

## A GERMAN-RUSSIAN FAMILY IN NORTH DAKOTA

by

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Pioneer myths admit to hard times and hard work, but all that toughness and derring-do was to have its reward in prosperity and relative leisure. Tough did not mean permanently poor--it was all in the spirit of adventure, mercifully a temporary one. This tradition of progressive optimism has obscured the effect on some families, especially on women and children, of the conditions of rural poverty during the years of western settlement by immigrants from Europe or the North American east and midwest. For some settlers, the new land merely continued the hardships of the old, and the habits of the old could make more trying the difficulties of the new. The Homestead Act of 1862 offered "free" land, but no help to keep it. There was no public assistance for transportation, tools, agricultural information, or housing; no educational, medical, or other services. There were no roads until enough wagons had travelled in the same direction to make ruts. Homesteading was a bet, as was said at the time, the government wagering that it could not be done.

For women, the details of poverty, the relentless dullness of too much work and not enough of anything else, always are wearing. And almost always lives in poverty are lost in silence, for there is "nothing" to tell. A recent exception is Homesteading on the Knife River Prairies, a booklet by Pauline Neher Diede, of Hebron, North Dakota, that describes her parents and the family of her mother's sister in their first two years on a homestead in central North Dakota. The families were German-Russian Baptists; their forebears had migrated from Germany to the Caucasus region of South Russia when Queen Alexandra was offering free land and freedom from conscription to Germans who did not want to serve in the German army. Policies changed in the early twentieth century, and these German settlers were conscripted for the Russo-Japanese War. Pauline Diede's families came to America partly to avoid further military service. Her uncle and her mother could not read or write, and no one in her parents' generation were literate in English, so Pauline Diede's book, based on her own recollections and on interviews with her relatives, principally her father and uncle, are as close as we can get to a first-hand account of that family's experience.

These two German families who immigrated together from Russia in 1909 illustrate ways that very poor people responded to settlement. Christina (Diede's mother) and Sophie Steinert were sisters living in Groszliebental, a fairly prosperous German village in the Caucasus, and they travelled with their husbands Ludwig Neher and Fred Martin to central North Dakota to homestead. The Martins had 7 children, the Nehers 1; the Martins eventually had two more, and Nehers a total of 8. They arrived in North Dakota later than most settlers and farmed rather hilly and rocky land, and they came alone and lived by themselves, in contrast to many other foreign

immigrants, particularly other Germans from Russia, who had settled in groups. The Neher and the Martins appear to have been even poorer than many of their neighbors, and less informed about American customs and local topography.

Inevitably, detailing how anyone copes with poverty is a detailing of humiliations. During their first winter, the two families of 12 people lived in a boxcar, burning cow dung and corn husks. Neighbors gave them a stove and cornhusk mattresses. Fred Martin said that they used a five-gallon grease can a farmer had donated for a night toilet "and near it a box of corn husks for toilet paper. We thought that a luxury" (23). And always the quest for food: "Our boys had a way of running about and showing their hunger . . . One day our oldest son, John, brought me a large hunk of fresh bread soaked in chokecherry syrup, and it was good. The next day a good woman brought us a big kettle of borscht the way we make it in Russia" (22). Neighbors' root cellars and bakings kept them alive. In Fred Martin's economy, there was nothing to spare: "I remember John pulling up stalks of grain and eating the whole thing and the other children following suit. He had to be stopped, for we needed to have every head of grain mature."

The Neher and Martin families' poverty was exacerbated by family ethnic traditions also founded in poverty, and these particularly affected the women. Both Sophie and Christina Steinert were married through marriage brokers hired by their husbands, a continuing source of shame to them; in fact, Christina and Ludwig Neher, Fred Martin thought, "hardly knew each other." The marriage broker had brought Ludwig to the Steinerts' home, where they found Christina "busy shoving bread out of the clay wall oven. The bread was light and smelled good; Ludwig ate some and liked what he saw of Christina" (13). They were married in a week and lived with his parents. As for the Martins, Fred said of Sophie that she "had married me unwillingly, and unwillingly was obliged to obey and follow where I might go" (14). He told of the time the shack they had moved into flooded because Martin had placed it on low ground: "My Sophie hauled me over. Deep down she loathed everything about America and never stopped thinking about the Groszliebental life. It is odd we ever slept together, but we had no other choice." Things were so bad, Martin added, "that when I think back to our first year on that coyote land, I can hardly keep from crying" (39).

