

GROWING UP IN CASSEL

My brother Harold sent me a recent copy of the Tavistock Gazette and drew my attention to a picture of the local high school student body which was taken some 60 years ago when I was in my second year at TCS, the Tavistock Continuation School. I recognized Principal Carl J Seltzer who taught, among other things, Latin, History and Mathematics. Also Miss Lucy Thompson who taught French and English. Mr Seltzer was one of the best teachers I ever had. My memory of Miss Thompson was less favorable, partly because students were less disciplined in her classroom. I was also able to identify some of my fellow students in the picture. I noticed immediately that the guys and girls were not as handsome and pretty as I had remembered them. And that included the fellow in the left hand corner of the top row who was wearing, of all things, a jacket and tie.

I observed that not only was I in a marginal spot in the picture, but I took it as a symbol of my place in that group. The others for the most part were the townies and I was the country lad who lived on a farm five miles southeast of Tavistock and one mile north of Cassel. Cassel was the crossroads village which consisted of five or six houses, a country store, a cheese factory, a sawmill, and a blacksmith shop. The families of the townies were the business and political leaders in our community. They were for the most part members of the Lutheran Church and of the United Church of Canada. Their children had grown up together. I was most comfortable hanging around the edges of their social circle and most uncertain about pushing my way in to the inside of the circle.

As I reflect on those days, I am aware that the more comfortable I became at TCS, the more uncomfortable some of my people became about my going to high school. They could not understand nor sympathize with it. As a result I found myself on the margin of both groups. "*Er is zu faul fur schaffa*" became the conventional wisdom to explain my aberrant behavior. There were a few Mennonite students at TCS and in the other local high schools. I married one of them (Ruth Steinmann). Not many of them went on to further studies although some became teachers in the public schools. Ruth eventually earned a college degree and a master's degree in Library Science. I was very proud of her academic and professional achievements.

My elementary school years were spent at SS#1, East Zorra, a one room school where children from grades 1 though 8 were seated. The older children were expected to assist the younger ones with their lessons. I recall listening to the teacher presenting the lesson for the day to each of the grades and so got a head start on that material when it came around to our turn. Grades three and four, five and six, seven and eight were combined in some subject matter which made the teacher's task more manageable. I also remember that we studied Canadian history and British history in alternate years. The history of the United States of America

was not included in our curriculum of studies.

There were several special events which took place from time to time to which we looked forward. One was a spelling bee; another was a geography bee. Still another was an arithmetic contest. The prize for the winners was early dismissal allowing them to arrive home about ten minutes ahead of their classmates. This gave them a kind of celebrity status in the school. For non-athletes like me, it was a chance to bask in the glow of achievement as well, albeit this kind of achievement did not count as much as hitting home runs or scoring goals.

This was the school which my older siblings had attended and so for that matter had my father. The building has by now been razed but the memories still linger or can be roused when the stories are told and retold.

It didn't seem strange then but it does today that each school day began with a reading from the Bible, the recital of the Lord's prayer and sometimes the singing of a hymn. At the end of the day the pupils were led in reciting this prayer from the Book of Common Prayer before they were dismissed:

Lighten our darkness, we beseech Thee O Lord
and by Thy great mercy defend us from all the dangers and perils of the night
For the sake of Thine only Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The political situation in Canada was different from that in the USA. Although there was no formal establishment of religion in Canada, the influence of the church on public education was quite strong. But Canada has become a multi-cultural society in which there are many religious options. Although the religious influence of the public school was supportive of the faith of my family and my church the same could not be said if Islam or Judaism were to become the dominant religion in our society.

The conflict which we did feel came at a different point. These were the war years and the public schools were recruited as peddlers of patriotism and supporters of the war effort. We learned to sing patriotic songs like "Rule Britannia", and "There'll Always be an England", and the like. We were pressured to buy war savings bonds and stamps. Although there was a heavy concentration of ethnic Germans in our community our German heritage was depreciated. We didn't speak German in public. All things German were portrayed as inferior and all things British were portrayed in a favorable light. How did we deal with this contradiction? We didn't! The process of Anglicizing our culture was well under way not only in our society but also in our churches.

My earliest memory of being in church was as a preschooler sitting with my father in the front row of the Amen benches at the East Zorra Mennonite Church. My father was one of the Sunday school superintendents. His task was to give a brief

overview of the lesson, to dismiss the classes and to reconvene them just before closing time and the beginning of the worship service. Dad had attended the Lutheran Sunday school as a boy because our church had not yet organized a Sunday school.

Among the family stories which were told and retold was one about John Kennel, Dad's grandfather, the immigrant from Alsace-Lorraine. Apparently he was a stickler for keeping things moving on time. When it was high noon he would rise from his seat, don his black hat and leave the church with his family in tow. When the service was over it was over and the sermon was over as well even though the preacher was still preaching. It recently occurred to me that one of the preachers at that time may well have been one of my Bender ancestors since I come from a long line of Jacob Benders who were preachers at East Zorra.

