



Leaving the Amish

Ira Wagler left the strict Amish community for the first time as a teenager. Years of doubt and turmoil followed. He returned, only to leave again nine years later. Ira packed his belongings for the last time. In July, the biography *Growing up Amish* will be released.

Text and photo: Jessica Adolfsson

He wakes up. The battery-driven alarm clock, with fluorescent numbers and clock hands, reveals that the time is 2 a.m. Ira, soon to be eighteen, puts his feet down on the cool concrete floor in the basement and starts getting dressed. Denim pants, without pockets, and a long sleeved green shirt. The straw hat and suspenders are left behind. He doesn't need them where he's going.

Stephen and Titus are asleep in their beds. They don't know that their younger brother will be gone at daybreak when the cows need milking. Nobody knows. It's for the best. Under his pillow is a note Ira has left for his father.

Ira collects the small, black duffel bag that he'd hidden earlier in another room. The front door creaks a bit when he opens it. Jock, the black and white colored dog, jumps up to him but is easily calmed down. Ira walks across the farm and begins his journey down the gravel road.

It's pitch black outside. Neither moon nor stars are to be seen. It's April and the birds have not yet started singing. All that is heard is

the gravel beneath Ira's feet.

He fears that he might run into a neighbor, but not a single person crosses his path. At the end of the road, he turns around and looks back at the big white house. In the kitchen his mother's lantern is lit, as always. Ira isn't sad. He knows he'll return someday. But now he is heading out to live the life he has longed for since his early teens. He keeps on walking.

Ira describes that April night of 1979 with a voice that speaks of certainty. He has done it before. It is the prologue to his biography, *Growing up Amish*, which will be released in July.

- I have known that I could and should write a book about my life, but I never knew how to proceed with it. The publisher was expecting an easy book about my childhood. Instead they got an intense story with many unflattering details.

We are sitting by his desk at the small company where he works outside of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The computer screen has to share

space with business cards and piles of paper. Ira wouldn't be sitting here today if it weren't for the choice he made years ago.

In 1961 Ira Wagler was born into a large Amish family in Ontario, Canada. He was number nine out of eleven children. They all helped out with chores, the boys out in the fields and the girls inside the house. At night, since they didn't have a TV, they would read.

- We had more books at home than most Amish do because my father himself wrote and read a lot. But the books at home all included some kind of sermon, so when no one could see me, I would read any westerns that I could get a hold of.

Ira knew at an early age that he sometime, somehow would leave the Amish, if only for a while. He wanted to experience what the world had to offer.

During the years of visits into town, Ira had seen enough to become curious. Afterwards he would return, then settle down and become a good member of the Amish. Ira was right, but only partially.

Over the summer he'd left the Amish for the first time, Ira worked on a ranch far away from home and spent all his money on living and partying. The new way of living wasn't persuasive enough. Ira returned to the Amish only a couple of months after that April night and was welcomed home with open arms. His family was relieved that he had come to his senses.

– When I was away I missed the security that my family home gave. I've always wanted to do what's right and I was taught that being Amish was the right way of living. I was terrified of hell and I believed that being Amish was the only way of being spared from it.

When at home, Ira didn't get along with his father and wasn't comfortable with all the rules. He made on last attempt to stay Amish by moving on his own to a community in Indiana.

It was during the time in Indiana that Ira truly understood that Amish wasn't the right path for him. He befriended a Christian man who had converted to Amish as an adult and the two of them shared many long talks. The Amish

are Christians, but Ira had never really felt that he had a personal relationship with the God that he believed in. He says that he, after many discussions with his friend, opened his heart to God. The anxiety, related to his fear of hell, vanished.

– I realized that I had always been lost when leaving the Amish before. This time I knew that I could leave and not be. I didn't have to be Amish. It wasn't right for me.

When Ira was 26 years old he left and became Mennonite instead, just like many other Amish do when they leave since the Mennonite can be seen as a milder version of Amish with less rules. Adjusting to a more modern daily life was never a problem. Ira had already experienced many things during his periods outside the Amish.

In 1994 he left the Mennonite and became what Amish call English, ordinary people. By then he had gone to college, after getting his GED as a consequence of not having a high school diploma. The Amish only attend school up until eighth grade since more knowledge that that is not considered needed

for a life out on a farm.

– In the beginning I had no idea of how to pronounce certain words, as I hadn't been around people who actually used them.

It was during his studies that Ira heard of Thomas Wolfe, the author who would become Ira's great source of inspiration. He read the book *You can't go home again* and understood that he himself would write one day.

– I found it in a used bookstore and couldn't stop reading it. Even though I had school, I couldn't put it down. Wolfe influenced me in my way of describing things. Why use five words, when I can use fifty?

Today Ira has several college degrees and is the general manager at a small company outside of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Four years ago he and his wife went separate ways. Now Ira, who is turning 50, is living alone.

Within the Amish, divorce is highly shameful with reference to a Bible verse. Re-marrying is only considered acceptable if it is due to the passing away of a former partner. On this particular point Ira is still affected by his Amish past.



Ira still speaks the English-influenced old German dialect that is the Amish language. It is known as Pennsylvania Dutch or Pennsylvania German since the majority of the German-speaking immigrants from Europe settled in the state of Pennsylvania.

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Anabaptists from Switzerland immigrated to North America

- The Amish originate from the Anabaptist congregation in Switzerland in the 1500's. The Anabaptists wanted a church that was separate from the state and exercised adult baptism instead of baptizing children.

