Introduction

The Plautdietsch (Low German) stories that are published here were written for radio and transmitted over CFAM in a series of weekly half-hour[1] Low German programs that Gerhard Ens produced between 1972 and 2003 (previously produced programs continued to be broadcast until 2005). These broadcasts began under the sponsorship of the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Committee and were intended to provide Manitoba Mennonites with a better historical context in which to understand the centennial of Mennonite settlement in Manitoba that was to take place in 1974. These programs proved popular enough that they were continued after the centennial. Devoted to Mennonite history and culture, they were broadcast in Low German, which for Gerhard was the mother tongue of the Russian Mennonites that emigrated to North and South America. As he noted in 2008, when he was awarded Mennonite Historical Society of Canada's Award of Excellence, "Mennonites of the Low German persuasion have no homeland in Europe they call their home. Low German has become a home where people can move in and out of and express themselves." These sentiments echo the observation James Urry made about the relationship between Low German and the Russian Mennonite identity.

> Low German was learnt at mother's breast, in mother's kitchen, sitting at the dinner table, playing in the yard. There were no school teachers, or grammars to enforce conformity, no dictionaries to check the "exact" meanings of words. Instead, words and phrases were thrown out without thought of "correctness"; spoken Low German could be fun, harsh, sad, and even a little naughty. Comment and conversation, observations and orders, cries and criticism, jest and jeers – the endless repartee of Mennonite life – made Low German a living force.[2]

It might be argued that since most Mennonites in North and South America now have English or Spanish as their first language, and have difficulty reading Low German even while they speak it fluently, these stories should be translated. While this argument has some basis in utility, the editors feel strongly that other more important considerations outweigh this argument. Whatever literary, historical, or didactic qualities these short stories possess, the Low German idiom is crucial to them.

In the first instance this book is an exercise in archival retrieval. That is, it preserves in print form stories that might otherwise be lost or neglected in the audio archives of the Mennonite Heritage Centre. It is also an effort, among numerous others, to retrieve Low German as a literary language among Mennonites. As Mary Warnock has noted in relation to retaining the archaic language forms of Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer*, traditional languages can evoke in its hearers and readers certain obscure stirring of feelings that are "creative of the vehicle for our sense of the sublime, just as music or landscape can."[3] Traditional language arouses sentiment "because it makes a direct appeal to the imagination, a power inextricably linked to our emotions. And the appeal to our imagination is direct precisely because of the unordinariness and antiquity of the language itself."[4] Indeed, Warnock notes that one of the ways in which old forms feed the imagination is by their very antiquity.

> The sense of continuity with the past, the knowledge that it is in the very same words as our fathers, that we are celebrating the very same recurring seasons – this affects us, both with a feeling of amazement and surprise and also a feeling of security.[5]

The decision not to translate these stories can also be supported on the basis of numbers. Low German is still spoken in the Mennonite villages east of those areas occupied by the Germans in World War II; among the Mennonite *Umsiedler* of the 1970s to 1990s in Germany; among Mennonites in Canada in the "Reserves" of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and to a lesser extent in urban and non-Mennonite settlements; among Mennonites in Mexico, Paraguay, Brazil, and Bolivia; and small vestiges among the Mennonites in the United States. In all it is estimated that there are more than 300,000 Mennonite Low-German speakers in the world, and when this is expanded to non-Mennonite Low-German speakers, this number jumps to more than seven million, most of whom reside in Germany.[6]

The Low German spoken by Mennonites in Russia and North and South America has its origins in the migration of Flemish-Frisian Anabaptists to the Vistula/North Sea region in the early to mid-16th century.[7] In making this move they brought along their dialects and the standardized Dutch languages for use in their literature and their church services. When they came to these eastern regions they also found a dialect in use by Lower Saxon colonizers. This dialect had been modified by an admixture of the native Prussian and came to be known as "Low Prussian." This is a dialect that was "picked up" by the Flemish-Frisian Anabaptist refugees. There are still pockets where this very dialect is spoken by non-Mennonite natives in the Vistula/North Sea region.

