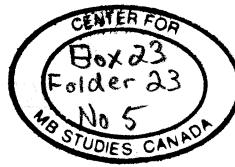


REMINISCENCES AND REFLECTIONS

1940-1960



Paul Toews suggested that in our autobiographical reflections we might focus, first, on our activities during the two decades (1940-60); secondly, that we mention some people who influenced us profoundly; and thirdly, that we recall some of the issues in the life of the church that surfaced during those years.

Before I attempt to do that, let me tell you very briefly where I was in 1940 and how I got there. In the winter of 1926, when I was almost four years old, we landed in Canada. I had a brother one year old and a sister who was a baby in mother's arms. My father carried a little bundle of bedding. We arrived penniless with a big debt to the CPR. I was frightfully cold when we got off the train in Herbert, Saskatchewan in November. We had nowhere to go and did not know anyone.

Jobs were not available and so after knocking about that first winter, my father got a job working for a farmer. Through an ad in the Mennonitische Rundschau my parents heard of opportunities in northern Ontario, at Risør, where several Mennonite immigrant families had gone to cut trees for the pulp and paper industry. And so in late fall, 1927 after our first year in Canada, we moved into the deep forest in northern Ontario, near Kapiskasing.

After two years in this wilderness, my parents realized that this was no place to bring up a family, and so we headed west. First we lived in Linden, Alberta, then in Grassy Lake, in southern Alberta; always working for farmers. Finally, we were able to make a downpayment on a CPR farm in Coaldale, Alberta, on condition that we grow sugar beets. When we came to Coaldale I was misplaced into grade two with my older brother, and until I got married and began my teaching ministry, my address was Box 64, Coaldale, Alberta.

I. ACTIVITIES 1940-1960.

A. Biblical Studies. With the outbreak of the War, in 1939, I entered the Coaldale Bible School, at age 16. Here I spent three wonderful years under the tutelage of men such as J. H. Quiring, J. A. Toews, and B. W. Sawatzky.

Mr. Sawatzky took a personal interest in me and helped me to regain some self-confidence. Since humility was seen as the epitome of piety in those days (B.B. Janz, our church leader, would come to town with his jacket tied up with binder twine), we had been duly knocked down in our youth, and some of us needed to be delivered from despising ourselves. Mr. Sawatzky helped me to regain some self-confidence.

Summers were spent on the farm, with a great deal of time to relax and to day-dream. We had next to nothing to read in those years. Before I entered Bible school, I enjoyed sports, but in my first year there I learned that sports were not conducive to godliness and so gave that

Dr. A.H. Unruh was considered to be the prince of preachers at that time in Canadian churches and preached in Coaldale repeatedly. And so for my fourth year of Bible schooling I went to Winkler, Manitoba to study under him.

Radio was still taboo in our church when I grew up, but with the outbreak of the War, people were anxious to hear the news, and so most families bought radios. That opened up another world to us. We never missed listening to the Old Fashioned Revival Hour of Charles E. Fullerton. Also we could hear Mr. L. E. Maxell, of Prairie Bible Institute, speak every Sunday morning on the Victory Broadcast. Sometimes Miss Miller, who had been one of Maxwell's teachers in Kansas, preached the sermon much to the consternation of my mother. Listening to Mr. Maxwell's messages on the victorious Christian life, led to a fifth year of Biblical studies at Prairie Bible Institute, Three Hills, Alberta.

While many of my friends spent 4 to 5 years in CO camps during the War, I was spared the draft and spent those five years in Biblical studies. The studies were rather narrowly focused and, as I think of it now, lacked some depth. But these were the formative years of my life, and provided the background for my life's calling to be a teacher of Scriptures.

B. Bible Teaching. It came as a grand surprise to me in 1944 when received an invitation to teach in the La Glace Bible School in north Alberta. I accepted the challenge with fear and trembling. When I was told that the La Glace community would probably not accept a single young man of 21 as a Bible teacher, Lena and I settled that question by getting married.