- In the late 1600's Jakob Amman became the leader of a separatist group that would live after stricter rules and shun those who left the group. The name Amish is after Jakob's last name Amman.

- This resulted in the separation between Amish and Mennonite. The last-mentioned live according to more liberate rules and do not exercise shunning.

- The Amish wear simple and covering clothes. The men wear pants with suspenders and a shirt and straw hat. The women wear long dresses, apron and a covering over the hair.

- The Amish don't have electricity in their homes neither do they own cars. Instead they drive a horse and buggy. In general they do not have a telephone.

- When the Amish and Mennonite immigrated to North America they often settled down in the same areas. This is why the unaccustomed eye can't always tell the difference.

- Within both Amish and Mennonite groups there are an extreme variety of rules since every community decides for themselves. Some Amish for example do not have buttons no their clothes while others even have their own telephones. The Mennonite usually drive cars and use cameras, two things that the Amish don't.

- There are approximately 250 000 Amish today that reside in North America. Two thirds of them live in Ohio, Pennsylvania and Indiana.

Source: Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies at Elizabethtown College

– If the right woman walks through the door I will have to work on getting over the idea of not marrying again. Since I haven't been put in that situation yet I haven't been forced to think about where I want to stand in this. But if it occurs, I will definitely have to consider and weigh the pros and cons against each other. Do I want to die alone? Ira asks out loud while holding on to the steering wheel and focusing on the road ahead.

We are on our way to some of Ira's good friends.

In order to be able to express his emotions regarding the divorce, Ira started blogging. After some time, he started publishing short stories from his childhood and received great response from his readers.

An old acquaintance from his past made sure that Ira came in touch with a publisher. The fact

that his background is different made the story marketable.

In the end, the publisher decided not to move forward with Ira's book, but a agent made sure that the idea was passed on to another publisher.

– I was quite naïve and figured that someone would notice my writings someday, and that's what happened.

He worked during the day and wrote during the night. After all the nights of working on his blog, it wasn't a big adjustment to stay up writing on the book. However, it was more intense.

– I had to go back in time and relive it all. This one time, I called my sister and apologized for things that had happened a long time ago. Now that the book is being published they also have to go through it all again.

The family was anxious about

what would be presented to the public when the book was published. At first, Ira didn't want them to read the script ahead of others, but was persuaded by his agent.

– I didn't want them to yell at me and tell me that what I had written was untrue. I mean, the story is written out of my perspective and it's my thoughts in there. There's a fine line between telling things in an honest way and being mean. I'm just being honest. At the same time though, my siblings helped me out with facts and corrected me if a detail was incorrect. But I have stood by my idea of how open I want the book to be. Of course I have changed some names in it. Those who knew me as an Amish will certainly understand who the people are, but the whole world doesn't have to know.

Today seven out his ten siblings



Ira doesn't miss his horse and buggy and enjoys the freedom his pickup gives him. Ira as a teenager.



A sister, who had become Mennonite, sneaked around with her camera since the Amish don't allow photography. This is Ira as a teenager. At the company where Ira works, seven out of eight employees have some connection to the Amish or Mennonite. The boss Patrick, in blue, grew up in a more modern Amish group.



“ This one time, I called my sister and apologized for things that had happened a long time ago.

have left the Amish. The younger brother, Nathan, has become English like Ira, but the rest of them are Mennonite.

– Already when I was young my siblings wanted to leave the Amish to become Mennonite. When I was fifteen we moved from Ontario to a less conservative Amish community in Iowa, after my siblings had said that they would leave for a more modern lifestyle with the Mennonite. It was my father's attempt to get us to stay Amish.

Even though the eleven siblings have chosen different paths in life and live spread across the nation, they are very close. During the divorce they called to check up on Ira, which he wasn't expecting.

– Ten years ago I would have heard it. They would have told me how bad it is to divorce. But now they only wanted to show their support and the whole thing was a positive experience that gladdens me.

It's a pleasant Wednesday evening when Ira's bright blue pickup enters the gravel covered driveway. The house is not white, like they are in many Amish communities, but sand-colored with bordeaux details. This is home to an Amish priest Elmer, his wife Naomi and their children. They are a couple of the estimated quarter of a million Amish that exist today.

Elmer knew of Ira's father and kept asking to meet Ira when he had moved to the area. Eventually Ira agreed to meet and ever since he visits the family almost every week.

Naomi treats us to meat from the neighbor's farm, potatoes, corn, red beets and bread. For dessert she serves cheese cake with raspberries.

She wears the typical, simple and long, dark dress with an apron over and a small white covering a knot of hair at the nape of her neck. On her feet are a pair of black Crocs sandals.

– Are you coming on Saturday, Ira? Naomi asks. When Ira has responded that he will probably come, she asks if they could possibly catch a ride with him. Even if the Amish don't drive their own cars they are permitted to ride with others. Ira usually helps them out with driving when needed.

– Elmer and Naomi are the kindest people and they're true friends of mine. They're also a connection to my past that I'll never get rid of. I can change my way of living, but not my past. Maybe that's why I've continued to live close to the Amish.

The Lancaster area in Pennsylvania has an Amish population of almost 30 000 and is the biggest and most famous Amish settling in the US. That is why the Amish are still a part of Ira's daily life, whether he's visiting friends or shopping at the supermarket.

– I probably haven't left after all. I'm just not a part of them.