

# Preservings

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Preservings \$20

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"A people who have not the pride to record their own history will not long have the virtues to make their history worth recording; and no people who are indifferent to their past need hope to make their future great."

— Jan Gleysteen



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# In this Issue

Saskatchewan is the focus of three of the four feature articles in this issue of *Preservings*. Allan Guenther offers a thought provoking analysis of the Warman School Inquiry held in that school in 1908. An important participant in that inquiry was Ältester Jacob Wiens, who was the primary spokesman for the Old Colony Church. Leonard Doell's biography gives us some insight into the person and family of the Saskatchewan leader. Another Old Colony leader present at the Inquiry was Johann P. Wall. Wall was also one of the delegates who went to find a new home for Old Colony Mennonites—ultimately they would migrate to Mexico. In this issue we reprint a tribute to Wall written by Cornelius Krahn upon Wall's death in 1961. John J. Friesen has provided an introduction, and we are publishing some of Wall's letters in English for the first time. We have also included some of the poems Wall wrote in their original German. Our final feature is an article by Martina Will de Chaparro, which looks at the Mennonite migration to Mexico from the other side—how it played into Mexican politics.

This issue also brings us back to the East Reserve with Henry Fast's account of Paul Jaxt, an 1884 German adventurer who visited the Regehr's of Rosenfeld. We also begin a two part series on the cheese industry in the East Reserve in this issue. This first installment by Ron Friesen examines the industry up to its demise in the 1920s. The next issue will look at the rebirth of the industry in the 1930s when it returned in the form of cooperatives. John J. Friesen, Royden Loewen and Hans Werner all traveled in Latin and South America in the last year and each offers some reflections on those travels. Margaret Loewen Reimer gives us a thoughtful translation of the children's prayer 'Müde bin ich geh zur Ruh' and the interesting story of its origins.

Our family and village history section has the story of the Wiebe's of Weidenfeld, by Margaret Hildebrand, a rich history of the Village of Edenthal, by Marlene Plett and Conrad Stoesz's biography of Abram J. Thiessen of Thiessen Bus Lines. Tim Janzen's careful documenting of inter-colony transfers from Russian archival sources will be of interest to the many genealogists of Russian Mennonite families.

We have included a discussion section in this issue where Jake Buhler's interesting reflection on 'Sin and Salvation' and the continuing dialogue between Harold Jantz and co-editor John J. Friesen will stimulate our readers' thinking on both the theological questions of today and from the past. We also have included a letter from Harold Schapansky, commenting and providing additional information on the Hildebrand Family story from the last issue.

Finally, we have a diverse array of books that our kind reviewers have read and offer here their impressions and critique.

Once again we thank all of the contributors to this issue without whom *Preservings* would not be possible.

Hans Werner,  
co-editor

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**Our Cover:** The photo on this issue's cover is by Lisa Braun, a Saskatchewan photographer. The wagon is a remnant of the past, standing by a home in Neuanlage in the evening light. The photo is featured on a series of 2010 calendars. For more information visit: <http://photographybylisabraun.blogspot.com/>

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## Editorial

by Hans Werner  
co-editor

It was a sad day when the news broke that a group of Bolivian men were accused of raping the women of their colonies. The shocking story, a summary of which appears elsewhere in this issue, spread across the media outlets around the world and only became more devastating as time went along. Mennonites everywhere struggled to make sense of the immorality that was exposed in some of the most conservative of Mennonite colonies of Dutch-North German-Russian origin. What can one say?

Stories of the abuse of women and children among Christians are not new to us. Priests abusing young boys, the litany of abuses in Indian residential schools, and even the incidents of sexual abuse among Mennonite families (Isaac Block, *Assault on God's Image: Domestic Abuse*. Winnipeg: Windflower Publications, 1991), continue to remind us that mutual respect for each other is regularly challenged—even in the Christian church. In the case of the Mennonites of Bolivia there is the additional group condemnation that accompanies the news of the events of the past months. Because the Mennonites of Bolivia are more community oriented, more isolated, more restrictive in their social controls, they bear even more heavily the blame for failure on this scale.

We should note that in contrast to some of the stories we hear, it appears in this case, it is not the leaders of the Old Colony Church that are indicted. It appears that to a large extent the perpetrators of the rapes were already on the outside of what was an acceptable lifestyle in the eyes of the Church. In fact the initial arrests seem to have occurred at the behest of colony leaders. The rapes that were exposed this past summer do illustrate, however, a weakness of the more rigidly isolated and separated Mennonite communities, like the Bolivian colonies. What is to be done with those who fail to live by the community's mores? Among the more modern and individualistic church practice common to Mennonite churches in North America, such people are simply lost to the church. They disappear into society and live secular lives, are arrested if their deeds fall outside of the law, and are forgotten by all but their grieving families. In Russia, where Mennonites also lived unto themselves, the problem was seemingly insoluble and Mennonites ultimately resorted to physical punishment, a recourse that seems to have happened in the recent Bolivian situation as well.

The events of this past summer must give the Bolivian Mennonite community, and the rest of us pause for reflection. The indictment falls heavily on men. In the conservative Mennonite communities the burden of leadership in the community, the church, and the family is in the main the domain of the men.

Surely a high standard of relations within the family and community necessarily follows. Fathers must teach their sons from an early age what it means to respect their sisters, mothers and brothers. The actions of the men accused here certainly do not reflect what Bolivian Mennonites teach their sons, but it does point to the need for a reassessment of attitudes and beliefs about men and women that have become the norm in the Mennonite colonies.

The tragedy of this summer also reminds us that while we may express our faith differently, work it out in different ways, create our faith community differently; we must hold ourselves to the 16<sup>th</sup> century principle of our Mennonite forebears. The church must be a believer's church. Although painful to comprehend, when those who reject the faith are not ultimately able to leave, we risk the growth of 'spots and wrinkles' within. This is a particular challenge for the conservative Mennonite communities, where living outside the colony involves such a dramatic change that it is not always realistic to comprehend.

The view of some that all that needs to happen is for Bolivian Mennonites to turn to North American style evangelical Christianity for the problem to be solved seems, however, to be misplaced. Josiah Neufeld in an article in the online edition of *Christian Week* (<http://www.christianweek.org/stories.php?id=700>) features a picture of a missionary with an open Bible bringing the gospel to those imprisoned and quotes one of them, John Banman, who claims that after "two hours of sharing the gospel, all seven men accepted the Lord." Undoubtedly the missionary's intentions are noble and I can only hope and pray that their efforts will bring lasting change to the lives of the perpetrators. I am less encouraged by some of the other actions attributed to the missionaries. According to Neufeld, Banman also notes that he discussed the problem with church elders and claims that "he wasn't trying to change their religion, but to open them up to better understanding of the forgiveness of Christ." Those words seem not to reflect what they actually were trying to achieve and Neufeld's commentary seems even less credible. Neufeld notes that the "colony is governed by church elders who oppose the infiltration of any other form of faith, including evangelical Christianity. Scriptures are read in High German. Old Colony Mennonites also shun electricity and vehicles with rubber tires." It seems people who read scriptures in High German, shun electricity and rubber tires cannot be true Christians. And I suppose the 'evangelical Christianity' he speaks for is quite open to 'infiltration from other faiths.'

This is, I believe, a time to stand by those in the colonies for whom this is a personal and community tragedy. I urge all of us who pray, to pray for our Bolivian sisters and brothers, so that they may overcome the events of the past summer in ways that honor the kingdom and each other.

## News

### Ohm Franz Banman Passes Away

Ältester Franz Banman of the village of Kleefeld (1A) in the Manitoba Colony in Mexico passed away on January 23, 2009. He was 82 years old and had been ill for a number of years. He was predeceased by his wife Anna Knelsen a number of years earlier. The funeral on January 27 was well attended

in spite of stormy weather. Ältester Banman served the church in Mexico as a minister for 11 years and as Ältester for almost 33 years. During his time as Ältester he baptized 2576 souls. He married 210 couples and served at 297 funerals. A number of years before his death Ältester Banman withdrew from his position due to ill health. He recovered somewhat and was able to speak at particular occasions, such as the funeral in Capulin where seven people had drowned. From *Kurze Nachrichten*, #634, 30 January 2009.

...news continues on page 97

# Feature Articles

## “Barred from heaven and cursed forever”: Old Colony Mennonites and the 1908 Commission of Inquiry regarding Public Education<sup>1</sup>

By Alan M. Guenther, Briercrest College

The title is a headline of the Regina paper, *The Morning Leader*, January 5, 1909 regarding Royal Commission hearings in the town of Warman north of Saskatoon a week earlier. Warman was in the national news again in 1980 when a public inquiry was held regarding a proposal to establish a uranium refinery there.<sup>2</sup> The Commission of Inquiry of 1908 had limited scope, but it did catch the attention of the newspapers in Saskatoon and Regina. The full headline of the Regina paper reads:

*“Progressive Mennonites “Barred from Heaven and Cursed Forever” by Bishop of the Sect in Saskatchewan. Commission of Enquiry into Practices of Old Colonier Sect of Mennonites near Warman leads to some Strange Revelations – Settlers who send their Children to the Public Schools banned by the Church – Excommunicants Shunned by their Co-Religionists and Blood Relations – Low Standard of Education Prevalent in Mennonite Private Schools – Canadian Branch of the Church Sterner than Parent Church – The Bible taken as Sole Basis of Authority and Conflict with Civil Authorities Result.”<sup>3</sup>*

What follows is a reporter’s detailed account of the examination of witnesses who appeared before the commission to testify about their experience of being excommunicated as a result of sending their children to a public school, rather than to a private school established by the Old Colony Mennonite Church. Fortunately we don’t have to rely on a journalist’s summary and interpretation of the two day hearing. The commissioners submitted a 100-page transcript of the questions asked and answers given by all the participants, a copy of which is in the Saskatchewan Archives.<sup>4</sup>

I will focus on the theme expressed in this newspaper headline regarding the bases of authority accepted by the Old Colony Mennonites and by those who had been excommunicated, after providing some background to the presence of the Reinländer Mennonites or “Old Colony” Mennonites in Saskatchewan.

Starting in 1874, 17,000 German-speaking Mennonites emigrated from south Russia, now called Ukraine, to North America, 7,000 of whom settled in Manitoba. The ones who came to be known as the Old Colony Mennonites settled on the



*The private Old Colony Mennonite School at Reinland in 1907-08 with their teacher Henry Janzen. Photo Credit: Leonard Doell, Hague-Osler Mennonite Reserve 1895-1995, 635.*

west side of the Red River in townships reserved exclusively for Mennonites by the Canadian government. Twenty years later, as farm land became scarcer, families began moving to the Hague-Osler region north of Saskatoon, where once again the government set aside large blocks of land for homesteading Mennonites. However, unlike regular homesteaders, the Mennonites did not have to reside on their individual homesteads; they were permitted to form their traditional villages enabling them to maintain their communal and religious traditions.<sup>5</sup>

The right to educate their children in their own schools was a major factor in the Mennonite immigration to Canada in 1875, and in their new villages in Saskatchewan they quickly set up schools where children learned the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. The texts used were a primer, or Fiebel, the catechism, and the Bible. As Bishop Jacob Wiens testified before the commission, all boys ages six to thirteen and girls ages six to twelve were expected to attend during the winter months from the middle of October till seeding time in the spring.<sup>6</sup> The teachers had received no training beyond their own years in such schools. At the time of the Commission of Inquiry, the Old Colony Church was conducting seventeen such schools in villages between Rosthern and Warman. Instruction was in the German language; the public schools under the supervision of the province were conducted in English.<sup>7</sup> This is where the problems emerged.

#### **“Progressive” Mennonites**

Other Mennonites who moved into the Rosthern valley area, while also wanting to preserve their traditions and German language, were much more willing to participate in establishing public schools where the language of instruction was English and the teachers were trained beyond a basic level. The word that they frequently used to describe themselves was “progressive.” Rev. David Toews, their pastor and later their bishop, was invited to appear at the commission because his church had taken in those who had been excommunicated by the Old Colony Church. He declared, “Our Church believes in public schools and *progress* all along.” In contrasting his church with the Old Colony, he said, “We are favouring public schools, *progressive* schools, and they don’t believe in them. We believe in voting, and they forbid it.”<sup>8</sup>

The media, and other non-Mennonite observers, picked up on that language, and those Mennonites desiring an English education (and excommunicated by the Old Colony Church) became known as “progressive Mennonites.” J. E. Knipfel, a non-Mennonite who practiced medicine in Warman testified briefly at the commission and subsequently wrote a letter to the government full of assimilationist language. Referring to the Mennonites in Saskatchewan, he said, “I have most confident reason to believe that the half and by far the most intelligent and *progressive* half of the number of these people will thank the government to the bottom of their heart, if they will be assisted in tearing themselves loose from this educational, civil, and also religious bondage.”<sup>9</sup> An editorial in Saskatoon’s, *The Daily Phoenix*, proclaimed, “In a country which is endeavouring to assimilate so many different types of people such difficulties are to be looked for occasionally where old time prejudices and convictions based on conscience come in sharp conflict with enlightened ideas.”<sup>10</sup> The Old Colony Mennonites who did not favour assimilation were left with the stigma of being prejudiced, bigoted, and whatever else was the opposite



*The Isaac P. Millers were excommunicated Old Colony members who were active in pressuring the province to take action on the schools question. Photo Credit: Leonard Doell.*

of “progressive.”<sup>11</sup> While this is how they were labelled by outsiders, I will examine the testimony of Bishop Jacob Wiens before the Commission to see how he identified himself and his church.<sup>12</sup>

What had happened in the Mennonite colony near Warman was that a number of men had been excommunicated by the Old Colony Mennonite Church, ostensibly for sending their children to a public school rather than to one of the schools established and run by the church. They had also joined other Mennonite churches, but continued to suffer from the excommunication because their businesses were being shunned by the Old Colony Mennonites who made up a considerable majority of the community. Several of the excommunicated Mennonites had written to the provincial government to request its assistance, enlisting the help of the Mennonite Member of the Legislative Assembly, Gerhard Ens. Ens forwarded a list of twenty-two men who had been excommunicated by the Old Colony Church, chief among them were Isaak P. Miller of Warman and Isaak P. Friesen and Jacob J. S. Friesen of Rosthern.<sup>13</sup> As a consequence, the Lt.-Governor ordered a Royal Commission to look into the matter and had appointed the Deputy Attorney General, Frank Ford, and the Deputy Commissioner of Education, Duncan P. McColl as commissioners, upon the recommendation of the Commissioner of Education, J. A. Calder.<sup>14</sup> The hearings were held in the schoolhouse in Warman beginning on December 28, 1908, and everyone interested was invited to attend and to speak.



*The Warman Public Schoolhouse, where the Commission of Inquiry listened to, and probed Mennonite witnesses about public versus private schools and the use of the ban. Photo Credit: Leonard Doell.*

Questions and testimony continued for two days while the commissioners probed the accuracy of the allegations and sought to understand the position of the Old Colony leaders on the education of children and their practice of excommunication.

Having access to the transcript of the discussions makes it possible to analyze how the Old Colony Mennonites understood and defined themselves. It suffers, however, from the obvious limitation that the record of the proceedings is in English, while most of the answers given by Bishop Wiens and other church leaders were given in German, most likely Low German. The man who had been invited to translate the questions and responses was Wilhelm Abrams, whose neutrality on the question of education is certainly suspect. Wilhelm's father, Peter Abrams, had promoted education in Manitoba, assisting in the establishment of what became the Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Gretna. Wilhelm had attended a business college in 1894, being perhaps the first Mennonite to study in Winnipeg. Now in Rosthern he was actively assisting Rev. David Toews in establishing the German-English Academy, the forerunner of Rosthern Junior College.<sup>15</sup> Wilhelm's eldest daughter, Ella Abrams, started teaching in the public school at Altona near Osler in 1913. But in spite of a possible bias, Abrams seems to have performed his duties as a translator in an acceptable manner. Members of the Old Colony leadership who could communicate in English without the help of an interpreter were also present, and no objection to the translation is recorded.

Other analyses that have considered the 1908 commission of inquiry have looked at the sociological dynamics of excommunication from the point of view of the victims, or at



*One of the Commissioners of the inquiry was Duncan McColl who later became the first Registrar of the University of Saskatchewan. Photo Credit: University of Saskatchewan Archives, Photograph Collection, A-2736.*

what it revealed about the state of education in the Mennonite communities in Saskatchewan.<sup>16</sup> While the transcript of the commission of inquiry is certainly a valuable source for such investigations, I am more interested in what its language reveals about how the Old Colony leaders constructed the authority that gave shape and continuity to their community. Although the inquiry was established to focus on the question of access to education, issues of power and authority dominated the discussion during the two days of hearings as well as the correspondence connected to the event. I will discuss that authority focussing on ordination, congregation, tradition, Scripture, and secular government.

### **Ordination**

The complainants who initiated the hearings blamed Bishop Wiens and the other ministers of the Old Colony congregation for their difficulties.<sup>17</sup> The commissioners, who would have been familiar with the more hierarchical church structures of the dominant Protestant denomination, accordingly probed the authority structures of the Old Colony Church. How long had Wiens been the Bishop of the Church? Who had appointed him? What was he before he became Bishop?<sup>18</sup> The answers, briefly, were that Wiens had been elected as a minister by the

congregation in Manitoba in 1888, then had been elected as Bishop, and had been ordained by Bishop Johann Wiebe who had been ordained by Gerhard Dyck in Russia and had led his people to Canada.<sup>19</sup>

Whenever he was challenged by the commissioners to speak authoritatively on behalf of the church regarding its beliefs or practice, Bishop Wiens would consistently defer to the authority of the congregation from whom he derived his authority since he had been elected by the members. Likewise the five ministers who worked alongside him had not been chosen by the bishop, nor had received any special training for ministry, but were Church members elected by the congregation to serve it. Therefore, with regard to the exercise of church discipline, neither the Bishop nor the ministers had any power to excommunicate a member; only the congregation could do that. Bishop Wiens also reiterated that he alone could make no decision to overturn an excommunication without the support of the community.

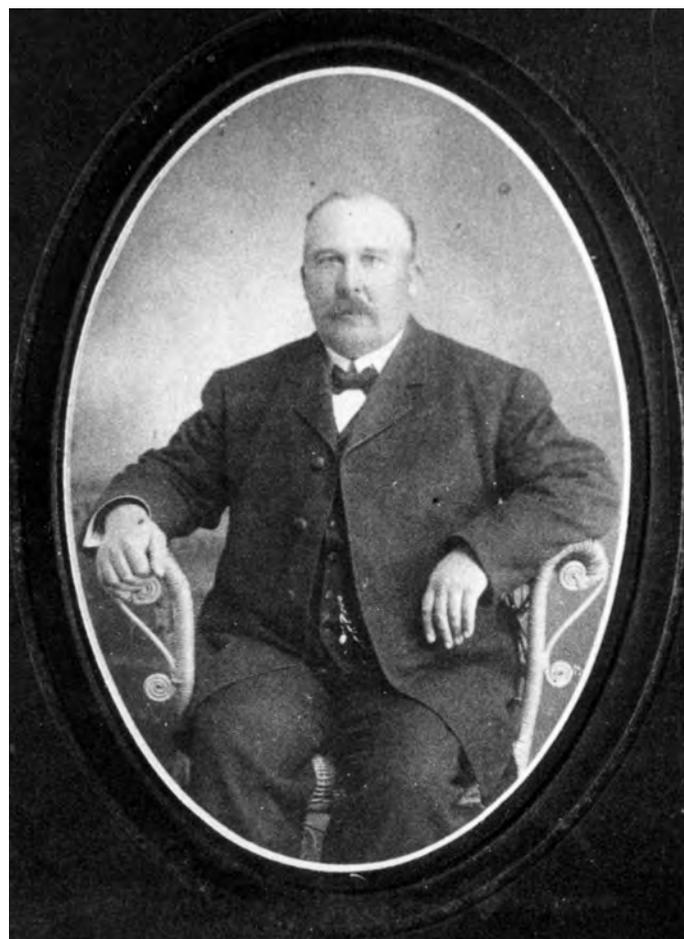
From the start, the complainants had seen the church leadership as the key authority, and decided to force them to relax the rules of the church by threatening to undermine their authority. In their discussions and correspondence with Premier Walter Scott and with the Minister of Education, J. A. Calder, they had suggested that the government could deprive the bishop and ministers of the legal right to solemnize marriages. In a memo to Calder, Premier Scott wrote:

*At Rosthern I saw Miller, of Warman, with Mr. Friesen in like position, together with Mr. Ens. Mr. Ens advises that the time has come to act if we can act at all. Two suggestions were made (1) to inform the Mennonite heads that unless they leave free those of their people who wished to use the public school we will compel the formation of Public School Districts where ever there are enough children of school age and will force the payment of taxes; and (2) to inform them also that we will deprive them of the legal right to solemnize marriages.<sup>20</sup>*

These suggestions were picked up by the commissioners and repeated at intervals throughout the proceedings. “Which would you rather do: give up your rights to solemnize marriage or let your people send their children to the public school?”<sup>21</sup> At a subsequent meeting with some of the leaders of the Old Colony Mennonites, Deputy Attorney General Ford admitted that the right to legally marry people was unrelated to the school question, and was simply a means the Government might consider using to force the church leaders to follow its dictates.<sup>22</sup> This threatened action did not address the issue of education, but was a direct attack on one of the duties and responsibilities conferred upon those Old Colony leaders who had been elected and ordained by their congregations.

When pushed to answer why he restricted the freedom of the church members, Bishop Wiens at one point responded with a parable that perhaps most clearly expressed how he saw the authority of his ordination:

*If there were a shepherd who was watching a flock of sheep, whom the Master had placed in the shepherd’s care, would not the Master demand an account of him, whether he had left each sheep to go as it wanted to go, or whether he had tried to enforce the rules as given him?<sup>23</sup>*



*Gerhard Ens was one of the first Mennonites to move into the Rosthern area and is considered the founder of the town. He was an MLA and an immigration agent. Ens became a Swedenborgian, but continued to be active in Mennonite life. Photo Credit: MHC Archives Photo Collection, 51:157*

In like manner, Bishop Wiens felt responsible for those who had joined the congregation voluntarily, to insist that they remain true to their commitments. The Old Colony leaders made it clear that their disciplinary actions applied only to those who voluntarily joined the congregation as adults; if children who had grown up in the community chose not to join the church through baptism, they did not suffer the discipline of “shunning.”<sup>24</sup>

### **Congregation**

Although exercising considerable authority as a Bishop in reality, Wiens continually described his authority as secondary to that of the congregation. In his words, there was one “congregation”, or “*Gemeinde*”, consisting of 950 members, meeting weekly in three church buildings or monthly in school buildings in other villages.<sup>25</sup> Members joined the congregation voluntarily as adults by accepting baptism at the age of nineteen to twenty-five for males, while females who joined might be a year or two younger.<sup>26</sup> This act of bending the knee to God at baptism (by pouring) and promising to remain faithful to God until death was the irrevocable decision which authorized the community to excommunicate those who did not remain true to their commitments. One of the leading elders of the church attempted to explain the strength of this commitment by

comparing it to a sworn oath, something Mennonites refused to do. (Of the 18 Mennonite witnesses that appeared before the commission, only one—Jacob A. Friesen—was sworn while all the others were simply “affirmed.”)

*We don't force anybody into our community, but when he is once in our community you know, he makes such a promise, - it is as strong as if you would swear anything.*<sup>27</sup>

One was not born into the congregation, but joined as a result of a personal decision made as an adult and by being baptized and making the accompanying verbal promises.

However, while the congregation consisted of all members, it was only the male members who were allowed to participate in the electing of ministers and bishops. Men were also the only ones permitted to participate in the decision to excommunicate a member. Through an interpreter, the commissioners elicited the following answers from Bishop Wiens:

*Q. Who has the power to excommunicate?*

*A. The whole community. The whole congregation has that power. He [Wiens] says it is first presented to the congregation.*

*Q. “The congregation.” Is that the whole community now?*

*A. That means the place where they have service.*

*Q. Well, are they all asked to come?*

*A. They are not specially invited for that special purpose: only those that come there. Then they pass a resolution that a certain member be excommunicated.*

*Q. Would the member himself know anything about it before the meeting?*

*A. Yes, he is invited to come and attend and speak for himself.*

*Q. Can the Bishop excommunicate?*

*A. Not alone.*

*Q. Can a minister?*

*A. No.*

*Q. How many people must meet together to excommunicate?*

*A. He doesn't know exactly, but he says whatever number of male members are in Church are asked to remain after the service and then the resolution is passed.*<sup>28</sup>

Although Wiens begins by including the whole congregation, further clarification reveals that the process in fact involves only the men of a particular gathering who are asked to stay after a regular service to administer discipline to a recalcitrant member.

The role of the congregation in the process of excommunicating a rebellious member was also not as authoritative as the rhetoric of Bishop Wiens would suggest. Yes, the member under discipline was invited to appear before the congregation, but the process was far from a free exchange of ideas leading to decision made by all. The onus was on the member to demonstrate to the congregation and its leaders, from Scripture, that their teaching or practice was wrong. If he was unable to do so, he had to acknowledge that he was wrong or face excommunication.<sup>29</sup>

Another role in which the congregation exercised its authority was in the delivery of the notice of excommunication. Generally, it was not the Bishop or a minister who delivered this notice, but two, sometimes only one, respected elders of the congregation. The commissioners took pains to inquire after the names of each of those who had delivered letters to the various excommunicants. This action had the effect of placing the responsibility of enforcing the ban on the whole congregation rather than just its leaders. A point repeated by two of the witnesses was that excommunication was understood by the congregation to have eternal consequences, in effect barring the excommunicant from heaven.<sup>30</sup> One of those witnesses, I. P. Friesen, later testified upon further questioning that he no longer believed that the community had the power to send him to hell for what he had done.<sup>31</sup>

### **Tradition**

Aside from quoting the biblical command of 1 Thess. 3:6, “Keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you have received from us,” Bishop Wiens did not explicitly appeal to “tradition” as a separate authority. But it deserves a brief mention because what Wiens referred to as the authority of the Word of God was in reality the interpretation he and the ministers had inherited. Rev. John Wall, one of the ministers who accompanied the Bishop, referred more explicitly to the “rules” to which baptized members of the congregation were required to adhere, though here, too, he refers to Scripture as the foundation of those rules. When asked whether a member would be excommunicated if he persisted in sending his children to a public school, Wall replied, “If they don't want [to] remain with us in the same rules and want to have another rule, when he wants to go outside the pale of the rules which we have according to God's Word, then we believe we must do so. For the sake of our and their soul's salvation.”<sup>32</sup> Incidentally, this is as close as the leaders of the Old Colony Church came to addressing the issue of whether they believed they had the authority to bar someone from heaven by means of excommunication.

As the probing of the commissioners revealed, tradition was the default position which the erring member had to refute, from Scripture, if he was to retain his membership. When repeatedly challenged by the commissioners to explain why people were being excommunicated when they merely wanted to send their children to the public school, the Bishop consistently responded that he always invited such a member to come to him or to the congregation and demonstrate that the practice in question was in accordance with the teaching of Scripture. The commissioners pointed out to Bishop Wiens that it would be nearly impossible for any member to convince the church leaders that they were wrong and that he or she was right and thereby to establish a different interpretation of Scripture. The translated exchange reads in part:

- Q. Suppose I belonged to your Church and sent my children to the public schools: would I be excommunicated?*
- A. He [Wiens] says if you were not able to convince him that you were right then you would be excommunicated.*
- Q. Would I be able to convince you that I was right?*
- A. He says God's Word is right.*
- Q. And God's Word says what about this?*
- A. He says God's Word says that if we know it from our youth up it can lead us in the paths of righteousness; or something like that.*
- Q. Has anybody been able to convince you that sending children to the public school is not against God's law?*
- A. He does not know of anybody ever trying. He says no one came to the church to—*
- Q. Ask him again how many persons have been excommunicated because of sending their children to the public schools.*
- A. He can't say. He says they were then asked to come to the church and they would not appear.<sup>33</sup>*

Repeatedly, this is the stalemate at which the commissioners arrive. The members who were threatened with discipline had been invited to appear to defend their position before the congregation, but none had done so. In the Bishop's view, then, no one had been excommunicated for sending their children to the public school, but rather for failing to defend their action before the congregation. When one of the excommunicants, I. P. Friesen, pressed the commissioners to make it possible for him to be freed from the ban, Bishop Wiens once again commented that Friesen had often been invited to convince him by way of God's word that he, Wiens, was wrong. Friesen then expressed his frustration with Wiens' interpretation of Scripture: "He takes a verse that didn't relate to that at all. How can a person convince him?"<sup>34</sup>

### **Scripture**

That brings us to the discussion of the authority of Scripture in the self-understanding of the Old Colony Mennonites. Occurring even more frequently than his appeals to the authority of the congregation are the Bishop's appeals to the authority of Scripture as the basis for his decisions and the decisions of the Church. It seems at times the commissioners became weary with his constant reference to the Word of God.

- Q. Tell us what is the effect on a man's business when he is excommunicated?*
- A. He [Wiens] says he can't say. He says, We tell our brothers to do nothing else than God's Word teaches.*
- Q. What do you do that God's Word teaches?*

- A. On account of disobedience, even the smallest disobedience is enough: or something like that.*
- Q. Would you shake hands with a man who is excommunicated?"*
- A. He says if God's Word says you should not then he has to obey God more than man.*
- Q. Well, does God's Word say so?*
- A. He says it says, If somebody comes who does not bring this teaching then do you not take him up in his house.*
- Q. Would you eat with a man who is excommunicated?*
- A. [before translator has time to translate Wiens' answer, the commissioner speaks again]*
- Q. Never mind God's Word; would you or not?*
- A. No.<sup>35</sup>*

It would be easy to conclude that Bishop Wiens was being evasive by his constant appeal to the authority of Scripture, but it would be more accurate to see in it a reflection of his deep-seated belief that God's Word was the only ground, not only for disciplinary action by the Church, but for all beliefs and practices of the Church.

To some extent, the authority of Scripture also lies at the heart of the desire of the Old Colony Church to maintain their own schools. Through Bishop Wiens' testimony it becomes clear that the Church did not wish to oppose public schools as much as it wished to promote its own. His justification for this is the injunction that is frequently repeated to the effect that a person must be taught the Scriptures from his childhood. Since the church schools used only texts which point the way to salvation (and public schools did not), sending one's children to the church school is a matter of obedience. In the Bishop's letter of excommunication to Jakob Friesen, a translation of which is also included in the government's file of correspondence the Apostle Paul's exhortation on the training of children in 2 Timothy 3:15, and Moses' command in Deuteronomy 6:6-7 are quoted, followed by the question, "Is it not then our duty to teach our children God's word in the school, where in every book the way to salvation is taught?"<sup>36</sup> Most of the rest of the letter of excommunication is likewise filled with Scriptural references and quotations.

However, this appeal to Scripture was not as straightforward and simple as Bishop Wiens and the other ministers expressed it. The commissioners rightly pointed out that the role of interpretation is actually more determinative than that of the Scripture texts alone. This was something that the ministers apparently found difficult to comprehend. At a subsequent meeting between Ford and three of the church leaders the following discussion ensued:

*Ford: "You believe a certain thing; and no amount of argument would convince you that you were wrong."*

*Mr. Klassen: "Our Testament and yours is exactly the same. I am pretty sure of that. I have one that is in your language,*

*and ours, and it is exactly the same. Well, as long as it is the same it should be understood the same. It cannot be misunderstood: it is so plain.*<sup>37</sup>

The hermeneutic of the Old Colony leaders effectively prevented any alternative interpretation of the biblical text. In their view, there could only be one interpretation, that of the plain, obvious meaning of the text. That meaning was the one taught by the Bishop and other ministers, and logically there could be no other understanding of Scripture.

The question of interpretation is compounded by the selective use of Scripture. This is seen most clearly in the congregational meeting of more than 300 members in response to a directive from the commissioners. The Bishop was asked to seek the opinion of his congregation on the matter of excommunicating those who went against the church's teaching regarding the education of children. The Bishop accordingly sent out a letter calling the members to a meeting within a month after the end of the commission of enquiry. The brotherhood was invited to gather to consider God's Word, and then the following verses were given as the ones that were to be considered:

*-Matt. 18:15-18 – if a brother sins, go to him in private, then take a witness or two, then tell it to the church, then let him be as a Gentile or tax collector.*

*-Mark 7:21-24 – from out of the hearts of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness.*

*-Rom. 16:17-18 – keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you have learned, and turn away from them...such men are slaves of their own appetites and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting*

*-Thess. 3:6, 14 – keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you have received from us...If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him so that he will be put to shame.*

*2 John 9, 10 – anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God...if anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting.*

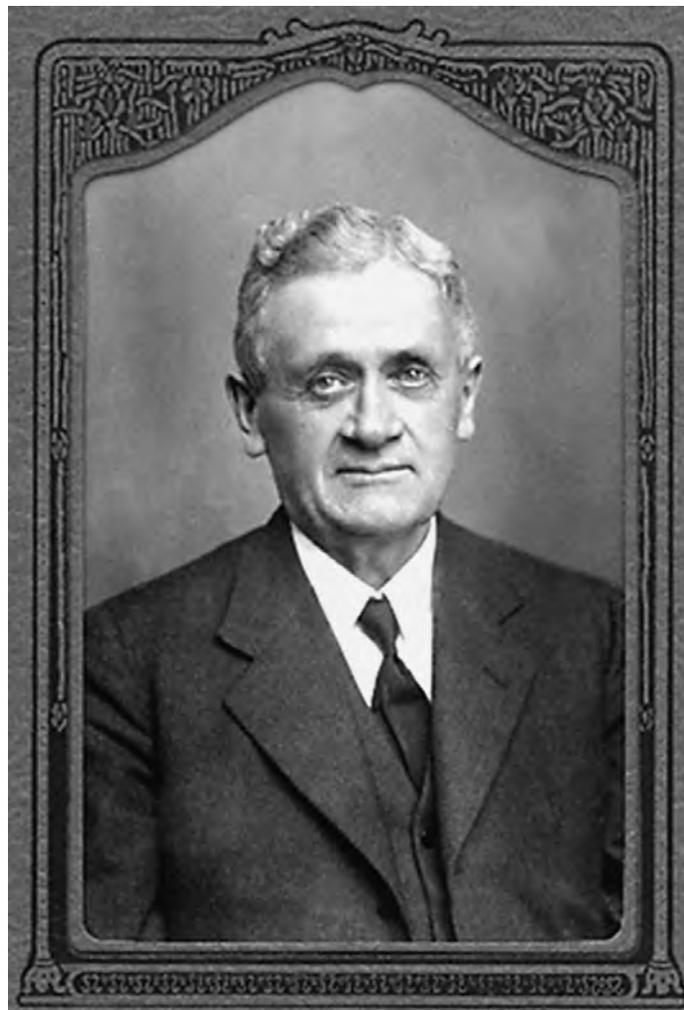
*2 Tim. 3:1-6 – in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power. Avoid such men as these.*

*2 Tim. 3:15 – from childhood you have known the sacred scriptures.*<sup>38</sup>

All verses but the last deal with the issue of church discipline and excommunication. This was not to be a meeting where the members could freely explore the Scriptures relating to the educating of children in government-run schools. Rather, the leaders perceived the issue to be primarily that of disciplining those members who did not submit to the decisions of the congregation. Nevertheless, this appeal to Scriptural authority must also be seen as a key to Old Colony Mennonite self-understanding.

### **Secular Government Authority**

Finally, I will take a brief look at the Old Colony understanding of the authority of the secular Government and its relation to the Church. Throughout the hearings, Bishop Wiens stated his respect for the government's authority, while clearly subordinating its role to that of Scripture and the Church as far as the education of children was concerned. When he did appeal to the authority of secular powers, it was in connection with the guarantee that the federal government of Canada had given to the Mennonite emigrants before they had left Russia, that they would have the fullest privilege of exercising their religious principles without any kind of molestation and



*David Toews was a prominent Mennonite leader who was instrumental in bringing Mennonites to Canada in the 1920s. He also represented Mennonites in discussions that led to the alternative service program during World War II. Photo Credit: MHC Archives Photo Collection, 53:*

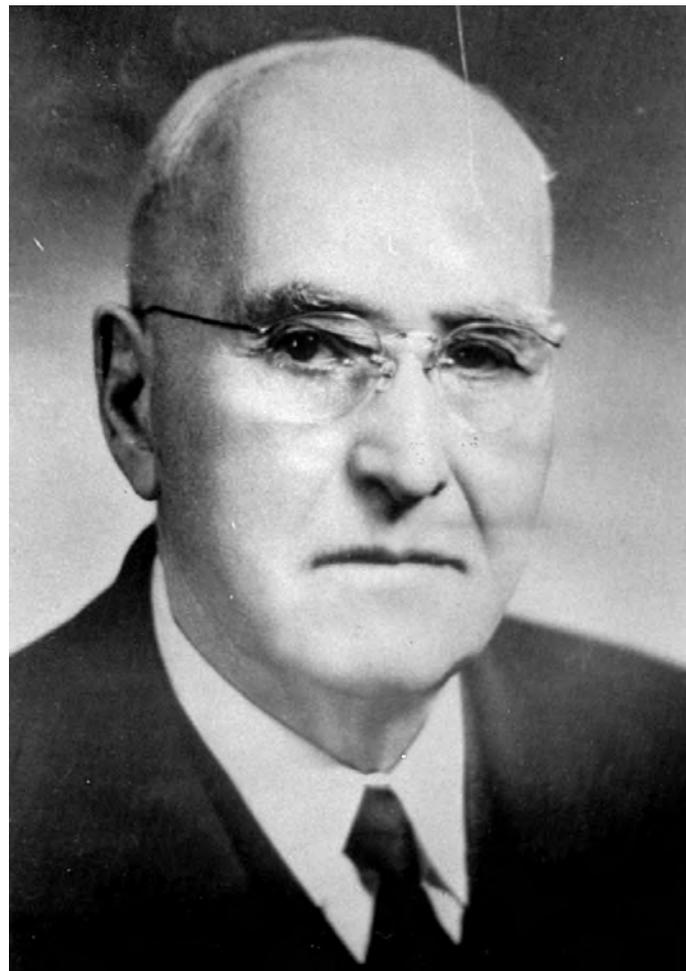
restriction whatever, and that the same privilege extended to the education of their children in schools. Bishop Wiens and the ministers had brought a copy of this document with them to the hearings and were eager to get it into the hands of the commissioners.<sup>39</sup> The document, included in the record of proceedings as an appendix, stated in clause 10:

*The fullest privilege of exercising their religious principles is by law afforded to the Mennonites without any kind of molestation and restriction whatever, and the same privilege extends to the education of their children in schools.*<sup>40</sup>

What Wiens and the other church leaders failed to realize was that the Canadian government had amended this original agreement by adding the clause, “as provided by law,” effectively nullifying any guarantee granted by the *federal* government with regard to education which, by law, was a *provincial* matter.<sup>41</sup> Although the commissioners did not build their case on this discrepancy, they did focus on the tenth clause, suggesting that the Old Colony leadership was itself in violation of the principle when “preventing others exercising their privilege of doing as they like as to sending children to school.”<sup>42</sup>

The language of “privilege” rather than “right” pervades the ministers’ discourse. When church members who were sending their children to public schools, were called before the congregation, they were asked why they did not want to avail themselves of the “privilege” the government was affording them, meaning sending their children to schools where they could be taught the Scripture.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps in their invocation of “privilege,” they were recalling the *Privilegium* promised to them by Catherine the Great in 1789, prompting the migration of Mennonites from Prussia to the steppes of south Russia. The eventual withdrawal of the exemption from military service guaranteed in that *Privilegium*, which had been renewed in writing by two subsequent Russian emperors, was the catalyst that had led to the migration of Mennonites to North America starting in 1874. Now, once again, they felt the promises made to them by government were being eroded.<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, those who were rebelling against Church authority likewise adopted the language of “privilege” and gave as their reason for leaving the church the fact that they wanted the privilege of sending their children to a school where they would receive a good education.<sup>45</sup>

Rev. David Toews, who had spoken in support of those Mennonites desiring to send their children to government schools and had welcomed excommunicated Old Colony Mennonites into his church in Rosthern, also spoke favourably of the Saskatchewan and Canadian governments, but from a perspective different from that of the Old Colony leaders. He wrote an account of the Warman Inquiry for *Der Mitarbeiter*, a German periodical which he helped edit, in which he detailed the advice and warnings given by the commissioners to the leaders of the Old Colony Church.<sup>46</sup> It appears that his article prompted a Mennonite in Pennsylvania to write an alarmist article for another periodical, the *Mennonitische Rundschau*, describing the incident as religious persecution in the Canadian Northwest. Toews wrote a strongly worded response in which he defended the actions of the government while denouncing those of the Old Colony leadership. He stated that in the so-called “Old Colony” congregation, there was the rule that if anyone sent his children to a public school, and did not listen to repeated



*I.P. Friesen, who was excommunicated by the Old Colony Church and an active participant in the School Inquiry process went on to become a minister in the Rudnerweide Church (EMMC) and an evangelist. Photo Credit: Leonard Doell.*

warnings from the leaders, he was placed under the ban. To speak of persecution, then, the real culprits in Toews’ opinion were the Old Colony leaders.

*That very same congregation who wishes to wear the martyr’s halo and is affirmed through articles such as the one mentioned, practices persecution in the most heartless manner, and in the practice, desires that the government guarantee to leave it in peace while it treats its individual members in a manner that is against the spirit of Christianity. Our Canadian form of government is a perfectly fine one. No one is disturbed in his religious views; all communities enjoy full freedom. But surely it is also the duty of a government to see that the individual has freedom regarding the education of his children as well as other aspects of faith. When complaints come, it has the duty to at least investigate; and that is what has happened till now.*<sup>47</sup>

Instead of insisting on freedom for the *community*, Toews was insisting on freedom for the *individual* who happened to disagree with the community. He also made the point that the government schools had much higher standards than those run by the Old Colony church. Rather than seeing the state intruding on the rights of a community of faith, he considered the use of

the ban to discipline those who wished to take advantage of the superior opportunities provided by the state, to be the church intruding on the prerogatives of the state—something the state was duty-bound to investigate thoroughly.

The Old Colony Mennonite leaders, on the other hand, desired that the government would leave them alone to live peacefully, as “the silent in the land,” except for keeping its commitment to permit them to run their private schools.<sup>48</sup> This quietist approach towards secular government was in stark contrast to those excommunicated members whose lobbying had precipitated the Royal Commission.<sup>49</sup> The letters sent by Miller and Friesen prior to the hearings demonstrate a willingness to use the levers of political power to achieve their goals. With both provincial and federal elections occurring that year, they did not hesitate to remind the politicians of their faithful support to the Liberal party and policies in the past, and their willingness to lend all possible aid in the upcoming election, with the expectation that the government would address their grievances. In early October, 1908, Jacob J. Friesen had written:

*Now, that the Dominion Election is nearing again I don't know what to do. I have always [sic] been a supporter of liberalism but judging the present Government by its action towards our condition I can't help but losing [sic] faith in it. I always had much confidence in Hon. Scott and his Cabinet but I fear that he will disappoint us in our believes [sic]. As far as I can learn, is the Hon. Mr. Scott afraid of the opposition to do anything in our matter. If this is really the case then I have always had a wrong opinion about the Premier's character.<sup>50</sup>*

Earlier, prior to the provincial election, I. P. Friesen had likewise connected government action on this matter with electoral support, when he wrote, “We may add that should you decide to take energetic [sic] steps in this matter shortly, we feel assured that you would make a lot of friends in this District for the forthcoming election.”<sup>51</sup>

The representatives of secular government, the two commissioners appointed to hear the grievances, saw their role as limited to listening and then passing on their recommendations to the government. Despite their evident frustration at times in trying to solicit clear responses from the Bishop, they approached their work with fairness, asking incisive questions to discover that in almost all the cases presented, the member had been excommunicated for reasons other than for sending his child to a public school alone. The points of law that they felt the Old Colony leaders may have violated were in advocating a boycott, a criminal offence, and in restricting religious liberty. But they repeatedly emphasized that it was not their intention to interfere with the Mennonites practice of religion or to bring in harsh measures.<sup>52</sup> The commissioners submitted their report, in the form of a transcript with accompanying documents but apparently without any concrete recommendations.

Three hundred members of the Old Colony congregation gathered on 19 January 1909 for a meeting called by Bishop Wiens. In the letter the Bishop subsequently wrote to the Saskatchewan government, he expressed the congregation's gratitude for the fact that “our belief, according to God's word, has been left undisturbed and that we have enjoyed our freedom of knowledge undisturbed by the honourable Government,” and requested that that freedom might continue.<sup>53</sup> At the same time, Wiens also declared that the brotherhood had unanimously

decided and voted to reject the claims of those who had rebelled against the community.

I. P. Friesen, one of those who had hoped to be released from the ban, also wrote to Premier Scott, expressing his profound disappointment that the church had decided to be strict rather than showing any leniency whatsoever.<sup>54</sup> He blamed Bishop Wiens for not taking a fair vote on the issue and for not framing the question in a way that would have elicited frank discussion. Friesen stated that members had not spoken out because of their fear of being banned and boycotted. Premier Scott responded to Friesen's letter with surprisingly strong language, “This species of tyranny cannot possibly be permitted to continue if the Government can find available means to stop it.”<sup>55</sup> He had written in similar language to J. E. Knipfel, who had followed up his oral testimony with several written submissions urging the government to act. Scott wrote, “No class of people can be permitted by a form of tyranny to discourage others from taking advantage of a public institution so essential as is our public school system.”<sup>56</sup>

In spite of the strong rhetoric, there seems to have been no action taken by the Legislature in response to the reports, disappointing those excommunicated Mennonites who had hoped to force the Old Colony to limit their use of the ban in disciplining the community. However, the issue of private versus public schools did not go away. It resurfaced less than ten years later when, after the First World War, the new premier of Saskatchewan, W. M. Martin, determined to close the German schools and force all children by law to attend the provincial schools. Because of the unwillingness to compromise on both sides, large numbers of Old Colony Mennonites moved away to Mexico where they were once again promised freedom to teach their children as they wished.<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusion

While from the outside, the authority in the Old Colony Church appears to be centered in the figures of the Bishop and his fellow ministers, or in the church's strong tradition handed down from generation to generation, it is clear from the testimony of Bishop Wiens that he saw the locus of authority in the congregation and in the Word of God. For the Old Colony ministers, decisions were not taken by the leadership, but by the gathered brotherhood. Also, they did not see their interpretation of Scripture as determined or even coloured by tradition, but saw it as the plain sense of Scripture, conclusions that anyone who read the Bible in humility would also reach. From their understanding of Scripture, the education of children must be done in an environment where all knowledge was based on and derived from the Holy Bible, found not in the public schools but only in the ones the Church had established. Also from their understanding of Scripture, anyone who resisted this plain teaching regarding the education of children was liable to the discipline of the community, specifically excommunication and shunning. The leaders did not arbitrarily enact this discipline on their own, but only as agreed upon by the gathered congregation.

The Bishop and ministers of the Old Colony Church saw their own authority as contingent upon these two other bases of authority, the Bible and the congregation. Consequently, the commissioners as well as the excommunicated members encountered insurmountable obstacles to extracting commitments from the leaders to change their practice of disciplining

those members who chose to send their children to schools other than those established by the Church. The leaders declared themselves to be without the authority to change the current practice, firstly because of the clear teaching of Scripture, and secondly because such decisions would need to be taken by the congregation as a whole. The strategy of the excommunicated members had been to attempt to force change by dragging the church leadership before government powers. Because they had failed to take into account the leaders' self-perception that their authority was not inherent in themselves, the disaffected members were thwarted in their attempt.

## Endnotes

- 1 This paper was first published in: *Historical Papers 2007: Canadian Society of Church History*, 129-148. The article has been revised slightly by the author. (eds.)
- 2 Leo Driedger, "Community Conflict: The Eldorado Invasion of Warman," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 23 (1986): 247-269.
- 3 *The Morning Leader*, 5 Jan. 1909.
- 4 "Inquiry re Practices of Old Colony Mennonite Church: Minutes of Evidence," Proceedings of Commission of Inquiry at Warman, Dec. 28 & 29, 1908, File Ed. 12 d., Saskatchewan Archives Board, Saskatoon; subsequent references to the transcript of these Proceedings will be cited as "Inquiry at Warman."
- 5 Leonard Doell, "Mennonite Homesteading in Saskatchewan," in *Mennonite Homesteaders on the Hague-Osler Reserve* (Saskatoon, SK: Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan, 1999), 13-22; Leonard Doell, "The Hague-Osler Reserve," *Hague-Osler Mennonite Reserve, 1895-1995* (Saskatoon, SK: Hague-Osler Reserve Book Committee, 1995), 26-38.
- 6 "Inquiry at Warman," 62.
- 7 A list of the villages in which the schools were located, along with the names of the teachers, was delivered to the commissioners in Regina two weeks later by a deputation of leaders from the Old Colony Church; see: File Ed. 12 d. Saskatchewan Archives Board, Saskatoon.
- 8 "Inquiry at Warman," 41, 43.
- 9 Undated letter by J. E. Knipfel, File Ed. 12 d., Saskatchewan Archives Board, Saskatoon.
- 10 Editorial, *The Daily Phoenix*, 5 Jan. 1909.
- 11 This discourse of "progress" also is reflected in the discussion of the inquiry in Frank H. Epp, *Education with a Plus: The Story of Rosthern Junior College* (Waterloo, ON: Conrad Press, 1975), 34-39.
- 12 On Bishop Wiens and other leaders of the Old Colony Church in Saskatchewan, see: Leonard Doell, "Hague Osler Old Colony Mennonite Church in the Old West Saskatchewan," in *Old Colony Mennonites in Canada 1875 to 2000*, ed. by Delbert F. Plett (Steinbach, MB: Crossway Publications, 2001), 142-146; and Leonard Doell, "The Old Colony Mennonite Church," in *Hague-Osler Mennonite Reserve*, 579-583.
- 13 I. P. Miller, Warman, to Gerhard Ens, M.L.A., n.d., File Ed. 12 d., Saskatchewan Archives Board, Saskatoon.
- 14 J. A. Calder, Regina, SK, to His Honour The Lieutenant Governor in Council, 15 Dec. 1908, File Ed. 12 d., Saskatchewan Archives Board, Saskatoon.
- 15 Wm. Abrams, "Schule und Erziehung: Die deutsch-englische Fortbildungsschule zu Rosthern, Sask.," *Der Mitarbeiter* 1(9) (June 1907): 68-70, reprinted as "Aus der mennonitische Geschichte: Die deutsch-englische Fortbildungsschule zu Rosthern," *Der Bote* (12 January 1938): 6-7. David Toews had likewise been involved in the Gretna school, and had studied at Wesley College in Winnipeg, starting the year after Abrams arrived there. See Helmut Harder, *David Toews Was Here 1870-1947* (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications, 2002), 36.
- 16 Leo Driedger, "Individual Freedom vs. Community Control: An Adaptation of Erickson's Ontogeny of Ritualization," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 21, no. 3 (1982): 226-242; Leonard Doell, "Education," *Hague-Osler Mennonite Reserve*, 635-667; William Janzen, *Limits on Liberty: The Experience of Mennonite, Hutterite, and Doukhobor Communities in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 100-103.
- 17 Jacob J. Friesen, Rosthern, to J. A. Calder, Regina, 1 Oct. 1908, File Ed. 12 d., Saskatchewan Archives Board, Saskatoon.
- 18 "Inquiry at Warman," 62, 72-73.
- 19 On Bishop Johann Wiebe and his leading role in the immigration of Old Colony Church to Canada, see: Plett, ed. *Old Colony Mennonites in Canada*, p. 45-72.
- 20 [Walter Scott], Memorandum for Mr. Calder, marked "Confidential," 2 Sept. 1908, File Ed. 12 d., Saskatchewan Archives Board, Saskatoon.
- 21 "Inquiry at Warman," 74-75.
- 22 "Inquiry at Warman," 93, 95.
- 23 "Inquiry at Warman," 75.
- 24 "Inquiry at Warman," 95-96.

- 25 "Inquiry at Warman," 62-63.
- 26 "Inquiry at Warman," 96.
- 27 "Inquiry at Warman," 96.
- 28 "Inquiry at Warman," 64-65.
- 29 "Inquiry at Warman," 67.
- 30 "Inquiry at Warman," 10, 29, 31.
- 31 "Inquiry at Warman," 87.
- 32 "Inquiry at Warman," 76.
- 33 "Inquiry at Warman," 67.
- 34 "Inquiry at Warman," 88.
- 35 "Inquiry at Warman," 68-69.
- 36 Jacob Wiens, Neuanlage, to Jakob Friesen, 20 Jan. 1908, File Ed. 12 d., Saskatchewan Archives Board, Saskatoon. The letters of excommunication for Isaac Mueller and I. P. Friesen are also included, the latter with the original letter in German script.
- 37 "Warman Inquiry," 95.
- 38 Jakob Wiens, Neuanlage, Announcement of meeting, File Ed. 12 d., Saskatchewan Archives Board, Saskatoon. The summary given of the Scripture passages is mine.
- 39 "Warman Inquiry," 71-72.
- 40 "Warman Inquiry," 89-90.
- 41 Frank Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920: The History of a Separate People*, vol. 1 (Toronto: Macmillan, 1974; reprinted by Mennonite Historical Society of Canada, 1993), 338-339.
- 42 "Warman Inquiry," 72.
- 43 "Warman Inquiry," 65, 71.
- 44 Abraham Friesen, *In Defense of Privilege: Russian Mennonites and the State before and during World War I* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2006), 4-10.
- 45 "Warman Inquiry," 20, 31.
- 46 [David T] [oews], "Nachrichten aus den Gemeinden: Aus Saskatchewan," *Der Mitarbeiter* 3, no. 4 (Jan. 1909): 28-29. I am grateful to Conrad Stoesz, Archivist of the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg, for providing copies of this article and others from *Der Mitarbeiter* and the *Mennonitische Rundschau*.
- 47 David Töws, "Religiöse Verfolgung im Canadischen Nordwesten?" *Mennonitische Rundschau* (24 Feb. 1909): 2-3. The translation is my own.
- 48 "Warman Inquiry," 75.
- 49 On the Mennonite involvement in political and legislative institutions in the early twentieth century in Canada, see James Urry, *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood: Europe—Russia—Canada, 1525-1980* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2006), 161-183.
- 50 Jacob J. Friesen, Rosthern, to J. A. Calder, Regina, 1 Oct. 1908, File Ed. 12 d., Saskatchewan Archives Board, Saskatoon.
- 51 I. P. Friesen, Rosthern, to J. A. Calder, Regina, 27 July 1908, File Ed. 12 d., Saskatchewan Archives Board, Saskatoon.
- 52 "Warman Inquiry," 86, 97.
- 53 Jacob Wiens, Neuanlage, to the Provincial Government of Saskatchewan, Regina, 21 January 1909, File Ed. 12 d., Saskatchewan Archives Board, Saskatoon.
- 54 I. P. Friesen, Rosthern, to Hon. Walter Scott, Regina, 20 Jan. 1909, File M1, IV, 57. Education: Foreign Schools, 1906-1916, Scott Papers, Saskatchewan Archives Board, Saskatoon.
- 55 [Walter Scott, Regina], to I. P. Friesen, Rosthern, 27 Jan. 1909, File M1, IV, 57. Education: Foreign Schools, 1906-1916, Scott Papers, Saskatchewan Archives Board, Saskatoon.
- 56 [Walter Scott, Regina], to J. E. Knipfel, Warman, 18 Jan. 1909, File M1, IV, 57. Education: Foreign Schools, 1906-1916, Scott Papers, Saskatchewan Archives Board, Saskatoon.
- 57 Janzen, *Limits on Liberty*, 103-112.

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# Ältester Jakob Wiens (1855-1932)

By Leonard Doell, Aberdeen, Saskatchewan

Jakob Wiens was the first Ältester of the Old Colony (Reinländer) Mennonite Church in Saskatchewan. He helped to form, shape, and nurture the church through its beginnings and some of its times of greatest material development which were also its most challenging and agonizing years.



Ältester Jakob Wiens, (1855-1932) was spiritual leader of the Saskatchewan Old Colony Mennonites. He migrated to Mexico in the 1920s where he helped establish the settlement of Durango. He was also the main spokesperson for the Old Colony Mennonites at the Warman School Inquiry in 1908. Photo Credit: Leonard Doell.

