

Abram's Last Christmas in Canada (1921)

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Photo Credit: Canada. Dept. of Interior / Library and Archives Canada / PA-04603



Pictured above is a homestead of a Mennonite settler in South Tofield, Alberta, 1920-30s. On March 1, 1922 at 11:00AM the first train carrying Mennonite settlers departed Plum Coulee, Manitoba, Canada destined for San Antonio de Arenales, Chihuahua, Mexico. During 1922-30 some 25,000 Mennonites immigrated to Canada, Mexico, Brazil, and Paraguay.ⁱⁱ

It was Christmas morning Abram awoke very early on but remained still in his trundle bed. The evening before Abram had expectantly set out his empty plate and he was rather curious about what Saint Nicolas had brought him.

That it was Pa and Mama and not Saint Nicolas he now knew who brought the presents. This insight had gradually come to him as he got older. He was in fact almost 12 years old. Just as his body seemingly on its own accord stretched a few inches upwards and gained between 10 to 20 pounds every year, so too had it slowly come to him that the adult world was altogether different. Not that he was unhappy about the whole matter. The presents seemed all the more special knowing Pa and Mama had picked it especially for him. And the surprise of Christmas morning too seemed just as exciting as when he'd thought that Saint Nicolas came down from the attic overnight.

Here in the Mennonite village on the Canadian prairies Saint Nicolas couldn't possibly climb down the chimney because the farmers all kept a nice crackling dung fire burning in the woodstove. And about this English Santa Clause Abram didn't know much at all. He had always gone to the private German school. Some of his friends from the village had for a time gone to the English district school but his Pa had commented that it created disunity within the community if he too attended there so he remained in the village school.

It was the whole school matter that made him so quiet and pensive on this early morning. It would be his last Christmas in Canada because it seemed that they would no longer be allowed to run their private German schools. A number of weeks before, his Pa had returned home from a brotherhood meeting and told Mama and the children that they would travel with the first train to a new country. This country was Mexico.

In Mexico, they would again be allowed to have school exactly the way things had always been. Especially the schools could remain as they had always had it. Abram however didn't want to move away. They'd have to leave everything behind: the beautiful house his grandfather had built in 1910; the large yard with a garden in front and back, all the fruit trees - plums, cherries and apple; the pond in the pasture where they could swim in the summer and skate in the winter. Then also the village and his friends would be sorely missed.

Some villagers would move too but most of them would not, at least not this year. Some families wanted to wait and see. They believed it would be easier to adjust to a new school than to a new country. Even Franz Goertzen's family. Franz was his second cousin and they saw each other all the time. Franz' Pa had talked to the district school teacher and decided that he could find nothing immoral in the school. The teacher was a Mennonite after all. He taught German and lessons from the Bible. Mr. Goertzen first wanted to wait and see.

Franz and Abram had always gotten along so well and he especially liked Franz' grandma, Abram's great-aunt but everyone just called her *Sauntjemum*. She baked such delicious bread! And she regaled them with stories from yesteryear especially from the time that she came to Canada almost 50 years ago.

Why should it now all of a sudden not be possible to stay? Why should he now be separated from his best pal? Abram had all of his questions to his grandpa. Grandpa's name was Abram too. He also happened to be Aunt Susana's little brother and he too remembered moving to Canada in 1875. Abram liked it when Grandpa talked about his childhood. He'd asked Grandpa why they must move away. And if it was so very important, why did not everyone in the village move? He especially wanted to know why the Franz Goertzens didn't want to move. Grandpa had deliberately stoked the fire in the brick oven before sitting down on the bench.

'You know what my little Abram,' Grandpa began, 'there are many things that I too do not understand. I couldn't go to school much and here in Canada not at all. There was too much work to do. But I have paid attention and kept my eyes open. And you know what my little Abram? Our ministers are correct. Our government did not keep their word. They promised us freedom to run our schools and now they are taking them away. Because of that I think it is time to look for a new country. Even so we can't become hateful. Maybe the government has no other option. Or maybe it is under great pressure from our resentful countrymen because our young men did not fight alongside their men in the Great War. And we should not judge those who believe that they can stay and exist under the new agreement.'

It had seemed to the young Abram that Grandpa had been talking more to himself. But perhaps Abram understood better than Grandpa thought and had remained silent for a while. They gazed at the flames dancing in the oven before Grandpa had added another bunch of straw. Abram had then said, *'were you not the same age that I am now, when you came to Canada?'*

How often Grandpa had told him this story! But he never tired of it.

