2007 Bechtel Lectures
The Confession of a Reluctant Mennonite

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LECTURE TWO
Writing from the Inside

My mother, along with many Canadians during World War II, had experienced discrimination because of her German accent, and years later she would still speak of it with indignation. I wonder now if she had ever recalled hearing stories during her childhood while living in Rosenthal, Russia, of fellow Mennonites having suffered repercussions for seeming to identify too strongly with Germany during World War I. In any event, I recall a moment in my own childhood when she seemed to be offended by the assumption that she was German. She told a stranger who made this assumption that she was Dutch. My mother had been born in Russia, which, in my mind, made her Russian. I had claimed the nationality as being part of my own, only to hear her say she was Dutch.

Many years later I would learn that my mother's ancestry does indeed lead back to Holland. The Schroeders had lived in Holland until the middle of the sixteenth century, and then moved, or perhaps fled, to the Danzig-Elbing area of what is now Poland, an area shadowed by the sweeping red castles of the Teutonic knights and whose landscape so resembles the floodplain land east of the Red River.

While growing up in a town that had been established and populated by people of mostly British descent, I remained puzzled about what it meant to be Mennonite. On occasion families from nearby villages came to Morris to shop, the women and girls wearing long dark print skirts and a small cup at the back of their heads into which they tucked their hair. They were not Hutterites but Mennonites, I was told. There were Mennonites who painted the chrome on their brand-new cars black, as the shininess of chrome was a sign of pride. I'd heard of Mennonites in Mexico who wore identical straw hats and dark clothing, and removed the rubber from their tractor tires to

keep their children from straying off the colony.

There were modern-looking Mennonites, such as my Mennonite cousins and the young people who sometimes came out to Morris from a Mennonite school in Winnipeg to minister in music to our dwindling church congregation: a small choir, a quartet of handsome young men. My mother hoped I would notice them and that they might notice me. Many years later I was asked by a perplexed *Toronto Star* reporter, what do Mennonites look like? Perhaps he had been imagining the Old Order Mennonites, their horses and buggies. "Like you," I told him, which, I'm sure, he found even more perplexing.

By the time I'd reached my teens, I had decided that most definitely I was not a Mennonite. Years later, as a newly-published author I found myself being asked to speak about what it meant to be a Mennonite writer. While my stories sometimes did have Mennonite characters, I realized that for the most part I had written about them from the outside, looking in at what I perceived to be their world: narrow, bleak, and out of touch. Then a book of photographs, *Forever Summer, Forever Sunday: Peter Gerhard Rempel's Photographs of Mennonites in Russia, 1890-1917*, landed in my lap. Several of the photographs were of people posing while engaged in various everyday activities, the landscape and season unfurling around them, and for the first time the long ago and faraway place of my exotic Mennonite relatives became real. The idea came to me that I might one day write a novel set in the pleasant-looking quaintness of their time, and to write from a Russian Mennonite's point of view. A romance, perhaps, about a man such as the photographer Peter Gerhard Rempel, an artist out of sync with his element. His wife, I mused, would operate a baking school in her home.

For a fiction writer, what is imagined is infinitely more captivating than facts. Before beginning to write any story, I fill pages in a notebook creating a fictional history for my fictional characters, outlining the particular events of their lives that brought them to the time and place of the story – events that make it necessary for the narrative to be told. After several trips to a Mennonite bookstore, where I was astounded and overwhelmed by the large number of books that had been published about Mennonites, I came to realize that the life of my proposed character, a photographer, had been

shaped by the collective history of Mennonites of which I knew nothing; by Russian history, of which I knew little; and by the events of the revolution and civil war that had exploded around these people and brought an end to a way of living they had known for over a century. I began what proved to be seven years of rather indiscriminate, voracious reading.

My research skills had not been honed by formal training, and therefore I brought things home from the bookstores and libraries, and copied in the archives everything and anything that caught my eye, beginning with self-published personal accounts of life in the Russian colonies, diaries, novels, and stories. Those first-person and fictional accounts then led to reading about German industry in the south Russian colonies; reading and re-reading Russian novels and poetry; analyses and histories of World War I; and histories of Europe, Russia, and Mennonites. I had set off on a long, arduous, and sometimes tedious journey, bolstered by a quote by Goethe pinned to my bulletin board: "One never goes so far as when one doesn't know where one is going."