This Lower Saxon or Lower Prussian dialect was then modified by the Mennonites over the centuries; they retained a large number of Dutch remnants (e.g. Oom and Oomstäwtje, Tjressbäa, Tjniepa, Tjiep, Olbassem, Onoosel, Schnäd Broot, Farjoa, Vondoag, Mag, Onjemak, maklich); they adapted Polish expressions (e.g. Blott, Klopott, Klotje, Kobbel, Kodda, Tjnirr, Kruschtje, Lush, Pauslaken, Plütz, Pessietjel, polucksch, Prom, Radnasack, Rachull, Wruk); they adopted Ukrainian/Russian expressions on moving to Russia (e.g. Arbus, Baraban, Benzintje, Barotzen, Burnus, Borschtsch, Bultje, Laups, Pastje, Petklatje, Prevaulji, Serai, Stapp, Tota, Werenitje); and they adopted English expressions after coming to North America (e.g. Fenss, Bonsch, Swetta, Truck, Tax, Pol, Nurse, OK).[8]

The Mennonites continued with the use of standardized Dutch in their church services in the Vistula region until a fairly late date. With the Polish

partitions (1773 and 1798), and the Prussian takeover of the Mennonite lands, German became the language of the school and eventually replaced the Dutch in the churches and the Low German in the homes. Mennonite Low German was saved from extinction by the immigration to Russia (beginning between the two Polish partitions). Indeed, the last of the immigrants to Russia (1850s and 1860s) did not, by and large, speak Low German anymore.

Several shades of Low German in Russia were evident depending on the date of migration. In Russia there were two early Low German-speaking Mennonites settlements: the Chortitza (Old Colony) and Molotschna (New Colony). The Molotschna coming to Russia later had accepted the High German to a larger degree, which, in turn, modified their Low German. The Chortitza dialect, by contrast, was seen by some as coarse and uneducated. Molotsch diphthongs were less broad. As well, the Molotsch tended to drop the "je" prefix of the past participle of the verb and loved contractions, imitating the High German. As the Molotschna Colony was more innovative in its economy and education, its dialect of Low German began to influence the Chortitza dialect as well,[9] however at the time of the Russian Mennonite immigration to North America these differences were still apparent.

This Low German, with its variations, was transplanted in the 1870s and 1880s (to a lesser extent in the 1920s) to North America, and in the 1920s and 1930s to South America. Most Mennonites coming to Manitoba in the 1870s came from the daughter colonies of the Chortitza Colony (Bergthal and Fürstenland) settling respectively on the East and West Reserves. There was, however, a third group, the Kleine Gemeinde, who were a Molotschna Colony breakaway who settled near the Bergthaler on the East Reserve and influenced the speech patterns of that group. Hence the Chortitza dialect was most prominent on the West Reserve and the Molotschna dialect most prominent on the East Reserve though retaining many elements of Chortitza speech patterns.[10]

Gerhard Ens, the author of these stories, was not a part of these early migrations, but came to Canada with the migrations from the Soviet Union in the 1920s. He was born on 4 August 1922 in the village of Gnadenthal, then a part of the Baratov Mennonite Colony (daughter colony of the Molotschna) in the Soviet Union. He was the eldest son of Gerhard G. H. Ens and Helena Sawatzky who had married the year previously. Gerhard and Helena, along

with their young son, were among the first Mennonites to leave the USSR after World War I in 1922-23.

On arriving in Canada, and following a year's separation (Helena was detained in Germany because of an eye disease), the couple settled with Gerhard's parents in the village of Reinland in the West Reserve having bought a farm from Mennonites departing for Mexico. Gerhard was educated in the Reinland village school until the age of fifteen. He then went to live with his maternal grandmother in Gnadenthal (also in the West Reserve) so as to be taught by Paul Schaefer then teaching in the village school there (1937-39). He completed his high school education (grades 11 and 12) at the Mennonite Collegiate Institute (MCI) in Gretna, Manitoba.

