



## Along the Road to Freedom: Mennonite women of courage and faith

**Opening**, Sunday, October 30, Manitoba Legislative Building Rotunda  
 exhibition in the Keystone Gallery, lower level Manitoba Legislative Building until January 29, 2017

The opening was a wonderful event, full to overflowing, with beautiful and soul stirring music. Unfortunately, speaking, due to bouncing sound, was difficult to understand for many. As a result of numerous requests since, we are putting the text of Ray Dirks — emcee, artist and curator — online in this document. We sincerely thank the Lt Gov of Manitoba, the Honourable Janice Filmon, for her kind and thoughtful words (*not included here*).

### Arrival of Lt Gov

Ladies and Gentlemen, please rise for the arrival of the Lt Gov of Manitoba, Her Honour the Honourable Janice Filmon... Please, be seated.



**Ray Dirks, Lt Gov Janice Filmon, and Along the Road to Freedom committee members Wanda Andres, Nettie Dueck, Henry Bergen, John Funk**

Photos by Gabriela Agüero, Dan Dyck, Conrad Stoesz, Eckhard Goerz, Ray Dirks

### Welcome by Ray Dirks

Our family grew by one last Sunday. Our daughter, Lauren, gave birth to a beautiful baby girl.

My grandma Siemens left the Soviet Union as an orphaned teen in the 1920s, after the Russian Revolution and the anarchy and famine that followed. Her mother had died when she was an infant. Her father was murdered after the Revolution. My grandma Dirks fled during the same period. Her eldest child died on the ocean crossing and was buried in Quebec upon



arrival in Canada. My wife Katie's oma Reimer left on the 1943 Great Trek, a widow with three boys, her husband having been taken and disappeared into Stalin's gulag. Katie's oma Froese also got out on the Great Trek. She made it to Paraguay where, living as impoverished pioneers in the arid Chaco, she died shortly after giving birth in 1950. Her husband and children all, eventually, made it to Canada.

Our beautiful, fragile, little granddaughter would not be here today, would not be a Canadian, a Manitoban, if not for those four grand-

mothers. They took bold and courageous steps, not so much by choice but rather by necessity, to leave a place of turmoil, persecution, famine, insecurity, even death. Their dreams were all the same. Canada.

My name is Ray Dirks. I am the curator at the MHC Gallery and I am the *Along the Road to Freedom* artist and curator. The MHC Gallery is a self-funded program of Mennonite Church Canada and one part of the Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives and Gallery. I welcome all of you this afternoon to the halls of government. An appropriate place, I think, for this event and the exhibition *Along the Road to Freedom: Mennonite women of courage and faith*. The exhibition subjects were all what are commonly known as Russian Mennonites. Now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, more than 60% of those around the world who identify as Mennonite are not from a European background. As we recall refugee and immigrant stories from the past century, it is, also, appropriate to acknowledge we are meeting on Treaty 1 Territory and the Homeland of the Metis Nation.

We are here to honour and remember women — the women in the paintings on the lower level of this building, other women like them, the women in your lives, regardless of country of origin, faith, culture, or when they reached safety and freedom in Canada. As a refugee woman from the Democratic Republic of Congo said to me after viewing the exhibition, "This is my story."



#### Introduction of Lt Gov Janice Filmon

We are honoured to have special guests with us today, including Her Honour the Honourable Lt Gov Janice Filmon. I invite Her Honour to speak to us now.

#### Introduction of Dr. Doug Eyolfson representative Martin Lussier

The MHC Gallery is located in the federal riding represented by Dr. Doug Eyolfson. Dr. Eyolfson cannot be with us. His communications manager, Martin Lussier, will speak on his behalf.



#### Introduction of *Along the Road to Freedom* committee and Korey Dyck

The *Along the Road to Freedom* exhibition came into existence because four people came to see me and then Mennonite Heritage Centre director Alf Redekopp eight years ago. They were all child refugees who fled the Soviet Union during World War 2 on what is called the Great Trek, when 35,000 Mennonites packed what they could, many families having already lost their men, and fled towards western Europe. 12,000 of those 35,000 eventually made it to freedom in Canada or South America. 23,000 did not make it. The

four people who came to see me were among the 12,000, along with the women who led them. They wanted to initiate a project, something that would honour their mothers, one's grandmother and other women like them, fearing that with *their* passing the stories of their mothers and grandmother could be lost. I would like to introduce you to those four people, now all precious friends of mine: John Funk, Nettie Dueck, Wanda Andres and Henry Bergen. Please stand.



