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Article abstract

This article is a feminist analysis of the oral life stories of the author's Mennonite grandmother, Maria Buhler. By using gender as a category of analysis, the author demonstrates that the stories tend to simultaneously subvert and reinforce traditional Mennonite women's gender roles. The author discusses implicit and explicit references to the dynamics of gender in the stories, and thereby uncovers subtexts and meanings valuable for a feminist understanding of Mennonite women's lives and history. Various performance tactics used by Maria Buhler in the telling of her stories are also considered. A feminist reading of the stories sheds light on the traditional gender role and identity embraced by Maria Buhler, as well as upon Maria Buhler's subtle challenges to male dominated versions of Mennonite history and tradition.

“I CHOSE SOME CUPS AND SAUCERS”

Gender, Tradition, and Subversive Elements in my Grandmother’s Life Stories

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Auction day came and for my sister Liena and I, it was a difficult day. Think about it: first our baby sister had died; then our mother, and then our father. Now everything was to be sold at the sale...We cried and cried. All we wanted was to choose one thing from our house as a keepsake, but Jacob Pauls, the sales manager, said we could have nothing. But Onkel Albrecht and Onkel Wiens, two village elders, took pity on us and said each of us could take one thing as a keepsake. I chose some cups and saucers (Story 6).¹

My grandmother, Maria Buhler, turned ninety years old this past summer. For almost the entire twentieth century, she has been part of this world, negotiating her place in it as a Mennonite woman who, in her own words, has “experienced many things”. To commemorate this birthday, my father presented everyone in the family with a copy of a collection of “Maria Buhler Stories” that he had compiled and translated from her original spoken Low German into English. The collection includes twenty-nine stories which chronicle her first twenty years of life growing up in the Mennonite village of Grigorjewka in Russia, and her immigration to Canada after the Russian Revolution.

Some of these stories are so familiar that I do not remember a time when I did not know them; others were new to me. As a Mennonite, and as a Buhler, I find that reading the stories is a profound experience. They give me a sense

1. I have numbered the stories to which I refer in this paper, and have included them in the appendix. The booklet of “Maria Buhler Stories” was compiled and translated by my father, Jake Buhler, in 1996-7.

of connectedness to my history and my people. As a feminist, I also find the stories significant. At a basic level, they add a woman's voice to the telling of Russian Mennonite and Canadian Mennonite history. But my grandmother's stories are also full of explicit and implicit references to the dynamics of gender. These references are manifest in their content, but also, less immediately obviously, in the way they are told. This paper explores a selection of my grandmother's stories as ways in which she constructs herself, and other women in the stories, as simultaneously accepting and tacitly subverting traditional gender roles.

A feminist reading of my grandmother's stories can expose many subversive elements within them. Descriptions of the dynamics of gender are often right below the surface of the stories, illustrating the claim that "for a woman..., the story is rarely told without reference to the dynamics of gender. Women's personal narratives are, among other things, stories of how women negotiate their 'exceptional' gender status both in their daily lives and over the course of a lifetime" (Personal Narratives Group 1989: 5). By telling her stories, my grandmother resists the elements of her tradition which exclude the voices of women, even as she perpetuates traditional notions of gender and the role of women. However, a closer reading exposes subversive elements alongside the traditional ones within the stories themselves.

My grandmother often tells stories about her life, both at the prompting of family members and voluntarily. Surely Mennonite women have always told stories about their lives to their families and friends, thus participating in the process of passing on the traditions and values which sustain a community. These oral histories are generally overlooked by the community as a whole when history is documented and traditions are accounted for. After all, Mennonite history and theology have traditionally been written by men. By telling her stories, my grandmother quietly challenges this "official" history. Elaine Lawless gives us some insight into this dynamic in her description of Pentecostal women's oral testimonial speeches in their churches. She writes that the "sex-linked roles in this traditional religious community dictate behaviour models and support only those performances that allow for the maintenance and perpetuation of the status quo. Yet, through their expert manipulation of the verbal discourse available to them...Pentecostal women do manage to alter the status quo for a short time" (1988: 77). Like the Pentecostal women, my grandmother simultaneously maintains and challenges the status quo in her life stories.