He was born in Russia on 11 May 1855, most likely in the village of Kronsthal in the Chortitza Colony. His father, after whom he was named, was also a church leader. Rev Jakob Wiens Sr. was born (1807) in Rosenort, West Prussia and was first elected as a Deacon in Kronsthal in 1840 and ordained as a minister in Chortitz on April 13 1843. Jakob Sr. had first married Maria Dueck who died in 1849. That same year he married Anna Friesen, who was the mother of Jakob Jr.<sup>1</sup>

The Wiens family came to Canada on the *SS Sarmatian*, arriving in Quebec City on July 6<sup>th</sup> 1875. Rev. Wiens Sr. was the minister who conducted worship services for the group in Hamburg before they sailed for Canada.<sup>2</sup> The Wiens family moved to the Old Colony village of Reinland on the Manitoba

West Reserve. Most of those who emigrated had to borrow money for the move but a few “like Isaak Dyck, Rev. Jakob Wiens and Johan Peters were in a solid credit position, with \$1,500.00, \$1,503.44 and \$607.16 respectively, loaned into the colony’s treasury at the end of 1876. They were either well to do or had been able to sell their properties in Russia advantageously.”<sup>3</sup> The lot in the village of Reinland settled by Rev. Jakob Wiens Sr. was taken over by his daughter Justina and son in law Jakob Wieler in 1881. After they moved to Mexico this yard was occupied by the Jacob P. Zacharias family and later the Gerhard G. Ens’s.<sup>4</sup>

By 1888, the aging Rev. Jakob Wiens Sr. was no longer active as a minister in the church and he died in 1889. The *Mennonitische Rundschau* reported:

*A solemn funeral was held in Reinland on Tuesday, September 24. The aged and beloved minister Jakob Wiens was carried to his final resting place. Almost 200 persons were present at the service. The funeral procession that followed him to the gravesite was probably the largest that has ever been seen here. The deceased reached an age of 82 and because of aging he was relieved of his pulpit duties several years ago. He has served in the ministry for approximately 45 years.*<sup>5</sup>

Jakob Wiens Jr. had also settled in Reinland and he homesteaded SW 23-1-4. When he moved to Saskatchewan in 1899 he sold his village lot to his sister Katharina and her husband Rev. Peter Harms. This is the site where the famous meeting with the Superintendent of Registration for the Conscriptio Act, P.C. Locke was held on June 13<sup>th</sup> 1918. Rev Harms sold this lot to his cousin Gerhard G. Harms who arrived in Manitoba in the 1920’s. After the Harms family moved to Snowflake in the 1940’s, Abram A. Paetkau purchased the farmstead, dismantled the old house and constructed a new one.<sup>6</sup>

Jakob Wiens met his future wife Helena Wall (born 3 April 1854) in the Village of Reinland. Her parents, Johan and Helena (Hildebrand) Wall settled there after coming to Canada on the



The former home of Ältester Jakob Wiens in the village of Reinland, Manitoba being dismantled in the 1940s. Photo Credit: Reinland: *An Experience in Community*, 238.



*The Old Colony Church at Neuanlage. The home of Ältester Jakob Wiens was on the same lot as the church. Photo Credit: Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives Photo Collection, 54.26.*

*SS Peruvian*, arriving in Quebec City on June 30<sup>th</sup> 1878. Jakob and Helena were married on April 4<sup>th</sup> 1880. They had no children of their own but took in two foster children in Manitoba. One was Franz Harder, who later became an Old Colony minister in Saskatchewan, and the other was Maria Janzen, who married Wilhelm Friesen.

An election of church leaders was held on October 20<sup>th</sup> 1888, to succeed Deacon Johan Ens who had died in 1883, and the aging Rev. Jakob Wiens who had retired from active ministry a few years earlier. Elected were Peter Wiebe of Rosengart, son of Ältester Johan Wiebe, and Jakob Wiens Jr., the son of Rev. Jakob Wiens, and Isbrand Friesen of Blumengart as deacon.<sup>7</sup> Jakob Wiens served the church in Manitoba as a minister until his move to Saskatchewan in 1899.

The Hague-Osler Mennonite Reserve had been established in 1895 to open new land for Old Colony settlement. Ältester Johan Wiebe served this new community as Ältester, conducting baptisms and communion and providing pastoral leadership. It was becoming more difficult for the aging Ältester to visit the growing Hague Reserve regularly, so he persuaded Jakob Wiens Jr. to move west in 1899,<sup>8</sup> with the hope that he would become the next Ältester. In July 1900, Rev. Wiens was ordained as Ältester of the Old Colony at Neuanlage Saskatchewan by Ältester Johan Wiebe. He actually resided on the north end of the village of Neuanlage, which was some distance from his homestead near Gruenfeld. By the time he arrived in 1899, the centre of the Hague-Osler Mennonite Reserve had been

homesteaded. Rev. Wiens bears the distinction of being the first Mennonite minister to lead a church service in the Town of Hague. He served there several weeks in a tent erected for settlers arriving at Hague in 1900.<sup>9</sup>

The homestead at Gruenfeld was located on SW 2-TP40-R5 W of 3, his foster son Franz Harder also took up a homestead near him on SE 10-TP40-R5 W of 3. In 1900 he broke 10 acres and cropped none, in 1901 he broke 16 and cropped 10; in 1902 he broke 15 and cropped 16. In 1903 he owned 10 horses, 14 horned stock and 4 pigs. In the Village of Neuanlage, Ältester Wiens built a 22 by 32 foot framed house, valued at \$400.00 on the same lot as the Old Colony Church. He also built a framed stable and framed granary valued at \$500.00.

Rev. Wiens was a well respected minister who was knowledgeable about scripture, and whose words were valued as truth by many of his church members. His voice was strong and could be easily heard in the church which had no public address system. He read a lot and was inquisitive about world affairs. In addition to this, he was famous in the area for his chiropractic skills. He also served the community as a veterinarian; he loved animals and knew home remedies that were easily applied at minimal cost. Ältester Wiens raised sheep and owned a grain farm. He was a respected agriculturalist, whose advice was sought by many about how to farm, when to seed, and how to care for the land.<sup>10</sup>

As Ältester Wiebe's health worsened, his son Peter was ordained as co-elder on July 22<sup>nd</sup> 1902. Eventually he was unable



*Anna Boschman was one of the children raised in the Jakob Wiens household. Photo Credit: Leonard Doell.*

to speak loudly and after an illness of 33 weeks, he died on 21 February 1905, at the age of 67 years. Saskatchewan Ältester Wiens officiated at Ältester Wiebe's funeral service in the Village of Reinland.<sup>11</sup>

One person has described Ältester Wiens as a man who was determined and dedicated to his task, who tried to live by the strict regulations of the church, and, because of this he endured hardships and criticism. This person also suggests that because they had no children of their own he could not understand youth very well.<sup>12</sup> The fact is that the Wiens household was home to many young people, some of whom came from homes with problems and others who assisted Helena Wiens, who was often ill. The 1901 census lists his 77 year old mother, and five young people living with them. They were Annie Miller (14), Susan Miller (11), Jacob Rempel (11), Wilhelm Rempel (6) and Susan Wall (16). Another source adds Sarah Penner, Adolf Gross, Susanna Klassen, and Anna Boshman as other children who resided with them for a period of time.

The Old Colony Church decided that its members should not own or operate cars in order to remain true to their understanding of keeping separate from the world around them. On one occasion Frank A. Peters, the Hague Ford dealer offered to give Ältester Wiens a new Ford car free of charge, which he flatly refused. Mr. Peters knew that if the Ältester would drive one, the rest of the church members would soon follow suit. A lady who lived near the Hague Ferry had become very sick and near death and there was concern that Ältester Wiens would not

get there soon enough and that she might die before he arrived. Ältester Wiens prepared his buggy, even when he was told that a car had been made available for him and said, "If the Lord wants me to see this sick lady alive, he will sustain her life until I get there." He was able to meet and comfort the dying woman, so that she was able to die with peace in her heart.<sup>13</sup>

In 1908, several former members of the Old Colony Church agitated and this led to a Royal Commission of Inquiry to look into private school education. The inquiry was held in December 1908 at the Warman schoolhouse. The Old Colony Church had to defend its case for private school education to the government, while several disgruntled petitioners, all of whom had been banned from the church felt their rights had been violated. They had sent their children to public schools, had operated businesses in towns, and purchased vehicles, all of this against the teaching of the church. Economic sanctions were part of the ban, which caused a loss of business for some businessmen in the group namely: Jacob J. Friesen, Isaac P. Friesen and Isaac P. Miller. Ältester Wiens justified the church's actions of excommunicating them. Wiens chastised Isaac P. Friesen for being disobedient to the teaching of the church, as upon his baptism Friesen had promised to be faithful to the teachings of the Old Colony community.<sup>14</sup>

For many years Jakob Wiens wife Helena struggled with poor health. One of the *Kaeksches* (maids) who assisted Mrs Wiens was Helena Kroeker, who later married Heinrich Wiebe. In 1908, when Ältester Wiens went to testify at the school inquiry at the Warman school house, the Assistant Attorney General Frank Ford asked Ältester Wiens if he preferred testifying the first evening or the following day. Rev. Wiens replied that his wife was sick at home and he would rather go home that night.<sup>15</sup>

On April 8<sup>th</sup> 1920, a group of delegates including Ältester Wiens gathered in Reinland Manitoba while enroute to Mississippi to search for land in which to settle. Ältester Wiens went with them because he could tell by examining the soil whether or not it would be good for grain production. They were ready to leave when Ältester Wiens received a telegram informing him that his wife was gravely ill and so he left the group and returned to Saskatchewan.<sup>16</sup>

The Old Colony sense that all of life was in the domain of the faith community sometimes meant that petty differences could become big church issues. Peter Elias of Manitoba relates a story in his memoirs about such an incident:

*Rev Wiens was very busy after moving to the west looking after his own farm land plus he had a lot to do in disciplining one person because of this and another one because of something else and a few things where he himself was the cause. At one point Mrs. Wiens suffered a stroke and so they decided to try the bath in Banff to see if this would improve her health. A few others went with them, among them was his brother-in-law, who was her brother, Cornelius Wall and because Mrs. Wiens could not do much for herself and was a heavy person, the Wall's helped Ältester Wiens a lot, bringing her to bed, also helping with changing trains; in getting on and off, etc. When they got ready for the return trip, Wiens bought a watermelon in town and Wall helped to carry it. Wiens promised this watermelon to them as a reward, to eat on the way together with them. Well, at the first stop Wiens apologized and said that because they hadn't been able to*



*Johan Driedger and his eight sons. Driedger was banned by the Old Colony Church under Jacob Wiens's leadership. The conflict with the Church festered for many years, but was resolved shortly before his death in 1920.*

*take tickets for the second class coach and had to take the first class, those compartments were too nice to eat watermelon and they were going to wait for the next stop, then they would probably get a second class coach. But no, they didn't need to change coaches and were able to stay in their coach until they reached their destination. Just before their destination Wiens had suggested eating the melon but the others thought it was too late now and they had to get ready to detrain. Ältester Wiens had taken his watermelon home and thought this was the end of it. But after those people talked about the Ältester's promise and how they had been cheated and that was more than the Ältester could take. He began to talk about this with the Walls and because he heard things which went against his desires he began to interrogate them on Dunnadach in church in front of the other ministers. But now the honor of the Walls was at stake and Wiens wanted to be honored as Ältester. This went on until Wiens asked them to come before the church and it got worse and worse. Because the Ältester had the reins and the whip, he drove as it seemed good to him and the Walls were put under the ban. At last, the Walls wanted to resolve the matter but were unable to appease the embittered man with their confession.*

*...at one point Mrs. Wall was so desperate that she let herself be heard to say that she would set fire to the barn of Ältester Wiens. This Mrs. Wall was a sister to Johan Driedger...<sup>17</sup>*

Johan Driedger had a store in Clarke's Crossing in the winter of 1910, but business was very slow. He announced one day in the Osler area that he was going to bring a load of goods to Osler to sell for a good price. Driedger was lucky, the weather was favorable and people came from everywhere to buy and before long Driedger had sold his load. Then he told the people he would bring a load to Osler again and would advertise beforehand. Many were waiting for the day. The day came and Driedger arrived with two loads instead of one; he drove the 18 miles in a snowstorm, but the customers did not come. He had made the trip in good time. He owned a vacant building in Osler and stored the goods there in order to sell them at a better time. Mr. Jacob J. Heinrichs owned a store next to Driedger's, which burned down the same night and Driedger's store burned down with all its merchandise.<sup>18</sup>

Johan Driedger and Jacob Heinrichs were both excommunicated from the Old Colony Mennonite Church when they applied for fire insurance under the Mennonite Brandordnung (Fire Insurance organization). The fire insurance did not cover Mennonites who operated businesses in local railway towns. Contact with non-Mennonites with different values was discouraged. The ban from the church was very serious, no church member could deal with Driedger or Heinrichs, nor could their families have any dealings with them. Jacob Heinrichs became bitter and took Ältester Wiens to court in 1914, asking for compensation for his losses. He claimed \$34,200.00

in damages and loss of orders and stock caused by his excommunication. After two and a half years of legal battles, the case ended on September 21<sup>st</sup> 1916. Mr. Heinrichs was awarded \$1,000.00 for conspiracy resulting in economic loss. Ältester Wiens, the defendant, did not appear in court, stating that it was wrong for a Christian to take another to court in order to resolve their differences. The Old Colony Church leaders appealed to the Federal Government Department of Justice for protection, for they felt they could not defend themselves in court. Solicitor General Arthur Meighen granted assurances that he would simply appoint counsel for defense in the event of further lawsuits.<sup>19</sup>

Johan Driedger was also at odds with the Old Colony Church for many years. Since he was excommunicated he was not allowed to enter the sanctuary of the church during the service. He was allowed to sit in the lobby of the church where he could still take part. If he did appear, the congregation would all leave the church and he was left there alone. Shortly before his death in 1920, he resolved his conflict with the church and was able to die in peace.<sup>20</sup>

When World War One broke out in 1914, the Russian Mennonites in the west were relying on the 1873 Order in Council that granted them military exemption, but not without some concern, since education legislation had already challenged part of their *Privilegium*. The first sign of trouble on the military question came in January 1917, when R.B. Bennett, the Director General of National Service under the War Measures Act called for an inventory of every male in Canada between the ages of 16 and 65. National Services cards were available at the Post Offices and were to be filled out and returned in 10 days. The first to respond negatively to this order was the Manitoba Old Colony Ältester Johan J. S. Friesen. He and his colleagues from Saskatchewan, Ältester Wiens from Hague-Osler, and Ältester Abram Wiebe from Swift Current, had been in Ottawa in November 1916 and believed that they had received assurances from Prime Minister Borden that Mennonites were totally exempt on the basis of the 1873 Order in Council. In a letter to Borden, Ältester Friesen expressed gratitude for the continued exemption and confirmed that Mennonites desired only to be the quiet in the land and to pray to God for the welfare of the country. The National Service cards were therefore being returned uncompleted but this should not, said the Ältester, be interpreted as disloyalty to the Crown. Ältester Jakob Wiens from Hague also wrote expressing appreciation for the peace which the community enjoyed in Canada and enclosed a cheque for \$1,383.00 with instructions that it be applied where it was needed to provide relief for victims of war.<sup>21</sup>

The Russian Revolution and its impact on the Mennonites filled the Mennonite newspapers that circulated in Western Canada. There were many letters and reports about the famine and suffering, which moved people to respond with compassion. On November 16<sup>th</sup> 1921, Ältester Wiens appealed to his church to do the same. "How we ought to seek to use the blessings given by God to help the poor people in Russia, among them perhaps many close relatives suffering hunger, to help satisfy their hunger. Is this not to move us to compassion, beloved congregation? How hunger does hurt! And we have gathered such a nice crop into storage. God has really blessed our fields. Are we not willing to contribute something to relieve the pain of people suffering hunger and misery? Hoping that all Brethren

will prove their readiness, for God loves a cheerful giver, 11 Corinthians 9:6-7 and bring their donation to the village Chairperson by December 1."<sup>22</sup>

Premier W.M. Martin visited the Old Colony private schools in the Hague area in the summer of 1917 in his capacity as the Minister of Education and had an extended interview with Ältester Wiens. By the spring of 1918, the Department of Education had come to the conclusion that it was high time that improvements should be made. In order to retain the private schools, the communities would be required to employ qualified teachers that were recognized by the department, use authorized text books, and provide instruction in English.<sup>23</sup> Believing that the Government had broken its promise of 1873, which guaranteed them freedom to run their own schools, with their own curriculum and language, they soon began to look for another home where they could live in peace and according to the way God called them.

Ältester Isaak M. Dyck wrote that as a young man growing up in Southern Manitoba, he heard Ältester Jakob Wiens from Saskatchewan speak about the necessity of migrating to another country. Church leadership wanted to keep an unadulterated teaching of the gospel, and this spurred a desire to find a place where the church members could live as the ministerial thought God meant them to live.<sup>24</sup>

The Old Colony people eventually chose to move to Durango, Mexico, where they acquired land and assurances from the Mexican Government that Mennonite wishes would be respected. In 1924, the first train load left for Durango. The migration to Mexico took with it the majority of the leaders of the Old Colony Church. Two ministers, Johan Loepky and Abram Wall, and Deacon Wilhelm Wiebe remained in Canada. Ältester Jakob Wiens moved to Mexico in the fall of 1926 but returned in the spring of 1927 and 1928 to conduct baptisms and serve communion. In 1927, it was reported that Ältester Wiens was in the Hague area for 5-6 weeks, visiting homes and baptizing 80 people in packed churches.<sup>25</sup> In 1928, 48 people were baptized in overfilled churches.<sup>26</sup> There were no baptisms or communion in 1929. In the spring of 1929, Ältester Wiens left for Canada with the intention of serving communion and conducting baptisms. Soon after he left for Canada his wife became very ill and some men from the village caught up with him and he went back to Mexico. His wife Helena died on 30 April 1929.

Ältester Wiens never returned to Canada again. He did not want to elect a new Ältester in Canada because as far as he was concerned the Old Colony Church had officially moved to Mexico. The Hague-Osler Old Colony church was too poor to assist its members with emigration and many individual members were impoverished from paying fines for not sending their children to public schools and could not afford to emigrate. Leonard Sawatzky suggests that for those that did migrate:

*The average determination... to prevail in Mexico was likely stronger than that of their Swift Current and Manitoba Brethren, while its financial capacity to give up and return to Canada was considerably less. Taking stock of their limited capacity for absorbing economic reverses and under the capable urging of Ältester Wiens, the Hague colonists made little attempt to farm on the basis of traditional crops and concepts of agriculture but adopted the indigenous Mexican beans and corn at once. They thus were spared many of the*

*disheartening reverses which punctuated the early years in Chihuahua.*<sup>27</sup>

The Old Colony Church reorganized by ordaining Johan Loeppky as its new Ältester on March 30, 1930. Bergthaler Ältester Cornelius Hamm officiated at this ordination.

Rev. Heinrich D. Martens grew up in the Old Colony Church but as a youth joined the Bergthaler and later became a Minister in the Bergthaler Church. He reflected on those early years noting that as long as Ältester Wiens was the leader, the Old Colony and Bergthaler could not work together. Ältester Wiens felt their group was not as proud and worldly as the Bergthaler. Many Bergthaler youth for example had neck ties and gold chains. Rev. Martens remembers being admonished for this by Ältester Wiens. But Rev. Martens reminded Ältester Wiens that his foster son Franz Harder also did but took them off when he went home. Ältester Wiens had replied that at least the son respected his father, not showing him the tie. Rev. Martens had then commented that you can fool man but the Father in heaven sees all. When Ältester Wiens left for Mexico relations between the Bergthaler and Old Colony under Ältester Loeppky were good.<sup>28</sup>

In a letter written from Reinland, Mexico on April 1<sup>st</sup> 1931, Jacob Friesen tells Isbrand Friesen at Hague that Ältester Jakob Wiens is very sickly. He has not been able to preach lately and is not always in church; it appears that he will be unable to serve communion or baptize. Things could turn for the better, even though he is almost 76 and he is not yet ready to give up his position.<sup>29</sup>

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of April 1932, he was released from his earthly body at the age of 76 years, 10 months and 21 days. The funeral was held on April 19<sup>th</sup> at the Blumenort Old Colony Church. The church could not accommodate everyone who wanted to be at the service.<sup>30</sup> A funeral service was also held at Neuanlage, Saskatchewan, for Ältester Wiens. The mourners from Aberdeen who wanted to attend the service were unable to because the water in the South Saskatchewan River was too shallow and the Clarkboro Ferry could not operate, so they had to return home.<sup>31</sup> Ältester Wiens served as a minister 12 years, as Ältester 31 years and 8 months and during this time he preached 1577 sermons, officiated at 370 funerals, baptized 1396 souls and officiated at 184 weddings.

## Endnotes

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- 27 Leonard Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 123.
- 28 Rev. Heinrich D. Martens, interview with author, 18 March 1982.
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- 30 *Steinbach Post*, letter by Correspondent Bernard Penner of Patos, Mexico, 12 May 1932.
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# Johann P. Wall – Life and Service

Introduction  
by John J. Friesen, co-editor

Johann P. Wall was an outstanding Old Colony Church leader. Ordained in 1903 at the age of 28 as a minister in the Rheinland Mennonite Church (later called Old Colony Church) in the Hague-Osler area, he served in Saskatchewan and later in Durango, Mexico until his death in 1961, a total of 57 years. He received his schooling in Ukraine, Russia and gained a good command of the English language in Canada. He lived in Manitoba for 7 years, in Saskatchewan for 27 years, and then migrated to Durango, Mexico in 1926, living there for 35 years. He resided in three countries during his lifetime, pioneering

twice, once in Saskatchewan and again in Mexico. He proved to be a person of deep faith, unshakable conviction, resilient, able to adapt to new conditions, and a "Moses" for his church, as Cornelius Krahn said.

The following material includes some of Wall's correspondence not published before in English translation, poetry, as well as an introductory article written by Cornelius Krahn, Bethel College, on the occasion of Wall's death in 1961.

The two poems, in the form of hymns, were written just before Wall left in the summer of 1919 as one of six delegates

to various countries in Latin America to investigate settlement possibilities. The first, and the longest poem, is addressed to his family: his wife, each of his children by name, his parents, and each of his brothers. In this context he expresses his belief in God, why he believes it is God's will that he undertake this journey, and that God will take care and comfort them wherever they are, recognizing that his leaving will create hardships for them. The second poem is addressed to the church (*Gemeinde*) and its leaders.

Because poetry is hard to translate well, the poems are included in their original German language, with apologies to readers who are not able to read the German.

The first of the three letters is written by Johann P. Wall during his trip to Latin America. One of the six delegates, Johann

Wall, died in Brazil. The letter to his widow is heart rending in the pathos it expresses, and yet is also hopeful and comforting.

The two letters, between Wall and Isaak Dyck, bishop of the Manitoba Old Colony Church near Cuauhtemoc, Chihuahua, deal with a difference of opinion that developed between these two strong Old Colony leaders, and their colonies, when for a short while the Mexican government threatened to take over Mennonite schools. This letter exchange gives readers a glimpse into the beliefs and convictions of these men, and some of the tensions they were dealing with during this "school crisis." After about a year, the Mexican government backed off from its threat, and again confirmed for Mennonites the right to run their own schools. Wall was crucial in the negotiations with the Mexican government to resolve this crisis successfully.

## Johann P. Wall, 1875-1961

By Cornelius Krahn

Reprinted with permission from *Mennonite Life* October 1961



*Johann P. Wall (1875-1961), minister among Mennonites in state of Durango, Mexico; calendar in the background seems to indicate the photo was taken on Friday, June 9, 1961. Photo Credit: Mennonite Life, October 1961, 185.*

With the passing of Johann P. Wall, the last pioneer and delegate of the Canadian Mennonite migration to Latin America has left us. Johann P. Wall's parents were among those who moved from the Chortitza settlement of the Ukraine to the daughter settlement of Fuerstenland where he was born in 1875. His family moved to the West Reserve of Manitoba in 1892 and in 1899 his parents were again pioneering when a new settlement was established in Hague, Saskatchewan.

Here Johann P. Wall was elected minister of the Rheinland Mennonite Church in 1903. When in 1919 the independent Mennonite school system in Canada was threatened, he became one of the chief negotiators with the provincial and federal governments, being a delegate of the Rheinland (later called Old Colony Mennonite Church) who had mastered the English language. Since efforts along these lines were unsuccessful, the Old Colony Mennonites of Manitoba and Saskatchewan appointed a delegation to investigate settlement possibilities in South America, where they might obtain their desired privileges which were threatened in Canada.

Johann P. Wall and Johann Wall represented the Hague settlement, while Julius Wiebe and David Rempel were of the Swift Current settlement and Cornelius Rempel and Klaas Heide were delegates of the Manitoba settlement. On August 4, 1919, they left for Rio de Janeiro via New York. Neither the Brazilian, Uruguayan, or the Argentinian governments were willing to let the Old Colony Mennonites settle under the conditions they considered as prerequisites. Disappointed and downcast by failure, the delegates were awaiting their departure in the port of Buenos Aires when Johann P. Wall was approached by a stranger who asked him why he was so sad. When Wall finally told him about the plight of his people and the desire to find a new country, the stranger suggested that they should investigate Mexico, assuring him that all the privileges they asked for would be granted them in that country. The stranger, who pointed their way to Mexico, was none other than the Mexican consul of Buenos Aires.

In 1920 the delegation was sent to Mexico to investigate settlement possibilities. During a visit about ten years ago, Johann P. Wall showed this writer stacks of carefully preserved official documents pertaining to the settlement and the rights and privileges which they secured at that time. In a neatly-kept diary, he had recorded the entire history of the trips of the delegates and the migration to Mexico. It was Johann P. Wall who negotiated successfully with the Mexican government when the Mennonite schools were to be nationalized.

Johann P. Wall was one of the most outstanding and best-educated leaders of the Old Colony Mennonites. He was the



*The home of Johann P. Wall in Hochfeld. Photo Credit: Leonard Doell.*

last surviving delegate. He negotiated with government officials at Ottawa, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Montevideo, and Mexico City. He had been the guest of the presidents Obregon and Cardenas, and president Rodreygeuz came to his home to visit him. At the time of his death, Wall had over four hundred descendants.

Modern Mennonites fail to comprehend why anyone living in countries of democracy, freedom and prosperity would choose to migrate to a backward country and spend his life in poverty and “darkness.” Leaders like Johann P. Wall can help us to recapture some of the vitality of the Christianity of early Anabaptism and recreate for us the willingness to pay the price of being a Christian in our day. The following statement could easily have been written by Johann P. Wall when the Mennonites moved from Canada to Latin America for the sake of conscience:

*We are leaving because we believe that no Christian church can endure without the teaching of God’s Word in our schools. We believe that such instruction must not be reduced to a minimum, but must receive primary emphasis, for our Lord said, “But seek ye first the Kingdom of God...” It is hoped that all defenders of faith in Jesus Christ and His will, be it the government or among the people will, through our migration, be encouraged to recognize that the Bible is the most effective and best weapon against the inroads of atheism and will*

*become, more and more, the primary subject of instruction in all schools of the land. – From a letter to the Canadian Government by Mennonites leaving for the Chaco, 1926.*

### **Register of Johann P. Wall’s Life And Service As Minister**

Died	1961 July 27
Born	1875 June 16
Age when he died	86 years 1 month 11 days
First marriage	25 years 11 months 10 days
Children	14 of which 5 died
Grand children	122 of which 24 died
Great grand children	279 of which 26 died
Descendants	415 [of whom 55 died]
Second marriage	23 years 2 months 28 days
Third marriage	somewhat more than 16 years
Served as minister	57 years 8 months
Church services	1536
Funeral services	217
Married	162 couples

**Reverend (ehrsamer) Johann P. Wall composed the following farewell songs, dedicated to his family and church (*Gemeinde*), on the occasion of his trip to South America in 1919.**

**To the Family**

Nun denn adjö geliebtes Weib  
 Du Freude meines Herzens  
 Adjö weil mich die Pflicht jetzt treibt  
 Ob auch mit vielen Schmerzens  
 Ich hoff' es ist des Herren Will  
 Daß ich mich soll in Hoffnung still  
 Ergeben seinen Führen

Gott hat uns hie einander doch  
 Geschenket u. gegeben  
 Hat uns mit Freud erfüllet hoch  
 So oft in unserm Leben  
 Doch hat bis weilen auch die Last  
 Die du mit mir getragen hast  
 Uns ziemlich wohl gedrückt

Nun deinem Herzen tut es weh  
 Die Scheidung jetzt zu machen  
 Ob ich dein Antlitz wieder seh  
 Sind ja nicht unsre Sachen  
 Er der mich kennet weiß es ja  
 Wie sehr du meinem Herzen nah  
 Und wie mein Herz dich liebet

Mein Leib u. Leben hat er mir  
 Bereitet u. geschenket  
 Nur ihm gehört es u. nicht dir  
 Er ist's der alles lenket  
 Er will dir schenken Mut u. Geist  
 Zu tun was deine Pflicht dich heißt  
 Ergieb dich seinen Willen

Du weißt es kann uns hier ja nichts  
 Begegnen u. zufallen  
 Als was der Vater! Herr des Lichts  
 Bestimmt nach seinem Wallen  
 Er kann es führen wunderbarlich  
 Zu meinem Wohl u. auch für dich  
 Kann Segen d'raus entstehen

Adjö dann bis aufs Wiederseh'n  
 O, bitt' für mich dem Herren  
 Daß er es hier noch läßt gescheh'n  
 Denn dies wünsch ich von Herzen  
 Sollt's anders doch in seinem Rat  
 Beschlossen sein, laß in der Tat  
 Er dort es einst geschehen

Adjö geliebte Kinder ihr  
 Die ihr auf meinem Herzen  
 Bisweilen schwer auch lieget mir  
 Erspart mir doch die Schmerzen  
 Daß nicht erfahren dürfte ich  
 Daß ihr der lieben Mutter nicht  
 Wollt folgen u. gehorchen

O macht ihr doch die Last so leicht  
 Als es nur immer gehet  
 Denkt stets daran daß ihr vielleicht  
 Mein Antlitz nicht mehr sehet  
 In dieser Welt, [??] trachtet doch  
 Daß es dann einst geschehe noch  
 Vor Gottes Angesichte

O Katrina u. Helena  
 Ihr größten alle Beide  
 Denkt, was ich zu euch sagte, da  
 Ich mußte von euch scheiden  
 Habt Gott vor Augen u. im Sinn  
 Und laßt euch niemals reißen hie  
 Was böses zu begehen

Denkt wie der Vater euch stets sieht  
 Obgleich ich euch nicht sehe  
 Ja alle Sünden scheut u. flieht  
 Daß es dereinst geschehe  
 Wenn ich sollt' wiederkommen noch  
 Daß ich mich könnte freuen doch  
 Mit euch vereint zusammen

Nun denn adjö mein Johann auch  
 Und Peter du mein Lieber  
 Die ihr nach rechtem Kinderbrauch  
 Euch nicht betrübt darüber  
 Daß ich von euch geschieden bin  
 Euch schließ ich denn in meinem Sinn  
 In meine Hand u. Arme

Adjö geliebter Vater du  
 Es muß geschieden werden  
 Ach seht: der Lauf zum Himmel zu  
 Geht nur durch viel Beschwerden  
 Dank Gott für euer Augenlicht  
 Und bet't mit mir, daß er zuricht  
 Auch euch für jenes Leben

Und auch adjö du Mutterherz  
 Seid doch damit zu Frieden  
 Wenn's euch bereitet diesen Schmerz  
 Daß ich nun bin geschieden  
 Denkt, daß das Leben ich nicht hab  
 Von euch, es ist des Herren Gab  
 Und dem gehörts alleine Zwar habt  
 ihr ja so manche Müh

So manche Sorg' u. Klagen  
 Die ich euch kann vergelten nie  
 Die ihr für mich getragen  
 Gott woll es euch vergelten reich  
 Und geben daß ich mich mit euch  
 Zu seiner Rechten finde

Adjö geliebte Brüder hier  
 Peter David u. Heinrich  
 Ach! Bittet Gott für mich auch ihr  
 Daß ich mit euch verein'gt  
 Zusammen treffen möchte dort  
 Zur rechten Hand am guten Ort  
 Das gebe Gott aus Gnaden

Adjö nun noch zum letzten Mal  
 Auch Wilhelm du der Jüngste  
 Von meinen Brüdern allzumal  
 Mein Herze wünscht auf innigste  
 Daß du die Zeit der Gnaden sehr  
 Zu deinem Heil u. Gottes Ehr  
 Doch auch anwenden möchtest

Amen.

**Reverend (Ehrsamer) Johann P. Wall, Hochfeld, To the church (*Gemeinde*)**

O Vaterhuld die mich bisher geführt  
O Vaterauge das mich treu bewacht  
O Vaterherz das meine Bitte rühret  
Und das mit ewger Liebe mein gedacht  
Du wollest mich auch ferner treulich leiten  
Daß ich den gnaden Weg zum Himmel geh'  
Und mich zum ew'gen Leben zubereiten  
Durch Lieb u. Leid, O Gott durch Wohl u. Weh'

Du weißt ja Herr, wie oft ich strauchele  
Du weißt es ja, wie oft ich fallen tu  
Auf meinem Weg u. Steg in allen Nöten  
Wollst du mein Helfer u. mein Beistand sein  
Du wollest mich auf meinen Wegen leiten  
Und führen mich nach deinem Rat u. Wort  
Und stehen mir mit Geist u. Licht zur Seiten  
Auf meiner Reis' u. an dem fremden Ort

Ein schwaches Rohr, Herr, bin ich oft bewegt  
Vom Sturm des Feind's u. manchen schwren Druck  
Du siehest Gott, wie sehr mein Herz erreget  
Wie oft ich flehend zu dir schreien muß  
Du weißt, O Herr, wie in verfloßnen Tagen  
Mit Bangigkeit erfüllt ich zu dir schrie  
O laß mich Gott, mein Vater! nicht verzagen  
Verlaß mich in Gefahr u. Not doch nie

Herr höre du nicht nur mein schwaches Flehen  
Ach merk auf das was deine Herde fleht  
Laß die Erhörung ihres Seufzens sehen  
Damit ihr Schrei'n doch nicht verloren geht  
Wenn Weib u. Kind, wenn Vater Mutter Brüder  
Wenn mich die Herd' in's Beten schließen ein  
So neige Herr, dein gnädig Ohr hernieder  
Und laß es Amen u. erhöret sein

O Brüder, Schwestern vereinigt allzumal  
Vor die der Arme hier mit Leben steht  
Erfüllt mit Druck mit Angst u. Herzensqual  
O hört was euer Knecht von euch hier fleht  
O schließet in die Seufzer u. Gebet mich ein  
O denkt an mich, wenn ihr vor Gott erscheint  
O lasset unser Fleh'n doch stets vor Gott hier sein  
Um seinen Schutz u. Hilf u. Gnad allein

Wer weiß, ob wir noch einmal wieder sehen  
In dieser Welt, in dieser bösen Zeit  
Wer weiß, ob wir zum Tempel Gottes Gehen  
Dieweil die Reis' dieweil der Weg so weit  
Wer weiß, ob wir noch einmal wiederkehren  
Wer weiß, ob Weib u. Kind wir hier noch wiederseh'n  
Wer weiß, wo Gott uns Ruhstätt wird bescheren  
Zu Lande oder wo die Wellen geh'n

Nur seiner Allmacht sei es hiegestellt  
In seiner Hand sind seine Kinder hier  
Er machs mit mir wie's immer ihm gefället  
Nur meinen Weg zu seinem Lichte führ  
Wo dort vereint vor seinem Angesichte  
Euch treffen will, ich armer schwacher Knecht  
Wo ich mit euch dann bei dem Weltgerichte  
Den Lohn empfang, ob gut sei oder schlecht

Bis dahin nun seid seiner Gnad befohlen  
Gott woll auch euch beschützen u. bewahr'n  
O laß von seiner Gnad herum euch holen  
Dann kann uns seine Hilfe wiederfahr'n  
Dann sind auch wir auf immer nicht geschieden  
Dann kann er uns zusammen führen noch  
Dann führt er uns durch manches Kreuz zum Frieden  
So scheint endlich seine Sonne doch

Ob auch der Weg für Fleisch u. Blut beschwerlich  
Ob auch das bange Herz oft zagen will  
Ob auch der Weg zu gehen sehr gefährlich  
So soll mein Herz in Hoffnung schweigen still  
Dieweil ich weiß und voll u. fest vertraue  
Daß ihr auf euren Händen traget mich  
Wenn ihr kommt Gottes Angesicht zu schauen  
Wenn euer Aug zu ihm empor sich richt

O heil'ger Geist, der du mit sanften Friede  
Mich strafest, tröstest, treibst u. Beten lehrst  
Der du den Gottesfrieden u. die Liebe  
den Glauben u. die Hoffnung mir bescherst  
Regiere mich, u. drücke mir den Stempel  
der Gotteskindschaft in die Seele ein  
Und weise du mein Herz zu seinem Tempel  
Zu einem heil'gen Gotteshause ein

O Gott mein Vater höre du das Flehen  
des Knechtes der in dieser Stunde schreit  
Laß die Erhörung des Gebets mich sehen  
Laß deine Hilf von mir doch nicht sein weit  
Gieb daß des Werks ich würdig mir bezeige  
Gieb daß die Herd' erfreut ich wieder seh'  
Dein gnädig Ohr zu uns hernieder neige  
Und sprich zu unserm Flehen: Es gescheh'!

Dann wollen wir, O Vater einst dort oben  
Im Licht verklärt vereinigt vor dir steh'n  
Und deinen großen heiligen Namen loben  
Und die Erhörung unsers Flehen sehn  
Doch hat dein Rat es anders hier versehen  
Daß ich zurück nicht kehren soll mein Hort  
Laß doch das Wiedersehen einst geschehen  
Mit allen Heiligen an den selgen Ort.

Amen.

**First letter:**

**A letter from Rev. J. P. Wall  
to the widow of Rev. J. W. [Johann Wall]  
Brazil, Curitiba, 29 September 1919**

Dearly beloved sister in Jesus Christ. With a very heavy heart, a deeply burdened spirit, and obligated by the responsibility in this difficult task, I write on this early morning hour to try to describe the last hours of your dearly beloved father and husband. My eyes fill with tears, and my heart is severely wounded so that I hardly know how to present such important matters. The deep wound in my heart is still so fresh, and is filled with this heavy sorrow. How much more will this be the case for you and your children. The notice about his death you will undoubtedly have received yesterday, because as soon it was possible to do so in the morning, we sent you the telegraph about this overwhelming news. Because I know that you are longing to hear about the circumstances and events, I will waste no time in briefly presenting a report. He had already written you that we had arrived in Brazil. We did not want to spend much time in this country. We primarily wanted to travel through it since it was on the way to Argentina. After we had made contact with the country's government, events did not go as quickly as we had hoped. Supplied with numerous letters of request from the government, we hurried from one place to the next. So on Sunday the 21<sup>st</sup>, we drove to Curitiba, arriving Monday morning, where we wanted to stay for only one or two days. After a short rest, and with no further delay, we wanted to continue our journey. On the journey here, which was physically very strenuous, I did not notice that he was not feeling well. At seven thirty we arrived, ate supper, and went to bed. Next morning, Tuesday the 23<sup>rd</sup>, when we went for breakfast, I noticed he was not feeling well. Despite this he ate. This was his last meal in this world, but not in the next. When we went to our work with the government, he remained in the hotel. We were so busy all day that I spent little time with him, because we wanted to be ready for the next day. We, as well as he, were especially drawn to Buenos Aires where we hoped to finally, after a long time, receive news from home. On the way here we both spoke a number of times about whether especially bad news was awaiting us, because our hearts were filled with deep aching and foreboding, so much so that it practically overwhelmed us. In the evening in our room I noticed that his condition was not improving. The pain in his stomach was steadily increasing. We went to bed, but he hardly slept. I repeatedly went to his bed. When morning finally arrived, we called a doctor, because his pain was still increasing. "He was constipated." There was no question about continuing on our journey. The doctor finally arrived at noon, but he shook his head reflectively. When he came again in the evening, his condition had only worsened. He recommended calling another doctor and we immediately gave permission. After some time he came with the other doctor, who had the reputation that he was the best doctor in Brazil. When they had examined him, they thought that by next morning he might be improved. If not, the only solution was to operate. Although his pain was diminishing somewhat, there was no improvement. "No air." On Thursday, when the two doctors came and saw that there was no improvement, they insisted that he be taken to the hospital. We decided that one of us would stay with him night

and day. At one o'clock the ambulance came, and brought him to the hospital. We received a room with two beds solely for our use. I did not leave his bedside except to get something to eat. I should say that he had terrible pain in his stomach. He did not want to have surgery, and we, at least I, did not try to persuade him. However, Saturday morning, when the doctor mentioned surgery again, he was not opposed to this, because the pain was almost unbearable. United, we got down on our knees as we had done so often before, and cried out to God our father in our time of need. Immediately thereafter, the doctor called me out of the room and discussed the surgery. I heard people speaking in the room and hurried back, and behold, the Lord had heard and answered our prayer. The constipation had been relieved. I immediately hurried to the doctor to tell him the good news. He came in, not really believing what had happened, and with his own eyes saw the impossible. He stood there, speechless. Oh, what a stone had rolled from our hearts. The doctor cancelled the preparations for surgery and was also hopeful. By noon the pain had greatly subsided, and after noon even more. Yet the patient was very tired, weak and depressed. Even though his hope had been strengthened, he was not as hopeful as we were. Toward evening his situation became more serious again. His pain was not as severe, but he had greater cramps. No, not in his spirit, but in his body. His heart and body longed to be freed. Because I had been at his side all this time, and since he was so much improved, we discussed that one of the others would stay with him and I would go to the hotel. But as his condition seemed to worsen again, I decided to stay with him, which he appreciated very much. "He said it would be his last night." He suffered terribly, crying to the Lord for help. I sat at his bedside, cooling his tongue with small pieces of ice. With a bag of water I cooled his head. This continued until about 3:00 am and then it did not seem to help anymore. Up to this point he had been lying on his right side. Now he turned onto his back and lay quite peacefully. At close to 4:00 am he stretched himself, shook our hands and we said good-bye to each other for this life. With his hands he reached up to heaven, and when he put his hands down, we saw the end was near. At 4:00 his soul was released from the bonds that had held him and he hurried to his resting place. Now his suffering had ended; now everything was finished. Now the field where he had battled and had victories, was behind him. Now his heart, which was often longing and fearful, was no longer agitated by the cares and worries of this world. His wish was fulfilled and his deepest prayers answered. I closed his eyes, which were no longer seeing this evil world. My heart is almost broken, and the overwhelming pain at times practically makes me numb. I also wish to note that the other travelers were by his side this last night. We hurried very much and yesterday we were able to place his earthly remains in the ground. This was none too soon, even though for you it will seem very quick. We were able to buy a coffin like we normally use. We dressed him as well as we were able, and then accompanied him to his last resting place on this earth. Now you and your children will think that I have written very little about his eternal hope. You, and we, will have no doubt that he has gone to the heavenly rest prepared for the children of God. He had a firm hope that he, through the grace of the blood of Jesus Christ, would be able to appear before God. His wish and prayer was that he would be able to see you, dear sister, and your children, in the presence of God. You dear children were very close to your

beloved father's heart. He asked me to tell you many things, which, if God gives me the strength, I plan to do, if I ever return. He asked me to tell you, dear sister, that in spirit he held you very close to his inner loving heart, and with a last kiss took leave from you in this life. He also remembered his mother, his sister, the *Ältester*, the ministers and the beloved *Gemeinde*. If I have forgotten to note something, that you beloved relatives have maybe seen as very important and would have wished to hear from me, then please forgive me, for at times the pain overwhelms me so much that I am hardly able to form any coherent thoughts, and so I could easily have forgotten something. I hope that you will be able to add what is missing. And let me also portray our situation. Even though your dear husband and father would gladly have ended his battle in your presence, he was not afraid in the least to end his life. At times he had the concern that maybe he would recover his health, which he did not want to happen. He wanted only to go to his Jesus. Now his wish and longing have been fulfilled. As a faithful worker in the service of the *Gemeinde* who commissioned him, he has completed his work. When the graves will be opened at the mighty word and command of the Lord, and those who have salvation will be gathered from the four winds, then he will also be among them, where all who loved him will be able to meet him at the right hand of the Father. Be comforted with this hope, and use this uncertain time to prepare, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

We plan to depart early tomorrow morning for Argentina. Greet all who intercede for us. Sometimes my heart almost despairs. Oh you dear *Ältester* and ministers, do all you can for us. And all you brothers and sisters together with your children, pray for us. May God in heaven hear and respond. Amen.

If God is gracious to me, and gives me strength and wisdom, I plan to write more from Argentina. That may take about a week, if God protects us. We are healthy now, thank God, but for how long? One more heartfelt greeting to you beloved and sorrowful sister. May God change your burden into eternal joy. Now I commend you to God, with heartfelt greetings.

Johann P. Wall and companions.



Johann P. Wall of Neuanlage, Durango Colony, Mexico. Photo Credit: Abe Warkentin: *Gäste und Fremdlinge*, 62.

### Second letter:

In 1936, when Mennonite schools in Mexico were closed, delegates from all colonies were sent to Mexico City, to regain from President Obrigon's government the freedoms that had been guaranteed them. Even at that time, a false spirit snuck in, making the work much more difficult, and led to difficult situations.

**A letter from the Reverend Johann P. Wall  
To *Ältester* Isaak M. Dyck,  
Blumenfeld, Chihuahua, Mexico  
Patos Durango, Mexico  
February 16, 1936**

Dearly beloved friend and brother in Christ. Not wanting to be untrue to your request, my intent, or purpose, is to attempt to answer your very dear letter, which you sent on March 4, but which I only received on March 14. First I want to wish you, from the inexhaustible grace of Jesus Christ, the source of life, all necessary help and assistance for your difficult office and service. May God give you strength according to the riches of his glory to become strong in the inner person through his spirit, and that Christ, through the faith which we have in common, may dwell in your heart, be rooted in love, and thus grounded in you. I also wish that you may enjoy the true basis of all blessedness, not that it is located here in this place, rather, when our work is done, peace will begin. I wish for both you and me, in grace, to arrive at this peace for which my heart has yearned many times, Amen.

Now my very dear brother, since I fear that it may happen to me as it appears to have happened to the sentences written to brother Ohm (Reverend) Abram, I beg you right at the beginning: That you would personally read through this unworthy letter in order that some casual hearer would not take offence at my great impudence. I, however, in the character of love, trust that you already know from earlier times about my bitter style of speaking and writing which can repel people. I trust you will understand and accept this in the spirit already mentioned, and that you will close your eyes where this is necessary or possible. Where something is not right, punish me in a brotherly way, for I want to, and have to, speak freely, in order to provide you with the answer you requested. I can say with the Apostle Paul: To this you have compelled me. If I have offended brother Abram with my letter, then I wish that I can truly say with the same apostle: If I cause you pain, then who will make me glad, if not the one who caused me pain? II Cor. 2:2. It is actually true, as I have said and written: I have been misunderstood by you. And in order to lighten my heart, I am compelled to express myself freely.

The last time we, sent by the *Gemeinde*, went alone to the capital city, in order to discover if the present government could be persuaded through petitions, entreaties, and discussions, and to inquire whether the freedoms which had been protected by the Obregon government and acquired with hard work and requests, would also in the future be graciously protected. Ohm Abram was completely convinced we should force the government through the Supreme Court to honour this. This caused great difficulties between us, because, I, or rather we, saw this as completely wrong. When we got over this difficulty, or rather

could ignore it, we tried to work together according to our best understanding. Everyone who has experience in such matters knows that is quite impossible without assistance, and so we looked around for help. Ohm Abram Dyck, who in an earlier stay [in Mexico City] had become acquainted with Mr. Mayer insisted that we contact this Mr. Mayer again, since he had no confidence in Mr. Salos. Mayer had been active on their behalf at that time, and had negotiated some things with these officials that they now completely denied they had said. I did not argue against this, since I agreed that we should find someone other than Mr. Salos since he was much too busy. Nevertheless, even though I do not want to say anything against Mr. Mayer, he did not make a good impression on me. He was also hardly less busy than Mr. Salos and so we were rarely able to meet him for our preparatory discussions. For me the point in Salos' favour was that he was completely convinced that the government could, and would, grant us our request. Also, there was no one in all of Mexico who was more familiar with the situation between the government and Mennonites than he, since from beginning to the end he was involved in the negotiations of our freedoms. Yes, he had even drawn them up himself. In contrast, Mr. Mayer was convinced that we would not be granted our request, and he only wanted to have us be released and be able to sell our possessions either through, or to, the government, from which he would get his profit. We, on our side, only wanted to solve the problem. It is thus evident that I preferred Mr. Salos, despite all his shortcomings. I also have to admit that when Mr. Salos began to work, he spared no effort. Therefore, I did not object when Ohm Abram began to talk about returning. Although it was often very difficult for me, later a lot of work was done, even with Mr. Salos. Before he left, Ohm Abram asked that I let you know what the expenses were so that he could contribute a portion thereof. Even though I gave him the information I have had no response. We here are so thankful that we had sent our friend Mr. Salos one hundred Pesos and left the rest up to you. Since in the mean time you were willing to pay more than two thousand Pesos, we had not assumed that you would not forward to him this much smaller total. Since this does not seem to have been the case, Mr. Salos is now so incensed at you, that he complained long and loud, and has declined to extend any further assistance to you directly, and indirectly also to us. In his latest letter he indicated that because of your efforts to return to Canada, despite the promises of the President, these promises will very likely be withdrawn, and that we together will have to bear the consequences. Now you will likely say: why does he make such an issue over this matter? In my view, it is a matter which needs to be clarified, but which I have feared to address so that I would not be misunderstood and be accused of false motivations. Since I have now begun to write, I want to express what is in my heart. What I, not we, have been unable to understand is how you could send a delegate to the capital city to negotiate about our freedoms, and then at the same time, even before any decision had been made, either for what we had hoped or the opposite, held brotherhood meetings and decided to send delegates to Canada in order to pursue that option. Yes, electing delegates for the trip to Canada without waiting for any decision from the above mentioned attempt, and to decide to move to Canada! If possible, without our knowledge, to make contact with the Chambers of Commerce in order that they provide you with freedoms here. No brother, I simply cannot understand this. No matter

how much I want to understand it, and try to see it within the context of love, I cannot. Not only that, but this has created a lot of difficult work for me, and I have regretted drawing you into this work, which only God knows how hard it is. Please do not misunderstand me. Not that I do not have love for your *Gemeinde* as for mine, and did everything I could with God's help. Rather, I feared that this work could result in what has seemingly happened. The government had to be clearly convinced, through untiring work practically day and night, that the issue was not the freedoms about which we were negotiating. Rather, the reason why we, and you, have been disgraced before the high authorities is due to some other reason. Here the view is widely held that you are sorry that the freedoms have been promised us again. At first I opposed this view. More recently I have come to agree with it, since you did not consider it necessary to inform us that you had received the information, but merely mentioned it in passing in later letters. In addition, various brothers have told me that you heard about it from Ohm Abram Klassen from the Swift Colony. He knew that you had not sent Ohm Abram to secure the freedoms, but to prepare for the emigration to Canada, specifically, to sell the land. I do not want to put too much weight on this last point, but your actions hardly lead to any other conclusion. Why did you pretend to want the freedoms, yes, even wanted to force this through the Supreme Court? I believe you will understand us when we say that we are confused about your actions. Maybe it is due to our shortsightedness or ineptitude in seeing the situation correctly. Also I do not want to blame you personally, at least only partly, because maybe I do not know your situation. However, that Ohm Abram was completely focused on Canada, regrettably, did not remain hidden from us. It is reported that he is to have said in our churches that, "You do not want to take even one step without us." What more should I say? I fear that this will already be too much for you. My aim is to attempt to draw the scattered views together more and more, and if possible, to express our, or at least my, views. On no issue would you and I agree more than that we should remain in unity, that is, in one outlook and understanding. Ohm Abram heard me say this repeatedly. For the times are evil. Also the teachers' association is against us and thus we accept local school inspectors. This should not be surprising. We have nevertheless taken this large and difficult step. In a recent brotherhood meeting our *Gemeinde* decided to face the future and move forward, confident that God would direct the hearts of the government officials to do what is best for us. That does not mean that I, nor likely any of us, believed that all hindrances are forever overcome. However, with the assistance of the federal government, which has indicated it is siding with us, we again should be able to overcome all small disagreements. This brings me to the question of citizenship, or gaining citizenship again. As you know, due to our long absence, we all, even those who were born in Canada, have lost our citizenship. The British Consul-General, as well as our friend Natus, who I believe we can truly call a friend of the Mennonites, have pointed out the danger we are in by being without citizenship. One. If for some reason we would need to emigrate, we would have to be able to show of which country we are citizens. Second. "To me this appears to be the most important." If the Mexican government knew that we are a completely stateless people, whom no other government sees or asks about, it should not surprise us if we are treated like step-children. In contrast, if we were citizens of a country, like

we all were in Canada, and that country had its representatives here, this government would know that it would not only be dealing with us weak ones who can only come with requests, rather that authorities of another country are concerned about our welfare, and this alone would be sufficient to avoid many troubles. Therefore, we have decided at our brotherhood meeting, to address this matter. We have already made contact with the British government to ask how this could be done. We have sent them our whole membership register, which they will also require of you, if you wish to do this. I have communicated to you some of the information I received from the capital city, but so far have had no response. I have also asked the British representatives to request the Mexican government to confirm the privileges it had again promised us. We are waiting for a response. They promised they would respond. Here I should conclude the letter. However, I want personally to answer the questions you posed. First, "Whether the government will honour our freedoms in the future?" I don't believe the government made promises if they did not intend to keep them. I know what it cost to achieve this. I also do not think they can, or will, keep the promises in the future if they see that we do not care about them. Second, regarding the business places, I did not know anything about this until now. A. A. Martens says the same occurs here as well. Based on what I have seen with my eyes, and not only in photos, this seems like a small matter. But where all these rapid changes will lead is impossible to know. With my own eyes I have seen not one, but two mass demonstrations. The last one was by public school children. The newspaper said there were 10,000 people, but I think there were likely 25,000, who went through the streets of the capital city yelling not only in an inhuman, but in a truly bestial manner. All that I could understand was: "Down with the clergy, lift high the Revolution." I stood about ten paces from this hoard of barbarous creatures. On the following day the President explained, "You are the ones on whom I lean for support." That tells us enough. Third, whether the wave of communism can be controlled, and the country protected and saved from it, that is hard to answer. My view is, yes, it can, but is there the will?! For we see how the same wave, which has reached far beyond itself, has been suppressed with an iron hand, specifically in Germany. Our government also fears to call the child by its correct name. Why? My view is that because the States fears this curse, it is carefully observing our country, and because of this fear will eventually use violent means to beat this animal to death.

We have no doubt that your striving in and toward Canada will not achieve its intended goal, and is impossible. Rather, we fear much more that what you wish to prevent and avoid, will thereby be promoted. Yes, I believe I can say, that we can feel the effects of this here. Even in my own family, regrettably, this is happening. The afflicted flesh always seeks the easier way. I fear that will happen, and we will loose sight of the freedoms of religion and conscience given us, and will only seek what is humanly beneficial. How sad. For us leaders, in the face of this confusion, it will be very important that we be on guard and oppose the danger. Then, however, it might be received however it turns out, or if the human desires become too strong, and the prince of darkness joins us with his whole host. Even if someone does battle, he will not achieve the crown unless he does battle in the right way. If then at times it becomes too

hard, and all hope seems to disappear because nothing seems to be effective, then I often remember the words of the poet, "It will not be long, endure for a while longer, it will not be long anymore, then we will come home," and so on. I often remember the words of the old *Ältester* Johann Wiebe, who, when he was about the age I am now, said, "I am an old man." He did not live long after that. How sweet will the rest be then when our conflicts are finished.

*Drauf wollen wirs denn wagen  
Es ist wohl wagens wert  
Und gründlich dem absagen  
Was aufhält u. beschwert  
Welt du bist uns zu klein  
Wir gehn durch Jesu Leiden  
Hin zu den Ewigkeiten  
Es soll nur Jesu sein*

*We thus wish to venture forth  
For it is worth the effort  
And thoroughly reject  
All that hinders and encumbers.  
World, you are too small for us  
Through Jesus' suffering  
We go to all eternity  
With only Jesus as our goal*

I must finally conclude. Don't be angry with me, even where I may have missed the mark. If possible, accept it in love. Your nephew, A. A. Martens, gave me your letter. Friday, at a funeral, I read the letter to him as well as to others, as you had requested. Whatever you wish that people would do to you, do to them likewise. He, as well as the *Älteste* and Rev. Peter Klassen whom I also read the letter, send their hearty greetings. There is considerable illness among the children. It is whooping cough. Last week five children were buried. God be praised. Among adults there is a kind of flu, which has made some very sick, although up to now none have died. In our household we are thankful that outside of the usual aches and pains we experience good health. I also wish you and your household this noble gift from God. My beloved wife sends greetings to your wife, and I include myself in this greeting. There is a lot of work at this time, especially in the vineyard of the Lord. On the previous Thursday we summoned fifteen brothers and sisters to the church. Next Thursday a number will again be summoned. Lack of understanding and living in sin is the rule of the day, and is taking control. Etc. This warns us that the judge stands at the door. As soon as your men have returned, please be so kind as to report to us the result of their work. Maybe something good can come out of this. Hearty greetings from one who loves you.

