

## **An Unreasonable Couple**

by **Marlena Fiol**

*“The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.” —George Bernard Shaw*

On June 9, 1941, two years into the second Great War, as Nazi troops advanced deep into the Soviet Union, a young, single, adventurous doctor named John Schmidt boarded a ship in New York for the eighteen-day trip to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, a stopping point on his way to Paraguay. The Atlantic Ocean was a war zone patrolled by Nazi submarines. Because the U.S. was still neutral, the ship's name and two large American flags were painted on both sides of the hull. At night, the ship sailed fully lit. It was a mighty blazing vessel, making its way through dangerous waters, carrying among its passengers a zealous man on a mission.

After spending a few days in Rio, John boarded a plane that took him across the vast land of Brazil. He arrived in Asunción, the capital city of Paraguay, on a cold rainy afternoon in mid-July. Gaunt and emaciated from almost constant diarrhea and vomiting during more than a month of travel, he deplaned and breathed in the smoky, sweet, heavy, pungent odors of Paraguay.

A crew of shabby, rather taciturn police at the airport "dossiered" and fingerprinted him, marking John down as a potential criminal. The Paraguayan government, headed at that time by pro-Fascist General Morínigo, admired Germany's *Wehrmacht* and expressed unabashed support for the German cause. Germany's effective propaganda reinforced the view that the German military was superior and that the true threats to the Western Hemisphere were not the Axis powers but Western imperialists. They viewed John as one of those.

“What are you doing here?” they asked him suspiciously in broken English. This tall, thin man with blazing eyes intrigued them.

“I’m headed for the Chaco,” he said, “to be a doctor.”

They traded loaded looks. “*No, hombre,*” they told him. “Not the Chaco. No white man can live there.”

But John barely heard them. He strode through the heavy double doors into the airport’s grungy waiting room and reached out to shake hands with the Russian Mennonite leaders of the Chaco colonies who had come to meet him.

As they drove over the cobblestone streets into Asunción, John stared at the red-tiled roofs of what has often been referred to as “the city of yesterday.” In colonial times, Asunción was the capital of nearly the entire southern third of South America. Later, because it is landlocked and because of the tragedy of numerous bloody wars, the city failed to modernize along with the rest of the world. It has kept much of its traditional colonial flavor, even today.

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When his medical internship in Baltimore had ended a few months earlier, John began looking for places to practice. “I could have chosen some places around Baltimore,” he said, “but I was tired of being around women who painted their lips and men who lived in sin. I wanted to be back among my own people again.” His “own people” were the Mennonites in Kansas who had emigrated from Russia in the 1870s.

At about that time, John’s brother Herb, also a physician, had become aware that a large colony of persecuted Russian Mennonites had recently immigrated to a territory of about 3,000 square kilometers in west Paraguay, South America. It was a harsh desert called the Chaco. Only a few scattered nomad Indian tribes considered it habitable. The new Mennonite colonists were from the same heritage as the Kansas clan. They had no doctor and had approached Herb about moving to Paraguay to care for them. But he was busy establishing his medical career in Kansas. Knowing that his brother John was looking for a place to practice, Herb sent him a telegram briefly explaining the situation.

John sat at the edge of his hard bed, the telegram in his lap. As he read, his back straightened and his muscles tensed. In that moment, he knew God was calling him to serve in the South American country they called Paraguay. His grandmother Lena had so often told him stories about how she and his grandfather Jacob had escaped the persecution in Russia. “If my grandparents hadn’t come to the U.S. when they did in the 1870s, I’d be lucky to be a barefoot boy walking behind a plow in Paraguay. For me to help the Paraguayan Mennonites medically is my expression of thanks that I was spared the pig mess in Russia,” he said, and then abruptly stopped, noticing that in his excitement he was speaking out loud to himself.

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Little did John know that the trip from Asunción to Filadelfia, one of the Mennonite villages of the Chaco colonies, would require another few weeks. First, was the 320-mile riverboat trip up the Río Paraguay, where he waited four days for a wood-burning steam engine train. The train trip of nearly 100 miles took another full day. Finally, he rode on horseback with guides the remaining forty miles through the bush to the dusty little village of Filadelfia.

They rode up to a small single-room hut with a sloping thatched roof that he was told had once been an Indian hospital. Birds had made nests in the roof and the mud brick exterior walls were eroding. The shutters leaned down unevenly from broken rusted hinges.