In story 6 (see appendix) quoted at the beginning of this paper, my grandmother describes the grief and anxiety that she felt surrounding the impending auction sale of her family's property after the death of her parents. As an eleven year old girl, she had very little power over the course of events. All the family's belongings were to be sold, and the children were to be "distributed" among relatives. She and her sister wanted to be able to keep just one token to remind them of the life and family that had been so cruelly taken from them. The sale manager would not allow them to have anything. What could an eleven year old girl do? Her account states that two of the village elders "took pity" on them and said that each child could choose one item to keep. The decision to allow the children to have a keepsake was made by several powerful men; Maria does not mention what she or her sister said to petition for this. Yet it is likely that Maria, as the oldest child, would have approached one of the elders to ask for his help in this matter. In the end, the children were successful in gaining what they wanted. My grandmother ends her story with a sentence that attributes the power of choice to herself: "I chose some cups and saucers."

Thus, her narrative moves from a depiction of herself as powerless over the situation (and indeed over her own life course!) to one where she is able to make a choice and thus exert a certain amount of influence and regain some control. This movement is subtle; nowhere does Maria state exactly how she played a part in transforming the situation. Although she attributes power to two village elders, I would contend that she played an active role in her final status as the owner of the cups and saucers.

The choosing of cups and saucers symbolizes the subtly subversive nature of many of the stories in the collection. Many of them focus on instances where Maria herself, or other women, work "behind the scenes" to transform situations in which they had little power (or where they would be expected to have little power) into ones where their voices and choices become consequential in various ways. Other stories can be read as exposing the power dynamics related to gender roles and expectations in patriarchal communities, without attempting to directly subvert or change them. Yet the act of exposing these gender roles and expectations can itself be subversive. In addition, many of the stories can be read as testimony to my grandmother's construction of a gendered self-identity. As the Personal Narratives Group suggests, "Women's lives are lived within and in tension with systems of domination. Both narratives of acceptance and narratives of rebellion are responses to the system in which they originate and thus reveal its dynamics" (1989: 8).

My grandmother would not consider herself a feminist. And yet I, her granddaughter, am making claims that a text composed of her oral life stories is valuable for feminist theorizing. Moreover, I contend that her stories are actually subversive, and a challenge to systems of domination. Katherine Borland writes that for “feminists, the issue of interpretive authority is particularly problematic, for our work often involves a contradiction...[W]e hold an explicitly political vision of the structural conditions which lead to certain social behaviors, a vision that our field collaborators, many of whom do not consider themselves feminists, may not recognize as valid” (1991: 67). I am quite sure that my grandmother would not understand or validate my point of view, not only because of her lack of fluency in English but because she would not read her life and stories as exemplars of feminist theory. As Borland, who also interprets her own grandmother’s narratives from a feminist perspective, writes:

From my own perspective,...the story does not really become a story until it is actualized in the mind of a receptive reader/listener. As my consciousness has been formed within a different social and historical reality, I cannot restrict my reading to a recuperation of original authorial intentions. I offer instead a different reading, one that values her story as an example to feminists of one woman’s strategy for combating a limiting patriarchal ideology (Borland 1991: 70).

By thus bringing my own feminist agenda to the interpretation, and locating meaning in the “communicative context”, I am “shifting the site of intention from the author to the receiving community” (Radner and Lanser 1993: 7).

By using gender as a category of analysis, I am able to disclose “sub-texts, meanings, and ways of knowing overlooked in non-feminist research” (Klassen 1994: 132), and thereby add to the richness of the stories as they were told. The study of women’s oral history and life history can lead to “a unique and provocative means of gathering information central to women’s lives and viewpoints” (Greenman 1996: 50). Because women’s stories about their lives and experiences have not been traditionally valued or acknowledged, my grandmother’s stories add to the movement toward “rescuing from silence the history and culture of subordinate groups” (Connerton 1989: 18).

Thus, a feminist reading of these stories challenges status-quo understandings of history. My work with my grandmother’s stories can also challenge notions that many feminists might hold about older Mennonite

women and their participation in their communities. Her stories help to "subvert stereotypes about older women, demonstrating that they too are reflective about the world they live in and that they have painful, complex, and inspiring stories to tell" (Klassen 1994: 134). Although my grandmother is not working with me to interpret her stories, "[d]oing feminist research with women who are not feminists...challenges stereotypes held by all concerned and provides fecund ground for the analysis of gender and power" (Klassen 1994: 131).

