

# Preservings

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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

One hundred forty years ago Mennonites from Imperial Russia migrated to the Great Plains and Prairies of North America. The feature articles in this year's issue tell that story. Ernie Braun begins by revisiting the question of why Mennonites chose to emigrate and why some chose Canada, while others the United States. The diaries of the 1873 delegation that toured North America are used in Hans Werner's article to explore their personal wonderment at travel and the new sights and people they met. James Urry revisits the question of how instrumental William Hespeler actually was in making the immigration to Manitoba happen, while Adolf Ens explores the diversity of faith expression that emerged in Canada soon after Mennonites arrived. These fresh looks are accompanied by reprints of previous story tellers. An excerpt from Ferdinand Schultz's 1938 history of Mountain Lake, Minnesota and a 1975 *Mennonite Quarterly Review* article by John D. Unruh and his son on settlement in South Dakota, offer windows into settlement in the United States. Other writings of the day tell us about being stuck in the ice on Lake Superior and British impressions of Mennonites stopping over in Liverpool.

Other articles offer new insights into diverse subjects. Kerry Fast uses interviews conducted in the 1970s to reconstruct the story of the early settlement of Low German Mennonites in Ontario; Orlando Hiebert examines drainage, bush and rocks on the East Reserve, while Glenn Klassen tells an engaging story of finding cemeteries there. Conrad Stoesz's article about a new collection of photographs from Paraguay conveys both a sense of the complications of early settlement and the prospect of restoring some rare and unique images. Dora Maendal and Jesse Hofer's account of how Hutterite suffering during World War I is being retold in new ways reminds us of the value of not forgetting our past.

Our issue ends with some interesting biographies, engaging reflections and book reviews. It is our hope you will find the issue interesting and inspiring—inspiring in that it may even stimulate you to write something for next year's issue. We are always interested and available to help make it happen.

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*Preservings*, a journal of the D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation, Inc., is published annually. Co-editors are Hans Werner 1.204.786.9352 [plettfoundation@gmail.com](mailto:plettfoundation@gmail.com) and John J. Friesen, 1.204.488.8128, [djfriesen1@shaw.ca](mailto:djfriesen1@shaw.ca). The annual subscription fee is \$20.00, and cheques should be made out to the D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation, and mailed to Hans Werner, D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation, Inc., University of Winnipeg, 515 Portage Ave., Winnipeg, Manitoba R3B 2E9. Reader responses are welcome. Please send manuscripts, articles, and/or photographs to the above address at the University of Winnipeg. Our mission is to inform our readers about Mennonite history, and in particular to promote a respectful understanding and appreciation of the contribution made by the so-called conservatives.

Mennonites' ability to survive for almost five hundred years in the face of many challenges is a remarkable story. During the past half millennium, Mennonites were physically threatened with imprisonment and death, given financial and cultural incentives to join mainstream denominations, challenged by the Enlightenment and modernity to give up their religious beliefs and lifestyles as outdated, condemned by Pietism and evangelicalism as not emphasizing inner, subjective faith sufficiently, and threatened by affluence to exchange conviction for comfort. Despite these challenges, Mennonites have continued, becoming more numerous, more international and multi-ethnic, and stronger as the years go by.

Mennonites have been able to survive because they had a vision. This faith vision was based on the Bible and included seeing the church as free from state control. This vision included the view that faith was formed by, and should be lived in church community. It emphasized that people's lives could be changed through the power of God's spirit and the support of the church. This vision affirmed that with God's help, faith could be lived in daily life – in discipleship, and that peace was something to strive for personally, communally and internationally. This vision emphasized service as a way of life.

Some Mennonites have witnessed to the Anabaptist Mennonite vision by engaging with society, both locally and internationally, through personal evangelism, peace witness, development work, and by providing social and economic services. They have organized themselves into groups or conferences for the purpose of providing greater financial and human resources for the tasks they chose. Even though there are divergent views within this group, they have seen themselves as being different from society in that they believe in God and Jesus Christ, see the Bible as the basis for life and faith, and hold values that are different from those in the larger society.

Other Mennonites, the so-called conservatives, Old Orders, Old Colony, or horse and buggy people, have expressed the Anabaptist Mennonite vision by emphasizing more strongly the biblical admonitions to be separate from, and not be unequally yoked with, the world. Even though this group also has divergent views within it, in general they have expressed separation from the world in a variety of ways, including style of dress and head coverings, mode of transportation, and use of technology. Through these ways of being separate from the world, they have created strong bonds of group identity. They have placed less emphasis on overtly witnessing to, or engaging with, society.

Their focus has been on strengthening primary community relationships. From their perspective, the world around them values individualism rather than community, pride instead of humility, personal aggressive accumulation instead of sharing, a lifestyle of conspicuous consumption instead of simplicity, and living in urban centres rather than in agrarian settings where they believe family, community and church relationships can be more fully nurtured.

A significant way in which these conservative, or conservative Mennonites have brought about renewal, either intentionally or unintentionally, is through migration. The migration

to Manitoba in the 1870s was one of those opportunities for renewal. In the case of the Bergthaler Church, migration to Manitoba was made possible because the more wealthy assisted those unable to pay their way to Manitoba so that all could move. This created strong bonds. Migration to Manitoba allowed the landless, who were almost two thirds of the church community, to acquire land and provide a better financial base for their families. Migration and the availability of large tracts of land allowed the Reinländer Church (later called the Old Colony) to create strong village communities, in which the schools, municipal organizations, the *Waisenamt* (which provided social and financial services for church members), and the fire insurance system could be placed under the direction of the church. Migration allowed the *Kleine Gemeinde* leaders to envision a new start in which they could achieve the unity and spiritual renewal that had eluded them in Russia.

Successful settlement on the open prairie in Manitoba required that people cooperated in starting homes and farms, establishing schools, and building the many organizations required to form a successful community. Through it all, they established patterns of extending warm hospitality to family and friends, and went visiting often throughout the Mennonite settlements. Strong bonds were created that transcended church divisions, and sustained the communities for decades.

The migration to Manitoba in the 1870s became a model for renewal during the migrations to Mexico and Paraguay in the 1920s. After the migration to Mexico, the Old Colony bishop commented that this move had provided a renewal in his community. This model of renewal has been repeated many times in subsequent years through the various migrations from Mexico and Paraguay to other countries in South and Central America. Not all migrations were, however, successful, nor did they always bring about the hoped for renewal.

These two ways in which the Anabaptist Mennonite vision has been expressed have their strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures. It is not clear that one is better than the other, or more faithful to the original Anabaptist Mennonite vision than the other. Unfortunately, that part of the Mennonite community that has been more engaged with society, has also been aggressive in proselytizing those who are less engaged, and in effect labelling them as non-Christian, and not being faithful to the Anabaptist Mennonite vision. Both groups can learn from each other without denigrating the other, or trying to convert the other to its views.

## Our Cover

Our cover combines two images of Mennonite immigration and settlement in a scene from the Mennonite Heritage Village. The Grandma statue by Bill Epp commemorates his mother-in-law from the 1920s migration, while the Hochfeld house was built in 1877 by 1870s immigrants. Photo Credit: Wikipedia Commons, Shahnoor Habib Munmun

# Feature Articles: The 1870s Migration

## Why Emigrate?

Ernest N. Braun, Niverville, Manitoba

*With gratitude to Dr. James Urry for resource materials and revision, and to Dr. Adolf Ens for editing assistance.*

### Introduction:

In late fall of 1869, news arrived suddenly in Mennonite colonies in Russia that Dmitri Milyutin, the Minister of War, was proposing universal military conscription that would include Mennonites. At the same time something happened in Canada that would create an opportunity for migration and resettlement: the Hudson's Bay Company transferred Rupert's Land to the Government of Canada. Of course the Mennonites only learned of this later. The government promptly sent surveyors to prepare the land for homesteaders but in October 1869, Louis Riel stopped the Dominion Lands Survey crew on what is now Brady Road near Whyte Ridge, Winnipeg, forcing the government to create the province of Manitoba in the spring of 1870. By 1871 this sequence of events resulted in the opening of vast areas of land in Manitoba for homesteading, so the federal government promoted immigration to prevent the United States from annexing the territory. This urgent need for settlers to occupy the new province coincided with the need for land and refuge by Russian Mennonites.

In Mennonite history a pattern of separation, persecution, disunity, and migration repeats over the centuries. Separation began at the time when the Anabaptist faith was adopted, and its logical result was to be deemed outcasts from the dominant society in Europe, whether Catholic or Protestant. The subsequent persecution is predictable, taking many forms, from torture and death to restriction of rights and the imposition of special taxes. Disunity is very likely, as persecution puts communities under extreme pressure, and any crisis in such circumstances spawns divergent responses. Such a crisis usually is precipitated by change, and the response to change often polarizes the community into those who are willing to compromise to deal with the change, and those who insist on the *status quo* or simply refuse to compromise. Often the only choice for those who refuse to compromise is to emigrate.

This recurring pattern is of particular interest for the, unique migration in the 1870s when one entire colony in Russia (Bergthal), an entire faith sub-group (the *Kleine Gemeinde*), one entire Molotschna village (Alexanderwohl), along with thousands of other Mennonites, pulled up stakes and moved to America, including Manitoba. There has been much discussion of this migration in Mennonite periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic, and in non-Mennonite newspapers and journals, both at the time and later.

The basic facts are: about one-third of the Mennonites in South Russia emigrated in this migration, the greatest numbers coming between 1874 and 1876, with lower numbers in the years thereafter.<sup>1</sup>

Who emigrated? The emigrants fell into several major groups: a) the entire *Kleine Gemeinde*, largely Molotschna

families who, under Klaas Reimer, had separated themselves from the main Mennonite church in the Molotschna in 1812, and who migrated to Markusland in 1863, and then to Borosenko in 1865, from where they emigrated; b) the entire *Bergthal Gemeinde*, the first daughter colony of the original Khortitsa settlement, established in 1836, and which was totally disbanded by this emigration; c) Khortitsa colonists including some Fürstenland leaseholders, descendants of the original Khortitsa Colony; d) various groups from the Molotschna colony (who chose the United States); and e) smaller groups from Volhynia and West Prussia (who also chose the United States). One other related group was the Hutterites, all of whom settled in the United States, some in colonies and some on individual homesteads.

**Mennonite Passengers Arriving at North American Ports, based on Ship Lists**

Year	Canada	United States
1873		215
1874	1,543	5,183
1875	3,261	1,688
1876	1,352	1,632
1877	184	1,028
1878	323	1,070
1879	208	1,094
1880	69	230
1881-1898	640	2,005
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>7,580</b>	<b>12,140</b>

*Canadian numbers to 1880 are from Adolf Ens, Subjects or Citizens? and those from 1881 to 1898 from Jake E. Peters, "The Forgotten Immigrants: The Coming of the 'Late Kanadier', 1881-1914," Journal of Mennonite Studies 18(2000): 129-145. United States numbers are tabulated from: David A. Haurey, Index to Mennonite Immigrants on United States Passenger Lists 1872-1904, (North Newton, KS: Mennonite Library and Archives, 1986).*

What was the reason for emigration? Any survey of the documents written by Mennonite leaders during those critical years between 1872 and 1876 gives an almost unanimous answer: 'for conscience sake'; specifically, the creation of a new Russian law which mandated universal military conscription for all young men in the nation, including Mennonites.

Newspaper articles in the secular media of the day in Canada and the USA ascribe the migration to the same cause.

The earliest Mennonite historians to address the topic, such as D. H. Epp, P. M. Friesen, and Franz Isaak, were educated and cultured Mennonites who had remained in Russia, and told the story from their perspective, which depicted the ones leaving as “conservative, culturally backward, and even disloyal to their Russian homeland.”<sup>2</sup> A new interpretation of events gradually made its appearance early in the 1930s, and more vocally in 1974 during the centennial of the emigration. It seems that the question should be raised in the plural: “what were the reasons for emigration?” In the last fifty years, historians have provided a more detailed context for the migration, generally suggesting that the impact the state of affairs in Russia had on the Mennonites was complicated, and that merely naming military conscription or lack of land as causes of the migration may not do proper justice to the subject.<sup>3</sup>

Several secondary questions emerge: did all the groups emigrate for the same reason, and why did the majority prefer the USA to Canada?

## Part I: The Motivation for Emigration

### Loss of Military Service Exemption

Almost all the early literature points to the new universal military service law as the main cause, with other factors mentioned as footnotes. Clarence Hiebert in *Brothers in Need* quotes an article after article in the American press citing it as the reason, and Mennonite writers of the day also claim that to be the motivation for emigration. Delegate Rev. Heinrich Wiebe is quoted by fellow delegate Paul Tschetter as saying that the military exemption was the whole reason they (the Bergthaler) were emigrating.<sup>4</sup>

Any examination of military service as an element in the emigration will require some background in Russian history and politics. The relationship of the Mennonites to the state was not that of citizenship as we understand it today, where a citizen has inalienable legal rights from birth. Rather it was a relationship based on a promise made to a subject people by the reigning autocrat, as a special gift which the ruler (ordained by God) was entitled to bestow. This promise was called the *Privilegium*, and, ideally, it would safeguard the subject group in specific ways, almost conferring a covenant obligation on the ruler to protect the agreement. Such *Privilegia* were common in early modern Europe before the rise of nation states and constitutional democracies.<sup>5</sup>

Mennonites had been a stateless people for a long time. In a number of the places they had settled they were denied the rights, however limited, of ordinary subjects. For their part, they have not valued citizenship much in any nation – instead preferring to negotiate separate agreements directly with the highest authority, willing to forego rights in exchange for the privilege of controlling their own religious institutions, education, use of language, local self-government, and most importantly, exemption from military service. The particular *Privilegium* that was negotiated by Mennonites as part of the agreement to settle in Russia, granted in 1800 by Paul I, was a reworking of an earlier document signed by Catherine the Great in 1787. Article 6 exempts, in perpetuity, all Mennonites and their descendants from military or civil service conscription. The annulment of parts of the *Privilegium* then was tantamount

*Wie wird's mit den Schulen, Kirchen, usw. sein? Aber wir verlassen unsere Heimat ja nicht zum Gewinnste, sondern um des Glaubens willen, tröstete man sich. Wir möchten mit unsere Kinder zusammen nach unsere Bezeugung leben und sterben. Daher wollen wir nicht nach hinten schauen, sondern mutig vorwärts gehen und uns auf den Herrn, den Lenker aller Dingen, verlassen, der soll uns führen.* J. B. Peters, “Die ersten Pioneere aus Süd-Russland in Kanada”, *Steinbach Post*, October 11, 1939, 6.

