2007 Bechtel Lectures
The Confession of a Reluctant Mennonite

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LECTURE ONE
Writing from the Outside

The most fascinating stories I read as a child usually began like this: Once upon a time, long ago and far away there lived. There lived a little girl, an old woman, a boy and his poor widowed mother, the three billy goats gruff, a cruel stepmother – the phrase "there lived" immediately evoked the presence of flesh, heart and mind, characters engaged in a struggle. Their presence raised the possibility for adventure, betrayal, strife; there would be heroic endeavors, an evil to overcome. "There lived" promised an array of characters who were infinitely more exotic than the majority of people living around me in the predictable prairie landscape.

My Mennonite grandparents and their extended family were similar to those exotic fairytale characters. They had once lived in a faraway land, long ago – twenty years ago by the time I was born – the land being what was then southern Russia; the town, Rosenthal in the colony of Chortitza. They had lived in the Byzantine land of Baba Yaga, the Frog Prince, and the little girl made of snow. A place, they often said, that was more beautiful than Manitoba. My Schroeder relatives, and my mother, twelve years old when she arrived in Canada, had lived most of their lives in the land of Fabergé eggs, where picnics were spread out on fur rugs and tea served from silver samovars. The country of the Tsars was a vastly richer experience, I imagined, than living in Morris, Manitoba, population 1,200, a town that had distinguished itself by installing a single traffic light on Main Street, and the hotel, and a neon sign: a chicken that pecked at a kernel of corn twenty-four times in a minute.

This difference was evident to me in the oversized cooking pots, pans, and kettles, the batches of noodles that were draped across chair backs and beds to dry on noodle-making day, the borscht or butter soup simmering in

a pot that was large enough to take a bath in, the heaps of buns cooling on a table, the triangles of deep-fried dough to be dusted with berry sugar and served on a hot summer day with watermelon pickles whose cool rosy flesh shone out from jars in the darkness of a cellar shelf.

The exoticness of my Mennonite relatives was evident in their periodic gathering at an uncle's place just outside of town; obviously well-to-do people, judging from the women's be-ringed fingers and their husbands' late-model cars. They came from across the country to take part in the butchering of several pigs. Their early morning preparations began before the sun had risen. The kerchiefs covering the women's hair, and their long aprons and rubber boots transformed them into peasants similar to those depicted in a painting I would come across in a book, Bruegel's "A Country Wedding." They became so-called simple people "in a state of utter contentment and gaiety," according to a caption beneath the photograph of the painting.

As the day went on, their voices rose to a shrill of excitement while they worked around a tub of water carving flesh from the pigs' heads, as they tended to the smokehouse churning out its woody odor, and rendered fat on a cook stove in a shed. I was old enough to recognize that the butchering was a ritual, a recalling of the past, the practice and passing on of what had once been necessary skills. None of my relatives looked as though they had ever missed a meal, and yet their deep hunger was palpable as they consumed crackles spread on bread. "Why don't you just buy lard at the store," I once suggested, testing the waters in my usual covert way. The comment was met with silent indignation; it was enough to have to suffer the presence of an interloper, not to speak of one who dared give voice to her own ignorance. "We use everything but the squeal," an uncle proclaimed at the end of the pig-slaughtering day, as he usually did, and then the men would gulp down a small glass of vodka.

Years later I would write a story, "The Day My Grandfather Died," in which the narrator – a teenaged girl – observes the celebration of her grandparents' fiftieth wedding anniversary and thinks that her grandmother, in her loose-flowing dress and with gold leaves intertwined in her white hair, looks like a fairy godmother who has the power to grant wishes. She would ask her grandmother to grant her the wish of happiness. But when the grandparents begin to fret over how much cake to cut for their guests, fearing waste, the girl's fairytale image vanishes.

> It came to me how their conversations always seemed to centre on food, the growing of it, the preparing of it and the eating…. [It seemed] to me their lives had been narrow and confining; even here, now, at a celebration, they were unable to step across the limits and celebrate.

She becomes angry and suggests to her grandparents that the leftover cake will not be wasted if they feed it to the pigs.