I am conscious of the fact that the stories have been removed quite drastically from their original context in their translation into English, and because they have been preserved in written form by someone other than the teller. My grandmother is most comfortable with Low German, which is spoken widely by the older generation of Russian Mennonites in Canada. In fact, her inability to speak a strong English has contributed to pain in my grandmother's life. In one story, where she describes the difficulty she experienced after arriving in England on her way to Canada, she says, "I spoke no English and cried a lot" (Story 9).

I do not speak Low German, and so I cannot be sure what has been lost in the translation. However, what people say is always mediated in some way before it is received by the listener. In this case, the English version of my grandmother's stories actually works to give her voice more legitimacy than it would have in her mother tongue. Deborah Cameron indicates that "access to economic and political power may depend on being able to speak a language other than your native language" (1992: 200). The details of the stories would be lost in my grandmother's broken English. So, my father's translation changes my grandmother's original oral Low German stories into a written text in a language which is literally not her own, yet also makes it possible for her to share her powerful experiences and memories with her family and others in contemporary Canadian society. In this way, her stories still give her "the possibility to speak as the subject of discourse, which also means to be listened to, to be granted authorship and authority over the story" (Klassen 1994: 64).

Ultimately, the stories make my grandmother the center of a version of history that is in itself a critique of the textbook versions of the same history that exclude women's voices. For example, Frank Epp's first volume on Mennonite history in Canada, which is considered to be one of the most comprehensive and historically accurate studies of Mennonites in Canada,

contains no mention of Mennonite women (Redekop 1996: 13).² Katie Funk Wiebe, one of the first to note the virtual absence of women from the documented history of Mennonites in Canada, commented that there is a connection between the historical record and women's relatively lower status in the community, saying that "the absence of historical material about Mennonite women may be symbolic of their role as wives, mothers, or maids, never entirely distinct from their servanthood position" (Redekop 1996: 15).

Katherine Borland writes that the "performance of a personal narrative is a fundamental means by which people comprehend their own lives and present a 'self' to their audience" (1991: 71). Throughout her stories, my grandmother presents a strong sense of self, even though she does not overtly claim that her life is remarkable in any way. A good example is the story of her birth and naming (Story 1). She begins, "I was born in the village of Grigorjewka, South Russia, on September 20, 1907, during the corn harvest", thereby situating herself in her historical and geographical context. This sentence heralds something of import: the birth of an "I", in a specific time and place. To add to this tone of a momentous occasion, she describes how her aunt, Taunte Nietta, rushed to the field where many of her family members were working, "shouting the news, 'Helena has just given birth to little Maria'." She explains that "it was already known that if I were a girl, I would be called Maria after my Groszma Pauls."

The phrase "it was already known" suggests a sense of value and expectation surrounding her birth. It also alludes to the continuation of tradition in the community: Maria's name was determined by the community long before her birth. I read a sense of predetermination: Maria's identity was known before she herself was aware of it. Symbolically, a gender role was paved for her by the community's act of naming her after her grandmother. Perhaps by telling the story of her birth and naming, Maria testifies to the expectations that the family and community into which she was born held for her, as a girl and as the daughter of a family steeped in tradition. At the same time, she is claiming that her birth and name are deeply significant not only to herself but also to her family and community.

It may be subversive for a woman to claim value for her life in this way, given the fact that her culture usually values men's achievements and lives over women's. It is not surprising, then, to notice that her stories also include statements where she seems to trivialize her experience in various ways. Indeed,

2. See also, for example, Redekop 1996: 57-60; Dyck 1981; Smith 1981.

she often plays down the strength of character that she obviously possessed in the face of the immense adversity of her early life. For example, her final comment in the last story is simply, "I was now nineteen and a half years old and in just ten years I had experienced many things (Story 10)". It seems as though she is playing down the incredible hardships that she had struggled through for all those years by including them under the vague phrase "many things". Conversely, that same sentence, along with many others in the stories, can be read as a powerful affirmation of self and identity. Anne Goldman comments that although many women's personal narratives include overt or subtle claims of personal insignificance, the very invocation of the singular "I" ends up subverting these assertions. She writes "the very words with which [a woman] expresses individual insignificance affirm[s] self-distinction instead" (1996: 160). Richard Bauman indicates that "a disclaimer of performance serves [...] as a moral gesture, to counterbalance the power of performance to focus heightened attention on the performer" (1984: 22). By playing down the significance of her stories, Maria effectively draws attention to herself and her stories.

