

# A Question of Audience? Two Views of Home in the Russian-Mennonite Novels of Barbara Smucker

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Barbara Smucker's historical novel *Days of Terror* (1979) has received several awards, considerable attention, and general acclaim since its publication in 1979. By contrast, the first novel Smucker wrote about a Mennonite family's emigration from war-torn Russia, *Henry's Red Sea* (originally published in 1955), has been largely ignored. If the 1955 book is mentioned at all, it is as a foil for the later, successful novel and as proof of Smucker's development as a writer. Cory Bieman Davies' opinion is typical. He characterizes *Henry's Red Sea* as "direct and didactic" and *Days of Terror* as "a more complex treatment of the themes of conflict and conscience" ("Remembrance" 19-20). Davies' assumption is that the differences between the two books can be attributed to skill, to "the twenty-five years which stand between the writing of these two stories." But the wide divergence of the two novels in tone, structure, and metaphorical patterns is not adequately accounted for by such an assertion.

A plot synopsis of the two novels suggests the basic similarity of the stories. In both, a Mennonite family witnesses the collapse of the safe and prosperous world built by ancestors on the southern steppes of Russia and determines to leave the motherland to make a new home in a new land. In *Henry's Red Sea*, the Bergen family decides to apply for emigration to Paraguay in South America. The Neufeld family arrives in Manitoba at the conclusion of *Days of Terror*.

Given Smucker's general faithfulness to historical fact, such similarity is not surprising. The mass migration of Mennonites during the aftermath of the Russian Revolution is well-documented in government immigration records, church histories, and personal memoirs. It seems reasonable to suppose that *Henry's Red Sea* and *Days of Terror* will be snapshots of the

same scene filtered through the lenses of two particular experiences. But, in fact, the two novels are based on quite different, even contradictory, assumptions about what a picture is and why it should be taken. The primary factor influencing these assumptions seems to be the question of audience.

The presentation of *Henry's Red Sea* clearly suggests it is aimed at an audience of people who share the author's and the central figure's cultural and religious heritage. It is a story for Mennonites about "who we are and where we came from." The novel was published in 1955 by the Mennonite Publishing House of Pennsylvania. Its author is recommended to the reader in the introductory material as the wife of a Mennonite minister and its story described as enjoyable reading for child and adult alike, although its format has been chosen particularly "so that young people can understand this important part of contemporary Mennonite history." Smucker has noted in an interview with Davies, in fact, that she wrote the book after observing her own children's interest in Henry's story as it was told them by a visitor who had lived through the events depicted in the novel (8). The introduction of *Days of Terror*, by contrast, does not mention the Mennonite content of the novel. It begins, rather, with the observation that "many young people who live in Canada and the United States today have relatives who were once called 'immigrants'." Peter's story is seen as one instance of what Smucker in the interview with Davies called "the story of immigrants" (10): "Peter Neufeld and his family in this story came from Russia to Canada in the 1920s seeking religious freedom" (9). The intended audience of this story is apparently both more general and more restricted, aimed particularly at young people, but generally at any young person who can sympathize with the experience of the dispossessed.

The assumptions about audience are suggested, as well, by the style and tone of the two novels. In *Henry's Red Sea*, Smucker has no qualms about including entire stanzas of hymns, detailed summaries of the contents of sermons, and long recapitulations of biblical stories. Her presentation of this material suggests that she presumes her audience is as familiar with it as she is. In one of the sermons, for example, Mennonite Central Committee worker Peter Dyck recites the basic Christian story of salvation, closely paraphrased from the Gospel of John. Neither the character nor the narrator attribute the source of the account nor does either suggest what is meant by such phrases as "those who believed in [Jesus Christ] would live forever" (56). This sermon is preached during the first church service eleven-year-old Henry has ever attended, the practice of his religion having been forbidden by Russian authorities. "Henry listened and he *could* understand!" (56), Smucker tells her reader. Henry, in fact, immediately identifies the "warmth he felt inside" as "the love of God" that is uniting everyone in the room. That Henry should be persuaded by the rather wooden recitations of hymn and litany given is just not plausible within the terms of the world the novel creates. His decision *is* quite understandable, however, for readers who share experiences external to the text. I find, for example, that the scriptural