Mennonite relatives were exotically old-fashioned in the way they spoke in their guttural-sounding language, the way they preferred to dress in their old country clothes that made them look as though they'd stepped out from another century. My great-grandmother Schroeder, at the age of 90 years, dressed all in black, a black shawl accentuating the piercing gaze of her small eyes. An embroidered sampler on her bedroom wall advised: Be not dismayed when sorrow enters; better days will follow. The optimistic message seemed lost on her, for my great-grandmother seldom smiled. Before climbing into bed at night, she poked about underneath it with a broom in the event that someone might be hiding there. She looked as though she wanted to eat children up with her eyes. Her gnarled fingers were so strong that when she grasped our arms it was impossible to pull away. It didn't take much to convince me and my sisters that our great-grandmother Schroeder was a witch.

My great-aunts were omnipresent, hovering in the corners of a room as they presided over a visit. They exuded a grim sadness and piousness that in my opinion were as outdated as their stiff and formal-looking dark tailored dresses. The dresses were sometimes trimmed with lace collars, or necklines of pleated satin from which the women's necks stretched swan-like – at least it seemed they were unnaturally long. The better to peer into your life with, my dear, I came to think. The better to listen in, to note a misbehavior, to admonish whenever I made the mistake of complaining that I was starving, or that I was so angry that I wanted to "just kill" one of my sisters. You don't know the meaning of those words, they said.

My Mennonite relatives sang beautifully in three-part harmony, grew exquisite and velvety-looking gloxinia plants on their windowsills, sighed a great deal, and slept in feather beds. In a story "The Two-Headed Calf," Betty, the main character, would observe:

> Her parents had dragged all their outdated influences with them to this country, including that "damned" clock with its blunt one-dimensional sound. They had bundled themselves, fled the Arctic, arrived in a tropical country wearing their fervent beliefs like layers of clothing they sweated in but refused to shed.

Once upon a time, my grandparents said, we lived in a land that was more beautiful than this land. Eventually they went on to explain that the climate in Russia had not been as cold as it was in Manitoba. There had been apricot and pear trees growing in their yard, and walnuts. They had grown sugar melons and cantaloupes, which my grandfather had tried in vain to cultivate in his garden beside the Red River.

At Thanksgiving they brought samples of their garden crops to church, jars of fruits and vegetables, and baking and sewing that were auctioned off and the proceeds given to charity. They thanked God for the peaceful country of Canada and its government that had opened its doors to them, but still, nothing was quite as good as it had been in Russia, not as lush, not as beautiful. The teaching we received in school was not as rigorous as it should be. Perhaps even we, the children, were not quite as good as the children had been in Russia. Especially not as good as Anna, my mother's young sister. That little girl had nursed the entire family when they were ill with typhus, only to succumb to the disease later on. We were not as good as the infant boy who'd been buried in a garden a week before my grandparents immigrated.

"So why did you come here, then?" I once ventured to ask. "Because there were bad people," my mother replied.

Aha! Now the story would begin, I thought. Once upon a time in a land far away, there lived bad people. "There were bad people, and that's why we left." And that was the end of my mother's story. What an unsatisfying tale!

My Mennonite grandparents came from the old colony, Anna Thiessen from the town of Neuendorf, and Johann Schroeder from Rosenthal. They were married on October 4, 1903. My grandmother was a tiny, vigorous woman who would give birth to nine children, and her influence in their lives continued throughout their adult years by means of her letters and their

visits. She was as compassionate as she was strong-minded. I don't recall any outward display of affection from my grandmother, but I knew that she loved us.

My grandfather's pale blue eyes were often filled with unshed tears. He was an erect slight man who walked and talked with circumspection, and seemed to be at home only in his garden. He took particular interest in me, and the groundwork for my life was cultivated there in his garden while I followed him about, learning the attributes of silence, patience, diligence, acceptance, and the rewards to be gained by hard work.

