

MENNONITE LIFE

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thing, however, he had miscalculated and that was the fact that there was still a small voice which told him of his terrible transgressions. Or why was there that far-away look in his eyes?

The answer to that question came soon after I had tried in vain to characterize the personality of Comrade Hildebrandt. It was a warm summer's day. We sat in the car and talked of this and that. In the course of the conversation he mentioned that he would probably leave us very soon. To my completely casual question as to the reason why we were heading for this "great loss," his look grew even more distant than I had ever seen it before. Then it came out: the doctors had discovered tuberculosis in his lungs and were recommending him to a sanatorium in the northern parts of Russia. The pine woods surrounding this sanatorium were considered to be very healthful and healing to this particular ailment.

Before I knew it I had said some consoling words and expressed my sympathy. Here was a man who had killed and even tortured scores of people to death. Now, that his own miserable life was at stake, he felt sorry for himself and was afraid to go through the dark gate through which he, himself, had dispatched so many. Not only that, but I, who knew all this, offered my sympathy and felt quite serious about it.

I did not see Comrade Hildebrandt for quite a while after this. One day, as I sat in my parked car in front of the regional agricultural government building, idly musing to myself, I saw a man cross the street. His eyes were fixed on me and he was walking rather slowly towards my car. I recognized him: it was Comrade Hildebrandt. But what a change! His cheeks were hollow, and the faraway look in his eyes had changed to a frightened stare. He came up to me and leaned his elbows on the car door. He coughed in short, dry bursts and a faint smile played over his haggard face. I could not help but

feel sorry for him. I shall never forget the conversation that followed:

"Hello, Heinz."

"Hello, Comrade Hildebrandt, how are you?"

"Not so good. It's getting worse."

"But I thought you were up north, in the pine woods, getting better."

"I was. But it's no use. Nothing can help me."

"But why not? I would think that daily walks through that pine-fresh air are supposed to perform miracles."

His eyes widened, his breath came in short bursts, his whole body began to shake. He looked at me with the stare of a hunted, mortally wounded animal and slowly came the words from his lips:

"I had to come back. . . . I have to be among people . . . yes, lazy walks in the pine woods . . . just as soon as I enter them I see decapitated bodies and human heads . . . and blood! Blood all over. You hear me! All over, even the sky turns to blood . . .!"

His last words had turned into a shout. An old Russian woman lugging her market basket heard it, made the sign of the cross and hurried on. Comrade Hildebrandt turned and slowly walked away. My eyes followed him until I saw him turn a street corner. I never saw him again, nor did I hear of him since. How long did he live, how did he die? Only this much I know: if ever anyone has paid for his crimes, Comrade Hildebrandt did so with interest. What should I do? Sit back and console myself with the thought that he was getting what was coming to him? Or should I live on and pretend I had never seen or heard of him?

He had, at times, expressed the thought that I was his friend. He had told me things that I am sure he had told no one else. I sat there in silence trying to find an answer to all this. I could not rid myself of one thought: "There, but for the grace of God, go I. God be merciful to him, a sinner!"

It Happened in Montana

BY RUFUS M. FRANZ

DURING the first World War there were also conscientious objectors. My father was one of these. We lived at that time in Dawson County, Montana, in the community commonly referred to as the Bloomfield settlement, about forty miles from the county seat, Glendive, and some thirteen miles from Richey.

In the Bloomfield settlement there is a church called the Bethlehem Mennonite Church. Near it is an Old Mennonite settlement called the Red Top settlement which met in a local schoolhouse by the same name.

These two communities were very prosperous with

wheat-growing and cattle-raising as the two chief occupations. The farmers had large homes and barns and generally well-equipped farms. The people were contented and their church was the center of their community activities.

When the first World War came and during the war period my father would frequently intercede for the men of our community at the local draft headquarters in Glendive and also with the state board in Helena, the state capital. Furloughs and deferments were often arranged because the drafted men were extensive farmers

with families, and being Mennonites, were conscientiously opposed to participating in war. He made a trip to Helena and represented our men whenever the local board would not defer them.