Maria similarly affirms "self-distinction" in instances where she seems to play down her own significance. For example, many statements where Maria appears to claim a strong sense of self and value in the community are juxtaposed with statements where she dramatically shifts the focus away from herself, and onto another subject. In her birth narrative, my grandmother says, "I was born in the village of Grigorjewka, South Russia, on September 20, 1907, during the corn harvest. Groszpa Unger was in the field about one wirscht from the village, weaving willow reeds into baskets." In one sentence, she deftly moves the attention away from herself and onto the field where her grandfather is working. In fact, the field comprises the setting for almost the entire remainder of the story. By bringing Groszpa Unger into the story, Maria simultaneously distracts attention from herself and shows proper deference to one of the most respected and powerful members of the family, her mother's father. This might be expected of a woman telling a story about herself. However, this tactic of juxtaposing a statement about herself and one about the patriarch of the family can also be interpreted as serving as an "ironic arrangement" where an "item that in one environment seems unremarkable or unambiguous may develop quite tendentious levels of meaning in another" (Radner and Lanser 1993: 13). Perhaps by invoking Groszpa Unger directly after telling of her birth, she reinforces the message that her birth *was* a significant event. More subversively, perhaps, this

juxtaposition also serves to level the traditional hierarchy which places Groszpa Unger higher than Maria in the social and familial hierarchies.

Groszpa Unger figures prominently in many of the stories. My grandmother always talks about him with great respect: he was a “fine storyteller”, and “usually the center of attraction” (Story 4). It seems quite clear that she really liked him and enjoyed being around him. At the same time, she often brings Groszpa Unger into the stories as a tactic to expose unfairness for those who did not similarly enjoy the prestige bestowed upon him by the community. In her story about “Birthdays” (Story 7), my grandmother opens by saying “Nobody made too much of birthdays. Only once do I recall that I had a small party.” However, a few sentences later, she mentions that “we would celebrate Groszpa Unger’s birthday.” On one hand, she is acknowledging and respecting the family’s custom of “celebrat[ing] older people’s birthdays” which may actually mean older men’s birthdays. On the other hand, she is tacitly pointing out the fact that she, and many others, did not enjoy this privilege.

In the far more serious story of the “Journey to Canada” (Story 9), my grandmother tells of an incident where “we were all checked for lice and other things. We all had to strip — males in one section and females in another section.” She goes on to say that “it was very humiliating, *especially for Groszpa Unger*” (my emphasis). Perhaps the humiliation of Groszpa Unger somehow explains why the search felt so humiliating to her. There may be some form of rationalization — if something like this could happen to Groszpa Unger, the respected one, the powerful one, it makes sense that pain and humiliation could also befall Maria. Perhaps she is using the implied incredulity about Groszpa Unger being humiliated to show the immensity of the unfairness and pain that she also felt.

Other than Groszpa Unger, the character that Maria talks about most often in the stories is her mother, consistently portrayed as a strong woman, unwavering in her faith and also in her willingness to pursue her own goals. In several cases, Maria compares her to her father, illuminating even more clearly her mother’s strength of character. In the story entitled “Our House” (Story 3), Maria describes how her family lived with the grandparents in a small house. She says,

My mother, especially, wanted her own house because we were overcrowded...Mother wanted to move to the Hans Braun house which was available...Mother was very sorry when it didn’t work out. Finally, when

I was ten my mother asked Groszpa Pauls for a loan to buy the Poettcker holva wirtschaft...It was exciting to have our own place, and my mother, especially, was very happy. I remember very clearly that it was mother...who asked her father-in-law for the loan. Father wasn't nearly as courageous as mother.

Women often speak about their mothers as having a profound impact on their lives as role models (Goldman 1996: 99), and, I would add, specifically as role models of how to live as *women* in the world. By sharing stories of how her mother subverted traditional stereotypes by making her desires for her own property clear, and then by going about actively pursuing these desires, my grandmother is continuing, in the footsteps of her mother, to challenge notions of women as passive and weak.

My grandmother also portrays her mother as a model person of faith. It is ironic that although my grandmother mentions the names of the (male) preachers and deacons of the church, the people who actually figure in her stories as mediators of specific religious teachings or experiences are usually women. For example, her mother taught her how to pray (Story 2). "Women's religious lives have fallen into what scholars have deemed the unsophisticated 'little tradition,' and have therefore not received as much attention as the more 'noble' and 'eternal' concerns of men's religious lives" (Klassen 1994: 92). By talking about the religious life of women in her family and community, and furthermore, by portraying these women as influential in her own religious life, my grandmother is providing an alternate account of their centrality to religion. As Pamela Klassen indicates, "[w]omen's lives display a way of being religious not acknowledged in formal religion. Women's stories challenge the androcentric formulation of Mennonite identity, and further the possibility for creating a religious community capable of supporting and learning from the experiences of all members, men and women, old and young" (Klassen 1994: 137).