He later came to me in the story "The Two-Headed Calf":

> Sylvia watched the grandfather tap his knuckle against the side of her watermelon, his ear pressed against it, listening intently. He listened, he said, for the heartbeats of musicians. An orchestra of seeds inside the melon.
>
> "Playing a serenade in B flat," Sylvia told him....
>
> He shook his head. "Don't forget about the trumpets," he said. He meant there were also fluted orange-coloured blossoms in the seeds, trumpets toasting the future births of other melons....
>
> "Did you know that seeds have memories?" he asked, as though it had only occurred to him. "They can remember every garden they came from. Even the garden of Eden," he said, with reverence. "Seeds are the Alpha and Omega," he went on to say. "The beginning and end of every garden."

My grandparents had lived in the town of Arkadak, where my grandfather taught school until his father became too ill to manage the farm. Arkadak was north of his family home and colder, near the forests, and sometimes they heard wolves howling in the night. My grandfather returned to Rosenthal with his young family just in time to be in the center of, and to experience first hand, the ugly repercussions of the revolution and the ensuing civil war. In Canada they spent an unproductive year on a farm east of the Red River, and several years in Winnipeg, where they operated a boarding house on William Avenue. My grandfather attempted to eke out a living by selling encyclopedias and Bibles door to door. Then they settled in

Morris, Manitoba, supported partly by their working unmarried daughters and partly by my grandfather's work as a janitor at the local hotel.

Morris was a town whose people were mostly of British descent, the exception being several families from eastern European countries and Germany, a Métis family, a Japanese man, and my family, the Roger Bartlette family. My father had anglicized his name from Berthelet and claimed to be part French, Scottish, Cree, and Ojibwa, a heritage of mixed blood that in the 1940s and '50s was more often denied than claimed.

There were Mennonites, other than my grandparents' family, living in the town who had known one another while living in that long ago time and place in Russia. I was related to most of them. I began to tell my friends that I was Russian, until I once heard my mother tell someone that she was not Russian, but Dutch. Her German accent was thick then, and so the man she was speaking with had assumed that she was from Germany. "Russia," she had corrected. Then she added, "But I'm not Russian. I'm Dutch." That was news to me. "Did you wear wooden shoes?" I later asked. "No, of course not," she said. "We wore regular shoes."

I soon realized that my curiosity about my Mennonite heritage would not be satisfied. I wanted to "be" something. It was important to be able to say where you had come from in the way my friends were able to do. My father spoke French, but he was only part French. My mother spoke German, but she wasn't German. She'd been born in Russia, but she was not Russian. She was Dutch, and although she did get down on her hands and knees and scrub the back steps and sidewalk as Dutch women were known to do, she had not worn wooden shoes. Being Mennonite, I thought, was complicated.

If I was to learn anything about my Mennonite relatives, I would need to study them when they weren't looking. I observed that my mother discouraged the expression of strong emotions; looking into a mirror for longer than it was necessary to determine whether or not you were presentable was frowned upon. There were many cousins and second cousins living in Winnipeg, Edmonton, and California, but most of them lived on farms east of the Red River where I sometimes spent my summer vacations pursued by a flock of cranky geese. My cousins, when playing baseball, were fiercely competitive, but in a restrained and quiet way. They liked to tease, to play

jokes on one another, and when we went to town on a Saturday night, they had a way of looking at town life with wry humor, which caused me to think how some people in Morris pronounced "Mennonite" as "Minnanite" and called them *Knacksote* eaters, Low German speakers, square heads. The Morris kids sometimes mimicked the Low German accents of the boys from the nearby towns of Lowe Farm and Rosenort as a way to show their superiority.

Then the husband of one of my great-aunts died, and another opportunity to learn what it meant to be Mennonite presented itself. Uncle Jacob had been my great-aunt's second husband, her first husband having died as a young man in Russia; their child, a girl, had also died, both of causes that were talked about in hushed tones and in German so the "big ears" in the room could not understand.