“What will happen with the schools, the churches, etc? But one comforted oneself: of course we are not leaving our homeland for gain, but for our faith. Together with our children we would like to live and die according to our convictions. For this reason, we do not want to look back, but instead go forward with courage and depend on the Lord, the giver of all things, who will guide us.” Translation: E. Braun.

**Cornelius Toews** (Kleine Gemeinde delegate) – “*Es war die Hoffnung, dass Kanada eine Heimat für friedliebende Mennoniten, Nachfolger Christi, bieten würde, die unter keinen Umständen einen andern Menschen töten können.*” Cited by Royden Loewen in *Der Bote*, June 2000, 5.

“It was the hope that Canada would offer a homeland for peace-loving Mennonites, followers of Christ, who under no circumstances can kill another human being.” Translation: E. Braun.

**Johann Wiebe** (Elder of Fürstenländer) – “*Die Ursache ist wegen der Wehrpflicht, dass unsere Kinder dort der Menschen Knechte werden sollten. I Korinther 7:23. D. h. , wir sollten sie zu den Diensten der Obrigkeit hingeben, und auch in der Kleidung, ähnlich den Soldaten sie tragen sollten, und sollten auch das Los nehmen. Und das alles machte uns Angst und Bange, und fürchteten, ob wir uns ganz und gar verlieren würden. Darum machten wir uns auf und gingen nach Amerika, Manitoba, weil uns hier die Freiheiten angeboten wurden, nach des Herrn und seiner Apostel Lehre leben zu können.*” Cited by Adolf Ens and Isbrand Hiebert in *Der Bote*, June 2000, 7-8.

“The reason is conscription, that our children were to become the ‘servants of men’ (I Cor. 7:23) there; i.e. we were to deliver them to the service of the government, and also to wear the garb like that of soldiers, and moreover to accept that destiny. And all that made us anxious and frightened, and feared that we would lose ourselves completely. For that reason we packed up and went to America, Manitoba, for here the freedoms were offered that would allow us to live according to the teaching of the Lord and his Apostles.” Translation: E. Braun.

to a fundamental betrayal of this contract with the Tsar.<sup>6</sup>

Although it may have appeared that way to many Mennonites, the shifting of the political ground did not happen overnight. Over time political changes, some already envisioned by Catherine the Great, gradually altered the understanding of government and citizenship as Russia slowly moved towards a *Rechtsstaat*, a state based on the Rule of Law and not on Divine Right. Successive tsars adopted a reform platform, some moving faster, others more reactionary. The country was an autocracy, supported by the nobility and the Orthodox Church, with the vast majority of inhabitants peasant serfs, and rural minority groups. Although Nicholas I (1796 – 1855) was a conservative Tsar, he tried to modernize the system. In late 1853, however, the Crimean War broke out with Britain and France joining the Ottoman Turks in a war against Russia, which was fought on the pretext of religious control over the Holy Land, but which was in reality over control of vital Black Sea ports. Russia lost the war, suffering the humiliation of defeat on its own soil. Nicholas I died during the war and was succeeded by Alexander II, a more enthusiastic reformer. The loss shook Russia's confidence in her military capability and betrayed the backwardness of the country. This required the total reform of Russian society: land, political, educational and military reforms, with resulting social and economic upheaval. The change that affected Mennonites the keenest was the issue of military conscription, one of the reforms advanced by Dmitri Milyutin to modernize the army.

The so-called "Great Reforms", introduced by Alexander II in the 1860s, were also intended to move Russia forcibly towards the Rule of Law, and towards a modern centralized nation with common values, in which the distinctions characterizing the "estates" within the country would be removed. The end result was a different conception of the "state" – one in which "everybody had a duty to the state and was subject to the same laws, same rights, same duties and obligations." This new status included Mennonites, who would no longer be "guests of the state," but citizens with specific rights and duties, including military service.<sup>7</sup>

James Urry points out that in 1870 this matter received an additional impetus when the new state of Germany was created under Prussian domination. Prussia had already defeated its neighbours, first Denmark and Austria in the 1850s and 1860s, and then France, with a conscript army. Prussia's reformed educational system produced good, disciplined soldiers. Moreover, the new Germany now threatened Russia's western borders.<sup>8</sup> The military reforms to deal with this threat included universal military service that would nullify the Mennonite exemption from any form of military service. This sparked an immediate crisis, and Mennonite representatives converged on the highest authorities they could reach in an attempt to speak to the Tsar, but to no avail. Several delegations followed, until it became clear that exemption from the law was not an option, but a form of alternative service was negotiable. Again, perhaps predictably, this created a rift between those who were willing to compromise, and those who insisted on the status quo. The matter was complicated by the recent history of the Mennonites in Prussia who, faced with a similar problem when Prussia enacted a conscription law, gave in to the pressure to become loyal citizens. Some Prussian Mennonites had immigrated to Russia and the United States because of this, but most remained in Prussia and accepted the new law, essentially abandoning their



*Dimitri Milyutin in 1885. Milyutin was Minister of War during the reign of Alexander I when he proposed the widespread military reforms of the 1870s after Russia was defeated in the Crimean War. Photo Credit: Wikipedia Commons.*

stand against taking up arms. When in 1871 some Mennonite leaders realized that the provision for freedom from military service in the Privilegium would be annulled, and that no further exemption from military service would be forthcoming, there was a deep sense of betrayal. Some groups began to cast about for emigration possibilities, and the right to leave was granted by the government, although serious obstacles were placed before them, notably in the delayed issuance of passports and exit visas. The conscription would not be effective for ten years, and during this time those who wished to leave had time to sell their property and emigrate. However, as early as 1873 all Mennonite colonies were required to submit lists of men over a certain age, with the result that additional mistrust developed and emigration fever heightened. At the same time, the more acculturated Mennonites accepted the new reality, and worked to make it succeed. Various alternative service possibilities were offered, and Mennonites chose work in the forestry, a four-year (later three-year) program financed and run by the Mennonites.

### **Religious Diversity**

The religious argument for emigration is complex. Tensions within the Mennonite community were nothing new, but by the 19th century several new developments in the religious realm were added to the situation. One of these was the rise of a more individualistic kind of faith, centered on individual

“conversion” as opposed to a faith integrated into and inseparable from the life of the community. This movement arose, at least in part, from the ministry of non-Mennonite evangelists from Germany who received sympathetic responses in both the Old Colony and Molotschna, but less so in Bergthal. The beginning in 1860 of what would become the Mennonite Brethren represents one aspect of this development, although other movements occurred throughout the Mennonite colonies. A groundswell of religious change moved through the Mennonite colonies, emphasizing a more evangelical faith, but in time also generating secular changes as more and more young teachers went abroad to study and came back to take on leadership roles departing from tradition in forms of worship and in their understanding of doctrine.<sup>9</sup>

The loss of authority by church leaders and the corresponding increase in the power of secular leaders had already been experienced during the reign of Johann Cornies who had died in 1848. One of the ways this manifested itself was in the administration of church discipline. Bishop Johann Wiebe of Fürstenland decried the reliance on state authorities rather than the use of spiritually-based methods of dealing with “disobedient” believers. Mennonites in Russia, he suggested, were now being penalized for their apostasy. His understanding of the emigration was that it was, at least in part, an attempt to recreate the Anabaptist ideal, which had been compromised in Russia, so that the “migration was a reform movement.”<sup>10</sup> The Kleine Gemeinde held a similar position.

Another factor within this religious context was that the economic development of the Mennonite colonies had fostered a departure from the frugal “*Stillen im Lande*” subsistence life-style. Subsistence farming had been replaced by a market economy in which prosperity and the pursuit of wealth became important aspects of Mennonite life. Bishop Gerhard Wiebe characterized this change as the loss of proper humility, with a self-sufficient pride in its place. Moreover, he also suggested that their political difficulties were a direct result of apathy, lovelessness and factionalism among the Mennonites as they became too complacent about their faith and “fell asleep.”<sup>11</sup>

### Socio-Economics: The Landless Factor

By mid-1800 Mennonites in Russia were becoming a socially stratified society, as they had in Prussia earlier. They possessed a small wealthy, educated class which included merchants, a large property-owning class (*Vollwirt*), but also a surprisingly large landless class (*Anwohner*). In 1788-1789 the landless in Prussia had been given an opportunity to improve their lot through emigration to Russia. Eighty years later, the situation repeated itself in Russia, with perhaps an even greater imbalance between the landed and the landless. Delbert Plett has illustrated land distribution for three colonies in 1867, indicating that over sixty percent of Mennonites were landless, as reserve land intended for future expansion had been leased to large landowners instead of serving younger land-hungry farmers.<sup>12</sup> The exception to this was the Kleine Gemeinde where in Borosenko up to ninety percent of the families were in the *Vollwirt* category. Therefore, the offer of a free homestead of 160 acres in Manitoba significantly enhanced the emigration option for the landless in the overpopulated colonies. Had this been the predominant factor, however, it is likely that the majority of emigrants would have been the landless and the indigent, since they had the most to gain.

As it was, the poor could only emigrate from the Bergthal Colony and Kleine Gemeinde group, since they received community support because both groups emigrated *en masse*. It is true that steps were taken to address the landless issue: Khortitsa established the lease colony of Fürstenland in 1864, and other Khortitsa settlements arose in Yazykovo in 1869, in Nepluyevka in 1870, and in Schlactin/Baratov in 1871. Molotschna daughter colonies were established in Crimea in 1862, in Borosenko in 1865, and in Zagradovka in 1872.<sup>13</sup> In the end, however, large numbers of landless farmers, particularly young married couples, still had no prospects for the future, since they lacked either the resources to emigrate without community assistance or to establish themselves in daughter colonies.<sup>14</sup>

Landownership and landlessness were further complicated by increasing industrialization. As James Urry points out, at this time, “Mennonite society in Russia was in the process of a transformation from an agrarian to an industrial society.”<sup>15</sup> Although rural areas in Russia were still driven by peasant agriculture, Mennonite colonies were an exception. The Mennonite genius for innovation and enterprise transformed each village into a mixture of agriculture and business, giving the landless employment opportunities and providing reliable labour for the entrepreneurs.

A series of crop failures in the three years leading up to emigration may also have been a factor behind the emigration fever, but in 1874 there was a bumper crop. This factor may not have influenced Kleine Gemeinde and Bergthaler in their decision to emigrate, but may have significantly affected other individuals who were not part of a larger communal movement.



Eduard von Todleben was a noted General of the Crimean War. He was of German descent and was sent by Alexander II to persuade Mennonites not to emigrate. He offered the compromise of alternative service in the forestry service that was important in convincing the majority of Mennonites to stay in Russia. Photo Credit: Wikipedia Commons.

The last-minute intervention of General von Todleben in spring of 1874, with offers of compromise persuaded many Mennonites to stay in Russia and the bumper crop helped many of the undecided to remain.

### **Education: Tradition vs Modernity**

Additional factors constituted a concern for Mennonites in South Russia in the late 1860s and early 1870s. A major change involved school reforms with more extensive and secular curricula. These reforms offered several challenges to the Mennonites. Perhaps the most significant of these changes, as their schools had been conducted in German, was the new national consciousness that brought pressure to teach in Russian. This was the second major shift in language for the Mennonites in less than a century. In Prussia they had abandoned the use of Dutch in religious services for High German although in everyday life they spoke Low German. In Russia, the Russian authorities had consolidated the attachment to the German language as it was the language of official communication with government for all “German” colonists. As such, they standardized the language for Mennonites and expanded its use outside of religious contexts. It was also the language of instruction in schools. Mennonites thus learned a better High German than they had been used to in Prussia and some used this to gain access to literary German, and to identify with German literature and folk history. The later move to Russian as the language of administration and instruction in schools was resisted, despite the fact that Mennonite secondary schools had already begun to teach Russian before the emigration crisis.

The threatened loss of German as the language of instruction, and the loss of control over the curriculum, meant that the main institution that acculturated Mennonite children to long-established Mennonite ideals in the home and the meeting house, would pass into the hands of the state, with the fear that the children would be lost to the faith. It was partly the influence of the new schooling on Mennonite life that Wiebe inveighed against as having brought “*Weltweisheit*” (worldly wisdom) and “*Hoffart*” (arrogance) into the community, instead of the “heavenly manna” they were accustomed to.<sup>16</sup> The pattern again follows true to form: this change exacerbated the difference in mindset among the various Mennonite groups. The majority of Mennonites were willing to accept the changes, and in fact some welcomed them. Eventually many prominent families would send their young men and some women to universities in Russia and abroad.

### **Political: Progressives vs Conservatives**

The new laws and reforms applied equally to all the Mennonite colonies, and would have resulted in mass emigration had they been interpreted the same way by all Mennonites. The fact that only about one third of the 54,000 Russian Mennonites emigrated suggests that other variables were at play. The aggregate result of all the factors could perhaps be summed up as representing unprecedented rapid change. It appears that the significant and radical changes affecting all Mennonites in South Russia did not pose the same level of threat to all Mennonite groups. For example, it is instructive that the option of serving in a forestry service, albeit organized on military principles, was acceptable to the majority of Mennonites. Increasing use of a state school model and the Russian language also did not appear to be enough of a threat

to prompt radical action. As the Mennonite world was increasingly commercialized and industrialized, for some Mennonites a landless population was actually a desirable aspect of colony life, providing reliable labour for large agri-business estates, and agri-business factories, and offering a diversified cottage industry. Accepting citizenship with its attendant new responsibilities towards the state also did not appear to be a critical hindrance to the majority of Mennonites, and may even have been welcomed in some parts of the Russian Mennonite world, just as it had in Prussia.