For seven years we were involved in Bible school teaching. We didn't always get a salary in those years. In Hepburn we got 30 dollars a month and housing. Bible schools ran for only six months of the year and so we had to pick up odd jobs in summer in order to earn our daily bread. For us the summer was usually broken up further by university summer schools. But we felt so privileged to be involved in Christian education that, to my knowledge, we never complained and carefully tithed our meagre income.

C. Further Studies. Higher education was generally suspect when I grew up. It was often equated with "the wisdom of the world" of which Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians. However, I rejected that attitude and earned a B.A. at a secular university, the University of British Columbia. One one occasion when my father-in-law saw some of my text-books he could only exclaim: "Gefährlich, gefährlich!"

I also earned an M.A. and a B.D., as well as an M.Th. in those years, but by then we lived in Winnipeg, for in 1953 we joined the faculty of MBBC. (Doctoral studies fall into the post 1960 period.) B.B. Janz, our church leader, and a member of the Board of welfare,

wanted us to go to Brazil for a Bible teaching ministry. We had applied for service abroad to our mission board. The board had decided to send us to Europe to work among Mennonite refugees. Mr. H.H. Janzen, president of MBBC and member of our mission board, had voted in favor, but on his return from Hillsboro, he gave us a call to join the faculty of MBBC. His letter and the letter from A.E. Janzen, of the mission board, arrived on the same day, and in a split second we had made our decision to teach at MBBC, and for 25 years our life revolved around what is now Concordia College.

I should mention, also, that teaching was only one aspect of our life during these years, for out churches regularly invited Bible teachers from our schools to preach all over Canada. Three-day Easter and Christmas Bible conferences almost became institutionalized, and participated in these for many years. But I won't go beyond 1960.

II. INFLUENTIAL PEOPLE

Next to my parents and the ministers of our church in Coaldale (I had 12 of them), my Bible school teachers had the greatest influence on my life. My spiritual mentor in the Coaldale Bible School was B. W. Sawatzky, who modelled the Christian life for me, taught me how to outline sermons, took me along in preaching missions, and awakened gifts in me that I didn't think I had.

Dr. A. H. Unruh of Winkler helped me to become more human. Somehow I had come to understand piety as seriousness, and Unruh demonstrated for us that naturalness, and even a sense of humor, did not militate against godliness. In fact he explicitly told us that we needed to be converted not only to Christ but also to our humanity. After all, there is a difference between being human and being sinful.

Another man who had profound effect on my life was L.E. Maxwell, of Prairie Bible Institute. Some may find this hard to believe, but he showed me as no other the continuity of God's salvatory plan for human

kind in the Scriptures, and weaned me away from dispensationalism, even though he never mentioned John Darby by name. I shall remain forever grateful for the lecture in which he severely criticized the views of L. S. Chafer, of Dallas Seminary, and then flung Chafer's book, Grace, across the podium. He taught us that people were always saved by grace through faith and so helped us to see the unity of Old and New Testame

Dr. Berkeley Mickelson, NT professor at Wheaton College, became to me a model in exegesis and hermeneutics, as did Dr. Kenneth Kantzer, although he to a lesser degree.

At Prairie Bible Institute I had unconsciously come under the influence of Fundamentalism (our churches were still German-speaking during my Bible school years, and did not get caught up in the Liberal/Fundamentalist controversy). At Wheaton I was introduced to a wider and more open Evangelicalism. At Luther Seminary, St. Paul, where I did my M.Th I was introduced to European theology. Here I was profoundly influenced by Dr. Rozentals, formerly professor of NT at the University of Riga, who had come to America as a refugee. He offered (among other courses a course on the Apocalypse of John, that was so moving, that I, like the Seer of Patmos, was reduced to tears.

iii. ISSUES

A. Cultural. Many of the issues we faced during the 1940's and were cultural in nature, although we did not see them that way then. By making them theological issues, some of them became the occasion of acute conflict. Most MB's among whom I moved were immigrants who had come to Canada in the 1920's. Threatened by the new culture, they tried very hard to maintain the values of their European past.

