Remembrance and Celebration: Barbara Smucker's *Days of Terror*

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In *Days of Terror,* her most recent historical novel, Barbara Claassen Smucker tells with characteristic compassion, simplicity and directness the story of the mass migration of Russian Mennonites to Canada in the early 1920's. *Days of Terror* represents Mrs. Smucker's attempt to keep strong within the larger Canadian community her own Mennonite heritage and faith, and to contribute strengthening Mennonite strands to multicultural Canadian peoplehood.

At the beginning of *Days of Terror*, during the peaceful days in Tiegen before the terror, Grandfather Penner tells Peter Neufeld, "We Mennonites have lived apart from Russian people. The price is too big to pay if we mix with them. Keeping our heritage and our faith has given us strength in a new land."[1] However, during the years of his own imprisonment by the Russians, Grandfather rethinks the strengths of his heritage and faith, and the strengths which he grows to value no longer depend as heavily on Mennonite isolation or separation. He shares his hard-won wisdom first with Gerhardt, Peter's father, and then with Peter. About the past, he says to Peter, "I have lived all my life in the Ukraine of Russia, Peter, and I love this country. But there was great misery and suffering and poverty in this land. We Mennonites lived too much apart and didn't know" (p. 128). About the future in Canada, which will soon replace Russia as the "new land" for 20,000 Mennonites, he says to Gerhardt, "we must live among other Canadians. We must not withdraw from the native people as we have done in Russia" (p. 118). Grandfather Penner finally has come, in the fiction, to a realization about Mennonite "peoplehood"[2] which seems to correspond with Smucker's present interest in presenting the Mennonite heritage.

In maintaining, celebrating and sharing her Mennonite identity and history, Mrs. Smucker aligns herself with forward movements emerging in current Mennonite studies. In the last twenty-five years, Mennonite historians and theologians have departed from separatism

and made advances in sharing their history, experiences, and values. The Forward by T.D. Regehr to Frank Epp's history, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920: The History of a Separate People*, articulates "the hope that all interested Canadians might benefit from and be enriched by a better understanding of the Mennonite culture, faith and history" (p. 17). Frank Epp speaks often of Canadian multiculturalism in *Mennonites in Canada*, and elsewhere:

> Canada's official policy of multiculturalism is helping much untold Canadian history to find the light of day. More and more our nation's story will include the history of all her immigrant peoples. Our lives will be enriched by a great variety of literature from and about the minority groups including personal memories and official histories.[3]

Sharing this viewpoint, Smucker sees her novel, *Days of Terror*, as an immigrant story for all Canadian children.[4] Still, the centre of literary experience in the book remains firmly and particularly linked to Mennonite history, through Smucker's personal involvement in the Mennonite heritage. The book does remember, interpret and celebrate the specific Mennonite and the universal human movement from bondage and suffering to freedom and hope. It reaches out to national and international communities, and to interdenominational readerships.

For twenty-five years Mrs. Smucker has been committed to making history come alive for children. The significance of her current work may be demonstrated through comparison with her first book, *Henry's Red Sea*, which was also based on Mennonite history and themes.[5] *Henry's Red Sea* tells the story of the Russian Mennonites' escape from persecution after World War Two to a refugee camp in Berlin, and of their final journey to freedom in Paraguay. It also tells of the work of the Mennonite Central Committee. A man who participated in the escape told the story to the Smuckers and their children at the Smuckers' home, and Smucker decided to make factual history into a book for children.[6] The strong narrative line in *Henry's Red Sea* grew out of her oral source. Written specifically for Mennonite children and published by the Mennonite Publishing House at Scottdale, Pennsylvania, the book addresses itself to Mennonite issues in a more direct and didactic way than does *Days of Terror*.

