**Sandra Heyer: The Plain People**

It is still dark when Elizabeth wakes up. She gets out of bed and shivers when her feet touch the cold, bare floor. The bedroom is not heated, and it is so cold that she can see her breath. She quickly puts on her long dress, black apron, and black shoes. Then she hurries downstairs to the kitchen.

The only light in the kitchen comes from kerosene lamps; Elizabeth´s husband lit the lamps earlier, before he went out to milk the cows. Elizabeth puts a few pieces of wood into the stove and starts the fire. Then she begins to prepare a big breakfast for herself, her husband, and their six children. It is the beginning of a typical day for Elizabeth.

Although Elizabeth´s day will be typical, her life is certainly not typical of life in the United States in the 1990s. Elizabeth belongs to a religious group known as the Amish. The Amish are often called the “Plain People” because they live and dress very simply. Their homes have no carpets on the floors, no pictures on the walls, and no soft, comfortable furniture. The men wear dark pants with white or blue shirts, and the women wear long dresses in dark colors. The women never wear makeup or jewelry.

The Amish have a saying: ”The old way is the best way.” Although the Amish accept some new ideas – they use new medicines, for example – their way of life has not changed much in 300 years. They do not use electricity, so Amish homes have no electric lights, no TVs, and no kitchen appliances like refrigerators. The Amish don´t own telephones, either. They ride in buggies pulled by horses, and they speak German, the language that the first Amish people spoke.

The first Amish people lived in Germany and Switzerland. They were called Amish because their leader was Jacob Amman. The Amish were persecuted in Europe, so around 1700 they came to the New World. They settled in what is now the state of Pennsylvania.

Most of the Amish still live in Pennsylvania, although there are large communities in other states, too. All Amish, no matter where they live, have similar beliefs.

The Amish believe that life in the countryside is best. Almost all Amish live on farms. Amish farmers do not use modern machinery, yet their farms are successful because the Amish work hard and take good care of their land and animals. Their farms are always small. The Amish think it is wrong to have more land or more money than they need to live. A few years ago some Amish farmers discovered oil on their land. Was there a lot of oil under the ground, or just a little? The Amish farmers didn´t want to know. They immediately sold their land and moved away, without telling anyone about the oil. They didn´t want to be rich.

The Amish, who are Christians, believe they should follow the peaceful example of Jesus. Amish men will not fight in wars or serve in the army. They will not even wear coats with buttons, because military uniforms often have large gold or silver buttons.

The Amish will not buy insurance of any kind. When there is trouble, they help one another. If an Amish farmer gets sick, relatives and neighbors will milk his cows, plant his fields, and harvest his crops. If a barn burns down, as many as 200 men will come and build a new barn in one day.

The Amish are not allowed to marry people who are not Amish. That has caused a peculiar problem. The 500 or so Amish who came to the New World in the 1700s had about 40 last names. The 100,000 Amish who live in the United States today are the descendants of those people – and have the same 40 last names. In one school in Pennsylvania, 95 percent of the students – and their teacher – have the last name “Stolzfus”. The Amish custom of choosing first names from the Bible adds to the problem. In one small Amish community there are 11 men named Daniel Miller!

To avoid confusion, the Amish give nicknames to people who have the same name. Some nicknames have obvious explanation: “Chicken Dan” sells chickens, for example; “Curly Dan” has curly hair. But what about “Gravy Dan”? How did he get his nickname? At dinner one evening this Dan wanted to pour some cream into his coffee. He reached for the pitcher of cream but took the pitcher of gravy by mistake and poured gravy into his coffee. Ever since that evening, his nickname has been “Gravy Dan”.

People are curious about the lives of Amish like Elizabeth and Gravy Dan. Every year thousands of tourists visit the part of Pennsylvania where most Amish live. They take pictures of the black buggies and the plain white houses. They watch Amish children as they walk to school and Amish are not happy about the tourists, but they tolerate them. Perhaps the Amish understand that the tourists want to experience, at least for a few days, the quieter, simpler Amish way of life.

**MENO PREKLADATEĽA:**