Johann P. Wall

**Third letter:**

**A Letter from the *Ältester* Isaak M. Dyck  
Chihuahua, Mexico**

This letter is only addressed to you, dear sir! I have again written in such a clumsy and open way to you. Since you, among others, have been given the gift of testing the spirits, I

hope that you will thus understand my spirit and intention. It has been indescribably difficult because of the work regarding Canada. If I am not mistaken, I believe that because we have directed our thoughts in that direction, we have grieved you. I am not surprised at this. But if you had known something of our situation, then you would have thought differently about it. You will know what you wrote in your last letter, where, among other things, you stated, "Because of that, great difficulties have developed between the two of us." I also hope you will understand me correctly. I knew at that time that his intention was completely directed to Canada. And this bitter root, I have to say, has taken such firm root in the *Gemeinde*, and even among the youth, that had I not, with God's help, expended so much effort and steadfastness, even while I felt like giving up

and resigning from this work, our delegates would have made a second trip. But, praise and thanks to God that, with your help and direction, I have come to the conviction that I want nothing more to do with the work to Canada. It should be enough that I allowed myself to be misled once. As you write, God alone knows what it cost you to regain the freedoms that had been lost, so I could also say that only God knows with how many prayers and tears I was mindful of the work that you did in the capital city.

Ält. I. M. Dyck

The preceding three letters are translated by John J. Friesen.

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## THE MENNONITE COLONIZATION OF CHIHUAHUA: REFLECTIONS OF COMPETING VISIONS<sup>1</sup>

By Martina Will de Chaparro

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The administration of President Lazaro Cardenas in Mexico is famous for the enormous distribution of lands that it undertook, the prize of the bloody and protracted revolution that had promised *tierra* to the nation's peasants two decades earlier. Less well remembered are the actions the administration took against the peasantry, when federal troops stationed in south-western Chihuahua killed several Mexicans while protecting a colony of Canadian-born Mennonite farmers. This quiet display of the central government's authority was not the first of its kind in the area around the growing town of Cuauhtemoc.<sup>2</sup> President Alvaro Obregón's administration had also sent troops to Cuauhtemoc, and their mission then as under Cardenas was the protection of the lives and properties of the small Mennonite enclave that resided in the area south of Chihuahua City. It was Obregón who invited the religious minority to settle in Mexico shortly after his election, and it was he who pledged federal government protection of the Mennonites' interests. The incongruities evident in the case begin therefore not with the stationing of the troops in Cuauhtemoc, but much earlier, with the very concessions that Obregón gave the Mennonites in the years after the Mexican Revolution.

The Mennonites came to Mexico at an unusual juncture in the nation's life, and the awkward situation that decades later turned into a standoff involving federal troops was in part a result of the conflicting demands of the period. The Mexican Revolution had ended two years prior to the Mennonite migration, and in the wake of its vast destruction, the federal government was challenged with reconstructing the nation. At the same time, the government had to realize some of the Revolution's goals so as not to lose its legitimacy as heir to the Revolution. These objectives did not always go hand-in-hand, as the Mennonite colonization of Chihuahua demonstrates. The federal government professed a dedication to land distribution to maintain the support of the people. Yet with the intention of fomenting growth and stability, the government concurrently preempted land distribution in one of the states most disrupted by the Revolution. By encouraging the sale of a large tract of

land to a group of foreign farmers, the federal and state governments in effect appropriated the very lands that otherwise could have been parceled out to the peasantry. At the same time that domestic control of the nation's resources was being championed, the government sold lands to a foreign religious minority. The contradictions of the story are highlighted by the irony in the Mennonites' choice of properties: they colonized the lands of the very hacienda where the first revolutionaries had met.

The northern border state of Chihuahua, where the Mennonites settled, was one of the states most divested by the Revolution. Warring factions had left little untouched, and for many years after the Revolution the state continued to be plagued by small-scale uprising and banditry. To secure the Mennonite colonization, Obregón issued a presidential decree granting them exemption from military service and freedom from state intervention in religious life and education. After a decade of revolutionary destruction and turbulence during which both clerics and foreign interests were viewed as pariahs, it is curious that the young post-revolutionary government gave such a set of privileges to a foreign religious-ethnic minority.<sup>3</sup> Although the concessions made by Obregón were ultimately upheld by later administrations, they clearly conflicted with the Mexican Constitution's regulations on secular education and church ownership of land. What then caused the Obregón administration to permit a religious sect to stand above the law of the land? What was the government's agenda in encouraging this highly devout, thoroughly foreign group of people to settle in Mexico? Did the Obregón administration not fear endangering its legitimacy as heir to a revolution which was steeped in exclamations of nationalism and agrarian reform by granting special status to this foreign enclave, and by allowing their purchase of an enormous tract of land in a state central to the Revolution? The Mennonite colonization of Chihuahua is a case in which the rhetoric and general trends of the Revolution were tempered by the dictates of expedience, and local and state interests were secondary to the federal government's own agenda.

### Old World Meets New: The Mennonite Arrival

Cries for *sufragio efectivo, no reeleccion* (Real Democracy, No Reelection) had ushered in the Revolution, but other ideals and grievances built upon this demand, expanding and prolonging the struggle. The northern landowners and intellectuals who first called for an end to President Porfirio Díaz's rule sought to stop the concentration of political and economic power in the hands of a few Mexican and foreign capitalists.<sup>4</sup> Joined by professionals, bureaucrats, medium-sized farmers and small businessmen, they unleashed the dissatisfaction of other interest groups when they articulated their demands. Rural laborers, small farmers, and others who had been marginalized under Díaz broadened the agenda of the revolutionaries beyond the establishment of a liberal democracy. They called for land reform, labor rights, better working conditions, and legislation to curtail the power of the Catholic Church and foreign capitalists. After ten years of fighting, it was the Obregón administration that was charged with implementing change and affecting reconstruction.

A little-explored but revealing proposal for national reconstruction centered on the importation of colonists into Mexico. Particularly attractive were those groups and individuals who would with their capital and good work habits promote economic growth. In accordance with these ideals, on the seventh of March 1922, a group of 215 Mennonites arrived in the Bustillos Valley in Chihuahua, Mexico.

These settlers from Manitoba, Canada were followed in the next four years by several thousand members of their community, all seeking to transplant their decidedly Old World way of life to Mexico. The austere Mennonites who settled in the area around what became Ciudad Cuauhtemoc personified the qualities deemed desirable in immigrants: a strong work ethic and some capital to invest in the country. These Mennonites were mostly members of the "Old Colony," a highly traditional and closed church within the larger Mennonite community. There are many churches within Mennonitism, and while customs and adherence to teachings vary among them, all share in the essential tenets of the faith. The conviction that war is a sin and that violence in all forms be abjured, based on the principle of nonresistance, makes military service directly opposed to the faith. In addition, the Mennonites adhere to a Doctrine of Separation which dictates that Christians and non-Christians be separated. In practice, this is generally satisfied by the repudiation of non-Christian ways rather than the physical separation implied. The ability to practice their beliefs without government intervention has been one of the main challenges to Mennonitism, and migration has often served as a means of preserving religious integrity and community identity when negotiations with governments have failed. The Mennonites who migrated to Mexico were from the most conservative churches in Manitoba. Their interpretations of Mennonite doctrine were uncompromising. Whereas some Mennonites participated in civic activities and sent their children to public schools, the conservatives wanted to reinforce the barriers between them and the non-Mennonite world, refusing even government aid for Mennonite schools. Having for years chafed under repeated government encroachments upon their religious beliefs, the most traditional segments of the Mennonite population found their very foundations endangered when the Canadian government began to assert its control over education. No longer able to remain in Canada while remaining true to their faith, they



Álvaro Obregón was President of Mexico from 1920 to 1924. Mennonite delegates negotiated a *Privilegium* with him before they emigrated from Manitoba in the 1920s. He died in 1928 at the age of 48. Photo Credit: George Grantham Bain Collection, Library of Congress, Wikimedia Commons.

looked for a land where they could live in compliance with their beliefs.

In January 1921, a delegation of Mennonites negotiated the terms of settlement in Mexico with President Obregón and the Secretary of Agriculture. The Mennonite representatives met with Obregón in Mexico City to discuss the guarantees that they would need prior to colonizing in Mexico. Although there is no record of these negotiations, Mennonite David Rempel, who was present, later wrote of the meeting:

*He [Obregón] said that we could for now hold school in our language, but that he would later find it wise that Spanish also be taught. As we explained our experiences and our reasoning to him as to why we did not want this, however, he stated that we had very good reasons. [Interpreter] Daniel Salas López also heard him say that he wanted a great deal of such people in the country. So he promised, never to bother or hinder us on this subject [of schools].<sup>5</sup>*

Obregón reportedly admired the Mennonites' desire to protect their principles, particularly on the issue of the schools, and quickly professed his support for the Mennonite colonization plan.

It was during this trip that the *Privilegium* or presidential decree of privileges was secured. This document was a

prerequisite for Mennonite settlement, and it pledged to respect precisely those rights that the Canadian government threatened. The text read in part:

1. *You are not obligated to military service.*
2. *In no case are you required to make oath.*
3. *You have the most far-reaching right to exercise your religious principles and the rules of your church, without being in any manner molested or restricted.*
4. *You are entirely authorized to found your own schools, with your own teachers, without the government in any manner obstructing you.*<sup>6</sup>

An addendum came from Obregón a few months later, wherein he stated, "I have the honor to inform you that you can at any time rely upon legal protection for your life and property. Furthermore, I want to assure you that you are allowed to conduct both school and church in the German language."<sup>7</sup> Neither document was published at the time in either the federal government's *Diario Oficial* or the Chihuahuan government's *Periodico Oficial del Estado de Chihuahua*.<sup>8</sup> The *Informes del Gobierno* of Chihuahua disregarded the Mennonites' arrival and despite their undeniable economic and social significance for the state, effectively ignored their presence through the mid-1930s.<sup>9</sup> Any mention made of either the *Privilegium* or the Mennonites' colonization in the pages of *El Correo de Chihuahua* or Mexico City's *El Universal* were nebulous, stating that they had government "permission" or mentioning the government's generosity to the colonists without articulating the preconditions so crucial to their colonization.

### Conflicting Expectations

The potential for conflict inherent in the *Privilegium* was enormous, and Obregón's concessions in later years proved problematic. As succeeding administrations tackled issues of church ownership of land and educational reform, Obregón's decree was repeatedly called into question, particularly until 1936, when President Lazaro Cardenas affirmed the document's legitimacy.<sup>10</sup> Myriad petitions from different parties to the government attest to the very real threats to the *Privilegium* and the uncertainty which the Mennonites must have felt throughout this period.

Indeed, Obregón's own references to the document at the time of its issuance reveal ambiguity. When asked by Atlanta journalist James Holloman, the president was reticent to precisely articulate the components of the *Privilegium*. Obregón furthermore gave extremely evasive replies to Holloman's inquiries regarding the future implications of the document. Unsatisfied with Obregón's responses, Holloman pursued the matter, asking the president to "reply numerically" to a list of very pointed questions about the exact nature of the agreement reached with the Mennonites. Obregón's answers were this time less vague but reveal an interpretation of the document that differed significantly from the Mennonites' understanding of their rights. Responding as to whether the "alien military exemption" would also extend to children of the Mennonites born in Mexico, Obregón stated that it would only apply to those who were not Mexican citizens. Upon reaching adulthood, those who acquired Mexican citizenship would naturally be subject to all of Mexico's laws. Whether or not the Mennonites were aware of this application is dubious, for it contradicts the spirit

if not the letter of the concessions which they had required as a condition of their settlement. As to the question of the Mennonites' right to conduct their own schools and teach a decidedly religious curriculum, the president answered that despite the secular education regulated by Mexican law, religious education had been permissible in certain private schools up to this point.<sup>11</sup> On the question of owning churches, Obregón wrote that "As far as property goes, they are not permitted to acquire any building designated for worship." Obregón's statement that a religious sect should not establish a house of worship remains curious. Clearly, the president's responses were designed to demonstrate that the so-called "privileges" did not actually give the Mennonites a special status.<sup>12</sup>

A letter from the Assistant Secretary of Agriculture to the Secretary of Foreign Relations dated two years earlier contradicts Obregón's assertions, declaring that the Mennonite schools must only institute secular instruction and would be subject to government authority.<sup>13</sup> This assertion was in direct opposition not only to Obregón's presidential decree nine months later, but also diametrically opposed to the very reason why the Mennonites sought to go to Mexico.<sup>14</sup> Already at this very early juncture, then, conflicting interpretations of the rights and responsibilities of the colonists were evident. It was precisely such vagaries and incongruities which laid the groundwork for problems during later administrations.<sup>15</sup> The Mennonite representatives who secured the *Privilegium* were themselves probably unaware of the great potential for conflict, or it is likely that they would have continued in their search for a new home. Instead, they took the document at face value and put their faith in providence.

Having looked about for a suitably large tract of land to purchase, the Mennonites decided to acquire 225,000 acres of the Hacienda Bustillos, part of the estate of Carlos Zuloaga. Zuloaga's heirs made a great profit, selling land estimated to have been worth \$.15 (U.S.) per acre for \$8.25 per acre. The sale was clearly advantageous as well in that it preempted the division and distribution of the Zuloaga properties by the federal government. The locals expressed no hostility towards the Mennonites in nationalist or religious terms, but tremendous agrarian conflict came to a head after their arrival in the region. According to *La Patria*, the region's small farmers feared that the Mennonites would be formidable commercial competitors.<sup>16</sup> But this was not the source of the emerging strife. The crux of the matter was that the Mennonites entered the Bustillos Valley at the very time when the local population expected the land reform rhetoric of the Revolution to be realized.

Part of the problem lay in the Mennonites' fallow lands. Not all of the Mennonites who intended to leave Canada were able to do so at the same time, and the lands purchased on their behalf lay uncultivated. Furthermore, having purchased lands in excess of what they needed in order to provide for the future growth of the colony, additional tracts of land lay idle as well. All of these unplanted lands were vulnerable to squatters, a number of whom had already settled on the Zuloaga lands in the last years of the Revolution. While some had no apparent claim to the lands, others had previously sharecropped or rented from the Zuloagas. The *campesinos* refused to recognize the change in ownership due in part to the *ejidal*<sup>\*</sup> request that they had initiated prior to the Mennonites' purchase of the lands. In contracting the acquisition of the Bustillos properties, the Mennonites requested and obtained guarantees that the lands



Lázaro Cárdenas del Río was President of Mexico from 1934 to 1940. During his tenure the Privilegium granted to Mennonites in Mexico was called into question, but eventually reaffirmed. Photo Credit: Aurelio Escobar Castellanos Archive, Wikimedia Commons.

were the legal right of the Zuloaga estate to sell, free of debts and outside claims. Although squatters were already situated on the lands when these negotiations were taking place, the Zuloaga heirs agreed to physically remove all squatters prior to the Mennonites' taking possession of the property. In September 1921 Governor Ignacio Enriquez awarded the families who had made the ejidal petition provisional possession of 7,323 hectares from the Zuloaga lands. The resolution was revised due to the fact that the lands had since been sold to the Mennonites by the Zuloaga estate, in an attempt to circumvent land reform. The Zuloaga estate in July 1922 offered to resettle the families on some 10,000 hectares. But the problem was not so easily solved, for homes had been built by the families and they refused to be uprooted.<sup>17</sup>

The Mennonite lands were "surrounded and permeated by agrarista settlements."<sup>18</sup> Approximately fifty families insisted that they had rights over the lands of Ojo Caliente, Moyotal, Napavechic, and Arroyo de Delores, at the heart of the old Hacienda Bustillos. Engineers from the Secretary of Agriculture went to the colonies to survey the lands, but their presence only exacerbated tensions, for the Mennonites were suspicious of the government's intent. The Zuloagas' legal representative also viewed the governor as "morally supporting all invaders of colony lands." The Mennonites wired those still in Canada and urged the suspension of migration until the issue was resolved. In October 1923 the Zuloagas agreed to give 1500 hectares to the squatters and \$10,500 (pesos) for division among them

upon their vacating the Mennonite lands. The deadline for vacating the property was March 31, 1924.<sup>19</sup> It came and went and still the agraristas occupied the lands. While the governor had agreed to let the Mennonites withhold payment of taxes on the lands so long as others occupied them, state and local officials were otherwise largely passive or negligent in upholding the federal government's policies and the agreement of the previous year. Federal government and Mennonite documents blame local and state bureaucrats for the conflict's intensification and longevity.<sup>20</sup>

As local officials looked the other way, the squatters persisted and the Mennonites again resorted to the federal government's benevolence. After further appeals, the dispute was finally settled with the decisive intervention of Obregón and the National Agrarian Commission, who in August 1924 gave 4,000 hectares to the population of San Antonio de los Arenales and another 1,476 hectares of Zuloaga lands to the other agrarian communities. The Zuloaga estate was required to pay the costs of relocating the residents and to make improvements on the land, including construction of a dam and a reservoir within six months. Although a small gain in terms of the vast Zuloaga properties, the settlement gave the squatters more than four times as much as what had been offered them the year before, (but almost 3,500 hectares less than the provisional grant of 1921).

Conflicts over land did not end with this decision, as new claimants emerged. Although his words and actions in reference to the Mennonite colonies were often ambiguous, and despite his strong anti-ejido stance, Enriquez tended to support local agrarian over Mennonite interests, even when the choice was between the independent Mennonite farmer and the ejidatario. The most dramatic and controversial example of Enriquez's allegiance took place in June 1923. Enriquez expropriated 7,344 hectares, of which 5,000 belonged to Mennonites, to be given to the approximately 306 farmers of Bachiniva. In expropriating these Mennonite lands, the governor bypassed the properties of San Isidro and La Quemada which actually bordered Bachiniva, crossing the sierra to reach the Mennonites' fields. According to a telegram to Obregón, there were better lands situated closer to Bachiniva, "which were from the beginning destined according to the state government, for such cases as this."<sup>21</sup> While it seems unlikely that Enriquez expropriated these lands to antagonize the Mennonites (as some maintained), an extensive legal and political battle resulted. Authorities at all levels found themselves in the uncomfortable position of having to choose sides in a series of complex legal and social questions. Guillermo Porrás, legal counsel for the Zuloaga estate, was concerned with the potential suspension of Mennonite immigration. Porrás wrote to Obregón decrying Enriquez's expropriation on the legal grounds that the owners had not been notified prior to the decree.<sup>22</sup> The Mennonites also challenged the decree by appealing indirectly to Obregón, a personalistic approach that they consistently relied upon when requesting government intercession.<sup>23</sup> Obregón tried to avoid getting involved in the conflict, but as Enriquez was following the dictates of the National Agrarian Commission, only the president himself possessed the power to circumvent the decree. In the meantime, Obregón backed up his statements of support for the colonization project with federal troops to protect Mennonite property. The issue was finally resolved by giving other lands to the *campesinos*, but tensions did not disappear.

Throughout the 1930s Mennonites and *campesinos* registered their complaints with successive officials, and federal troops were again called in to protect Mennonite lives and property rights. The local government played little role in the conflicts of the period, typically receiving complaints and simply forwarding them to the state authorities.<sup>24</sup> Governor Enriquez was key in determining the state's posture towards the Mennonite colonies. He was, like Obregón, a strong proponent of agricultural modernization, to which end he staunchly opposed the ejidal system. He was conservative in his agricultural policies, championing the small independent farmer but not seeking any rapid or dramatic transformations in the structure of land ownership. Unlike Obregón and Calles, Enriquez did not believe that Mexico needed to import labor. He was interested in promoting private land ownership and educating the peasantry to achieve increased productivity. It appears that he was not consulted on the colonization of the Mennonites in his state, and he was ambivalent and occasionally confrontational in his dealings with them. Although the colonies promoted the ideal of the small farmer through division of the latifundios while also animating Chihuahua's devastated economy, Enriquez met their settlement with displeasure, as per a newspaper article: "[S]o long as the lands are not given to the residents of the pueblos, he considers it unjust that preference be given to foreigners . . . and that Mexicans have to see themselves deprived in their own land of rights which are so easily obtained by citizens of other countries...."<sup>25</sup> Enriquez furthermore feared that other large landholders would follow the Zuloagas' example and sell their properties to foreigners in an attempt to dodge land reform.<sup>26</sup> Enriquez perceived the contradictions between ideology and policy evident in Mexico's embrace of the Mennonites. The highly active role the federal government assumed once the colonists established themselves in Chihuahua in particular conflicted with the rhetoric of the recent past, especially as federal troops were called in to defend the rights of a foreign enclave over those of the Mexican peasantry.

The state of Chihuahua was the stage upon which much of the Revolution was enacted. It may be viewed as a microcosm of the nation, for the problems facing the country after the Revolution all manifested themselves within the state's borders. The immense destruction of life and property which took place during the ten years of civil war had been particularly devastating to Chihuahua, and even after the Revolution it was but a restless peace that existed in the state. While the government's defense of this foreign people's possession of national soils flew in the face of what the Revolution had promised the *campesino*, stakes were so high that the Obregón administration could thus dissociate itself from the issues of the Revolution in order to achieve its goals.

### **A Risk Worth Taking**

The case of the Mennonite colonization of Chihuahua is rife with incongruities, yet both its contradictions and its legitimacy were born of the Revolution. Obregón's reasons for encouraging the Mennonites' colonization in Mexico as well as the difficulties which they experienced after their settlement were inextricably linked to the Revolution. Policies of pacification, economic growth, modernization, and a Positivist view of ethnicity were the determinants of the federal government's policies, a program which did not always coincide with local and state interests but which was ultimately supported by all levels

of government in an affirmation of the federal executive's power.

In light of the havoc wrought by the Revolution, pacification of the nation's disparate social groups and political factions was vital to showing the world and especially the United States, that "Mexico has finished with revolutions."<sup>27</sup> Solely through subduing and appeasing the different forces within the country would both foreign investors and economic development come to Mexico. Pacification was therefore an integral part of Obregón's drive for popular support, as it was only by stifling further clashes that the president could offer any hope of normalization, economic recovery and agrarian reform.<sup>28</sup> Since the U.S. media was the source of much international information regarding Mexico, the alleged "campaign of calumny against the government of Mexico" in the U.S. press had, it was feared, instilled in foreigners the view of Mexico as a brutal and primitive land.<sup>29</sup> Mexico desperately needed to lose this image if she was to succeed in restoring her economy and fostering political stability. The desire for recognition from the U.S. was a notable component of this concern over the international perception of Mexico, but in his drive to obtain it, Obregón had to exercise caution in balancing domestic and U.S. interests. The elusiveness of U.S. recognition was a cause for concern and a challenge for the administration. Due to its inception in the ouster of the Venustiano Carranza administration and the threat which implementation of the 1917 Constitution posed to U.S. business (in particular, petroleum) interests, the U.S. regime was wary of Obregón's government and reticent to recognize its legitimacy.<sup>30</sup> The interests of the U.S. had repeatedly backed, indirectly and directly, first one camp and then another during the course of the Revolution, supporting the winners and then turning on them when the faction in question took power and moved to execute measures antagonistic to U.S. government or commercial interests.<sup>31</sup> Carranza's own dramatic demise and flight from the capital can in part be attributed to his inability to ameliorate and play off against each other domestic and foreign interests.

Perhaps the greatest force linking the distinct domestic interests was nationalism, a nationalism that was decidedly anti-U.S. in flavor. As Friedrich Katz writes, the Pershing expedition had "left behind a country where not one of the revolutionary factions, however much they might have hated each other, was willing or able to resume the old policy of alliance with the U.S."<sup>32</sup> But even this anti-U.S. nationalism was a limited force upon which Obregón could draw in his effort to establish unity among the myriad domestic interests. Its power as a social force notwithstanding, such nationalistic sentiment worked in opposition to the need for U.S. recognition and the desire for foreign investment. Any equilibrium between foreign and domestic actors which Obregón could procure would be somewhat precarious. In order to attain recognition from the U.S., Obregón had to prove that he could mollify the needs of the nation's divergent factions while also avoiding policies directly injurious to U.S. interests.<sup>33</sup> For Obregón to remain in the presidential chair he had to consolidate power by addressing the nation's many factions, for whom the objective of pacification was perhaps the only common denominator other than nationalism. So long as the country was held hostage to a fear of insurrection, U.S. recognition, political progress, and economic development would be elusive. National pacification was a crucial first step in Obregón's consolidation of power.

In addition to Chihuahua's significance as a hotbed of revolutionary activity, national sovereignty was also at stake.

Chihuahua's strategic location on the northern border made the state's pacification a priority, particularly given the extensive landholdings by foreigners in the northern third of the state. The nation was acutely aware of its neighbor to the North, and Obregón recognized the importance of consolidating power in the region. The punitive expedition into Chihuahua led by Pershing in 1917 had deeply impacted the national conscience, and this assault on the nation's sovereignty had been underscored as recently as 1919, when Mexico's expansionist neighbor again entered Chihuahua in order to shoot at Villistas.<sup>34</sup> While Obregón was certainly no friend of Villa's, the implications for the nation of such jaunts southward by the U.S. colossus superseded any personal disdain for Villa. Already in 1916, General Obregón had struggled unsuccessfully over this same issue with the U.S. Army, insisting that Mexico could take care of Villa's transgressions on the border independent of U.S. interference.<sup>35</sup> Given the end of the European war, sentiment was that the U.S. would again redirect its attentions to Mexico, and fear of U.S. intervention in domestic politics was foremost even in the U.S.-

postwar Europe, where economic and social problems served as an impetus for emigration. There was great optimism that emigrants would soon look to Mexico as they did to the United States, as a nation of opportunity where one could quickly profit by one's labors. To this extent, a special office was created by the Secretary of Agriculture in January 1921, to facilitate colonization by enabling potential colonizers to make contact with landowners interested in selling properties.<sup>40</sup> A discount of 50 percent for passage of colonists on the national railways was enacted, and in 1922 the government revised the process of application for land by foreigners, simplifying it in order to encourage immigration.<sup>41</sup> Mexico was in a propitious position to receive immigrants from Europe; the nation simply needed to convince people that it was a desirable place to settle. If Mexico were to make this a priority, capital, technical expertise, and immigrants would come hand-in-hand and foster social as well as economic development in the nation.<sup>42</sup>

By drawing foreigners into the country, Obregón sought to prove to the world that Mexico had left the violence of the

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### **Although shooting at Mexicans in order to safeguard a foreign enclave conflicted with the ideals of the Revolution, the protection of Mennonite interests was part of a larger policy aimed at ensuring the safety of foreign elements in Mexico.**

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recognized administration of Venustiano Carranza.<sup>36</sup> The U.S. press gave considerable coverage to prominent interventionists and powerful business interests, who were concerned over events in Mexico and demanded that the U.S. intervene militarily to at last restore order in that nation. Carranza's refusal to give in to U.S. interests and compromise Mexican sovereignty in 1919 only increased concern that the interventionists, whose "campaign and demands for military intervention in Mexico grew by leaps and bounds in the United States," would meet with success.<sup>37</sup> Fostering population growth and economic development of the border states and thereby securing Mexican sovereignty over the region was a mechanism for defusing the potential for U. S. excursions across the border.

Obregón's stance towards colonization was articulated even prior to his assumption of the presidency, and proved to be consistently favorable in its view of foreigners who wished to reside in Mexico. Despite a powerful undercurrent of anti-foreign nationalism during the Revolution, the president on several occasions implored foreigners to migrate to Mexico, detailing all that they stood to gain in doing so. In an early speech, Obregón outlined some general ideas on immigration and colonization, asserting that: "We must open our borders for all those men, of whatever nation, who bring with them a contingent of morality and culture and who come in good faith to join efforts with us in wresting from our bountiful soil the riches which will serve as the foundation for our future well-being."<sup>38</sup> About two weeks later, Obregón again addressed this issue: "This country welcomes with great hospitality all men who arrive in search of a just reward for their labor and capital, and this government will give all classes of guarantees to those who, as part of this strenuous and noble struggle, come and cooperate with us in the aggrandizement of our nation."<sup>39</sup> Although all men of virtue were welcomed, there was a decided focus on European emigres, in part due to the situation in

past behind, and any foreigners residing in Mexico would act as living propaganda in favor of the nation which had emerged from the Revolution.<sup>43</sup> Their presence in Mexico would assure people abroad of the government's benevolence and the stability of the new regime. Clearly, guaranteeing the safety of these foreigners was the only effective way to go about this, as any damage to life or property would send precisely the opposite message to the global community. With the explicit intent of inspiring the confidence of foreign political and business interests, Obregón enumerated his administration's goals in a speech to foreign nations in April 1921 wherein he guaranteed pacification through non-violent means as well as protection of foreign and national properties and interests. He concluded by extending "a cordial invitation to all the citizens of other countries who wish to come to Mexico, where they will find all kinds of facilities . . . provided they are men devoted to work."<sup>44</sup> These policies shared a common objective: the attainment of a level of peace which had not been seen in Mexico since the end of the Diaz regime.

The protection of foreign interests was a clear prerequisite for U.S. recognition in particular, and of great concern to the international business community as a whole. Government assurances as to the security of foreign interests in Mexico were crucial as well to attracting the new capital so important to rebuilding the ravaged nation and achieving a return to normalcy. In light of the objectives that Obregón articulated, when federal troops shot at Mexican nationals in the 1920s and again in the 1930s to protect the recently settled Mennonites and their property, this was not so incongruous with national interests as it initially appears. Although shooting at Mexicans in order to safeguard a foreign enclave conflicted with the ideals of the Revolution, the protection of Mennonite interests was part of a larger policy aimed at ensuring the safety of foreign elements in Mexico. This policy was necessary to regain

favorable international standing and encourage foreign investment. The risk of alienating a segment of the rural population was secondary to what the nation stood to gain in compromising some of the Revolution's goals. Vital to the government's agenda in encouraging the Mennonites to come into Mexico was the country's much needed reconstruction after the years of blight and turmoil. The president's April 1921 speech met with approval from *El Demócrata*, confirming that "We need colonists, machinery, books, new industrial systems, education, and improved transportation..."<sup>45</sup> *El Universal* echoed this sentiment in an editorial which declared that "for the exploitation of our extraordinary natural resources, our country needs not only sources of capital but also many hands. Within an extension of territory as large as ours, abundant colonization must be established in order to attain the needed level of agricultural production."<sup>46</sup> The need for capital and resources was significant in fueling the government's favorable stance towards immigration. This is further evidenced in the administration's stipulation a year later that only foreigners with the resources to establish themselves in agriculture could enter Mexico.<sup>47</sup> The need for labor and capital was especially acute in Chihuahua. Unlike some areas which were unscathed by fighting or had been the site of only occasional violence, the war had been fought without respite on the scarred soils of Chihuahua. The generous privileges and assistance granted to the Mennonites by the federal government were therefore a byproduct of the region's devastation after a decade of fighting.

Although Enriquez disagreed with Obregón and his Secretary of Government Plutarco Elias Calles as to the necessity of fomenting population growth in the country, the federal government prized human resources during this period. There had historically been a shortage of labor in the North, and internal and external factors had further exacerbated this situation in the period preceding the Mennonites' migration to Chihuahua. Although migration to the northern states of Mexico had been encouraged by the Porfirian government in the late nineteenth century already, population density had remained relatively low.<sup>48</sup> Pull factors in the U.S. such as the growth of jobs in mining, agriculture and railroads in the Southwest, and the migration of U.S. labor to better-paying jobs in the northeastern United States had resulted in significant Mexican emigration prior to the Revolution. With the conscription of a large segment of the U.S. labor force and the mobilization of industry during World War I, the demand for labor in the U.S. increased further, and tens of thousands of Mexicans heeded the call.<sup>49</sup> Outward migration due to the Revolution's particularly violent character in the North had crippled subsistence agriculture, animal husbandry, and mining ventures. The Revolution also induced a number of Mexicans to migrate to the U.S. in pursuit of relief services available across the border. In addition to emigration, a big reduction in the region's labor supply was due to the loss of life which was a product of the Revolution. Approximately 1,000,000 people were killed in Mexico as a whole during the ten-year struggle.<sup>50</sup> In Chihuahua, where the population had grown from 328,000 in 1900 to 405,000 in 1910, it had by 1920 slipped to barely 402,000, despite the steady flow of refugees making their way northward to Ciudad Juárez.<sup>51</sup> The Secretary of Foreign Relations expressed concern over the outflow of Mexicans produced by the economic crisis, and to this end, efforts were made to repatriate Mexicans who had participated in the U.S. bracero program, with only modest

success.<sup>52</sup> Emigration coupled with the death toll of the Revolution had deprived the country of its most important resource, and intervention from the federal level was key to reversing the state's poor prospects for economic development. Obregón and Calles both viewed the need for an increased rural population as crucial to Mexico's development, and to this end encouraged foreign immigration to non-urban areas.

Not only was the human population greatly reduced in the aftermath of the Revolution, but the livestock population and the country's economy had been devastated as well. In Chihuahua in particular, proximity to the border had made for a convenient and reliable market for a variety of goods acquired through criminal means. Stolen livestock were routinely sold across the border, thus forming the economic foundation of at least one revolutionary army. Animal husbandry could not survive where violence and banditry reigned, and by the end of the civil war, there was little that had not been ransacked and sold. The wholesale destruction which had taken place left much of the populace completely reliant upon subsistence agriculture for survival. Production had ground to a halt and inflation had its way with food prices. Chihuahua's cattle population had dwindled from almost 400,000 in 1902 to about 96,000 in 1923, the highest population loss among the six northern cattle states.<sup>53</sup> The situation in Chihuahua was so grave in 1921 that the killing of cows under a certain age was prohibited as part of a drive to increase the livestock population of the state.<sup>54</sup> But stunted agricultural production and stagnant economic growth were not unique to Chihuahua. As Obregón took office, this was the Mexico that his administration was faced with reconstructing. Capital and labor would clearly be needed, and it was to this end that the Mennonites were able to secure the privileges they desired. For Obregón, the benefits of their colonization outweighed the costs.

Talk centering on the possibility of the Mennonites' migration to Mexico invariably included mention of their material contributions to the state and the border region as a whole. Prior to the Obregón administration's first meeting with the Old Colony delegation in 1921, the El Paso Chamber of Commerce wrote of the Mennonites' potential for "rehabilitating the state of Chihuahua and starting a new era of prosperity for all of us."<sup>55</sup> With the arrival of the Mennonites in the Bustillos Valley, population density increased, the restoration of the cattle population began, and business enterprises were born with the inflow of capital. Along with the settlers' financial resources, different breeds of cattle and new types of seed entered Chihuahua. While commercial, communication, and transportation infrastructures remained impaired, an economic upsurge was underway. Demand for a broad range of goods and services was stimulated with the new settlements.<sup>56</sup> The Mennonites brought an estimated four million dollars in capital into the country.<sup>57</sup> Although classified a "pueblo" in 1921, in 1927 San Antonio de los Arenales was elevated to the status of "municipality." At this time, its name was changed to the secular and indigenista Cuauhtemoc, which enjoyed the highest population growth rate in all of western Chihuahua. By 1933 its environs were home to almost 14,000 Mexicans and 9,000 Mennonites.<sup>58</sup> What had been a dusty rancho within a decade became a thriving center of agricultural and commercial activity, and acted as a magnet for surrounding areas.<sup>59</sup>

Although the sale of land to this enigmatic group may have precluded distribution to the peasantry, as Mark Wasserman



*A Mennonite farmer ploughing the land of the Bustillos Valley with two horses and a one bottom plough. The boundary stone between the Manitoba and Swift Colonies is in the background. Photo Credit: 75 Jahre Mennoniten in Mexiko, xi.*

has observed, the erratic harvesting of staple crops due to the Revolution “forced the state and national governments to seek a delicate balance between promised, hard-fought-for land reform . . . and the desperate need for increased food production.”<sup>60</sup> A government representative noted that the nominal costs entailed in encouraging colonization were compensated for by the economic development of regions colonized.<sup>61</sup> This was certainly true in the case of the Mennonites’ colonization of Chihuahua. In addition to agricultural production, demand for goods and services, and large-scale construction, they invested heavily in the construction of roads.<sup>62</sup> Thus the Mennonites, by settling in Chihuahua and putting into production the land which had lain fallow, fulfilled specific regional needs after the plunder of the Revolution, and exemplified the government’s program of reconstruction.

Governor Enriquez and President Obregón shared a vision of Mexican agriculture which rested upon the ideal of the small independent farmer. This image ran counter to the popular ejidos, the traditional communal farms that Enriquez and Obregón saw as antithetical to modern agriculture. Enriquez viewed the revolutionary ideal of a return to the ejidos as a step backwards for the people, and urged progress through the application of modern methods and the exploitation of the state’s unused natural resources.<sup>63</sup> Obregón emphasized agriculture and modern agricultural methods, believing these to be the basis for Mexico’s wealth. His decision to encourage the Mennonite migration to Mexico is consistent with his view of small-scale farming as the key to Mexico’s future. The president saw landowners who resided far from their properties as a significant obstacle to agricultural development, and to this end the smaller landholdings with direct control by owners characteristic of the Mennonite settlements coincided with Obregón’s vision for the nation.<sup>64</sup> Technology and improved credit for farmers would stimulate the creation of a class of small and medium-sized farmers, upon whom the reconstruction and progress of the nation depended.<sup>65</sup> Obregón was essentially interested in increasing production through the refinement of agricultural techniques, the expansion of irrigation, and the improvement

of marketing so that producers would enjoy a higher profit margin.<sup>66</sup>

Obregón berated inefficiency and ignorance as the culprits of Mexico’s agricultural problems. Rather than increase efficiency and become more competitive, he asserted that Mexico’s landowners during the Porfiriato had routinely run to the state for protection. He insisted that this tendency be changed, and it was to this end that he encouraged agricultural education.<sup>67</sup> In an effort to increase education and innovation in agriculture, the Mexican government had already in 1919 begun to implement “experimental stations” of agriculture in Sinaloa and Sonora. Obregón wanted to install such experimental stations in each state, thereby increasing knowledge and productivity.<sup>68</sup> Agronomists were to be distributed throughout the country in an effort to promote education of farmers in modern, scientific methods which would increase agricultural output. Additionally, labor-saving machinery was to replace the “antiquated systems currently in use.”<sup>69</sup> The Mennonites’ farming techniques and their skills meshed well with presidential ideals of agricultural efficiency.

Obregón had emphasized agricultural development as the basis for national reconstruction as early as 1919: “In countries which have as many resources as ours, agriculture must be considered the best source of wealth for sustaining the government.”<sup>70</sup> He felt that the Mexican small farmer lacked education, and that it was this deficiency that hindered high crop yields and impeded consistency in farming.<sup>71</sup> During the initial negotiations with the Mennonites, Obregón articulated his eagerness to “acquire for Mexico so large a group of enterprising farmers.”<sup>72</sup> The farming methods, which include the use of tractors and power machinery was superior to the Mexican *campesino* who 20 years later still used oxen to draw a hand plow.<sup>73</sup> The introduction of mechanized farming was an improvement over the subsistence agriculture and grazing which had characterized Chihuahua, and the federal government hoped that the example set by the Mennonites and the concomitant exchange of information would lead to advancements in the farming techniques used by their Mexican neighbors. This hope was reminiscent

of the Positivists' ideas: "If not by means of a more intimate association with more cultured peoples, it will be impossible to lift the lower classes of our people out of their ignorance."<sup>74</sup> Seventy years later, the federal government had changed little in its assessment of the populace: the Indian and the poor still needed this contact with "superior" peoples.<sup>75</sup>

When Mexican authorities went to visit the colonies in 1924, they found that the Mennonites had done well for themselves: "Armed with almost unbelievable capacities for sustained, backbreaking toil, an inner peace requiring few diversions, and a skill developed by centuries of devotion to the soil and its fecundity, these people have created an agricultural bread-basket in a region once considered suitable only for pasturage."<sup>76</sup> The officials praised the Mennonites for their innovative farming techniques and the advanced machinery which they used.<sup>77</sup> "Due to their orderly way of life, their organization, their capacity for work and their activity, they may be considered as an example of rural economy with much to teach."<sup>78</sup> Of course, the isolation which was a key aspect of the Old Colony way of life would preclude their teaching agricultural methods to the Mexican *campesinos*, and while they may have set an example in some broad manner, the notion of using them to teach agricultural techniques to the *campesinos* would ultimately have to be abandoned.<sup>79</sup>

Despite the many advantages promised by foreign colonization in the areas of agriculture, economic development, and international opinion, not all people were welcomed into Mexico with the same enthusiasm. Beyond the 1922 requirement that immigrants possess sufficient resources to establish themselves in Mexico, there existed a clear preference for European immigrants. Newspaper articles and government agencies were enthusiastic in supporting the immigration of Europeans and those of European descent, but considerably more cautious where other ethnicities were concerned. In a replay of Porfirian bids to lure European immigrants to Mexico, the head of the Department of Labor under Obregón wrote of U.S. and European immigrants: "We urgently need the colonization of other races." These other races were described as "the revitalizing current that may so providently direct itself toward our territory."<sup>80</sup> The Secretary of Agriculture also deemed it prudent that Mexico welcome those farmers from Europe who were experiencing great hardship due to the continent's "economic distress."<sup>81</sup> Whatever the justifications given, there was an official consensus that encouraging foreign immigration would serve Mexico's interests. Although a significant degree of anti-foreign nationalist sentiment was aroused during the Revolution, foreign immigration was viewed favorably for the economic and spiritual sustenance it would supply the nation. The professed need for industrious and dedicated workers notwithstanding, however, the government adhered to Porfirian values when determining which peoples would be permitted to colonize in Mexico. African-American and Chinese were not readily admitted, while German, Austrian, and Spanish immigrants were gladly received. An article by the Secretary of Agriculture made the basis of this policy clear: "The arrival of colonists of inferior races, like the Chinese, Black, and Hindu, must be avoided."<sup>82</sup> Secretary of Government Calles affirmed this perspective, indicating that "We consider it detrimental to the country, the immigration of people of color, because instead of bettering the race, they will impoverish it, in this manner further complicating our ethnic problem, which is already quite

grave."<sup>83</sup> Given the magnitude of this perceived ethnic problem, Calles declared that only "elements of the white race" would be allowed to emigrate to Mexico, a decision in which the Secretary of Agriculture concurred. The Old Colony Mennonites, while not European per se, were of European descent, and according to Calles, the federal government "desires the immigration of all who come to this country to establish themselves in the manner of the Mennonites, for such colonies will yield the nation greater benefits than immigrants of other nationalities."<sup>84</sup>

## Conclusions

The Mexican government had a clear agenda in encouraging the Mennonites to settle in Chihuahua. Overlapping goals of pacification, restoration of economic and population resources, and the pursuit of a European ethnic ideal were all furthered by the federal government's decision to permit the Mennonites to migrate to Mexico. While their migration to Mexico after the Revolution seemed perhaps to undermine some of the ideals of the Revolution, the national government was inclined to risk a degree of criticism given all that the region stood to gain with the colonization of this foreign minority in Chihuahua. Despite the federal government's welcoming of the Mennonites, their settlement was not viewed with the same eagerness by state and local officials and residents of the region.

Although the state and municipal governments were every bit as concerned with pacification and food production as the central government, their perspectives from the middle of Chihuahua caused them to approach things differently than the federal government. The reluctance of local and at times state authorities to protect the Mennonites and their property, in opposition to the promises made by Obregón, discloses the relative lack of enthusiasm for the settlers whom the president and the press had lauded. The occupation of Mennonite lands and the crimes perpetrated against the colonists, although more an expression of local need than animosity towards the Mennonites, reveal as well the disparity in national and local interests. While residents of the region sought federal action on their behalf in the form of land distribution, the federal government found itself faced with more immediate concerns. The nation's economic situation and international standing were of foremost importance to the federal executive, and land reform was primarily undertaken only as a means of consolidating power and appeasing local dissent rather than as an end in and of itself.

The privileges which Obregón gave the Mennonites did not coincide with the Revolution's anti-clerical, anti-foreign objectives, and threats to the *Privilegium* under Presidents Calles and Cardenas would reveal the extent to which it contradicted the Constitution. Yet, Obregón's concessions to the Mennonites were in harmony with his vision for the nation, a vision rooted in the idea of moving Mexico unequivocally and rapidly forward. In granting the Mennonites the concessions enumerated in the *Privilegium*, Obregón was able to further his goals of pacification, an improved international perception of Mexico, and economic growth. The Mennonites were in part a means of undermining revolutionary activities in Chihuahua, as their presence brought capital and opportunities for business expansion, providing work and food for Villa's old base of support. The mantle of federal authority could thereby be gradually extended to this important state, which was still decidedly violent and politically volatile in these early years.

Enriquez had little role in the decision to let the Mennonites settle in Chihuahua and was less supportive of them during his term as governor, but his interest in the state's pacification and economic development was advanced by their colonization as well. The large landholdings of the Zuloaga family were divided, and large-scale farming began in the Bustillos Valley. Where before were dry and empty lands, fruit trees and oats were planted. Land distribution was an important mechanism for pacification as well, but both the president and the governor were preoccupied with maximizing the land's output, and to this end, modern farming techniques and small and medium-sized landholdings were important. Here the agendas of Obregón and Enriquez did not entirely coincide with those of the landless rural population of Chihuahua, who needed land but generally lacked the capital and the education to institute modern farming methods and make improvements upon the land. The Mennonites offered the nation much-needed modern farming techniques and capital, but in a manner that was less offensive to the nationalism of the period than the characteristic foreign investment by wealthy entrepreneurs who came to exploit Mexico's labor and land resources. Rather, these were families who intended to settle in Mexico and establish roots, not make a quick profit and siphon out the nation's assets at the expense of Mexican citizens. And in establishing themselves in Mexico, this country which suffered under such ill international distinction due to its long, violent Revolution and negative press, these families would advance a positive image of the nation abroad. That the purveyors of change were of European descent was certainly a premium of their settlement, and the federal government's beneficence would probably have been at best less zealous had their ethnic origin been less desired.

Therefore, while the case of the Mennonites' colonization seems at first a refutation of the Revolution's objectives, it was in many ways actually a product of the economic and political configurations which were an out-growth of the Revolution. President Obregón had few reservations in granting the community the requested privileges and then authorizing the use of federal troops to protect the colonists' interests when these were threatened. While the sight of federal troops protecting this foreign enclave may appear to have been an assault on nationalism, protection of foreign interests was vital to encouraging investment, which was needed to restore the damaged economy. These measures were part of a general government policy aimed at the protection of foreign interests in the wake of the potentially dangerous anti-foreign nationalism of the Revolution. If foreigners were not safe in Mexico, the image of the nation abroad would continue to be that of "barbarous Mexico," rather than as a climate friendly to foreign capital. Therefore Obregón did not endanger his government's legitimacy as heir to the Revolution by sending federal troops to patrol the Mennonite settlements, for in his protection of Mennonite interests, he ultimately furthered the national objectives of pacification and economic growth.

The migration of the Old Colony Mennonites to Mexico, born of threats to group survival, sought to simply transplant the established community to the soils of Chihuahua, where they hoped to live without fear of conscription or educational standardization, a state within a state. While the privileges which the Mennonites enjoyed in Mexico came under scrutiny on several occasions, they were consistently respected by the

federal government. The retention of the community's ethnic-religious identity was the overarching objective in going to Mexico, and this has arguably been maintained through the last quarter of this century. For a long time, change was successfully limited to agricultural adaptation, and group identity and religious integrity were largely preserved. Although some men learned the basic Spanish necessary to conducting business very early on, Low German was maintained as the primary language. And despite the perilous situation experienced under Cardenas, the schools remained under the authority of the church, with education effectively limited to the remedial level which had in the past safeguarded the community's cultural-religious integrity.

Albuquerque, New Mexico

### Endnotes

1 The author wishes to thank the Center for Iberian and Latin American Studies at the University of California, San Diego and the University of California Consortium on Mexico and the United States for their generous support. Thanks also to Linda Hall, John Lear, Peter Smith, and Christine Hunefeldt for their insightful suggestions on earlier versions of this essay.

2 Lazaro Cardenas to John Wall and A.A. Martens, June 19, 1936, Archivo Municipal de Cuauhtemoc (hereafter cited as AMC).

3 Although the anti-clericalism of the Revolution was a response to the Catholic Church rather than a generalized discontent with religion, the laws regulating and limiting the practitioners of Catholicism extended to other faiths as well.

4 While the south-central region of Mexico also experienced tremendous fighting during the Revolution, the objectives of the heterogeneous northern interests are most relevant to the post-revolutionary period in Chihuahua.

5 Walter Schmiedehaus, *Die Altkolonier-Mennoniten in Mexiko* (Winnipeg: Canadian Mennonite Bible College Publications, 1982), p. 24. The interpreter had been sent to the Mennonites by Arturo Braniff, who was Obregón's brother-in-law and probably a land agent; he acted as interlocutor for the president in subsequent cases of immigration and goods importation.

6 Translation from Harry Leonard Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 39. Document in AMC. There was, however never any contract of colonization between the government and the Mennonites, for in 1933 the Department of Migration of the Secretariat of Government inquired of the Secretariat of Agriculture's Department of Colonization as to whether such a document existed, and found that it did not. Rodolfo Sotero-Galindo, "Resultados de la colonización extrajera en Mexico: La colonización Menonita en Chihuahua" (Ph.D. diss., Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1956), p. 64.

7 Translation from Redekop, *Dilemmas* p. 252; document dated 30 October, 1921 in AMC. See also Obregón to Julius Lowen, Julian Loeppky, et. al., 3 October 1922, AMC.

8 Apparently the only official document in which the text of the *Privilegium* was published was a collection of laws edited by the Secretary of Agriculture in 1944. Luis Aguilar Aboites, "Norte Precario: Polbamiento y Colonización en Mexico, 1760-1940" (Ph.D. diss., El Colegio de México, 1993), p. 155. According to an untitled memorandum apparently commissioned by the Chihuahuan government, the *Privilegium* was not published in the *Diario Oficial de la Federación* "for reasons of public order . . . so as not to awake jealousy in the Mexican campesinos." Untitled Memorandum, Lic. Enrique Gonzalez Flores, August 24, 1961, private collection of Ing. Jesus Heiras, Chihuahua, Chih.

9 *Informes* reviewed for the years 1921-1924 and 1927-1936. Already in 1925, the economic importance of the Mennonites in Chihuahua was recognized. *El Correo de Chihuahua* noted their farming success and President Calles made a visit to the colonies that November, in which he was impressed by the rapid transformation that the region had undergone. "Vendran al edo. de Chihuahua, mas Menonitas," *El Correo de Chihuahua* (Chihuahua, Chih.) August 1, 1925, p. 1.

10 Although he upheld the privileges, Cardenas declared them unconstitutional. Sawatzky, *They Sought*, p. 153.

11 Author's emphasis.

12 Exchange between Alvaro Obregón and James Hollomon, May 22-27, 1922, Archivo General de la Nación, (hereafter cited as AGN), Mexico City, Ramo Obregón -Calles, leg. 823-M-3.

13 Subsecretary Dozal to Secretary of Foreign Relations, June 24, 1920, Archivo Historico de la Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores, Mexico City, leg. 11 - 18- 126. Dozal was Subsecretary of Agriculture from 1920-1921, and would be in charge of the Secretariat of Agriculture from 1921-1922.

- 14 Dozal cites Articles 3 and 24 of the constitution as the basis for these stipulations.
- 15 This would particularly be the case under the Calles administration, when the rights of religious institutions in general were curtailed and regulated.
- 16 *La Patria*, 29 March 1922:2, quoted in Aboites, "norte" 171. Even such opposition must have been minimal, this being the only such reference to a perceived commercial threat which I have found.
- 17 Roel to Obregón, Untitled Memorandum, 6 July 1923, AGN-OC 823-M-3.
- 18 Schmiedehaus, *Altkolonier*, p. 93.
- 19 The agreement was signed by all concerned parties: agraristas, the Zuloaga estate the President of the Administrative Committee of San Antonio de los Arenales, and two Mennonite representatives.
- 20 R. Talavera to Obregón 27 April 1924 AGN-OC 823-M-3.
- 21 Untitled Memorandum, 6 July 1923, AGN-OC 823-M-3.
- 22 Porras to Obregón, 27 June 1923, AGN-OC 823-M-3.
- 23 This personalistic approach may also explain the dearth of contact with local and state authorities. In most cases, their involvement was at the behest of the federal executive, after receipt of a petition or complaint from the Mennonites.
- 24 There are very few documents available at the local/municipal levels due to the fact that San Antonio/ Cuauhtemoc really became a town (it was classified a "hacienda" as late as 1910), with the arrival of the Mennonites.
- 25 *Excelsior* 3 April 1922, quoted in Aboites, "Norte," p. 171.
- 26 This concern manifested itself in 1920 through Enriquez's granting approval to the sale of the Terrazas latifundio to the U.S. business man, Arthur J. McQuatters. McQuatters proposed to sell parcels of the land in an installment plan to anyone interested, with preference given to Mexican nationals. Although this plan promoted the ideal for the small independent farmer, both Obregón and Enriquez, reluctantly withdrew their support of the project in 1922 after the press seized upon the issue. See Martina E. Will, "The Old Colony Mennonite Colonization of Chihuahua and the Obregón Administration's Vision for the Nation" (M.A. thesis, University of California at San Diego, 1993), pp. 83-91.
- 27 *Excelsior*, (Mexico City), April 6, 1921, in U.S. Department of State, *Records of the Department of State Relating to Political Relations Between Mexico and Other States, 1910-1929* (hereafter cited as RDS).
- 28 Agrarian reform was both an objective in and of itself and a method for appeasing the rural population: "By identification with peasant leadership, pacification, and beneficial agrarian programs, and by generally offering at least a hope for the future, Obregón gained the political support of Mexico's peasantry and became their champion." Randall G. Hansis, "Obregón, the Mexican Revolution and the Politics of Consolidation, 1920-1924," (M.A.thesis, University of New Mexico, 1971), p. 317.
- 29 *Excelsior*, (Mexico City), April 6, 1921, in RDS.
- 30 It was 1923 before the U.S. granted recognition to Obregón's government.
- 31 Friedrich Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico: Europe, the United States, and the Mexican Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 564.
- 32 Katz, *Secret*, p. 565.
- 33 See Katz, *Secret*, for a discussion of nationals' and foreigners' views of Carranza.
- 34 Francisco R. Almada, *Resumen de historia del estado de Chihuahua* (Mexico, D.F.: Libros Mexicanos, 1955), p. 422. See also Linda Hall and Don Coerver, *Texas and the Mexican Revolution: A Study In State and National Border Policy, 1910-1920* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1984).
- 35 Florence C. Lister and Robert H. Lister, *Chihuahua: Storehouse of Storms* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1966), p. 247.
- 36 Katz, *Secret*, quotes one Professor Starr, of the University of Chicago: "War with Mexico was planned and fixed up at the peace conference in Paris. Of this I am positive." Although the Secretary of State denied such allegations, the possibility existed and was undoubtedly known to Mexican officials
- 37 Katz, *Secret*, pp. 529-530.
- 38 "El Gral. Obregón y los agitadores extranjeros," *El Universal* (Mexico City), September 15, 1920, p. 3. Interestingly, the words "morality" and "culture" were to be utilized frequently in descriptions of the Mennonites, by government and non-government observers alike.
- 39 "Un signielcativo mensaje del Sr. Gral. Obregón al Chicago Commercial Herald," *El Universal* (Mexico City), September 27, 1920, p. 1.
- 40 Luis Aguilar Aboites, "De Almeida a Quevedo: Lucha Política en Chihuahua, 1927-1932," in *Actas del Segundo Congreso Historia Regional Comparada* (Cd. Juarez: Universidad Autonoma de Cd. Juarez, 1990), p. 146.
- 41 "La adquisicion de bienes raices por extranjeros," *El Universal* (Mexico City), March 28, 1922, p.1.
- 42 "Por que y como Mexico puede llegar a ser uno de los primeros paises del mundo," *El Universal* (Mexico City), March 16, 1922, p. 3; also "Se juzga la colonizacion extranjera en Chihuahua de grande utilidad," *El Correo de Chihuahua* (Chihuahua, Chih.) September 13, 1921, p. 1.
- 43 See Ing. Fortunato Dozal's article "Apuntes relativos a colonizacion," *El Universal* (Mexico City), May 22, 1922, p. 3, which outlines government policy on colonization.
- 44 Statement of Obregón, April 2, 1921, RDS. Among those facilities granted to immigrants was free passage on the national railways from the border to their destination, and a 50 percent reduction on freight tariffs. "La colonizacion de regiones agricolas por extranjeros," *El Universal* (Mexico City), March 16, 1922, p. 1.
- 45 *El Demócrata* (Mexico City), April 6, 1921, in RDS.
- 46 "Los obstaculos para la colonizacion," *El Universal* (Mexico City), March 30, 1922, p. 3.
- 47 "Executive Order to Prohibit the Immigration of Foreign Laborers to Mexico," *El Universal* (Mexico City), March 3, 1921, in RDS. A 1920 editorial had expressed fear over Mexico's becoming a "dumping-ground" for the masses of unemployed in the U.S., and warned against allowing indigents to enter the country. "Evitemos que nuestro pais sea un vertedero," *El Universal* (Mexico City), December 27, 1920, p. 3.
- 48 Lawrence Anthony Cardoso, "Mexican Emigration to the United States, 1900 to 1930: An Analysis of Socio-Economic Causes" (M.A. thesis, University of Connecticut, 1974), p. 28.
- 49 Linda B. Hall and Don M. Coerver, *Revolution on the Border: The U.S. and Mexico, 1910-1920* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), chapter 8.
- 50 Cardoso, "Mexican Emigration," p. 65. "La poblacion de Mexico," *El Universal* (Mexico City), March 2, 1922 estimated that 1,000,000 people had emigrated since 1910.
- 51 Lister and Lister, *Chihuahua*, p. 265. The decrease in population appears slight, however, this is deceiving, for by using the rate of population increase from 1900 to 1910 (23.5 percent), one can project that the 1920 population would have stood at 500,175 given this same rate for the 1910 to 1920 period.
- 52 "No deben emigrar trabajadores Mexicanos," *El Universal* (Mexico City), December 26, 1920, p. 1; Camara de Diputados: 429.
- 53 Manuel Machado, *The North Mexican Cattle Industry 1910-1975: Ideology, Conflict, and Change* (College Station: Texas A & M Press, 1981), p. 125. There is a good deal of discrepancy in cattle population estimates, which Mark Wasserman addresses in "Strategies For the Survival of the Porfirian Elite in Revolutionary Mexico: Chihuahua During the 1920s," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 67:1 (February 1987), 94. See also Mark Wasserman, *Persistent Oligarchs: Elites and Politics in Chihuahua, Mexico, 1910-1940* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).
- 54 "No se suspendera el trafico en la división de Chihuahua," *El Universal* (Mexico City), March 1, 1921, p. 13.
- 55 El Paso Chamber of Commerce to Alvaro Obregón, El Paso, October 25, 1921, AGN, Ramo Obregón -Calles, leg. 823-M-3.
- 56 Frank Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1982), p. 113. Sotero-Galindo, "Resultados de la colonización," p. 73.
- 57 Sawatzky, *They Sought*, p. 125. His source is interviews with Jacob Wiebe and Walter Schmiedehaus, both of whom were engaged in banking during this period in San Antonio de los Arenales.
- 58 Untitled document from June 1933, AMC. In 1921, the population was 291 persons.
- 59 By June, 1933 about 14,000 Mexicans and 9,000 Mennonites lived in the municipality. Undated document, AMC.
- 60 Mark Wasserman, "Chihuahua: Politics in an Era of Transition," in *Provinces of the Revolution: Essays on Regional Mexican History, 1910-1929*, Thomas Benjamin and Mark Wasserman, eds. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990), p. 220.
- 61 "Apuntes relativos a colonización" *El Universal* (Mexico City), May 23, 1922, p. 3.
- 62 Letter from Jose Saenz Juarez to President, Sección Municipal de San Antonio de los Arenales, March 31, 1927, AMC.
- 63 "By establishing in this [post-revolutionary] era the same system, we have committed the injustice of judging our campesinos to be in the state of savagery in which the aborigines were found four centuries ago." Ignacio C. Enriquez, *Democracia Economica* (Mexico, D.F.: PolTua, 1944), p. 1 17; Aboites, "Norte" p. 165.
- 64 Narciso Bassols Batalla, ed., *El pensamiento politico de Alvaro Obregón*, (Mexico, D.F.: Impresiones Modernas, 1963), p. 133.
- 65 Hansis, "Obregón," p. 306.
- 66 Linda B. Hall, *Alvaro Obregón: Power and Revolution in Mexico, 1911-1920* (College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 1981), p. 202: "En la agricultura esta el porvenir de Mexico, insiste el Gobierno General," *El Correo del Norte* (Chihuahua, Chih.), December 23, 1921, p. 1.
- 67 Batalla, *Pensamiento*, p. 139. Obregón was quoted in *Excelsior* (Mexico City) on March 6, 1921.
- 68 Batalla, *Pensamiento*, p. 133. Obregón listed these agricultural stations along with other accomplishments in the field of agriculture in his address to Congress. Camara de Diputados 450.
- 69 Distribución de agrónomos en el territorio de la Republica," *El Universal* (Mexico City), May 20, 1922, p. 3.
- 70 Batalla, *Pensamiento*, p. 132.