The floor in my small writing room was covered with stacks of essays, files, photographs, and correspondence. There was more than enough information to bury me. After several failed attempts at writing, I knew that the novel would need to be much more far-reaching than a story about a man who would rather take photographs than work in his father's factory. I set it aside, and for the next three years wrote stories and a novel for children. The novel was about a girl, Virginia Potts, whose idyllic, perfect, and smoothly run town suddenly and mysteriously floods. It breaks free from the ground and with everyone on board, including Virginia's over-protective parents, it floats away, leaving Virginia stranded on a foreign shore. I was feeling a bit like the protagonist, watching helplessly as all that is familiar disappears into the horizon.

In 1992 my brother John had toured Ukraine with a choir, and he went to the area where our mother had grown up. He returned having been profoundly affected by the experience, and he urged me to go. And so, in September 1994 I was on a train heading toward Zaporizhzhya from Kiev. The coach swayed like a cradle, and I imagined rather romantically that it was carrying me into my grandmother's lap. As we left the city behind and the sun began to set,

the countryside was bathed in a crimson gold light and the several people walking along a ridge of land beside the train tracks became silhouettes.

So far, what I had seen of the country of my ancestors had been unsettling. The misery of the people at the train station in Kiev was haunting. I couldn't shake the impression of a sea of gray bundles that turned out to be people lying on the floor, propped up along the walls, row upon row of the elderly, sick, women and children, taking shelter in the heated station. So many people I'd met had open sores and boils on their faces and hands. There were warnings of cholera posted everywhere.

I had met up with a friend in Poland, Jan Zarzycki, who traveled with me to Ukraine, and upon boarding the train he'd been persuaded by the conductor to part with a few American dollars to ensure both that we'd be served a pot of tea during our trip and that the price of our tickets would not increase once the train was underway. Beyond the window the night descended, and the countryside that my relatives had extolled as so beautiful was cast in darkness.

Familiar music filled the train compartment from the speaker above the window, swelling with passion and melancholy, and I thought of an audio tape I had happened upon while living in Waterloo in 1988 – a mix of classical music from various sources. The particular piece was by Mozart, a movement that I have since been unable to recall precisely enough to track down. The music had the effect of putting me in a trance-like state, and for fleeting moments I imagined that I was experiencing the time and place where my grandfather had lived as a young man.

I often used music to help evoke the setting I was writing. When I think of it now, the Mozart piece was the beginning of *The Russländer,* even though I was writing my first novel when it entered my consciousness and would go on to write another before, prompted by my brother's travels and with a sense that this was a chore that could no longer be avoided, I decided it was time to take another look at my Mennonite heritage. I made plans to travel to Holland, Poland, and Ukraine.

And now I was on the last leg of that journey in October 1994, going into the heart of what had once been the Mennonite colonies, on an overnight train from Kiev. Our coach companions, a young woman and a train engineer, Nikolai, had lain completely still from the moment they

slid under the covers of their berths, and I wondered if this was some kind of train etiquette to lie quietly, hardly breathing and hardly present, out of deference to those around you.

That night I dreamed that Nikolai was snoring and that in the morning the efficient porter came to the doorway of our compartment with a clipboard. She had recorded the amount of time Nikolai had snored and for how many kilometers, and had multiplied the time by the distance and by a certain amount of money, the sum being the amount Nikolai must pay for having snored. The Kafkaesque quality of the dream had no doubt been brought about by the discombobulating events of my travels so far.

The train pulled into Zaporizhzhya in the morning to brilliant sunshine, to lively band music, to the smiling faces of Olga, our guide, and of our host, Yuri, an energetic and intelligent man, brimming with good humor. At his apartment we were greeted with an embrace by his mother-in-law, Rita Alexandrovna, and a table spread with a breakfast of stuffed peppers and paprika carrots, cheese, sausages, and bread – an elaborate spread which we later realized must have been difficult and costly for Rita to find and to purchase. That morning we first experienced Yuri's extraordinary hospitality, the kind of hospitality we would encounter wherever we went in Ukraine.

