

Some Bolivians Wear Bonnets and Babushkas:
A Family Story of Mennonites in South America

Research Thesis

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by

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1. Introduction

My mother was born in a Mennonite community in the outskirts of Santa Cruz, Bolivia, along with some of her younger brothers and sisters and some of my cousins. My grandparents were born in Chaco, Paraguay in the 1930s, and began their own family there (my uncles and aunts) in the late 1950s. They moved to Bolivia in 1964 and stayed there until 1980. However, I was not raised speaking Spanish because my family never spoke Spanish in the home. They belonged to (relatively) conservative Mennonite communities in both Bolivia and Paraguay who spoke a dialect of German called *Plattditsch* in their homes, churches, and schools, and maintained a degree of isolation from mainstream society.

In 2015 and 2016 I lived in Brazil and Argentina, respectively. Inevitably, I made both Brazilian and Argentine friends who came to learn a lot about my family history and me. Many of my friends remarked that I easily became a part of their local culture, that I spoke the language (Spanish or Portuguese) very well, and that I could pass for a Brazilian or an Argentine person. Whenever they learned that my mother and her side of the family were Bolivian citizens, their response was typically something like “that explains a lot,” making connections primarily between my Spanish skills, personal interest in Latin American cultures, and family history. These connections were assumptions; my mother’s first language was Plattditsch, and I learned Spanish in school. My interest in Latin American cultures came from my desire to learn about these languages and cultures, and it was the course of study that I decided to pursue for my undergraduate degree. Only recently did I realize that my studies of the Spanish language and Latin American cultures and literatures could help me understand more about my own family, our history, and myself.

I realize that I probably would not have pursued my family's history through this lens had I not dedicated my studies to Spanish and this region of the world. It is necessary then to recognize that I am coming at this from an angle of general and basic understanding and knowledge of the history and some of the mainstream cultures of Central and South America, meaning that the more I have studied these regional histories and cultures, the more I have understood how my family's culture (and Mennonite culture, generally) is different. When I returned from South America to the United States in 2016, I had a mini identity crisis. I seriously thought, for about a month, that I was Latina because my family was Bolivian. Even though my mother's family was from a Mennonite community that did not even speak the same language as everyone else around them, I qualified all of us as Latinos on the basis that we were still from Bolivia and Paraguay and that somehow these places were significant to our self-identification. Perhaps drawing this conclusion was a mistake; Hispanic/Latino identity is a complicated and complex topic, and claiming this label indexes a set of stereotypes, ideas, and sometimes a general cultural history that my family does not fit (as well as many families that identify as Hispanic/Latino).

I argue that living in Bolivia and Paraguay was significant for my family because we maintain certain traces of the cultures of these countries, like food, habits, or practices, which are still significant for us today. The Mennonites, despite being a closed, conservative, religious and cultural group concerned with the preservation of their way of life, had to reproduce their culture in new environments as a result of their migrations. However, the reproduction of their culture was never the same as it had been before; out of necessity and circumstance, certain traces of their new environment's way of life were adopted and adapted into their families as well as into mine. Therefore, even the most isolated group can, to some degree, account for cultural

adaptation. My family's "Bolivianness" comes from their memories, stories, practices, and language. When I say that my family is "Bolivian," I do not mean that they are ethnically, nationally, or even culturally Bolivian, but that they adopted Bolivian cultural traits, which I will elaborate on in the following sections.

2. Auto-ethnography and methodology

This study is a unique kind of ethnography or rather auto-ethnography. I am both an insider and an outsider in the sense that I am writing about my own family history and have experienced my family's Mennonite culture first-hand, while never having been to Bolivia or Paraguay or lived in a Mennonite community. There are certain assumptions made about ethnographers who study their own communities, like the fact that many "insiders" may overlook important details of these communities. Ana Celia Zentella writes, "[a]ny researcher who comes from the racial and/or ethnic group s/he is studying and assumes 'I know that community because I lived in one like it' may ignore significant regional, generational, and intra-cultural differences that distinguish one community from another" (7). While I know my own family very well, I never lived in a Mennonite community because my mother left the Mennonites before I was born, so I do not "know" my community of interest like other auto-ethnographers might. I believe this to be an advantage primarily because I have access to members of a community who trust me enough to be interviewed by me, while most of the information that I gathered in my interviews was brand new to me. All of the family members that I interviewed willingly and happily shared their stories with me, and the vast majority of what they said I had never heard before. Being an insider and an outsider at the same time allows me the special

ability to access what only an insider can and to analyze it with the eyes of an outsider, meaning that important details will not be overlooked.

However, being an outsider can also have its downsides. Marcia Farr begins *Rancheros in Chicagoacán* by questioning whether “‘outsiders’ could ever really understand ‘insider’ meanings and whether or not studying other people was even ethical because it turned them into ‘objects’” (xi). Since my “subjects” are my family members, I cannot analyze their interviews through an objective lens, and I cannot see them as objects. They are my family before they are interviewees for an undergraduate thesis. Even though their stories are new to me, my desire to share them does not come from a place of wanting to expose them as novelty. I want to share our story because it is important to me, to my family, and because I genuinely believe that other people who have found themselves in identity limbo can identify with it.

The information that I use for this thesis was collected through five private, one-on-one interviews with some of my relatives. Because the majority of them live in Steinbach, Manitoba, Canada, many of the interviews were conducted over Skype, FaceTime or Facebook video call and were audio-recorded onto my computer. I also took hand-written notes of important parts to remember. I do not identify them by their relationship to me and everyone will appear under a pseudonym to protect their privacy and maintain confidentiality.

Their memories and stories are integral in the development of section four, which explains my family’s background and history. To put their words into this text, I went back and listened to the interviews, searching for elements of Bolivian culture and sentiments of “home” to argue my main point. It is important to note that the questions I asked in the interviews were meant to focus on our family’s history and the personal impact that living in Paraguay and

especially Bolivia had on each of my family members. This personal impact is what I look for in my analysis of the audio recordings.

3. Historical Background

Before I tell my family's story in Bolivia, I will begin with the general history and background of the religious beliefs and migrations of the Mennonite people beginning in the early sixteenth century. Without explaining this, at least briefly, there is no way that we can understand how Mennonites came to build communities in Bolivia in the early twentieth century, nor can we understand why they are seen (and see themselves) as "outsiders" or even "extranjeros" ("foreigners") in Bolivia (Kopp 105). I will begin with the religious history of the Anabaptists and the evolution of Mennonite communities following the Protestant Reformation in Germany during the sixteenth century. I will continue with the migratory history of the South German and Swiss Mennonites to the United States, and focus more closely on the trajectory of the North German and Dutch Mennonites (from where my family comes) to Russia in the eighteenth century, to Western Canada in the nineteenth century, and to South America in the twentieth century. Finally I will give an overview of their religious and cultural beliefs, which explain the principal reasons behind their mass migrations: conservative, Mennonite education and the refusal to participate in the military or any government service.