“*Welkohm* – welcome. We hope it is good for you to live in this house, *Herr Dockda*,” said the stooped, thin Russian man who opened the door for the new doctor. “An Indian has died in it so people refuse to use it.”

All John heard was his beloved *Plautdietsch* (Low German), the language of his Russian Mennonite people. He felt his heartbeat quicken. He had arrived.



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I once asked John to tell me about his years as a young doctor in the Chaco.

“You were fresh out of your internship without even your medical books (it took his crate of books six months to arrive in Paraguay). And you were trained as a general practitioner, not a surgeon, but you had to do it all when you were out there alone?”

“Mostly I was just grateful the Lord sent me there,” he said. “Before I arrived, many of the Mennonites had died. They died of malnutrition, typhoid, even child birth.”

“But you didn’t have any medical facilities, no nurses,” I said. “How was it even possible to practice medicine?”

“*Ach...* I managed,” he said, shrugging. “I built my surgical team with what I had. For my anesthetist, I trained a grade school teacher from one of the Mennonite villages. For my I.V. fluids, I set up a crude still to make distilled water from collected rainwater. For iron, I went to the blacksmith and heated rusted iron red hot. Then I put it in a mortar and pestle. I used this to treat anemia, which was common because of hookworm infestation.”

“Did it ever scare you that you were so far from home in a wilderness where the white man supposedly can’t live?” I asked.

“*Najo*,” – there is no direct translation for this word, which roughly translated means “oh, well” or “well maybe” – he said, closing his eyes to remember. “Until the first time I walked into the hospital kitchen for a lunch. There sat a plate of Russian ammonia cookies, just like we used to have at home on the farm in Kansas. Here, thousands of miles from home and after many warnings of coming to ‘no man’s land’, I landed right smack into my Grandma Lena’s kitchen.”

“I can tell you I never became homesick because of strange customs in the Chaco,” he added. “After the sinful atmosphere of medical school and the hospital in Baltimore, I was back with my own people.”

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John was the sixth of twelve children, or the way it is listed in the Schmidt genealogy, he was the fifth of eleven living children. No one in his family ever talked about the embarrassing firstborn, conceived before John’s Mennonite parents were married in 1902. This first son died when he was very young and the Schmidt family records don’t even acknowledge his existence.

Late in his life, I asked John to give me a tour of his childhood homestead near Goessel, Kansas. As we made our way to the old barn, he walked ahead of me, briskly, as though he needed to rush to get to something important. His faded brown polyester pants, shiny from wear in the back and at the knees, hung loosely on his slender frame.

“From when I was the age of eight, my older brother and I were each responsible for hitching up our five-horse outfits right here in this barn,” he said in his somewhat stilted English. *Plautdietsch* always remained his preferred language. His arm waved in the direction of the fields behind the white-shingled two-story house where he grew up. “We tilled those fields with sulky plows.” He tenderly stroked the scarred post where the horse harnesses had hung. “I pulled the binder with my five horses. After cutting the wheat, which came from the binder in twenty- to thirty-pound bundles, it had to be shocked or piled up in stacks that resembled small tepees. This was so the grain would dry before it was threshed.”

John's eyes took on a far-away look. "After the wheat stayed in the shock to dry for a few weeks, we bundled it. When we stacked the bundles, they were so slick that sometimes the whole stack would come sliding down and fall apart. We'd have to start all over."

"And you hitched up your own plow and binder all by yourself at the age of eight?"

"Sure. And we often stayed home from school to get the wheat seeded. On rainy days I would fix the harness and repair all of the machinery ... the binder, gang plow, harrow, and drill."

"Weren't there child labor laws?"

My question pulled him out of his reveries. "Child labor laws?" he growled, turning to stare at me in disbelief.

"Yeah, you were just a kid." He said nothing and I dropped it. I learned later that regulations to abolish child labor in the U.S. appeared in 1904. But they did not apply to agricultural employment, allowing children to work an unlimited number of hours on a farm even when school was in session. John's Mennonite heritage blended nicely into the child labor practices of early Twentieth Century. Within the Mennonite culture, it is of paramount importance to fulfill one's duty to God first and foremost, then to parents, to the family as a whole, and to the larger community. And it is the obligation of children to work hard and responsibly toward these ends.

John led me into the rear part of the old barn that had begun to cave in. "I often helped my father here late into the night, turning the fan for his blacksmith fire. We would heat pieces of wrought iron or steel over the hot coals until the metal became soft enough to shape into farm implements, using a hammer and a chisel."

