

WEHRLOS



WEHRLOS (DEFENSELESS)

**A story from the Emmental
in the time of
the persecution of
the Anabaptists
(Swiss Brethren)**

**Original playbook
and plot summary
by
Ueli Remund**

English translation
of plot summary by
Hannes Maria Aleman

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Scene 1

One summer evening, Peter Eggiman returns home to the Emmental after years of mercenary service with the French military. He has received a medical discharge. He wears a military uniform and a soldier's knapsack. The itinerant herb woman comes by and sells Anna and Vreneli Flükiger a salve remedy. Flükigers ask her about news of the outside world. The herb peddler reports that she heard the city of Berne has a new mayor, a harsh man, and suggests that doesn't bode well if you belong to the "brothers and sisters" (Anabaptists). And there are other signs that the times are turning more severe again. Peter greets the Eggiman family. He reports guardedly about his time as a soldier and his injury and how he got tangled up in a questionable affair with his captain. Peter's brother and his wife are just bringing in their cattle. Peter gets a cool reception, especially from his sister-in-law, who fears that Peter has come to claim his inheritance and thus to jeopardize the farm's financial viability. The Eggimans would rather have preferred that Peter hadn't come back. Hired hands, an Anabaptist couple, [Gerbers] who help out with harvest work on the farm, can't understand how Flükigers could take in Peter if he so wished, a man who has been to war and who may have taken others' lives as a soldier. But for Anna, this narrow Anabaptist view of life seems strange. The Anabaptist woman and Anna indulge in a brief debate, using Bible quotations to counter each other, showing how solid they both are in their knowledge of the scriptures.

Scene 2

(Scene is mimed, without spoken dialogue)

The village's executive magistrate, who has been seated on the uppermost tier of a grandstand, rises to stand between two bailiffs. A drummer heralds his ceremonial entry, and after allowing the audience to applaud him, the magistrate strides down the steps with great dignity, onto the dais mounted by the ceremonial seat of justice, where he sits. He waves to acknowledge the public, then takes a seat on a second chair. A clerk presents him with a small table covered with documents and writing materials, and he begins his official work, reading documents and letters and writing. He gestures to the drummer and the bailiffs, and they withdraw. From time to time a clerk, responding to his beckoning, takes away a letter or brings another one.

Scene 3

Vreneli and Anna are busy with household preparations. Anna asks Vreneli about Peter's plans, whether he intends to stay on with them, etc. The Reformed pastor arrives, bringing with him Vreni from the Schotthof farm and her son Resli. The pastor is looking for someone to take in Resli, since Vreni's husband was taken away as a hostage to the dungeon in Berne. He has some understanding for the views of the Anabaptists, but claims that his official position with the Church ties his hands. He hints that a raw wind is blowing for them since the new magistrate has taken control, and he begs Anna to attend church services so that he won't be forced to denounce them to the authorities.

Hans comes to join them and Resli is taken in. When the pastor has left, Hans asks what's going on. Anna replies in brief, and Hans comments that he thinks the pastor is actually right. Peter has been out putting in fence posts and after work comes home with the children. The other children are not so happy to see Resli, but Anna reprimands them sharply. They

all wash their hands at the spring and go into the house to eat. Vreneli and Peter linger a little longer. Vreneli presents Peter with a four-leafed clover, and he gives her a heart-shaped stone. Vreneli kisses Peter on the lips, which disturbs him and he is surprised that she, an Anabaptist woman, would do such a thing. As everyone knows, Anabaptists draw such a clear line between matters of the flesh and the spirit. Vreneli replies that the woman who washed Jesus' feet was known as a "loose woman". But she thinks that Jesus was a man who favored life and love in all its forms, including also "carnal love". She wouldn't be able to explain it, but in her mind it is all connected. From the house, Anna can be heard calling them to come in before the soup gets cold.