Specific changes in the political sphere also affected the Mennonites. In 1818 the government set up a separate agency to administer foreign colonists (*Fürsorgekomitee*). It treated Mennonites as a distinct group of colonists, allowed local self-rule and used High German for all administrative communication. This agency was to be abolished in the reforms of local government in the 1870s and Mennonites were to be administered in the same way, and with the same units of local government as all Russians. As such the language of administration would be Russian. New courts were established with trial by jury, juries on which Mennonites would have to serve.<sup>17</sup> None of these reforms specifically targeted Mennonites.

Other political considerations need to be factored in as well. Traditionally, separation of church and state featured strongly in Mennonite thought, but the rapid development of a Russian national consciousness, fueled by the rise of nationhood in European countries, called the Mennonite relationship with rulers into question. As of old, Mennonites held to an older system of “citizenship”, in accordance with the principle of being ‘in the world, but not of it’. Officially Mennonites belonged to the State Peasant estate, but they lived as a separate people, who negotiated their special Privilegium with the autocrat.<sup>18</sup> This erosion of the special relationship provided by the Privilegium divided Mennonites into those who were willing to redefine their place in the larger society, in fact becoming patriotic Russian “citizens”, and those who adamantly refused to do so.

It may be that there was a further complication. The formulated rationale for emigrating put forward by the leaders of various groups, especially the Bergthaler, involved a collective motivation for emigrating. But each family needed to buy into this motivation or opt out. The reasons that individual households decided to sell everything, usually at a loss, to travel to America, with little hope of return, may also have an entirely different cast. No survey exists giving the specific reasons for individuals for joining the emigration. However, it is clear that every family needed to make its own decision, but for the Bergthal Colony, the Kleine Gemeinde and the Alexanderwohl group it involved the dissolution and sale of their colony by a majority vote in a community assembly. The choice for many was also set in the context of their next-of-kin’s decision to emigrate, for this threatened family ties, and the potential loss of community if they did not join in the emigration. All of this created considerable pressure on an individual family to leave with the group. Further, the option of staying for these people would mean relocation anyway, so even financially there would be some hardship. At the same time, none of the serious challenges that they faced in Russia would be addressed by remaining.

In summary then, the decision to emigrate cannot easily be ascribed to one factor or even a few categorical factors. By

1870, like everybody else in Russia, Mennonites were experiencing the effects of a paradigm shift on many fronts, and it was their faith distinctives that precipitated the crisis for them. Many nuanced variables came into play at that point, variables that split a people geographically, if not spiritually, as some emigrated and most remained in Russia.

## Part II: Why Immigrate to Manitoba instead of the USA?

Sixty percent of the Mennonites (approximately 10,000) who left Russia in the 1870s settled in the USA, raising the question: did a new Privilegium guaranteeing exemption from military service not play as important a role for those people? No definitive answer has appeared in the literature, although Alberta Pantle claims that “most of the delegates did not seem concerned with the question of special rights in the United States” although she provides no support for her comment.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the audience that Paul Tschetter had with President Grant in which he predicted that no foreign war was in the offing for at least fifty years, eased the fears in that regard.

Of the twelve delegates, only four viewed Manitoba with favour. Wilhem Ewert of Prussia, Andreas Schrag and Tobias Unruh of Volhynia, *Herold der Wahrheit* publisher John F. Funk of Indiana, and the two Hutterite delegates cut short the tour after seeing what became the East Reserve, and returned to Dakota. Near the end of the excursion to land west of Portage La Prairie, Leonhard Sudermann of Berdyansk, Jakob Buller of the Molotschna Colony, and Jacob Shantz, also returned to Fort Garry somewhat earlier than the rest and headed back to the Dakotas. This left only the Bergthaler and Kleine Gemeinde delegates to take a second look at the areas offered and negotiate

an agreement with the Government of Canada.

At least seven of the twelve delegates therefore summarily dismissed Manitoba as an option. Most of these seven had already investigated lands south of the border, areas which offered better land and less isolation. Moreover, Bernhard Warkentin, who had been living in the United States for a year and had travelled extensively in both Manitoba and the USA, provided first-hand reports favouring the latter, as did John Funk and various railroad representatives who accompanied the delegates. Funk writing in *Herold der Wahrheit*, gave three reasons for their choice of the United States: “1) milder climate; 2) proximity to commercial centres for discharge of produce; 3) republican form of government.”<sup>20</sup> Funk, an enthusiastic exponent of settlement in the USA, may not be an impartial authority, but at the very least the first two advantages he mentions appear to be based on practical considerations. The third argument has been subject to debate over time.

One further factor that has been taken for granted by most historians is the impact of the efforts of the American Mennonite community to induce the Russian Mennonites to choose the American West and not Canada. Even those who were already committed to Manitoba were confronted at Fargo and strongly pressured to abandon the wilderness in Manitoba, and settle instead in the USA. Perhaps even more obvious is the fact that, as in Canada, there were already large Mennonite communities in the USA who had not lost their historic non-resistant faith. Therefore the fact that the United States government never passed legislation granting privileges or rights to incoming Mennonites does not seem to be an issue. The fact is that the States of Nebraska, Kansas and Minnesota did pass laws exempting Mennonites from militia



*Jacob Y. Schantz was an Ontario Swiss Mennonite who became very involved in settling of Mennonites in Manitoba. Schantz had been to Manitoba with Bernhard Warkentin in 1872 and he accompanied the 1873 delegates on their tour of the northern states and Manitoba. He was also instrumental in negotiating loans from his own church and the federal government to assist Mennonites in the early years of settlement. Photo Credit: GAMEO*



*Bernhard Warkentin on the left and Johann Funk on the right were instrumental personalities in the migration of Mennonites to the United States. Warkentin had toured Manitoba and large parts of the United States in 1872. He also toured Kansas and Texas with the two delegates Jacob Buller and Wilhelm Ewert and later became a prominent miller in Kansas. Johann Funk was a Swiss Mennonite Church minister and publisher of *Herold der Wahrheit* and its English version *Herald of Truth* from Elkhart, Indiana. He accompanied the 1873 delegates for most of their tour, including Manitoba. Photo Credits: GAMEO*



duty, so in reality the absence of a Privilegium became moot for the moment.

In addition to the Canadian promise of universal military exemption, Manitoba offered block settlement, not available in USA as a political promise. This relative advantage was nullified as the huge blocks of land that railroad companies had been granted in the USA were used as a means to recoup the money invested. Land agents and railroads sent representatives to Russia to entice the emigrants to the American West, offering alternate sections within ten miles of the tracks to various Mennonite groups, thereby managing by various mechanisms to accommodate the Mennonite desire to establish village settlement. E. K. Francis wrote that one factor in favour of Manitoba was the fact that land was considerably more expensive in the USA, at \$3 per acre, whereas land in Manitoba was free for the first 160 acres and only about a \$1 per acre for another 480 acres.<sup>21</sup> This factor, which likely influenced the Bergthalers most as there were few who had means to buy land, was somewhat vitiated by the eagerness of the railroads in the United States to offer easy terms of repayment. This quick review of the issues suggests that in general the basis of decision of those who chose the USA may have been less ideological (i.e., less concerned with a need to secure a new iron-clad Privilegium), and influenced more by pragmatic considerations involving climate, land, market logistics, and politics.

### Summary

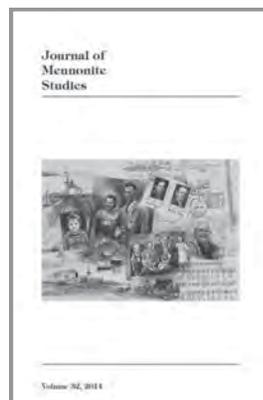
When in spring of 1874 Bishop Gerhard Wiebe was compelled by General von Todleben to speak for his colony, the reason he cited for the emigration was “*Die Gemeinde ist bang vor der Zukunft. . .*” (The congregation is worried about the future).<sup>22</sup> To support that conclusion, he mentions that the landless and the *Anwohner* as well as the *landowners* left their houses and farms without receiving a cent for them, and departed from their homeland because of this fear. At enormous sacrifice they left their established life for the unknown, opting for some of the least desirable land (Manitoba) of all the territories examined by the delegates, because as E. K. Francis pointed out, “above all, they wanted to be absolutely assured that the experiences which now drove them from Russia would never be repeated again.”<sup>23</sup>

The inertia of a settled lifestyle, a known paradigm, and comfortable circumstances, at least for the leaders and trendsetters, could not be overcome by the gradually increasing religious ferment, threats to language and schools, or even commercialization of agriculture and the introduction of a cash economy of paid labour. Only an overwhelming immediate and unforeseen threat to the core of the community could overcome that inertia, and the sudden loss of the military service exemption was that threat. For the conservative Mennonites, it was the straw that broke the camel's back. For the progressive, acculturated Mennonites, conscription merely confirmed what was largely tacitly accepted; namely, that an isolated, separate existence apart from any participation in the civic life of their host country was no longer feasible. Compromises needed to be made, if possible on the most favourable terms.

### Endnotes

- 1 Although the land annexed by Catherine the Great was called New Russia at first, and then South Russia by Mennonites, the current name is Ukraine. For sake of simplicity, the generic word Russia will be used.
- 2 Harry Loewen, “A House Divided: Russian Mennonite Nonresistance and Emigration in the 1870s” in John Friesen, ed. *Mennonites in Russia: Essays in Honour of Gerhard Lohrenz* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1989), 127.
- 3 See James Urry and Frank H. Epp in *Mennonite Reporter*, November 25, 1974.
- 4 Clarence Hiebert, comp. and ed., *Brothers in Deed to Brothers in Need: A Scrapbook about Mennonite Immigrants from Russia, 1870-1885* (Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press, 1974) and E. K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia* (Steinbach: Crossway Publications, 2001), 42-43.
- 5 James Urry, *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood: Europe – Russia – Canada 1525-1980* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press), 2006, 43.
- 6 An English translation is in William Schroeder, *The Bergthal Colony* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1974), 78-80. See also Cornelius Krahn, “Views of the 1870s Migrations by Contemporaries.” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 48 (1974): 447.
- 7 James Urry, email correspondence with E. Braun, April 6, 2014.
- 8 James Urry, email correspondence with E. Braun, July 31, 2014.
- 9 Gerhard Wiebe, *Ursachen und Geschichte der Auswanderung der Mennoniten aus Russland nach Amerika* (Winnipeg: Der Nordwesten, 1900), 13.
- 10 Peter Zacharias, *Reinland: An Experience in Community* (Reinland, Manitoba, Reinland Centennial Committee 1976), 29.
- 11 Wiebe, 13-17.
- 12 Delbert Plett, *Pioneers and Pilgrims* (Steinbach: D. F. P. Publications, 1990) 262-263.
- 13 William Schroeder and Helmut T. Huebert, *Mennonite Historical Atlas*, 2 ed. (Winnipeg: Springfield Publishers, 1996), 117.
- 14 Plett, 265.
- 15 James Urry, “Chortitzer, Kleine Gemeinde, and Russländer: Conflicting views of life on the East Reserve, 1874-1940,” in John Dyck, ed. *Working Papers of the East Reserve Village Histories, 1874-1910* (Steinbach: Hanover Steinbach Historical Society, 1990), 122.
- 16 Wiebe, 13.
- 17 James Urry, email correspondence with Ernest Braun, September 1, 2014.
- 18 James Urry, email correspondence with Ernest Braun, June 23, 2014.
- 19 Alberta Pantle, “Settlement of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren at Gnadenu”, Marion County, *Kansas Historical Quarterly* (February, 1945): 261.
- 20 As quoted in F. H. Epp, “Mass migration from Russia to Manitoba”, *Mennonite Reporter*, Nov. 25, 1974, 13.
- 21 Francis, 43-44.
- 22 Wiebe, 31.
- 23 Francis, 36.

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# 'Something...we had not seen nor heard of': The 1873 Mennonite Delegation to Find Land in 'America'

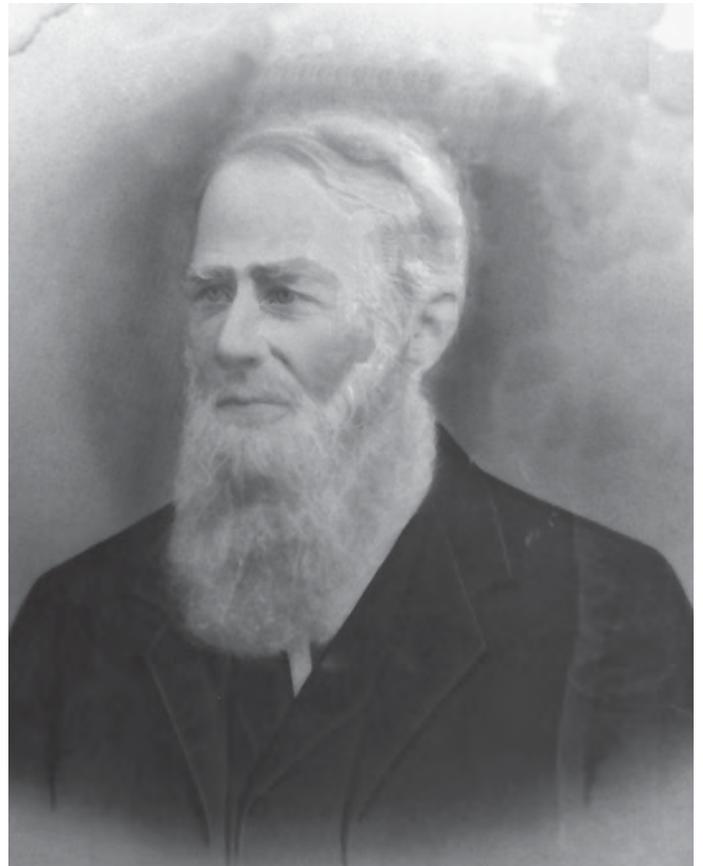
Hans Werner, Winnipeg, Manitoba

The military reforms of the 1870s in Imperial Russia threatened the military exemption that had been promised to Mennonites by Catherine the Great and confirmed by her successor Paul I for all time. Meanwhile in Prussia the King's subjects were increasingly becoming citizens, a status that flew in the face of granting special privileges to some, but not others. For many Mennonites, the threat to their pacifist position stimulated a sense that their time in the cherished homelands of Russia and Prussia was coming to an end. Certainly there were other 'push' factors: landlessness, leases that were expiring, religious disunity, and the pull factor of vast new lands in 'America'. When one delegation to St. Petersburg after another failed to negotiate an acceptable compromise various groups of Mennonites commissioned delegates to travel to North America to find a place for them to settle. Among the Prussian Mennonites many chose to abandon their stance of rejection of military participation, however, Wilhelm Ewert, one of the 1873 delegates had made a trip to Russia to determine whether his congregation could migrate there. When he realized Mennonites there were facing the same problem, 'America' became the preferred option.