We began the tour in what had been the village of Chortitza, at the site of "the old oak tree," as my mother had referred to it when she recalled having picnics in its shade. I had promised I would telephone her and give a report. The oak tree was almost dead now; only one limb remained green, although, Olga explained, the entire crown had been green in spring only years ago. "It's a bad sign when an oak tree dies," said Yuri. It was a sign of poison in the environment, a sign of a poisoned country, a poisoned soul, he said. The tree was actually drowning, Olga hastened to explain. The Dnieper hydro-electric dam had raised the water table and the tree's roots were drowning, she said. It was just one of several explanations for the demise of the mythic tree that I would eventually hear. I walked around it, touching it, so as to be able to tell my mother that I had, and tucked a leaf in my notebook.

I was eager to walk down what had been Main Street in Rosenthal, to follow in the footsteps of my great-uncle. I had recently read his memoir, and he sounded confident when describing how the town was laid out. He'd

described a river and called it "Chortitza River," and there was a creek he'd driven across on a bridge so wildly with his horses. Later, when his horses had been requisitioned several times during the civil war, each time by a different army, he drove across the creek with camels. That allowed him an interlude of humor, when he wrote:

> On this particular day I was driving down Main Street. We called this section of the street "brake hill," because our loaded wagons had to be hemmed or braked by tying a board to the rear of the wagon on which someone stood to brake the vehicle. As my camels slowly moved up the hill, a farmer was coming down it with a load of pumpkins. My camels made their peculiar noise, and the horse started to buck and pull to the side of the street. Well, wouldn't you know it! The pumpkins fell off his wagon and bounced down the street. I could scarcely suppress my laughter.

As I found it, "Brake Hill" proved not to be a hill any longer, but a slight incline in the road. There was a small bridge, and the creek he'd referred to frequently in his memoir was a shallow gully of wild grasses. Our guide Olga could not recall there having been a "Chortitza River." But my great-uncle's description of the village being in a valley, the escarpment, was there to see, as was the onion dome of the Orthodox church.

Armed with my uncle's account and with maps, I very soon reached the location of my grandparents' property and the purpose of my trip: to hold up to the light of reality what I had imagined all my young life. Car garages had been built on most of my grandparents' small estate, and where there were no garages I walked among ruins, rusting metal, and garbage. The property was covered in tall weeds, and there were several stunted trees that were too young to have been trees in my grandfather's garden a hundred years ago.

I found a slight ridge of earth, what may have been the rectangular foundation of a building, and uncovered broken pieces of red brick, the building material for many of the Mennonite houses. I stood for a moment listening, as it seemed that the wind had risen and I was hearing the rustle of cottonwood leaves. What sounded like wind stirring leaves proved to be the sound of electricity in the power lines strung from giant towers across

the valley. It was here my grandfather had buried an infant son only days before leaving for Canada. In that final resting place there were thousands of nail polish bottles, the remains of a failed enterprise lying in glass puddles among the twisted shapes of rusting metal, bits of wire, and refuse.

Throughout the remainder of the week I continued the tour of various places I'd been reading about, growing ever more disenchanted. The girls' school that my great-aunts had attended remained intact, as did the volost building mentioned by my great-uncle, the boys' school, the teacher training institute, and many of the houses, which was a testament to their sturdiness, the quality of material, and the way the Mennonites had built them, Olga said. It was like visiting a nursing care home, trying to imagine the vitality and youthfulness of the elderly despite their aged appearance and failing bodies. Perhaps it might have been better not to have come, I thought; better to allow the town to remain the idyllic place of photographs, the picket fences intact. If I were to write about this place, I would need to imagine the streets alive with children, horses, and wagons; a sky clean of power lines, apartment buildings, and smog. I would need to crawl inside the hearts and minds of people governed by their faith, and into a way of living that was not my own. A growing sense of the enormity of such a task was disquieting.

