“Let my people go!” In July 1948, when Elfrieda Dyck faced the hostile captain and crew of the Charlton Monarch, she boldly echoed the words Moses spoke to Pharaoh in ancient Egypt. “Her people” were 860 Mennonite refugees. Under MCC’s (Mennonite Central Committee’s) direction, they had placed themselves at the mercy of the ship’s crew to take them from postwar Europe to their new life in Paraguay. After more than six weeks aboard a faltering ship that had spent much of its time adrift without power, the Mennonites aboard the Charlton Monarch were stranded at port in Recife, Brazil. The shipping company made promises while the refugees remained in the dark with spoiled food and no plumbing, 2,500 miles from their destination of Buenos Aires. Thirty-one year old Elfrieda, the sole MCC representative on board, squared off against the ship’s chief officers and declared she was getting her people off of the ship.

With the help of the IRO (International Relief Organization), Elfrieda flew 106 refugees to Asunción, Paraguay. She planned to do this every night for a week until everyone was off the ship. The elderly, the sick, and mothers with newborns were sent on the first of the night flights. Seeing that Elfrieda was succeeding in getting her people away, the captain moved the ship from the port to the open harbour, ostensibly to save docking fees while repairing the ship.

Undaunted, Elfrieda arranged for a small launch to make multiple nighttime trips from the ship to the dock. Children, the elderly, the weak: all climbed down the emergency ladder in the dark with their meagre belongings, down the outside of the ship, while the launch rose and fell on the waves below. The Charlton Monarch had sailed from Bremerhaven, Germany on May 16, 1948. The last of the refugees left the ship on July 10.

Elfrieda Klassen Dyck was born in 1917, in Donskaja, New Samara, Russia; the youngest of Franz and Justina (Wiebe) Klassen’s fourteen children. The family left Russia in 1925 and settled in Winnipeg, Manitoba where Elfrieda graduated from
nurses training in 1939. Orphaned by the age of sixteen, Elfrieda looked to her older siblings for care and guidance. One of them was C.F. Klassen, the well-known Mennonite Brethren leader who told her MCC needed nurses in wartime Europe. Elfrieda decided there was a need that she could fill and boarded a ship for England. It was 1942 and German U-boats patrolled the Atlantic in wolf packs to sink and destroy Allied Ships.

In England, Elfrieda met fellow Canadian MCC worker, Peter Dyck. Together they founded a convalescent home for poor boys from Liverpool and Manchester. In the town of Whaley Bridge, before an excited congregation of twenty convalescing boys dressed in matching MCC outfits, Elfrieda Klassen married Peter Dyck in 1944.

The Dycks moved to the Netherlands at war’s end to distribute relief supplies. There they saw the tip of the iceberg of the thousands of displaced Mennonites moving through Europe in a desperate bid to avoid repatriation to the Soviet Union. MCC restationed Elfrieda and Peter in Berlin where Mennonites gathering in the American sector hoped to get past the Soviets to the west.

Peter worked with government and military leaders to move the people out while Elfrieda ran the refugee camp that eventually numbered over 1,200 people. The hasty last-minute evacuation of the Berlin group fell solely to Elfrieda as Peter was away when the go-ahead came. Within an hour and a half, Elfrieda had all her people at the train station, including a woman in labour who was collected from a Berlin hospital along the way. This miraculous passage through Soviet territory has come to be known as the “Berlin Escape.”

Elfrieda and Peter escorted the refugees from Germany to a new start in Paraguay aboard the Volendam. After this successful voyage, C.F. asked Elfrieda to lead a second voyage on her own. Once again, Elfrieda recognized there was a need that she could fill. Elfrieda led 860 Mennonites to Paraguay aboard the General Stuart Heintzelman. While she was en route, Peter prepared another group for emigration. As soon as Elfrieda returned to Germany, she set out again to lead a third voyage aboard the Charlton Monarch. Boarding the ship in Bremerhaven, no one knew of the misadventures that lay ahead.

Elfrieda succeeded in one impossible task after another because she was willing to be used by God to fill a need. One of the earliest lessons Elfrieda learned as a relief worker was that she had to be able to accept help herself. She graciously recognized and welcomed whatever help the Lord sent her way: military personnel, international relief workers, local people and the refugees themselves.

Queen Juliana of the Netherlands knighted Peter Dyck in 1950. In 2000 The Mennonite named Peter and Elfrieda Dyck among the 20 most influential Mennonite men and women of the past century. After a lifetime of ministry that was marked by willingness, trust and generosity, Elfrieda Klassen Dyck died on August 20, 2004 at the age of eighty-seven.

For more details, read the book Up From the Rubble by Peter and Elfrieda Dyck (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1991).