The delegates' trip to North America has been a regular part of the history of the 1870s migration. The outlines of the story emphasize their representing prized prospective settlers in the eyes of immigration agents of the new Dominion of Canada and railway interests of the United States. It is duly noted that some of the delegates very quickly concluded that the land and climate of Manitoba was not to their liking, while others wrote off the American West because of the inability of the United States to guarantee military exemption. The delegates' story is often told from a regional point of view, particularly as it relates to the story of the *Bergthal*, *Fuerstenland*, *Kleine Gemeinde* and Old Colony settlers who chose Canada.<sup>1</sup> My aim here is to retell the story of the 1873 delegation's trip from the point of view of what the delegates saw, their reactions to the people they encountered, and their assessment of the New World they were to recommend to their coreligionists. The delegates' impressions offer a unique perspective on the world of 1873 and their interactions with the American and Canadian settlement frontier. They would see and experience new things, meet other Christians, even 'brothers' with different beliefs and senses of propriety, and encounter worldliness not seen before.

The trip to North America would be a long journey and a momentous undertaking for those chosen. While the railway age had also finally arrived in the Black Sea areas of the Russian Empire and travel had become much more common even for Mennonite farm folk, a trip across Europe and the Atlantic Ocean to a New World they had only read about was still a major undertaking. The sources for the delegate's travel experiences are mainly their diaries. Tobias Unruh and Paul Tschetter kept diaries with what appear to be almost daily entries. Leonhard Sudermann also kept a diary and based his 1897 travel narrative *Eine Deputations Reise von Russland nach Amerika* on entries recorded at the time of his travels a quarter

of a century earlier. Andreas Schrag seems to have recorded a diary, but judging by some of the entries, the surviving fragment may have been recorded later. His actual diary may have been a victim of a storm at sea on their return trip. Orpha V. Schrag, who translated and published an excerpt of the diary, also suggests that portions of the diary may have been borrowed and not returned. The diaries of John F. Funk who accompanied the delegates on portions of the trip are also invaluable.<sup>2</sup> Funk, while not from Russia and not a delegate, was instrumental in facilitating the eventual migration of Mennonites from Prussia



**Cornelius Toews** – 1836-1908, farmer and minister, born in Fischau, Molotschna Colony, emigrated from Gruenfeld, Borosenko Colony, as representative of the Blumenhof Kleine Gemeinde. Entire Gemeinde emigrated to Manitoba, but many converted to Holdeman (Church of God in Christ, Mennonite) church in the early 1880s. Print at the Mennonite Heritage Village, 973.74.1 Photo Credit: Ernie Braun.

**David Klassen** – 1813-1900, farmer and minister, born in Pietzkendorf, Prussia, emigrated from Borosenko Colony, representing the Heuboden group of the Kleine Gemeinde. Entire Gemeinde emigrated, but a small part of Heubodener group chose Jefferson County, Nebraska. David Klassen did not settle on the East Reserve but opted for the Scratching River (Rosenort, MB) area, where he led some 35 families to settle. No available photograph.

and the Russian Empire to North America. Unfortunately diaries of the Bergthal and Kleine Gemeinde delegates either were not kept, or have not survived. Delbert Plett has published a small diary fragment from Cornelius Toews that was part of a letter sent from Fargo to his brother Peter in Russia. The rest of the diary and other materials were likely lost in a house fire in Gruenfeld on Manitoba's East Reserve in 1875.<sup>3</sup> There are also a few letters extant that Wilhelm Ewert and Jacob Buller wrote to their families while they were travelling. The delegates' travels in Kansas and Texas are least represented in the diaries and here the writings of Christian Krehbiel, a Mennonite from Summerfield, Illinois, are helpful to outline the Bergthal and Kleine Gemeinde delegates' trip to Kansas and Texas before they saw Manitoba. A letter written by Bernhard Warkentin to his friend David Goerz offers some insight into Jacob Buller and Wilhelm Ewert's tour of Kansas near the end of their stay in North America. Warkentin came to North America as a tourist in 1872, where his extensive travels included a trip to Manitoba. He later settled in Kansas where he became a miller and was instrumental in the introduction of hard red wheat to the Great Plains.<sup>4</sup>

### Getting There—The Trip

The delegates left their homes in three groups. The first to leave were Jacob Peters and Heinrich Wiebe representing the Bergthal Colony. They were accompanied by Cornelius Buhr,

### The Bergthal Delegates

**Jacob Peters:** 1813-1884 farmer and Oberschulz of Bergthal Colony, born in Kronsweide, emigrated from Heuboden, Bergthal Colony in 1876 to East Reserve, Manitoba. The Bergthal Colony dissolved, sold their farms, and almost all emigrated.

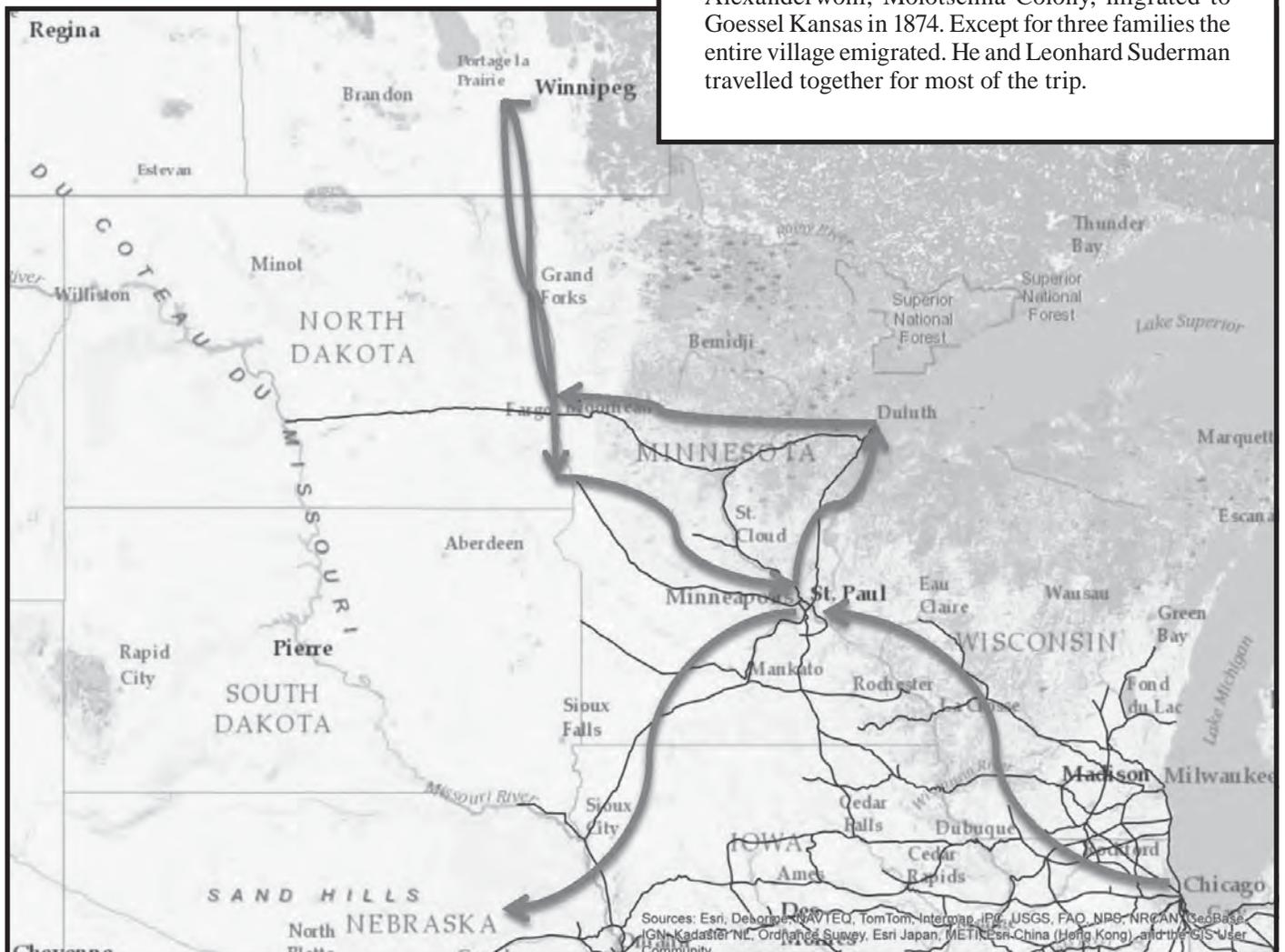
**Heinrich Wiebe:** 1839-1897 farmer and minister, born Schoenfeld, emigrated from Schoenfeld, Bergthal Colony in 1874 to the East Reserve, Manitoba and then to the West Reserve.

**Kornelius Buhr** – 1826-1885 – not an official delegate, estate owner, born Niederchortitza, lived on Bergthal Estate, stayed in Russia. Many of his descendants emigrated in the 1920s.

The Bergthal delegates travelled together for the entire trip.

### Alexanderwohl Delegate

**Jakob Buller** – 1827-1901- farmer and minister: born Alexanderwohl, Molotschna Colony, migrated to Goessel Kansas in 1874. Except for three families the entire village emigrated. He and Leonhard Suderman travelled together for most of the trip.



a wealthy estate owner who travelled on his own expense. The three left the Nikolaivesk train station on March 4, 1873 and travelled to Hamburg. There they were met by Jacob E. Klotz, a Canadian immigration agent who made sure American railway agents would not lure them away. Since it was too early in the year for the St. Lawrence to be navigable to Quebec City, they landed in Portland, Maine, arriving there on the *S.S. Scandinavian* on April 8, 1873.<sup>5</sup> The second group consisted of two Hutterites, Paul and his uncle Lorenz Tschetter. They left Huttertal on April 26, 1873 and were joined in Nikopol by the two Kleine Gemeinde delegates, David Klassen and Cornelius Toews. The four took a steamship on the Black Sea to Odessa and then travelled by train to Hamburg via Berlin. In Hamburg they boarded the *S.S. Silesia* and landed in New York on May 20, 1873.<sup>6</sup> The third group consisted of Tobias Unruh and Andreas Schrag from Volhynia, who travelled to West Prussia, meeting Wilhelm Ewert in Thorn (Toruń). The three then joined Leonhard Sudermann from the Berdjansk congregation, and Jacob Buller from Alexanderwohl. The third group arrived in New York on May 29<sup>th</sup>; Sudermann and Buller had left Berdjansk on April 30, 1873.

While in our day a loved one failing to return from a trip to distant lands is a tragedy, for Mennonites in Eastern Europe in the 1870s, returning from such a trip whole and hearty was still a miracle. Leaving was traumatic for Paul Tschetter and his family. On April 14<sup>th</sup> he announced to his diary: "I began my momentous journey to America, taking leave of my wife and dear children with a heavy heart.... Love obliged my dear father and mother to accompany me as far as Nikopol and so we left sad and with a troubled heart, only God knowing if I should ever see my loved ones again." When they finally separated his parents embraced him and "wept bitterly."<sup>7</sup> The storms at sea were particularly unnerving. Tschetter described the waves as rolling "furiously" while Tobias Unruh was sure they "would perish. Many thought the sea would be our grave."<sup>8</sup> The danger was real in the 1870s. Unruh's ship nearly collided with another ship; the two were so close he thought they "could have reached hands with the people on the other ship." A few days later "the raging storm" forced another ship so close to them that they actually collided, breaking the other ship's mast.<sup>9</sup> On the return trip on the *Hammonia*, Schrag, Sudermann, Ewert and Buller endured a terrible storm where huge waves crashed into the ship, breaking away some lifeboats and dumping water below decks. Sudermann "thought of my wife and child and commended them to God," while Schrag had doubts "whether we would again see our loved ones."<sup>10</sup> The ocean passage brought them face to face with their own mortality and when they awoke at sea each morning, they "praised and thanked the Lord for his protection," as Tschetter put it. When the storm on their return passage began to abate, Schrag exclaimed to his diary: "it appeared God would be merciful."<sup>11</sup>

Travel on land was mostly by train. Tschetter was impressed with how they "travelled across long stretches of plains, hills and valleys" in Europe "at tremendous speed."<sup>12</sup> When their train almost derailed on a section of relatively new rail that had washed out west of Duluth, Minnesota, an exasperated Unruh confided to his diary that "the trains run unusually fast in America and the roads are not built any too good. Sometimes the trains go speeding at such a terrific speed that you must commit your life into the hands of God and say farewell to your loved ones at home."<sup>13</sup>



**Tobias Unruh** – 1819/21-1875, farmer and minister, born in Karolswalde, Volhynia representing the West Prussia Mennonite group in Volhynia, to Dakota Territory in 1874. The entire group he represented emigrated, mostly settling in Kansas. He was the first of the delegates to die in America. Photo Credit: GAMEO

**Andreas Schrag** – 1821-1899, farmer and minister from the Swiss Mennonite congregations in Volhynia, to Hutchinson County (Yankton), Dakota Territory in 1874. No available photograph.

