



Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

Susan B. Peters: An Adamant Voice for Peace

Born in South Russia in 1899, Susan B. Peters' early life in the Mennonite village of Schoenfeld shaped her commitment to Christian faith and service. Susan grew up in a home "filled with singing and laughter." However, World War I and its aftermath of revolution and civil war disrupted the lives of many German-speaking colonists in Russia, including Mennonites. Her family was forced to flee their home, leaving behind all property and possessions. For several years, they struggled to survive through famine, war, and abuse.

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), a North American organization formed to help the growing numbers of Mennonites suffering in Russia, sent packages of food and material aid in 1922. With MCC's help, Susan's family survived until 1924 when they immigrated to Alberta, Canada. There, Susan struggled to adapt to a new language, culture, and economy. Her family relied on their new faith community at the Linden Mennonite Brethren Church.

At her 1992 memorial service, Susan's nieces and nephews reflected, "Aunt Susie never forgot these deeds of kindness and later devoted many of her best years to serving other needy persons in various parts of the world." From her early experiences as a Mennonite

refugee, Susan formed an adamant voice for building peace through relief work.

Susan expected to spend her life as a teacher. After graduating from Calgary Normal School in 1938, Susan taught in Canadian one-room schools. In 1944, she heard MCC Chairman P.C. Hiebert deliver a sermon on Mennonite refugees in Europe after World War II. Hiebert called for volunteers to serve the global church, reminding Susan of the MCC packages she had relied on in Russia.

Passionate about helping others, Susan answered Hiebert's invitation. In 1945, Susan applied for work with MCC and was placed in London at Taxal Edge, a boys' convalescent home. After she spent a year running the home, MCC transferred Susan to Copenhagen, Denmark where she directed MCC's aid to Mennonite refugees. For two years, often working alone, she coordinated the MCC refugee camp's finances, advocated for the rights of refugees to both government and MCC officials, and helped to meet the refugees' vast spiritual needs.

Serving with MCC, Susan was characterized as a woman who spoke up for others. Susan rarely shied away from confrontation. She wrote letters to MCC leaders Harold S. Bender and Atlee Beechy to suggest institutional



Susan B. Peters (1899–1992)

changes that they could make to create stronger avenues for relief work.

In May 1948, Susan wrote to urge Bender to quickly pursue options for European Mennonite refugees to immigrate to Paraguay. While recognizing her limited knowledge of the restraints that Bender encountered at an institutional level, Susan passionately relayed the stories of heartache she witnessed as she built relationships on the ground with Mennonite refugees.

Susan's compassion for the people she served stemmed from her own experiences. In a letter to her family, Susan shared, "Having been a refugee myself, arriving penniless in Canada, I know in some measure what these people here have to go through." She recognized the essential role that MCC and the broader church had in providing hope to those in need.

Despite an unwavering commitment to her work, Susan often felt homesick and frustrated in Denmark. Writing home, she shared about the daunting task of finding homes for Mennonite refugees and her draining work of learning to carry others' burdens. For two years, she walked daily beside refugees as they struggled with homelessness, poverty, separated families, and despair. She struggled with her own lack of institutional power, as well as her tendency to abruptly speak her opinions. Susan concluded, "In spite of all this that I have written, I still have a vision. I still want to hold out until our brethren can be brought into a new home country and be helped to get a new home. I just cannot quit before the task is finished."

In 1948, Susan's work in Denmark end-

ed, but she continued to serve those around her. She returned to Canada and began teaching children in Hutterite colonies while pursuing further education. She completed a B.Ed. degree at the University of Alberta in 1956 and then moved to northern Canada to teach Inuit children for the next four years. In the 1960s, she agreed to serve another term with MCC, working this time with refugees in the Middle East.

Susan retired in 1964 and moved to Linden, Alberta. Well known for her independent personality and sharp sense of humor, Susan continued to build close relationships that nurtured others as well as her own spiritual growth. Susan never married and in letters to her friends she often reminded them that she did not need a man to live. Until her death in 1992, she served as an MCC representative in her home province of Alberta.

Steadfast in her commitment to material aid, Susan devoted every spare moment of her life to serving those in need. In a short diary Susan kept while in the Middle East, she described traveling at sea. The diary shows how she scribbled knitting patterns and row counts of sweaters, slippers, and gloves she was working on. She also noted where she intended to send her handiwork: some she sent to cheer up family members, others to aid friends in need, and several to MCC.

At her memorial service, Susan's nephew Arnie Neufeld explained, "Service characterized her whole life . . . wherever she lived." From North America to the Middle East, Susan B. Peters served refugees with loving acts that strengthened her testimony to the gospel of peace.



Profiles

of Mennonite Faith: No. 58, Fall 2015.

Written by: Elizabeth Wittrig. During the summer of 2015, Liz did the research for this Profile while working as an archival intern at each of the four Mennonite Brethren archives in North America. Susan B. Peters' personal papers are preserved in the archives at the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Winnipeg (Vol. 1028).

E-mail: jon.isaak@mbchurches.ca • www.mbhistory.org

Readers are invited to recommend stories for future Profiles and to contribute church and institutional records to the nearest Historical Commission archive (Hillsboro, KS; Fresno, CA; Abbotsford, BC; Winnipeg, MB).