It should be noted that there are not many sources on the migratory history of the Mennonites. The two main sources that I use to provide historical background, the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online and the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada, largely provide the same story, but there are contradictions in population numbers and dates of migrations. These sources also consider Mennonites as a religious group, while I consider them

to be both a religious and cultural group. This is an important distinction that I will elaborate on later. The authors of these sources, Cornelius Krahn, H. Leonard Sawatzky, and Derek Suderman, are all of Mennonite origins like myself (Goossen; Martens; Suderman). Therefore it is necessary to recognize that bias will be present in the histories they recorded.

The beginnings of Mennonite religious beliefs are found shortly after the Protestant Reformation in the beginning of sixteenth century Germany, around the year 1525 (Suderman). Along with Martin Luther's departure from the Roman Catholic Church and the groups that followed his lead, there were other radical groups that emerged during this time: the Anabaptists, or "re-baptizers" (Suderman). They believed that baptism was a conscious choice and a public declaration of Christian faith; therefore they rejected child baptism and began baptizing adults. This was done in defiance of what Roman Catholic Church leaders taught and was not a part of what other mainstream Protestant reformers believed. For this reason, both the Protestant and Catholic institutions severely persecuted the Anabaptists from 1525 until the beginning of the seventeenth century, and led them to migrate to other countries in search of religious freedom (Suderman). Menno Simons, a Roman Catholic priest from Holland, left Catholicism in 1536 and became an important leader of the Anabaptists, founding the religious foundation of the Mennonites. The word "Mennonite," describing Menno Simons' followers, is derived from his name (Suderman). Simons published texts on beliefs that are now at the core of Mennonite practices, especially peace: a communal rule of nonviolence in all situations, which explains the Mennonites' refusal to participate in military or government activity.

The Mennonites of South Germany and Switzerland followed William Penn's example of leading the Quakers to religious freedom in Pennsylvania and migrated to Germantown, Pennsylvania in the early 1680s (Suderman). About a century later, Catherine the Great II of

Russia, knowing the Mennonites' reputation as exceptional farmers, invited the Mennonites of North Germany and Holland to cultivate lands along the Dnieper River in a settlement called the Chortitza Colony (Suderman). This migration to Russia was a protest on the part of those who moved against Mennonite assimilation to mainstream society in Germany, Holland, and Switzerland, and a movement to preserve their Mennonite traditions, maintain their nonconformity to society, and minimize their contact with the "outside world" (Krahn & Sawatzky). For this reason, they are known as the Old Colony Mennonites because of their conservative beliefs or Chortitza Mennonites because of their location on the Chortitza River in Russia (Krahn & Sawatzky; Suderman). I will refer to them as the *Altkolonier* (from their native language Plattdeutsch, meaning Old Colony) Mennonites for the rest of this section (Kopp; Krahn & Sawatzky).

The *Altkolonier* Mennonites migrated to Russia because of Catherine the Great's promise that they could live, practice their religion, and educate their children privately and freely in their own communities, without the interference of the Russian government. One of my interview participants, Julia, said that Mennonites were "self-governing" in Russia, meaning that they were very much outside of the influence of the Russian government and therefore "privileged" (Interview #1). From 1789 until 1859, the *Altkolonier* Mennonites colonized lands in Russia from the first settlement on the Chortitza River to Siberia, growing in numbers from 400 families to a population of over 34,000 people (Suderman). However, in the 1870s, the Russian government began interfering in Mennonite communities primarily in the educational sector. These communities had their own schools in which *Altkolonier* Mennonite children were taught to speak, read, and write Plattdeutsch, or Low German. The Russian government wanted the language of instruction to be changed from Plattdeutsch to Russian, and for Mennonite schools to

comply with the standards of education set by the Department of Education of Russia (Krahn & Sawatzky). Altkolonier Mennonite colonies were no longer isolated from Russian mainstream society as they had been almost a century earlier, and with this increased contact with the outside world came obligations to governmental service or even military service, to which many of the Altkolonier Mennonites were strictly opposed, especially those who were more conservative (Krahn & Sawatzky). In order to avoid integration into the Russian education system and later obligations to serve the emerging Soviet military, many Altkolonier Mennonites left Russia and migrated to Canada, although some stayed behind.

According to Krahn & Sawatzky, the migration of 3,240 Altkolonier Mennonites from Russia to Manitoba, Canada, took place between 1874-1880. In contrast, Suderman writes that from “1873 to 1884, about 8,000 Mennonites migrated to Manitoba” and that 21,000 more followed in the 1920s and 1930s because of the new communist regime in the Soviet Union (Suderman). In Manitoba, a series of events similar to those in Russia ensued. The Canadian government had an agenda to develop the western prairies (present-day Manitoba and Saskatchewan) and received the Mennonites for their farming skills, just as Catherine the Great II of Russia had a century earlier (Suderman). For a few decades, the Altkolonier Mennonites enjoyed the “privilege” of freely educating their children and practicing their religion the way they saw fit, until the School Attendance Act of 1916 was passed by the federal Canadian government (Krahn & Sawatzky). Under this Act, private schools were to conform to public education standards or else the Canadian government would condemn the schools. “Once a private school was condemned the Minister of Education had the right to appoint school trustees who would establish a public school with compulsory attendance” (Krahn & Sawatzky). The Altkolonier Mennonites in Manitoba ran 22 schools for seven months of the year, attended by

girls between the ages of 7-13 and boys between the ages of 7-14. These schools did not conform to Canadian public education standards, so the government established district schools with government-employed teachers for Mennonite children. However, when the parents deliberately refused to send their children to these schools as a protest, the Canadian government required public school attendance for Mennonite children, fined, and even jailed Mennonite leaders (Krahn & Sawatzky). Between 1919 and 1921, male leaders of the colony from both Manitoba and Saskatchewan, began investigating the possibility of migrating again, and the Altkolonier Mennonites set their sights on Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Alabama, Mississippi, Quebec, Mexico, and Paraguay (Kopp; Krahn & Sawatzky; Interview #1 with Julia). The Mennonites took interest in these places primarily because large areas of land were available and because the local governments (state or national) seemed interested in offering them the privileges of educating their children privately and exemption from military service (Krahn & Sawatzky). However, many of these governments did not officially agree to grant the Mennonites their requests, and no migrations ensued. Mexico was the principal country willing to agree to their requests and in the 1920s, many Altkolonier Mennonites left Canada to live primarily in the state of Durango (Krahn & Sawatzky).

Knowing that the Altkolonier Mennonites were looking for a new place to live, both the Bolivian and Paraguayan governments entered a sort of contest to bring them into their countries, with the intention of settling the conflict in the Chaco region. Wanting to claim “sovereignty” over Chaco (lying to the north of Paraguay and the east of Bolivia), both the Bolivian and Paraguayan governments sought Mennonite migration to cultivate these lands under their authority and therefore establish the Chaco region as an official part of their country (Kopp 46). Paraguay won the “contest” and in 1927, a group of Mennonites from Canada migrated to the

city of Filadelfia, in the northern part of the Chaco region (Kopp 46). Between the years 1932 and 1935, Bolivia and Paraguay fought each other in the Chaco War for control of the Gran Chaco region, which Paraguay won. Interestingly enough, the Chaco Mennonite colonies helped the Paraguayan army by opening up roads and offering food and water to passing soldiers (Kopp 46).

