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**Going by the Moon and the Stars:
Stories of Two Russian Mennonite Women**

**Pamela E. Klassen
Honours B.A., McGill University, 1989**

Thesis

**Submitted to the Department of Religion & Culture
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts degree
Wilfrid Laurier University
1992**

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you think if you say the right
words the jagged pieces will fit
you think a true sentence will
wrap itself around your red wound
like a fist if you wait long enough
she will rise from her charred bones
singing when did a single gut
wrenching sound ever escape its own
dark when we sat on the verandah
that night sorting our lives did we
hear the world's sobbing next door
our talk gathering like smoke &
a great hole in the floor

—— di brandt (1987:61)

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Abstract

The stories of women's religious lives are essential to understanding religion. This thesis records and interprets two Russian Mennonite women's religious lives, using methods of feminist ethnography. The first chapter is a video which presents Agatha Janzen and Katja Enns talking about their childhoods in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 30s, their flight to Germany during World War II, and their subsequent emigration and life in Canada. Chapter 2 tells and interprets Agatha's and Katja's experiences of marriage during the war, and the effect of their status as widow (Agatha) and single mother (Katja) upon their entry into the Canadian Mennonite church. Chapter 3 discusses the structure and content of the women's stories about the war, and the ways they have integrated their war stories into their religious life. Chapter 4 considers the ways Agatha and Katja are Mennonite today, looking especially at the role of prayer, preaching, and personal relationships in their lives. The last chapter discusses the process of deciding what is religious about a life, the merits and tensions of feminist ethnography, and the implications of video for life history. Reflections on the effects of this work on Katja, Agatha, and me conclude the study.

Acknowledgements

This thesis has grown out of my collaboration with many people. Ron Grimes, my supervisor, has given me his support and criticism and a place to exchange all manner of stories. I am grateful for the faith he has shown in me and my work. Agatha Janzen and Katja Enns have opened up their lives to me in uncusomary ways. Not only have they displayed courage in telling me their stories, they have also sustained and nourished me during my retelling. I offer them my thanks, affection, and respect.

John Marshall has been a source of encouragement, provocation, and sustenance through somewhat unpredictable times, for which he has my perpetual gratitude. Pauline Greenhill and Peter Erb, the readers for the thesis, have offered many helpful insights and comments. Sandra Woolfrey favoured me with a reading of the thesis (and with her friendship) and prodded me to take a second look at some of my assumptions. Susan Scott and Stephanie Walker have been steadfast confidantes during my time in Waterloo, and their insightful understanding has greatly enriched my work and my life.

Marlene Epp and Len Friesen allowed me to sound out my ideas to Mennonite ears and have provided much-needed affirmation and background information. Joel Klassen, Chris Hiller, Charles Fernandes, Maggie MacDonald, and Ruth Richardson have listened to me, encouraged me, and motivated me. Participants in the Religion and Culture colloquium helped me to refine some of my ideas. Ilse Friesen provided an opportunity to show the video which generated some fruitful discussion. I also thank Helen Epp for putting me in touch with Agatha and Katja in the beginning and Cathie Huggins for her generous assistance.

Finally, I thank my family for the affirmation and encouragement they have given me in support of my work.

Introduction

...A woman's face that will fade if I do not dream it, write it, put it in a film. I write it, try to make everyone else dream it, too; if they dream it, they will know something more, love this woman's face, this woman I will become, this woman they will become.

—— Dionne Brand (1990:47-48)

Turning the stories of a woman's life into text and image can be a profoundly disturbing act. For both the storyteller and the interpreter, making the private public generates anxiety and exhilaration; disclosure provokes vulnerability as well as connection. This study writes and videotapes the process of two Russian Mennonite women, Agatha Janzen and Katja Enns,¹ telling me their lives. Coupling their telling with my interpretation, I offer this work as a comparative analysis of the construction of two women's religious lives.

In putting forward my analysis, I insist on the centrality of stories to the construction of gender and religious identity. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo writes, "Cultural patterns—social facts—provide a template for all human action, growth, and understanding" (1984:140). Stories are told with reference to cultural patterns, sometimes in accordance, often in opposition to them. Stories shaped by cultural patterns contain plots. Women's stories, according to Carolyn Heilbrun, have been restricted to the marriage plot, which allows women centrality only in stories of romance and courtship (1988:21). The aging of women, the anger of women, and the aspirations of women remain unnarrated when women's stories are constrained to one plot (Heilbrun

¹Not their real names. Agatha chose a pseudonym only for her surname, while Katja changed her entire name. The women did not decide to make these changes after viewing the video but only after reading the thesis.

1988:28). Heilbrun suggests that to counteract the marginality imposed by marriage plot, women must "exchange stories..., read and talk collectively of ambitions, and possibilities, and accomplishments" (1988:46).

By analyzing Agatha's and Katja's stories—determining which plots they followed and which plots they created themselves—this thesis offers stories unwritten in Mennonite history and collective memory. Katja and Agatha are part of a group of women who emigrated to Canada after fleeing from the Soviet Union during World War II. Because of women's own silence and the unwillingness of others to listen, Mennonite women's stories from World War II are not included in the cultural pattern of which they are a part.²

My purposes, then, are twofold: to present the stories of Agatha and Katja paying particular attention to their religion and to ask why their stories are not part of a collective Mennonite consciousness. To accomplish this I use a feminist ethnographic method and draw primarily from feminist and ethnographic theories of religion.

Summary of Chapters

The first chapter of the thesis is a video entitled, "Going by the Moon and the Stars." Incorporating interviews, family photographs, and scenes from their church and home environments, the video focuses on telling of the religious lives of Katja and Agatha. The video presents Katja and Agatha

²The documentation and analysis of Mennonite women's lives has only recently begun. Referring to women such as Agatha and Katja, Marlene Epp (1987:104) writes, "The stories of post-World War II [Mennonite] refugee women need to be told."

telling their stories in their own words, with their own gestures, and in their own voices.

The second chapter consists of a retelling of the stories of Agatha's and Katja's experience of marriage and motherhood. The chapter shows how they have accepted and deviated from conventional plots, and why their experiences of marriage and motherhood are part of their religious lives. The recounting is laced with the beginnings of my interpretation of the effect of post World War II women refugees on the Mennonite community in Canada. Discussing the patriarchal structure of the church, its ritual and history, this chapter sets the groundwork for a discussion of both women's current religious lives.

The third chapter is a more detailed account and analysis of the women's memories of the war than that provided in the video. After briefly discussing the relationship between memory and story, I consider what the structure of Katja's and Agatha's stories of the war reveals about their Mennonite identity. The Mennonite response to the women's stories of World War II is then discussed in light of Mennonite attitudes to war and Nazism.

Chapter four compares the similarities and differences in Katja's and Agatha's experience of being Mennonite. First providing some of the parameters of the term religious life, I then discuss their experiences of prayer and preaching. I close with a comparative look at the influences of Agatha's and Katja's past stories on their present lives as Mennonites.

The final chapter discusses the theoretical and methodological tools I have employed in the course of this study. Specifically, I situate my work

with respect to the study of religion and feminist ethnography, and I apologise the use of video in the project.³

Meeting Agatha

On the June morning when I rang the front doorbell of Agatha's house, I was nervous. Her house was a trim suburban bungalow, on a quiet street in Kitchener, with a well-tended garden bright with flowers. Agatha came to the door, a fairly tall woman with blackish-gray wavy hair, big brown eyes behind glasses, and olive skin. As she unlocked the screen door to let me in, I smiled, hoping my nervousness was subsumed by the mutual uncertainty of a first meeting. She returned the smile and welcomed me into her home.

I walked into her front hall, took off my shoes, and followed her into the living room, still sweating from my bike ride. Medium-sized with a piano, a couch, three chairs and a large window looking onto the street, the room was a blend of beige fabrics, pictures of children and grandchildren, and paintings of wheat fields. As we sat down on the couch beside each other, I noticed a pile of books on the table. With a quick glance I saw they were all about Mennonite history. The top one was a spiral bound hand-typed book Agatha had written herself about the history of her village, Gnadenfeld. Without referring to these books, we began to talk.

"So what is it you want to know?" she asked.

³ Those who prefer to begin with a discussion of methodology might choose to read chapter 5 first. The methodological discussion is placed after the telling and analysis of the life histories to equip the reader with sufficient information about the process before introducing my strategies of coping with the fieldwork situation.

I was careful in my choice of words, wanting to avoid leading her response, but also wanting her to agree to work with me. "I want to hear the story of your religious life, of how your experience of religion developed," I said, feeling my way somewhat gingerly, casting about for the right words. My Mennonite name gave me a bit of confidence, but I remained worried she might see me as too much of an intrusion.

To my surprise, Agatha started then to tell me her story, and only finished two hours later. Our first meeting, which I had thought would consist of negotiations and explanations on my part, became an exhausting and emotional encounter during which Agatha did most of the talking. I felt filled to the brim with the details of a compelling story.

The story that Agatha told me that day, and told me again and again in different ways later on, seems to me to be the central story of her life. A compact story, in that she tells it somewhat chronologically with a beginning and an end, Agatha's account was well-polished. Agatha's story began with her childhood in the Ukraine and her flight to Germany during World War II at the age of 20, and ended with her arrival in Canada. Her journey through the war profoundly affects the rest of Agatha's life; it shapes her faith, her role as a woman, and her memory.

While Agatha may have ended her story with her arrival in Canada, her life did not end there.⁴ Once in Canada Agatha was employed for a few years, and then was married to a widower with two sons, with whom she had

⁴In 1982 Agatha wrote an autobiography entitled *Footsteps*, which also ends with her arrival in Canada, thus reinforcing her narrative of childhood and the war as the story central to her identity.

a daughter. She and her husband Ernie soon moved to Kitchener, where Agatha looked after the house and the family. She also cultivated interests in herbology, painting, writing, and reading. She is now sixty-nine and spends most of her time as a nonprofessional historian and churchworker.

My relationship with Agatha has developed into an intellectual collaboration. She has often encouraged me by telling of her own experiences of writing.⁵ We share an interest in alternative health practices and taking responsibilities for our own bodies. We are interested in our history and what it means to us, and in our religious tradition and how it shapes us. A voracious reader, Agatha studies the Bible in three languages: English, Russian, German. Though at times our perspectives differ quite substantially, we both continue to ask questions of each other.

Meeting Katja

The first day I met Katja was on a July morning in the doorway of her white frame house. She is a small woman, with pure white hair, bright blue eyes and pinkish tanned skin on her wrinkled face. Katja, sixty-seven, was born in 1925 and is not married. She has a grown son who is now married, has two children, and lives about four hours away from Katja. Despite her slight build, Katja has a tautness about her, a certain strength of movement and vitality that undercuts her age.

⁵In addition to *Footsteps*, an unpublished autobiography, Agatha has written *Gnadenfeld, Molotschna*, a self-published history of her village in the Ukraine.

Katja welcomed me in, seeming a bit nervous, but friendly. An eager smile took hold of my face as I manoeuvred through the narrow vestibule, past her living room and into the bright kitchen with walls of pink tile. I felt hesitant about my purpose and scared of intruding into this carefully ordered domestic space. We sat down at the kitchen table, on which was a neat pile of books and maps.

"I got these together," she said, "because I didn't know what you wanted to know. I talked to the minister and he said you probably just wanted to know about my past. So here are some books."

"Well," I replied, "I'm interested in hearing you tell your story about how you became a Mennonite. I'm interested in your religious life history."

Without much more introduction, Katja began telling me her story. The structure of her narrative was remarkably similar to Agatha's. She began to tell me of life in the Soviet Union once her father was taken away, and then proceeded to tell me about walking and running through World War II. She spoke of singing with her school choir while Hitler was in the audience. She told stories of being shot at, being threatened by gangs of soldiers, and running, always running. Her story was replete with dates and places rattled off without pause for thought.

This was obviously a story that Katja had lived through and knew well. She did not have to reach far back in her memory to recount her youth. Events that were lived fifty years ago seemed skimmed off the top of her mind and put into words. I sat silent for most of the time, stunned and

moved by her stories. She stopped after about two hours, once her narrative of the war was over.

Three months later, when I came to visit Katja for our first formal interview, there was a note on the door, "Come into the kitchen Pamela." I walked in to her kitchen filled with what I later discovered was the smell of *ikra*, a carrot relish made in the Ukraine. Katja was at the counter grating carrots and occasionally stirring the relish already on the stove.

Once I sat at the table she grated a while longer, and then joined me. We exchanged small-talk about the summer, and she told me about her bus trip to California. Then she said, "I think I have to cancel our appointment."

"You mean all of our appointments?" I asked querulously.

"Yes," she replied.

She then explained that she was talking to her son over the Thanksgiving weekend, and they decided that since talking about her experiences in the Soviet Union and during the war upsets her, she would rather not talk with me. She apologized for hurting me and for wasting my time. I was numb. She seemed so resolute about her decision, that I resigned myself to it almost immediately. My fear and guilt over being an intruder no doubt abetted this reaction. To my surprise, I did not throw a silent temper tantrum. I did not struggle to think of ways to convince her. I sat there in shock, staring blankly at the calendar on the opposite wall.

But then she asked me some questions about how the videotape would work, so I explained to her what I was doing with Agatha. She seemed interested so I went on to tell her more. I wanted to understand, I said, how

she came from not having a religious education or affiliation, to becoming a Christian and a Mennonite.

Katja's tone changed. She started speaking as if she might take part, and I became quite confused. I decided not to encourage her, but to answer any questions she asked. Talking about her religious identity seemed to be more of a possibility for her. That I was not concentrating on her story, on the violence and trauma of the war, but on how she became a Christian, was more acceptable to her. After about twenty minutes of discussing it, she said that she would think about it, and might change her mind.

We arranged to meet the next Tuesday, giving her some time to think about whether she would do it and what she wanted to talk about. After arranging the meeting, I got up to leave and she asked me if I wanted to stay for some tea and cake. A bit surprised, I said sure, although the thought of eating any cake made my stomach turn at that moment. I felt like everything was quite tentative; if I said the wrong thing all would be ruined. And I did not understand why she wanted to talk with me some more. Was it guilt? She said she felt badly that she had wasted my time, that she was hurting me, but I said, "No, I don't want you to feel forced to do anything, it's totally up to you."

Over tea and cake we talked for an hour and a half about a lot of the things I wanted to discuss anyway: the stories of her childhood. Since that day, Katja and I have developed a relationship where she shifts between being a critic of her culture, a proud grandmother, and an engaging gossip. I am alternately a student of religion, a well-fed granddaughter, and a confidante.

Katja calls me a nosy spy, and she might well be right. She, however, is a willing collaborator in this academic eavesdropping. When I talk with Katja about her religion I feel we are two in an alliance of wayward women: women outside convention yet drawn by tradition and willing to speak, at least amongst ourselves.

A Short History of Russian Mennonites⁶

Agatha and Katja were born in Mennonite villages in the southern Ukraine. They grew up in what used to be the thriving Mennonite colony of Molotschna. Mennonites first emigrated to Russia from Prussia in 1788, seeking the freedom to practice their pacifism and set up their agricultural communities with some degree of autonomy. The Russian Mennonites established quite complex communities, with some becoming wealthy landowners and entrepreneurs, while others remained landless peasants. Maintaining boundaries between themselves and the Ukrainian and indigenous peoples, the Nogai, who surrounded them, Mennonites kept to their German and Low German languages, ran their own schools, and organized their own churches. Theirs was a tightly-knit community, but one that also became quite worldly, industrial, and bourgeois (Urry 1989:277).

There were three major emigrations of Mennonites from the Russian colonies to North and South America: the 1870s emigration of mostly landless peasants, the 1920s emigration of predominantly wealthy Mennonites fleeing

⁶I speak here only of Russian Mennonites, a group of Mennonites distinct from the Swiss Mennonites who settled in the United States and Waterloo County earlier than, and separately from, the Russian Mennonites.

after the Revolution, and the 1940s emigration during World War II. Katja and Agatha fled from the Soviet Union in this last group. The Molotschna that these women grew up in was no longer a wealthy and enclosed society. With the revolution of 1917, the class system in which Russian peasants worked for rich Mennonite landowners was overturned.

The period between 1918 and 1922 saw battles between the Red and White Armies, and anarchist groups. Armed bandits looted the Mennonite villages, raping women and shooting whole families.⁷ Some Mennonite men organized the *Selbstschutz* (self-defence units), taking up arms to defend themselves and their families, fighting both the anarchists and the Red Army (Toews 1989:269). By 1929, 20,000 Mennonites had left the colonies by train. The Canadian government accepted the refugees with the assurances of Canadian Mennonites that their Russian counterparts would be looked after (Paetkau 1984:73).

Those who remained in the Soviet Union faced Stalin's collectivization and the assault on *kulaks* (landowners and any others accused of disagreeing with the system).⁸ Many Mennonites were turned from their homes and denied ownership of their land. Mennonites were also persecuted for being German and for practising their religion (Stricker and Sawatsky 1984:296). As a result, most of the Mennonite children born after the revolution, including Katja and Agatha, grew up without religious education or practice. With the

⁷For a young woman's account of early 1920s in the Russian Mennonite colonies see Baerg (1985).

⁸For a woman's perspective on the colonies from 1928-1941 see Toews (1988).

beginning of World War II, the only Mennonites left in the colonies were women, old men, and children. Most of the men had been sent to labour camps in Siberia, or killed (Epp 1992b:3).

By 1941, the German army had occupied Molotschna, saving the women from deportation to inner and northern regions of the Soviet Union. The German-speaking Mennonites considered the Nazis their liberators: once the Germans arrived the Mennonites could open their churches again and have schooling in their own language (Woelk in Doerksen 1989:291).

There was, however, some ambivalence towards the Germans as liberators. With the occupation, German officers entered the colonies populated mostly by single women and widows. These administrators took Mennonite women as their assistants and mistresses, and the young men who were left in the colonies joined the German army, by force or choice.⁹ Sexual compromise and the abandonment of pacifism were the conditions for survival (Epp 1992b:5). In addition, rumours began circulating about the Nazi's killing of the Jews. In one case, Mennonite children found a half-buried dead body in the snow, but Mennonite adults still could not (or chose not to) believe that a policy of genocide was in effect.

Under Nazi occupation, Russian Mennonite women lived with a contextual morality. Survival meant finding protection with the German soldiers. In the autumn of 1943, as the Soviet army approached the Germans made plans to retreat, telling all German-speaking people to join them. The

⁹See Lohrenz (1982) for one young Mennonite man's story of this time.

Mennonite women and children started on their trek to Germany, some with horse and wagon, most walking and trailing behind the German army. Many died from starvation, cold, and being caught in the crossfire of the Eastern front. Most that did make it to Germany were captured by the Russians, or handed over by the Allies, and forcibly resettled in remote regions of the Soviet Union (Sawatsky 1989:301). After the war, the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), a relief organization, sought out Russian Mennonites all across Germany. The MCC arranged for many of these refugees, mostly women and children, to emigrate to Paraguay, until Canada agreed to accept them.

Upon arriving in Canada, these refugee women encountered a Mennonite community reorganizing after the war, in which women were encouraged and expected to be wives and mothers playing supporting, non-public roles in the church (Epp 1987:102). As a group, the women from this emigration threatened the emphasis on domesticity within the Mennonite community, not by their own intent, but by virtue of their lives and stories.

Many women from this group had been widowed, raped, or had given birth in unconventional situations (Epp 1987:101). Surviving the chaos of the war gave these women pasts incongruous with Mennonite ideals of femininity. In seeking acceptance and resolution in the Mennonite faith, these women encountered resistance from their community. More disturbingly for some women, they continue to struggle with reconciling their internalized sense of femininity with their lived experiences as women.

A Feminist Approach to Life History

My responsibilities in telling and interpreting the religious lives of these two women are many. I share a relationship with both Katja and Agatha; they have been forthcoming and honest with me, telling intimate and painful stories. They have not told me everything, but they have entrusted me with much of who they are. I want to be true to their stories and true to our relationships.

Being true to these women's stories means not alienating them in the process of writing their lives. But while endeavouring to articulate their stories in a voice familiar to them, my own voice of reflection and analysis must be heard as well. Born more than forty years after both women, I have grown up with different frameworks of knowledge. For example, I have deep roots in feminist theory; the analysis of gender is one of my most central intellectual activities.

What it means for Agatha and Katja to be women, and how the world sees them as women, are two of the fundamental questions of my project. At times, Agatha and Katja may think I go too far with my analysis; I will try to make overt the dissonances between my interpretation and that of Katja and Agatha in an effort to avoid silencing the women. But, even with my acknowledgement of dissonance, a power imbalance remains. In the end, I control this text and video. Not only do I choose my methodology and theory, but as Daphne Patai writes, I also have "access to the means of production capable of transforming the spoken words into a commodity" (1988:7). With video, not only their words, but their faces and presences are

commoditised. Their stories become more accessible, but commoditisation also presents the risk of voyeurism.¹⁰

I do not deny the power I hold in this process of drawing images and analyses from intimate relationships I share with Katja and Agatha. Such acknowledgement, however, cannot become another reason for silencing the stories of women. I concur with Judith Stacey, who writes:

An uneasy fusion of feminist and critical ethnographic consciousness may allow us to construct cultural accounts that, however partial and idiosyncratic, can achieve the contextuality, depth, and nuance I consider to be unattainable through less dangerous, but more remote research methods (1988:26).

These life histories could be interpreted as partial and idiosyncratic. I write and tape them, however, with full acknowledgement of the multiple perspectives within the video and text, which both cohere and conflict. This interpretation of the lives of Katja and Agatha is offered as part of an ongoing dialogue. This work does not suggest closure, but contributes to an unfolding of sensitive and critical discussion of women's lives.

The methodological tools I use to interpret Agatha's and Katja's stories come largely from feminist theories of ethnography, life history, autobiography, and film criticism. The emphasis in feminist ethnography lies on collaborative research, which aims to maintain a reciprocal relationship throughout the process of fieldwork and interpretation, and tries to return the results to the participants for their own consideration and comment.¹¹ The purpose of feminist ethnography is not just to extract information, but to engage in

¹⁰See Mulvey (1990:39) for a discussion of voyeurism and female image in traditional narrative film.

¹¹Examples of feminist-inspired fieldwork from which I have drawn include: Brown (1991); Cruikshank (1990); Kendall (1985); Lawless (1991); Mbilinyi (1989); Sered (1988).

relationships that are opportunities for learning and meaningful reflection for all concerned.

Writing about the War

I come to the stories of Agatha and Katja as a Canadian Mennonite born after World War II. I have grown up with books, movies, and TV shows documenting the horrors of the war: the evil of Hitler, the brutality of the Holocaust, and the relentless bombing of Europe and Japan. For me, there were no heroes in this war. I have no relatives who fought for my country; my father was a child at the time, and my uncles worked in labour camps as conscientious objectors. Victors in the war are equally absent. Stalin was no liberator, nor was Truman. Canadians had their own racist policies, which turned Japanese Canadians into the enemy.

I see degrees of violence, cruelty and inhumanity in the stories of World War II. Still, it is difficult for me to hear the stories of Agatha's and Katja's escape into Germany without thinking of what Germany was in those times. When both Agatha and Katja were finding freedom in occupied Poland and Germany, Jews, Gypsies, political prisoners, and many others were being sent to brutal deaths in concentration camps just a few miles away.

In making this comparison explicit here, I do not wish to castigate either woman, nor do I wish to make them culpable. In speaking of the suffering and survival of Mennonite women with reference to their association with Nazism, I want to begin a conversation. There are many unasked questions regarding the experiences of Mennonites in World War II. Though possibly

without answers, these are questions that need to be asked and talked about for Mennonites to understand the profound significance of suffering, both in their own lives and in the lives of others.

It is impossible for me to follow the stories of these two women without tracing the larger webs of their lives. They were rescued by Nazis from Stalinists, rescued by fascists from tyrants. What does this mean for them as Mennonites and women, and what sort of wider legacy does this leave? In addition to constituting a threat to the patriarchal structure of the church, the relationship of these women to war and to the Nazis makes their stories very uncomfortable reminiscences for Mennonites to hear. Canadian Mennonites have their own legacy of Nazism which has received little scholarly attention.¹² The circumstances of their lives make these women appear to be supporters of Nazi Germany, not a status reconcilable to a view of them as kind-hearted Mennonite women. To tell their stories is to risk not receiving a compassionate audience and forces hard questions upon the way we remember the war.¹³

¹²Frank Epp's doctoral dissertation was an important beginning for inquiry into the relationship between Canadian Mennonites and National-Socialism. However, there has been little subsequent work on what Epp calls a "Mennonite paradox:" how members of a traditionally pacifist, left-wing, democratic, and tolerant Christian group in Canada could identify with and support the militaristic, fascistic, racist, and nationalistic German state (Epp 1965:332).

¹³Mennonite scholars give several reasons for not talking about these women's experience e.g., "it is a subject too painful to talk about" (George Epp 1987a:117) and "the military experiences of these people are peripheral to the study of Mennonites in Canada" (Regehr 1987:77). Much attention has been given, however, to the male experience of war amongst Russian Mennonites now in Canada, including studies of the *Selbstschutz* (Klippenstein 1984; Loewen and Urry 1991:34-53) and of the experiences of conscientious objectors (Keirn 1978).

Religion: Some Terms

Together with my background in feminist theory and my birth as a Canadian after World War II, I come to this project as a student of religion. The questions I asked of Katja and Agatha were often overtly, sometimes subtly, directed by this interest. The key question for me, cast in religious terms, is how and why did these women who grew up without religious education and practice come to be Mennonites in Canada?

To answer this question, I asked Katja and Agatha more questions. Some brief discussion of the terminology we used in our discussions and I use in my analysis are needed. My first question to both women concerned their "religious life." In our ensuing discussions they told me stories which fell into four loosely structured categories: stories of their ambivalent attitude to religion during childhood, of how God acted in their lives during the war, of their experiences upon entering the Mennonite church in Canada, and of their understanding and experience of being Mennonite today. Exploring their religious lives naturally fell into a narrative structure, though not within a chronological order.

I used the term "religion" quite liberally at the beginning of our discussions, until Agatha stated that she did not have a religion, she had faith. According to Agatha's definition

Religion is always the efforts of the human being to reach out to God. But faith life is different. That's God reaching out to humans. And that's through Jesus.

After discussion Agatha agreed that God acting in her life was faith, but her efforts to reach God, such as going to church and praying, were religious. With Katja the differentiation never arose.

The different meanings signalled by the same word demonstrated the necessity of understanding what religion means both to the narrators and the interpreters of life histories. Understanding, however, is not always achieved by denotation. Instead, through asking about, and listening to, how Katja and Agatha constitute what is religious I have gathered a picture of the wide spectrum of religion in their lives. While reference to God, Jesus, prayer, baptism, and preaching were clear signals that they were talking of their religious life, so also were conversations about their mothers, children, doubts, fears, food, and daily habits.

