

Lisa Weaver, Julie Kauffman, and Judith Rempel Smucker. *On the Zwieback Trail: A Russian Mennonite Alphabet of Stories, Recipes and Historic Events*. Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2011.
Reviewed by Robert Martens

The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage. Psalms 16:6

The book begins with A for Anabaptist, and then steps quickly through the alphabet all the way to Z for Zwieback: "What a delicious ending to our Russian Mennonite alphabet!" At first glance, *On the Zwieback Trail* might seem frivolous or superficial, skipping lightly over complex and controversial historical issues. And some might wonder if another book celebrating the Anabaptist/Mennonite heritage is appropriate, in a time when that heritage is expanding far beyond its original ethnic boundaries. But *On the Zwieback Trail* turns out to be a delight. With its superb graphics and well-chosen snippets of information, the book is an excellent introduction to the Russian Mennonite heritage, especially for younger people or for newcomers to that tradition. The authors have succeeded in making history a pleasure.

As might be expected, this "Russian Mennonite Alphabet" dwells on the ethnic past: L for Low German, for example; or M for Mulberry trees grown for the silkworm industry; or Q for Question to the czar on Mennonite privileges in the Russian Empire. O is for the massive oak tree, now nearly dead, but which was for decades a landmark and meeting place in Chortitza for Mennonite colonists. "Reverence and peace could be found beneath this tree," wrote N. J. Kroeker, "which cast a spell like the biggest cathedral in Europe." And in S for Singing, refugee Justina Neufeld is quoted as saying that, despite her near starvation, "Singing ... was as necessary as food to us."

On the other hand, *On the Zwieback Trail* seems to go out of its way to emphasize Anabaptist/Mennonite values that might define the future of a non ethnic group. Peacemaking is mentioned throughout. N for Nonviolence traces the Mennonite history of pacifist principles from alternative forestry service in Russia to public protests against the war in Vietnam. M for Menno Simons highlights his teachings on nonviolence: "The prince of peace is Christ Jesus. ... True Christians do not know vengeance. They are the children of peace, and they walk in the way of peace."

On the Zwieback Trail also stresses writing and literacy as a way of sharing the past and planning the future. U for Universities and Colleges documents the institutions of higher education established by Russian Mennonites in North America. I for Ink tells the stories of the Mennonite periodicals, the *Mennonitische Rundschau* and *Der Bote*, and refers to a longstanding love of reading and publishing among Russian Mennonites. When P. M. Friesen, for example, was asked in 1885 to write a history of Mennonites in Russia, it was expected that he would finish the project quickly, in as short a time as two weeks. Instead, his massive volume of history would be published in 1911 after 25 years of research and writing.

This "Russian Mennonite Alphabet" is packed with fascinating details, even for readers conversant with that history. W for turkey red Wheat chronicles the variety of wheat that Russian Mennonite migrants brought with them to Kansas and cultivated with enormous success. T for Tractors reports that after Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) was formed in the 1920s to help alleviate hunger among post Revolution Russian Mennonites, "they realized they need to provide more than the food itself – they needed to provide a means for people to grow their own food." Forty Fordson tractors were subsequently shipped to Ukraine. And K for Kroeger tells the story of a longstanding family business of fine clockmaking: "Kroeger clocks were made by members

of the Kroeger family, beginning in Prussia in the 1700s. In the 1800s and early 1900s, they were made in the Chortitza colony in the village of Rosenthal. A Kroeger wall clock might have cost a family a month's worth of wages." Kroeger clocks are being repaired in Winnipeg by a family descendant to this day.

The tone of *On the Zwieback Trail* is usually light hearted and spirited, even gently comic. The Mennonite predilection for socializing over food – after all, many among them had survived famine – is engagingly documented in F for Fasma, the traditional late afternoon snack. "A guest will never leave a Russian Mennonite home without Fasma," write the authors, and then go on to quote: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." In Z for Zwieback, an enthusiast is quoted, "Toasted Zwieback is especially enjoyable when soaked and softened in one's coffee cup." And in B for Borscht, it is said that "Borscht seems to taste even better the second day, warmed up."

In fact, this volume accentuates the Russian Mennonite fondness for food, and includes a number of interesting recipes. P for Peppernuts, Pluma Mos, and Pancakes contains recipes for all three. The following is for peppernuts (*Pfeffernüsse*):

1 cup sugar
½ t. nutmeg
1 cup brown sugar
½ t. cardamom
1 cup shortening or margarine
½ t. anise
3 eggs
1 t. baking powder
1 t. salt
4-5 cups flour
1 t. cinnamon

Mix ingredients one after another in order. Roll dough out in skinny ropes and cut in ½ inch pieces. You can lay 4 or 5 ropes out on the table and cut through them all at one time. Bake in 350° oven for 10 minutes.

On the Zwieback Trail also highlights the enforced wanderings of the Russian Mennonites, and here the tone turns tragic. E for Emigration, the longest entry in the book, chronicles the various waves of Mennonite emigration from Russia and the USSR: the 1870s migration to North America; the refugee flights of the 1920s and of World War II; and the *Aussiedler* (emigrants) relocation to Germany from the 1970s on. Emigration often occurred under conditions of intense suffering, but the Mennonites endured and carried on. At their best, they could be models of integrity. In G for God go with you, an elderly father who is staying behind in Russia writes the following letter in 1900 to his emigrating children:

"Beloved children! Take to heart the things that come from the heart; for it is my utmost desire to stand at the right hand of God with all of you.

Avoid debt as you would avoid the devil.

Be especially concerned in all your statements to be accurate.

Promise little, but keep the smallest promise.

By diligence, honesty and painstaking integrity, make yourself worthy of your employer.

Hold onto a higher ideal than anyone places before you.

Use your energy on your own business.

Do not speculate or gamble.

Never speak evil about anyone.

Forget not the God of your father and your mother. Do not despise small churches or modest ministers. Do not strive for advantages, but rather seek to be humble. Read the Proverbs and the writings of the New Testament frequently.

The Holy God go with you and protect you."

Words spoken in the spirit of tradition and heritage: do they sound old fashioned today?

On the Zwieback Trail can be purchased at the Mennonite Historical Society Archives.