Thirty years later, Bolivia reentered into contact with the Altkolonier Mennonites in Paraguay, asking them to cultivate their lands in light of the Agrarian Reform and the Revolution of 1952 (Kopp 46, 94). “The Agrarian Reform of 1953, retaking Bolivarian intentions, adopted structural changes which leveled the path to capitalism in farming and its conversion into a key component of the national economy” (Kopp 38)^a. This reform freed those working on plantations and promoted them to a farmer’s status, gave communal lands back to indigenous people, and promoted capitalism in its three components: land ownership, production systems, and work regimen (Kopp 37-38). It sought to modernize the agricultural sector of eastern Bolivia (Santa Cruz) without crossing the boundaries of traditional power (Kopp 38). In 1955, the Mennonites received an invitation from Bolivia to work in their agricultural sector, and the Bolivian government issued a decree guaranteeing the “privilege” of freedom of religion for Mennonites, but required Mennonite children to attend Spanish-speaking schools with Bolivian teachers (Kopp 94). However, this decree, seeking to encourage Mennonite migration to Bolivia, was unsuccessful as only 100 Mennonite families arrived during this time (Kopp 47). A second decree in 1962 revoked this requirement, extending the “privilege” of the Mennonites to include the freedom to educate their own children within their communities, and to facilitate their

^a “La Reforma Agraria de 1953, retomando las intenciones bolivarianas, adoptó los cambios estructurales que allanaron el camino hacia el capitalismo en el agro y su conversión en componente clave de la economía nacional” (Kopp 38).

migration to Bolivia (Kopp 94). Under this decree, more Mennonites (especially from Mexico) migrated to Bolivia to solve their own communities' overpopulation problems. However, it is unknown whether the second decree in 1962 significantly affected the Mennonites' incentives to move to Bolivia, since the requirement to learn Spanish in Bolivian schools was never enforced under the first decree (Kopp 47).

3.1. Mennonites as "Outsiders"

There are three principal mass migrations of the Altkolonier Mennonites pertaining to my family's history that I have outlined above: from Germany to Russia in the eighteenth century, Russia to Canada in the nineteenth century, and Canada to South and Central America in the twentieth century. Here I will clarify the reasons why the Altkolonier Mennonites migrated.

The Mennonites see themselves as their own nation. Historically, conservative Mennonites have believed that their allegiance is to God, not to any one country or nationality; therefore they belong to God's nation (Suderman). While they may possess a country's citizenship, this is seen as secondary to their role as citizens of "God's country," or heaven (Suderman). For this reason, Mennonites adopted an extreme and unique anti-authoritarian view of worldly governments. They are considered anti-authoritarian because they reject the rule of secular governments, not because they reject the idea of authority itself. As Christians, they submit themselves to the authority of God, the Bible, and its interpretations (Suderman). Their anti-authoritarianism in the secular world included refusal to participate in governmental service or political life, especially military service. They also maintain a firm stance of pacifism in

conflict, which is religious in its nature (Jesus was not violent) and another reason for their refusal to serve in any country's military or participate in political life (Suderman).

Mennonites also hold firm beliefs on education: they want to educate their children in the way that they see fit, to avoid the influences of the "outside world" (Krahn & Sawatzky). Because conservative Mennonite groups did not adhere to governmental standards of education, this was a primary reason for all three of the mass migrations outlined above. Government curriculum for Mennonite children would essentially require assimilation of Mennonite communities into the mainstream society of the host country: it would require the community to learn the country's host language (not Plattditsch), and would (in the cases listed above) secularize their education. For this reason, the maintenance of private schools was seen as a primary way to preserve their religious and cultural beliefs. When the government threatened to interfere in Mennonite private education, conservative Mennonites left in search of a country whose government would respect their request to live in cultural isolation.

Mennonite migrations then, have been *conservative* responses to preserve their culture and religious beliefs. In all of these migratory cases, there were sections of Mennonite communities that could not afford to migrate, or were in a more "liberal" disposition to begin assimilation into the host country's society. It was the most conservative Mennonites that embarked on these journeys, concerned primarily with preserving their way of life (Krahn & Sawatzky). However, the reproduction of their lifestyle in a new environment is what interests me the most: "When a religious group adhering to a conservative cultural pattern breaks away from a mother settlement and proceeds to establish a new entity, it is likely to make some adjustments in its economic, social, and cultural life to its new environment" (Krahn & Sawatzky).

4. Family Background

From the five interviews that I conducted with my family members, Julia, Natalia, Aline, Sarah, and Barbara, I have pieced together our family history and background through the paternal line (they knew less about their maternal line, but said that the two histories were similar). The purpose of this section is to orient my family in the context of South America: I will explain why they were there, how my relatives grew up and lived there, and their opinions and beliefs about being “separate” from the rest of Bolivia and Bolivian locals. However, it is worth noting that this account is reconstructed from what I understood from the memories of my relatives. It is not guaranteed to be completely correct. What interests me more is how my relatives remember their lives in Bolivia, and how they retell this story to others. These memories have more influence on their identity than historical accuracy does. According to Stuart Hall, “[cultural identity] is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth” (Hall 226). The majority of this account of our family history comes from Julia, although Natalia, Aline, and Barbara contributed to it as well, each having a different point of view.

When recounting this story, my relatives always begin in the 1870s with my great-great-great-grandparents. The reason for this (I suspect) is because the Mennonites did not leave their origins (Germany, Switzerland, Netherlands) until the late 1700s, and there were many destinations for Mennonites fleeing persecution during this time. The migrations of the 1870s distinguished to which Mennonite group my family belonged: the “Russian” Mennonites that migrated to Russia/Ukraine and settled an area along the Dnieper River called the Chortitza (or Gortitza, as my family says) colony, near present-day Zaporizhia, Ukraine (Interview #4). In 1876, our ancestors left Ukraine for America and settled in Minnesota. The next generation left Minnesota for Canada to look for work in the provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan, where

they began families and settled down. In Canada, Mennonites were essentially self-governing, running their own private schools (Interview #1). However, the Canadian government began implementing mandatory public school attendance, which certain Mennonites believed to be a threat to their freedom of religion, since their schools were the main arena for teaching children the faith (they only baptized adults), with basic reading, writing, and arithmetic, but lacking many other subjects. In 1927 my great-grandmother and her family moved to Paraguay with a wave of other Mennonites from Manitoba to a settlement called Puerto Casado.

Julia described our family's migration to Puerto Casado, and the difficult living conditions that people faced while living there:

"In 1927, is when both grandma and grandpa's parents moved, made a track to Paraguay. They crossed by railroad over Canada to New York, where they got on a boat. They were on a ship for 21 days. And they ended up in Argentina, and in Argentina they got uh... [stuttering]... like they're not wagons, they're... carts."