Crucial among these was the German language. In some homes English was strictly forbidden, even though that was the language the children spoke in school. This caused deep rifts in some families. I myself spent Saturdays in German school for a number of years, and loathed it deeply.

We as young people were eager to shake off our European past and to identify with our Canadian friends at school.

Nevertheless, when Lena and I became parents, we spoke only German to our children, for by then we thought it would be an advantage for them to be bilingual. However, when the children went off to school, they soon turned to English and we decided not to make an issue of it. Lena and I, however, to this day have our evening prayers in German.

The language conflict in church was often more acute than in the home, because the faith of our parents was somehow bound up with their mother tongue. For us as teenagers it sounded a bit comical to hear leading churchmen explain, that with the loss of German we would also lose our faith. The language change also created problems for our schools. In the early years of MBBC (begun in 1944) one of the major concerns at the annual college board meetings was, how many courses were taught in German compared to those in English. When I began to teach at MBBC in 1953, I still had to teach some classes in German. A language change is, of course, no laughing matter, for few things run as deep in a person's psyche as language.

But there were other tensions caused by clashes in cultural mores. There were certain European patterns of behavior that parents expected their children to perpetuate. Women were to dress conservatively, and sometimes the wrath of a preacher who, as it was then said, was not afraid to speak the truth, was aimed at the sisters who wore short-sleeved dresses. Also, it was considered bad form for women to wear their hair short, because of, what I consider to be a misinterpretation of 1 Corinthians 11. On one occasion at the Canadian Conference, when I was moderator, I was taken aback when a woman got up and asked what we were going to do about the fact that she had been excommunicated years ago for cutting her hair. At Prairie Bible Institute girls were strictly forbidden to cut their hair. Since I worked on the garbage crew as part of my gratis

work, it was enlightening to find piles of hair in the dustbins, just prior to graduation, in time for going home. Evidently the truth had sunk in.

The wearing of jewelry was generally taboo, particularly since, according to the book of Judges, the Midianites had worn ear-rings. (That Eleazar gave Rebekah a nose ring, weighing half a shekel, was however overlooked.) I recall B.B. Janz reminding the congregation that he preferred a marriage without a wedding ring.

Another question that troubled us greatly was how to relate to our non-Mennonite neighbors--designated as the "world." In school we were together with other ethnic groups, but after school we had next to no contact with them. We were constantly warned against friendship with the world and it wouldn't have occurred to us to invite non-Mennonite neighbors to our home (not even General Conference Mennonites).

This became a serious theological problem for us, when our teacher in Bible school encouraged us to witness to our faith in our community. Our efforts at missions had to be kept at a safe distance from the local church. One outlet for us was to teach DVBS in country schools away from our community. Even if we had wanted to invite a neighbor-friend to church it would have been pointless, for our services in the forties were still in German. A few efforts were made to begin Sunday evening services in English in the local highschool, but they were stopped rather quickly by the church leadership.

When our teacher, J.A. Toews, ventured to say in a sermon, that was not our duty as a church "den Kulturwagen zu ziehen", but that it was our calling to evangelize, he found himself in trouble with B. B. Janz--not a comfortable position to be in. I might just add, that the author had great interest in foreign missions in my growing up years, but that was called only for prayer and giving; the church did not have to receive these converts.

Looking at it now from a sociological point of view, I have great sympathy with our parents and our ministers who had to see so much of what was precious to them in their European culture go by the board. (A mild parallel might be the loss that some of us feel so keenly today as we lose the hymnody by which our souls were nourished in the past.)

B. Theological. Our families had come through the trauma of the revolution in Russia and most of them had lost everything and the beginnings in Canada were hard. That may explain the strong emphasis on "the better land" in the world to come. Our favorite hymns were "Heimatlieder" and I memorized a great many of them in my youth. Also, much of the preaching had an apocalyptic note in it, creating a lot of fear. As a child I feared the night, since Christ was to come as a thief in the night. And when we were informed on one occasion that the Mount of Olive had already split in three, we were sure the end of the world was near.

