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MY FATHER WAS A FISHERMAN

A Reminiscence

My father was a fisherman. Working his way carefully through the underbrush following the banks of a narrow, fast flowing stream, in a quest for a few pan sized speckled trout, was dad's idea of life at its best.

Our first record of my father as a fisherman was of his passage out of Russia. The scene is of a nine year old boy standing on the stern of a Canadian Pacific liner, trailing a fishing line behind the ship, as she steamed across the Atlantic. He and his family were on their way from post revolutionary Russia to Canada, the promised land.

That he should be on the boat at all was not obvious. The year was 1928. Stalin was well on his way to eliminating 40,000,000 of his fellow citizens in his quest to create a new and better way of living. Terror, chaos and famine were part of day-to-day life in Russia. My father was born and raised in a village near Ufa, at the foot of the Ural Mountains. He lived with his parents, two older sisters and a younger brother. They were part of a larger Mennonite community that had migrated there from Prussia, in northern Europe, a century earlier, in a quest for freedom from religious persecution. For a hundred years, and the first time in their three hundred year history, peace and prosperity had been theirs, but now they were in the wrong place, at the wrong time.

A Mennonite exodus from Russia had been underway for about five years. Leaving was not easy. The government was in chaos and exit visas were hard to come by. Money for the passage was scarce. Early in 1928 my father's uncle, a mill owner, was travelling to Moscow to see if he could obtain the documentation to allow his family's emigration. My grandfather (his brother) asked him if, when he was in Moscow, he would be able to acquire the same exit papers for my grandfather's family. His brother expressed scepticism, but said that he would try. My great uncle returned from Moscow distraught. He had failed in his own quest for his family's emigration, but, unexpectedly, he had obtained the necessary papers for my grandfather's family¹. The family departed Russia by train. This train, it turned out, was the last train to leave Russia with Mennonite refugees. The borders of the U.S.S.R. closed behind them.

In Southampton, England, the family boarded the Empress of France on September 8, 1928 and reached Quebec City six days later. My father's first experience trolling behind a boat had not yielded any fish.

The family moved to Kitchener, where there was a large existing Mennonite population, and began the process of becoming Canadian.

Dad had a lot of fishing stories: about the big ones that he caught, about the big ones that got away, and about the adventures and adversities of his pursuit.

¹ Before my father's family departed Ufa, the uncle appeared at their house one night with a box of gold coins and asked them to hide the money. My grandmother hid the box in the stove. He retrieved them the next day. He was not seen alive again. A week later he was found dead, floating in a nearby river. Family lore has it that his hair had turned completely white.

We move forward to the late forties. Dad had been working in the bacon room at Schneiders Meats and was offered the opportunity to go out on the road and deliver meat. He accepted it. Dad had a strong artistic inclination and after a time his job evolved into setting up advertising displays for Schneiders in the towns and villages in back water Ontario. He drove a panel truck and carried a fishing rod along on his trips. After a quick glass of milk and a cookie, he luxuriated in spending the rest of his lunch hour parked beside a small stream investigating its possibilities. He spoke with special reverence of the Styx River - a tributary of the Saugeen, flowing through the hill country north and west of Durham at the base of the Bruce Peninsula. Those were good days. After a few years on the road, he began working in the office and thirty years later, retired as Schneiders' advertising manager. It was a position he attained, in part, because of those early golden days on the road creating marketing displays.

My mother reports that a significant part of their honeymoon was spent in a rowboat in a series of lakes in the Haliburton district. She remembers that Dad's most frequently uttered phrases were "just one more cast" and "lets just go around the next bend". She also reports that on the day of the birth of her first child (your author), Dad was fishing on the aforementioned Styx River with his good friend Wally Dankwardt. They were different times with different priorities.

The summer months of Dad's retirement were spent with my mother at their cottage on Lake Bernard, near Sundridge and a few kilometres above Burke's Falls. He filled his time there doing maintenance, puttering, gathering blueberries and, of course, fishing. A number of spring fed streams nearby flow into Lake Bernard and dad got to know them well. An occasional encounter with a bear added to the thrill of his pursuit. Occasionally Dad would go further a field. Sundridge is close to the western border of Algonquin Park and he would take his full sized Oldsmobile' 88 and go driving down some nearby logging roads in search of the perfect stream. We worried about this and in 1984 my brothers and I bought him a fairly wrecked Toyota Land Cruiser² for Father's Day. With four wheel drive and rugged tires, it helped ensure that he would not be stranded, whereabouts unknown, deep in a great northern wilderness. Speckled trout were a regular feature on the Bergen cottage luncheon menu.

