

# **MENNONITE DOMESTIC WORKERS: INTERSECTIONS OF GENDER, ETHNICITY AND RELIGION**

by

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## ABSTRACT

The dominant representation of domestic work in the current literature is quite negative, with uncaring employers, sexual, verbal, and physical abuse, and underpaid and overworked employees. However, the oral interviews conducted for this micro-study present an intriguingly different image. Young, immigrant Mennonite women who had come to Canada during the Second World War moved during the post-war period from their rural homes in the Fraser Valley, British Columbia, into the city of Vancouver. There, they were employed in domestic work and spent their Thursday afternoons at the *Maedchenheim*, or girls' home, with their peers. This thesis examines the disconnect between their accounts of domestic work and those of other domestics, with particular attention to how ethnoreligious understandings of gender, community, and survival informed my narrators' memories and retellings of their experiences. It also explores whether the shift from a rural to an urban environment changed these women's perceptions of their gender identity.

**Keywords:** Mennonites; religion; oral history; gender; immigration; ethnicity; domestic labour; Canada; British Columbia.

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all the Mennonite women who, as young women, ventured out into the city of Vancouver and worked so very hard each and every day to ensure the financial survival of their families. Your contributions helped to sustain the Fraser Valley Mennonite community. Your stories of joy, sadness, heartbreak, and triumph have been an inspiration to me. Without all of your help, your time, and your delicious tea and cookies, this thesis would not have been possible.

This work is also dedicated to Miss Katarina Lehn (1907-2003), whose long hours spent at the Mary Martha *Maedchenheim* with these girls will never be forgotten. You were a wonderful mother to them all, and they are still grateful.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

*We first came to Manitoba, to Winnipeg, and looked for a farm. We were farmers. We tried farming in Manitoba, and didn't find it very productive, so we came to British Columbia, and here my parents had a little berry patch and my dad would work out. That's where I came in, and I had to go to Vancouver and work domestic work, like maids. I worked there for several years before I got married—then I got married and had my own family. I got married and had a big family. That's sort of my life.<sup>1</sup>*

This is an excerpt from a very brief history of life in Canada by Suzie, a Mennonite immigrant from Russia. She recalled the events of her life in very distinct stages. The first of these stages occurred in war-torn Russia. While the Second World War officially ended in 1945, for many Mennonite men, women, and children in and around Russia, the hardships were nowhere near over. As their cultural background and German language identified them with the German army, even though they were Russian citizens, the Mennonite population in Russia experienced very hostile treatment during World War Two.<sup>2</sup> For instance, in the fall of 1941, approximately 350,000 Germans were expelled from the Volga district.<sup>3</sup> To escape physical harm and discrimination, large groups of Mennonites, often led by the German army, began what is known in collective Mennonite memory as 'the great trek,' or simply 'the trek,' in 1943. The trek was a long and arduous process, recalled with memories of “deep mud, bone-chilling

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<sup>1</sup> Suzie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 30 June 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Lynn Jost and Connie Faber, *Family Matters: Discovering the Mennonite Brethren* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Kindred Productions, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Cornelius C. Reimer, “Mennonite Relief Work in Russia,” *Mennonite Life* 3, no.1 (January 1949): 27.

cold, rain, over-burdened wagons, treacherous travel, and food shortages.”<sup>4</sup> With the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization (CMBC) facilitating evacuations and sending aid, close to six thousand Mennonites managed to come to Canada between the years 1947 and 1949, with the bulk making the journey in 1948.<sup>5</sup> The subjects of this study were among this wave of immigrants.

With the help of the CMBC, Mennonite refugees were able to secure permission from the government to gain passage to Canada.<sup>6</sup> The board, founded by David Toews in 1922, secured government permission to bring these displaced persons to Canada through a Railway Agreement with the Canadian Pacific Railway, by which rail transportation was provided on credit.<sup>7</sup> Most could not pay the transportation costs, so their travel was sponsored by relatives or other Canadian Mennonites. The debt accumulated by families, known as the *reiseschuld*, had to be repaid to the person who had sponsored them.

Mennonites took pride in being self sufficient, so upon their arrival in Canada, a chief priority for these immigrants was to pay off their debts as quickly as possible. J. J. Thiessen noted in 1949 that this wave of immigrants was quite eager to repay their debts.<sup>8</sup> Hoping to recreate their agricultural lifestyle in

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<sup>4</sup> Marlene Epp, *Mennonite Women in Canada: A History* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2008), 43.

<sup>5</sup> Marlene Epp, *Women Without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 197.

<sup>6</sup> The two main reasons that the Canadian government and the CPR agreed to this immigration scheme were because “they remembered how the 1874 immigrants were such good farmers [and] the CPR still had large tracts of land in the Prairies that needed to be settled.” C. Henry Smith, *The Story of the Mennonites* (Newton, Kansas: Mennonite Publication Office, 1957), 495.

<sup>7</sup> David Wiens, *The Wiens Family Chronicle* (1994), 185.

<sup>8</sup> J. J. Thiessen, “Present Mennonite Immigration to Canada,” *Mennonite Life* 4, no. 3 (July 1949): 34.

Canada, a large portion of these immigrants moved into the rural Fraser Valley, most particularly Yarrow, Chilliwack, and Abbotsford.<sup>9</sup> Upon their arrival, families often stayed with their sponsors for a short while, until they could establish themselves on their own land. Neighbours quickly assisted those who came with nothing, as many newcomers did. For instance, showers were held for new immigrants, whereby gifts such as groceries, kitchen utensils, and household linens were given to the newcomers.<sup>10</sup> Mennonite refugees, who had gone through so much during the war, received a great deal of help from those Mennonites who had already established themselves in Canada.

Family members worked hard, doing whatever jobs were available to them in the Fraser Valley, such as picking hops, berries, and tomatoes in the summer. The General Conference (GC)<sup>11</sup> noted that "the vast majority of these refugees took their obligations seriously... and did all that could be expected of them" in order to pay off their debts.<sup>12</sup> Yet, paying off their debts remained a substantial challenge for newly arriving families, many of which had no male head of the household to help contribute to the family income. One of the approaches employed by families was to send daughters, who were on average between the

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<sup>9</sup> These three communities were densely populated by Mennonite immigrants from both waves, most especially Yarrow. An article in the *Province* newspaper claimed that "about the only person living in [Yarrow] who isn't related to Mennonites is Bill Siddall, postmaster." Les Rimes, "Yarrow's Mennonites are Good Canadians," *The Vancouver Daily Province Magazine Section*, 10 June 1950, 3.

<sup>10</sup> *The Chilliwack Progress*, 7 April 1948, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Most of the Mennonites in British Columbia belonged to one of the main Mennonite denominations—either the Mennonite Brethren or the General Conference of Mennonites. This paper focuses on the latter. Peter Hamm notes that "in personal, moral issues Mennonite Brethren hold a rather conservative position, similar to the Mennonite church, but significantly more restrictive than the General Conference Mennonites." Peter Hamm, *Continuity and Change Among Canadian Mennonites* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 1986), 79.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, 697.

ages of eighteen and twenty-two, to work as domestic workers in the city of Vancouver. While it was unusual to allow women to leave the supervision of their families for extended periods, the elders of the Mennonite community hesitantly had previously approved this strategy during the Great Depression, due to the overwhelming financial need, and therefore it was commonly employed once again by this wave of Mennonite immigrants. For instance, when asked why she went to work in city as a domestic, Helena replied:

We needed to work... I think I recognized that there was no other choice. I had actually not many decisions to make—I had no other. It was other work in the household or this day-working. There was, I would say, nothing else for me or for us.<sup>13</sup>

Mennonite domestic workers became essential to the financial survival of their families. Women from various types of traditional cultures have adapted to similar economic hardships by engaging in paid work, especially domestic work, in the past. However, this was quite extraordinary for Mennonites, given their understanding of a woman's place in the home and, even more so, their overall desire to remain isolated from the world. Mennonite domestics, while working in the city, were quite separated from the city at the same time as they spent their afternoons off with other Mennonite domestics. The working experiences of interviewees differ from that of other immigrant women of this time period because of the tremendous pressure from their parents and the church to return to the community after work, and the consistent pressure, through the *Maedchenheim*, or girls' home, to behave within the scope of female Mennonite piety.

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<sup>13</sup> Helena, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 5 June 2009.

To watch over these young working women, the GC established a *Maedchenheim* in Vancouver.<sup>14</sup> According to a report given to the GC newspaper, *Der Bote*, the home in Vancouver was "a place where the girls would find a home away from home. Where they could get advice and guidance and be protected from being exploited."<sup>15</sup> Located next door to the *Maedchenheim* was a GC church, so there was constant interaction between the young women in the girls' home and church leaders. Therefore, the *Maedchenheim* extended the ethnoreligious community into the city; it was an attempt to monitor the well-being and the behaviour of these young women. But how did the women themselves experience the *Maedchenheim*? This thesis will explore that question by attending carefully to the voices of the women, themselves.

Two key areas of understanding for this research include the history of Mennonites in Canada and the literature on domestic service. In historical writings, Mennonite women have largely been overlooked, and gender analysis has rarely, and only recently, been used to understand their lives. Mennonite history up to the 1970s and 1980s has been, and to a certain extent continues to be, overwhelmingly equated with male experiences. While much of the literature

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<sup>14</sup> This type of home was set up by the GC for young Mennonite women working in cities, not just in Vancouver but also in Winnipeg and Saskatoon. There were two *Maedchenheims* in Vancouver: the Bethel Girls' Home, run by the Mennonite Brethren Conference (MB), and the Mary Martha Girls' Home, run by the Mennonite General Conference (GC). For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the activities of the Mary Martha Girls' Home, as the bulk of my interview participants attended this conference. While both were Mennonite establishments, the differences between the two conferences were great enough that the homes operated quite differently. In fact, the two girls' homes were mere blocks apart from each other in Vancouver, and while the young women in both homes knew about the other's existence, most narrators of this study noted that the residents never interacted with one another. Therefore, any theories or conclusions arising from this paper pertain specifically to the young women and community members of the British Columbia GC.

<sup>15</sup> J. J. Thiessen, "Unsere Maedchenheime," *Der Bote*, 18 September 1940, 1.

places emphasis on the persecution and forced movement of the Mennonite community, such as the group's trials during the Second World War and the trek, that process of immigration is described through a masculine lens; the reader follows the male decision-making processes before, challenges during, and accomplishments after the immigration and resettlement process. For example, Cornelius J. Dyck notes that the Russian exodus during the 1920s and 1940s "called forth men of vision who were willing and able to direct them and who frequently risked a great deal to bring them to pass."<sup>16</sup> Similarly, C. Henry Smith discusses the accomplishments of "the men most active"<sup>17</sup> in various early Mennonite settlements in the United States. Women's influences on the decision to immigrate and their experiences during the trek have been given little attention, creating the impression that women played no role in the immigration and settlement process whatsoever.

It was during the late 1980s and 1990s that Mennonite historians began to include women's experiences. While at first the focus centred primarily on extraordinary women who were celebrated for participating in masculine spheres, such as in missionary work abroad, the literature further developed to include discussions that centred on ordinary women, focusing on everyday experiences that shaped their lives. My research will add to this literature by looking at how

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<sup>16</sup> Cornelius J. Dyck, ed., *An Introduction to Mennonite History: A Popular History of the Anabaptists and the Mennonites* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1967), 199.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, 444.

Mennonite women experienced religion and gender, not just within their community but also outside it.<sup>18</sup>

A significant historical work is Marlene Epp's 2000 book, *Women Without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War*. It is a vital contribution to the existing literature, in which she chronicles the life experiences of widowed or abandoned Mennonite women after the war. Epp uses gender analysis as her central theoretical tool, outlining gendered aspects of the war and immigration, ways of remembering, and cultural experiences of refugees as well as the divergence between historically accepted gendered expectations and the practical negotiations of gender roles arising from wartime realities. Epp diverges from the previous literature, which attempts to portray Mennonite women as a homogenous group, and underscores the importance in understanding that while these women faced similar circumstances and events, their reactions and the adjustments that they made in their lives to deal with these issues were individual and often quite dissimilar. While Epp studies the mothers and wives of this time period, my work follows the next generation, focusing on the daughters of the women whom she studied.

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<sup>18</sup> Epp, *Women Without Men*. Epp's *Mennonite Women* presents a broader range of topics, time periods, and regions that deal with Mennonite women, in which she continues to utilize gender theory and highlights the importance in understanding a diversity of experience. Another historian who employs gender analysis is Royden Loewen, whose book *Diaspora in the Countryside* chronicles the transformation of two secluded, rural Mennonite communities in the twentieth century. Loewen dedicates two chapters of his work to gender issues: the first on changing images of femininity and the second on shifting definitions of boyhood masculinity and adult manhood in these rural areas. See Royden Loewen, *Diaspora in the Countryside: Two Mennonite Communities and Mid-Twentieth-Century Rural Disjuncture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

Another omission in the field of Mennonite literature is the discussion of gender and religion. Mennonites locate their personal and group identities primarily within their religious beliefs. While historians have referred to biblical models to which Mennonites have looked for guidance regarding gendered roles, there is a lack of analysis in these discussions. For instance, Frank Epp, a significant Mennonite historian, makes note of the Mennonite belief that biblical references created male “church leaders who knew what was best for their flock.”<sup>19</sup> Yet, there is no discussion of how women felt about or reacted to the patriarchal structure or whether they were engaged in constructing their own identities. Only in the mid-1990s did historians begin to consider the meaning of religion for ordinary Mennonite women.<sup>20</sup> My work will examine the ways in which Mennonite women have looked to their religious beliefs to shape their identities and the significance that religion has played in their daily lives, especially during their time as domestic workers in Vancouver.

In addition to the literature on Mennonite history, work done on domestic service was vital to the development of this thesis. Though there was some literature on female domestic workers before the 1970s, that decade witnessed an increasing stream of works on experiences in domestic service. Reflecting a growing interest in the ways that class relations played out in women’s history,

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<sup>19</sup> Frank Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People’s Struggle for Survival* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1982), 71.

<sup>20</sup> Gloria Neufeld Redekop, *The Work of Their Hands: Mennonite Women’s Societies in Canada* (Waterloo, Ontario: The Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996), 9. For additional sources on Mennonite women and religion, see Pamela E. Klassen, *Going by the Moon and the Stars: Stories of Two Russian Mennonite Women* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994); Martha Rempel, *History of B.C. Mennonite Women in Mission (1939-1976)* (Chilliwack: British Columbia Mennonite Women in Mission, 1987); and Ruth Unrau, *Stories of Mennonite Women* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1986).



much of the literature on domestic workers has included discussions of the imbalance in employer/employee relationships and acts of resistance on the part of servants.<sup>21</sup>

Historians also increasingly incorporated discussions of race and ethnicity in their work on domestic servants.<sup>22</sup> Tanya Schecter, for example, points out that a high percentage of domestic workers were immigrants and ethnic minorities and that, while the power relations between employer and employee clearly favoured the employer in terms of class inequalities in the mistress-servant relationship, the situation was further complicated by race and ethnicity.<sup>23</sup> My work contributes to these understandings, for while Mennonite women shared their employers' skin colour, their German language and cultural background, unfamiliarity with household appliances, and religious principals clearly denoted them as an ethnic 'other.'

While some historians note that relationships between employers and employees were indifferent at best, there is a tendency to see the relationship through the lens of the abusive employer and the victimized servant, with domestics often exposed to "chattel-like treatment."<sup>24</sup> The negative aspects of domestic work, heavily influenced by class, ethnicity, gender, and race, seem to

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Jacklyn Cock, *Maids and Madams: A Study in the Politics of Exploitation* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1980); and Faye E. Dudden, *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth Century America* (Middleton, Connecticut: Wesleyan Press, 1983).

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, Abigail B. Bakan and Daiva Stasiulis, eds., *Not One of the Family: Foreign Domestic Workers in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); and David Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>23</sup> Tanya Schecter, *Race, Class, Women and the State: the Case of Domestic Labor* (Montréal: Black Rose, 1998), 2.

<sup>24</sup> Bakan and Stasiulis, 6.

outweigh any possible positive relationships in these writings. Furthermore, since domestic workers performed traditional women's work in the home, their work was devalued and seen by employers as unskilled and insignificant.<sup>25</sup> These issues did have an impact on my narrators, but they did not see their experiences as entirely, or even mostly, negative.

The interviews that were conducted for this project tell a different story. Interestingly, the Mennonite women interviewed do not seem to 'fit the mould,' presenting their employers as kind-hearted individuals and their time working for them as quite enjoyable overall. This difference compels me to understand why this was so. I will examine why narrators' recollections are so divergent from the trend noted above by examining my narrators' particular ethnoreligious worldview and how they positioned themselves within it, using oral history theory as an analytical tool (see "Sources and Approaches," below).

More recently, there has been a further movement in the literature away from a narrow focus on work-related issues, such as duties or working conditions, to larger political and economic trends reflected in domestic work, such as the feminization of certain professions or the progress of women's rights through their entry into the public sphere.<sup>26</sup> Historians are currently looking at

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<sup>25</sup> Noeleen Heyzer and Vivienne Wee, "Domestic Workers in Transient Overseas Employment: Who Benefits, Who Profits?" in *The Trade in Domestic Workers: Causes, Mechanisms and Consequences of International Migration*, ed. Noeleen Heyzer, Geertje Lycklama a Nijeholt, and Nedra Weerakoon (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1994), 31. Mary Romero also notes that there is "an assumption that housework is the sole property of the housewife and that... the outside labour market exploits the social ideology and role expectations of women and reproduces the structure in a gendered work force." Mary Romero, *Maid in the U.S.A* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 19.

<sup>26</sup> Isidro Dubert, "Modernity without Modernization: The Evolution of Domestic Service in North-West Spain, 1752–1900," *Gender & History* 18, no. 2 (August 2006): 199-210.

issues such as marriage and celibacy, and how the life cycle of a domestic was influenced by her occupation.<sup>27</sup> Such historians no longer study domestic work in isolation of the broader historical setting, but rather within it—shifting and transforming as society changed and affecting change in its own right. My work will also take a broader view of my subjects' lives, situating them within their Mennonite community and the larger city as well as within their ethnoreligious identities. Using oral interviews, my work will attempt to understand the ways in which their experiences of domestic work affected their lives after they had left the field.