- 71 Batalla, *Pensamiento*, p. 136.  
 72 Sawatzky, *They Sought*, p. 39.  
 73 Joseph Winfield Fretz, *Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee, 1945) p. 20.  
 74 Dieter George Berninger, "Mexican Attitudes Towards Immigration, 1821-1857" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1972), p. 147.  
 75 Aboites, "Norte," p. 144.  
 76 Lister and Lister, *Chihuahua*, p. 277; Almada, *Resumen*, p. 430. Lister and Lister, *Chihuahua*, p. 277; Almada, *Resumen*, p. 430.  
 77 Sawatzky, *They Sought*, p. 129.  
 78 Almada, *Resumen*, p. 430.  
 79 According to a 1945 work, the Mennonites were viewed in such a favorable light that the governors of different Mexican states were "outdoing" each other in trying to attract Mennonites to settle in their respective states. Fretz, *Mennonite Colonization*, p. 33.

- 80 Hall, Power, p. 27. Hall's source: Department of Labor to Secretariat of Industry and Commerce, March 28, 1921. AGN-Department of Labor, vol. 334, exp. 23.  
 81 "Ya no habra mas contratos de colonización nominales," *El Universal* (Mexico City), May 19, 1922, p. 1.  
 82 "Apuntes relativos a colonización," *El Universal* (Mexico City), May 23, 1922, p. 3.  
 83 "No sera tolerada la inmigración de Negros al pais," *El Universal* (Mexico City), May 20, 1922, p. 1. During the Calles presidency, this policy persisted, and there was, for example, a campaign undertaken in which women especially were encouraged to form clubs to oppose the immigration of Chinese, allegedly out of the fear of the spread of trachoma and other diseases. "Se intensifica la campana antichina," *El Correo de Chihuahua* (Chihuahua, Chih.), August 9, 1925, p. 1.  
 84 "244 Menonitas mas cruzaron la frontera," *El Universal* (Mexico City), March 17, 1922, p. 8.

## Articles

### A German Adventurer Visits the East Reserve

By Henry Fast

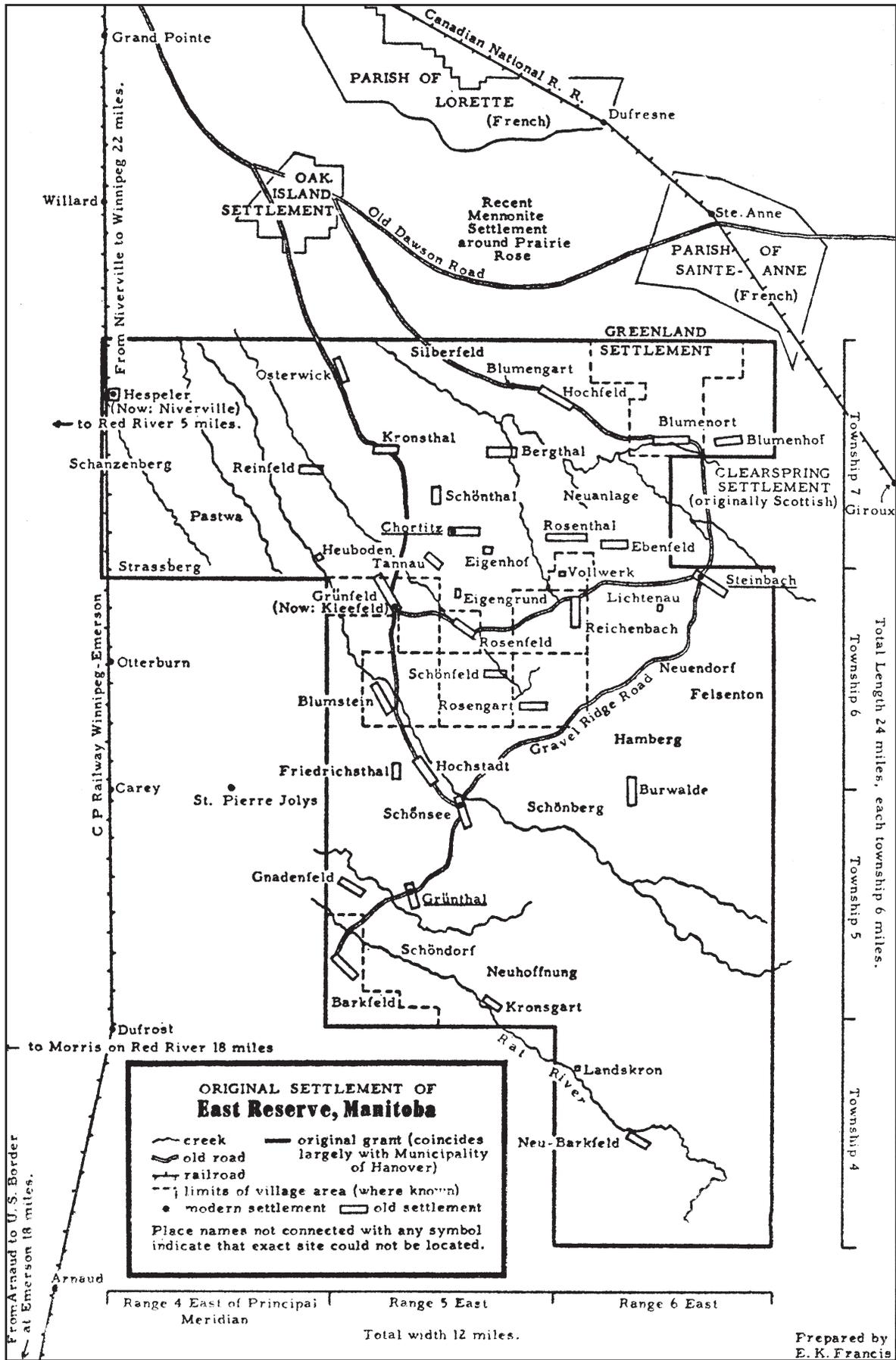
Paul Jaxt (a.k.a. Paul Jart), a German adventurer, entered the Mennonite East Reserve in Manitoba on a cold winter morning of January 18, 1894. He came at the invitation of Jacob T. Regehr, merchant and cheese maker, from the village of Hochstadt. However, Regehr did not take Jaxt to Hochstadt; instead, without prior arrangement with his recently bereaved father, Jacob Regehr Sr., he deposited Jaxt at his father's house in the village of Rosenfeld. Jacob T. Regehr assumed, probably correctly, that his father would benefit from some company during this lonesome period. So Jaxt, a city boy from Germany, became a guest both in the Regehr home and in the village of Rosenfeld for the next three months.

Rosenfeld was one of the early Mennonite settlements in Manitoba. This picturesque village was situated on 27-6-5E alongside a creek with a back drop of a cedar and tamarack forest. Originally the village was occupied by only four pioneer families. By 1894 with the addition of second generation families, Rosenfeld consisted of seven homesteaders; Gerhard Schellenberg (1827-1908) and wife Elizabeth Warkentin (1819-1905), Gerhard Shellenberg Jr.(1852-1932) and wife Anna Regehr (1858-1938), Jacob Bartel (1864-1947) (foster son of Gerhard Schellenberg) and wife Justina Isaac (1866-1935), widower Jacob Regehr (1832- 1906), Diedrich Isaac (1831-1928) and wife Anna Esau (1840-1919), Johann Esau Sr.(1832-1904) and wife Maria Rempel (1833-1907), Johann Esau Jr.(1860-1940) and wife Maria Unger (1862-1894).

Paul Jaxt's arrival in Rosenfeld did not have an auspicious beginning. The Regehrs were grieving the death of Jacob T. Regehr's five-year-old daughter, Elisabeth, who had passed away that morning. Next morning another of the Regehr grand children, one-year- old Heinrich Loewen, died. How was a 62 year old man who had lost his wife less than two months ago and now two grandchildren in quick succession to host a complete stranger during this time of grief?

Jacob Regehr's diary indicates the progress in the friendship as it developed over the next three months.

- Jan.21: I and Paul visited my children, the Schellenbergs.*  
*Feb. 2: I and Paul drove to Hochstadt to the Loewens and Regehrs.*  
*Feb. 4: I and Paul were at the Heinrich Reimers in Gruenfeld.*  
*Feb. 10: Paul brought home a lot of mail. (Hochstadt had a post office in 1884)*  
*Feb. 21: I and Paul drove to Hochstadt. Paul stayed there.*  
*Feb.27: I and Paul drove to Steinbach.*  
*March 4: I and Paul were at Schellenbergs.*  
*March 7: I took Paul to David Loewens (Hochstadt) where Paul helped with the chores while David went to Pinehill for wood to build the roof of the barn.*  
*March 16: David Loewen brought Paul home. (to Rosenfeld)*  
*March 22: I and Paul were at David Loewens.*  
*March 25: I and Paul were at Isaac Wiens in Gruenfeld.*  
*March 29: I and Paul were at the funeral of Johann Dueck. (in Gruenfeld)*  
*April 1: I and Paul were at Peter Toews in Gruenfeld.*  
*April 4: Paul got me from Gruenfeld. (Regehr had come from Winnipeg)*  
*April 5: I drove Paul to David Loewens.*  
*April 6: I got Paul.*  
*April 11: Paul helped to shingle at David Loewen Jr.*  
*April 15: I and Paul visited at Heinrich Rempels (school teacher in Gruenfeld).*  
*April 21: Paul Jaxt had a bath in the creek (Regehr notes that there was frost the previous day but warm weather on the 21st).*  
*April 22: I and Paul drove to David Loewens but could not cross to the other side. (obviously the water in the creek was too high). Paul then walked to the David Loewens in Hochstadt. Paul was taken to Otterburne on April 23 by Regehr.*



Map of the East Reserve. Hochstadt and Rosenfeld are South and Southeast of Kleeefeld. Source: E.K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia*, 51.



The great-grandsons of Gerhard K. Schellenberg pause at the cemetery marker in the Rosenfeld cemetery. A number of Rosenfeld pioneers who lived in the village when Paul Jaxt visited are buried there. Photo Credit: Preservings 9 (1996), Pt.1: 38, 39.

Isaac Wiens of Gruenfeld notes in his diary entry of April 22, 1894 that “D.K. Loewen and Paul Jaxt were here. Jaxt wants to leave on a journey tomorrow to get to know about America”. Evidently, Jaxt headed south from Otterburne to travel through the United States. By September of that year he sent a letter from Niagara Falls to Jacob Regehr. Regehr records that he sent letters to Jaxt on September 13, 1894 and on October 26, but does not indicate the address. Jacob T. Regehr received a letter from Jaxt in 1914 and shared the letter with the readers of *Der Volks-Bote* of June 17, 1914.

#### **Suez, Aden, 8 May, 1914**

Dear Friend, Jacob T. Regehr

*I wrote to my friend, Schellenberg, shortly before Christmas in 1912 and informed him that I had left some low German books for him at my guest house in Winnipeg. I have not yet received an answer. It would be sad if both the books and letter had become lost.*

*I am now writing to you and all my friends there that I have learned to love. Maybe now I will receive a letter from you. There is, however, no hurry since I will not be home before the end of the year. At that time it is best to address your letter to Paul Jart, Elbing, Vogelsang, Germany. Of course I will not be there, but my letters will be forwarded to me.*

*You may ask what I am doing by the Red Sea. Well I am again traveling in order to see the last part of our earth so far as it has been opened up for us. I now plan to visit central and south Africa by foot, though only partly. They do have some rail and steam ship routes inland.*

*When this wanderlust will lessen for me I cannot say. It is not much different for me than for your people who moved from one end of the world to the other. Generally my travels have gone well and I anticipate the same for this journey. Yet this journey is not without dangers because of the many diseases, like swamp fever (also known as malaria) and similar diseases which come from the sting of insects. There are still many wild animals*

*in Central Africa such as lions, panthers, tigers, elephants, rhinoceros, zebras, large snakes and “ was sonst kreucht und fleucht” as was said in the old language.*

*I myself have no fear and wander around as a child in the world without any harm happening to me. My world travels have become part of my life. I love all regions of the world, yet the homeland is always the best and it continually draws me back.*

*When I think of all my travels, I always fondly remember Manitoba and the Mennonite settlement where as a young man I found my second home, even though for only a short time. I still remember how I met you one evening at the old immigration house near the railway station in Winnipeg and how the next morning you took me on your sleigh to Rosenfeld. Your traveling companion, young Loewen was, like you, a very friendly person. At that time I was not used to the minus 28 degree morning temperature and from time to time I had to get off the sleigh and run. We stopped only once in order to drink some hot tea and eat our lunch which you had taken with you.*

*We arrived in Rosenfeld in the evening where your father gave me lodging, but he evidently had some reservation about hosting a city boy who knew little about rural life and would evidently not fit in. Well it worked better than any of us could have imagined. Your ability to judge personalities did not disappoint you. I have good memories of you and your father. You were the one that took me into your settlement and arranged for shelter. These memories, however, would not be as strong if I had not received such a friendly welcome, as if I was one of your people.*

*I remember Rosenfeld with its beautiful street and the near by village of Gruenfeld, the largest village in the area. How things have changed. Many have moved away and some to a place from which there is no return. But Rosenfeld remains to me that same old Rosenfeld and traveling the road to Hochstadt through the woods by day or night leaves me with a beautiful memory.*

*I had refreshed these memories in a letter to friend Schellenberg a little over a year ago, yet I do not get weary of repeating them.*

*If the opportunity should arise that we could meet again, it would be a pleasure to renew and trade my memories with my old friends there.*

*Last year I visited South Russia twice, once in spring and also in fall. In spring I visited the region of the Tartars near the Crimea. I also visited the Mennonite settlements near Alexanderowsk. There I spoke to a number of people about you who live in Manitoba. A large number of Germans are beginning to move to the spas in the region of the Caucasus. One German has received permission from the government to buy land in the region of Tscherkerszenland for settlement. Here you have large health spas in the mountains near Kiszliwodek and Mineralnyi-Wodi. The government is agreeable to have the area developed in an orderly fashion and to bring the land into useful production. The Kscherkessen only have small farms with meager production so that they are unable to provide the city with produce.*

*So the German farmer appears on the earth. They can be found in all corners of the earth where food can be raised and through hard work and efficiency they improve the land. You find them in the steppes of South Russia and then 60 years later in the prairies of Manitoba and the Indian Territories of the United States and then later in the steppes of Brazil and other parts of South America. They are also found in the steppes of Australia and the Siberian Territory.*

*Now in conclusion I send greetings to you, your wife and children and to all the friends and families that remember me.*

*Paul Jart.*

This may have been the last letter received by Jaxt's friends in the East Reserve. If other letters are extant they would likely be found among the extended Regehr and Schellenberg families. The outbreak of the First World War may have compromised Jaxt's ability to further communicate with his friends in Manitoba during the next four years. It is possible that Paul may not have survived this difficult period of history.

From this letter it is obvious that Jaxt in his world travels had a bias toward German superiority in farming, hard work and efficiency. Among these Germans, Jaxt counted the Mennonites of Southern Manitoba whom he had the opportunity to observe during a brief period in the winter 1894. Paul was a stranger and they took him in. They offered him friendship even in a time of personal sorrow. They shared with him food and shelter during the winter months. In turn, Jaxt was willing to be a companion to Jacob Regehr Sr. as the elderly widower learned to cope with the loss of his beloved wife. Evidently, during these three months, a lasting bond of friendship was formed between Jaxt and the extended Regehr family. A number of years later two children of the Rosenfeld pioneers, Johan R. Schellenberg and Jacob I. Bartel, each had a son whom they named Paul. Since the name "Paul" had not been used by the Kleine Gemeinde pioneers who settled in the East Reserve in 1874, it can be assumed that Paul Jaxt also left a memory of his visit in the descendents of the Rosenfeld villagers by sharing his name.

#### Endnotes

- 1 Courtesy of Ted and Emmy Wiens, Kleefeld, Manitoba.
- 2 Courtesy of Ted Wiens, Kleefeld, Manitoba.

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## A Survey of Early Cheese Factories in the Mennonite East Reserve of Manitoba

Part I  
by Ron Friesen

### Introduction

The impetus for this inquiry into the early cheese industry of Manitoba and the Mennonite East Reserve is derived in part from my personal experiences with that gregarious institution – the rural cheese factory. Although the commercial cheese factory of Canada originated in Oxford County, Ontario in 1864 and migrated to Manitoba around 1880, it found a unique expression in the crossroads and hamlets of Manitoba, including those of the East Reserve.

Like a prairie wildfire, the phenomenon which began in anglophone communities and quickly emerged in francophone villages spread also to the Mennonite East Reserve. By the time Klaas W. Reimer introduced the commercial cheese factory to Steinbach in 1889, there were twenty-four small cheese factories operating in Manitoba.

### The 1880s – 1890s

Despite the Reimer family's progressive stance in initiating the first Mennonite-owned cheese factory in Manitoba, their farming co-religionists from both the Kleine Gemeinde

and the Bergthaler groups remained in the thrall of subsistent agriculture. When American immigrants passed through the Mennonite villages enroute to their homesteads, they described the milk cows they saw in the villages as "non-descript", apparently lacking in any identifiable breed characteristics.<sup>1</sup> An intention to buy some cows from the Mennonites was abandoned by the American immigrants when they observed the inferior status of their cattle.

A government source placed the milk production of Mennonite-owned cows at 2500 pounds per lactation, the lowest in the province if the figure is accurate. There were, of course, extenuating circumstances in the first decade of settlement. The Mennonites were poor after immigration, having to deal with travel costs and two successive crop failures due to weather and grasshoppers. The quality of cattle feed in 1875, as described by Klaas W. Reimer, goes a long way to explaining the cattle's poor condition. Swampland hay, often frozen, was unable to sustain the cattle in cold Manitoba winters.<sup>2</sup>

Descriptions of malnutrition and starvation in cattle appeared in diarized accounts of pioneer life as well as in oral

histories. An interview conducted by the late John Dyck and published in an East Reserve history describes such difficulties in the village of Old Bergfeld.<sup>3</sup> A similar account diarized by John W. Dueck of Gruenfeld describes frozen limbs and gangrenous extremities in cattle of the Mennonites during their first two winters in Manitoba.<sup>4</sup>

None of the difficulties encountered in the care of animals invalidates, however, the reality of the inferior dairy cattle owned by Mennonite farmers in the period between 1874 and 1900.

Social geographer J. H. Warkentin has provided some commentary on the subject:

*Livestock was important primarily for subsistence use and as a source of subsidiary income, though in the marginal lands of the East Reserve they were sometimes the sole source of income. No Mennonites engaged in... selective breeding of stock.... It is doubtful that the Mennonites brought any new agricultural techniques or institutions to Manitoba that helped other pioneers to open up the Canadian prairies for settlement.*<sup>5</sup>

In this last statement Warkentin articulates directly what Prof. George Bryce of Winnipeg's Manitoba College had alluded to some fifty years earlier. They are both referring to a period of early Mennonite settlement during which little agricultural progress was made.

So there is embedded in the narrative of the first decades a disconcerting conundrum which may be inevitable in such circumstances. Because the Mennonite settlers were poor they practiced poor farm management, and this practice of poor farm management ensured the continuation of endemic poverty. The colonists of the Mennonite Reserves had difficulty in creating a more effective economic paradigm.

These deficiencies were in clear contrast to the progress of Anglo-Canadians farmers who were actively establishing agricultural societies, improving cattle bloodlines and developing new hay and forage crops. Archibald Wright of St. James-Assiniboia was breeding cattle of Holstein-Friesian type about thirty years before Jacob T. Regehr and other Mennonites showed a similar interest in the R. M. of Hanover.

This weakness of Mennonite agriculture in early Manitoba was in contrast not only with the more advanced methods of the English settlers but also with their own agricultural history. In 1885, Mennonites living in the Kuban region of Russia established a cheese factory with an efficient, high-producing sixty-cow supply herd consisting of the Red-type of Mennonite dairy cow and the Holstein breed from Holland. Another well-regarded dairy breed utilized by the Mennonites of East Prussia was the *Warder* cow.<sup>6</sup>

While in Russia, the *Kleine Gemeinde* had been given favourable evaluations on such matters by Johan Cornies, the prominent agriculturist, a memory they still carried with them in their new land but seemed unable to replicate under the strange and harsh conditions.

For the pioneering Reimer family in Steinbach the entry into cheese manufacturing was likely more about industrialization than about agriculture or dairying. Their cheese factory of 1889 was an extension of their milling business and their merchant holdings. It would be useful in their business relationships with the merchant class in Winnipeg, with men like J. H. Ashdown and with those in the food brokerages.

## The Cheese Factories 1890 – 1920

Licenses to operate cheese factories were required by the Dairy Act of 1885 and later legislation. Such a formality, both a tax measure and a public health measure, served to bring Mennonites out of their self-imposed social isolation. The first wave of cheese factories of the East Reserve was of private ownership or limited partnerships; the cooperative business model was to follow with considerable success after 1932.

There were fifty-two cheese factories operating in Manitoba in 1895, of which four were located in the R. M. of Hanover. Early that year the Dairy Superintendent C. C. Macdonald had distributed a survey form which solicited cheese making projections from every cheese factory in the province. The Mennonite owners complied with this solicitation promptly and so the R. M. of Hanover returns are listed in Table 1.

Location	Manager/Owner	Address	Est. Lbs.
Blumenort	K. W. Reimer	Chortitz	300
Gruenfeld	P. W. Reimer	Gruenfeld	200
Steinbach	K. W. Reimer	Steinbach	1000
Hochstadt	J. T. Regehr	Hochstadt	200
Grunthal	H. Frechette	St. Pierre	-

Table 1: Source: *Annual Report to the Minister of Agriculture, 1895*

The Steinbach factory projection of 1000 pounds a day was the highest in the province. Other sources, however, suggested a much lower figure. The *Nor'West Farmer* reported the Steinbach cheese factory produced 21,351 pounds in the season just completed, while Gruenfeld made 37,934 pounds and Blumenort turned out 45,746 pounds. The information published by the newspaper is quite irreconcilable with the projections provided by the Dairy Superintendent, an example of the vagaries found in early statistics.

## Cheese Factory Inspections

In 1907, a typical year, the Dairy Superintendent inspected the cheese factories of Blumenort, Steinbach, Hochstadt and Kleefeld four times. Of the forty-two factories open in Manitoba that year, 16 were graded by Supt. Carson as first class, twenty-three were graded as second class, and three graded as totally unfit for food production.<sup>7</sup> The names of specific factories were not given and none were closed, probably because no illnesses were directly attributable to these factories. Typhoid, however, was not an uncommon disease in southern Manitoba at the time.

Two years later, Isidore Villeneuve of Prescott, Ontario was appointed cheese inspector of Manitoba. When the new official made his initial rounds, he rated thirteen of thirty-four factories as unsanitary, a 38% failure rate.<sup>8</sup> Such an evaluation reflected



*Isidore Villeneuve, originally from Prescott, Ontario was appointed cheese inspector in 1908, a career that would last 36 years. Photo Source: J.M. Joly, Pages de Souvenir et d'Historie.*

an intractable problem despite twenty years of remedial efforts by government. The gulf between the farming community and the regulatory bodies had not been bridged in Manitoba during phase one of the cheese industry.

### **Mennonites Lag Behind 1890 – 1920**

Nostalgic visions of green summer pastures, clean, rustic barns and newborn calves, the essence of rural calendar art, could not mask the more common reality, one of pioneering farmers taking financial shortcuts on their mixed farms in order to survive the approaching Canadian winter. The inadequate rations fed to cows, the poor manure disposal methods and the rough milking routines often conspired against the scientific recommendations of dairy experts. Some producers were aware of the trend to higher quality and consumer demands but they lacked the resources to make the necessary changes. Others in their rural isolation were unaware of industry expectations and carried on in the most basic of farming methods.

In 1910 the Department of Agriculture placed 1784 cows on production testing.<sup>9</sup> Both levels of government participated in the purebred herd sire program, available also to Mennonites. From such initiatives it seemed that progress could readily be envisioned for the industry. However, other factors did not support such optimism for the Mennonite Reserves. By 1915, no agricultural societies had been formed in the R. M. of Hanover or on the West Reserve, though such advances had been made in the adjacent municipalities of DeSalaberry and Ste. Anne. Similarly, no Mennonite youth had graduated from the Manitoba Agricultural College with the exception of J. J. Siemens of Altona who received a one year diploma in 1913.<sup>10</sup> The attendance of Jacob E. Regehr at the Manitoba Agricultural College is also confirmed by family records and a college photograph published previously in *Preservings*.<sup>11</sup>



*J.E. Regehr taking a cheese making practicum at the Manitoba Agricultural College, ca 1908. He is at the second tub on the left. Photo Credit: Cliff Regehr, Preservings 11 (1997): 54.*

When evaluating the Mennonite reluctance to pursue higher education, some consideration should be given to the political environment in Manitoba at that time. Both the Manitoba School Question of 1916 and the Conscription Crisis of 1917 served to place them in a defensive position.

### **Industry Slowdown**

A prolonged drought in 1910 caused a downward drift in milk and cheese production. From 1.45 million pounds in

1909, cheese output in Manitoba fell to 560,000 pounds in 1911. At that time the cheese factories in Kleefeld, Steinbach, Blumenort, Greenland and Ekron were operational, but after 1913 they began to bow out of the race one after the other. A Grunthal cheese plant which had been off the record for a decade resumed production in 1915 and continued for at least three years before it again closed its doors. By 1919, only Kleefeld was still intermittently in production and by 1920 no cheese factories were open in the R. M. of Hanover.

An abysmal provincial cheese production level stood at 226,000 pounds in 1920, a result which was no longer included in the annual reports of the Minister of Agriculture. Federal statistics support an even lower figure of 122,000 pounds for Manitoba.

### **Manitoba Dairy Association**

Klaas R. Reimer, a Steinbach pioneer, purchased an M.D.A. membership in 1897, as did Hochstadt farmer Jacob T. Regehr who was elected as a director of the association that year. The convention of 1902 heard reports from cheese factories in Steinbach, Blumenort and Hochstadt along with others across Manitoba. By 1902 Jacob T. Regehr had become the recognized dairy representative for the Mennonite East Reserve while William Lagimodiere assumed a similar role for the francophone districts of Manitoba.

For many years there was a studious attempt to obtain numerically equal Protestant and Catholic representation on the M.D.A. board of directors, a concession to the political character of Manitoba.<sup>12</sup> During his tenure, Regehr assumed the mantle of both Protestantism and Mennonitism in the councils of dairy agriculture.

Attendance at conventions and M.D.A. membership continued to grow in the period 1900 to 1914 and included numerous men from Steinbach, Blumenort, Greenland, Hochstadt and Kleefeld. In 1901, H. L. Fast, J. B. Toews, Peter Toews, Jacob T. Regehr, Abram Penner and Jacob S. Friesen all joined the M.D.A. market service, a subscription by which market prices from Montreal were relayed by night wire and published in the *Manitoba Free Press*.<sup>13</sup>

M.D.A. director Jacob T. Regehr of Hochstadt was a strong proponent of decentralization of M.D.A. meetings. When the motion advocating a rural presence was presented, Regehr seconded the motion and so facilitated the occasional rural meeting of the M.D.A. in the period of 1897 to 1910.

As the primary voice of the dairy industry in Manitoba, the M.D.A. mounted promotional displays every year. A gargantuan exhibit of butter, some 10,000 pounds of it, was displayed at the new Eaton's store in 1908.<sup>14</sup> Such arresting displays were common to the dairy industry, serving to instil confidence in a developing field of agriculture.

### **M.D.A. Conventions**

Conventions were begun shortly after the dairy association was established in 1886. Except for one rural convention held in Portage la Prairie in 1890, the early ones were convened at Winnipeg City Hall council chambers. From this location the convention moved in 1906 to the Manitoba Agriculture College in Tuxedo and, in 1918, a move was made to the Fort Garry Hotel, a C.N.R. property.<sup>15</sup> Another change to the Royal Alexandra Hotel in 1926 ensured both railways were involved in hosting the annual event.

### Cheese Factories of the East Reserve

In addition to the larger early cheese factories in Steinbach, Kleefeld, Blumenort and Grunthal, there were seven others of lesser importance. Some of them had only a short operational life while others, though of longer duration, had a low level of production.

In the group of factories classified as minor are the following:

*Hochstadt (1893 – 1910)*

*Greenland (1899 – 1912)*

*Hochfeld (1896 – 1911)*

*Barkfield (1937 – 1938)*

*Ekron (1909 – 1912)*

*Sarto (1909 – 1911)*

*The Ridge (1907 – 1909)*

While these enterprises were of lower significance, they also had a role in the cheese industry of Manitoba.

### Steinbach Cheese Factory

When Klaas W. Reimer built his cheese factory in 1889, the first in the East Reserve, the village population was only 265 and the lowly cowherd was still a figure of pioneer life.<sup>16</sup> By 1891, village property assessments concluded there were 1983 head of dairy cattle in the R. M. of Hanover.<sup>17</sup> This size of supply herd suggested enough milk for about four large cheese factories.

Horses were used to deliver milk to cheese factories, which needed to be within a five mile radius of the majority of producers. A contemporary photograph from the winter of 1945 illustrates the requirement of horse-drawn sleighs for winter milk hauls.

For a privately-owned cheese factory to emerge in the area it was important that one Mennonite immigrant, K. R. Reimer in this case, managed to rise above subsistence within the first decade of settlement. This man and his sons were

entrepreneurial, founding a store, a feed mill and four cheese factories in the early years. Having succeeded in launching the original plant, Klaas W. Reimer moved on to establish factories in Blumenort and Hochfield in 1892 and 1896 respectively. Another Reimer factory was established in the village of Gruenfeld, now Kleefeld, in 1890 by Peter W. Reimer. References to the Steinbach cheese factory may be found in provincial dairy archives beginning in 1894, and in such references, the name of K. W. Reimer is regularly noted.

### Extension Dairy Courses

One of the earliest dairy schools in the southeast region was held in Steinbach in 1898. A substantial course of two-week duration, it covered the basics of cheese making theory and practice. These courses were directed by the provincial Dairy Superintendent Carmen C. Macdonald who brought with him a coterie of instructors and speakers, including newspaper editors Richard Waugh from the *Nor'West Farmer* and E. Cora Hind from the *Manitoba Free Press*.<sup>18</sup> This new familiarity with Manitoba leaders and opinion-makers was to influence the progressive element in the Steinbach community. G. G. Kornelson noted at Hind's death in 1942 that his father had read her publications avidly and kept some of them in his library.

By 1902 John G. Barkman had supplanted founder K. W. Reimer in provincial dairy records and it was Barkman whose name appeared in relation to the Steinbach cheese factory right up to 1917, the final year of operation.<sup>19</sup>

### Kleefeld Cheese Factory

This second oldest cheese factory in the East Reserve was established by Peter W. Reimer in 1890. Provincial dairy records list the Kleefeld factory and its owner for the first time in 1895. By taking over an existing creamery Reimer attempted to quickly replicate in Gruenfeld his brother's new and innovative enterprise in Steinbach. By 1900 the plant had demonstrated a



A later photo of the Kleefeld Cheese factory with the horse drawn sleighs delivering milk to the cheese factory. Photo Credit: Ron Friesen

capacity to manufacture 40,000 pounds of cheese a year.

Records show that P. W. Reimer relinquished ownership of his factory to J. H. Ashdown Company of Winnipeg in 1896.<sup>20</sup> The nature of this transaction suggests a disposition based on a creditor-debtor relationship as it would seem improbable that Ashdown, a mayor of Winnipeg and one of the city's 19 millionaires, would have bought a cheese factory in a homogeneous Mennonite settlement with an intention to operate the business in the long term.

A subsequent buy-back by two Kleefeld farmers, H. L. Fast and J. B. Toews, resulted in a return of the factory to local ownership. The parties negotiated a price of \$360.00 for the asset.<sup>21</sup> Provincial dairy records list H. L. Fast as the manager of the early Kleefeld cheese factory from 1896 to 1917, after which Jacob R. Dueck assumed that position in the declining years of the business.<sup>22</sup> After Jacob S. Friesen of Kleefeld attended a thirty-day farm dairy course at the provincial dairy school in Winnipeg in January 1898, and received a Level I certificate, he was employed as a cheese maker at the Kleefeld plant.

### **New Building**

A new building for the cheese factory was constructed in Kleefeld under the management of H. L. Fast and J. B. Toews in 1907 with its location described as SE32-6-5E in the R. M. of Hanover. These premises served the local operation for one more decade but no production records are available for this period. In 1908 a new provincial cheese inspector was assigned the job of factory inspections. I. Villeneuve from Ontario began a thirty-six year career in Manitoba, becoming familiar with all those in the dairy manufacturing industry in the province and a good friend to many.

### **Closure**

As everywhere else in Manitoba, the fortunes of this factory declined and it closed in 1919, the last factory in the East reserve to do so. A disposition of cheese factory assets by public auction occurred in 1921 and another function was found for the building itself.<sup>23</sup> With the closure new markets were required for local milk. In many cases, a return to cream separation was necessary until another option appeared.

### **Another Option**

At some point in 1923, Kleefeld milk producers began to ship their milk to the Rioux cheese factory three miles west of Kleefeld in the R. M. of DeSalaberry.<sup>24</sup> This factory had been built in 1903 by the Low German-speaking francophone Pierre Rioux, who also operated a general store and an apiary at his farm. The acreage owned by Pierre Rioux now forms part of Suncrest Hutterite Colony.

By 1928 local shippers Jacob W. Isaac, John I. Penner and John R. Friesen collaboratively shipped milk to the Rioux cheese factory, an arrangement which continued until Kleefeld built its own cheese factory in 1933.<sup>25</sup>

The use of the Babcock tester to determine butterfat content in milk had become the customary practice during the life of the first Kleefeld cheese factory, allowing for the differential pricing of farmers' milk. Cheese maker J. S. Friesen had received instruction on the Babcock testing methods in his 1898 course where a hand-held model was introduced to the class.

There was a fifteen year hiatus in Kleefeld cheese production from 1919 to 1933. Upon its rebirth in 1933, the Kleefeld

cheese plant was built a mile farther south, where, together with the Schellenberg general store, it formed the nucleus of a new village. This village would become home to a diverse and growing population, living, mostly unaware, in the historical shadow of the 1933 cheese factory.

### **Blumenort Cheese Factory**

Among the first cheese factories to be built in the East Reserve was the one built by Klaas W. Reimer in Blumenort in 1892. The Reimer family of Steinbach was an entrepreneurial clan of whom it was said they paid almost half of all taxes levied in the village.<sup>26</sup> Though Reimer pioneered the Blumenort cheese factory, a fact confirmed by provincial dairy records, others assisted him in its further development. Men like Cornelius Penner and Abraham Penner lent their wherewithal to the new project.<sup>27</sup> Another prominent figure in the early business venture was Peter F. Unger, a man who later served at the cooperative in Blumenort.

Provincial records indicate the years from 1894 to 1900 were productive years at the Blumenort factory and *The Nor'West Farmer* placed its productivity at or near the top in the province. In 1907, Dairy Commissioner W. J. Carson inspected the cheese factory four times in the course of his duties.<sup>28</sup> In the years 1905 to 1917 the Blumenort factory is listed in dairy reports as being operational each year.<sup>29</sup> When cheese production was discontinued in 1918, the Blumenort facility was not left vacant but served as a milk receiving station, a plant duly inspected by Prof. I. Villeneuve. He maintained the local dairying interest by holding meetings once or twice a year. The meeting in 1921 attracted 80 people, a relatively high number for a Mennonite community, albeit much lower than such events attracted in neighbouring Ste. Anne or other French villages.

### **Grunthal Dairy**

A new agricultural industry was introduced to the residents of Grunthal in 1893 when a former Quebec artisan started up a cheese factory in the village. Hormisdas Frechette had arrived in St. Jean Baptiste from Ste. Hyacinthe, Quebec in 1888 and, like so many of his compatriots, he was a cheese maker by trade. Having moved to St. Pierre in 1893, he spent that year and those following in creating a network of cheese factories in towns such as St. Pierre, Ste. Agathe and Otterburne. He believed the Mennonite village of Grunthal also had the prerequisites to support a cheese factory and the seven mile distance from St. Pierre justified another plant.

A provincial government loan program for new cheese factories likely had an influence on Frechette's expansion plans as well. Not only was a \$500.00 forgivable loan available to him for this purpose, but an exemption from municipal taxes served as a further inducement. A proliferation of small factories in the 1890s may be attributable to such monetary incentives from the provincial treasury. The divestiture of the Frechette factory to the Grunthal business firm of Braun and Krahn occurred in 1895.<sup>30</sup> In this regard Walter F. Braun notes that "In the early years grandfather Braun together with his brother-in-law operated a cheese factory.... Grandfather John Braun was involved in several business enterprises." Later, a limited partnership assumed ownership of this well-known Grunthal enterprise about which Braun states: "They owned and operated a cheese factory, a saw mill and, with additional shareholders, established the Grunthal Trading Store...."<sup>31</sup> In 1896 the cheese factory was in



*Students of the Extension Cheesemaker Course offered by the Manitoba Agriculture College pose for a class photo. The course was held in the R.M. of Hanover ca. 1910. Photo Credit: Archives Manitoba, 1974-29.*

summer production and also subject to an inspection by Dairy Superintendent C. C. Macdonald.<sup>32</sup>

The Braun and Krahn plant commenced cheese production around May 10<sup>th</sup> each year as did most such factories, a practice so reliable as to define an annual “cheesemaking season”. Records exist to confirm cheese production occurred in Grunthal from 1896 to 1900 with annual outputs in the 30,000 pound range. An exact figure of 37,934 pounds was reported for 1899 with an accompanying price of ten cents a pound.<sup>33</sup> These production values compared favourably with a provincial average factory yield of 25,714 pounds a year.

No further references to the Grunthal cheese factory are noted in provincial reports until many years later. It was in 1915 that the somnolent Grunthal plant came alive, re-opening under the business name of Grunthal Trading Co. The principals again appear to be none other than Braun and Krahn.<sup>34</sup> There were three years of production during World War I before another lengthy hiatus occurred at the Grunthal plant.

The documented period of dairy manufacturing resumed in 1927 when City Dairy Ltd. of 329 Notre Dame Avenue in Winnipeg took ownership of the Braun and Krahn building and converted it into a country creamery. There was, however, no cheesemaking activity in Grunthal until 1937 when the city firm enlarged the building and brought in F. Pelletier from its Winnipeg plant to manage the cheese manufacturing component.

### **The Collapse of 1920**

The collapse of European currencies in 1920 had ramifications for the Manitoba cheese industry.<sup>35</sup> Many export opportunities for Canadian cheese were gone with the devaluation of the German mark and other currencies.<sup>36</sup> The Winnipeg cheese brokerages suffered enormous economic losses on their existing inventories and shipments in transit so that they declined to buy any more cheese from the factories. Many such wholesalers went bankrupt while others were forced into mergers and acquisitions.<sup>37</sup> This state of the export market was one of the main reasons for the rapid decline of cheese factories in the Mennonite East Reserve as well as in other Manitoba areas.

There were likely other reasons as well. The winter of 1920 to 1921 was particularly cold and a poor, wet spring, as well as an extension of the Winnipeg milkshed from a radius of 12 miles to 20 miles, allowing more milk producers to participate in the table milk market all contributed to the demise of the cheese industry.

While a gradual recovery of the industry took place in Manitoba in 1923 and subsequent years, no factories resumed production in the East Reserve until 1932. A new organizational effort on a cooperative business model would be required for a cheese manufacturing renaissance in Mennonite areas during the Depression.

## Endnotes

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# Researching the History of the Conservative Mennonites in Bolivia and East Paraguay

By Royden Loewen, University of Winnipeg

Between July 5 and July 22, 2009 I had the distinct privilege of making many new friends at several colonies in Bolivia and East Paraguay. The colonies included Colonia El Sur, Florida, El Palmar and Bajio Verde in southern Bolivia and Colonia Rio Verde in East Paraguay. My task was to collect stories for a history book on the more conservative Mennonite colonies, the so-called 'Horse and Buggy' Mennonite colonies. Of course, I will be unable to visit all such colonies in Central and South America and so seven research associates are assisting me. Several, including Kerry Fast, Karen Warkentin, Anne Kok and Tina Fehr Kehler have already visited colonies in Mexico, Belize and Bolivia and have been warmly welcomed there. Andy Martin, Jakob Huttner and Anna Sofia Hedberg will be making their visits in the next year or so.

The history book, that I hope will result from these visits, will tell the story of the remarkable scattering of Low German Mennonites in Central and South America. It will also describe how the most conservative of the Mennonites have been able to stay true to their vision of following Christ, that is, by resisting modern ways and avoiding modern technology. A book though is not like Mate tea (which I drank a lot among Bolivian Mennonites!), it is not made instantly and it will be several years before it is completed.

During my visit I found very kind, friendly and welcoming people. I also met many gifted story tellers. I left my home in Steinbach (Manitoba, Canada) on July 5<sup>th</sup>, and after 24 hours of traveling arrived in Santa Cruz (Bolivia) where Hans and Elma Schroeder from Centro Menno provided a warm welcome; their children even gave me a strong sense of being at home. Later that day I had the privilege of meeting Sieghart Schartner, who described his comprehensive new book on Mennonites in

Bolivia, and also Alfred Koop who worked for MCC in Santa Cruz when I first visited there in 2004.

On Tuesday, July 7<sup>th</sup> I boarded a bus for Yacuiba, near the Argentine border, arriving there just as nightfall set in. I found a taxi driver who was willing to drive me in the dark, on what seemed like very rough roads, to Colonia El Sur, more than an hour from Yacuiba. Using an introduction Kennert Giesbrecht had made for me, I made my way to the home of Schoolteacher Benjamin Guenther where he, his wife Anna and his children made me feel very much at home. I also met his parents, David and Helena Guenther, and their unmarried children; they told



Royden Loewen (left) with Maria and Jakob Neudorf and their daughter Anna who is married to Abram Wiebe. They are in front of the teacher-age-school building in Colonia El Sur. Photo Credit: Royden Loewen.

me of the first years at El Sur, especially of making their home in a plastic-sheet covered tin-roofed shelter that over the months and even years turned into their brick house.

The next day, on Wed, July 8<sup>th</sup>, Benjamin drove me to the neighbouring colony, Florida, just to the north of the Argentina border. The hour long buggy ride offered a good opportunity to talk about the first years at El Sur. I learned how the settlers came from Capulin Colony in Chihuahua, Mexico; how the move to Bolivia occurred to avoid modern technology, but how the parting of ways with those who stayed in Mexico was friendly; how the move caused many members to re-examine their own spiritual lives and recommit themselves spiritually; how the more well-to-do offered credit to the poor; how freight was shipped by container from Mexico to Chile and then hauled by truck to El Sur, how a colony-owned bull dozer ploughed down the first trees.

Upon reaching Colonia Florida we visited the home of *Vorsteher* (colony leader) Heinrich Banman who described his childhood at Santa Rita Colony in Mexico, the rather sudden move to Bolivia, the initial years at Colonia El Norte, and then the move to Florida to look for land. At the Banmans I also met their neighbour, Johann Wall, originally of Colonia Ojo de la Yegua (Mexico), and we also had a very worthwhile visit. At Florida we also visited the colony's seed co-operative, and watched how a group of young men prepared bags of the Semillera Florida soybean seed.



*Johann Wall in his buggy, ready to leave the Banman farm in Colonia Florida. Photo Credit: Royden Loewen*



*Bagging soybean seed at Colonia Florida. Photo Credit: Royden Loewen*

After our return to El Sur, Benjamin introduced me to Mr. Gerhard Neudorf, the *Vorsteher* of the colony during the very first years. He spoke of coming to Bolivia as a delegate on several different trips before purchasing land at El Sur, of having to adjust to Bolivia's hot climate and of learning to deal with the country's various land laws. That night Benjamin took me to the home of Jakob and Maria Neudorf where I spent the next two nights and enjoyed warm hospitality.

On Thursday Jakob showed me their farm and he even taught this Canadian how to plant potatoes and lettuce! Again we focused on history: the move from northern Mexico, the search by young families for land, the work of a *Waisenmann*, (person in charge of orphans) and the establishment of schools. Later that day I also met *Mennonitsche Post*-contributor IsaaK Klassen and learned more about setting up a family farm, building the first church, and Old Colony ways. On the way back to the Neudorfs' I also had the opportunity of meeting with the young *Vorsteher*, Peter Rempel.

The final day of my visit to the southern colonies, Friday July 10, was divided among three colonies. In the morning I encountered a very interesting sight when some thirty Bolivian women who bought chickens produced by the Neudorfs dropped by for a tour of their farm operation. The women seemed very impressed by the farm and were eager to sample some 'Mennonite' food. Then Jakob, his energetic second cousin Johann Neudorf and I traveled by taxi to the colonies north of the Pilcomayo River, near Villa Montes to Colonia El Palmar. Here we had a very informative and friendly visit, sat in on a very fine singing practice by the song leaders at the church, and were guided to a brief visit of the new colony, Gruenthal, Bajio Verde where we visited with the Braun family. Back at El Palmar we met the elderly Johann Wall who recalled in very precise detail how the community had first considered land in Brazil, only to find that the government there would not allow German language schools.



*Maria Neudorf and her daughter Susanna Wiebe (nee Neudorf) meet Bolivian women visitors who were very interested in their farm and in Mennonite food. Photo Credit: Royden Loewen.*

That night it was time to leave my new found friends and return north by overnight bus to Santa Cruz. Here on Saturday, July 11, I attended the anniversary celebration of MCC in Santa Cruz and also met Mennonites there from various other colonies. That same day I flew to La Paz, the capital of Bolivia

where I searched for materials on the Mennonites in Spanish. I used Sunday, of course, as the day of rest, a very necessary rest in order to acclimatize to the high altitude of the city, the highest capital in the world. On Monday July 12<sup>th</sup> I met with Dr. Prof. Raúl Calderón Jemio, a history professor at the Universidad Mayo de San Andrés; he not only speaks English very well but was very helpful in explaining where I could obtain old newspapers and government documents relating to the original *Privilegium* of 1962. He was very enthusiastic about the book project, saying that Bolivians need to learn to know their Mennonite neighbours and how valuable the Mennonites were for Bolivia. During the next two days I spend time at the Archives for the Ministry of External Affairs and the National Archives, again meeting very helpful people who seemed kindly disposed to the Mennonites.



Royden Loewen visiting with Dr. Prof. Raul Calderon Jemio, history professor at the Universidad Mayo de San Andres in La Paz. Photo Credit: Royden Loewen.

Late on Tuesday I bid Bolivia farewell and traveled to Asuncion for the Mennonite World Conference. Even though it was very impressive to see so many thousands of Mennonites from around the world, I was very eager to visit Colonia Rio Verde and Durango in East Paraguay. Unfortunately bad roads kept me from going all the way to Durango, but on Thursday, July 16<sup>th</sup> I was able to rent a car, and found a travel companion in a Canadian friend Paul Redekop. Together we made our way on very good roads to Rio Verde where we met with young Franz Loewen and his brothers who were all busy at the family's gasoline station; Franz showed us his work at the radio station and was very helpful in orienting us to the colony. That afternoon we had a very worthwhile visit with *Altester* Johann Schmidt and then visited the elderly Cornelius Bergen who had very clear memories of the first years of settlement at Rio Verde. Before we returned to Asuncion, we drove through Manitoba Colony and then stopped at the restaurant at Kilometer 101 for a supper of *Verenikje* and deep fried chicken.

On Monday, July 22<sup>nd</sup> I safely returned to Manitoba, Canada, where my wife Mary Ann picked me up at the airport. Within a week I also reunited with my children, Rebecca who works as an architect and with Alexander and Mary Margaret who returned from Peru where they had worked at an orphanage during the time I was in Bolivia. I was thankful to be at home, but as thankful for the many worthwhile visits I had had with my new friends in Bolivia and East Paraguay. We may be from different churches, but we in the North certainly have much to learn from our brothers and sisters in the South who follow Christ in sincerity, simplicity and humility. These are difficult days for Mennonites in Bolivia as a few bad examples have recently cast a shadow over the whole community with very disturbing accounts reported on in the newspapers. Still, everywhere I traveled I heard how the vast majority of Mennonites in Bolivia set an example of high moral standards, hard work, and orderly community life. I will not easily forget my friends in Bolivia and East Paraguay.

## A Visit to an Old Colony Church

By John J. Friesen, Co-editor *Preservings*

Sunday morning, in late April, less than an hour after sun-up, with the thermometer hovering just above zero, I set out for the Old Colony Church at Neuenburg, north of Cuauhtemoc, Mexico. Since the worship service starts about an hour after sun-up, I do not want to be late. The parking lot at La Huerta hotel where I am staying is silent, except for the meadow larks singing in the crisp morning air. There is little traffic on the highway, so entering is easy. Very different from the usual heavy flow of cars and trucks along this 40 kilometre four-lane paved road from Cuauhtémoc to Rubio. One local person described these 40 kms as the world's longest one-street city, since businesses line both sides of the roadway for the entire distance.

From the highway I can see the sun streaming onto the Bustillos valley with the hills in the background. The rows of villages, called campos, are nestled along the base of the hills, with crossroads running from the main highway to each village.

Less than a km south of the hotel I turn onto a paved cross-road running east. On one side of the road is a huge orchard

with rows and rows of apple trees, with the dark netting still pulled back, since the hail season has not yet begun. On the other side of the road is a large open field. It looks as though it was seeded to corn last year. Apple and corn provide the main agricultural income for the area, together with milk from the many small family-run dairies that supply the village-based cheese factories. Both apple orchards and cornfields have to be irrigated to produce an adequate yield.

Far in the distance, to the south-east, on the side of a tall hill, lies the city of Cuauhtémoc. It is bathed in the brilliant morning sun. When Mennonites arrived in 1922, Cuauhtémoc was a railway station surrounded by a few houses. Now it is a bustling city of more than a 100,000 inhabitants.

The first village I come to is Blumenort, and at its entrance I turn north, away from the village, onto a gravel road. The road is lower than the land around it, but quite good. On the fields corn shoots are just beginning to emerge. After about two miles, near the village of Neuenburg, is a large, painted sign announcing

the name of the village. Entering the village, one is struck by the orderliness of the layout. A broad main street, a brick or cement fence along the sides of the street, with farm yards on both sides. Each yard is laid out with houses near the street, and barns further back. And, there are trees; trees everywhere. For a village in a semi-arid valley, trees are abundant. Rows of pyramidal trees line the main street, on the yards, and around houses. Then as I drive slowly along the main street, I see the reason for the greenery. A tall water tower stands in the middle of the village, supplying the households with abundant water for human and animal consumption, and for watering the trees and grass on the yards. The water is pumped from deep wells.



*The Neuenburg village water tower. Photo Credit: John J. Friesen.*

At the centre of the village stands the church and on the other side of the street the private school. As I drive onto the church parking lot, it is evident that I am one of the first ones to have arrived. I sit in the car and watch people arrive. Virtually all vehicles are new pick-up trucks, most with extended cabs. Some are driven by men, and others by women in traditional dark Old Colony dresses and embroidered hats (Huev) covered by kerchiefs.

The church is a large, white, two-storey building that looks like a house, complete with curtained windows. There are two entrances on the east side of the building where women enter. Men have two entrances, one on the north side of the building and another on the south side. The yard is surrounded by a five-foot high adobe brick fence, with two entrances for vehicles.

After some time, I slowly make my way into the church, using the north entrance, and sit down toward the back of the men's section, on the right hand side of the sanctuary. Men hang their hats on hooks over their heads. Women sit on the left hand side, with older women toward the front and the younger women toward the back of the building. The younger women have their own entrance. At the very front, facing the congregation, is a bench for the oldest women. The men's side also has a bench for the oldest men. All women and men carry a black songbook with them as they enter. They place them in the book-holders on the backs of the benches. This church building is more modern than most, and has back rests, whereas most Old Colony churches have no back rests.

