Inheriting joy
Lessons from ancestors in the faith

Korey Dyck

For the most part, my life has been carefree. I had a nurturing childhood, education at several Mennonite institutions, a supportive church and family. A retrospective glance reveals a life that has been calm, predictable, proceeding according to plan.

Most of my adult life I have been connected to universities, as either a struggling student or an impoverished contract lecturer. I have conveniently detoured around many of the highs and lows of life, adhering to a mantra of deferred gratification: Someday, I think, my life will take the shape I ultimately want it to have, and then I will enjoy it. *Stay calm and you'll get there*. Looking back, I seem to have bypassed joy. I know contentment, and even happiness at times, but I tend to think of these feelings as self-generated.

By following a trail through history I seek an appreciation for the faith of my ancestors, a perspective from which to witness the joy in their lives that is found in relationship with God.

On further reflection, I realize that I have been touched by joy at moments throughout my life. Graduations, championships, an engagement and wedding, and the birth of two children—these were all joyous occasions. And I notice on reflection that these joyous moments were deeply influenced by the presence of people who have given me support and love. I did not experience these events in isolation, and I could not have generated them on my own. Teachers, tutors, teammates, family, and friends have all played a role in bringing joy to my life.

A longer look back

Though I may not often take time to do it, reflecting back on my life to find joy is not that hard. And I see how that joy is connected to moments shared with people I love. What is harder is examining the longer history of my people in a search for joy.

Where in the extended narrative of Mennonite history do I look for joyous events? Where are the moments of past joy in which I can in some sense participate now with the cloud of witnesses who went before me? And what can I learn about joy from these religious ancestors?

In these pages I propose to take a brief trip through a part of Mennonite history that relates to my extended family. That is, I will be looking for joy in historical events connected to my ancestors. But in addition to sleuthing through my family history, I want to consider God's work in these events of my family's past. By following this trail through history I seek an appreciation for the faith of my ancestors, a perspective from which to witness the joy in their lives that is found only in relationship with God.

Can we inherit joy? Perhaps doing so requires that we look in the right places, and take initiative to apply the lessons found in our history.

The travel debt

When she was a young child in the early 1920s, my maternal grandmother arrived with her parents at the Port of Quebec harbour. The family disembarked from the *Empress of France*, and from there began a series of train trips across Canada. My grandmother was part of the first group that arrived in Rosthern, Saskatchewan. It was in Rosthern that my ancestors were met by David Toews. Like some 20,000 other Mennonite immigrants from the Soviet Union between 1923 and 1930, my grandmother's family dreamed about a new beginning, and on the Canadian prairies they slowly forged new lives and livelihoods.

As refugees from the Russian Revolution, these settlers arrived in Canada with few and meager belongings. Many could not even pay for their transport. To help facilitate the immigration process and finance and secure passage for this influx of Mennonites, the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization was established. Under the leadership of A. A. Friesen, the newly formed board secured an agreement with Canadian Pacific Railway that guaranteed a loan—it would amount to $10,000,000 with interest over the loan's duration—to bring Mennonites over the ocean and across the prairies.

It became the responsibility of David Toews to manage the finances for this mass migration, and he personally guaranteed the

loan to bring his fellow Mennonites to this new country. He spent many years overseeing the integration of these immigrants into their new homeland. In 1923, 2,759 immigrants landed, and there were 5,048 new arrivals in 1924. By 1930, a total of 20,201 Mennonites had arrived in the promised land of Canada. Because of regulations associated with their travel arrangements, the new arrivals could only live in the countryside and were unable to take up urban occupations that would have helped them get established in Canada more quickly.

Carrying responsibility for more than 20,000 people and their enormous *Reiseschuld* (travel debt), Toews had an unenviable task. The work of collecting the money owed he eventually passed on to C. F. Klassen, but Toews took his personal guarantee seriously and worried about whether the debt would ever be repaid. Many obstacles prevented its timely repayment: the Great Depression of the 1930s reduced the savings of Mennonites who had come to Canada in the 1870s, and the new immigrants struggled to break the prairie sod and establish farms. Some of them saved up to repay the travel debt as quickly as possible. Others delayed payment, spending their earnings in acquiring a few personal comforts before beginning repayment. And some immigrants refused to pay at all, rationalizing that the government-run railway had enough money. Sickness, death, crop failures, and other factors continued to prevent the full repayment of the travel debt.

The weight of the debt and his promise remained heavy for David Toews in his later years. But by November 1946 it was finally paid in full. Pastor J. J. Thiessen visited the elderly Toews and shared the good news: "The debt is paid." Toews could no longer hear very well. "The entire debt and all the interest has been repaid," Thiessen said again. At first Toews would not believe his ears. He chided Thiessen: "I know you all feel sorry for me, since I gave my word that the debt would be paid. You know I can't die until it is paid."