Days of Terror also began with specific details of a personal story, but it developed in different directions from those in *Henry's Red Sea* and grew to include several of the complex issues which modern Mennonite studies are now addressing. Smucker's social imagination

responded again in *Days of Terror* to the oral transmission of events from the Russian past. A woman from Hespeler, Ontario, told Smucker the story of apples given to her by an elder just before she boarded the emigrant train to Riga in the early 1920's. She was given ten apples, one for each day of the trans-Atlantic voyage. Originally, Smucker intended to write this story for young children, focussing it on a little girl. Later she decided to use an older child as her main character, and created Peter Neufeld, an older and more active hero. Katya became his younger sister. Smucker saved the story of the ten apples (which Aunt Lizzie gives to Katya) until the end of the larger story, where its telling achieves an emotional climax when it is joined to Katya's description of Aunt Lizzie's death (p. 148).

Smucker also expanded and developed the character of Otto, Peter's older brother, and Otto's role in the Selbstschutz or Self Defense League. The sub-plot focussing on Otto's actions allows the author to explore the various kinds of conflict beyond the initial and obvious conflict between Russians and Mennonites during the civil war. Against the Mennonite principles of non-violence and non-resistance, Otto joins a Mennonite fighting unit (the First Halbstadt Company), formed to defend the Mennonite communities against Makhno's bandits in the terrifying days of anarchy. In the sub-plot, Smucker examines the conflicts caused within the Mennonite community, then within the Neufeld family, and finally within Peter. Choosing to keep Otto's secrets from his parents, Peter takes full responsibility for Otto's freedom by carrying a money belt past Russian guards into Riga. There Peter meets Otto, and gives him the money which will pay for the older brother's escape to the United States. Peter becomes a much more active and heroic character than his counterpart, Henry, in *Henry's Red Sea*, partly because the sub-plot in *Days of Terror* demands a more complex treatment of the themes of conflict and conscience without and also within the Mennonite community, the family and the individual. Peter has opportunities for action which Henry did not have. Peter and the Neufelds must make more complicated decisions than Henry and his family. The central characters in *Henry's Red Sea* remain essentially passive, however courageous, because of the nature of their refugee existence; only the Mennonite Central Committee acts.

Other differences point to the twenty-five years which stand between the writing of these two stories of conflict and conscience. Tina, the older sister in *Henry's Red Sea*, goes through a crisis in conscience, but she finally chooses to remain within the Mennonite family unit, affirming a faith in God which links her to her larger Mennonite community. Because it is an earlier book, *Henry's Red Sea* deals primarily with the conflicts between the Mennonites and their

persecutors. Otto, however, does not return to his family unit once he and the Neufelds reach North America. Otto will never again "really fit" into the Neufeld family, although he can continue to love the family and stay in touch. Smucker's handling of the Self Defense League and her characterization of Otto point to the conflicts *within* the Mennonite community which Mennonite historians and theologians are beginning to document and to discuss more openly.

The traditional Mennonite response to violence and persecution has been forgiveness and the effort towards disinterested love of the enemy. We find current awareness of the dangers inherent in "self-denial and the suppression of anger" summarized by John Daniel Stahl:

> The principle of nonresistance internalized can turn natural and inevitable feelings of anger, denied external expression, into "passive aggressive" behavior accompanied by feelings of self-pity and self-righteousness, and issuing at their extreme is self-hatred or despair.[7]

Through the opposed responses of Gerhardt and Otto to the terror, Smucker dramatizes the conflict between traditional Mennonite non-violence and passive nonresistance, and active defense. Otto defies the traditional Mennonite principles because he cannot suppress his anger and deny his youthful emotions, and decides to act by joining the Self Defense League.

Similarly in history, the Russian anarchists' wholesale destruction of Mennonite villages in the Ukraine and the savage rapings of women caused some young Mennonite men to band together to defend the villages; disagreement among Mennonites and struggles in conscience grew out of the formation of the Defense Leagues. The first two chapters of John B. Toews' history, *The Lost Fatherland* (Scottdale, Herald Press, 1967) and Gerhard Lohrenz's historical novel, *The Fateful Years: 1913-1923* (Winnipeg, Christian Press, n.d.) provided source material for Smucker's treatment of the Self Defense League. Lohrenz's central character, Peter Braun, is a member of the Self Defense League, and he struggles often with the question of rightness or wrongness of the Selbstschutz. Smucker now joins in asking the question about the rightness or wrongness of the defense units. She draws on centuries of Mennonite tradition as Grandfather Penner answers young Peter: "Yes it was wrong . . . and Otto believes this now too" (p. 128). Yet for Otto the complexities remain. He can never return to the strong Mennonite family life based on unity in communal consciousness and on unity of religious experience.