"Caravans, right?"

"Yeah, they were like, it was a caravan of carts and, and ox. Very few people could afford horses 'cause they were very expensive... uh... and the military used them. So the horses were not available to the farmers so they used oxen. And so from Argentina they tracked... a caravan tracked to Paraguay, being a landlocked country, you know, they had... they couldn't just land there, you know? In Paraguay... they had to track across Argentina to Paraguay."

"Yeah, wow."

"Yeah. And they lived in a group of people in tents, for one year. It was called Puerto Casado."

“Puert—”

“Puerto Casado. And in Puerto Casado, a lot of people died... because... they got sick. And illness amongst people. So sometimes, if you were sitting and visiting with grandma, she would refer to all kinds of people who were her relatives, who are not blood-related. But it was because spouses died, children died, some parents both died and they left children behind, and families adopted and remarried, you know? To... to... people that had lost spouses got married, and so that’s how there’s quite a bit of people that grandma would refer to as relatives that are actually not blood-related.” (Interview #1)

I do not know if it can be assumed that my family was a part of the exact migration from Canada to Paraguay that Adalberto Kopp describes in 1927. According to his research, the destination for these Mennonites was Filadelfia, which lies about 220 kilometers west of Puerto Casado. However, Natalia mentioned her childhood in a village called Lichtfeld, which is only fifteen kilometers away from Filadelfia (Interview #4).

Both of my grandparents were born in a Mennonite community in Chaco, Paraguay, where they met and began their family. From Natalia’s interview, I assume that this community was Lichtfeld, Paraguay. Their oldest children, including Natalia, Julia, and Aline, were also born there. In 1964, they moved to the Rheinlander Colony in Bolivia to farm (Interview #1). “The invitation of Mennonite colonies to Bolivia is a result of the government’s concept that modern agricultural development would require external contribution in capital and technology since the country did not have them” (Kopp 94)^b. Other Mennonites who had gone before them

^b “La invitación de colonos menonitas a Bolivia resulta del concepto de los gobiernos de que el desarrollo de la agricultura moderna requeriría de aportes externos en capitales y tecnologías puesto que el país carecía de ellos” (Kopp 94).

said that the climate was better, cooler, and not desert-like as Chaco had been. In Bolivia, my family farmed everything—whatever was selling best at the time: cotton, soya, yucca/cassava/manioc, sweet potatoes, beans, and kaffir corn. They would plant vegetables in the winter, in what they called winter gardens, so that the summer sun would not scorch the plants. They knew how to farm these vegetables: when the moonlight was right for planting the seeds (a Bolivian practice), when to butcher an animal so the meat was tender (Interview #4). They always had cattle, hogs, and chickens for eggs. Most of the food they ate was grown in their own backyard or hunted. Grandma worked in the home, making everything from scratch. She was well known in the community for her cheese and butter. Grandpa was a cowboy and hired Bolivians from Spanish-speaking villages nearby to help our family work the fields (Interviews #1, #3, #4, and #5).

My family lived in the Rheinlander Colony for one year, where interacting with non-Mennonites was forbidden (Interview #1). Being too conservative for their preference, they soon moved to Colonia Canadiense (Canadian Colony—named for the Mennonites who came from Canada) twenty-five kilometers east of Santa Cruz, which was a little more open-minded and “freer.” There, my grandparents conceived the rest of their children, including my mother. In Colonia Canadiense, they all had interactions with people outside of their Mennonite community, stories which I will tell in the next section. After living in Colonia Canadiense for ten years, they moved to a new settlement called Morgenland in the middle of the jungle, very isolated from other “civilizations” but close to an Ayoreo tribe. They stayed on this settlement for three years before moving to Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada in 1980, where many of their relatives still lived. My interview participants (and my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and mother) were all born in either Paraguay or Bolivia but moved to Canada later on in their lives. Their relatives in Canada

were those who did not move to Paraguay in 1927. Only one man from our family, my great-grandfather, left for Paraguay during this time with his wife's family. The rest of his family remained in Manitoba, and the following generations in Canada kept in contact with those in Paraguay and later Bolivia (Interview #1, #3, and #5). Barbara explained why our family moved back to Canada:

“Okay so, that would go back to the influence of my family, particularly my father’s family, and his younger brother, would come visit us every so often from Canada to Bolivia. And they—the encouragement from them was always for my father to bring his family back to Canada.”

“Do you know what—why they encouraged...?”

“Oh, well they just thought it would be a better... better opportunity, a better life for us all. Better education, I think particularly, an easier life...for us. Um...”

“Do you think that like... education was important to your family?”

“Not particularly. Not the importance that I would have in my mindset for... my children, growing up in North America.”

“Do you think that... but do you still think that education was a big reason why they ended up leaving?”

“In my parents’ mind, I don’t think that would have been the first and foremost reason. If I—from what I understand if I understand my parents is, is that it was just a better life in general, that’s what they had thought. Um... [pause]... and perhaps an easier life. And a different way of life. And so we came to Canada as landed immigrants, which means that before we could enter Canada, we had visas—we had working visas, we had jobs. All of

those of us who were working age had jobs and there was a home that was secured for us...

“And your—and grandpa’s family did that?”

“And grandpa’s family did that, his younger brother, and his uncles and aunts would have done that for us.” (Interview #5)

However, before moving to Winnipeg in 1980, life inside of the conservative Mennonite communities was often difficult for my relatives. In the interviews, many of my relatives described school as basic and rather boring, where they were taught to read and write in High German (as opposed to Low German or Plattdistch spoken in the homes) by reading and writing Bible verses, and church as “mundane” (Interview #1). However, none of my family members spoke about the Mennonites exclusively as a religious group. They all referred to the Mennonites as a cultural group, either directly or indirectly, multiple times. Much of the difficulty that my family experienced arose from their separation from the outside world. In the following excerpt, Julia indirectly refers to the Mennonites as a culture and talks about how they maintained separation from other cultural groups:

“We lived very secluded from the... the... local... like the local people. Yes we had them around us and yes we hired them as workers, and we sold them stuff, we had interactions with them, but we were still very separate from them. And... and actually, we were taught to fear other cultures.”

“Okay, do you—what exactly do you mean by that?”

“If we were walking down the street to the neighbors to visit our friends or something, when we saw a car coming, because the Mennonites didn’t—there was

maybe two cars in the... two or three people that could afford cars in the colony—when I was a young girl, when we saw a car coming that we didn't recognize, we would hide in the bushes.” (Interview #1)

The reason behind maintaining such a degree of separation from non-Mennonite people stemmed from the fear that exposure to the outside world would jeopardize the Mennonite Christian faith. However, Aline and Natalia did not seem to think that this was the only reason for separation from Bolivian locals. Referring to the Mennonites as a cultural group, they identified prejudice, specifically racism as a “practice” by the *white* Mennonite society:

“No. I thought—I always think in our home, racism was not taught. As a community... as a white society, uh... yes there was racism going on. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah that does. Yeah... that's... so like, the Mennonite—the larger Mennonite community was...”