"Were you and your father close?" I asked.

"He once called me his follower," he mused. "But he also gave me more beatings than any of the other kids," he added, shaking his head as if to rid himself of the memories.



Although John went to High-German grade school (with some English in the weeks after Christmas), his family spoke only *Plautdietsch* at home. One warm spring day in 1923, the lanky twelve-year old jumped effortlessly from his beloved horse. John was tall for his age. His thick dark brown hair was brushed back severely from a prominent forehead. His intense dark eyes narrowed as he spotted his twenty-year old brother Herb sitting with his father on a bench next to the barn. They were both smoking. John knew how much his mother hated those cigarettes and he wished they would stop.

“I just passed my final exam in Geography. *Dot’s aules* – that’s all,” he announced. “No more school for me. I’ll be your helper on the farm now, *Pa.*” John expected him to smile in agreement, but his father said nothing, just pulled hard on his cigarette and glanced over at Herb. Herb was teaching in a small high school in Plains, Kansas and had come home for a few weeks during a school break.

“You’ll do no such thing,” Herb said sternly, as though taking over the role of his father. “You’ll enroll in English high school.”

John did. And a number of years later, he followed Herb into college and medical school at the University of Kansas. He wished he weren’t always following in his brother’s footsteps. And he wished he weren’t always in his shadow. But going to med school like Herb did seem like the logical thing to do.

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He finished medical school at KU and began an internship at St. Joseph’s Hospital in Baltimore. During a visit back to Kansas where Herb was now practicing medicine, John and his oldest brother exchanged notes about their medical experiences.

“How’re you doing at St. Joe’s?” It sounded to John like Herb was quizzing him.

“I’m fine,” he said. “But hospitals on the east coast sure are more conservative than hospitals here in the Midwest.”

“What do you mean?” Herb asked.

“Well, just take the intravenous anesthesia Pentothal Sodium you’re using, as an example. It’s not something St. Joe will touch until it undergoes a lot more trials.”

“It is a controversial drug, John. You know it was tested for the first time on human beings not long ago.” Herb grinned at his brother. “Want to take some back with you?”

John was intrigued enough with the drug’s promise that he carried some back to St. Joe’s.

“This drug is just what we need,” he said to two other interns on his shift one night. “It reaches the brain and causes unconsciousness within less than a minute.” His colleagues looked at each other with raised eyebrows and then nervously glanced around the room.

A few days later, the Chief of Surgery called an emergency medical staff meeting. He was a stern, no-nonsense man who never said much. When he spoke, it usually meant someone was in trouble. Staff members filed anxiously into the meeting room, wondering what was about to happen.

The Chief sat at the head of the long conference table. “Some scheister is bringing potentially dangerous experimental medicine into our midst and I want to warn you to beware,” he said, turning his intense gaze on each person around the table. When his eyes met John’s, the young intern did not waver. The meeting ended without confession or exposure of the guilty party.

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Clara rushed down the hall and around the corner on the Obstetrics floor of the Bethel Deaconess Hospital in Newton, Kansas. Her crisp white apron effectively covered up her shapely body fitted into the blue-gray fine-striped uniform of a nurse in training. She needed to empty the bedpan and have evening devotions with one more patient before she went off duty. It was early June in 1941, one of those perfectly clear summer evenings, and she couldn’t wait to get out for a walk.

“Miss Regier, where are you off to in such a hurry?” A man’s voice boomed from the other end of the hallway.

Clara cringed. She didn't know why Dr. Herb Schmidt, one of the most prominent surgeons at the Bethel Hospital, had been singling her out from even much more senior nurses and it wasn't clear to her why he even knew her name. A few weeks earlier he had informed her that he knew her uncle Peter Andres. "I've long been impressed with the special breed of cattle he is raising," he had told her, his eyes flashing. She was sure that the twinkle in his eyes must be because he was making fun of her.

"Uh ... good evening, Dr. Schmidt," she stammered. "I'm just going in to see this patient ... uh ..."

He approached her with long confident strides and she tried not to notice his tall fit body, his strong square jaw, and the intense eyes that were now focused on her. He laughed in that loud, gruff way he had.

Clara's face flushed a deep red and she nervously fingered the little white New Testament in her uniform pocket under the apron.