The committee members had first hoped that the exhibit would be shown at the Human Rights Museum. Many others have expressed that same wish. I did contact various people at the museum on a number of occasions in the last few years. The response was always gracious but nothing was ever confirmed.

I thank Eckhard Goerz for suggesting I try the Legislative Building. I thank Legislative Building staff for being accommodating and helpful at every turn. I thank the family sponsors of the exhibit, many who are with us today.

Much more of Mennonite history can be found in the Mennonite Heritage Centre archives. I invite director Korey Dyck to come forward.

#### Introduction of music

Two choirs are with us, along with harpist and song leader Paul Dueck. You will hear lots of music this afternoon. I hope you can still yourself and feel the pain, hope and thankfulness of a people whose faith and wish for safety for their children were paramount. Hymns were central to faith and culture of the Mennonite refugees in the paintings, are fixed deep in the hearts of Great Trek survivors and stir memory and emotion for those of us who grew up in the church of those who came here first. As you view the paintings after this event, remember the music you are about to hear and feel.

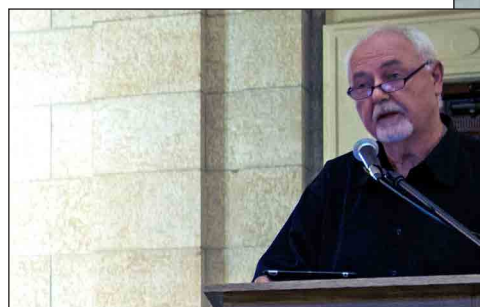
#### Introduction of Paul Dueck

Paul Dueck is well known in Mennonite circles on several continents. You heard him playing harp as you entered. Paul, please, play another song.

#### Introduction of Eckhard Goerz

Eckhard Goerz and his siblings are *Along the Road to Freedom* sponsors. As a result, one of the paintings is the story of their mother. Katja Goerz was, when this project began, one of two surviving women who are subjects in the paintings. She was in her 90s, blind, confined to a wheelchair. Eckhard wanted me to meet her. But he said not to expect much. She would tire and maybe not be coherent.

We went to the Menno Home in Morden. An hour into meeting with Katja, Eckhard and his sister looked at me, quite astonished, and, as I recall, Eckhard said, "She has talked for an hour and has talked in chronological order. She has not done that in a long time." This project meant a lot to Katja.



It meant a lot to me to be at an unveiling family gathering which Katja attended. She was wheeled close to the painting. A granddaughter described the painting to her. Later, as Katja held my hand, she said, "I'm not worth this fuss." I was happy to be able to tell one of the women in the paintings that, yes, you are very much worth the fuss.

She squeezed my hand a little tighter.

Katja has since passed. Shortly after her passing Eckhard wrote a poem about his mother's journey. Eckhard, please. (*Eckhard's poem can be found on the MHC Gallery website and on a panel in the exhibition.*)

### Introduction of Riel Gentlemen's Choir and Alexa Dirks

Many of the members of the Riel Gentlemen's Choir and my daughter Alexa Dirks are rooted in the stories of *Along the Road to Freedom*. They represent a younger generation, further removed from the time of seeking refuge but, nonetheless, they ultimately owe their good lives to women like those in the exhibition. This exhibit asks us to remember, from one generation to the next. Gentlemen, please, sing for us.



### Talk by Ray Dirks

"We who were formerly no people at all, and who knew of no peace, are now called to be...a church...of peace. True Christians do not know vengeance. They are the children of peace. Their hearts overflow with peace. Their mouths speak peace, and they walk in the way of peace." So wrote Menno Simons, formerly a Dutch Catholic priest and the Menno in Men-

nonite, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

We are all human. Certainly, amongst the Mennonites of Russia who sought to survive during World War 2 there were Nazi sympathizers, even some collaborators. War, terror, ignorance, years of suspicion and persecution, in this case brought on in grinding and hideous ways by Stalin, can bring out the worst in a person. To naively suggest all was peace and love would be untrue. Yet, as I interviewed people for this project in order to get to know the women I would paint, time and again, over and over, I heard of women who harboured no desire for revenge; no desire to have possessions, homes and land returned; no desire to remember for the sake of evening the score; no wish to fight to reclaim a place of supremacy. Some did say their mothers could not forgive for the loss of a husband or a child but each said their mothers had been able to live without a consuming need for payback.