phrases and clichéd responses call up an entire range of memories, emotions, and ideas for me. But I suspect I am one of the few readers of Canadian children's literature who has participated in innumerable Mennonite worship services, prayer meetings, and evangelistic campaigns. This is not so much didactic literature, as Davies would have it, as confirmatory literature.

In *Days of Terror*, Smucker generally avoids using the religious vocabulary of the Mennonites, preferring the narrative overview to the transcribed sermon. Where Peter Dyck in *Henry's Red Sea* prays volubly for help in forgiving "the communists of Russia" and loving them "as Christ commanded us to love our enemies" (57), the narrator of *Days of Terror* explains the Mennonite belief in non-resistance: "Their religious beliefs, taken word for word from the Bible, followed the commandment 'Thou Shalt Not Kill'," (17). The received opinion of the group is not immediately recognized as truth nor quickly embraced in the second novel. Smucker rather explores a variety of reactions to the traditional doctrine through her characters. Peter's elder brother Otto leaves the family farm and joins a Mennonite Self-Defence Unit. It is a decision that Peter's father sees as Otto's renunciation of his right to call himself Mennonite. Grandfather pities the men who have violated their integrity by choosing violence. Peter questions whether the bandits against whom Otto and his friends have armed themselves have perhaps resigned the right to be considered human. Smucker certainly makes a case for the traditional pacific response of the Mennonites, but she does so by showing the consequence of the various viewpoints in her story. By building the world of her novel block by block in this way, Smucker makes the story of one particular cultural group accessible to readers from outside the group.

But somewhere in the process of making the story accessible, Smucker has changed that story radically. The mirror she holds up to her own people in *Henry's Red Sea* does not show the same face the reader sees through the window of *Days of Terror*. Just how different the two novels are can be seen by an explication of their structural and metaphorical patterns. In the remainder of this paper, I will look specifically at the concept of home in the two Mennonite novels.

That it is the depictions of home that allow access to the central patterns of meaning in these two novels will not be a surprising fact either to readers of the literature of what has come to be called "the Russian-Mennonite experience" or to readers of children's fiction. Harry Loewen has noted that "the land or home motif, whether understood in the physical-geographical-historical sense or in the spiritual-symbolic sense, runs like a red thread through most of Canadian-Mennonite prose and poetry" (77). Loewen suggests that home is typically evoked as the lost physical world among the older writers of this tradition, while younger writers such as Rudy Wiebe are posing more complex questions about what home can be for a people who are to be at once in the world, but not of the world. In Vicky Schreiber Dill's assessment, Wiebe has moved far from the need to fix home in terms of any

land or language: “the nature of the Mennonite task,” as Wiebe defines it through the character of Samuel Reimer in the concluding chapter of *The Blue Mountains of China* (1970), is “to walk the immense and empty prairie of the world as one carrying a cross to no particular place and for no particular reason except the understanding one gains by walking” (68).

Home as both setting and metaphor is a commonplace of children’s fiction. From Beatrix Potter’s *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* to the most recently published picture books and novels, home is a primary concern of virtually every protagonist in children’s literature. Typically, the action turns on a conflict between child and home, with the result that the child leaves home, either metaphorically or physically. Most often, the story intended for children is resolved formally by a return home, but such return is balanced by the suggestion that a move away from familial control and toward self-definition is imminent.