Dr. Herb didn't seem to notice. In his clipped staccato, he rattled off what he had mentioned to her before, but this time with less preamble and more determination. "I have a brother. He's a good Mennonite. His name is John. He's going to Paraguay. Do you know where Paraguay is? He's a doctor. I want you to meet him."

Clara looked over her shoulder, hoping no one was nearby to hear. "Uh, that's good ... no I don't know where Paraguay is ... excuse me ... I really do need to see this patient." She ducked into the room.

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Clara was twenty-seven. The prior year, in 1940, she had entered a new class of thirteen girls to begin nurses training at Bethel Hospital in Newton, Kansas. She had occasionally daydreamed about marriage and family, but things didn't seem to be going that way. The oldest of four children, Clara had been responsible for her younger siblings at an early age because her mother had "nerve problems." For several years of high school she had to stay at home, somehow managing to finish with correspondence courses and to start college.

Her strict Mennonite father had controlled her every move. Until just a few years earlier, she had still been living at home on the farm east of Newton. Her father had not allowed her to mingle with young men. He hadn't even allowed her to stay up late in her own room, studying. So she made the bold decision to stay on campus at age twenty-five for her last year of college, working at a farmer's cooperative office to pay her way. It nearly broke her parents' hearts.

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As Clara hurriedly finished the evening devotions with her last patient, she thought about what Dr. Schmidt had said and wished she had some idea where Paraguay was. She made a mental note to look it up at the library.

A few days later, the nurses were all abuzz when Clara entered the staff lounge.

"Dr. Schmidt's brother is in town and he's making the rounds with him today," they said, eyeing her with barely concealed excitement. Without a word, Clara grabbed her clipboard and walked out of the room, wondering how she could escape this embarrassing situation.

Just outside of Room 239, she heard Dr. Herb bellow, "Nurse Regier, Nurse Regier. There is someone I want you to meet."

There was no mistaking that they were brothers. The same inflections when they spoke. The same dark wavy hair combed back from prominent foreheads. The same squared off jaw. And the same dark, intense, fiery eyes.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm John," he said.

"My wife and I are taking John to Wichita tonight to see a moving picture," Dr. Schmidt said. "Can you join us?"

"I ... uh ... I don't know," Clara hesitated. She wished Dr. Schmidt wasn't so imposing. She just didn't know what to say. "Well ... Okay, yes, I guess I can."

As she rolled her thick brown hair into a mass of curls that framed her face, Clara tried to convince herself that she was simply doing Dr. Herb a favor by going. She wore her very best Sunday dress that exactly matched the light blue shade of her eyes.

The evening was uneventful except for John reaching for Clara's hand in the back seat of Dr. Herb's Ford. She snatched it back, thinking he was rather fresh.

It was the first week in June of 1941. John Schmidt left the next morning for New York to begin the eighteen-day boat trip through the war-torn Atlantic Ocean to Rio de Janeiro, a stopping point on his way to Paraguay.

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On a still starless night in December of that year, in the stifling summer heat of the Chaco, John Schmidt sat at a rickety wooden table, a kerosene lamp casting shadows across his one-room shack. On a sheet of paper he began to write:

*"Before I left the U.S. to come to Paraguay, I felt the need to look for a life partner. Since my interest was to find a Mennonite girl and I did not find those in Baltimore, I asked my brother Herb to look out for one in Kansas. So this is what he did. He helped me get acquainted with you. I have a special purpose in mind for this letter. Especially at my age of thirty years it must be obvious to you what interest I have in our correspondence ..."*

And in another letter dated March 30, 1942, but which Clara didn't receive until May in the same mail as the previous one, *"I haven't had any letter from you since the one written at Christmas. I've sent three since then ... but better briefly repeat. In one, I made a potential proposal, active if you agree with it."* He enclosed a small black-and-white photo of himself.

Clara dropped both letters into her lap and looked at the photo. John's dark eyes stared back at her. She had been lonesome. She did like his letters. And she had made a commitment to God to serve Him as a missionary. So she wrote back:

*"Dear John. I hadn't really thought about it. But I will surely consider this indirect proposal ... I must, however, give you an idea of the things I look for in a companion for life."* She went on to write that he needed to be a devout Christian, that he needed to live a clean and vice-free life, that he needed to be mission-minded ... the list went on.

To her surprise, John wanted the same things. He wrote that he would be home by Christmas of 1942.