### New Things

A trip across Europe, the Atlantic and a large part of the United States with stops in some of the great cities of the time meant that delegates saw many new things worthy of note in their diaries. They were certainly impressed with the cities. Berlin had a "large railroad station such as I had never seen in my life" and its zoo featured "a large number of strange and wonderful animals." Philadelphia impressed Tobias Unruh and he offered a detailed description of its water distribution system. He finally despaired that he could not "explain or describe the whole matter," but it was certainly "operated and handled with wonderful and miraculous machinery."<sup>14</sup> Earlier on the trip, Unruh experienced the joys of running water personally. While spending time between trains in Ypsilanti, Michigan he and the others went to a mineral bath where each room contained "a large white tub and there are two faucets over it,

one supplies cold water and the other hot. We could mix the water to the temperature that we desired; it was something that we had not seen nor heard of. We thought it wonderful.” He, Jacob Buller, Jacob Schantz and Leonard Sudermann all took a bath.<sup>15</sup>

Paul Tschetter did not attend the circus that had come to town while he was in Elkhart because he “considered it a sin to witness such devilish things.” He was, however, fascinated by the parade that wound its way through the town to entice people to attend. He described the “thirty-four wagons in which there were all kinds of animals,” the “seven teams of horses” that pulled the first wagon with “all the men and horses . . . decorated with red, white, and green colors. The wagon was as if of gold and seated upon it were musicians and comedians who played tunes. The other wagons were all drawn by two and three teams.” He had “never seen such things in all my life.”<sup>16</sup>

### Other Mennonites

The delegates spent considerable time among various groups of Mennonites in Pennsylvania, Indiana and Ontario. Sharing only theological rather than ethnic roots, meeting these other groups of Mennonites produced its own sense of wonderment. Delegates did not always share sensibilities with the Mennonites they encountered. In some cases they avoided contact with questionable coreligionists. Paul Tschetter, one of the more outspoken diarists, was invited to visit Pastor Rosen in Hamburg, but declined because “I knew that he was an unsound Mennonite. The Apostle warns us to ‘avoid those who may harm our souls.’”<sup>17</sup> Tschetter was also surprised the Old Mennonites he visited in Pennsylvania allowed instruments and music. After listening to Deacon Henry Brenneman play a number of songs while visiting in his home he quoted Ephesians 5:19 to him, where he interprets Paul to suggest singing should be restricted to “making melody in your heart to the Lord.” Brenneman countered that David had also played the harp, to which Tschetter responded that “David was also a warrior and shed much blood.” Tschetter notes that Brenneman, “became silent and did not say another word.”<sup>18</sup>

Since a number of the delegates were ministers in their congregations they were often asked to sit together with the ministers in worship services



**Paul Tschetter** – 1842–1919, farmer and minister, born Blumenort, Molotschna Colony, emigrated from Hutterthal, Molotschna area in South Russia to Neu-Hutterthal, Dakota Territory in 1874.



**Lorenz Tschetter** -1819-1878 was uncle to Paul. The entire Hutterite community emigrated except for two families. Paul Tschetter did not attach himself to a Bruderhof, and lived on his own homestead, as did other Prairieleut. Photo Credit: GAMEO and C. Krahn, *From the Steppes to the Prairies*, 77.

of their hosts and frequently were asked to preach. Tschetter found this difficult because the American Mennonites preached extemporaneously, a practice he was not accustomed to. In general he appeared to approve of their practices of praying out loud, the conservative dress of the men, the custom of parting their hair in the middle, “like we do.” He describes the colourful dress of the women, but does not seem to find it objectionable and approves of the use of the ban, “as in our church.” One thing he did not approve of, namely “the fact that some women smoked and chewed tobacco.” He allowed that the Old Mennonites were more hospitable to visitors, but also had “their dark sides. The minister at whose home I stayed had three guns in his house and everyone in the house smoked, even the women.”<sup>19</sup>

Andreas Schrag was more generous. He refers to the “dear Brethren” and the “dear wife who was a gracious hostess.” When he forgot his reading glasses, Brother Abraham Metzler’s wife Elizabeth, “considering my need, gave me hers.”<sup>20</sup> Leonard Sudermann’s reflections, admittedly written some time later, recalled “how it cheered our hearts to meet so soon . . . cherished fellow believers in such unexpectedly large numbers,” when they arrived in Ontario. In the worship services, “much was new and unfamiliar in the singing and preaching, but nothing was offensive.” Tobias Unruh, who was with Sudermann in Ontario, agreed that they “received a very warm reception” that left “a deep impression” on them.<sup>21</sup> We learn very little from the diaries about what they thought of each other, since they also came from different areas and congregations. It does seem that the conservative orientation of the Bergthal and Kleine Gemeinde delegates resonated with the fairly conservative view of Paul Tschetter. When he met the Bergthal delegates and visited with Heinrich Wiebe, Tschetter exclaims that “it seemed to me that they were of my own.”<sup>22</sup>

### Other Christians

The delegates had occasion to brush shoulders with, and sometimes worship with, other Christians. In some cases these interactions were quite ecumenical. On the *International* between Fargo and Winnipeg John Funk approached the captain about the possibility of having a worship service on a Sunday morning



*The photo of the 1873 delegates and the entourage that travelled with them to the East Reserve. Tobias Unruh and Paul Tschetter were not pleased with being photographed. Photo Credit: Manitoba Archives.*

and William Hespeler invited the passengers to participate, which many did. The boat's engines were slowed to provide a quieter atmosphere. John Funk preached in English, and Leonard Sudermann and Wilhelm Ewert spoke in German and sang a German hymn. Both Tobias Unruh and Leonard Sudermann were moved by the 'Americans' kneeling in prayer with them, although Unruh thought "the whole services were rather long."<sup>23</sup>

Sometimes attendance at worship services of other Christians was positively unsettling. While they were staying at John Funk's home in Elkhart, Paul Tschetter attended an evening service in what he terms an Evangelical Church near Funk's home. His diary entry conveys his discomfort with the experience:

*The minister began to speak louder and louder and as I sat near the pulpit I was greatly bewildered; in fact I felt like running from the church. He marched back and forth behind the pulpit, once to this side then to the other as if he were insane. He hammered on the pulpit with his fist and pointing to his heart he cried: 'Herein must the Lord live'. At times he pointed to heaven and then again down to hell shouting like a mad man, for only a mad man could act like he did. His actions were not those of a minister of the Gospel, but those of a general. Sometimes he praised everyone into heaven and*

*then again he damned us all into hell. It is not in my power to describe this and my readers will doubt my statements, but it remains true nevertheless. I have been in many churches but I have never witnessed the like. A comedy could hardly offer more entertainment. He preached the truth, but with great indiscretion and lack of judgment.<sup>24</sup>*

### **The World**

Given a shared Mennonite sensibility that the Christian should separate themselves from the world, delegate interactions with people outside of the religious sphere gave opportunity to both reinforce their own sense of what was appropriate, but also sometimes engendered surprise and respect for the people they met. Paul Tschetter was the most critical. When they arrived in Berlin he was sure that in the city, "plenty of wicked people can be found." He was even less impressed when they entered an emigration building in Hamburg "where boys and girls were dancing." He "was almost terrified and shrank back" and thought they should rather pray. When the person he was with retorted that "we cannot always pray; we must enjoy ourselves," Tschetter resigned himself that it was simply the "wicked way of the world."<sup>25</sup>

Wilhelm Ewert, on the other hand, was impressed with the people they met in North Dakota. When they visited some settlers near Pembina he describes them as "very pleasant and



**Leonhard Sudermann** – 1821-1900 – *businessman and minister: born Goldschar, Prussia, emigrated from Berdjansk to Butler County, Kansas in 1876 – almost no one else from his church emigrated. He also represented the Molotschna Colony as delegate. Photo Credit: GAMEO*



**Wilhelm Ewert:** 1829-1887, *minister: born Stronske, Thorn, Prussia, from Obernessau, Prussia, to Bruderthal, Marion County, Kansas in 1874. A few families from his congregation emigrated. Photo Credit: GAMEO*

charming, like most Americans.” He seems particularly sensitive about the use of alcohol and the behaviour it spawned and contrasted what he saw in Manitoba and the United States. In the United States he notes that there are entire cities where no liquor is permitted to be sold and even in railway station restaurants they did not serve beer, on “moral grounds.” In Manitoba, however, “old and young, brown, yellow and white carouse in the bars, arguing, partying, and fighting.”<sup>26</sup>

Some of the delegates’ sensitivities were aroused when they were assembled for a photograph before leaving Winnipeg for the East Reserve. Tobias Unruh confides to his diary: “this act grieved me seriously. We had come here as pilgrims and strangers, labouring in distress, seeking a home in a country where we could, with our children together live according to the dictates of our conscience, and we were, as it were, arrayed and classed highly.” The photo opportunity was also not to Paul Tschetter’s taste. As he explained to his diary, “I do not like to have my picture lying around in all parts of the world.” But, as he was forced to admit, the “world is the world and will remain the world until the Lord will come and end it all.”<sup>27</sup>

### **The Landscape and Environment**

An important, possibly the most important agenda item was to evaluate the land with an eye to its productivity and

ease of establishing hearth and home. The most favourable assessments were for the land in North Dakota. On their tour of the area east of Pembina Unruh was sure it was “very good land and much timber. . . . We need not look for nor wish for better land.” Wilhelm Ewert was similarly impressed. In his letter to his family he reports there “is a lot of very good land here.”<sup>28</sup> Manitoba fared much less favourably, although here there was also land that pleased the delegates. Tobias Unruh noted the land in the East Reserve was “good and plentiful”, “was still virgin prairie” and would be “very good country if ditches were provided.” On the whole, however, most of the delegates were unrestrained in their negative assessment of what they saw in Manitoba. Tschetter notes frequently how wet and marshy the land was and how poor the roads. Leonard Sudermann notes that most of the delegates were “considerably disheartened.”<sup>29</sup>

Most distressing were the mosquitoes. Sudermann reserved his most eloquent accounts for a description of the mosquitoes. After a day where the wagons got stuck on the soggy banks of a stream and grass had to be cut with scythe to provide a more solid base, he describes the evening and night:

*Our lodging for the following night was not an enviable one. The mosquitoes gave us no rest in our tents. Their forwardness surpassed all limits of decency and moderation. There*

were too many of them for us to satisfy. Completely clothed, hats on our heads, with nets over our faces, it was still impossible for us to protect ourselves from these intruders. So we greeted the dawn of a new day with joy.<sup>30</sup>

### Conclusion

The diaries and letters of the delegates offer a small window on the world of 1873 and what migration was like. Although the immigrants who would follow them faced the reality of pioneering on the prairies and Great Plains of North America the delegates' journey brought a greater range of experiences. They met face to face with other Mennonites, English speaking railway promoters, boosters of particular provinces and states, and were moved by the sights and sounds of new places. Ironically, perhaps, only a few of them would actually settle in the areas they saw, much less the areas they thought were the best. The area of North Dakota west of Pembina and Cass County west of Fargo would see few Mennonite settlers. Although the delegates saw the Mountain Lake area of Minnesota, none would settle there, but other Mennonites would. Kansas would become the largest benefactor of Mennonite settlement, even though most delegates either did not see it or had written it off as unsuitable.

### The Itinerary of the 1873 Delegation to North America

The itinerary below is constructed from the diaries of Paul Tschetter, Tobias Unruh, Andreas Schrag and Johann Funk; the journal of Leonhard Sudermann, and letters written by Bernhard Warkentin, Wilhelm Ewert, Jacob Buller, and Cornelius Toews. The dates have all been converted to the Gregorian calendar.

#### Getting to America

##### *The Bergthal Group*

March 4, 1873 Nikolaievsk station.<sup>31</sup> Jacob Peters, Heinrich Wiebe and Cornelius Buhr boarded the train and travelled to Liverpool by way of Berlin and Hull. In Liverpool they boarded the *S.S. Scandinavian* and arrived in Portsmouth, Maine<sup>32</sup> on April 8<sup>th</sup> or the early hours of April 9<sup>th</sup>.

##### *The Hutterite and Kleine Gemeinde Groups*

April 26, 1873 Lorenz and Paul Tschetter, representing the Hutterites, and David Klassen and Cornelius Toews representing the Kleine Gemeinde left their homes in south Russia on the 26<sup>th</sup>. They met in Kherson where they took a steamer to Odessa. They then travelled to Hamburg by way of Lemberg (Lviv) and Berlin and boarded the *S.S. Silesia* bound for New York on May 7<sup>th</sup>. They arrived in New York harbour on May 20<sup>th</sup>.

##### *The Volhynian, West Prussian Berdjansk and Alexanderwohl Delegates*

April 19, 1873 Tobias Unruh left Karolswalde, Volhynia. He met his fellow Volhynian delegate, Andreas Schrag at the Black Eagle in Lemberg (Lviv).<sup>33</sup> The two travelled together and

arrived at the home of the Prussian delegate, Wilhelm Ewert in Thorn (Torún) on April 26<sup>th</sup>.

April 30

Leonard Sudermann from the Berdjansk, and Jacob Buller from the Alexanderwohl congregations left for West Prussia, arriving there on May 3<sup>rd</sup>.

May 14

After joining the others the entire group arrived in Hamburg via Berlin and boarded the *S.S. Frisia*. They disembarked in New York on May 29<sup>th</sup>.

#### Getting to Know the 'Brethren'

##### *The Bergthal Group*

April 15, 1873 Arrived in Berlin (Kitchener). After disembarking in Portsmouth, Maine the Bergthal delegates left immediately for Montreal where they were met by William Hespeler. They stopped briefly in Ottawa and spent the weekend in Toronto before visiting the Swiss Mennonites in the Kitchener-Waterloo area.

April 23

Elkhart. After being accompanied as far as Detroit by Jacob Schantz, the delegates arrived at the home of John F. Funk where Heinrich Wiebe preached in the local meetinghouse. The delegates soon left for Summerfield, Illinois where Bernhard Warkentin resided. Warkentin was a Mennonite from Russia who had travelled extensively in North America the year before.<sup>34</sup>

##### *The Hutterite and Kleine Gemeinde Groups*

May 23, 1873 Elkhart. After arriving in New York on the 20<sup>th</sup> the Hutterite and Kleine Gemeinde groups left immediately for Elkhart where they spent just over a week among the Old Mennonites of the area, although John Funk was not at home.

##### *The Volhynian, West Prussian, Berdjansk and Alexanderwohl Delegates*

May 30, 1873

After arriving in New York the day before, this group of delegates split up, with Ewert and Schrag going to Philadelphia while Sudermann, Buller and Unruh joined William Hespeler on a trip to Canada.

June 4

After spending ten days visiting Ontario Mennonites where they preached and visited, Sudermann, Buller and Unruh left for Elkhart to catch up with the Hutterite and Kleine Gemeinde delegates.

## Evaluating the New Land

### *Texas and Kansas*

Two groups of delegates visited these two states. The Bergthal delegates spent a month here before they went to Manitoba, while Ewert and Buller visited after their group split up on July 22, 1873.