My great-aunt had married in Canada and late in life, the second time. The honeymoon was barely over when Uncle Jacob passed away. I overheard a woman comment, rather wryly, that perhaps if she'd been married for a longer time her grief would not have been quite as severe. The comment reflected on what some took to be her rather dramatic display of bereavement over her husband's body before the funeral (when my sisters and I had been encouraged, and refused, to kiss him goodbye), and during the service and burial. In the following days my great-aunt became fearful of sleeping alone, so I was sent to keep her company. Upon my arrival from the skating rink, shivering with cold, I found hot cocoa waiting and a plate of buttered buns. She hovered over me as though she expected I might run for home. I felt a bit like Hansel in the story "Hansel and Gretel" – as if I was being fattened up for the cooking pot.

For several nights I lay beside my great-aunt in the darkness, the clock ticking loudly as she wept and whispered prayers, sighed, and called out. As the night wore on, her ample body sank deeper and deeper into the feather mattress, dragging me along with it. I hung onto the pillow, afraid that I would smother, and fearing what I thought she feared – that we would be visited by the ghost of Uncle Jacob.

I had learned that Mennonite funerals were very large. People came from far and wide to attend them, and many photographs were taken of various individuals posing with the dead. Afterwards, they ate dill pickles,

cheddar cheese, and buns, and told rambling stories about the departed. I had heard that my great-uncle Jacob had been a good man and therefore he had likely gained his reward. My great-aunt expected to join him one day, yet she carried on as though this was not the case. In retrospect, I remember Uncle Jacob had been a handsome silver-haired gentleman with gentle ways. There's no doubt that his unexpected courtship, and so late in life, had rekindled hope, and there's no doubt that yet again my aunt's heart had been broken. But what I recalled then was that she had often sung the song "Faith is the Victory," and I concluded with my black and white, legalistic, twelve-year-old way of reasoning that my great-aunt's excessive display of grief over her husband's body and her fear of sleeping alone made her faith somewhat less than victorious. Was this, too, another attribute of being Mennonite?

I would learn one day that my great-aunties' lives had been shaped and dictated to by their close-knit community in what was then southern Russia, and by its church. They'd once lived in towns and villages surrounded by Ukrainians and Russians. They'd hired these people as farm laborers and household servants, yet they were content to know little about them, just as they chose to remain uninformed about their non-Mennonite neighbors in Morris, Manitoba, the world in which they now found themselves. They had strong advice on how my mother ought to raise her children. They hoped to compensate, I surmised, for the fact that my mother had committed the unthinkable and married out of her religion and culture.

My sisters and I strenuously resisted being taught how to embroider and to speak German, but our attendance at church was not negotiable. We had been baptized Roman Catholic in deference to the wishes of our paternal Roman Catholic grandmother, but attended a small white Mennonite church that had been hauled into town from the country and set onto a vacant lot beside the Morris Hospital. For a time it was presided over by my grandfather, then by Uncle Jacob and, when he died, by various lay preachers until membership dwindled and it became financially unfeasible to keep the church open. My grandparents had been Old Church members in Russia, and although several of their relatives had become Mennonite Brethren after arriving in Canada, I believe we received Old Church teaching. We were taught that how we lived spoke louder than words. We learned to do unto

others as we would have them do unto us, to not seek to draw attention to ourselves, and above all, when others harmed us, to turn the other cheek. There would be no boisterous play on Sundays. As I became a teen I learned that being beautiful meant having a clean heart, groomed fingernails, shining hair, and a complexion enhanced by face cream and not cosmetics. I was not allowed to go to movies and school dances. Being Mennonite, in my opinion, meant not having any fun.

In an early story, "The Day My Grandfather Died," the young narrator, Lureen, says,

> "Being French meant being flashy and demonstrative, traits that I didn't see in my mother or my grandparents, who were Mennonite, a fact I detested. Being Mennonite was like having acne. It was shameful, dreary. No one invited you out."

With the exception of my grandparents, whom I had grown to respect and deeply love, the opinion I'd formed of Mennonites in general was unflattering, biased, and, I would one day learn, sometimes just plain wrong. The story "Flowers for Weddings and Funerals" ends like this:

> I can see Oma bending in the garden, cutting flowers for weddings and funerals. I can see her rising to search the way I take and she will not find me there.

