

## Four Poems from the Tante Tina-Little Haenschen Dialogues

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### **Tante Tina and Little Haenschen: How Rudy Wiebe saved the Communists**

Listen Little Haenschen, one time in the Molotschna when  
the Revolution was -  
the picture on the table there, by the window  
on the doily, see? My mother is there,  
but she already dead was.  
There Red soldiers were and White soldiers  
and the Machnovites who were a black flag waving  
and the Mennonites in the *Selbstschutz*,  
who just hello waved with Wilma Thiessen's laundry,  
they not fighting were,  
only self defending by shooting and  
very fast running and then being shot.  
Always Mutti has soup gemade  
for everyone, no matter what colour.

Rudy Wiebe was one time the kitchen rug out-shaking  
for my mother; he visiting was  
and something for his soup he needed to do.  
Mutti wasn't soup for nothing giving.  
But the Reds they are seeing him waving and thinking  
he is with the *Selbstschutz*, so Tolstoy  
himself is coming and after Rudy running.

Tolstoy? You mean Trotsky?

*Ja*, the Kommunist, that one, through the barn  
and over the river chasing. He is wanting

Rudy Kommunist to be making or to shoot.  
But it is April and in the Dnieper River has a hole cracked  
in it like the old toilet seat behind the house,  
slippery and cold just like that,  
so Trotsky is through falling.  
*Plumps* just like that. Nick has once almost been  
in slipping like that even.

In the river?

In the outhouse.  
Then Rudy the cries hears Help! Help me comrade!  
and is turning and him helping  
from the hole.

This is just like in the Mennonite Martyrs book  
Felix Manz or someone.

We have soup from Felix the cat made  
after the Revolution. But that is a different story.  
And after they are to Mutti's  
for soup coming.

I think in the Martyrs book  
the fleeing Mennonite is hauled up before the Catholics,  
or was it Lutherans? And drowned,  
hung into the icy water by his feet.  
Or maybe crucified, or burned  
in a street full of shoppers.  
That sounds like a German thing,  
doesn't it? How *did* they kill,  
usually? His mouth gagged? How will  
you sing now? they laughed.  
But he hollered through the rags.  
Some early version of *Ich weiss einen Strom*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Ich weiss einen Strom* – literally, “I know a stream,” but in English titled “Oh have you not heard,” or “The Beautiful Stream,” is a hymn which was composed in the nineteenth-century and has since become (in German) something of a Mennonite standard.

This, after dragging the pursuer to a warm inn.  
That's the *Englische*<sup>2</sup> for you. Not even singing  
moves them.<sup>3</sup>

Listen, *bursch*. I am about Russia talking.  
Are you not history knowing?  
Then Trotsky is to Mexico  
going, because there are so many Mennonites  
and he is the soup so much liking and at home  
to be feeling. He has there I think a Petkau girl married.

Trotsky?

Tolstoy. Listen *mal*, there is more.  
More important.  
So many soldiers to feed  
my mother is in the evening down lying  
and in the morning she is not up-getting.  
My Uncle Fritz is looking.  
The Lord has come for Mutti, he is saying  
but I have already  
for the picture taker paid,  
because Nick and I will be to Canada going  
and everyone else is behind staying  
so we a picture are needing. But Mutti with the Lord is.  
*Was ist zu tun?*<sup>4</sup>  
We are the navy dress on her pulling  
and the Sunday hat with the flowers  
on her planting,  
and Nick and me are her upholding  
so now we the picture have,  
all my life to remember.

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<sup>2</sup> *Englische* is used here as a generic term for all non-Mennonites.

<sup>3</sup> The story is actually attached to Dutch Anabaptist Dirk Willems, who saved his pursuers from an icy grave. The man he saved immediately arrested him; Willems was burned at the stake on May 6, 1569.

<sup>4</sup> What's to be done?

Your mother is dead  
in this picture?

A good picture, *Ja*?

She doesn't look dead.

*So ist das Leben.*<sup>5</sup>

I am wondering now  
what has to Rudy Wiebe happened?

