

CANVASS

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<http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/programs/gallery/>

hours: Mon. - Fri., 8:30 AM - 4:30 PM; Sat., noon - 5 PM

an institution of Mennonite Church Canada

located on the campus of Canadian Mennonite University

TAX DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS: The MHC Gallery's budget is met primarily through private, tax deductible donations. Please, help keep the gallery alive and growing. Make cheques payable to: MHC Gallery. Mail to: MHC Gallery, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, MB R3P 0M4. Credit card donations, contact Connie Wiebe at cwiebe@mennonitechurch.ca.

(204) 888 6781; Ray Dirks, curator, rdirks@mennonitechurch.ca

Along the Road to Freedom

Mennonite Women of Courage & Faith
exhibition by Ray Dirks

October 14, 2012 – January 26, 2013

OPENING

Sunday, October 14, 3:00PM

Program, CMU Chapel (next to the gallery)

Reception & Art,

Mennonite Heritage Centre Gallery

both venues, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd.,

Canadian Mennonite University south campus

CLOSING CELEBRATION

Friday, January 25, 7:30 PM

Mennonite Heritage Centre Gallery

From revolutionary times through World War II the lives of Mennonites were torn apart in Russia. *Along the Road to Freedom* honours the suffering, courage, faith and love of women who brought their families to peace and freedom in Canada, mostly coming from what is now Ukraine.

The *Along the Road to Freedom* exhibition includes completed artworks and paintings in progress, sketches, reference photographs, stories and artifacts. As the exhibit run continues, more completed artworks will be added. The exhibit will close in January with prayers, music and a celebration sending the art and stories on tour across Canada — a tour to honour, remind and remember, to thank God for those who walked the road to their families' freedom.

Canvas — a piece of strong cloth on which to paint a picture

Family Journeys

In 2008 Mennonite Heritage Centre Director Alf Redekopp and I were contacted by a small group of people wanting to establish a permanent tribute to women — mothers, sisters, grandmothers, aunts, many already widowed or fatherless — who brought families out of Russia, during times of extreme persecution and chaos, to ultimate safety and freedom in Canada. Nettie Dueck, Wanda Andres, Hans Funk and Henry Bergen were each moved to act by their personal refugee experiences as children in south Russia who began their journeys to freedom during the later years of World War II.

Nettie, Wanda, Hans and Henry became the *Along the Road to Freedom* committee and my friends. Since that first meeting we have met dozens more times. After much discussion as to how it should be shaped, it was decided the tribute would be a series of paintings I would create. These paintings would form an exhibit that would open at the Mennonite Heritage Centre Gallery and then tour. Eventually, the paintings would be installed permanently in Winnipeg as lasting tributes.

It was decided that for a donation of a set amount a family could sponsor an artwork. We hoped for up to 20 sponsorships but were willing to settle for a dozen. To justify my beginning to work on the project, each committee member committed to sponsoring artworks. My in-laws agreed to sponsor a painting. Soon thereafter one more family committed. Then, for a long enough period to cause some to wonder, no more sponsorships materialized.

In early 2012 interest snowballed. Now, we are beyond 20 artworks sponsored. The vast majority of sponsors are families. Also included among the sponsors are organizations such as the Mennonite Central Committee, so important to the survival and escape from Russia for many, and Friends of the Mennonite Centre in Ukraine (FOMCU), Kingdom Ventures and the Mennonite Benevolent Society — Mennonites who have returned in a spirit of goodwill to help the people of Ukraine, not to reclaim lost property and possessions.

A spirit of graciousness and a lack of a desire for revenge, are important aspects of the story of many of the featured women. Survival was difficult, most existed in a form of hell on earth for long periods, many lost family members — murdered, tortured, starved, thrown into the gulag system never to return. Even so, many left this earth having reputations that reflected humility, decency, love, grace and faith.

When I was a child growing up in Abbotsford, my Tante Tina, my grandfather Dirks' sister, was the epitome of kindness, inner beauty and faith. She did not speak English. I did not speak German. Yet, because of the great love and respect my parents had for Tante Tina, I admired her as the embodiment of all I could wish to become.

I didn't know Tante Tina's story well. For the most part, I just knew she lived alone in a tiny,



Special Thanks

Along the Road to Freedom committee, Wanda Andres, Nettie Dueck, Hans Funk, Henry Bergen; without them this project would not be unfolding

Alf Redekopp, Connie Wiebe, Lori Matties, Timothy Dyck

examine carefully, discuss — **Canvass**

tidy shack in Yarrow and had fled from Russia during World War II. I remember my mom telling me Tante Tina had eaten rats as she fled. Later I learned she had had five children. Three died in Russia. The remaining two were taken from her as she fled in 1943. Her husband had been murdered in 1938.