Smucker's treatment of Mennonite themes and history has followed changing patterns and impulses within the larger context of Mennonite self-understanding. While she does not choose to confront the complexities of separation or non-resistance in the same critical way that Rudy Wiebe has confronted them in *Peace Shall Destroy Many* and *The Blue Mountains of China*, or as some recent historians are confronting them in their studies of the Mennonites' years in Russia,[8] she does place these controversial issues at the dramatic centres of her main plot and her sub-plot. She does allude to the very great wealth of some of the Mennonite landowners and their mistreatment of the Russian serfs, although she vindicates the Neufeld family from such charges of mistreatment and separatism by developing their relationships with their Russian servants, Tanya and Esch, and by leaving Grandfather Penner in the care of Igor, the Russian shepherd. Gerhardt mentions Uncle Herman's wealth: "One man should not own so much." Mrs. Neufeld's reply, "It is not for us to judge" (p. 55) is significant, for it implies a kind of judgment (God's perhaps?) in the destruction of Herman's estates.[9] For the most part, however, Smucker is sympathetic in her portrayal of the Mennonites' situation, and in her dramatization of their strengths.

Smucker's fiction for children written between *Henry's Red Sea* and *Days of Terror* maintained historical and social themes. Her novel about the underground railway for slaves from the Southern States to Central Canada, *Underground to Canada*, which was published in 1977 by a secular Canadian press, has been very successful here and elsewhere. Over the years her readership has moved out in ever-widening circles from the early Mennonite centre to include Canadians, Americans, British, Australians and Japanese of all faiths. In *Days of Terror* she returns after twenty-five years to specifically Mennonite themes and to Mennonite history as it merges this time with Canadian history.

Involved as she had been with the story of human dignity, survival and freedom in *Underground to Canada,* she confesses, "I got more involved" in writing *Days of Terror.* Again, she researched thoroughly. In addition to written sources of factual information – histories, manuscripts, diaries, other historical novels – she drew from interviews with many Russian Mennonites, now living in Ontario and Manitoba. As well, she drew from the experiences of her grandfather, C.F. Claassen, who worked with the relief committees in North America during these years, and of others in the Claassen family who gave shelter to a Russian Mennonite family for a time. Smucker remembers a letter to her grandfather from a refugee family. It was "written on a piece of torn wallpaper"; her grandfather forbade her

to read it because she was too young. She says that she then "knew it must have been horrible [and that even now she] can still see this torn-off piece of wallpaper."

Out of her own experiences and the experiences of many Russian Mennonites, Barbara Smucker has written in *Days of Terror* a powerful novel capable of evoking emotional responses and of stimulating interest in another way of life. Much of the book's impact depends on the immediacy created through details in characterization and in dramatic incident. The characters and the incidents most real to Smucker either in her own remembered experiences or through those of other Mennonites emerge as the most real and convincing for readers of the fictionalized version of the story. The characters of Aunt Lizzie and Makhno, for instance, are most effective. Mrs. Smucker remembers her own Aunt Lizzie: "she was really like this woman so maybe that came through. I really knew her. She was not pretty – stern – and when she smiled it was very warm. And she was abrupt and said exactly what she thought and her husband had been murdered. She was from one of these estates." Makhno, too, was real. There are many accounts in personal memoirs and anecdotal histories of Makhno, bandit and anarchist, who raided the villages of the Molotschna settlement from 1918 to 1919. Smucker has relied on the details in these memoirs to characterize Makhno in *Days of Terror*. Also, survivors of the exodus described Makhno to her: "He would ride in a carriage with a pillow sort of like he was an emperor of some kind. He was terribly perverted." The Mennonites from the Molotschna speculated that he was once a servant on a Mennonite farm or estate, and that after years of imprisonment and embitterment, he set out to destroy Mennonite holdings. In Aunt Lizzie's description of Herman Klassen's murder by the Makhnovites (pp. 54-55), Smucker combines the story of Maknho in the carriage and memories of her own Aunt Lizzie. From these historical and personal contexts, Makhno emerges in *Days of Terror* as a more convincing and complex villain than his counterpart, Mr. Sims, in *Underground*.