On the last day of the journey we returned to the giant oak tree, as I wanted a final impression of the place more positive than the rubble of my grandparents' property. The scene at the oak tree was pleasant, a respite of greenery surrounded by small cottage-type houses; goats grazed near a narrow creek. It was a scene that years later I would describe in *The Russländer*, when the passage of time allowed memory to grant it a more pastoral ambiance:

> Soon they came to a quiet stream, next to which goats on tethers were grazing. Lydia pointed out a pair of swans that were coming into view round a small island in the center of the stream. The girls went onto a footbridge and waited for the swans to reach them, stood in a row at its railing, looking down, their faces given back to them in the sepia-coloured water; the stream a shallow one, Katya noticed…. She held the notebook against her chest, fearing she might drop it, listened as children playing near the water called to one another, a fish, a fish, they

> had just seen a fish. A woman pushing a baby buggy hurried to them and stooped over the water to look.
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> …When [Katya] looked up, the children and woman were gone, Greta, Lydia, and the girls were not on the bridge, and for a moment the silence held her in place, and her legs began to tremble; it was as though everyone, the town itself, had vanished.

I ended the scene in this way, thinking of their future.

While at the oak tree on that last day, I became aware of a woman out in a yard of one of the houses near the tree, sweeping a path. When she was done, she stood with hands at her hips, looking at me. Within moments she was coming towards me, her hair covered by a white scarf, her face broad and tanned, a wide smile revealing a row of gold fillings in her teeth. She asked through Yuri, if I was "one of them." "One of them" meant Mennonites, Yuri explained. My mother is Mennonite, I told her.

She went on to say that often she would visit with Mennonite tourists who, like me, came to view the tree. Moments later, with worry now creasing her face, she said that the tree was dying. A free enterpriser had wanted to turn it into a tourist attraction, and had built a restaurant nearby, poured concrete, and pounded iron rods into the ground all around the tree to fence it off. The rods had leaked iron into the soil. That, and the weight of the concrete, and too many people coming to see the oak tree, had killed it, she said. The tree is dying because of greed. I thought about what I would and would not tell my mother.

Sensing that I was about to leave, the woman began emptying her pockets of walnuts, tucking them into my pockets and then into my hands when my pockets were full. A gift, she said. Then she wrapped her large warm hands around mine and looked straight into my eyes, her eyes as pale blue as my own. She was not one of those, she said. But her grandmother had taught her a song which she wanted to sing to me. In a high and quavering voice, she began to sing "Gott ist die Liebe." I recognized the song instantly as one my grandfather had often sung in his rich bass voice, and I found myself singing along with her, my voice wobbly, surprised to find that my eyes were wet with tears.

Weeks earlier, when I was about to leave on this trip, I dreamed of my grandfather who, in a way, had sent me off to his homeland with a blessing. Now I was leaving his homeland, thinking that I had found my grandmother and that she was sending me back to Canada with her blessing.

That evening Jan and I walked in the neighborhood of Yuri's apartment. Dusk came so quickly and by five o'clock it was already dark. Weary-looking people waited quietly for trams. A young boy ran behind a bus, caught a ride on its bumper and, with the universal courage of the very young, hung on and disappeared into the darkness of the street. Two little girls passed us by, giggling, wearing the traditional pompons on their heads, on their backs the latest fad: Jurassic Park knapsacks. I thought of the young boys who earlier in the day had come running in the street to show us the puppies they carried in their arms, their joy and affection for the animals so very obvious. Their mothers didn't know they were bringing the pups home, they said in reply to Olga's question, and we all had a good laugh. I thought of the woman who had given me the gift of walnuts. Although much had changed since my grandparents' time, emotions such as love, and the ways of expressing it, remained the same.

I was aware by now of the tragedy that had struck the colonies during the revolution and civil war, irrevocably changing the lives of people, including my grandfather. He'd been arrested and imprisoned, and faced death along with other men who had also been incarcerated on the strength of innuendo or on a whim – they had been standing in the wrong place at the wrong time. I would leave the archives or library after reading the accounts of massacres, the killing of individuals, the deaths from disease and hunger, with an unpleasant, heavy taste on my tongue. In *The Russländer* Katya Vogt described the taste as equivalent to having eaten too much blood sausage. There came a time when I would need to go swimming after writing and rewriting such a scene, hoping to cleanse my body and mind with water and exercise. I feared that carrying those brutal images around with me might well be cause for an illness. The images and the writing of them certainly did bring on months of depression. After reading those accounts, I no longer wondered whose story I would tell, but rather I knew that the entire story of the Russian Mennonites' loss should be told. What I needed was a voice to tell it.

