

## It's a Small World

Text written by Louise (Regehr) Wiens, Leamington, Ontario, February 2014

"I can't believe how frequently you refer to people here with regards to their ethnicity," my cousin Ilse remarked to me several years ago on one of her frequent visits to Canada. I shrugged my shoulders in response as her husband Paul chimed in, "Yes, we both find that extremely unusual, to say the least. We would NEVER do that in Germany. It would not be considered appropriate."

Growing up we lived in an area of our town referred to then, and even now, as the "war time housing section," which consisted of several blocks of identical looking bungalows which had been built for returning soldiers from WW 2. They varied only in color. Many of the families that lived there were transient and came and went as they "moved up in society," so to say. At the age of 37, after working and saving for only 6 years, my parents brought cash to the table and proudly bought one of their own. It was actually a great place to live as children abounded everywhere and we were never at a loss for playmates. Incorporated as a town in 1890 on the north shores of Lake Erie, one of our 5 Great Lakes, fishing and agriculture drove the local economy, and as Europeans continued to flood into the area in the 50's and 60's, not only did the population of 10,000 zoom, the economy benefited as well as the new immigrants brought their skilled trades with them to their new homeland. Construction boomed with many new local companies, several still operating today, founded by Italians and Russian Germans. One of my first playmates was Maria, a girl my own age, having recently come from Italy. Both of our parents had a big vegetable garden in the backyard, our mothers did lots of baking and canning, and her father always called me "Louisa."

I was keenly aware at a young age of the local founding fathers of our town, and was also very familiar with some of their names. Wigle, Talbot, Wilkinson, to name a few, all with streets named after them. We lived just off of Wigle Street and over the years I even came to know some of their family members. Surnames were easily identified by nationality, and I could identify most of the local German Russian names with respect to their Mennonite, Lutheran or Catholic affiliation. In later years when I began work at our local hospital, one of our now retired internists, with parents from Hungary, would regularly quiz us young nurses on the proper phonetic pronunciations of surnames, which often included a detailed history of the name itself.

In the 1920's and 30's, Mennonites from the Ukraine established one of their largest settlements in Canada here and began to till the rich soil, quickly developing a reputation for their honesty and hard work ethic. Preserving their identity and culture was of utmost importance to them as their churches were built after models from the homeland. Thousands of these white, wooden rectangular buildings were erected across Canada and the U.S., complete with steep front cement steps, rooms in the basement for Sunday School and wedding dinners, topped off with a white steeple on the roof. In a 1982 yearbook in our bookcase, a photo dated "1939" documents the construction of a local Mennonite church as men with horses are digging the basement. One of the men was my husband's grandfather, as much of the construction relied on volunteer labor from the congregation. The plans also usually included a parsonage next door for the Pastor and his family. My husband recalls sitting in the back of the church in one of the hand hewn wooden oak pews with his parents as they tried

to keep their 5 children in line during services. Somewhere in the pews they even carved their initials, he tells me, as at times his dad would doze off during the sermon.

Decades later my husband and I sit in the same uncomfortable pews with our kids as the Pastor gives his flock a report on the latest government bylaws detailing new requirements for handicapped accessibility, and how this will affect our church. "We will definitely have to make some changes," he continues, "and with an older building like this will have to comply. We have already contacted the town and will proceed as soon as possible." I look up at the raised wooden ceilings, also documented in the old yearbook and referred to during the building project of 1939 as "roof sheathing." Two narrow aisles on the sides of the church have not been feasible for brides for years, and I recall my husband's aunts telling me that even their dresses were too "poofy" to walk comfortably to the altar on their wedding day.

There is another church building for sale in town, a newer Catholic church. "We are so sad that it is closing," my friend Maria, who lives across the street from the church tells me. "It was so convenient for my dad and I to just walk there," she sighs, as I prepare to leave out the front door. "Thanks for coming Louisa," her dad calls out, as I say goodbye. As I get into my van and can see the local Lutheran church on the other corner. It was also built by Russian Germans, in the same fashion as our church, except it is made of brick. They have had a Pastor for about 8 years from Germany, who is also a Russian German, and who has become a very good friend. With my father receiving 2 German pensions, one for an injury sustained in a combine accident while in exile in Kazakhstan, Rev. Mertz regularly helps us with e-mail correspondence. "We didn't think much about it anymore," my mother relayed to me years ago, "but as we were filling our immigration papers to come to Canada the guy at the bureau asked dad what was wrong with his arm." Holding up his severely deformed limb my dad was informed that he would most certainly be eligible for German compensation for this horrific injury.

