

Dear Ayame,

I am fortunate to be able to see you almost everyday and I marvel at how quickly you learn new words and how you learn to do new things by working together with your mom and dad. You will be living in a world that in many ways will be different than the world in which I grew up in. I don't want to either sentimentalize or romanticize the past. What hasn't changed or what will not change is the necessity of seeking out meaning and our vocation of being truly alive. Being a human being is something that is reborn in us as we interact with the challenges and atrocities of living within the modern world. My ancestors, now your ancestors, knew the hard lessons of continually discerning the meaning of living because it cost them their very own lives.

You are the child of a long line of peasants. I say this with a sense of dignity not shame. Since the 1500's your people have been discerning the meaning of being a child of God. They found from their reading of the Bible that we cannot know who we are apart from being a part of a community dedicated to a constant search for how to live as God intends us to live. What they learned is that all human beings are free and cannot be owned or controlled by others. People should be treated fairly. Fields, forests and grazing lands are to be cared for and shared in common for the benefit of all. Taxes and laws that cause hunger and threaten the continuation of the community life God called us to live needs to be respectfully and nonviolently opposed. Solidarity with our brothers and sisters in community takes precedence over obedience to any ruling authorities. This commitment to "seeking first the Kingdom of God" resulted in over 100,000 peasants being killed by political leaders with the sanction of the Christian church in a sixmonth period in 1524.

Since that time your people have been a sojourning community. They have sought out safe places to live where they will be at least tolerated for their existence. They have been excellent farmers and have contributed to the well being of the nations to which they were invited to live. In 1753 Catherine the Great invited your ancestors and other German speaking farmers to Russia. Your ancestors were given two tracts of land, one on either side of the Dneiper River, which is in modern day Ukraine. It was a beautiful and rich area that had yet to be opened to agriculture. The colonies were independent from the Russian government. They governed themselves, they educated their children and in keeping with their pacifist beliefs, they were exempt from military service. The colonies grew in numbers and they also expanded their farmland. In the 1860's the Russian Czar decided to take away the privileges granted to your ancestral community and wanted your ancestors to become a part of Russian society paying taxes, learning in Russian schools and serving in Russia's army.

As your ancestors always have done. They gathered together to pray and to discern together how they would respond to the governments demands. After meeting together 18,000 people decided that they would rather leave the country and start a new life in the fertile prairie lands of America, that they saw being advertised in posters, than submit to the proclamation of the Czar. After your ancestors met and made their decision they informed the government on what they had decided. Shocked by the response that 18,000 people would decide to leave the country. The government changed their mind. But even after the Russian Czar changed his mind your ancestors had already had decided that God was calling them to a new land.

When it came time to leave the Mennonite Colony on the banks of the Dneiper River each family crafted their own trunk. Some of these boxes had

beautiful designs made of inlaid wood on their lids. Inside the family had to decide what kind of belongings that they would take with them for their journey and what precious items they would take because they would never return. In it they packed clothing and quilts and in between the layers of clothing, in pockets and socks they poured seeds of Turkey Red Wheat. They loaded their trunks onto a train bound for Hamburg, Germany and from there they boarded steam powered ships that were designed to carry coal for the long journey to New York. There was no Statue of Liberty to greet them when they arrived because it had yet to be built. The year of their arrival was 1874. From New York they travelled by train to Lincoln, Nebraska where a large immigrant house was built to house them as they decided where they would eventually move.

An expeditionary group was sent out to look for land on which to settle. The railroad company representatives in Nebraska showed your ancestors lands in the Western part of the state but the grass was short and so they refused to buy thinking that the nature of the place would make life difficult. They could tell the quality of the land by the grass which grew on it. On their way back to the immigrant house in Lincoln the railroad men conceded that there may be some land they were interested in. They stopped in Sutton, Nebraska and travelled 15 kilometers North on horse. The grass was so tall you couldn't see a man riding on the back of a horse. Upon returning to the immigrant house they reported on their findings and 35 families decided that this is the place that they would like to call home. In Lincoln they bought plows and livestock paying cash and headed to their new home. The railroad company built a simple structure for the 35 families to live in for that first winter. When they arrived at their destination the women cried.

They had little time to sorrow for winter was coming. The men began the process of plowing the land and preparing the soil while the women carefully unpacked their belongings from the trunks being careful to not lose any of the precious seeds that was intermingled with their belongings. After emptying their trunks they scooped up the seeds and sowed them on the land. Turkey Red proved to be very suitable to the new land to which it had been brought. The yields of this variety of wheat were superior to that of other varieties that existed in America at the time and the baking quality was unmatched. Apart from the hardship of thirty five families living under one roof that first winter the community faced little hardship due to the presence of Turkey Red Wheat. Other farmers began to take note of the Turkey Red Wheat so in the later part of the 1870's Bernard Warkentin imported 300 tons, a ship load at the time, from the Ukraine to sell to other American farmers. It was enough wheat to plant nearly 2100 ha of land. It soon became the variety of choice for American wheat growers and maintained its dominance on the American landscape until the early 1940's. Turkey Red is a beautiful variety. It is tall and its bearded heads wave like the ocean in a summer breeze. Turkey Red fell out of favor with American farmers after the Universities became involved in developing new varieties that were able to adapt to the use of chemical fertilizers. Applying chemical fertilizers to Turkey Red causes it to lodge.