

Tena Friesen, *Pushing Through Invisible Barriers: A Canadian Mennonite Story*. Altona, Man.: Friesens Corp., 2011. Pp. 520. Softcover, \$29.95.

In this large volume Tena Neudorf Friesen has written her autobiography – a fascinating, detailed account which should be of particular interest to Canadian Mennonite readers and students of Mennonite settlement history.

The book appropriately commences with a succinct (15 page) background overview of Mennonite history in the Netherlands, West and East Prussia, “South Russia” (today Ukraine), and finally the Canadian Prairies in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Revealing her penchant for Mennonite history, this is hardly a cursory summation; rather much interesting detail is accurately provided, together with maps and archival photographs and documents.

The first substantial part of the book, consisting of nineteen short chapters (each 3-16 pages), describes Friesen’s childhood in

Saskatchewan (39-159). Born and raised in the Saskatchewan Valley settlement, she begins her personal story of childhood in a traditional Mennonite farm family during the 1940s and early '50s. Her descriptions of the farm and countryside in the Altona district near Osler from a child's impressions are evocative, playing with her original five siblings and going to a one-room school. In an informative short chapter she probes into her Mennonite heritage: her family's background in Russia (Ukraine) and the reasons for them leaving for Canada, then the transplanted Mennonite culture in Manitoba and Saskatchewan – the village layout (with diagrams), the house-barn and organization of the household, family life, roles and chores, traditional clothing, how Christmas was celebrated, community hog slaughters, and traditional recipes. This part of the book concludes with the exodus of mostly conservative Mennonites from this settlement to northern Alberta as part of a continuing movement since the 1920s – including to Mexico – to protect their traditional culture.

Part Two, consisting of chapters 20-34 (155-268), describes Friesen's youth living in the remote Mennonite settlement around La Crete in northern Alberta from 1953 to 1962. This settlement had been founded in 1931 by Old Colony Mennonites from Saskatchewan, who settled east of the Métis communities of Paddle Prairie and south of Fort Vermilion. At the time the only way to reach the area was during summer by river boat down the Peace River from the town of Peace River, a distance of almost 200 kilometers. By the time the Neudorfs made the long journey north, when Tena was twelve, a rough gravel and mud road had been pushed through the heavy bush. The early homesteaders faced incredible challenges, yet survived to build a prosperous farming community mindful of Mennonite traditions. Back in Saskatchewan the Neudorfs had gradually moved away from the more conservative Mennonite church, leaving the Old Colony church in 1934 to become Bergthaler, occasionally even attending the liberal General Conference church. Initially the first settlers around La Crete were predominantly Old Colony, whereas the author's family was regarded as less conservative. As the settlement expanded, a Bergthaler church was constructed in 1957. In time, with each generation, clothing became less traditional (revealed in the many vintage photographs provided). However, by the 1950s more than thirty families moved out of the settlement, increasingly dissatisfied with progressive change and still in search of a place where Mennonite tradition could best be preserved; with land becoming scarcer in the Mexican settlements, they joined other conservative Mennonites in developing new settlements in British

Honduras (now Belize). The author was temporarily obliged to leave the settlement in 1958-61 for her high school education, but returned to marry a local man the following year – a new stage in her life would commence as a Friesen.

Part Three, chapters 35-66 (273-446), continues with the author's life in the La Crete settlement, taking us through her married adulthood from 1962 to 2000. This part of the book, spanning almost four decades, describes her initial work in the family gas station and restaurant in La Crete, but then mostly her long service as the postmistress (1963-75), and finally as a school librarian, while raising a family of three children and building a home. In the meantime, a couple of chapters return to the persistent theme of "Mennonites on the move again" – this time more families from the La Crete settlement to Bolivia and Paraguay during the late 1960s-early '70s, and a later chapter focusses on Mennonite settlements in Mexico, where the Friesens had close relatives. Sectarian divisiveness has long been problematic within Mennonite settlements, as Mennonites tried to cope with change from traditionalism, and the La Crete settlement has been no exception; now a division affected the Bergthaler church. The author's mother died in 1986 and father about ten years later; and she became a grandparent Christmas day 1986. She finally left the settlement in 2002, after more than half a century since moving there from Saskatchewan.

The fourth and final part of the book, chapters 67-73 and the afterword (451-491), takes us from the author's retirement in 2000 to increasing health issues in 2009, in Tumbler Ridge, B.C. The interconnectedness of Mennonite settlements is convincingly documented in this book, with school reunions, homecomings and extended family gatherings. Other families had formed conservative Mennonite settlements in British Columbia, around Burns Lake and the Prespatou-Altona district north of Ft. St. John; but the main attraction of Tumbler Ridge, quite an isolated former mining community in northern B.C., apparently was the plentiful inexpensive housing and a congenial "church family" (which, interestingly, is not identified as Mennonite).

Tena Friesen calls her extensive autobiography "a Canadian Mennonite story," which indeed it is, revealing the restless Mennonite quest for new settlements, often in remote areas or foreign contexts, intended to preserve valued Mennonite traditions and lifestyles. It is a story of incredible perseverance against innumerable challenges, a story of "how hope transcended adversity". Tena Friesen is to be thanked for candidly opening her personal life to tell this fascinating story, which allows the reader

taking this journey to appreciate and understand Mennonite family life in all its diversity.

Alan B. Anderson
University of Saskatchewan