“Yeah like the white society. Like we were called the... the... uh... chaqueños... uh... the gringos.” (Interview #4)

The two excerpts from Julia and Natalia are astonishing examples of how the Mennonites in Bolivia saw themselves: not only as a religious group, but also as a cultural and even ethnic group. They were even identified by other Bolivians as *chaqueños* (people from the Chaco region of Paraguay) or *gringos* (immigrants, normally white). Therefore, I think that maintaining separation from Bolivia's mainstream society was not simply a matter of religion. It was also about maintaining cultural and ethnic separation from the local Bolivian people. This was an extreme belief taught by the larger conservative Mennonite society, but it did not always hold strong in my own family's household. My grandfather was actively involved in work outside of

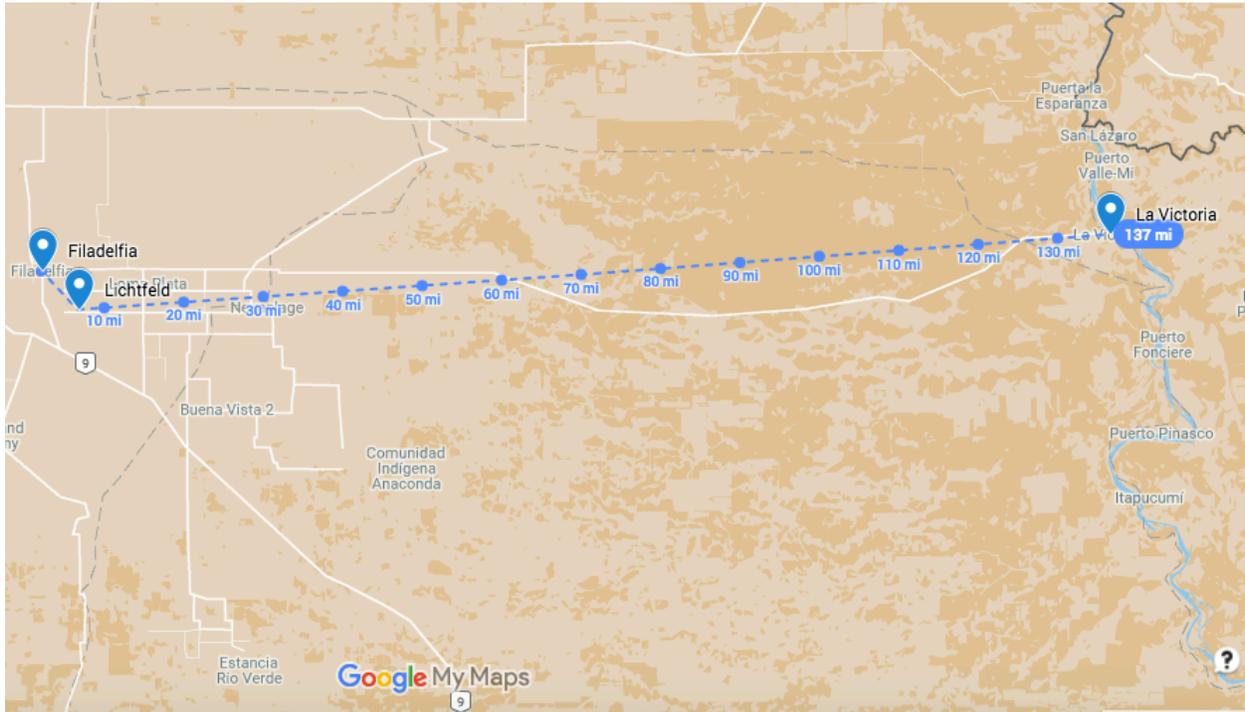
the Mennonite colony with local Bolivians, as were some of his siblings (Sarah's father especially, who later left the Mennonite community). Spanish was an important part of my family's daily life because it was the language through which my grandfather made a living. Many of its words were adopted into the Plattditsch that my family spoke at home through interactions had while working alongside other locals.

Map 1



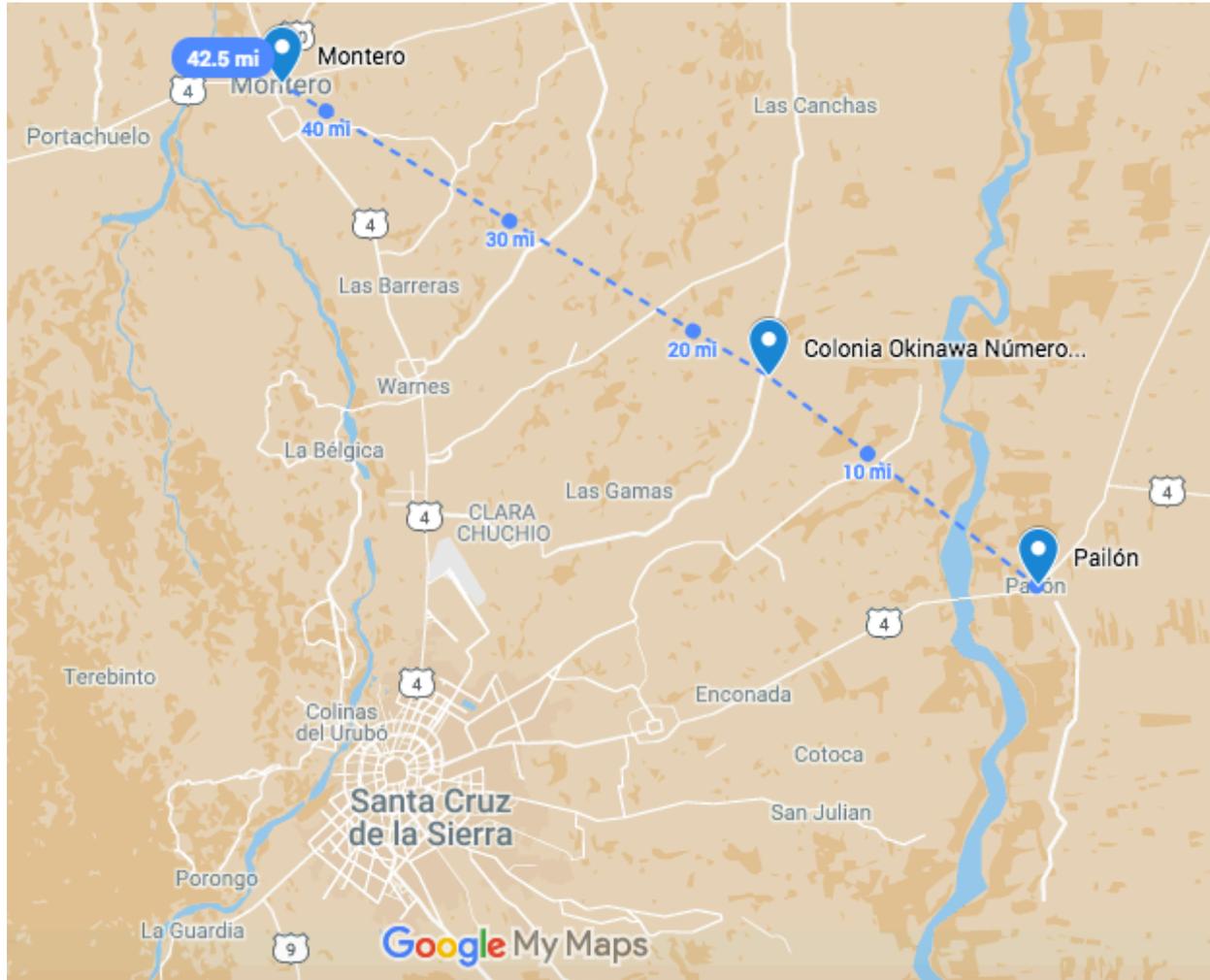
Screenshot from Google My Maps account, labeling the places in Paraguay and Bolivia where my interview participants lived, and the places mentioned by some of my outside sources.