During our conversations I paid attention to both informal religion (that which is unstructured and without explicit rules) and formal religion (that which is structured and with publicly articulated rules and custom).¹⁴ Religion is woven into Katja's and Agatha's daily lives, and is not defined only in terms of the Mennonite church or theology. This is not to say that Katja and Agatha are fixedly pious or reverent, but that their lives are consistently shaped by their relationships to God and by the norms of the religious community they have joined. Sometimes they are in accordance with the formal norms, sometimes in conflict, but their informal relationship to God endures.

¹⁴A definition of religion is suggested and discussed in terms of Katja's and Agatha's religious lives in Chapter 5, page 131.

Religious identity is sometimes used synonymously with religious life in the thesis. Identity is, specifically, the way people differentiate or connect with others (Grimes 1992a:1). Katja's and Agatha's religious identities are shaped in a process of differentiating and connecting themselves with Mennonite people, traditions, myths, and the church.

I want to acknowledge the volition Katja and Agatha exercise in the construction of their religious lives and consider the constraints and possibilities allowed by the religious system they chose to join.¹⁵ I strive to articulate a dialectical tension between the way they think about and live out their religion, and how their religion calls them to think and act.

To this end I have found two foci for my analysis: stories and ritual. Both Agatha and Katja have *narrated* their religious lives to me. In telling their stories statements of *belief* have not occupied central importance; I have not emerged from this process with a feminized and revised version of the Schleithem Confession.¹⁶ Certainly, I did not begin with the question, "What do you believe?" but neither did they turn the discussion in that direction.¹⁷

Katja and Agatha are aware of the importance of telling stories to one's identity. They both comment on how important were the stories their mothers told them in childhood. However, they feel that stories are not the same as

¹⁵William Runyan stresses the impact of cultural constraints on personal volition. In arguing for renewed attention to life histories, he states, "a *fundamental* question about a culture is what kinds of lives its members are allowed to lead" (1986:183).

¹⁶The *Seven Articles of Schleithem* (1527) form a seminal document stating the core Anabaptist beliefs.

¹⁷Agatha spoke more often of belief than did Katja. I will explore this comparison in Chapter 4.

history. Agatha feels that if her father had lived longer, he would have passed on the history of Mennonites to her; she would have developed a Mennonite identity if she knew the official story. What her mother gave her was knowledge of how to be faithful through prayer.

In the same way that men control the access to communal Mennonite identity through writing history, they control the access to communal religion through regulating ecclesiastical ritual. When all of the preachers were killed or exiled in the colonies, the church life of Russian Mennonites died too. For the most part, a domestic ritual life did not grow to replace that forbidden and destroyed under communism; most women did not know how (and were too frightened) to take the men's place. Control of ecclesiastical ritual continues to be determined by gender in Katja's and Agatha's religious lives.

To achieve my dual purpose of presenting these women's lives as they tell them and analyzing the impact of their religion on their lives, I listened for stories about rituals in my conversations with Katja and Agatha. We have discussed baptism, weddings, communion, and funerals. We have talked about the role of prayer, preaching, singing, and reading the Bible in their lives. In the process of articulating their religious lives, stories about rituals have helped me both to understand their experience of faith and the impact of religion on their lives.

Religion: Some Disclosure

My religious formation and identity was not a major subject of our discussions, though it shapes our relationships and my interpretations. Coming from a Mennonite family that emigrated from Russia to Canada in 1870, I have the links of name and a partially shared history to bridge the distance between Agatha and Katja and me. My Mennonite heritage allowed a certain easy familiarity to develop between both women and myself, despite the many differences between our religious lives stemming from age, family and education.

While my family history and early church experiences give me the status of an insider, I am also very much an outsider. My parents are divorced, conferring on me the status of one whose family has broken from the norms of the church. I am not baptized and do not presently attend a church, nor does most of my immediate family. I am not from the same place as Katja and Agatha, and I know very few of the same people.

My interest in the Mennonite religion seems to be interpreted by the women both as a return to my roots as well as the nosiness of a scholar. My peripheral placement allows Katja and Agatha to speak to me as if they are speaking outside of their church environment, but to someone who understands the vagaries of Mennonite life.

Speaking through the Silence

Despite the promise of new insight and knowledge that comes with the telling of women's lives, certain barriers remain. As Carolyn Heilbrun writes, "...biographies of women, if they have been written at all, have been written under the constraints of acceptable discussion, of agreement about what can be left out" (Heilbrun 1988:30). This agreement, an implicit collusion fostering silence, is even in effect when women write about other women. A deeply ingrained complicity, deciding when to speak through the silence is a difficult choice.

In writing and videotaping the lives of these two Russian Mennonite women I made such choices. In the process of constructing these necessarily incomplete life histories, telling the compelling and significant stories of Agatha and Katja has at times conflicted with honouring their privacy. Both women are concerned with maintaining a modicum of modesty while also conveying the truths of their experience. My inscription of their lives on paper and videotape has left them feeling vulnerable yet important. The process of producing this thesis has affected all three of us as women and as Mennonites.

Chapter 2: Stories of Marriage and Motherhood

Many years ago Adrienne Rich said that the greatest thing older women could do for younger women is to tell the stories of their lives.

——— Carolyn Heilbrun (1991:33)

In the video I tried to convey a sense of the religious lives of Katja and Agatha. Their experiences of religion as children, adolescents, and women are presented in their own words, through their own lips. After watching the video, Katja said about Agatha, "She fills up the gaps in my story." But gaps remain despite the combination of their stories, gaps that could be partly filled by what was said when the camera was off, what I chose to edit out, and what was edited out at their request.¹⁸

One of the most central stories in both women's lives is also one they did not wish to present in the video, the stories of their experiences of marriage. In this chapter I will present and interpret these stories as they were told to me by Agatha and Katja. I did not record Agatha's story, but she has written of it in her autobiography, *Footsteps*.¹⁹ Katja's story was recorded on videotape and then transcribed.²⁰

Agatha's Story of Marriage

When Agatha Loewen was a young woman of twenty, she was a teacher in her childhood village of Gnadenfeld. She lived with her mother and

¹⁸Addressing these gaps in the written thesis was acceptable to Agatha and Katja.

¹⁹Agatha wrote *Footsteps* in 1982, after much prompting from her daughter, but only circulates the book amongst her family.

²⁰When quoting from Agatha and Katja without references, I use transcriptions and field notes.

two sisters in a German-speaking Mennonite community made up mostly of women, children, and old men. Just the year before, in 1941, the German army had occupied her village, saving her from deportation to Siberia. The S.S. officers soon established themselves, and the Mennonite colonies were under Nazi rule (Epp 1962:353).

Agatha tried to find a place for herself in this new order. She applied for a job as an interpreter with an officer from the district command, only to find that her services as an interpreter were only part of what was required. These German officers with "questionable morals" were looking for young Mennonite mistresses. Agatha did not want to play the role of mistress for this man and chose to remain with her teaching job.

Soon after the Germans occupied the Mennonite colonies, they formed a cavalry unit of the young men remaining in the villages. These horsemen trained in Gnadenfeld, Agatha's town. It did not take long before Agatha met Aaron, with whom she had once gone to school, and who was now one of these soldiers. They began visiting each other, and in a year they were engaged.

In a picture in *Footsteps*, Aaron appears as a handsome man, with thick, wavy, blond hair, and big blue eyes. Together with Agatha's long dark hair and brown eyes they made a striking couple. It was an unfortunate time to be in love. Two days before their September wedding, Aaron was told that he was to ride into battle on his wedding day. Agatha and Aaron had a hasty wedding:

On September 9 Aaron came over. I could tell he was very upset about something. His squadron had received orders to ride into battle! What devastating news to receive just a few days before our wedding date! Then he asked if I would mind if we got married immediately. Then at least he would have the comfort of knowing he had a wife at home praying for him while he was at the front.

And so I put on my white wedding gown, (the veil and the wreath stayed behind) and we two went on foot to Konteniusfeld to be married. Pastor Boldt's two daughters served as witnesses. His text was Romans 12:12 - "Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer."

Then off we went to the village council to make it official. We had no reception. No friends or relatives were in attendance (*Footsteps* 1982:67).

Upon returning to Gnadenfeld after their wedding, the newlyweds discovered the villagers scrambling to pack up their belongings. The Soviet army was approaching, and the Germans were retreating, taking all German-speaking people with them.

In the one day they had left together, Aaron found a wagon and three horses for Agatha and her family, a pair of hob-nailed soldier's boots, and a soldier's coat for Agatha to wear during her journey. With that Aaron had to report for duty, and Agatha began her trek. In their first five months of marriage they were with each other for ten days, meeting during the odd times the trek would stop for an extended period, and Aaron would have home leave.

After their reunion in February, Agatha and Aaron did not see each other again until the summer, when Agatha was living in Lindenthal, a German-Polish village, where she was teaching:

On July 22, 1944, Aaron was home on leave once again. I had purchased a bicycle and we had a wonderful time travelling and visiting. We would take turns—one riding, one walking—and managed to cover quite a lot of distance in this manner. I recall however that despite my happiness at being with him again I could always feel the tears just below the surface. Perhaps it was a premonition. On August 8 I said good-bye to my husband not realizing I would never see him again (*Footsteps* 1982:84).

After their last meeting, Agatha received two letters from Aaron, one from Belgium, the other from France. After the last letter, dated August 26, 1944, Agatha heard no more from Aaron. She continued writing him and requested the Red Cross to search for him.

After fleeing from the Russians again, Agatha lived in Husbaecke, a town in northern Germany where her sister was attending a school. By now the Germans had lost the war, and all those who had fled from the Soviet Union lived under the threat of being forcibly resettled by the Soviets, who roamed throughout Germany looking for refugees. Agatha was torn between joining her relatives in Canada to escape the Soviets and staying in Europe to find Aaron. She wrote in her diary on April 19, 1946:

Today is Good Friday and the day after tomorrow Easter! And still no news of Aaron. What should I do?

We just had a visit from a Cornelius Thiessen from Canada. He is a Red Cross worker. He told us that the English do not recognize us as German citizens. To them our immigration papers are worthless and when the Russians come we will simply be handed over. There is no way we could ever let that happen, especially as we wouldn't even be allowed to go back to our village. I'm sure Aaron would never return either—what should I do? If we go to Holland the border will separate us. But the barrier would be even greater across the ocean! (*Footsteps* 1982:97)

She sent many letters all over Europe inquiring about Aaron, but Agatha could find out nothing. The only clue regarding his fate was a disturbing dream she had shortly after she received his last letter. Agatha dreamt she saw Aaron lying on the battlefield with blood gushing from a wound in his head. In retrospect, Agatha considers this dream to be a premonition of Aaron's death. Agatha feels she dreamt this as Aaron was dying; their connection was so deep that she lived through his pain.

Agatha eventually received a letter stating that Aaron was missing in action. Despite the uncertainty and pain she felt about leaving without Aaron, Agatha decided to emigrate to Canada. The fear of being forcibly moved to Siberia was real and great. She could not pass up the chance to be with her family in a new land, which seemed to promise safety and security.

Once in Canada, Agatha and her family settled in the Niagara region and found seasonal work in a canning factory. At the urging of her aunt, Agatha applied for work in a dentist's office. She worked there successfully for two years. During this time, Agatha met Ernie, who came calling for Agatha when his aunt told him about a young woman who needed a ride to St. Catharines once a week for choir practice. On these long drives Agatha and Ernie learned to know each other and found much in common, especially their shared birthplace, Gnadenfeld. Ernie, ten years older than Agatha, had left Gnadenfeld with his family in the 1920s.

Agatha and Ernie decided to get married. Ernie went to speak to the minister at his church in St. Catharines, but to his surprise found that the minister refused to marry them. The problem was not that Ernie was a widower, but that Agatha was not legally a widow. The uncertainty surrounding Aaron's death was enough to convince the minister and the church council that Agatha could not remarry.²¹

Ernie came back to Agatha with the news, disappointed but not daunted by what he considered an unfair decision. They went to Agatha's church and

²¹In 1947 it became official church policy to refuse permission for remarriage in cases like Agatha's. As Marlene Epp writes: "Obviously this caused problems for many women who would have had difficulty obtaining economic security without a male partner" (1987:101).

talked to the minister. This time the council decided that if Agatha could have Aaron pronounced legally dead, they would allow Agatha and Ernie to marry. Throughout this ordeal, Agatha was caught between fear of the past and desires for the future:

Some people didn't want us to marry. They were very opposed to it. It was seven years since my husband was missing, but some of the deacons and ministers didn't think it was right. One woman who was in favour of our marriage said I was doing missionary work, marrying this man with two young sons. And I had qualms, worries, that my first husband would come back some time and show up and make my second marriage null and void.

Even Ernie's aunt, the woman who introduced him to Agatha, did not want them to marry. She had another woman picked out for Ernie, one who did not have a problematic past.

Marrying within the Fold

Agatha has told me many stories of the trauma inflicted on Mennonites who lived through the war: husbands or wives thought long dead reappear, provoking guilt, pain, and confusion in their spouses who have since remarried. Individuals and families have fallen apart from the stress of being stained with the shame of being married to two people at once, despite the chaotic circumstances after the war (Epp 1992b:7).

The Mennonite church in Canada did not understand what had happened in the war, Agatha says now. The ministers and deacons had not lived through the same chaos and devastation; they could not understand the exigencies of survival. Those who wanted to remarry without firm knowledge of their spouse's death faced excommunication (Epp 1962:454)—a punitive measure excluding people from both their religious and social communities.

The family has been central to maintaining both the faith and social organization of Mennonites (Redekop 1986:91). The disrupted marriage patterns of the post-war immigrants were threats to the conventional family. Endogamy, or in-group marrying, remains strong in Mennonite communities, compared to other ethnic or religious groups in Canada (Redekop 1986:81).²² Despite the emphasis placed on endogamy, women from the 1940s immigration were informally told by the members of the church that they would be better off marrying "English" men than Mennonite men.²³

These refugee women were considered less Mennonite than their Canadian sisters. Living most of their lives outside of the ritual and patriarchal structure of the Mennonite church, these women were foreigners within the highly-structured Canadian church. Though women like Agatha lived comfortably with informal religion—spontaneous prayer and hymn singing—their lack of biblical or ritual knowledge,²⁴ their ability to take care of themselves, and their direct experience of war meant they had lived a different plot, in Heilbrun's terms, than conventionally open to a Mennonite women.

Their differences began in the Soviet Union. Mennonite women and children who were living in the colonies did not sustain formal and communal

²²Mennonites in Canada are considered both a religious and an ethnic group (Kraybill 1988:158). See Chapter 4 for a discussion of the difficulties in dividing ethnicity and religion in Agatha's and Katja's lives.

²³This observation arose in conversation with Dr. Len Friesen. "English" means non-Mennonite, English-speaking Canadians.

²⁴Paul Connerton points to the importance of ritual to communal memory, calling commemorative and bodily ritual "acts of transfer of crucial importance" (1989:40).

religious education or practice. Once the Germans occupied, however, they somewhat indifferently allowed the women to reopen the churches. Practising a limited form of ritual authority, women organized choirs and read sermons written by previous male pastors, but would not preach freely. The women played these roles by default. Had the men not been absent due to detention and death, the women would not have assumed leadership, according to Agatha. Controlling the church and heading the family not by choice but by necessity, these women implicitly subverted gender roles.

By virtue of their survival the refugee women were, as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg phrases it, "that almost universal symbol of disorder and of the world turned upside down—the powerful woman" (1984:231). Though powerful might seem an exaggerated characterization of women who had just struggled through World War II, the very facts of their existence demonstrated strength. These women had starved and survived, been raped and survived, and crossed the war front and survived, all without the protection of male relatives.

The church circumscribed this power instead of celebrating it. Once living within the Mennonite community, these women's stories were not heard, at least in the official telling, perhaps because, as Smith-Rosenberg notes:

Power in women must always be an androgenous characteristic, praised only at moments in time when liminality, the crossing of categories, and the rejection of rigidity are embraced, just as women secure actual power and autonomy only at those moments when rigid economic and institutional structures are broken open (1984:231).

The church had an ally in its attempts to diffuse the threat posed by women like Katja and Agatha; the women themselves wanted to become respectable and obedient.

Their culture did not allow them to perceive their memories of survival as a source of power or pride; their experience marked them as "other" in unconventional and uncomfortable ways. Having lived through chaos, the women sought order and stability, not the restructuring of the Mennonite community. To fit into the community, their stories were abridged into witnesses to the glory of God, but not praised as testimonies to their own perseverance.

The women who came into the Mennonite community after the war wanted to reconstitute a mythical order, one they had not lived. They sought to fit into an order where men reigned at home and in church (Epp 1992a:2). In this order their power of survival would be ignored, or sanitized and attributed solely to God. Despite the women's desire to turn themselves right-side-up within patriarchy as obedient wives, their stories trailed them. These stories, unspoken but not forgotten, led some members of the church to refuse sanctioning the marriages of women like Agatha (Epp 1992b:7).

Autonomy within Marriage

Eventually, after Aaron was pronounced legally dead, Agatha and Ernie married in the Mennonite church. They had a private ceremony, with a small family reception but no wedding pictures. Agatha and Ernie recently celebrated their fortieth wedding anniversary by hosting a dinner in their

church, well-documented by their son-in-law's video camera. Agatha feels at home in the church now and comfortable with public celebrations of her marriage.

Marriage has granted Agatha a measure of security and autonomy. Becoming a wife helped her to merge into the Mennonite community, her stories somewhat subsumed under her new identity as Ernie's wife. Economically, Russian Mennonite women like Agatha have lived through a radical shift. From a time of famine and disease when money was scarce and bartering was the means of survival, they have established relatively affluent lives in Canada.

Agatha entered into the position of a middle-class homemaker upon marrying Ernie, who worked for an electrical company. While he worked outside the home, she raised his two children from his previous marriage, and their daughter, in addition to cultivating a large garden of herbs, vegetables, and flowers. She cooked for her family and did the housekeeping. Her husband is now retired and they live in a comfortable bungalow in a suburb of Kitchener. She and her husband have a mid-size American car, a VCR, and a TV. She does not need to pray anymore for enough food to eat, nor does she need to perform the back-breaking labour on the collective farm she once had to in her teens.

Agatha has been able to pursue her interests within the economic security of her marriage: she has written and self-published a book about the history of Gnadenfeld and still receives many queries from people for more information; she has developed an extensive knowledge of herbology which is

respected by many in her community; and she has painted more than 200 canvasses, some of which document her experiences in Europe. In addition to this, Agatha has maintained an active life in the church, quilting and leading a Bible study at the women's Mission Circle, going to a Monday night Bible study, teaching adult Sunday school classes, preaching occasionally, and visiting elderly patients in the hospital.

Agatha's marriage gives her companionship, economic security, and the support and stability to sustain an active life in the community. Despite the difficult and painful beginnings of Agatha's experience of marriage, her relationship has become a firm basis for her to explore her interests and her self. "My husband does not restrict me," says Agatha. Her marriage provides Agatha with material security and stability. This security and stability allows the basis for her activity in the church. Due to her conventional roles as wife and mother Agatha has felt sufficiently comfortable in the church to tacitly confront its patriarchal structure by preaching.

Katja's Story of Marriage

In 1942 Katja had left her family and was attending a teacher's college for girls with German backgrounds, run by the German government in the occupied Ukraine. Staffed by German soldiers, the school was regulated with strict discipline which emphasized that the girls must live a life of simplicity and purity. This meant that each girl had to have long hair divided into two long braids, wear no make-up, and not leave the premises without the supervision of a nurse. According to Katja,

Hitler preached simplicity, you know. That's why at our school we all had to be very plain, no make-up. And we could never go out alone, always with a nurse. When people saw us, they would say, "There go the nuns!" We were supposed to be very simple.

At fifteen, Katja was three years younger than most of the young women at the school, and she had to beg the principal to let her stay. When he heard that she had no father and was trying to support her family by becoming a teacher, the principal relented and allowed her to study.

Katja was a good student, devoted to school and determined to become a teacher. Her determination was not strong enough to counteract the forces of war, however, as the school retreated farther west into Warthegau (occupied Poland) with the approach of the Soviet army. Katja was left behind to bring the horses, wagon, and groceries to the school's next location. Together with two other students and one teacher, Katja suffered through a harrowing journey to Poland. Katja first recounted this journey to me by painting images of devastating clarity, compounded into one story, without mention of many other people. A fuller story is put together out of bits and pieces of our conversations.

The teacher Katja travelled with became her husband. They were secretly married by an army official, with little ceremony, and were together sporadically for three months, as they followed the school in retreat. During this time Katja became pregnant. Soon after, her husband, Franz,²⁵ was called to the western front. Katja spent most of her pregnancy alone and running through the war: sleeping in the snow, starving, and being shot at.

²⁵Not his real name.

Upon arriving, alone, in Bavaria, Katja gave birth to her son in an ill-equipped hospital. She was barely twenty:²⁶

He was a seven-month old baby, premature. And he was so...they didn't know whether he would live, survive. See, I had starved so much. And at the time he was born there was nothing to eat either. So, I got about a quarter of a litre of one percent milk, and two potatoes. Well, that was nothing. That was—everybody got that as a mother. And they had no incubators. We put him in—and I took the curtains off, those were the diapers. And we got half a pound butter, unsalted butter, for....

So, he was so wounded. I didn't have baby powder or anything and in order to—he was blue and greenish looking. He looked like, so ugly. Pamela, you've never seen. Long curled fingernails. And so I put him in this little, it was a wash tub, or a basin, and beer bottles with warm water around him. And he survived.

And I didn't have any milk of course. So, we boiled milk. Well, that's when I went to the farmer and worked there, that I got better food. And I had to work with an alarm clock in my pocket. I would hoe beets and the poor kid was all alone at home, crying [and] wet. I'd go in at three hours, would go and feed him. And at night I'd wear the baby bottle on my tummy and it got soured. And he—oh well, I don't want to talk about it. He survived.

Katja would go to the train station near the farmer's house almost every day, with the hope of finding her husband, or someone from her family. She had no success and became more and more depressed.

Then one day, while at the farm, Katja was told that a man was looking for her. A man dressed in rags walked up the road; Franz had found her. According to Katja, one of Franz' first questions was, "How is our son?" He was sure their child was a boy: a confidence bolstered by his desire for an heir. Franz was from a wealthy Prussian family. He had been married to a woman but they had been separated for fifteen years. They had no children. When his wife discovered that Franz had remarried and had a son, she came looking for his new family. She found them in Bavaria. Katja had not known

²⁶Katja usually quotes dates quite precisely. In telling the stories of her marriage and the birth of her son, the dates became fuzzier, and I did not feel it important to push the matter.

Franz was married. She was surprised, hurt, and fiercely protective of her son. She recalls a discussion between Franz, his wife, and her:

So, then I talked it out and I said, "Sorry, if I had known, this wouldn't have happened."

And she said, "Give me the child and then he will come to me."

And he said, "Never," and I said, "No way. You must hate the child!" And how could I, you know?

Katja's marriage was annulled and she made hasty arrangements to come to Canada, "to give him a chance to go back to his wife."

Once in Canada, Katja felt lonely and alienated from the people, language, and land in Alberta. Both she and her son desperately wanted to go back to Germany, when her aunt who had located her, asked her to come to southern Ontario, where more people spoke German. Once in Ontario, Katja started making plans for Franz, who had not gone back to his wife, to come to Canada. But her plans were in vain as Franz, much older than Katja, died alone in Germany.

Single Mothers in the Church

Katja's experience of marriage and motherhood has profoundly influenced her religious identity. After trying out many different churches, Katja decided to be baptized in the Mennonite church. She soon discovered that the church officials considered her status as a single mother to be a mark against her. Though they did not know the full story, Katja's single motherhood was enough for the church to feel she was an unsuitable candidate for baptism. Katja felt hurt and alienated by the rebuff. She had

struggled to understand and accept her Mennonite identity, and now Mennonites were denying her the ritual of welcome and inclusion into their community.

Ritual sustains a community's "master narrative" by *enacting* the story, not *telling* it, according to Connerton (1989:70). The correspondence of master narratives and rituals, however, depends on who is the master.²⁷ When a woman like Katja with a life story contrary to the master narrative—as told by the patriarchal Mennonite church—wanted to take part in the ritual of baptism, her story precluded enactment. It took an outsider to find a story capable of fitting Katja into the narrative:

And then an evangelist, Dr. Krupka, came from Germany. He was an evangelical Lutheran. And he had a whole week of evangelical [meetings]. And I went every evening. And I sort of felt, well he's telling me all about—he's explaining *me*. And I had a feeling [that] a lot of it was human understanding. That, and the way I translated it to myself. It wasn't the church people who forgave me for things I didn't know I had done, or what I had done. But I would have to straighten out with Jesus, and I thought I had done that. So, one day I was at work—and he [Krupka] said anyone that has a problem could come to the United [Mennonite] church. He had a room there and we could have questions.

So, this one day—I had been attending three evenings—this one day I sat at the office and I couldn't, I just couldn't relax. It bothered me. I wanted to talk to him. But it was so strict at work, you couldn't get time off. So, finally, the boss noticed that, and he said, "What's the matter with you, you seem not to be able to concentrate?"

So, I said, "No, I have a problem." And I said, "I have a chance to talk to an evangelist. I wanted to have a few things straightened out." I said, "Is it possible for me to go?"

Although my boss was a very strict Catholic, he said, "Go on, you don't produce today."

So, I went and talked to Dr. Krupka. And he explained it in simple words. He says, "If you have committed something, or offended someone, you straighten it out with that person, and if that person doesn't forgive you, that

²⁷For a critique of Connerton's use of the phrase "master narrative" see Grimes (1992:8, n.33).

doesn't matter." He said, "But if you straighten out with Jesus and ask for forgiveness and so on, that's all that matters."

And then he asked me, because he was in our church, what our pastor and the deacons had to say. And I said, "Well, they don't want to baptize me." And then—so then he gave the example of that woman who had been a sinner and she went before the Pharisees. And Jesus says to the woman, "If you have asked for forgiveness, those Pharisees who have not committed a sin throw the first stone." And he says, "Who are the people?"

So, in other words, that time I came through. And it's—oddly enough he must have talked to the pastor and the deacons, because they came and I was baptized. That was June 15, 1960. But by then I was 35 years old.

