

# Elisabeth Rempel Reimer - Immigrant Woman

by Dr. Royden K. Loewen,  
Dept. of History, U. of M.

On 13 September 1874, 59 year-old Elisabeth Rempel Reimer arrived at the confluence of the Red and Rat Rivers in Manitoba with her 66 year-old husband Abram. She and her husband would make their way to the village of Blumenort that had been founded in August, 15 miles to the east. Here in Blumenort, the Reimers registered a homestead, SW 21-7-6E, (in September 1877) and established a small farm.

Within a short time, however, the couple seem to have followed the tradition of settling on the farmstead of one of their children. The 1879 diary of Elisabeth's husband, Abram Reimer, indicates that the couple was semi-retired, Abram spending his days visiting and chopping wood for neighbours, Elisabeth working to ensure the health of her children and grandchildren and sewing for neighbours. By 1883 the couple owned only 30 cultivated acres of land, one cow and small quantity of furniture; just a year later they were cultivating only 20 acres and possessed nei-

ther cow nor their own furniture. By 1889 the Reimers were no longer listed on the municipal tax roll. Both lived to relatively elderly ages, Abram dying at 84 in 1892, Elisabeth at 79 a year later.

The story of Elisabeth Reimer, is more than that of a quiescent Mennonite woman following her husband to a new land, and living out a peaceful, pastoral twilight of her life in a quaint East Reserve village. It is the story of a migrating woman, similar in some ways to the lives of millions of other European women who came to North America in the nineteenth century; these were lives determined by the limitations and opportunities rooted in a unique intersection of gender, ethnicity and agrarian lifeworld.

Like migrating women of other traditions - whether Jewish, Finnish, Ukrainian - Elisabeth lived out a complex life in a web of family, kinship, and village ties, and pursued a life that was made difficult by a never-ending cycle of birth, illness and death and by a migration to a new land. But she was also a Mennonite and would hold an especially pronounced sense of community, commitment to farm life, vision of historical lineage, and belief that migration itself was a religious act.

Like the worlds of other migrating Mennonite women in the 1870s, Elisabeth's life was rooted in the farm household and extended family. Family and kinship was the primary arena of her social relations; the Blumenort village and Kleine Gemeinde congregation represented a secondary arena; the outside world of market and government was usually outside her purview as a woman and an elderly person. It is significant that although she and Abram arrived in Manitoba with the third contingent of 1874 Kleine Gemeinde settlers, included in her travelling group were the families of three daughters and two sons and a total of 21 grandchildren, ages 15 years to 3 months.

Elisabeth and Abram were probably met at the river bank by their two sons - Peter and Abram - who had arrived six weeks earlier; the elderly Reimers also probably by-passed the Jacob Shantz immigration sheds and made their way straight to Blumenort where they would have been met by the wives of Peter and Abram Jr., each named Maria, and another 9 grandchildren.

Three of Elisabeth's married children were to make Blumenort their permanent homes, four would settle in Steinbach, four miles south (one remained in Russia). Within this tightly knit group of 40 members of her direct family, Elisabeth transplanted a familiar pattern of life.

That life had evolved in Russia. It began in the Molotschna colony where she was born as a twin to Peter and Katerina (Berchen) Rempel in 1814 and where, in 1835 at age 21, she married Abram Reimer, the son of Kleine Gemeinde bishop, Klaas Reimer. Genealogy records indicate that Elisabeth bore 8 children,

having her last child when she was only 38.

She was fortunate, each of her children grew to adulthood. But life was difficult. Her parents had been financially secure land-owning farmers and according to the bylaws of the Mennonite inheritance order she would have been entitled to an inheritance in 1837; but given those rules, too, and the size of families, that inheritance would have represented just 1/14th of the farm asset. Moreover, her husband, Abram, was not a successful farmer.

As a family history notes he "apparently...prospered neither spiritually nor materially the way his father had." It appears that Elisabeth had married the village intellectual. As a grandson, Bishop David P. Reimer noted in the 1950s, "on the whole [Abram Reimer] is said to have [had] a real interest in many areas in which others were uninformed. As is the case with many so-called men of knowledge, he too did not always end up on a green twig." Kleine Gemeinde deacon records indicate that the Reimer family relied on the church's poor fund to make ends meet, and frequently borrowed money from the deacon's fund: in 1847 it was to purchase a cow, in 1856 to construct a house, in 1861 to cover debts incurred elsewhere.

The Reimers' economic difficulties meant that Elisabeth was called to participate in the public world to a greater extent than other Mennonite women. It was not unusual that she would have worked the farmyard, milking cows, tending the chickens and gardens to feed the family. Nor was it unusual as a mother of one of the poorer homes to see her children leave home to work as teenaged "lifecycle" servants for neighbouring families. Klaas Jr., the future Steinbach merchant, left home at age 12 to learn the trade of blacksmithing, while son Peter left home at 14, recalling later how he returned home only for visits by skating down the frozen river and running over the steppe to the sound of howling wolves.