May 2 to  
June 4, 1873 The Bergthal delegates left Summerfield, Illinois for Kansas with Christian Krehbiel and John Ruth. Little is known about this part of the trip. Christian Krehbiel had to leave the group due to family illness on May 9<sup>th</sup> while they were in Kansas. John Ruth apparently continued the tour into Texas.

July 24 to  
August 11 Ewert and Buller travelled to Kansas and Texas with Bernhard Warkentin and others from the Summerfield area. There is also little information about this portion of the trip. The group was in Topeka, Kansas on August 8<sup>th</sup>.<sup>35</sup>

### *The Entire Group of Delegates*

June 4 to 9, 1873 These days were spent trying to bring the group together as the Bergthal delegates made their way from the southern states, while the group that had gone to Canada (Sudermann, Buller, Unruh) tried to catch up with John Funk and the Hutterite and Kleine Gemeinde groups, and Ewert and Schrag were making their way from Philadelphia. On June 5<sup>th</sup> the Hutterite and Kleine Gemeinde groups met the Bergthal group in St. Paul. They continued on to Duluth and then Glyndon, Minnesota, leaving the Bergthal group behind in St. Paul to wait for the rest. On June 6<sup>th</sup> the group who had gone to Canada met Ewert and Schrag in Chicago and then joined the Bergthal group in St. Paul. The various groups finally caught up to each other at the Glyndon train station in the evening of June 9<sup>th</sup> and the entire group travelled to Moorhead that evening.

### *Glyndon*

June 9, 1873 While they were waiting for the rest of the delegates, the Kleine Gemeinde and Hutterite groups toured the area around Glyndon, Minnesota.

### *West of Fargo*

June 10-12, 1873 The entire delegation toured the area west of Fargo. They took the train from Fargo and then toured in wagons and camped in tents.

July 6-9 After returning from their Pembina River tour, Ewert, Unruh and the Hutterite group spent a day on a further tour of the area west of Fargo. They were joined the next day by Buller, Schrag and Sudermann for an extensive tour of the area over the next few days.

### *Manitoba East Reserve*

June 18-21, 1873 The entire delegation left Fargo on June 13 for Manitoba on the paddleboat steamer, *The International*, arriving in Winnipeg on June 17<sup>th</sup>. The delegates left Winnipeg with a large entourage to tour the East Reserve the next day.

July 5 After arriving in Winnipeg from a tour of Western Manitoba the Kleine Gemeinde and Bergthaler groups likely returned to see portions of the East Reserve they had missed earlier.

## **M** R. J. A. WRIGHT, BUILDER AND CONTRACTOR.

If you propose to build a habitation,  
Whether of great or small accommodation,  
First, I pray you, read this short cantation,  
And if, upon a moment's meditation,  
It is not your sincere determination  
That J. A. Wright has got a reputation  
For building houses cheap and of duration,  
'Twill be a proof of your transmogrification  
From a long-eared specimen of brute creation.

Look at his work!—'twill bear examination—  
It stands unequalled in our Confederation  
For workmanship; and without hesitation  
You will acknowledge that your expectation  
Was far exceeded by your observation.

Then call on Wright—he'll make a calculation,  
And build your house at such remuneration  
As you'll acknowledge poor consideration  
For time and money spent in excavation,  
Lumber, building, and ornamentation.

His men, you'll find, are always at their station,  
To ply with zeal their known well vocation  
Of building towns where once was desolation;  
And he himself deserves congratulation  
For what he's done towards the confirmation  
Of making Canada a glorious nation.

To conclude, we'll say, in this relation,  
The Mennonites have sent a deputation  
To choose for them a tip-top reservation;  
And soon, we trust, we'll have a population  
Sufficient large to make one grand plantation  
Of Manitoba in the present generation.

*This advertisement in the form of a poem appeared in the Manitoba Free Press on July 5, 1873 while the delegates were visiting Manitoba. The editors would like to thank James Urry for pointing us to it and providing the image.*

**Western Manitoba**

June 23, 1873 Some delegates left the group on June 21<sup>st</sup> to travel back to the USA, but Sudermann, Buller, Schrag, the Kleine Gemeinde and Bergthal groups left Winnipeg for Western Manitoba. They travelled to about present day Arden, where Buller, Schrag, Sudermann and Schantz turned back on June 25<sup>th</sup>.

July 1<sup>st</sup> Sudermann, Buller, Schrag and Schantz left Winnipeg for Fargo. The Kleine Gemeinde and Bergthal delegates, accompanied by Hespeler, likely turned back after going as far as present day Neepawa. On this day they were involved in a dispute between their drivers and a group of Métis at White Horse Plains.

The Bergthal and Kleine Gemeinde ended their evaluation after they had visited the East Reserve a second time.

**North of the Pembina River to International Border and west to St. Joseph (Walhalla) in Dakota Territory**

June 23-26, 1873 Ewert, Unruh and the Hutterite group left the *International* at Pembina for a tour just

south of, and according to Funk, occasionally into the area that would later become the West Reserve.

**Alexandria, Minnesota**

July 9, 1873 After touring the Fargo area, the remaining delegates went to Breckenridge, Minnesota and from there took the train to Douglas, Minnesota (Alexandria). They toured this area for a day before heading to Minneapolis.

**Mountain Lake, Minnesota**

July 14-16, 1873 From Minneapolis the delegation took the train to Worthington, Minnesota and then toured the area around Mountain Lake by wagon.

**Columbus, Nebraska**

July 17-21, 1873 The delegation took the train to Columbus, Nebraska by way of Sioux City, Iowa. They toured areas east and south of Omaha.

**Negotiating and Soliciting Support**

July 26, 1873 The Bergthal and Kleine Gemeinde delegates



On June 28, 1873 some of the delegates climbed the hill at St. Joseph (Walhalla, N.D.) where the Pembina River emerges from the Manitoba Escarpment. Tobias Unruh recorded that he “looked to the east and my thoughts went home to my loved ones and an ardent desire arose, could I now only look into my home, my heart bled and I could not keep my tears from flowing: but in vain. I had to turn again and look after things that pertained to my mission.” This 2014 view from the Pembina Valley Lookout Point just outside of Walhalla may be the point Unruh was looking from some 140 years earlier. Photo Credit: Hans Werner

left for Elkhart on July 14<sup>th</sup>. From there they travelled to Ottawa where on July 23<sup>rd</sup> they addressed a letter to Department of Agriculture outlining their requests. They received the Lowe letter of privileges three days later on the 26<sup>th</sup>.

- July 23, 1873 The remaining delegation split up. Johann Funk went to visit his brother in Missouri. The Hutterite delegates and Unruh travelled by train to Elkhart; Buller, Sudermann, Schrag and Ewert went to Summerfield, Illinois and then left for Elkhart on July 26. Buller and Ewert continued to Kansas and Texas from Summerfield.
- August 1-8 Sudermann and Schrag, accompanied by Schantz, visited Mennonites in Ontario. Sudermann spoke at least three times during the week.
- July 30-31 Philadelphia. The Hutterite delegates and Tobias Unruh travelled to Elkhart and then left for Philadelphia to speak to Jay Cooke, the head of the Northern Pacific Railway, regarding fare for crossing the Atlantic and settlement on its lands.
- August 9-14 Sudermann, Schrag, Ewert and Buller visited Mennonites in Pennsylvania.
- August 8 The Hutterite delegates and Unruh continued negotiations in New York regarding settlement and then visited President Ulysses S. Grant in Long Beach on this day to request military exemption.

### Back Home

#### *Bergthal and Kleine Gemeinde Groups*

August 7, 1873 The delegates left Ottawa on July 31<sup>st</sup>, boarded the ship in New York, and arrived in Nikopol on August 7<sup>th</sup>.

#### *Hutterite Group and Unruh*

September 9, 1873 The Tschetters and Unruh boarded the *S.S. Cimbria* in New York on August 14<sup>th</sup> and arrived in Hutterthal on this day.

#### *Sudermann, Buller, Schrag and Ewert*

September 14, 1873 The three delegates boarded the *S.S. Hammonia* in New York on August 21<sup>st</sup>. They experienced a terrible storm at sea, but arrived safely in West Prussia on September 6<sup>th</sup>. Schrag arrived at home on September 10<sup>th</sup> while Sudermann and Buller arrived in Alexanderwohl on the 14<sup>th</sup>.

### Endnotes

1 See for instance John Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba*, (Steinbach, Hanover Steinbach Historical Society, 2000) and E.K. Frances, *In Search of Utopia*, (Altona: D.W. Friesen and Sons, 1955).

2 The diary of Tobias Unruh was published as Abe J. Unruh, trans., *Great Grandfather's Diary* (Montezuma, KS, 1970), (hereafter Unruh Diary). Paul Tschetter's diary was published as: J.M. Hofer, trans. and ed., "The Diary of Paul Tschetter, 1873 I," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 5(2)(April 1931): 112-127 and "The Diary of Paul Tschetter, 1873 II," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 5(3) (July 1931): 196-220, (hereafter Tschetter Diary). For the diary of Andreas Schrag see: Orpha V. Schrag, "Andreas D. Schrag: The Delegate and His Diary," *Mennonite Family History* (July 1993): 102-109, (hereafter Schrag Diary). Leonhard Sudermann's travel narrative was translated and edited and appeared as Elmer F. Sudermann, trans. and ed., *From Russia to America: In Search of Freedom* (Steinbach: Derksen Printers, 1974), (hereafter Sudermann Journal). John F. Funk's diary was published in Kempes Schnell, ed., "John F. Funk's Land Inspection Trips as Recorded in His Diaries, 1872 and 1873," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 24(4) (October 1950): 295-311. Funk's diaries were reprinted in Clarence Hiebert, ed. *Brothers in Deed to Brothers in Need*.

3 Delbert Plett, *Storm and Triumph* (Steinbach: DFP Publications, 1986), 293, 301-302.

4 The letters of Wilhelm Ewert are at the Mennonite Library and Archives (MLA), Newton, Kansas, Wilhelm Ewert Collection, MS 6. A letter dated 29 June 1873 was published in *Der Mitarbeiter*, October 1929, 1-5. For Christian Krehbiel see: John Thiesen, "Travel Report of Christian Krehbiel, 1873," *Mennonite Life* 58(3) (September 2003) and Edward Krehbiel, ed. and trans., "Christian Krehbiel and the Coming of the Mennonites to Kansas," in C.J. Dyck, ed., *From the Steppes to the Prairies* (Newton, Ks: Mennonite Publication Office, 1949): 25-49. The Bernhard Warkentin letters are published in: C. J. Dyck, "Some Letters of Bernhard Warkentin Pertaining to the Migration of 1873-1875," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 24(3) (July 1950): 248-263.

5 John Dyck, *Oberschulz Jacob Peters*, 52 and Clarence Hiebert, comp., *Brothers in Deed to Brothers in Need*, p. 41. In the text all dates have been converted to Gregorian calendar or New Style, which at this time was 12 days later than the Julian calendar (O.S.) used in Russia until 1918. For ease of referencing the notes that follow reference diary entries with the date given in the respective published versions. For Paul Tschetter's diary these are O.S.

6 Tschetter Diary, April 14 to May 8, 1873.

7 Tschetter Diary, April 14 and April 15.

8 Tschetter Diary, April 16 and Unruh Diary, May 21.

9 Unruh Diary, May 24 and 28.

10 Sudermann Journal and Schrag Diary, August 24.

11 Tschetter Diary, April 20 and Schrag Diary, August 27.

12 Tschetter Diary, April 18.

13 Unruh Diary, June 9.

14 Tschetter Diary, April 20 and Unruh Diary, May 11.

15 Unruh Diary, June 4.

16 Tschetter Diary, May 12.

17 Tschetter Diary, April 24.

18 Tschetter Diary, May 21.

19 Tschetter Diary, May 16.

20 Schrag Diary, August 12 and August 17<sup>th</sup>.

21 Sudermann Journal, June 1 and 3 and Unruh Diary, June 1.

22 Tschetter Diary, May 24.

23 Sudermann Journal, June 15 and Unruh Diary, June 15.

24 Tschetter Diary, May 20.

25 Tschetter Diary, April 20 and 23.

26 Wilhelm Ewert Letter, 29 June 1873.

27 Unruh Diary, June 18.

28 Unruh Diary, June 23 and Wilhelm Ewert Letter, 29 June 1873.

29 Unruh Diary, June 18 and 21 and Tschetter Diary, June 6 and 7, Sudermann Journal, June 19.

30 Sudermann Journal, June 20.

31 Klaus Peters gives the date as February 26 O.S., which would be March 10, 1873. See: Klaus Peters, *The Bergthaler Mennonites* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1988), 13.

32 William Schroeder and Klaus Peters incorrectly have them landing at Halifax. See William Schroeder, *The Bergthal Colony* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications 1986), 38 and Peters, 13.

33 "Under the Black Eagle" was the name of a pharmacy at the corner of Market Square in Lviv, Ukraine. It is now a museum of pharmacy.

34 In the *Herald of Truth*, it is reported that they went to Chicago to meet Bernhard Warkentin. It seems Schroeder and Dyck use this as evidence that he travelled with them, but there is no other evidence of Warkentin having accompanied them. Hiebert, 43, 47; Dyck, 54; Schroeder, 38. Warkentin's letter to Goerz, dated April 22, 1873 suggests he had just become aware that the delegates were in Elkhart and were coming to Summerfield where he was at the time.

35 Warkentin indicates in a letter of August 13, 1873 that he accompanied the two to Kansas and Texas, a trip that took two weeks. A *Topeka Daily Commonwealth* report of August 9, 1873 indicates Buller, Ewert and Warkentin had been in that city the day before. Hiebert, 66.