This thesis examines the lives of Mennonite domestics during their time in Vancouver during the early 1950s, utilizing oral interviews in order to understand interviewees' ideas of gender relations in their community, their paid work, and the *Maedchenheim*. Using gender analysis and drawing from recent theory on oral history, I intend to push the literature forward by complicating the category of gender identity with specific experiences of ethnoreligious community. As their place in the city and paid work outside the home disturbed the existing religious framework of the community, these young women had the potential to create a shift in Mennonite gender roles. However, the church community rallied around these women in an attempt to ensure that domestics continued to be protected by their elders and that their religious beliefs regarding female piety were maintained. The *Maedchenheim*, or girls' home, acted as the church's vehicle for

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<sup>27</sup> Raffaella Sarti, "All Masters Discourage the Marrying of Their Male Servants, and Admit Not by Any Means the Marriage of the Female': Domestic Service and Celibacy in Western Europe from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century," *European History Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (July 2008): 430.

the conservative forces of the rural community. Intriguingly, unlike the vast majority of domestics in Canada during the twentieth century, my narrators viewed their experiences in domestic work in positive terms. I will argue that their ethnoreligious perceptions of work and familial duty, along with their understanding of the Mennonite metanarrative of a cyclical process of persecution, struggle, and survival—going back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century—help us to understand the gap between their recollections and that of other domestics. Even though these women had the opportunity to challenge existing gender relations in their community, narrators chose to go back into the home, and revealed during the interview process that they were proud of their roles as mothers and wives later in life. By exploring these issues, this thesis contributes to the literature on Mennonite immigration to Canada, and specifically the interconnectivity of gender and ethnoreligious experiences of work.

## **Sources and Approaches**

Interviewees' narratives are at the core of this project. One of the primary aims of this work has been to provide a space in the scholarly world for the voices of the women whom I interviewed.<sup>28</sup> This thesis is therefore very much an oral history; the bulk of my primary research is comprised of the oral interviews that I have conducted, and the following pages are filled with the voices and stories provided by my narrators.

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<sup>28</sup> Like the work of Nancy Grey Osterud and Lu Ann Jones, my research was primarily concerned with "hearing women's voices." Nancy Grey Osterud and Lu Ann Jones, "If I must say so myself: Oral Histories of Rural Women," *Oral History Review* 17, no.2 (Fall 1989): 1.

Interview participants for this small-scale study were recruited primarily through the Mennonite Historical Society and narrator referrals, as snowballing led from one interview to another. Therefore, almost all narrators are still practicing members of the Mennonite faith and continue to be active in their church community.<sup>29</sup> While I made enquiries, I was unsuccessful in gaining referrals to individuals who had left the community after their work, and I recognize that this has limited the scope of my study. Seventeen interviews were conducted over a six-month period: two interviews on site at the historical society; all others, in the homes of my narrators. I interviewed Ruth and Katy together; all other narrators spoke to me in one-on-one interviews. The length of the interviews ranged from 40 to 120 minutes, while most averaged around 60 minutes.

All but one of the interview participants were women.<sup>30</sup> Only three interview participants, Peter, Erika, and Mary, had not participated in domestic work. Interviewees who did engage in domestic work lived and worked in the city of Vancouver, primarily in the Shaughnessy area of East First Street and Vancouver West, between the years 1946 and 1955. Seven narrators participated in live-in domestic work, while seven lived in the *Maedchenheim* and worked during the day. Narrators stayed in the domestic field for no more than

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<sup>29</sup> One interview subject, Mary, has left the Mennonite faith and is now a member of a different Christian denomination. Mary is younger than other participants. Her mother came to the *Maedchenheim* after Mary was born, and Mary's memories are from her childhood experiences at the girls' home, thus providing a different perspective on the Mennonite community and the girls' home.

<sup>30</sup> The one male participant in this study, Peter, was interviewed specifically because his mother was one of the first matrons of the girls' home. His experiences in the home provided a male perspective on the activities within the girls' home and the attitude of the community towards Mennonite womanhood when he was young.

two years, usually leaving when they got married or after their families' debts were completely paid off.

All but three of my narrators were born in Russia or the Ukraine and immigrated to British Columbia between 1946 and 1950. Approximately three-quarters of my narrators' families were one-parent units at the time of their work in Vancouver, as in most cases the father had been killed, or arrested and never heard from again, during the Second World War. Though many of their families had once been prosperous farmers, circumstances during World War Two and the trek to Canada left them with little to no financial security and few personal belongings.

I recognize that the very process of transcription, of turning speech into written words, and arranging life stories within an analytical framework, involves intervention and manipulation by the historian.<sup>31</sup> However, I have to the best of my ability transcribed the interviews and reproduced lengthy sections of transcribed quotations from narrators in this paper, allowing women to speak for themselves as much as possible.

Still, I do not shy away from historical analysis and avoid a common pitfall of oral historians of "disappear[ing] in the name of giving voice to the people."<sup>32</sup> Giving voice to my narrators does not mean that my interpretation must be the

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<sup>31</sup> Alessandro Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History," *History Workshop Journal* 12, no.1 (1981): 97.

<sup>32</sup> Ronald J. Grele, "History and the Language of History in the Oral History Interview: Who Answers Whose Questions and Why?" in *Interactive Oral History Interviewing*, ed. Eva M. McMahan and Kim Lacy Rogers (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994), 1.

same as theirs.<sup>33</sup> While my training as an historian has helped me to see patterns of analysis that might not fit with how my narrators see their lives, however, I also want to respect their interpretations, for these are their truths and are just as legitimate as mine.

My goal has been to produce a feminist historical work that utilizes a number of core feminist principals in its methodology and objectives.<sup>34</sup> I have used gender as an analytical concept in this thesis. In Mennonite communities, a male-headed power hierarchy was created through perceived differences between men and women, most commonly described through religious doctrine and reinforced with biblical examples. While gender is a social and cultural construct—not merely internalised, but also preformed, sometimes challenged, and sometimes changed—fluctuating across time, space, and experience, my narrators' understandings of gender have been rather static. Potential for change existed, as narrators in this case study had left the confines of their community and ventured into the city to participate in paid work, which was outside the realm of their prescribed roles within the home as mothers and wives. Yet, my narrators maintained their original understandings of appropriate female roles with a slight 'twist.' Their time in the city had shown narrators that they encompassed abilities beyond a communally perceived skill-set. This situation intrigued me, and therefore the focus of my research became the understanding of this construction

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<sup>33</sup> Susan Gieger, "What's So Feminist About Women's Oral History?," *Journal of Women's History* 2, no.1 (Spring 1990): 177.

<sup>34</sup> Gieger, 169.

of a gendered identity that was so heavily influenced by religious beliefs that it resisted change during and after my narrators' time in the city.

I came to the kitchen table of each narrator's home knowing that the woman sitting across from me was not merely a text or another primary source—she was indeed a human being. Sociologist Verta Taylor argues that feminist interviews should be open and reciprocal, and that there should be empathy between the researcher and the narrator.<sup>35</sup> Until recently, so often in oral interviews the position of the interviewer is dominant and the researcher “knows all the questions to ask and by implication all the answers.”<sup>36</sup> In the case of my own research, the narrators involved were always free to diverge from the topic at hand as they shared related information about their lives. I encouraged interviewees to ask me any questions that they had about my own experiences. The most frequently asked question was why, as a non-Mennonite, I was doing this project. After a short explanation, the conversation always seemed to steer itself towards the immigration experiences of my own parents and their time under the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia. Like Verta Taylor, I spoke openly with interviewees about my own life and my family's experiences.<sup>37</sup> The women's initial fears or hesitations about a formal interview quickly faded with friendly chats over tea, German cookies, and cool watermelon in the summer heat.

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<sup>35</sup> Verta Taylor, “Feminist Methodology in Social Movements Research,” *Qualitative Sociology* 21, no. 4 (December 1998): 371.

<sup>36</sup> Valerie Yow, “Do I Like Them Too Much?: Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Visa-Versa,” *Oral History Review* 24, no.1 (Summer 1997): 67.

<sup>37</sup> Taylor, 371.



Another element of feminist oral history is the concept of ‘giving back’ to interviewees. This does not need to occur on a large scale, with grand gestures or lifelong indebtedness. The researcher needs to be aware of her own time restrictions in terms of her project, as well as the extent to which she is willing to collaborate with her narrators. Marlene Epp’s research, for example, was informed by a feminist approach, but she found that it was impossible to give back in the form of full collaboration between researcher and interviewee.<sup>38</sup> In oral histories, the process of collaboration occurs when discussion and decision-making is shared throughout the entire process—from the interviews themselves to the analysis and final conclusions.<sup>39</sup> Collaboration is a “long haul” process, with interpretations established over time through a plethora of meetings between the researcher and interviewee.<sup>40</sup> Like Epp, I was not able to involve my narrators in the analysis of my research due to the time restrictions of a Master’s thesis. I will, however, be able to give back to the women and the broader Mennonite community in other ways.

For instance, when I have successfully defended my work, I will make a second visit to let each narrator know how the work went and to present her with a transcribed copy of her interview with me, along with a copy of my completed

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<sup>38</sup> Epp, *Women Without Men*, 13.

<sup>39</sup> See, for instance, the confessional article on the topic of collaboration, by Lorraine Sitzia, “A Shared Authority: An Impossible Goal?” *The Oral History Review* 30, no.1 (2003): 87-101.

<sup>40</sup> Linda Shopes, “Commentary: Sharing Authority,” *Oral History Review* 30, no.1 (2003): 105.

thesis.<sup>41</sup> As there is so little information on the Vancouver *Maedchenheim* available publicly, I am able to help preserve this one aspect of the ethnoreligious community's history. When the project is completely finished, I intend to donate to the Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia much of the non-interview primary information I have collected, such as the translated articles on the *Maedchenheim* from the *Der Bote* newspaper, letters from narrators, and the numerous photographs given to me by a few of the women.<sup>42</sup> Lastly, I will also provide the historical society with a copy of the completed thesis, as requested by the society's manager. I therefore believe that I have successfully accomplished my initial aim, which is to create a piece of academic work in the shape of an oral history that utilizes a feminist approach.

A clear understanding of oral history more broadly, along with various methods of its analysis, was vital to this work. Oral history once had only a democratising intent—that is, to recover the voices and experiences of marginalized groups. However, the field of oral history has grown significantly in recent years, incorporating ideas about memory, subjectivity, reflexivity, and more. Michael Frisch claims that oral interviews require a “self-conscious and reflective” approach that goes beyond merely transcribing interviews and utilizing

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<sup>41</sup> Many of my narrators were shy and nervous about doing an interview at first, claiming that they did not remember enough to be very helpful to me and advising that I should not get my hopes up. However, all of my interview participants had much to say, and every story contributed in one way or another to my understanding of their experiences. All of the narrators' names in this work are pseudonyms; when I visit them with the completed thesis, I will show them which name has been assigned to them so that they will be able to see exactly in what ways their stories contributed to my work.

<sup>42</sup> This will all be done with the permission of those who provided me with these sources.

quotes as “historical evidence... [that] tells it like it was.”<sup>43</sup> Historians who utilize oral interviews are required to equip themselves with theoretical approaches to their work.

While oral interviews are gaining ground as reputable primary sources, the Western preoccupation with written text continues to render oral sources as questionable and at times unreliable.<sup>44</sup> In a field such as history, where objectivity is often seen as a hallmark of academic work, oral sources are too often seen as subjective, plagued by issues of remembering, lapsed time, and personal bias. However, the claim of historians to create truth about the past “obscures the fact that people’s perceptions of reality are in fact all we can recover from the past.”<sup>45</sup> The subjectivity of oral history can tell us much about the meaning of an event or activity, rather than just what happened. When narrators share stories, the interviewer may be able to discern “what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, [and] what they now think they did.”<sup>46</sup> For example, an individual’s version of an event or issue may differ from the established literature on that subject. Rather than discarding such statements as problematic, the historian must examine them to understand what the interviewee believes, for they are emotionally and psychologically true to the narrator.<sup>47</sup> Their ‘facts’ are indicators of their frame of mind and perspective, and in this sense, “untrue

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 7-8.

<sup>44</sup> Numerous oral historians have noted this academic trend. See, for instance, Portelli’s and Geiger’s discussions.

<sup>45</sup> Alexander Freund and Laura Quilici, “Exploring Myths in Women’s Narratives: Italian and German Immigrant Women in Vancouver, 1947- 1961,” *Oral History Review* 23, no. 2 (Winter 1996): 19.

<sup>46</sup> Portelli, 100.

<sup>47</sup> Portelli, 100.

statements are still psychologically true.”<sup>48</sup> Oral history accounts demonstrate the worldview of the individuals relating them—the mental landscape in which they organize their past in the present. Oral history narratives need not be mined for facts so much as explored for the meanings behind the narratives. In the case of my thesis, narrators’ stories allowed me to understand how these women saw themselves in relation to their ethnoreligious community, their work, and their own past. Such interpretations are at the core of feminist history.

The practice of oral history also requires self-reflexivity on the part of the researcher. Vicki L. Ruiz describes this process:

1) Recognizing ones own assumptions, 2) situating the stories (or centering the narrator) within larger historical and theoretical contexts, and most importantly, 3) acknowledging the reciprocal position of narrator and historian with trust at its core.<sup>49</sup>

In terms of embracing my own subjectivity, I came to the realization that my Protestant religious background, while quite different from that of my narrators, played a distinctive part in my understanding of their narratives about God. For a long time, I was hesitant to unravel the meanings behind their stories that included discussions about their faith, not wanting to challenge their understanding of the world. Likewise, my own life experiences as an independent young woman with a world of possibilities open to me, and a strong feminist understanding of this world, is quite divergent from that of my narrators.

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<sup>48</sup> Portelli, 100.

<sup>49</sup> Vicki L. Ruiz, “Situating Stories: The Surprising Consequences of Oral History,” *Oral History Review* 25, no. 1/ 2 (Summer- Autumn 1998): 73.

Lastly, the concept of metanarratives in oral history is particularly important to this study. Oral accounts often present more than just the personal narrative of the individual; they also show the prevailing ideologies and memories of the broader community.<sup>50</sup> For Mennonites especially, there is a powerful group narrative of continuous persecution, immigration, self-sacrifice, and survival since the group's beginnings in the sixteenth century. This metanarrative resounds, for example, in the opening passage of Mennonite author Andreas Schroder's history of the group:

For sheer epic drama—across four and a half centuries, five continents, over forty countries; following or fleeing viscous persecution, utopian enticements, breached promises, perfidious governments, their own prophets—few histories can match the story of the Mennonite people.<sup>51</sup>

It also echoes through the narratives of my interview subjects: the persecution of the Second World War; the forced movement of the trek; the self-sacrifice in setting up early on the farm; and the survival made possible by young women's ability to find domestic work in the city. As the reader will see in the following chapters, to a great extent, my narrators understand their experiences through this lens.

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<sup>50</sup> For instance, women interviewed by Alison Baker did “more than just describe isolated incidents of their own participation in the Moroccan resistance... [Rather the] women tell us about a period in history when women played active, militant roles along with men, and about the image that they have of themselves as strong, capable women, heroines of the resistance.” Here, women tell their stories in accordance with the positive ways in which Moroccan women from the period of resistance are remembered by their community. Alison Baker, “History and Myth: Women's Stories of Moroccan Resistance,” *The Oral History Review* 22, no. 1 (Summer 1995): 46.

<sup>51</sup> Andreas Schroder, *The Mennonites: A Pictorial History of Their Lives in Canada* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1990), 2.

In this thesis, chapter two will explore the ways in which Mennonite religious beliefs shape and sustain the community's understanding of gender roles and the relationships between women and men. Chapter three examines the divergence in opinion between narrators and the broader literature on the employer/employee relationship and the nature of domestic work. Chapter four considers the role of the Maedchenheim from the perspective of both the church community and the narrators of this study. Lastly, in order to achieve a feminist history, the conclusion will present my analysis of these topics alongside the understanding of interviewees. These chapters show that while gender is flexible and changes through time, religious beliefs, a strong group metanarrative, and a continuous effort from the community can work together to sustain gender roles and expectations even through trying times and momentous change.

## 2. “GIRLS DON’T NEED TO BE EDUCATED”: YOUNG MENNONITE WOMEN AND GENDERED EXPECTATIONS

*My mother, she did everything. I remember when she was 80 years old, she said 'Ok girls, I am not baking or cooking another meal. That's it!' We said [jokingly], 'Mother! You can't do that to us! You haven't taught us anything. How are we supposed to take over!' That was so funny. But anyways, that was it—she quit.<sup>1</sup>*

Mennonites comprise an ethnic group identified and self-identified primarily through its Anabaptist religious beliefs. When studying Mennonite women in the first half of the twentieth century, it is impossible to analyze gender without taking into consideration the women’s ethnoreligious background. In fact, I would argue that their perception of what it meant to be a woman was inextricably bound to their community’s religious beliefs; central to the understanding of ideal Mennonite womanhood were notions of female piety. Chapter two will provide an analysis of the essential link between ethnoreligious identity on the one hand and Mennonite ideas of female piety and appropriate gender roles for women on the other.

Mennonite understandings of gender roles were (and are) structured in a hierarchical manner: God ‘the Father’ and Jesus were at the top, followed by male church leaders and elders, husbands and fathers next, and then women at the bottom. At each level, spiritual wisdom and moral character were key factors

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<sup>1</sup> Frieda, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 12 August 2009.

in determining the status of an individual, but the overall model was androcentric and patriarchal.

Only men could be church leaders and elders, responsible for the care and well-being of the entire community. While no person was equal to God, heads of the church had established themselves— through their exclusive right to higher education and their having been created in the image of a male God— as having the necessary wisdom and moral compass to interpret and make judgements on the messages of the Bible. In order to maintain female subordination and, therefore, remain at the head of the mortal congregation, church leaders interpreted the Bible in ways that furthered their authoritative position. While Mennonite leaders claimed to follow a strictly literal interpretation of the Bible, it is apparent that they read biblical scripture in a certain way in order to uphold male power. For example, they ignored portions of the Bible that liberated women and presented their spiritual worth, such as Jesus' acceptance of female religiosity or scriptures that suggested that men and women were created at the same moment, as in Genesis 1:37.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Mennonite doctrine stressed biblical passages that supported the benevolent subordination of women, such as 1 Corinthians 14: 33-35, which states:

As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Male and female He created them." Gen. 1:37.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor. 14: 33-35 New International Version.