Scene 4

The magistrate is discussing the Anabaptist problem with the provincial governor. The governor explains how difficult it is to resolve the issue of Anabaptism, in particular, what is to be done with Anabaptists' sympathizers, folk who still attend church and have their children baptized. After all, he says, the entire Emmental region can't be put behind bars. The area is so extensive and the terrain so rough that the movement can't be fully eradicated, especially since the country folk aid and abet the Anabaptists where they can. He advises against expelling too many Anabaptists, since that would result in a glut of vacant farms, which would in turn depreciate real estate prices. The magistrate is a wealthy landholder and he can appreciate that argument. He says it's important to prosecute selectively. He thinks that the lay teachers and professing Anabaptists should be sold as galley slaves; when everything else fails, firmness may be the only effective means of repression. The governor reminds him that past experience has shown that the more harshly the Anabaptists are dealt with, the more animosity the country folk show toward the government. And only those who are content with their government can be counted on to fight bravely for the Bernese side in a future war against the Catholics.

For his part, the magistrate pretends ignorance and asks who said anything about a war -- at least he didn't. But he mentions that a man commissioned by his son, the general, has been looking around in the Emmental and is on the lookout for people who may be spreading these compromising religious teachings. Just so the governor knows: these people need to be shut up, and he's counting on the governor's support in this matter. The governor says that's fine, and he will see what he can do. The cook comes in to announce that the meal is ready and lists dishes on the menu.

Scene 5

It's evening and Anna and Vreneli Flükiger are seated in front of the house cutting up bread. Hans is cleaning up around the house, and the two children have been sent to the attic to bring down dried apples. Hans says he's uneasy about their house being used as a meeting place. Anna replies that it's for the best that the meeting site is changed every time, he must know that, and this time it is their turn. Peter comes home from the market in Huttwil. The children come out to meet him and ask if he has brought them anything. Peter has bought a few potatoes to be planted so that they can harvest a new potato crop. The market tender said they could also be eaten. Peter is quite distraught, which Vreneli notices immediately. He saw in the market place a veteran, a soldier who had served together with him under the same captain. Peter doesn't want to divulge the full story because he is fearful of involving the family in his affairs. But Anna observes that in this house whoever shares a concern will be helped, even if that means only hearing him out. And Peter can trust them in that, for as "brothers and sisters", they are used to keeping confidences. So Peter unloads and tells what happened in France. He had learned that their captain had converted so that he

could marry a French noblewoman with whom he had fallen in love. But on returning to Berne, the captain had married the daughter of the new magistrate. So at all costs he had to cover up his earlier marriage to protect his promising career. Peter is afraid that the veteran he saw was charged by the captain to search for anyone in on the story. In any case, the veteran had tried to sound Peter out, asking where he lived and if he had met other ex-soldiers. But that was all conjecture on Peter's part and possibly he was seeing spooks. And besides, he hadn't said a word about where he was living. Hans offers that if anyone really wanted to find where he was, he could. All it would take is to ask around in the tavern if a veteran had shown up lately. Peter says it's good that they stand by him, a man who had served in the army and had seen and done some bad things. Anna replies that they are all sinners in need of grace, and that Peter is actually like a member of the family now. Bendicht and Madle Gerber and Elsbeth Stalder arrive to help Flükigers with the preparations. Vreneli brings a glass of brandy for Bendicht, who is fond of hard liquor, but that doesn't suit Madle and Elsbeth. Then they all go into the house for the Bible study. Vreneli looks at Peter and asks him, "And what about you?" Other groups of Anabaptists emerge from the dusk and disappear into the house. Singing is heard from inside, but Peter paces back and forth in front of the house, reflects for a bit and then goes inside, too.