In the late eighties, I became a one-sixth owner of a cottage on Bekanon Island in northern Georgian Bay. Three years later, my two brothers, Karl and John, and I organized a spring fishing weekend with our father at Bekanon Island. This became an annual event known as the Henry Bergen Fishing Weekend. It involved a group of friends, relatives and grandchildren, who came up when possible. The event was generally held in very early May, just after the ice was off Georgian Bay, and often before all of the snow had melted on the island. Fishing was combined with island maintenance, good meals and story telling.

The Northern Pike was the object of our quest. In early May, these fish like to be in places where the water has started warming: back bays and shallows. Many fine, chilly spring days were spent trolling from a fourteen-foot aluminium boat that found its way through the convoluted passages and shoals the large bay that extends out behind the island.

Over the years the Bergen brothers came to a realization of sorts: if we were fishing with our father, he would catch many fish, and we would catch none. This does not seem reasonable. After all we were using the same lures, the same poles and the same lines. But, with some minor exceptions, it was fact, true. Our understanding began in childhood and was confirmed in

² A machine that was featured prominently in last year's newsletter.

our adult years. Was it something in the way he tied the lure on, held his pole or the set of his teeth? We don't know, but what was clear was that in the fish catching department, in terms of our family, there was Dad, and then there was no one else.

Other people could catch fish. My brother-in-law, John Kooistra, ardent fisherman and regular participant in these events, often caught fish. Jim Reimer, a Mennonite theologian of some repute, and also a passionate fisherman, caught fish. We did not.

And so, with time, a pattern evolved. Brother Karl stayed back and pattered about on maintenance issues. I acted as guide, sitting at the stern of the boat with charts in one hand and outboard tiller in the other. John sat on the bow looking for rocks and was ready with the net. In the middle sat my father with one or two others, the fishermen.

Time passed and more than one pike made its way onto our boat with Dad and John Kooistra going neck and neck in the fish catching business. Our best story from those years involved Jim Reimer, the aforementioned passionate fishing bible scholar. Dad had caught a modest pike, but that had been our only action that day. We were trolling along a narrow channel through the islands when Jim hooked the largest pike we had encountered in our years of fishing up there. He and that fish fought for a long time, but finally it was up beside the boat. There was a problem. Our net was clearly outclassed by this fish. As well, there was some general fumbling by the support team. This gave the pike a chance to regroup. We manoeuvred the net under the fish but it was too small. The fish just rolled over, broke the line and swam back into the dark waters. Jim was almost in tears.

Jim is a theologian, and so he may experience a bit more divine intervention in his life than you and I are used to. An hour after the first fish, he hooked a second that was even larger than the first. (You see: this story is developing a clear biblical flavour). Again he played the fish and slowly, carefully getting it along side. He looked up, saw brother John holding the clearly inadequate net, recalled our last attempt and desperately reached into the water. He grasped that great pike with a mighty grip. He wrestled it into the boat and then he held it close to him until the fish was eventually subdued. When Jim finally let go, he found that his hands had been badly cut and were bleeding from all the sharp projections in the pike's gill structure. This did not matter; Jim felt no pain at all.

Usually we eat what we catch immediately, but not this fish. We drove it back intact to Jim's home in Waterloo, so that Jim could present it to his wife and teenage children. Being a renowned scholar of biblical text was one thing, but being a provider of great fish from the deep was another. People who fish understand this. On the other hand, wives and teenage children, judging by their reactions, may not.

The fishing weekend always began with the installation of Dad's dock, at his cottage. Two or three Bergen brothers would drive up to Sundridge with Dad late on Thursday and spend the night at his cottage. In the morning we would have breakfast, Dad would clean up and the brothers would take the four sections of dock and set them in the lake in readiness for the new season. From there we drove to Britt, met with the others, loaded the boat and headed off to Beganon for three days of fishing.

The 2001 Henry Bergen fishing weekend was promising to be a vintage event. In addition to the usual cast of characters, David Mathies, a friend of the family and a partner in Beganon Island, was scheduled to join us for the first time. David, a family physician in Huntsville, was also chief of staff at the Huntsville Hospital and past-president of the Ontario College of Family

Physicians. He had been experiencing a very busy year and was looking forward to three days of relaxing in an unstructured world.

Karl, Dad and I drove up to the Sundridge cottage on Thursday night. In the morning we had breakfast and Karl and I went out to launch the dock while Dad cleaned up. When we came back in Dad was sitting there, perplexed. He said that he was feeling weak and was experiencing tightness in his chest that felt like indigestion. He reported that he had been experiencing a mild version of this feeling for much of the previous week. There were a number of possibilities, but a heart attack was clearly one of them. The nearest hospital was in Huntsville, an hour south. We discussed the situation. Dad took an aspirin³ Karl and I finished the clean up expeditiously, and we all got into the van and drove south.