When Ludwig reached similar despair, he longed for his mother, Julianna Zimmer, whose life he realized had been very hard. She was the daughter of a Baptist minister, and had grown up poor: "Typical of pastors' families, they nearly starved for doing as the Good Book said about taking in wayfarers and giving them bread, even if their children were left with practically nothing to eat." Julianna married Ludwig's father hoping for something better, supposing that a farmer always would grow enough to eat, but she was consistently disappointed. Her son Ludwig, homesick in America, turned his thoughts to his mother; Diede writes:

A woman in those days had few rights and kept her needs to herself, often in desperation crying out

her troubles only to another woman, though cautiously so, that she not be discovered in her laments . . . . What Ludwig remembered most about his mother was seeing her on her knees praying, her hands outstretched to the Heavens where God was."

Thinking about his mother invariably reminded Ludwig how disappointed he was in Christina, in spite of her promising bread-baking:

Men wanted wives to be like their mothers, but Christina Steinert was not like Julianna Neher, especially in her intellect. Christina came from a progressive dorf, but could not read nor even write her name, unlike her sister Sophie. This displeased Neher, because in Russia you were somebody if you knew how to read and write. (47-48)

Christina felt unhappy as well, but in a somewhat different manner: "Christina was not prepared for living on the prairie alone, so unlike what she had known in the Russian dorf. She had two babies and a man she scarcely knew and she felt all in all thrust in to chaos" (63).

In North Dakota, Ludwig's demands for Christina's physical labor as well as for sexual relations, to say nothing of his original demand that she move there, exhausted her, both from overwork and from continual childbearing. Christina did her best to meet his requirements, and to nurture her children, however crudely--it was she who most kept alive the sense of "family." To Ludwig family meant workers: children to do chores, and Christina to care for them and him, and to help him with outdoor farm labor as well as to keep up his spirits. Some of Ludwig's own actions appear to make family life more difficult. He was unwilling to practice birth control, which would have meant abstaining from sexual relations, or at least delaying after childbirths. Diede writes:

Scriptural directives to "multiply" too often were the excuse to ignore common sense in birth control. Some who followed Biblical pronouncements literally thought there was nothing wrong with a surplus of children and were convinced that God will provide and that other people would help out families with many children and many needs. (74)

After the birth of her second child, Christina lived for several months in the summer kitchen of the Jaegers, a neighbor German family. Neher was unhappy about "not having his wife with him," claiming that "nature demands it," and he became angry when Fred Martin said to him that Christina was well off where she was--"Do you want to make her pregnant again?" Neher answered that it was fine for Martin to talk, he already had many children (46).

Pauline Diede, the Neher's third daughter and writer of this family memoir, knows of attempts to delay her own conception. Repeatedly, when Ludwig visited Christina in the summer kitchen, Mrs. Jaeger tried to keep the two apart. On

his first visit, "She ordered Christina to keep the baby sucking to prevent impregnation, and told Ludwig Christina was still in the menses from childbirth and he should abstain" (43). Another time Ludwig arrived wanting "comfort for body and soul and the warmth of a woman," but "Frau Jaeger appeared, giving her usual stern admonishments" (55). And when the Neher's left the Jaegers' farm for their own homestead, Frau Jaeger "advised Neher one more time, as he left, to watch out lest he get his wife pregnant too soon again" (58). She succeeded only a short while, for Pauline was born seventeen months after her next oldest sister--the third birth in two years and seven months.

An episode soon after the Neher's started housekeeping in their sod house illustrates differences in the relationships of these two parents to their children and their general awareness of "family" concerns. Ludwig one day came home to find the infant Odeelia unattended and crying.

He picked her up, and for the moment realized that he had another child, his daughter, a girl baby again. He had not yet had a chance to get to know his second child. In Russia it was considered shameful for a woman to present her man with girl babies. The first-born, let alone the second, should have been a son. But today Ludwig pressed against his chest this infant who needed tender attention and he felt strange compassion for the little life he and Christina were responsible for.

Again Ludwig longed for his mother, wishing she "could cuddle baby Odeelia as she had Dilda (their eldest), and feed her gruel." And, more alarmingly, "Ludwig hardly knew the woman he married, realizing only that she was inwardly disturbed most of the time and talked to herself in low tones and abrupt screams. She was not at all like his own mother, wise and confident in spite of hardships." That she talked and screamed to herself may not be altogether surprising, given what Christina was trying to do. That day she had, to be sure, left the youngest infant alone, and had taken the other child on a trip for water.