Each man, when he is seated, nods a greeting to the one on his right, and then to the one on his left. Those who sit next to



*The Old Colony church in the village of Neuenburg. Photo Credit: John J. Friesen.*

me nod greetings to me as well. In this way everyone is given a quiet greeting and blessing. After the nod of greeting, everyone sits quietly. There is hardly a sound in the church.

As the men enter, they slip a bill into the offering box attached to the wall beside each entrance. Some women do the same. The offerings in these boxes, as I learn later, constitute the *Armenkasse* (fund for the poor). This fund is used by the deacon to assist those members who have financial needs. A large portion of such payments are for extraordinary medical bills. The deacon and his wife told me that taking care of the financial needs of the 7,000 members and 7,500 children in the Manitoba Old Colony church was a large task. The deacon indicated that sometimes they also need to assist people from other Old Colony settlements like Durango or Zaccatecas who come to this area looking for work, but are penniless when they arrive.

Everybody is dressed in dark clothes. About half the men wear dark suits, shirts, and no ties. The rest of the men simply wear dark shirts without jackets. Women are dressed in dark dresses, with a black kerchief over the Huev (a black embroidered hat). Unmarried women wear only a black kerchief.

At about a quarter after eight, after the building is almost completely full, five song leaders enter the church from a third door on the women's side of the sanctuary, and take their place to the right of the pulpit, on the men's side, facing the congregation. Each has a songbook holder in front of him. One of the song leaders announces a song, and begins to sing.

Singing is in the traditional *Lange Wies* style, which is a slow form of singing in which the melody is augmented with additional ornamental notes. After the song leader has sung a few words the other song leaders join him. After the first line, the congregation joins the song leaders. The congregation stops singing before the last syllable of each line, allowing the song leader to complete the line on his own. The leader then starts the next line with everyone joining him.

It is an amazing experience to hear the unaccompanied sound of the singing, which starts quietly and gradually swells to fill the room. The powerful women's voices blend with those of the men, the volume rising and falling with each line. Numerous verses are sung, and the first song takes about ten minutes. The second and third songs are somewhat shorter. At first I



*The pulpit with the benches for the ministers on the left and for the song leaders on the right. Photo Credit: John J. Friesen.*

listen in rapt enchantment. Soon I look in the songbook of the person next to me, and before long I sing along. Catching the cadence and flow of the *Lange Wies* is not difficult, and makes me feel part of the congregation.

At the end of the third song, the minister, who this day is bishop Ohm Franz Kroeker, quietly enters from a third entrance on the left side of the building. It is the entrance from the ministers' room and is used only by song leaders and ministers. He stops half way to the pulpit, gives the congregation a blessing in German: "*Die Liebe Gottes, die Gnade des Herrn Jesus Christus, und die gemeinschaft des heiligen Geistes sei mit euch allen, Amen*", and proceeds to the pulpit. He is dressed in a black ministers' suit with longer tails than in normal suits, and wears newly polished black boots, following the biblical admonition that ministers are to be "*an den Beinen gestiefelt.*" (Ephesians 6:15) Kroeker proceeds to give a twenty minute opening sermon, called a *Vorrede* (Introduction).

In this sermon Ohm Kroeker invites young people to faith and to commitment of baptism. Faith he says is not based on outer forms, on the water of baptism, but is a matter of the heart, of inner commitment, and conversion to God. In his sermon there is a lot of emphasis on the grace of God, and that believers receive salvation as a gift, not by works. At the end of the *Vorrede* Kroeker again invites the young people to consider baptism, and announces that immediately after the service all the fathers of the young men and women who want to take the catechism instruction this year, and be baptized, are invited to meet him individually in the ministers' room.

At the end of the sermon, the bishop gives a hardly discernable signal for the congregation to pray and kneels down before the chair behind the pulpit for a silent prayer. The congregation, expecting a prayer at this point, follows suit, turning around, kneeling, with arms resting on the benches. This silent prayer follows a pattern that Dutch Mennonites practiced since the sixteenth century, and is based on the conviction that God can hear what is in our hearts, and that it is good if each participant communicates directly with God. After a few minutes the bishop prays Amen, and everyone gets up and again sits on the benches. The bishop proceeds to pray an audible prayer. This follows a newer pattern and thus the two prayers represent the old and the new.

The congregation sings a hymn, after which bishop Ohm Franz begins his sermon. He announces that this Sunday the annual catechism instruction is beginning. There is a feeling of reverence and anticipation in the room. The bishop is a gentle, pastoral, well-liked, leader, who has a progressive vision for the church. This sometimes results in the more conservative members resisting his ideas. But people know that they can expect him to speak his mind, and they listen attentively to his teaching today.

The outline of the sermon is provided by the questions of the catechism. The questions begin with the trinity: God the creator, Christ the Saviour, and the Holy Spirit. The sermon is read from a High German text prepared many years before, as was the *Vorrede*. Ministers usually do not prepare their own sermons, even though on occasion this may happen, as the bishop indicated in personal discussion. Ohm Franz, however, adds lengthy Low German comments to the written text, since the hearers are more familiar with Low German, the universal language among Mennonites in this area. This Sunday the Low German commentary is as long as the High German parts.

The sermon is a powerful presentation of the Christian gospel. It includes many applications to a life of discipleship and teachings of Christ in every day life.

The eighth question asks how the selection of leaders is to be made. The answer, which he bases on some biblical texts which he reads, is that leaders are to be selected from among the members of the congregation, following prayerful meditation and waiting upon the leading of the spirit of God to direct the congregation to make the right choice. Ohm Franz tone does not change, but it is evident this is an important point. He reminds the people that the Manitoba Old Colony *Gemeinde* (church) will shortly be facing the election of a new minister. He encourages them to follow the biblical admonition and to search in their heart who will be the best minister for the *Gemeinde*.

And then Ohm Franz indicates his concern. He says that in a previous election, some members had said someone should be elected who is not a supporter of the Komitee (Committee) schools. In the past decade a school committee was organized, made up of Old Colony members, who wanted to reform the school system. The committee established a number of schools throughout the Manitoba Old Colony villages, hired teachers, held teacher seminars, and adopted a new curriculum which was a German translation of the materials put out by the Swiss Mennonites in Virginia. The curriculum is similar to that used by the *Kleine Gemeinde* schools in the area.

This school system is in competition with the village schools which continue to use the traditional four-level system of Fibel, catechism, New Testament and Bible for their curriculum. The Committee schools provide a broader, more advanced education. The bishop, Ohm Franz, is a supporter of the Committee schools, whereas the other bishop, Ohm Loewen, is less supportive. This has set up a tension within the *Gemeinde*, and this morning Ohm Franz addresses the potential divisive danger of this issue head-on.

Everyone listens attentively, and when Ohm Franz concludes this section and goes on to the next question, numerous men clear their throats. One gets the impression the bishop had touched a nerve with these words.

The sermon has a lot of discussion of discipleship, namely following the teachings of Jesus in daily life, but always with the emphasis that the heart must first be in tune with God. Also,

he makes repeated references to grace, that faith is by grace and not by works.

The sermon is followed by a song, after which Ohm Franz makes two announcements. He presents an extensive report about the health of Ohm Loewen, the other bishop, whom he visited two days earlier in hospital. He reports that Ohm Loewen is very ill, is unable to walk, and the prognosis is not good. He requests prayers for him. Then he also announces that there will be a funeral for a widow in the early afternoon, in this church, where he will be the officiating minister. The announcements are followed by a hymn and a closing benediction.

After the benediction the men and women leave by row, the front row first, and in sequence to the back of the church. The front rows on the men's side of the church exit through the front entrance. As the men go past the pulpit, some reach out to shake the *Ältester's* hand. Ohm Franz remains standing behind the pulpit until the church is empty.

In the parking lot I meet Peter Rempel and his nephew from Ontario. They had also come to attend the church service, and had sat some distance in front of me. We chat for a few minutes, and then we leave to go to the General Conference church in Blumenau. We will get there in good time for the morning church service.

As I drive the car I reflect on what I have just been part of. I remember the words of a local person who said that too often Mennonites from Canada send evangelists to Mexico to convert the Old Colonists, as if they are heathen and have not experienced salvation. The evangelists sometimes rent large granaries or sheds in which to hold their services. Local people refer to these sessions as *Spikja* meetings. Some of the evangelists, when they go back to Canada, report very negatively about the Mexican Mennonites, and say how they have brought the light of salvation to these unsaved people. This person said that such evangelism is not welcome in Mexico. It does not serve to build the church, nor assist individuals to helpfully incorporate new religious ideas into their faith experience.

What I experienced this morning was something holy. For an hour and a half I was in the midst of a faith community that believes deeply in God and is seeking to live a life of faithfulness. I saw a gifted, dedicated, loving, leader nurture his members, and calling them to faith and faithfulness. The bishop was the true evangelist.

As I returned to the highway, and drove to the street leading to the Blumenau Mennonite Church, I could again hear the meadowlarks. I too felt like singing.

## Visiting Paraguay and the Mennonite World Conference

By Hans Werner, Co-editor, *Preservings*.

This past July, the Mennonite World Conference took place in Asunción, Paraguay and it afforded an opportunity to visit the Mennonite areas of Paraguay, an opportunity I had not had before. My wife and I decided to join a tour and we met our fellow travelers in Miami, Florida and then traveled to Sao Paulo, Brazil, Iguazu Falls, and then Asunción. We went by bus from Iguazu Falls, made a brief stop in Sommerfeld, had supper at the leprosy hospital at Kilometer 81 and then spent the night in Asunción before leaving for the Chaco. When we returned it was time for the Mennonite World Conference, but during the conference we took a day off to visit my wife's relatives in Sommerfeld. After the conference came what seemed to be

a lot of airports and endless waiting before we arrived back home in Winnipeg.

The Chaco was an impressive landscape. Rain a few weeks before we arrived, had made the desert green—at least where we traveled along the Grand Chaco Highway. The Mennonite colonies in Paraguay still bear the marks of their histories, which are surprisingly diverse. The Menno Colony was the first to be established in 1927 by Mennonites from Manitoba, who migrated there for many of the same reasons that their coreligionists moved to Mexico. They have, however, not remained conservative in the same way as many Old Colony Mennonites in Mexico



and South America. Loma Plata is the bustling centre of the Menno Colony and the milk processing facility was a testament to the industriousness of the Colony. It was good to meet Uwe Friesen from the Menno Colony, who is active in preserving the history of the Menno Colony through his work in the *Verein für Geschichte der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, an organization that includes the Neuland, Friesland and Fernheim colonies.

In contrast, the nearby Fernheim Colony was settled by those who managed to escape the Soviet Union via Moscow in 1929. Like their Canadian *Russlaender* counterparts, these Mennonites had experienced revolution but also collectivization, which



A warehouse storing UHT milk at the Cooperativa Menno Loma Plata dairy. Photo Credit: Hans Werner

had been brutally forced upon the countryside by Stalin. To the outside observer the Fernheim Colony is more conscious of its history, more deliberate in its education, and more celebratory of its accomplishment. In Fernheim we toured the scrupulously clean peanut processing facility, a facility certified to process peanuts for the Japanese edible peanut market. We also toured their extensive museum, a vivid testament to the challenges of settling in the Chaco, and we stayed in their comfortable hotel.



*Processing peanuts in the Fernheim Colony. Photo Credit: Hans Werner*



*Fernheim, now the provincial capital boasts a modern hotel complete with a swimming pool.*

Neuland, a colony we did not visit, but one that also is a neighbour of Fernheim and Menno in the Chaco, has a third story. The settlers of Neuland were Mennonite refugees, who came to Paraguay after 1945. Because of the turmoil and dislocation brought on by the war, the colony was overwhelmingly widows and children. The Neuland colony has been at the forefront of building a large slaughterhouse and packing facility along the Gran Chaco highway close to Asunción.

While in the Chaco, we also had the opportunity to see the efforts made by European Mennonites to work with their indigenous neighbours. We visited the mission station and cooperative at Yalwe Sanga, where the Chaco Mennonites began their mission to the indigenous people: *Licht and den Indianern*

(Light to the Indians). It is an unusual experience to talk in Low German to an indigenous person whose name is Teichroeb.

The colonies of East Paraguay share some history with their Chaco counterparts but are also unique. The Bergthal and Sommerfeld colonies were established by a new wave of emigrants from Manitoba that left Canada for Paraguay after World War II. The Sommerfeld Colony was established by those from Manitoba's West Reserve while their East Reserve counterparts established the Bergthal Colony nearby. The two large East Paraguay colonies went through successive economic stages. The predominance of bush and harvestable trees meant that the early years were spent in the lumber business. Once the trees had been harvested the economy gradually switched over to crop production and dairying. Now there are planted stands of Eucalyptus trees and it seems the economy may change again—back to some form of tree culture.



*Flour mills are big business in Paraguay. This one is a privately owned mill in the Sommerfeld Colony.*

We did not visit the other two East Paraguay colonies, Volendam and Friesland. Friesland is a colony established by people from Fernheim who were unhappy with the original Chaco colony, while Volendam has a similar history to Neuland. Its settlers also came from Europe after the war.

The cooperative movement has been a tremendous boon to the Mennonites of Paraguay. The first cooperative was founded in Fernheim in the 1930s with its first goal to find an easier way to bring necessary supplies from Asunción to them—deep in the Chaco. Gradually, however the cooperative model was adopted by all the colonies and became the engine of economic growth for the Mennonite colonies. The five cooperatives that make up the CSEM (*Comite Social Economico Mennonita*) had an annual turnover of 497 Million dollars (U.S.) in 2007 and employed 3875 people.<sup>1</sup> There are five other cooperatives that are not members of this association. The cooperative system embraces much more than just stores. The large Lacto Landa dairy in Bergthal and Sommerfeld, for example and even the colonies' social programs and infrastructure are managed through the cooperative model. The cooperative model has also been extended to the work among indigenous people. Mennonites of Paraguay have helped them form their own cooperative.

After arriving back from the Chaco we attended the Mennonite World Conference in Asunción. Held in a not quite completed evangelical church that easily seated the 5000 or more



The skyline of Asunción, Paraguay.

attendees, the conference was a testament to the organization skills of the Paraguayan Mennonites who made up the bulk of the volunteers. One had the distinct sense that the cooperation between the various colonies, indigenous and Paraguayan Mennonites was a first on this kind of scale. It made, I think, for some interesting dynamics. For some of the Mennonites of Paraguay hearing a woman preach and watching and listening to rap dancers must have been a stretch.

We took a day off to visit relatives in Sommerfeld Colony. The tour of the colony was fascinating and I came away impressed with the energy and social conscience of the Paraguayan Mennonites. In Sommerfeld we toured local businesses, the



Lunch with relatives in the restaurant at Campo 9.

medical and elder care facilities, the meal program for neighbouring Paraguayans and enjoyed the visits with relatives.

After returning to Asunción for the last days of the Mennonite World Conference it was back to waiting in airports, being delayed and getting home tired. It had been a wonderful experience.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Edgar Stoesz, *Like a Mustard Seed: Mennonites in Paraguay* (Waterloo: Herald Press, 2008), 137.

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## ‘Müde bin ich, geh’ zur Ruh’ The story of a children’s prayer

By Margaret Loewen Reimer

The children’s prayer, *Müde bin ich, geh’ zur Ruh*, is dear to the heart of many Mennonites who grew up in German-speaking homes. A recent request for an English translation sent me on a quest to discover what was available. The translations I found were unsatisfactory, and so I resumed work on my own translation, which I had begun years ago. Meanwhile, I decided to trace the origins of this classic little prayer. The search uncovered a surprisingly rich story.

*Müde bin ich* first appeared in a songbook for nursery school children compiled by Theodor Fliedner in Kaiserswerth, Germany, in 1842.<sup>1</sup> That is why the tune is sometimes identified as “Kaiserswerth” or “Fliedner”. It is likely that the melody is based on a popular folk tune, as are many familiar hymns.

The words were written by Luise Hensel (1798-1876), a widely-read religious poet and hymn writer, and a woman who led a remarkable life.<sup>2</sup> Hensel’s father was a Lutheran pastor in Brandenburg. Her brother, well-known painter Wilhelm Hensel, was married to Fanny Mendelssohn, sister of Felix. After the death of her father in 1809, Luise moved to Berlin with her mother. Here she captured the attention of several remarkable men. Romantic poet Clemens Brentano acknowledged her influence on his poetry and apparently

shared with composer Ludwig Berger an unrequited love for Luise. Another poet, Wilhelm Müller, was also attracted to her. Today, Müller is remembered for his *Waldhornisten* poems which Franz Schubert set to music in his song cycles, *Die schöne Müllerin* and *Winterreise*. Another friend, Ludwig von Gerlach, who would later become a teacher of Otto von Bismarck, drew Hensel into the upper ranks of the Centre Party, a political force in Germany at the time. These activities apparently conflicted with her religious feelings, however, and in an emotional crisis she joined the Roman Catholic Church in 1818.

From then on, Hensel led the life of a pilgrim, moving from place to place as a religious teacher and writer. She was head teacher at a school for girls in Aachen for six years, until ill health forced her to return to her brother’s home in Berlin. (In Aachen she turned down a proposal of marriage from Clemens August Alertz, who later became personal physician to Pope Pius IX.) After her mother’s death in 1835, Hensel again wandered from school to school until finally settling in a convent in Paderborn, a city in the North Rhine-Westphalia region of Germany. Here she died at the age of 78. There is a monument to her memory in Paderborn.

Hensel's poems consist mostly of pious verses composed for special occasions. Some of her poetry, freely altered by Brentano, appeared in an 1829 work entitled *Geistlicher Blumenstrauß* (Spiritual bouquet). Poems by Hensel and her sister were published in 1857 under the title *Gedichte von Luise und Wilhelmine Hensel*, and a compilation of her letters was published posthumously. *Sämtliche Lieder*, which includes *Müde bin ich*, her most popular song, was published in 1869.

The man who first published *Müde bin ich* in his songbook for children was himself a fascinating character. Theodor Fliedner (1800-1864) was a German Lutheran pastor in Kaiserswerth, now part of Düsseldorf, who was deeply concerned about the poor and needy in his parish, including prisoners who lived in appalling conditions. During a trip to Holland, he "observed Mennonite congregations that frequently were served by deaconesses who looked after the women and children and assisted the sick, needy, and poor."<sup>3</sup> Shortly after, in 1836, Fliedner founded the first "Deaconess Mother House" to train nurses and deaconesses for work in parishes, among indigent groups, and in foreign missions. By 1864, the Kaiserswerth movement had 30 mother houses and 1,600 deaconesses. Protestants in many other countries, including Mennonites in North America, adopted Fliedner's model: "Almost all the first North American deaconess programs took as their inspiration the work of Pastor Theodor Fliedner...and his wife Friederike...in Kaiserswerth, Germany."<sup>4</sup> The most famous deaconess associated with Kaiserswerth is Florence Nightingale. She spent time there in 1851, observing the program and gaining her first nursing experience. That same year she wrote, *The Institution of Kaiserswerth on the Rhine, for the Practical Training of Deaconesses*, her first publication.<sup>5</sup>

### Mennonite use of the hymn

*Müde bin ich* has found its way into many Lutheran and Mennonite hymnals, in addition to being passed down through family lore. (I recently saw fond mention of it by a Jew raised in communist Yugoslavia who learned it from a German-speaking grandmother.<sup>6</sup>) Although I did not check European Mennonite hymnbooks, I found this children's prayer in a number of North American hymnals, both German and English. The 1942 *Gesangbuch der Mennoniten* (General Conference Mennonite Church) places this prayer among the *Abendlieder* (evening songs), and identifies the tune simply as *eigene Weise* or "own tune". (*Lieber Vater, hoch im Himmel*, another popular children's prayer, is with the children's songs.) The 1965 *Gesangbuch der Mennoniten*, published by Faith and Life Press, Newton, Kansas, includes it in the children's section, with the tune identified as "Kaiserwerth, 1842". In the Mennonite Brethren (MB) tradition, the song appeared in the *Heimatklänge* (Sounds of home) collection brought over from Russia, which became part of the *Drei-Band* (three-volume) hymnal. It was not in the MB *Gesangbuch* of 1952 or later English hymnals.<sup>7</sup>

The 1902 *Church and Sunday School Hymnal* (Mennonite Publishing House), edited by J.D. Brunk for Swiss Mennonites, includes the words of *Müde bin ich* in its *Deutscher Anhang* (German supplement). The *Deutsches Lieder und Melodienbuch* (Mennonite Publishing House, 1926), based on an 1895 hymnal, includes the prayer in its *Abendlieder* section, but with an entirely different tune!<sup>8</sup> Ontario Swiss Mennonites I spoke with did not know *Müde bin ich*, but a man who grew up in the Amish tradition remembered singing it, perhaps because the

Kinderlieder

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Psalm 121, 4: Siehe, der Hüter Israels schläft noch schlummert nicht.

Kaiserswerth, 1842

1. Mü - de bin ich, geh zur Ruh, schlies - se  
 2. Hab ich Un-recht heut ge - tan, sieh es,  
 3. Al - le, die mir sind ver - wandt, Gott, lass

mei - ne Au - gen zu; Va - ter, lass die  
 treu - er Gott, nicht an! Dei - ne Gnad und  
 ruhn in dei - ner Hand; al - le Men - schen,

Au - gen dein ü - ber mei - nem Bet - te sein.  
 Je - su Blut macht ja al - len Scha - den gut.  
 gross und klein, sol - len dir be - foh - len sein.

The setting of "Müde bin ich geh zur Ruh" found in the 1965 *Gesangbuch der Mennoniten*. Source: *Gesangbuch der Mennoniten*, (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1965), #534.

Amish retained the German language longer.<sup>9</sup>

Neither *The Mennonite Hymnary* of 1940 (General Conference) nor *The Mennonite Hymnal* published jointly by the General Conference and (Swiss) Mennonite Church in 1969 include *Müde bin ich*, even though both have some German hymns. *The Youth Hymnary* (Faith and Life Press, 1956) has an English translation by someone identified only as H.J.L. The same version is found in *The Children's Hymnary* (Faith and Life Press, 1968) with the translator listed as Lester Hostetler. In *The Youth Hymnary* the melody is entitled "German folk tune", while *The Children's Hymnary* identifies the tune as "Kaiserswerth, 1842".

### Variations and translations

Luise Hensel's hymn appears in several German variations. In some versions, the second line reads "Schliesse beide Äuglein zu" (close both little eyes), and the seventh line says "Jesu Blut" instead of "Christi Blut". Some versions use "treuer Gott" (faithful God) instead of "lieber Gott". The fourth verse has the most variations. (I remember only three verses from my childhood, so I chose a fourth one I thought most in keeping with the rest.) The version that appears with Hensel's biography on Wikipedia has this fourth verse: *Kranken Herzen sende*

## Now the Light Has Gone Away

Words: Frances Ridley Havergal, 1869.

Music: 'Müde bin ich, geh zur Ruh' from *Liederbuch für Kleinkinder-Schulen*, 1842.

Setting: *Common Service Book (ULCA)*, 1917, alt.

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$\text{♩} = 100$

1. Now the light has gone a - way; Fa - ther, lis - ten while I pray,  
 2. Je - sus, Sa - vior, wash a - way All that has been wrong to - day;  
 3. Let my near and dear ones be Al - ways near and dear to Thee.  
 4. Now my eve - ning praise I give; Thou didst die that I might live.  
 5. Thou, my best and kind - est Friend, Thou wilt love me to the end.

Ask - - ing Thee to watch and keep And to send me qui - et sleep.  
 Help me ev - ery day to be Good and gen - tle, more like Thee.  
 Oh, bring me and all I love To Thy ha - ppy home a - bove.  
 All my bless - ings come from Thee; Oh, how good Thou art to me!  
 Let me love Thee more and more, Al - ways bet - ter than be - fore.

A setting of the English translation by Frances Havergal appears online in the *Open Hymnal* project. Source: <http://openhymnal.org/new.html>

*Ruh, / Nasse Augen schliesse zu, / Lass den Mond am Himmel steh'n / Und die Stille Welt beseh'n* (Send rest to ailing hearts / Close weeping eyes / Let the moon stand in the heavens / And overlook the silent world). The 1942 Mennonite *Gesangbuch* closes the song with lines that strike a different tone than the rest of this gentle prayer: *Lass, die noch im Finstern gehn, / Bald den Stern der Weisen sehn* (May those still wandering in darkness, / Soon see the star of the Magi). These German lines also appear in the *Youth Hymnary* and *Children's Hymnary*. In the 1965 *Gesangbuch*, the last two lines become: *Hab auf alle gnädig acht, / Schenk uns eine gute Nacht* (Watch favourably over all, / Send us a good night), which seem more in keeping with a children's hymn. I also came across a whimsical fifth stanza which would surely appeal to little ones: *Jedem Tierlein überall / Gieb ihm Schutz and gieb ihm Stall. / Jedem Blümlein seinen Traum / Wiege leise jeden Baum*. (Loosely translated: Give every little animal protection and shelter, every little flower its dream; gently rock each tree.)

A number of English translations of the prayer exist, but none, in my opinion, measure up to the lovely childlike quality of the original. Most translations rely too heavily on the diction of sin and atonement, thereby altering the tone and theological "simplicity" of the original. The second stanza, especially, illustrates the shift. The German version simply asks God to ignore or "not to notice" any Wrong (*Unrecht*) that

might have been done today. The reassuring last line of that stanza, difficult to translate within the given metre and rhyme scheme, conveys the comforting image of a God who undoes all injury or harm (*Schaden*) and makes everything better again ("kissing it better" comes to mind). Mennonite translators, undoubtedly influenced by the subjective language of American evangelicalism, transform this notion of external wrong into a confession of personal guilt. For example, a translation in *Prayers for Everyday* hardens the tone by rendering *Unrecht* and *Schaden* as "evil" and personalizing the need for redemption: "Have I evil done today, / I pray, dear Lord, do not repay."<sup>10</sup> Lester Hostetler's second stanza emphasizes personal salvation even more: "All my guilt Thou dost forgive, / Through Thy mercy Lord, I live." He ends the fourth verse with an equally "unchildlike" sentiment: "Weary travelers in the night, / Lead them to eternal light."

An 1869 translation by Frances Havergal, the British hymn-writer who wrote "Take my life and let it be", remains close to the original meaning of the second stanza: "Jesus, Savior, wash away / All that has been wrong today". (I prefer her emphasis on "washing away" the wrong to Hensel's use of "Christ's blood" to imply that idea.) In the rest of her translation, however, Havergal departs substantially from the German original. Havergal's version, found in Lutheran hymnals, can be characterized as warm piety with a moral tone. Opening with "Now the light

has gone away”, she closes with this fifth stanza: “Thou, my best and kindest Friend, / Thou wilt love me to the end. / Let me love Thee more and more, / Always better than before.”

In my own translation, I tried to capture the “non-pietistic” sense of the original, with its lyrical, simple diction and rhyming couplets. In the second stanza, I found “Christ’s blood” impossible to rhyme so I used “Christ slain”, admittedly not a very childlike or simple sentiment. In the third stanza, I substituted “sheltering arm” for the image of resting in God’s “hand”, again because of rhyme. The last part of the third stanza, *Alle Menschen, gross und klein, / Sollen dir befohlen*

*sein*, also proved difficult to capture within the limits of the verse. Literally it says, “All people, great and small, shall to Thee commended be.” The word “commended” hardly seemed suitable for a children’s prayer, so I focused on the sense of refuge in God. One translation that appealed to me was: “All Thy children, great and small, / Let Thy love surround them all.” I opted, however, to keep the word *sollen* (shall), which can express both certainty and hope, and to reiterate the sense of safety evoked by the “sheltering arm”.

Below is the German version I learned as a child (plus a fourth verse), and my English translation.

## Müde bin ich, geh’ zur Ruh

Translation by Margaret Loewen Reimer

*Müde bin ich, geh’ zur Ruh,  
Schliesse meine Augen zu.  
Vater, lass die Augen dein  
Über meinem Bette sein.*

*Hab’ ich Unrecht heut’ getan,  
Sieh’ es, lieber Gott, nicht an.  
Deine Gnad’ und Christi Blut  
Macht ja allen Schaden gut.*

*Alle die mir sind verwandt,  
Gott lass ruh’n in Deiner Hand.  
Alle Menschen, gross und klein,  
Sollen dir befohlen sein.*

*Kranken Herzen sende Ruh,  
Müde Augen schliesse zu.  
Gott im Himmel halte Wacht,  
Gib uns eine gute Nacht. Amen.*

Weary now, I go to rest,  
Close my eyes in slumber blest.  
Father, may Thy watchful eye  
Guard the bed on which I lie.

Wrong I may have done today,  
Heed it not, dear God, I pray.  
For Thy mercy and Christ slain  
Turns all wrong to right again.

May my loved ones, safe from harm,  
Rest within Thy sheltering arm.  
All Thy children everywhere  
Shall find refuge in Thy care.

Send Thy rest to hearts in pain,  
Close the weary eyes again.  
God in heav’n Thy vigil keep  
Grant us all a restful sleep.

Amen.

### Endnotes

1 According to the *Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal* (1942), the song first appeared in the *Liederbuch für Kleinkinder-Schulen*, Kaiserswerth, 1842.

2 Biographies of Luise Hensel are available on the Internet, including the online *Catholic Encyclopedia*. She is also in the *Dictionary of Hymnology*, Vol. 2, edited by John Julian (New York: Gordon Press, 1979), first published in the 1890s. *An Encyclopedia of Continental Women Writers* by Katharina M. Wilson (Taylor & Francis, 1991) provides references for further study.

3 Rosemary Skinner Keller and Rosemary Radford Ruether, eds. *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), page 822. The deaconess ministry among Mennonites goes back to the Anabaptists, but Fliedner’s homes initiated a “professional” nursing order for women, imitated by German and Russian Mennonites who brought the practice to North America. In 1898, the Bethesda Hospital in Goessel, Kansas, inaugurated deaconess work. Bethel Deaconess Hospital was dedicated in 1908, followed by other Mennonite deaconess hospitals in Kansas and Nebraska. For further details, see the “Deaconess” entry in the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online (GAMEO).

4 Ibid, A biography of Fliedner, entitled *Life of Pastor Fliedner, the Founder of the Kaiserswerth Sisterhood Of Protestant Deaconesses*, was translated from the German in 1867 by Catherine Winkworth, a British hymnwriter. Winkworth is best known for her translations of well-known German hymns, such as “Now thank we all our God” and “Jesus, priceless treasure”. *Hymnal, A Worship Book*, used by Mennonite Church Canada congregations, includes thirteen of Winkworth’s translations.

5 See “Florence Nightingale” entries in *Encyclopedia Britannica* and on Wikipedia online.

6 See Zdenka Novak’s online memoir, ‘When Heaven’s Vault Cracked Zagreb Memories’, detailing Jewish life during World War II.

7 The Mennonite Brethren did, however, pick up another hymn by Luise Hensel: *Immer muss ich wieder lesen* (“Ever would I fain be reading / in the ancient Holy Book”). This hymn was included in the 1952 *Gesangbuch der Mennoniten Brüdergemeinde* and its English version, *The Hymn Book*, published by the Canadian MB Conference in 1960. This hymn also appears in *Evangeliums-Lieder*, an 1891 German translation of gospel songs (*Kernlieder*) compiled by Americans Walter Rauschenbusch and Ira D. Sankey, which was used in Mennonite Brethren churches and on occasion in the Berghaler Mennonite Church in Manitoba, the church of my childhood.

8 Unidentified in *Deutsches Lieder und Melodienbuch*, the tune is a slight variation of “Mercy,” the tune of “Holy Spirit, Truth Divine” (#508 in *Hymnal, A Worship Book*).

9 From a conversation with Ferne Burkhardt, an Ontario Swiss Mennonite who is currently News Editor for Mennonite World Conference. Burkhardt also told me that *Müde bin ich* was on the lips of Frank H. Epp, Mennonite historian and editor, as he lay dying in 1986. The Menno Singers, a choir founded by Swiss Mennonites in Ontario, learned the prayer so they could sing it at his funeral.

10 Elaine Sommers Rich, compiler, *Prayers for Everyday* (Faith and Life Press, 1990). According to Rich, the first two stanzas were translated by Marlin Jeschke, former philosophy and religion professor at Goshen College, and the rest taken from *The Youth Hymnary* version.

# Family and Village Histories

## HISTORY OF EDENTHAL

By Marlene Plett

The Edenthal School District, one of the many school districts established late in the 1800's, has a lively history. Early papers and the recorded memories of former residents who witnessed the changes in Public and Private Schools that came about following the enforcement of the 1916 School Attendance Act help to flesh out the topic, making by-gone controversies come alive. Supporting documentation gives a view of the sometimes-heated discussions surrounding the closure of the Private Schools and the transition to the Public School system. These debates give us an insight into the people who lived in Edenthal.

This paper uses sources located at the Rural Municipality of Rhineland, the Altona and District Archive and Research Centre (ADARC), cassette taped memories and a personal history diary. Information and interpretation surrounding the school issues are based on material in a study by Adolf Ens.<sup>1</sup> Other sources used are papers and pictures from personal collections. Some information gathered from presentations made at the Edenburg/Edenthal Reunion held for the combined school districts on July 1st and 2nd, 2000, are added. While the record ends in 1952, with the closure of the Edenthal School, the spirit of vitality that marked their forbears can be seen in the descendants of former Edenthal residents.

### Formation

The Edenthal School District #756 was in the West Reserve along the US border, two miles east and three miles north along the Principal Meridian on sections 5, 6, 7, 8, 17, 18 1-1 East. The accompanying map shows several distinct drainage systems that are linked to the Aux Marias, a tributary that drains into the Red River at Letellier. These systems were maintained as natural waterways by respective landowners. The lands were sandwiched between the Edenburg School District #330 to the west and the Halbstadt School District #886 to the east as shown on the map.

The John S. Rempel family from Chortitz, Russia came to Canada in 1874 and settled near Grünthal, not far from present day Steinbach on the East Reserve. Later they moved to the West Reserve, settling in Edenthal around 1890.<sup>2</sup> A burial plot with Rempel family graves is situated on the W½ of SE¼ of Section 7-1-1E north of the site of the Edenthal School yard. Great-grandsons, Abe Rempel and Henry W. Rempel of Altona, MB, have drawn up a map locating graves on the site.<sup>3</sup>

In a clipping titled "Issues divided Edenthal", J.C. Fehr describes Edenthal as being

settled about 1880, with changes to the public school district established on May 16th of 1893.<sup>4</sup> In 1885, the Rhineland Municipality began with provisions to set up school districts in the area, if petitioned for by the ratepayers.<sup>5</sup> No references as to when the Private School was opened have been uncovered. A petition to the RM of Rhineland dated October 26, 1904, requesting "the removal of Sections #5,6,7 and 8 from Edenthal SD #756 and released for open Private teaching" and that "sections #17 and 18 be added to Halbstadt SD" is signed by seven Edenthal ratepayers.<sup>6</sup>

Edenthal, made up of sections 5,6,7,8, 17 and 18 -1-1 East of the Principal Meridian, was formed by By-law #16, on March 17th, 1893 in response to district ratepayer's petition. The By-law was repealed and altered by By-law #23 on May 16th 1893 by adding sections 4, 9 and 16 -1-1 East to the original lands.<sup>7</sup>

In response to an appeal from Edenthal and Strassberg ratepayers to detach sections 4, 9, 16, and 3, 10 and 16-1-1-East of the Principal Meridian respectively, Judge Corbett Locke of Morden, ordered the formation of the School District of Halbstadt on April 17, 1896 and included the terms of alteration of the Edenthal School District to consist of Sections 5,6,7,8,17 and 18 East of the Principal Meridian. In his opinion most ratepayers in both districts favoured the changes and any disagreements were for "pecuniary reasons" and the fear of "having to move their school site".<sup>8</sup> The Municipality of Rhineland Tax Roll ledger entries indicate taxes for the School Districts of Edenthal and Halbstadt were listed individually in 1896.<sup>9</sup>

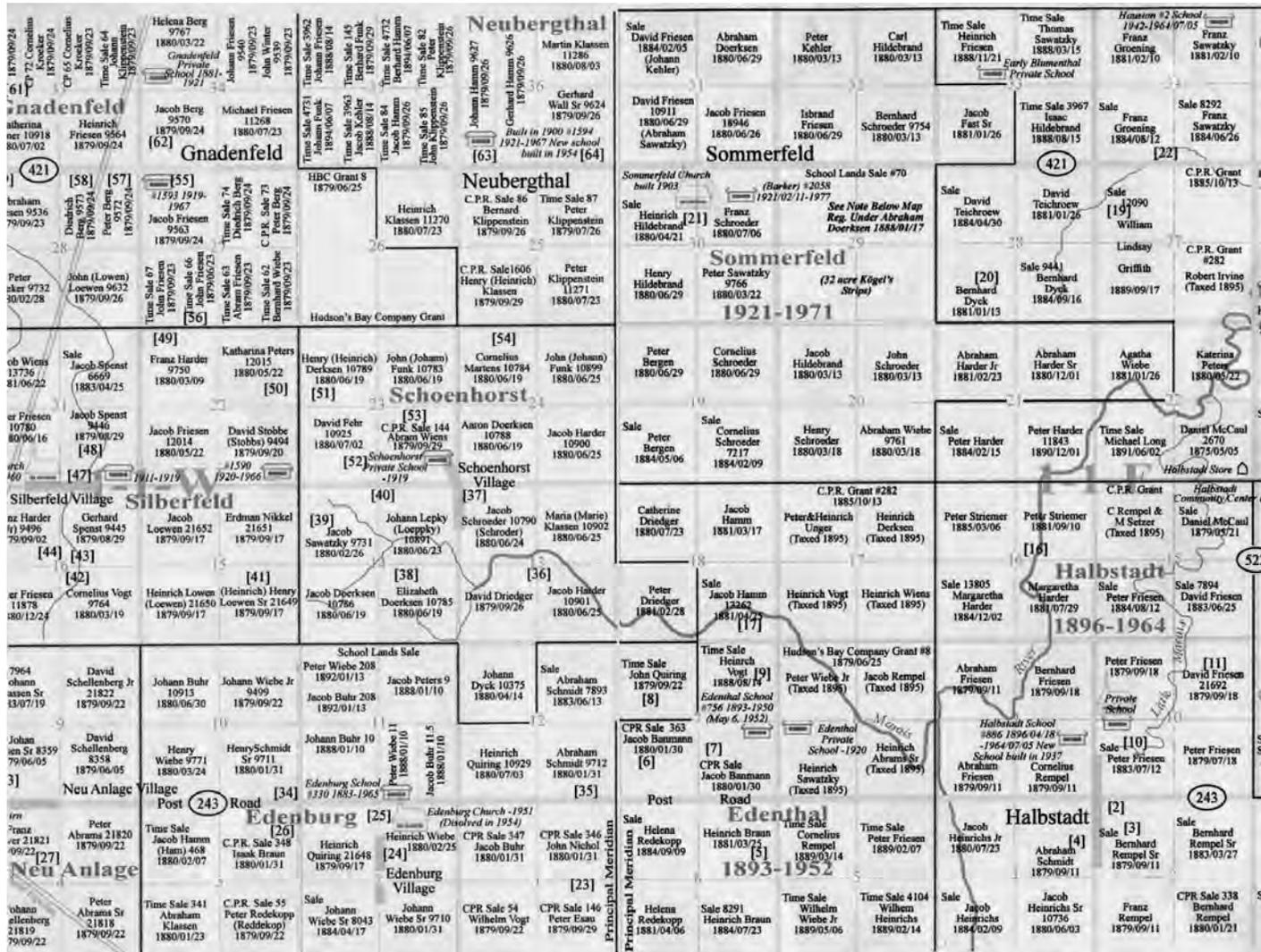
### Church and School

While there appears to be no early indication of an organized village plan in Edenthal, there are reports or stories that "a small village was located on the NE¼ of section 6, but no list of Village Residents could be confirmed."<sup>10</sup> No sign of a central church or an early common meeting place has survived in Edenthal. The families moved on to their own homesteaded land and drove or walked to attend the worship services in the church to which they belonged in Sommerfeld, Edenburg, or Halbstadt. Perhaps the schools were the closest to being a community-gathering place, and when these were divided in practice it may have been hard to maintain loyalty. This was highlighted by Fehr's March 1984 article in the *Red River Echo*, and by Mary Wall's *Memories on Tape*. Nonetheless, Edenthal parents sent their children to either the district or the private school.

A map of the area shows the location of both schools. The public school was located



*The tombstone of pioneer homesteader Heinrich Vogt (1865-1900) on the W½ of NE¼ 7-1-1e. Atlas...of the West Reserve, 10 and Manitoba Archives, Negative #6376. Photo Credit: Marlene Plett.*



The School District of Edenthal #756 was located west along the Principal Meridian and south along USA Boundary. This map shows the location of the Public School on section 7-1-1E and with the Private School situated on section 8-1-1E and includes names of original homesteaders. Source: Dave Harms Collection. Dave Harms, Box 54. Altona MB, R0G 0B0.

on the W 1/2 of SE 1/4 7-1-1e, and the private school stood on the E 1/2 of SW 1/4 8-1-1-E, directly across the road. Recollections of two former pupils attending their respective schools included watching the other pupils in activities and games on their own schoolyards, but not visiting each other in their separate schools.<sup>11</sup>

The two schools worked side-by-side, and had their own systems of managing the schools and the education of the children in their care. While no Private School records are available, the Edenthal School District #756 records show fifteen students attended the Edenthal School in December 1906. A report in a letter dated 1897 indicated 140 school days were recorded; and a brief report from 1905 included news of a teacher hired for 160 days; both letters requested tax revenue payments for these days.<sup>12</sup>

The people who settled in Edenthal were a group of families belonging to differing branches of the Mennonite church. While in Russia they had belonged to the Bergthaler Colony, the Old Colony, and Fürstenland, they tended to remain attached to their 'home' church persuasion, and settled in areas near each other. In Edenthal more settlers had originally come from the Bergthaler Colony than had come from Chortitz in Russia.

In addition some families had originally come from the Old Colony in Russia.<sup>13</sup>

### The School Problems

Beginning in 1890 with the Manitoba Schools Act, then the policy requiring schools to fly the Union Jack in 1906, and followed in 1916 by compulsory Public School Attendance many and rapid changes came to all Mennonite settlers in the designated Reserves and in Edenthal in particular. A great deal of discussion and fearfulness arose as the 'right to provide education for their children', as promised in the *Privilegium* of 1874, was seen to be threatened.

All the Mennonite settlers were affected by this change, and they reacted in different ways. Some favoured the new school curriculum, sought to find ways to include German language and religious instruction that would work for them, but others, opposing higher education in principle, opposed all forms of government influence, which they saw as being 'unequally yoked' with the worldly authorities.<sup>14</sup> This significant difference divided the Edenthal citizens into two groups in school matters.

Even though the schools were within sight of each other, they continued to function separately, but with some distancing



*Edenthal Pupils 1926-1927. Teacher A. L. Toews; Back: Cornie Friesen; Second row: Tina Heinrichs, Tina Rempel, Lizzie Martens, Ernest Friesen, Helen Penner, Agatha Heinrichs, Susie Rempel, Ben Martens, Mary Toews, Jake Nickel, Leonora Friesen Jacob Rempel; First row: Abram Rempel, Willie Heinrichs, Mary Penner, Helen Friesen, Jacob J Friesen, Helen Rempel, George Martens. Photo Credit: Henry W. Rempel Collection.*

among neighbours. When Mary Wall and later JC Fehr mention disunity this referred to their social interactions; but this did not hamper their daily business when living on individual farms because they remained connected to each other by their sense of neighbourliness, by their adjacent farmland and by the boundaries of their common school district.

### **Mennonites, Education and Government: Changes**

Since Mennonites had been funding and running their private schools on their own, they were at ease with the responsibility of taking complete care of their schools. As a result they were able to maintain their school without government funding. The resolve, as led by the newly formed Manitoba government's Department of Education, to change all schools from private, self-sustaining schools to a public education system, was moving forward. The need for better training for teachers became evident as school inspectors working in the East and West Reserves, some of whom were Mennonite, found the teacher's skills and preparation to be inadequate. As early as 1885, meetings with Mennonite educators and Church leaders regarding improving education and instruction in English were conducted and by 1888, the local School Society made specific plans to provide training for prospective teachers. An Education Society to train them for schools in Mennonite Reserves was formed.

In 1890, the Manitoba Schools Act abolished bilingual instruction in schools. In a bid to unify teaching and learning across the province, the Manitoba Schools Act of 1890 established English as the only language in schools, and as a result ended use of French as an official language in the Manitoba schools and government. In response to an outcry from French citizens and their reliance on the 1870 Manitoba Act establishing French language rights, a provision was made for instruction in a second language in a bilingual system with English when more than ten pupils spoke a language other than English. In 1906, a policy by the Department of Education was adopted requiring the Union Jack flag to be flown over all

schools in Manitoba. Since the Private school supporters did not receive Government support, they remained outside the public system and its changes in 1890, but saw the 1906 flag ruling as a military gesture, and a threat to their faith and to their practice of non-resistance. Only ten years later a greater change came into effect, creating a much greater change for the Mennonites who were accustomed to being in charge of their own schools.<sup>15</sup>

In 1916, the School attendance act was passed enacting compulsory public school attendance for all school age children across the province. This coincided with the early years of World War I, and widespread heightened patriotism of the strongly pro-British Government officials and their need for uniformity in the Education system as they supported Canada's participation in this war. It is likely that heightened patriotism in the general population and among the people during and after World War I added to the Department officials' need to anglicize all settlers coming from foreign shores.

The difficulty for Edenthal ratepayers lay in giving up their right to educate their children in their own private school system, as provided by the privileges granted to Mennonites when they immigrated to Manitoba in 1874. Some of the parents held to the old ways, counting them to be as reliable as they had been in the past. They steadfastly resisted change by paying for costs of their own schools, refusing to fly the required flag and resisting government policies, which they saw as interference. Others foresaw changes on the horizon, and believed the public system would better equip their children for the future. They became more open to making government decrees work for them by writing letters outlining their demands and by engaging in debate and dialogue. The struggle between the two groups, complicated by the Department of Education's pressure to integrate this district into a uniform public system is described in the personal papers of Abram Janzen's diary.<sup>16</sup>

Sometimes the business of managing the schools overlapped. Correspondence dated September 25, 1918, suggests that J F Greenway, Official Trustee, had hired P F Winter to teach in the Edenthal Public School.<sup>17</sup> The local public school trustees had hired Jacob J. Toews for their school, while the private school had hired Erna Kehler, who had completed Grade 11 at MCI in Gretna, for their school.<sup>18</sup> By hiring her, private school trustees were hoping to entice the public school trustees to combine the two schools into one operated by the private school. This incident brought about vigorous discussion in the district as described by Mary Janzen Wall in her taped interview.

According to her, Jacob Sawatzky spoke for the Private school representatives in a conciliatory way, trying to persuade the public school representatives to accept the Private school teacher and so have only one school in the district. His reasoning went something like this, "If the teacher doesn't know as much as some of the pupils in the beginning [of the school year], he will be able, if he is willing, to catch up to the pupils level by spring." Abram Janzen, a spokesman for the public school parents, did not agree to join the two schools into a single private school. He believed the level of education offered at the private school was unsatisfactory, and "did not wish to send his children to a school such as this."<sup>19</sup> Later, J. F. Greenway offered to find another school for Toews, the teacher who had been hired by local trustees.

T.G. Finn, the school inspector, reports in a letter dated April 18, 1918, "As the Edenthal Private School is closed the pupils

from that school should be attending your school...” He goes on to give parents instructions and warnings against keeping their children out of school.<sup>20</sup>

By 1921 the pupils from the private school appear in the Edenthal public school records.<sup>21</sup> To date no information on the closure procedures of the Private school has come to light. I have not found any ‘new’ ancient information on the Edenthal private school. To date, Susan Rempel Schmidt Heinrichs is one of the few surviving pupils of the Edenthal private school and in our conversations she did not remember details or any of the teachers’ names.



Edenthal School built in 1922. Photo Credit: Marlene Plett.

#### The School registers:

The Edenthal public school registers dating from 1906 are stored in the Manitoba Archives in Winnipeg. Much information is contained in these records, including family names of the first settlers. Names of heads of families common in the district were: Hamm, Rempel, Sawatzky, Guenther, Heinrichs, Friesen, Janzen, Martens, Unger, Schapansky and Vogt. These names also appear in the School Attendance Records.<sup>22</sup>

The school registers offer particulars that help us picture how the school was run. The trustees took their responsibility seriously and did not hesitate to write to the Department of Education for clarification of detail, or to question the validity of some of the regulations that came down from the Department. Correspondence received in reply to letters and requests made to this Department by Peter J. Loewen, secretary of the Edenthal School District have survived. Replies from JF Greenway were officious and sharp in tone. Some letters dealt with questions about the issue of early school closure in spring, and used a firm tone to get the taxpayer’s compliance to their demands.

In a letter dated August 21, 1918, Deputy Minister R. Fletcher replied to a letter written to the Department of Education earlier that summer asking whether the private school could make use of the public school facilities. The letter states categorically that the Edenthal School #756 is not available for private school use. Fletcher continues: “since the ratepayers have decided to abandon the public school and the trustees have concurred...we have no option but to appoint an Official Trustee to manage the public school.” The letter, while it does not forbid instruction in the private school, lays down strict guidelines in how the private school is to be managed. These struggles resulted in the appointment of J F Greenway as Official Trustee for Edenthal.<sup>23</sup>



Edenthal Pupils with Teacher JD Siemens in back row, ca. 1931. Next to him in back: Margaret Rempel, Tina Heinrichs, John Rempel, Agnes Dueck, Willie Heinrichs, Mary Friesen, Ferdinand Dueck, Tina Guenther, Annie Rempel, Mrs. Siemens; Third Row: John Guenther, Mary Heinrichs, Eva Heinrichs, Selma Heinrichs, Tina Kauenhofen, Helen Rempel, Mary Rempel, Abram Rempel; Second Row: Henry Rempel, Jacob Kauenhofen, Peter Guenther, Nettie Friesen, Annie Doerksen, Susie Heinrichs, Lena Rempel; Front Row: Esther Siemens, Annie Rempel, Helen Heinrichs, Nettie Kauenhofen, Eva Friesen, Tina Rempel, David Doerksen, Ben Rempel. Photo Credit: Marlene Plett.

#### The Official Trustee:

The people of the district chafed under the compulsion of the Official Trustee. In Abram Janzen’s memoirs he refers to this pressure to force school attendance as ‘*Schulzwang*’.<sup>24</sup> In a November 12, 1921 reply to an earlier petition to have the district returned to local trustees Greenway refused, citing the “poor attitude and antagonism toward the teacher who represented public education present among the parents” as the reason. Mr. Greenway went on to complain to district Secretary Peter J. Loewen that the teacher “is using the time from 2:45 to 3:15 to practice religious exercises.” Greenway informed the trustees in November 1921 that the teacher “has promised the Inspector to correct this practice.” However, in a letter dated December 8th, 1922 to the RM of Rhineland J.F. Greenway states “we have turned over Edenthal SD #756 to the local school board” ending his term as Official trustee so that local ratepayers were again elected as recorded in the school registers of those years.<sup>25</sup>

#### The Greenway Schoolhouse

The typical prairie schoolhouse, which replaced the original one, was built in 1922. Records in the Edenthal #576 Cash Book show a record of building materials bought and wages paid to construction workers ‘for the new school.’ Teacher Alvina Friesen Giesbrecht, who taught in the fall term of 1943, provided details of how the dwelling for the teacher was built in 1928.<sup>26</sup> The records in the Edenthal account ledger confirmed this. A barn as well as other out buildings and the inevitable lilac hedge appeared on pictures of the schoolyard taken from 1945 to 1949. Space was provided for a vegetable garden and some fruit trees, including chokecherry and native plum trees. A shelterbelt enclosing the almost two acres completed the site of the schoolyard.<sup>27</sup>



*Edenthal School in 1930's with Teacher Peter B Krahn. Back row: Linie Krahn, Mary Friesen, Nettie Friesen, Helen Heinrichs, Nettie Kauenhofen, Susan Heinrichs, Hertha Krahn, Lena Rempel. Third row: Susan Krahn, Elfrieda (Ellie) Wall, Anne Sawatzky, Gertrude Heinrichs, Eva Friesen, Tina Rempel, Frieda Krahn. Second row: Jacob Rempel, Gerhard (Hardy) Krahn, Peter Rempel, Ben Kauenhofen, Armin Wall, John Kauenhofen, Irwin Hoffman, Henry Krahn. First row: David Kauenhofen, Albert Hoffman, John Unger, Henry Rempel, Ben Rempel, Elvan Friesen, Willie Rempel. Sitting in front: Esther Penner, Evelyn Penner, Nettie Rempel, Eva Sawatzky, Dora Rempel, Edna Heinrichs. Photo Credit: Marlene Plett.*

### The School Day

The teacher and pupils worked in a one-room school setting, with 8 grades. The older pupils had the choice to take 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Grade by correspondence under the supervision of the teacher. After Easter children who had reached school age would begin attending school, as listed in the Edenthal school registers. Some of the registers describe work done in school, including arithmetic, spelling, reading, writing and singing in both English and German, art or drawing. Religion was taught in the German language in the last ½ hour of the day. During the World War II years, when the use of the German language became unpopular, the Edenthal teachers agreed to hold a half hour class in German language instruction before the start of the regular school day.<sup>28</sup>

The teachers in the District were leaders in planning and encouraging new and educational activities outside of school duties. They organized and led garden clubs, and encouraged pupils to display the produce for competition and judging at the annual Rhineland Agricultural Fall Fair in Altona. One such activity recorded in the school register for 1932 included evening classes to raise the level of general literacy. The classes were taught by J.D. Siemens with twelve men and three women enrolled. Mr. Siemens began teaching in Edenthal in 1927 and stayed for seven years. An undated picture of one of his classes' shows the pupils gathered on the east side of the almost new school building.

Mr. Peter B Krahn succeeded Mr Siemens, who also taught in this school for seven years. During his stay he and his wife invited the women of the district to form a Ladies Group, beginning in about 1937. The Edenthal Ladies began to meet to sew clothing and blankets for the Red Cross, and for the Mennonite Central Committee. A picture of a group of these women has survived, and shows them standing against the south wall of the teacherage. They included Mary Wall, Anna Friesen, Katherine Friesen, Helen Heinrichs, Helen Hoffman, and Justina Krahn who was the teacher's wife.



*Edenthal Nähverein Ladies, 1937. From the left: Mary Wall, Anna Friesen, Katherine Friesen, Justina Krahn, Helen Heinrichs, Helen Hoffman. Photo Credit: Marlene Plett.*

In the 1930's the Edenthal girls baseball team was the 'top team to beat' at the interschool baseball games', according to the recollection of one pupil, Eva Heinrichs Nickel, who was there. Now in her mid-eighties, she remains an avid baseball fan. There was also a strong representation of female singers from Edenthal who entered in the Music Festival competitions held in Altona.

### The Depression Years

In 1933, teacher's salaries dropped from \$1100 to \$550 annually as recorded in the Edenthal SD Cash Book, reflecting the state of the province's economy during the Depression years. How the Krahn's managed to support their family that grew to include six children during their years in Edenthal is a mystery. In the depth of depression days, it seems, people who got even a small salary were inventive and plucky and did their best to scrape through without luxuries. In the pictures taken at this time outbuildings identify a barn for a cow, a chicken pen, and a beekeeping and honey hut for a teacher, which points to ways how the family's income was supplemented.



*Edenthal District Parent's Farewell for Teacher P.B. Krahn in 1940. Back row: Jacob J Friesen, Peter C Heinrichs, John Sawatzky, Ben Hamm, David Heinrichs, Jacob T Heinrichs, Ernest Friesen, Martin Klassen, Ben Friesen, David Wall, John Rempel, Peter Rempel, Ben Kauenhofen. Next: Helena Friesen, Maria Heinrichs, Mrs John Sawatzky, Nettie Hamm, Nettie Friesen, Helen Heinrichs, Agatha Klassen, Tina Heinrichs, Katherine Friesen, Anna Friesen, Mary Wall, Justina Krahn, Anna Rempel, Peter Rempel, Helen Rempel, Maria Kauenhofen. Photo Credit: Marlene Plett.*

## Concerts and Programs

Then there were the programs prepared by the teacher and the pupils at Christmas and at Easter. Copies of the programs presented during the year have survived.<sup>29</sup> Carols, poems and plays were memorized and practiced, and presented to all the families and neighbours who were packed into the schoolhouse on Christmas Eve. The Christmas tree appeared at these concerts beginning in the late 1920s.<sup>30</sup> This too was a small controversy, since the more traditional customs of some neighbours did not favour this practice. The Easter concerts were held in the afternoon, and the roads often were very muddy due to run-off waters during the spring thaw. The June school closing concerts were secular in nature, and could include an auction of glass painting artwork, handcrafted articles made by the boys in wood working classes and hand crafted work completed in the girls' needlework sessions on Friday afternoons. The proceeds were donated to the Red Cross, following a practice begun in 1945 during and after World War II, when donations were solicited by the Department of Education.<sup>31</sup>

The annual school picnic continued to be a celebration for the whole community. Edenthal #756, Halbstadt #886 and Strassburg #757 gathered together to hold their picnic in Halbstadt at the end of June. There was the usual variety of races for all ages, and a booth manned by the parents who were also the trustees, where ice cream and other treats were sold. A feature of the booth at the picnic was a complete bunch of just-ripe bananas from the tropics hung from a nearby tree shading the store area. Our choice was picked right off the bunch. After the picnic lunch the baseball games would begin. While the older folks rested in the shade, others would watch the games and pupils would come to bat when their turn was called. After the play-offs among the three schools a winner was declared, and all returned to their homes, tired and sunburned ready to enjoy the freedom of summer holidays. This pattern of the activities in the school year continued for many years.