This challenge is illustrated by my grandmother most profoundly in the story about the death of her parents (Story 5). Her mother and father died within days of each other when my grandmother was eleven years old. Describing her mother's death, Maria says, "I saw mother die...As she was dying she said, 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.' She said 'Jesus' four times. The last time she barely whispered the name." Here is a woman whose last words reflect the strength of her faith, and whose faith is a model for others in the family. My grandmother says, "Mother was a Christian at the time of her death; Father was not." She goes on to show how deeply her father was affected

by her mother's death, and specifically, how he was affected by her strong faith: "After the funeral he begged 'God, take me to the place where my wife is'".

Another woman in the story is also portrayed as having special religious insight. This is Taunte Marie, who "was called immediately when it became clear that Mother would die. As she neared our house she saw a stream of light in the sky. 'Lienche is on her way to heaven', she said. When Taunte Marie walked into the house, Mother had just died." My grandmother clearly attributes a mystical religious authority to her aunt, subversive in a traditional Mennonite context which does not allow women any such position. In Mennonite churches, men have traditionally had the power over "theology, church structure, regulation of ritual, and public demonstration of the community's history" (Klassen 1994: 92).

Similarly, it is usually implied that the Mennonite commitment to pacifism and non-resistance is an issue for Mennonite men to struggle with and carry out. Cornelius J. Dyck, a prominent Mennonite historian, writes that the principle of non-resistance was difficult for some Mennonite men to accept during the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia "in the face of murder, rape, and wholesale plunder" (1981: 182). Harry Loewen and Steven Nolt write that "Mennonite men were torn between defending their women, children, and possessions, and remaining faithful to their principle of nonresistance" (1996: 248). Generally, when women do enter stories that illustrate the debate about pacifism in Mennonite tradition, they do so as in Dyck's comments quoted above "as silent characters, providing the circumstances for climax through their passivity: would a real man (who was also a pacifist) fight to protect his wife and/ or property?" (Klassen 1994: 83).

In a story that subverts these ideas about Mennonite men as the sole agents of non-resistance, my grandmother talks about her older sister Liena, who completely transformed a situation of violence through her creativity and active non-resistance (Story 8). Maria describes a horrific day during the Russian Revolution when a group of bandits stormed into their house, terrorizing the family, looting, and threatening to kill anyone who did not obey orders:

Then in the midst of all this terror and fear, Liena, who was about sixteen years, took her guitar, sat on a chair and began to play and sing songs that she had learned at school and at church. The officer of the group of bandits saw her and listened to her singing and playing. "Stop", he shouted

to all his men. "Stop your stealing and your swearing and your bad manners". Suddenly everything was quiet... "We ought to be ashamed of ourselves", said the officer to his men, "to be doing this to a frightened family. Shame on us all. Drop everything. Go outside. Get on your horses. Let's leave this village. Don't hurt anyone". And they rode away.

Here is a powerful story of a woman transforming a situation both by accepting her tradition (Mennonite pacifism), and by completely subverting the expectation of women as passive and uninvolved in the "ritualized roles" for Mennonite men of conscientious objection and protection of families (Klassen 1994: 81). She takes it upon herself to stand up to the army officer and the soldiers, and ends up protecting the entire family and community from harm.

Interestingly, my grandmother ends the story with the statement: "God was surely there to protect us." Through this trivialization, she negates the powerful action of a young woman by attributing the family's escape to God's providential protection. Though this tactic could lessen the subversive potential of the story, it could also assert that God worked *through* Liena to protect the family, despite the presence of many men. Pamela Klassen writes about an older Mennonite woman who justifies her act of preaching in a male-dominated church by denying "that she is especially gifted or deserving of praise because of her efforts. She says instead that God is speaking through her" and thus transforms "a potentially controversial act of speech into an act of obedience" (Klassen 1997: 244). By attributing Liena's heroism to a providential act of God, my grandmother simultaneously highlights Liena's action and maintains deference to the faith tradition which demands humility from women.