One Day . . .

One day in early spring my father, John M. Franz, my mother, my younger brother and I drove to a nearby schoolhouse about a mile from our home for a special school meeting. Matters of school business were to be taken up. When we arrived at the school meeting, we noticed a number of strangers, two carloads of them. Most of us came by horse and buggy to the meeting. The school district was quite largely made up of Mennonite families with the exception of one or two non-Mennonites in the district. We arrived somewhat late and entered the school building shortly before the meeting was called to order. Father had gone to get his mail from our mailbox which was just across the road from the school premises. Among other items which he had in the mail was his hometown paper, *The Mountain Lake Observer*. At that time this paper had several pages of German news, news of local affairs at Mountain Lake and vicinity. He took it along with him into the school building. As soon as he was seated in the building, together with Mother and us boys, the meeting was called to order.

Hardly had this happened, when a man came to him and asked him to come outside. He went, taking his mail along with him. As soon as he was outside several other men accosted him and told him to come along with them. They took him by force to one of the cars which was parked on the school premises ready to leave seemingly at a moment's notice. My father began to reason with them trying to find why they were taking him. They gave no reason except that he had in his possession a German paper. They said: "You are the man that is making all this trouble." They threatened "to fix him" giving as their reason that he was the leader of the Germans in this settlement, meaning the Mennonites. He didn't struggle with them but got into the car and as he did so he requested of them that he be permitted to see my mother. This, they said, was not necessary.

. . . there was a tree . . .

By this time my mother, as well as others from the school building, noticed that something unusual was going on. She went out of the building to the car. When she came to the car she inquired what was going on and they informed her that it was none of her business and that they were taking Father for a ride. She insisted that she go along and climbed on the running board of the car. One man took her forcibly from the car and threw her to the ground so brutally that she lay there for a time. My mother was pregnant at the time, it being only two months till the birth of my younger brother, Arthur. The men quickly drove away with my father and took him to an isolated spot about thirty miles away in the Bad Lands of Montana where there was a large tree.

My father noticed as he boarded the car, and so did my mother before she was thrown off, that there were guns, shovels and rope in the car. They both wondered what it meant. When the men arrived at their destination they took my father out of the car and prepared to hang him from the tree. They told him that now they would soon show him where he belonged. As they approached the large tree, my father told me he prayed this prayer: "Lord I belong to thee. Whatever you allow these men to do is all right with me." They had the noose ready and were attempting to place it over his head when he got hold of the rope and held it. He doesn't know why, but for some reason he had a great measure of strength so that they were not able seemingly to release it from his hands. As he held the rope he began to reason with them as to why they were doing this. He told them that he was an American citizen, that his father was such, and that he feared greatly for them, what the implications of their contemplated act might be. He said he trusted they were fully aware of what they were doing. They began to argue among themselves as to what should be done. There were twelve men. Among these men was the county sheriff, two attorneys, a banker, and several business- and cattlemen.

I voted for you . . .

My father said, "You Mr. X, are the sheriff of this county. I voted for you because I believed in you and trusted you. You were to give me protection if and when I should need it. Now you are not giving me that protection."

"Mr. Y," addressing the attorney, "you are the attorney representing the law and representing us before the law. I, too, gave assent to your position and now you, too, are opposing me by this method. I am wondering why you are doing this. Could you not give me a hearing in this matter?"

So he pleaded with them asking for a hearing so he could disprove any false charge.

The sheriff then began to weaken on this matter and fearing what might happen, used what little influence he had on the group to have my father taken to Glendive, the county seat. We later discovered that the men agreed among themselves to hang father from a bridge over the Yellowstone River, probably with a greater number of people or a mob so they could do away with him later that evening.

For the time being they took father to Glendive and locked him up in the county jail. In the meantime, Mother, after she had gained composure, my little brother and I, went into a side room of the school, not knowing what to do. We knelt for a few moments in prayer and then decided we must go home to formulate some plans. The members of the church board assembled within a short time at the home of one of our neighbors. Members of the church board were Ben Janzen, Peter Janzen, Jonathan Graber, P. K. Tiessen, and George L.