Little Dilda ran along close by, rubbing her eyes, crying from the mosquitoes, and wanting her mother to carry her. Christina could not very well carry both pails of water and the fifteen-month-old as well. So she sat Dilda on her shoulders, expecting the child to hold on. But she had scarcely hoisted the two pails and taken a few steps when Dilda let go and began falling. Quickly Christina dropped one pail of water and grasped the frightened child. It took a long time to reach home and a lot of water had been lost, but Christina was glad to have what was left. (60)

When it came time to thresh wheat, it was Christina, not Ludwig, who knew how to do that, and who prepared the threshing floor, a beaten circle smeared with mud, "the way she had done it in Russia, and the same way as it had been done in Biblical times." Once the threshing floor was

smoothed out, "which Christina did with a stone resembling a spatula," came the threshing: "Christina carried armfuls of wheat down the hill to the threshing platform; not wanting to wear out her only pair of shoes, she tied rags around her bare feet to protect them from cactus stickers" (67). Even so, she had Ludwig's jealousy to contend with: "Ludwig was reluctant to listen to, let alone accept a woman's advice, but this time Christina's word ruled. He did not want to admit that she knew more than he." In addition, Ludwig resented Christina's praying, the fact that she talked "out loud as though God were right there beside her, and often cried as well when she was very tired or when Ludwig made sarcastic remarks about her praying" (69). The strains between them, both cultural and personal, did not relax even in the midst of very hard work. During threshing:

every time Ludwig picked up the pitchfork that he had bought on time on his last visit to Hebron, he thought of how fortunate he was to be able to use something that handy. Christina had to use her open arms and ten forked fingers to grasp armfulls of ripened wheat and carry them to the gumbo floor. (70)

Although to anthropologists this may be an instance of "gendered" tool use, one cannot help wondering why Ludwig did not share the one pitchfork, rather than feel superior to Christina while using it alone.

Threshing exhausted Christina so badly that despair from overwork merged with her personal bafflement. One night she "developed convulsions and Ludwig did not know which way to turn. Both babies were screaming." He sought out a German neighbor, Elizabeth Boehler, who told him, sensibly enough, "that Christina was being killed with work, that it was not human any more, and that she was to stay in bed until she got back her strength." Christina had, her daughter writes, reached exhaustion

by her ox-like labors, malnutrition, and worries about her little ones. She also was homesick, and it comforted her to have Mrs. Boehler around, for she did not understand the man she had married. The arranged marriage had allowed her only ten days' acquaintance before holy matrimony, and then she had come to these wild prairie lands that she knew no better than she did Ludwig's personality. And then she found herself with two babies and hardly anything to sustain them. Ludwig understood little more than her, only assuming that it was up to her to submit to him. (71)

Diède describes her mother, not long after, pregnant, lying down on the grass, and "fancying the clouds were baby-carriages," and Diède reflects on women's estate:

Scripture was understood to mean that it was a woman's duty to bear children and to work hard. Because of the great demand placed on men just to survive, some became severe and took out their

anxieties on wives and children by rough treatment, often beating them. This was a way of life that now cannot be described to fourth, fifth, and later generations. There was genetal abuse of minors in the family, children and wives, and it was considered discipline according to the Bible. (Of course such severe discipline did not prevail in every settler household.) Nevertheless the man in the family held all the rights, often making things hard on women folk. (84)

"Nehers were not alone in being too strict with children and women"--all settlers were, Diede says. According to Mrs. Boehler, "Females were for that, young or old, they were slaves, of inferior rating, and were subject to any kind of treatment due to a man being insecure about what life held in store for him and his family" (86).

Pauline Diede is, of course, the baby Christina was carrying, and she knows that her birth was precarious. Frau Jaeger, who delivered her, performed "proxy baptism," fearing that she would die, and her daughter stayed the requisite nine days to help care for the mother and children. She reported later "that because there was no privacy in the house, she was not able ever to take her clothes off. 'There was such poverty, I cannot describe it. It was no wonder my mother gathered everything she could take to help. I shall never forget'" (85).

The Neher family in the first immigrant generation never became prosperous, and, Diede says, her parents lost the farm in the Depression. But the very harsh conditions of the first two "coyote years" did abate somewhat. The Nehers bought an adjoining farm that included a three-room wooden house, "a luxury for my mother." But not a luxury to make work disappear:

Our clan of growing girls were brought up to hard work, especially the two eldest, Mathilda and Ottilia, who became field workers and received harsh treatment from Pa. They were expected to do as much work as a man. I didn't grow up quickly, and so was chore girl to help mother with domestic work, which I did not like, and often was slapped by my mother. I much preferred being outdoors, and was very curious, traits that brought much trouble to my relationship with my mother. (86)

But for Christina, a frame house, however small and poorly insulated (it would not have been as warm as the one of dirt and sod), and the relief from field work, meant decided improvement in status and in her view of herself, even though, incongruous as it may seem, she entered into housewifely competition: "Prairie women judged every woman ruthlessly on how her wash looked. Ma was no exception; she was sure her reputation as a homemaker rested on the number of wrinkles there were after the tedious trek of ironing." For all the disparagement we now level at nineteenth century women for fancying themselves "civilizers"--the pianos, dress-up clothing and useless ornaments many crammed at great expense

into shanties--we might wonder also whether these attempts to soften conditions were not psychically necessary. Christina's daughters remember a great deal of washing and ironing and cleaning, milking and scrubbing the cream separator, and they resented having so little affection shown to them by their mother. But harried and often misguided as she may have been, Christina saw herself, I think, not frivolously imposing a "cult of domesticity" upon a more natural and physical way of living, but straining, out of necessity, to make endurable what by itself was not.