# Myth and History: The Story of William Hespeler's Independent Role in the Immigration of Mennonites to Manitoba in the 1870s

James Urry, Wellington, New Zealand

One of the stories often told of the Mennonite immigration to Manitoba in the 1870s involves the special role of William Hespeler in initiating their move to Canada. The stories of Hespeler's role in the immigration vary in detail, but all suggest that he personally learned of the Mennonites desire to emigrate from local sources while in Germany and therefore initiated the process that led to their immigration. My intention here is to consider the validity of this story and to show that contemporary sources suggest a very different account.<sup>1</sup>

First, let us consider the stories of Hespeler's autonomous knowledge of the Mennonite interest in emigrating from Russia. In the early 1870s when Mennonites in Russia first enquired about the possibility of immigration to North America, Hespeler was an agent of the Canadian government based in Germany employed to promote German immigration to Canada. The earliest version of his autonomous role that I can find appeared in 1877 in an account of the 1877 visit of the Governor General of Canada to the Mennonite reserve. The report states that the province was primarily indebted to Hespeler for the Mennonite immigration, "as it was he who 1871 on a visit to Germany ascertained that a large emigration of these people was in contemplation."<sup>2</sup> A similar report from the *Winnipeg Standard* was reprinted in the British Quaker journal *The Friend*.<sup>3</sup> Hespeler, who the author of the article thanks for "most of the interesting particulars," apparently "ascertained in 1872, during a trip to Germany, that a Mennonite emigration to this continent was probable." While use of the word "ascertained" in both reports is ambiguous, the latter account continues that Hespeler "visited Southern Russia in 1870," that is two years before any enquiries by Mennonites to the British government about emigrating.<sup>4</sup> By the time the newspaper report was published, Hespeler was



William Hespeler, ca 1903. Photo Credit: Manitoba Historical Society, original Archives of Manitoba N19987.

living in Winnipeg having been given a central role in settling the new immigrants by the government. He also acted as a middle-man between Mennonites, the government and local merchants. This role is reflected in the report that "upon his representations, and under his auspices, a delegation came to Manitoba in 1872" and now with "three years of activity and well-directed effort" this had produced a successful settlement.<sup>5</sup> These reports therefore give three dates for Hespeler learning of the Mennonite desire to emigrate: 1870, 1871 and 1872. Only in 1872 was he apparently "commissioned by the Canadian government to visit Russia" and he then went on to arrange for a delegation to visit Canada.<sup>6</sup>

The appearance of these articles may have been occasioned by an earlier report in the *Toronto Mail* that appeared to credit Jacob E. Klotz, Hespeler's fellow immigration agent in Germany, with a central role in the Mennonite settlement.<sup>7</sup> At least one newspaper in Winnipeg that had republished

the *Toronto Mail* report, quickly "corrected" this account, giving Hespeler major credit for promoting and developing the immigration movement. However, it did not suggest that Hespeler had any prior knowledge of the Mennonites' desire to emigrate.<sup>8</sup> But William Leggo, in his account of the administration of Earl of Dufferin, the Governor General of Canada at the time of Mennonite settlement and published shortly after these newspaper reports appeared, also suggests that Hespeler had independently learned of the possibility of a Mennonite emigration from Russia and as a consequence he had informed the Canadian government. This would have been ahead of the Canadian authorities being informed by the Colonial Office in London of the first Mennonite approach to the British consul in Berdjansk.<sup>9</sup>



Jacob E. Klotz was born in Canada to German immigrant parents. He served as the Canadian Immigration Commissioner to Germany from 1872 to 1880 during the period when Mennonites emigrated from the Russian Empire to settle in Canada and the United States. Photo Credit: *The Canadian Album*, 1893.

Later accounts of the settlement of Manitoba gave the story of Hespeler's independent role in the immigration process a degree of historical validity. In his 1906 account of the history of Manitoba, Dr. George Bryce states that when Hespeler "discovered that a large number of Mennonites in South Russia were contemplated [of] emigrating to America" he made "these facts ... known to the Canadian government."<sup>10</sup> The Manitoba writer Margaret McWilliams presented a similar account: Hespeler, on a visit to Baden, learned of the Mennonites' plight and had informed the Canadian government.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, the fact that Hespeler was in Germany as an official agent of the government concerned with immigration is either underplayed in these accounts, or replaced with stories of him being on a personal journey to his old homeland, visiting family. Nowhere is it stated that in fact he was in Germany on official business.

The most influential Mennonite account of Hespeler's independent role occurs in an account of the Bergthal emigration written by Klaas Peters published as a small book in 1925. According to Peters, while visiting his home in Baden, Hespeler "became acquainted with the Russian Count Menchikow who was spending time in his castle in Baden. He informed Mr. Hespeler that because of a new imperial decree, the Mennonites in Russia ... were considering emigration to America." Hespeler then "wrote to the Prime Minister of Canada, Sir

John A. MacDonald in Ottawa, whom he knew personally, and submitted the matter for his consideration." Only after a "considerable time" - presumably without receiving any response from MacDonald - was Hespeler contacted by the "minister of Immigration and Agriculture, John Henry Hope" and was informed that the government had learned from London of the desire of Mennonites in Russia to emigrate. In May 1872 Hespeler was therefore asked by officials to go to Russia and contact the Mennonites.<sup>12</sup>

What is interesting about this story is that when Peters first published his account of the immigration in 1890 in a series of articles in the *Mennonitische Rundschau*, he made no mention of Hespeler's prior knowledge of a Mennonite desire to emigrate, of him informing MacDonald, or of a Russian count.<sup>13</sup> Somehow, between 1890 and the book's publication thirty-five years later, a more elaborate story had been added to the text. It is perhaps worth noting that during the 1890s Peters was himself an immigration agent encouraging Mennonites to come from Russia to Canada. In his role he came into contact with Hespeler.<sup>14</sup>

Shortly after the publication of Peters' book, the Count Menchikow story began to appear in scholarly accounts published by Mennonites of the immigration movement, although often without being attributed to Peters. C. Henry Smith repeated the story in his 1927 account of the immigration movement.<sup>15</sup> In 1932 Georg Leibbrandt reported the story but without providing his source of information.<sup>16</sup> The major study of Cornelius Jansen's role in the Mennonite immigration likewise drew on the Menchikow story.<sup>17</sup> Other Mennonite accounts have also repeated stories of Hespeler learning independently of the Mennonite desire to emigrate while in Baden and his informing the Canadian government with or without repeating the alleged Menchikow and MacDonald connections.<sup>18</sup>

It would only be fair, however, to note that not all scholars concerned with the Mennonite immigration have succumbed to the story of Hespeler's independent knowledge of the Mennonite's desire to emigrate. These include Ernst Correll (see below), E. K. Francis, Frank H. Epp and Adolf Ens, to name but a few.<sup>19</sup> Only Sam Steiner, however, openly rejected Hespeler's claims of independently learning of the Mennonites' wish to emigrate. Angelika Sauer has questioned the validity of the evidence for the existence of Count Menchikow.<sup>20</sup> However, in an earlier article on Hespeler, she appears to accept the validity of the story.<sup>21</sup>

So what is the truth about Hespeler and his knowledge of Mennonite enquiries about immigrating to Canada? In 1937, Ernst Correll published a letter dated June 1<sup>st</sup> 1872 from the Public Archives of Canada in Ottawa written by John Lowe, Secretary of Agriculture, to Hespeler, "Special Emigration Agent."

*I have the honor to enclose to you herewith a copy of correspondence and the action which has been taken upon it by the Government of Canada with reference to the Emigration of a large body of German Mennonites from Russia; and I have an instruction from the Honourable the Minister of Agriculture to request you to proceed immediately upon the receipt of this letter to Berdjansk, to put yourself in communication with her Majesty's Consul there; taking also such further steps as may be considered necessary to promote such emigration from Russia to Canada.*<sup>22</sup>

Hespeler replied on July 17<sup>th</sup>:

*I will start for Russia to-morrow. I am in the greatest of hope to meet with success on this important mission and if I am successful in bringing such a worthy class of people (I have been living amongst Mennonites for 20 years) to our Country I shall consider my work as a very satisfactory one.*<sup>23</sup>

A report of the Minister of Agriculture of Canada for 1873 on the Mennonite immigration stated:

*the first intimation made to the Canadian Government of the proposed emigration from Russia, was contained in a despatch (No. 51) dated 7<sup>th</sup> March, 1872, from the Right Hon. The Secretary of State for the Colonies. The despatch had reference to letters from Mr Zohrab, Her Majesty's Consul at Berdjansk, and from leading Mennonites, enquiring whether, if these people emigrated to Canada, they would be allowed exemption from military service, and from the ordinary form of oath; asking moreover what advantages they might calculate upon in the way of land grants.... During the summer of 1872, Mr. Hespeler, then Emigration Agent in Germany, was instructed to visit Berdjansk.*<sup>24</sup>



James Zohrab was the British Consul in Berdjansk in 1872. He was the first person in the British government to be contacted in February, 1872 about a potential migration of Mennonites to Canada. Photo Credit: <http://zohrabfamily.atwebpages.com/jamesenz.html>

There is no evidence in the archival sources, or in any other contemporary account, that Hespeler possessed any knowledge of the Mennonites interest in emigrating before he received information from Canada and was instructed to visit Berdjanks.<sup>25</sup> Nor is there any indication of him independently initiating the process that lead to the Mennonite migration. Pope's letter also makes it clear that Hespeler was supplied with details on the Mennonite enquiry. What were these details? They included information supplied by the British consul in Berdjansk, James Zohrab, who had forwarded the Mennonite enquiry about possible emigration to Canada to his superiors in the Foreign Office in London. These had been copied and forwarded to the Colonial Office to be sent on to Canada. It was this information that Hespeler received. While Hespeler indicated that he had prior experience of Mennonites, this was of Mennonites in Ontario (and possibly Germany), but not those in Russia.

One might also say that there is no evidence that a Count Menchikow, in whatever spelling one would prefer (Menchikoff/Menshikov), owned a castle in Baden or was even in Baden in 1872, if he existed at all.<sup>26</sup>

So what is the origin of these stories of Hespeler's independent role and why have they persisted for so long? The first reports, appearing so soon after the Mennonite immigration, point to Hespeler as the source of stories due probably to his increasingly important roles in their settlement. Hespeler had aided the Mennonite representatives sent to view the land in Manitoba.<sup>27</sup> He was also appointed to help the first immigrants settle on their lands and continued to act as a mediator in a range of issues effecting Mennonites for almost the next thirty years.<sup>28</sup> Adding the additional role of actually initiating the immigration may merely have completed the story.

However, there is no direct evidence of Hespeler being the source of the story. In 1892 E. Cora Hind wrote an account of the Mennonites which includes details on the immigration to Manitoba.<sup>29</sup> It is clear that she knew Hespeler and had access to the documents he had received from Canada in 1872. But she attributed the initial contacts between Mennonites and the British government to consul Zohrab (or Zorabs, as she refers to him) in Berdjansk and in her account Hespeler is only involved following this contact. In 1896, at a major convention on immigration held in Winnipeg, Hespeler gave a talk on the history of Mennonite settlement in Manitoba. Unfortunately, while his address is mentioned favourably in a number of contemporary reports, no text of what he said appears to have survived.<sup>30</sup>

The story of the Russian count and the Canadian Prime Minister therefore appears to have begun primarily with a Mennonite account published after Hespeler's death. As a story it appears to have been the version particularly favoured by Mennonites, although on occasion it has extended to non-Mennonite writers. Interestingly, its source in Klaas Peters' book has rarely been acknowledged, and certainly not critically examined. Instead the story has entered Mennonite mythology. But a consideration of contemporary historical sources exposes it as little more than a myth without foundation.

#### Endnotes

- 1 For a detailed examination of Hespeler's life and work with Mennonites, see Angelika Sauer, "Ethnicity employed: William Hespeler and the Mennonites." *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 18 (2000): 82-94.
- 2 "The Viceregal Visit. The Trip to the Mennonites," *Manitoba Free Press*, August 25, 1877, 1.
- 3 "The Mennonites in Manitoba," *The Friend*, October 1877, 280.