One question that was often debated, was the security of the believer. "Eternal security" was considered a heresy. We knew nothing about Calvinism or Arminianism, but we knew that the warnings of Scripture had to be taken seriously. This often led to a lack of assurance and robbed us of much joy and peace.

Sanctification was very central in the church's teaching, and at times it was understood as perfectionism. And since none of us measured up, we often felt like giving up. Although it was clearly stated that we were saved by grace, the strong emphasis on holy living and good deeds gave us cause to wonder whether we would be able to stand in the final judgment or whether, like the five foolish maidens, we would find the door shut.

Conversion was generally understood as a crisis experience, and those who had come into the kingdom in a rather more gentle way, not kicking and screaming, would certainly have to do a lot of explaining before a 600-member congregation when it came to baptism.

One of the dangers we were frequently warned against was the teaching of evolution. It was one of the reasons Mennonite high school were established: to keep young people from imbibing this heresy. (It was not recognized at the time that the social sciences and literature in which human values are constantly debated, were actually more dangerous).

One theological issue that earned me personally much criticism was my failure to uphold the dispensational approach to the Bible. Some thought I had become a modernist because I no longer held to a pre-tribulation rapture. In fact I was Anabaptist in this regard. I took the Sermon of the Mount seriously, which Mr. Scofield had relegated to the coming millennium. I didn't have to speculate on who or what the treasure in the field or the pearl of great price was, because I interpreted all the parables of Jesus as Kingdom parables. The most bitter attacks came when it was discovered that I put little stock in political development in modern Israel, which is largely godless; and when I pointed out that the line in the NT is no longer drawn between Jew and Gentile, but between people of faith and unfaith.

C. Ecclesiological. Immigrant MB churches transplanted the worship styles they were used to from Russia to Canada. All churches put great emphasis on congregational singing and on choirs (although B.B. Janz tried to stop the change from Ziphern to notes--"die kleinen Dinger mi Haeckchen, die lass bleiben"). Lengthy prayer sessions usually opened the Sunday morning services. The pulpit was central. In Coaldale we always had two sermons for adults (Sunday School was for children). Most of our preachers had little or no theological training (except the Bible school teachers), but they preached amazingly well. Although our hearts did sink when certain ministers got their turn.

B.B. Janz often asked young men to lead the prayer meeting. If they showed gifts in public speaking, he might ask them to preach the first or second part of two sermons. Should there be a fiasco, the second preacher could

correct all the blunders the first speaker made. The result was (and perhaps it was not even planned) that a score of teachers and preachers from Coaldale later served our churches and schools all over Canada.

Churches were generally "congregational" when it came to decision making. The church council served as a clearing house. Here the agenda for the business meetings was prepared (and these were held fairly often) but the congregation made the decisions on matters great and small. This was very time-consuming, but created a great esprit de corps. Often, this led to fiery debates over minutiae. I was a member of the church council when the question was first raised in our church, as to whether we should have a salaried pastor. But it still took many years before the church agreed to pay its leading minister.

Church membership was taken seriously. Discipline was practised regularly. Some members were excommunicated for trivial reasons and this was reprehensible. But where would one find a church today that excommunicates a member because of greed (as our church did; and won the brother back, too)? Baptizands were usually given a long list of rules which the church expected them to observe. And, much as these were later ridiculed, they gave the new members certain parameters for daily living. The danger of equating true piety with the observance of such an ethical code was, of course, always present.

In retrospect one smiles at some of the foibles and failures of churches in the 1940-and 50's. Some things that seemed so crucial then have now become non-issues. Personally, I am glad we could leave some things, that caused us so much grief, behind. However, I must say to the credit of our leaders during those decades, that they took their calling seriously. There was a vitality about church life that is often lacking today. Most of our leaders who served the church during those decades lie buried in the Coaldale cemetery. In spite of their shortcomings, I would join the writer to the Hebrews: "Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith."

David Evert