Map 2—Paraguay



Screenshot from Google My Maps account, showing La Victoria (Puerto Casado) and Lichtfeld in relation to Filadelfia, a colony mentioned by Kopp. The distance between Lichtfeld and Puerto Casado is about 130 miles (209 km), and the distance between Filadelfia and Lichtfeld is about 7 miles (11 km).

Map 3—Bolivia



Screenshot of Google My Maps, showing the distances between places in Bolivia where my family *may* have lived. I could not find the Rheinlander Colony, Colonia Canadiense or Morgenland on any map, so I used Colonia Okinawa and Pailón as reference places. I could not find a reference place for the Rheinlander Colony. Based on my interview with Julia, I knew that Colonia Okinawa was close to Colonia Canadiense, so here I use Colonia Okinawa to show the general location of Colonia Canadiense. Barbara mentioned the name “Pailón” in her interview, and other interviewees (Aline, Natalia, Julia) said that Morgenland was right on the Rio Grande. I assume Morgenland is close to Pailón and use Pailón to show the general location of Morgenland. Montero is where Sarah went to Catholic boarding school, outside of the Mennonite colonies. Montero is about 25 miles (40 km) from Colonia Okinawa, and Colonia Okinawa is about 17 miles (27 km) from Pailón. Montero, Colonia Okinawa, and Pailón are all between 25 and 30 miles (40 and 48 km) away from Santa Cruz.

5. Finding the Traces

Many years later, after living in Canada for over a decade (1980-1993), my grandparents moved back to Bolivia. They sold their house in Canada, lived in Bolivia for six and a half years, but had to return to Canada because my grandfather's health was declining and there was better health care in Canada, along with his children to take care of him. My grandfather missed living there very much and it cost him his house and his job (in Canada) to go back and live in Bolivia again (Interview #4). These sentiments of Bolivia as "home" are what interest me, and many of my relatives have said that they expressed these sentiments in the past. Perhaps Bolivia is not home at the present moment for my mother's generation, but it was certainly home for my grandparents, having lived there for 22 years in total (1964-1980, 1993-1999) and being the place where they raised their entire family. Taku Suzuki, who studies a transnational Japanese community called Colonia Okinawa near Santa Cruz, Bolivia, has an interesting perspective on identity. (An interesting side note is that Colonia Okinawa and Colonia Canadiense are located very close to each other; Julia specifically remembers interacting with Japanese people from this exact colony.) He writes that, "...individual identities are defined here as contested and shifting 'positions' in which subjects are placed and place themselves in relation to other individuals and institutions" (Suzuki 4). I understand all of this to mean that an individual occupies multiple "subject positions," like socioeconomic status, occupation, ethnicity, citizenship, language, education, religion, gender, etc., which index certain identities (Suzuki 4; O'Sullivan 310). All of these subject positions converge and sometimes contradict each other, and this convergence changes along the course of a person's life, because the subject positions of any given person are changeable. For example, my family living in Canada identifies as Mennonite (in relation to non-Mennonite Canadians) and Bolivian (in relation to non-Bolivian Mennonites). My family

members had Bolivian citizenship in Bolivia, but it is likely that they identified only as Mennonites in relation to other Bolivian locals, instead of identifying as Bolivians. Living in Bolivia was meaningful for my family, and *still is* meaningful in the way they identify themselves today because the “subject positions” they embodied at that time were all within and in relation to the context of Bolivia: my grandfather was a farmer in Bolivia, my aunts and uncles grew Bolivian food crops, Sarah went to a Bolivian Catholic school, and everyone had Bolivian citizenship. In this section, I will explain how my family interacted within their Mennonite community and outside of it, and how these interactions impacted them as individuals. I will also explore the ideas behind how language affects the speaker’s sense of community, and how this is heavily tied to my family’s identity.

5.1. Language as an Identity Marker

One of the most interesting parts about these interviews with my family members is the fact that many of them had a great desire to learn Spanish. I never explicitly asked if they had wanted to learn it, but they expressed a sentiment of curiosity, of wanting to be able to interact with other people through the stories they told me, like Aline’s below, where she recalled how she and her siblings worked in the corn fields for a Spanish-speaking family who lived in a nearby village:

“And this family, they had three boys, and their youngest son was—I was twelve, he was fourteen—and he was, he had a crush on me and I had a crush on him... [laughter]... because he was not German! He was Spanish, I think one of his grandfathers was half German, but they were a Spanish family, mixed. That was

my first ever crush. His name was Page. They called him Peggy. He was Spanish, I couldn't talk with him!" (Interview #3)

This desire to learn Spanish was not unique to Aline or the situation of having a crush. Every relative that I interviewed said many times that their father was very good at speaking Spanish, and that he had many friends outside of the colony, friends that would be invited over to visit and friends that would host our family in turn. They also spoke at length about the Spanish-speaking people that would help them work the fields. These people and their Spanish language undoubtedly had a profound influence on my family, especially my mother, aunts and uncles who were children at the time. Dr. Anna Babel, a professor of a course I took at Ohio State, said on the first day of class that there is no such thing as a language, rather that there are speakers of languages (Babel). In this sense, the Spanish that my relatives learned was not because they interacted with Spanish as a language in itself, but rather because they interacted with Spanish-speakers who were important for their survival in Bolivia. Through these interactions, Spanish words were incorporated into Plattdeutsch that was spoken exclusively in Mennonite communities; in the interviews, everyone knew and used a few Spanish words and phrases, for example: *campesino, río, pan, chaqueño, gringo, suegro, cuñado, empanada, hola mi amor*. It is true that understanding a few words of a language cannot be equated with being conversational or fluent in a language, but each of my family members “learned” Spanish to varying extents based on what they did in Bolivia. My grandfather, working closely with Bolivian locals, became conversational in Spanish. Similarly, my uncles (being male) also had the opportunity to work in the public sphere outside of the Mennonite community and therefore learned Spanish to a greater extent than their sisters and mother, who were mostly confined to the private sphere at home or

within the Mennonite community, where Plattditsch was spoken. However, the Spanish language, or rather the interactions with Spanish-speakers, had such an influence on my family's spoken language that words from Spanish were adopted into Plattditsch. It's particularly interesting how Barbara used the word *asado* in our interview together:

"We might have had some Spanish food, like empanadas, like cheese empanadas... [unrelated talking]... the cheese empanadas, that's something that we would have adopted. Maybe there's like, barbecues were a really big thing, um... [pause] which we—in German we would call it asado."