Though the story capable of granting Katja inclusion in the community was part of the Christian narrative all along, those who determined the master narrative would not initially allow her the ritual of belonging.²⁸

Katja's life in the church has been shaped by her marital status. To be her age and single in the Mennonite community is rare, but with the emigration of refugees from the Soviet Union this became a more common state. Many refugees from both 20th century immigrations remained living with their parents, brothers, and sisters and never married.²⁹

But women who chose to remain unmarried and live *alone* presented a different sort of unconventionality to the community. A single woman who supported herself disturbed the highly gender-divided post-war Mennonite community. Not living within the division of labour which saw men work outside and women inside the home (Redekop 1986:85), single women upset the balance of gender complementarity (Epp 1992a:17-18). The threat presented by a single woman is still acted out every Sunday; Katja says she sits on the

²⁸Fitting Katja into the Christian narrative by way of the story of the adulterous woman, however, persists in seeing her single motherhood as a sin, which seems to me a fallacious and overly harsh judgement.

²⁹Waldemar Regier, a Mennonite pastor, made this observation in a personal conversation with me.

right side of the sanctuary during the church service because that is the silently acknowledged side where single women sit. Only men and married women sit on the left side, she says, although she notes that this is changing.

When Katja asked me out for lunch one day, she reflected on her own experience as a single woman in the Mennonite community. As we sat in the restaurant we had a conversation which jolted me by its frankness. I recorded it in my journal:

"Already when I was young I decided there would be no men in my life," she said.

"Why was that?" I asked.

"I saw too many women raped and killed by men when they were with them. No. I just don't like them." She turned her face away and shrugged her shoulders in a shivering sort of way.

I wanted to ask, "What did you see?" but I didn't. The topic seemed closed, the shrug shutting a door to something.

Katja's experiences during the war have profoundly affected the choices she has made later in life. These choices, including the decision not to marry, have deeply affected her daily life, her role in the church, and her position in the wider religious community.

The implications of her singleness are far-reaching, not only affecting her experience of the public ritual life of the church, but also impinging on her position in the more private, social circles of the church:

Mennonites, they have such a narrow view of things. My friends who have husbands won't come over to my place very much because they worry there won't be any men to talk to here. I ask people at church to come over and they say, "Well, we'll see," and by then I know already what they're feeling. And then I get invited over and I feel like a fifth wheel because there are always four couples over. And the men treat me extra special, give me attention, and I get uncomfortable. And some of the women then look at you in a funny way.

Despite feeling uncomfortable, Katja manages to find a place for herself in the sharply divided social world of Mennonite women and men:

The men always sit in one place and the women in another. They don't talk to each other. I think that still comes from the time when the women had to sit on one side of the church and the men on the other. And they still do that, even at the Church picnic. Me, I just go and throw water balloons with the young people. That's what a picnic is for.

In addition to religious and social implications, Katja's marital status has economic ramifications. Katja, who was without immediate family when she came to Waterloo, looked for menial work when she arrived but experienced discrimination since she was a displaced person without a good command of English. She eventually found work as a seamstress at a dry-cleaners where she was overworked and underpaid (cf. Epp 1992a:9).

To get out of what she found to be an intolerable working environment Katja went to business college in the evenings. Upon graduating she took a job in an insurance company and worked her way up. When she told me her stories of the insurance company, at first it seemed that she had achieved a high-level position, meeting with vice-presidents, and being sought after by men from different companies. She says she "got as high as a woman could go" in the company. Given this picture of responsibility, I was shocked when Katja told me how much she was paid. When she retired seven years ago in 1984, after thirty years of working in insurance, Katja was making under \$20,000 dollars.

While she worked at the insurance company and raised her son, Katja also took in sewing in the evenings and rented out rooms to university students. Katja owns her house now, and lives there alone, without boarders.

She drives a mid-size American car, has a TV, and travels almost once a year. She still feels her good fortune is tentative; her life now is measured against what was. When she takes a bath she revels in the comfort, amazed at her survival in plenty here, compared to the time when she went months without baths, sleeping in the snow, covered in lice.

Katja is not modest in conversation with me, as our discussion in the restaurant showed. She speaks out and is honest about her feelings and impressions of other people. But whenever she criticizes or reflects on her position in her community, she washes her criticism with self-deprecation.³⁰ She says to me, during our conversation about men and women in the Mennonite community, "I have more bad qualities than good qualities. That's a problem."

Foremost among these "bad" qualities is what she considers her tendency to speak out, "saying what I want to and then thinking about it later. I am not diplomatic enough." Katja worries about, but also cherishes, her role as a "troublemaker" and a "joker." She seems to measure herself against a notion of femininity that she does not fit: a woman should be subdued and gentle, she says, "an obedient wife in the Lord's eyes."

Katja is not a wife. She has made decisions about how to live in this world and one of those decisions is to live without a man. This independence puts her in an ambiguous position in her community. Men do not know how

³⁰As Marlene Epp writes about Mennonite women, "Their conditioned modesty, humility, self-denial and obedience often prevents a wholehearted and assertive embrace of issues that concern injustices which are very personal" (1987:93).

to act around her since she is not spoken for, and women fear the implicit (though perhaps unfounded) status this availability gives her.

Katja can still wonder, "If a man were to ask me to marry him...." Marriage remains a potential plot in her mind, but she states quite clearly that she is not the least bit interested in marriage. She does not want "to wash somebody's socks," she says. Though she misses having someone around to discuss the "little issues with, like aluminum siding," Katja is proud of her ability to take care of herself and take responsibility for her own mistakes and successes.

Katja thinks she would be a hard person to live with, since she is so used to independence. "There's not a man born today who could live with me," she says. But there is also loneliness in her independence, loneliness connected with memories of what was. Katja has another reason for not remarrying. Her memories of her love for her husband and the father of her child run deep, despite the pain occasioned by their relationship. One evening, while talking about marriage, Katja and I had a conversation about first love:

She mumbles something about being too much in love.

With some trepidation I ask, "Your husband—was he your true love?"

"My husband? Oh yes, he was my only love."

Many years after coming to Canada Katja returned to Germany, and visited the apartment where she had lived with her husband before she left. Katja recalls now that the landlady said to her, on her visit, "He did not die of a heart attack, he died of a broken heart. He was so lonely and sure you would return."

Marriage is a source of pleasurable and painful memories for Katja. Her early experiences of marriage have defined her later experiences of religious community and continue to shape her personal life and her role in the church. Due to the actions and judgments of certain people in the church and to her own perceptions of who she should be as a woman, Katja's past relationship and current singleness shape her religious identity. Her past affects which Bible stories she finds important, which roles she allows herself to play in the church, and the relationships she has to others in the congregation.

Katja has developed an identity outside the Mennonite community. She is not part of the women's groups in the church and many of her friends are not Mennonite. She still attends Sunday services regularly, however, and occasionally volunteers with the cooking at church suppers.

Wives and Mothers: A Comparison

Perhaps the most succinct way to compare Agatha and Katja in their attitudes to the conventional plots for women within patriarchy is to consider their relationships to their mothers, their first examples of marriage and motherhood. Both women speak of their mothers as incredibly strong women who worked very hard to survive. In addition to their hard work, their mothers survived because they prayed. Agatha tells a story about the success of her mother's command to pray for bread when they had no more food in the Soviet Union. Katja says that her mother managed to bring all her eight children back home to her after the war because she prayed constantly for their return. When Katja visited the Soviet Union in 1967, the last of the

children to return, her mother said she could now die, since all her children had come back.

Women who work hard and pray devotedly, their mothers are exemplary women for Agatha and Katja. Where Agatha identifies with her mother, however, Katja differentiates herself. Agatha remembers fondly the stories her mother would tell:

AJ: We were sitting in the dark and asked mother, "Tell us something about your past, how it used to be."

And she had all these wonderful stories about her home life. Her parents and the food that they could eat and so on. And we were hungry, [laughs] and so we always thought it was just like fairy tales.

I guess this way my mother could have a great influence on us by telling us how everything really was.

PK: Did she have a big influence on your religious life?

AJ: Oh she was the most—she influenced me the most. I can tell you about prayers that were fulfilled.

The stories and prayers of her mother gave Agatha an early desire for faith, despite growing up without a church community to teach her the rituals and history of Mennonites. Her mother treated Agatha almost as an equal, turning to her for support:

AJ: See I lost my father very early, I was nine years old. And my mother wasn't very strong and she was in a bad shape even socially, because we were a minister's family and we were the "scum" so to speak in the communist's eyes. And they didn't want us. So she needed someone to talk about her problems and I was really—we always talked about things that bothered her. I had to do grown up things very early in my life I guess.

In her later years, Agatha found herself becoming increasingly similar to her mother. Unlike many women today, this was not her worst fear, in fact, she took pleasure in the realization:

AJ: Mother was the biggest influence on my life. And she was really a mother and a father. She was the only one that we could turn to.

PK: Did you ever have any disagreements with your mother about things?

AJ: Maybe, yes we probably had. But I was always so sure that my mother's opinions were right, I never doubted them. Even here in Canada, I don't know how long I was married—all of a sudden it dawned on me that my opinions were actually my mother's, about clothes, or about, about everything!

PK: What else?

AJ: Mostly about bringing up the children I guess. And about faith life too. She was a wonderful mother.

Well into her marriage, Agatha realized that she shared her mother's opinions and attitudes. This mirroring reinforces her religious and gender identity. By virtue of her mother's example, Agatha is a hardworking and prayerful woman, but a woman who has lived with the support of a husband.

Katja also remembers her mother as a woman with almost saintly qualities. Her father was taken by the Soviets when she was a child and her mother was left with eight children. Katja describes her mother's reaction to the night when her father was taken away, and her subsequent steadfast faith (which Katja only learned about in 1989):

We woke up, because [my] father was gone. My mother and the other sisters, they stood at the open window. It was in the summer in August, and they were crying. We woke up. Because mother was all that we had. And when we heard her cry, as I said, she just looked sad at us, boy we'd do anything to make her happy again.

And so, they said, "The Communists were here and they have taken your father." But my older sister told me now, two years ago, when I was in Germany for the family reunion. She said that my mother had gone in the garden and had knelt beside the bush and had cried out, "Father how could I manage with the family!" You know, that she had prayed and cried. Now, my sister was older, she knew that. But I found out now, you kn. w.

I guess—well, my brother said, for example, my mother's prayers were answered because I was the last one that she found of her eight children. And they said, just through her prayers. She'd been so close to death, she'd been sick, lung cancer. And they said her prayers saved us, brought us together. Not many famil[ies] would ever be together [after the war]. There was always someone missing, you know? And that our family was spared, all the way. My brother, when he preached the service—I had it on the tape—when he preached the service [at the funeral] he said, "My mother deserved heaven. Because she was a mother through prayers, that kept the

family...just because she prayed so hard." I mean there's many [families who lost each other]. That's the way he came to that, my mother deserved heaven.

When Katja was separated from her family during the war she was devastated by the loss. She wanted to die. When she visited the Soviet Union in 1967, her mother told Katja why she had survived:

You know, my mother gave me the answer in 1967. When I finally got permission, I'd found them, that they were alive. And through people, not Red Cross. By then I was in Canada already. When the first letter came from my mother, where they were, and how bad life was for them, how they were persecuted. I ran to my closet and I pulled everything out, even my son's tie. Anything I had, put it all in one parcel, and sent it to Russia. And when I came in 1967-68, I didn't tell them half of it, because they thought I had been saved and not gone through anything. Like they'd gone through horror. So, I didn't tell my mother, because she had enough in life, you know. She lost all of us, didn't know from eight children where anyone was. She was by herself. And so, when I found out their story, and what had happened, I only told part of mine. The better parts of life.

And then I said how happy I was when I heard from a man that they were alive, that I just cleaned out everything. And people where I lived, they give me stuff and packed a parcel. And she says, "When you questioned why God let you live, there was no sense in being spared, he let you live so that you could send us, and save us now from starvation." That was the purpose, you know. And when I think of it, maybe it was true. Because when the help came from me with that parcel, it saved their lives. They were near death—starving, you know. The Russians were really treating them bad. And my brother, my older one, had malaria, dying of fever. And they had nothing to help him. So, they sold the stuff and carried on.

So, she says, "That's where the answer is." But you see, mother had more knowledge about religion than, than we kids.

Though Katja does not remember being taught by her mother about religion, she now understands her mother to have been a "deeply religious" woman. She casts her mother as a soft-spoken and gentle woman, one who is also wise with religious knowledge.

Katja withheld the pain of her story when meeting her family. In what seems to be a supreme act of trying to keep her mother happy, Katja did not mourn her pain with those closest to her. She considers the strife of her family to have been greater than her own. In keeping with Mennonite norms

of women's selflessness (Epp 1987:93), Katja felt that to claim her own grief would be selfish and insensitive.

In contrast to Agatha, when Katja compares herself to her mother, she sees difference:

PK: Who do you resemble most?

KE: I? I am most like my father. I would like to be like my mother, soft and gentle and kind-hearted. But I'm not. You see, I had two older sisters but there were boys in between us and they forgot about me. I just grew up among boys.

Katja's fear that she is not obedient and gentle as a woman should be is reinforced by her view of her mother. In contrast to her mother's gentleness and her deeply religious life Katja feels inadequate. Her decision not to tell her family about the suffering she endured during the war adds to this inadequacy; her mother did not hear her story, and could therefore not help to wipe away the pain and the shame that Katja still feels.

In an interesting parallel, Agatha says that since she grew up amongst only women (her sisters and her mother) she feels capable of taking care of herself. Katja thinks that growing up among boys made her tough and somewhat of a rebel, but maybe too tough and too rebellious.³¹ While she seems proud of her ability to take care of herself, she encourages an ideal of "femininity" as she calls it, which does not fit with her image of herself as a joker.

³¹Luisa Passerini notes the stories of rebellion in her oral history work with Italian women: "[the rebel stereotype] could be the means of expressing problems of identity in the context of a social order oppressive of women, but also of transmitting the awareness of oppression and lack of integration, and hence of directing oneself to current and future change" (1989:191). This analysis sheds light on Katja's comments, although she is not self-consciously occupied with "current and future change."

Agatha, and to a lesser extent Katja, both fluctuate between saying they had no religious upbringing and emphasizing the deep religious influence of their mothers on their lives. In listening to their retelling, it is impossible to know how deep an influence their mothers effected. It is clear, however, that Katja and Agatha were not without religious experience when they entered the church in Canada. They may not have been Mennonites according to the formal definition upheld by men in practice and in words (and relatively unchallenged by women), but they were educated in the informal religious lives of Mennonite women, lives of prayer and care for others.

Katja lives in contrast to her memory of her mother as a gentle-hearted and deeply religious woman, and simultaneously regrets and affirms the difference. Agatha, in her present life, considers herself to be mirroring her memory of her mother as a deeply faithful woman and rejoices in it. Both women's memories of and comparison with their mothers speak clearly about who they think they should be in the world: faithful women and good mothers.

Their mothers, however, achieved their accomplishments without the aid of men. Their husbands dead, Katja's and Agatha's mothers had to be solitary economic, emotional, and spiritual caretakers for their children. Despite the contrary example of their mothers, Katja and Agatha feel that being an obedient wife is part of being an exemplary woman. Though in comparing their own lives with their mothers they reach different conclusions, both women still draw marriage and motherhood as the roles fundamental to delineating what it is to be a woman "in the Lord's eyes."

Chapter 3: Stories of War

When Katja and Agatha first told me the stories of their lives, they told their stories of the war—they offered ten years of their lives in place of seventy. Traditionally, women occupy a peripheral role in the stories of battle. War is men's business; the politics of killing do not befit a lady. But for Katja, Agatha, and many other women, war is the central story of their lives. Being shot and strafed, and watching people die has left memories deeply embedded in these women. How they have turned their memories into stories and how the Mennonite community has reacted to the stories they embody are both shaped by the intricate relationship between gender and war.³²

The stories of their journeys through World War II are fundamental to both Katja's and Agatha's lives. The narrative was well known to both of them; they needed little prompting during the telling. Their words streamed out as I sat mutely, astonished by the terror, grief, and survival.

Tania Modleski argues that critiques of war must "adopt not just the perspective of the warrior but also that of the *victims* or potential victims of war and of the rapist mentality that reigns in wartime" (1991:67). One way to reach such a critique is through narrative. As Teresa de Lauretis, in advocating a feminist revision of women's narrative as a strategy for subverting the "master narrative," writes,

The attraction [of narrative] is in the possibility, glimpsed if not assured, to make up one's story, the possibility to speak as subject of discourse, which

³²Margaret Higonnet *et al.* comment on the intricate relationship between the making of war and the construction of gender: "The 'otherness' of femininity, like the 'liminality' of the warrior figure, establishes the social limits of war and guarantees the possibility of postwar normalization" (1987:2).

also means to be listened to, to be granted authorship and author-ity over the story. Not that women have not been writing stories for several hundred years, or telling stories for much longer than that, but they have done so with little or no authority, with severe constraints as to genre, medium, and address, and mostly, in someone else's phrase, after great pain (1987:113).

Katja and Agatha tell their stories with an authority drawn from experience. They are authorized by experience to speak because they have lived through war; they have lived through great pain.³³ Many times in the course of our conversations I felt that perhaps I had provoked anguish that would be best left buried. But upon reflection I see that whether or not I initiate conversation about the war, they continue to live with reference to their experiences during World War II. To talk about the war is to talk about who they are.

I rely on the video to have told enough of the women's stories of war and now focus on interpreting the significance of these stories to the women's lives. I first address the interplay between memory and story in the reconstruction of their experiences of war. Then the structure of the women's narratives is discussed—how and when they tell them, and what they say. Finally, I consider the significance of the experience of war to the religious lives of Agatha and Katja.

³³Authority drawn from experience is not sufficient to command a hearing of women's stories. Though able to talk of war because of having lived through it, women and men still live under a hierarchy determining which experiences are important to talk about, which experiences deserve to be "authored." For example, we have many histories of battles, fewer of civilians' experience of war. See Modleski on war as the "ultimate authoritative experience" and "the ultimate male referent" (1991:66).

Stories and Memories

Life stories come from memories. In listening to Katja's and Agatha's stories, I was not hearing about how the war *really* was. Instead, I was listening to the sifting of their traces of experience into a story. Fragments of how they felt, what they saw, and what they thought were spoken to me, and I transcribed the words into text. What I have on the page are memories, and as Sidonie Smith writes,

Memory is ultimately a story about, and thus a discourse on, original experience, so that recovering the past is not a hypostasizing of fixed grounds and absolute origins but, rather, an interpretation of earlier experience that can never be divorced from the filterings of subsequent experience or articulated outside the structures of language and storytelling (Smith 1987:45).

Finding the structures to turn memory into story is a somewhat daunting task for women like Katja and Agatha. While both women knew they had a story to tell, upon first meeting me, they were armed with history books and protestations that I would not find much of use in talking to them. By implication, the women were saying that the stories deserving of attention are those already written into the collective memory (and history books) of Mennonites, stories told by and about men.

Once my desire to hear their stories in whatever form became clear, Katja and Agatha began talking. "The filterings of subsequent experience," however, shaped what I was told. The first time they told me their war narratives, there was no mention of their first husbands. The stories that had caused them considerable anguish both privately (on an emotional level) and publicly (once they encountered the Mennonite church in Canada) were excised from spoken memory. As the layers of stories about the war unfurled, I

realized an inevitable dilemma: I wished to avoid causing Katja and Agatha pain but needed to focus on that which was most painful in order to understand and interpret them.³⁴

Listening to Katja's and Agatha's harrowing stories, the horror of which is beyond my comprehension, made me want first to protect them—to validate their pain and experience and to refrain from causing them further anguish. But in the process of transcription and interpretation, their stories became open to my analysis. As Joan Scott writes,

We cannot simply accept at face value the written records or people's memories; we cannot assume that women's experience lies outside officially constructed contexts, as a definably separate, "purer" commentary... (1987:29).

Women's stories are not impermeable to analysis; they are shaped by cultural patterns of past, present, and place. In interpreting the war stories of Katja and Agatha, we must remember the stories are partial: glimpses of memory which are in turn glimpses of experience. Which glimpses they share and when they share them tells us more about who they are now than who they were then.

Agatha's Story of the War

There were two occasions when Agatha told me her experiences of the war as a narrative: on our first meeting and during our third taped interview. Apart from these times she did not speak of the war very often. Our

³⁴Elaine Lawless encountered this problem when researching Pentecostal women preachers in Missouri who wish to live according to cultural norms of women's humility while not drawing attention and criticism to themselves for their public roles. She writes, "...To enter this world and bestow attention on these women is to invite more pain" (1988:14).

conversations centered more on talking about her activities in the present and her life in the Soviet Union before the war. Hence, it is not from habitual references to the war that I draw the conclusion that going through the war is a central story in Agatha's life. It is not primarily through speaking, but through writing and painting that Agatha demonstrates the importance of the war to the telling of her life story.

Two-thirds of Agatha's autobiography, *Footsteps*, describes life in Gnadenfeld before the war. The remaining third speaks of her journey through World War II.³⁵ Written when she was sixty, Agatha's autobiography deals with the first twenty-four years of her life.³⁶ Closing with the end of the war, *Footsteps* reveals the overwhelming importance Agatha gives to the first third of her life, both as a personal statement of who she is and as a historical document.³⁷

Footsteps, as a text, tells more than some of the stories fundamental to Agatha's identity; Agatha's explicitly stated intentions for the autobiography are also telling. Agatha wrote the book for her family to read, as a testament for the questions of future generations. But in the preface she addresses

³⁵Arguably, I could have chosen Agatha's childhood as the central story of her life since she refers to it more often than the war. The war, however, is told as a complete narrative that brought transformation to her life; the war brought Agatha into her religious identity both physically and psychically.

³⁶Agatha's concentration on her childhood and youth can be compared cross-culturally. Robin McGrath, considering Inuit women's autobiographies, writes: "According to Inuit women, it is proper to recall the 'learning years,' to show themselves as children or young girls who make mistakes and accept correction, but it is improper to boast or attract attention as adults" (n.d.:5).

³⁷Agatha begins the autobiography with an introduction to the history of the Mennonites, including a list of the seven points of the *Schleitheim Confession*. She thus exercises "authority" in two ways: she authenticates her story as part of a larger history and writes herself into a history from which she has been omitted.

herself to a wider readership (and to God), simultaneously placing herself as a worthy historical subject while denying any desire to be considered as such by the reader:

Whatever the readers' opinion of me at the end of this story may be, my main concern is how my life stands in the eyes of God. I can only thank Him in all humility for the wonderful way He has led me, for I am no better than the many thousands who perished (*Footsteps* 1982:n.p.).

A tension exists for Agatha in telling the stories of her early life. Her first twenty-four years are what give her a story to tell. Surviving Stalin's collectivization and the bloodshed of World War II makes her a witness to some of the most cataclysmic events in this century. Yet she does not want to claim importance based on survival, because she considers her experience not as difficult as some and finds it hard to reconcile her survival with the extinction of others.

Despite this tension of wanting to tell but wanting to be humble, Agatha keeps telling. When she took up painting, Agatha quickly moved from pastoral landscapes and still-lives to "trying to relate my [Agatha's] story." She painted a number of pictures documenting life in Gnadenfeld and during the trek. The most powerful painting she has shown me is included in the video. In it a brilliant and fiery sunset glows over a panorama showing a long train of wagons coming over a hill, while women and children make a fire to cook their meal outside.³⁸ In expressing herself through both text and painting, Agatha's trek emerges as a dominant story, demanding to be told.

³⁸This painting, entitled "Exodus," was seen by Frank Epp and then used as an illustration in *Mennonite Exodus*, his widely-read book about the Russian Mennonite experience (Epp 1962:360).

The Structure of the Story

The structure of Agatha's war narrative differs from the way she tells stories about her present life or her childhood. The trek is told within a linear narrative form; the plot moves with frequent reference to time and place. On the odd occasion that I interjected a question, Agatha quickly answered it and continued the story. The story demanded getting from one place to another; the action had to continue, and the ending had to be reached.³⁹ By contrast, her stories of life in the present came out as anecdotes without clear temporal reference or a strong sense of forward movement.

The dense and compact form of Agatha's war narrative stood out clearly in contrast to the way she talked about her childhood and present life. In subsequent taped interviews concerning her present life, Agatha's sentences were shorter and somewhat clipped. I had to ask many questions, and she often deflected the conversation back to her childhood or youth. I followed willingly, since she seemed more comfortable and could talk at length about more distant memories.⁴⁰

Not only did her narrative form differ in comparison to stories about childhood or the present, her war story seemed in contrast to much of the

³⁹Lonnie Kliever argues that space must be taken as seriously as time in analysis of story, "Whether we speak of biography, history or ontology, the *places* we were and the *places* we will be are what concern us most intimately and urgently" (1977:554).

⁴⁰The ease with which I followed Agatha's lead highlights a recurrent problem I faced in my conversations with both women. I wanted them to speak from their own memories with their own narrative structures, so I would often follow their trail of stories to such an extent that I lost the moment to ask questions. Fortunately, most of the stories or themes were repeated at later times, so I was given a second chance to ask questions within the natural flow of conversation.

current analysis of women's storytelling. She does not circle back within the story to colour in more detail, as some women do,⁴¹ but instead proceeds within a chronological order.

So the last part of it, well, it wasn't into Poland, it was still next to the border of Poland. It was still in Russia, we travelled by train. Of course we gave up our horses and the cow and everything else, and left a lot of our belongings too, because we couldn't take them. So, we stayed there from the beginning of December. I think it was the fifth of December, until—and I think it was the fifteenth of March, [19]44, when we had to pack up again. And we boarded a train again. And then it seems the Russians had circled us, and it looked like we wouldn't get out.

I remember being very, very upset, because the train wasn't moving in the direction I thought it should be. It moved the other direction. That was the way of trying to escape the encirclement. But we got out and we crossed the Polish border, which was a relief. And we already noticed, even getting into Poland, how different civilization—the clothes that people were wearing and everything—it was so different compared to what we had been accustomed to. And this was where we were deloused in a great big steambath. The clothes were all taken off, taken away, and they were all fumigated I guess. We were sent to camps where they distributed us in different villages, in the so-called Warthegau.

This excerpt is both typical and atypical. Agatha often referred to dates, places, and used "we" instead of "I." She also frequently told the story as if her movement was determined by forces other than herself ("they distributed us"). She does, however, mention her emotions in this passage ("I remember being very, very upset") which is rare in her war narrative. She often told the story from the perspective of a group of people, instead of from her own individual point of view. This way she neither made comments about, nor did she visibly re-experience, her emotional state during the trek.

Where Agatha chooses to end her story, both in her autobiography and in our conversations, reflects what she considers to be *the* historically important

⁴¹For example, see Brown (1991:17) and Bennett (1989:168).

story of her life. In our third interview she ended a long narrative (with very few interruptions from me) this way:

So, that's my flight out of Russia into Germany. And this is where we experienced the end of the war. On this farm. We were of course looking for the rest of our friends and our relatives, and we didn't know where they had gone to. It took a few months until we found out that most of them had gathered around Celle. Celle near Hanover. This Mr. Neufeld that I mentioned in the book, he was there too. He was very active in writing here and there, and contacting people. Bringing members of families back together again and so on. He was really active in that, really helpful.