In her life stories, my grandmother reinforces traditional Mennonite cultural values, such as the importance of marriage, the maintenance of familial and church hierarchies, the domestic duties of women, and the significant role that faith plays for the entire community. From her experience, she knows intimately the expectations that traditional Mennonite communities hold for women, and has subscribed to those expectations throughout her life. Her stories do not explicitly challenge the traditions she speaks about. However, by sharing stories about her own life, my grandmother implicitly claims that her experiences are worth knowing about, and that they fit into the larger story of her people and her faith tradition. By telling her stories, she claims the authority to define the meaning of her own life as well as to speak about the history and values of the wider community to which she belongs.

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Appendix

My Birth (Story 1)

I was born in the village of Grigorjewka, South Russia, on September 20, 1907, during the corn harvest. Groszpa Unger was in the field about one wirscht from the village, weaving willow reeds into baskets. Other family members were shucking the corn and putting it into Groszpa's baskets. Taunte Nietta, my mother's younger sister, who was about 15 or 16 then, came rushing to the field in a horse-drawn wagon shouting the news, "Helena has just given birth to little Maria". My older sister was already named Helena after Groszma Unger, so it was already known that if I were a girl, I would be called Maia after my Groszma Pauls. I was born at home in the Pauls house with the assistance of a trained midwife.

Prayers Mother Taught Me (Story 2)

My older sister Helena and I would kneel by our bed whenever we said our evening prayers. It had a mattress filled with straw.

At mealtime we would say this prayer:

Our House (Story 3)

We lived in Groszpa and Groszma Pauls' house. Our family lived in the Little Room where we slept and ate. The house was made of bricks with an oven in the middle of the house. The oven could heat all the rooms at once. My mother, especially, wanted her own house because we were crowded. When I was six, Mother wanted to move to the Hans Braun house which was available. It was located across from the school. Mother was very disappointed when it didn't work out. Finally when I was ten my mother asked Groszpa Pauls for a loan to buy the Poettcker holva wirtschaft. We moved all our things by horse and wagon. It was exciting to have our own place, and my mother, especially, was very happy. I remember very clearly that it was Mother (who was an Unger) who asked her father-in-law for the loan. Father wasn't nearly as courageous as Mother.

Do You Want to see America? (Story 4)

Groszpa Unger was a fine story teller and mischievous as well. We gathered frequently at our grandparents' home amidst many aunts and uncles and cousins. My mother had seven sisters and two brothers but Groszpa Unger was usually the center of attraction. At one winter gathering, Groszpa Unger asked us if we wanted to see America. Of course, we wanted to see America. "All you have to do is walk to the railway line and lick the steel rails", he said. "Then you will see America at once!" Our parents were much alarmed and gently chided their father for telling such dangerous stories. We were promptly warned not to "see America" or we would lose our tongues!

The Death of My Parents (Story 5)

I was eleven when my parents died. First my mother; then, a few days later, my father.

My mother had tuberculosis and my father was suffering from influenza. As both became weaker they were bedridden. Mother had continual bouts of fever and so she was moved to the Faecht Hus which was cool. Father had chills so he was moved into the Somma Schtov which was warm. I helped look after both of them trying to make them comfortable, giving them food and water and so forth. They spoke to each other through the large gratings of the central stove. "Are you still alive," they would call out to each other. Each was worried that the other might have died when there were long silences.

One day Father said to Nietta (mother's sister), "which one do you want when we die?" She answered, "I don't know, but probably Grietchen, the youngest one." "No," said Father, "she will go to Grieta, because she was named after her aunt."

I saw Mother die. She was very weak and didn't even straighten out at the time of her death. She died at 8:00 p.m. on September 27, 1918. As she was dying she said, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus". She said "Jesus" four times. The last time she barely whispered the name. My sister Liena and my father also saw Mother die.

Taunte Marie was called immediately when it became clear Mother would die. As she neared our house she saw a stream of light in the sky. "Lienche is on her way to heaven" she said. When Taunte Marie walked into the house, Mother had just died.

Father attended the funeral but he was very sick. He shook as a result of his chills. He was very, very sad. Mother was a Christian at the time of her death; Father was not. Father was a very loving person but a bit hardened. After the funeral he begged, "God, take me to the place where my wife is". Father struggled with these thoughts but in the end he was victorious.