A couple of years pass and the Pastor announces during a Sunday morning service that he has met with the elders and that the building project will now proceed. The entire old building will be demolished and the basement will be filled in, we are told. A company has already been contracted for the job, and I was happy to hear that they were local. They are Italian. "A pew will be available for anyone who wants one," the Pastor continues. "Just let the office know." I smile at my husband, having mentioned this to him on previous occasions. I smile just thinking about the preservation of this piece of history in our home. "We never want to forget the history of this building, and what it means to our community here. Which is why we are going to take some of these pews and have them constructed into a conference table for use in our new building," the Pastor announces from the pulpit. I am still smiling as I relay this piece of information to several elderly Mennonite women in town, who also smile, because you see, the church has not been part of the Mennonite Conference for years. The new facility should be open and functioning in about 6 months, we are then informed.

Last evening I attended Sunday evening service, temporarily held in a large addition functioning as the sanctuary. I slipped into a chair beside Yaquelin, a beautiful young woman from Cuba, as the visiting Pastor from Argentina was preparing for his sermon. The music was a mix of Spanish and English, with many off shore migrant workers from Mexico present, as usual. The guy at the end of the row smiled at me as I frantically tried to remember his name. My mind wandered as I scanned the crowd. Ahead of me was Danilo from Costa Rica with his Canadian wife, and several Filipino girls employed locally for the season. Fernando, from Honduras, a certified translator would assist the visiting Pastor. One of our Pastor's daughters, adopted from China, sat in the front row. Another Spanish Pastor, visiting for the evening, regularly held services in another local Mennonite church, I was sure. Our Pastor himself was a transplanted Italian from the Detroit area. The music continued as I

briefly turned around and saw the new conference table which was completed, hand crafted from some of the old pews, just as the Pastor had mentioned several months earlier. It is covered in a sheet, and parents have been reminded to not have their children play near it, if possible. It is stained dark brown, and was made by the brother of a woman in the congregation. The woman herself is a Russian German, with strong ties to Mexico and Belize.

Several days earlier at work I had been called to the ER to translate for an elderly German woman from Mexico. As she rambled on in Low German about her ailments, I nodded knowingly. "Are you sure you really understand this stuff?" the young Doctor quizzed me, causing me to raise my eyebrows at his doubt. The same day, I had an interesting chat with the family of one of my patients, an elderly Catholic priest. A pilgrimage to Rome had been a highlight for him years ago. The visitor goes on to tell me that he enjoys classical music, as she leaves, then promptly returns with his CD player. As I push the buttons on the CD player to no avail, I call out to Chris, one of our physio staff, to come to my aid. "Hey, you're Catholic...come and help me!" I implore impatiently. Chris, a former Little League coach of our son's also lived for several years in the house beside our church, which initially served as the parsonage. Chris asks how the construction of the church is coming.

We never did pick up a church pew. "How would I even get it home?" my husband had pleaded with me. "And what would you put on it, shoes I suppose? It would just be used for storage anyways." So, with that, I had laid my case to rest.

The song "It's a Small World" keeps going through my head as I picture all the nations portrayed in this famous Disney ride, as passengers sit in boats and glide through canals of water with refreshing cool temperatures. All the continents are portrayed as ethnically correct dressed people sing and dance in their native tongue. Children in the boats around us shriek with joy and delight.

On a visit to Heidelberg, I remember commenting to my husband how odd it seemed to me that the attractive Oriental student at the gate had addressed us in German as we were paying our entry fee. "Why would seem odd?" he said. "It's no different than a German speaking English," a comment which had left me in deep thought.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." John 3:16

Volunteers will start to paint the interior of the church tomorrow. My husband was asked to be one of them.