I had decided that I was most definitely not a Mennonite.

In the early 1980s I was a newly-published writer, living and working in Winnipeg. There was a literary conference, and I was startled to find myself invited to take part in a panel discussion on what it meant to be a Mennonite writer. The auspiciousness of the occasion, that I was to be included in a discussion along with the literary giant Rudy Wiebe, was not lost on me. Being a newly published author meant that several of my stories had appeared in small literary magazines. Wiebe had published one of those first short stories in an anthology, *More Stories From Western Canada* [1980]. In doing so he had firmly established me as a storyteller of note among other western Canadian storytellers such as Sinclair Ross, Gabrielle Roy, Margaret Laurence, Frederick Philip Grove, Wallace Stegner, and Robert Kroetsch, whose creative writing course I had attended at the University

of Manitoba. In that course I had met, and became close friends with, the writers Armin Wiebe and Victor Enns. Kroetsch had been instrumental in bringing my stories to the attention of Turnstone Press. I was in very good company.

Rudy Wiebe and I had corresponded only briefly in an exchange of notes over the short story he had chosen to publish in the anthology. I had read his novel *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973), and more recently had fallen under the spell of *The Scorched-Wood People* (1977), a novel that had affected me deeply and fueled my interest in my father's ancestry. I wanted to write about my Métis heritage and to explore the possibility that I might be related to Louis Riel.

I was aware of Wiebe's earlier books, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* and *The Blue Mountains of China*, but I hadn't read them. It had been difficult not to be aware of them and the controversy aroused by their publication. I confess that I didn't understand the reason for it, and it didn't concern me. "I'm not Mennonite," I would tell anyone who would listen, just as I would proclaim I am not a feminist writer, woman writer, Manitoba writer, prairie writer. It behooved me now on the occasion of the panel discussion to accept being identified as a western Canadian writer, and to try and pass myself off, for this occasion at least, as being somewhat Mennonite.

The moderator was Robert Enright of the CBC. Rudy Wiebe sat on one side of me in the studio, and on the other side was Patrick Friesen; and perhaps Di Brandt was there, or it may have been Ralph Friesen, who within several years would become the editor of my first collection of short fiction, *Night Travellers* (1982). Ralph was on the board of Turnstone Press, and when it looked as though my book would be published without the benefit of having been edited, I prevailed upon him for help and he responded by taking his vacation and spending it working on my stories. During the late 1970s and early '80s there was an enclave of up-and-coming Manitoba authors who had been dubbed "The Mennonite Mafia." I found myself among members of the Menno Mafiosi, about to take part in a panel discussion, and feeling very much a fraud.

Before the taping began, I felt the need to substantiate my presence. I leaned over and whispered in Rudy's ear. I told him about my dual heritage. That was when he said, "You should write about Mennonites. You'd be a

good person to do it." He went on to say that I had one foot in and the other out, which gave me a good perspective.

Years later when I reminded him, and I would do so on several occasions, he couldn't recall having made the comment. But I can recall as though it was yesterday that my mind immediately churned with objections. He couldn't have known that several of my new stories were riddled with references to my Mennonite connection. I was writing about them, yet I objected to the suggestion that someone thought I should.

Stories such as "Judgement" questioned the inconsistencies of what I thought was a legalistic faith. An old man, Mr. Thiessen, dies in the night of lung cancer, and his widow waits for the sun to rise. She expects the doctor to come in the morning as usual, to administer a shot of morphine, and while she waits, she and her dead husband have a talk. The husband asks her to roll him a cigarette, and the wife refuses. She berates him for having smoked and harmed his body, and declares that consequently he will not go to heaven. He counter-argues that she eats too much. She's obese, which, in his opinion, is just as harmful as smoking. After the doctor leaves, the dead husband appears to his wife in the potting shed where he's gone to get his tobacco and papers, which he takes with him as he goes off down the road to heaven. His wife, Mrs. Thiessen, tries to run after him, but she can't keep up because she is too fat.

