdsell's *The Russlaender,* both published in 2001), it seems appropriate that we should hear, as a kind of coda, Frieda's always inevitably ironic musings, gently undercutting the enterprises of Mennonite history, fiction, and myth-making.

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