I recall how Tante Tina wished with all her heart to see her sons, who, after some years, she learned were alive in Siberia. I remember her mailing letters to Soviet authorities, over and over again, asking for permission to have her sons come visit her. They always answered no but left the door slightly ajar. Then, one day Tante Tina received a letter telling her to give up. She would never be allowed to see her boys.

Within weeks she died.

Tante Tina's obituary detailed the tremendous struggles and trials in her life, her unanswered prayers to see her sons. It, also, stated she, Katharina Peters, was an inspiration and example to many because of her decency and kindness, because she was faithful, filled with peace and love.

Tante Tina, a simple, quiet woman who lived alone in a tiny hovel, was and is a hero to me. I want to honour Tante Tina in a painting because she has no immediate family to do so. I don't want her story to silently slip off history's edge. In the same vein, FOMCU chose to honour a woman who did not get out of Russia, Margarita Pankratz. Of the 35,000 who tried to flee during World War II only one third actually made it. Those who did not get out need to be remembered, too.

Of course, those stories of women who did bring their children to freedom and peace, those at the core of *Along the Road to Freedom*, need to be remembered. Visit the exhibit and discover stories of grace and humility, trial and sorrow, love and family, faith and strength — real people in real situations, struggling to survive and, whether they knew it or not, acknowledged it or not, in some way they are heroes, fragile and imperfect, maybe even broken, but heroes, nonetheless. We thank them. We thank God. *Ray Dirks*

My Personal Journey

I apologize. *Along the Road to Freedom*, as it opens in Winnipeg, is an exhibition in progress. When this journey began I certainly intended for it to be complete by this point. It isn't. But, in any case, I believe it will be equally as moving, as meaningful, from the opening up to when all paintings are complete.

Why am I not finished?

Shingles in my eye last summer put me behind two to three months. That lost time bumped two other major projects, which had to be completed, into *Along the Road to Freedom*. Regular gallery work took up more time than I could have anticipated in recent months. Interviewing families, reading wider history, searching for images, trying to imagine and create situations with no visual reference, sketching, re-sketching, interviewing again, took much more time than I had guesstimated.

Late success has, perhaps, been the most significant issue. As noted earlier, at first sponsorships came slowly. But this year that has changed. Many sponsorships are relatively recent. I had planned to be painting exclusively from May onwards. However, my work remains a mix of painting, sketching, interviewing, researching... And now, it is also time to bring the exhibition together — writing, printing and mounting text and other didactic material, coordinating framing, creating and distributing media releases, preparing for the opening, crafting an opening talk, writing and designing the newsletter, invitation and

Canvass

posters, contacting churches, etc...

So why come to the opening? All the sponsored stories will be featured, as will many photos, notes, sketches and other parts of my journey to completed artworks — offering viewers an opportunity to better see the project through the artist's eyes. Artifacts from many of the women will be included. Finished paintings will be on display. You will be able to share the same powerful, emotional and heroic stories I have experienced. As I finish paintings, I will add them to the exhibit. It will evolve and grow right to the closing event on January 25.

I continue to be honoured to depict the lives of the women and their families in these artworks. My prayer is that they will encourage people to look into their own stories and remember them, honour them, learn from them.

For many years I have concentrated on working across cultures, here in Canada and around the world. It has also been a passion of mine to return to my own roots. *Along the Road to Freedom* is that journey for me. I, also, hope others, from all over the world, will see similarities, feel an affinity, and that we with deep Mennonite roots, who have ourselves or through our ancestors come here as refugees or immigrants, will remember that our story is the same as many of those of our newer neighbours. We are so different but so the same. God calls us to remember our own and also, equally, all others. *Ray Dirks*



If Interested

Once all paintings are completed, a full colour catalogue will become available. If interested in being alerted as to when it will be available, sign up at the gallery or let me know by e-mail at rdirks@mennonitechurch.ca.

Prints can be ordered of any completed painting. If interested, let me know by e-mail or sign up at the gallery.

Next

Ingrid Lincoln and Gaëtan Sylvester, a multimedia, including installation, two artist exhibition. Opening on February 1.

Donations

Many thanks for helping the gallery thrive as a unique institution, existing only because of private donor support, for 14 years. Help us make the 15th year the best.

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