



Roseanne van Renesse's story of

Louise



Unfortunately, by the time I had grown enough to consider my mother a person in her own right, she had already died. I now have so many questions and there's no one left to ask.

One of nine children born to German parents living in what was then known as Prussia, my mother, Louise Tabbert, was born on August 30, 1920, the seventh born but the sixth living. From what I've been able to piece together, the family, although not wealthy, were able to live a fairly comfortable life working their farm. Then the Red Army began its plundering march to expand Russia's territory. The army helped itself to things of interest; then burned and slaughtered the rest. My grandmother's pleas must have fallen on generous ears that day, because the entire family was spared. Traumatized and with no means to continue as before, the impoverished group picked themselves up and fled southward.

In the year my mother would turn four, the family left Hamburg, Germany, for England. The trip was rather unpleasant, as their freighter was filled with raw beef hides destined for the tannery, and reeking! Once ashore, both train and bus travel took them to Liverpool, where they boarded the Empress of Scotland, the ship that would deliver them to Canada! What a trip that must have been: rough seas, little comfort, scant food supplies. In the days of children being "seen and not heard", whatever fear or excitement little Louise was feeling must surely have been stoically locked away.

Upon reaching Canada's east coast, the family took a long, arduous journey by train. The rails came to rest in southern Alberta where, with few possessions and empty pockets, abandoned boxcars sufficed as their home for the next while. Considering all their hardships up to that point, the next step likely appeared less daunting; approaching strangers in a strange land to offer up a family's labor in exchange for food. Children worked too, and when Louise was old enough, she landed a job on a dairy farm in Claresholm. I don't know, but she must have had some schooling here. In 1935, when she was eleven, the family relocated to a small hamlet sixty miles north of Edmonton. Somehow word must have passed through the area that land was available further north. Perhaps now a new life could begin.

Rochester, Alberta, was a small farming community made up of many European immigrants seeking better lives. But these "better" lives were not easy. My father's family had ventured north some three years earlier, acting upon the same advice. If only someone had suggested stopping thirty miles to the south, life may not have been quite as difficult. Only thirty miles, it seems, was the difference between farming arable land and battling nature's intent. That land was, and continues to be, some of the most productive agricultural land in the province. Rochester, however, was bush, half-swamp and tamarack stumps.

In 1943, Louise married Gerhard Munstermann. They likely met at school or at church. I never bore witness to any real affection between my parents, and I wonder about their relationship in those days. Was Louise in danger of becoming an "old maid" (at 23), and did Gerhard feel he was saving her from that fate by marrying her? Was it simply the next phase of life – considering all available options and the circumstances in which they lived? Were they truly in love?

They got land across the road from his parents, and Louise proceeded to have babies; seven of them in a twelve year period. Chronologically, there were two boys, a girl, three boys and then me in 1956. In addition to the difficulty of raising seven children, there were long cold prairie winters, no running water or central heating. The outhouse was a fair walk from the house and electricity came later. And of course there were diapers – for years! – to hand wash and somehow get dried. I imagine that the coal-fed Booker heater burned non-stop, with a drying rack perched alongside. I recall that Booker as a source of warmth and comfort. One of my earliest memories is of waking from a nap in the dark cold of winter and my mother handing me a hefty chunk of fresh-from-the-oven bread, so warm that the butter slathered upon

it was still melting. She wrapped a blanket around my shoulders and positioned me next to that warmth until the sleepiness lifted.

We lived on a mixed farm, which meant there were grain crops, pasture land, hay crops and beef cattle. There was plenty of work to do with cows to milk, pigs and chickens to feed and a tremendously large garden to maintain. If it wasn't produced and "put up" in the summer, we would all go hungry in the winter months.

Mom's patience was tested often, having so many children underfoot. On a farm the day is not ruled by a clock. Whether it is pitch dark or the sun is up, the day begins with the animals and the chores. Before central heating, and then later the purchase of a television, we really were guided by the seasons. We were warmer in our beds and aside from schoolwork, there wasn't much reason to stay up late. Louise was a busy woman each and every day and rarely had time to herself. She was the first one up in the morning and the last to shut the day down.

Mom was a gentle soul, and I cannot imagine she foresaw all that would be required of her in the years to come. What young bride would ever perceive an entire day spent slaughtering, plucking, cutting up and pressure canning chickens? To take a living creature and be the instrument of its demise bothered her immensely. Inevitably, on those days, we would sit down to a chicken feast at the supper table, all except Mom, whose appetite had waned.

