

Getting accepted

When I arrived in Canada I had no knowledge about the possibility for me to visit or live with an Amish family. I travelled to a smaller city in rural Ontario closer to Amish-country. Through contacts from a conference I attended in Pennsylvania, USA, I was invited to stay at a Bed & Breakfast located only half an hour's drive from the nearest Amish settlement. It was at this point I presented my wish to live with a family. However, all the non-Amish I spoke with were less optimistic about my goal. I decided that this should not keep me from trying. After two weeks I was invited to another Bed & Breakfast located in a small village surrounded by Amish districts. Additionally, several Amish families live in the village. I had still not reached my main goal, but was at least able to meet with Amish through daily interaction in the village. This was also an opportunity to make myself more visible to the Amish, which again could ease the challenge of getting in contact with them. A couple of days later I had my first visit at an Amish farm, where I introduced my intentions and myself. After the family had discussed the possibility for me to live with them, I was invited to stay with them for some days.

I invited myself to spend a day at the farm prior to my arranged arrival, giving them the opportunity to be more certain about their decision. The following Saturday morning I drove up their lane, and parked behind the barn. I was invited inside the kitchen, and asked to be seated on a chair along the wall. The women were busy cleaning cherries. They also had a one week old baby in the house that needed a lot of attention. I soon understood that this in fact was a busy family that could need a helping hand, and, not longer than half an hour later, I found myself working with the women in the kitchen. I did not leave until late that evening, and we were all looking forward to meet again the following week. When I returned for my stay, I was soon put to work both inside the house and barn, and out on the fields. The few days soon turned into weeks. I guess the Amish do not receive free help on their farm every day! This was not the only family I visited or lived with. I was fortunate also to stay with other families in different settlements in Ontario. And on my "breaks" from the field, staying at the Bed & Breakfast in the village, I

interacted with Amish through regular visiting in their homes or "small-talks" on the streets. Each time I left an Amish family and returned to the Bed & Breakfast, the contrast was striking. I felt I was switching from one world to another; one that was totally different.

Many people ask me how I dressed when living with them. I did not use Amish clothing often (except from when my own clothes were dirty), but I wore long skirts and usually covered my head. Despite the many predictions about how excluding Amish are towards non-Amish and how difficult it would be for me to be invited to live with them, I managed in some way to achieve this goal. And I have some thoughts on why. First of all, I was not the regular tourist travelling from afar to come and watch this people from a birds'-eye view. It did not take long before some women expressed their impression of my genuine interest in their way of living as I worked side by side with them trying to learn "their" ways, doing my best to show them respect through my own clothing. Another case in point is my gender. I believe that my fieldwork would have been more challenging to perform for a male in terms of having restricted access to certain knowledge. Although Amish have clear boundaries on the division of labour between men and women, it is often the case that the women help the men in the field or in the barn (or wherever the men's working sphere is located). The opposite is rarely seen. Therefore I could more easily cross between these spheres and learn more about both. My age (twenty-four) and marital status (unmarried) led to an additional positioning of me in their families. The families I lived with had children my age, and I was therefore positioned as a daughter in the family. This led to new possibilities for me, as I was able to discuss matters with both the adults and their children, regardless of gender. Secondly, as I was travelling from a far away country, I doubt that many Amish saw me as a threat. This is yet another reason for them being as open to my stay as they were. I never met any adult Amish that explicitly told me or showed me in any manner that I was not welcome. It was quite the opposite. I was invited to numerous homes for dinner and supper, and spent long days at their homes.