I did, too, hear stories of forgiveness. Forgiveness of those who had stolen, killed and raped. I heard, more than once, references to offering thirsty enemy soldiers water. Repeatedly I heard stories of thankfulness, thankfulness to find freedom and peace, thankfulness to God above all else, even after incredible loss.

As the Soviet Union crumbled, Mennonites increasingly visited former homes. What I heard in many interviews has been translated into work and service to this day. Friends of the Mennonite Centre in Ukraine board member Rudy Friesen sums up well the spirit of Menno Simons' words reflected in the actions of children and grandchildren of Mennonite refugees who returned:

".... Mennonites had begun returning to the land of their forebears. They came first as tourists. More recently they have come as friends, scholars and builders to help reconstruct the damage done. These are the Mennonites whose parents, grandparents, relatives and friends once lived in that area. They are coming now neither to glorify nor mourn the past nor to reclaim what once they owned, but in a spirit of mutual embrace."

*Along the Road to Freedom* includes paintings from three periods. There is one painting to acknowledge the people who came to the Prairies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many of whom settled in southern Manitoba. Most paintings are from the two periods of persecution and horror — in the 1920s following the Russian Revolution and the anarchy and famine that came in its wake, and during World War 2, after years of Stalinist terror and uncertainty when many of the husbands of the women in the paintings were taken, either killed soon thereafter or thrown into Stalin's gulag.

While these stories' beginnings are all found, depending on the point in history, in the Russian Empire or Soviet Union, the family histories do not originate there. The first Anabaptists were in Switzerland nearly 500 years ago. Mostly, the stories in *Along the Road to Freedom* are birthed in Menno Simons' homeland, the Netherlands. Simons and other Anabaptists broke with the larger Christian community because they believed adults should decide for themselves to be baptized. They, also, moved towards being what Simons, as in the earlier quote, called a church of peace. These distinctives led to persecution — in early years even to being hunted with the intent to torture and kill.

Many of the Anabaptists, likely including all the ancestors of the women in the paintings, fled to Prussia, now Poland and settled near Danzig, now Gdansk.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century life began to get more complicated for Mennonites in Prussia. Prohibitions and restrictions caused some to look elsewhere. Russian Czarina Catherine the second invited them to settle in the Russian Empire, in present day Ukraine.

By 1914 there were 110,000 Mennonites in Russia.

The Russian Revolution began in 1917. Other than the painting of Judith Epp representing those who came to Canada in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the stories found in these artworks are all profoundly affected by what happened from the time of the Revolution, through civil war, anarchy, communism, the rise of Stalin, famine, loss of land and possessions, the loss of men, World War 2.

I will relate a couple of stories from the exhibition which reflect the spirit of Menno Simons' words — one representing the 1920s refugees and one the 1940s.

Following are some blended excerpts from Anna Dick Bergmann's story as written by her grandson, John Wieler. This story and those of all the other women in the paintings will be featured in more detail in an upcoming coffee table book.

Anna was born on April 7, 1880 on Rosenhof estate in south Russia.

In 1901 Anna married Abram Bergmann. They settled on his family estate. Anna gave birth to ten children. Six survived. The estate prospered.

While some Mennonite businessmen had bad reputations among the locals, Abram was well liked and respected by his employees.

Then came the revolution and anarchy. Abram's father, a member of the Russian parliament, became a sought after person by revolutionaries. In January 1919 he was caught and murdered. Shortly thereafter, Abram, along with a brother and a friend, fled but were also caught, jailed, stripped, beaten, then shot and dumped into a well.

Months later Anna received the terrible news of her husband's fate. She moved to her uncle's Steinbach — Steinbach in Russia, not Manitoba — estate with her six children. In 1921 they were evicted and again forced to move, this time to very primitive facilities, an old granary. In August 1922 another move was made back to Steinbach and in the spring of 1924 yet another, this time into an old, filthy sheep barn, still full of manure when they arrived.