Once I had decided to tell the whole story, my research became more particular. I began to read about the silkworm industry, the fauna and flora of the steppe, steam-powered engines. I read sermons and hymnals and folklore, studied cookbooks and home remedies, made myself familiar with sewing patterns and the Low German language. To my dismay, I would come to recognize *Plautdietsch* expressions and words only to discover that they were said in different ways in different colonies. Russian, German, and Ukrainian words and names for things were often used interchangeably and lumped in with *Plautdietsch*. I cooked and baked Mennonite foods, using recipes that had crossed the ocean with my grandmother, and my mother would declare that of all her six daughters, I had made my peppermint cookies and *Lebkuchen* almost as they should be.

If anyone had suggested to me that I was writing a historical novel, I would not have agreed, although I was having to take historical events into account, and to account for the way the period determined how people lived physically, how they thought and acted, not to mention how the Mennonites viewed their world, which was an anachronism from the days of the Reformation.

It wasn't until after *The Russländer* was published and referred to as a historical novel in a review that I realized that of course that's what it was. Around this time, during the International Festival of Authors in Toronto, I was seated beside an author whose novel was set in a desert during the time of Christ. I marveled about its many details that so vividly evoked the time and place, and was surprised when the author told me that he hadn't done any research; the details had been imagined. "I made them up," he said. He went on to say that he realized, given the political era of *The Russländer*, that it had been necessary for those events to be factual. In my mind, although the characters and what happened to them in my novel were fiction, out of a sense of responsibility and respect for the subject it had also been necessary not to stray from the facts of the larger Mennonite story.

My frequent visits to the Mennonite museum in Steinbach, attendance at Mennonite church services, and listening to oral tapes all provided opportunities to hear Mennonites speaking. It had seemed from my reading that the storytellers and writers often used identical phrases, expressions, and words to describe an action or reaction to something. There was a similarity

in the stories told of celebrations of various holidays. There didn't appear to be a lack of humor and ways of expressing it, as my great-uncle did so adroitly in his memoir. But there seemed to be a lack of words, or perhaps a reticence, to express other emotions, even happiness, and I wondered, was this another characteristic of Mennonites. I answered my own question in *The Russländer*, in this way:

> All right, then. She would come to need personal care, and to live among other survivors of that time in Russia, women mostly, who had stories to tell, but no words to tell them. Just as their recipes had lacked concise instructions and measure, their Plautdietsch language lacked the necessary words to give shape to the colours, to describe the nuances, the interior shadows of their stories.

I was writing now, a hundred pages, over and over, while waiting for the voice of the storyteller to speak. On one of my visits to the museum in Steinbach, I sat on a bench outside a period store, feeling rather downhearted that the voice of the novel eluded me. I thought to ask the museum people if I might be able to sleep overnight in one of the period houses; perhaps the silence, the odors, something, might trigger a response. A woman, a volunteer, came over and introduced herself, and then she sat down beside me, both of us in silence for a moment. No doubt she was motivated by my obvious downcast appearance when she said, "I'll pray for you." I left the museum feeling more optimistic, bolstered by the woman's apparent empathy and good will.

Indeed, finding a voice for the *The Russländer* took years. It proved to be the most vexing and troubling aspect of writing the novel. I won't take the time here to chart the many early drafts when the voice was, I thought, distinctly male and authoritative, a ponderous pulpit voice, as I referred to it, and thought that perhaps I had been too influenced by my great-uncle's writing. It wasn't until the final draft and the year of publication in 2001 that the voice of Katya Vogt as an old woman stepped out from behind the scenery and more or less said, "All right, you've done your work, now it's time to let me tell you the way it was."

By that time I had made some important decisions; the first was that I

would try to tell the whole of the Russländer story. Another decision was that I wasn't writing the novel with Mennonite readers in mind. I reasoned, incorrectly, that Mennonites already knew their history and their stories, even though they were reluctant to tell them. Rather, I was writing for readers such as the *Toronto Star* reporter and for myself, who had known nothing about Mennonites and the Russian Mennonite story.