Immersion in received detail also stimulated Smucker's imagination as she was creating specific scenes in *Days of Terror*. She recreates details from Henry Rempel's *Passages Out of My Life* in the scene depicting Peter's hatred for the Russian version of his name (p. 21), and in the symbolic descriptions of the ripe cherries in the orchards of Tiegen (pp. 128 and 152).[10] There are strong correspondences in detail between the railroad scenes in Lohrenz's *The Fateful Years* and in *Days of Terror*. In the ugly, crowded and filthy station, the Russians scream at Peter and Gerhardt, "Death to the traitors! Death to all Germans!" (p. 28). Smucker borrows these cries from *The Fateful*

Years.[11] Both Peter Braun, hero of Lohrenz's historical fiction, and Gerhardt remember the station as it was before the Civil War – splendid, clean and quiet. Both remember a lady pouring cream into tea.[12]

When I asked Mrs. Smucker during our interview to discuss her particular purpose in writing *Days of Terror* about the Mennonite communities in the Molotschna, and the exodus to Canada in the early 1920's, she paused for some time. To my second question asking whether she was trying to dramatize, through historical fiction, a particular aspect of Mennonite experience and/or to dramatize a more universal moment from bondage to freedom – since this, too, is the central theme in the non-Mennonite *Underground* – she replied that she was not conscious of trying to fulfill either of these purposes as I expressed them: "I just wanted to tell the story . . . I'd heard this story all my life . . . I wanted to write about it for children."

Barbara Smucker's social imagination responds to her historical material – most keenly and most emphathetically when that material has come to her orally and personally – and it reaches out to touch her readers with the awareness of the gift of freedom and its attendant responsibilities. We remember and celebrate with her as we read "this story."

NOTES

[1]Barbara Smucker, *Days of Terror* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1979), p. 19. All further references to this work appear in the text.

[2]I borrow this term from Frank H. Epp. See his *Mennonite Peoplehood: A Plea for New Initiatives* (Waterloo: Conrad Press, 1977). See especially pages 17-21, which define Mennonite "peoplehood" in terms of Christian community and service, and pages 96 to 103, which discuss the extending of the borders of peoplehood to include the larger Canadian and Christian family. See also pages 117-118, which suggested the title for this essay.

[3]Frank H. Epp, Foreword, *Passages Out of My Life*, by Henry Rempel (Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1977), p. vii. Mrs. Smucker used Rempel's volume in writing *Days of Terror.*

[4]During an interview with me on February 20, 1981 (on which I base much of this essay and from which I quote directly later in the essay) Mrs. Smucker said that she first entitled the book *Immigrant Boy.* Clarke, Irwin suggested the present title. *Days of Terror* has been reviewed by Adrienne Kertzer, *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 12, No. 1 (1980), 139-141, as part of a body of immigrant literature for children.

[5]For a discussion of these themes in *Henry's Red Sea*, see John Daniel Stahl's "Conflict, Conscience, and Community in Selected Mennonite Children's Stories," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 55, No. 1 (January 1981), 62-75.

[6]See C.B. Davies "An Interview with Barbara Smucker," *CCL*, 22, p. 8.
[7]Stahl, p. 73.
[8]See for example J.B. Toews, *The Lost Fatherland*; see also P.A. Koop, "Some Economic Aspects of Mennonite Migration: with Special Emphasis on the 1870's Migration from Russia to North America," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 55, No. 2 (April 1981), 143-157.

[9]Martin Sawatzky, Mennonite Chaplain at The University of Western Ontario, suggests that guilt feelings do arise in many Mennonite communities out of the Mennonites' worldly success. Some Mennonites see persecution (as it occurred for example in the Russian Mennonite communities) as God's judgment upon their worldliness.
[10]See Rempel, pp. 11-12.
[11]Lohrenz, p. 72.
[12]Lohrenz, pp. 74-75. See *Days of Terror*, p. 26, for Gerhardt's version.

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