We called David Mathies by cell phone en route and described what was happening. David was waiting for us when we arrived at his office. He agreed with the probable diagnosis of a heart attack and checked my father into the Huntsville hospital where tests confirmed this. David said that Dad would have to spend at least three days in hospital for observation⁴. Dad was checked into a bright room with a large picture window looking out over the rocks and white pines behind the hospital. We called mom and she and brother John's wife Sharon arranged to come up to be with Dad. David introduced Dad to Malcolm Wilson, the physician who would be looking after him. Malcolm was an internist who left a teaching post at the University of Western Ontario to find a different way of living in Huntsville. It was small town Ontario, but Dad would receive excellent care.

The fate of the Henry Bergen fishing weekend was unclear until Dad called Karl and me over. He said that although it had been very nice visiting with us, it would not be a good use of time for us to sit by his bedside for the next three days, being solicitous sons, when we could, in fact, be out there fishing. Mom and Sharon would be up shortly and they could easily look after him. There were a series of phone calls and all was arranged. David Mathies and his gear were loaded into our van and we headed off to Britt. There we met with John Bergen and John Kooistra. We were on the island in time for supper.

Dad had said that we should go fishing, so on Saturday morning David Mathies and the three Bergen brothers set off to do so. It was not a great start - something along the lines of "The Three Stooges Go Fishing". Within ten minutes of trolling we had hooked bottom, lost a lure, had a spool fall off a reel resulting in a huge tangle of line and finally got another lure hooked on the keel of the boat. This was not as planned. John suggested pulling the boat up on a small island overlooking our favourite fishing hole and casting from shore. This plan was met with scepticism because, over the years, we had always caught our fish while trolling, and never while casting from shore. On the other hand, what we were doing was clearly not working. The boat was pulled up and we disembarked.

After his third cast, John called out that he was stuck on the bottom. And then the bottom moved. He had hooked a fish of legendary, in our books, proportions. After ten minutes, he had the fish close to shore and I was there with our new and much larger net. It was barely big enough. We got the fish on shore. Ten years earlier, after our first fishing weekend, David

³ A highly recommended procedure in the case of a suspected heart attack.

⁴ Dad had lived a remarkably healthy life, and in spite of an early bout with polio which left his left leg muscles somewhat atrophied, he had until this time never spent a night in the hospital. In 47 years at Schneiders he missed one day of work due to illness (the flu).

Mathies had given me a large wooden fish bonker⁵. It was a joke, implying that we would never catch anything nearly large enough to ever require this primitive weapon. Now David, our cool, experienced medical hand, got to use this bonker to quell the fish. When he was finished, he had broken the club in two.

We were all kind of breathless and stunned. John suggested that we head back to Beganon to call Dad and tell him. David said that he could do better than that and reached down to his belt and pulled up a tiny cell phone. It seemed miraculous. On that tiny island, out in the middle of a wilderness, David dialled through to his hospital, introduced himself, asked to be put through to intensive care and then asked to have my father put on the line. When you are chief of staff you can get results. He handed the phone to John. John told the story. There was joy on that island and there was joy in a hospital bed in Huntsville.

Dad was released from the hospital on Monday. For the next six weeks, he was fatigued but in good spirits. My parents went back up to Sundridge and Dad raked leaves for a couple of days. On his return to Kitchener, his heart began to act up again. On Friday, he was admitted to St. Mary's hospital. That Sunday the entire family came to visit. He told stories about his childhood, about meeting and proposing to my mother. He spoke with quiet appreciation about all of the good things in his life. The next day his heart was worse. He described himself as being very tired but with no pain at all. He was remarkably at peace with the world and almost optimistic. On Tuesday he was transferred to London and tests showed that his situation was inoperable. On June 21, Thursday morning, he woke up in good spirits. He talked with my mother and brother Karl and at 10:30 he fell asleep. A bit before noon his heart stopped.

This year's Henry Bergen fishing weekend is scheduled from May second until May sixth. Dr. Zogheib will be looking after things during my absence.

Postscript: We ate John's fish for lunch. That afternoon we returned to our fishing hole and John Bergen, John Kooistra and I each caught a fish. Dad's fishing karma had moved on to the next generation. This past summer, my father's oldest sister, Tina, the last surviving member of the family that left Russia in 1928, died at the age of ninety-one.

⁵ A fish bonker is a club used to bonk a large fish on the head to subdue it.