

FINAL DRAFT: 1235 words

Passing on stories about poppyseed rolls and prayer

by Laurie Oswald Robinson for *Mennonite World Review*

NEWTON, Kan. -- When 51-year-old Leslie Seifert visited the 1943 marker in rural Moundridge that names her Swiss Volhynian Mennonite ancestors who came to Kansas in 1874, she was overwhelmed with wonder -- and lots of questions.

What motivated her ancestors to suffer the trials of uprooting to preserve their religious freedom? What can they teach her and her two sons about faith, family and a focus on hard work?

To piece together her ancestry puzzle, Seifert, daughter of Kathy and Randy Goering, Moundridge, sent a questionnaire to her aunts and uncles on both sides of the family. Also aiding in her efforts is the membership she and her parents share in the Swiss Mennonite Cultural and Historical Association (SMCHA). Through education, cultural events, historical preservation and storytelling, the non-profit association seeks to preserve this group's heritage.

"I am just fascinated about how my ancestors came over here, where they suffered through all those blizzards and windstorms," said Seifert, who farms with her husband, Doug, in Oklahoma. "They had to put up with amazing things, and were very hard-working."

Her questionnaire focused much on faith practices. "I know they were people of faith and trusted God," she said. "I am sure that helped them through trials. Even in heartaches, they never let go of their faith."

"I wanted to know what my great-grandfathers prayed about all that time, and how it was that my mom came to love the Bible so much, and passed on its stories to me and my brother. Today I love Jesus and love to pray, and I know that has a lot to do with my ancestors' love for God."

Not all great-grandchildren have Seifert's passion and curiosity. Nevertheless, SMCHA strives to keep the legacy alive. Because of their biblical pacifism, the Swiss Volhynians fled persecution in Switzerland through France, Germany, Austria, Poland before settling in the Ukraine. Forced into conscription in war-bound Russia, they uprooted again. Their four villages immigrated on four ships to Kansas and South Dakota.

Today, about 300 of the 3,000 or so descendants are members of SMCHA. It is seeking to find and record stories before another generation passes, said Kathy Goering and LaVern Stucky, SMCHA leaders in south central Kansas. The region is a large hub for immigrant communities such as Moundridge, Buhler, Inman, Hutchinson, McPherson, Peabody, Florence, Whitewater, Goessel and Newton.

Seeking stories is not simple

Acculturation threatens to mute past memories and render them irrelevant now, Goering said. And the storytelling is growing more complex. The wider Mennonite church seeks to retain its roots as it embraces people of other backgrounds and cultures who are becoming part of the Anabaptist "tree."

Goering, SMCHA's membership officer, is soul searching. She wonders what to emphasize. Ethnic food for the body such as poppyseed rolls? Food for the soul -- prayer in the face of persecution? Or both? SMCHA began in 1974 as an offshoot of the immigration centennial. Will the story and its stories fade or flourish in these next 100 years?

She asks: "What about the Anabaptist story needs to be saved? What part will actually strengthen our children and help them face life with the same courage as their ancestors did? ... Could we still collect stories from the old ones that would inspire us all to hang on to those godly values?"

During a recent joint interview, Stucky said he shares her urgency in seeking out the stories from earlier centuries that will matter most in the 21st.

"Perhaps the real reason for the story writing is that we need to preserve and understand those incidents in our history that made our faith," said Stucky, SMCHA president. "We need to be remembering the things that made us Anabaptists, that made us children of God, made us a family."

SMCHA story completes wider Anabaptist story

John Sharp, professor of history and Bible and ministry at Hesston (Kan.) College, said that the story gathering of regional groups such as SMCHA contribute to the wider Anabaptist narrative. It ranges from the progressive Mennonite Church USA to their Amish spiritual cousins.

"If we don't share and know our stories, we lose something of who we are," he said. "Stories build community. They also bring healing. They help us put fragments together to create a fuller picture."

Sharp is editor of *Gathering at the hearth: stories Mennonites Tell* (Herald Press, 2001). The book contains 28 stories that reveal Mennonites' core values, who they are and want to be. The stories range from peacemaking Native Americans, pioneer life, revolution in Russia, migration, Annie Funk and the Titanic, a near hanging in Kansas, Orie Miller, dismantling racism, Emma Richards and Marilyn Miller, Peter Dyck, Mesach Krisetya and a new search for Clayton Kratz.

"The Bible is the master narrative, and we need to know where we as Anabaptists fit into that," he said. "Stories give us a place to stand, a place to understand ourselves in this world. They voice our convictions for other faith traditions. ... These stories are a gift to us. ... We are irresponsible if we do not pass this gift onto our children, grand-children and great-grandchildren – and to newcomers in the faith."

The sharing of this gift was deeply formative in the life of former Bethel College student Brian Stucky, now a retired teacher of Goessel and a SMCHA member. When he was a junior in college in 1974, the centennial of the 1874 migration that was underway in south central Kansas communities captivated him.

"It seemed to me that I was the only college kid that cared about Mennonite history at the time," he said. "But as the old timers shared their stories, I knew that I should keep my ears open."

Stucky joined SMCHA in college, and then fell away before returning in recent years. The centennial – and the many times his teary-eyed grandmother shared the story of babies buried in graves only recently uncovered in Peabody -- seeped into his soul. These stories prepped him to pursue the past.

"Every family has a story but don't often want to be identified as the ones to step forward and tell it," he said. "But every time I give a bus tour, I ask people to raise their hands if they never cared about Mennonite history when they were younger, but do now. Many of their hands shoot up."

"They share a similar lament -- 'I want to pass our story onto my kids and grandkids, but I can't because I didn't ask my grandparents and parents about these stories, and now they are dead. I wish I had paid more attention when I was younger.' "

Because of Seifert's earlier-than-usual passion for these stories, she will not have this lament.

"Deuteronomy 7:9 promises that God is faithful, and keeps his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments," Seifert said. "It touches me deeply to think that all these generations may have prayed for their descendants."

"And now the next generation is being effected. When my youngest son, Casye, was in a season of struggle, Mom shared stories with him about our ancestors. His response was, 'Wow, if they could move

and start a better life, then so can I.' That modeling shows him that options for a better life are out there for those who believe and are willing to act on that belief."