In another story, I had given a woman the name Mrs. Brawn, when I really had meant "Braun." She's the leader of a group of women who meet for Bible study and good works in "The Wednesday Circle." A young girl seeks out the women, hoping for guidance and comfort, to confess a "sin" and find her way to redemption. She overhears a woman among them relate an account of the suicide of a young girl who, during a war, had been captured by soldiers and brutalized many times. The women argue about whether or not God would forgive the girl for having taken her own life. Mrs. Brawn ends the dangerous discussion by quoting scripture. The woman who had told the story about the raped girl sums up their reaction to it when she says, "We obey because we fear punishment, not because we love."

As part of the literary conference, Rudy Wiebe had agreed to meet with writers and critique their stories. "The Wednesday Circle" was one of them. "This is theological," Rudy said, which was only one of several comments he'd made about my story, but the one that stuck. I recognized

that, indeed, stories such as "The Wednesday Circle," "Judgment," and "Night Travellers" were an attempt to achieve religious significance.

My evolution from being an over-achieving homemaker and mother, community volunteer, member of a church choir, Sunday School teacher, leader of a girls' club in an inner-city neighborhood, to becoming a writer of fiction had been fraught with indecision, self-doubt, and fear. And yet, when I had "discovered" literature and when I began to write fiction, I felt as though all of my life I'd been a duck waddling about on dry land and suddenly I had found the pond. This seemed to be what I was meant to do. However, my mother had taught me that telling stories was tantamount to telling lies. If my stories contained a theological element, I might somehow redeem myself in the eyes of those whose opinions mattered, such as my mother, my relatives, and my church.

The question of whether telling stories was an honorable, or even a moral, thing to do haunted me. When we talked about writing, Mennonite writers immediately understood the very real risk of being ostracized by their family and community. They seemed more willing to take that risk than I was. Indeed, some of them seemed eager to free themselves of who and what they were, which was impossible for me to do even if I'd wanted to. I would need to write my way toward that kind of understanding.

The urge to write stories eventually took precedence over my fear, and I convinced myself that honesty meant no subject could be taboo. It meant portraying the world the way I saw it to be, and not the way that I wished it to be. I had decided that I could bring honor to my grandparents' name and to my name if, in my writing, I practiced all the attributes I'd learned from them: patience, acceptance for what came, and willingness to pay attention to the smallest details and to work hard. I had read Rudy Wiebe's preface to the anthology *More Stories From Western Canada*, where he had written,

> Stories must be told and re-told, and the retelling of stories about a place, a person, an act is so much more important than recounting the original facts because the so-called lies—the accretions and deletions of each new telling—are more humanly significant than literal facts can ever be. The "lies" of good stories are always, perversely, truer than, "facts."

Rudy was a Mennonite, it was quite possible that we were related, and his

words were good enough for me.

Ladies of the House (1984), my second collection of short stories, pointedly stayed away from my Mennonite connections and was followed by two novels. In the first, *The Missing Child* (1989), the Mennonite community is centered on a small church and is depicted in a rather strong way. The Mennonites in the novel are among the minority in the community, just as they had been in Morris, Manitoba: a kind of sub-culture existing on the edges of the predominant culture, which is British. The gentle pastor, Jacob Friesen, presides over his unruly and trying flock, and his teaching somewhat reflects the teaching of the Mennonite Brethren whose influence among my General Conference Mennonite relatives had at some point taken over. They were influenced, too, by American evangelists who, in the late 1950s and '60s, had set up their tents in rural Manitoba. When Jacob Friesen dies, his flock comes to mourn him and to tell stories about his life, including Hendrick Schultz, a young boy whose life has been inordinately influenced by the minister and his wife. The pastor's widow, thinking to finish the work Jacob had started to ensure the salvation of Hendrick's soul, requests that he stay the night to keep her company.