Given the agreement between the basic terms used in Russian-Mennonite literature and children’s literature, Smucker’s use of the form of the novel for children to tell the Russian-Mennonite story seems an obvious and promising choice. In *Days of Terror*, in fact, the agreement between the two traditions seems complete and uncomplicated. Structurally, the story follows the circular journey pattern of the children’s adventure story. Smucker emphasizes this structure by assigning separate titles to the three parts: Peace, Terror, and Deliverance. Predictably, the first part is a pastoral hymn. It begins with the “melodious and clear” notes a Russian shepherd sounds on his bugle and continues by evoking in detail the lush abundance of the harvest and the homely customs of village life. Much is made in this section of the Neufelds’ proprietary rights. Early in the first chapter, Peter notices — as he always does, Smucker tells us — the date his great-grandfather has cut into the beam of the barn and thinks: “For 112 years a Neufeld farmer had walked beneath that carved date” (18). Home for Peter and his family is clearly this soil enclosed by the village fences and sealed by the carved date.

In the second part of the novel, *Terror*, the quiet world of the Mennonites which asks only to “fold into itself” is invaded by onslaught after onslaught of armed men from the outside world. First come the bandits, then the Soviet officials, who are replaced by German soldiers occupying the Ukraine. The departure of the German forces leaves the Mennonites vulnerable anew to the terrorism of marauding bandits. The final plague to be visited on the hapless Mennonite villagers is a far-flung drought and famine.

In the last section of the novel, relief aid arrives from North America, and the villagers of Tiegen begin to talk about mass migration. Mennonites such as the Neufelds have been presented as victims of an anarchic world in the middle section of the novel. In this last part, they seem to play an equally passive role in their deliverance. Grandfather arrives home from prison in time to tell the family to emigrate. Financial arrangements have been made for them by co-religionists abroad. When they hear that the Canadian

Pacific Railway will be accepting 1000 passengers to travel to Canada in a week's time, the Neufeld family quickly decides that it will be on the train.

The journey in the family buggy to Lichtenau, by train to Latvia, by ship to Quebec, and by train again to Ontario is made quickly in the novel, taking a scant twelve of the novel's 152 pages. To Peter, the journey seems to be "a dream." To the reader, I suspect, it seems equally insubstantial. The novel concludes with the Neufeld family arriving in Steinbach, Manitoba, which promises to be much like the home they have left. The land delights Father by looking "like the steppes of Russia," the railway platform is crowded with "old friends and relatives from the Molotschna settlement" (150), and the family is carried off in a wagon "just like the wagon that had carried them to the train in Lichtenau" (152), right down to its flared sides. It is in the protective embrace of the wagon that we leave the Neufelds. As in most fiction written for children, the journey away from home is resolved by the return home.

But Smucker has imposed the conventional form of the children's novel on the Russian-Mennonite story only by distorting the facts of human experience. The story succeeds as high adventure in part because all of the Russian-Mennonite community plays the role of child. The larger world invades the security of its home unbidden, it is saved because it relinquishes control of its destiny to larger forces, and it is allowed to return home, which is, after all, the proper place for a child to be.

In order to maintain the illusion of the innocence of the community, Smucker must censor much of the doubt, guiltiness, and pain of the Neufeld family. We are aware that there are other stories edging the central story, but these are silenced by the insistence on the narrative pattern chosen. As a result, the family in *Days of Terror* comes to be a collection of people unable to communicate their most significant knowledge and experiences to one another. After Otto becomes a member of a Mennonite Self-Defence Unit, for example, we see him only in whispered and hurried conversations with Peter. Aunt Lizzie comes to live with the Neufelds after her husband and sons are murdered, but she will not speak about them. She seems, Peter observes, to "shield them behind her eyes" (59). When Grandfather returns from prison, he will say only that the months of confinement are "a buried horror within me" (117). Neither Grandfather nor Aunt Lizzie make it to the new land. Grandfather asks to be left in Russia because he sees himself as a liability to the Neufelds' travel plans, a request this family readily accepts, and Aunt Lizzie dies "because she is tired." Nothing old or battered, it seems, is to be allowed to diminish the glory of the reconstituted home at the end of the novel.

