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**Mennonite.**

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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.*

**MENNONITE**  
**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 dribbe 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.

.....