Scene 6

Peter is working with the entire family in the field making hay. A castle guard appears with two comrades in arms and asks if a certain Peter Eggimann, an ex-soldier, is there. Everyone looks at each other. Vreneli replies that they don't know him, but Anna says that's not true, and Peter identifies himself. The guard says he has to come along to the castle. Peter is not even allowed to go to the house to change clothes, but is taken off without delay. Peter asks what the charges are, and the guard says he doesn't know, but in his opinion if anyone is haled into the castle, he must have done something wrong. And as for veterans, it's well-known that they are a bad lot. Hans contends that the guard has surrounded himself with a bad lot, since one of his companions must certainly be a veteran, walking with a stiff leg at his age as he does. That's easy to see, and Hans says he will go along with them. But that's forbidden; only Eggimann is involved. Hans asks outright what business the other two men are about and gets an unclear answer. The guard lets slip a hint that they will soon enough get a chance to know their business. Peter is led off under arrest, and Vreneli follows them for a bit, but then is chased off. Anna asks what kind of men the guard's comrades could be. Hans has heard the report that Anabaptist bounty hunters are about, spying out the area with the guard and waiting their chance to strike.

Scene 7

It's growing dark as Peter and the herb peddler come on the scene. Peter met up with her on the road, and she has come with him to give directions on how to care for him. She recommends a salve for his back, which looks to be in bad shape. And only now are the women aware that Peter's shirt is blood-soaked on his back. Vreneli carefully takes off his shirt and all of them are shocked by the sight of his abuse. In a fragmented report they learn of his beating, laid on because he refused to take an oath concerning his testimony about his captain. Anna is amazed that he refused the oath, since he is not a member of "the brotherhood". Peter vows to repay his abusers, but Vreneli reminds him of the Bible's exhortations on how to treat one's enemies. Vreneli and Anna are restless, since they really wanted to attend a Bible study group. But the herb woman takes note and advises them otherwise, for rumor has it that the bounty hunters are coming. The herb peddler goes her way. Anna and Vreneli won't be deterred and they too leave. First, muted singing is heard,

then suddenly the church bells begin pealing, mixed with yelling and with cries of victory. Anna and Vreneli return with the lay teacher brother Fankhauser and with the report that the bounty hunters had been given a good thrashing. Hans says that the story is not over yet. The bounty hunters had been given something to think about indeed, but they certainly wouldn't give up that easily. Fankhauser must be hidden away, right here and now. The children are awakened and told that teacher Fankhauser would be staying there until further notice. He is to be hidden away in a secret hideout which they don't know about, but which had been used years ago when danger threatened. They are to tell no one anything about it, no matter who should ask. Hans tells them it wouldn't be lying if they just kept quiet and didn't say anything. The children want to know if the parents would also refuse to talk. Anna answers that that may not work for them, but there are just situations when you have to tell a "white lie" to prevent a worse calamity. Hans explains that from now on, brother Fankhauser will be sleeping in the hideaway, although it's very cramped in there. Fankhauser protests that he doesn't want to endanger the family's safety on his account. But Anna asks where else then he could hope to go. Fankhauser says that there are other hideways around. Anna says that's true, but they seem to be far away. Fankhauser can't deny the truth of that, so he finally gives in. Hans begs Anna to go back to church again so as to avoid drawing any kind of curiosity about them, and Anna accepts reluctantly.

Scene 8

The magistrate's daughter is complaining about the unfaithfulness of her husband, the colonel. The magistrate has little sympathy for private happiness or personal problems. Politics trumps her concerns, so the daughter is told to keep quiet. Otherwise, the French sympathizers in Berne would gain the upper hand once more. And nobody wants the family to be the target of idle gossip. The most important thing is that none of this matter would become public.

