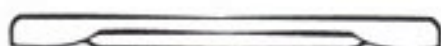


Introduction



April 16th, 2003, was a normal morning for Dave and me [Erna]. We got up about six o'clock and drank our maté (yerba tea). Dave read from the Bible and about seven o'clock he got ready to leave for work. He went down to the basement and put his shoes on, and I followed with one last cup of maté. Usually he gave me a hug, but that morning for some reason he didn't. He seemed to be in a hurry. He backed the car out of the garage and I closed the door as he drove off, not knowing that it would be the last time that I would see him alive.

About eleven o'clock, I got a phone call from Dave's brother Pete, who worked at the same golf course that Dave did. It was Pete's day off, but he wanted to know Dave's date of birth. Thinking that Pete was planning a surprise birthday party, I told him it was June 27th. I was planning a party as well. Then Pete asked what year Dave was born in, and I knew that he didn't need to know that for a party. If Dave could not remember his birthday, something must be wrong.

I asked what had happened, and Pete said that Dave had been badly cut on his leg and it did not look good. I replied that his year of birth was 1941 and Pete hung up. I was paralysed with fear—I couldn't do anything. Then Pete called again and asked me to come to the Chilliwack hospital. It was serious. On my way there, my mind raced in circles. What did Pete mean that it was serious? Would Dave's leg have to be amputated? Could Dave die of a leg injury?

Could it be possible that I will soon be a widow? Am I already one?

David Fehr's earthly life ended tragically that day in British Columbia's Fraser Valley, a long way from where he was born in a conservative Mennonite community in a remote region of Paraguay. It was a full life—marked most significantly by his distinct conversion to Christianity as a young adult and his subsequent endeavours to be a reflection of the love and grace of Christ to those around him. No doubt he fell short many times, but those who knew him testify that his intent seldom wavered. Along the way he worked hard and successfully developed different business ventures; enjoyed his family; indulged in his penchant for humour and practical jokes; and nurtured his passion for flying, ranching, and lassoing. This book is an imperfect, incomplete, and deliberately celebratory attempt by friends and family to tell Dave's story and reflect on how he affected their lives.

Every story must have a beginning, but locating that beginning can sometimes be tricky. Where to begin the story of a man born in Paraguay whose family is of German descent, speaks a centuries-old obscure German dialect, and lives in an isolated, tightly-knit Mennonite "colony"? A family that emigrated in turn from Germany to Russia to Canada, each time for reasons of religious conviction and conscience. A family that for centuries had been part of the devout Mennonite faith community that chose to live separately from mainstream society. Where to begin, so that we can appreciate the faith and distinct, yet unfamiliar culture that so shaped Dave's life and character?

We choose to take the long view and start our narrative about five hundred years ago in Europe, where the greatest social and political upheaval that western civilization has ever known was about to take place. It's a long way from June 27th, 1941, perhaps too far for readers familiar with Anabaptist and Mennonite history. For those who are not, we hope that this overview, as it relates to the Fehr family, will be engaging in its own right and provide a better understanding of the faith and culture that played a large part in Dave's life.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Erna Neufeld—Early Years, Courting, and Conversion

Erna traces her family back to Adelsheim, in Chortitza Colony in Russia. Her great grandparents, Aron Neufeld and Helen Rempel, immigrated to the U.S. and then to Saskatchewan, Canada. Their son Diedrich married Aganetha Sawatsky and farmed in the Dalmeny area of Saskatchewan before moving to the Chaco in 1926 with all but the oldest of their children. The oldest child, a daughter, did not want to leave Canada and ran away from home the night before the family left for Paraguay. The family departed anyway, taking their other children, including four-year-old Jacob, Erna's father.

The family spent the next twenty-five years working hard in Menno Colony, building a productive farm. While returning from Asunción one day on the riverboat, Diedrich fell overboard, or was pushed, and drowned. He was carrying a lot of money with him that he had withdrawn from the bank in Asunción and as it was never recovered, many people believed that he was killed for the money.

Jacob married Katharina Funk (daughter of Peter Funk and Helena Braun, both from Gruenthal, Manitoba) on July 28th, 1942, in Menno Colony. Katharina's family had also come to the Chaco from Canada in 1926 when she was just three years old. After getting married, Jacob and Katharina lived in the village of Neuanlage in Menno Colony, where they grew sorghum feed for horses and cotton. Erna recalls her early years in the Chaco and meeting Dave.

When my parents started farming, they used an ox team to plough and haul the cotton to "145"—the end station of the train line from Puerto Casado. It was about seventy kilometres one-way, and the trip often took one week. After a few years they sold the ox team and bought a mule team.



The Neufeld family, Menno Colony, Paraguay. 1946? L—R Jacob, Erna, Katharina.

My mother said that August 11th, 1943, was a cool, drizzly morning. It was a special day for Jacob and her as their first child was born. As was customary, a midwife delivered the baby, as there were no doctors. The news travelled fast in the village, especially as the name for the little girl was Erna. This was unusual, as she should have been called Katharina, or Aganetha, or Helena, or after some other relative.

On October 18th, 1944, a second child was born, a boy. Sadly, Rudi lived only five days. Something was wrong as he did not want to drink and he got sick. Grandma Neufeld was with him the entire time, and he died on her lap. Even though it was for a short time, she loved her first grandson dearly.

We lived on the farm in Neuanlage until I was ten years old. We had almost everything we needed—milk, cream, butter, eggs, chickens, beef, sweet potatoes, mandioca, and other vegetables. It was often lonely for me, as I was an only child. I remember having a little dog, a sled and harness, and a rag doll that I liked a lot. I used to visit my grandparents a lot, as they lived in the same village. I also had some school friends.

When I was young, we were pretty poor. We had a small house, just a kitchen and two bedrooms. We didn't really



Erna (Neufeld) Fehr, six years old, 1949. Menno Colony, Paraguay.

need a living room as we pretty much lived outside because it was so warm. There was no electricity, plumbing, or refrigerators.

I think my dad missed having a son, as he treated me sort of boyish. I learned to ride a horse when I was three or four. One time, my mother was leading the horse and I fell off, landing on a bunch of grass, so I was not hurt. I didn't want to get back up on the horse again, but my mother persuaded me to. I have fallen off many times since then! As soon as I was old enough to handle a horse by myself—when I was about seven or eight—my dad gave me one. Then it was my job to chase away the birds from the sorghum fields. Both the horse and I soon got tired of it!

Religion and faith were not really a big part of our life—not like Dave's family. In our village we only had a church service every third Sunday. Religion was more like a Sunday morning tradition, a habit. We were Mennonites, so we had to be baptized, go to church, and take communion. The preacher read his sermon. It was just part of life. It was quite formal and not very interesting for me as a child.

When I was ten years old, we moved to Neuheim where