In *Henry's Red Sea*, Smucker seems less concerned with imitating the typical pattern of children's fiction. Davies identifies the "direct" style of the novel as its distinctive quality. Retelling Henry's story directly, apparently with little artistic reinterpretation of the account she heard from the visitor in her home, Smucker has succeeded in creating a narrative that can be read

within the tradition of children's fiction, but also adds something singular to that tradition.

Structurally, *Henry's Red Sea* inverts the typical home-away-home pattern of a children's novel. It begins with the homeless Mennonites on the run from Russian soldiers attempting to arrange themselves for the night in a dirty, half-bombed building in Berlin. The middle of the novel concerns the group's rescue by MCC workers who have secured temporary housing for the refugees in the American quarter of the city. It is in this section of the novel that Smucker develops the textures of normal Mennonite life. During the months they live in their "blanket homes" in MCC headquarters, the group begins a school for its children, reinstitutes church services, and celebrates Christmas. The novel ends with the refugees crossing the Russian sector of Berlin — the Red Sea of the title — and boarding a ship bound for Paraguay. Framed by the two journeys, home in the novel is seen only as a temporary resting place.

But the notion of home is not devalued in Smucker's story by either narrator or characters. Home in the refugee centre is made by each family stringing blankets from the ceiling to separate its bunk beds from those of other families. Despite the constraints of space, the blanket home feels expansive, orderly, and beautiful to Henry. Grandma lavishes care on the small home, covering the beds with white spreads brought in her blanket roll from Russia, and setting out Father's picture in the gold frame. Far from being devalued, home is seen as a basic necessity. Defining and ordering a place for oneself is the first step beyond mere physical survival in *Henry's Red Sea*. When the Bergens hide in the bombed-out building in the opening chapters of the novel, Henry finds a large table in the corner of the room. He quickly realizes the table's potential as a shelter for his family: small, crippled Rudy can sleep beneath the table without fear of being stepped on in the crowded room and their possessions can be kept dry and orderly on the tabletop. The Bergens with great dignity proceed to make the table their home.

Home here is not a particular, fenced piece of soil, as it is in *Days of Terror*, but an idea of order and relationship one carries with him. It is a rigorous concept of home rigorously maintained in this novel. Several times Henry thinks wistfully of the clean and bountiful farm they have left, but he knows there is no way back for them. Even Grandma with her belief in miracles has not prayed for that! Henry expresses his nostalgia only once, in drawing a picture of the Russian home and barn for the calendar the school children are to present to Peter and Elfrieda Dyck. Appropriately, the sentimental remembrance is relinquished to the march of time. Nor is their destination in South America seen in idealistic terms as a return home. The Bergens are well aware that they will cross their Red Sea only to enter the wilderness. But to Tina's protests that "the country is hot night and day," "our houses would be made of mud and all the crops would be strange to us"

(38), Grandma reiterates that home is not a familiar place, but a space within. It will be home if they can live without fear and worship God.

Concomitant with this notion of home is the necessity of a homogeneous community, for if the home a cultural group shares is an idea rather than a place of origin, it can only be maintained by being held in common. So, in *Henry's Red Sea*, the health of the group is not judged by how far some of its individual members have moved, but by whether its weakest members have been brought along. Little Rudy has adopted Henry's family as his own after the death of his mother. Crippled, he will not be eligible for immigration either to the United States or Canada. The Bergen family decides to apply for immigration to Paraguay because Rudy can be included in such an application, despite the fact that such a decision makes it unlikely that Henry's sister Tina will be able to achieve her goal of training as a teacher. Tina's protests over her mother's decision are met by a response from Henry that is eloquent in its simplicity: "But he calls me his brother" (23). Tina paradoxically achieves wholeness in this novel when she binds herself to yet another sickly orphan, voluntarily assuming the responsibilities of caring for the young Katie Reimer. John Daniel Stahl has noted, in his consideration of this novel in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, that "[t]o understand Tina's transformation fully means to understand a great deal about the basis of Mennonite life. What to the value system of individualism would appear reprehensible — the ideal of self-denial for the sake of family life — here is represented as leading to growth of character and spirit" (73).