Great-grandfather Kennel had two sons, John and Christian, who helped to build the East Zorra meetinghouse in 1883. A few years later they moved with their families to Thurman, Colorado along with a number of other young families from Tavistock to seek their fortunes. Sadly, the settlement did not thrive in spite of the glowing predictions of the land agent. So they moved on to other communities in Michigan and Oregon.

In addition to her two brothers my grandmother Anna Kennel Bender had a sister, Elizabeth Kennel Ropp. There had been a family conflict over a matter of inheritance which was settled by the courts. Elizabeth and her husband John Ropp then left the community in search of their fortune, a disappointing search which took them to California, Mexico and Tucson, Arizona where they are buried.

My grandfather Christian Bender died in his mid twenties. In the space of a few months my grandmother lost her husband and two sons. Jonathan and Eli were victims of an infectious disease for which there was no cure at the time and are buried in a single grave in the East Zorra cemetery. And in that setting my father Chris (also known as CK Bender) was born. Anna sold the farm where she and her husband had begun their married life together and moved in with her parents on the farm which is still in the family today.

It must have been a hard blow for this young widow and that may account for the tight control she exercised over the family in an effort to feel secure. For my father it meant that he had to stay on the farm although he had some dreams of his own for his future (such as becoming a lawyer) which he had to forego. His mother needed him at home to manage the farm, a calling he did not enjoy. For my mother it meant sharing the family space with her mother-in-law and yielding at many points her own preferences to those of her husband's mother.

A poignant moment occurred when a major renovation was completed (the

installation of a bathroom in a space made vacant when Grandmother passed away). It was on the very day of my mother's funeral that the hot water was finally turned on. The unreliable contractor was better at making promises about the schedule of completing the work than on delivering on them. My mother was the mistress of her own household for only six months after her mother-in-law died.

My brother Walter was the oldest of five children in our family. He was my hero. He used his influence with my parents to persuade them to let me go to high school. During my second year in high school he and Selma invited me to live with them in Kitchener because better transportation was available. It was a very traumatic experience for me when he died suddenly early in life. And so it was back to Tavistock and TCS for me. He himself had nearly finished high school as a young adult before returning to the work force.

Walter had enrolled in a training program to become a male nurse in a psychiatric hospital in Hamilton, Ontario but withdrew after some time in the program. His supervisor had ordered him to withhold some expensive medications from the patients but to mark them in the charts as having been administered to the patients. Walter would not compromise his integrity. He resigned. I admired him.

My sister Leona lived to the ripe old age of 88 years. She told me shortly before she died that I was to have been a girl. "I already had three brothers and I didn't need another one." But after a while she became fond of the little tyke and invested deeply in raising me since my mother was an invalid. Leona remembers vividly an incident that happened when I was named Ross. A difference of opinion had arisen between my mother Katie and my grandmother Anna. Anna insisted that my name should be John. John had been the name of choice in the Kennel family for succeeding generations as far back as anyone could remember. Mother announced, "His name is Ross Thomas." Big sister Leona was sent to the mailbox to retrieve the registration papers which were about to be sent to Toronto. But the next day she returned the forms to the mailbox as originally filled out. My mother did not win many of the turf battles but she won this one. I never did find out the source or meaning of my name but I choose to interpret it as "Katie shall prevail".

My brother Orie had a sense of humor and loved to tell funny stories. Time and again he would get to the mailbox ahead of me and when, later on, I would try to tell one of the jokes in the "Reader's Digest" he would say, "I've heard that one before." He did leave a generous gift when he died. It is a collection of some of his favorites called Orie's Stories.

One late afternoon Orie took me with him in the Ford car to Cassel to pick up some ice cream. The road had recently been graded and there was a ridge down the middle. Orie was driving too fast and the car bounced around but he did not slow down and kept bouncing along. Finally he turned to me and asked, "Are you

scared?" I said "yes", to which he replied, "So am I."

Harold, four years older than I, was my big brother. He walked to school with me to show me the way and to get me to the school on time. It was two miles from home to the little red schoolhouse. When I got tired he would carry my books. He knew the names of the local residents as well as their nicknames. He helped me buy a snack from Verley at the country store (a licorice pipe or an ice cream cone for a nickel). I felt secure when I walked with him. For many years he and Marie lived on the family farm until it was time to pass it on to the next generation.

The Amish Mennonite community at East Zorra grew and prospered as the decades came and went. In the early 1930s it became clear that there were more families in the East Zorra church than space to seat them. A decision was made to rent and then to purchase a church building near Cassel, a building no longer in use by the local congregation of the Evangelical United Brethren Church. The building, a little over 30 years old, was sold to our church for about \$800. This is the place where my spiritual growth was nurtured. It seemed strange at first to gather for worship in a building with stained glass windows, three red velvet "thrones" with an altar rail enclosing them, a fancy pulpit, a balcony for overflow seating and an empty space where an organ had once occupied a prominent place. The organ had to go when the Mennonites took over. So did the stained glass windows and the red velvet "thrones".