And then the Canadians like C.F. Klassen—you heard of him—and Sigfried Janzen came. And there was a Mr. Tjart who was a soldier who was interested and helpful in our establishment there. We worked in different places. My sisters, my mother, and I, we stayed here, because we thought it was better to stay here at the farm, where we could get some extra food too, from the farm. And this is where I learned how to spin wool on a spinning wheel. And my mother and I did a lot of spinning because they had a lot of sheep and a lot of wool. And you need socks on a farm, you need all kinds of things. They made blankets of it too. And we spun this wool for the farmers. We got some eggs, flour or butter on top of our rations that we were to buy.

So, now what else?

After talking her way from Gnadenfeld to Germany, Agatha first shifts her focus to the various Mennonite men organizing the emigration of Russian Mennonites to Canada and then to me. What comes after her war narrative is no longer determined by her, but by historical forces greater than her own agency and by my questions. Once she has come to safety, there is no more action to propel the plot, so she positions herself with relation to the men of history and turns to me, the collector of history, to take the next step.

Agatha and the Mennonite Story

Agatha situates herself within the Mennonites from Gnadenfeld as a group to the end of her story. She presents herself as part of a community of people, though she was often travelling with only her mother and sisters.

In retelling her story, Agatha locates herself as a Mennonite, as part of one more version of the epic story of Mennonites always moving, always seeking freedom.⁴² In a self-reflexive moment, while talking about the teachings of Mennonites, Agatha worries that she may have told her story in too exaggerated or individualistic a fashion:

AJ: You try not to tell lies, but then there isn't—and I'm wondering about myself now. I've told you so many things now, whether I was truthful or was some of it imagination? Or did it you know, get more larger in my memory? Was it still true?

But that's life. I hope I didn't overemphasize certain things that maybe...

PK: What kinds of things would you be worried about having over-emphasized?

AJ: Oh, maybe some of our struggles, I don't know. You know when you're in those struggles and you're not alone and the whole group is struggling in the same way, it doesn't seem to be as awful. As if you were all by yourself in all that dirt and all that mud and so on. But everybody was in the same boat, which made it more bearable I think. But when I think back it was just terrible, I wouldn't want to go through it again.

But still, I wouldn't want to go through it, but I still think it was a good school of life. It makes me more thankful for that what I have now.

Agatha has filtered her war experience into a contribution to the story of "we Mennonites." She fashions her story into what folklorists term "memorates." A memorate, as an "embodiment of communal beliefs" (Bennett 1989:167), constructs personal experience in accordance with the expectations and stories of the teller's community. As a memorate of the Mennonite community, Agatha's story demonstrates her internalization of Mennonite myths⁴³ and identity.

⁴²Agatha, unlike Katja, uses the term *exodus* to describe her journey, a term laden with biblical significance and later popularized by Frank Epp's book, *Mennonite Exodus* (1962).

⁴³By "myth" I mean the dominant stories that communicate the values of a culture.

Agatha has actively reconstructed her past through storytelling to make what was a childhood full of conflict between an atheistic government and a faithful mother into the beginnings of a rich life of communal religious identity. She continues to weave more characters and plots into the story as she researches the history of Gnadenfeld and answers letters from Mennonites in the Soviet Union and Germany looking for their relatives. Piecing together her own history, as well as that of other Russian Mennonites, strengthens her sense of being a Mennonite.

A woman who has written two unpublished books centering around the first third of her life, Agatha's desire to tell has not been quelled by her marginality. Despite the absence of women's stories in Mennonite history and the lack of Agatha's strong identification with Mennonites during her youth, Agatha persists in telling her story of migration. Though perhaps not consciously, Agatha enacts a strategy explicated by Rachel Duplessis:

When a writer...oscillates between being a member and a critic of her culture, she can turn to a myth because she can thereby attain a maximum tension with and maximum seduction by dominant stories (1985:106).

In writing her life and the life of her village within the myths of Russian Mennonites, Agatha articulates a woman's voice within the dominant story. Her very action is implicit critique of the gender imbalance of who tells and who is the subject of history, though not framed this way by her:

PK: What prompted you to write that book [about Gnadenfeld] that you did?

AJ: Well, I always loved my home, I loved the people. And in 1987, we got the idea of getting together and having a reunion. We had a reunion in Winnipeg. And it was kind of scary. I wondered how many would turn up, and there were over a hundred people there so that made me real happy about it. We had prepared a program and an exhibition of photos from way back. Old photos. Yeah, I have never shown you those pictures. I have an album

full of pictures of our reunion. And we were together for two days at the [Canadian Mennonite Bible] College. We stayed at the College, some of us.

And then I, for the reunion we were looking for some historical material about our village. And we went through archives and they didn't have much. They couldn't help us. I thought, this was stupid, Gnadenfeld was such an important village, not just to me. In the Russian colonies there were two centers. One was Gnadenfeld and one was Halbstadt. In [18]54 and [18]57 villages were divided amongst them. So, Gnadenfeld was one of the centres. And they had almost no material about Gnadenfeld. So, I thought, this has to be remedied.

I looked around amongst these 104 Gnadenfelder that were there and there was no one who I could see who would do something like that. I said to my husband, "We cannot wait, because the people who still remember are passing away. We have to do it right now." And this is what I did.

In telling the stories of her life in the Soviet Union and during the trek, Agatha situates herself primarily as a Gnadenfelder and a Mennonite. She redresses the blanks in history from the vantage point of place and religion, not gender.

Agatha's primary locus of identity in her writing is not that of a woman. Nevertheless, I choose to concentrate on her experiences as a woman. I believe Agatha does not put the same energy into telling the rest of her life after the war precisely because she is a woman. She is a legitimate historian when recovering the past of her village and the story of God's steadfastness in her life because no one else is stepping forward in her place. Stories of struggling for communal identity and surviving through God's steadfastness are safe and worthy topics to take up.

The stories of a wife and mother learned in herbology and active in churchwork, however, are not the makings of gripping narrative, at least as it has been constructed in both the Mennonite and wider androcentric accounts of history. Agatha is seduced by and uses the seduction of the dominant story: triumph through disaster with the assistance of God and men.

As witness and victim of the pain and destruction of the war Agatha feels compelled to write her story into common history. As wife and mother she stops feeling the need to document her life. Perhaps, however, it is her status as wife and mother—as a woman who has taken on acceptable roles after chaos—which gives her an inchoate permission from her community to tell her story, albeit by public and somewhat distanced historical writing and painting.⁴⁴

Katja's Story of the War

Unlike Agatha, Katja refers often to her experiences during the war. Once, as we sat in her kitchen, she remarked, "Everything is a souvenir. Everything is a memory. You never forget." The war recurs daily in Katja's memory, but she talks to very few people about these deeply embedded and painful memories. Some days, after four and a half hours of travelling into another time with Katja I slowly fell from being enthralled by her stories into a low, low depression. Unable to respond to any human contact or to trust myself to behave appropriately within the university walls, I worried that it would be impossible to hold back my tears and analyze.

Every time I visited Katja, from the moment I arrived in her house till the moment I left, she gave me a constant stream of stories and images. During this inexhaustible retelling of her life, I felt like I was soaking up her history through all of my pores. Katja has overflowed to me. She trusts me,

⁴⁴Agatha has sold many copies of her Gnadenfeld book and many of her paintings but insists that her autobiography is only for her family to read.

she says, based on her sixth sense. The bitter fruits of her trust are these chapters, which expose stories she has carefully kept hidden.

Katja's war story, like Agatha's, has a beginning and an end. During our first taped interview, after about an hour of talking uninterruptedly about the war, Katja gave a cursory beginning to her life in Canada. She closed her story this way:

I wanted to be a Mennonite. Of course, my aunt told me then all about the parents and the forefathers. And I thank the Lord that I found the place and I became a Mennonite, and I believe. And that's about all, Pamela, that I—I don't know whether you can use any of this or not.

Similarly to Agatha, Katja ended her story with her arrival in Canada. The life that she thought was important (and possibly the life she thought I was looking for) was a devastating litany of stories about "looking death in the eye" again and again, and being slowly convinced of God's protection.⁴⁵

Katja encapsulated the story of her life within the first twenty years of her existence. What came after did not fit into this tale of destruction, pain, and terror. Katja's life in Canada is forever engaged in the impossible task of making sense of her youth. Katja has not turned to writing or painting to bear witness to her experiences in the public way chosen by Agatha. Katja carefully guards most of her stories about the war. She does not like what has happened when people have heard parts of her story:

I don't want my story told as if I am an important person because of my experience. Some people they make my story sensational. They say "Oh I wish I had a story like that." I don't like that. It's something I lived through.

⁴⁵The risk that these women's stories are more compelling because of the suffering they have gone through, and because of the importance given to their suffering since it took place within an event given great historical significance in our culture, remains a troublesome issue for me.

Despite her desire to keep her story away from the distortion of other people's retelling, Katja wants to tell.

Caught in the same bind as Agatha, Katja does not want to seem arrogant for talking about herself, but she does want to talk about her life. In effect, though her self might not be a worthy topic of discussion, she feels the painful events of her life deserve documentation.⁴⁶ This differentiation between self and events is problematic and produces tension.

Katja's self is *not* separate from the events she has experienced, as her unwillingness to reveal herself by talking about certain events shows. But it is only by creating this differentiation that she can speak with authority about her life without worrying about undue egoism. Katja knows she has lived through experiences that make an incredible story. She also knows the pain of being marked as a woman with a past.⁴⁷

The Structure of her Story

Katja's account of the war shares a sense of forward movement with Agatha's; she overlays the disorder of war with the order of time and place.

⁴⁶Though Katja has not publicly documented her story, she did tell me of sitting down alone one Sunday afternoon to tell her story into a tape recorder. She feels an urge to record her experiences, but does not take this urge to the same extent as Agatha. Katja's stated reticence to talk about her experience, however, does not seem to affect her willingness to tell me all sorts of stories.

⁴⁷Robin McGrath points to an interesting twist on the legitimizing power of "incredible" events for Inuit women's autobiographies, "Quite a number of reminiscences by female artists and leaders record a miraculous recovery or escape-from-death as a turning point in their lives, and in many cases it would appear that the male parent--who is the only person with more authority over an Inuit woman than her husband--has given permission for that woman to put herself forward" (n.d.:15). In some ways I am the person who has given Katja permission to put herself forward.

During our first taped conversation Katja provided what would more aptly be phrased a monologue. As she spoke, I rarely interjected, and the times I did were to clarify confusing details of her account. Peppered by changing dates, weather conditions, and place names, her telling of her journey advances with urgency. Katja says she can recall such details because she kept a diary. The diary was lost near the end of the war, but its contents are emblazoned on Katja's memory. Listening to Katja speak about the war often seems like hearing her read pages from a diary. She delivers a recitation of detailed patches of story not always coherently related:

But on the way, when I left my mother and brothers and sister, going toward Berlin, the guerillas cut us off. And we were amongst one of the, at the time, biggest fight. The Germans fought the Russians. The Germans fought on the ground, the Russians came with airplanes. The town was Gnesen. I had a diary, where every day was written down. And we were all encircled. And the Germans had put mines around the whole city. And just when we were getting out through the city, because the Russians came from behind, and women were running and children were screaming and soldiers were shot. The—we crossed through the city. Before we even got to the city, all these people that were on the trek, that were fleeing, the Russians came down and shot them. They mowed them away. They were just screaming. The fields were full. And so, we just kept running. There were two friends of mine, girls, and a teacher. And he knew, because he had turned through there, how to get through the city. Because you could see it was lost. And so he said, "Stop."

Well, let's see. Because the girls got all separated, so the teacher said, "Stop. Let's see if we can find them in this commotion." And it didn't take long. We found—two girls came. There were three of us, and the teacher. Then the mine went off, blew up, in the city. And at that time, I must say this, we were still on a wagon that had the groceries and stuff for the school. Because I was good with horses I was always stuck with the wagon, or driving. And so we stopped with the wagon, and the teacher was going to see where the girls were. And at that time, the mines exploded around the city, and I found myself way out in the field, with the blast. It was right behind the wagon that I drove. One horse was killed, the other one was injured. And so I crawled back, and everybody called my name all of a sudden. So, the teacher had found the girls and I.

Katja repeatedly circles back within her narrative, filling in details that radically alter the scene set in the preceding sentences. First she is running, then on a wagon, then hurled into a field by a bomb. First she is with two

girls, then just with the teacher (who was her husband), then crawling back alone looking for them. Her storytelling is chaotic, mirroring the chaos she is describing.

The repetition perhaps serves another purpose, however. Functioning as what Gillian Bennett calls "delaying tactics," Katja's circularities are

an effective rhetorical tool. They underline events by focusing the listeners' attention and making them *wait* for the next piece of action (1989:178).

The onslaught of ghastly and gut-wrenching images is too painful both to tell and to listen to. The circularity confuses the scene momentarily, perhaps finally intensifying the horror. Katja never cried while telling her story. Tears came to her eyes and her voice cracked, but the motion of the narrative always pulled her along, dragging her through memories to the end of the story that we both knew had to come.

Perhaps it is this unrelenting motion which renders the patchwork quality of her war stories more linear and immediately comprehensible than her stories about childhood or her present life. Often, while listening to Katja's stories about her present I never knew quite where they were going. Sometimes, through a wide looping and weaving of plots and characters, her stories came back to where they started and she made one central point. Sometimes the stories would come out following one on top of the other. I would become confused and frustrated, feeling that she might be trying to cover up silence, or trying to cover up the question I had asked her or the question she had asked herself.

Despite my initial confusion, however, I eventually understood what Katja was trying to tell me. Katja's roundabout style is echoed by other women storytellers. Karen Brown describes her encounters with Mama Lola's storytelling style this way:

Each story has a theme—better, a refrain—with which she opens and to which she returns time and time again as the story is woven, never in a simple logical or chronological fashion. Each time the refrain is repeated, it signals a new attempt to tell the story. Each attempt seeks to capture that story whole. Yet none succeeds, because the connections, the meanings, and the layers of possible interpretation are too dense to be caught in a single telling (1991:17).

Even after our taped conversations, Katja often began stories with a reference to the war. One time when we were about to eat dinner, Katja commented on how there was no bread during the war, only potatoes. This opening refrain brought on another story which told of her war experiences yet again.

Katja's recurrent stories about the war come in what I call "resurgent blocks." Drawing from Gillian Bennett's notion of "super-blocks," and Elaine Lawless' roughly paraphrased addition, "emergent blocks,"⁴⁸ I see Katja's repetition of her war stories as an unremitting attempt to work through her pain. Resurgent blocks, as repeated efforts to tell the same story, are a way to elaborate, make sense of, and mourn a story over time.

Allowing the storyteller more complexity and the listener more glimpses of the teller's identity, resurgent blocks also allow for more confusion. Even in telling her story within resurgent blocks, I doubt that Katja can find closure or resolution to her memories. As she articulates more facets of her story, the

⁴⁸Super-blocks are used to "repeat or reframe the central action in successive layers" (Bennett 1989:171). Emergent blocks are parts of a woman's life story which "represent a working out of a woman's identity" (Lawless 1991:50).

scope of her experience grows vaster, and the pain of it grows deeper. Katja knows the ultimate inadequacy of stories to convey her experience. She said, that same night at the end of the story opened by the potato reference, "I can't ever describe it to you, Pamela, the horror."

Katja and the Mennonite Story

Katja does not identify herself as a Mennonite when she talks about her childhood and youth. Since she did not grow up with Mennonite education or practice, this fact is not surprising. But even in retrospect she does not try to mold her story into a part of the larger Mennonite story. Compared to Agatha, who often retrospectively situates herself as part of Mennonite history, Katja makes "I" statements much more than "we" statements. Katja tells her story as a girl or woman without any links to others:⁴⁹

I had looked death so many times in the eye. And every time I was spared.
But I also was desperate. I wanted to die, because I didn't have anywhere.
I was alone in the world among strangers.

During the war, Katja was dislocated from all whom she knew: her family, her classmates, her husband. Most of the time that she was running through the war she was pregnant and alone. She was not with a group of villagers from the Mennonite colonies, nor did she meet up with Mennonites in an organized way once in Germany. Katja was identified as a Mennonite only through an active search by the Mennonite Central Committee. She could have easily

⁴⁹ In a sample of both women's transcripts, Katja's ratio of first-person singular to first-person plural statements is two times that of Agatha.

remained in Germany but for the conflict with her husband and her desire for a better life for her son.

Before she came to Canada, Katja had a stronger identity as a German than as a Mennonite. She did not even use the word Mennonite in our first taped conversation until she spoke of meeting some Mennonites in Germany. Her subsequent involvement with the Mennonite community, her initial rejection and her lingering estrangement have not led her to recast her experience as part of the Mennonite story.

Where Agatha writes and tells her life as a memorate in continuity with the Mennonite story, Katja concentrates on the individuality of her struggle. Perhaps because she does not speak from the safety of the conventional domestic role as wife, Katja has not received tacit permission from the community to publicly tell her story. Instead, her license to speak emerged in our interaction, thus making her story (and my experience of it) more volatile and raw than Agatha's. Instead of aligning her story with the Mennonite myth, Katja remains silent in the community. She suffered alone and the story is hers.

God and War

The war was a time of transition in which God became an actor in the lives of Katja and Agatha. Agatha's faith, already planted in her by her mother, grew during the war so that when she arrived in Germany she chose to be baptized. Katja, who had few religious sensibilities in her early life,

found herself praying to God in her most fearful moments of the war and feeling that God was saving her from death.

Agatha does not describe her realization of faith as an abrupt event:

Christianity has meant a lot to me. I cannot say of a date when I was reborn or whatever you want to call it. I think I just grew into it. I always believed in prayer.

Agatha points to no dramatic or climactic conversion episode in her passage through the war. But she does note that her experiences during the war led her to baptism:

PK: What most influenced you to get baptized, do you think?

AJ: The impulse? Oh, I guess I wanted to be obedient. Because, that's not a matter of being saved or not, whether you're baptized, it's not that important. But it says, "*So du glaubest und gelauft wirst, dann wirst du selig.*" If you believe and be baptized, you'll be saved. So, and I believed by that time, after all the experiences I had gone through. I knew that I wanted to believe, and I read my Bible and so on. And I thought it was just a matter of being obedient.

God had been working in her life, Agatha felt, and it was time to recognize his power.⁵⁰

For Katja, faith came more abruptly, at least initially. With little experience of prayer and even less of God, watching fleeing refugees massacred by Russian tanks brought Katja to pray:

So, it was January the 18 and it was the middle of the night. And it was very, very cold. Snow was—we went just about knee deep in snow. And we went on the road going toward Posen, capital of Warthegau. And so we said let's take that direction. Just going by the moon and the stars. There was a collection of soldiers, wounded soldiers, children, parents, mothers, men. Everyone that was fleeing. The road was just crowded. And so we kept walking, not know how far, just direction to Warthegau. And all of a sudden, the sound of approaching military. It turned out they were—it sounded, you know, when you are outside, and there was a big forest ahead of us. And the echo came the wrong direction. What we thought, the German troops would come and save us. They call it *Nachschup*, like bringing help to the ones that were fighting, but the fight was over. And, so, what we thought, we'd get help from the front. It was the Russians coming from behind us. And they had the big T-34 tanks. Stallion tanks, what they call. And they were so wide

⁵⁰I use the masculine pronoun because this is how both Agatha and Katja identify God.

the German roads couldn't take them. So, they took more than the road, and they plowed over all of us.

So, few were saved. I know, I ran. Everybody ran in different direction when we saw behind. You know, we were ahead of them. And I ran into the bush, or forest. And the snow was up to the hip. Deep snow, more or less crawled. And all of the sudden the sound had disappeared. They had gone over. You heard off and on moaning and I thought, "Which way do I go now?" because I was all by myself. So, I started to crawl in the snow. And I came to the road. And there was a man standing, and he didn't move. And I said to him, "Don't you want to go on? Don't you want to go, like save ourselves, just in case?"

He says, "These were the Russians." He says, "No, I won't move." He said, "That's my wife on the side, and those were my two children." And it was just a mass of flesh and blood in the snow.

So, I started to shiver. I started to walk by myself. And I found myself just going, one direction. I looked at the star. And in school we learned that when you see the northern star and you know to the left is west and to the right is east. And I want to go to the west. So I looked at the star. But when you are in shock and completely disorientated, that all left me. And, so, I just started out. I hadn't come through the bush yet, when sound came again. And I thought, "Well, this is it, this is it for me." And I stood on the side of the road, in the bush, and all of a sudden I could pray. I prayed and prayed, and I don't know where the words came from. But somehow, I made it, and finally I started to walk....

Katja considers that these prayers came to her from the God of her ancestors, who then led her to safety and continued to "show her the way." Looking back on this experience, she draws a Biblical parallel, one she says she did not think of at the time:

But, I don't know where the words came from. I don't know. I just prayed to some being that had been my grandpa's or great-grandfather's. Mother and Father had enough of that that they taught so I knew there was something, a higher being, that if you pray to, you know? Invisible to me. But somehow the words just came. And I was thinking of David, he did that, you know, when he sinned. He was a shepherd before. And when he sinned, how he prayed to God to forgive him you know. And I guess the words came to him.

I just can tell you really what I prayed for. Like, help or something, you know. Because I was alone.

Though the words came to her, they did not draw her to religion immediately. Katja called on God to lead her, but she was not yet convinced by any

promises of eternal life. At risk of death while being shot at by a plane, Katja was propelled solely by a desire to assert her own identity in this world:

And there was an overpass on the ditch and finally I dashed for it and put my head in the pipe.

And you know, Pamela, my last thought was, I've seen so many people killed and dismembered, that I thought, "Well, I'll save my head. I'm gone now, for sure. I'll save my head." And I put it in the pipe so that when people would find me, they would know who I am. I had nothing with me to say who I am, who I was! But that was my last thought, if they find me, that they would know who I am. And with that, the pilot thought that he killed me.

Katja saw her desperation to save her head—her face (the prime means by which we identify people)—as a fundamental assertion of self. Looking back at her actions, she realized that there was no one who could recognize her. She had no papers and no people to verify who she was. Despite her anonymity, however, her impulse was to save her identity by saving her face.

In a revealing split-second decision, Katja illustrated her need for other human beings to recognize her existence. She could not bear to be unknown by people around her; to be known by a higher being did not seem to be enough. Katja tried to preserve what Jane Flax calls a "core self" (1987:93).⁵¹ By saving her head she tried to ensure that her existence would be remembered. Through telling the story she underlines her aloneness during the war and emphasizes her desire for connection with people who could have confirmed her fragile identity.

⁵¹Flax suggests that the self under attack by post-modernists is a unitary masculine self. She cautions women to think twice about embracing fragmentation, saying, "I am deeply suspicious of the motives of those who counsel such a move at a moment when women have just begun to re-member their selves and claim an agentic subjectivity" (1987:106). Katja's storytelling tries to piece together her fragmented self, not perpetuate the fragmentation.

In her storytelling, Katja often returns to these experiences where her core self was tested—when the fragility of her identity was made plain. In returning to the pain of her experience now, however, she also includes a refrain, which goes something like this, "So, again I prayed and I said, 'Lord, show me the way.'"

Despite her retrospective refrain, too many questions and doubts remained in Katja's mind once she made it to Germany and found that religion did not answer her questions. Speaking of Catholicism she says:

And then when they spray the Holy water on you, and I know darn well that it came from the tap! It was blas—and to me when you search, Pamela, you dig in. It was so instilled in us in the Russian schools that you had to prove everything.

Katja entered into a time of doubting and criticizing God, wondering why he had not let her die when she wanted to, but believing in him enough to search for answers to her doubts.

Agatha portrays continuity as the dominant feature of her coming to faith. Continual growth amidst chaos brought her to Christianity, without leaving any clear and abrupt demarcations of conversion. Katja does not present the same sense of continuity. Prayer comes upon her suddenly, out of nowhere, allowing her to continue struggling to survive. But neither does she speak of dramatic reversals or conversions to religious identity; belief in a providential God is not easily consonant with her experience of death and suffering in war.

According to Margaret Higonnet, "war must be understood as a *gendering* activity, one that ritually marks the gender of all members of a society, whether or not they are combatants" (1987:4). War is ritualized for

men at the battle front and for women on the home front, and even, in the Mennonite community, for men who choose to be conscientious objectors. The war, however, did not have rules or patterns for Katja and Agatha. The war was a turbulent time during which they, as civilian women, had no determined role in the chaos.

As she emerged from the disorder of the war, Agatha felt ready to be obedient: ready to be baptized. Katja took longer to reach this point. She poked and prodded at rituals and beliefs by going to different churches while trying to find a religion capable of accounting for her experience. Both women chose to join the Mennonite church to state to the world they were Christian. But with such choices they did not achieve relief from chaos or pain. Instead of a smooth acceptance into the Mennonite church, the women found an ambivalent welcome from the religion of their ancestors.

The Mennonite Response to Women and War

Going through the war brought Agatha and Katja to the Mennonite church. The MCC, as an arm of the church, helped refugees such as Katja and Agatha to emigrate to Canada and Paraguay. They took a special interest in these Soviet refugees specifically because they were Mennonite.⁵² Once the women arrived in Canada, however, they encountered both compassion and animosity from the men and women in the Mennonite communities they joined.

⁵²Regehr (1991) provides an example of MCC's involvement in the emigration of these refugees.

While many church members were generous to women like Katja and Agatha—helping them find accomodation, inviting them to supper, and orienting them to life in Canada—there were others who spurned the women as displaced people. The church hierarchy also saw the women as structural threats to the community because of their unconventional patterns of marriage and motherhood (cf. Epp 1992a:17). While Agatha and Katja comment on the generosity of the community, they also note certain unpleasant reactions to them, whether because they spoke only German at first, or because they had led uncommon lives.

When I asked Agatha if she ever felt prejudice in the church for being a displaced person she said she felt "sort of" integrated, but within certain limitations:

PK: Did people want to hear about your story? Did they want to know what had happened?

AJ: Umm.

More people of ours would come and we would sort of chum, and visited each other. You feel more comfortable in a group that has gone through the same things.

Katja tells more explicit stories of being rebuffed by family and church members.⁵³ For the refugees to talk about the horrors of war would be painful, certainly, but to talk to people who could not relate and who were judgmental would be even worse.

In addition to the structural threat posed by the women, I want to explore two further possible causes for the ambivalent reception these women

⁵³None of these stories are on tape, but they are referred to in my field notes. I will not try to recreate them here.

received. Mennonites, pacifists by declaration, found it hard to listen to or understand these women's stories of war. They were also made intensely uncomfortable by the links these refugees had with the Nazis.