Following graduation Gerhard attended "Normal School" (teachers college) in Winnipeg and began teaching in Gnadenthal in 1942. World War II and conscription intervened, however, and when Gerhard was called up for a medical exam he applied for "conscientious objector" status in the spring of 1943. Although he received CO status his teaching license was suspended and he was obliged to enter alternative service, first on a farm and then, a year later, at the "Manitoba School for Retardates" at Portage La Prairie. Here he served out the rest of the war.

At the conclusion of the war his teaching certificate was restored and he began a career of teaching at the MCI in 1946. He would remain there until his retirement from teaching in 1977, the last ten years of which he served as principal. During this period he married Anni Niebuhr, a Russian Mennonite emigrant from the 1940s, and together they had five children: Helen, Anne, Gerhard, Werner, and Waldemar.

In addition to teaching, Gerhard had a number of other careers or avocations. In 1958 he was ordained as a lay minister of the Blumenorter Mennonite Church, in 1972 he began broadcasting a weekly Low German radio program (continued until 2005), and in 1977 he took over the editorship of *Der Bote*, a German language Mennonite weekly newspaper, which he continued to edit until 1992.

As noted earlier, the Low German short stories published here were one of the products of his radio program. The first of these stories, "Dee easchte Wienachten enn Kanada 1875" (The First Christmas in Canada), was broadcast 10 December 1973 and the last, "Niejoa enn Dietschlaund" (New Years

in Germany), on 3 January 1983 (The date the stories were broadcast is indicated on the upper right corner of the first page of each story). It is apparent that the output of his stories slowed down markedly after he became editor of *Der Bote* when he found a new outlet for his literary ambitions.

Although written[11] as stand-alone stories to commemorate and humanize various aspects of the Manitoba Mennonite experience, it is clear that as the scope of these stories expanded, in both a chronological and geographic sense, Gerhard began conceptualizing the separate stories as a more unified narrative of Mennonite departures and arrivals on three continents over a century. It was his desire to rework these stories into a more novelistic form, but he never found the time to do so.[12] It is possible, however, to see this process of tying the various stories together in the later stories. For example, one of the last stories, "Dee easchte Wienachten enn Mexiko 1922" (The First Christmas in Mexico), is told from the perspective of the great grandchild of the child who narrated the first story "Dee easchte Wienachten enn Kanada 1875."

This last point illustrates other characteristic features of the stories. Almost all are narrated by children, or are told from a child's viewpoint, and all are stories dealing with emigration – leaving the old world – or the process of settling and adapting to a new world. The child's perspective was also a device used by Arnold Dyck in some of his stories – a perspective that helped to simplify the complexities of the adult world, while still being able to convey the pathos and sorrow of adult life.[13] What Gerhard wanted to get across were the reasons why the Mennonites had been such a restless people, moving across three continents in two centuries. "Wuarom daut so seenen musst." (Why it had to be so.) This, for him, was easiest to do from the perspective of a child – a world narrowed down to the limits of a child's comprehension.[14]

Most of the stories are also Christmas stories which allowed Gerhard to convey or teach a moral lesson. As he noted in his broadcasts, he tried to choose a particularly important or difficult era – periods in which people make mistakes, recognize them, and make them good again. For him, this was one of the most important meanings of Christmas. Christ's birth, or the example of Christ, was the means by which we can change our way. Christmas time, in his stories, forms the backdrop for arrivals and departures in 1875,

1921, 1922, 1926, 1949, and 1975, and the background for stories of war and distress in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. This allowed him to deal with the world of the 1874 immigrants, that of the migrants to Mexico and Paraguay in the 1920s, the post-World War II immigrants, and the "Umsiedler." Life under Stalin, during the Great Depression, and the experience of the COs were also set at Christmas time.