The hymnal which was used was called *Lieder und Melodien* which was mainly in German. Later we sang from the Church Hymnal, mainly in English. And still later we used the Church and Sunday School Hymnal. As we moved along the transition from German to English we added the song books Life Songs Number One and Life Songs Number Two. The earlier hymnals had emphasized Christian doctrine while the later ones had emphasized Christian experience. For example, the opening hymn in the German service was often "*Grosser Gott, Wir Loben Dich*". In the English service it was often "Jesus Lover of my Soul".

I came to associate the physical move to the building at Cassel with the simultaneous movement from German to English in our services. The older ministers continued to preach in German while the younger ones preached in English. As I listened to the sermons I would read the Scripture texts in both languages and even developed some facility in reading the old German script. I also enjoyed teaching myself to sing the shape notes in some of our song books.

In my early teens there came a visiting preacher by the name of CZ Martin from Pennsylvania. He preached a series of sermons from the book of Revelation and illustrated his sermons with charts pasted on the front wall of the church. It was an interpretation that I had never heard before nor was it familiar to our people. We learned later that it was a pre-millennial interpretation of the book of Revelation.

Many people responded to his message and went to the front of the church to confess their sins. I did not but instead knelt by the bedside of my parents who gently led me to confess Jesus as my Savior and Lord.

During my 14th year I joined the baptismal class taught by one of our ministers. We studied the Dordrecht Confession of Faith. My assignment was to memorize and recite Article One, Concerning God and the Creation of All Things. On Pentecost Sunday 1943 we were baptized upon our confession of faith and became members of the Cassel Mennonite Church. Our congregation was a part of the Ontario Amish Mennonite Conference as it was known at that time. It was the custom for the boys to wear new suits and for the girls to wear new dresses on that occasion. In some respects it was like a wedding for it involved sealing a covenant of faithfulness in a public setting.

CONCLUSION

The account which you have just read is a brief summary of the influence of my family, my church, my school and my community upon my psychological, psychosocial, intellectual and religious development from my early years continuing to about the time that I entered high school. It was a process of interweaving a variety of experiences with each other, what Piaget would call an interactionist process in which I made some choices and other significant persons focused my choices in fruitful ways. (See my essay on Piaget in [Education for Peoplehood](#).) There had also as we have seen been some attempts to frustrate my choices or to counteract them since they were perceived as a threat to the well-being of the community, its values and traditions.

It is obvious of course that the decision of one person to go to high school would not in itself be a significant event. There were many changes simmering in the Tavistock community at that time and since which opened up the doors of opportunity for all. It was striking to read the names of Mennonite owned and operated businesses advertising in that same issue of the Gazette. It is no longer unusual for Mennonite youth and young adults to pursue secondary and higher education and to enter the professions.

For me personally it was a life changing experience to walk through the door of opportunity and to follow the path of opportunity wherever it led. On the other side of that door lay experiences, people, tasks and challenges I could not have imagined.

They involved:

continuing in further studies and graduating from Goshen College and Goshen

College Biblical Seminary as well as earning the PhD in Religion from Yale University;

studying at the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Geneva;

teaching in both public and church related schools from primary to seminary levels;

being ordained as a Mennonite minister preaching, teaching and pastoring in three congregations in Ontario, Pennsylvania and Colorado;

engaging in research, writing, and editing articles and books, for example, the Conrad Grebel Lectures on Christians in Families;

providing administrative leadership to various Mennonite agencies, boards and schools, for example:

- principal of Rockway Mennonite High School
- chairman of the Mennonite Commission for Christian Education
- executive secretary of the Mennonite Board of Congregational Ministries
- moderator of the Mennonite Church General Assembly
- chairman of the Mennonite Church General Board
- president of the Mennonite World Conference
- dean of the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries
- director of the Institute of Mennonite Studies

spending a sabbatical year as research associate in the Office of Family Life Education at the World Council of Churches;

attending the reunion celebration of the Southern and Northern Presbyterian Churches in Atlanta in 1983 as an ecumenical guest;

celebrating the 450th anniversary of the Reformation in Geneva as the guest of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches;

co-leading the theological conversations between the Mennonite World Conference and the Baptist World Alliance;

co-leading the theological discussions between the Mennonite World Conference and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches;

co-editing the proceedings of the MWC/WARC theological conversations in preparation for their publication under the title Baptism, Peace and the State in the Reformed and Mennonite Traditions;

auditing a course in the Doctrine of Election in the theological faculty established many years ago by John Calvin.

One can only wonder at what must have been going through the mind of some of the persons I met along the way through the world shaped by John Calvin. "What is a Mennonite doing here?" Answer: It must have been foreordained.

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