Thiessen bent down and cupped his hands around the ear of the elderly Toews and once more repeated the good news. David Toews sat in his rocker and shook his head. He could not believe it. When he finally realized that it was indeed true, he bowed his head and wept. With tears of joy soaking his beard, he kept saying

again and again, "*Gott sei Dank*! Thank God!" With his burden lifted, David Toews died a few months later.[1]

"In all their misery, they still sing"

My paternal grandmother and her four children were part of the larger story of Russian Mennonite refugees who survived the Great Trek and made it out of the Soviet Union, going first to Paraguay and then later to Canada.[2] In the following story, narrated in *Up from the Rubble*, Peter Dyck recounts his meeting with the first group of Russian Mennonite refugees who fled to the Netherlands after World War 2. Peter Dyck and Dutch Mennonite pastor Teerd Oeds Ma Hylke Hylkema listened as the refugees told their stories of life in the Soviet Union, the famine and repression, the war, and their trek to the west. The refugees also shared the faith in God that sustained them:

> *Presently one of the women began to sing, softly at first, but as the others joined her, the volume increased. People nearby stopped to listen.*
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> | | |
> |---|---|
> | Ist's auch eine Freude | *Is there joy and gladness* |
> | Mensch geboren sein? | *In this vale of strife?* |
> | Darf ich mich auch heute | *Naught but tears and sadness* |
> | meines Leben freu'n? | *In this earthly life?* |
>
> *Now it was my turn to pull out my handkerchief:*
>
> *Where there's so much sorrow,*
> *Many doubts and fears;*
> *Cares that leave the morrow*
> *Dim with death and tears.*
>
> *And then the reassuring third verse:*
>
> *O what consolation,*
> *There's a God who cares!*
> *Jesus brought salvation*
> *From the world's despair.*
>
> *They sang from memory most of the fourteen verses of this familiar hymn I had grown up with and that was one of my mother's favorites. They sang not only in four-part harmony, but also with feeling and personal conviction,*

as if they were answering our question about their belief and spirituality.

Wüstens doch die Leute	*Many have not tasted*
Wie's beim Heiland ist.	*Of the Saviour's grace.*
Sicher würde heute	*Surely they would follow*
Mancher noch ein Christ.	*If they knew his peace.*

When we left, the thirty-three were all standing at the gate, waving goodbye and singing. Hylkema turned to me and said, "Can you imagine, in all their misery, they still sing!"[3]

Along the road to freedom

The *Along the Road to Freedom* art exhibit created by Ray Dirks tells the stories of mothers, daughters, grandmothers, and sisters who led their families out of persecution and suffering to lives of freedom and peace. The exhibit features a portrait of my paternal grandmother, and it portrays the quiet heroes of other families, too—women whose stories have often been lost to us. The memory mosaic the artworks create values the stories of women, women who were compelled to run for their lives, or were forced to remain behind. Portraits of these particular women of courage fill in an important historical gap, telling future listeners what life was really like for them.

One woman who is representative of this group is Anna Dick Bergmann. Anna grew up in a prosperous and happy family, and she married into another wealthy family. When the Russian Revolution came they lost everything. Abram, Anna's husband; his father; and all male family members over eighteen years of age were killed, leaving Anna a widow with six children. They barely survived the great famine in 1922. Finally she and her children were able to make the long journey from Russia to Manitoba, where she and other similarly impoverished families began a new life in humble homes on the cold and unforgiving prairie. As Ray Dirks interviewed relatives in preparation for painting her portrait, what he heard, over and over again, was about what a joy-filled, generous, and forgiving person she was. At a family gathering where the painting was unveiled, someone asked, "Do any of you ever remember our grandmother saying anything in

Anna Dick Bergmann (1880–1961) was a tower of strength not only for her children and her church family but also for many others whose lives she touched. Anna lived a life of love, forgiveness, and inspiring faith that the Lord God is the Father of the widow and orphans. (*Portion of a portrait by Ray Dirks, in the exhibit* Along the Road to Freedom. *Used by permission of the artist. All rights reserved.*)

anger?" A long pause followed, and finally one person said, "A man in dirty clothing came to our door once, and she told him to take a bath."[4]

Joy can be ours, too

The stories of David Toews, Peter Dyck, and Anna Bergmann bear repeating. When we cease to tell the stories of our past and when we neglect the rich heritage that is ours, we no longer understand how we arrived where we are today. If we do not avail ourselves of resources—handed down to us by those whose faith saw them through hardship as a body of believers—we miss opportunities to employ their hard-gained wisdom.

God used ordinary people to perform miracles from which we can learn. Some of us have ties of kinship with them; others are heirs to their faith. The blessings of God-given joy which they knew in their lives continue to be available to us today.

Notes

[1] The David Toews story has been retold for various audiences. See D. J. Schellenberg and Peter Dyck's chapter "David and the Promised Land," in *Gathering at the Hearth: Stories Mennonites Tell*, edited by John E. Sharp (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 53–61; and Cornelia Lehn's *I Heard Good News Today: Stories for Children* (Faith and Life Press: Newton, Kansas, 1983), 135–36.

[2] "The Great Trek was the period from 1943 to 1945 when thousands of Mennonite refugees left the Soviet Union in an attempt to escape to the west. With its retreat westward after the capitulation at Stalingrad, the German army was ordered to take with it the remaining population of Soviet Germans, numbering approximately 350,000; this number included 35,000 Mennonites." From Helmut T. Huebert and Susan Huebert, "Great Trek, 1943–1945," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*; http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Great_Trek,_1943-1945&oldid=119714.

[3] This passage is excerpted from Peter and Elfrieda Dyck's book *Up from the Rubble: The Epic Rescue of Thousands of War-Ravaged Mennonite Refugees* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991), 84–85.

[4] Ray Dirks is curator of the Mennonite Heritage Centre Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba. The portrait of Anna Dick Bergmann is part of an exhibit of twenty-six portraits; see http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/files/gallery/AlongTheRoadToFreedomTourInfo.pdf.

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