

Book Reviews

Canadian Journal of Family and Youth, 9(1), 2017, pp 187-191
ISSN 1718-9748 © University of Alberta
<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/cjfy>

Kroeger, A. (2007). Hard Passage: A Mennonite Family's Long Journey from Russia to Canada. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press.

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In the biography titled “Hard Passage: A Mennonite Family’s Long Journey from Russia to Canada,” Arthur Kroeger recounts the life events that have forged his family’s history. He is one of five sons of Heinrich and Helena Kroeger, devout Mennonite farmers from Russia. The Kroeger’s journey is a difficult one, as is evident by the title “Hard Passage.” Throughout the text, Kroeger uses photos to bridge a hundred year gap between when the events took place and the present day, adding an element of authenticity to his narrative. Kroeger is also able to portray in his history how the roles of the family are malleable as they conform to the changes of society. Even though their journey is filled with dark, depressing, and often frightening experiences, the implementation of specific positive experiences by the author serves as a function of relief and is used to create a lighter tone for the reader.

In his record, Kroeger uses pictures to build upon word-based descriptions, allowing them to add emotion to past experiences. In describing the Kroeger family’s suffering through the two-year famine, phrases such as “food was in short supply” or “we had to go without,” have little emotional impact as compared to a picture. Kroeger embeds a picture of victims who have lost their lives to the famine: the bodies have wasted away, leaving the skin alone in preventing the bones from protruding from the

body. Observing this image, the reader gains greater empathy for the characters, as it exposes the harshness of the events.

When the time comes for many Mennonites to leave their native land of Russia, the grief of the Mennonites' departure is captured in a photo chosen by Kroeger. The photo shows a large group of Mennonites sending their loved ones away on their unknown journey. The train is packed full of passengers preparing to leave their country to settle in a foreign land. On the platform below, family and friends gather to bid them farewell, knowing that in a few moments their homeland will be forever changed. Together, the Mennonites have established a long-developed community, bearing each other up in times of difficulty and trial. This image helps the reader to grasp the sense of unity held by the Mennonite society and the pain of saying the simple word "goodbye."

After a month's grueling journey, the Mennonites arrived in Canada, which they would soon call their home. Unbeknownst to the Mennonites, the country's flat dry prairies made farming nearly impossible, extinguishing their primary livelihood. The brutality of the land is shown in a photo taken shortly after a dust storm. Sand floods in, covering fences and tractors like a thick, suffocating fog. The image illustrates the seemingly endless nothingness of the prairies and helps the reader develop a greater appreciation for the adversity the Mennonites faced in trying to farm and provide for their families. Throughout the Kroegers' expedition from Russia to Canada, not only did the geography of their home change dramatically, but the roles of the family members also shifted greatly.

Kroeger is able to portray through his family history how the roles of family members changed with the ever-changing society. At the beginning of the biography, set

in the early 1900's, the Kroegers lived in Russia. Economic factors began exerting pressure on families, leaving many with no option but to depart in search of a better life. In Russia, many Mennonite people lived in close association with extended relatives, making departure all the more heartbreaking. As societal pressures around them mounted, the decision to leave was finalized, and the Kroegers left for Canada.

A new beginning involved a great deal of work. Kroeger describes the roles his brothers and sisters took on as young children, including: "haymaking, harvesting, milking cows, gathering eggs and scrubbing floors" (pp. 130, 188). As time went on, society changed along with the children and their responsibilities. The world around them began to evolve and industrialize. As Kroeger and his siblings aged, the once expected responsibility to return to the family farm faded. With increasing employment opportunities open to men and women alike, they obtained higher educations and failed to return to their family's farm. The growing business industry drew in Kroeger's older brothers and the education system welcomed his older sister. As the account of the Kroeger family proceeds, one observes the gradual dissipation of family closeness and the customary family roles.

Arthur Kroeger counters the saddening events of his memoirs, both before and after his family's long journey to Canada, with numerous pleasant occasions. The journey of the Kroeger family to Canada was one of great perseverance and hardship. Kroeger places emphasis on positive experiences in dark times, which help lighten the tone. As the Kroegers experienced World War I and the Russian famine first hand, they witnessed many deaths and much suffering around them. Kroeger describes his father's experience of serving in the military, which forced him to be separated from his wife and newborn

son for more than a year. During this time, Kroeger states that his father “saw frozen bodies piled like cordwood in the combat areas” (p. 40). Shortly after World War I ended, the Kroeger family endured not only the “violence, looting, rape, and other depredations” of the Russian civil war, but the major famine that followed (p. 53). To elevate the tone of these tragic events, Kroeger describes the rescue of the American Relief Administration, which was able to deliver food to those in desperate need. Kroeger mentions that the relief had a significant impact on the well-being of the Russian people, as it prevented thousands of deaths (pp. 66-67). Kroeger also provides an uplifting mood by acknowledging the attitudes of the Mennonites through these times. He states that an “unshakable religious faith” and “a commitment to non-resistance” was held on to by many (p. 66). As the Kroegers journeyed to Canada, the hard times from which they sought refuge followed them; Canada proved to be far from the Promised Land they were seeking.

Upon arriving in Canada the family had to share living accommodations with strangers, food was sparse, and work was limited. Despite their circumstances, the family found enjoyment, involving themselves in the community, playing games, holding dances, and participating in community events. Kroeger also recounts the impact of David Toews, a Canadian Mennonite leader who played a major role in helping the Mennonites immigrate to Canada; many people viewed him as a hero. Toews’ heroic acts reminded the Mennonite people that there was still some good found among men; there were still role models who inspired them, revitalizing the hope that war had diminished. Kroeger’s use of these uplifting examples relieves the reader of a consistently dark overtone.

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The quest to Canada taken by many Mennonites is brought to life as Kroeger reproduces his family history. The text, “Hard Passage,” dramatically illustrates the endurance needed during the calamities that fell upon many. As the book concludes the author proceeds to elaborate on the individual lives of the family members. He provides details about the descendants of Heinrich and Helena, including university training and business successes and failures, which do not meaningfully contribute to the Kroegers’ compelling journey from Russia to Canada. I do not wish to make light of the Kroeger family’s immense struggles, but I believe it would be sufficient to summarize the events of each child’s achievements as they matured. As I read “Hard Passage,” I was educated on historic events and compelled by the heroic lives of many. To the disciplines of history, sociology, education and philosophy or any interested in the sacrifices made to create Alberta roots, I would strongly recommend this book.