My mother fashioned nutritious meals out of an array of leftovers in record time. She baked incredible breads and pastries. She canned and preserved everything her garden and the surrounding forests provided. High bush cranberries, chokecherries, wild raspberries, blueberries, strawberries and Saskatoon berries were transformed into sparkling jams, jellies and desserts. She sewed, repaired and revamped clothing. She darned socks.

On more than one occasion, we would find her down on the kitchen floor bottle-feeding a runt-of-the-litter piglet or rubbing circulation back into a half frozen calf whose misfortune had been to be born in the dead of winter. She would, at the same time, be getting our breakfast ready and our lunches made, because the school bus would be coming at any moment.

One particularly harsh winter (likely when the boys were at the age of perpetual hunger) Mom was fearful that our Border Collie was not getting enough food, due to a lack of leftovers. No self-respecting farm was without a highly useful working dog, and ours was no exception. Mom boiled up some potatoes, sliced in a few carrots and turnips and mixed it together with "chop", a coarse grain that was usually fed to livestock. It smelled fantastic as it baked, and once it had cooled, Queenie received a massive slab of it soaked in milk. Another winter with no casualties.

Rochester was nestled in a valley, and our farm was about three miles east and on higher ground. The cold often settled in the valley, but we lived where the wind blew! Dressing her young ones for the outdoors was a task in itself. In those days it was a matter of piling on all your warm clothing at once, and then securing it with a long scarf. Upon completing this lengthy process, at least one of us would announce the need to go to the bathroom. Sometimes, out of exasperation, we were simply ejected from the house! "Find something to do and stay out of trouble," were pretty much the only guidelines.

There were not many occasions (or spare time for that matter) to socialize. Although my mother might have wished to go, my father didn't really like church, and Mom didn't learn to drive until she was well into her 40s. If a funeral, fall supper at the hall or some school function was approaching, my mother

tended to become a bit unraveled. She didn't have a lot of dress-up clothing or fancy shoes, and her hair caused her grief. Even though she'd suffer through an entire day in rollers or a head full of bobby pins, inevitably the end result would disappoint her. Sometimes, though not often, her brother Dan would show up with his brood of seven children. As happy as she was for the company, those cousins were always hungry; and Mom, being the gracious person she was, would put together sandwiches for everyone, knowing she'd have to find the time to bake up another batch of bread the following day. However, it would not have been acceptable to be less than generous. Period!

Mom had no money to call her own. A few dozen eggs sold to neighbours brought in small change. The cream she shipped to the NADP (Northern Alberta Dairy Pool) earned a cheque, the amount falling far short of the effort she put forth. She would eventually need items for the family that she could not supply herself (shoes, coats, dry goods, etc.) and would have to approach her husband for money. He would grumble while handing it over, which made her feel small and dependent, isolated. I realized too late that not nearly enough credit was given for all her inventiveness and the skill she used with what little she had at her disposal. We took it for granted, as children tend to do, and I often feel ashamed that I was so stingy with my appreciation.

Dad was not a particularly easy-going man, and we spent long days helping him pick rocks, bale hay, shovel manure, harvest, tend animals, mend fences. Even with everything on her daily plate, Mom could sense when we kids were at our limit and would stop her own tasks to haul her slim 5' 7" frame out to join us. Somehow, with her just being nearby, we felt as though we'd been rescued.

It was a routine day in 1978, when Mom's aneurism hit. I wasn't at home; none of us were. We were grown and gone. Mom knew this was the way life was supposed to be; Dad was annoyed that even though he had sired five sons, only one showed any interest in sticking around to continue working the land. And yet, there it was, a cold February morning and Mom was out milking a cow in a makeshift stall – not even in the protection of a barn. She either finished the milking or sensed something was not quite right and headed back. We'll never know. Dad was in the house, wondering what was taking so long; he was waiting for his breakfast to be served. She had crumbled in a heap of snow by the side of the road, the pail of milk wasted. His next glance out the window was when my father's life changed. He went from being the head of a household to the boss of no one.

My mother never used foul language or spoke ill of others. She was not "preachy" and yet, her faith was strong; she truly believed that the hardships endured in this lifetime would be rewarded in the next. I desperately hope that this trust rang true for her. She said that she never wanted to be a burden on others and, as it turned out, this indeed became the reality. She was in her 58th year of life when the aneurism occurred. She did not regain consciousness and then slipped away from us all. Too soon.

I hope she finally has her feet up.