Despite a history of pacifism, Mennonites have their own share of war stories told in scholarly literature. Most center on the experiences of Canadian Mennonite conscientious objectors in alternative service during the two world wars or on the occasions when Mennonites relinquished their non-resistant ideals.⁵⁴ The protagonists in these stories are men. As Katie Funk Wiebe states, "Because the destiny of the Mennonites revolved around the way sons were involved in [conscientious objection] and not the way women experienced the truth of scripture, women's contribution was not as significant" (Wiebe in Epp 1987:98).

When women did enter the stories, they were silent characters, providing the circumstances for climax through their passivity: would a real man (who was also a pacifist) fight to protect his wife and/or property?⁵⁵ Arguments in favour of violence to protect wives and property gained currency in early twentieth century Russia, leading to the establishment of the *Selbstschutz* (self defence units) in the chaotic and violent Mennonite colonies. Such arguments found their basis not in pacifism but in traditional and gendered arrangements of authority, which saw the defense of women and property the responsibility of men. The *Selbstschutz*, though subverting the

⁵⁴For example, Loewen and Urry (1991); Klippenstein (1984); Hostetler (1990); Keim (1978).

⁵⁵For an example of such a question see Loewen and Urry (1991:41).

radical peace stance of Mennonites, supported traditional gender arrangements, participated in by both women and men.

Perhaps the support of gender arrangements partly accounts for why the study of the *Selbstschutz* is undertaken with more energy by scholars of Mennonite history than is the study of women's experiences of war. There is already open dialogue on pacifism within the Mennonite tradition. Pacifism is an organizing principle of Mennonitism with an obvious and recognized history. Pacifism can be discussed and debated within an identifiable discourse. The construction and effect of gender, however, has not been an issue in most Mennonite storytelling, scholarly or otherwise.⁵⁶

Katja and Agatha tell a different story of war. They were drawn into war without going through a preliminary process of moral decision-making. Pacifism was not foundational to either women's identity. Agatha's story, however, does not include the graphic accounts of violence that Katja's does. Agatha's story tells of distress and suffering, but not with horrific detail. Agatha has turned her story into Mennonite memorate, but Katja has not, perhaps because what Katja has to say about violence and survival would be too hard to hear.

In traversing through war, Katja was affected by seeing and participating in violence. As Jean Elshtain writes about women and war, "Female violence was an aberration, an eruption of not wholly disciplined subjects" (1987:169). Women who have experienced violence are thus marked as somehow

⁵⁶Investigation into the impact of pacifism on Mennonite men's gender identity would make for a fruitful and important study.

irrevocably different. By their victimhood they become damaged goods or by their aggression they become aberrations.

Katja, and to a lesser extent Agatha, tacitly overthrow the safe role of loyal women on the home front as they are forced into the thick of the battle. Agatha tells her story without much reference to her own agency or violence and can thus more easily (though mistakenly) be fit into a non-threatening "woman as victim" plot. Katja, though definitely prey to forces beyond her control, states the possibility of her aggression and action, when in the video she says, "I carried a gun." Her statement shocks, coming from the mouth of a small white-haired woman in a pale pink sweater, but she will say no more.

Mennonites and the Nazis

Mennonites, both in Europe and in Canada, affiliated themselves with National Socialism in various ways. In Germany and the Soviet Union, men joined the SS or the regular army, some by force and others by choice (Regehr 1991:17; Sawatsky 1989:300). Women became translators, administrative assistants, or mistresses for officers in the occupying forces in the colonies (*Footsteps* 1982:65). Canadian Mennonites joined the Nazi party and wrote openly about their political beliefs (Epp 1965:298). Though not a widespread phenomena, Russian Mennonite involvement with Nazism emerged due to a strong identification with the German state and people.⁵⁷

⁵⁷Support for the Nazis in Canada during the 1930s was not only limited to Mennonites or German-speaking people, as Lila-Rose Betcherman details (1975:67).

Native German speakers, and indebted to the German army for saving them from deportation to Siberia, women like Katja and Agatha have a strong German identity. They also have an ambivalent relationship to the Nazis: at once sympathetic and critical. Agatha illustrates her ambiguous position in the retelling of history in which she was linked to the enemy:

AJ: So, but we were still glad to be able to be under the protection of the Germans then. We didn't really know about the Jews, how they were treated. We had heard things here or there, of course we couldn't distinguish between truth and propaganda because we have been fed so much propaganda, Communist propaganda before, so how would we know? Well, we thought German, okay, that's our brothers and sisters sort of, you know? They wouldn't do things like that. But then, we saw signs here and there, that some of it must be true.

PK: What sort of signs?

AJ: Well, one time, and that happened the last winter that we were at home. My sister was playing with her playmates outside in what we call the *Windwehr*, it was actually a hedge to protect us from the winds as I was mentioning before. And there was snow all over and snow on the trees, bushes. And they had made little igloos and things and had fun. There, all of a sudden they had seen a hand sticking out of the snow. And they were scared. They came running home and they told us. And then we found out that the Germans had taken a Jewish lady into the bush and shot her there. And probably didn't—because of the frozen soil and so on—they couldn't really cover her up properly. So, that was a real shock.

So, we found out more things. We were given clothes, used clothes from the Germans. And, we thought they had been collected by the Germans, just like we collect for the benefit shops and so on. I remember one time I was involved in giving out the clothes and helping there. There was a beautiful dress but it was bloodstained. And it was in the chest area. So, we figured it must be clothes that they have taken off the Jews.

PK: How did you deal with that? How did you know?

AJ: It's hard to deal with that. It's very hard. Especially when you expect so much from the Germans. You know, you expect them to come and really help you and be your knight in shining armour. And to be so disappointed. But, you get to the point—see we had fought for our survival for so long. I think you harden inside too. You harden. You try and put things out of your mind, because you're looking for survival. Of course by that time I was grown up.

Agatha eventually washed the bloodstained dress and wore it. After reading this chapter she told me:

You do not throw a dress away if there is some wear in it left in those circumstances. We also were too afraid to say anything. For many years we had been afraid to speak out under the Communists—keeping your mouth shut had become second nature.

Listening to unsettling stories like these is not easy. Empathy for Agatha—a kind woman with an onerous story—becomes more difficult when she is allied with a state perpetrating genocide. But as Annemarie Tröger, writing about German women's memories of World War II, states:

As long as Germans refuse to face the concentration camps, they will not be able to understand their own suffering in the war. This inextricable knot is the barrier to finding a symbolic, that is, a common language to discuss the last war. The problem is not linguistic but psychological: it is the "inability to mourn," attributable to deep, contradictory emotions (1987:285).

As long as Mennonites cannot face their connections with Nazism, the stories of both the men and women who suffered in the war while affiliated with the wrong side will be silenced. The stories of those who profited from the suffering of others, though less palatable, will also be absent.

Women and men who have the courage to speak about their pasts despite the fear of not receiving a compassionate audience do a great service to reshaping what has become a selective collective memory. Tröger continues:

Because the Germans have not been able to work out collectively the experiences of the Second World War, individual memories assume more importance—and become a political force themselves (1987:286).

Agatha and Katja, in speaking about their lives, open a curtain onto the Mennonites relation to Nazism. Both were married to men in the German army, and their stories are strewn with references to German soldiers and officers.

Their stories are not simply stories of oppressed women. These stories are of women who were allied with and rescued by an army and state that

perpetrated genocide.⁵⁸ This makes it much more difficult to view Katja and Agatha as either saints or victims.⁵⁹ Instead, they were women who exercised the powers they had to survive in an amoral and turbulent time. Their survival, a combination of strength, luck, and, according to them, God's help, should be respected, but not revered.

I feel profound unease when stepping back to analyze Katja and Agatha's war experiences *without* reverence. I can never fathom the pain and distress of their journeys.⁶⁰ Equipped with the benefit of hindsight, however, I cannot laud Katja and Agatha for survival, without situating them in their context. Concentrating only on their survival makes these women valid subjects only on the basis of their suffering. Suffering should not become the only basis for the discussion of women's lives; such a discussion would be both ahistorical and misleading. Women exercised power and choice during the war, albeit under severely constrained conditions. Agency and affliction must both be considered.

Joan Ringelheim, in discussing her past work on Jewish women in the Holocaust, writes:

The Holocaust is a story of loss, not gain. After all, most Jews were killed in Europe. In addition, one-fourth to one-half of the Gypsy population was killed.

⁵⁸During the trek the Nazis forced Russians from their homes to provide lodging for some of the Mennonites. Frank Epp writes, "Although their superiority complex blinded many of them to the injustice thus dealt to the Russians, some of the Mennonite refugees also confessed an uneasy conscience and feelings of guilt over this mistreatment" (1962:361).

⁵⁹See Epp (1987:92) for the dangers of portraying Mennonite women as saints. See Elshtain (n.d.:2) for a critique of theories of the "universal victimization" of women.

⁶⁰For a non-judgmental portrayal of one man's World War II experiences that shows the murkiness of morals under conditions of survival see Agnieszka Holland's film *Europa Europa* (1990).

Perhaps two hundred and fifty thousand homosexual men were killed. The list goes on. Even if we can find differences—even if women did maintain themselves better than men—how is this a real gain? We need to look critically, moreover, at the many ways in which women maintained themselves; their strategies were not always positive, and so a most difficult question has to be asked: "what have the victims wrought?" (1985:757).

Asking the difficult questions in trying to understand women's lives evokes grief and pain. In asking Agatha and Katja questions about the Nazis, I did not always receive answers comfortable to hear. They, from their position of fear and privation in the Soviet Union, sought refuge with soldiers and a state that welcomed them and killed others. Agatha comments:

We had no choice. Things around us just happened. Even our flight from home was ordered, not voluntary. But of course we chose what we thought was the lesser evil. We could not have stayed there, the houses were burnt down. Siberia for certain. What about Dresden? It was of no military significance. And many other cities populated by women and children, bombed by the Allies? What about the rapes and killings done by the Soviet army—the ally of the West? The suffering and torture and death of *our* men in the concentration camps? That was very much like genocide. But the Soviets were allies of the big Western powers—who handed a lot of our own people over to the Russians at war's end.

Katja's and Agatha's idea of the enemy is not one common to Canadians. They and women like them, were shot by American soldiers and planes, assaulted by Russian soldiers, and threatened by the British. These soldiers did not bring liberation to Katja and Agatha, they were violent and frightening. The Nazis were evil to many, but they were the liberators of Katja and Agatha.

The ambivalent reaction occasioned by hearing the stories of Mennonite women of the post World War II migration contributes to their exclusion from communal stories. Mennonites are good at lauding their success stories, but not so capable of encountering weakness, according to Steve Masterson, a counsellor:

I have great respect for the Mennonite people but in the last 22 years I have counselled enough of them to know they worship the religion of the strong. They come out of such persecution and incredible loss several generations back that their one goal in life is to never have to suffer like that again. When you deal with personal weakness, that pulls them into an area they don't want to go. To admit that incest and sexual abuse is part of their community and family life would be such an admittance of weakness and there is no way to deal with that kind of trauma both in family and church structure (*Mennonite Reporter* January 21, 1991).

The church structure could not accommodate the expression of the pain of women like Katja and Agatha. Their stories confronted the prescribed stories of what Mennonite women should be. As a result, Katja and Agatha met with equivocal reactions when they joined the community.

War and Story

Agatha has worked to shape her story into a contribution to the larger Mennonite story. As a memorate of her community, her story supports the Mennonite myth of exodus. Her memorate also functions as critique, however, in that it inserts a woman's voice into the chorus. Katja has not made her story public, but continues to tell it within personal relationships. By telling her story in resurgent blocks, she tries to work through in the present the pain of her experiences during the past.

The war was a transitional event for both women. Walking across Europe with the constant fear of death brought them to see God as an actor in their lives. Surviving the war convinced Agatha that she must be obedient to God, who had seen her through to Germany.⁶¹ For Katja, survival brought

⁶¹After reading this chapter, Agatha wrote: "The act of baptism was an act of obedience. I do not consider most of what I do as obedience, but as a desire to reciprocate God's love through Jesus (in His death for me). My "obedience" is not to a tyrant who forces me to do things, but by His attributes and my admiration I *want* to be obedient.

more questions and an ambivalent relationship to God. How could a God who loved let her suffer so much?

Eventually, both women constructed their Mennonite heritage upon coming to Canada. Their chosen Mennonite communities, however, did not so readily claim them. Their involvement in the war and attachment to the Nazis marked them as women who had lived aberrant lives. Their stories stirred up tender elements of the Mennonite community, threatening traditional gender roles and highlighting the Mennonites' historical relationship with the German people. This threat and highlight were extremely undesirable in the wake of the war in North America, a time when women and men were meant to return to conventional gender arrangements⁶² and people held deeply imbedded anti-German sentiments.

The way Katja and Agatha tell their stories of the war is affected by who they are now. Their construction of what is religious about their lives is manifested in their stories filtered through an accumulation of experience. Their stories of war are fundamental to their religious lives. The dark places of their lives—their experiences of war—must be articulated and acknowledged before any understanding of Katja and Agatha is possible.

⁶²See Michel (1987) for an analysis of American women's roles in the family during World War II, a time when "most Americans simply yearned more avidly for the time when the war would end and women would be returned to their proper place" (1987:167).

Chapter 4: Being Mennonite

Katja and Agatha are Mennonites. Being Mennonite permeates the foods they cook and eat,⁶³ the language they speak, the church they attend, and the stories they tell. They both state with confidence, "I am a Mennonite," but in so doing they do not always mean the same thing. In this chapter, I continue my exploration of Katja's and Agatha's religious lives by comparing the similarities and differences in their renderings of being Mennonite. I begin by establishing some of the parameters of my discussion of religion. I then consider their experiences of, and attitudes to, prayer and preaching, in order to understand the private and public dimensions of their religion, and to provide concrete examples for comparison. The chapter ends with a comparative look at the influence of their past stories on their present religious lives.

The Domestication of Religion

Discerning the religious lives of Katja and Agatha requires stepping beyond the ecclesiastical structures which have played a role in shaping them. Understanding their religious lives demands entering their domestic worlds as well—places where their religion is lived out and adapted every day. In their homes, their food is blessed by God, they are watched over in their sleep, and they offer hospitality and love to visitors. In their kitchens and living rooms

⁶³Katja and Agatha both learned to cook traditional Mennonite meals only upon coming to Canada.

they sing hymns, they pray, and they praise and critique their church and community.

Agatha's and Katja's personal experiences of religion, however, are not contained only in the home. They carry their understanding of what it is to be Mennonite into sanctuaries, church basements, hospitals, and shopping malls. Susan Sered, in her work with Oriental Jewish women in Israel, depicts a process she calls the "domestication of religion," which

refers to the personalisation of religion, to the process in which people who profess their allegiance to a wider tradition use the rituals, symbols, institutions, mythology and even the theology of that wider system to address their personal, domestic religious concerns (1988:516).

Sered argues that all people—men and women, lay and specialist—are part of this process (1988:518) and that any analysis of religion that fails to consider domestication is severely curtailed by both ethnocentrism and androcentrism (1988:517).

Sered maintains that women's religious lives are often "expressed in the language of personal relationship" (1988:517). She argues, following Carol Gilligan's analysis of moral development scales,⁶⁴ that the use anthropologists of religion have made of evolutionist models has meant the omission of domestic religion as a subject of inquiry. Women's religious lives have fallen into what scholars have deemed the unsophisticated "little tradition," and have therefore not received as much attention as the more "noble" and "eternal" concerns of men's religious lives (1988:517). In the Mennonite case, men's

⁶⁴Gilligan (1982), in Sered's words, "questions the legitimacy of a developmental scheme in which male moral modes are deemed to be more highly developed than female ones, and in which relationship and care are subordinated to universal rights" (1988:517).

concerns include theology, church structure, regulation of ritual, and public documentation of the community's history.⁶⁵

Sered's description of the domestication of religion furnishes me with a useful perspective from which to understand what being Mennonite means to Katja and Agatha. The process of domestication breaks down what I see as the falsely stringent divide between Mennonite ethnicity and Mennonite religion. Donald Kraybill writes that

a common history, a collective biography, a transgenerational cultural legacy and a shared fate constitute the ethnic glue which fuses Mennonites together above and beyond religious experience (1988:157).

Kraybill includes storytelling as part of this ethnic glue that transcends religion (1988:158). In concert with Sered, however, I argue that by piecing together their own personal stories (mythologies in Sered's parlance) with the stories of the Mennonites specifically and Christianity more generally, Katja and Agatha shape themselves *religiously*, not only ethnically. They describe their religious lives with reference to personal relationships with God, as well as to communal relationships with others, both those who worship at their church and those who do not.

Consequently, it is crucial not to leave religious questions within the walls of the church and its theology. While being with them in church deepens my understanding of what being religious entails for Agatha and Katja, being with them in their homes has introduced me to how Agatha and Katja cook, pray, sing, entertain, and tell stories. In all of this (especially their

⁶⁵This is not to exhaust the extent of the concerns of Mennonite men's religious lives, just to point out the traditional (slowly-changing) gendered division of labour in the Russian Mennonite church.

storytelling), I found clues to who they are as Mennonites. Katja and Agatha are religious women who both sustain and tacitly subvert the dominant stories of Mennonites and Christians through their lives at home, at church, and in the world.

Agatha and Prayer

Agatha says that prayer has always been a part of her life. Growing up without the Mennonite rituals and practices formerly housed in the churches in Russia, Agatha's first experience of religion was prayer. With the shutters drawn and the house in darkness, Agatha's mother lined up her daughters and instructed them to pray. Thanks to her mother, prayer became a foundational practice in Agatha's life, one which she continues to nurture today.

In most of the stories she tells about prayer, Agatha notes its efficacy. Over the years Agatha has learned that God provides for those who ask. Agatha coalesces her earliest memory with the earliest instance in her life of God's answering prayers:

Well, my first memory. My mother said I must have been three years old, because I had—they called it *Rote Ruhr*, which is a kind of dysentery that's infected. And many children had died of it. And I was very, very ill. And I can remember the pain. I can remember how I wanted to eat, and I was afraid to eat because I had so much pain. So, and I remember lying in the living room in the daytime and looking at overhead in my mother's china cabinet. She had some beautiful pieces there, just a few, but I remember there was a doll sitting there. I remember that.

So, I must have been three years old. This was a very difficult time for my parents. They had lost two children already and I was the third one, the third oldest. And at one time they thought I was dead, but I revived somehow, and I survived. But I know that my father being a minister—somebody told me just last year, that he had been at the pulpit with tears in his eyes, asking the congregation to pray for me. So I guess this is why I survived.

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I turned out to be the oldest one in the family. I was actually the third. I had three more sisters, all girls. And my mom and dad had hoped for a boy but there was none. So, that's how it turned out.

Since Agatha was told of her father's life-saving prayer a year ago by a fellow Gnadenfelder, she has woven the anecdote into her memory, turning it into a story echoing many other stories of reward and comfort secured through prayer.

Agatha does not harness the power of prayer only for herself. Her prayers tie her into webs of relationships with others, some family members and some strangers:

PK: Do you feel like you—I remember we were talking at one point about prayer and sort of a mystical aspect of it. When you say that you want God to speak through you, do you feel something when God speaks through you? Or is it sort of more like you just know that God is speaking through you?

AJ: That's amazing. It's so amazing sometimes. I mentioned to you that Teresa my sister-in-law died. She was paralyzed for 53 years from the waist down. She hadn't walked for 53 years. And of course had a lot of difficulties in her life. But she was a very cheerful person. And when we found out that she had cancer, the thought that so much was in my mind that "Oh please God, don't let her suffer too long, don't let her suffer."

And I thought, for her, to go through a lot of pain would be terrible. And I hadn't, I was thinking these things, and I hadn't really prayed much about it, but I have a little box there of little verses from the Bible, and every once in a while I take out a little card and read it. And that day I was so thinking of her, and I pulled out a card and it said, "I'm answering their prayer, before they even prayed it."

That's not the exact words, but that's the gist of it. Like he had answered my prayer before I had even prayed about it. I was moved to tears because it was just like an answer to what was innermost in my mind. And then we went to visit her, and that was two days before she died. Somebody came in and asked her, "Are you in pain?" And she said, "Absolutely not!"

And she was only on Tylenol. So the prayer was answered even before I asked. There is something mystical about it. Of course, mystical, what's mystical? Anything our mind cannot understand, right? That's mystical. But it's still there.

PK: So, I guess believing in God doesn't mean just thinking about it.

AJ: No. It's living it, it's being it. And it's very important to me. More than ever in my life. The older I get, the more important it is to me. And one of the most important things now in my life is that all my children and grandchildren should come to that faith.

That's daily in my prayers.

Like Jewish women who light candles for their relatives (Sered 1988:510), Agatha enacts the process of domestication by praying for her family. She uses the ritual of prayer to direct God to her personal concerns.

Agatha sees God working everywhere in mystical ways not cognitively explicable. The Bible card she picks out carries a deeper meaning when put into the context of her relationship with her sister-in-law, a meaning fully intended by God. The answers she receives to her prayers reinforce her faith and replenish her reservoir of stories extolling the power of God.

Agatha often turned to stories about prayer when trying to convey to me the significance of religion in her life today.⁶⁶ By telling stories, she situated herself within the pattern of interconnected relationships while stating the centrality of God in her life. Praying for her family to share the faith she now holds is one of Agatha's most constant petitions. In personalizing and domesticating her prayer, Agatha becomes a "spiritual guardian" (Sered 1988:509) of her family. Though she does not claim her prayers are unfailingly efficacious, Agatha continues to pray, because she is convinced that it works.

Agatha does not necessarily agree with my understanding of domesticated religion as a substantive part of being Mennonite. She feels strongly that becoming a Mennonite means being baptized and joining a Mennonite church as a member. Accepting a statement of faith and adhering to certain beliefs makes one more of a Mennonite than eating traditional foods

⁶⁶While Agatha admits that answers to prayers do not always turn out the way she would like, she did not tell me any stories about those instances, nor did I think to ask.

and speaking Low German, she says. Though she expresses her religious identity in many informal ways, she places greater importance on the ritualized statement of belief—baptism—as the defining act of Mennonitism (cf. Appendix I).

The older she becomes, however, the more Agatha sees herself growing concerned with *living* her belief in God⁶⁷. With age comes awareness of mortality, and for Agatha this demands certainty of God's love. The conviction that God will grant her salvation is fundamental to Agatha's sense of what it is to be a Christian. Prayer is essential to keeping this belief alive.

Agatha's age plays a part in the image of God in her prayers. While younger Mennonite women are concerned with reimagining God into a genderless or feminine deity (Kropf 1990:345), Agatha is adamant that God as father is the image that makes her most comfortable:

PK: When you pray, who do you pray to?

AJ: Sometimes I pray to Jesus. I mostly pray to God the Father. But that sort of goes into the same thing you know? It's sort of the same thing to me. I can, the same prayer I can talk to both of them. It's not two [beings], it's one. It's hard to understand the Trinity. People think about it and they think it's so difficult to understand. You talk about one God and then you talk about the Trinity. But things can be, have I talked about this?

PK: The water?⁶⁸

AJ: Yeah, the water. So I'd better not repeat it.

PK: So, does it feel that there's a difference even though it's one?

AJ: Yes, I think God himself is so holy, and nothing earthly or sinful can exist before him. Of course, Jesus is holy too. But he stepped in for us. So, it's

⁶⁷Renee Hirschon, working with Greek women, found that with age "the observances of religious life take up more of a woman's time" (1983:123). Cf. Sered (1988:509).

⁶⁸Agatha explained the Trinity with the metaphor of water. God is like water because he is everywhere. Jesus is like ice because he could be held and touched, and the Holy Spirit is like steam because it is an invisible power of great strength.

much easier to refer to him, because he's willing to clean you of all your sins and all your troubles. When you're cleansed by him then you are free to stand before God as a father. He says so in the Bible that if you believe in Jesus and accept him, then I am your Father, then you are my children. And a child can talk to his father.

When speaking of her prayer life, Agatha describes an intimate relationship with a father God. She has well articulated explanations of the Trinity and considers the Holy Spirit to have a special role in connecting her to people in prayer:

PK: How do you feel the Holy Spirit inside of you? I know it's pretty hard to....

AJ: I think the Holy Spirit works through your conscience. Conscience is given to everyone, even non-Christians. They all have a conscience, they all have a feeling for good and bad. Although you can make your conscience be more lenient to certain things and tell your conscience that this is old-fashioned, or not so important. But I think it's through your conscience.

Not only that, I find sometimes when I do things, or even when I pray or when I read or so, all of a sudden a name comes into my mind. And I haven't even thought of this person, but for some reason that name keeps coming up, and then I have the feeling that that's the prodding of the Holy Spirit. This is what I explain to myself. And I think I, most of the time I send up a special prayer for this person, whether this person needed it or not. And very often I found that this person was actually in some kind of trouble and needed some supportive prayer.

Prayer, though most often performed in private, links Agatha to the people around her. The Holy Spirit facilitates connection by sending the names of those in need to Agatha. Praying and supporting others gives Agatha fulfilment. Praying for others is fully condoned by God and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, and conforms to her conscience as a Christian woman caring for others.

Prayer grants Agatha deeper union with God as well as empowerment in her life. Agatha does not express anxiety about fitting herself as a woman

into the Christian tradition.⁶⁹ While some Mennonite women struggle to find text and image in prayer that allows them to remain within the tradition (Schertz 1983:79), for Agatha prayer to a father God does not raise feelings of exclusion. In coming to God in prayer she continues the practice instilled in her by her mother, is cleansed of her sins, and is taken into the arms of her heavenly father:

If it says in the Bible about "him", I don't feel, or even if it says, "all men praise the Lord," I feel included, I don't feel excluded. Men, it's the human race. I never felt excluded. Jesus himself, who was sent by God, it says he was a son. A son couldn't be a woman. And why should he be? I think sometimes the women's lib go too far. They've done a lot of good things, there was a lot of, and there still is a lot of discrimination, and there's still room for a lot of improvement, but we don't have to be so militant. We don't. We should recognize some of the things that men do, certain things we cannot do. And certain things we do, men cannot do. That's the way God has created us, and why should we object?

Agatha does not feel the need to resist the text in order to pray. She accepts the conventions of gender-exclusive language, finding more meaning in masculine images than in women's revisioning of gender and deity. She is not always so disinclined to object to tradition, however, especially when it comes to preaching—spreading the word of the Lord.

Agatha as a Preacher's Daughter

Agatha feels part of the Christian tradition. God is her heavenly father. Jesus died for her sins, and the Holy Spirit guides her in prayer. Her mother provided her with the tools to develop a personal prayer life at an early age.