This attempt to make sense of "Die Heimat zur Fremde geworden" was somewhat typical of the Russländer migrants of the 1920s. The lawlessness of the 1917-18 war and civil war period in Russia seemed incomprehensible to many of the scattered, rootless, and penniless emigrants that came to Canada during this period – they were a people in shock and needed to have their story told in order to again experience belonging and continuity. While Gerhard was only an infant when this migration occurred, he considered himself an heir to the generation of writers who provided these needs. Men like Gerhard Toews, Peter Klassen, J. H. Janzen, Hans Ens, Heinrich Goerz, Nicolai Unruh, and Arnold Dyck.[15] For Gerhard then, these stories had both didactic (to teach Mennonite history and impart a moral lesson) and literary (the representation and reinscription of the Mennonite past) pretensions.

Gerhard Ens died on February 13, 2011, while this book was being completed.

Notes on Transcription and Orthography

Low German is predominantly a spoken dialect, yet because of its importance in the life and imagination of Mennonite authors who had immigrated to Canada from Russia, many of them, beginning with Arnold Dyck and Fritz Senn in the 1930s, attempted to write both prose and poetry in the Low German language. These early authors commonly used High German phonetics to create a written language, but followed their own individual idea of how words should be spelled without agreeing on a standard or even remaining consistent in their own writing, since no definitive texts existed as a common reference point.

Gerhard Ens began telling and writing his stories when few published Low German works existed. Inconsistencies in orthography appear in all

drafts of his short stories, especially since he wrote over a long period of time during which the standardization of Low German orthography had only begun and was in a constant state of development and change. Most of his original drafts appear either in his own handwriting or as typewritten manuscripts that had been prepared for broadcasting, not necessarily for publication. In a few instances, the stories remained only in audio form and had to be transcribed. The question for the editors was, then, how to go about standardizing the orthography to create a consistent text.

As a founding member of the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, Ens supported the society's republication of the collected works of Arnold Dyck in 1986 in which the editors had taken considerable care to standardize the orthography of the Low German portion of the texts. In 2003 the dictionary *Mennonite Low German Dictionary; Mennonitisch-Plattdeutsches Wörterbuch* was published by Dr. Jack Thiessen, and in 2009 an even more comprehensive Low German dictionary, *Ons Ieeschtet Wieedabuak*, was published by Ed H. Zacharias, who had previously translated the Bible into Low German.

Although there are many similarities in these three seminal texts, there still remain numerous differences. In deliberating which of these sources to use as a reference for this edition, the editors consulted with the author, who stated a preference for the orthography first endorsed by the Mennonite Historical Society in the publication of Dyck's works, since he had played a role in its development. Using this text as a reference proved difficult, however, because it does not exist in alphabetical format and displays numerous inconsistencies. The editors then decided to use Thiessen's dictionary as a more practical and reliable reference, since its spelling system is closer to the Arnold Dyck series than the more recent orthography used in the Zacharias dictionary.

The orthography used in this volume leans on Thiessen's dictionary to a great extent. However, some adaptations were made. Since Low German orthography attempts to be as phonetic as possible, we tried to remain true to the version of Plautdietsch spoken by the author. For example, although Thiessen consistently ends verb infinitives with an "e," we have added the "en" ending to both verb infinitives and plural verb forms. Another adaptation was the elimination of Thiessen's use of apostrophes to separate prefixes or compound words (Auf'gang, ve'jäte). The High German *Dehnungs-h*

(a silent "h" meant to emphasize the long vowel in words such as Joah, Veeh, Strooh), was also eliminated, since Ens tended not to be consistent in this usage and Ed Zacharias's practical argument for its elimination seemed reasonable. In some cases Thiessen's dictionary offered multiple spellings for the same word, in which case the editors chose one spelling as their standard. Other adaptations have also been made, but on the whole, the editors have used Thiessen's dictionary as their main guide.