Deckert. They decided that all of us should go in Pete Janzen's car to Glendive.

The news of this event at the school spread like wildfire throughout the community and spontaneously the members of our church gathered at the church building to hold a prayer meeting. These five men, my mother, my brother and I arrived at Glendive in the evening about four o'clock. When we arrived there we went to the county jail where the sheriff's office was located to inquire and to report regarding our experience. Upon our arrival we knocked at the door but seemed to get no response. After repeated rapping a man opened the door and in an abrupt way asked, "What do you want, lady?" Mother said she would like to see the sheriff. He said, "I'm sorry but the sheriff isn't in." My mother said, "Where is he and when can I see him?" He said he didn't know but possibly the sheriff was out of town. "Well, we'll have to do something else then," Mother said, whereupon a side door opened and the sheriff came out, having recognized my mother.

She asked, "What have you done with Mr. Franz?" He said, "I don't know the man." She then replied, "That could hardly be the case. You were there at Independence Schoolhouse this afternoon." He said, "Yes, I remember," and mother asked again where father was. He told her that if she came back in half an hour she could see him. Thereupon my mother nearly fainted. Then he said, "You may talk to him." My mother had thought that something had happened and that she would perhaps not get to see him alive. So we left the jail and stayed around the building during the half hour interval.

After thirty minutes we again went to the jail and again had the same difficulty when we knocked at the door. Finally the jailer opened the door and said in a very brusque way, "Well, what do you want? Can't you go away from here?" My mother replied she wished to see the sheriff again since he had told her to come back. The jailer proceeded to close the door but mother shoved my younger brother and me through the door and then she also came into the building. The sheriff opened one of the side doors again and told her that she should come into his office. After she was in the office he closed the door, locked it and walked away.

We offered a prayer . . .

After a few minutes we could hear our father coming down the corridor. He was brought into the room. I will never forget how my father looked at that moment. It seemed as though he had aged tremendously. We talked for a few minutes together as a family, even offered a prayer not knowing what it all meant or what it was all about. The sheriff had called in an attorney and presented all the charges held against my father. He explained all of them but none of the charges were well founded. Finally, the sheriff said it was time for my father to leave but father insisted that the family be left together, telling him that mother was in a serious condition and that they needed to be together. The sheriff said



John M. and Mrs. Franz, West Salem, Oregon, today.

there were no accommodations for women in jail and that she would have to go since he did not feel it wise to let my father leave the jail. Thereupon we were puzzled what to do, but my father insistingly pled with the sheriff that mother at least be allowed to remain in the jail building for the night, although the sheriff suggested that he take mother to the hospital. Finally, the sheriff consented that we could all stay together and arranged a private room in jail for our stay.

The next day was Sunday and nothing was done. On Monday evening about seven o'clock a crowd began to gather in the city hall. We wondered about this. Finally, we saw father taken into the city hall building and we wondered still more. My father was then given what is commonly called a "gorilla hearing." They put him in the center of the room and the others gathered around him. About two hundred people were present who now began to "fire" questions at him. The questions were something like the following: "Are you a citizen?" whereupon my father replied, "Yes." "Isn't it true that you speak German?" My father explained that he was of German parentage, his grandfather and father having come from Russia to this country where his grandfather had taken out citizenship papers and become a citizen of this country and that accordingly his father, who had then been under twenty-one years of age, was a citizen and that he himself had been born at Mountain Lake, Minnesota, in Cottonwood County. He said if they were willing to give him time, he could prove to them that he was born in Cottonwood County and that his name was recorded at Windom, Minnesota, the county seat of Cottonwood County. The main charges centered about the idea that they thought he was "pro German."

... he was "pro German."