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In 1942, the Atlantic Ocean was under the control of German U-boats, so John began his journey home from the Chaco by making his way west over the Andes Mountains. There he boarded a Chilean ship, *Copiapo*, a mixed freight and passenger ship that came up the Pacific Ocean and through the Panama Canal. When they docked in New Orleans, John sent Clara a telegram, asking her to meet him at the train depot in Kansas City.

The train was very late. Loud-mouthed soldiers and sailors were carousing around the station. Clara sat on a bench, staring at each person stepping off the train and rushing past her. She was in suspense to see John's face, thinking she might be remembering him all wrong. After a time, she began feeling dejected. Of all the people coming out, she saw no one that looked like the little photo she had of him.

As she was about to leave, a tall thin man with a decorative wooden cane, wearing a long black coat and black hat, and carrying two jaguar pelts under his arm, approached her. He looked like a bum, not having shaved or washed for days.

The man saw her rising from the bench and asked, "Are you Clara Regier?"

Then he stood before her, shaking her hand, mumbling some sort of greeting and at the same time apologizing for how he looked. His gaucho-style pants were filthy. Under the tattered black coat, his wrinkled shirt was only partially tucked in. Part of it was hanging unevenly down the front.

"I've been standing on a military train for days," he muttered.

He looked outlandish, a traveler from a faraway place, someone she certainly needed to be cautious of. But he was somehow intimate too, because of what they had shared in their letters.

Clara smelled an unfamiliar sweaty male odor and shuddered. She had grown up on a farm just a half hour's drive from John's family homestead. But

their homes were worlds apart. She was from the uptown High-German Mennonites who had emigrated from Prussia about the time John's people emigrated from Russia. *Plautdietsch* Mennonites from Russia were considered less sophisticated than the Prussian High-German Mennonites. And his guttural mostly-unwritten *Plautdietsch* was highly challenging to learn to speak if one did not grow up with it.

Now, faced with the real live *Plautdietsch* John, rather than his High-German letters, Clara began to think she had made a very big mistake. When he pulled her toward him to kiss her a few days later, she withdrew in revulsion. Was this vulgar man who dared to try to kiss her on the mouth the same man who had written her those beautiful letters from that faraway land, Paraguay? The letters had sounded so refined and sophisticated. This man seemed somehow much more boorish and ordinary than she had imagined him. She began to back away.

Until she heard him sing. She and John and one of John's sisters attended a church together the following Sunday. As they rose to sing and Clara heard his tenor voice, so clear and true, she knew in that moment this was the man she would love for the rest of her life.

John and Clara married on August 25 of the following summer. Just one day after their wedding, John took his young Mennonite bride back for another three years to the Chaco, the land "where no white man can live." Clara's parents were torn between feeling disappointment that their oldest daughter had married a *Plautdietsch* descendant of Russian Mennonites, and pride that she would now be a doctor's wife. They would have preferred for the newly-weds to settle near them in Kansas rather than to travel to that heathen country called Paraguay. But they no longer controlled their oldest daughter.



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Most everywhere the young couple traveled on their way to Paraguay, people gave priority to soldiers and sailors, so it took them six weeks to get to Asunción. The newlyweds didn't mind. There was so much to discover about each other.

"I brought this book that I thought we might read together," John said on their first night on the ship as they were preparing for bed. "It's called *Sane Sex Life and Sane Sex Living*."

Clara blushed. She felt shy about her body and she wasn't used to the way her new husband talked about sex so freely and openly. It just didn't seem like the Christian thing to do.

*Sane Sex Life and Sane Sex Living* was published in 1919. It was written by and for medical professionals. The author wrote this dedication in the front of the book. *“To my fellow members of the medical profession into whose hands this book may come, and to all who may read it under their direction, this volume is most sincerely dedicated by The Author.”* And in the Forward, the author wrote. *“As we all know, many of the most serious and complicated cases we have to deal with have their origins in these delicate relations [read: sexual problems] which so often exist among wedded people, of all classes and varieties.”*

That night, the brash young doctor and his small-town Mennonite nurse wife sat on the hard bed in their tiny ship compartment with just curtains separating them from other compartments, on their way to no man’s land, reading about sex together. One of the chapters, titled *“Coitus Reservatus,”* states, *“In this act, the lovers simply drift, petting each other, chatting with each other, visiting, loving, caressing ... the hands wander idly over the body... it is the most natural thing in the world that the sex organs should tumesce, and that there should be a flow of both prostatic and pre-coital fluids ... and when the organs are properly enlarged and lubricated, let the wife come over into her lover’s arms ... and the organs be slipped together easily... and then let them stay so, fully together, but do not go on... just lie still and enjoy the embrace.”*

“Can we try it?” he said hoarsely, barely concealing his lust.