**Tante Tina: Bible Stories**

At the gate in Latvia  
on the train the soldiers came.  
At each seat they are stopping.  
Papers, they are papers wanting.  
And things. Where is that samovar from?  
Did you steal it?  
And then they are taking it.  
Or they are saying, these papers are not right.  
And then Fred Peters from the train must go  
and Mrs Peters and the girls they are weeping,  
please please.  
When they are by me standing  
where I am with my brother Nick,  
I am not anymore a little girl running.  
A squeal there is, in my heart, a piglet  
through the mud scrambling, my fear  
everywhere splattering.  
So, running away from home?  
No mummy and daddy?  
Why not here be staying? We can take care of you.  
One of them is my cheek touching and laughing

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<sup>5</sup>That's life.

but the other one, he is asking,  
What are you reading.  
I read the Bible. It is all.  
I need no others.  
Ah so many good books  
you are not reading, they laugh.  
One is me on the breasts touching.  
So many good stories you are missing.  
I am about Jael thinking, how she  
her body used, to bring the enemy into her tent, even,  
*ja*, how she a tent peg used his brains out to be poking,  
how many stories these soldiers are not knowing.  
And then we through the gate are.  
Look, look said Nick, we are free.  
But I the story am reading, about David  
seeing Bathsheba in the bathroom.  
And I am about the border-guard thinking.  
In Canada, I have heard, the Indians are tents having.  
So, I am thinking, they must tent pegs have.  
A safe country. I am thinking. A safe country.

### **Tante Tina and Little Haenschen: What was Uprooted**

*Ja*, we like the trees were  
in Prussia and when they were us uprooting  
to Russia how those Germans were missing us!  
Who would feed them now?  
Who would boats make for them?  
And Catherine the Great she was  
us welcoming with arms as big as the steppes.

And rounding up Cossacks  
and sending them away.

Ah you *knirps*, what do you know.  
And when the Kommunisten have come

and us sent away for being good farmers

Rich farmers, and German speaking

*Ja*, don't be so smart

like Goethe, or Friedrich Engels, German speaking, even.

So we to Canada are coming

And the Indians sending away.

They are sugar beets picking.

And last year, Nick is me telling

how all the Indians are coming

and working so hard, they have farms gebought

in Clearbrook.

Those were different Indians.

But after, they are us missing

because they have dirt and no farmers

like gums with no teeth.

And Oma sits there, quiet,  
rubbing her gums.

And after all the stumps were out-gepulled,  
like rotten teeth, brown and twisted, the roots  
have there been lying.

The furrows like torn gums.

And only after many years, the cows  
and sunflowers. And

Grinning toothlessly at me

Grandchildren.

**Little Haenschen: The Ballad of the Travelling Mennonites  
the last song for oma in the nursing home**

In 1780 the Mennonites came  
from Prussia to the old Ukraine.  
Schlepped by horses, through the mud,  
not like in the 30s, when they had the old Ford.

Not from Namaka to Manitou  
no windows open, hot air blowing through.  
Just miles and miles of rain and mud,  
with Elder Toews and the voice of God.

Off to the Promised Land they marched

*Ja, and then they Elder Epp followed  
to meet God in Samarkand.  
And in the Green Hell in Chaco.  
And Trotsky in Mexico.  
And Doft in Altona.*

Who is writing this song, Oma?

*I don't know. You are making up anyway.  
We had no Ford. We Nettie the horse had.  
Trotsky didn't visit the Mennonites.  
And we no Promised Land are having.  
Like Jews without Israel. But I am thinking  
maybe it is better, having nothing to kill for  
like that. Maybe a Promised Land is a curse.  
It is better to have a promise  
and no land.*

And Canada?  
*Ha bursch, you make a joke.  
Too many mammon worshippers we are having*

*here, Maggie Thatcher's little hatchlings  
like Harris, and Chretien, and Campbell,  
and that Kleine knirps in Alberta.*

*Ja, this is only where we are stopping,  
like that Greek.*

Zorba?

*Odysseus.*

You read the Odyssey?

*I am three children through school putting,  
what do you think?*

*He didn't last one year I think  
after home coming.*

My Dad?

*Odysseus. Too much time at konference and demons fighting.  
Like the Mennonites. Our paradise is not a place to be going.  
Our paradise is in the wandering  
Now sing me once more about the ants.*

The ants?

*Ja, you are singing, The ants are my friends  
they're blowing in the wind.*

*In Paraguay, cousin Aaron has me written,  
the ants big as rats are traipsing in  
and everything from the kitchen carrying away,  
even Truda's rollkuchen, and once, from the window sill,  
a whole rhubarb pie.*

In 1990 the Mennonites went  
from Winnipeg to old Tashkent.  
They brought a cookbook, a Bible too.  
And they sang four parts all the long night through.  
Vorsaenger, backslider, one and all,  
they sang on the journey from spring to the Fall,  
carousing choruses, journeying blues.  
*So ist das Leben. Was ist zu tun?*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>That's life. What can we do?