But poverty also meant that the Reimer household was more dependent on mother producing non-agricultural products than other homes. Daughter Margaretha, born in 1852 recalled years later how "mother, a seamstress was often called away from home on business. In the cause of her profession she did such work as tailoring men's suits, making men's caps with patent leather peaks and even, making hoop skirts for the nobility. Thus, her frequent absences caused [Margaretha, the young girl] much loneliness."

Conditions improved somewhat after the mid 1860s when Elisabeth and Abram joined Kleine Gemeinde migrations, first to Marcusland and then to Borosenko. In Marcusland they found a place for themselves on the farmyard of their son Klaas, and in Borosenko at their son Johann's place in the village of Steinbach.

And here, too, they witnessed each of their married children prosper. Abram's diary is

## Emigration

*continued from previous page*

When the church private school system was abolished in direct contravention of the 1873 "Letter of Privileges" which had induced them to come to Canada, a group of Chortitzer Mennonites went to Paraguay where they established the Menno Colony in 1927.

At very much the same time, the Soviet Revolution, Machno insurgents and famine devastated the Mennonite settlements in Russia so that some 23,000 immigrated to Canada. The first group of these so-called "Russländer" arrived in Giroux on August 20, 1923.

A second series of major immigrations occurred in 1948 when another group of Chortitzer moved to Paraguay. At the same time, some 65 conservative Kleine Gemeinde families, besieged by American fundamentalists in their own ranks, moved to Mexico, from where a smaller group moved on to Belize in 1958.

World War Two directly affected those Mennonites left in Russia as the battle front twice engulfed what was left of their once flowering settlements. The lucky ones were able to flee back to Germany while others perished in Stalin's Gulag. Many of these refugees came to Hanover Steinbach in 1948 as so-called "D.P.s" or Displaced Persons.

Our community has frequently experienced immigration: the farewells to relatives never to be seen again, the challenges of establishing new settlements, etc. The stories in the feature section provide insight into the drama and pathos of our history.

filled with a myriad of references to the expanding commercial agricultural, blacksmithing and milling activities of the Reimer children. Johann, for example, who was seen most often, made the two-day trip to Nikopol, the riverport on the Dnieper, with wheat for export approximately once a month and returned with goods or cash amounting to 28 to 34 rubles. But similar references are made to sons Peter and Abram marketing grain, and to the blacksmithing and milling enterprise of son Klaas and son-in-law Abram Friesen.

Most importantly for Elisabeth, Borosenko was the site in which she was able to work the close network of her extended family, offering assistance during the many times of illness and child birth. These close ties were made possible by having most of her children living within 15 miles of their own residence. Five married children - sons Klaas, Johann, Peter and daughters Elisabeth and Maria and their families - lived right in Steinbach.

Seven miles south along the shallow, winding Buluk River, past the Russian town of Scholochown, lay the large Mennonite village of Blumenhof where Elisabeth's son Abram and his family farmed. Clear across the Borosenko Volost, 15 miles east northeast of Steinbach, past the seat of the Volost council in Nikolaithal, lay Rosenfeld where her youngest daughter, Margaretha, lived with her husband Abram Penner.

Within this setting Elisabeth exercised her role as the matriarch of an extended Mennonite family. Few Sundays passed but that the Steinbach children gathered at a sibling's place in the village with the parents for the afternoon "Faspa" and often, too, daughter Margaretha or son Abram came from their respective villages with their families. Through the week the boys in Steinbach helped one another shoe horses or assist in construction projects, and borrowed tools or arranged caravans to Nikopol.

Husband Abram spent much time visiting or assisting his children in the village, or if a ride happened to be available his children too in Blumenhof and Rosenfeld. Elisabeth, herself, walked the dusty streets and travelled outlying roads as much as her husband. But she was younger and more vivacious and her contacts were as much medical as social.

Abram's diary for the Borosenko years is a unique document describing not only activities of the male world, but that of the female world, and especially that of his wife, Elisabeth. The diary indicates that her life followed closely the activities of his daughters and daughters-in-law. In 1870, for example, five infants were born to Elisabeth's extended family, revealing that the round of child bearing and illness was a very difficult stage in the woman's life and that these were the events that bonded women of different generations.

It was Elisabeth Sr. who attended all child-births. Sometimes attending to childbirth was a mere formality. On June 16 son Peter's wife, 20 year-old Elisabeth Friesen, went into labour with her first child and Elisabeth Sr. quickly came over and during the night a

granddaughter was born; a day and half later the mother was up and about. In August when son Johann's wife, Anna, had her first child, she experienced such a fast birth that Elisabeth Sr. arrived too late to see the child, a son, born.