Scene 9

In the gray of dawn, the Anabaptist bounty hunters return with the castle guard and some other accomplices, looking for Fankhauser. They pound on the door of the house, and the distraught Flükiger family comes out. In answer to questions regarding Fankhauser's whereabouts, Hans asks how he is supposed to know that. The reply is that the men know that Fankhauser is there and they know there is a secret hideaway in the house. Hans says that anyone could make charges like that. The bounty hunters cross-examine the children. A breathless silence. But the children keep mum and don't say anything, as they were told to do. The bounty hunter Ruegsegger and the guard both want to shoot off their mouths. Ruegsegger takes over as the ringleader, divides up the accomplices and together they ransack the entire house without mercy, but without finding anything. Let down by their fruitless search, they smash the dinnerware and trash the household food pantry, leaving the house in total chaos. The frustrated bounty hunters have to leave with their task undone. Big sighs of relief all around. Most of all, the children are in shock at the home invasion by the bounty hunters. They go through the house, noting one piece of damage after another caused by the ransackers. Fankhauser signals with a knock when he is sure that the invaders have disappeared. He wants to get out of the hideaway and says he's leaving immediately, seeing that he can walk some better again and that he doesn't want to endanger the family that way ever again or bring greater disaster on them. He simply couldn't bring himself to do that again. Hans asks him to consider that the bounty hunters could be lying in wait for him in the grove of trees out front, since they are still suspicious. At least he should wait until tomorrow evening for his escape. Peter announces that he is going with teacher Fankhauser.

Vreneli asks if he knows what he's in for if he accompanies the teacher as he flees. Then the authorities will take aim at him, too. Peter replies that the teacher is like a father to him and you don't leave your father in the lurch. Peter can't be dissuaded, and Vreneli disappears in the house, very upset and slamming doors behind her.

Scene 10

The provincial governor is reporting to the magistrate on how things are going with the persecution of the Anabaptists, but there is little news to boast of, and the magistrate urges the governor to act more energetically.

(Mimed scene, without spoken dialogue and dimly lit)

During the course of the conversation, Flükigers come out of the house with Fankhauser and Peter. The Anabaptist leader takes leave of his close friends and sets out with Peter. He walks with difficulty and needs the support of Peter and Vreneli. Then the group stops walking and Vreneli and Peter say their farewells. Fankhauser goes a bit further and turns away. Peter has to tear himself from Vreneli's embrace. Vreneli stands alone in the path and watches the two men go on. Crying, she turns and sits down on the bench in front of the house. Then the front door opens again, Anna comes out, sees Vreneli and leads her back into the house.

Scene 11 *(Three months later)*

The herb peddler comes by. She has heard that Fankhauser wasn't up to the rigors of constantly fleeing from arrest and that he has died. She brings a note from Peter Eggimann, who is in custody in Berne. He writes that he was captured at a meeting of Anabaptists where he was preaching. The word is that soon the Anabaptists will be allowed to leave with their belongings and travel to Holland. Maybe he will be allowed to go along, but that's all up in the air for now. He just wants to let them know of that possibility. Vreneli loses control of her emotions and says she would like to go to Berne today to learn first-hand what's going on with Peter.

Scene 12

The magistrate is negotiating with the Dutch ambassador concerning resettlement of Anabaptists in Holland and Prussia. The deportees will be allowed to take with them their possessions, but they won't be allowed to return. The ambassador bemoans the Anabaptists' stubbornness, people who won't accept anyone's help and don't understand that emigration is the best thing for them.

Scene 13

Anabaptists being deported march by Flükigers' farm, loaded down with their belongings and under the watchful eye of the castle guard and the bounty hunters. Anna and Vreneli give them some food for the march. The guards urge them to keep moving, but they in turn are given refreshment and they soon become more easy-going. Käser says that in the war, baggage like the Anabaptists would have been dealt with in short order and not allowed to emigrate, taking all of their things with them. Ruegsegger is happy to linger over a shot of brandy. Vreneli gives Madle Gerber a note to pass to Peter, who may possibly join the emigration march. Madle says she's surprised the Flükigers haven't been persecuted,

imprisoned or forced to flee. Elsbeth Stalder accuses Anna of backsliding from the faith. She thinks that whoever is upright should leave now or else go to jail; the people left behind have betrayed the cause. Anna says that she feels like a traitor and is ready to join the forced march as a sign of solidarity. But that idea doesn't sit well with Hans and Vreneli. The daughter asks them to consider that things might have gone better for the Anabaptists if they weren't so rigidly set on their principles. Jesus Christ, who had understood people so well, would certainly also understand the situation that sympathizers were in, even if most of the "brothers and sisters" saw it differently. And Jesus would certainly also understand if they stopped meeting for Bible study and started attending regular church services again. But the Anabaptist woman says that in her opinion people like Vreneli should be shunned.