They asked him about this newspaper which they had and he told them that it was a home-town paper, and that he was willing to translate every sentence of it for them, and that it included merely local news and it had no connections whatsoever with Germany. He also told them that neither he, nor his father nor perhaps any of his relatives knew anyone in Germany. Next they asked regarding war bonds and why it was that neither he nor his people, the Mennonites, bought war bonds. He tried to explain to them as carefully as he could why Mennonites did not buy bonds. He told them that they took part in Red Cross activities and he believed that for the size of his community they had done more in Red Cross activities than any other community of its size in the state. It was later discovered that the Mennonites had done more than twice as much in Red Cross activities than any other community of similar size. Finally, after many questions of this sort they adjourned and my father was led back to the jail. We were given entrance to the jail, and my mother, my brother and I slept in the jail three nights, my father being there all day long, but my mother, brother and I being dismissed during the daytime. The final decision of this hearing entailed:

1. that all German services be prohibited,
2. that father be placed under \$3,000 bond,
3. that he report to the district court four times a year. This was to continue until the close of the war and if no charges existed, the case would be dismissed.

The next morning my father was released under three-thousand dollar bond which they felt sure could not be raised. However, it took only three hours in which to raise this amount. It required only time enough to get the members of the church board together in order that they could fill out papers to transfer their property to serve as security for the bond. This wholehearted response by the church members was quite amazing to the county authorities who could not understand how or why these people could trust their leader so implicitly. My father remarked that it was the only thing that they as members of the same church could do since their church was a brotherhood where members were motivated by Christian love. The understanding was that four times a year, as previously stated, my father was to report to the county seat to answer questions which might arise regarding him from time to time.

We returned home and carried on our usual activities. For several months we refrained from going to Glendive but finally went as we had always done. After the first meeting of the district court the three thousand dollar bond was cancelled and a letter accompanying it stated that it was unnecessary for my father to appear again at Glendive. The case was dismissed. We took no account of that action but continued to visit Glendive whenever the occasion presented itself, never fearing to go there because of public opinion or past events.

The war finally ended and conditions seemed to change. A few of the neighbors who bordered these Mennonite settlements found out that misinformation regarding the Mennonites had been given to the county officials and the people of Glendive by several unscrupulous families in the neighborhood bordering the Mennonite community. These families were given forty-eight hours in which to leave the county because of the wrath of people in the community. They left by night. The Mennonites and the people of the Bloomfield Mennonite Church had nothing whatsoever to do with this.

Vengeance is mine . . .

Prominent lawyers contacted father on several occasions and offered to sue for damages on a fifty-fifty basis. My father refused them, quoting the Scripture: "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord." He told them that he had no intentions of ever doing anything about it and that the case had been left entirely in the hands of God. This was very difficult for these distinguished lawyers to understand for they felt that it was necessary for justice to be done; that the case be prosecuted by all means. However, they could do nothing without my father's consent and this he refused to give. They repeatedly remarked that they could not understand this reasoning at all.

Several years later, and I remember it very clearly because it made a very vivid impression upon me, my father and I were working out in the field. My father was doing a little farming in addition to his ministry which was a common practice in Mennonite communities. One day, while we were out in the field a car stopped at the edge and a man came walking toward us. We were cutting grain. My father stopped his team and the man said, "Do you recognize me, Mr. Franz?" My father said, "Why, yes, I do. How can I forget you? You were one of the twelve men. You are Mr. Y." He replied, "Yes," and with tears in his eyes, "I have come to ask you for a thing which is probably very hard for you to do but I am asking it nevertheless. I am asking that you forgive me the great wrong that I did you and your family during the war." My father paused a moment and reaching out his hand, said, "Yes, Mr. Y. I willingly forgive you." To my surprise they shook hands and then they parted. My father assured him that it was as though the event had never happened. He would mention it in church. This he did and there was a rejoicing for what was felt to be a spiritual victory.

After that my father met Mr. Y a number of times at Glendive. At no time would he ever avoid my father. Many times he offered to do legal work for him, to give him any kind of legal advice that was necessary. I remember on several occasions that he walked across the street, when he saw my father, merely to shake hands and to show that they really were friends. The other eleven men never did anything about it. This experience left an impression on the Mennonites of this community so that its effect is still felt to this day.