> Hendrick Schultz lay in bed that night beneath the feather quilt, eyes closed, feigning sleep as from the foot of the bed came the sound of Lena drawing her funeral dress up over her head and shaking the creases from it…. She had not turned on the light…but Hendrick saw her anyway, in the sounds she made…. The room contained the smell of Jacob.… something moist and round, an unpleasant clean odour which said nothing of its owner, except that he was clean.
>
> … He opened one eye and saw the clock—a pinwheel of green light—as she wound it…. Hendrick clutched at the side of the bed as she pulled back the feather quilt, sat down, and the whole mattress tilted…
>
> "Oh, God, oh God," Lena whispered. "Why did you have to take Jacob away from me so soon? Why did you have to go and do that?"

> … He pretended that he'd fallen asleep instantly and began to snore, but the wool socks she'd given him to wear to bed prickled against the soles of his feet. He felt like kicking out…, rising up suddenly in a scream….
>
> [During the night] he rose to the surface gradually, aware immediately that the darkness of the night had reached its fullest point…. when there was a loud pounding on the door….
>
> "What is it, oh Lord?" Lena said, awake instantly….
>
> "It's me, Elizabeth." The door flew open… [as Hendrick's mother] strode… into the bedroom.… Hendrick saw her hair,… rippling in silver streams across her breasts.
>
> "Get out of bed," Elizabeth said [to him].
>
> She… climbed into bed beside Lena. "I'll take his place," she said. "For tonight only. And then you're on your own."
>
> …Hendrick tore the wool socks free, felt the shock of the cold linoleum against the soles of his feet, and entered the world.

My second novel, *The Chrome Suite* (1992), went off in an entirely different direction. But my literary connection to my mother's heritage would not go away, thanks in part to Hildi Froese Tiessen, a professor of literature at Conrad Grebel University College at the University of Waterloo. Very early in my literary life, Hildi sought me out and we became friends. She was influential in my being invited to be writer-in-residence at the University of Waterloo in 1987 and 1988, and in 1989 she published several of my stories in *Liars and Rascals*, an anthology of fiction by Mennonite writers. I was invited to speak to her students and to give public readings, and on these occasions, graciously invited also to attend "community suppers" at the College. There I found myself surrounded, and a bit overwhelmed, by the Mennonite-ness of a hoard of good-natured, clear-eyed, energetic, and gregarious students. They were so like my cousins. I felt a strong kinship towards them, and towards Hildi and her husband Paul Tiessen, as I did to other Mennonites I met throughout my literary life wherever I traveled.

Immediately upon hearing the names such as Bergen, Dyck, Toews, Friesen, Wiebe, Enns, I felt an affinity with these persons and was drawn to engage them in conversation, or to just stand beside them in a crowd of people and feel sheltered.

Before one of the several readings I have given at Conrad Grebel since the 1980s, Hildi gave me a book to look through while she attended to last-minute arrangements. She and Paul ran a small publishing company named Sand Hills Books, and they had published a collection of photographs called *Forever Summer, Forever Sunday: Peter Gerhard Rempel's Photographs of Mennonites in Russia, 1890-1917* (1981). In the book was a photograph of a group of women and children sitting on the steps at the entrance of a graceful-looking house, a flower bed of petunias in the foreground, the veranda trellis covered in ivy. The women were all dressed in lightly-colored clothing, white dresses perhaps, such as I had often seen the Tsarina and the beautiful Romanov princesses wearing in photographs. In another picture, children paused in their game of croquet in a yard; beyond them stood a hedge and a tree. Young men sat round a table playing chess; a group of people posed with the carcass of a pig following a butchering, their long aprons and their pride of achievement at the end of the day a replica of the scene I had witnessed as a child.

I was astounded when, as I leafed through the volume of pictures, the familiar faces of my great-aunts leapt out from among a group of women, two young and beautiful women with enigmatic smiles and smoky dark eyes and hair. I recognized my oldest daughter in their features and hair. In another picture I saw my grandparents' children – my mother and her siblings as youngsters, the very young great-aunties with them looking hauntingly shy. The woman who had lain beside me in the dark grieving the loss of her husband may have been about fifteen or sixteen years old. She held an infant niece on her lap, one hand curled gently across the baby's stomach, while her other hand was tucked up under the arm of an older child to hold her in place on a stool. My great-aunt looked vulnerable and uncertain as to how she should arrange her features for the picture-taking. It was easy to imagine her going down a Russian street in the town of Rosenthal in winter with that same tentative look, her back straight, her long skirt brushing the tips of her shoes as she made her way along the wooden sidewalk, leaving a trail of

footprints in the snow. That imagined description would appear in my next novel, *The Russländer* (2001).