## Teachers

After J.D. Siemens and P.B. Krahn completed their long stay in the school, John I. Warkentin, stayed for two and a half years. His term was finished by Anne Klassen of Altona area who carried on till the end of the term. 1943-1944 saw Alvina Friesen, Helen Peters and Jacob Peters, all native of Gretna,



*Helen Peters, 1943. Photo Credit: Marlene Plett.*



*Jacob J. Peters, 1943-1945. Photo Credit: Marlene Plett.*



*John P Dyck family 1945-1949. From left Marianne, Mrs Agnes Dyck, Eliese (Liesel), John, Mr. John P Dyck, Irmgard, Helga. Photo Credit: Marlene Plett.*



*Edenthal School Pupils, 1945. Back: Peter Sawatzky, Jacob Rempel, Elvan Friesen, Mary Kauenhofen, Marlene Wall, Justina Unger. Front: Gerhard (George) Wall, Sylvia Klassen, Susie Kauenhofen, Mathilda Friesen, Jackie Sawatzky, Edwin Rempel. Photo Credit: Marlene Plett.*



*A combined school photograph circa 1963. Back row: Mr. J.J. Enns, Rodney Friesen, Eleanor Hildebrand, John Elias, Ken Heinrichs, Elaine Hildebrand, Walter Harms, Jake Janzen, Second row: Aldon Loeppky, Wilma Enns, Teresa Klassen, Eileen Loeppky, Sharon Rempel, Evelyn Sawatzky, Dale Heide, Bernie Plett, Grant Harder, Gloria Sawatzky. Front row: David Plett, Kevin Heide, Lauren Friesen, Valerie Sawatzky, Barbara Harms, Glenda Heinrichs, Elsie Driedger, Debbie Hildebrand, Rosemarie Plett. Photo Credit: Marlene Plett.*

complete the year. Jacob Peters continued to teach the next year, ending in the spring term of 1945. The fall term began with a new teacher, John P. Dyck, whose former position had been in the village of Blumenort, east of Gretna. His term ended in the spring of 1949 when he moved on to Springstein, MB. All of these changes are recorded in the School Registers and the Cash Book of the District of Edenthal.<sup>32</sup>

By middle of the 1940's farming patterns had begun to change. Machine power replaced horses for farm work, and reduced the number of people needed to raise crops.

**Table of Ratepayers Who Served  
as Trustees of S.D. of Edenthal # 756  
1893-1952**

1893	Abraham Guenther
1897	Franz S.Rempel Report
1905	Jacob Hamm Report
1906	Diedrich Schroeder, Jacob Hamm Jacob Rempel
1913	Abram Janzen, Peter F. Martens, Peter Heinrichs
1915-1916	John J Friesen (secretary-treasurer)
1916	Jacob Hamm, Peter F Martens, John J Friesen
1917	Peter J. Loewen
1918-1922	J. F. Greenway (appointed official Trustee) Ended Dec. 8,1922.
1924	John G. Rempel, John J Friesen (secretary treasurer), David Wall (auditor)
1926	David Wall, Peter Heinrichs, Jacob Rempel, Peter G. Rempel
1932	Ab Guenther, John G Rempel, Peter G Rempel, GG Neufeld (Insp.) JJ Friesen (secretary treasurer)
1933	Jacob H Friesen, Bernhard Kauenhofen, John G Rempel, Peter G Rempel
1939-1941	J J Friesen, David Wall, Bernhard Kauenhofen
1942-1943	PC Heinrichs, Bern. Kauenhofen, JJ Friesen, D. Wall (sec treasurer)
1944	Peter Rempel, Martin Klassen, John Unger, David Wall (sec treasurer)
1948	M D Klassen (secretary treasurer) PP Nickel, GW Elias, MD Klassen
1950	GW Elias (secretary treasurer)
1950	Bernhard Hamm
1950	Ben P. Hamm
1952	June - G.W. Elias (sec treasurer) M.D. Klassen, P.P. Nickel Wm Harms

Farms began to get larger and student counts declined and that was also reflected in the number of students in rural schools. The school registers show that several families left the area presumably to find work elsewhere. In the spring of 1949 there were fifteen students listed and when John P. Dyck and his family moved, it left eleven. The trustees decided to hire a teacher and carry on into the spring of 1950.

**Edenthal, closing the doors**

In the fall of 1950 students were bussed to Edenburg in an informal arrangement between the districts, with M.D. Klassen and W.T. Heinrichs the first bus drivers. After this interim year, the trustees began proceedings to close the school. The Rural Municipality of Rhineland with By-law #991 of May 6, 1952 dissolved the S. D. of Edenthal, adding these lands to the Edenburg School District #330.<sup>33</sup> This information can be found in the Formation File of the School District of Edenthal #756 also in the Formation File of the School District of Edenburg #330.



*Edenthal School in Winter 1948. Photo Credit: Marlene Plett.*

An auction was held and the 1 7/8-acre school yard was sold in two parcels to David Wall and John Plett. In a letter from the Municipal Auditor, E.H. Floyd to School Inspector R.W. Dalton the assets were dispersed by the Edenthal school district board and all final arrangements were made for the transfer of lands to the Edenburg district. The school building was moved to the schoolyard in Gretna and used as a sports building. The teacher's dwelling was moved to the Edenburg district schoolyard where, in 2007, it still is being used. The land was eventually cleared and levelled, and incorporated into the farmlands of John and Marlene Plett.

Edenthal School district was in existence from its settlement in the 1880's, beginning with a Private School and then later as The School District of Edenthal #756, created on March 17,1893, altered later that year, altered again to become part of the Halbstadt School District #886 in 1896 and dissolved on May 6th, 1952. The last trustees were Peter Nickel, G W Elias, M D Klassen, Secretary, all of Edenthal, Manitoba.

**Conclusion:**

From the small beginnings of a country community the successors of the pioneering people who lived in this area have spread out and settled all across the continent and beyond. With gratitude we remember those elders who went before us who laid the foundations of this district with courage and steadfastness. We are privileged to be a part of Edenthal and the community of the friends and neighbours that helped shape and form our heritage that grew to become this particular part of our Canadian community.

Table of Teachers at Edenthal School District #756

Year	Teacher	Year	Teacher
1897	Report: Total of 140 school days	1926-1927	A L Toews
Notice to G Limprecht, RM Rhineland		First class picture available, 2007	
1905	Report: Teacher hired for 160 school days	1927-1933	J.D. Siemens, Morden
Notice to council-RM of Rhineland		Annual salary \$1100.00	
1906	Tina Sawatzki	1933-1940	Peter B. Krahn, Reinland
1906		Annual salary \$550.00	
1907, 1908	Gertrude Wiens, Plum Coulee,	1939-	
Plum Coulee 1909			
1909-1911	Catherine E. Wiebe Altona	1940-1942	John I. Warkentin
8 months salary: \$400.00		Wm. Hoffman's house burns	
1910-1911	Sadie E. Loewen	1941-1942	John I. Warkentin
		John and Eva Sawatzky transfer out	
1912-1914	Jacob C. Klassen	1942-1943	John I. Warkentin
Dentist; moved to Hawaii		January-February.	
1914-1915	Helen L. Warkentin	1943	Anne Klassen, Altona
Later a missionary in India		March to June	
1915 -1916	Peter F. Winters; St Jean Baptiste	1943	Alvina Friesen, Gretna
Fall term		September –December	
1916	Jacob Schellenberg.	1944	Helen Peters Gretna,
January to June.		First term; Heinrichs' family move	
1918-1919	Anna Heinrichs	1944	Jacob J Peters Gretna
Fall term. Spanish flu outbreak		April -June	
1919	Peter F Winters	1944-1945	Jacob J Peters Gretna
October-November		School Register missing	
1919-1920	Emma R. Ewert.	1945-1949	John P Dyck,
May Rainfall closes school.		Blumenort/Gretna	
1920-	Mary I. Wiebe,	1949-1951	Helen Friesen
Gretna		Halbstadt	
1922-1924	John Mueller	1951-1952	Pupils bussed to
Annual salary \$1100.00		Edenburg School District #330	
1924-1925 & 1930-1931		1952	Edenthal S D #756 closed
School registers missing		May 6th, 1952 Bylaw #991	

**Endnotes**

1 Adolf Ens, *Subjects or Citizens? The Mennonite Experience in Canada, 1870-1925* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1994).  
 2 *John S. Rempel and family*, published by Herman Rempel. 1990.  
 3 John Rempel and Bill Harms, *Atlas of original Mennonite Villages Homesteaders and some burial plots of the West Reserve Manitoba* (Altona, 1990).  
 4 John C. Fehr. "Issues divide Edenthal", *Red River Valley Echo*. March 7<sup>th</sup>, 1984.  
 5 Adolf Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?*, 66. See also footnote #30, 78.  
 6 File: "Edenthal School #756," Altona and District Archive and Research Centre (hereafter ADARC).  
 7 *By-laws of Municipality of Rhineland #1 to #62 1891-1897*. Bylaws #16 and #23, pp. 43,55, 57. Rural Municipality of Rhineland, Altona, MB.  
 8 ADARC. File: "Halbstadt School," Corbett Locke to Wm. Rempel, April 13, 1896 in File: "Edenthal School #756." Also confirmed by Mary Wall's recollections: *Memories on Tape, 1982*.  
 9 "96 Collector's Rolls," 1896, p. 3, R.M. of Rhineland. Halbstadt was not listed in the Collector's Rolls for 1895.  
 10 Rempel and Harms, *Atlas*, 15.  
 11 "Edenthal #756" Manitoba Archives. Public school pupil Mary Janzen (Wall), was listed in Edenthal SD register dated 1915. Author's conversation with private school pupil Susan Rempel dated June 14<sup>th</sup>, 2004.  
 12 "Edenthal School #756." Earliest public school records available start with a report dated February 24, 1897, by Franz Rempel listing 140 school days in 1897. Jacob Hamm reports a teacher was hired for 160 days in 1905, July 28<sup>th</sup>, 1905. ADARC.  
 13 Mary Wall. *Memories on Tape, 1982*. Interviewer Kathy Klassen. Marlene Plett Private Collection and Rempel, *John S. Rempel and family*.

14 Ens, *Subjects and Citizens?*, 75.  
 15 Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?*, 106-108.  
 16 Abram Janzen, *Memoirs—1958*, Translated by Helen Janzen. Marlene Plett Private Collection.  
 17 "Edenthal School #756," ADARC.  
 18 Mary Wall. *Memories on Tape 1982*.  
 19 Abram Janzen, *Memoirs*.  
 20 "Edenthal School #756," ADARC.  
 21 Ibid.  
 22 "Edenthal School #756 Attendance Records," Manitoba Archives.  
 23 "Edenthal School #756," ADARC.  
 24 'Forced Attendance', Abram Janzen, *Memoirs*.  
 25 "Edenthal School #756," ADARC.  
 26 Edenthal/Edenburg Reunion, July 1&2, 2000. Alvina Friesen Giesbrecht recalled the teacherage being built in 1928. Her father, owner of the lumber business in Gretna, supplied much of the materials and supplies needed for the new building. Her sister, Anne Friesen Siemens, was married to J.D. Siemens, a long time teacher in Edenthal.  
 27 *The John P. Dyck Collection*. Elise Dyck Epp, Elm Creek, MB.  
 28 "Edenthal School #756 Attendance Records," Manitoba Archives.  
 29 *The John P. Dyck Collection*.  
 30 "Edenthal School #756, Cash Book Entries," ADARC. Mary Janzen Wall mentions this topic in her *Memories on Tape, 1982*.  
 31 "Edenthal School #756, Cash Book Entries," ADARC.  
 32 "Edenthal School #756, Attendance Registers," Manitoba Archives and "Edenthal School #756, Cash Book Entries," ADARC.  
 33 Manitoba Archives. Formation File for Edenthal School District #756.

# The Wiebes of Weidenfeld

The Ancestors and Descendants of my grandparents, Peter B. and Anna Wiebe of Weidenfeld, near Altona

By Marjorie Wiebe Hildebrand, Winkler Manitoba

## History

History is central in understanding and development of life. It helps us appreciate what our forebears have done before and teaches us self-acceptance. The past pushes and shapes us to be who we are.<sup>1</sup> For me it is helpful to go back to the history of the 16th century during the time of the Protestant Reformation to recognize where Mennonites originated, especially the Dutch Mennonites who are my forebears.

The Anabaptist movement began within the framework of the Protestant Reformation in Europe. Because of a new understanding of Scripture drastic changes were made in worship practices. As a result many were severely persecuted for their faith, even to the point of death. This movement also reached Holland. Menno Simons, a Catholic priest, began reading the Word of God and after years of struggle announced his Anabaptist beliefs to the world. Even though he often had to flee for his life, he became a strong stable influence within that group for over twenty-five years. His followers took their name from this sixteenth century Dutch priest.

Persecution finally caused many Dutch Anabaptists to settle in the Vistula Delta in Prussia (now Poland). Here they were able to stay for over 200 years. This is also where they picked up the Low German dialect which we speak today. However, by 1788 there was great unrest within the camp. Prussia was pressuring the Mennonites, as they were called by now, to support the military. This they were unwilling to do because they believed that Christ taught us to love our enemies, not kill them. A pressure tactic used by the Prussian government did not allow them to buy more land for new families. As a result many became the landless poor (*Anwohner*), but farming was their way of life. What should they do now?

Catherine the Great of Russia needed farmers to work the soil in Ukraine. She invited the Mennonites to come and they accepted the invitation. The first groups to go were the very poor *Anwohner*. Their move in the fall of 1788 was with great difficulty and hardship. The 228 families were forced to stay the winter in Dubrovna and that was not a happy situation. They planned to settle in southern Ukraine, but with the wars along the border flaring up they had no choice but to settle farther north along the Dnieper River. This new settlement was called the Chortitza Colony. "Great was the disappointment of the weary colonists, when upon arrival at Chortitza in July 1789, they first sighted the bare and hilly waste that was to be their new home, their promised land."<sup>2</sup>

The first years were trying ones for those settlers. Over time, however, their lot improved. By 1830 the colony was prospering. The problem of enough land became evident once more as families grew. A solution to this was to establish daughter colonies. In 1836 the Bergthal Colony was started and this is where my more immediate forefathers lived. My grandparents were born there, coming to Canada as young people in 1875-76. The reasons for this move were: the pressure for young men to join the army, "the increasing pressure of minority groups to assimilate with the Russian population, land hunger resulting

from the high Mennonite birth rate, and an unwillingness or inability to deal creatively with the problems of a changing society."<sup>3</sup>

In 1873 Mennonite leaders from Russia were sent to North America to spy out the land. The Bergthal Colony sent two of their finest, Jacob Peters, their 60-year old *Oberschultze* and Heinrich Wiebe a 36-year old minister from Schoenfeld. On February 18, 1873 a special service was held for the delegates.<sup>4</sup> They toured Nebraska and south as far as Texas. They had agreed to visit Manitoba as well. The delegates from Bergthal chose Manitoba as the place to settle because Elder Wiebe was prejudiced in favor of a country under the rule of a British monarch rather than a country with a republican form of government.

In 1874, 160 families prepared to migrate to Manitoba and they settled in the East Reserve. The journey of the Russian Mennonites to Canada followed the route through Danzig, Berlin, Hamburg, Germany and Liverpool, England. The journey took seven weeks, covered 10,000 miles and required seven different trains, five ships and two stretches by wagon.<sup>5</sup> "From 1873 to 1884 approximately 17,000 Mennonites came to the central states and provinces from Russia."<sup>6</sup>

Within three years the whole Bergthal Colony had moved to Canada. As it turned out, this was a very wise decision and we cannot but thank God for it. Our lives would have been very different had our great-grandparents decided to stay. The Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 resulted in the suffering and destruction of hundreds of lives of those Mennonites who chose not to move in 1874-76. Typhus, cholera and venereal disease followed, claiming thousands.

## Forbears

The personal stories of my paternal and maternal great-grandparents are not known except for what is recorded on ship lists, church registers and the Canadian census. We do know where they lived and what their general lifestyle was, however, and I have attempted to weave some of this into the stories of the lives of these people. There is one exception. A daughter of my great-grandparents Kornelius and Helena Wiebe, Mrs. Maria Peters, shared some of her life as an immigrant in a book called *Manitoba Mennonite Memories*.<sup>7</sup>

## Paternal Great-grandparents

*Bernhard Wiebe Aug 24, 1821 - Mar 28, 1897*

*Cornelia Wiebe Sept 24, 1823 - Mar 2, 1896  
m. June 4, 1844*

The village of Heuboden in the Bergthal Colony was settled in 1839 by 28 families. The site was beside the Glubokaja River, just one and a half kilometers north-east of the village of Bergthal. The name Heuboden was chosen because of the lush growth of hay in that area. It was also close to the Schoenfeld Mountain where children loved to play together.

This is where Bernhard 23 and Cornelia 20 Wiebe lived

after they were married on June 4, 1844. By that time the settlers had been living in the area for eight years. The trees planted earlier were beginning to give shade and some of the plum and cherry trees were yielding fruit. It was a good time to start married life in Heuboden. Just two years earlier, at the request of Tsar Alexander I, the villages had planted thousands of trees. The purpose was to provide future generations with a minimum supply of lumber. It improved the appearance of the villages as well.<sup>8</sup>

The climate in this part of Russia is quite mild, the highest average temperature being 38° C and the low in winter -24° C, with a frost free period of 175 days. However, precipitation is low. Some years Bernhard struggled on the farm because of lack of rain and high winds. In 1847 the entire area was hit by a severe dust and snow storm, raging over a period of three weeks. The snow piled up on the roofs threatening cave-ins. So he had to get up on the roof and shovel the snow. Taking care of the livestock was hard because haystacks and wells were covered with snow.<sup>9</sup>

Ten children were born to them in Heuboden, four daughters and six sons. All grew to adulthood except Philip born in 1864. He died when he was 2 1/2 years old. By 1874 the four oldest children, Maria, Cornelia, Jacob and Heinrich, were already married and together they had given Bernhard and Cornelia eight grandchildren. Cornelia and Peter Funk had twin girls born to them but they died as infants.

After living in Heuboden for thirty years, Bernhard and Cornelia had to make another move. This time it was not just a couple of days' trek across land, but now they were immigrating to another country across the ocean. Everyone in the Colony was going so there really was no choice. They would move as well. Cornelia had to decide what to take along. Most of their things had to be sold or given away. But maybe she could take some precious things in a chest, such as a clock or some treasured wedding gift.

Bernhard had to sell the land and his implements. He did take some tools with him, such as a hand scythe. This ended up being very important for cutting hay to make thatch for the *semlin* in Manitoba.

Bernhard and Cornelia, both in their early 50s, were married 32 years when they left Russia. Many memories stayed in their village home. They would have to adjust to a new way of life at their old age and it would not be easy. The children would be a big help.

They traveled from Heuboden, Bergthal Colony in Russia via Danzig, Poland, Germany and finally on the ship the SS Sardinian, landing in Quebec on July 30, 1876, together with five children, Bernhard 21, Peter 18 (my grandfather), Anna 15, Helena 13, and Diedrich 9. The four oldest members of the family, who were already married, (Maria Bergen, Cornelia Funk, Jacob and Heinrich) emigrated as separate families.

To arrive at their destination they had crossed half of the North American continent. Manitoba, a flat treeless prairie was to be their next home. The Canadian government had allotted land to the Mennonites east of the Red River in the southern part of the province. The Red River fed into Lake Winnipeg, with the Assiniboine and Pembina Rivers being tributaries of the Red. Hence the terms East Reserve and West Reserve used this river as the dividing line.

The first days were spent in the immigration sheds, until a sod hut or *semlin* could be built for them. They never really settled down here but soon were ready to move to the West Reserve. In 1878 the Bernhard Wiebe family, including the married children, moved with more than 200 families to settle on the west side of the Red River.

Bernhard and Cornelia Wiebe chose to settle just southwest of Rosenfeld, a lovely spot beside Buffalo Creek known as Weidenfeld. The creek was a substantial source of water for horses and cattle. They built a log house in the style used by all families, with a living room or *Grote Stove*, a kitchen-dining room, pantry and bedrooms. The barn for oxen and cattle was attached to the house to facilitate caring for them during harsh winter weather. Three children, Helena, Anna and Diedrich, were still at home with them, Peter married that fall and lived with them according to the 1881 census.<sup>10</sup>

This is where they lived until their death in the late 1890s. Their last years were spent in a special room built for them in their son Peter B.'s new house on that same yard. Cornelia died March 2, 1896 at 73 while Bernhard died March 28, 1897 at the age of 76. They are buried underneath some trees on that yard, together with three of their young granddaughters. They had been in Canada just over 20 years. They saw their family get a good start on the land they had chosen as their new home.



A drawing of how things looked inside the sheds where the immigrants stayed until they moved to their own homesteads.



A drawing of a *semlin*.

### Paternal Great-grandparents

*Kornelius Wiebe*

*Apr 16, 1821 - Sept 16, 1896*

1) *Agata Kroeker*

*Dec. 26, 1823 - Apr 2, 1858*

*m. Sept 17, 1845*

2) *Widow Helena Klassen Wiens*

*June 1, 1832 - ?*

*m. Apr 27, 1858*

In the summer of 1836, together with their respective families, Kornelius Wiebe and Agatha Kroeker moved from the Old Colony, Chortitza, to begin a new life in a village in the new Bergthal Colony, 212 kilometres south east of their former home. Forty sections of land had been designated for the Mennonites near Mariupol to help solve the problem of the growing population in Chortitza. The first village was located in the Bodena Valley and named Bergthal. "The name Bergthal was suggested because it described the geographical setting of the village. The Berg was a fairly high hill just north of the village and the Thal was the Bodena Valley."<sup>11</sup>

Kornelius and Agatha learned to know each other in school and at church. Church was an important part of Mennonite life. Even though the men had to sit on one side and the women on the other, there were ways to get the attention of certain young ladies. They both knew they could not get married until they were members of the Mennonite church. After he was baptized and had joined the church, young Kornelius began visiting at the Kroekers. Once the couple came to an agreement, Kornelius approached Mr. Kroeker for his daughter's hand in marriage. Then things began to move. Two weeks before the wedding there was the engagement party (*Felafnis*) with the proclamation of the banns in church. The date of the wedding was September 17, 1845.

Agatha's parents sent out the wedding invitation to relatives and friends. The invitation was hand written giving names, time and place of the wedding and at the bottom of the invitation a list of the people invited. The family delivered it to the first name on the list who in turn had to deliver it to the next one till all had received the notice. On a lovely September day Kornelius and Agatha began their married life together. At the time of their wedding they had been living in the Bergthal Colony for nine years since they had moved from the Chortitza Colony. Kornelius and Agatha may have lived with his parents the first years, as was often the custom.

When the village of Friedrichsthal was established, they moved there with three children Gerhard, Kornelius and Justina. Friedrichsthal was the last and smallest of the Bergfeld villages to be established. Founded in 1852, it was located on the north side of the Bodena River and settled by a mere nineteen families.<sup>12</sup>

Six children were born to them within twelve years. One died at nine months. The sixth child was a baby girl whom they named Anna (my grandmother), born on Feb. 5, 1858. Just two months later on April 2, 1858 Agatha died leaving five motherless children in Kornelius' care. She was only thirty-five and they had been married 12 1/2 years.

Three weeks later on April 27, 1858 Kornelius married a widow, Helena Wiens Klassen, with one small child, Anna. In August of the following year a daughter Helena<sup>13</sup> was born to them. Every year and a half after that Helena was pregnant, having twelve births in sixteen years with one a set of twins, who died in infancy. Only six of the children grew to adulthood.<sup>14</sup> One of them was Maria, who after coming to Canada, married Johann Peters (two Marias died in infancy). They made their home in Weidenfeld on the north bank of Buffalo Creek opposite my grandparents Peter B. & Anna Wiebe. Maria and Anna (my Grandma) were half-sisters.

The climate was mild and the geography made living in Bergthal interesting and profitable. The area was relatively flat, treeless and grass-covered, with an occasional deep valley intersecting it. "The Bergthal villages were well planned and beautiful. The streets were straight and wide, with a row of pear trees standing along each side. A neat row of mulberry trees divided one farmyard from the next."<sup>15</sup> Besides fruit trees, many shade trees were also planted. The decision to move from this lovely spot was not made lightly.

It was hard for Kornelius and Helena to uproot and move again, but they had to think of the future of their children and grandchildren. Kornelius 53, laborer and Helena Wiebe 42 came to Canada from the Bergthal Colony in Russia on the S.S. Manitoban and arrived in Quebec on July 27, 1875, together

with eight children, Anna K. 17 (Helena's daughter by her first marriage), Anna Wiebe 16 (Kornelius' daughter by his first marriage.), Helena 15, Katharina 14, Abram 7, Maria 5, Jacob 4 and Johan 1.<sup>16</sup>

They settled on the East Reserve in Manitoba in the village of Grunthal. Maria recalls some of their life in Schoensee near Grunthal on the East Reserve.

*We were a happy family, if not happier than families are today. We didn't have many clothes or wealth, but we didn't expect much. My father made our shoes which he carved from wood. When the children became ill with measles the first winter we were here, and with food and living conditions not being the best, other complications set in so that I was ill for a long time. Doctors in those days were few and far between.*

*Our home was a crude structure, but we managed to keep warm during the winter months. As for furniture, it was very plain and consisted only of the bare necessities such as stove, chairs, table, and Schlopbenken, beds that were pulled out to sleep two persons and during the day served as seating space.*

*The food we ate was simple and consisted chiefly of beans, which we brought from Russia, macaroni, bread and milk. We had a cow that provided the family with milk, though not as much as we would like to have had. After a few years we also had a few sheep so mother spun the wool and knit us stockings. This also meant more meat was on the menu. I remember the first time we had bacon for dinner. That was quite a treat! Our beverage consisted of Prips, brewed from roasted wheat - that replaced coffee.*

*We had a pair of oxen that served in various ways. They plowed the fields, took us to Emerson, which was our trading centre the first while, and took us visiting. Though stubborn as can be, the pair always got us to where we wanted to go, but they frequently lay down for rests and once down it took much prodding to get them up on their feet.<sup>17</sup>*

Kornelius and Helena continued living at Schoensee near Grunthal until the time of their death. Kornelius died in 1896 at the age of 75. Helena was nine years younger and was only 66 at the time of her death. The exact date is not known.

## **Grandparents**

### *Paternal Grandparents*

*Peter B. Wiebe, July 24, 1854 - Jan 13, 1924*

*Anna Wiebe, Feb 5, 1858 - Oct 28, 1935*

*m. October 6, 1878*

Young Peter, son of Bernhard and Cornelia, was a tall, thin likable fellow, not too talkative. He had learned to know and love a young woman while still living in Schoensee on the East Reserve shortly after coming to Canada. She was Anna, daughter of Kornelius and stepmother Helena Wiebe. Anna's mother died when she was three months old and was brought up by an aunt, who may have lived in the West Reserve.

Peter and Anna learned to know and love each other. They were married on October 6, 1878. They moved in with Peter's folks, for when the 1881 census was taken they were listed as living with Bernhard and Cornelia Wiebe in Weidenfeld, with



*Peter B. Wiebe 1854-1924 who settled in Weidenfeld beside Buffalo Creek near Altona. Photo Credit: Marjorie Hildebrand.*



*Anna Wiebe 1858-1935 was the daughter of Kornelius and Agatha Kroeker. Photo Credit: Marjorie Hildebrand.*



*The new house and barn built by Peter B. and Anna Wiebe situated on the bank of Buffalo Creek in Weidenfeld, northwest of Altona, Manitoba. Photo Credit: Marjorie Hildebrand.*

two little daughters, Cornelia age 2 and Anna a baby.

Peter B. and Anna belonged to the Bergthaler Church which had separated from the more conservative Sommerfelder group. The Bergthal immigrants had reorganized themselves into three groups, the Chortitzer Mennonites in the East Reserve, the Sommerfelder in the West Reserve and a smaller group in the West Reserve who retained the name Bergthaler.<sup>18</sup>

Towards the end of the century, Peter B. and Anna decided to build a house for their growing family on the same yard. They would be able to take care of his aging parents. They built a large two story-house of planed wood, facing south. Anna loved flowers and wanted a bay window facing south for her many plants. On the west side there was an open porch and on the east side a closed porch with windows facing south and east. To protect Anna's outside flower beds in summer, Peter B. constructed a pretty lattice fence around the front. A short distance from the house they built a big red barn with a hip roof.

Peter took great pride in his buildings and always kept them in good repair and well under paint. He enjoyed taking care of his horses, keeping them well groomed. People remember him driving his well-matched team of black or brown bays, with reins pulled taut. In winter he wore a tall fur hat.

Tragedy struck this young family in February 1888. Cornelia, their oldest daughter age eight and Helena three died of diphtheria three days apart. Anna six and Agatha, not quite one, were spared. The following year 1889 on June 18 Maria was born.

On May 2, 1891 their first son was born. Peter B. (the initial stood for Bernhard, his father) was mighty proud of his first boy and named him Peter. Every two years for the next six years another son was born, Cornelius, Henry and Bernhard. Bernhard was ten months old when Maria became very sick.

Little Maria died in 1897 at age eight of a ruptured appendix. Sadly Peter and Anna laid to rest their third little girl. Six of the nine children reached adulthood. Daughter Anna, who married Peter Fast, died at twenty-three in 1905, a mother of three young children, Peter, Neil and Alma. Alma, a tiny baby girl, won Grandmother Anna's heart and she raised her as her own.

Life for Peter B. and Anna in the new country had brought deep sorrow as well as joy and hope. They enjoyed seeing their two daughters and four young sons growing up in this country filled with promise. By 1893 the railroad had been constructed. They could now sell their produce with relative ease and buy manufactured goods from eastern Canada.<sup>19</sup> Peter B. taught his sons to be good farmers and they became hard workers. There was a good father-son relationship with each of them. However, when they had problems to discuss, it seemed easier to talk to their mother, Anna.

Peter B. valued learning and made sure his children got an education. He helped organize the district school in Weidenfeld at a time when many Manitoba Mennonites preferred the village schools where education was in German, using the *Fiebel*, the catechism and the Bible, with writing and arithmetic added. The district schools were accredited by the provincial government and included subjects such as social studies and literature.<sup>20</sup> They were taught in English, with German as a second language.

The girls, older than the boys, were sent to Rosenfeld until they got a school closer to home in 1898. Later, in 1890, Peter B. was involved in establishing the Mennonite Educational Institute in Gretna, giving young people the opportunity for higher learning. He believed that a good education was important for getting on in the new country. As treasurer of the MEI Society he was a member of the Administration Committee.<sup>21</sup> All of the Wiebe children attended MEI except Peter who preferred farming to sitting in the school benches.

Agatha was encouraged to continue her education because her health was poor, not allowing her to do hard work. She finished grade eleven and then entered nurses training at the Evangelical Deaconess Hospital in St. Louis, Missouri where she graduated three years later in 1914 at age twenty-seven. Peter B. brought her down there and told her she would have to stay until she was finished for they could not afford to have her come home for a visit in between. To receive her Canadian Registered Nurse standing she took a post graduate course in communicable diseases. For seven years she served as nurse in



Agatha Wiebe graduated as a registered nurse at the Evangelical Deaconess Hospital in St. Louis, Missouri. Photo Credit: Marjorie Hildebrand.

the Ninette Sanitarium. When she was forty years old she married my Mother's oldest brother, Frank F. Thiessen, a widower with eleven children. Two sons were born to them, Ben and Otto.

Cornelius completed the equivalent of grade eleven at the MEI and then attended normal school in Morden for the academic year 1912-13, and taught one year in the village school in Schoenthal. He found the atmosphere in the district very restrictive as far as the methods of teaching were concerned. After school closed in spring he registered at Wesley College in Winnipeg where he studied liberal arts for two years. In 1916 he married Helena Groening and in 1920, after some years of indecision, entered the Manitoba Medical School. Graduating *cum laude* in 1924, he was placed in an Edmonton hospital for a year of internship, after which he wrote his final exams. He was able to practice medicine in any province and chose to do so in the town of Winkler. "When he retired after half a century of devoted and energetic service there was a measure of truth in the evaluation of one resident: 'In many ways, Winkler is Dr. Wiebe'."<sup>22</sup>

Parents Bernhard and Cornelia lived with son Peter and his wife Anna during their last years. Agatha recalls, "Grandmother had paralysis the year I was born and could not cook anymore, so they built an addition to the house and moved in. Breakfast and tea they had in their room but dinner and supper with us." Cornelia died in 1896 and a year later Bernhard passed away.

In the early 1900s Peter B. had a share in the Rat Portage Lumber Co. in Altona, where his brother-in-law Henry M. Klassen had the dealership. Henry was married to Peter B's sister Anna. This partnership gave him access to good wood

at a discount price. He was able to sell the farm at a high price and build a solid house for himself and Anna in the town of Altona about 1920. This solid house stands today on the same spot on 3rd St. They had a small barn for their cow and room for a garden. Flowers were always a big part of the yard.

Son Cornelius, who had chosen to become a doctor, was assigned to work as an intern at the Royal Alexander Hospital in Edmonton beginning on May 1, 1924. It was difficult to leave that spring as his father suddenly passed away in January 1924. He had been in considerable pain at the Christmas reunion but had not said anything to the family. Anna's description to Cornelius of his father's condition suggested that the cause of death was probably due to a ruptured gall bladder.<sup>23</sup>

How suddenly death had entered Anna's life again, leaving her alone in her lovely new home. She had to resign herself to the fact that her Peter was gone. She had



Cornelius W. Wiebe became a medical doctor in 1925. This photograph was taken in 1932 when he was also a member of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba. Photo Credit: Beloved Physician, 76.

a congenital problem with her hips that caused her to either walk bent forward or else thrown back. This did not keep her from being active. She loved hollyhocks and had some underneath her dining room window. Chives grew along the path from the front gate to the kitchen door, a path that led around the house. Her vegetable garden always had peas and tomatoes. To buy her groceries she walked to Loewen's Red and White Store, using her cane. The town had built a wooden sidewalk crossing over the railway tracks.

In cold weather she never wore a coat but chose to use heavy shawls, wearing heavy undergarments and long skirts. Her skirt touched her shoes in front and in the back her ankles showed because her back was hunched over. Her hair was braided in two braids crossed over in the back and drawn around her head. She would wear heavy kerchiefs, one inside the other when going out into the cold.

Grandchildren loved to visit and stay overnight. She made them feel special. When they would go to the store with her the first thing she would buy for them was a lollipop. In the house the sugar bowl with sugar cubes attracted longing eyes from grandchildren. When they would get too rowdy, Anna would send them to the attic. There were stairs leading up to a big room where they could look at old photographs and pictures.

When coming for a visit to our house in Burwalde, the children would fight about who would sleep with Grandma in the guest room where Mother would use her best linens. She would make *kielke* and butter. There were two methods of making *kielke*, one was to cut the dough into boiling water, using scissors. The other method was drying the dough by hanging

it on the fence and cutting it with a knife. My mother liked her mother-in-law, who was a very kind and loving person, and the sentiment was returned.

Anna died in 1935 at age 77 of peritonitis due to an obstructed bowel. She had been a widow for eleven years. I remember Uncle *Knals* (Cornelius) come tearing onto the yard to give us the sad tidings. When he saw Dad outside feeding the pigs he drove up to him and gave him the sad news. I was five years old at the time.

Peter B. and Anna are buried in the south-east corner of the Altona Cemetery, with a joint headstone identifying their graves, facing east.

### Parents

*Peter P. Wiebe, May 2, 1891 - Jan 20, 1968*

*Margaretha Thiessen, Jan 24, 1892 - Feb 26, 1977  
m. Dec. 1, 1918*

Manitoba was an open prairie, with large tracts of land still available for settling. The pioneer spirit of their forefathers was also instilled in our parents. The year before, Father had purchased land 30 miles north-west from their home near Altona, in a district known as Burwalde. At the Land Titles office in Morden it was first registered in the name of grandfather, Peter B. Wiebe and later to Peter P. Wiebe, my father. This shows that Grandfather laid down the cash for the initial purchase and Father later paid back the loan. It was bought from a certain M. Sexsmith.<sup>24</sup> What attracted Father was the large tract of oak forest that came with the one-quarter section. Father saw this as a sign that the soil was heavy fertile loam that would not blow away during the next wind storm. He was always loathe to cut down a tree, especially an oak tree. The shallow creek running through the woods, holding water only for a few weeks in the spring when the snows melted, was also an attraction.

Back in Schoenthal, Mother was packing up to make the big move away from home. Her mother had died in May and all the sisters were married except the two youngest ones, Barbara sixteen and Katherina fifteen. It was hard to leave her grieving father and move so far from home, but she had to think of her future as well. There were many mixed emotions struggling in her breast as she thought of her life in Burwalde. It would be lonesome and she would miss her father and sisters very much.

After their December wedding, Mother helped Father load their wagon with household goods, hitch a team of horses to it and said good-by to family and friends in the Altona area. Burwalde was very far from the homes where they had grown up. It took the greater part of daylight hours to go this 30 mile stretch. There was only time to unload before darkness surrounded them in their two-room little house in the woods. Next morning there would be time to unpack and get settled. She was also looking forward to meeting her new sister-in-law, Henry's wife, Anna. Peter's brother, Henry and Anna had been married just seven months prior, on April 14.

*Father, Peter P. Wiebe, May 2, 1891 - January 20, 1968*

Father grew up on a lovely well-kept farm south-west of Rosenfeld, owned by his parents Peter B. and Anna Wiebe. His grandparents Bernhard and Cornelia Wiebe lived in a small house on the same yard. Father was the oldest of four sons, having been born after five daughters, only two of which reached

adulthood. All were given a chance to go to school. Even though his siblings chose to further their education beyond elementary school, Father chose not to but remained at home, working on the farm. He especially enjoyed working with machines and metal. He was good at fixing things and improvising when need be.

In their growing up years Father and brother Cornelius were referred to as the "big boys" and Henry and Bernhard as the "little boys". The big boys worked together on the farm until *Knals* went off to school. By then Henry was getting older and Father and Henry became a team. In the spring of 1918 Peter B. helped his sons buy land in the school district of Burwalde, six miles north-east of Morden. That summer he helped Father build a small two-room house with the plan that a wedding would take place in fall. Henry's land had a lovely big house on it and so when he married Anna Siemens on April 14, this is where he brought her.

Mother told us that she had known Father for only five months when they were married. Where they learned to know each other is not known, but the first card Father sent her is still available. It is dated August 1, 1918 and says that he plans to visit her on Sunday. Father was twenty-seven and Mother going on twenty-six. Both had experienced much responsibility by then and were ready to settle down on their own.

The next years were busy ones trying to make farming viable plus raising a family. In 1922 the house was getting too small because by now there were two children. It was decided to enlarge the house. A long narrow kitchen-dining area was added downstairs on the north side of the house, and four bedrooms and a "bathroom" upstairs. The bathroom was never developed and always remained a room for storage. This made living conditions much better for Mother who had found the two rooms very cramped. After there were four children, one boy and three girls, plus Mother and Father, the bedrooms were full.

A very quiet reserved man, Father found it difficult to express his thoughts. His speech was never hurried. When he did speak people listened. Co-op Board members said, "When Peter Wiebe says something, everyone is quiet and listens." He was a member on that Board for many years and never missed a meeting unless for a very good reason. I recall him shaving and changing his shirt and pants and saying to Mother, "I'm going to meeting." We knew what meeting that was without asking.

Conversation rarely came to high speed when visitors came. Philip Reimer's John and Father could spend an evening without too much effort at words. When George Friesens, living off highway fourteen near Winkler, came over, that was a little different. Mr. Friesen was a joker and a talker. Father did enjoy a good laugh and he liked getting together with his friend, George.



*Peter P. Wiebe, the oldest of four sons of Peter B. and Anna Wiebe of Weidenfeld became my father. He was born after five daughters, of whom only two reached adulthood. Photo Credit: Marjorie Hildebrand.*

Father seemed to enjoy reading newspapers and the *Popular Mechanics* magazine. We had subscriptions to the *Family Herald*, *Free Press Weekly*, the *Western Producer*, *Country Guide* and the *Steinbach Post*. He would sit and read and finally fall asleep in his chair with the paper over his face. The *Popular Mechanics* magazine was something he would buy on occasion and enjoy browsing through, just as women enjoy a craft magazine.

Breakfast and *Faspa* were Father's favorite meals. He had to have breakfast the minute he snapped his suspenders in place and walked downstairs from their upstairs bedroom. Mother knew that and saw to it that coffee was ready and bread, butter and plum jam were on the table. They would eat, then chore.<sup>25</sup>

The most acreage our parents ever owned was 240 acres. Until there were tractors the land was worked with horses. John, our hired man, could plow five acres a day with a two-share plow. The cultivating, seeding, spreading manure, cutting the ripe grain, was all done with horse drawn machines. When Father was able to buy a tractor the work on the farm was facilitated a great deal. The first one he owned was bought in the early 1940s, a John Deere AR on steel lugs. Some of the implements could be adapted to the tractor, but others like the plow had to be purchased to fit the tractor.

The main crops were wheat, oats and barley. Before the invention and use of combines, harvesting a crop was a long tedious operation. The grain was cut with a binder which would spit out sheaves tied with binder twine. These sheaves had to be set upright in small groups of five or six called stooks. Later they would be gathered on a hayrack and fed into the threshing machine. The stokers started early in the morning. The noon meal was served at 11:00 a.m. After a short rest, they would go back to work. At 3:00 p.m. *Faspa* was brought to them on the field. Sitting on the stubble leaning against a stook, there was no better food to be had than fresh buns with butter and plum jam, fresh dills and cold black coffee. This was no chore for the person bringing the food because they too could take part in the "picnic". The bright blue sky with puffy white clouds, swallows darting back and forth and killdeer scolding in the distance, added to the setting.

Father was a partner in a threshing gang. He and Uncle Henry, his brother, owned the big Rumely tractor and the threshing machine. During the year they were always parked on our yard. Because of his mechanical ability, Father was the engineer of the big Rumely tractor used to run the threshing machine. He enjoyed this job immensely. Well before harvest, Father would check out the machines, so that they were in readiness for the first ripe crop to be harvested. I can still feel the excitement when he would drive these two enormous machines across the yard. What power!

Four families formed the harvest company. The machines were moved from field to field, accompanied by all the men, boys, horses, and hayracks belonging to the four families. Some had to gather stooks and others helped move the grain from the field in a wagon. Father was the engineer, keeping a watchful eye on all the belts and pulleys on the threshing machine. In the evening he went around with a grease gun, lubricating the many pulleys on the threshing machine, in readiness for the next days' work.

Serving food to the men was the job of the women where the threshing was happening. Things had to be ready when the gang of fifteen to twenty men came to the house, tired and dusty, but

joking and laughing. My job was to see that water and towels were ready for washing their hands. This was set up outside on a little table. The smell of *bubbat* and roast chicken, mashed potatoes and pie made everyone hungry. No one knew how to make roast chicken like Mrs. Peter Wiebe. She put prunes and raisins in the pan, making the chicken brown and tasty. *Faspa* at the Wiebe home meant fresh buns, fresh plum jam, fresh dill pickles and home-made butter.

Mother would use her best china, the dishes with the little pink roses, to serve the gang. It was quite funny to see these rugged farm men hold the rather small dainty cups when drinking their coffee. I don't recall that anything ever broke while serving the harvest gang. The round table in the dining room had three boards to make one long oblong table and so all the workers could eat at one time. There was loud conversation and guffawing among the harvesters. We liked to serve because then we could listen in without embarrassment. After they left, Mother and daughters could sit down for a relaxed meal. Not for long, however, because all the dishes had to be washed and *Faspa* put on. It was a hectic time for both the men and the women when it was your turn to have the threshers at your farm.

During the summer and fall, weather permitting, Father would take an early Sunday morning trek through the woods. Sometimes he would take his gun with him, mainly to shoot birds and animals harmful to crops. I never liked seeing him with a gun in his hand. For birds that were welcome, he built a feeding station close to the picture window so he could watch the red-headed woodpeckers, blue jays, chickadees and nut-hatches during the winter months.<sup>26</sup> He had little "gardens" in the woods, experimenting with unusual seeds like millet, alfalfa or canary seed, planting them in newly broken sod after brush or unwanted wild shrubs and dead trees had been removed. He liked to bring home sprays of ripening seed heads, which were hung to dry in the summer kitchen.

His greatest hobby in later years was his workshop. In the early years the *Schmaed* was not so much a hobby as a necessity on the farm, but once they retired and moved into their smaller home, fixing things became a hobby for him. The shop was kept comfortably warm with a space heater he made from an old oil drum. The wood was supplied from the woodland in his back yard.

Just west of the barn Father had a big scrap iron heap which was a big eye sore to the women in his life. The question Mother and her three daughters often asked each other was, "Why does that ugly scrap iron heap have to be where everyone can see it



*Peter P. and Margaretha (Thiessen) Wiebe who moved from Weidenfeld, near Altona to Burwalde, Northwest of Winkler in 1918 and lived there until Peter died in 1976. Margaretha then moved to town where she died in 1977. Photo Credit: Marjorie Hildebrand.*

as soon as they come onto the yard?” He did not see it that way but rather as a source of supply for repair jobs he did, not only for himself, but also for many neighbors. He created gadgets to add to the comfort and interest of the family. This included a motorized doll stand for the dolls Mother made. Esther remembers him making an upholstered cutter out of an old rear seat of a car, complete with leather upholstery.

Some unique things the family knew about Father was that his favorite color was green and did not like red, at least not on the barn. He would have liked his barn painted white, but whatever paint there was on the barn was red. He was also not into music, but there were two tunes he has been known to whistle, one was Schubert’s “Unfinished Symphony” and “When You and I were Young, Maggie.” He did not like to have his picture taken and as a result there are very few around. Twice he went to the photographer, once upon my special request while we were in Brazil, “so your grandchildren will not forget you.”

The descendents of Peter B. & Anna Wiebe have scattered all over Canada and USA.

#### Endnotes

- 1 Anabaptist History notes from a course taught by Jack Heppner, Sept. '89.
- 2 C. Henry Smith, *The Story of the Mennonites*, 389.

- 3 Cornelius J. Dyck, *An Introduction to Mennonite History*, 155.
- 4 William Schroeder, *The Bergthal Colony*, 63.
- 5 Reynold Sawatzky, “Historical Sketch of the Henry M. Klassen Family,” 1976 (unpublished paper)
- 6 Dyck, 154.
- 7 Julius Toews and Lawrence Klippenstein, *Manitoba Mennonite Memories*, 95-96.
- 8 Schroeder, 25-26.
- 9 Ibid, 28.
- 10 John Dyck, ed., *Bergthal Gemeinde Buch*, 1993, 375.
- 11 Schroeder, 18.
- 12 Ibid, 23.
- 13 Helena married Jacob Wiebe, my Grandfather Peter B. Wiebe’s brother. Helena and Jacob’s son Jacob married Mother’s sister, Helena Thiessen. We spent a lot of time with this family when we were children.
- 14 Dyck, 71.
- 15 Schroeder, 25.
- 16 Dyck, 306 and 308.
- 17 Toews and Klippenstein, 95.
- 18 Schroeder, 113.
- 19 Schroeder, 112.
- 20 Mavis Reimer, *Cornelius W. Wiebe: A Beloved Physician*, 1983, 4.
- 21 Reimer, 4.
- 22 Reimer, page?
- 23 Reimer, 17.
- 24 Isaac Froese, ed., *Burwalde Album Newsletter*, No. 4, Oct.1977.
- 25 Marjorie Hildebrand, ed., *Wiebe Link*, Dec.1987.
- 26 Elizabeth Bergen, “Creative Hobbies...”, *The Red River Valley Echo*, Mar.23,1966.

## Abram J. Thiessen (1910-2002)

By Conrad Stoesz



The seeds for Abram J. Thiessen’s future were planted in his past. Thiessen was born into an average Mennonite family in the village of Rosenfeld, near present day Altona, Manitoba. Here he experienced joys and hardships and grew into an extraordinary man of vision and determination who was involved in business, politics, and education while maintaining his grass roots connections and honest values.

Abram J. Thiessen was born on December 12, 1910 to Abram A. Thiessen (1887-1960) and Susanna Braun (1882-1945) on a farm south east of Rosenfeld. He had close connections to his extended family and he believed he was “emotionally closer to my grandfather [paternal] than my own father.”<sup>1</sup> Abram’s maternal grandfather Johann Braun (1858-1941) was a mill owner in Niverville and later in Altona. Abram’s paternal grandfather, Abram B. Thiessen (1861-1935), was a school teacher in the village of Chortitz and participated in political elections, which was frowned upon by his church.

In 1912 the Thiessen family moved to the village of Rosenfeld where Abram and his two younger brothers attended school. By the age of twelve he was in grade nine when he took a break from school for six years. In 1922 he found employment working neighbors’ fields with horses. In 1924 Heinrich H. Ewert of the MCI (Mennonite Collegiate Institute) came to Abram’s father to convince him that young Abram should enroll at the MCI. This was not a welcomed visit as Abram Sr. was a board member of the rival MEI (Mennonite Educational Institute) in Altona. In 1925 he worked for the CPR replacing railway ties for twenty-five cents an hour. By 1927 he landed a job on Ogilvy’s grain elevator repair gang for forty cents an hour. At this time there were no marketing boards or extra storage on

farms for grain. During harvest most grain went straight from the field to the elevator. This meant there was a lot of competition between elevators for farmer's yields.

In 1928 Abram went back to school in Rosenfeld and enjoyed the classes and many extra curricular activities. After Sunday catechism classes in Altona, Abram was baptized by bishop David Schultz and joined the Bergthaler Mennonite Church on May 21, 1928. This event implanted a desire to become a missionary. He offered his services to the General Conference Mennonite church with the hopes of joining Rev. P.A. Penner in India. However he was told he needed more education. He corresponded with various schools in the US and at the end of grade eleven, in 1930, was in serious correspondence with Bethel College in Newton, Kansas. The difficulty became money, especially during the depression. "I had no way of earning money to go to college nor could my parents help me. I tried to borrow money, but to no avail. I tried to get a job teaching and walked many miles to school boards trying to find work... Since I was young and inexperienced, I had no chance.... I approached the Bergthaler Ministerial Group... this was very disappointing to me since...my then-chosen vocation [was] a missionary... This missionary desire burned in my heart until 1933."<sup>2</sup>

In 1929 Abram borrowed money from his grandfather to attend school in Steinbach where he earned the Governor's General medal. Abram enjoyed his year in Steinbach and made many friends. During this time he attended the EMB (Evangelical Mennonite Brethren) Sunday school classes.

In 1931 Abram rode the rails from Montreal to Calgary looking for work. Between them, Abram and his two friends had fifteen cents to their name. At times they had to resort to begging for food. Over the 9,000 miles traveled that summer Abram met many people of different backgrounds and faiths. He gained an appreciation for those "down on their luck".

In 1932 Abram's father left the family and moved to the Interlake region." This put enormous pressure on Abram. "This left me in complete responsibility for my mother and two young brothers. We felt alone and completely destitute."<sup>3</sup>

A.J., as he was often called, began his career in business during the depression in 1931 with a partnership with George Fast selling used clothing and groceries. A.J. picked up extra work by selling insurance for the Wawanesa Insurance Company and teaching English classes to new immigrants and helping them prepare for citizenship. In 1932 Thiessen began his trucking business by using his grandfather's car. He removed the back seat and transported eggs and chickens to Winnipeg. He took passengers for seventy-five cents one way. The car was not the best vehicle as it had no brakes and was susceptible to broken axles. AJ's family and larger community supported AJ when they could, feeling sympathetic for the family. Soon a trailer was needed and in 1934 a 1929 Chevy truck with a homemade cab was purchased and they received a license to transport livestock and freight.

On July 28, 1935 a lean 172 pound, twenty-five year old Abram J. Thiessen married Lenora Friesen (1914-2007) in the Edenberg Bergthaler Mennonite Church. The service was led by Rev. David D. Klassen. Together AJ and Lenora had five children, Ronald (1936-), Bernhard (1939-), William (1941-), Irvin (1944-), and Carolyn (1948-). The first years were especially difficult for Lenora. AJ writes "My wife was a very hard worker and did not receive any help from her husband."<sup>4</sup> AJ



*Abram J. Thiessen and Lenora Friesen. Abram died in 2002 and Lenora in 2007. Both are buried in the Rosenfeld cemetery. Photo Credit: Conrad Stoesz*

worked long hours, six days a week and was often away from home. In addition to looking after the children, she was also responsible for the hogs, cattle and chickens. After the birth of three children in five years Lenora needed some medical attention in the form of surgery. During this time several local women helped out at the Thiessen home. AJ credits the Mennonite Collegiate Institute, where all the children attended high school, in helping to raise his children. The children all became involved with the business making it truly a family business.

The Fast and Thiessen Company built rapport with farmers by delivering their cream to Winnipeg and returning with deliveries such as Eaton's orders. The first office was located in Rosenfeld. The business expanded in 1936 by becoming a Chrysler dealership and in 1948 the Massy-Harris dealer. In 1952 they had the highest Massy-Harris dealer sales in the province. With the implement dealership the company began to make some profits. They kept the Chrysler dealership until 1957. In the end it was not profitable. There were problems with the product and they "overpaid on used cars and trucks and probably gave more service than we should have."<sup>5</sup> In the end the company had to write off \$20,000 worth of bad accounts.

The Fast Thiessen Company continued to invest in the trucking enterprise. In 1942 they bought Wiebe Brothers Transport of Plum Coulee. In 1943 Hiebert Trucking of Altona was purchased. Until about 1945 roads were not always the best and so the trucking season was closed from November or December to April or May. In the winter AJ bought and sold cattle, shipping them to market by train. He would visit farmers across southern Manitoba by horse and cutter during the coldest months. AJ commented that in the end they broke even with this venture, but was surprised by people who were "usually quite religious [but] had no qualms about lying to us about the weight of hogs or the condition of a cow..."<sup>6</sup>

In 1943 they expanded into the retail business with a general store they purchased from William Coblentz. In that year the store took in \$180,000.

On January 1, 1945 George Fast and Abram Thiessen divided their business operations, keeping the dealerships together but with Thiessen taking the trucking business and Fast retaining the store. In 1946 AJ was one of the four applicants



*The first bus that A.J. Thiessen purchased in 1946. On the first trip of the new Thiessen bus lines there were more people than the bus could carry. Photo Credit: Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives,*

for the franchise to operate a bus service. After the license was granted, Thiessen Bus Lines was born and headquartered in Rosenfeld. The service was to run between Gretna, Altona, Rosenfeld, and between Winkler and Plum Coulee along with daily service to Winnipeg.<sup>7</sup> On the first trip, August 28, 1946, there were more people than they could take. One of the stipulations was that they would only operate the service when the roads were passable. East of Rosenfeld the roads were poor, so on rainy days they always had a tractor on standby as it was often needed to pull the bus the last two to three miles through the mud to Rosenfeld. By 1950 Thiessen had five buses in service.

In 1947 the Western Canadian bus industry was revolutionized with the first bus tour which took 23 people from Southern Manitoba to Mexico to visit relatives, with AJ as the bus driver. In 1948 another tour was organized taking Mennonite clergy to the Mennonite World Conference in Newton, Kansas. The tours included lively singing from the gospel hymnal and the *Gesangbuch* and a tour guide. This was the origin of Circle Tours, which was officially started in 1966.

In 1955 the Thiessen family moved from Rosenfeld to a farm in the Gnadenfeld school district, south of Altona where the younger three children attended a one-room country school. AJ continued buying land until 1956 when they farmed 640 acres. In 1965 the farm was sold to cover a bad business purchase and the family moved permanently to Winnipeg.