Scene 14

(One year later)

Peter shows up in the middle of the night and throws pebbles against Vreneli's bedroom window to waken her. He refuses to come in to avoid getting Flükigers into trouble. So Vreneli dresses and comes out, and they greet each other tentatively and hesitatingly. But then the pent-up emotions burst the dam, and they embrace each other and assure each other of their love. Anna awakes as well, and soon they all are outside, greeting Peter. They press him to recount what's happened. He had been locked up in Berne and was on the river transport which was to carry the deportees down to Holland. But in Breisach he had managed to escape and return home on foot. In Basel he heard that the bishop was offering the Anabaptists a refuge in the Jura plateau. Peter has come home to claim his share of the inheritance and to fetch Vreneli. He wants her to follow him as soon as he can get set up in the Jura region. Until then, he's planning to work for Anabaptists, but he already has his eye on a small farmstead there. Peter has already talked with his brother tonight and the brother reluctantly agreed to relinquish a part of the family legacy to him. The family says goodbye to Peter, then Vreneli appears again. Peter tells her he is going to hide in a barn nearby and in the morning he will talk again with his brother. Peter says a final farewell to Vreneli. She would gladly go to the barn with Peter, but as a future Bible teacher, he doesn't want to commit any "offense". But all of the moral rectitude of his faith dissolves in the intimate embrace of his Vreneli. Her siblings have been eavesdropping, and her sister Züsi accuses her of acting so dishonorably.

Scene 15

(It is evening and the windows of the farmhouse are dimly lit).

Bendicht and Madle Gerber emerge from the woods and knock, and Flükigers open the door. They are quite surprised and happy. Gerbers have a letter for Vreneli. Their plan is to go on, but they are persuaded to stay for a night or two. Then they're going up to Madle's brother's place in Eggiwil. Almost no one goes there and in the summer they can work up on the alm where her brother tends the dairy herd for the summer grazing season. They were with Peter over in the Jura on their way home. Soon they go inside, and Vreneli reads the letter aloud. Peter still hasn't been able to take over the farmstead because the former owner can't make up his mind to sell. Vreneli decides to pack up and go there and not wait any longer. The parents are helpless to talk her out of it. She wants to get the inheritance share from Peter Eggiman and go to join Peter. Anna wonders if they can't keep Gerbers on longer, but Hans is strictly opposed to the idea.

Scene 16

(Church bells are heard pealing).

Flükigers and Eggimanns are planting potatoes together. They listen to the church bells and speculate whether it's a fire signal or what. The herb woman reports that the Gerbers were arrested on the road to Eggiwil. Anna is struck by the news and has to sit down on a potato sack. She asks if there is any word about Vreneli, and whether she arrived safely in the Jura. But the herb peddler has no news of her. On the other hand, she does know why the bells are ringing, for war has broken out against the Catholics. The castle guard comes sounding the call to arms and he calls up Eggimanns' son Hansli. The summons to serve suits Hansli just fine, and he says the war will be better than planting potatoes. Lise Eggimann rebels, saying it would be better to muster out people like the Flükigers; they deserve it more. And there is always such a going and coming at their place. Hansli has to report for duty the next day in Huttwil, but he wants to leave and get ready immediately. The castle guard hints broadly that the Flükigers' number will be coming up soon enough. He knows for a fact that Anna is going to forbidden meetings again. Anna tells Hans if she would just turn herself in, peace would come to the family and they wouldn't be further burdened by guilt. But Hans won't hear of it. So they continue planting potatoes. Hansli says goodbye to his parents and leaves for the call-up. Other soldiers being mustered for duty appear along the road. From the grove of trees, muted singing is barely heard. Anna asks Hans if there is singing wafting in the air, but he denies it. Anna says she's sure that she hears singing, and she heads into the woods to be certain.

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of plot summary by
Hannes Maria Aleman

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