> Winter was taking its time ending, and the town looked dismal, dark tree branches set against a grey woolen sky, the street deeply rutted and icy, wooden sidewalks criss-crossed with the slushy footprints, mostly small ones of the children who had gone to school earlier.

I would see my great-aunt as I wrote about my young protagonist, Katya:

> A crisp wind tugged at Katya's skirt, and she felt the bite of it at her ankles. . . . [Once again she counted her steps,] [noting] how many it took for her to reach her grandparents' house. When viewed from across the street, the Schroeder house looked small. Pots of African violets and gloxinia lined the windowsills, their blossoms magenta and pink jewels. Her grandmother was known to have a hand with gloxinia, and hers were always in bloom.

The world of that long ago and faraway place portrayed in *Forever Summer, Forever Sunday* became real. My Mennonite relatives had attended school and church, shopped at stores, gone on picnics and for walks among a grove of walnuts. They'd been flesh, heart, and mind engaged in the daily struggle of life. Why had they been so reluctant to tell their stories?

I returned home realizing that I didn't know anything about my Mennonite heritage. I had one foot in and one out, but so far, most of what I had written about them had been from an outside point of view. In my few attempts to write from the inside, such as in the novel *The Missing Child*, the Mennonites – like all the characters – were somewhat larger than life.

My mother feasted for days on the photographs in *Forever Summer, Forever Sunday*, as though she couldn't get enough. She recalled the large oak tree in the town of Chortitza which had been central to a legend of the Zaporizhzhyian Cossack, Hetman of Ukraine, Bogdan Khmelnytsky, who in the mid-1600s had assembled his troops around the tree to inspire valor before going to battle with the Poles. My mother knew only that the tree was very old and very large, and that it had been a meeting place. She had sat in the shade of its branches, just as the children in the photo were doing. She

claimed to be able to find her house in the photograph of Rosenthal in the winter. The picket fence had a hole in it, she said. She had crawled through that hole when the "bad men" had come and she'd been sent running to tell her grandparents. Other stories, often dark, began to emerge.

I made arrangements to travel to the Vistula Delta region of Poland, and to Ukraine. I finally took the time to read my great-uncle Gerhard Schroeder's memoir, *Miracles of Grace and Judgement*, an account of those very terrifying years when my grandparents' world had come apart. Now I was going to go over there and, finally, "find" them. The narrative in the book of photographs *Forever Summer, Forever Sunday* had provided enough information for me to realize just how much I didn't know. I worried that there was too much for me to learn in too short a time. It would prove to take seven years in all to fill in the gaps and write from the inside of the Russian Mennonite world in the novel *The Russländer*.

While I researched, I wrote another short story collection, *The Two-Headed Calf* (1997). Several of the stories reflect the efforts of that early research, and touch on the subject of my grandparents' tragic past – in particular, the story "The Two-Headed Calf," which I referred to earlier. Sylvia is a child born out of wedlock to Betty, a Mennonite young woman. She's in the garden with her grandfather when she asks him if he might know who her father is. He replies in this way, in the way that came to me in a dream just before I departed on my first trip to Ukraine:

> The grandfather jabbed the earth with a finger and then drew a vertical line through it. "This is the beginning," he said. Then he drew another vertical line, a wide space between it and the first one. "And this is the end. Watch," he said, as he drew a horizontal line between the two lines, his finger stopping midway between them. "See? That's you." Finally, he drew an ellipse the shape of a melon seed, and enclosed all the lines. "And that's the almighty God, your father. He already knows your beginning and your end. Do you think that when he sees you, he sees your mother and your father, too? No, He sees only you. So just be who you are. Be you."

Whomever and whatever that would prove to be.