Clara pulled back, confused. Talking about sex this openly had to be wrong. Who was this carnal man she had just married? She, like all good Mennonites, had been taught to never acknowledge her sexuality explicitly and certainly to not talk, or read, or write much about it. Sex was meant for procreation. Not for pleasure. She knew well the message so often conveyed from the pulpit: “Our body is identified with the flesh. It is a major source of temptation and it inevitably leads to sin.”

“Please be patient with me. I’m just not as sure as you about all of this,” she mumbled awkwardly, trying to avoid his piercing gaze.

John abruptly closed the book, blew out the lamp and rolled over to his side of the bed.

“John, please ....” She touched his shoulder.

“We will figure it out together,” he said with uncharacteristic tenderness.

By the time they reached the Chaco of Paraguay, two and a half months later, Clara was pregnant.

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Finally, they arrived. With some trepidation, Clara stepped into the broken-down shack, the *Dokta Haus*, which was to be their first home. She took in the mud floor, the two single beds made from roughly hewn lumber with straw-filled sacks for mattresses, a wardrobe, and a small table with two chairs. Against the wall hung a can with a nail in the bottom, which when pushed up, released water into a washbasin underneath. Even on her father’s humble farm in Kansas, she had never seen anything this primitive.

“My back hurts,” she complained, wiping perspiration from her forehead. “I need to lie down.”

“We can’t,” John said gruffly, pointing to the open doorway. “Don’t you see that there is work to do?”

She walked to the door and looked out. They had arrived less than an hour before and already the horse-drawn wagons were lining up with patients coming to see the doctor. They had been without a doctor for the entire nine months that John was traveling to the U.S. and back.

“John, we’ve just traveled by ship, then by horse and buggy, then by another boat, then by buggy again, and then by train. I don’t even know what month it is. I stink. I’m exhausted. And my back aches. I need to lie down.” She dropped heavily onto the bed and felt the coarse straw poking up out of the sacks.

“I have no other nurse,” he said, pulling her up off the bed. “*Moak die wajch* – now get going!”

As she wearily followed John out of their house, Clara mouthed the Bible verse from the book of Ephesians that she knew so well: “Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church.”

Their workload continued to increase during the next several months, as people got word that the doctor was back. One night, a horse-drawn buggy rolled up to their house and a sharp rap on their door woke them from a deep sleep.

“*Herr Dokta*,” a man’s shrill voice pierced the silence. “My wife is dying.”

“Hurry up and get Oscar,” John ordered, as he pulled on his clothes and headed for the door. Oscar was the grade school teacher John had trained to be his anesthetist.

Clara lay for just another moment on the lumpy bed, her swollen pregnant body resisting what she knew she needed to do. Two tears slipped from under her eyelids and made their way slowly down her cheeks. She brushed them away and sluggishly pulled herself up.

By the time she and Oscar reached the room they used for surgeries, John had already cut the clothes from the woman’s body and was washing her belly.

“It’s a ruptured appendix,” he shouted. “Clara, get over here and help me with my gloves. Bring over those instruments and move the lamp closer. Oscar, we need to start right now!”

Clara tried to rush, but her massive bulk made every move unwieldy.

“No, not that package of instruments!” John threw the instruments she handed him onto the hard-packed mud floor and crossed the room to get the ones he wanted. “I thought you were a trained nurse,” he yelled.

Oscar kept his eyes down and focused all of his attention on the patient. He had often heard the doctor yelling at nurse Clara when he considered her an inadequate assistant. He cleared his throat.

Two hours later, the three of them carried the patient to an adjoining room and placed her on a bed. The operation had been successful.

As soon as Oscar left the room, Clara burst into tears. “I can’t do anything right. And it’s so embarrassing when you yell at me in front of others. And I’m so tired and ...” The words tumbled out of her mouth.

“At least you can’t go home crying to your mother,” he said as he left the room.

Clara sat on a hard chair by the patient's bed until late morning. Every hour she checked the patient's vital signs. And in between, she allowed the tears to flow. There was no one there to see them.

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Patients continued to come, many needing intubation and surgery. It became evident that Clara alone could not keep up with all of the nursing needs.

"We need to start a nurses' training school," she said to John one morning after their devotions. "Our son is only a few months old, I'm pregnant again and I just can't do it all."