In this way, male church leaders and elders utilized the Bible to justify the subordination of women in church activities and continue male domination of the pulpit.

This patriarchal domination of women extended into the home, where husbands and fathers utilized the same biblical ideas and examples to control their wives and children through an “idealized father knows best”<sup>4</sup> mentality. Church elders often quoted Ephesians 5:21-24, which instructs women to be “subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife.”<sup>5</sup> Gerda Lerner describes patriarchy as “the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general.”<sup>6</sup> In the case of Mennonite families, the ‘almighty’ Father provided husbands and fathers with a model for their dominance over their wives and daughters. God, the all-knowing father figure, was the ultimate example of male wisdom and intelligence. God’s rules were to be upheld under all circumstances, and punishment for noncompliance—eternal hellfire— was non-negotiable. In much the same way, transgression against a father’s rule was considered to be a sinful act. As Andreas Shroeder notes, “Both family and church were solidly patriarchal. [Through biblical examples] the man was the undisputed head of his

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<sup>4</sup> Marlene Epp, “Pioneers, Refugees, Exiles and Transnationals: Gendering Diaspora,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 12 (2001): 142.

<sup>5</sup> Eph. 5:21-24 NIV.

<sup>6</sup> Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 239.

household.”<sup>7</sup> The Bible, the last word on appropriate gender relations, as in other things, was used to uphold patriarchy through its androcentric language.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the authority of the male—whether it was manifested in God, Jesus, church leaders, or fathers—was legitimized by an assumption of female weakness. Like Eve in Genesis, who was unable to resist the serpent and the apple, women were seen as naive, weak-minded, and susceptible to temptation. Mennonite women were infantilized by church doctrine and seen as unable to sustain appropriate female behaviour without the direction of their husbands or fathers.<sup>9</sup> Religious conceptions of a woman’s moral weakness meant that even the most submissive and obedient women needed the strict guidance of fathers and husbands in all matters.<sup>10</sup> For those narrators whose fathers had been killed or arrested during the war, their mothers stepped into the role of quasi-father. Widows also taught their children that they needed protection from the world. “I always felt safe,” reflected Maria. “I knew she would take care of things.”<sup>11</sup> Without this guidance, Mennonite women would fall off the “straight and narrow

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<sup>7</sup> Shroeder, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *After Eden: Facing the Challenges of Gender Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans, 1993), 135.

<sup>9</sup> Much like Catholic perceptions of elite women in colonial Brazil, Mennonite conceptions of a woman’s weakness meant that even the most submissive and obedient woman needed the strict guidance of fathers and husbands, lest she become “wild, garrulous, vain, and profligate, especially in the purchase of cosmetics and clothing.” Carole A. Myscofski, “Bounded Identities: Women and Religion in Colonial Brazil, 1550-1750,” *Religion* 28, no. 4 (October 1998): 330.

<sup>10</sup> Maria, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 19 April 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Maria, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 19 April 2010.

pathway to Heaven” and slide straight onto the “broad highway to Hell, and the everlasting fire.”<sup>12</sup>

One of the ways in which women could be protected from worldly pleasures and a sinful life was for them to stay within the home, or its close environs, at all times. Safe under their husbands’ or fathers’ roofs, Mennonite women were constantly under the care and supervision of their male protectors. Menno Simon, the sixteenth-century spiritual leader whose followers became known as Mennonites, had instructed women how to behave:

Be obedient to your husbands in all reasonable things... remain within your house and gates unless you have something of importance to regulate, such as to make purchases, to provide in temporal needs, to hear the word of the Lord, or to receive the holy sacraments, etc.<sup>13</sup>

Mennonite women were still following these dictates centuries later. As one of my narrators, Katie, observed:

My mother never went grocery shopping. [Father] went and bought stuff, whatever he thinks we can pay for. Whether she wanted anything else that was beside the point. She stayed home all the time.<sup>14</sup>

The only times these women normally left the home was to attend church service, and in these cases, male church leaders took the place of husbands and fathers, offering spiritual direction while perpetuating male dominance.

As Mennonite women were restricted to the home, their clear identity was that of mother and wife. For Mennonites, the family was a "near sacred

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<sup>12</sup> David Philip Reimer, *Mennonites of BC* (Vancouver: UBC History Department, 18 April 1946), 53.

<sup>13</sup> Redekop, 25.

<sup>14</sup> Katie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 29 May 2009.

institution,"<sup>15</sup> in which "marriage and motherhood [were] the roles fundamental to delineating what it was to be a woman in the Lord's eyes."<sup>16</sup> Mennonite women were to look to biblical women for role models: Jochebeth, the mother of Moses; Hana, the mother of Eli; Mary, the mother of Jesus; and Louise, the mother of Timothy.<sup>17</sup> A Mennonite woman should aspire to be a good mother and a warm wife, serving God and her family as best as she could.

Mennonites believed that references to submissive wives in the Bible should be strictly followed and that women should be "steadfast, modest, and quiet."<sup>18</sup> Mennonite women therefore reinforced the patriarchal structure of the household by submitting to their husbands. An interviewee in Pamela E. Klassen's work described the power relations in a Mennonite household:

Before God there is no man or woman, they're all the same, before Him. In the family it's different, just like any institution needs someone at the head that sort of oversees the whole thing, so the family does too. And the man should actually be able to oversee the family.<sup>19</sup>

This was not a situation wherein only the males believed that they should lead the family in a patriarchal structure; rather Mennonite women, following biblical references, believed this as well.

Narrators expressed understandings of gender that fit with these expectations. "My obligation was with the children, raise the children,

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<sup>15</sup> Epp, *Mennonite Women*, 61.

<sup>16</sup> Klassen, 62.

<sup>17</sup> Epp, *Mennonites in Canada*, 450.

<sup>18</sup> Klassen, 11.

<sup>19</sup> Klassen, 29.

housekeeping, baking and cooking,” noted Agatha. She made it clear that motherhood:

...was the most important thing. To look after your family, that was the priority... We thought this was God’s way, to leave our father and mother and make our own family.”<sup>20</sup>

When asked about the role of faith in her life, Katie stated: “I would think that [faith] played a part in it; that’s what girls did. Most girls, I would say 99 percent of females, would prefer to be married and have children and raise a family. It is sort of your inner drive or whatever you would call it.”<sup>21</sup> Additionally, becoming a mother was the only plausible route for Maria: “I think that’s what we all thought life was all about. We didn’t think a career or going to school was much of an option.”<sup>22</sup> Narrators’ understandings of gendered responsibilities mirrored the religious descriptions of women’s roles that had been articulated by the church and the broader community.

Similarly, narrator’s husbands and male peers, though a generation removed from the old country, upheld the views of their fathers in regards to women. “I would almost say that Mennonite boys preferred girls that were not educated,” noted Katie. She went on to explain that this would:

...put the female above the male. If the girl is a teacher, and she marries someone that is just a labourer, even though they are both immigrants, it doesn’t function so well. The old country style men prefer that they were on top [in the family hierarchy], and not women on top.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Agatha, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 8 April 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Katie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 9 April 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Maria, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 19 April 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Katie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 9 April 2010.

Rebecca noted that her husband did well financially, and therefore she had the opportunity to stay home with her children. “All the other women in Yarrow went hop-picking,” she recalled. “I was going to go hop-picking too. My husband says, ‘Oh no, you’re not going to go picking.’ I says, ‘Why not? They’re all doing it.’ He says, ‘When I can’t make a living anymore you can start.’”<sup>24</sup> Rebecca recalled the hard work of her husband and her time at home with fondness, illustrating her internalisation of her husband’s and the community’s attitude that women should not work except out of absolute necessity.

In my oral interviews, it became very clear that Mennonite mother and fathers trained girls from childhood to understand that their future role placed them within the household. As Anna remarked, “With the Mennonites, [the] parents, they were so very strict”<sup>25</sup> with their teachings, and few young people challenged them.<sup>26</sup> “I had a rigid upbringing... I was used to doing what I was told,” Maria explained. “You never ask questions. You are told what to do and you did it.”<sup>27</sup> Agatha informed me that when she was young, she managed to finish grade nine here in Canada. After that, however, her father told her, “Girls don’t need to be educated any more—I want you to go work.”<sup>28</sup> As the male head of the household, her father had the authority to dictate her future, which would

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<sup>24</sup> Rebecca, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 26 April 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Anna, interview by author, Langley, BC, 19 June 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Helen Janzen recalled how “there were some strict rules. Rudeness to parents and elders was never tolerated.” Lawrence Klippenstein and Julius G Toews, eds., *Mennonite Memories: Settling in Western Canada* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Centennial Publications, 1977), 253.

<sup>27</sup> Maria, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 19 April 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Agatha, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 23 June 2009.

now be one without a higher education. Later on in the interview, Agatha noted that her family was not the only one in which the girls' roles were firmly set:

It wasn't just my father that did that [sent his daughter to Vancouver to do work]. Mostly the Mennonite fathers thought, well girls, they only need to know a household, they don't need to be educated, you know. If a boy wants to be educated and become a teacher, that was understandable. But not for girls. They are just going to get married and have a family. They need to know how to cook and sew and that, that was the main thing. That was the main attitude.<sup>29</sup>

Mennonite women did not require secondary education because it would not be necessary for the tasks of housework and motherhood that they were expected to assume. Moreover, young Mennonite girls could be useful in their household role at a young age, so they were taken out of school earlier than boys.<sup>30</sup> Since the “most intensive gender socialization occurs during youth, especially within the home,”<sup>31</sup> my narrators had internalised these Mennonite ideals of womanhood before they stepped foot in the city.

Narrators also revealed that obedience was important to them when they were raising their own children. Agatha, for instance, claimed that she tried “to raise them as good as I could. The most important thing was that they would obey.”<sup>32</sup> Maria too insisted that “teaching your children, that was important.” She went on to explain:

I remember one time my sons were complaining about something, and I said to them, “One day when I go to heaven and God will say,

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<sup>29</sup> Agatha, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 23 June 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Solomon Stucky, *The Heritage of the Swiss Volhynian Mennonites* (Waterloo, Ontario: Conrad Press, 1981), 102.

<sup>31</sup> Sean Leonard Elliott and Augie Fleras, *Unequal Relations: An Introduction to Race and Ethnic Dynamics in Canada* (Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice-Hall Canada, 1992), 105.

<sup>32</sup> Agatha, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 8 April 2010.

'And you let them get away with that; you know that wasn't the right thing to do!'<sup>33</sup>

For Mennonite children, then, obedience to one's parents was taught with references to their faith; just as children had to obey God, they had to obey their parents as well. This religious framework built around obedience to one's parents was not only accepted by narrators, but also continued during their own experiences of parenthood.

The kitchen was the prime location for young girls to learn their proper roles from their mothers. "My mother was always an example to me,"<sup>34</sup> recalled Katie. From a young age, Mennonite girls were able to observe the daily activities of their mothers, and understand that these would be the same responsibilities that would fall on their shoulders. "My mother," noted Elizabeth, "did all the cooking."<sup>35</sup> Agatha similarly recalls that while her brother worked with the strawberry crops and in the fields, "mother usually said [to her and her sister] 'Here is an apron,' and we helped her make buns for Sunday... We helped our mother a lot in the kitchen."<sup>36</sup> She went on to relate how much of her identity was learned from her mother: "I sort of still do things the way the mother did, or taught us, or what we saw her do. We followed in her footsteps in all sorts of ways."<sup>37</sup> Much as Mennonite women in adulthood could look to biblical foremothers to achieve acceptable womanhood, girls could look to their own mothers to train them to be proper young women.

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<sup>33</sup> Maria, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 19 April 2010.

<sup>34</sup> Katie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 9 April 2010.

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth, interview by author, Richmond, BC, 18 August 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Agatha, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 23 June 2009.

<sup>37</sup> Agatha, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 8 April 2010.



The church was also a prime location for Mennonite girls to learn to behave appropriately when they were young and to fulfil their ultimate duties as wives and mothers when they grew up. The sermons given in church taught children to follow the examples laid out in the Bible or face retribution from God. Church sermons often condemned inappropriate behaviour and instilled fear of reprisal from God in the congregation. Therefore, young girls were less likely to stray from the path prescribed to them by the church. Their options in these isolated communities would have been limited.

There was a profound contradiction, then, between a worldview that saw females as child-like and the decision to send Mennonite daughters to work in Vancouver, where they would be exposed to all the temptations of the big city. However, given the financial necessity of Mennonite immigrants upon their arrival to Canada, young Mennonite women moved out of the home and into the workplace. The young women working in Vancouver were separated from their families and communities by considerable distances—from Abbotsford, by 43 kilometres, or 27 miles; from Yarrow, by 85 kilometres, or 53 miles—thus mitigating the influence that church leaders or fathers could exercise over them on a regular basis. In addition, many of the narrators of this study had no father in the household at all, as many men had died or been arrested during the Second World War. This worried church leaders even more, as these young women no longer had a father-figure constantly upholding religiously-based gender norms. There was concern that their participation in the paid work force would tempt them to remain in the workplace. The possibility that a non-

Mennonite man could seduce a Mennonite woman further threatened the cohesion and continuation of the tight-knit community. In addition, Mennonite domestics were exposed to worldly sins and highly susceptible to temptations during their time in the city. How did the church and the broader Mennonite community deal with these tensions?

In essence, the ambiguity was moderated by the nature of the work itself. Domestic work was seen as an acceptable form of paid work for young women because it blurred the line between the private home and the public workplace, as domestics continued to spend their time within a home, if not their own, participating in the paid labour force for the well-being of their family. Therefore, domestic work allowed the Mennonite community to send young women into the city and still maintain gendered work boundaries.

Further, this work provided young women with the training that they would need to fulfill their future roles as mothers and wives. Live-in domestics, in particular, often looked after the children of employers in addition to doing housework. While the young women worked in homes that were non-Mennonite, they would remain connected to the community through the *Maedchenheim*. The existence of the *Maedchenheim* allowed church leaders to feel that their influence, most notably through the rules and protection of the matron, would continue even after the young women left their communities.

Even so, sending daughters into the city challenged the patriarchal structure of this ethnoreligious community. Biblical references and church sermons that taught women to stay inside the home as mothers and wives, under

the constant protection of the male heads of the household, were directly contradicted. These young women, while watched by the girls' home matron, Miss Lehn, were still walking the streets of Vancouver alone and spending large amounts of time unsupervised. This situation created the potential for change in Mennonite gender roles within this generation.

### 3. “LIFE WAS HARD, BUT PEOPLE WERE GOOD”: DOMESTIC WORK AND ‘THE LADIES’

*But there, put that in—we were always amazed that the people into whose houses we went, the people we met, were very, very helpful. Never ever laughed at the blunders we made with the language.*<sup>1</sup>

The established literature articulates a negative perception of domestic work. Conversely, narrators for my thesis recalled their work and their employers with laughter, smiles, and oftentimes a great deal of fondness. Most of the women had very kind words for the people for whom they worked in Vancouver. Employers were remembered as friendly and caring individuals. "Oh, they were very nice," recalled Anna, "really, I mean, I was amazed."<sup>2</sup> Frieda also noted that her employers "were kind-hearted" and that her workplaces were "wonderful, absolutely wonderful."<sup>3</sup> This chapter discusses my narrators' positive perceptions of their employers and their work, which were shaped at least in part by interviewees' memories of the war and their understanding of a larger Mennonite metanarrative.

There was a steady decrease in 'desirable' British and Canadian-born domestic servants in the 1940s and beyond due to rising expectations in the workplace for women, making options for Canadian employers limited.<sup>4</sup> The list of most preferred domestic workers included Canadian, American, British,

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<sup>1</sup> Helena, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 5 June 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Anna, interview by author, Langley, BC, 19 June 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Frieda, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 12 August 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Sager, "Women in the Industrial Labour Force: Evidence for British Columbia, 1921- 1953," *BC Studies* 149 (Spring 2006): 41.

French, Dutch, Swiss, and Scandinavian women, based on the idea that they were more easily assimilated because they shared the same skin colour, mores, and Christian religious background as the dominant Anglo-Canadian society.<sup>5</sup> Women from various displaced person camps around Europe in the 1940s and 1950s were the top choices.

The post-war period in Canada saw a decline in the number of Canadian women working in domestic work. After widespread participation in the wartime workforce, Canadian women's expectations for wages and working conditions grew. After the Second World War, many Canadian women moved away from domestic work in large numbers and towards retail work or pink-collar jobs in business and government. Veronica Strong-Boag notes that Canadian women themselves did not enjoy domestic work and that among working women, domestic service was "the most avoided and lowest in status."<sup>6</sup> Demands exceeded employer requirements and expectations became more flexible.<sup>7</sup> Women from Germany were prominent among domestic workers in the 1950s.<sup>8</sup> While they were white women, they were, nevertheless, 'alien, enemy' women

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<sup>5</sup> Franca Iacovetta, "Ordering in Bulk: Canada's Postwar Immigration Policy and the Recruitment of Contract Workers from Italy," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 11, no. 1 (Fall 1991): 54.

<sup>6</sup> Veronica Strong-Boag, *Janey Canuck: Women in Canada Between Two World Wars, 1919-1939* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1994), 10.

<sup>7</sup> Sedef Arat-Koc, "From 'Mothers of the Nation' to Migrant Workers: Immigration Policies and Domestic Workers in Canadian History," in *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*, ed. V. Strong-Boag, M. Gleason, and A. Perry, 283-98 (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2002), 291. As demand exceeded supply, the Canadian government entered a domestic immigration scheme with Jamaica and Barbados beginning in 1955, bringing many women of colour into the field of domestic work. These immigrants were not allowed to enter Canada under the Assisted Passage Loan Scheme. Rather, the Caribbean scheme required the "sending countries to bear responsibility and the costs for recruiting, training, medically testing, and arranging transportation" of these domestics." Arat-Koc, 295.