In *Henry's Red Sea*, the family is an accretion of people who need protection. Widowed Grandmother, crippled Rudy, and invalid Katie are all added to the nuclear family within the span of the novel. In *Days of Terror*, the opposite occurs. The Neufeld family slough off various of its members as they become impediments to emigration plans. Not only Aunt Lizzie and Grandfather are perfunctorily dispatched; little Katya is left behind in Riga and must go on to a detention camp in Germany to recover from the measles before she is allowed to travel to Canada. When she has regained her health, the young girl makes the ten-day crossing alone. Otto is a potential liability to his family because of his military activities: he finds his way overland to Holland alone and books passage for the United States there. Only a remnant of the family — mother, father, and Peter — actually travel to North America together and each of the three Neufeld children arrive on the new continent independently of the others.

The solitary journeys of the children emphasize that this novel works within the dominant cultural definition of growing up as individuation from the group. As in many conventional novels for children, the sentimental celebration of the restored home at the conclusion of the novel is not a counterpoint to that notion, but a confirmation of it. Only when something has already been lost can one feel nostalgia for it. In *Henry's Red Sea*, however, Smucker has suggested quite a different model. The notions of home and journey are still useful in explicating the imagistic and structural

patterns of the novel. But Smucker has not simply borrowed the standard values attached to these terms. For Henry and Tina, growing up is the acknowledgement and embrace of vulnerability, in the *alter ego* characters of Rudy and Katie, but also metaphorically in themselves. Given such a model, home does not function primarily as insulation against the world for the child. It is, rather, an idea and a relationship that allows the child to maintain his integrity as he opens himself up to the world. The journey itself — the walk across the world, to borrow Dill's phrase about Wiebe's novel — becomes home.

*Days of Terror* is unquestionably the more polished and accessible of Smucker's Russian-Mennonite novels. In part, this can be attributed to the skill she has gained as a writer in the twenty-five years between the two novels. But *Days of Terror* is also readable because it forces the Russian-Mennonite story to fit the conventional mould of the children's adventure story. The dense religious vocabulary of *Henry's Red Sea* makes it a difficult book to decipher, particularly for someone outside the ethnic group, and the unconventional use of home and journey motifs makes it a novel that requires serious reflection. But it also rewards serious reflection.

I suggested at the beginning of this paper that the contradictory assumptions underlying the two novels suggests the audience to which each is addressed. If this is so, it suggests that Smucker sees the role of the artist as a double one. Holding a mirror before her own people, she reminds them of their unique vision, condemning individual ambition and insisting on faith as an arduous journey for both child and adult. Inviting readers outside the group to look through the window of her novel, she asks for sympathy for a dispossessed people and suggests that, after all, it is only external details that separate the Mennonites from other groups in North American society. They share the one "story of immigrants" with many other peoples.

There is, of course, another possibility. Perhaps Smucker merely retells the stories we tell. Perhaps in the twenty-five years between the writing of *Henry's Red Sea* and *Days of Terror* our story has become indistinguishable from that of other immigrant groups and illustrative of the values of the dominant culture around us. Perhaps. And yet the final words of *Henry's Red Sea* seem to me to resonate with a quality still recognizably Mennonite. Grandma, who has long believed her son to be either dead or imprisoned, catches sight of him onboard the ship bound for Paraguay. Scurrying up the gangplank to embrace him, she exclaims: "The Lord hath given and the Lord hath taketh away . . . Blessed be the name of the Lord!" (108). The strange commingling of gain and loss, fatalism and joy in that quotation is a peculiarity in a children's novel, but it seems to me peculiarly Mennonite. It is in such rich paradoxes, in Henry's story rather than in Peter's, that a reader may catch the unusual accent of the Mennonite voice.

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