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Mennonite.

Author(s): Martens, Wilfred

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Mennonite history has been recorded in many different forms—history, biography, narrative, fiction. Each form provides us with a unique perspective on the past. The following narrative attempts to express part of that history in a contemporary genre, free-form poetry. This genre utilizes the natural rhythms of the language, its syntax, phrases, sentence structure. The focus of the poem is upon immigration patterns from Europe to Russia to North America. Interspersed among the stanzas are Low German and High German folk verse; the meter, rime, musical quality and vernacular level of language add contrast to the free-form, giving the poem variety of style. The following excerpt is taken from the beginning of an extended poem. It is not intended to be complete in itself but is the first of several sections.

MENNONTIE
Wilfrid Martens*

He drained the sea,
dredged canals, raised dikes,
turned marshes into meadows;
on swamplands disdained by others
he built his farm.
But success turned to struggle
as his conscience was caught
in conflict.
So he moved on
to tame the wild steppes and
seed the virgin soil
of a new land,
south.

.....

*Wilfrid Martens is Chairman of The Department of English at Pacific College, Fresno, California.

Geprachet, gegeft un geborgt,
Genoanne un dan vada vaukofft;
So sen Foadiki, un Moutiki entlich,
Fon Dietschlaund noam wille Russland geflocht.

.....

Planting his villages
in the wilderness,
he plowed and prayed
until he reaped a hundred-fold.
For a century
he toiled and rested,
seeking to keep the new world out
and the old world in.
But his adopted land
could not contain his conscience,
so he moved on again,
from the steppes of the Ukraine,
from the villages of Chortitza,
from the mills of Molotschna,
from the shops, churches, homes
of Orloff, Elisabethal, Einlage,
Berdiansk, Margenau, Schonfeld,
Ruechnau, Darmstadt, Lichtfelde;
the dark soil of Omsk and Kuban
tempted him to stay,
but the earth could no longer
retain the restless root.
So he moved on,
not sure if he were
pushed
or pulled.

.....

By foot, on horseback,
in wagon and train,
the mixed caravan
of peasant and preacher,
tailor and teacher,

farmer, merchant and miller,
crossed the Dnieper and Volga.
Over mountain and plain
they dragged their dreams,
leaving behind empty bins
of hardship,
or barrels of flour and salt pork.
Woven wicker baskets,
polished cedar chests,
crude pine trunks with
rusted iron latches
became chests of treasure
destined for a new home
(satin kerchief with floral border,
feather quilt with a smell of nostalgia,
jar of hand-picked seeds,
clock with flowered face,
its detached pendulum waiting
to measure a new time,
china teapot and chipped
sugar bowl,
worn family Bible, its loose covers
wrapped in string
to contain the records of
life, love and sorrow).
They moved on,
the steppes behind,
the sea before,
waiting
to plant the prairies.

.....

Doch ober wo ist Amerika?
Ich han schon ofter hara saa
Es ist dort dribbe ungefar
Bei vierzig Meil vom grosse Meer.
Die Leena meent, Sie wees davon
“Es is net weit von Oregon”
Die Marie Saat, “Ich denk beinah
Es is in Pennsylvania”

Jetzt kommt derzu die alte Lis'
Sie lacht und meent "Es is net so,
Es is in alt New Mexico."
Der Michael hat das net gelitt
Das sich Weiber hen gestritt,
"Ich wees es fescht, Ich kann eith saa
S'isch drible in Amerika."

.....

Dust of the village
still on his shoes,
he stepped from the steel ramp
of S.S. Silesia.
The city greeted him
with a new language
of uniforms, concrete,
traffic,
and milling mobs of strangers.
Brief refuge was found
in the immigrant house
crowded with village sights and sounds:
odors of soup kettles,
damp clothing hanging from rafters,
tales and dreams
in Plattdeutsch, High German, Russian,
bundles and chests of mementos,
family and friends,
seeking a village home.

A conscience nomad
seeking soil for his roots,
he moved on again,
across rolling plains
and wide prairies.
He scattered seed and
the roots reached deeper.
Responding to the spring rains,
homes and churches
rose from the sod,
villages sprouted and grew,
old names transplanted

among the new:

Gnadenau

Mountain Lake

Steinbach

Freeman

Ebenfeld

Menno

Emmenthal

Jansen

Corn.

Now, across plains and mountains,
he moved west,
searching for the dark soil
in which to plant his dreams.

Hillsboro

Henderson

Yarrow

Abbotsford

Vancouver

Reedley—

moving more slowly
as the prairies ended
and he faced the sea
again.

.