<sup>8</sup> Marilyn Barber, *Immigrant Domestic Servants in Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1991), 21.

from the losing side of the Second World War, still fresh in the minds of Anglo-Canadians. Though Italian women were available for hire as well, they too were not overly desirable because they were seen as wartime enemies; furthermore, as Franca Iacovetta explains, the discrimination against Italian women, “less versed in democratic traditions,”<sup>9</sup> came mostly from “longstanding prejudices...based on assumptions equating hot climates with darker populations and cultural backwardness.”<sup>10</sup> Mennonite domestics, with their Northern European background, were much preferred over the new wave of Italian workers. It was widely known that in Vancouver, the employment of a Mennonite domestic was “virtually guaranteed.”<sup>11</sup> According to an article in *Der Bote*, “The demand for our girls is often greater than the supply.”<sup>12</sup> Mennonite domestic workers were able to find jobs in the Vancouver labour market without any great difficulty.

Like Dutch immigrant domestics of the period, Mennonite domestics did not consider domestic work demeaning because they were supporting their families.<sup>13</sup> Mennonite women participated in either day- or live-in work for upper middle-class and upper-class families, usually for professionals such as

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<sup>9</sup> Iacovetta, 53.

<sup>10</sup> Iacovetta, 52.

<sup>11</sup> Ruth Derksen-Siemens, “Quilt as Text and Text as Quilt: The Influence of Genre in the Mennonite Girls’ Home of Vancouver (1930-1960),” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 17 (1999): 121. Peter also commented on how “it became quickly known, through word of mouth I would imagine, in West Vancouver and the Shaughnessy area, that there was, there were, reliable, honest young women who did quality work to be had.” Peter, interview by author, Burnaby, BC, 17 June 2009.

<sup>12</sup> J. J. Thiessen, “Unsere Maedchenheime,” 1.

<sup>13</sup> Herman Ganzevoort, *A Bittersweet Land: The Dutch Experience in Canada: 1890-1980* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988), 102.

architects, doctors, dentists, and the like.<sup>14</sup> Helena described employers' homes as "big and average houses... not small houses."<sup>15</sup> Mennonite domestics in day-work earned between 50 and 75 cents an hour, and working eight-hour days meant that they would receive \$4 to \$6, five days per week. Live-in work resulted in longer hours, up to twelve hours per day, as the young women were expected to be constantly available to their employers, except on days off. However, long hours were offset by the fact that room and board were included in pay; their net earnings were, on average, \$50 per month.

When asked about the relationship between them and their employers, Mennonite women maintained that they did not feel that they were out of place in their employers' homes or that they were merely considered to be servants. "I never felt like they looked down at me, like I was only the maid. They treated me very well,"<sup>16</sup> explained Suzie. Though the employer/employee relationship can be quite fraught with tension, Pamela Horn notes, "Strong bonds of affection and mutual regard existed between some families and their domestic staff."<sup>17</sup> A few narrators in this study pushed this claim even further, suggesting that their employers identified them as a part of the extended family. Irene claimed that "my sister worked at one residence for a number of years; she was part of the family there,"<sup>18</sup> while Elizabeth believed her employer was a very nice and

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<sup>14</sup> Helena, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 5 June 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Helena, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 5 June 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Suzie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 30 June 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Pamela Horn, *Life Below the Stairs in the Twentieth Century* (Stroud: Sutton, 2001), 19.

<sup>18</sup> Irene, interview by author, Yarrow, BC, 26 August 2009.

"motherly person."<sup>19</sup> Suzie recalls that when she could not make it home for Christmas one year, her employer made sure she still had a nice holiday:

Christmas came and I could not go home. They would have me when they were distributing presents under the Christmas tree, and I would come down in the morning and I would get a present too. It was nice.<sup>20</sup>

Mary, who was the young daughter of a domestic worker, reminisced through happy tears and laughter:

This one [place] in Vancouver, we stayed for two and a half years. They were really good to us. They were my momma and zeta. They were really good to us. Their youngest son, he was in university at the time, and whenever I had a birthday and he would come home from UBC here, he would come and entertain the kids. He'd pop his towel at me.<sup>21</sup>

It appears as though these women were safe and happy in the homes of their employers and were treated very well.

However, while many of the narrators felt that they were 'like a part of the family,' there were still class barriers evident between them and their 'ladies.'<sup>22</sup>

One narrator observed how one of her employers made her feel less than an equal:

She just expected more things, unnecessary things of me, like washing the kitchen up to eye level every day, all the walls in the kitchen, the whole kitchen, the floor, and the bathrooms, every room in the house, cleaning the windows every day in the whole house and even washing the fireplace out where they burned wood almost every day. I mean, that was a little excessive, I thought... I

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<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth, interview by author, Richmond, BC, 18 August 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Suzie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 30 June 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Mary, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 6 October 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Narrators now, and Mennonite domestics at the time of their employment, referred to their female employers as their 'ladies' or 'my lady.' This will be explored in more detail further on.



was smart enough that I knew all this was not necessary. This was being, kind of, I dunno, putting me in my place.<sup>23</sup>

While Maria clearly felt taken advantage of in this situation, she did not feel as though these circumstances were enough to warrant her departure from this employer, as her responsibility to her family outweighed her personal feelings. Similarly, other interviewees did not mention having any sort of situation that proved to be too difficult to take. In most cases, the young women usually worked through it quietly. For instance, Maria “had to deal with everything by [herself], without being able to tell [her] fears to even [her] mother.” She explained, “It just wasn’t done. Children didn’t approach it so you didn’t think you could ask or tell them. You had to deal with it on your own.”<sup>24</sup> The accounts that do mention difficult work environments follow aspects of the traditional Mennonite metanarrative of persecution, movement, struggle, and survival. Like the religious persecution suffered by Mennonite pioneers in the early years of the Anabaptist offshoot, narrators reflected that hard work was typically endured in silence, a sign of steadfast self-sacrifice. Narrators, therefore, were able to place their difficult work experiences within the collective historical memory of their group.

While a few of my narrators were in situations where they felt like part of their family, these young women still understood that “at our work places we have to keep a certain distance between our employer and ourselves, and not to overstep our boundary.”<sup>25</sup> For instance, narrators addressed and spoke about their employers in a respectful manner. Agatha recalls how Mennonite domestics

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<sup>23</sup> Maria, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 18 June 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Maria, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 19 April 2010.

<sup>25</sup> X, “Something About the Girls’ Home in Vancouver,” *Der Bote*, 21 February 1940, 2.

"always said 'my lady said this, and my lady said that' when they talked about them [their employer]."<sup>26</sup> Even now, years later, many narrators continue to refer to past employers as their 'lady' in the interviews, and they rarely use their employers' first names in conversation. The word 'lady' clearly denotes an acknowledgement of the power relationship between the employer and employee. It implies the employer's refinement, gentility, and high social standing. Conversely, the terms 'maid' or 'domestic servant' signify a lower status and servitude. This type of language clearly identifies the unequal relationship between the employers and their employees. My narrators' continuing use of this term implies that they had internalized their subordinate position in the workplace, and maintained this understanding after they left employment.

Mennonite perceptions of domestic labour further influenced narrators' understanding of domestic service. However, while some of the young women had encouraging experiences in the workplace, they still understood that an unequal power relationship existed between them and their employers, even if they took part in some aspects of family life.<sup>27</sup> For instance, there were certain social courtesies that needed to be upheld so that a domestic would know her place. There existed a clear manifestation of social hierarchy within the physical structure of an employer's home. Katie remembers, "Once I came home from somewhere, not thinking about it, I go to the front door. You didn't enter the door from the front. [The male employer] wouldn't open the door, he was there. I go to

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<sup>26</sup> Agatha, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 23 June 2009.

<sup>27</sup> This was the case for most domestic servants in Canada. Barber, 26.

the backdoor."<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the daily activities of domestics and employers, such as meals, were separated spatially as well. Elizabeth, Katarina, and Sarah all noted that while they served the family dinner in the dining room, they ate in the kitchen—Katarina remarking that she "didn't eat with them, no. I had to eat the leftovers."<sup>29</sup> As Katzman notes in his work, "Servants, after all, were not family; a domestic was not a daughter."<sup>30</sup> The daughter of the employer's family was not the individual waxing the floors or washing the windows.

Interviewees' lack of English skills and unfamiliarity with household appliances meant that they required assistance from employers. Here, narrators provided positive comments about the helpful nature of their employers, especially in terms of learning the English language and adjusting to modern housecleaning machinery. Maria recalls how her employer would help her with English, allowing her to read the newspaper comics each day to strengthen her skills. She felt that her employers encouraged her to learn:

They gave me a radio, to put in my room, which I had, well, that was something I couldn't even think of. We hardly had paper and pencil when we were in Europe the last few years. So having my own radio! I started listening in the morning; they had these fifteen-minute soap operas, these fifteen-minute stories... Within a few months, I listened to them regularly and I guess that helped me to develop.<sup>31</sup>

Another narrator remembered having to run down to the basement to find cans of food when her employer was cooking dinner. Ruth did not have "a word of

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<sup>28</sup> Katie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 29 May 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth, interview by author, Richmond, BC, 18 August 2009; Sarah, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 8 July 2009; and Katarina, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 29 June 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Katzman, 161.

<sup>31</sup> Maria, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 18 June 2009.

English... and finally [the employer] decided if I was to get the right thing, she would take out a magazine—they had lots of magazines with pictures—and she would point. She was very, very helpful.”<sup>32</sup> Katarina too recalled how her employer helped her to learn English: “If there was something that I didn't know, she told me, ‘This is what this is called,’ what you name this thing and so on and so on... She helped me if I didn't understand things, what they meant.”<sup>33</sup>

Coming from non-established farms in the Fraser Valley or isolated rural areas in Europe, most of the Mennonite domestics had not experienced many of the modern appliances that they were meant to use in their employers' homes. “You didn't know the products you were working with and the customs, the way it was,”<sup>34</sup> Anna observed. Here too, stories about how the employers would teach interviewees to operate various objects were plentiful. Irene commented on the first time she went to work in a home:

We had a very small place at home. I had never seen a vacuum cleaner or a floor polisher or anything like that. And here I was supposed to be cleaning people's houses and I didn't even know how to use them.... So the lady had to show me how to work these things first; it was the first time I had used them. The floor polisher wanted to take off on me!<sup>35</sup>

Another interviewee, Frieda, had a similar experience. “Being the youngest, or the second youngest in my family, I never had to do any work,” she began:

I had never seen a washing machine. She [her employer] was surprised I didn't know how to use a washing machine, so she showed me and then left to go and do her own work. I washed

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<sup>32</sup> Ruth, interview by author, Vancouver, BC, 30 November 2009.

<sup>33</sup> Katarina, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 29 June 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Anna, interview by author, Langley, BC, 19 June 2009.

<sup>35</sup> Irene, interview by author, Yarrow, BC, 26 August 2009.

everything once, and then I did it all over again, because that's what we do at home.<sup>36</sup>

With the help of their employers, my narrators felt that they were able to adjust to working with the machinery and in time were able to communicate effectively in the language of their new home.

It is quite possible that my narrators' experiences with helpful employers stemmed, at least in part, from the employers' perception of the Mennonite workers. Known for their conservative Christian lifestyle and reliable work ethic, Mennonite domestics were highly sought after in Vancouver.<sup>37</sup> Ruth Derksen-Siemens, who has done work on the MB conference girls' home in Vancouver, observes that Mennonite domestics were in demand because they were "white, submissive, quiet, and hardworking, and their lifestyles appeared as clean as their floors."<sup>38</sup> One of her interview subjects similarly commented on the fact that "they [the employers] didn't emphasize [that they wanted] Christian girls, but I do think that they liked the ways of life of the Christian girls."<sup>39</sup> Their religious nature and modest lifestyle assured employers that they would be well-behaved in their homes. Their behaviour would reflect middle-class standards of working-class respectability.

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<sup>36</sup> Frieda, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 12 August 2009.

<sup>37</sup> Sedef Arat-Koc notes that while most domestics from Central and Eastern Europe were not sought after for work in the cities, the Russian Mennonite girls were "one group of domestics who were preferred for urban employment." Arat-Koc, 290. David Reimer also notes that "Mennonites girls are frequently preferred by employers." Reimer, *Mennonites in B.C.*, 83.

<sup>38</sup> Derksen-Siemens, 121.

<sup>39</sup> Betty Esau, interview by Ruth Derksen Siemens, Abbotsford, BC, 17 August 1993.

Indeed, these young women had a reputation for being hard-working and trustworthy, much of which went hand-in-hand with their religiosity.<sup>40</sup> The women of the previous Mennonite immigration in the 1920s had established a good name for Mennonite domestic servants, and this second wave between 1947 and 1949 maintained it well. Agatha commented, "The ladies... they knew they could trust the Mennonite girls. It was never ever that they stole or something. They wouldn't dare."<sup>41</sup> Ruth noted, "I don't remember hearing of any story where one of us got in trouble for stealing or anything."<sup>42</sup> When asked if Mennonite domestics lived up to their reputation, Frieda replied, "Yes, I am sure they did... they worked very hard, they were very conscientious."<sup>43</sup> Since employers would "phone in and ask [for a Mennonite girl] because they found that they were the most reliable help that they could get,"<sup>44</sup> they took care to treat these young women well. If the employers wanted the best workers, they had to be willing to be the best employers, or else lose the Mennonite worker to another employer.

In addition, cases of Mennonite domestics being mistreated were less likely than with non-Mennonite domestics because narrators had a major advantage over many other domestic workers in the matron of the *Maedchenheim*, Miss Lehn. Before sending a Mennonite domestic to a household, Miss Lehn would interview a prospective employer. Furthermore,

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<sup>40</sup> Mennonite domestics in the Prairies, many of whom eventually came to Vancouver, had the same reputation, as dependable and honest. Marlene Epp, "The Mennonite Girls' Homes of Winnipeg: A Home Away From Home," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 6 (1988): 107.

<sup>41</sup> Agatha, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 23 June 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Ruth, interview by author, Vancouver, BC, 30 November 2009.

<sup>43</sup> Frieda, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 12 August 2009.

<sup>44</sup> Erna Froese Voth, interview by Ruth Derksen Siemens, 4 December 1995.

Mennonite domestics were encouraged to speak to Miss Lehn if they were being mistreated in any way, in which case Miss Lehn would step in and remove the young woman from her position in that particular household. The *Maedchenheim* attempted to prevent mistreatment and protect the young women.

In addition, an employer who taught her Mennonite domestic how to speak English or use various household appliances was really making a business investment. If she believed that these young women were the best workers, and preferred them to workers from the Caribbean, Germany, or Italy, it would be in her best interest to train them quickly in Canadian ways and then retain them for the high quality of their work. Therefore, it is quite possible that the employers of Mennonite domestics were more kind toward their employees than those of other domestics in Vancouver.

The employers' goal of training Mennonite domestics in Canadian ways may also have stemmed from a maternalistic attitude. Stories in Canada about war-ravaged Europe and vulnerable refugees would have contributed to an employer's desire to 'save' or 'take care of' their Mennonite domestic. Suzie remembered how one of the families she worked for looked upon her "as if I was their child." She had a strict curfew with this family: "They wanted to know when I would come home; and if I was going to be late, they wanted me to phone so they wouldn't worry. They took very good care of me."<sup>45</sup> Non-Mennonite domestic servants often viewed this sort of maternalistic treatment as restrictive, resenting

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<sup>45</sup> Suzie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 30 June 2009.

being treated by the employer as “childlike and dependant.”<sup>46</sup> However, Suzie did not feel this way at all. She understood her employer's rules about her curfew as an expression of "genuine concern... I just took it that they wanted to take care of me and that they cared for me."<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth also recalled similar maternalistic behaviour of her employer with fondness:

One time when I was walking home to my place, I noticed there was a car coming home just very slowly and they were trying to get my attention. I just kept on walking. So when I got to my place I told my lady about that, so then they got a night watchman for us girls when we got off the bus to watch us girls... I thought well that was really nice. They were really concerned that we would find our way home.<sup>48</sup>

Narrators had internalised Mennonite views of women as childlike and requiring direction and protection, and therefore they did not react negatively to this type of intrusion by employers. Rather, employers were understood to be temporarily fulfilling the role of protector while the Mennonite domestic was at work.

Similarly, gestures of familial kindness were taken at face value by the Mennonite domestics of this study, and were not regarded as acts of condescension.<sup>49</sup> When asked about having to wear uniforms, Maria mentioned:

I wore my own clothes. She [her employer] actually gave me a lot of things from her sisters, they were old-fashioned things but I was very happy with these clothes. They were very nice. Yes, she gave me some clothes, because I didn't have a lot of things to wear.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Romero, 49.

<sup>47</sup> Suzie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 30 June 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth, interview by author, Richmond, BC, 18 August 2009.

<sup>49</sup> Romero points out that “condescension and the lack of respect given to domestics by employers” was often the reason that women chose lower paying unskilled occupations instead of the higher paying domestic servant positions. Romero, 62.

<sup>50</sup> Maria, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 18 June 2009.



These clothes may have been hand-me-downs, but Maria greatly appreciated their quality and the kindness of the gesture. Immigrants often came to Canada with few possessions, and like other Mennonite domestics, Maria had little extra money for buying new clothing, as most of her earnings went home to her family. Coming from a wealthy woman, these clothes were probably of a higher quality than she would have been used to. Gestures such as these, unnecessary in the employer-employee relationship, solidified the girl's warm feelings towards her employer.<sup>51</sup>

Perhaps because they were separated from their own mothers, who were out in the Fraser Valley, narrators did not feel that the maternalistic relationship was a limiting one or that it invaded their privacy. While day-work allowed a fortunate few to travel home during the weekends, for Mennonite domestics who did live-in work, visits back to the family farm occurred only once or twice a year, if at all. In general, the circumstances of the lives of Mennonite domestic workers often isolated them from their families in the Fraser Valley. Unlike other domestic workers, who felt that this type of unsolicited mothering was suffocating or intrusive, these young women took these actions of their employers as quasi-mothering, a substitute for relationships that they could not have with their own mothers while they worked.