"We have no books, your nurses' training was in English, not German, and there's no one here with more than a grade school education," John countered. But he knew she was right. He knew this was all getting too much for her. Somehow they would make it work.

"I think we should plan to include all of the classes that are offered in our U.S. training schools," Clara said. "We'll just have to re-create the material."

Late into each night, sitting at their little kitchen table in the dim light of a single kerosene lamp, John and Clara wrote down what she remembered from her own training and what he needed the new nurses to know in order to assist him. In the end, they designed the content for seventeen classes pertaining to nursing and medical work.

"The first class needs to be on Nursing Procedures," Clara suggested, beginning to outline the content of the class on the notepad in front of her. "They need to learn about safety procedures, infection control, and patient care skills like bathing, dressing and feeding patients, and making their beds. We should also cover steps in checking vital signs and providing medication."

"You want to spend an entire class on teaching them to make a bed?" the doctor growled. "I can't wait that long to get some medical support around here."

Clara nodded in seeming acquiescence, but continued to make detailed notes about basic nursing procedures.

Their first volunteers to take the classes were seven girls from the very poor farming community around them, so they were not bothered by the primitive

conditions of the hospital. Three of them could neither read nor write. The others had barely completed sixth grade. Only the ones who'd spent relatively more time in grade school were fully fluent in High German. The less schooled spoke mostly *Plautdietsch*.

Three evenings a week, after seeing a full day of patients, John and Clara lectured (he in *Plautdietsch* and she in High German) from the notes they had created. John, especially, was finding it hard to get through to the girls.

After one of his lectures on the Human Anatomy, he and Clara were squatting on their front stoop, eating slices of watermelon. The setting sun was a bright ball of fire in the horizon. Flies were buzzing around them, drawn to the sweetness of the juice dripping from their hands. They were taking a short break while their helper was putting their two-year-old son and newborn daughter to bed.

"They just sat there looking at me all dazed and bewildered," he said, leaning wearily against the adobe front wall of their house

"Let's figure out how to make it more basic," Clara said, always seeing the positive side of every situation.

One night a wagon arrived bringing a middle-aged woman with a high fever, weakness, and severe abdominal pain. She complained of diarrhea and vomiting.

"Let's take a look," John said as he helped her onto the examining table. Her chest was covered with a skin rash and dotted with rose-colored spots.

"Typhoid," he muttered under his breath. Since this was a very contagious disease, it required meticulous isolation techniques. Their nurses-in-training knew nothing about this.

"I have no time to lecture them on the role of pathogenic microbes in human illness. Or about disease pathology or immunology. We just need to get them to be bug conscious and fast," he said.

Within an hour of listening to Clara's lecture, the girls were squirming in their seats, feeling typhoid bugs crawling all over their bodies. And when the

lecture ended, they lined up at the washbasin to scrub their hands with disinfectant solution until they were sore. They never forgot the basics of isolation techniques.

All of them “graduated.” Together they stood, proud and tall, to recite the medical oath.

*“Ich verspreche bei Gott, dem Allmaechtigen und Alwissenden das ich nach bestem wissen und Vermoegen ... I vow to God, the Almighty and All-knowing, that I will to the best of my knowledge and ability...”*

The home-printed and home-decorated roll of paper stating what they had accomplished meant nothing anywhere outside of the Chaco of Paraguay, but the seven girls beamed as they rose to receive them. Even the steely doctor seemed to have something in his eye.

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John and Clara were my parents, who left behind extensive diaries and letters about those early years. It has been more than seventy-five years since my father first landed where “no white man could live.” Today, the Mennonites in the Chaco take pride in the high standards of their educational institutions and their hospitals, as well as their farms and industries. They earn an average of \$42,000 a year — over ten times the Paraguayan per capita income.

As for John and Clara, they devoted their entire lives to providing medical services to the poor and underprivileged. Over time, their partnership deepened to include not only mutual respect, but also a profound love for each other. They died in their mid-nineties within a kilometer of the *Dokta Haus*, their first home in the Chaco.



Marlena Fiol, PhD, is a world-renowned author, scholar, speaker, and a spiritual seeker whose writing explores the depths of who we are and what’s possible in our lives. Her most recent essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *The SummerSet Review*, *Under the Sun* and *The Furious Gazelle*, among others. A sampling of her publications on identity and learning are available at [marlenafiol.com](http://marlenafiol.com).