⁶⁹Riv-Ellen Prell found that women in a Jewish prayer group in California experienced a dissonance between their desire to be part of the Jewish tradition and their relationships to the gender-specific texts and images of that tradition. In order for the women to continue in the prayer group, they had to find ways for "performance [to] resist the text, though not the tradition, and [to] redefine successful prayer" (Prell 1989:274).

What she felt she missed, however, was a grasp of the history of her specific tradition—her Mennonite heritage:

Somehow, with my upbringing, I wasn't even clear what Mennonite meant. Because Mennonite to me was German. See there was no church, there was no education in Mennonite history. I didn't know about all this. I actually found out about all these things here in Canada when I was able to read about it. See had my father lived, maybe he would have educated me differently. But these were things that you didn't really even want to put out and be proud of because you just wanted to be left alone. You just wanted to exist.

Agatha's father had access to realms of knowledge closed to her once he died. Her mother could pass on the practice of prayer and stories about family life in the old days, but it was her father who was theologically trained with a seminary education and aware of his place in history as a Mennonite.

Agatha's father occupies a prominent place in her imagination. He was a preacher, which Agatha mentions often because she is proud of his vocation and because she suffered a great deal in the Soviet Union as a result of being a "preacher's kid." Agatha tells a story about her grandmother's having fervently prayed that her father would become a preacher. He eventually did, going to Switzerland to study. Agatha keeps writing the plot of that story today, by claiming an ancestral connection to preaching the Gospel. She tentatively says that perhaps she is carrying on the aspirations of her father by speaking in church.

The Mennonite church that Agatha and Katja attend is unique. Two services are organized every Sunday morning, the earlier one in English and the later one in German. Older people who emigrated from the Soviet Union in the 1920s or 1940s, including Agatha and Katja, attend the German service and have a say in how services are conducted and who speaks. Despite the

objections of some to women preaching, the team (including a middle-aged minister) which asks people from the congregation to preach the occasional sermon, has asked Agatha to speak five times.

"I Think I Should Be Obedient"

Regardless of objections from men and women in the church to her preaching, Agatha has taken on the mantle of her father's vocation. In trying to establish herself as a competent preacher, Agatha has employed multiple strategies. She has resisted conventional interpretations of Biblical text dictating women's silence (especially 1 Corinthians 14) and has disavowed any assertions of her own power, claiming instead that she is being fully obedient to God's will. She has reread the Bible to find justification for her desire to speak, situating herself firmly in the Christian tradition, while challenging some of its Mennonite manifestations.

In resisting the text, Agatha contextualizes the writings of Paul and performs her own hermeneutics, combing through the text to form her own interpretation. A careful and diligent reader of the Bible (in three languages, German, Russian, and English), Agatha has applied herself to the question of women preachers in the church:

PK: Do you look at the Bible historically, and say well, Paul would have said this because he was living at this time, that was his culture, or do you think that you have to think of it as the word of God and you can't—

AJ: I think the—what your question is⁷⁰—like there are groups of Mennonites,

⁷⁰I had not mentioned women in the Bible prior to this point in the conversation. While Agatha was keyed into my concerns about gender, I think she turned the conversation to preaching at this point because it is a prominent topic for her. After reading this chapter she added, "Because I was still going through intense battles within me at the time. I still am

especially these ones that have come from Russia, ladies who wouldn't go anywhere without a kerchief on, or certain clothes on. And they think of Paul saying that a woman has to cover her head. But he wouldn't have said—yeah and he also said that the man wasn't suppose to cover his head. And he didn't say that to Jews. Had he said that to Jews they would have really been angry at him, because the Jews think differently. A man will cover his head when he goes to pray. So, if he would tell a Jew to uncover his head when he goes to pray, that wouldn't work. So, Paul had to tell these people who didn't come from the Jews, had come from the heathen, because this was their custom. And if the woman had her hair open and uncovered and so on, then she would be a cheap woman or a street woman. That's how they are themselves. So he didn't want them to look like someone from the street. But that doesn't mean that we can't have our heads bared now. Or hair cut and so on. It's just because that was the time. Of course Paul was still a little bit under the influence that prevailed at the time that woman was below man, but Jesus actually didn't treat women that way. There were lots of women that followed him and looked after him and did all kinds of good things and he sent them out, and some of them had preached.

Agatha pulls from the text a Jesus who would support her as a preacher. She states that Paul was affected by the patriarchal climate of the time but that Jesus was free of such influences. She maintains her attachment to Jesus and her tradition, while abjuring interpretations that would forbid the fulfillment of her commitment to Christianity—a commitment demanding that she preach.

In accepting the request to preach, Agatha denies that she is especially gifted or deserving of praise because of her efforts. She says instead that God is speaking through her. Her voice utters his words, her body is just a channel for his message. She does not claim the right to speak based on theological training or a captivating preaching style. She says she relinquishes herself in the delivery of God's message, transforming a potentially controversial act of speech into an act of obedience:

When I feel there is still someone who objects to it, I wonder if I should be up there on the pulpit.

And I resisted it for a long time. But then I wondered, am I listening to the people around me when I resist, or does God want me to be out there? And it came to me that I think I should be obedient here too. If I have something

sometimes."

to say, then I should get up there and say it. And I did it a few times. I prayed to God not to bring what I want to say, but I prayed for him to use me, and to sort of speak through me. And I think he did.

Agatha uses the rhetoric of obedience to convince both herself and the congregation that she is not undermining the structure of the church.⁷¹ Despite the possibility that presenting herself as a channel for God's word could be seen as an even more audacious act than speaking with her own voice, Agatha confidently states her obedience to legitimate her preaching.

In calling on God to use her as a conduit, Agatha enacts the opposite of Sered's domestication. When Agatha's religious life takes on public form she *depersonalizes* it. She wants to detach her preaching from all personal attributes—the way she speaks, her body, and her gender. Her detachment, however, is implicitly buttressed by her role as wife and mother.

Bodies Behind the Pulpit

Some of the objections Agatha encountered in preaching came from older men in her congregation. They conveyed the message to her through her husband, assuring him that it was not *Agatha* as a preacher they were opposed to, it was a *woman* as a preacher. Agatha agrees that men are the ideal preachers; women's bodies are unsuitable behind the pulpit. By wearing make-up and fancy clothing women "arouse men," says Agatha, and keep them from concentrating on the sermon. "A man in a nice suit looks much

⁷¹Agatha's espousal of obedience is mirrored by many Christian women claiming to speak God's word, from Margery Kempe, a fifteenth century mystic (Butler-Bowdon 1954:287) to Sister Connie, a twentieth century Pentecostal preacher (Lawless 1988:85).

better up there," she says. Given the choice, she would rather see a man preaching. But she does not feel that she has such a choice:

And if there were enough men willing to fill the pulpit and do the jobs, I would gladly step back, let them do the preaching. But sometimes I see some lay person on the pulpit and I think, "Well, I wish he wasn't there." Not that—I don't know, maybe I'm sometimes too critical too. But I have never volunteered any preaching. As a matter of fact I was asked a few times before I said yes I would. And I even had a feeling that my husband wasn't very thrilled about it. But after I had done it once he never said anything critical about it. I haven't done it very often, I think, what was it, three times maybe.

Agatha does not want her preaching to be taken as a critique of the patriarchal structure of the church; she is merely filling a void.⁷² Just as when Mennonite women in the Soviet Union took the roles of sermon readers when there were no men around during the German occupation, so Agatha feels it necessary to fill the lacuna she sees in her church.

The Sunday I went to one of Agatha's sermons the church seemed more sparsely attended than previous Sundays I had been there. Agatha wore a skirt and jacket with a blouse that covered her neck well: she sat on the stiff, high-backed chairs behind the pulpit together with the worship leader while she waited for her turn to speak. She told of how Jesus is the only door through which one can pass to heaven. This is the message that Agatha wants to sound louder than the effect of her body behind the pulpit: people must be more "secure in their beliefs," they must be convinced of their salvation.

⁷²Sister Alma, a Pentecostal preacher, echoes this defence, "If you men will do what God wants you to do, we women won't have to!" (Lawless 1988a:42).

Preaching, Prayer, and Connection

Agatha wants to assuage the fear of death by telling people about God's forgiveness for those who are saved. She considers it important to evangelize, though she avers that she does not coerce anyone.

AJ: I never force religion on anyone who doesn't want it. We just talk family and our problems and so on.

PK: So, do you feel it's part of your duty to talk about religion to people, or how does that....

AJ: Jesus says, "Go ye into the world and preach the gospel." And that's not just for the disciples. When you're a Christian you are actually a disciple and you should really preach. And he also says, "Don't throw the pearls before—" how does it go, "*Man soll die Perlen nicht vor die Säue werfen.*"

PK: Cast pearls before swine.

AJ: Yes. So you have to be careful there. Some people who are so opposed to it, you shouldn't even try.

When she visits elderly and sick patients in the hospital as a "befriender," she takes her message of salvation to those people she feels need it most. Agatha feels that God speaks through her when she is at the bedside as well as when preaching. While she justifies preaching with reference to obedience, Agatha feels no need to legitimate her role in the hospital. She is playing a nurturing, maternal role, one consonant with her identity as a woman.⁷³

As preacher and befriender Agatha reinforces her connection to others. Her desire to speak is motivated by concern for the well-being of those with whom she is in relation, both family and strangers. Through storytelling, Agatha connects her preaching in the church to her work in the hospital:

PK: What did it feel like when you were preaching. Did you feel like you were doing something rebellious?

⁷³See Lawless on women preachers who adopt a maternal strategy in delivering sermons (1988a:145-165).

AJ: No. I had prayed to God to speak through me, and not to let me say my own things. And I want the honour to all be his, not mine. And that's how I feel about it. If people come up to me and say, that was a good sermon, I feel very uncomfortable. I wish they wouldn't say that because it wasn't my—I just think it was God doing through me. I think I want to tell you something what happened last week in the hospital.

I—you know I go and visit people. And I came to this bed, and there lay an old woman that I had never seen before. And I could see that her eyes were sort of blank, one was closed. And I wasn't sure whether she was in a coma or not. But I called her name and she reacted immediately. And then I introduced myself and she says, "I'm Jewish." And I say, "That's fine, I visit with Jews too."

She says, "I want to change my religion." And that sort of took me back a little, and I thought, "Oh boy, how am I going to handle this? Am I going to make a mess out of this?"

I had to send a little prayer to God, "Help me, speak through me, because I don't know what to do now."⁷⁴

Agatha's intimate bond to God through prayer facilitates her ability to speak, both in church and in the hospital.

To explain the significance of both prayer and preaching in her life, Agatha turns to stories. Stating her beliefs is not enough. She needs recourse to plot, dialogue, and the specificities of characters to draw a full picture of her religious life. In learning about her religious life, I have come to know a cast of characters drawn from church, family, and people outside of these two environments. Agatha's prayer and preaching bring her connection to others and to God, and she needs stories to relate this connection.

The Mission Circle

The mission circle is a quilting group at Agatha's church, comprised mainly of women who came from the Soviet Union. The women make quilts and blankets for the Mennonite Central Committee and for private customers.

⁷⁴The rest of this story can be found in Appendix I.

Any money earned from the paying customers goes to charity. Agatha leads the group in prayer and Bible study. At the meeting I attended, Agatha took a break from quilting to read from the Bible. She read a passage in English and then gave an exegesis in German. The other women kept quilting, their eyes on the fabric, not looking at Agatha while she spoke. Agatha asked for questions at the end, saying, "Don't leave me all alone up here."⁷⁵ Two people made comments, to which Agatha responded. When there were no more questions, she asked them to pray.

In turning to pray, Agatha commanded the women's full attention, at least outwardly. Their hands stopped moving as they laced their fingers together and bowed their heads. Agatha said a prayer, the women sitting still with their eyes closed. Once she finished, their hands opened up, picked up the needles, and pounced back onto the quilt, moving the needles like they were part of their fingers.

Compared to women's religious lives in other cultures, Mennonite women did not seem to have a distinct realm in which they have their own power over ritual and connection to the divine—a connection more public than prayer. There is no equivalent of spirit possession (Brown 1991) or trance (Kendall 1985) practised publicly by religious specialists for the benefit of members of the community. The mission circle, however, is a public place

⁷⁵It seemed (and Agatha suggested) that the women did not have as many questions as usual because I was there with my video camera, making their Bible study into a more widely public event.

where women gather together under their own auspices and perform work that binds them together and links them to a wider community.⁷⁶

Quilting is both a social activity and a means to perform acts of charity and ministry. As Marlene Epp writes:

For many women, the sewing done in the context of women's groups was, and is, a form of ministry, one of the few avenues in the church for a woman to visibly exercise her spirituality and desire to "minister" (1987:100).

Making blankets for the MCC to distribute to Third World countries and quilts for the MCC relief sale allows women a personal sense of ministering, without placing them in dangerous and exposed public positions. The quilts are sent to the public place, the auction, and are sold for thousands of dollars. There the art is mostly anonymous, the artists nameless, as though somehow signed artwork would be too blatant a recognition of their contribution, work, talent, and art. It is left for the buyers to gain fame and recognition for their purchases.⁷⁷

Agatha says that she actually does not enjoy quilting very much but does enjoy the chance to talk with other women in the church. Agatha took the opportunity of the mission circle for a different kind of ministry: to provide a time for the women to listen to and discuss God's word. By initiating a Bible study in the mission circle, Agatha felt she could add

⁷⁶Hirschon notes that increased religious practice often takes older Greek women out of the domestic sphere and into public places like cemeteries and neighbouring parishes, thus concluding that "the public realm is not one of exclusive male activity" (1993:118). Perhaps a revisioning of what is public and private space is also necessary to understand Mennonite women's religious lives. A place like the mission circle is public even though men are not around.

⁷⁷See Fry (1990:3-13) on the anonymity of African-American quilters, and Lippard (1983:32-43) for an analysis of how the folk art/high art distinction has rendered women's quiltmaking anonymous.

spiritual depth to the meetings. She felt that in addition to doing good works, women must ponder their faith, and ruminate on the Bible.

Agatha brings her prayer and preaching into many circles in her life. She feels strongly she has a message to convey, and goes through many trying and uncomfortable situations to pass it on. Even though some people may not always want her to be speaking, Agatha is compelled by her commitment to do so.

Katja and Prayer

Katja describes her mother as a prayerful and devout woman. She does not, however, tell stories about specific incidents in which her family turned to prayer in a crisis. Instead, she remembers learning to say grace and a prayer before bed. She remembers wondering why she had to recite certain prayers instead of praying in her own words.

The most memorable effect prayer left with Katja from childhood is fear of losing her mother:

And the same in school. We were asked, "Do you pray?"

"No." We would deny it. Because we still had mother. And if they would find out that we did things that was forbidden by the Communists, then my mother might go, you know. So, this was instinct, more than anything else.

With the subsequent stories Katja heard from her sisters and brothers long after the war, she learned to think of her mother as a religious woman who succeeded in gathering her children around her through the power of her prayers.

Despite her altered perception of her mother—from a vaguely religious to a devoutly faithful woman—Katja does not retell her childhood as being one infused by God's presence. She feels a certain critical mindset was instilled in her at a young age, and this criticism runs deep:

I just know there's a higher being. There's a higher being. God who is, well, invisible, who's invisible. And nobody ever has seen him, so there's things. And that brings me back to childhood. Religion. When you're brought up from small on, a child believes whatever it's taught. You know, the fairy tales. What comes from the family or whoever it is. They don't question it either. And as they grow up they're so familiar with everything. And those questions that I have as an adult, they would never question probably.

But don't forget, I was brought up without religion. I mean, sure my mother and father would have probably taught us, but it was forbidden. And so, being—having had high school education, high education, and if you know you can figure out the result by algebra, by numbers, or geometry, you know, you prove things, and you get your answer. So, and then all of a sudden saying this is, you know, someone else has done all that and knows all that, that's entirely different.

And as an adult I guess you question more anyway.

Despite the inherent suspicion of things unverifiable implanted in her through education in communist schools, Katja has grown to trust prayer as a path of communication to God. Through prayer she gives thanks for her survival, gains comfort, and makes supplications for God's help.

Katja has confidence in the efficacy of prayer, as does Agatha. Her experiences during the war are her foremost example of God's responding to those who petition. She feels that God gave her the words to pray and then led her through the war to safety. Though Katja now prays that her child and grandchildren will come to her faith, most of her stories about prayer centered around her own personal experience of prayer, especially during the war. Katja may very well pray often for those around her, but she does not tell stories about doing so, and she does not explicitly establish prayer as a means

of connection to others. Prayer, for Katja, is a profound and deep link to a God who protects and listens to her when no one else can or will.

"Between You and the Lord"

Katja is not concerned with providing detailed explanations of herself on theological grounds. She does not elaborate trinitarian doctrine or attribute different powers to the Holy Spirit, Jesus, or God:

PK: When you pray, who do you pray to?

KE: To Jesus.

PK: So, do you notice a difference between Jesus and God and the Holy Spirit?

KE: No, no, no, no, not really. To me that's all one. If I might say, well, if I speak in English I say "Lord, dear Lord." Whoever is meant by "dear Lord." Because the Holy Ghost and God and Jesus are one. I don't know why we differentiate. But then that was the Old Testament and then Jesus came and he changed, many things changed, you know. So, but I usually am—when I pray in German, "*Gott, lieber Gott.*" You know? That's the way I go. I will not necessarily say "Jesus." Sometimes I say that. Because to me it's all the same. I will never mention Holy Ghost because, I don't know why but as I say, they emphasized the three are one. So, whatever I mention at the time.

Just as Katja does not spend much time choosing the name of the divine she prays to, she is not much concerned with its gender. She accepts the conventional names of God, Jesus, and Lord, and accepts the conventional gender of male:

PK: Has it ever been discussed in your church, the idea as God as feminine, or God—

KE: No. Not to my knowledge.

PK: What do you think of that? Have you ever thought about that?

KE: Of sex? Never. I would say male. I mean if someone asked me directly, because...I would say male. It's a super being, super human being. So nobody has seen whoever. Nobody can prove. I mean, why the issue comes up, whether it's a female or a male or black or white or whatever. I don't think I ever even thought of it that way. Never entered my mind.

Though the gender of the deity she draws sustenance from is not a cause for much contemplation, gender is not a concern altogether absent from Katja's religious attitudes. Katja's status in the church has been profoundly shaped by her gender, especially by the ways she has lived a life contradicting prescribed gender roles.

Katja describes her relationship to the Lord⁷⁸ during the time of her baptism as a personal connection which gave her strength to stand up to the pressures and prejudice she felt in the Mennonite community. Establishing herself with respect to Christian theological beliefs is not as important a task for Katja as it is for Agatha. Katja now turns to Jesus in a personalized way, for validation of who she is and what she has experienced.

Katja depends on Biblical texts to intensify her bond with Jesus. Dr. Krupka, the German evangelist who succeeded in convincing the pastor and deacons to baptize Katja, told her the story of the adulterous woman (John 8:3-11) to encourage her. Katja found meaning and solace in Krupka's analogy. Identification with the adulterous woman allowed Katja to feel she would not be condemned by Jesus once she had asked for forgiveness. Her internalization of the story also gave her the strength to know that men in authority are not always legitimate judges of the lives of others. In this instance, Katja took a biblical story, with the help of Krupka, and applied it to her life, thus resisting those who usually interpreted the Bible for her.

⁷⁸Katja used the three terms Jesus, Lord, and God equally often in our taped conversations.

Dr. Krupka's authoritative and learned perspective on her situation also led Katja to a very personalized relationship with Jesus. During the time when Katja was encountering resistance to her desire for baptism, she felt Jesus was on her side:

And I thought, if I straightened out everything with Jesus, then I was okay. So, they sort of didn't want me, you know? That's the way I felt.

Reflecting upon that time, Katja sees that her relationship to the Lord was affirmed. When the community was not supportive, God was:

Sometimes when I think about all these things and I thought, well, I still come to the basic, what's in you, what's between you and the Lord, people don't matter.

Once Katja took the step of asking for forgiveness, she could not see why others would not follow the lead of the Lord and accept her despite her misfortune to be an unwilling single mother.

"A Woman Didn't Go to Greece"

Though Katja is not preoccupied with identifying the gender of the God she prays to, when it comes to preaching, gender is a deciding factor for Katja's preferences. When it comes to hearing the good news, Katja would much rather listen to a man.

When Katja draws from biblical texts to resist the rejection of the Mennonite church, she draws Dr. Krupka, the evangelist, into the story. He lends the telling some weight, as he no doubt also lent credence to Katja's desire for baptism. When invoking biblical passages to explain her reaction to women's preaching, however, Katja takes the text into her own hands, and refers to the Bible directly:

KE: On the pulpit, yeah. Well, I can't have the right words for that. Because nowhere when Jesus was on earth do you ever hear of any woman—you know, times are quite different, or changed—but you never heard, not a prophet, not anyone. But they were all men, not women, even though Lydia was the first Christian. And her life showed that she was sort of a leader because women, you know, gathered there. But nowhere is there anywhere where a woman should be on the pulpit.

PK: You were saying something before too about, people who, preachers having studied and so therefore they had more authority to speak.

KE: What?

PK: Preachers had studied? Had studied theology and stuff, so they....

KE: Well, that was at a time when I learned to read the Bible. And they were teaching and I started to go to church all the time. In those days, mind you, this is so many years ago, a woman didn't go to Greece and study the scrolls and whatever needed. It was usually a man that seemed to be able to, you know, learn more. And I would take their word almost like gospel, what they explained.

Mind you, you soon get to know who's a good speaker. Not necessarily a preacher, who—there's professors that can't tell you, they know it but they cannot express themselves to teach their students the right thing. They just can't, they don't know how to teach. And it's the same with pastors, with preachers. They might know, but they're not good speakers. And so there's a difference in get[ting] it to the congregation and show[ing] them. And all I was after, to learn and I've—well at that time there were just men, and preaching. So, maybe I should change my mind and say women can do the same which I am sure they can. They know. Their knowledge is probably just like that, maybe even better. But somehow, it's just my attitude, my belief. I don't say they have no right to do that, no I can't do that. But, my, my belief is I don't like to see that, that's all.

Preachers provided Katja with access to the Bible. They taught her through catechism and sermons when she first arrived and provided her with the stories and framework to understand her wartime experience in terms of God's will.⁷⁹ When coming to a decision about which church to join, Katja chose the Mennonite church for its simplicity:

PK: What was it about the simplicity, like why simplicity?

KE: There wasn't—well first of all, the minister talked in ordinary words. He—the way he read the Bible, and he would explain the way he understood it, and naturally you knew that he had studied somewhere religion. That he

⁷⁹See Katja's reference to David in chapter 3.

knew more than I did. And then the surroundings, and the people. They, you know—mind you at that time, everybody wore hats. Now that to me didn't matter. But, as I say it was simple. There was no Holy water sprayed around, or altar boys, or anything. The choir were just, you know, that. That's what I meant under simplicity.

Katja made her decision based on the simplicity of the rituals in the church. There was none of the flair of the Catholic church she so feared, and the preachers provided just what she wanted: plain-speaking, well-educated conveyors of the gospel.

Katja did not make her decision only on the basis of beliefs. She also chose the Mennonite church because it could offer her what she could accomodate within her suspicion and doubts of religion: simple preaching that took place in more of a classroom than a theatre. Going to a Mennonite church educated her in the religious tradition she had missed as a child, and accorded with her culturally instilled distrust of elaborate ritual and religious flashiness—a distrust shared both by Communists and Mennonites.

Agatha and Katja as Mennonites: First Impressions

From my first impressions of Katja and Agatha, I thought I had them pegged. Katja seemed a strong woman free with her criticism and commentary on the world around her. She had lived the hard life of a single mother in a day when such a life was not only economically difficult but transformed a woman into a social pariah. I was sure that with the experiences she had gone through in the war—what she had seen soldiers do to women, what she had experienced herself—she would be eager to direct her criticism to the patriarchal society of which she was a part.

Agatha, on the other hand, seemed to be living a more traditional life. She had married a widower and raised a family. She did not have a professional occupation, she seemed comfortable as a Mennonite, and she spoke reverently about her faith. I guessed that she would not have stories to tell that were critical of the church, and that there would be great dissonance between her attitudes and my own.

Over the course of our conversations, however, I realized that all I had surmised was mistaken. Katja did not roundly criticize the patriarchal structure of her church, she endorsed it. Agatha, by virtue of her determination to preach, fell into an implicitly critical stance towards her church. Recognizing how different their attitudes were from what I had expected was a profoundly humbling process. I realized that despite my enthusiasm for hearing women tell their own stories, I had quickly been lured by easy stereotypes. Instead of simply reversing the roles, however, and making Katja the compliant believer and Agatha the rebellious critic, I learned that the religious lives of these women are intricately tangled up in their stories of what they were and what they have become.

"The Man of the House"

Part of the process of untangling the religious lives of Agatha and Katja demands sorting out how their lives are religious. Their experiences of prayer

and preaching are obvious places to begin, but they quickly lead to questions about who Katja and Agatha are in their families and social circles.⁸⁰

Katja and Agatha have similar attitudes to women's role in the family. In the best of all possible worlds, the man is the head:

PK: What do you think makes a good Christian woman?

KE: A Christian woman? That has, first of all, a strong belief of what she's here for in the world: to raise the family. First of all. If she has one. And live a clean, good life. At the same time, I think a Christian woman should also have a certain right in the family to express herself. In the old days a woman didn't mean anything. Maybe this is getting a little modern and because I'm alone I have to look after everything myself. But I think a real good Christian woman is to also have certain freedom, in the house, outside, in the church, whatever it is. But she should show that in her behaviour. Not demonstrate it in a loud voice or yelling, or doing things like that, that maybe her husband the man does. There's a difference, you know. Keep the femininity, in a way, showing that she is an obedient wife in the Lord's eyes.

It doesn't say that, you know, it's still practised that you see the man as the man of the house. He sits at one end of the table and this is the way the order is, you know. She, well, I don't know whether she should be a ruler, no. As I said before, I don't believe that a woman should preach in church. On the pulpit she shouldn't be. Now I might be way off, I might be wrong there, but this is the way I feel. She can express, and her feeling and her belief in showing that she is a Christian woman just in her behaviour.

PK: What sort of behaviour?

KE: Well, I almost contradict myself by saying be subdued, be gentle. Have a gentle, a gentle personality that shows. And she can teach, she can teach first of all in the family her children. She can teach in Bible schools, she can do—but, and I think that would show that she's knowledgeable. That she can talk, she can teach the Bible everywhere.⁸¹ But not, I say, I might sound really...

Katja's picture of the ideal Christian woman does not fit her own story, nor does it fit who she is today. Katja is not a wife, let alone an obedient one.

