



Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

Katharina Reimer Claassen: *Faithful Disciple in Mennonite Brethren Beginnings*

On January 6, 1860 Johann and Katharina Claassen were among the 18 families of the Molochna Colony, South Russia who organized the Mennonite Brethren Church. The group experienced much joy but also new challenges. In March, nearly three months later, the municipal authorities ordered the “Brethren” back to their former churches and Johann, as their spokesman, was in danger of arrest. Consequently, he prepared to leave for the capital, St. Petersburg, to obtain legal recognition for the group.

Before he left, Johann and Katharina knelt together in prayer. As her biographer Betty Suderman Klassen tells us, “They committed each other to God’s care.” * When he was gone, Katharina felt helpless and wondered if her only contribution to the new church would be the sacrifice of managing without her husband. Should she continue to invite the group to worship in their home even if her husband was gone? This she chose to do and it gave her some comfort. The day after he left, the municipal authorities searched their entire house for Johann. But he was gone and she

was glad he was free. It would take him three weeks to reach the capital and several months to return home.

During the next five years Johann was absent from his family many months at a time. Katharina had four children to care for. Jacob, David and Johannes were seven, four and two years old and Maria was just a baby. Even with the hired help, it was a lot of work to manage the household, garden their plot beside the Tokmak Creek, host the fellowship group, and attend Bible studies.

The tragic drowning of her son Johannes affected Katharina greatly. During the first four years of their marriage when she lost four infants, her husband had been there to comfort her. Now he was gone. The hardship of separation was greater as she mourned alone. She found some comfort in the words Heinrich Huebert had spoken at the funeral, “You know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.”

Various issues arose in the new group. In October 1860, when Johann was still at home, the worship meeting and the baptism which followed it had been disrupted with interjections of

“Hallelujah! Glory! Victory!” as well as loud, joyous singing and shouting. Katharina felt this was out of place and spoke to Johann about it afterwards. The neighbors also complained and Johann and the preachers had to appear in court. The group was ordered to return to their former congregations within two months or lose their Mennonite privileges. Again Johann had to leave for St. Petersburg.

In June 1861 in Kakbas during the Pentecost celebrations, loud singing, shouting and playing of instruments made it hard to understand what the leaders were saying. Katharina described the meeting to her husband in a letter. It was one of many letters she wrote to Johann. This was her way of keeping him informed and giving him her perspective on church affairs. Johann acted as a mediator in these and other issues and sought reconciliation between the moderate and the exuberant members of their group.

When Johann returned in June 1862 he showed Katharina the papers from the Czar granting permission for a new Mennonite settlement near the Kuban River. Many families among the brethren had suffered economic boycott from members of their former church. Soon after Katharina gave birth to another daughter, Aganetha, in April 1863, Johann and their son Jacob left to clear land and build a home in the Kuban.

Three years later, in January 1866 another daughter was born, named after Katharina. That fall Katharina and the children accompanied Johann to the Kuban. Katharina worked hard to make the sod hut with the dirt floor into a home. Life was difficult and baby Katharina died. In 1869, at age 42, Katharina herself succumbed to the dreaded disease in the new settlement— malaria.

As the wife of a leader often absent from home, Katharina endured the hardship of separation, deprivation and loneliness. Yet she practiced hospitality generously and contributed substantially to the welfare and establishment of the Mennonite Brethren Church.

Adapted from Betty Suderman Klassen, “Living Apart for the Lord, Katharina Reimer Claassen (1827-69)” in Katie Funk Wiebe, ed., *Women Among the Brethren, Stories of Fifteen Mennonite Brethren and Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Women* (Board of Christian Literature of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1979), pp. 16-32.

*All quotations are from the chapter. For a detailed story of the Kuban settlement, see *The Kuban Settlement*, by C.P. Toews, Heinrich Friesen and Arnold Dyck, trans. by Herbert Giesbrecht (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications, Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1989).



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Written by: Linda A. Huebert Hecht

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E-mail: ajdueck@mbconf.ca • www.mbhistory.org