Another decision was made while watching television newscasts filled with accounts of the war in Bosnia. I watched people fleeing for borders, carrying babies and children on their backs, pushing the elderly along in wheelbarrows; a people fleeing with their possessions, all that they could manage to carry in bundles as they ran from a place they had for generations called home. One night there was a brief image of a truckload of young Muslim girls, rape victims, being spirited away from the public eye, a similar situation to one that had been alluded to in my great-uncle's memoir. He wrote:

> Just take a look at the street in Rosenthal in the morning! Who are those women? They are wearing light home-sewn caps to over their heads because they have clipped their hair short. All these fine young women and girls are going north to the doctor. Do you know why? What a sad picture! How we felt for them and how our prayers went up for them.

Like the Muslim women, Mennonite women had grown up sheltered in a relatively closed community that had protected them from such knowledge, where chastity and fidelity were unquestionably highly esteemed and the norm. A deep sense of shame would keep them silent about what had happened to them. I thought of my great-aunts, whose home had been invaded several times by the anarchist hooligans who sometimes moved in and lived with them for weeks.

I decided that the voice of the novel would be female, for several reasons, one of which was that the women had felt the need to remain silent about their grief, and about their many acts of courage and sacrifice committed during the years of revolution and civil war. Those who could recall the events of that time were aged now, in their nineties or near to it, as was my mother, and I wanted them to at last be given the chance to speak through Katya Vogt, and then, finally, through the voice of an aged Katya Vogt.

Another reason for a female point of view was that I believed the privileged and protected society afforded the Mennonites, when measured against the hardship and vulnerability of the peasant farmers, was somewhat like the point of view of the majority of women who had been born, married, and buried without ever having ventured beyond the parameters of their physical and cultural borders. Mennonites had been spared loss and injury during times of war in exchange for service in the forests and on the roads while living in camps that had been established for, and managed by, their own people. Theirs seemed to be a collective, restricted point of view on the world at large. Mennonites who did venture out into the world, and who were informed about the harsh reality of the Ukrainian and Russian workers and the political events unfolding around them, had been, for the most part, male and well educated. They were the exception and not the rule. Hence, I decided on a female point of view with all its attendant domestic concerns and details.

I had returned home from that first trip to Ukraine in 1994, knowing that I would write a large sweeping saga about the Russian Mennonites' loss, a universal story of displacement through violence that had been occurring since the beginning of time and was presently going on in Bosnia. I would need to take the time to rebuild their pastoral paradise, in order to emphasize their loss. I finished writing the children's novel and the collection of short stories.

Around this time I was living in Vancouver and had gone to a hairdressing salon for a haircut. The hairdresser and I were chatting, when a car backfired in the street beyond the window. I was shocked when she suddenly dropped to the floor. Moments later she got up, and with a pained smile explained that she was a refugee from Beirut and had experienced its bombing. What she had experienced to cause such a reflex reaction to something that should have been entirely normal, gave me cause to think about my great-grandmother Schroeder poking about under her bed each night with a broom, the piousness of my great-aunties, my grandfather's inherent sadness. In one way or another, they too had been dropping to the floor.

I returned to Ukraine in the autumn of 1998, this time in the company of Mennonites and on what was known as the Heritage Cruise, and with a

clear agenda of what I needed to see and with a cooler eye. The stories my fellow travelers told as they visited the home sites of their relatives were often stories of suffering and loss, and although the stories were told with sadness and grief, they were without bitterness or anger. Instead, as I put it in *The Russländer*:

> They came to pay homage to the stories their grandparents and parents had told them, and to refurbish the operating room in the Chortitza hospital with more modern equipment. In another village Mennonites had rebuilt an Orthodox church which had lapsed into ruin. They brought suitcases filled with antibiotics and aspirin, clothing, hard currency and forgiveness.

Was this spirit of forgiveness, I wondered, the reason why Mennonites had been able to move on and to prosper in their adopted land? They had not only survived but had gone on to create something new from their loss.

Upon returning from the Heritage Cruise, ten years after my grandfather's world had been evoked through the music of Mozart, I wondered while writing in a notebook, "What is the colour, shape, the sound of mercy, grace and love?" I took the one hundred pages of my manuscript and went into seclusion in East End, Saskatchewan, in February 1999, to stay at the Wallace Stegner house. In the early morning coyotes called to one another in the hills beyond the window. I often came upon the footprints of deer on Main Street and on the path where I walked. Sometimes days passed before I would need to speak. A month into my stay, the peace and quiet was shattered by the sudden and untimely death of a beloved sister. Weeks later I returned to the Stegner house and to the manuscript spread about on the dining room table, a rather shabby, manufactured attempt at imagining the shape and color of grief.