⁸⁰While Katja and Agatha talked about their children more than is represented in these pages, when talking about the *family* they spoke more paradigmatically. Their children are not frequently mentioned here both because they did not speak of them often during our taped conversations and because I did not speak to their children directly and do not want to misrepresent them.

⁸¹Both Katja and Agatha taught Sunday school a few years after their arrival in Canada. The church let Katja teach German even before they would baptize her.

She does not see herself as a subdued woman. She calls herself a joker and worries that people do not take her seriously enough.

Despite linking the Christian woman to the family, Katja does not continue this connection in describing her experience of childbirth:

PK: Did childbirth affect the way you thought about religion?

KE: No. No. No. No. He was a seven month old baby, premature..⁸²

Childbirth was not joyful for Katja. It was a painful and lonely experience, a time when she did not have enough food and lived among strangers. Although God helped her through the war, she did not connect him to the birth of her son. She does say, however, that her son kept her alive. Without her love and desire to care for him, and his affection and concern for her, Katja says she might well have given up and died. The implications of childbirth were thus paradoxical. Her son gave her hope, but her status as a single mother induced pain and censure.

Katja's life as a woman has not been exemplary according to her own terms. Instead, she has grappled with personal contradiction and external disapproval. Katja is aware of the contradiction between her self and her ideal. She does not resolve it. She sets herself apart by saying that "this is woman and this is me." Katja and I have agreed that I will never be able to figure her out to my satisfaction, and she said to me as a warning "If anyone tried to fit me into a framework, I'd fight like anything to get out." She cheers on women athletes and revels in their victories because they are women, and she harshly criticizes men who abuse their wives, yet she insists that women in the

⁸²For the rest of this story see Chapter 2, page 36.

family and religious environment must be subdued and allow men to dominate.

I offer a partial explanation for Katja's contradictory views on women in the world and women in her religious community. Katja wants women to keep silent in the church, because she does not want to have to speak herself. Preaching is a public act which would draw attention to her. She does not want such public display, because she still carries with her the painful traces of the rejection she experienced in her early years in the church. To present herself in a public way would be to set herself up for ridicule and to relive humiliation:

PK: Has your status or, has your status changed within your church, from when you first got there to now, or?

KE: Well, of course, your mind changes. Or you grow. You grow in a Christian way just like you do in life. No, matter of fact, I would say I am less active than what I was. See, at first I always liked to teach and I would be in everything. I was in committee, Church committee, secretary of the Sunday school and all that. But as you grow older on, I really—we were talking yesterday morning about that, I had people here for breakfast. And once, I had a very responsible job, and once that—you know and I had to study a lot. All above duties that I have with the house and that, and we were talking about sleeping. And I hardly ever sleep more than three hours. But I was so used to it, studying, I'd get up in the morning early and I'm better in the morning, I'm not so absorbed in the afternoon. But now, as I grow older, you know, all of a sudden you say, well my active life goes down. I used to work at the Self Help every Friday. Now, I was away a lot, and you know, you cannot, it's all volunteers there. They could not depend on me. They call me in if they do inventory or something like that. But as a steady job I gave that up too. I did four months service in United States at the MCC. So, you know, but now, I say I haven't gained anything as far as going someplace. A matter of fact, I should admit that I'm not an active Christian as such, you know. Like doing all kinds of things.

The minister asked me to be deacon in church. And I have this in my mind, no, somehow I don't want to be. Because I still think of my past. One should forget, it's forgiven. But the congregation at that time, they didn't want to baptize me, and now I'm single, I'm a single mother, you know. Nowadays nobody cares, it's open. I keep thinking, if I go and visit people, as a deaconess—I guess I should pronounce it female—a lot of these older people would say "What does she say?" I mean, you know, a human being is a human being. Mind you, most of them at that time, they've passed away. And these younger people, well they're different you know. But again, now I'm a senior, and the young people I don't know them as I used to know

when I taught Sunday school. All the parents, the grandparents, you know. But the church has grown, there's so many more people there too. And so sometimes you don't know whether it's a member of our church or if it's a visitor.

Katja felt comfortable in the roles harmonious with her ideal woman: teacher, volunteer, secretary. But when asked to take on a more public role, she declined it for fear of being criticized for her past. To watch other women preach is to challenge her to do the same.

Katja says that she feels religious life is somehow separate from regular life, and she expects different things of women in the different spheres. When she is with her friends, most of whom do not go to her church, Katja can be boisterous, playful, and even risqué. One evening while I was having dinner with Katja, she brought out her evening gowns from the days when she used to go out on dates: a beautiful red silk dress with a slit exposing her back, a matching ivory silk jacket, and another long shimmering gown. The dresses brought on talk about the men in my life, the men in her life, sex, love, and marriage. Katja told me that I should get married. She said, roughly paraphrased, "You're as independent as anyone I've seen, but you're young, and when you get older, then you can't go places anymore. For a man it's fine but for a woman, no."

Katja has the world divided into places where women can and cannot go. She spends her time in the shopping mall, the bowling alley, her friend's houses, a few restaurants, the church, and mostly her home. If women who are without men adhere to these divisions, they can protect themselves from

the dangers of the public world.⁸³ Katja brings these divisions into the church. She can joke while helping at the turkey dinner or talking to the minister, but to put herself behind the pulpit or present herself as a deacon would be to invite the reproach given to a woman out of place.

Though Katja may separate religion from everyday life, her family status has profoundly shaped her religion. For Katja, being without a man has meant both freedom and constraint. For example, each time I shared a meal with her, Katja said grace before eating, except the time she asked me to do it. A bit taken aback, I came up with an old standby from childhood dinners complete with my family's own idiosyncratic twists. When I ate with Agatha and Ernie, he said grace every time. Almost by default, Katja assumes responsibility for the domestic religious rituals traditionally conducted by men.

Katja does not have to wash anyone's socks, but she has never wiped clean the stigma of being a single mother by joining her identity with that of a man through marriage. She has established a deep relationship with a male God, but still feels the need to remain silent in church.

Agatha and the Family

Agatha agrees with Katja that men should be in charge of the family and effects a link between women in the family and in the church, albeit with different results than Katja:

PK: What do you think about women preaching?

⁸³She has not always felt this way, however. Katja has travelled to Greece, Europe, and the Soviet Union alone.

AJ: I've done that too. I've preached. I don't think we can—before God there is no man or woman, they're all the same, before him. In the family it's different. Just like any institution needs someone at the head, that sort of oversees the whole thing, so the family does too. And the man should actually be able to oversee the family. He's not always able to and too bad when he isn't. And we see all kinds of problems in families. But in church work, I think women should have a chance to preach. I had my own doubts about it, especially since I knew that many old men wouldn't like a woman on the pulpit. And I hate the thought of someone not coming to church because I'm at the pulpit. I wouldn't want that. But I think that will disappear.

When Agatha preaches in church, she is secure in her status as a wife. She does not, by example or intent, pose a threat to gender arrangements in the family. When placing herself in a public position she tries to efface her womanly attributes as much as possible, but speaks firm in the conviction that she does not challenge her community in her private life. Elaine Lawless found a similar dynamic in Pentecostal churches:

An unmarried woman, rejecting the life of wife and mother, would pose a serious threat to the equilibrium of a fundamentalist congregation. A woman preacher's own maternal experience becomes weighted and must be foregrounded in order to minimize the threat that her position "in front of" the church is a rejection of her "natural" role as wife and mother (1988a:149).

As a wife and mother, Agatha allows herself more freedom of speech in church than does Katja as a single mother.

Agatha, though distinguishing between women's roles in church and in the family, does not bound what is religious about her life in the same way as Katja. Agatha's reflections on disparate times in her life often include references to prayer and the providence of God. In contrast to Katja, Agatha's recollections of childbirth are celebratory:

PK: How did having a baby affect your religious life, or did it affect it?

AJ: Ohhh! I always wanted a baby. I wanted a baby very, very much. And I think when I was there in labour I just prayed that everything would be alright. And I remember just behind the curtain, another lady was in labour and, did I tell you this? I might be repeating myself again.

PK: No, go ahead.

AJ: There was another Mrs. Janzen also, and she cursed her husband because she was having her fifth child. And I was apparently always smiling, because the doctor came in and said, "What a difference!" he says. "That one is cursing, and here I see a smile."

I was so—when I held my daughter in my hands the first time I just cried for joy. It was such a wonderful feeling. I think it was the highlight of my life.

And she was a little chubby thing. Eight pounds, four ounces. That was such a wonderful feeling, you put your baby on top of you, her little arm fell just like a little hug right around my neck. It was wonderful.

The story Agatha tells of childbirth is joyful, the answer to a longing and a prayer. She does not answer my question with a clear delineation of what she believes is explicitly religious about birth, but moves into a story which shows the joy and power of this event in her life.

What Agatha perceives to be religious is wound up with times in her life when God has assisted her: he brought her from suffering to comfort in the war, from pain to joy during childbirth. Agatha has experienced most of the major transitions in her life within a supportive family. When Agatha gave birth, she had the support of her husband and family, lived in her own home, and had enough food to eat. She has always felt that she belonged somewhere, including under the care of God.

Katja, Agatha, and Belonging

Agatha's sense of belonging gives her the courage to speak up in ways Katja avoids. In addition to speaking in church, Agatha teaches adult Sunday school, participates in a Bible study at church, and leads the women's mission circle in Bible study and prayer. Katja considers herself less of an "active

Christian" these days, and has not joined the women's mission circle after her retirement.

Katja is concerned about how she will compare to Agatha with respect to the vigour of her Christianity. In our discussions Katja often referred to the story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42). She does not want to appear as a Martha, staying in the kitchen and not conversing with Jesus and the disciples, while Agatha as a Mary "chooses the good portion" and contemplates the word of the Lord. She says she feels neither like a Mary nor a Martha, to which I respond, "There are more than two ways for a woman to be."⁸⁴

Katja's experiences and the way she has constructed a story out of them have led her to Christianity and to Mennonite identity. How she lives out her religion is largely private. She lives in a social circle of friends, many of whom are not Mennonite, and draws her strength and sustenance from these people who accept her and enjoy her:

And I have good friends. I enjoy my retirement. Not that I deserve any of that. No. I didn't want to say it that way. But, I'm so thankful. And that's what I will, as long as I live, I will thank the Lord for my friends, I have very good friends, and for all the things he did for me.

The Lord provided Katja with people willing and capable of supporting her. These people, more than the people from her church, stand out in her life.

Agatha energetically works within the church to share her faith and understanding of the Bible and Christianity. She works from a position of belonging, which has been nurtured by her connection to her father as a

⁸⁴Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, in the Lutheran Life lecture in Waterloo, November, 1991, pointed out other constraints of the Mary and Martha story for women, saying that the story opposes women's domestic work and contemplative thought.

preacher and her mother as a devout woman, the support of her family, and her position as a wife and mother.

In the process of understanding what it means for Agatha and Katja to be Mennonites today, I have unravelled the stories that they have told me and braided them together again comparatively. What has emerged are two different strands of being Mennonite. Both Katja and Agatha have a deep relationship with God which has sustained them and continues to do so as they get older. Through prayer, singing, reading the Bible, and sermons both women nurture that relationship.

Katja's relationship with Jesus has bolstered her when she feels alone and alienated. Agatha's experience of the Holy Spirit has brought her connection with others, both family and strangers. Katja still feels traces of the alienation and estrangement she first encountered in the Mennonite church: traces which keep her from assuming any public roles in the church. Agatha remembers her assimilation into the Mennonite church as an easy one; she belonged from the start. From her feeling of belonging she steps from the grounding of her personalized religion into the public role of a preacher, a teacher, and a missionary to the sick.

The differences between Katja and Agatha show the power of stories in shaping religious lives. Katja and Agatha have formed who they are religiously from the memories they have of prayer, preaching, exclusion, and acceptance. Not only do the stories they relive and retell shape who they are, their stories shape how others perceive and respond to who they are. In this process of constructing the stories of their lives, I have thought of Katja and

Agatha as both supporters and critics of their religion and community: women who sustain tradition with their stated intentions, while confronting it within their lives.

Chapter 5: Theoretical and Methodological Reflections

When you are a feminist, you write a feminist book.

— Elizabeth Young-Bruehl (1991)

In the process of crafting life histories, methodology constantly emerges, as lives are told, recorded, and interpreted within relationships. The methodologies used are negotiated between two or more people and cannot be fully determined at the beginning of a project (nor perhaps at the end). This shifting is partly why I left this chapter to the end. For the most part, I worked inductively to understand how Katja's and Agatha's religious lives intersect with theories and definitions of religion, and thus I place my generalizations after the particularities of their lives.

Another reason for opting to position this chapter at the end is to give primacy to the stories. Agatha and Katja told me stories about their lives, and I want my interpretation to reflect the drama and discovery of this process. The thesis is organized accordingly. The structure of the video—introductory clips of Katja's and Agatha's story of the war, then more or less chronological stories about childhood, war, and life in Canada—approximates the way they told me their stories. The subsequent chapters elaborate on what I considered the most significant aspects of those stories. Their stories are the basic ingredients from which I have worked and are thus presented and interpreted before pursuing more broadly theoretical debates.

In this chapter, I begin with a discussion of ethnographic definitions of religion placed in the context of women's religious lives. Then, I turn to the influence of ethnography and feminist methodology on my work, assessing

how and why my work contributes to feminist method. Finally, I examine the role and implications of video both for this study and life history generally.

Why Definition?

Initially, I embarked on this project because of a strong commitment to recording and interpreting women's religious lives, both for historical reasons (once these women die there will be no chance to ask the questions) and for epistemological ones (understanding women's religious lives contributes to and challenges what we know and how we think about religion). There is a dearth of descriptive and interpretive research by religion scholars on women living today. While prescriptive literature abounds (Kalven and Buckley 1984; Conn 1986; Spretnak 1982; Young 1990a), detailed ethnographic studies of women's religious lives by religion scholars are hard to find.⁸⁵

Correspondingly, feminist definitions of religion are equally difficult to locate.⁸⁶ Definition is crucial in ethnographic research, especially when working with people whose lives fall outside of what has conventionally been defined as religious. Women's lives have long been ignored in theology (Leonard 1990:146) and religious studies, two prominent forums for discussion of religion.⁸⁷ If a definition is not broad enough to include women's lives, then

⁸⁵ Anthropologists have embarked on such work (Holden 1983; Hoch-Smith and Spring 1978), but field study of women's religious lives from within religious studies is much less commonplace.

⁸⁶ Karen Brown (1991) provides the best example I have found of ethnographic research on women's religious lives from within religious studies, but she is not explicit about the meaning of the word "religion" within her work.

⁸⁷ Agatha's definition of religion (see Introduction) is formed primarily within her Christian education from theologically trained ministers and her own reading in theology.

it is an inadequate definition and precludes questions crucial to understanding what is religious about women's lives.

Definitions, whether or not consciously explicated, implicitly determine what counts as religious and what does not.⁸⁸ In the lives of Agatha and Katja, for example, pacifism is not a fundamental concern. Both women spoke about pacifism, a defining tenet of the Mennonite religion, only briefly, in response to a question. Measured against what is conventionally considered part of the substance of Mennonitism, Agatha's and Katja's lives do not fit. Proffering a definition of religion informed by my study of these women's religious lives both clarifies how I decided what was religious about their lives and contributes to the method and theory involved in studying religion more generally.

Geertz's Definition of Religion

Clifford Geertz's definition of religion as a cultural system is classic. Religion, he writes, is:

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men [*sic*] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (1973:90).

Geertz is concerned with calling for "an analysis of the system of meanings embodied in the symbols which make up the religion proper" (1973:125). He

⁸⁸Kathryn Anderson elaborates on the implicit influence of definitions on which questions an interviewer asks: "Reviewing my interviews, I have found that my training in the history of facts and action triumphed over my awareness of a decade of historical research pointing to the importance of relationships and consciousness in women's lives and kept me from hearing the reflections that women were clearly willing to share"(1990:98).

wants to move the anthropology of religion toward a view of religion as potentially determinative, not merely reflective, of social or psychological processes.

I use Geertz as an example because he claims his path to a definition of religion is ethnographic.⁸⁹ He draws his theories from specific cultures, from "thick" description of people and the symbols with which they live. He uses the details of ethnography to colour in the generality of concepts such as symbol and ritual. Geertz's aim as an ethnographer

is to draw large conclusions from small, but very densely textured facts; to support broad assertions about the role of culture in the construction of collective life by engaging them exactly with complex specifics (1973a:28).

In instances where concepts do not fit specifics, concepts, not specifics, must be dispensed with (1973a:27).

I agree with Geertz's assertion that ethnography provides the necessary details—"bodied stuff on which to feed" (1973a:23)—for drawing conclusions about religious lives. In the case of his definition of religion, however, the ethnographic details which I have elaborated—the complex specifics of Katja's and Agatha's lives—stubbornly refuse to stay within the lines of his picture of religion as a cultural system.

Geertz's definition pivots on the idea of a "system of symbols" that are "models for" and "models of" reality. Symbols signify both the ideals toward which one can aim, and the parameters of who one can be, according to Geertz (1973:93). In my view, however, symbols may be models of and for,

⁸⁹In arguing for an "ethno-theology," Joanne Waghorne elaborates on the significance of ethnography to Geertz's definition of religion and to the method of historians of religion (1984:33).

but they serve other functions as well. Jesus, for example, is more than a model of or for Katja. He is also a companion, someone who keeps her going during struggle. More than prescriptive or descriptive, Jesus is an active participant in Katja's life.

I take Geertz's definition of religion as an opening for my contention that *stories* are crucial to understanding religion both as a concept to think about and to think with (Geertz 1973a:23). Attention to stories of prayer, daily living, relationships to God, and the lives in which the stories take place, adds thickness and detail to symbols. Stories about lives enmesh symbols and their users in history.⁹⁰

Symbols, as Geertz describes them, are "abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms, concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgements, longings, or beliefs" (1973:91). Though such a description seems to root the ideal of symbols in experience, Geertz goes on to insist that

the tracing of the social and psychological role of religions...is a matter of understanding how it is that men's [*sic*] notions, however implicit, of the "really real" and the dispositions these notions induce in them, color their sense of the reasonable, the practical, the humane, and the moral (1973:124).

Despite his insistence on drawing conclusions from the thick descriptions of ethnographies, Geertz, when providing a definition of religion, implicitly accords beliefs (notions) a determinative role. He draws a picture of religion in which systems of beliefs—"conceptions of a general order of

⁹⁰Caroline Bynum critiques Geertz' definition for being too narrow to encompass the complexities that gender (both of symbols and symbol users) introduces into the relationship between symbols and religion (1983:11).

existence"—determine the possibilities of action, reasonable, humane, and moral.

The implicit hierarchical split between belief and action is challenged by some scholars of religion for its rationalist and ethnocentric assumptions (Grimes 1990:12; Brown 1991:49). The experience of action, which includes being acted upon, influences belief just as much as belief shapes action and experience.⁹¹ The process of Katja's becoming a Mennonite was not only a process of her accepting beliefs of the Mennonite church such as acknowledgement that Jesus died for the sins of humanity. She also joined because she could sing there. She could feel at home in the simplicity of the Mennonite church's architecture and ritual. Belief is certainly part of the process,⁹² but embodied experience is an equally important element.

A life story, as a recounting through memory of lived experience, is thus also more than a "vehicle for a conception" (Geertz 1973:91). A story is not only (or not at all) an abstraction from experience meant to bear systemic conceptions. Stories convey past and present emotions, contradictions, and pieces of lives that fit and do not fit into cultural patterns. Especially in a cultural system characterized by gender inequality, women's life stories can break up the system and reveal what is not moral, humane, reasonable, or practical about it.

⁹¹Action is too *active* a term for my purposes here. Experience connotes having *undergone* and been *affected* by an event or situation possibly by one's choosing but not always under one's control.

⁹²For example, Katja could not believe that holy water in a Catholic church was holy, since she knew it came from the tap.

The Personal Narratives Group (PNG) considers all women's stories to be "essential primary documents for feminist research" (1989:4). Personal stories expose both action and being acted upon, both individual power and systemic control in women's experience of patriarchal religion as a cultural system:

Women's lives are lived within and in tension with systems of domination. Both narratives of acceptance and narratives of rebellion are responses to the system in which they originate and thus reveal its dynamics (PNG 1989:8).

Regardless of whether women support the system in which they live, their stories exemplify the gendered nature of that system:

Certainly, men are affected by the social construction of gender, but for men, gender has been an unmarked category. For a woman, however, the story is rarely told without reference to the dynamics of gender (PNG 1989:5).

In the Soviet Union Katja and Agatha lived within a culture and religion divided by gender. When telling the story of how one half of the divide, the men, were taken away or died, they refer to the loss in gendered terms. Their stories reveal systemic repercussions. Once the men were gone, their religion, as a cultural system, faltered.⁹³

There are other levels of story besides personal narrative that are important to a definition of religion: myth and collective history.⁹⁴ Henry Munson argues that in failing to consider myth in his definition of religion and subsequent ethnographic work, Geertz obscures how people are set into a

⁹³Certainly the penalties for religious activity were harsh under Communism, but even a domestic, clandestine version of formal Mennonitism did not grow at the hands of the women left in the villages. Agatha's mother prayed with her children but did not instruct them in the history or rituals of the Mennonite church.

⁹⁴In the 1970s theologians and scholars of religion took to considering religion *as* story (Wiggins 1975). The emphasis was less on the particularities of life stories than on "Story" as a theme, literature, or Bible as story (cf. Grimes 1990:158-173).

wider religious worldview. Instead, he argues, Geertz concentrates too much on religious behaviour (Munson 1986:21-22).

In Katja's and Agatha's case, the religious myths they learned (but did not grow up with) were Christian. They related their lives to certain characters in biblical stories. Agatha compares herself to Peter's denial of Christ (Mark 14:66-72 and parallels) when talking about her denunciation of religion upon joining the Communist Youth League. Katja compares herself to Martha when reflecting on the differences between her and Agatha, but does not emerge with a comparison satisfying to her.

The role of myth in Katja's and Agatha's religious lives demonstrates the paucity of effective models of or for women in the Bible, while also showing the innovation certain women employ to fit themselves within the gendered myth of their tradition. Like Geertz, Karen Brown suggests that the characters within myth can "provide a template for...life" (1991:222). But in the Christian and Mennonite tradition there are fewer templates of mythical female characters for either women or men to draw upon as Brown finds in Haitian religion. This difference has a profound effect on the visibility of women in Vodou and Christianity:

The adaptability of Vodou over time, and its responsiveness to other cultures and religions; the fact that it has no canon, creed, or pope; the multiplicity of its spirits; and the intimate detail in which those spirits *reflect the lives of the faithful*—all these characteristics make women's lives visible within Vodou in ways they are not in other religious traditions (Brown 1991:221 *italics added*).

Without established templates (myths and characters) to draw from, it is harder for women to tell the stories of their *religious* lives in a manner that grants them connection to and prominence in their religious traditions.⁹⁵

Susan Sered includes symbol and myth in the process she calls "the domestication of religion" (1988:516). Sered provides a perspective on religion that allows us to consider the concrete ways in which symbols *and* myths of religious traditions are made effective or relevant in people's lives. Paying attention to the domestication (or personalization) of religion gives prominence to both formal and informal religious practice.

In her description she insists that people's experiences of religious traditions (systems in Geertz's language) are wound together with the "relationships of caring and interdependence" (1988:506) in people's lives. Definitions of religion which do not incorporate stories and relationships (not just the relationships of symbols to each other and to people, but of human beings to each other) are incapable of encompassing the sweep of religious *lives*.

Katja and Agatha have recourse to symbols and myths within the Mennonite and Christian tradition. These symbols and myths are embedded in relationships which have brought them to religion, but have also kept them from full acceptance. Sered's understanding of relationships as exclusively

⁹⁵Julie Cruikshank notes, however, that even when women do tell their life stories drawing from rich mythical resources, such as the Yukon native elders she works with, the way they tell their stories is not understood and thus not listened to by people in the dominant culture. They are "doubly marginalized—first by male-centered conventions defining what events are significant enough to describe in writing, and second by the position these women have as members of a minority culture" (1990:3).

favourable is limited when applied to Agatha's and Katja's religious lives. When Katja, for example, wanted publicly to declare her relationship with Christ, she was spurned because of the ambiguity of her relationship to the father of her child. Women's relationships as wives and mothers (or lack thereof) are therefore means both for acceptance and rejection in religious communities.

The collective history of a tradition also provides plots and characters from which to draw. The way in which a woman or man uses such history to depict their religious identity tells much about how she or he fits within the tradition in the present. The stories of persecution and migration central to Mennonite collective memory shape the way Katja and Agatha reconstruct their coming to be Mennonite, although in different ways. Agatha draws heavily from this collective history of Mennonites who move from suffering to salvation and feels and acts as if she is integrated into the Mennonite community today. Katja does not evoke the collective history of Mennonites as ardently in telling the stories of her life, and she feels a persistent level of estrangement from her religious community.

Stories, Relationships, and Religious Identity

Instead of seeing religion only as a *system of symbols* functioning as models of and for people as believers, our definition of religion must be modified to focus on individual experience, based on personal history and context, as it is articulated in personal narrative. The experience of religion and the way in which that experience is *remembered* are central to

understanding how people use symbols. Religious symbols have histories—they are embedded in particular stories and particular lives and are evoked by remembering.

I offer this tentative definition for the purposes of this thesis: Religion is the process of interpreting life stories in terms of traditional myths and family history, connecting with and differentiating from others and institutions, and acting out, through structured ritual or informally in daily life, their fundamental values.

Katja and Agatha interpret their life stories in terms of the Mennonite story and their family history, Agatha finding more points of contact with Mennonite history than Katja. The way they tell their stories (and the ways others listen) affects how they feel connected with or differentiated from themselves, God, other Mennonites, and the church. This connection and differentiation affects how they act within their chosen Mennonite community, and how they live through a day.

The definition is not uni-directional. Actions and values affect what sorts of stories are told and allow for connection and differentiation. Agatha has retrospectively constructed her story as part of the Mennonite story more than Katja because she has felt more welcome in the community.

This definition is also not meant to be universal. It states what I have included in coming to my interpretation of Katja's and Agatha's religious lives, but might also prove helpful to others engaging in fieldwork on religion.

Religion is both something people *do*, and something people *react* to. Religion can simultaneously provide meaning and inspiration in people's lives

and provoke guilt and alienation. Katja's and Agatha's stories—the way they tell them and the way they tell how others have reacted to them—both construct their religious identities and confront their religious traditions.