If even slight relief from destitution made Christina house-proud, it also allowed the families to renew the sustaining comforts of religion. They took turns having services in their homes, and often some spent more time on the journey than at the service, "but they were together." These occasions were religious in the deepest sense, incorporating all aspects of people's lives--their anxieties, physical danger, loneliness, and the strains among family members and between husbands and wives. People experienced emotional release and pleasure as well in the simple art of group singing, as Diede tells us:

The group sang, to a rhythmical beat, evangelical songs they had memorized in the old country. A leader kept the singing going, for hymn books with music were not common in those days. They discussed scripture openly, and a convert was apt to admonish others of their sins. Women went to their knees and cried their woes out to God, but if a woman spoke of her man's abuse, she was scolded then and there. (81)

Conducting services again, after the lapse of months (about which they felt guilty, Fred Martin reported), meant that they were re-admitting God's spiritual power. But this process also required exerting social control over errant members, control that reasserted men's physical power over women.

Rural poverty has been less well understood than urban poverty; in fact, according to the concomitants of urban poverty--crowding and lack of food sources--poverty ought scarcely to exist for rural people. They have land on which to grow food, and all outdoors to move in. But, as the Nehers and Martins demonstrate, living space in the country can be excessively crowded and unsanitary, and "all outdoors" meant being cut off from neighbors' help and support. Furthermore, to harvest a garden, you have to have been there to plant it--with seed, equipment, and suitable soil. And you have to know how to do a lot of things besides: build housing, and supply yourself with clean water, sanitation, fuel, and so on. Virtually all these requirements were lacking for our families.

The tough-times-but-we-made-it chorus to so many pioneer stories implies also that country living, however stark, makes people good; it brings people close together and nurtures strong affections and family ties. But for the Nehers and Martins, poverty kept families together because they had no means to be apart. It did not cement closeness. Husbands and

wives claim hardly to have known each other; they did not develop intimacies before their commercially arranged marriages, and claim to have gained little acquaintance as the years went on. The rule of men meant that when men needed support rather than obedience from women, language and gestures were missing to achieve that communion. Parents were distant from their children, even if they could not get away from them: think of Ludwig holding an infant daughter in some surprise. The "coyote hole" way of life, if we believe Fred Martin and Ludwig Neher, meant proximity but not affection. Even so, the women saw to "family," to the private gestures and personal kindnesses that Ludwig missed in his mother, the "cuddles" the grandparents gave the first children before they left Russia. For all her impoliteness, Mrs. Jaeger was thinking of a family's survival when she tried to shame Ludwig from impregnating Christina. As for Christina's central role in the operation of the farm--she was the only one who knew how to make a threshing floor and how to thresh grain--that knowledge does not appear to have strengthened what we'd call her decision-making powers within the family. If anything, Ludwig tried to make up for his ignorance and incompetence in agriculture by asserting domestic authority more harshly.

Pauline Diede's is, of course, only a single account of a dozen people in a two-year span, but because she makes no claim to saying anything remarkable, her tale bears listening to. She and those she writes about take it for granted that their experiences were not very different from those of others around them. In one of the "Prairie Echoes" columns she has been writing weekly for the Hebron Herald, Diede reports a conversation she had with a woman on a bus, who said:

We settled on a homestead, and we worked like slaves to build the sod house, barn and other abodes. Plus all the man and house work. After we had grown up and left home, our father gave all the homestead enterprise to his oldest son. The rest of us got the 'hot air'. I have no fond memories of my growing up years. Our father was rough with mother as well as with all the girls. He brought that wicked idea over from the old country.<sup>2</sup>

The one unusual aspect of Pauline Diede's writing is the mass of detail it brings to the lives of persons whom neither imaginative literature nor public documents have so far been able to reach with much precision.

#### NOTES

1. Pauline Neher Diede, Homesteading on the Knife River Prairies (Bismarck: North Dakota Germans From Russia Heritage Society, 1983). Subsequent quotations are from edition cited, with page numbers.

2. Pauline Neher Diede, Hebron Herald, 8 November 1983. For several years, Mrs. Diede has written a weekly column, "The Prairie Echoes."