In 1922 famine proved to be very difficult for Anna and her children. They had few possessions. Starvation was rampant. Many times Anna expressed her thankfulness for the help received from Mennonite Central Committee. She did not know how the family would have survived without it.

A painting representing the role of MCC in the 1920s and 1940s, connected to women in the exhibit, is included in *Along the Road to Freedom*.

In late summer of 1924, Anna and her children were able to leave Russia. After ten days on a freight train, they finally made it out of the old country. They arrived in Altona, Manitoba in the fall. The day after arriving, her two boys aged 14 and 16, were placed on farms where they would labour for board and room. The oldest daughter found work in Winnipeg as a maid. Anna stayed in Altona with three daughters, one an invalid. While life was very difficult, they were now free and thanked God for deliverance.

The next year the family was settled on a farm in Glenlea, Manitoba. Initially several other families also occupied the simple, weathered house. Farming in Canada was an ongoing challenge. The only farm income was a small cream cheque. That together with the paltry earnings of the oldest daughter constituted the total cash, really insufficient to meet the family's needs. Yet ten percent was conscientiously set aside for the Lord's work. Those were very tough years, and the conditions on the farm most primitive.

When a family decided to sponsor an *Along the Road to Freedom* painting, I would get together with family members and talk about the woman who was to be depicted in the artwork. I'd ask for old photos, diary entries, identity documents, stories, anecdotes — things that would mesh in my mind to form the nucleus of a sketch which would eventually become the painting. I asked them to supply a Bible passage or a song that was important to the woman. Anna's family gave me Psalm 103: 1, 2 and 13. Listen while thinking of Anna's story.

Psalm 103: 1, 2, 13

<sup>1</sup> Praise the LORD, my soul;

all my inmost being, praise his holy name.

<sup>2</sup> Praise the LORD, my soul,

and forget not all his benefits —

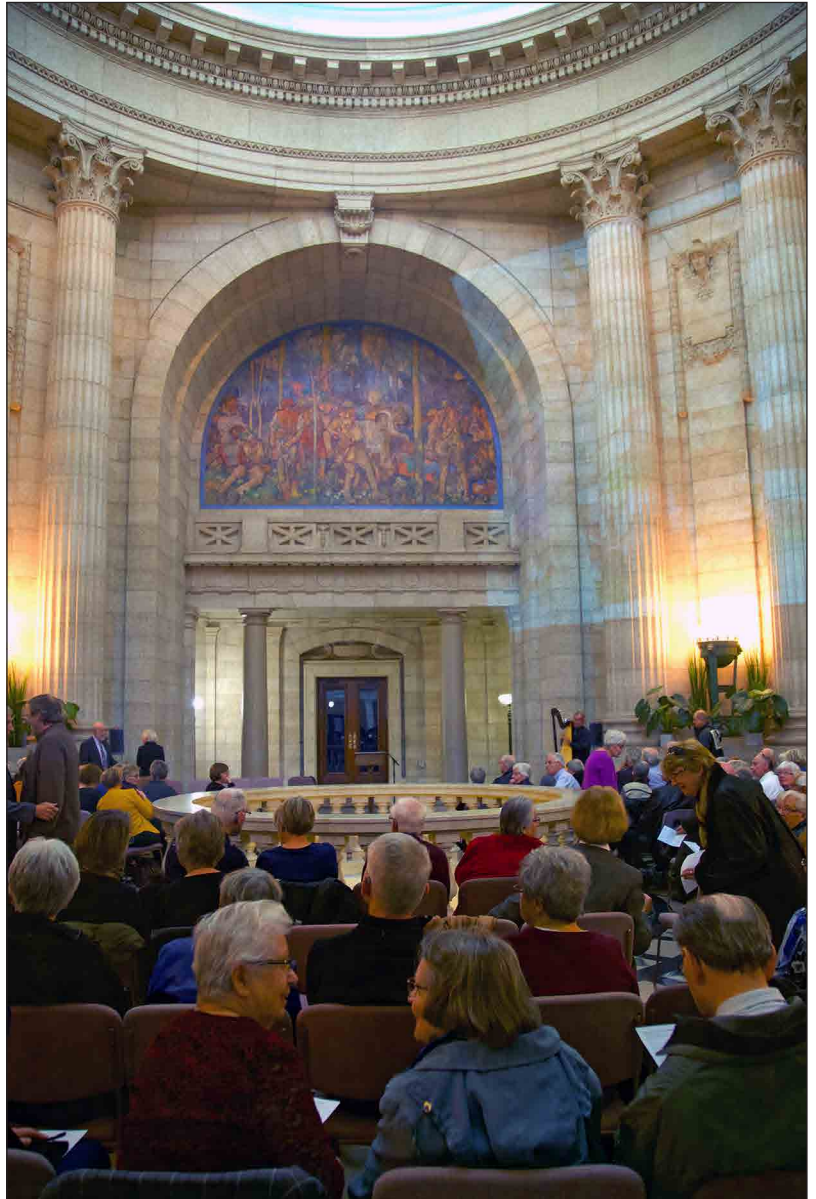
<sup>13</sup> As a father has compassion on his children,