In terms of the actual labour conducted by the women, few of them described their domestic situation as exceedingly laborious. While narratives of

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<sup>51</sup> These findings are limited to the Mennonite domestics who were interviewed for this study. Women who chose a different path after their time in the city may have felt differently about their relationship with their employers.

some other domestic workers recalled backbreaking labour, which resulted in “coarse, work-reddened hands and arms,”<sup>52</sup> Mennonite domestics generally did not feel as though their work was overly difficult. For instance, Katarina did not recall the work as being too hard: “Work was like, cleaning the house and doing stuff like that... It wasn't that hard, I don't think.”<sup>53</sup>

Even though some of the interviewees made note of some of the difficulties, they seemed to brush them away with their next words. Suzie had one employer who

tried to get a lot more out of you that you would normally do. They weren't really bad either. I was more a nursemaid more than anything else, because there was a two-year-old little girl that I took care of most of the time. But I washed all of her clothes every morning. I went for a walk with her in the afternoon, so I didn't work too hard. But I was still doing the cleaning too, dishwashing and that too. I washed her clothes by hand. It wasn't really bad.<sup>54</sup>

It is interesting that even though Suzie was required to work harder in this home than in others, she still felt that the work was not ‘bad’ or ‘too hard.’ She seemed unaware of any contradiction in her revelations. Similarly, while Anna maintained that she “didn't mind the work at all... It wasn't a hard thing to do,” she went on to say: “I mean, you worked hard. You clean the whole house from one end to the other. You would change the bedding, and vacuumed and dust everything off in the bedroom and in the house.”<sup>55</sup> There seems to be some tension in these narratives: descriptions of difficult work situations combined with disclaimers

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<sup>52</sup> Romero, 60.

<sup>53</sup> Katarina, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 29 June 2009.

<sup>54</sup> Suzie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 30 June 2009.

<sup>55</sup> Anna, interview by author, Langley, BC, 19 June 2009.

about the workload. Yet, overall, interviewees recall their work experiences and past employers with a positive attitude; thus participants managed to situate their work within the parameters of the group's metanarrative of patient struggle and survival.

These memories clash with much of the literature on domestic workers' relationships with their employers. Eric Sager claims that most Canadian historians have focused on the negative aspects of domestic services, as domestics often had to deal with long hours, lack of freedom, loneliness, mistreatment, and sometimes abuse.<sup>56</sup> For instance, Tanya Schecter argues that because a high percentage of domestic workers tended to be immigrants and ethnic minorities, they were often treated quite poorly, as their economic need, common skill set, and, in some cases, limited knowledge of the English language ensured their endurance of inferior workplace situations.<sup>57</sup>

A question arises then when comparing the existing domestic labour literature to the experiences recalled by my narrators: why are their memories quite positive and often told with laughter? These young Mennonite domestics were immigrants; they did not speak English when they first arrived in Canada; they had limited education and common workplace skill sets. They clearly fit into Schecter's definition of the typical domestic, yet their memories do not seem to mirror the experiences described in Schecter's study or so many others like it.

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<sup>56</sup> Eric Sager, "The Transformation of the Canadian Domestic Servant, 1871-1930," *Social Science History* 31, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 510.

<sup>57</sup> Schecter, 2.

Often, immigrant women have had to adopt various coping strategies to help them deal with difficult life situations.<sup>58</sup> In the case of these Mennonite domestics, the difficult work and separation from their community and family was hard to deal with, but they were able to rationalize this work to make their situations less disagreeable. While most narrators did not indicate that the tasks they carried out were tedious and straining, as Marilyn Barber notes, “almost all domestics found the work physically tiring and disliked the long hours.”<sup>59</sup> There are three possible explanations for this gap: firstly, the position of women in Mennonite religion; secondly, the metanarrative of persecution, movement, self-sacrifice, and survival; and lastly, narrators’ pride in their reputation—all of which are quite compelling.

Marlene Epp notes that many Mennonite domestics in Canada partially endured their situations without complaints because of their religious resignation.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Sarah Buhler believes that Mennonite women often justified their actions by saying that God was speaking through them, and telling them what to do and how to act.<sup>61</sup> My narrators also understood their experiences in the city in terms of their religious convictions. After recollecting the worst parts of her job, Elizabeth remarked that she “had made up my mind, that even though you had hard people to work for, just remember that you are doing it

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<sup>58</sup> Osterud and Jones, 3.

<sup>59</sup> Barber, 18.

<sup>60</sup> Epp, “The Mennonite Girls’ Homes of Winnipeg,” 110.

<sup>61</sup> Sarah Buhler, “I Chose Some Cups and Saucers: Gender, Tradition, and Subversive Elements in My Grandmother’s Life Stories,” *Ethnologies* 21, no. 1 (1999): 56.

for the Lord. If it was hard, I kept reminding myself, I am doing it for the Lord."<sup>62</sup> Sarah similarly remarked that she felt "it very important, at least it has been for me, to know just what is the Lord's will in your life and to be obedient."<sup>63</sup> Maria too noted that, for her, "doing a good job at work, and always being honest and working hard and not shirking any duties... was an honour to your family and God."<sup>64</sup> Many of the narrators indicated that the work they carried out was in obedience to God's will.

Mennonite women who worked in the city as domestics had experiences that could have caused numerous instances of frustration, but they were able to fall back on their religious convictions to help ease potential sources of tension. Twentieth-century sociologist Emile Durkheim argued that when people place faith in their religious beliefs, they are more able to deal with difficulties in their lives, as their God will sustain them through their trials.<sup>65</sup> My narrators reminded themselves that their work was part of the larger scheme of their creator, their answer to God's call. Religion allowed them to understand their situations and to cope with threatening or difficult situations. Agatha recalled how important her faith was during her time in the city: "Sometimes we did go through hardships, but if you just kept on believing, the Lord helped you through difficulties. You rely on your faith daily, and the Lord is our Sheppard."<sup>66</sup> Similarly, Maria felt that she

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<sup>62</sup> Elizabeth, interview by author, Richmond, BC, 18 August 2009.

<sup>63</sup> Sarah, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 8 July 2009.

<sup>64</sup> Maria, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 18 June 2009.

<sup>65</sup> W.S.F. Pickering, *Durkheim's Sociology of Religion: Themes and Theories* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 304. For more information on the view that religion helps people cope with difficulties in life, see Ivan Strenski, *The New Durkheim* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

<sup>66</sup> Agatha, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 8 April 2010.

was “doing the work to honour God.” She understood her work in the city within the religious belief system of her community:

There is a verse in the Bible: everything you do, do unto the Lord. So everything you do, you do for Him, so you have to do it honestly, you can't, you know, do a bad job just because somebody is not watching, and I think most of us felt that way.<sup>67</sup>

Religious beliefs often show people how they should act in various situations, and how these acts are gendered.<sup>68</sup> These Mennonite women believed that God had called them to work in the city, and their proper response was to work hard and be selfless and self-sacrificing. Their attitudes fit well within the metanarrative of Mennonite history, which stresses the importance of selflessness and self-sacrifice, both for the Lord and for one's family. Narrators were able to recollect their memories of domestic work within a narrative form that was both familiar and reassuring to them.

Almost all of the narrators also made it clear that their work in the city was not for their benefit. Rather, the women all stressed the importance of family obligations and contributing to their families' finances. Mennonites believed that “religious life can only be practiced within a community where self-will is submerged,”<sup>69</sup> and therefore service to the community and family came before service to oneself. “We all had to go and do our best to help our parents. I felt

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<sup>67</sup> Maria, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 19 April 2010.

<sup>68</sup> Robert A. Segal, “Clifford Geertz and Peter Berger on Religion: Their Differing and Changing Views,” *Anthropology and Humanism Quarterly* 15, no.1 (June 2008): 4.

<sup>69</sup> Joseph Smucker, “Religious Community and Individualism: Conceptual Adaptations of One Group of Mennonites,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 25, no. 3 (September 1986): 274.

that it was my duty to help my parents, and what I earned, I sent home,"<sup>70</sup> commented Suzie. Katy recalled her first job "wasn't my best experience," but she stayed on and worked hard because "there I had worked steady and I was supporting my family."<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Agatha stated that "all [her money] went to [her] dad. Most girls did that... You would help the parents get started in the new country."<sup>72</sup> Here again, narrators were able to alleviate some of the strain of their situations by placing their work within a context of family duty.

According to Dana Jack's theory regarding moral language, the narrators felt that in order to live up to the ideal of a 'good daughter,' they had to go to work in the city.<sup>73</sup> The narrators all mentioned that a 'good daughter' would 'do her best' to help to support her family—that was her 'duty.' For Mennonite communities, "family honour is intricately linked to a woman's behaviours."<sup>74</sup> As Maria advised me:

God says pride is not something we should have. Even if we did, I do not think we would have expressed it as pride. That was part of the Bible teaching, that you shouldn't be proud. You should be humble. We understood that as perfectly acceptable and normal.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Suzie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 30 June 2009.

<sup>71</sup> Katy, interview by author, Vancouver, BC, 30 November 2009.

<sup>72</sup> Agatha, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 8 April 2010.

<sup>73</sup> Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack, "Learning to Listen," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson (London: Routledge, 1998), 166.

<sup>74</sup> Judith C. Kulig, Ruth Babcock, Margaret Wall, and Shirley Hill, "Being a Woman: Perspectives of Low-German-Speaking Mennonite Women," *Health Care For Women International* 30, no. 4 (2009): 330.

<sup>75</sup> Maria, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 19 April 2010.

By participating in domestic work without complaints, interviewees were able to construct their stories “in relation to their social sphere and their position in it”<sup>76</sup> and fulfil their duties prescribed to them in this position.

Still, my narrators did indicate, either directly or indirectly, that there were difficulties in domestic work. For instance, Katie noted, “When [the Mennonite domestics] had somebody they really couldn't stand to work for, then they just left. There were other places.”<sup>77</sup> Katy recalled a particularly bad experience that resulted in her leaving the employer:

Sometimes, you went there and you didn't go back, because they expected too much. Like, I had one lady where I washed the ceilings and walls all day and I was in pain. And she came home and she said, “Is that all you did?” Well they smoked and I washed that room just about three times and I couldn't get that yellow, gucky stuff off. She didn't seem to be too happy, but she said, “Well, I will see you tomorrow.” I said in my head, “No tomorrow!” I didn't say anything, and I just went home. I said to Miss Lehn, “I am not going back.”<sup>78</sup>

Even though she brushed aside the difficulties of domestic work later in the interview, Katie's experiences had not all been positive.

Furthermore, the service of the *Maedchenheim* in protecting Mennonite domestic servants from abuse or mistreatment in the homes of their employers suggests that such instances did occur. The question is, therefore, why did my narrators admit that the work could be strenuous, yet not look back at their time in the city as difficult or unpleasant?

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<sup>76</sup> Tammar B. Zilber, Rivka Tuval- Mashiach, Amia Lieblich, “The Embedded Narrative: Navigating Through Multiple Contexts,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 14, no. 6 (September 2008): 1048.

<sup>77</sup> Katie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 29 May 2009.

<sup>78</sup> Katy, interview by author, Vancouver, BC, 30 November 2009.



Whether Mennonite domestics went to work very shortly after their arrival in Canada or a few years later, in both cases their memories of the war and the trek were strong. “I know [the war] was when I was 11 and this [city job] was when I was 17,” Anna said quietly, “but it was still in your mind. Not the war exactly, but the scary part. I had nightmares a long time after that. I always heard the planes.”<sup>79</sup> Even to this day, many of the women interviewed have a hard time discussing the trials that their families went through. Working as a domestic did not come close to replicating the emotional upheaval and physical privations during and after the war. “There was just a lot of thankfulness,” recalled Agatha, “especially thankfulness to be in Canada, and a home to go to where we felt safe.”<sup>80</sup> Given the weight of memories of the war and the danger encountered during the trek, the long hours and labour in Vancouver that were “just hard”<sup>81</sup> seemed relatively insignificant for women looking back on their time in the city. “We felt so safe in Canada compared to how we had lived for so many years,” recalled Maria. “We had been from Russia, through the war, the trek, and all the refugee camps... It felt very safe compared to what we had been through.”<sup>82</sup> Mennonite domestics in Winnipeg similarly felt that domestic work was a pleasant alternative to life in Russia.<sup>83</sup> In both situations, the young women were able to play down any difficulties or stresses that they encountered in domestic

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<sup>79</sup> Anna, interview by author, Langley, BC, 19 June 2009.

<sup>80</sup> Agatha, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 23 June 2009.

<sup>81</sup> Maria, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 18 June 2009.

<sup>82</sup> Maria, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 18 June 2009.

<sup>83</sup> Frieda Esau Klipperstein, “Doing What We Could: Mennonite Domestics in Winnipeg, 1920s to 1950s,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 7 (1989): 150.

service, reminding themselves that it was not as bad as the war or trek had been.<sup>84</sup>

Furthermore, Mennonites tend to value individuals who work hard and are self-sacrificing. “We had been taught in our faith that other people come first,”<sup>85</sup> explained Maria. Indeed, the divergence in the stories of my narrators and that of the broader research on domestic work can also be understood in terms of narrators’ very restrained sense of pride in the reputation of domestic workers. It was widely known in Vancouver and the Fraser Valley that Mennonite domestic workers had a reputation as being reliable and “very conscientious.”<sup>86</sup> Narrators underplay their contributions to the family, claiming that their work was for God, that they had no choice, or that it had to be done for the families’ survival. Yet, at the same time, narrators subtly express their pride in their ability to be selfless and accomplish the difficult work of their positions: narrators continuously reinforce the fact that Mennonite domestics were ‘the best’; they express pride in the fact Mennonite domestics were so sought after; and even more so in their belief that they lived up to employers’ expectations. Maria, for instance, reflected upon this reputation:

I can’t remember [my employer] ever having to teach me something twice. I can’t remember that she had to reprimand me for something or tell me this wasn’t good enough, or that I should have done something different... We did our very best and I think they noticed that. Even if they weren’t home, they came home and

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<sup>84</sup> One individual recalls how Mennonite immigrants in Leamington, Ontario, exhibited a “strong work ethic, fortitude, care, and appreciation of a second chance” after their survival through the war and their arrival in Canada. Tonya Davidson and Katherine Davidson, “Leamington Ontario,” *Canadian Dimensions* 43, no. 5 (September/October 2009): 32.

<sup>85</sup> Maria, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 19 April 2010.

<sup>86</sup> Frieda, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 12 August 2009.

everything was done properly. I tried very hard to always work hard; even if no one was watching me I tried to do it like they were watching.<sup>87</sup>

Furthermore, much of the burden of their families' survival had shifted from the traditional male breadwinners onto their shoulders, as their work provided them with a steady flow of cash. My narrators were quietly proud of their contributions. While they never explicitly stated that 'they saved their family,' they clearly understood and accepted the value of their work. They went to the city as loyal and obedient Mennonite women, in accordance with their understanding of appropriate Mennonite gender relations. Through their narratives, interviewees were able not only to secure the existing reputation of Mennonite domestics, but also to situate themselves as hard working, self-sacrificing Mennonite daughters. Indeed, their sense of pride has likely contributed to their positive recollections of domestic service. More measured comments would have been necessary to accomplish an air of humility, and, therefore, tasks considered overly difficult by the women were set aside; a hard-working Mennonite domestic should have had no trouble with housework, something that she had been doing since an early age in her own home and without the modern technological conveniences of their employers.

There is a direct contradiction between the established literature and narrators' recollections of the relationship between worker and employer, and the description of domestic work. The women interviewed reflected on their time in the city as an overwhelmingly positive experience, wherein their employers

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<sup>87</sup> Maria, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 19 April 2010.

treated them well and the work was easily accomplished. While my narrators' position as 'in demand' workers may have resulted in employers approaching their relationships and interactions with Mennonite domestics in a more positive manner, thereby differentiating Mennonite experiences from those of other domestics, Mennonite women, already subordinated within their homes, were able to adjust to life in the domestic field more easily than other domestic workers. Furthermore, their wartime experiences and ethnoreligious perspectives would have lessened their personal expectations while providing them with coping mechanisms to deal with their troubles. Lastly, pride in their hard work and selflessness would have likewise affected their perspective on their time in the city.

#### 4. “AS IF WE WERE IN A DIFFERENT WORLD”: UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF THE *MAEDCHENHEIM*

*I heard a lot of very fun stories of the goofy things that they did [at the Maedchenheim]. One of the girls, she passed away last year, she was apparently absolutely crazy! For them, having gone through all they went through, they had some good times there.<sup>1</sup>*

Women often have distinctly different perspectives than men, which are shaped by the realities of their own gendered experiences. These views frequently contrast with cultural assumptions that reflect the dominant position of men in society.<sup>2</sup> The young Mennonite women who entered domestic service had a different sense of the purpose of the *Maedchenheim* than that of the male-led church community. The church community felt that the home was important for ensuring the spiritual survival, physical well-being, and sexual purity of the city-bound young women; yet the young women who utilized the home felt that the main role of the *Maedchenheim* in their day-to-day lives was to provide a haven from physical labour and a place to socialize and enjoy themselves. This chapter will explore this tension between perspectives.

Mennonites during this time felt that the city was a place of evil—the hiding place of the devil. In the Mennonite worldview, the city was:

... a kind of sinful place to be... There wasn't necessarily any history of an experience factor that motivated this kind of thinking, but there was a great fear that parents had... So, it wasn't a fear based on terrible, first-hand

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<sup>1</sup> Erika, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 27 April 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Anderson and Jack, 157.

experiences. The city has to be evil, and you had to insulate yourself from that, and probably isolate yourself.<sup>3</sup>

Katie recalled that her father “was reluctant to let me go to that wicked city.”<sup>4</sup> Part of their religious identity stemmed from their belief in living simple, upright lives through nonconformity to the world and rural isolation.<sup>5</sup> If one moved from that rural existence, there was a risk that all of the temptations in the city would take one’s focus away from God and turn it onto oneself. The Fraser Valley Mennonites oriented their actions through this worldview, and yet they sent their daughters into the city.