In 1961 the company began to expand again with the purchase of Grey Goose Bus Lines which operated in Western

Manitoba and North Western Ontario. At this time the expanded company became known as Grey Goose. In 1962 Western Flyer, a manufacturer of buses was purchased. In 1969 Manitoba Motor transit of Brandon was added to the fleet and Western Flyer was sold. To continue to expand more capital was needed and so in 1970 Grey Goose Company went public. In 1971 AJ exchanged controlling interest in Grey Goose for equity stock in Laidlaw Transportation, headquartered in Hamilton, ON. In 1971 Acme Sanitation services was purchased, launching the company into the waste management industry. In 1974 and 1976 Grey Goose acquired Yellow Cab in Edmonton and Calgary. In 1977 A.J. Thiessen gave up day to day management of Grey Goose but retained the chairmanship of the Grey Goose Corporation. This was a difficult transition for the man who started the company from the ground up as he now had to step back. At this time Bernie managed the Manitoba bus operation, Bill managed the waste management division in Manitoba and Ron, in Edmonton, headed the waste management and taxi cab operations in Alberta. Family and close friends had always been important to AJ and many of them were working with AJ for Grey Goose.

Thiessen was a man with vision and energy and spent time with his family. In 1973 a cottage was purchased at Clearwater Bay, Ontario where the Thiessens enjoyed hosting family and friends. Fishing became a passion for AJ and Lenora. She became known for catching some big fish.<sup>8</sup> Holidays such as Christmas centered on family. Food was a special enjoyment

of AJ's. He described the traditional meals Lenora made as "good, simple, nutritious and hearty food."<sup>9</sup>

While A.J. Thiessen was operating his business, farming and raising a family he had energy and interests in other areas. From an early age AJ was introduced to politics. His father and grandfather were Conservative Party supporters. Some of its leaders such as Robert H. Borden and Arthur Meighen stayed the night in the Thiessen's Rosenfeld home. In 1953 Thiessen had plans of running in the federal election in the riding of Provencher as an independent but party leader George Drew convinced him to run as a Conservative. Thiessen's good name was to his advantage. In his election promotion he honestly states "I make no promises except to say that I will try to represent you to the best of my abilities and be available to you."<sup>10</sup> However at the end, with light voter turn out, Thiessen lost by a wide margin. He garnered 2141 votes while the Liberal candidate had 6,542.<sup>11</sup>

In 1962 Thiessen was encouraged by Conservatives and Liberals to run against incumbent Jake M. Froese of the Social Credit Party. This time around there was more energy and publicity poured into the campaign that touted Thiessen as a "well-known and capable man"<sup>12</sup> and as "our only hope in Rhineland for a voice in the Manitoba government". Thiessen's campaign was linked to the successful record of the then Premier Duff Roblin of the Progressive Conservatives. Thiessen held town hall meetings and gave speeches on the radio. Personal testimonies were published in the newspaper supporting him<sup>13</sup>. In the end Thiessen narrowly lost by 17 votes.<sup>14</sup> In reflecting on his forays into political life Thiessen said he learned a lot about human nature and was glad for the experience. He later realized that if he had won, it would have negatively affected his business.<sup>15</sup> Thiessen held no ill feelings towards J.M. Froese who later became one of the early leaders in the bid to establish a Mennonite radio station.

In 1955, perhaps as a result of his earlier visions of becoming a missionary coupled with his role as member of the Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba radio committee, AJ conceived the idea that the Mennonite community needed a radio station to highlight its own religious programs. In March 1956 at his home, Thiessen brought together Rev. J.M. Pauls, John Brandt, Dennis Barkman, Dave Fehr, J.A. Penner, D.K. Friesen, T. E. Friesen, and C.W. Thiessen to discuss "... a station that would provide good programs and could be a witness to others in the listening area."<sup>16</sup> By the next meeting on May 18, 1956 the group had grown to twenty-one men.<sup>17</sup> By May 1956 A.J. was elected as chairman of the board.<sup>18</sup> The group sold shares to twenty-eight people<sup>19</sup> to raise capital and then applied for a license, which they received. The application to the CRTC highlighted a second purpose for the station being "... to serve a distinctly rural and farm audience with particular interest to the farmer and rural residents."<sup>20</sup> The slogan became "Your farm and good music station."<sup>21</sup> "On March 13 1957, most Altona residents were huddled around their radios waiting to see if the dream would come true."<sup>22</sup> Soon after the station started tensions became evident, one of which was around which music should be played. Each of the board of directors had their own taste in music which they promoted rather than leaving it up to employees to choose. Then on November 10, 1957 Thiessen put forward a motion at a board meeting which did not pass. He subsequently resigned from the board and sold his shares. Former board member Peter Kroeker stated: "Thiessen was

a strong-willed character; on the positive side this character trait gave him determination to get something done, but on the negative side, it led to an inability to deal with dissent."<sup>23</sup> Thiessen later wrote "differences of opinion developed within the Board of Directors... possibly sparked by me... I feel I certainly would have acted differently later on."<sup>24</sup>

Thiessen's church involvements went well beyond the radio committee he sat on, such as the Elim Bible School building committee and the Altona and Winkler Senior Citizen's Homes. The committee he served the longest was the MCI where his children attended. He was elected to the board in 1950. From 1960-1965 he was board chairman and he resigned from the board in 1967.<sup>25</sup> Here AJ was able to rub shoulders with people such as teacher Paul Schaefer whom Thiessen held in high regard. The MCI board meetings were all in German which stretched Thiessen to improve his German.<sup>26</sup>

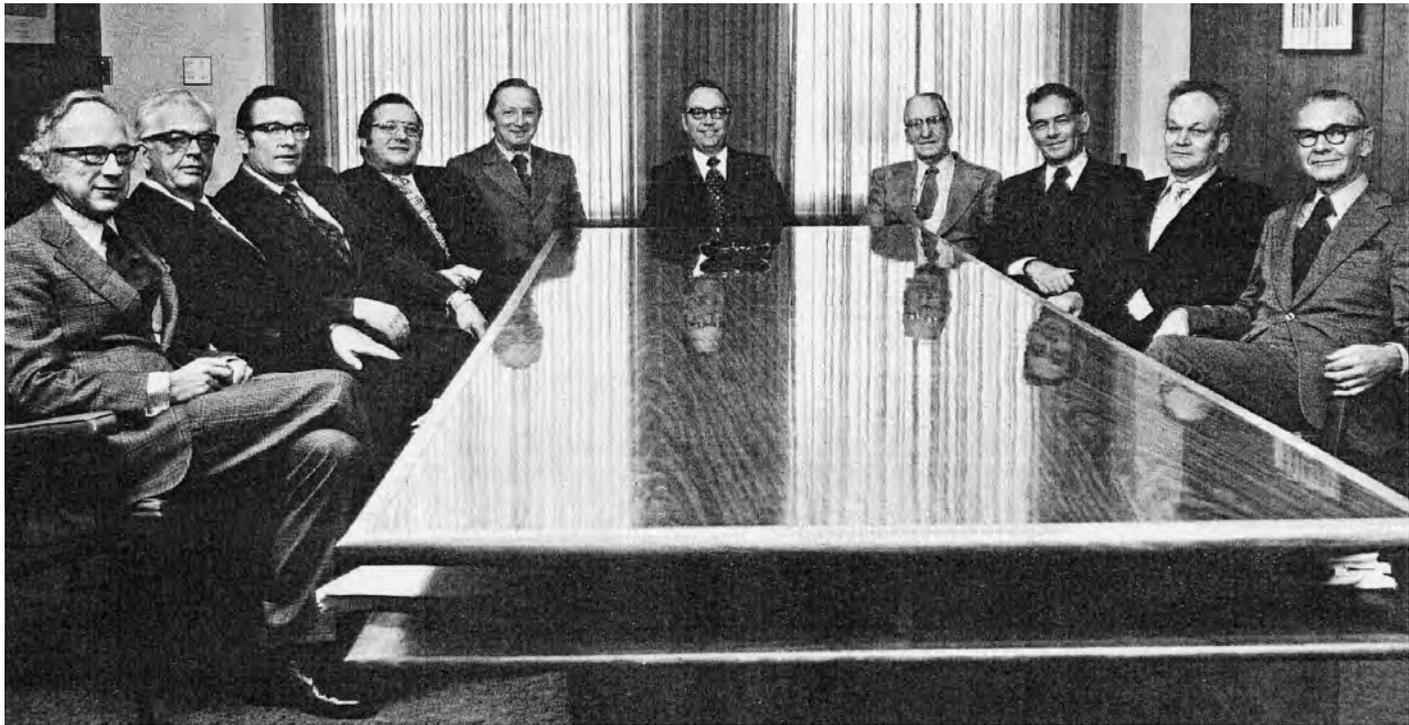
The board continuously dealt with grumbling in the constituency over issues such as the location of the school. In September 1954 the board entertained a proposal that would see all the buildings be moved to Morden, Manitoba. A vote was held in January 1955 with 262 votes vs. 102 to keep the school in Gretna. Thiessen was then elected chair of a building committee for a new residence for the school. The plans approved were less than faculty hoped for and it was later revealed that the architect badly underestimated building costs. The plans were scaled back to a single floor structure rather than a two story with basement. Other cost cutting measures were also taken. Even with these measures the project was over budget and the board was in debt without a clear way out. For this and other reasons Thiessen resigned from the building committee.<sup>27</sup>

Thiessen was able to honor his long time friend and fellow board member, Paul Schaefer, with a large donation to the MCI for the building of the Paul J. Schaefer library which opened in May 1981.

The MCI was not the only educational institution he served. As early as 1942 Thiessen served on the Rosenfeld school board until 1955 when the family moved and he then served on the Gnadenfeld school board until the family moved to Winnipeg on a part time basis in 1961. In 1947 he was elected a director of the Manitoba School Trustees Association (MSTA). At various times he served as director, president and vice-president. One year he served as president of the Canadian School Trustees and made an honorary life member. Because of his involvement with MSTA, he was drawn into other government advisory boards dealing with educational issues. These include: Government Advisory Board of Education, Teachers Pension Fund Board, Teachers Discipline Committee, and the Municipal Assessment Committee.

Seeing a need for a unified voice against the formation of larger school divisions, Thiessen organized the Mennonite School Trustees Association. It was made up of the trustees from the Rhineland (Altona area), Stanley (Winkler area), and Hanover (Steinbach area) school divisions. They met in January before the Manitoba School trustees Associations meetings, which were held in Winnipeg. They were opposed to the formation of larger school divisions. The fear was that larger school divisions meant larger schools with less input and supervision from parents. The association ended when the larger school division legislation passed in the Manitoba legislature.<sup>28</sup>

In 1973 Thiessen was brought into the Manitoba Development Corporation headquartered in Winnipeg. The corporation



*The Board of the Manitoba Economic Development Corporation in the 1970s. A.J. Thiessen is second from the left. Photo Credit:*

operated as a lending institution and worked with economic development in the province on behalf of the Manitoba government. Thiessen served on the board of directors and on the loan committee. In 1973, eighty-seven loans worth \$40 million were approved and in 1974, \$23.5 million. In addition to providing loans the organization helped businesses apply for other federal and provincial funds. In 1974 the board of directors met eighteen times and the loans committee eight times. The organization employed forty-six people.<sup>29</sup> Thiessen served in this capacity until 1976.<sup>30</sup>

Abram J. Thiessen died at his residence at Bethania Mennonite Personal Care Home, Winnipeg on March 7, 2002. His funeral was at First Mennonite Church where he and Lenora had been attending. He was laid to rest in the Rosenfeld cemetery. Lenora died December 13, 2007 and is also buried at the Rosenfeld cemetery.

Like his father and both grandfathers AJ Thiessen was involved with education, business and politics and slightly with farming – perhaps the reverse of many of his local peers. AJ Thiessen’s circle of influence was large. He served the Mennonite community and the wider public through his business ventures, his forays into politics, and service on church and secular business and educational committees. The amount of volunteer time he poured into the various committees and boards was possible only through the support of his wife and children.

Through his experiences he remained a committed Mennonite and Mennonite church member content with simpler things in life. “I have felt that in the social and business establishments in Manitoba... looks askance at all ethnic groups... unless you are willing to deny your own Mennonite background and become avid members of their churches, legions and clubs... We have rather been happy to socialize with our family and friends from our Rosenfeld background.”<sup>31</sup>

#### Endnotes

- 1 A. J. Thiessen, *My Background and Life's Experiences* (Altona: by the author, 1982), p. 3.
- 2 Thiessen, p. 35.
- 3 Thiessen p. 5.
- 4 Thiessen p. 10.
- 5 Thiessen p. 51.
- 6 Thiessen p. 53.
- 7 Gerhard Ens, *The Rural Municipality of Rhineland* (Altona: R.M. of Rhineland, 1984), p. 187.
- 8 Lenora Thiessen obituary, *The Red River Valley Echo*, December 29, 2007, p. 14.
- 9 Thiessen p. 72.
- 10 *Red River Valley Echo*, Altona, Manitoba, August 5, 1953, p.4.
- 11 “Jutras Wins Fourth Consecutive Election”, *Red River Valley Echo*, Altona, Manitoba, August 12, 1953, p.1.
- 12 *Red River Valley Echo*, November 28, 1962 p. 5.
- 13 *Red River Valley Echo*, December 5, 1962 p. 15 and December 12, 1962 p. 12.
- 14 Thiessen p.62. Other sources such as Wikipedia, “Manitoba general election, 1962”, give the difference as 32 votes. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manitoba\\_general\\_election,\\_1962](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manitoba_general_election,_1962) accessed August 12, 2009.
- 15 Thiessen, p. 62.
- 16 “First Meeting of Persons Interested in Establishing a Radio Station in Altona”, March 15, 1956.
- 17 “Minutes of the meeting of shareholders of the proposed Radio Station at Altona”, May 18, 1956.
- 18 Minutes of the meeting of shareholders of the Southern Manitoba Broadcasting Company”, May 25, 1956.
- 19 Peter Letkemann, *The Ben Horch Story* (Winnipeg: Old Oak Publishing, 2007), p. 329.
- 20 “Altona to Get Radio Station”, *Canadian Mennonite*, November 2, 1956, p.1.
- 21 CFAM book p.
- 22 Esther Epp-Tiessen, *Altona the Story of a Prairie Town*, (Altona: D.W. Friesen, 1982), p. 249.
- 23 Letkemann, p. 346.
- 24 Thiessen, p. 91.
- 25 Email from Jeremy Siemens at the MCI to Conrad Stoesz May 6, 2009.
- 26 Thiessen, p. 95.
- 27 Gerhard J. Ens, *Die Schule muss sein : a history of the Mennonite Collegiate Institute 1889-1989*, (Gretna: MCI, 1990), p. 192.
- 28 Thiessen p. 97.
- 29 “Manitoba Development Corporation Annual Report 1974”, p. 5-6.
- 30 Telephone interview with Mr. James Kilgour by Conrad Stoesz May 2009. Mr. Kilgour is the current manager of the Manitoba Development Corporation.
- 31 Thiessen p. 90.

# Transfers to the Bergthal Colony

By Tim Janzen

The accompanying table is a summary of the information found in a document in the Zaporizhia Archives in Zaporizhia, Ukraine that pertains to Mennonites who transferred to the Bergthal Colony from the Chortitza Colony or the Molotschna Colony or transferred from one village to another within the Bergthal Colony during the period 1850-1858. Scans of the original pages in this document were given to Delbert Plett (1948-2004) by Aleksandr Tedeev, the director of the Zaporizhia Archives, in 1998 or thereabouts. Delbert Plett had the scans translated from Russian circa 1999 by someone in Winnipeg, Manitoba. In 2000 Delbert shared with me a copy of the translation. Unfortunately, Delbert had misplaced the scans of the document by that time. I have made attempts to obtain duplicate scans from the Zaporizhia Archives since then, but have not been able to obtain them. Therefore, it is difficult to know if the errors in the summary below are errors made by the translator or errors in the original document.

The fond, inventory, and file number in the Zaporizhia Archives for the document from which this information was translated is uncertain at this time. However, it is known that similar transfer information pertaining to the village of Friedrichsthal is found in Fond 12, Inventory 2, File 232, part 2. This is known because Andrey Ivanov translated the information from this file circa 1999 during a visit to the Zaporizhia Archives. A copy of his translation was given to the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Fresno, California and is on file there. Information in italics is found in Andrey Ivanov's translation, but not in Delbert Plett's translation. A careful comparison of the two translations indicates that Andrey Ivanov did not translate the same document that Delbert Plett had translated. Where there is information found in Andrey Ivanov's translation that is not found in Delbert Plett's translation I have added the information found in Andrey Ivanov's translation in italics.

I have inserted some information in brackets that are corrections to Delbert Plett's translation. The information in brackets follows names or ages that I believe to be incorrect based on other sources, principally the 1843-1876 Bergthal Gemeinde Buch, a transcription of which was published in 1993 by the Hanover Steinbach Historical Society. It should also be noted that the patronymic names for the wives found in the census data are generally given but their maiden names are not given. Thus the male given name that follows the wife's given name is the given name of her father. This practice was customary for wives listed in the 1850 and 1858 Russian revision lists. For reference, I have added columns in the table for the page number (or numbers) in the 1843-1876 Bergthal Gemeinde Buch where the family is listed and have also added the record index number in the GRANDMA Mennonite genealogy database as published by the California Mennonite Historical Society in 2006 in the GRANDMA 5 CD.

This transfer data is helpful from a genealogical perspective because it supplements other available sources pertaining to the Bergthal Colony, the most significant of which is the 1843-1876 Bergthal Gemeinde Buch. Unfortunately, no locations are given in the Bergthal Gemeinde Buch for the events recorded in that source. Thus the locations provided in this document

are of significant interest. In most cases the transfers involved a physical move by the family from the village in which they were registered to the new village they were transferring to. However, it is possible that in some cases the transfers did not involve a physical move. The exact year when each of these transfers took place is not given in Delbert Plett's translation, but they all must have occurred between 1850 and 1858 or 1858 census data would have been given in the document instead of 1850 census data.

All of the transfers to Friedrichsthal must have involved a physical move and probably took place in 1852 when the village was established. A total of 19 families reportedly settled in Friedrichsthal.<sup>1</sup> Seventeen of these families are included in the accompanying table and all seventeen are of Mennonite ancestry. Two other families are included in Andrey Ivanov's translation of the document found in Fond 12, Inventory 2, File 232, part 2. One of these families is Adam Valentin Scheffer, 41, his wife Margaretha, 38, and their children Jakob, 16, Wilhelm 14, Friedrich, Adam, Katherina, 6, and Parsia, 2. They came in 1824 from Europe and settled in Ludwigsthal. They later moved to Marienfeld. The other family is Anton Nickolaus Fischer, 25, his wife Charlotte, 17, and his son Peter, 4. The ages above are as of October 20, 1850. Neither family is mentioned in the Bergthal Gemeinde Buch. It seems probable that neither family was of Mennonite origin. These two families may not have remained in Friedrichsthal for very long before moving elsewhere since they are not listed in Friedrichsthal in the 1858 Bergthal Colony Census.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Schroeder, William and Helmut Huebert, *Mennonite Historical Atlas*, Second Edition, (Winnipeg, 1996), p. 118.

## Subscribe to the Journal of Mennonite Studies.

The 2009 issue has articles from the October 2008 *Mennonites and Money Conference*. The 2010 issue will feature a number of articles about Mennonite Writers.

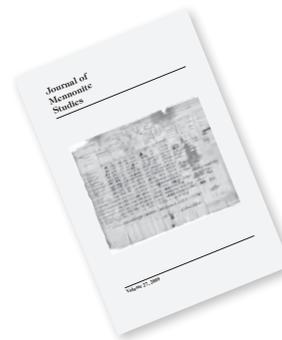
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**1850 Census (Revision List) Data for Mennonites who transferred to  
or within the Bergthal Colony between 1850 and 1858**

Page in the 1843 - 1876 Bergthal Gemeinde Buch where the family is listed	Number in the Grandma 5 database for the head of household	Village in the Chortitza, Molotschna, or Bergthal Colony from which the family is transferring	Village in the Bergthal Colony to which the family is transferring	1850 Census (Revision List) Data
A59	186888	Neuendorf	Schoenfeld	Jacob Philip Dyck, 25, his wife: Elisabeth Abraham, 22, his daughters: Katharina, 2, Elisabeth, 1
A166	184622	Schoenhorst	Schoenfeld	Abraham Johann Friesen (son of Peter Abraham)[son of Johann Johann], 26
A33	186447	Nieder- Chortitza	Schoenfeld	Jacob Johann Schwartz, 25, his wife: Katharina Wilhelm, 35, his daughter: Agatha, 2
A153	177417	Nieder-Chortitza	Schoenfeld	Johann Johann Schwartz, 23, his wife: Agatha Wilhelm, 24, his son: Wilhelm, 3 (born in 1847), his daughter: Katharina, 1
A57	69906	Nieder- Chortitza	Schoenfeld	Peter Erdmann Buhr, 32, his wife: Helena Jacob, 21, his son by his second wife: Jacob, 1 (born in 1849), his daughter by his first wife: Helena, 9
A58	54034	Tiegerweide	Schoenfeld	Johann Peter Abrams, 53, his wife: Maria, 57, his sons: Jacob and Heinrich [Johann], 21 (twins), his daughters: Anna, 26, Katharina, 19, Eva, 17 [14], Helena, 10
A164	201745	Rudnerweide	Heuboden	Franz Franz Janzen (his father Franz Franz Janzen came in 1795), 22
A148	52766	Rudnerweide	Heuboden	Abraham Johann _____ [Flaming] (his father Johann Philip came in 1821), 24
A140	265757	Rueckenau	Bergthal	Daniel Abraham Enns (son of the second wife of Abraham Enns, who came in 1826 [1809 or 1810]), 23, his wife: Anna David, 37
A137	166252	Rosenthal	Heuboden	Bernhard Heinrich Wiebe, 28, his wife: Eleanor [Cornelia] Jacob, 27, his son: Jacob, 1 (born in 1849), his daughters: Maria, 4, Eleanor [Cornelia], 3
A29	230194	Schoenhorst	Heuboden	Heinrich Heinrich Wiens, 35, his wife: Margaretha [Aganetha] Johann, 30 [35], his sons: Heinrich, 14, Johann, 13, Abraham, 2, his daughters: Helena, 6, Margaretha, 4
A158	52767	Rudnerweide	Heuboden	Andreas Johann Phillips [Flaming] (his father Johann Johann Phillips [Flaming] came in 1821), 22
A11a	7662	Schoenwiese	Bergthal	Jacob Jacob Harder, 38, his wife: Katharina Johann, 38, his sons: Abraham, 7, Heinrich, 5, David, 3
A56	146159	Kronsthal	Bergthal	Johann Johann Schroeder, 42, his wife: Maria Aron, 37, his sons: Aron, 17, Johann, 8, Abraham, 3, Gerhard, 2, his daughter: Katharina, 20
A100	69740	Nieder-Chortitza	Bergthal	Abraham Abraham Friesen, 34, his wife: Katharina Aron [Johann], 30, his sons: Abraham, 11, Johann, 9, Aron, 2, Peter, 1, his daughters: Anna, 7, Katharina, 6
A152	266286	Neuendorf	Bergthal	Johann Johann Loewen, 33, his wife: Helena Jacob, 30, his sons: Johann, 8, Jacob, 2 (born in 1848), his daughters: Anna, 7, Margaretha, 5, Helena, 2
A136	126933	Schoenwiese	Schoenthal	Johann Johann Funk, 52, his wife: Katharina Jacob, 47, his sons: Abraham, 17, Johann, 10, Peter, 9, his daughters: Katharina, 13, Helena, 13
A67	185942	Einlage	Schoenthal	David Abraham Hiebert, 31, his wife: Susanna Peter, 27, his sons: David, 4, Abraham, 1, his daughter: Agatha, 7
A150	185949	Einlage	Schoenthal	Johann Michael Kehler, 31, his wife: Maria Jacob, 31, his sons: Johann, 10, Wilhelm, 5, Jacob, 2, his daughter: Helena, 10
A67	177137	Neu- Osterwick	Schoenthal	Heinrich Peter Bergen, 45, his wife: Susanna Johann, 45, his sons: Heinrich, 16, Peter, 12, his daughters: Margaretha, 18, Helena, 14, Elisabeth, 2

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A135	199289	Nieder- Chortitza	Schoenthal	Cornelius Erdmann Buhr, 52, his wife: Maria David, 53, his sons: Erdmann, 31, Peter, 24, David, 12, his daughters: Sara, 21, Aganetha, 16, Erdmann Cornelius' wife: Anna Johann, 26, Erdmann Cornelius' sons: Cornelius, 4, Erdmann, 2, Erdmann Cornelius' daughters: Maria, 7, Anna, 5, Sara, 1
A178	109172	Nieder- Chortitza	Friedrichsthal	Heinrich Johann Dyck ( <i>second adopted son of Heinrich Heinrich Penner</i> ), 32, his wife: Helena Peter, 41, his sons: Heinrich, 11 [6], Peter, 4, his daughters: Agatha, 13, Helena, 8
A172	164865	Rosenthal	Friedrichsthal	Daniel Daniel Blatz (relative of Bernhard Philip Kaunskau [Kauenhausen]), 32, his wife: Helena Peter, 25, his daughters: Maria, 7, Helena, 4, Elisabeth, 1
A179	107870	Blumengart	Friedrichsthal	Erfried [Friedrich] Peter Wall, 40, his wife: Maria Cornelius, 38, his sons: Erfried [Friedrich], 11, Cornelius, 9, Peter, 2, Heinrich, 1, his daughters: Maria, 18, Katharina, 17, Susanna, 15, Margaretha, 13, Anna, 6, Aganetha, 4
A174	219393	Insel Chortitza	Friedrichsthal	Klaas Klaas Peters, 29, his wife: Agatha Johann, 28, his daughters: Helena, 8, Sara, 6, Aganetha, 5, Katharina, 3
A165	146119	Einlage	Friedrichsthal	Johann Johann [David per the 1858 Census] Bergmann ( <i>came in 1840 to Einlage from Europe</i> ), 24, his wife Anna Bernhard, 22
A177	187004	Neuendorf	Friedrichsthal	Abraham Peter Hamm ( <i>third son of Peter Michael Hamm</i> ), 46, his wife: Helena Jacob, 33, his son by his first wife: Peter, 22, his daughters by his first wife: Barbara, 13, Katharina, 10, his son by his second wife: Abraham, 3, his daughter by his second wife: Margaretha, 1
A180	106265	Neuendorf	Friedrichsthal	Johann Jacob Berg ( <i>son of Jacob Jacob Berg</i> ), 35, his wife: Maria Jacob, 31, his sons: Jacob, 7, Johann, 4, his daughters: Maria, 13, Christina, 9, Helena, 2
A173	198547	Neuendorf	Friedrichsthal	Johann Jacob Buhler ( <i>third son of Jacob Abraham Buhler</i> ), 23, his wife: Aganetha Jacob, 23, his son: Johann, 1 (born in 1849)
A85	186916	Neu-Osterwick	Friedrichsthal	Jacob Peter Wiens ( <i>came in 1838 to Neu-Osterwick from Europe</i> ), 34, his wife: Gertruda Jacob, 26, his sons: Jacob, 3, Peter, 1, his daughter: Maria, 8
A175	219402	Schoeneberg	Friedrichsthal	Johann Peter Peters, 32, his wife: Aganetha Johann, 32, his sons: Peter, 14, Johann [Isaac], 2, his daughters: Helena, 13, Anna, 11, Aganetha, 9, Katharina, 7, Maria, 4
A19, B85	180070	Bergthal	Friedrichsthal	Jacob Wilhelm Rempel (son of Wilhelm Wilhelm Rempel), 22
A22, B57	222503	Bergthal	Friedrichsthal	Franz Peter Goertzen [Harder] ( <i>third son of Peter Abraham Goertzen [Harder]</i> ), 26, his wife: Anna Jacob, 22, his son: Jacob, 1, his daughter: Anna, 2
A31, B77	184858	Schoenfeld	Friedrichsthal	Peter Jacob Penner [Hoepfner] ( <i>fifth son of Jacob Anton Penner [Hoepfner]</i> ), 23
A30, B62	180915	Schoenfeld	Friedrichsthal	Jacob Jacob Derksen (first son of Jacob Jacob Derksen), 22, his wife: Maria Peter, 21
A46, B25	186471	Schoenfeld	Friedrichsthal	Wilhelm Jacob Thiessen (first son of Jacob Wilhelm Thiessen), 36 [31], his wife Barbara Johann, 36 [31], his daughters: Egelya [Katharina], 16 [10], Anna, 4, Helena, 2
A1, B5	220329	Schoenthal	Friedrichsthal	Thomas Peter Sawatzky (second son of Peter Thomas Sawatzky), his wife: Elisabeth Heinrich, 24, his son by his first wife: Jacob, 4, his daughter by his second wife: Elisabeth, 1
A88, B54	184988	Schoenthal	Friedrichsthal	Franz Jacob Dyck (son of Jacob Klaas Dyck) <i>who lived in Neu-Osterwick prior to 1839</i> , 27, his wife Katharina [Margaretha] Cornelius, 22

# Letters and Discussions

## Sin and Salvation

By Jake Buhler

They are not neutral, these words, *sin* and *salvation*. In almost every society, without regard to religion, border or culture, there are meanings and interpretation for sin and salvation. Indeed, the very shape and movement of cultures are influenced by how these concepts have been inculcated and internalized. In his dictionary of ideas, S.C.F. Brandon observes that “sin and salvation are traditionally derived from an ancient belief in deities who govern the universe and decree laws designed to maintain a proper relationship between themselves and mankind in order to preserve both the cosmic order and harmony of human society”<sup>1</sup> It is no surprise, then that sin and salvation are also large subjects in Christianity. Indeed one central core of Christianity is the response to sin.

If sin and salvation are key tenets of belief in many religions and cultures, it can be argued that their impact is on individuals within a specific society. Each individual must feel and internalize those commonly held teachings.

But what are those beliefs if they are not shaped formatively by language and other traits of culture? There is no generic understanding of sin or salvation unless it is couched in the milieu of language set in a specific culture.

I wish to show how my own understanding of sin and salvation shifted from orthodoxy to liberalism to liberation and finally to contextualism. I will argue that two elements are normally present in such changes: a significant experience and an accompanying cognitive or educational encounter.

I will use a self case study to show how my earliest understandings of sin and salvation were determined by my first language within a specific cultural milieu. These orthodox views were damaged by an outside influence. Certain influences led to a liberal view of sin and salvation. A major event in the community provided circumstances that changed my thinking to liberation. Finally, a long sojourn in Asia led to a contextual view of sin and salvation.

I was born into a Mennonite farming family of seven children in the middle of World War II. It was not a good time in Canada for my parents to be Germanic conscientious objectors. Up to the age of six I spoke only Low German at Home. [High] German was the language of the church. When I entered the world of grade one, I learned English. The language at home remained Low German. The church switched from German to English in my late teens.

Low German is an oral root language older than English, German or French. It has similarities to Yiddish, Afrikaners and Dutch. Its metaphors and sayings are concrete, unlike English which uses abstractions.

I was instructed at my mother’s knee that the *Schreft* (Writings) taught that all persons were *zindlich* (sin-like) because the first man, Adam, had been *oyahorsam* (disobedient) to *Gott* (God). However, not to be *feloren* (lost), I could *bekjia* (come into a state of turn around) myself to become *seelij* (blessed).

*Bekjiaren* (turning around) involved *aufprachern* (beg off) for my *zindlichkjet* (sin situation) and then Jesus would *fezei* (forgive) me. Then if I *storf* (died) I would be with Jesus in *Himmel* (Heaven). This was made possible because Jesus died on the *Kjreetz* (cross) in my place and took my sin upon himself. God had so much *liv* (love) to give up [his] only son for me. But, mother explained, “*oba vann eina sich dot laeven nich omdraeht dann meint di zeelichkjet nuscht* (but if you don’t change your behavior, blessedness means nothing).

Of note is that there is no word for salvation in Low German. The words blessed and blessedness are used to denote the fulfillment of God’s work through Jesus Christ. Upon having blessedness, most traditional Mennonites then hoped for God’s love so that they would be with Christ after death. There was a reluctance to have assurance of salvation. To be self-assured was to play the role of God: only God can judge. “Man” would be guilty of pride if he took judgment liberties upon himself.

My older brother, Irvin, used to speculate what might happen if one wasn’t *seelij* (blessed) when one died. He judged eternity to be a long time. “Take your thumb nail and scratch this big rock once a day,” he said. “When you have ground it down, eternity will have just begun”. So I scratched the rock a hundred times until my thumb was bleeding. There were no marks on the rock! I hoped that God would count me as *seelij*. Irvin explained that the fire of hell might never go out.

By the 1950s, the quiet villages 35 kilometers north of Saskatoon had received electricity and telephone. Radios broadcast in English. And outside evangelists set up their tents near my village at Osler. A new message, different from my mother’s, was shouted on the stage. The God of Love I had experienced turned into a Judge. We were unworthy worms, trumpeted evangelist Leo Janz. We were degenerate sinners even if we thought we were good, he shouted. For me that was surprising because my parents were hardly worms; and they were good. I learned that there was nothing I could do. All the good that our family did was useless. We were not *seelij* (blessed) unless we repented in a certain way saying certain things. We would then receive salvation and be saved. And we could be sure that we were born again. We were guaranteed a place in heaven. So I whispered the words just to be sure. But I did not go to the front to face the scary man.

Sin and Blessedness became Sin and Salvation. But deep down I hoped for *Seelijkeit*. *We are Today what we Became* Then was a cutting edge film produced by the National Film Board in the 1970s. It argued that what we believe and practice today is based on the formative learning experiences of youth. I maintain today I have received blessedness, not salvation.

My mother bested my father by two years with her 6<sup>th</sup> grade German language schooling. Yet she might have agreed that her “blessedness” came from the having “begged off” to obtain a

new relationship with God. Her limited schooling did not preclude her from a solid understanding of sin and salvation that included a turning around (*bekjiaren*) to achieve blessedness. The process in which that occurred was explained as God's love, rather than God's grace. I embraced those early beliefs. In the month that she died in 2002 at the age of 95, she asked me if I was "turned around" and if I had "blessedness." I replied that I hoped so.

As John Bunyan's Christian claimed, "...I am undone by reason of a burden that lieth upon me."<sup>2</sup> I inherited this view of sin from my mother, but not Bunyan's preoccupation with its guilt. I achieved salvation [blessedness] not unlike Christian did. "...just as Christian came up with the cross, his burden loosed off his shoulders...and began to tumble...and [it] was no more."<sup>3</sup> I "stood with one foot already in the new land of forgiveness."<sup>4</sup> God was Love, after all. And in my context, I made a commitment, after which the task was to live a life of worship and service.

And I did. By the age of 16 I was teaching Sunday and leading a youth group. Encouraged by others, we explored other faiths and cultures. We visited a Jewish synagogue, a Catholic church and an Indian [First Nations] reservation. We washed cars and grew potatoes to raise money for local fire victims and overseas children suffering malnutrition. We sang for the elderly and sang praises around the fireplace. When I entered Bible College at age 18 I read Paul Tillich; I would never be the same. I discovered that:

*The courage to be for him is the courage to affirm oneself in spite of sin and guilt. It could not have been different for the courage to face one's own guilt leads to the question of salvation instead of renunciation.*<sup>5</sup>

I was at once absorbed in existentialism, not fully understanding it, but embracing it cautiously. Why not carry Plato's view that humanity can be essentially good into the Christian realm? Tillich writes:

*...the essential nature of man and his world is good...it is divine creation. But man's created goodness has been lost.*<sup>6</sup>

It is in another book that Tillich explains salvation more fully. He sees salvation as

*...Christ our saviour with power that heals when he accepts us and liberates us by showing us in his being a new being – a being in which there is reconciliation with ourselves, with our world and with the divine Ground of our world and ourselves.*<sup>7</sup>

The alcoholics of Winnipeg's skid row were in need of salvation. I saw the saviour within myself, optimistically. I had yet to discover that the true saviour for an alcoholic must come from within himself. But I embraced what I understood to be liberal theology. I ceased to be categorical about the alcoholics, the Indians [First Nations], the Jews and the Catholics. I ceased to think of myself as disobedient. Instead there was a lack of love. Much later Solle would say that "love is always greater and requires more than what I am and do."<sup>8</sup> I believed it as a young person but had no words to express it lucidly. I was brought up to believe that it was God's love that enabled

me along the road to blessedness [salvation]. The liberal view of sin hearkened back to my mother's teaching about love. The song I sang with her was "Jesus liebt mich ganz gewisz, weil mann's in der Bibel liesz." (Jesus loves me, that's for certain because we read about it in the Bible).

I began to believe that I "had sinned against you [God] alone."<sup>9</sup> Sins were no longer only acts of bad deeds. Much later Migliore would say clearly what I might have been thinking: "...we misunderstood the depth of sin if we see it only as a violation of a moral code; it is instead, primarily, the disruption of our relationship with God."<sup>10</sup>

More difficult for me, even before Migliore wrote about it, was that sin "is fundamentally an opposition to grace."<sup>11</sup> Grace was a sort of ambivalent word that was theoretical with little practical grounding. It was called *Gnoden* in my first language and used secondarily to love.

By the time 1978 had come, I had traveled to Europe and Asia. I saw England as one of the cradles of imperialism and India as a place of abject poverty that had been raped by an imperial power. Questions began to surface. But it was a gargantuan struggle in my own "back yard" that made internalized a connection between the oppressor and the oppressed.

From 1976 to 1981 I was one of about six key leaders that fought Eldorado Nuclear's one hundred million dollar proposal to construct a uranium hexafluoride refinery east of Warman, just two miles from my farm home where I lived. We mobilized a huge opposition (500 members) and after a 5-year mammoth struggle we prevailed. During the official hearings we called in "our experts" that included Mennonite activists from the Philippines and India who made connections between North America and the third world. They demonstrated that the poor in the third world are suffering because of first world interventions. The nuclear industry was in the middle of it. We were not about to be a part of further oppression. The panel heard about the economic oppression of Indians and Philipinos. What some of us heard in teach-in seminars was how Catholic priests were being imprisoned in the Philippines for raising the plight of the shanty-town slum dwellers. Our eyes were opened and our minds began to think differently. I was one of the people radically affected by Dorothy Friesen's stories about living with the oppressed Muslims in Mindanao. We began to learn what identifying with the poor was all about through the life of Bishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador. When he was assassinated by right-wing elements in 1980, we were aghast.

As I related the story of Bishop Romero to my parents, they reminded me that when one is faithful to one's beliefs, one may have to pay the ultimate cost. Mother reminded me that her brother-in-law was killed in Russia for refusing to bear arms. It was then that I learned that my parents believed in the big evil out there described by Paul as "powers and principalities."<sup>12</sup>

When we began to talk the language of the dispossessed we were called radicals. Some argued that we needn't run down our own country because of poor people in the Philippines. By 1981 I had resigned my principalship, my wife her university position, and we were off to Thailand, I to work there and Louise in Vietnam. It was a belief in liberation theology that motivated the decision. Little did I know that twenty years in Asia would lead to yet another shift in theology.

Solle argues that if sin is separation from God, it "expresses itself in social structures...it is manifested in covetousness...and injustice."<sup>13</sup> Mary Engel says "sin is a betrayal of trust."<sup>14</sup>

She goes on to explain that it is a “lack of care.”<sup>15</sup> She is most eloquent when she says:

*This is the sin, the breaking of the bond by the perpetrator through a betrayal of trust, not the brokenness itself, in which the victims cannot help participating.*<sup>16</sup>

The link between domestic violence and abuse, which was Engel’s focus, and that of the first world-third world arena, can be made with integrity; in each case there is an oppressor and a victim. In both instances there is violence; one is physical, the other is economic and political.

It is Grant who observes that “when we liberate others, we liberate ourselves...the redemptive process...is a dynamic existence not only between the redeemer and the redeemed community but also with the redeemer”<sup>17</sup>

Liberation theology helped me to understand injustice caused by political, economic and physical violence. What I had not expected was Sally McFague’s brilliant explanation of sin against the environment. She begins her argument by saying that “sin is the refusal to accept our place as limited.”<sup>18</sup> In answer to sin she says that the “relationship between creation and salvation in which salvation is the direction of creation and creation is the place of salvation”.<sup>19</sup>

I have witnessed the destruction of melaluca forests in Cambodia and Vietnam. Their demise in the reaches of the Lower Mekong Basin is now the main cause of serious flooding each year. Greed caused humans to sin against nature. McFague had added an entirely new explanation to a theology I had but could not express. I worked with local officers to preserve and conserve patches of melaluca tracts in Dong Thap. The sin against creation in Vietnam is extensive. Salvific solutions are often lacking.

While in Thailand I read with interest Koyama’s book *Water Buffalo Theology*. He argues that the gospel message must be relevant in the context of any given society or culture. Koyama was a missionary in Thailand and realized that to connect he had to “trakj on” (Low German: literally putting on the other person’s situation) the Thai people before he could be relevant with the gospel. He learned how to use the metaphors understood by local people. The good news was told in their language. Koyama contextualized the messages of sin and salvation, two terms that do not readily translate into Thai. The Buddhist understandings are explained so differently from those in Islam, Judaism and Christianity.

I had always reacted negatively to Rudyard Kipling’s notion of the “white man’s burden” in India. He believed the British had a responsibility to improve the lot of the less-than-adequate Indians. His ethnocentric views have long since fallen into disrepute. My first learning experience in Thailand was a discussion with Acharn Sulak (revered teacher) who said “you will begin to understand us when you trade your logical mind with our illogical mind. Then you will find us to be logical as well. If you want to understand what sin and salvation are, think cyclically, not linearly. We begin at a different point with a different explanation” And I did what he said.

I was introduced to C.S. Song by my daughter who studied his writings and held discussions with him. Song’s voice speaks of a contextual theology. Speaking of salvation and western ethnocentrism he says:

*what are we to make of the reluctance, and sometimes refusal, on behalf of many preachers and Christians to see God’s saving activity outside the Christian community as well as within it.*<sup>20</sup>

That salvation could divide peoples and cultures into opposing camps is beyond his toleration thresh-hold:

*This is the irony of ironies: that salvation should become something that divides people into saved and the unsaved.*<sup>21</sup>

The chiding is followed by his answer:

*Jesus’ gospel of God’s reign expands our vision of resurrection and extends our experience of salvation. It creates space in our theology for fresh insights into how people of diverse cultural and religious traditions respond to the question of life and death.*<sup>22</sup>

I learned from Buddhism that truth is not absolute. Buddhists do not replace one truth for another; they add new understandings to existing beliefs. It is an inclusive religion. In its own way, Christianity would do better to add to its message new understandings of sin and salvation.

Over more than fifty years my views of sin and salvation have shifted from orthodoxy to liberalism to liberation and finally to contextualism. The boundaries among these positions were not always distinct. There were times when I found much comfort with my mother’s orthodox explanation of salvation (blessedness). To see sin as a lack of love brought on by egoism is progressive but did not call me to action. Liberation theology was a call to commitment and action. My liberal attire was suede shoes, dress pants and a top coat; with liberation theology,

I put on work shoes, overalls and work gloves. When I embraced contextual theology I put on the clothes of the Thai and the Vietnamese.

In this paper I demonstrated that my orthodox views of sin and salvation were developed through the early experiences

with my mother and with language specific terminology. Outside evangelists briefly damaged a healthy orthodox position. The shift from orthodoxy to liberation took place when two positions were present: educational and experiential learnings. A major community interruption sensitized me to the suffering of poor people in the third world caused in part by the first world power brokers. I read liberation authors and resigned my job to go overseas, Once overseas, and able to practice liberation theology, I was introduced to theologians who said any theology, to be relevant, must *trakj*-on the local culture. Over twenty years I was able to succeed, and, of course, at times fail, in my endeavor to practice liberation and contextual theology. I did this without discarding some of the orthodox and liberal ideas of my earlier Christian sojourn.

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**Over more than fifty years my views of sin and salvation have shifted from orthodoxy to liberalism to liberation and finally to contextualism.**

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My views on sin and salvation have moved rather substantially at least three times. Each shift has meant an addition. I have attempted to explain that such shifts, and additions, can occur when academic and experiential learnings combine to create new paradigms.

In the end I ask again what is sin and what is salvation. For Saint Paul it included a life-long struggle between doing good and not being able to do good. For him there was God's sufficient grace through the event of the cross. For me sin and salvation was, initially, an acquired understanding that impure humanity could result in *seeligkjet* (blessedness) following an experience of *bekjearne* (turn around). I moved to embrace other views before learning that a contextual understanding of sin and salvation is to first appreciate the existing language and cultural understandings. Then, to discover how the Gospel can be expressed to obtain equivalent expressions of *bekjiaren* and *seeljkjet* (turn around and blessedness). Sin and salvation, then, are English words waiting for valid expressions in other languages and cultures to provide new meaning for a global society.

## Endnotes

- 1 S.C.F. Brandon, "Sin and Salvation", *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*. (Charlottesville, VA., 2003).
- 2 John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*. (London, 1948) 2.
- 3 *Ibid.* 37
- 4 Dorothee Solle, *Thinking about God*. (Harrisburg, PA, 1990) 58.
- 5 Tillich, Paul, *The Courage to Be*. (New Haven, 1962) 17.
- 6 *Ibid.* 127 (note: I want to be careful with this quote. Tillich in explaining existentialism explains hu[man]ity's condition as quoted.
- 7 Tillich, Paul, *The Eternal Now*. (New York, 1963) 121.
- 8 Solle. 60.
- 9 Psalms 51:4
- 10 Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*. (Grand Rapids, 1999) 130.
- 11 *Ibid* 130.
- 12 Romans 6:12.
- 13 Solle 65.
- 14 Mary Engel, *Lift Every Voice*. (San Francisco, 1990) 157.
- 15 *Ibid* 160.
- 16 *Ibid* 160.
- 17 John Grant in *Lift Every Voice* (San Francisco, 1990) 208
- 18 Sallie, McFague, *Body of God (...)* 112
- 19 *ibid* 180
- 20 C.S. Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, (Minneapolis, 1994) 60
- 21 *Ibid* 61.
- 22 *Ibid* 62.

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## Dialogue between Harold Janz and John Friesen

Dear Editor,

I've long appreciated Harold Bender's idea about a search for a "useable history." It has been one of the elements of my thinking that has motivated me to read and reflect on many of the threads that continue to influence how my church community, the Mennonite Brethren, tends to live out its faith and how other parts of the larger Mennonite family experienced their faith.

A copy of the most recent issue of *Preservings* (Issue No. 28, 2008) came into my possession and two articles caught my attention in particular, and I would like to comment briefly on them.

There are the editorial by John J. Friesen, "A useable Past," in which he draws on Harold Bender's *The Anabaptist Vision*, and the second is an address my friend Bill Janzen gave to MCC workers in the agency's Low German programs in 2007, "Government pressure, Mennonite separateness, and the 1920s migration to Mexico and Paraguay." I don't want to argue with Bill's address – because I feel it was carefully researched and sympathetically presented. Some of what it says, I feel, however, is influenced by an inadequate understanding of the earlier history of the Old Colonists and as a result does not provide the direction that it might and probably should have given.

In my estimation by reflecting a misreading of both the Prussian and Russian Mennonite history and Anabaptist theological roots, the articles provide a certain misleading comfort to leaders within the conservative Low German church communities that ends up doing them a disservice.

John Friesen argues, firstly, that the Old Colonists "exemplify many of the basic biblical emphases that Bender identified in [The Anabaptist Vision]." Friesen says the "negative evaluation of the Old Colonists is wrong. There is a solid core of faith and faithfulness in their communities and individuals. Sure they have their weaknesses and problems, but what church doesn't."

I like what Bill Janzen says much more. He is a careful

researcher and a very generous-spirited individual, and his inclination has always been to treat those to whom he has addressed himself with great respect. And he loves the Low German folk among whom his own roots lie. He has served them unstintingly for decades. That service can only be applauded. He is also capable of seeing failures and naming them.

However, after describing the conflicts and tensions that led to the movement of the conservative groups to Mexico and Paraguay in the 1920s, it seems to me that it should have been possible to make a clearer statement of what was wrong about events at the time of the exodus and the harmful outcomes that continue to flow from those decisions. For they most certainly do continue.

However, I am most troubled by John Friesen's use of Harold Bender's vision of what Anabaptism stood for. I distinctly recall listening to an address Bender gave to a large Mennonite Brethren centennial assembly in Winnipeg in 1960 in which he specifically referred to the renewal of a vital faith that had come out of the Pietist-inspired awakening movement in Russia a century before. He especially noted how needed it had been in the conservative Mennonite settings. If you read Bender's "Vision" address, you will see that before he comes to what he considers the three distinguishing marks of Anabaptism, he links these to a review of the movement as "the culmination of the Reformation" and quotes two German historians: "The essential and distinguishing characteristics of this church is its great emphasis upon the actual personal conversion and regeneration of every Christian through the Holy Spirit..." (Max Goebel). And the other: "More radically than any other party for church reformation the Anabaptists strove to follow the footsteps of the church of the first century and to renew unadulterated original Christianity..." (Johann Loserth). The distinguishing marks of the Anabaptists assumes a vital relationship with Christ.

To grasp why many of the Low German churches have wandered into such troubling truths, their history needs to

be examined and understood in Prussia, Poland and Russia. Where did their fixation on German (not simply Low German but High German as the language of the school and church) come from? Where did their resistance to inputs to their educational system come from? And where did the belief that geographic or physical isolation from others come from? Certainly, these are not simply the legacy of the Anabaptist reformers.

*(Some of the following paragraphs have been omitted because they do not further the argument, but either review Prussian and Russian Mennonite history which is well known, or level criticisms against Old Colonists which you have made earlier, and are not new.)*

But our greatest sorrow should be the state of the churches and their life as Christians. I don't have the slightest doubt that large numbers of people in the Old Colony, Sommerfelder and Reinlaender churches in Mexico, Bolivia, Paraguay, and perhaps even Belize, are utterly sincere people and maintain good behaviour. But is it enough to believe people are sincere? Indeed, they work hard, are honest, they love their families, they care for each other. But they live under harsh rule, they are afraid to speak openly, they cannot share their struggles and questions within the church - a great deal of legalism and fear dominates their church experience. Large numbers have known the judgment of the church when they chose to return to Canada or stepped over the traces in some way in Mexico or Bolivia. Large numbers are greatly disadvantaged by the socialization they experience.

Will the people who profess to care for the Low German communities ever acquire the ability to speak the truth about the harms they recognize happening to them there? For those of us who've found it so easy to condemn the wrongs done elsewhere, why can't we recognize them here? Or if we have felt that the aid and relief were good elsewhere, why not equally here? If the leaders of the Plett Foundation or the editors of *Preservings* want to do genuine good for the Old Colonist Mennonites, we should be getting something other than what we read in this most recent editorial.

Cordially yours,  
Harold Janz

### **Response to Harold Janz**

Dear Harold,

Your letter allows me to correct and clarify a number of misconceptions that you have of the history and life of Old Colonists. One of your basic complaints and laments seems to be that they are not like Mennonite Brethren. They are not as involved in the world as MBs; they are separated from society. They do not use the personal Pietist religious language; they use the historical language of commitment, community and hope. They are not as involved in the politics and life of their host societies as MBs, they have chosen to form separate communities. They are not out in society actively evangelizing like MBs do, they are more focused on winning their children to the faith. And the list could go on.

By focusing so strongly on seeing Old Colonists in terms of how they fall short of being like MBs, you have failed to see them in their own terms. Before one can helpfully critique a

group, one has to at least try to understand them in their own terms. If one does this, one will see that the basic convictions of the Old Colonists are solidly rooted in scripture and in the historic Anabaptist faith experience. This is why I referred to H. S. Bender's article on "The Anabaptist Vision" because I believe it provides some categories for helpfully understanding Old Colonists.

In regards to Harold Bender, you say that he was critical of Russian Mennonite conservatives, and that he would not have agreed with the way I applied his "Anabaptist Vision" article to them. In that I think you are wrong. In Bender's own Swiss tradition there are the Old Order Mennonites and Old Order Amish, both of whom have many similarities to the Old Colonists in terms of separation from the world, emphasis on the community rather than on the individual, and community language of faith rather than pietist/evangelical language of personal experience. I think Bender would have understood very well that his article applied to the conservatives in both the Swiss and Russian Mennonite traditions.

In fact, Bender was much more critical of the more liberal Russian Mennonites, those who organized the *Selbstschutz* in Russia, and who, in his view, compromised their historical view of peace by taking up arms. Bender, and many American Mennonites, were so upset with this compromise of a basic biblical tenet of faith, that they were unwilling to support David Toews and the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization in their immigration efforts in the 1920s until the Soviets were closing the doors to emigration. It was the liberals, like the MBs, who fell much more under Bender's critique than did the conservatives.

Now to the historical misunderstandings. You say that the conservatives were mistaken when they migrated, and that many harmful consequences have followed. This is simply incorrect. When the conservatives migrated they believed they did this out of sense of faithfulness to God. One can point out many positive consequences of the numerous migrations. If it were not for the migrations of the conservatives, you, Harold, would not be in Canada today. It is conservatives who first migrated to Canada, pioneered, established communities and organizations, and then were able to provide the base for the CPR and the Canadian government to allow 20,000 Mennonites to migrate to Canada. Conservatives pioneered in Russia, and later in Mexico, Paraguay, and Bolivia. If it had not been for the conservative Menno Colony in Mexico, the Mennonite refugees from Moscow in 1930 would not have been able to move to Paraguay and found the Fernheim colony. In each case the conservatives went first and paid the price of pioneering. The more liberal Mennonites came later, and instead of being grateful to the conservatives for having blazed the trail for them, often blamed them for being backward, not religious enough, not using the right language, and tried to convert and change them. See Frank H. Epp's studies which refer to this point.

Your understanding of the Russian Mennonite setting is incorrect. Mennonites did not choose to live in colonies separate from the Russian and Ukrainian societies. This structure was imposed upon them by the Russian government, which required this of all settlers, because it wanted to protect its people from potentially corrupting foreign influences. See James Urry's fine study *None But Saints* for how the Mennonite communities were organized under the Russian government's Ministry of the Interior.

You are also incorrect in implying that conservative Russian Mennonites simply passively accepted this pattern of community organization imposed upon them by the government. They resisted it, especially the requirement that Mennonites were to separate the church from local civil and judicial matters. Such a separation meant that on important issues, e.g. those dealing with conflicts between neighbours, the church was prevented from dealing with these matters in terms of church discipline. They were dealt with as criminal acts, and handled by the Mennonite civil administration, instead of being seen as breaking fellowship with fellow believers and resolved within the context of the church. Because the Russian government naturally sided with the Mennonite civil administration, the church frequently felt powerless.

The conservatives, following sound Anabaptist principles, argued that the Christian faith, the Bible and thus also the church, should apply to all of life, including the local everyday civil concerns. The *Kleine Gemeinde* formed in 1812 largely over this issue. The conservatives who moved to Manitoba in the 1870s, and organized the *Reinlaender Mennonite Church*, later known as the *Old Colony Church*, made sure that the civil organizations would be under the direction of the church. This is how it is to this day in their settlements.

The more liberal Mennonites in Russia accepted the Russian government-imposed system in which civil, judicial and political issues were secularized and taken out of the realm of the church. They thus narrowed the areas of corporate life to which the church and the gospel applied.

Your most serious historical misconception is regarding the origin and founding of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia. This misconception seriously distorts your present understating of Old Colonists. You suggest that it was the Pietist movement, mediated by the Mennonite Brethren Church, which introduced the key Anabaptist emphases to Mennonites in Russia, and thus imply that the Mennonite Brethren Church's Pietist identity was the proper continuation of the sixteenth century Anabaptist vision. Both views are not born out by the facts of the Russian Mennonite story.

Let's turn to the latter point first. To suggest that the Anabaptist period was a golden age which shortly thereafter deteriorated and was not recovered until the founding of the Mennonite Brethren Church in 1860 is simply a distortion of history. There was a much greater continuity between the sixteenth century Anabaptist movements and the subsequent history than you suggest. The vibrancy of the early years was continued for centuries, albeit, in changed circumstances. The faith of the Mennonite communities remained strong while they faced active persecution, as well as economic, political, and educational discriminations for centuries, first in the Netherlands, and then later in Poland and Prussia. See Peter Klassen's new book on the history of Mennonites in Poland and Prussia for a very fine discussion of this story.

During those years Mennonites developed the patterns and organizations that have carried them successfully from that time to the present. Their historic understanding of the Christian faith, their tenacious adherence to scripture, their community based churches, their view of salvation as developed in a process of nurture and training, was solid, biblical, and served them well.

Your other point that you suggest and assume, namely, that the MB church injected the corrective of Pietism into Russian

Mennonite life, is historically incorrect. Whatever one thinks of the influence of Pietism, Pietism was firmly established in Russian Mennonite churches for more than a generation before the MB church began.