'Yes, I was about 12 years old. And you know what?' he continued, *'I found it just as hard to move away from Russia as it is for you now to move away from Canada. When I think back on how we had it in Russia, then I regret it to this day that we had to leave everything behind. And then also, more than half of the Mennonites stayed in Russia. Only one third of all the Mennonites came to North America. Those who stayed were not more sinful than we were. Their understanding about Christendom and worldly involvement was a bit different and they are not guilty of what is now happening in Russia. But when I see what is happening there in Russia, then I am happy that we came here. And you know what?'* he now said thoughtfully, *Hopefully I will not live through it. But maybe by the time you are my age, you too will be happy that your parents and grandparents emigrated just as I am happy about it now.'*

Becoming very still Abram asked once again, *'But why is it that the Goertzens don't want to come as well? I am going to miss Franz so much.'*

At this, Grandpa dimpled slightly and replied, *'at the Goertzen's house the final word has not yet been spoken. You forget that Sauntjemum is my sister. She's such a dear. You know what? Her husband, who died two years ago from the flu, also did not at first come to Canada. But he couldn't survive without Susana. The next year the Goertzen family also came to Canada. I know that Susana wants to move as well and she will yet bring her oldest son Franz around.'*

Grandpa's eyes twinkled as he told Abram to have patience.

But now it was Christmas and so far nothing had changed. After a while, Abram got up curious about what he would find on the Christmas table. He got dressed and first went out to help with the chores. As a 12 year old boy he was a big help in the barn and it was expected of him to help.

After the work was complete and before breakfast he did in fact go into the small sitting room where his two younger sisters marvelled over their new dolls. His sisters were not at all concerned about the upcoming move.

Abram looked at his plate, and there amongst a pile of peanuts and candy was a wonderful book. He read avidly and here was an illustrated book about Mexico published in Germany. Pa had ordered it especially for him. He was very happy receive such a wonderful book but genuine happiness about the move to the new country still eluded him.

After that it was time for breakfast. The two sisters, Tina and Neeta, recited their poems selected by the teacher for them to learn for Christmas. They prayed all together and then Grandpa, who lived with them said, *'I know we're all thinking about how this will be our last Christmas in Canada. And you know what, almost 50 years ago when I was as old as Abram is now, I had my last Christmas in Russia. It was just as difficult for me then as it is now for Abram and I too had to leave my best friend behind. His parents moved to a different colony in Russia and we came to North America. But now after many years I have received a letter from him. My friend's name is Gerhard. He would like to move to Canada and wondered whether I know of a farmstead to buy in the region. What do you think, should we offer him ours? I know if there is ever a person*

who will pay us for the homestead as soon as he's able, it would be Gerhard. He was the most honest school friend I've ever known.'

Everyone at the table was quiet for a time. The impending move was suddenly very real to them. Abram had not pictured it, that their yard and farmstead would belong to someone else. Inwardly, they could picture the new family from Russia settling on their yard. Grandpa very seriously commented that he'd rather sell to his friend Gerhard than to anyone else.

Abram had carefully observed the conversation and he suddenly saw how the loving heavenly Father had wisely arranged everything. When his grandfather as a twelve-year-old boy had had to leave *his* home, the loving Father had unbeknownst to anyone prepared a way for others who would be in great need. Not every person would come to the same understanding but the important thing was how faithful one was. God's people should never be completely at home here on earth. This was true in the first Christmas story. Even in childhood our Jesus did not have a place to rest his head. Why should we have it any better? Slowly, young Abram began to feel at peace with the approaching move to Mexico to the point of almost looking forward to Mexico with joy.

Suddenly, a loud knock thundered at the door. 'Well!' said Pa, '*who comes for a visit this early in the morning for breakfast?!*' But before anyone had a chance to say '*come in*', the door flung open and Goertzen's Franz bounced inside.

'Abram, Abram!' he said, '*We are also moving to Mexico. Pa said this morning we will be on your train.*' Abram forgot about his milk and bread with drippings and jumped up from the table. 'Pa,' he simply asked, '*when is our train leaving?*'

Grandpa leaned back on his chair amused and then thought to himself, '*we are a wandering lot. He and his friend Gerhard, Abram and his cousin Franz –always on the move. But always with God. That was what mattered.*' And now he needed to go with Abram to look through his Mexico book.

ⁱ This is a work of historical fiction and the names of characters are not based on any one person. But through storytelling a deep inner truth can be communicated. The Low German audio version is played during the Christmas season on De Brigj, CHPD 105.9 FM broadcasting out of Aylmer, Ontario.

ⁱⁱ Krahn, Cornelius, Harold S. Bender and John J. Friesen. "Migrations." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1989. Web. 13 Dec 2016. <http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Migrations&oldid=141217>.