so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;

Praise the Lord? Anna's life turned from one of great privilege to one of almost total deprivation. She lost four children. Her husband and other family members were murdered.

Forget not all his benefits? Her home changed from a lavish estate to a manure drenched barn.

John ends his grandmother's story, "Anna never spoke hatefully or with revenge. She was a forgiving woman, generous





and loving, deeply rooted in her faith. Her love extended far beyond her family. Her legacy was one that drew the best out in people. Her thankfulness for the Lord's graciousness to her and the family and to others, was testimony to that abiding faith, and a vivid reminder of what she had experienced, namely that the Lord indeed is the Father to widows and orphans."

At one point during a family gathering where the painting of Anna was unveiled, John asked if anyone in the audience remembered Anna having ever been angry.

Silence.

Then, someone piped up. With everyone laughing, the evidence was shared. One day a stranger had shown up at Anna's door. He was filthy. Anna had told him, quite sternly, that he needed a bath.

In Glenlea, Anna took it upon herself to be mother and grandmother to any and all children who were without a grandmother.

As I met with John Wieler and his wife Betty to talk about Anna, I flipped through an old, yellowed photo album. In it was a handwritten note penned by Betty many years ago for her children's sake. Betty was one of those unrelated children taken under Anna's wing. Betty wrote, "We all called her grandma, too. She treated us like her own grandchildren. She was one of the sweetest, gentlest people I've ever known."

All that horror. All that loss. Yet, for what is she remembered? Love, gentleness, kindness, forgiveness. What a testimony. What a legacy.

To conclude, I want to mention my



Tante Tin, Katherina Dirks Peters. She is depicted in the painting with the large image of Stalin and, also, can be found in the MCC painting.

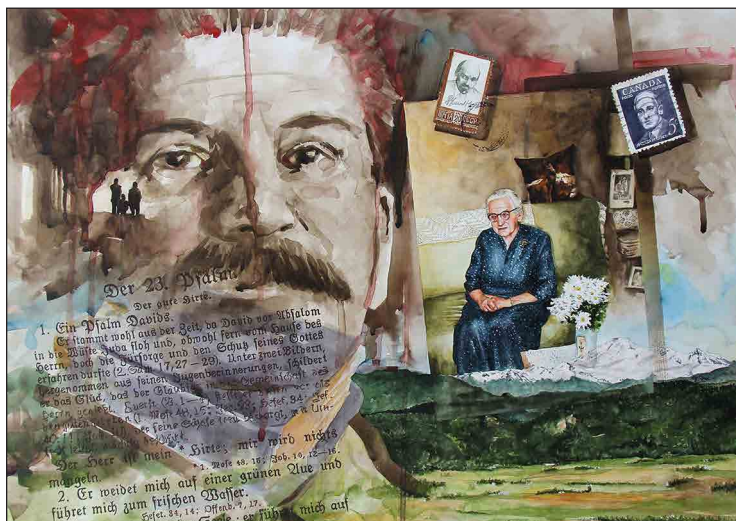
Stalin is at the centre of many of these stories. I felt his image needed to be in the exhibition. However, over and over again, sponsor families told me they would never accept an image of Stalin in the painting of their mother or grandmother. Tante Tin has no surviving family in Canada, so, I felt it was safe to include his portrait in her painting.