Pietism was introduced into the Russian Mennonite communities at least as early as the 1820s and the 1830s. In the 1820s some of the teachers whom Johann Cornies recruited from Prussia to teach in his new secondary school in Ohrloff brought in Pietist influences in the form of hymnody, literature and new school curricula. In the 1830s the Gnadefeld congregation was established by Mennonite immigrants from Prussia, and immediately the congregation became a centre of Pietism. While in Prussia this group had absorbed a Moravian type of Pietism, and had accepted numerous people of Lutheran background into membership. When this congregation of mixed backgrounds moved to Russia, it was already using the Pietist language of conversion and personal piety, and had organized Bible study groups, held annual mission festivals, and connected with the Russian Bible society.

In 1859, a group of men from this Gnadefeld congregation approached the bishop and asked to be allowed to celebrate a separate communion. They wanted only those who were truly converted, according to the Pietist understanding, to attend. The bishop said no. He explained that he was the bishop of the whole church, and did not want to separate the congregation into two parts. He was also thereby saying that the church should be large enough to include both those who had a Pietist understanding of the faith, and those who had a historic Mennonite understanding. The group of men rejected this explanation, met separately, and formed the MB church.

The basic principal in the formation of the Mennonite Brethren church was not Pietism, since that had already been present for decades. The basic principal was separation – a view of the church that included only a Pietist understanding of the faith. By separating, the MB church thus narrowed the view of who qualified for the church. To use another metaphor, it created a smaller tent. Only the Pietists were included.

The principal of separation was introduced from two sources. One was from the Wuerttemberg Pietism of the neighbouring Lutheran colonies, a Pietism that was separatist. Earlier Lutheran Pietism, including Moravian Pietism, had seen its movement as a leaven within the large church by forming small circles of fellowship, Bible study and prayer. Spener, one of the earliest Pietists, called these groups "ecclesiola in ecclesia" (little churches within the larger church). Wuerttemberg Pietism, on the other hand, advocated that Pietists withdraw from the larger church and form their own church consisting only of like-minded people.

The other separatist influence came from the German Baptists who were active in the Chortitza colony. They demonstrated their separate status by insisting on adult immersion baptism. After some time, these two separatist groups, the one in the Molotschna influenced by the Wuerttemberg Pietists, and those in the Chortitza colony, joined to form the Mennonite Brethren church.

My challenge to you is to move beyond separatism, and to enlarge the tent. Accept both the Pietist/evangelical as well as the historic Mennonite view of faith and the church as expressed by Old Colonists. If one accepts the Old Colony historic Mennonite view of faith as valid, then one can discuss their shortcomings and problems, but from within the framework of

their faith understanding. I believe this will be a more fruitful discussion than holding them up to a view of the church and of the Christian faith which is foreign to who they are. I believe that the Old Colonists deserve respect for their long history of advocating biblical and historic principals of faith that you and I, who are more liberal, have long since discarded. We may

be able to learn from them. It is not only they who need our critique, we need their witness.

John J. Friesen  
Co-editor, *Preservings*

## Re: The Hildebrand Story

I read with interest the article in *Preservings 2008*, written by M. Hildebrand. Although, indeed a very good and informative article, it regrettably contains some errors which need to be corrected and clarified.

There is a serious error of translation in this piece which requires amendment because indeed this author is not the only writer who has made this mistake. This error is also found in writings of professional Mennonite historians, and it is the reason that I critique an otherwise excellent article.

The passage in question reads: "In Neuenburg Peter Dueck was unanimously voted in as teacher. ...On the 24<sup>th</sup> they had elections for a school teacher in Chortitz and two men were elected David Giesbrecht and Gerhard Enns."

Although I am not aware of the source of this translation, it is incorrect and misleading. A German dictionary may indeed translate the word *Lehrer* only as teacher. Regardless, in this Mennonite context, the word unambiguously and unequivocally means "Minister."

Up until the late 1800s, Mennonite Gemeinden always referred to their Ministers as *Lehrer*, even in many parts of West Prussia. Moreover, school teachers were appointed or hired, not elected (although perhaps a form of committee consultation may have taken place with respect to the hiring of teachers). School teachers were termed *Schullehrer*, or sometimes *Schulmeister*. Ministers, on the other hand, were always elected as were the other members of the *Lehrdienst* [the Ministry], in the traditional Mennonite Gemeinden, at least perhaps until recent times.

When therefore we read in any translation that a teacher was elected, in the context of the Mennonite community of the 1800s or earlier, we may be sure that a translation error has occurred. This is the same kind of dictionary usage error which occurs when we read of a *Wirtschaft* being translated

as a "Pub"— which no matter what the dictionary says, in the Mennonite context means "Farming Establishment".

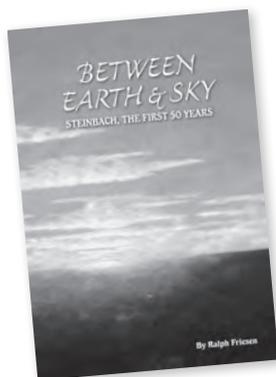
If I may say so, too many historians, professional or otherwise pay insufficient attention to the Mennonite context when attempting translations, sometimes resulting in an inaccurate description of Mennonite society.

Perhaps I may be allowed to point out some other minor errors in this piece. The Lehn children listed—beginning with Christoph (b. 1727) and ending with Hans (b. 1746) were children of Simon Lehn (1704-1782) m. Maria Neufeld (1702-1788) and not of Christoph and Elisabeth Lehn, as stated. Simon was the son of the senior Christoph. Although Christoph was baptized in Holland, it does not follow that he himself was born in Holland, as many West Prussian Mennonites sent their children to Holland for various reasons. And West Prussians wanting to join the Mennonite church sometimes went to Holland to be baptized, owing to restrictions in West Prussia.

Also, Bernard (II) Hildebrand married Agatha Krahn in 1839. The marriage date (19.6.1818) given in the article is the birth date of Agatha.

If I may add to this piece, it seems likely that the Bernard who married Sara Harder, was a son of Bernard Hildebrand listed in the 1776 West Prussian Mennonite census in Lakendorf with one son and one daughter. Perhaps this first Bernard was a son of the Bernard listed as a Mennonite farmer at Krebsfeld in 1727. If so, the name Bernard does indeed have a long tradition in this Hildebrand family. Sara Harder, was probably the daughter of Peter Harder of Walldorf, and likely baptized in 1787, being born then in about 1767.

Regards,  
Henry Schapansky



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# Book Reviews

## *Es lauft e Meisl: Hutterischa Kinder Verslen*

Karis Hofer, MacGregor, Manitoba:  
Hutterian Brethren Book Centre, 2008, ISBN 078-0-98-9105-2-0, 29 pp.

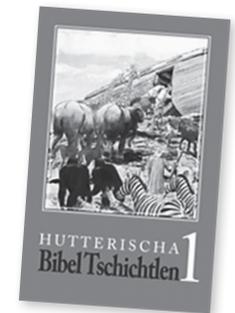


## *Lindas glücklicher Tag*

Linda Maendel, MacGregor, Manitoba:  
Hutterian Brethren Book Centre, 2006, ISBN 0-9780112-1-X, 18 pp.

## *Hutterischa Bibl Tschichtlen*

Originally translated from the American Bible Society literacy series into Hutterisch by Hillside Colony translation group, Doland, South Dakota, edited and reworked by Linda Maendel, MacGregor, Manitoba:  
Hutterian Brethren Book Centre, 2002, ISBN 978-0-201-10179-9, 180 pp.



Three children's books published by the Hutterian Brethren Book Centre offer Hutterite children amusement and instruction and, most importantly, a sense of belonging through their use of the Hutterian dialect and setting.

*Es lauft e Meisl*, compiled and illustrated by Karis Hofer, is a delightful collection of Hutterite children's nursery rhymes. The detailed, whimsical illustrations accompanying each *Versl*, which feature children and an assortment of baby animals – birds, mice, chicks and ladybugs – donning traditional Hutterite wear are immediately captivating. Hofer manages to capture the joys and trials of a child's life with gentle humour, precision and astonishing artistry. The verses, in true nursery rhyme fashion, short and fragmentary in content, come alive through the illustrations and inspire further imagination on the part of the reader.

Nursery rhymes are invaluable tools for young children to acquire and practise language, since rhyme and rhythm enhance repetition, crucial to language acquisition. They also provide for an enjoyable communal experience of learning, since they are generally playfully recited in chorus. This collection celebrates Hutterite culture and language, and instils a sense of belonging in its young readers.

The collection was inspired by a high school assignment, in which Hofer gathered the verses from mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. The enjoyment she experienced in discovering many more rhymes than she had learned as a child and her conviction of the need to preserve and share this linguistic and cultural treasure, led to the compilation, illustration and publication of the collection. Hofer has certainly achieved what she set out to do. This children's book can easily take its place next to the many award-winning children's books filling bookshelves today.

*Lindas glücklicher Tag*, written by Linda Maendel and illustrated by Sonia Maendel, is a lovely children's book about a young girl who longs for a toboggan big enough for her and her friends. She learns to be patient, having been told that her father is especially occupied during this season. Although

she feels sorry for herself at first, she soon gets distracted helping her mother look after her baby sister. When she is called to the carpentry shop on a mysterious errand and finds a brand new handmade sled, her surprise knows no end. Especially when the carpenter *Vetter David* teases her by saying he's not sure who would like such a sled. The twinkle in his eye gives him away, and Linda realizes her father has secretly asked *Vetter David* to build it for her.

Maendel is a gifted storyteller. The characters are believable and engaging. The parents are portrayed as loving and gentle people who guide their young daughter with wisdom, affection and humour. A sense of the importance of contributing to the community pervades the story. Linda's desire for a sled is driven partly by wanting to have fun, but also by wanting to share the fun with her friends. She contributes to her family by helping her mother look after the baby and by cleaning *Vetter David's* shop as thanks for his gift.

Maendel uses the High German language to narrate the story, but uses Hutterisch for all spoken parts. I suspect that Maendel, a German teacher, sees the need for her pupils to develop their High German reading skills with books that reflect their own world. The use of Hutterisch in the dialogue is a creative way of lending authenticity to the narration, fostering respect for the dialect and adding to the tone and feel of the Hutterian context of the story.

The detailed illustrations by Linda Maendel's sister Sonia Maendel greatly enhance the story. Faithfully representing Hutterian life, they depict Linda's daily environment – children sledding down a hill, children eating in their communal dining room called *Essenschuel*, Linda's mother sewing in the family home while Linda tells her her troubles. The illustrations are attractive and complement the narrative in a harmonious way.

*Hutterischa Bibl Tschichtlen* is an illustrated collection of six Bible stories told for children, originally published in English by the American Bible Society. Linda Maendel has translated and reworked the text, creating simple, short texts

in the Hutterite language. Each page is dominated by a large, colourful illustration, while the text is kept to one or two short sentences in bold print. This makes the book ideal for very young children.

The collection begins with several Genesis stories – the creation of the world, the fall of Adam and Eve, the Flood and the Tower of Babel – and concludes with two stories which are family- and child-centred. The story of reconciliation between Jacob and Esau is told with warmth and the story of Baby Moses, whose determined mother finds an innovative way of hiding him and whose clever sister contributes to her brother's survival, will certainly delight young children.

This is a useful text for Hutterite parents and teachers. While the illustrations are colourful, I find the picture of “evil people” destined by God for extinction in the Flood story to be too graphic and realistic in today's political climate. Karis Hofer or Sonia Maendel would probably have used more subtle ways to illustrate these stories.

All three books come with a CD readers can listen to in order to follow along – an invaluable asset for all young readers.

by Erica Ens  
Winnipeg

## Mennonites in Early Modern Poland and Prussia

Peter J. Klassen, Baltimore, MD, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009.

Peter J. Klassen's book on Mennonites in Poland and Prussia makes an important contribution to Mennonite historical research. In recent years a great deal of scholarly attention has been given to the Anabaptist, Russian and Canadian stories, however, not so for the Polish and Prussian Mennonite history. This book corrects that imbalance.

The only major recent English language publication about Mennonites in Poland was the republication in 2007 of the book by H. G. Mannhardt, *The Danzig Mennonite Church: Its Origin and History 1569-1919*, by Bethel College and Pandora Press. Most studies of this history have been in German. In addition to Mannhardt's study of Danzig Mennonites, one of the important books is Wilhelm Mannhardt's study of non-resistance and rejection of war, published in 1863. Another significant resource for this history is the four-volume *Mennonitisches Lexikon*, of which the first volume was published in 1913 and the final two after World War II. Herbert Wiebe, a very fine Mennonite scholar began his career in the 1930s with his doctoral dissertation about Mennonites along the Vistula River south of the Delta region, from Fordon to Wessenberg. Unfortunately, he was killed in World War II and the Mennonite community lost a most promising young historian. After the war, his dissertation was prepared for publication by Dr. Kurt Kauenhoven, and published in 1952.

The most recent, and still most comprehensive, study of Mennonites in Poland and Prussia in the German language is the two-volume set by Horst Penner, a Mennonite scholar born in West Prussia who spent his academic career and writing days in West Germany. His books are entitled, *Die ost-und westpreussischen Mennoniten*. Volume I deals with the history up to the Polish partitions, and Volume II with the history after the partitions.

Now, Peter Klassen has provided an excellent, carefully researched study in English. The book primarily covers the history up to the Polish partitions at the end of the eighteenth century, and then briefly surveys the rest of the history in the final chapter. Klassen spent decades doing research in the various archives in Gdansk and in cities along the Vistula River, piecing together the Mennonite story. Many records were lost in World War II, but from what remains, he was able to find much that illuminated the Mennonite story. His careful research

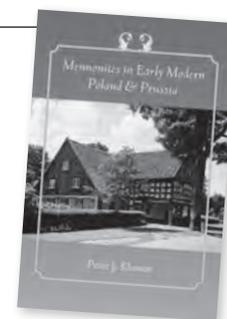
gives the study a remarkable depth and immediacy.

One of the strongest features of this book is the context he creates. The Mennonite story is placed within the larger historical developments in the Low Countries, Poland and Prussia so that the reader feels the influence of the political and cultural movements of the day.

Klassen firmly roots the Polish Mennonite story in the Anabaptist reforms of the sixteenth century. After briefly telling this story, he proceeds to discuss why Mennonites moved to Polish regions, and why local authorities and bishops in the Vistula region gave Mennonites protection. In the subsequent history, he shows how Mennonites, first under Polish rule, and later under Prussian control, reshaped their original vision, and gave it community and organizational structure.

Over the centuries in Poland and Prussia, Mennonites were not actively persecuted. However, they were often under legal and financial restrictions, and periodically even threatened with expulsion. In such times, there was usually some authority that came to their defense, be it the Catholic bishops, the Polish king, or some other officials. Mennonites were valued for their economic contributions, but their minority religious status continued to create suspicion and opposition. Usually Mennonites' economic contribution to the region made them too valuable to expel. They had the skills necessary to drain the marshy low lands near Danzig and in the Vistula River delta, and to make the land productive. They introduced trades like *Brandwein* brewing, lace making and other aspects of the cloth making industry that they had learned in Flanders. Klassen shows well the tug-of-war between those who valued Mennonites' economic contribution, and those who saw Mennonites as unwanted competitors or religious undesirables.

For readers of *Preservings*, this book will be of great interest because it deals with so many “origins.” The unique Mennonite leadership patterns of bishop, *Lehrer* (ministers), deacons, and song leaders go back to Poland. Gaining official exemption from military service began in 1642 in Poland when Mennonites arranged their first *Privilegium* with the Polish king. Some of what we know as traditional Mennonite church architecture was developed in Poland, and reflects the legal restrictions placed on Mennonites at the time. The elementary schools, which



provided basic literacy for both boys and girls, began in Poland. The fire insurance organizations through which members of the church helped each other were started here. The practice of building residential institutions for assisting the old and the poor in the church was pioneered here. The Low German language was acquired here, and for those who first moved to Russia, remained their first language.

An important feature of this book is that it focuses on the Polish part of the community's history. During most of the time that Mennonites lived in the Danzig/Vistula region, the political context was Polish, not Prussian. This reality shaped the identity of the early migrants to Russia, especially those who formed the Chortitza settlement. It was their descendents

who migrated to Canada in the 1870s. This book will thus assist descendents of the 1870s immigration in Canada, and those who later moved to Latin America, to better understand their "origins", and many of the influences that gave their communities the form and shape they now have.

The book includes a number of helpful maps, illustrations, and photos. A bibliography provides a sample of additional research in various areas and topics related to Polish and Prussian Mennonite history. This book is highly recommended for all who are interested in Mennonite history.

by John J. Friesen  
Canadian Mennonite University



## Desert Patriarchy: Mormon and Mennonite Communities in the Chihuahua Valley

Janet Bennion, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004).

This anthropological study offers a rare and interesting comparison between two visible minorities in northern Mexico, the Mennonites and the Mormons. Granted the book emphasizes the Mormon communities at Colonia Le Baron and its author is much more comfortable talking about the Mormons than she is with Mennonites, it will still be of interest to students of Mennonite society. The comparison is instructive as the two communities share a great deal – a commitment to isolation, anti-modernity and privation – even though one is patriotic and proselytizing, the other pacifist and endogamous (insisting on marriage within the group). Then, too, the book is about gender, and speaks to issues of authority and family formation, topics that generate heated debate among Mennonites and issues that are often at the foundation of newscasts about Mennonites in Latin America. The book is also worthy of reading because it reports first hand on an extended visit by a U.S. professor and her research associates to an Old Colony Mennonite family in Capulin, one in which the American visitors lived and worked with a Mennonite family.

There is much in the book that is left to be desired. A close study of a single family – the family of Rev. Johann and Elisabeth Neufeld, and especially that of Johann and his one daughter Katerina – probably doesn't give the author the authority to refer to this as a study of "Mennonite communities in the Chihuahua Valley." The Mennonite books on which the author relies to fill in gaps and provide a background are woefully inadequate for a scholarly study and the author's assertion that "the most thorough description of everyday culture in Mennonite colonies is John Hostetler's *Mennonite Life* (1959)" lacks credence. [12] And there are glaring errors throughout the book. The note that these Low German Mennonites are "Swiss German folk" [83], that Plautdietsch refers to "Plaute," that is "high German," [85] that the Mennonites of Chihuahua are descendents of Mennonites who migrated from Switzerland to Netherlands and from there to Russia, or that Menno Simons was born in 1469 (actually 1496), suggests a very cursory knowledge of Mennonite history. The assertion that Capulin was founded 70 years ago, "during the 1920s," [83] that its residents traveled the road from Capulin

to Casas Grandes by horse and buggy (a distance of almost 50 miles), that its first families had no previous "knowledge of the Mexican climate" are quite astonishingly wrong [39/68]; Capulin was founded in 1962 by Mennonites from Manitoba Colony founded in 1922. The idea that Mennonites here "abhor technology of any kind" is contradicted by the author's own findings [69]. The suggestion that denim overalls and broad rimmed hats had their genesis in the 16<sup>th</sup> century is bizarre. [146] The note that typical first names include Joshua, Samuel and Rebecca rings untrue. [163]. The idea that children are taught "the mealtime prayer as soon as they can talk" seems far fetched as mealtime prayers are silent. [155] The acknowledgement that the student researcher spoke a bad Spanish and a worse German makes one wonder if the information was gathered in too much haste. [82]

The author's approach to the Mennonites, mostly as a contrast to their Mormon neighbours, presents its own set of problems, as it highlights a "desert mentality" and "Anglo-American" values. The idea that a physical feature, an ecology – the desert – can shape gender relations, that it "facilitates religious patriarchy," (3) is problematic as surely patriarchies also exist in jungles, on well watered plains, on humid coastlines, in suburbia! And to name the patriarchy she discovers as a "unique form of Anglo *machismo*" suggests a cultural myopia, as if "Anglos" have a particular brand of patriarchalism and even more problematic, as if Mennonites somehow possess this particular brand of inequality. And because the author fails to clearly distinguish between Mennonites and Mormons, one could well gather from the introduction and indeed from throughout the book that Mennonites are Anglos and polygamist.

Still the book has much to offer the student. First it describes a very specific region of settlement in northern Mexico, specifically the region north of Casas Grandes, its physical features and cultural landscape. And it describes in particular the dynamics on Capulin Colony. Its research, conducted in the summer of 1999, catches the community in a dynamic tug-of-war, some families heading north to Canada, others south to Bolivia, "where it is greener," (151) the youth oftentimes to Texas, while most remain steadfast at Capulin.

More importantly the author captures the ethos of Capulin. It consists of those “who gave up physical and technological comforts in order to receive the ultimate heavenly reward: to live in the presence of God” [42], those “who continuously express their faith in Christ and their trust in frugality and order” [61] and those who “consider their primitive, agrarian lifestyle a blessing rather than a burden.” [69] Bennion’s experience is almost spiritual: “we lived in a silence and isolation that none of us had ever known – the noiseless.” [83] In fact, she writes, “my experiences with the Mennonites taught me much about ...beauty and simplicity” and “when coupled with order, creativity is enhanced and directed...” The Mennonites understand how to be responsible for the elements around them in such a way that their lives have meaning and beauty.” [93] At another juncture she suggests that “their dogged, enduring labors have created a space in time within which soul and mind can breathe.” [146] She notes that they “have no use for stocks, bonds and futures speculations. They look to their children and their associations in the community for their future...” [150] And as more than one visitor to Old Colony communities, she too “began to question the Western values of mobility, competitiveness, consumerism and the emphasis on individuality to the point of narcissism as we attempted to live as the Mennonites do: with obedience, *communitas*, modesty, patience and submission.” [146]

She seems objective in her analysis. She captures well some of the more quaint or complex cultural artifacts. She describes, for example, the *Langwiese* singing (although not by name) as a “Byzantine-sounding mantra” in which “together, as in a marching of a powerful army, they hit a strong crescendo all on the same middle C. It was like a rising wave of sound gathering strength and force at the crest, and then crashing in silence on the rocks.” [92] And she offers her own analysis of some of the more troubling features of Old Colony life – youthful frustration, inadequate medical care and “hereditary disorders” common in small, close-knit communities. [169]

But the most informative aspect of the book is its the analysis of gender relations, and especially the worlds of women. The discoveries Bennion makes are of course those made by other scholars – the women work hard and with remarkable efficiency,

they keep an “immaculate home,” they obsess about “cleaning every surface.” [155]

But Bennion goes far beyond a simple description, she offers a religious interpretation. She is no fan of patriarchy and self identifies as a “feminist” [176] and writes that “‘speaking only when spoken to’ and letting the men do all the talking was very difficult for us.” [153] Still, she asserts boldly that “I found that women in rigid patriarchal groups have a surprising degree of autonomy.” [71] The women find meaning and beauty in their worlds and their labours “are actions that are part of a directed purpose, done with care and order because that is the way of God.” [93] Their work is not separated from their worship, “both are sacred” and “as her hands work...she is performing a religious ritual of gratitude and devotion to God.” [168] And the women work collaboratively with patriarchy, to maintain community borders and religious ethos.

Within their particular domain, writes Bennion, the women have significant autonomy. The women may work hard but they also have “plenty of time to talk, visit and nurture friendships with other women” [157] and within this cultural space they spin status and enforce cultural standards. And within the house they rule: “women take pride in their homes and shoo men out of the kitchen and parlor at will” and Bennion insists that “there is order and harmony in their [gendered] lives.” [167] In a controversial comment she suggests that “the imposed inferiority affords women a measure of liberating distance from the male world” where they possess “a surprising amount of informal autonomy...” [172]

In the end two main problems persist, the sense that the book is not really a true comparison between Mormons and Mennonites, but a reading of Mennonite culture through a Mormon filter, and the existence of simply too many factual errors. Yet, this comparison is illuminating, the ethnography seems thorough and is eloquently presented, the reflections are thought provoking, and the insights to gender relations within the Old Colony community highly instructive.

by Royden Loewen  
University of Winnipeg

## Tales From The Ridge

Maria Falk Lodge, 2008

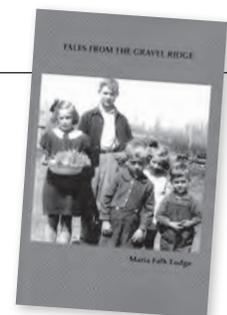
This is a welcome collection of 34 short stories that Maria Falk Lodge has written over the years that reflect on her childhood and youth growing up in the community of Rosengard, southwest of Steinbach. Many of the stories have been published in the *Carillon News*, a rural weekly paper. It is in this paper that I followed the writings of the author for years. Having the stories in one book makes the community of Rosengard come alive for the reader

The Falk family finally settled on a small farm located on the gravel ridge in Rosengard School District in 1938. They had left the Chortitza Colony in Ukraine in 1928 to join other family members in Manitoba. After a series of hardships they were able to claim Rosengard as their home for the next twenty years. The author’s 16 years in the community provide the memories for the stories selected for this volume.

The selected stories reflect memories that may be grouped in three areas: the landscape, the family and the school.

The landscape stories reflect on the gravel ridge, creek, trees, flowers, snowdrifts and fences. In the family stories the author remembers their house, canning, gardening, laundry, baking, and modes of transportation. Reading, penmanship, making copies, Remembrance Day, singing, Christmas programs, and football highlight the school memories.

It is the landscape stories that provide the setting for the author’s experiences. She remembers playing among the trees, picking wild fruit, sliding down high snow banks, walking along the gravel ridge road, and watching the spring creek turn into a winter skating rink. Even the prairie crocus is clearly etched in her memory.



Providing for the family was a full time job that involved all the family members and left indelible memories. Seasonal activities such as carefully planting a vegetable garden, and canning fruits and vegetables to fill up the pantry are recalled. They made poverty more bearable. The stories about weekly family tasks such as baking bread, using a special large wooden bowl to knead the dough, and doing laundry with homemade soap reflect the self-sufficiency and resourcefulness of the Falk family. Who could forget breakfast in the bedroom on winter mornings so cold the water had frozen in the washbasin in the kitchen.

The Rosengard School holds wonderful memories for the author. Reading was fun and she remembers reading textbooks such as the Dick and Jane series and the *New Friends and Neighbours* that portrayed a life style well beyond the gravel ridge. Each year the library added a few new books to encourage more reading. Do you remember the words of the song, *D'ye Ken John Peel* in the red *Manitoba School Song Book*? By teaching music the teachers passed on a rich heritage and introduced students to the future. The highlight of the school year for the author was the annual Christmas concert. Here the whole community sat together on planks, resting on wooden trestles, in the one-roomed school eagerly anticipating the concert prepared by students and their teacher. In summer the school picnic created a similar gathering of the community.

In the mind of the author the school was truly the community center.

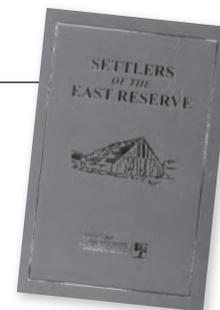
Of special note is the recognition given to mothers that made a difference in the Rosengard community. The back cover features a picture of sixteen women with the caption, "Some of the women who helped to make our community strong during difficult times." In the stories the author will frequently describe her present situation to show how family and community life has changed from her childhood years, mostly positive but with some sincere regrets. The loss of a sense of community is identified as the most significant. It was this quality that enabled the survival of the poor Rosengard families.

This may be a thin book, but it is a powerful tool for reviving our own memories of growing up during the 40s and 50s. I found myself drawn into the stories by comparing them to my own memories. Both our mothers worked very hard to provide for the family, but I also remember my mother doing field work such as hauling hay, stacking clover, and stooking grain sheaves. This reviewer belongs to the same age cohort as the writer, and so I relived my Strassberg childhood vicariously through the stories. What a wonderful experience!

by Jacob L. Peters  
Winnipeg

## *Settlers of the East Reserve: Moving in – Moving out – Staying*

Adolf Ens, Ernest N. Braun and Henry N. Fast,  
eds. Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2009



Some things just take their time. When the process is drawn out, and when it seems as if a project might never see the light of day, we may wonder if that day will ever come. I was part of more than one discussion about volume 4 of a series of histories of the Mennonite East Reserve in Manitoba, published by what was then the Hanover Steinbach Historical Society (HSHS). And now, after years of gestation, *Settlers of the East Reserve* has finally been published, and those who care about the history of Manitoba Mennonites can at last rejoice. The first three books of the series came out in quick order in the early 1990s. The late John Dyck (1928-1999) was alive to edit them and Delbert Plett (1948-2004) was alive to pull materials together and underwrite these efforts.

And then John Dyck died, and Delbert Plett turned his attentions increasingly to the stories of Old Colony Mennonites in Mexico and Central and South America—and Volume 4 in the series, although it was in the works, stalled. The HSHS became the Flemish Mennonite Historical Society (FMHS). Then Delbert Plett died too, leaving the provision that his estate be used in support of the same sorts of historical work to which he had dedicated his life. Thanks to his personal contributions, the FMHS was also left with some money.

Adolf Ens, Ernest Braun and Henry Fast—all of whom were active in the development of this series from the beginning—teamed up to gather together the materials for Volume 4 and bring them into publishable form, and coincidentally the assets remaining with the FMHS became available to the Manitoba

Mennonite Historical Society, allowing for *Settlers of the East Reserve* to be published at last. Dedication, perseverance, education, talent, wise decision-making, financial resources—put them together and eventually you may have a book.

*Settlers* is divided into four parts: People and Institutions, Village Histories, Biography and Family History, and Departures from the East Reserve. Valuable primary resource materials can be found here, such as a listing of the homestead applications for Hanover Municipality, an index to the 1876 Chortitzer *Brottschuld* Register, and data from the 1891 Census for the East Reserve and Scratching River Settlements. The village histories are of Friedrichsthal, Rosengart and Schoenwiese, and these are added to the 26 previous histories of the 62 villages and place names in the original East Reserve. The biographies and family histories include the merchant Erdman Penner family, the Johann M. and Katharina Koop family, the journals of Jacob T. and Jacob D. Wiebe, and a brief autobiography by teacher Heinrich Rempel. The "Departures" section chronicles Mennonite settlement in the Dakota Territory, the Bergthaler resettlement to the West Reserve, and emigration to Paraguay in the 1920s. Clear maps and useful tables accompany the text and careful, thoughtful editing is in evidence throughout.

The interests of a variety of readers may be satisfied in this book. My own interest tends toward narrative, toward the stories of individuals and families, but I was also drawn especially to the story of Rosengart as told by William Schroeder, who

chooses the early settlement period of 1875 to 1910 and then also shares his personal recollections and knowledge of the years 1930 to 1947. Schroeder's style is personal, personable, humorous, and his wisdom shines through. While he does provide a great deal of factual information he also encourages the reader to imagine the everyday experience of the people whose stories he tells, and does not hesitate to supply anecdotes from his own life. An example: a *Russländer* playmate, upon discovering that Schroeder was born in Canada, exclaims: "Then you are a Kanadier!" upon which the young Schroeder "retreated into the hayloft and wept bitterly." Stories like this convey the poignant human reality of the conflicts inherent in the life of any community.

The story of the family of Erdman Penner, well-known businessman who started his Canadian career in Winnipeg and later operated stores in Tanneau, Niverville, Gretna, Reinland, Altona, Pilot Mound, Clearwater and Plum Coulee, is told by this daughter Helen Penner Hiebert (1874-1961), herself a very accomplished woman who graduated with her B. A. from Wesley College. Her perspective on the immigrant experience is unique—almost all of these stories have been told from a context of poverty or hardship, but the Penners were a family of means. Hiebert gives us some clear pictures of Mennonite life in South Russia prior to immigration. Prejudices about Ukrainian workers were common, but the Penners also appreciated a capacity for expressiveness somewhat foreign to the cautious Mennonite style: on a Saturday her father would halt work and let everyone go down to the sea for a swim: "the Russians, men, women and children would plunge in . . . stark naked, and the splashing and the laughter and the fun were a joy to behold."

The journal of Jacob D. Wiebe (1865-1938), who settled with his family in Chortitz, Manitoba in 1875, provides an example of what might be thought of as an early form of Mennonite fiction. Actual fiction writing, of course, was simply not done by Mennonites of that time, as it was considered a form of lying, or at least not telling the truth. But our ancestors were

story-tellers all the same. A section of Wiebe's journal is devoted to "three bad dreams"—but it is immediately evident that he was not recording actual dreams but writing in the tradition of John Bunyan, allegorically. (His brief autobiography, with frequent references to a pilgrim journey, makes this connection even more clearly.)

"I dreamt I was in hell," begins Wiebe. And then goes on to relate a tale of demons sent by Satan to tempt poor humans and lead them astray. Tellingly, humans are lead astray through their tendency to dissatisfaction about church, or holding resentment in their hearts against others. In other words, the "dream" holds up the importance of humility and deference to communal authority. "Secret prayer" is the means through which the Christian maintains himself in right relationship with others. This moral is conveyed through instilling fear and terror, in the old medieval tradition.

Doubt and fear were certainly part of the personal lives of our ancestors, just as they may be for us today. Even the strongest of them, such as Jacob's father the Aeltester Gerhard Wiebe (1827-1900), were subject: "he lay bound in captivity [in the Castle of Doubt] . . . where . . . demons counselled him to take his own life." The elder Wiebe was able to prevail, finding his way "back to the King's highway."

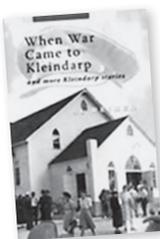
All three articles in the "Departures" section of *Settlers of the East Reserve*, by Bruce Wiebe, Lawrence Klippenstein and Adolf Ens and Ernest Braun, are researched with meticulous care—Wiebe's account of the little-known Mennonite settlement in the Dakota Territory in particular is drawn from a vast range of different original source materials.

In all, *Settlers* is a worthy addition to the volumes which preceded it, and whets the appetite for even more. Blessings to the efforts of the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society in continuing to bring out the stories of our ancestral past.

by Ralph Friesen  
Nelson, B.C.

## When War came to Kleindarp: and more Kleindarp stories

Al Reimer, Winnipeg MB: Rosetta Projects, 2008.



*When War came to Kleindarp: and more Kleindarp stories* is a collection of short stories by former English professor, Al Reimer. The stories are set around the Russian Mennonite community of Kleindarp, Manitoba – a fictionalized version of Steinbach. Five of the eleven stories have been published before in various publications, but this is the first time they have been brought together in one volume.

While the stories are fictional, they emerge out of Reimer's experiences growing up in Steinbach. The first story is about a Russian Mennonite boy who had recently immigrated to Manitoba in the 1870s and how he dealt with the tragic drowning of his father. The subsequent stories are set around the time of the Second World War. This is a time when there are monumental shifts taking place in Mennonite communities. The outside world is knocking and has penetrated into these relatively isolated communities. "When War came to Kleindarp" most poignantly demonstrates this with corporal Steve Froese

marching into the front pew in full uniform complete with dress sword at his side. Kleindarp and the other Mennonite communities were changing, often from within.

Reimer includes stories that are warm, intimate, and private, like the stories about Eva who wrestles with her husband's deteriorating mental state; or the hardworking *Grossmame* Brandt who serves as the community midwife. Then there are the "sensational" stories you may read about in the local newspaper, such as the fire that burned down Duck Janz and Gumshoe Ike Isaac's shack while they were "entertaining" two women from Winnipeg; or the story of Danny Brandt who worked hard at "not getting saved" at the local revival meetings.

The last chapter, "Mennonite Firebirds," is the sequel to Reimer's 1986 novel *My Harp has Turned to Mourning*. The main character is Wilhelm Fast, a recent Mennonite immigrant from Russia who wishes to be a portrait artist but feels his talents are squelched by his own Mennonite upbringing and context. Fast moves from Winnipeg to Kleindarp to take up the editorship of the local paper to the chagrin of his wife

Clara who longs for the “cultured” world of Petersburg, which they had left behind. While Wilhelm enjoys his editing he also begins writing some stories in Low German following the antics of *Jasch enn Jeahrt*. He also launches a new periodical *Mennonitische Welt*, which has a short life. Clara is a voice teacher who guides young Evan Bartel to a promising and prestigious singing career.

The fictional stories are well written and easily catch the reader’s imagination. Sprinkled throughout the book are Low German phrases and a style that gives the book an authentic flavor. To quote Reimer’s character, Wilhelm Fast, it is a language “... of vivid everydayness, devoid of social or intellectual pretensions, based solely on a verbal bedrock of candour, zest and shared humanity.”

Despite Reimer’s effective writing style, there is a disturbing undertone throughout the book. The villains in the book are average Mennonites who go to church and try to live godly lives in the tradition of their ancestors. These people are characterized as hypocritical zealots and “pious devils.” Repeatedly Kleindarp is seen as a place to escape from. In the words of Danny Brandt, “I’m shaking the dust of this blasted *Darp* off my size elevens as soon as I can.” The Mennonite community is

seen as “culturally barren... meek, sober, church-dominated... reeking with naiveté... [a] prison.”

This theme is tiresome, unbalanced and disheartening. Why couldn’t the extraordinary events that happen to ordinary people be included rather than only the ordinary stories of a few extraordinary characters?

There are a few moments when Reimer’s characters, like Mel Plett who returns home from Toronto for a funeral, catch a glimpse of something redeeming about their Mennonite home and the traditions they have resisted. Reimer himself says in the preface, “I did finally discover that heritage I had grown up with was a precious possession, and that by denying that heritage I was damaging the very taproot of my existence.”

*When War came to Kleindarp*, is an interesting book of short stories that illustrate some of the changes that took place in Mennonite communities during the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. It does this through well-written vignettes of some of the locals. It is a captivating read from one side of the tracks.

by Conrad Stoesz  
Mennonite Heritage Centre  
Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies

## *Bolivien: Zufluchtsort der konservativen Mennoniten*

Sieghard and Sylvia Schartner. Asuncion: by the author, 2009, photographs.



The German speaking Mennonites of Bolivia are an enigma for many. Their Bolivian neighbours find them to be a strange people, their fellow Mennonites who are often more liberal, ‘progressive’ and worldly, find them embarrassing. This book goes a long way to providing the essential outline of the Mennonite colonies that dot the lowlands east of Santa Cruz while asking important questions that Bolivian Mennonites will need to answer

to assure their future as a faith community.

The authors of this survey were born in Filadelfia and raised in the villages of the Fernheim colony in the Chaco of Paraguay. Siegfried became an educator and pastor who received his theological education in Montevideo, Uruguay and in Buenos Aires while Sylvia trained as a nurse. The Schartners served with MCC among the German speaking Mennonites in Bolivia for four years, beginning in 1999. That was followed by another 6 years in church work in the settlement of Buena Vista.

The book is a compendium of description, statistics, and stories of the more than 60,000 Mennonites that called Bolivia home in 2007. The Schartners’ stated aim for this volume is to share with others the joys and sorrows they heard about and experienced when they lived among the German speaking Mennonites of Bolivia as MCC workers. More importantly, if one judges by the number of pages devoted to it, was the aim to provide a survey of the Bolivian Mennonite story in written form in response to the many people who had asked them about that story.

To that end the volume is richly diverse in its offerings. A brief overview of Bolivian and Mennonite history is followed by the most comprehensive descriptions of various colonies

available anywhere. The sections describing individual colonies and the tables of statistics for the first time provide a sense of the genealogy and demographics of the Bolivian Mennonite scene over the last fifty years. The authors describe 67 colonies that have been settled, some of which are no longer in existence, and provide tables with the origins of the first migrants, the names of leaders, and their population in 1997, 2000, 2003 and 2007. The Global Mennonite Encyclopaedia (GAMEO) would do well to refer to these tables when updating its content regarding Bolivian Mennonites. The statistics convey what can only be described as a demographic explosion; by the Schartner’s calculations the number of Bolivian Mennonites has increased over fifty percent in ten years. [48-51] Statistics are, however not the only strength of the book.

The book goes on to describe the various church groupings and has an extensive discussion of the social and cultural aspects of Mennonite life. Here the Schartner’s adopt a pastoral tone, not avoiding the problems that Bolivian Mennonites face, but grappling with difficult issues by asking questions, questions about tradition and the Anabaptist principle of a believer’s church, about the quality of education, about the lack of activities for youth, about the problems presented by large families. Sometimes issues are addressed by understatement such as “I have never met a school teacher that got rich through his work in schools.” [258]

Most interesting for the reader not familiar with the Bolivian Mennonites will be the sections describing everyday life. Here the book describes the intentional agrarian lifestyle, family life, and the world of work. The theme of social life not only paints a picture of the family gatherings at Christmas and Easter, engagement celebrations and weddings, but the public auction, courting, school life and the cultural obligations that accompany the life cycle.

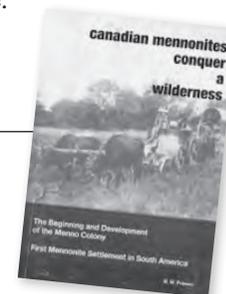
The conclusion reviews the strengths and weaknesses of Bolivian Mennonite life. The authors laud the strength of family life, but wonder what can be done so that a healthy family life can be “a personal conviction” not only a tradition. [301] Their assessment of strong congregational life is tempered with the question of how the gospel of Jesus Christ can remain the “real basis for faith” while the *Ordnungen* take their rightful place in assisting faithful discipleship. [302]

The authors face a difficult challenge. The depth of social problems they see among the Bolivian Mennonites easily come through in their text. Their probing questions are certainly aimed at Bolivian Mennonite readers and clearly seek to challenge them to rethink aspects of their community and church life. They

are, however careful not to side only with the mission-oriented groups whose view is that all that is needed is conversion. The Scharnters challenge their readers to find the common ground at the trunk of the Mennonite tree rather than promoting competition and dissension among the branches.[210]

The number of subjects the writers attempt to address in this volume necessarily results in a rather brief treatment of many aspects of Bolivian Mennonite life. Nevertheless, the author’s have produced a welcome addition to our understanding of one of the largest groups of Mennonites anywhere.

by Hans Werner  
University of Winnipeg



## Canadian Mennonites Conquer a Wilderness: The Beginning and Development of the Menno Colony , First Settlement in South America

Martin W. Friesen, trans. by Christel Wiebe, (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Historical Committee of the Menno Colony, 2009), photographs, appendix.

Why did more than 1700 Mennonites move from Canada to Paraguay in 1927? M. W. Friesen’s central theme in his book is that it was not because they were reluctant to have a progressive, English education for their children. Rather, Friesen suggests that these Mennonites moved to the Chaco because the Paraguayan government had invited them, and so they accepted the invitation (p. 20). Friesen then goes on to tell the story of the Paraguayan Chaco settlement, its early hardships and its attempts to establish an economy. He also spends a large amount of time describing the advances that the Mennonites in Paraguay made to their education system, and how this improved the quality of education from 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian standards to an essentially modern education system. In fact, as Friesen proudly sums up the changes that came about through the revamping of the education system in the Chaco one gets the impression that the only thing that these Mennonites preserved was their German language.

*Canadian Mennonites Conquer a Wilderness* begins by telling the story of how Mennonite groups in Manitoba and Saskatchewan made their decision to move to Paraguay. It describes the first boat load of migrants to arrive in their new land, their reception by the president of Paraguay and their anticipation of a better life soon to come. However, many of these freshly arrived immigrants were poor, and things in Paraguay were not yet set up for settlement, and so a waiting period began. Friesen paints a picture of what this waiting period was like through a mix of letters ‘home’ and newspaper clippings about these migrants. In the letters the optimism of the leadership is contrasted with the fears of the rest of the community as they face poor living conditions, unfulfilled promises and the time called ‘The Great Death’, when ten percent of the population died. These letters ‘home’ are snapshots of the very real and life-threatening problems these migrants faced, and make for compelling reading in this book as they provide that personal touch that makes these types of histories so interesting.

The book continues with stories about some of the early migrants and their work to establish their communities. A

great deal of this work seems to have been in setting up of their cooperative system, which regulated the economy of the settlement, negotiated loans on its behalf and extended credit to individuals. The description of this cooperative system is updated in this translation in the appendix, where the cooperative’s community-based approach is credited as being a major reason why the settlement in the Chaco succeeded (p. 193). In the appendix, the book outlines a capable, modern Mennonite community leading the way in terms of dairying in Paraguay and fully participating in international trade, economic equals with their English speaking cousins that they left in Canada.

The bulk of the rest of Friesen’s book takes up the question of education. This part of the story of the settlement is a fascinating account of how these Mennonites reformed their education system from within. Friesen tells of a slow but sure process of standardizing the village schools. He describes how they slowly developed teacher training and even a sort of professionalization of the job of teaching. The birth of the high school is outlined, as well as the progression in the curriculum. According to Friesen, the community for the most part responded positively to these changes, and began to expect more from the schools as they made advances in educational practices. The interesting thing about all this is that as the schools developed, they began to drop things from the curriculum that would have been unheard of by early migrants. For example, Friesen explains the end of teaching the Catechism as being the result of indifference on the part of the educational community, and that instead of revising it they simply slowly stopped teaching it. One has to wonder what the migrants of 1927 would have thought if they had known that a mere fifty years later the Catechism would stop being relevant in their schools. Finally, the topic of education is visited again in the appendix, where further advancements are detailed, including female teachers in the elementary schools, special schools for children with special needs, and even daycare centres for working or single parents. Friesen acknowledges that there was opposition at times to all this progress in education, but points

out that no church split ever came from this. Indeed, it seems that in respect to education those in favour of change managed to walk the fine line between progress and being offensive. For these reasons it appears that in all respects these Mennonites in Paraguay have developed a progressive education system, recognizable to the first schools only by the German language.

All this is not to say that this book is without its difficulties. The translation work was obviously not done by a native English speaker, which creates a kind of non-academic feel that at first weakens the credibility of the book. This is easily overcome however, by readers with some German in their background; the sentences take on a sort of German structure and the reader can get used to that fairly quickly.

Beyond the language, there are a few other difficulties that are not so easily overcome. The first is the question of what kind of book is it? It surely is not an academic history of the Chaco settlement, because the author makes no attempt to hide his bias and support for how things have developed in his community. He proudly details the accomplishments of the cooperative system, shining a bright light on its successes while hastily sweeping its less glorious achievements under the rug. He makes no effort to offer a critical perspective of the strength of the church in the Chaco. Most of all, his obvious support for how the schools changed even when these changes threatened to divide his community speaks to the fact that Friesen is

telling his version of what happened, and no one else's. One is left wondering where space was left for the democratic voice of dissent in the face of the Cooperative, the Church and the Schools, and judging from this book one must assume that this space simply did not exist. As such, this book becomes an ideological history of the Chaco Settlement, something like a new Catechism of God's will in leading his people towards the realization of their promised land. As the new Catechism, it at least carries a certain kind of cultural relevance, even if it loses academic merit.

The final evaluation of this book is that it is a worthwhile read. The mixing of conservative themes with progressive ideas in the context of the isolation of the Chaco makes it a compelling, thought provoking and sometimes frustrating book. The letters from the early migrants offer a glimpse into their world no matter what the bias of the book may be, and this in itself is interesting reading. Finally, anyone thinking of visiting their cousins in Paraguay should read this book, because it will give the reader an understanding of what these Mennonites have been taught to believe about themselves. That alone is worth the investment that reading *Canadian Mennonites Conquer a Wilderness* demands.

by Franklin Rempel  
Rosenfeld, Manitoba

## News

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### Archives Launch Joint Project

The Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives and the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies have announced a joint project, "Text to Terabyte" that will seek to preserve digital records and to create new digital sources. At the center of the project is a plan to digitize the films made by Mennonite filmmaker Otto Klassen. The two centers are accepting donations for the project. For more information visit: [www.mbconf.ca/cmbs](http://www.mbconf.ca/cmbs) or [www.mennonitechurch.ca/programs/archives](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/programs/archives).

### Low German author Dies

Noted Low German author Reuben Epp died in British Columbia on June 20, 2009. He was 89. Epp worked primarily as a master mechanic and vocational educator throughout his career; in 1985 he retired from his position as vice-principal of Northern Lights College in Dawson Creek. He was well known in the international Mennonite community as an author, noted for his scholarship in its languages, history and literature. His hobbies were myriad: woodcraft, all things mechanical, hunting, fishing, boating and even preparing jams, pickles and soups. He enjoyed camping and traveling with his wife, Irmgard, throughout North America and Europe. He was a devoted family man and will be sorely missed by all who knew and loved him.

### Rape Charges Rock Bolivian Mennonites

On June 21, 2009 world media outlets reported the shocking news that nine Bolivian Mennonite men had been arrested on

charges of raping upwards of sixty of their own women. Bolivian prosecutor, Freddy Perez held a news conference that was attended by international wire services and the story spread throughout the world in a short time. Over the next weeks more details emerged, there were additional arrests, and there were accounts of revenge and threatened retribution.

According to accounts from various sources, a group of men ranging in age from 18 to 46 used an aerosol spray, which they released into people's homes through the windows, to render the occupants unconscious. They then entered the bedroom where they raped the women of the household. The activities had aroused suspicion, however, at first they were dismissed as lies. Finally the elders of the Manitoba Colony, where most of the arrested men resided, had turned the accused over to authorities. The aerosol used in the attacks was provided by a colony person and those purchasing the product had to sign that they were prepared to be killed if they divulged their source.

By late August, the number of arrested men had risen to eleven and there were reports that the rapes had gone on for as long as five years. In September local Bolivian newspapers reported that a male from the Belize Colony with a long record of problem behaviour had died in hospital after he had been accused of participating in the rapes. He had been tied to a tree for hours and not given anything to drink. Underlying health problems had apparently contributed to his death.

The revelations brought fear and changes to the colonies in Bolivia. People began locking their doors for the first time, put bars on their windows, and in some cases moved in to their basements to be more secure. One Colony leader suggested the community was shocked and could only come to some understanding of the horror of these actions by pointing to them as a clear sign of end times.

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# News

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## Saskatchewan Loses Historian

Dick Epp, long time chair of the Saskatchewan Mennonite Historical Society died on June 28, 2009. An educator by profession, Dick turned his attention to history in his retirement. He wrote and published *From Between the Tracks 1927-1952*, a volume of personal stories. Dick was awarded the Saskatchewan Centennial Leadership Award in 2005 for his outstanding contribution to the province of Saskatchewan. He was also honoured by the Saskatchewan Mennonite Historical Society in 2006, for his many years of service as the editor of the Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian. He was also a long-standing member of the Board of *Der Bote*.

## Khortitsa 99 Committee Awards Grants

The Khortitsa 99 committee, consisting of Peter Klassen, Paul Toews and John J. Friesen, have awarded the following grants to researchers in Ukraine and Russia who are working on Mennonite related projects.

For 2008: Natalie Ostasheva-Venger received \$1500 for the publication of "Between Congregation, Clan and Russian Society in the Epoch of Choice: Mennonite Entrepreneurship in the Context of Russian Modernization, 1789-1920." Andrei Savin received a Senior Research Grant for a third volume of "Ethnoconfession in the Soviet State: Mennonites in Siberia in the 1920s and 1930s - Emigration and Repression." Ella Nikolaevna Stepchenko, Kiev received a dissertation research grant for "The Historiography of the Ethnic History of German-Speaking Colonists in Southern Ukraine from the Late Eighteenth to the Early Twentieth Century."

The 2006-2007 Khortitsa 99 grants were: Irina Chernova from the Ethnography and Museology department and Ekaterina Remple of the Omsk State Historical Museum, Omsk State University both received \$400 dissertation grants. George Epp Memorial Grants of \$950 each were awarded to Inoyatova Dilaram, History, National University, Taskent and Tatiana Smirnova, Ethnology and Museology, Omsk State University. Senior Research Grants of \$500 each were awarded to Oksana Beznosova and Svetlana, Ukrainian-German History, Dnepopetrovsk National University and Andrei Savin, Siberian Section, Russian Academy of Sciences, Novosibirsk. A publishing grant of \$1500 was awarded to Petr P. Vibe of the Omsk Historical Museum and the Omsk Pedagogical Museum.

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#### Dear Friends:

With this mailing, the D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation is pleased to be able to provide another issue of *Preservings*. Through it we hope to continue the vision of Delbert Plett to help readers better to understand and appreciate their Mennonite heritage. Our plans are to continue to produce *Preservings*.

There are of course considerable costs incurred in preparing, editing, printing and mailing this journal. We invite all readers to assist in covering the costs by subscribing on the form attached below. The subscription fee is \$20.00 per year.

We also invite you to contribute articles, biographies, or news. You may know of people whose story should be told in these pages. Maybe grandparents, relatives, or neighbours' stories would be of interest to our readers. Please contact us about writing such stories, or let us know who might be able to do so. We depend upon many willing writers for the content of the paper.

Blessings to you.

Sincerely,

John J. Friesen and Hans Werner,  
co-editors for *Preservings*

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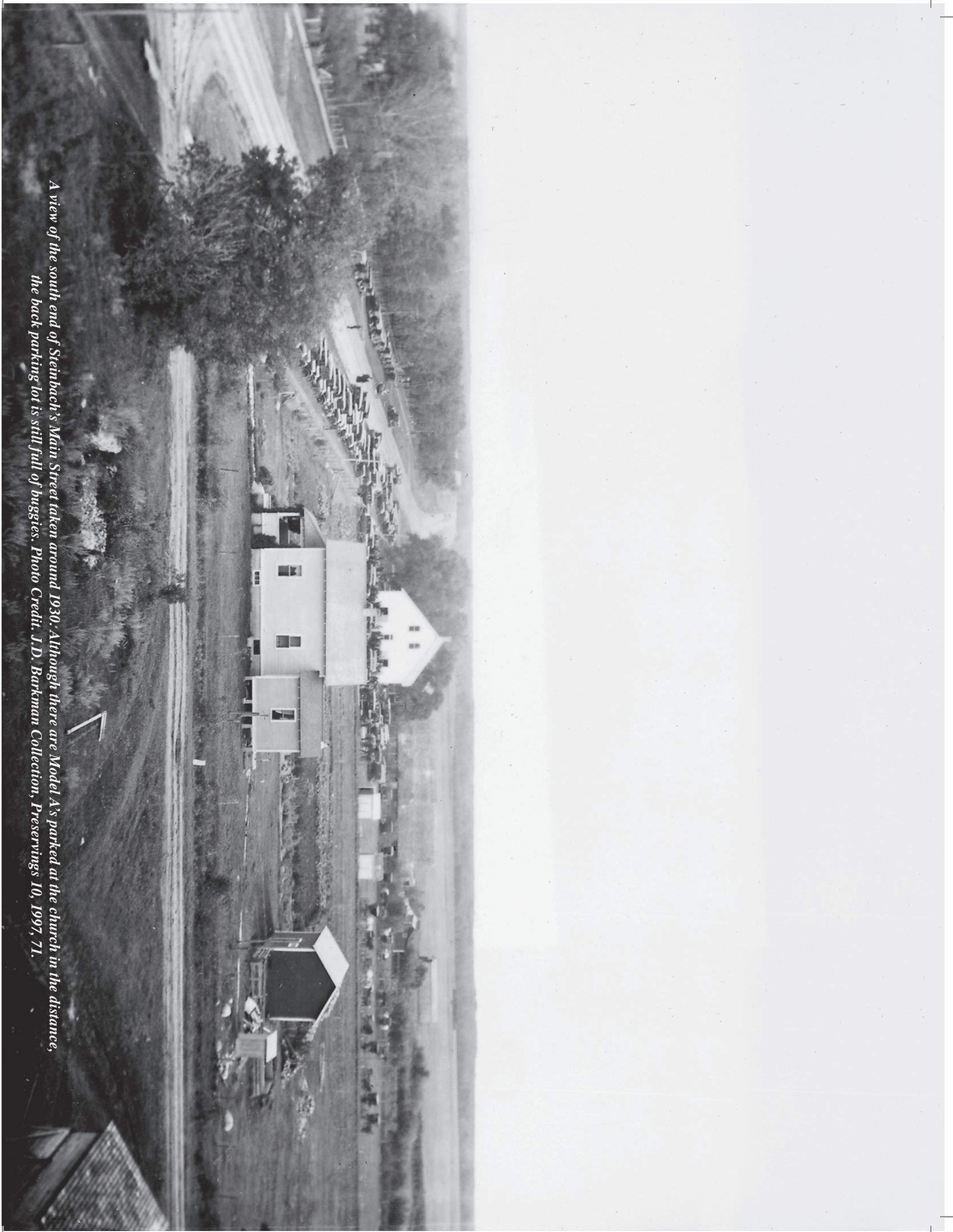
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*A view of the south end of Steinbach's Main Street taken around 1930. Although there are Model A's parked at the church in the distance, the back parking lot is still full of buggies. Photo Credit: J.D. Barkman Collection, Preservings 10, 1997, 71.*



*A harvest scene somewhere near Steinbach. This photo was in a collection of negatives among Delbert Plett's research materials. The envelope where this photo came from was dated September 2, 1926. The photos belonged to J. D. Goossen of Steinbach.*