[Laughing] "That's so funny, that's Spanish!"

"That's probably the Spanish word and we just didn't know—or, or churrasco?"

"Yeah! Churrasco!"

"Yeah, those are words that we would have adopted from the Spanish, you know?" (Interview #5)

Here, Barbara says that *asado* was a *German* word. This word was a part of her repertoire to such an extent that she did not identify its Spanish origins until I commented on it in our interview. From these two examples, it is clear how language impacted my family's sense of community. The language barrier between the Spanish-speakers and many Mennonites contributed to the separation of their communities and the infrequency of their interactions. It was through language learning that members of these communities began to interact with one another. Similarly, the language spoken by my family gives away the extent to their interactions with "outsiders": since so many Spanish words were adopted into their everyday language usage, since their father regularly and conversationally spoke Spanish, it is reasonable to assume that

their family was open to broader interactions outside of the Mennonite colony. In a very literal sense, our family's doors were always open to those who needed a meal to eat or a place to stay, and that was not a service offered exclusively to Mennonites (Interviews #1, #2, #3, #4, and #5).

On a similar note, language is also a self-identifier. Blommaert & Backus say that language repertoires are biographical: "Repertoires are biographically organized complexes of resources, and they follow the rhythms of human lives" (9). This means that an individual's spoken language is a powerful identity marker. When I asked Barbara about Bolivian "things" (practices, food, possessions, rituals) that are currently a part of her life, her first response was "my language." She does not speak Spanish, Quechua, Aymara, or any other language associated with the various nations of Bolivia. She speaks English every day with her husband and children, Plattditsch with her siblings and mother, and knows very few Spanish words. Plattditsch, a dialect of German, is deeply connected to her roots in Bolivia. It was her way of expressing her needs and desires while living there; it was how she formed her identity in relation to other people in a small, Mennonite colony in Bolivia. For my family, Plattditsch *is* Bolivian because it was their vehicle of communication in Bolivia, their way of life. When I was a child, every Bolivian person that I knew was both a Mennonite and a Plattditsch-speaker. Most of the children from my generation grew up speaking English in school. Even though I was not raised as a Mennonite, many of my cousins were raised in a contemporary, English-speaking, Canadian Mennonite community. In this way, speaking Plattditsch was a mark of closer ties to our community and past in Bolivia; my cousins who spoke Plattditsch at home were also born in Bolivia. Growing up, I thought that everyone in Bolivia looked, spoke, and dressed like my grandmother (floral dress and sometimes a babushka or bonnet on her head). I thought that being Mennonite was the same thing as being Bolivian. This is because I associated my family's

language and culture with their Bolivian citizenship, although this is complicated since Mennonites have been largely absent from political participation in Bolivia and have remained, for the most part, relatively isolated from Bolivian society, provided that they stayed in the Mennonite colonies (if they leave, it's a different story). My family has always made this distinction and usually identifies as both Mennonite *and* Bolivian.

5.2. Sarah as an Exception

Sarah, who is a generation younger than many of my aunts and uncles (but a generation older than me), has a different story as a Mennonite growing up in Bolivia. Her family left the Mennonite community, because her father wanted his children to go to school and because his church attendance was lacking (he worked outside of the colony with other Bolivians frequently). Sarah went to a Catholic boarding school in Montero, just outside of Santa Cruz, for three years in high school (Interview #2). She and her siblings were the only Mennonites there. She learned Spanish fluently and it quickly became her means of communication outside of her family:

(Speaking about her Bolivian friends) They didn't even know that we would speak German unless they would come to the house. We only spoke Spanish. When we were between us, us siblings, we always spoke Spanish. Everything was Spanish. So, unless they would come to our house and they would hear us speak with mum, uh...we only spoke German to mum... a lot of our friends didn't know.

(Speaking about other Mennonites) They wouldn't recognize, we always dressed uh... like anybody else. The way we do today. But uh... when we would go to the

market place, sometimes the Mennonites would be talking. And they would have no clue that we could understand them. (Interview #2)

Here, language was the key to accessing different communities. After her family left the colony, Plattditsch was only spoken in her home, specifically with her mother. I assume that this is because her father worked more in the public sphere (where Spanish was spoken), the children went to school (where Spanish was also spoken), and her mother worked in the private sphere at home, where she mostly spoke Plattditsch. This is only my assumption, though; Sarah never specified the reasons why they did not also speak Spanish at home. Outside of her home, “everything was Spanish” (Interview #2). Sarah, coming from a very different background than most Bolivian people, made non-Mennonite friends that she keeps in contact with to this day. Her language usage kept these two parts of her life relatively separate, but also intertwined. Sarah is not two people in one body; she is one person whose subject positions span two spheres that are thought to rarely interact: being Mennonite and also being Bolivian. In this way, her story shows that it is possible to have a mixed identity even when its components contradict one another. As Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “*Soy un amasamiento*, I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining...” (103).

5.3. “We’re Migrants”

Where does this leave my family? Natalia, Julia, Barbara, and even Sarah said that our family, before being “Bolivian” is first a family of migrants. Traces from our Ukrainian roots still remain as part of our identity in the form of borscht and chicken noodle soup. How, then, can I argue that living in Bolivia and Paraguay was somehow significant to my family? Here is

how: “From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollinization, an ‘alien’ consciousness is presently in the making—a new *mestiza* consciousness, *una conciencia de mujer*. It is a consciousness of the Borderlands” (Anzaldúa 99). My family does not identify as mestizo, and I don’t think other people would classify us as mestizo either; we’re pretty white. This is an important distinction to make. *Mestizaje* has real-life consequences for people who have what is considered a racially and ethnically mixed ancestry, consequences that neither my family nor I have ever experienced. Our *cross-pollinization* comes from a cultural and ideological mixture. Most of my sources have written about Mennonites as a religious group, but I believe that they are also a cultural group because of the nature of their interactions with non-Mennonites. My family lived in South America from 1927 to 1980 (and many of our relatives still live there now), a timeline that spans 53 years and three generations. In the reproduction of their culture, even in an isolated society, traces of the host environment were adopted into my family’s way of life. In this way, my family is Bolivian, if only a little bit. I have encountered people who believe that Mennonites are an entirely separate entity simply living within a nation’s borders; therefore my family is not Bolivian. For that to be true, Mennonites around the world would have to have the same practices, language, rituals, and way of life. In my interview with Natalia, she spoke about the differences between Mennonite communities in Paraguay and Bolivia, and how she maintains traces of Bolivia in the way she makes her food sometimes:

We also prepare our rice dishes differently than the Mennonite people do from Paraguay. And that has to do with uh... we were so close...we lived so close to the Bolivian uh... city Santa Cruz, and we had the... the native people so intertwined with us that we learned how to cook their rice dishes. And the other thing is plantain. And uh... avocado, that is very Bolivian. I still, if I get uh... if I

go to Superstore and find a nice plantain, I still uh...fry it the way we used to in Bolivia. (Interview #4)

Even more astoundingly, Barbara spoke about varying cultures and practices within the world-wide Mennonite community:

(Speaking about Canadian family visiting them in Bolivia) And they learned a lot from us! They were very interested in our way of life, you know, as they identified as Mennonites, and we were identified—we identified as Mennonites, yet we were culturally—we were different because we lived... you know, the South American Mennonite culture is different... is very different than the cultural Mennonite setting in North America, than in Canada... you know? Um... [pause]... because the struggles for life were very different. The way of life was very different. You know, every day life for our family, or...for the Mennonites, not just for our family but for all Mennonites was very different than the Mennonites to where we went to. Because we did, like...where we ended up living in Winnipeg, there was a lot of Mennonites in the area where we lived. My family went to a Mennonite church, you know...where they had German services, you know, so that my family could understand. You know, so... but it would have been—we were... viewed very differently. (Interview #5)

The Mennonites worldwide are not only a cultural group, but also a group that has variations within it. There are “conservative” Mennonites, “liberal” Mennonites, Mennonites from Canada, Mennonites from Bolivia, and many other different “kinds” of Mennonites. This speaks to how Mennonites identify themselves in relation to other people who inhabit their

cultural surroundings and environment (i.e., “Bolivian” in relation to other Canadian Mennonites, or “Mennonite” in relation to non-Mennonite Bolivians). Being a cultural entity, the Mennonites had to adapt themselves to a new way of life every time they moved. Undoubtedly there are Mennonite communities that *do* maintain a rigid separation from the culture of their host country, like the families that would hire my aunts and uncles to work their fields because they would not hire the local Bolivian people. However, to some extent, cultural adaptation is unavoidable. It was because of the need to survive and thrive that my family incorporated yucca, plantain, and rice into their every day meals, food staples that they would have never grown in Canada or Ukraine. It was why my grandfather learned Spanish and hired local Bolivians to help his children in the fields. It was why these people eventually became family friends, why some of our relatives remain in Bolivia to this day. It was why Barbara’s favorite music happened to be sung in Spanish:

Oh the other thing is, is we had record—we had a record player, and we would listen to Spanish music, you know? Remember the song that I shared with you not too long ago about these boys, they had an accordion and a guitar and they were singing? These songs. I LOVED the music. I loved it. But, so... listening to Bolivian music was amazing. I loved it. It made you wanna dance and it made you happy and to this day, when I hear anything like that, it’s just like, oh my gosh! You know? It just brings back this feeling of like... it was just—it’s familiar to me. (Interview #5)

Suzuki’s definition of identity is what would most accurately describe my family. Their “subject positions” changed over time and space to include cultural influences from Ukraine, Canada, Paraguay, and Bolivia, and each position had a profound impact on their identity,

leaving traces of having occupied said position in the way they speak, prepare their food, etc. Since identity transforms and moves with time, it is safe to say that now my family is much less “Bolivian,” having lived in Canada and the United States now for years, speaking English regularly. Living in Bolivia was significant in the formation of their identities and the continuation of representing themselves now in relation to other people. Even though most of my family members say that they are not Bolivian, they are migrants, Bolivia is still present in the way that they make rice, plantains, in the music they listen to, in the way they (and I) still drink *yerba mate*, a tea from the Chaco region of Paraguay near the Bolivian border:

Mennonites in Canada don't drink yerba, Michal. Unless you're South American. You get that? (Interview #5)

6. Conclusion

Self-identification has always been a confusing subject for my family. Coming from such an uncommon, complicated background, sometimes I do not know whether or not I should say that my mother and her family is Bolivian, even though they have all held Bolivian citizenship at some point in their lives. My experience living in Latin America only complicated this confusion further for me, which stems from questioning who has the authority to claim an identity, and what it means to hold an identity. For some, it is offensive for a white Mennonite to call herself/himself Bolivian based on their citizenship, but Bolivian citizenship, Bolivian nationality, and Bolivian cultural identity are not the same thing. Mennonites were not present in Bolivia until the mid-twentieth century, and were therefore absent from the process of Bolivian national formation. The majority of Mennonites in Bolivia (80 percent, including my family) hold Bolivian citizenship, although the Bolivian public sees them as “extranjeros” (“foreigners”)

(Kopp 105-106). While my family's Bolivian citizenship is the reason why I began questioning my family's identity, I believe that our Bolivian identity extends beyond our citizenship.

Through the interviews conducted with my relatives, I found evidence that "Bolivianness" isn't always necessarily a national identity, but rather that it manifests itself in memories, stories, practices, and language.

Language indexes an "other" identity for my family. Plattdistch, or Low German, was the language that they used every day to communicate in Bolivia and therefore it is not only associated with Bolivia, but it was the way they lived in Bolivia. Uniquely, even though Mennonite communities were relatively closed and taught High German (mainstream German) in schools, bits and pieces of the Spanish language made their way into the Plattditsch that my family spoke at home, especially words related to types of food and people. This is significant because it shows that Mennonites and Bolivian locals *did* interact, enough that words from Spanish would be adopted into an isolated community language. If Plattditsch is not a Bolivian language in the sense that it does not come from Bolivia, then Spanish cannot be considered a Bolivian language either. It is because Spanish was significant in the national formation of Bolivia for centuries that it is an official language of the country. Plattditsch, on a smaller scale, was integral in the formation of my relatives' identities in the context of Bolivia, and was certainly altered to fit this context.

Finally, the stories that my family members told me were woven with example after example of how much the "outside world" of Bolivia influenced them in their colony, like when Aline had a crush on a Bolivian boy, how Barbara's favorite music record was in Spanish, or how Natalia learned how to fry plantains the Bolivian way. Besides the question of language, there were South American food staples that they farmed, different ways of preparing certain

dishes, and interactions with non-Mennonite people that affected my family during their time living in Bolivia. These memories and stories are important when looking back, and the rituals are still important today. My family is not *only* Bolivian because their birth certificates say so; they are also Bolivian because living there had a profound impact on who they are today.

Everything about my family would be different had they not moved to South America. The Mennonites, though they were not a part of Bolivian mainstream society, still had to reproduce their culture out of the need to survive. They grew yucca, ate plantains, drank yerba mate, and spoke a little or a lot of Spanish. My family's identity is a result of this reproduction, and Bolivia and its local people characterized it.

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