Tante Tin left on the 1943 Great Trek, fleeing the village of Paulsheim. She came to Canada in the late 1940s as a middle aged widow.

Tante Tin lost her husband in the 1930s, taken and murdered by the NKVD, Stalin's secret police. She had five children. Three girls and two boys. All three girls died when they were young children. Both boys fled Paulsheim with Tante Tin. Both were lost on the war ravaged journey west.

My memory of Tante Tin is of a quiet, kindly woman living in a tiny shack with a wonderful blue plum tree out back, not far from the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church in BC's Fraser Valley. My parents, brother and I would drive from Abbotsford many late Sunday afternoons to share *vaspa* with her.

I could not talk to her much. I couldn't speak German. Yet, I sensed, I knew, she was a beautiful, wonderful, humble soul.



As I got older, my mom would relate stories to me about Tante Tin. How she suffered. How she ate rats and anything else she could find as she fled, in the end alone. How she lost her husband and *all* of her children.

I was aware that after many years of not knowing, she found out her boys were alive, exiled in Siberia. Her life focused on the wish to see her sons. Over many years, Tante Tin sent countless letters to Soviet authorities requesting her sons be allowed to visit her. Finally, in 1974 Tante Tin received a letter from Russia telling her to give up. It would never happen.

She died shortly thereafter.

Through it all, the only way I knew Tante Tin was as a gracious, humble, thankful woman who cared about us more than she cared about herself. Through it all, as with so many who suffered so much on their road to freedom, she never openly questioned her faith in God.



Tante Tin had immense disappointments. Her greatest wish did not come true. She had weaknesses. In the depths, I'm sure she must have had horrible nightmares and must have cried out in despair to God.

I've had people tell me, "my mother was weak, my mother had doubts, my mother could not forgive." That does not make them any less a child of God. Does not make them any less a person to be remembered and honoured.

Tante Tin's obituary, written by someone from her church, ended:

"For many years this beloved sister lived in Yar-row where her loving, peaceful and honest way of life was a blessing to many." She lived the words of Menno Simons.

There are many, many blessings found in the lives of these women. Also, I'm sure, in the women responsible for your being here, regardless of your heritage and family journey. Knowing our stories sets

us on the road to knowing who we are, to knowing we should be thankful and honour those responsible for our being able to meet today, in peace, in security, in this beautiful space.

While these stories are all from the lives of women who come from early Anabaptist origins, all of us here this afternoon can share a common wish, a prayer, for ourselves and for all humanity found in the words of Menno Simons: "Their hearts overflow with peace. Their mouths speak peace, and they walk in the way of peace."

### Introduction of Sargent Ave. Mennonite Church Choir

I invite the Sargent Ave. Mennonite Church Choir to sing hymns that sustained the women of the Great Trek, and their children to this day.

### Closing remarks

I thank each of you for attending this afternoon. After the closing song, the words of which you can find on the back of the program, you are invited to head to the lower level Key-stone Gallery to view the exhibit. If you really want to fully take it in, you will need to return. It is here until January 29. The building is open seven days a week from 8:00 to 8:00. It is free.



The exhibit is tightly hung, out of necessity to fit the space. I think it works well hung that closely together. It can be looked on as a storyboard or, in a way, a graphic novel.

The largest painting is being shown for the first time anywhere. The top of it focuses on the story of Maria Funk, committee member John Funk's mother. The middle includes images of women connected to each committee member. The bottom is a general timeline, which goes from east to west, rather than left to right. The journeys to freedom all faced west. I felt I had to create the timeline in the same direction, towards Canada.

**As noted, all of the paintings and all of the stories will be in the upcoming book.** How to contact us to know when the book will be available can be found on the program (**contact Connie Wiebe at [cwiebe@mennonitechurch.ca](mailto:cwiebe@mennonitechurch.ca)**). If you are part of a group which might like a tour, feel free to contact me ([rdirks@mennonitechurch.ca](mailto:rdirks@mennonitechurch.ca)).

Finally, on Sunday, January 22 at 2:30, in this same spot (due to sound difficulties, the location will be moved), we will have a refugee storytelling event. Storytellers will include Russian Mennonite and more recently arrived refugees. The stories continue to this day.

Please, remain standing for the closing song, *Holy God, we praise thy name/Grosser Gott, wir loben dich*.