The individuals who comprised the male-only General Conference believed that, without the stable force and spiritual guidance that the *Maedchenheim* offered, Mennonite domestics in the city would surely fall to the wayside because of their gender, age, and incomplete exposure to religious training during the wartime years. Church leaders feared that the lack of institutionalized religious education during this chaotic period had weakened Mennonite domestics’ spiritual resolution. During the war, there were few contexts in which an institutional Mennonite church could exist, and during the trek, with people always on the move, it was impossible. Furthermore, the Russians had taken away so many adult Mennonite men during the war, who were rarely seen again, that the religious instruction at that time came primarily

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<sup>3</sup> Peter, interview by author, Burnaby, BC, 17 June 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Katie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 9 April 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Reimer, *One Quilt, Many Pieces*, 18.

from the mothers in families.<sup>6</sup> Maria recalls how the refugee camps were filled with “women, and a couple [of] elderly men here and there.”<sup>7</sup> The tight-knit religious community in the Fraser Valley was well aware of what had happened to their Russian peers, and Mennonites already living in Canada thought that “the spiritual life of the immigrant has suffered, of course, under the influence of the anti-religious propaganda in Russia and Germany.”<sup>8</sup>

To compensate, the church at this time wanted to expose the city-bound Mennonite domestics to the Mennonite faith as much as possible in Vancouver. Church leaders believed that here was “a challenge to our churches. We will have to work patiently to win [female immigrants] for Christ and for the church.”<sup>9</sup> The *Maedchenheim* extended the church’s teachings into the city. “The *Maedchenheim* was a safeguard, in quotation marks, and that is exactly what it was supposed to be,”<sup>10</sup> Katie suggested in reflection. Rebecca too noted that the *Maedchenheim* was important in terms of the young women’s’ spiritual well-being:

A lot of girls had never been away from home. [With the *Maedchenheim*] the girls would feel more secure. Some would be inclined to throw their lives away, to go along with the world, and forget the ways of the Lord. That’s why [the church] decided on this home, I am sure that was it... [It was there] to encourage us not to

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<sup>6</sup> It was known in the Mennonite communities that “Soviet secret police would come ‘just for questioning,’ they said, but the apprehended were always sentenced. A sentence of five years could mean survival. Everyone knew that those who were sentenced to ten years did not come back, and were never heard from again,” Connie Braun, *The Steppes are the Color of Sepia* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2008), 23.

<sup>7</sup> Maria, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 18 June 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Thiessen, “Present Mennonite Immigration to Canada,” 34.

<sup>9</sup> Thiessen, “Present Mennonite Immigration to Canada,” 35.

<sup>10</sup> Katie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 9 April 2010.

throw our faith away, and to love the Lord and shine His light where we are.<sup>11</sup>

Encouraging young Mennonite women to visit the *Maedchenheim* as much as possible would help church leaders to fulfill their goal of sustaining Mennonite domestics' religiosity.

The long-time matron, Miss Lehn, ran this church-organized and -funded home.<sup>12</sup> Miss Lehn was considered the most appropriate replacement for church leaders or fathers, as she had never married and was childless, which removed her in a way from her female counterparts and effectively placed her role in a grey area between feminine passivity and masculine authority. Her previous experience as a domestic worker herself allowed her effectively to protect the young Mennonite women physically, spiritually, and emotionally from the dangers of the city and workplace. Her responsibilities included answering phone calls and assigning Mennonite domestics to positions, doing all the cooking and cleaning in the home as well as the grocery shopping, and making sure that these young women were well taken care of. Mennonite live-in domestics, like many other domestic workers, had Thursday and Sunday afternoons off—and

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<sup>11</sup> Rebecca, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 26 April 2010.

<sup>12</sup> The idea of a meeting place for Mennonite domestics was first established in Vancouver during the early 1930s. The girls would meet in the home of Mr. and Mrs. P. Thiessen, who voluntarily opened their lives to the young girls. After a year, a home was rented for \$20.00 a month and operated by a Mrs. Heinrich Rabsch. This did not last long, because in 1935 the General Conference saw the need for a girls' home similar to the ones that existed in the prairie provinces. The conference organized another home that was established in the manse of the First Vancouver Mennonite Church, in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Jacob and Eliese Janzen, which was later taken over by their daughter, Erna and her husband, Mr. Jacob Wiens. It was not until 1938 that Katharina "Tina" Lehn became associated with the home. She began running the home in August of 1946 and continued as matron until 1957.



could spend them at the girls' home.<sup>13</sup> Many of the young women who engaged in day-work lived at the girls' home, with Miss Lehn acting as their 'house mother.'<sup>14</sup>

The matron's scrutiny began before a girl was even placed in a home. Miss Lehn would interview the prospective employer, usually by telephone, to make sure that they would not cause harm to 'her girls.' "That was another job Miss Lehn had," Ruth remembered, "to screen calls and quiz them as to what their expectations were. I often overheard when one of the ladies called. She would give them a pretty good test as to what their expectations were."<sup>15</sup>

When they began their work, whether it was live-in or day-work, Mennonite domestics were encouraged to let Miss Lehn know if their employers were mistreating them. Like the matrons of the Canadian Women's Hostels for British Domestic or the hostels for Finnish domestics, the matron of the girls' home intervened if she felt that a girl was threatened, but did so more directly than hostel authorities.<sup>16</sup> Katie noted that "Miss Lehn, if she would find that there was a situation in a home where the girl was not safe in some ways, or was mistreated... she would remove the girl from there and find her another place."<sup>17</sup> Since the young women would visit the *Maedchenheim* almost every Thursday

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<sup>13</sup> Cornelia Lehn, *Frontier Challenge: The Story of the Conference of Mennonites in B.C.* (Clearbrook, British Columbia: Conference of Mennonites in B.C., 1990), 51.

<sup>14</sup> My narrators include women who had engaged in both day-work and live-in domestic positions during their time as domestics. Also, there were some women who only conducted live-in work in Vancouver. The more common of the two work engagements for my narrators was live-in work.

<sup>15</sup> Ruth, interview by author, Vancouver, BC, 30 November 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Barber, 17.

<sup>17</sup> Katie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 29 May 2009.

afternoon, they would have had ample opportunity to let Miss Lehn know about any mistreatment by employers. All of the narrators indicated that Miss Lehn was very diligent in looking after all of the young women and making sure that they were alright in their places of work. Since the women in the area wanted Mennonite domestics working in their home, they had little choice but to treat them well.<sup>18</sup> In this way, Miss Lehn's managerial role at the *Maedchenheim* acted as a deterrent to potentially ill-behaved or abusive employers. In general, the chances of these young women having negative experiences were moderated by the employers' desire to recruit, and retain these Mennonite domestics with their highly sought-after skills and reputable character.

These young Mennonite women were not expected to ensure their own safety and security within the workplace. Rather, Miss Lehn acted as their protector, as young women were perceived to be unable to shield themselves from the harsher elements of the outside world. Reflecting on this aspect of Miss Lehn's role, which may have been perceived as invasive or suffocating by other domestics, narrators did not express frustration or anger, but rather gratitude for her supervision. "It was the same thing as living at home," recalled Agatha. "You felt safe in the *Maedchenheim*. It just felt like home."<sup>19</sup> Erika also reflected on the role of the home, claiming that

...the home was there to give them security. They didn't have family there and the home fulfilled that need... I think that was a carry-over, that you need to stay in the nest, and even though these

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<sup>18</sup> This is not to say that there were not many employers who genuinely cared for the well-being of the girls whom they employed. However, if any employers had any intention of being unjust towards a girl, they would have been deterred by the knowledge of Miss Lehn's supervisory role.

<sup>19</sup> Agatha, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 8 April 2010.

girls did work, they had the *Maedchenheim* and Miss Lehn to go home to. That was the security.<sup>20</sup>

Narrators' lives continued to be monitored and safeguarded in Vancouver by the matron, a clear extension of their parents' protective role at home.

The Mennonite community held strong gendered assumptions about these female immigrant workers at this time, believing that women were more susceptible to sin than males. According to my narrator Peter, Mennonites felt that "young men are better able to handle the problems than young women... It was always felt that the man had more wisdom than a woman did."<sup>21</sup> Suzie too commented on the Mennonite community's perception. "They all thought [the girls' home] was necessary," she told me, "that it would keep the girls together and away from a lot of temptations."<sup>22</sup> Due to their lack of wisdom and weak moral character, women would be considerably more tempted by the city's distractions. Therefore, the positive influence of the girls' home would help balance a young woman's weaker moral character. Furthermore, in the case of day-workers, Miss Lehn knew where each and every domestic was working, what time they began, and what time they were due to arrive back at the girls' home after their shifts. If a young woman did not return to the *Maedchenheim* at a reasonable hour, Miss Lehn would talk to her and ensure that she was not straying from her spiritual path.

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<sup>20</sup> Erika, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 27 April 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Peter, interview by author, Burnaby, BC, 17 June 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Suzie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 30 June 2009.

This perception of feminine moral weakness was further illustrated by the fact that when Mennonite young men started to filter into the city after the Second World War, no boys' home equivalent was established for them. At first, this was mostly due to the fact that there were so few men going out into the city to find work. Men's work was situated on the farm, and, up until the war, this work had been plentiful and much needed. However, after the Second World War and the introduction of technological innovations, farm work became increasingly specialized and less labour-intensive. Young men who could not find as much work on the farms began to move in increasing numbers into the city.<sup>23</sup> Yet there was no church-run facility for them to use. One narrator thoughtfully stated:

During the time of the *Maedchenheim*, it was believed that a man was able to take care of himself and take care of his family, and the young men were able to do that as well. So there wasn't the worry about their coming to Vancouver; they would know how to deal with the problems. Young women, nevertheless, would easily become victims of some unfortunate event.<sup>24</sup>

Another remarked that "I guess they expected men to know their way around better than a girl could."<sup>25</sup> The church did not feel that the boys needed the same amount of guidance and leadership that was required for the young women, who were viewed as child-like and in need of protection.

The age of the young women living in the city also played a part in the fear of church members for their physical and spiritual safety. The conference sent

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<sup>23</sup> Gerhard Lohrenz, *The Mennonites of Western Canada: Their Origin, and Background, and the Brief Story of Their Settling and Progress Here in Canada* (Steinbach, Manitoba: Derksen Printers, 1974), 43.

<sup>24</sup> Peter, interview by author, Burnaby, BC, 17 June 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Suzie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 30 June 2009.

warnings to parents not to send their daughters into the city at an early age.<sup>26</sup> In many respects, the institutionalized church infantilized these young women. They claimed that the young women were "naïve when it came to knowing what the world was like in the big city."<sup>27</sup> Mennonite directors recommended that parents "advise their daughters to take part as much as possible in the programs at the homes on the Sundays and Thursdays."<sup>28</sup> Since the domestics in the city were of such a young age, compounded with the fact that they were female, the church felt that they would not be able to make appropriate moral decisions and therefore needed guidance from the matron. By spending their time in the girls' home on their days off, church leaders felt, the young women would not be distracted by all the city had to offer.

The church believed that Mennonite domestics needed a place to go that offered a calming and appropriate environment in the city. One of the "foundational stones" of Mennonite faith was "nonconformity of the church to the world,"<sup>29</sup> and the *Maedchenheim* provided a peaceful and religiously suitable atmosphere for domestics during their time off. In a 1937 issue of the conference newspaper *Der Bote*, the minister of First Vancouver Mennonite Church wrote that the home

...is a place for girls who have moved to the city and this is their home. They don't need entertainment and loud 'parties,' which we are not providing; they are arranged at other places [where the girls are discouraged from going]. A room is available to them where

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<sup>26</sup> Thiessen, "Unsere Maedchenheime," 475.

<sup>27</sup> Peter, interview by author, Burnaby, BC, 17 June 2009.

<sup>28</sup> David Toews, "Something About the Girls' Home," *Der Bote*, 27 September 1933, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Harold S Bender and C. Henry Smith, *Mennonites and Their Heritage: A Handbook of Mennonite History and Beliefs* (Mennonite Central Committee, 1942), 43.

they can write letters, have discussions, read or just relax, as needed.<sup>30</sup>

The activities that were encouraged within the home fit the community's assumptions about respectable womanly comportment; the young women were to be quiet and unassuming, and were to eschew overly modern or worldly entertainment.

According to historian Frieda Esau Klipperstien, one of the worst results of city life would have been that a young woman left her community and her faith.<sup>31</sup> Without the girls' home as a refuge on their days off, women might have been tempted to spend their time at movie theatres or public dances. "Their father couldn't be where the girls were," reflected Katie.

The girls went to work, and they did their own thing when they were in their homes... The girls had to be stimulated again [by Miss Lehn], but mostly on the religious scale. That was always impressed very much, that that's what the girls' home duty and role was. Not in an oppressive way, but that was always underneath there.<sup>32</sup>

The *Maedchenheim* provided religious supervision of Mennonite domestics in place of their fathers' watchful gaze. It is also interesting that Katie does not see this as oppressive, again illustrating the internalization of the belief that women were weaker and needed guidance. Another imminent danger in the city was that young Mennonite women might meet outsiders who would corrupt their faith and lead them away from the Mennonite way of life. One narrator explains:

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<sup>30</sup> *Der Bote*, 1 September 1937, 1.

<sup>31</sup> Klipperstien, "Doing What We Could," 157.

<sup>32</sup> Katie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 9 April 2010.

In the movie 'The Witness,' one of the things that the Hutterites were afraid of is what they called 'the English people' because the English people represented, ah, certain vices. For example, they would smoke, they would dance, they would drink and they might take liberties of women that were not appropriate.<sup>33</sup>

Outsiders might also tempt young Mennonite women. The community felt that if their daughters stayed in the home with other Mennonite young women and were exposed to Mennonite values on a consistent basis, they would be less likely to fall away from their faith and interact with outsiders, who would be a negative influence on them.

The city itself provided an immense distraction, as most of the narrators had grown up in rural areas. The city had the potential to be a primary site of female pleasure, where Mennonite domestics would be tempted by items such as makeup and fashion. Yet in Mennonite circles, this pleasure was considered sinful and dangerous. Anna noted:

Sometimes, I know, our minister said these girls they go to Vancouver to work and come back with nice hairdos. They come back with hats and makeup. They thought it would be better for them to stay home and work here.<sup>34</sup>

The Christian apostle Paul had written that women should "focus on their religion and show otherworldliness in modest and sober dress,"<sup>35</sup> and the Mennonite church community followed this proscription, stressing that if a woman dressed fashionably or wore makeup, then her "heart was cold spiritually and conformed

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<sup>33</sup> Peter, interview by author, Burnaby, BC, 17 June 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Anna, interview by author, Langley, BC, 19 June 2009.

<sup>35</sup> Linda B. Arthur, "Deviance, Agency, and the Social Control of Women's Bodies in a Mennonite Community," *NWSA Journal* 10, no. 2 (1998): 81.

to the sinful world."<sup>36</sup> Without the guidance of the girls' home, the community feared, the weakened faith of the Mennonite domestic would lead her to care too much about her outward appearance, rather than her inward spiritual character.

If a young woman was becoming too worldly in her appearance, church leaders felt, the next sin that she might commit would be sexual promiscuity, with the danger of becoming pregnant out of wedlock. As in the broader Canadian community during the 1950s and 1960s, morally appropriate behavior for Mennonites dictated that sexuality be confined to the matrimonial bed, although the level of religious restriction was more intensive. As Marlene Epp points out, sexuality was surrounded by sinfulness, and an overactive or premarital sexuality was linked to the frivolity of worldly culture.<sup>37</sup>

However, this patrolling of sexuality of Mennonite youth had a gendered aspect. As in many other religious communities, young Mennonite women were assigned sole responsibility for sexual abstinence in Mennonite communities. As Ruth commented, "The shame and the guilt... in those days it was all on the girls."<sup>38</sup> Katie too recalled that "parents were not worried about the innocence of their boys. They worried about the innocence of their girls, that they wouldn't go out with the wrong guys or flirting or stuff like that."<sup>39</sup> Young Mennonite women needed to be watched and their sexuality guarded, lest they might be led astray. A young woman's sexual behavior could prohibit her access to the Mennonite community. In the case of Mennonite women, participating in sexual relations or

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<sup>36</sup> Dyck, 184.

<sup>37</sup> Epp, *Mennonite Women in Canada*, 72.

<sup>38</sup> Ruth, interview by author, Vancouver, BC, 30 November 2009.

<sup>39</sup> Katie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 9 April 2010.



becoming pregnant out of wedlock would render a woman “sexually deviant” and not respectable.<sup>40</sup> Whether the relationship was with a non-Mennonite or Mennonite man, the result for an unmarried woman accused of sexual promiscuity would be the same: shame, guilt, and social persecution.

By creating the girls’ home, complete with a responsible, older woman to run it, the church leadership hoped to maintain a close eye on young Mennonite women in the city and regulate their sexual behavior, helping to ensure their spiritual survival.<sup>41</sup> For instance, while Mennonite domestics were permitted to date and have boyfriends, these boys were not allowed in the *Maedchenheim*. Young men would have to wait on the front steps of the house; never were they allowed inside. This physical separation points to the belief on the part of Miss Lehn and the church authorities to whom she was responsible that Mennonite youth were not to be trusted together inside a home. Rather, appropriate places of congregation included various church functions, where there was an adult figure to watch over couples, or public places such as the park, where the lack of privacy would deter inappropriate sexual behavior. “If you had a steady boyfriend, Miss Lehn was always aware who was who,” recalled Katie.

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<sup>40</sup> Lerner, 215.

<sup>41</sup> While many of the girls’ parents were wary of the city and it was quite difficult for them to let the girls go, the *Maedchenheim* “gave them a great security” of mind. Katie recalls that it was reassuring for her parents because they “knew where I was going, where all the other girls were, which was a Mennonite establishment—the atmosphere and all that.” Similarly, Helena notes that Helena’s mother was “very comfortable that the home was there. She was anxious, but since so many people did it [it was alright].” For the parents, the home was a reassurance of their daughter’s physical safety, especially after the war and the trek, as well as their spiritual well-being. Katie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 29 June 2009. Helena, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 5 June 2009.

She made, maybe even literally, a promise to the parents I will look after your daughter. I do not know if it was literally, but it was certainly a promise in her mind that she was responsible.<sup>42</sup>

Young Mennonite women were seen as being unable to look after themselves or their own sexuality due to their naivety. Therefore, the church saw the *Maedchenheim* as a means of protecting domestics from sexual promiscuity, and by extension, spiritual purity.

While the Mennonite church community felt that wartime experiences had weakened the girls' faith, my narrators indicated that the war had actually had the opposite effect. Even though so many Mennonites were unable to leave Russian land, narrators in my study had made it through the war and eventually to Canada. Agatha explains:

We just were so thankful that this opportunity was available for us. Our faith was firm, and the same. We all had the same background, coming through the war. [We were] very thankful that we were protected through it all. Sometimes we thought, "Why us?" So many had been shipped back to Russia. There was just a lot of thankfulness.<sup>43</sup>

These women felt that God had watched over them through the war. Their survival in the midst of such adversity proved to be the miracle that had cemented their beliefs.