The Auction Sale and Distribution of Children (Story 6)

Auction day came and for my sister Liena and I, it was a difficult day. Think about it: first our baby sister had died; then our mother; and then our father. Now everything was to be sold at the sale. Imagine if everything that reminded you of your parents and your home were suddenly to be taken away from you. We cried and cried. All we wanted was to choose one thing from our house as a keepsake, but Jacob Pauls, the sale manager said we could have nothing. But Onkel Albrecht and Onkel Wiens, two village elders, took pity on us and said each of us could take one thing as a keepsake. I chose some cups and saucers and my brother Hein chose a meiza.

That was also the last day that I ever spent together in one house with my brothers Yasch and Hein and my sisters Grieta and Liena. It was decided by our grandparents and uncles and aunts how we children would be dealt out to various families. We had no say in the matter.

Birthdays (Story 7)

Nobody made too much of birthdays. Only once do I recall that I had a small party. But sometimes we celebrated older people's birthdays because it was a reason for everyone in the family to get together. For example, we would celebrate Groszpa Unger's birthday. We would come together for faspa and have milk, coffee, twieback, sugar lumps, and some sweets.

Bandits and My Sister Liena (Story 8)

One day, a dozen bandits rode into our village of Grigorjewka on black horses. They came to a halt in front of our house. The officer and his men marched right into our house without knocking. They demanded food for themselves and for the horses. Sword swung from their sides; each carried a revolver. Some were a bit drunk. They were mean and threatened to kill anyone who didn't obey orders. They asked for clothes and anything else that caught

their fancy. They demanded money. There was shouting and crying and confusion. Then in the midst of all this terror and fear, Liena, who was about 16 years, took her guitar, sat on a chair and began to play and sing songs that she had learned at school and at church. The officer of the group of bandits saw her and listened to her singing and playing. "Stop", he shouted to all his men. "Stop your stealing and your swearing and your bad manners". Suddenly everything was quiet. My grandparents, sisters and brothers stood perplexed on one side of the large room. I was scared and clung to Groszma Unger. All was quiet. "We ought to be ashamed of ourselves", said the officer to his men, "to be doing this to a frightened family. Shame on us all. Drop everything. Go outside. Get on your horses. Let's leave this village. Don't hurt anyone." And they rode away. God was surely there to protect us.

The Journey to Canada (Story 9)

I was seventeen when we left Grigorjewka but during the trip to Canada I turned eighteen. At one point we were all checked for lice and other things. We all had to strip — males in one section and females in another section. It was very humiliating, especially for Groszpa Unger. We left Europe and arrived in England where my brother Yasch and I stayed for six weeks in the city of Southampton. Yasch had pink eye but the medical officers suspected trachoma. After two days of waiting it was decided that everyone would continue on to Canada but I would stay back with Yasch. I spoke no English and cried a lot. But I kept telling Yasch not to cry or we would never get to Canada. Once when I walked to the market to buy knitting wool an exhibitionist exposed himself to me. He followed me on a bicycle and did it several more times. I was frightened. We stayed in large barracks. Men were separated from women. Finally, one day, an official spotted us and recalled that we were the orphan children without anyone to look after us...he had pity on us and got us onto a ship. The expenses for the food and lodging amounted to 37 dollars. I had 13 dollars left with which to buy food on the *Melita*, the ship which took us to Canada.

Courtship and Marriage (Story 10)

I can't remember when Kjnals started to take an interest in me, but it was probably in the Spring of 1926. He was nearly 15 years older than I was but that didn't seem to matter. We worked on the same farm so we saw each other a lot. On week days we might walk together to fetch the milking cows.

As time went on we spoke about marriage. We planned to marry in April of 1927 but Rev. Toews was not available. So we moved the date forward a month. Some days before our wedding, something totally strange happened to me. I was at home in my work clothes carrying a box of things when a group of women surprised me. I didn't know what to do. I just stood fixed on one spot holding the box. It was my first introduction to a new custom called a "surprise shower".

I had been in Canada for only 16 months with no parents or relatives in whom I could confide. There were new customs and there was the courtship which was also new and strange to me. I was a working maid. It was not easy. Sometimes I was perplexed and lonely.

On March 27, 1927, Kjnals and I were married in Rosthern at the Mennonite Church. Only a small number of people were able to attend the wedding. The few gifts we received were modest ones; there was little money in the Osler area.

I was now nineteen and a half years old and in just ten years I had experienced many things.