Katja and Agatha tell stories about becoming Mennonite that describe not only symbols of their faith but how significant and not-so-significant women and men have influenced their faith. Eventually, Katja and Agatha emerge with stories that are personal narratives of coming to awareness of their historical identity within and through interpersonal relationships, especially with mothers, and also with fathers, children, deacons, and many others. Relationships with others and the effects of personal history are crucial to understanding religious lives.

The ways in which Katja and Agatha have lived their lives have not always been in concert with conventional patterns of Mennonite women, yet they undoubtedly still feel Mennonite. In talking with me, they have constructed their identity as Mennonites through stories of acceptance and nurture, rejection, and resistance. The contradiction, confrontation, and paradox of lives bleed through the boundaries of symbol systems. Though they are thankful to have a God who loves them and a tradition to live within, Katja and Agatha are not beyond tacitly confronting the aura of factuality imbued in their religion.

Ethnography and Feminist Methodology

The question of feminist methodology has attracted great interest in recent years. Some feminist scholars assert that a distinctly feminist method

is non-existent. Sandra Harding argues that feminist challenges to traditional epistemologies and methodologies ignorant of women's experiences, women's needs, and the value of subjectivity, have given feminist research "extraordinary explanatory power" (1987:10). According to Harding, feminists have used conventional methods to explain and expose sexism and women's oppression. To consider these traditional methods—put to new uses—as uniquely feminist is wrong and deflects attention from the significance and power of feminist methodology and epistemology, she states (1987:9).⁹⁶

Feminist ethnographers, however, are not so quick to deny the existence of feminist methods. Feminist methodology⁹⁷ and epistemology certainly inform their work (Brown 1991:16; Stacey 1988:21), but feminist ethnographers have found it necessary to develop and struggle with new methods in the process of completing their research.

Using Harding's somewhat clinical definition for methods as "techniques for gathering evidence," we find in the fieldwork situation that feminist scholars are faced with the dilemma of what constitutes a technique and what classifies as evidence. Fieldwork is based on conversation and observation which often, especially with women who work and live in domestic space, happens at home (Brown 1991:7; Cruikshank 1990:15). Sitting around the

⁹⁶Harding defines method as "techniques for gathering evidence," methodology as "a theory and analysis of how research should proceed," and epistemology as "a theory of knowledge" (1987:2-3).

⁹⁷Pauline Greenhill considers that "a distinctive aspect of feminist methodology is the fact that we try to interact in our writing/construction of research...with the people who are our subjects, [as well as] the idea of returning the research results to those people" (personal correspondence).

kitchen table, eating, laughing, and exchanging stories can eventually make an ethnographic relationship into a friendship.⁹⁸

As friendships develop, the methods offered by traditional scholarship fail (Brown 1991:9,11). In the time I spent with Katja and Agatha, I could not (and did not want to) record by notes or by tape everything we said. But everything we have said to each other has formed my opinion of who they are. In trying to sort out what to include in my writing, I realize both the influence of my own memory and selection and the difficulty of distinguishing between what they have told me as a friend and as a researcher. Writing their lives becomes a process fraught with power imbalances, as I make decisions about what and how to tell of their lives.⁹⁹

Writing ethnographies—making public *and* interpreting what has been private—can force the recognition

that conflicts of interest and emotion between the ethnographer as authentic, related person (i.e., participant), and as exploiting researcher (i.e., observer) are also an inescapable feature of ethnographic method (Stacey 1988:23).

Judith Stacey considers betrayal, inequality, and exploitation to be endemic to both ethnographic process and product (1988:23), though she also recognizes positive results of ethnography for the subjects, such as support, attention, and acceptance (1988:23).

⁹⁸In a parallel to friendship revealing of gender dynamics, Maurizio Catani describes his life history work with Aunt Suzanne, a French woman, as "the result of a two-way seduction, a love story" (1981:212). Women researchers, though not immune to two-way seduction when studying other women, consistently refer to the affective dimension of their relationships as friendship.

⁹⁹Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich affirms that writing the biography of another woman requires the conditions of friendship: mutuality, equality, and familiarity (1985:287). Though her suggestions are well-taken, in the end her method of friendship seems too sanguine and suffers from what Stacey calls "the delusion of alliance" (1988:25).

In trying to resolve the power imbalance of ethnography (not an imbalance noted only by feminists [cf. Clifford 1988:8]), some feminist scholars have turned to collaborative ethnography (Cruikshank 1990; Lawless 1991). Elaine Lawless calls her methodology¹⁰⁰ feminist and emergent reciprocal ethnography. Her work is feminist because it grows "out of an understanding of how women come to know what they know" (1991:39), and emergent because her conclusions are not "fixed" (1991:39). Lawless describes her work:

While I certainly would never advocate that the subjects we study take on the role of "censor"..., we need to establish a more collaborative methodology for fieldwork and a theoretical framework of knowledge-sharing which will allow for dialogue. This dialogue can be included in the ethnographic field research as well as in the presentation of that ethnographic work, as a part of the discussion, serving to privilege no one voice over any other (1991:36).

Lawless reached such a conclusion after the Pentecostal women she researched (Lawless 1988a) did not like her interpretations of their lives. The women she works with using her new methodology, however, are highly educated ministers who seem to be conversant and interested in feminist issues and discourse. Despite the practical and theoretical import of her suggestions then, her methodology leaves unresolved the issue of how to do feminist research with women who are not feminists, and do not accept feminist interpretations. Collaboration is more difficult when ways of knowing and interpreting are not mutual. Doing feminist research with women who are not feminists, however, challenges stereotypes held by all concerned and provides fecund ground for the analysis of gender roles (cf. Mbilinyi 1989:222; Borland 1991:73).

¹⁰⁰Unlike Harding, Lawless uses the word "methodology" to include methods and theories about methods.

Katja and Agatha do not consider themselves feminists. They want to connect themselves to the community more than they want to dissent from its implicit rules and structure (cf. Cruikshank 1990:335). I felt somewhat hesitant to bring up issues such as sexuality, my feminism, and my own family and personal history, fearing that doing so would inhibit our conversations.¹⁰¹ It took a long time for these issues to emerge comfortably in my visits with Katja and Agatha.¹⁰²

Perhaps Lawless' method of consistently feeding her transcriptions and interpretations back to the women could have provoked dialogue over uncomfortable issues between Katja, Agatha, and me, but as Lawless herself notes (1991:57; 58,n.9), collaborative ethnography takes time.¹⁰³ I did not have this time in working with Katja and Agatha. I received two sets of comments on the video and one set on the written work.¹⁰⁴ In addition to the time factor, however, there are other inevitable barriers to collaboration which privileges no one voice. People always have conflicts of interpretation regardless of how much they talk to or like each other. I am not a ghost writer of Agatha's and Katja's autobiographies. I am writing my interpretation

¹⁰¹Elizabeth Young-Bruhl notes the difficulty of asking questions of someone "extraordinarily reticent about sexuality," when talking about the writing of her biography of Hannah Arendt. She characterizes the biographical process as "an ongoing struggle with issues of privacy" (Young-Bruhl 1991).

¹⁰²Katja and Agatha knew from the beginning that a major reason I wanted to record and interpret their stories was that they were women. They shifted among understanding my motivations, teasing me for being a feminist, and worrying about being portrayed as "women's libbers."

¹⁰³Julie Cruikshank began her work in 1974 and published *Life Lived Like a Story* in 1990. Karen Brown starting meeting with Alourdes in 1978 and published *Mama Lola* in 1991.

¹⁰⁴Collaborative ethnography also takes time for the subjects, and they may not be as interested in devoting time to the project as the ethnographer.

of their lives. Both Agatha and Katja agree that the project is ultimately my work, and they have even said to me, "It's your thesis!" when we differ. In some ways, my authorship frees them of responsibility for what they say, allowing them to voice critical opinions they might not otherwise. They can remain modest, attributing the audacity of telling their stories to me.

I consider this study to be in the tradition of feminist ethnography for reasons both of epistemology and method. In interpreting the religious lives of Katja and Agatha, I have consistently used gender as a category of analysis capable of disclosing sub-texts, meanings, and ways of knowing overlooked in non-feminist research (Brown 1991:16). An analysis which did not consider the effect of gender in Agatha's conflict over preaching or Katja's experience of baptism would be impossible.

Gender also shapes the way people tell stories. Feminist folklorists have validated women's stories either misrepresented or ignored by traditional scholarship, and their analyses of the way women tell stories have provided much-needed tools for this study (Lawless 1991; Bennett 1989; Kodish 1987). Without the emergent story structures suggested by feminist folklorists and literary theorists (Heilbrun 1988; Duplessis 1985; Smith 1987), the work of understanding women's religious lives would be much more difficult.¹⁰⁵

As for method, the first thing I did was to ask Agatha and Katja to tell me the stories of their religious lives. Though intended to be a broad question

¹⁰⁵A next step in the cross-fertilization of feminist literary theory with folklore and ethnography is an understanding of the differences between a woman's *writing* and her *speaking* of life stories. Issues of intention and motivation, and the dynamics of relationship (researcher/researched), and the dangers of public disclosure ought to be clarified in such a comparison.

in order to minimize its determinative influence, asking them about their *religious* lives led them to hear "religious" louder than "life." Talking about religion made it easier for Agatha and Katja to talk to me, because the question was not threatening. Instead, it offered a chance to talk about their relationship to God, a culturally sanctioned topic for women (Heilbrun 1988:25). If my question had been, "Can you tell me about your life story?" and I were not a student of religion, however, the stories might well have been different or not told at all.¹⁰⁶

From the beginning I requested that whenever Agatha and Katja felt that I was overstepping bounds of their privacy in asking questions, they should tell me. They exercised that right at times, and at other times they told me stories that they would rather I did not repeat. In some instances, we discussed the nature of these stories and decided that the stories are so important to their identities and to the self-perception of the Mennonite community that they need to be told. When I have taken what felt like risks by telling Katja and Agatha about myself and my reactions to who they are, we joined in discussions that for me, broke down stereotypes of what older Mennonite women think, feel, and experience.

Working comparatively with two women was another conscious choice of method. Agatha and Katja tell stories that corroborate and contradict each other. A comparative analysis has the potential to generate more questions

¹⁰⁶Lawless warns against seeing people only in terms of research interest: "I visited the women featured in these pages because they are women preachers. While our perception of the identities of these people and their perceptions of themselves with that identity may certainly coincide, we must be prepared to recognize that they have many *other* identities as well" (1988:62).

and directions than a single life history by comparing the different choices and opportunities open to different individuals. Comparison enabled the distinction between Agatha's story as a memorate of her community, contrasted to Katja's story as an account of individual survival. This distinction is central to my interpretation of who they are as Mennonites today.

Comparison also necessitates added sensitivity, however, so that people do not feel judged by someone else's yardstick. In the process of my comparison, Katja and Agatha inevitably compared themselves to each other, but they also began talking to each other about the project, comparing their experiences and reactions to me. As well, Katja felt more comfortable and less immodest sharing the attention with Agatha, instead of being singled out alone.

Learning to know and understand people through conversation, sharing meals, and becoming friends is a method attuned to rhythms of how people tell stories: within relationships fostered over time, in spaces where they feel comfortable, and when one least expects it. Entering into relationships with Katja and Agatha has provoked both sorrow and elation. The work that has emerged is fully infused by these friendships.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Karen Brown appreciates friendship within fieldwork when she describes her feminist methodology as coming from her socialization as a woman "to the skills of empathy, the importance of relationship, and the interconnection of thought and experience" (1985:79).

Implications of Feminist Ethnography

Despite acknowledging that what is presented here is my interpretation, partial and idiosyncratic (Stacey 1988:26), I am not negating the pain and potential for betrayal in the ethnographic process. At times I have felt guilty for stirring up painful memories and emotions in Katja and Agatha. This project has altered these women's lives. It has made them feel exposed, vulnerable, and open to judgment one more time. Does the life history process rip open old wounds for more pain, or does it allow for growth and new understanding? Is it enough for Katja and Agatha that other people need to hear these stories—that these stories are not told and not talked about? Is it enough that by telling they redress the blanks in history where their lives should have gone?

Feeling pain is not necessarily a bad thing, although in our culture we are wont to avoid or submerge pain at all costs.¹⁰⁸ Both women struggled with exposing their stories and reliving their pain. But when Katja wanted to take certain parts out of the thesis it was Agatha who told her that these stories need to be told, and encouraged her to leave her story as it was. Complicating the issue further, Katja and Agatha both want to see me succeed in my work. On numerous occasions they have encouraged and supported me, despite feeling ambivalent about exposing themselves in the process which they are encouraging.

¹⁰⁸I am indebted to Maggie MacDonald for pointing this out to me.

Recording and interpreting the religious lives of women is essential to a historical and critical understanding of all religions. Specifically, telling the stories of Mennonite women's lives is important for the self-understanding of Mennonite women and men. Their stories display a way of being religious not acknowledged in formal religion. Women's stories challenge the androcentric formulation of Mennonite identity,¹⁰⁹ and further the possibilities for creating a religious community capable of supporting and learning from the experiences of all members, men and women, old and young. The process is not unequivocally gratifying for the women telling the stories, but this is no reason to stop working in a compassionate and respectful way to listen to and interpret women's stories.

Video and Life History

Video opens traditional written life history to image and spoken word.¹¹⁰ Watching the video, the viewer can see and hear Katja and Agatha formulate their memories as they tell them. Their words are not totally disembodied. Pain, fear, anger, age, and laughter are expressed in their faces and voices. When it comes to interpreting their stories, meaning comes not just from their words, but from their pauses, their tones of voice, their darting eyes or direct gaze (cf. Young 1990:161).

¹⁰⁹Examples of androcentric portrayals of Mennonite identity include Redekop (1988), a volume on Mennonite identity which does not consider gender as a category of analysis.

¹¹⁰For two retrospective accounts of the tradition of written life histories including feminist approaches, see Geiger (1986) and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1989).

Watching and hearing Katja and Agatha speak provoke an emotional and visceral response. When the time comes for the viewer-reader to interpret their stories, it is difficult to separate feelings for the women from their views and their contradictions. I think this emotional connection is helpful, however, not detrimental to the process of analysis. As James Young writes about the video testimony of Holocaust survivors:

There is a point at which these memories are still part of the survivor's inner life, still an inner wound; if, in watching these memories pass from the private to the public sphere, we also feel some of the pain in this transition, we may understand something more about the consequences of both the experiences and the telling of such experiences (1988:162).

Understanding comes not just from the logic of Katja's and Agatha's words or my written interpretation; it also emerges from the affective reverberations of their stories, voices, and faces.

Recording interviews with videotape meant that while in conversation there was a camera between the women and me. There were a few times when they asked me to turn off the camera or told me that some stories should not be on record. The camera affected what and who they talked about, and when they told me certain stories. Sitting behind the camera affected my feeling of connection with Katja and Agatha during our conversations. At times I felt quite distanced, concerned more with the camera and planning the next question than listening. We both felt some relief once the camera was turned off and our conversation became more relaxed and intimate.¹¹¹

¹¹¹Katja and Agatha were both more open to the use of video than I had anticipated. Though they were not always comfortable (nor was I), they often made sure the camera was on, and made suggestions about lighting and seating (cf. Cruikshank 1990:15).

During taping, the camera was most often focused on Katja's and Agatha's faces, and these shots dominate the video. I chose this approach for two reasons: they were not comfortable with my moving the camera around while they spoke, and I wanted a simple angle that did not distract attention from their stories. By piecing together long sections of narrative with photographs and scenes of them as they are today, their stories come out slowly and more closely aligned to the rhythms of their speech.

This video adopts a style of what has been called, at times derisively, "talking heads" (Martineau 1984:257; Lesage 1984:223). Advised by various people that my use of talking heads would only bore viewers, I stuck (with what a viewer called "relentless" adherence) to presenting Katja and Agatha as storytellers with faces.¹¹² As Barbara Martineau writes, "The effect of talking heads depends on who is talking about what and how" (1984:267). Katja and Agatha tell riveting stories and need lots of uncluttered space and time for telling them.¹¹³

The camera does not rove over their bodies and rooms and they do not expect it to. In focusing on their faces, I have chosen simplicity and

¹¹²Karl Heider insists that for a film to be properly ethnographic the "close-up should be seen as an extraordinary step, taken only because of extreme necessity" (1976:79). His analysis of the "ethnographicness" of film, however, does not take into account the desires and needs of the people being filmed. Such desires and needs must be considered during the process of making an ethnographic film or video, to mediate the ever-present potential for objectification (especially of women) in visual representation (cf. de Lauretis 1990:291).

¹¹³Extended presentation of each woman in the video parallels the sometimes extended quotes in the text; both provide polyvocality (Lawless 1991:56) and "trustworthy texts" (Titon 1988:11).

straightforwardness instead of dissonance (Rabinger 1987:122).¹¹⁴ The video evokes difference not by contrasting stories with images, but through alternating between the two women's stories. In choosing to emphasize their stories, I wanted to give to their on-screen presence the power and integrity I felt from them off-screen. Their storytelling profoundly affected me and confirmed what Julia Lesage, a feminist film theorist, writes about feminist documentaries:

The self-conscious act of telling one's story as a woman in a politicized yet personal way gives the older tool of women's subcultural resistance, conversation, a new social force as a tool for liberation (1984:234).

By speaking their way into public discourse, Katja and Agatha affect their environment. They make people aware of how they think about everything from German soldiers, to war, to preaching. Most dramatically, they subvert stereotypes about older women, demonstrating that they too are reflective about the world they live in and that they have painful, complex, and inspiring stories to tell.

Consequences of Telling

The consequences of telling have not been all good. After showing Katja the rough cuts of the video, we went for a coffee in the university cafeteria, a somewhat inhospitable place. While we talked, I could see that Katja was in the middle of some very deep pain. My questions and video brought her to relive frightening memories of the war.

¹¹⁴Rabinger defines dissonance as a "usage [which] exploits discrepancies," and spurs "the viewer to crave resolution" (1988:122).

The memories would have been there anyway, but as I sat with her that afternoon, I struggled to understand what I was to her, and what my responsibility was in the face of her grief.¹¹⁵ While watching herself on the screen, Katja was involved in an encounter with herself in which I had no part. We were no longer in conversation; the video forced self-reflection upon her.¹¹⁶ That same afternoon she talked to me about the power of God in her life and suggested that maybe he even brought me to her. The mixed emotions evoked by the video have been intense for all three of us.

Katja, after seeing the finished video, exclaimed that she talked too much. Her friend, who had offered her apartment for us to view the video, remarked, "That's the point." Katja felt that she came across as too much of a "yo-yo" with her eyes not fixed to the camera and her arms and head moving around. She worried that she may have been too negative about the church, but she agreed that what she had said was truthful.

Agatha, after watching the video, echoed one of Katja's first comments, "I'm an old woman! I don't think I am as old as I look," she said. She added that she felt at times the camera was too close-up on her (I agree). A few days later while speaking with her on the phone, Agatha told me she felt that she came across as too much of a "women's libber." She was concerned that

¹¹⁵Before and after taping at the Yale Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, participants are given support by a group which includes a psychologist or mental health professional (Hartman 1989:58).

¹¹⁶Perhaps the experience of watching oneself on screen has the effect Elizabeth Bruss describes: "Filmed, the unowned image of the body becomes a locus of identity rather than its mask, and expression of personality rather than an encumbrance" (1980:319). Though I would substitute "container" for the disdainful "encumbrance," her point remains that film conveys the body in ways text cannot, and can wreak havoc on traditional dualisms of mind and body.

I played up the differences between her and Katja too much, making Agatha seem too rebellious.

That same day Katja had called her, and they talked about their discomfort with being on camera, with their lives being opened for all to see. She said, "Maybe I just have to get used to it." This video has had profound effect on them. The video worries them, it upsets them, it is not perfect for them. The video reveals too much and leads people astray from Katja's and Agatha's proper lives of modesty, obedience, and faith. Yet they also approve of it, and they let me show it (outside of their church).

The experiences of Katja and Agatha have led them into unconventional lives as women. They still struggle to maintain a cherished notion of femininity. The video throws their femininity into question, breaking down the image most are allowed to see. What causes them pain, however, is also what was my purpose: to provide a forum for their stories to be heard by others, to flesh out their words, their contradictions, their faith, and their lives. A resolution of the paradox of pain and purpose of storytelling will probably not be found, and I will continue to show the video with what I hope is respect and compassion.

Implications of Video for Life History

After working with elderly Jewish men and women involved in a community centre in California, Barbara Myerhoff became convinced of the importance of presentation to life histories (Myerhoff 1980:30). Myerhoff draws from Susanne Langer, who considers presentational symbols to be "the

explication of 'unspeakable' things" (Langer 1985:105). Langer asserts that emotion and intuition, traditionally relegated to the irrational, carry reason presentationally. Presentational symbols—non-verbal acts, pictures, light, tone of voice—"are involved in a simultaneous, integral presentation" (1985:102), contrary to discursive symbols embedded in language, which are defined in terms of other symbols (1985:101). With the help of presentational symbols Langer gives meaning to feeling and senses, emphasizing that understanding is gained not only through the logic of words, but from our bodily interaction with the world:

The symbolic materials given to our senses, the *Gestalten* or fundamental perceptual forms which invite us to construe the pandemonium of sheer impression into a world of things and occasions, belong to the "presentational" order. They furnish the elementary abstractions in terms of which ordinary sense-experience is understood (1985:103).

Videotaped life histories can achieve a union between the discursive and the presentational. With video we hear language spoken while hearing, seeing, and feeling the emotions within the words and silences. Images and text coalesce to form a presentation that is experienced in our minds and our bodies. The presentation is rational, in that it makes sense (Myerhoff 1980:30), but is not necessarily without paradox or contradiction.

With videotaped life history we can listen to and watch the stories of another human being's life complete with laughter, tears, confusion, and

without punctuation.¹¹⁷ But as Myerhoff warns, considering life history to be presentational

is marvelous but treacherous and paradoxical, because on the face of it we would seem to end up right back with discursive symbols, since all of this has too much to do with words. But perhaps the discursive symbol cannot be separated from the presentational one, if the line that I am trying to take is the correct one (1980:31).

Myerhoff's line is correct; feeling and embodiment must be understood as part of the process of life history, while the ability to analyze words and speech articulately and cogently must be maintained.

Videotaped life histories, to be complete, need to be accompanied by text, that more fully describes and interprets the context, the relationships developed, and the significance of the stories in the process of the life history (cf. Heider 1976:96). The combination of video and writing in the presentation of life history affords a depth of resonance and dissonance in conveying the ethnographic encounter.

Conclusion

In working on this thesis, I have become acutely aware of the power formal religion has in shaping what is considered religious, even in light of my explicit interest in informal religion. It has been a slow process for me to shift from listening for references to pacifism and church to realizing that Katja's and Agatha's relationships with their mothers, Agatha's quilting, and

¹¹⁷Punctuation of orally delivered texts runs the risk of making the speaker sound more coherent or more confused than she actually is. In the written thesis I have opted to use literarily correct punctuation in an effort to make the quotations easily comprehensible. Video avoids this dilemma somewhat, although editing can have the similar consequence of rendering the speaker more or less coherent.

Katja's daily conversations with God, fundamentally comprise their religious lives.

Feminist theory, as both a political project and an analytical tool, has given me the basis from which to value and understand Katja's and Agatha's religious lives. The attention within feminist ethnography to method and process has helped me to understand the tension between research and exploitation, but I have not resolved this tension. I remain committed, however, to recording and interpreting women's religious lives, and I remain friends with Katja and Agatha.

I see now that the process of completing this thesis had allowed me to work at my own understanding of what it is to be Mennonite. Speaking with Agatha and Katja has forced me to accept that being Mennonite within an organized church works for some women, despite inherent tensions. By simultaneously valuing and analyzing their religious lives as Mennonite women, I caught a glimpse of what it meant to be Mennonite for my mother, my aunts, and my grandmothers.

My interpretation of Katja's and Agatha's religious lives is drawn from my relationships with them. I have been with them in their homes, church, and in their pasts by way of stories. I hope to have drawn a portrait of them that they can recognize and respect. In writing and videotaping their lives, we three have told stories that fill the gaps where women's lives should be: gaps in the scholarly canon, in Mennonite history, and in the storytelling that shapes boys and girls into women and men.

Appendix I

Continuation of Agatha's Story from Page 100

AJ: And then all of a sudden, I said to her, "How would you like to change your religion?"

And she said, "I want to become a..." and then she stopped. She wasn't going to say that. And I waited a little while, I said, "A Christian?"

"Yes." A very clear yes.

I said, "Do you believe that Jesus is the Messiah?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe that he died for your and my sins?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe that he rose from the grave, that he's alive?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe that he's in the spirit, right here with us, and hears every word we are saying?"

"Yes."

Well, I thought, "What else can I do? Everything seems to be in order, what else can I do?" And we talked a little bit about her family and so on. And then I asked her, would she want to pray with me, to Jesus. I asked another Jewess years ago, whether she wanted me to pray for her and she said, "Yes, but don't pray to your Jesus."

This time I asked her whether she wanted me to pray to Jesus, she said, "Yes."

So, I started praying and she repeated every sentence, in a loud voice. I think the nurses must have heard it. And then she sort of settled back in her cushions and was sort of relaxed and comfortable. And she is a very feeble old lady, I just asked her if I should leave her now and let her rest, and so that's what I did. But then later when I came home, I thought, "Well, I know that Jews can be very, very difficult when one of their family joins a Christian organization. And I don't know enough about her family, whether they will be fighting it, or what happens."

So, I was sort of looking for someone who would take over, because I'm not supposed to evangelize in the hospital, in this job that I'm doing. I don't want to get into trouble. So, I called—after searching for a while—I called an organization that is in Hamilton. It's called "The Chosen People" and they are Christian Jews. And they would send someone to visit her on a regular basis.

But I don't think they will have much chance in visiting her much more, because I saw her on Tuesday again, and she is more or less out of it now. She's all confused. Very upset that they have to contain her in a bed. They have put the sides of the bed up so that she wouldn't fall out and so on. Usually people can't understand, they feel sort of shut in and sort of very, very unhappy. So I just hope and pray that she can just go, you know, die. That's what she would like to.

PK: Did she say why she wanted to become a Christian?

AJ: No. She didn't explain it. Just this, that's all she said. So somebody must have worked with her, it wasn't me. And if I would have known, you know, if I had tried to prepare something to speak to her this way, I wouldn't have known. It wouldn't have worked. I feel that God really leads you sometimes. And that was just the right time, because that was when she still was clear in her mind. She's not clear anymore. She was trying to climb out of bed when I saw her. Had thrown all the blankets and clothes off her. And I had to talk to her and sort of quiet her down. And I had a nice visit after that. Fed her some apple sauce and so on, and after a while she relaxed, and I could, when I left her she was relaxed again. I don't know, is it the medication or is it something else. I think it's mostly the medication that they give old people that make them wild and incoherent.

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