Their mothers were instrumental in upholding their faith through the war and in the refugee camps. In the way of informal religious training, or 'little tradition,'<sup>44</sup> mothers were able to guide their children's religious education without

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<sup>42</sup> Katie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 9 April 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Agatha, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 23 June 2009.

<sup>44</sup> Buhler, 55.

the presence of institutionalized church authority. A 1949 article in *Mennonite Life* notes that "much credit is due to the mothers," as not all young immigrants were "ignorant in spiritual matters."<sup>45</sup> Maria thinks back to her time in the camps and notes:

The women did all the teaching... We had no minister in camp. The women taught us, they told us stories and they taught us the church songs. And every night when everybody was kinda ready for bed, then we would all sit together and sing those old hymns. And that's how we learned them, all by heart. I think that was their way of teaching us how to pray. Talking about faith or praying hadn't been done for so many years under communism. It wasn't an easy thing for them to do. But in the stories and the songs they sang, they taught us their faith.<sup>46</sup>

In general, when asked about the purpose of the girls' home, narrators did not provide any responses that indicated that it was meant to supervise their sexuality. Neither did narrators reflect upon its religious nature or the possibility that the home was meant in part to reinforce their commitment to the Mennonite community. Nor did they describe it as a place of spiritual well-being. When the women were asked about their religious beliefs and the role of the home, they all agreed that they were at ease around people who shared their faith and could accommodate their religious practices. However, the bulk of the interviews were spent discussing more secular aspects of the home, such as birthday celebrations, dinners, and laughter between the young women.

Narrators did not immediately speak about religion when they were asked about the *Maedchenheim* because, while it was wonderful to be around people of

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<sup>45</sup> Thiessen, "Present Mennonite Immigration," 34.

<sup>46</sup> Maria, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 18 June 2009.

the same beliefs, narrators believed that their faith was already solid and in no need of spiritual protection by the home, matron, or conference. To the young women who actually used the *Maedchenheim* on a weekly or daily basis, the home had a quite different function, and they did not perceive it as a means to patrol the religious and sexual boundaries of their lives. Rather, interviewees expressed their deep appreciation for the girls' home and the role that it played in their lives.<sup>47</sup> Narrators recall the house as being vital to their well-being and happiness during their time in the city, as the home was a place to have fun, celebrate special occasions, share experiences, and help each other cope with painful wartime memories.

Before the home was set up by the General Conference, Mennonite domestics working in the city had very little to do on their time off. A domestic worker did not want to spend that time in the employer's home, because she would still be in her workplace. Also, passing the time alone in her room would have been dull, and "these girls would have been lost and very lonely in the big city of Vancouver."<sup>48</sup> Therefore, desperate to go somewhere, groups of Mennonite domestics would meet at the train station, because it was warm and they could find somewhere to sit.<sup>49</sup> Maria notes:

They knew no people; there was no one living here, like Mennonite families. So they met at the C.P.R. station, and those train stations

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<sup>47</sup> Frieda Esau Klipperstien observed a similar attitude among her interview subjects. See Klipperstien, "Doing What We Could."

<sup>48</sup> Agatha, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 23 June 2009.

<sup>49</sup> Lehn, *Frontier Challenge*, 52.

were beautiful and they were warm and there was lots of room. They could find a corner, where they could just sit and visit.<sup>50</sup>

The problems with this situation were twofold: not all of the young women knew that others were meeting at the train station on their days off; and for those who did use it as a meeting place, it was not exactly comfortable or private. These young women often felt out of place in the train station.

At the *Maedchenheim*, by contrast, the Mennonite domestics could get together "and just hang out together and have fun together."<sup>51</sup> For the girls who actually lived in the *Maedchenheim*, the home was a comfortable place to go after a long day of work. Anna recalls that "you would come home and [Miss Lehn] would have supper ready. You had fun in the evening with all the girls there."<sup>52</sup> Helena mentioned, "The dining room was a big place, always a happy place."<sup>53</sup> Young Mennonite women were able to share a meal that they did not have to prepare themselves and just relax at the end of the day. For young women who did live-in work, the *Maedchenheim* provided a welcome retreat once a week, where they would eat German cake and relax with their peers.

The *Maedchenheim* was also a place where young women could "relax and let go of all anxiety, and forget about work, as if we are in a different world."<sup>54</sup> Maria remarked, "After all, we were just teenagers, and we had to live this very serious life; we had no outlet for being teenagers whatsoever. So when we got

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<sup>50</sup> Maria, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 18 June 2009.

<sup>51</sup> Irene, interview by author, Yarrow, BC, 26 August 2009. Ruth too claimed that the home was a "place to hang out, in today's terms." Ruth, interview by author, Vancouver, BC, 30 November 2009.

<sup>52</sup> Anna, interview by author, Langley, BC, 19 June 2009.

<sup>53</sup> Helena, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 5 June 2009.

<sup>54</sup> C. Lehn, "Our Girls Home in Vancouver," *Der Bote*, 7 March 1945, 5-6.

there, it was fun."<sup>55</sup> Some of them were quite young, and in their short years they had already survived a war, the trek, and immigration, and now had to engage in paid work in the city in order to support their families. At the home, the young women could be themselves. Irene said of the home, "It was nice, girls of my own age."<sup>56</sup> Agatha remembers one light-hearted incident just before bed:

This one [girl], she worked for a lady, and quite well to do... and she got all these hats from this lady; she didn't want them, she just wanted to get rid of them. And she took them and she placed a hat on each one of us. And my sister-in-law, she took a piece of curtain that was lying there and wrapped it around herself. We had lots of fun at the *Maedchenheim* all the time.<sup>57</sup>

Anna, one of the Mennonite domestics who lived in the home and did day-work, recalled how there were four young women who all slept on hide-a-beds in the living room. Since "you are a 17 year old, you don't sleep really fast," she admitted. "We giggled a lot."<sup>58</sup> Laughing and giggling seemed to be a regular occurrence at the home. "We had lots of fun there," Margaret remembered. "We did each other's hair. Laughing... we had a good time."<sup>59</sup> At the home, they could leave all their responsibilities behind, if only for a few hours.

Special occasions were also times when the young women were quite happy to have the *Maedchenheim* as a place to go and celebrate. Though they often had to work during special events and holidays, the home, the matron, and the conference made sure that they would be able to participate in special

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<sup>55</sup> Maria, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 18 June 2009.

<sup>56</sup> Irene, interview by author, Yarrow, BC, 26 August 2009.

<sup>57</sup> Agatha, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 23 June 2009.

<sup>58</sup> Anna, interview by author, Langley, BC, 19 June 2009.

<sup>59</sup> Margaret, interview by author, Langley, BC, 14 July 2009.

occasions as well. One Mennonite domestic wrote a letter to the *Der Bote* newspaper claiming that "much care was given that we 'serving girls' should also have a Christmas celebration."<sup>60</sup> Likewise, in another *Der Bote* article, two young women recollected special Christmas activities:

Sunday afternoon before Christmas was planned for the celebration in the home, and that same evening the celebration at church. Each girl would bring a small present, which would be exchanged by drawing a number. There was much whispering going on in preparation... We enjoyed a supper of Plumemoos (sweet plum soup), ham, and buns, which had been lovingly prepared by [matrons] Mrs. Janzen and Kaethe. For dessert we had coffee along with Christmas baking.<sup>61</sup>

Helena remembers how bridal showers were held to commemorate the special occasion of a wedding. She noted that "they managed to surprise me one evening... And that was a large group, in that shower there."<sup>62</sup> Irene reminisced about how birthdays would be celebrated en masse and how, "once a year, we would have a big birthday party for everybody, and we would dress up as spring, summer, fall, and winter and then sit at our according tables."<sup>63</sup> Without the girls' home to go to and the matron to look after them, Mennonite domestics would have felt left out of special occasions. Without these happy events, the morale of the young women would have been quite low, especially during important religious times such as Christmas. The home fulfilled a tremendous need to feel like part of the Mennonite community and not just individuals cast adrift in the city.

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<sup>60</sup> One of the Girls, "Vancouver Maedchenheim," *Der Bote*, 18 January 1939, 3.

<sup>61</sup> *Der Bote*, 4.

<sup>62</sup> Helena, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 5 June 2009.

<sup>63</sup> Irene, interview by author, Yarrow, BC, 26 August 2009.

Coming to the *Maedchenheim* on Thursday afternoon, especially for those young women who lived with their employers, was also important in terms of shared experiences. At the home, young women could "discuss the past, the future and the present, and even when [they] have long finished [their] meal [they] continue to converse, it seems easiest at the table."<sup>64</sup> Katie recalls how "we would come to the 'heim... We ate a good snack about four or five o'clock. And we would exchange our experiences."<sup>65</sup>

The young women were able to learn from one another by sharing stories from their week. As noted, one of the major adjustments for the Mennonite domestics was the introduction to modern appliances. "On the farm, we didn't have any electrical things, no power, no lights, no any washing machines or anything,"<sup>66</sup> said Sarah. Some Mennonite domestics learned how to use appliances in the workplace and then came home to the *Maedchenheim* and taught others what they were for and how to use them. Margaret remembers this learning process: "We had never seen a vacuum cleaner. One girl, she vacuumed up a stocking and she felt so bad—where did it go?!"<sup>67</sup> When asked if she had any similar experiences, Margaret replied, "No, because you keep talking to the others and you learn a lot through them. You ask questions. Yes, that helped."<sup>68</sup> Sarah also noted that at the home, they would talk about "some things they were learning, some different jobs. Some would have to do certain

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<sup>64</sup> Lehn, "Our Girls Home in Vancouver," 5-6.

<sup>65</sup> Katie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 29 May 2009.

<sup>66</sup> Sarah, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 8 July 2009.

<sup>67</sup> Margaret, interview by author, Langley, BC, 14 July 2009.

<sup>68</sup> Margaret, interview by author, Langley, BC, 14 July 2009.



cooking, or more or less different types of cleaning and how they would do things."<sup>69</sup> Exchanging stories at the *Maedchenheim* was an educational experience, in which young women who were in the process of learning about the social norms and material culture of their employers could share their experiences with others.

English-language skills were also honed at the *Maedchenheim*. Many of the Mennonite domestics who worked in Vancouver did not speak English upon their arrival in the city. Great numbers entered domestic service right after they had come to British Columbia, the need for extra income for their families being so dire. As English-language courses were not provided for these young women, they were forced to learn the language as they worked. Agatha recalls how teaching each other English words was quite common at the girls' home:

There were many, many humorous stories about the language, learning the English. Oh what was that? Well, this is not a very nice story, it doesn't sound very good. But the lady said, "Could you change the sheets on the bed?" She didn't know what it was; she [thought] "Well what is she talking about?" Well, sheets in German is a very bad word, you know? It is s-h-i-t, you know. So what is she talking about? Then of course on Thursday they would come together and say, "I learned a new word." In English, it is a sheet. We thought, "Well that is not a very nice word." And 'tomatoes' means 'to eat;' that was funny too for them. It sounded like German, but it meant something completely else.<sup>70</sup>

The home acted as a place of learning, where they could come together and share their experiences as well as help each other along in the acquisition of the English language.

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<sup>69</sup> Sarah, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 8 July 2009.

<sup>70</sup> Agatha, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 23 June 2009.

The stories told during interviews about learning English and how to use appliances were told with smiles and seen as humorous. Frieda recalled that after an incident in one of her first day-work positions, she "got home, you know, to the *Maedchenheim*, and I said I am not going back there, because I won't do any better. You know, I was scared."<sup>71</sup> Anna too claimed that one time, she just could not get the children out of the bathtub, because they were having too good a time. In the end, she had to go downstairs and ask her employers for help. She recalled with laughter how she "was just mortified that I couldn't even do that."<sup>72</sup> The narrators do not look back at these experiences with anger or negative emotions; rather, time and distance have filtered their memories and now these learning experiences are recalled with laughter and fondness.

At the time, however, these experiences were quite exasperating and embarrassing. Overcoming the language barrier, though it was accomplished quickly by most of the young women, was quite stressful at times. "I wanted a pair of boots with a zipper," remembered Katy:

So I go [to the saleslady], "Slipper zipper, slipper zipper." So she brought out slippers. I got so frustrated. I told a friend of mine about it. She says, "But Katy, those are slippers. Those are house shoes, not boots." I never went back to the store again, I was so embarrassed!<sup>73</sup>

Even though this incident was told with a smile and ended in a bout of laughter, one can imagine that when Katy found out she had made such a mistake, she would have been quite frustrated by the whole event.

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<sup>71</sup> Frieda, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 12 August 2009.

<sup>72</sup> Anna, interview by author, Langley, BC, 19 June 2009.

<sup>73</sup> Katy, interview by author, Vancouver, BC, 30 November 2009.

Since the Mennonite domestics who lived in had so little interaction with German-speaking individuals, the *Maedchenheim* was like a haven, where they were able to speak with ease and comfort in their native tongue. They did not consider English their language, finding it difficult and alien in comparison to their Low German. In fact, many of the women still revert to Low German today when searching for the English equivalents of words. Being surrounded by people whom you do not understand would have felt quite isolating. Yet, memories of wearisome emotions, loneliness, or embarrassment recalled during interviews do not seem at all bleak. There were no changes in narrators' tones or expressions during the interviews to indicate hurt or upset feelings.

One of the reasons for this nostalgic recollection of the past may be that it is seen through the wider lens of the Mennonite metanarrative of persecution, struggle, and survival. These Mennonite domestic workers had not only survived the war and trek; but, further, they had navigated the minefield of new cultural ways in Canada, struggled to learn a foreign language, and then finally adjusted to life in Vancouver in order to ensure the survival of their families and community. Most importantly, narrators survived spiritually as well—they did not fall victim to the temptations of the city. Pride in their accomplishment led my narrators to focus on the last element of the metanarrative—success. For instance, Katie states that she was "in a way [always confident], but you had such obstacles that you had to overcome. First of all when you come there in the

big city, not knowing the language. After that I progressed."<sup>74</sup> Her pride and sense of accomplishment are the focus of her narrative, rather than the struggle, and so the trials and tribulations of the past have become dulled with time.

While the church leaders established the *Maedchenheim* in order to protect the young women spiritually, they were already well-grounded in their faith and viewed the purpose of the home quite differently. According to Anderson, et al., oral interviews are vital in doing this type of women's history as "they can tell us not what women were supposed to be thinking and how they were supposed to be acting, but what the women actually did."<sup>75</sup> I would argue that what they actually thought is equally significant. In this case, women's oral interviews have revealed a perspective on the role of the Mary Martha *Maedchenheim* in Vancouver that is quite different from the one described by the male community in the *Der Bote* newspaper articles and Mennonite General Conference meeting minutes. Oral interviews have allowed us to understand how the women utilizing the *Maedchenheim* on a regular basis perceived its existence and purpose in their lives.

That being said, the *Maedchenheim* did indeed accomplish what it had set out to do, for these young women behaved as good Mennonite daughters and returned to the community to become good Mennonite wives. Mennonite church elders felt that if the young women had a place to go, they would not engage in

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<sup>74</sup> Katie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 29 May 2009. Katie went on to say that her employer "asked [her] many questions about the war and things, and the fact that she thought that I could give her a decent answer was very complimentary to me."

<sup>75</sup> Kathryn Anderson, Susan Armitage, Dana Jack, and Judith Wittner, "Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History," *Oral History Review* 15 (Spring 1987): 104.

sinful activities. While the women interviewed were not forced to spend their free time in the home, their companionship with other Mennonite domestic workers and the safety that they felt with people of their own background kept them isolated from the broader population.

Even though they worked in the homes of upper- and middle-class women and were exposed, to a limited degree, to the temptations of the city, their constant affiliation with the *Maedchenheim* and young women from their ethnoreligious background may have kept outside ideas from taking root. Mennonite women trusted and relied on people only from their own culture, as the “collective past seemed to have forged enduring friendships and loyalties.”<sup>76</sup> Sarah recalled, “We were very good girls, we stayed home. We weren't on the street. We did embroidery or sewing, and weaving and so on [in the home].”<sup>77</sup> Mennonite domestics did not engage socially with people from other backgrounds; they were “mostly with other Mennonite girls. At that time, yes, that was common,” Sarah said. “We were drawn to each other.”<sup>78</sup> Narrators were grateful for the *Maedchenheim* for many reasons. It did provide, though, a point of intervention for the church community. The *Maedchenheim* fulfilled a valuable function for the church in sustaining the women’s ethnoreligious identity, which, in turn, reinforced rather than changed gender relations in the community.

As their religious identities were maintained through the continued use of the *Maedchenheim* and the Mennonite church located mere steps away,

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<sup>76</sup> Davidson and Davidson, 32.

<sup>77</sup> Agatha, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 23 June 2009.

<sup>78</sup> Sarah, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 8 July 2009.

narrators adhered to religious principals reinforcing motherhood within their ethnoreligious community. Mennonite women often followed the biblical prescription regarding motherhood to have “as many children as God wants you to have.”<sup>79</sup> This was grounded in scriptures: “Nevertheless, she will be saved in childbearing if they continue in faith, love and holiness with self-control,” they taught, and “Behold children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb is a reward.”<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, narrators who continued to associate with young women from the *Maedchenheim* after they left domestic work encouraged interviewees to become wives and mothers. “In the fifties and sixties, it was just wedding one after another, and then there were soon baby carriages lining up along Fraser Street,” remembers Agatha. “And they were all just so proud to have their own home.”<sup>81</sup> Church leaders, the home’s matron, and their female peers who adhered to the same principals reinforced my narrators’ desires to proceed with motherhood rather than continue to participate in the work force.

Furthermore, while Mennonite domestics were not forced to utilize the *Maedchenheim* or openly directed to behave appropriately in the homes of their employers, they did know that the church community and their parents were aware of their activities. When a girl did not attend the home on her time off, the tight-knit community spread the word back to the Fraser Valley. Katy recalled how one time she was falsely accused of acting up while picking tomatoes: “Someone went home and told [mom] we were partying... When I came home,

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<sup>79</sup> Kulig et al., 335.