But only three days later Elisabeth was rushed to Rosenfeld where her 18 year-old daughter, Margaretha, gave birth to her first child, a daughter, after three hours of hard labour; Margaretha was less fortunate than her sisters-in-law and spent many days in bed, exhausted, "very sick" and afflicted with mastitis.

Only two days after Elisabeth had travelled to Rosenfeld, she was summoned back home, to Steinbach where her son Klaas's 34 year-old wife, Katherina Willms Reimer, gave birth to her seventh child, a son; this too was a difficult delivery as the mother "was very weak and sick." The most difficult time in the Reimer family that year came when 20 year-old daughter, Katherina, gave birth to her second son on October 23. Although she was "peaceful and enduring" for two days, her condition worsened and over the course of the next month she was near death on two occasions.

The year of migration, 1874, would threaten to dislodge this closely-knit life. But Elisabeth would focus her energies and authority on ensuring that the migration was a transplantation and not an uprooting. The preparation for moving itself was a trying time as auction sales were organized and strong bonds of friendship broken.

These were times sometimes of emotional crisis: on June 9, 1873 it is noted that daughter-in-law Elisabeth Friesen Reimer's "condition deteriorated ... [and] at 10:30 her breathing decreased rapidly until 11 o'clock when she died"; on 6 November it was noted that "at Toewes [daughter Elisabeth Jr.] is somewhat distressed about the travelling and very anxious about selling their house" and on 8 March 1874 daughter-in-law Katherina, who suffered from a mental disorder, is said to have returned home where "she cried and insulted very much."

Then, too, there was the need for additional income. It is possible that the Reimers operated a small consignment store: on 10 February 1874, for example, they took "four pounds of raisins, six pounds of coffee, three pounds of sugar, one pound of prunes, carrots, half a pound of wax" from Peter Friesen of Nikopol for "14 days." Elisabeth took on other assignments that spring. In a single day in January 1874 "Abram Reimers came to visit for lunch and 'Faspa' and brought work here, one large fur coat and [ordered] other clothes to be made. Also Peter Wiebe brought three old fur coats to be made into two new fur coats for two of his sons."

These were times that the men folk would travel to Katerinoslav, the capital, or to Molotschna colony, to organize the migration. On such occasions women gathered for moral support: on 25 February 1874 Abram and Margaretha Penner came to visit from

Rosenfeld, but after a while Abram returned home to catch a ride to Katerinoslav and his pregnant wife, Margaretha, stayed on with parents; the next day, on the 26th, daughter Katherina Friesen spent the night at Reimers. All the while there were more births of grandchildren, one in March, another in May. Each time Elisabeth was called to assist: as Abram recorded it for the birth in March, it was "at about 10 o'clock [that] my wife was driven to Toewes and at 11 at night a son...was born."

But on March 30, just as grandson and his mother were making progress, the new mother "walking about the room and sitting by the oven", Elisabeth herself fell "very weak and sickly." Although she regained enough health to ride to church service with her son Klaas on his "two-wheeler" the next day, she suffered a relapse. On April 10th her husband noted that Elisabeth Sr. had "been very ill since Easter, so much so that she could not be up for the entire day, and this week still she has had so much throat pain that we have often been very saddened." The voyage to North America during the summer of 1874 was even more trying; while husbands scouted for land and debated the merits of locating in Manitoba or in Kansas, women were preoccupied with health: at least three of Elisabeth's daughters were ill on the voyage, a brother-in-law remained in Russia on account of his ill health, one grandchild died en route, another died in Manitoba, just a month before Elisabeth herself arrived. Still, as in Russia, Elisabeth became a focal point for her daughters and their families. Her only difficulty was keeping her ever-curious husband by her side: Abram is said to have become so enthralled with the sites at Quebec City that he became separated from the larger group and missed the train to Toronto.

In Blumenort and Steinbach, Elisabeth saw to it that a renewed kinship-based female network was quickly woven into place. Sometimes she witnessed her daughters visiting one another: an entry in Abram's 1879 diary notes that on "Sunday, June 22, Bishop Toews preached and in the afternoon Mrs. Peter Reimer walked to Blumenhof and Mrs. Abram Penner went with her." More often Elisabeth would do the visiting. A typical entry in Abram's diary is the one from May 1879 in which he records that "when I came home I discovered my wife had gone to Abram Penners, so I went there as well."

Sometimes when Abram would leave the village for one destination, so too would Elisabeth, but heading in a separate direction: thus on 28 March 1889, as the elderly Abram travelled to Gruenfeld for the day, Elisabeth visited her daughter-in-law in the neighbouring village of Blumenhof. On still other occasions the daughters came to Blumenort: on 27 February 1889, a Wednesday, when married daughters Katherina and Elisabeth Jr. of Steinbach came to visit their sister, 42 year-old, Margaretha in Blumenort, Elisabeth Sr. and Abram walked over at once to

*continued on page 7*