The novel was finished in February of 2001 and published in September of the same year, not allowing time for any sober second thoughts. Off it went, out into the world, for better or for worse – and to a great silence, as the novel was published immediately following 9/11 and the day-to-day concerns of life had ground to a halt. The author Alistair McLeod once said that a writer sends letters out to the world and hopes the reader will be affected in some way. Affected, I hoped, by the evidence of charity and forgiveness I had witnessed while on the Heritage Cruise. Reminded, perhaps, in the

months and years following 9/11, that there were other ways of responding to acts of aggression and hatred rather than fighting fire with fire. That *The Russländer* was a universal story was underlined by the large amount of correspondence I would receive from people who were not Mennonite but recognized their own stories in the book.

Eventually I went off on the book tour, but before leaving there was one last trip to make to the cemetery in Morris, Manitoba, and the gravesites of my Russian-born relatives. A brisk autumn wind was blowing and swishing through the dried grasses alongside the Morris River, a sound I had imagined so often while writing, the wind running through the tall grass on the steppe. I stood back from the graves to take them all in at once, and it seemed to me that my relatives suddenly all rose up, like a choir preparing to sing. Among them were my great-grandmother dressed all in black, my great-aunties, my mother's youngest sister, Frieda, who had died too young of lupus. My grandfather assumed his usual circumspect and quiet manner; the wind flipped the hem of my grandmother's apron. My favorite aunt, Frieda, waved to me, and with a wide grin that had always displayed the fetching space between her two front top teeth, she said with obvious pleasure, "Oh Sandra, we haven't seen you in such a long time." I had been away, I thought. I told them the novel was finished. "I've done it," I said, aloud. I had told their story, and with those words I felt an immense burden leave my body.

The following spring I went walking with Rudy Wiebe after an event at the Steinbach Mennonite Museum, where we had read from our novels. There had been a late snowfall and the land was freshly covered in wet snow, the air crisp, and the long and sometimes bleak journey into the story of loss and redemption of *The Russländer* seemed only a vague memory. I had planned to bring the surviving Vogt family members to Canada halfway through the novel and follow their settlement here, but the novel grew too long and I abandoned the idea. I had already decided, during the writing of it, that Sara Vogt would meet a man in Canada who had the other half of my dual heritage, and she would marry him. It was a story I felt I had in my back pocket, and I was anxious to begin. At Rudy's request, Victor Enns took our picture as we posed in front of a billboard announcing the reading we'd just given. Rudy Wiebe and Sandra Birdsell: it was a moment to think about, seeing our names up there together.

As we resumed our walk, Rudy said in a matter-of-fact voice, "So, Sandra, now you'll become a Mennonite." I laughed, and wanted to object, which is my nature to do. But I didn't object, nor did I reply. I had found much to admire and emulate during my journey inside the Mennonite voice, and had recognized that the Mennonite attributes of my mixed-culture heritage were mostly positive. I had inherited and learned traits that had stood me well throughout what was sometimes a difficult, precarious, and often lonely life.

I like to show people a card I carry in my handbag that attests to my Métis heritage. I like to say that if Mennonites gave out a card, I would gladly carry it around with me, too.

Sandra Birdsell has published four novels: Children of the Day *(2005),* The Russländer *(2001),* The Chrome Suite *(1992), and* The Missing Child *(1989). Her short story collections include* The Two-Headed Calf *(1997) and* Agassiz Stories *(1987).*

The Bechtel Lectures

The Bechtel Lectures in Anabaptist-Mennonite Studies were established at Conrad Grebel University College in 2000, through the generosity of Lester Bechtel, a devoted churchman actively interested in Mennonite history. Lester Bechtel's dream was to make the academic world of research and study accessible to a broader constituency, and to build bridges of understanding between the school and the church. The lectures, held annually and open to the public, offer noted scholars and church leaders the opportunity to explore and discuss topics representing the breadth and depth of Mennonite history and identity. Previous lecturers in this distinguished series were Terry Martin, Stanley Hauerwas, Rudy Wiebe, Nancy Heisey, Fernando Enns, and James Urry.