<sup>80</sup> Kulig et al., 335.

<sup>81</sup> Agatha, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 8 April 2010.

my mom said 'I just about sent a taxi.'"<sup>82</sup> The community's ever-present surveillance of young women would have deterred them from participating in activities deemed sinful or deviant according to the community's ethnoreligious standards.

Also, while the matron protected the young women, she was also part of the monitoring process, for the *Maedchenheim* also worked for the benefit of employers and parents. Most employers wanted a worker who was "the very quiet kind, never wanting to leave the place unless it is very necessary."<sup>83</sup> The 'ladies' were encouraged to phone Miss Lehn if Mennonite domestics misbehaved or acted inappropriately, as one of the reasons that the young women could find jobs so readily was because they had a good name and the matron "wanted to keep the good name."<sup>84</sup> Those who did live-in work and constantly spent their free time away from their employers' homes every day faced repercussions from their employers, who would complain to Miss Lehn about their behaviour. As for the young women living in the home, Miss Lehn had rules that were to be followed. Though she was not an overly strict woman, according to almost all the interviewees, the Mennonite domestic workers could not cross a certain line. Ruth recalled how "one time [Miss Lehn] was at her wits' end and she said, 'I will talk to Rev. Wiens about this situation.' I don't remember who this lucky girl was, but she had reached her limit."<sup>85</sup> Therefore, Mennonite domestics knew that if they acted inappropriately, word would reach their parents

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<sup>82</sup> Katy, interview by author, Vancouver, BC, 30 November 2009.

<sup>83</sup> Dudden, 197.

<sup>84</sup> Anna, interview by author, Langley, BC, 19 June 2009.

<sup>85</sup> Ruth, interview by author, Vancouver, BC, 30 November 2009.

and the community, activating informal methods of control, such as gossip and reproach from friends and family.<sup>86</sup>

Knowing that they were being watched almost all the time may have prevented young women from deviating from the prescribed behaviour of a Mennonite girl. Mennonite domestics were constantly under the supervision and scrutiny of the people around them— the matron, their employers, or other Mennonite domestics. This is not to say that without the home, they would have gone to parties, drank, or gone dancing on their time off. It merely indicates that the home may have prevented Mennonite domestic workers from being presented with *opportunities* to do so.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, they continued to act in accordance with the norms of their ethnoreligious community, even when they were not living in their community. At this time, the Mennonite community felt that women in the work force should return to the home upon marriage.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, the *Maedchenheim* reinforced pre-existing identities and gender expectations, even though narrators themselves did not view the home in this way.

What can be taken from this analysis is that while the *Maedchenheim* did work the way that the church leaders hoped it would, the oral interviews force us to broaden our understanding of the purpose of the girls' home. The

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<sup>86</sup> Arthur, 90.

<sup>87</sup> Just as the panopticon prevented prisoners from misbehaving, so too did the constant supervision of narrators. Foucault's theory is based on a prison plan made by Jeremy Bentham that was never actually built, but it would have been in the shape of a cylinder with the exterior of the walls encompassing backlit single cells and the interior, a dark watchtower. The prisoners, though unable to see whether or not someone was actually in the watch tower, always felt as though they were being watched, and behaved accordingly. This resulted in an internalized sense of fear—of being seen. Prisoners would have had no sense of privacy and would therefore not misbehave. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1975).

<sup>88</sup> Loewen, 137.



*Maedchenheim* created a sense of security for these young women, with Miss Lehn acting as their protector, and was an essential resource for Mennonite domestic workers. Here, they could find work, receive mediation between employers and themselves, and utilize a broad network of social support. Moreover, narrators' saw the home as a place of leisure and pleasure, somewhere they could go to bond with other young women who were in the same situation as them. Though interviewees subtly expressed the difficulties that came with life in the city, such as learning the English language, the narrative of persecution, struggle, and survival in Mennonite oral tradition influenced the ways that these trying experiences were remembered. Narrators' 'struggled' in the city, but 'survived' both physically and spiritually and moved on with their lives, and now can look back with laughter and nostalgia.

## 5. CONCLUSION: “IT WAS A MAJOR THING IN MY LIFE”: LIFE AFTER THE *MAEDCHENHEIM*

Despite Mennonite women’s vital presence in their community, their experiences remain muted in much of the historical literature. Moreover, their memories, created in a different time and under diverse circumstances, are often interpreted by academics in a way that may not always represent the narrators’ points of view. While discussing the aspects of a feminist approach in history at the beginning of this thesis, I noted my desire to give voice to the women who were interviewed. Here, I present my narrators’ understandings of their experiences of domestic work in the city and their lives afterwards, alongside my own historical analysis of their stories, in order to accomplish this goal.

While the temporary move to the city created the potential for re-negotiating gender relationships within the Mennonite community, no profound shift occurred. The women’s experiences showed them that they were capable of manoeuvring about the city, learning a new language, and participating in the paid work force; yet most of the women interviewed for this project decided to rejoin the Mennonite community in the Fraser Valley, get married, have children, and remain in the home as mothers and wives.<sup>1</sup> Their understanding of their newfound abilities did not persuade them to stay in the city and continue working.

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<sup>1</sup> Veronica Strong-Boag notes that during the Second World War and into the 1950s, Canadian “couples married at ever younger ages. First and second babies came earlier in these marriages... women were often preoccupied with their roles as wives and mothers.” Veronica Strong-Boag, “Home Dreams: Women and the Suburban Experiment in Canada, 1945- 1960,” in *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women’s History*, ed. Veronica Strong-Boag, Mona Gleason, and Adele Perry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 315.

But while their experience in Vancouver did not disturb traditional understandings of gender, it did promote a shift in individual confidence and self-esteem.

Mennonite children were raised to believe that the city was an evil place that they should avoid at all costs. Internalising these ideas and the notion that the weakness of their female character made them ill-equipped to fight against the sins of the city, my narrators initially viewed the move to the city with fear and trepidation. Young women moving to Vancouver received warnings from parents about the numerous dangers in the city.<sup>2</sup> Suzie recalled her fear upon entering Vancouver: “At first it scared me very much.”<sup>3</sup> Agatha remembers how frightened she was about going to the city, and how she did not want to go: “I thought, ‘Oh, I am so short;’ and then I thought, I was younger than most of the girls that worked there. I felt very timid, or how do you say it, just me, little Agatha.”<sup>4</sup> Many young Mennonite women did not believe that they would be able to deal with the hazards and complexities of the city.

Yet looking back at their experiences in Vancouver, interviewees realized that their time in the city had changed their perception of urban spaces and themselves. They saw that they were able to maneuver around the dangerous, the unknown, without even a working knowledge of the English language. Helena recounted how, on her first day at the *Maedchenheim*, she was let off the bus on the wrong street and had the wrong address for the girls’ home. After walking around for a bit with her suitcase, she approached a man working on the street

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<sup>2</sup> Klipperstein, “Doing What We Could,” 157.

<sup>3</sup> Suzie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 30 June 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Agatha, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 23 June 2009.

who was able to direct her to the home. When I suggested that this must have been quite a scary experience, Helena merely smiled and said, "I think I was more proud that I managed, because everything was so new."<sup>5</sup>

Narrators expressed pride in their accomplishments in learning how to use modern Canadian household appliances during their time in the city. Maria recalls how she learned all these new things very quickly. Thinking about how young she was, Maria proudly said, "When I think I was only 15! I am impressed with myself."<sup>6</sup> She recounted her experiences in the home:

It was a kind of adventurous experience, something so different. Having a washing machine you know. They had a Bendix, the first automatic washing machine to go this way, and I had to learn to use that. That was, well, after two weeks, I did the washing and everything myself. I picked it up quick, I guess. The only thing I did is I burned one slip with an iron. Everything had to be ironed. It was all nylon. And I know one time my iron was too hot. But that was the only accident I had ironing and washing. I caught on pretty quick. I figure things out.<sup>7</sup>

Elizabeth observed, "Sometimes I wonder how we really managed to do what we did... It wasn't an easy job. We learned a lot."<sup>8</sup>

Women also made comments that learning during their time in the city allowed them to understand themselves and their capabilities better. "Actually, for me, I think it was a very good experience," noted Suzie. "I came out of my shell a little bit more, and I could do a little bit more things on my own. I didn't feel, 'Oh I

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<sup>5</sup> Helena, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 5 June 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Maria, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 18 June 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Maria, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 18 June 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth, interview by author, Richmond, BC, 18 August 2009.

can't do this, and I can't do that.' So, it helped."<sup>9</sup> Margaret thought, "It was a good experience, I mean, to learn."<sup>10</sup> They learned many new things in the city, such as how to use higher-end appliances, how to speak a new language, and how to take care of other people's children and of themselves.

One of the major sources of pride for these Mennonite domestics was their ability to instil a sense of trust in their employers, even though they could not speak the language, did not know how to use a vacuum, and were so young. One narrator, Maria, while thinking back to her experiences working, was almost awestruck that her 'lady' trusted her so quickly and to such an extent. Maria observed:

The lady had said she would stay home a month to teach me, and then she would go back to work. But after two weeks, she had felt comfortable enough to leave me with her house and her daughter and everything, and went back to work. And I was 15!<sup>11</sup>

Suzie recalled that her 'lady' trusted her to keep her child safe. "The lady didn't have to tell me what to do anymore. I knew what to do and how things ran," she said. "She was quite at ease; she could go away and leave their little boy with me for two weeks. And that's a good feeling, if you are trusted."<sup>12</sup> Helena also recalls that when her employers went on a short vacation, "I stayed there when they went, husband and wife, on a holiday to Harrison. She had wished that I stayed

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<sup>9</sup> Suzie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 30 June 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Margaret, interview by author, Langley, BC, 14 July 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Maria, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 18 June 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Suzie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 30 June 2009.

there with the girls overnight. Trusted me with her own house.”<sup>13</sup> Their employers trusted them, and this too helped to boost their confidence.

On starting this project, I had wondered whether their experiences in the city and the lessons that they had learned about their capabilities would have encouraged them to continue working, further their education, or move away from their rural ties.<sup>14</sup> Rather, these Mennonite women clearly continued to fit the ideals of female piety and domesticity held by their community. “Most of the girls got married and had families,” noted Katie. “Maybe some of them got married later than others; I in fact didn’t get married for quite some time. I studied, went to normal school, became a teacher, and then I got married, but that was an exception.”<sup>15</sup> Domesticity in Vancouver did not continue to work in the city after they got married.<sup>16</sup> Rather, they followed Mennonite religious norms and got married, had children, and moved into the household sphere as their mothers before them had done. While the ideological impetus was different in the lives of my narrators, in some respects, their choices resembled the lives of other Canadian women who were buying into the post-war suburban dream and female domesticity.

Furthermore, interviewees indicated that the vast majority of marriages were endogamous to the ethnoreligious community. In fact, marrying outside of the community was highly discouraged. Erika remembered how her sister briefly

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<sup>13</sup> Helena, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 5 June 2009.

<sup>14</sup> A couple of the interviewees noted that they would have liked to have stayed in school rather than worked in the city. However, because of their families’ financial situations, they did not have this option when they were young.

<sup>15</sup> Katie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 9 April 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Sarah, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 8 July 2009.

“dated this guy who was a German, but not a Mennonite. My dad was just sick about it. It’s not the German language, it’s the Mennonite.”<sup>17</sup> Similarly, when asked if the young women who utilized the *Maedchenheim* married Mennonite men, she replied, “Yes they did, almost without exception.”<sup>18</sup> Narrators’ regular interaction with Mennonite men, usually brothers or cousins of their friends, led to the continuation of endogamy of the ethnoreligious group, and, by extension, Mennonite understandings of gender relations.

This is not to detract from the agency of my narrators when making these choices. While pressure from the community to return to the home certainly existed, my narrators indicated that this was the path that they had chosen for themselves. Yet their strict and consistent religious upbringing and continued contact with other Mennonite women certainly influenced their decision, prioritising the ideas of motherhood and marriage in their minds. Much like the women interviewed by Frieda Esau Klipperstien, these young Mennonite women hoped that one day they would leave the workplace to have husbands, children, and families of their own.<sup>19</sup> Narrators in my study reinforced Sager’s claim that many women treated “domestic service as part of the transition to a new country.”<sup>20</sup> When asked what she had wanted for her life after paid domestic work, Helena said “A marriage, a good husband, children, very much... [a

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<sup>17</sup> Erika, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 27 April 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Katie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 9 April 2010. These findings are limited by the sample of interview participants, and therefore do not extend to any women who may have left the community during their time in Vancouver.

<sup>19</sup> Klipperstien, “Doing What We Could,” 159. Mennonite women were not the only immigrant group that wanted to go back into the home after working out. Dutch immigrants, with their strong family orientation, “saw their paid work as temporary... bringing up children and having a family were seen as most important.” Ganzevoort, 104.

<sup>20</sup> Sager, 531.

husband] that is supplying for the family... Doing my part in the family too. Keeping a home for the family."<sup>21</sup> Sarah was asked the same question, and her answer mirrored Helena's: "I think that every young girl hopes or thinks some day to get married and have a home."<sup>22</sup> Although they worked in the city, they knew that this was just a temporary phase in their lives. Ultimately, narrators waited for the time when they could leave to start families of their own.

Nonetheless, interviewees indicated that they had little regret about choosing the domestic path. Rather, my narrators were quite happy and satisfied with the lives that they had chosen. Anna noted that after working as a domestic, she worked at a bank for a while "until I was married and moved here. Then I was very happy."<sup>23</sup> Ruth remarked that she got married young, at the age of 21, and then "a year later, I was pregnant, and since then I have been a stay-at-home-mom."<sup>24</sup> She noted that she was very happy staying home, and that she "cooked and sewed and baked to my heart's content."<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Maria claimed that "the babies and the children; yes, that was the happiest time."<sup>26</sup> These women did not express any regrets in their choice to remain in the home.<sup>27</sup> Mennonite women did not venture into new roles in order to develop their

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<sup>21</sup> Helena, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 5 June 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Sarah, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 8 July 2009. Katy too answered the question saying, "Because I had a boyfriend I thought about getting married." Katy, interview by author, Vancouver, BC, 30 November 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Anna, interview by author, Langley, BC, 19 June 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Ruth, interview by author, Vancouver, BC, 30 November 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Ruth, interview by author, Vancouver, BC, 30 November 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Maria, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 19 April 2010.

<sup>27</sup> By 1968, there was still a very low percentage of married Mennonite women working out, with 68 percent of wives completely unemployed, 22 percent participating in part-time work, and only 7 percent in full-time work. Peter Letkemann, "Mennonites in Vancouver," in ed. Leo Driedger, *Mennonites in Urban Canada* (1968), 163.



newfound abilities further, but rather continued on their prescribed life course with a heightened sense of self-esteem and self-worth. Furthermore, many of these new skills surely helped narrators become good mothers and wives.

While this research sheds light on the gendered and ethnoreligious experiences of my narrators' working lives, and the vehicles that sustained their understandings of gender roles—the institutional church, childhood experiences, and the girls' home—the limitations of a master's level thesis leaves many questions unanswered. How did the church view the women once they returned to the Mennonite community, for example? How do the experiences of the GC girls' home compare to that of the Brethren Maedchenheim? Did narrators' experiences affect the ways in which they brought up their own daughters? Future research needs to be done to understand the ways that city life and paid work affected Mennonite domestics after their return home.

Despite the need to address these research questions in the future, this thesis has shed light on the specific experiences of Mennonite domestic workers in Vancouver while contributing to the more general body of knowledge on immigrant labour and maintenance of gender relations in post-war British Columbia. On a practical community level, this work highlights the importance of the *Maedchenheim* in the community's past, which, to the immense disappointment of those who utilized the girls' home, has almost altogether disappeared from the community's memory.

There are three main points to take away from this case study. First, different experiences, a strong group metanarrative, and individual feelings of

pride came together to create a very different account of domestic work than that which is typically found in the established literature. Narrators looked back and saw kind-hearted employers, who treated them like members of the family, even though they were not able to eat dinner with the family. While employers were commonly described as overbearing or unkind in the historiography, the quiet Christian background and strong work ethic of Mennonite domestics positioned them in high demand. In order to keep this good help, employers understood that they needed to treat the young Mennonite women reasonably well. Those few Mennonite domestics who felt mistreated endured this treatment in silence, adhering to the ethnoreligious principal of self-sacrifice for the financial well-being of their family. In general, interviewees described the physical labour of their positions as being undemanding and quite easy. Four main aspects of narrators' lives shape these memories: the desire to do God's work and do it well; the wish to be a 'good' Mennonite daughter; a reflexivity that combined memories of wartime experiences with thankfulness to be alive and able to work; and pride in their reputation.

Secondly, strong religious doctrine established in childhood was sustained through connections at the *Maedchenheim*, reinforcing the of understandings of Mennonite gender relationships and the maintenance of a patriarchal ethnoreligious community. Mennonites at this time saw the city as a place of great evil and worldly temptation, and church elders believed that narrators would stray from their religion and the community if they went to the city to work because of their limited religious education during the war and trek, feminine

weakness, and youthful inexperience. Therefore, the Fraser Valley Mennonite church community established the *Maedchenheim* in order to extend their reach and protection into the city. Miss Lehn, the girls' home matron, watched over the young women and reported their actions to parents or church elders as necessary. Even while narrators expressed their understanding of the function of the girls' home in very different terms—in being a place to celebrate holidays, escape from their responsibilities and have fun, and help each other learn the ways of their employers—the church leaders accomplished exactly what they had set out to do. Narrators returned to their rural communities in order to lead the very lives their church and parents had advocated for them since childhood. Following ethnoreligious norms, interviewees married, became mothers, stayed inside the home, and helped to sustain the patriarchal nature of the community.

However, this is not to detract from narrators' understanding of their experiences. My narrators' stories reflect great personal happiness and little regret. Interviewees look back upon their time in the city and see a change in themselves; they were able to overcome an internalised sense of female weakness and escape the city with their female piety intact. While their experiences in the city did not lead them to challenge male authority openly upon their return, they did come to realize that the supposed physical and mental limitations of their gender could be pushed aside as they adjusted to the language and lifestyle of their new country quickly, earning the trust and respect of Vancouver's employers of domestic servants.

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