- 4 The first approach was made to the British consul in Berdjansk, James Zohrab, in February 1872; there had been an earlier approach by the Mennonite merchant Cornelius Jansen of Berdjansk to the Odessa consul of the United States in 1871, but the Americans only received a formal request for information at the same time as the British, see Ernst Correll ed., "Sources on the Mennonite immigration from Russia in the 1870s." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 24(4) (1950): 337-38, 340.
- 5 "The Mennonites in Manitoba," *The Friend*, October 1877, 280.
- 6 "The Mennonites," *The British Friend*, November 1877, 284; in part from *The Manitoba Free Press*, August 25, 1877, 1.
- 7 Like Hespeler, Klotz was an Ontarian originally from Germany who operated as Canada's agent in Hamburg. Here, between 1874 and 1877, he played a major role in transferring Mennonites onto ships to Canada, in exchanging their funds into dollars and promoting further emigration from Russia; see his reports in Ernst Correll, ed., "Mennonite immigration into Manitoba: documents and sources, 1873-1874," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 22(1) (1948): 51-52, 54-57; Ernst Correll, ed., "Canadian agricultural records on Mennonite settlements, 1875-77," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 21(1) (1947): 38, 42-45.
- 8 Original report: "The Mennonite immigration," *Manitoba Free Press*, 9 December, 1876, 1; correction "Our Mennonite settlements." *Manitoba Free Press*, 16 December, 1876, 4. The latter article notes that Jacob Shantz, a Mennonite from Ontario, had toured Manitoba with a Mennonite representative from Russia in 1872 before Hespeler ever got involved. This was Bernhard Warkentin, a rich Russian Mennonite touring North America with two friends. He was not a representative of the Mennonites in Russia but later settled in Kansas. Shantz would play an important part in the later Mennonite immigration most notably in getting a government loan to help them settle, see Sam Steiner, *Vicarious Pioneer: The Life of Jacob Shantz* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1988).
- 9 William Leggo, *The History of the Administration of the Right Honorable Frederick Temple, Earl of Dufferin ... late Governor General of Canada* (Lovell Print. & Pub. Co., 1878), 594.
- 10 George Bryce, *A History of Manitoba: Its Resources and People* (Toronto: The Canada History Company, 1906), 368; Dr. Bryce had worked with Hespeler during the 1880s in efforts to reform Mennonite schooling and had arranged for Heinrich Ewert's move to Manitoba from Kansas to assist with this work.
- 11 Margaret McWilliams, *Manitoba Milestones* (Toronto: J.M. Dent, 1928), 155.
- 12 Klaas Peters, *Die Bergthaler Mennoniten und deren Auswanderung aus Russland und Einwanderung in Manitoba* (Hillsboro, Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1925), see 9-10 on Hespeler. These quotes are from the English translation by Margaret Loewen Reimer, *The Bergthaler Mennonites* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1988), 11.
- 13 "Die Bergthaler Mennoniten und deren Einwanderung aus Russland," *Mennonitische Rundschau* 11(5) (January 29, 1980): 2.
- 14 See Leonard Doell, "Klaas Peters (1855-1932): A Biography," in Peters, *The Bergthaler Mennonites* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1988), 49, 55-59.
- 15 C. Henry Smith, *The Coming of the Russian Mennonites: An Episode in the Settling of the Last Frontier, 1874-1884* (Berne, Mennonite Book Concern, 1927), 49-50.
- 16 Georg Leibbrandt, "The Emigration of the German Mennonites from Russia to the United States and Canada in 1873-1880: I." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 6(4) (1932): 213; this in spite of Leibbrandt using archival sources that refuted such claims.
- 17 Gustav E. Reimer and G. R. Gaeddert, *Exiled by the Czar: Cornelius Jansen and the Great Mennonite Migration, 1874* (Newton: Mennonite Publishing Office, 1956), 59.
- 18 Is. W. Toews, "Aus- und Einwanderung," in 75 *Gedenkfeyer der Mennonitischen Einwanderung in Manitoba, Canada* (Steinbach, n. p. 1949), 35; John Dyck, *Oberschulze Jakob Peters, 1813-1884, Manitoba Pioneer Leader* (Steinbach: Hanover Steinbach Historical Society, 1990), 45. Lawrence Klippenstein, "Broken Promises or National Progress: Mennonites and the Russian state in the 1870s," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 18 (2000): 103.
- 19 E. K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia: The Mennonites in Manitoba* (Altona: D. W. Friesen, 1956), 37; Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920: The History of a Separate people* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1974), 187; Adolf Ens, *Subjects or Citizens? The Mennonite Experience in Canada, 1870-1925* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1994), 13.
- 20 Steiner, *Vicarious Pioneer: The Life of Jacob Shantz*, 68, note 22; Sauer, "Ethnicity employed," 93, note 29.
- 21 Angelika Sauer, "Who's Who in German-Canadian History: Wilhelm Hespeler," *German-Canadian Studies Newsletter* 3(1) (1998): 3.
- 22 Ernst Correll, "Mennonite Immigration into Manitoba: Sources and Documents, 1872, 1873," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 11(3) (1937): 220.
- 23 Correll, "Mennonite Immigration," 221; corrected with reference to the original letter in the Public Archives of Canada, RG 17 67-6462.
- 24 *Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada*, 1874, Volume 6, from the Annual Reports of the Immigration Agents, pp. XI-XiV in Ernst Correll, "Sources on the Mennonite immigration from Russia in the 1870s," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 24(4) (1950): 334; this is a report on the activities of Hespeler.
- 25 In 1972/73 I consulted the archives of the Foreign and Colonial Offices in the Public Record Office in England and also looked at papers in the Public Archives of Canada in Ottawa and none record anything that would support Hespeler learning of the Mennonite migration prior to British contacts.
- 26 Menchikov is a name involved with the Russian nobility but there is no evidence of any links with Mennonites, Germany or Hespeler.
- 27 In fact Hespeler first suggested that James Zohrab accompany the Mennonite delegation to Manitoba, a suggestion rejected by the British government (see Correll, "Mennonite immigration," 223-225). The British authorities were concerned with the diplomatic issues of the Mennonite emigration, and Hespeler's clumsy actions which had created problems with the Russian government, see James Urry, "A Matter of Diplomacy: The British Government and the Mennonite Immigration from Russia to Manitoba, 1872-1875," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 87(2) (2013): 225-49.
- 28 Hespeler eventually lost credibility with many Mennonites when he shifted political allegiance after being elected to the Provincial Assembly in 1900, see James Urry, *Mennonites, Politics and Peoplehood: Europe - Russia - Canada, 1525-1980* (Winnipeg: Manitoba University Press, 2006), 171-73.
- 29 E. Cora Hind "The Mennonites," *The Colonist* [Winnipeg] 6(11) (1892): 6-7, 14; Hind was a writer and a leading figure in the early feminist movement in Manitoba.
- 30 Only Hespeler's other address on the need to increase population through immigration was published, see "Get Population," *The Commercial* 14(26) (1896): 555, 561. On favourable comments on his "history" see "Assisted migration," *The Commercial* 15(26) (1896): 557 and A.C. L., "The Immigration Convention," *The Week* [Toronto] 13(17) (March 20, 1896): 397.

## Stuck in the Ice on Lake Superior

The sources for this example of the challenges of migration are a collection of letters from Peter and Maria Penner, found in the doddy house attic on the former Peter G. Martin farm in Woolwich Township, Waterloo County, and the diary of Elias Eby. Peter and Maria Penner were part of a group of migrants who stayed in Ontario in the winter of 1875-76 before leaving for Manitoba in the spring to settle initially in the East Reserve village of Rosengart. They were hosted in Ontario by the Peter G. Martin family. Elias Eby, was the son of the pioneer Bishop Benjamin Eby. He was a miller and very interested in the migration of the 1870s.<sup>1</sup> (eds.)

### From the Diary of Elias Eby.

May 8, 1876

"The Russians who stayed here in Ontario last summer gathered in Berlin, from whence they left for Sarnia at 8 p.m. and on Tuesday at 11 p.m. went from there per boat on the lakes to Manitoba, 442 persons. Our son-in-law, Aaron Schantz, who guided 600 Russians there June 4, 1875, was their guide again. He took along his wife, his two small children and Nancy's youngest

son, Henry Clemens. They are all seeking a home there. Besides these, there were over 200 other persons on the same boat. May the dear God attend them on this dangerous trip."

May 29, 1876

"Today's mail brought the first news of the above mentioned emigrants to Manitoba, from which I take a short excerpt from Aaron Schantz's letter:



The steamer Atlantic on Lake Superior of Minnesota Point near Duluth in June of 1874 or 1875. The Penners travelled a year or two later and experienced a lot more ice on the lake than is shown on this photo. Photo Credit: Hennepin County Library Special Collections.

May 9, in the evening, the boat left Sarnia, Ontario, having several hours interference from the ice at Manitoulin Island, yet hoping to reach Duluth by Saturday, 13, but in vain. Although they were now on Lake Superior, they were still far from Duluth. The lake is an average of 600 feet deep. In this region stands the 95 foot light house which cost \$73,000, and can be seen for 18 miles. Monday 15th they were within 20 miles of Duluth, but were daily hindered by ice, so that they only arrived at Duluth with great difficulty and the help of two other steamers, on the evening of the 24<sup>th</sup>. The provisions of food were practically exhausted. 26<sup>th</sup> they went per cars to Moorehead, and on the morning of May 30, they all arrived safely at Winnipeg, where Aaron entered the service of a store with free rent, within a few days.”

#### **Peter and Maria Penner’s letter to their hosts, the Peter G. Martins.**

Duluth, May 25, 1876  
Dear Parents:

As I promised to send you a card, I will write a few lines about the journey. On May 8 at 8 o’clock in the evening we boarded the ship. That was Tuesday, then we travelled to the Edward Islands, Thunder Bay, that was Sunday forenoon, the 14<sup>th</sup> at 10 o’clock we left. The 24<sup>th</sup> we came to the city of Duluth. Dear parents, the journey was distressful, but still better than we feared, since no one died of hunger. But that we lived on 5 potatoes and a quarter pound of bread on the journey; but Wednesday the 24<sup>th</sup> the Lord opened the way. But some had even less to eat. Monday the 27<sup>th</sup>, 18 men crossed the ice to the land. The ship was about 20 miles from the harbour. They travelled about 16 hours on foot over ice; thus the Lord showed us how he can punish us and how he can preserve us. But the Name of the Lord be praised; we poor mortals cannot praise and thank him enough for his great mercy. Concerning ourselves, we are quite well, God be praised, and wish that this imperfect writing may find you in good health. You perhaps wonder why we call you parents. I can do no else, since you did not accept me as a brother; yes as children you took us up, for which we cannot repay nor thank you. I think the Heavenly Father will repay you.

Second, I must inform you that we leave tomorrow,

Thursday.

In closing a hearty greeting to you and your children from us. I promised Henry I would write but have no time. A hearty greeting of love to you.

Peter and Maria Penner

#### **Endnotes**

1 Mimeographed copies of the letters are in the Mennonite Library and Archives Peter G. Martin collection, Hist. Mss. 1.160; the Eby diary is in Hist. Mss. 17. Slightly different transcriptions of the diaries and letters were published in Lawrence Klippenstein, “Old Letters Tell Our Story,” *Mennonite Historian* 4(4) (December 1978): 1-2 and Isaac R. Horst, “Colonization in the 1870s,” *Ontario Mennonite History*, 16(2)(October 1998): 19-23. The text used here is from the archival copies. (eds.)

**ICE IN LAKE SUPERIOR.** - There is ice enough in Lake Superior to block the ports there, so that it is almost impossible for vessels to enter or depart. A dispatch received at the office of the Northern Transit line yesterday, from Duluth, stated that the Nashua had just arrived at her wharf, having lain in the ice for almost a week. In her efforts to effect a release she broke her wheel. The Garden City, of the same line, now on her way to Duluth, will meet the Nashua at Copper Harbor and tow her here. - Cleveland Leader.

**ICE AT DULUTH.** - A telegram from Duluth of Saturday last reported the steamer Fremont and one or two other boats ice-bound at Duluth. It appears that the northeast wind has driven the ice, of which there remain immense fields, to the head of Lake Superior, blocking up the port of Duluth. The ice is said to extend out ten miles or more.

We suggest that the citizens of Duluth advertise a great centennial skating carnival for the next Fourth of July upon the ice in that harbor. It would attract more visitors than any other entertainment that could be afforded.

*Detroit Tribune*, June 6, 1876. <http://images.maritimehistoryofthegreat-lakes.ca/5142/data?n=5>

# The Religious Context of the First Decade of Mennonites in Manitoba

Adolf Ens, Winnipeg

By the end of the 1876 shipping season, most of the Mennonite immigrants (6,156) had arrived in Manitoba and settled in three communities: the East Reserve, Scratching River, and the West Reserve. That included all the Bergthal Colony (2,833) and Kleine Gemeinde (696) emigrants as well as about 2,627 from Chortitza (Old) Colony and its newer daughter colonies. The latter settled in the western part of the West Reserve. The 784 arrivals in the next four years were smaller groups, almost exclusively from the Chortitza family of colonies.

The major upheaval – leaving behind their homes and their country of birth – was now behind them, but seeking to create new communities and a new home in this ‘foreign’ place brought new challenges. Each of the three groups encountered factors pulling them apart or hampering their coalescing.

## The Kleine Gemeinde

The *Kleine Gemeinde*, which originated in Russia in about 1812, had only very recently (1865) consolidated itself geographically in Borosenko, a new daughter colony in Russia. But its cohesion as a church community was still fragile as a result of the not yet fully healed effects of a division.

In Manitoba the majority settled on the East Reserve but a significant number settled in two villages on the Scratching River, creating once more a geographically divided community.<sup>1</sup> Bishop Peter Toews was soon in touch with John Holdeman, a Swiss Mennonite who had recently (1859) separated from his Mennonite church community in Ohio to found a new Gemeinde, the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite. Correspondence between Toews and Holdeman began in 1876, and three years later Holdeman was preaching in Kleine Gemeinde congregations in Manitoba. This led to the “conversion” and separation of Toews and about a third of his followers to join the Holdeman church in the winter of 1881-1882.

In addition, Marcus Seiler, Holdeman’s co-evangelist, introduced the teachings of Emmanuel Swedenborg and the Church of the New Jerusalem into the Manitoba Mennonite settlements a few years later. This led to a group of Swedenborgian adherents forming in the Scratching River settlement.<sup>2</sup>

## The Bergthal Gemeinde

The Bergthal Gemeinde came to Manitoba almost in its entirety, led by Bishop Gerhard Wiebe and a roster of ministers. The five villages of Bergthal Colony in Russia now became at least three dozen, scattered over a large area of the East Reserve, many of them on land unsuitable for farming. Cohesion was difficult to achieve in those circumstances. When a second reserve, west of the Red River, was opened in 1875, the opportunity to relocate became increasingly attractive, especially as grasshoppers, early frosts, and successive wet years stalled progress on the East Reserve. By 1878 about half of the Bergthal settlers had indicated their intention to move. To serve the now widely scattered Bergthal community, Minister David Stoesz was elected in 1879 to serve as Assistant to Bishop Gerhard Wiebe.



*Johann Funk, with his third wife Louise, and their foster daughter, Justina Klassen, ca 1890. Funk was more open to the evangelists who came to the West Reserve in the 1880s than many of his parishioners, precipitating a split in his church that gave rise to the larger Sommerfelder and smaller Bergthaler Gemeinden. Photo Credit: GAMEO, original at the Mennonite Heritage Centre: 205.1*

When Wiebe abruptly “resigned” as bishop in March 1882, it became immediately clear that Bishop David Stoesz would need to lead elections for a new bishop for Bergthal Church members on the West Reserve. Accordingly, Johann Funk of Altbergthal village was ordained in 1882. Funk soon found out that the Gemeinde at West Lynne, which he was to lead, included many Mennonites who were not from Bergthal Colony. The new village of Edenburg, for example, included nine families from Borosenko and Molotchna colonies, and did not naturally fit into the Bergthal Gemeinde.<sup>3</sup> Farther west, the “Old Colony” village of Hoffnungsfeld practiced a kind of religious piety which led the majority of its residents to seek affiliation with the (West Lynne) Bergthal Gemeinde.<sup>4</sup>

## The ‘Old Colony’

The ‘Old Colony’ settlers on the western portion of the West Reserve came from Chortitza, the oldest colony, and from Fürstenland and a number of other Old Colony daughter colonies. All were part of the large Flemish Gemeinde in Russia. Under the leadership of Bishop Gerhard Dyck, this Gemeinde formally agreed to accept the compromises conceded by the Tsar and not to emigrate. Deeply disappointed by this decision, his assistant bishop, Johann Wiebe of Fürstenland Colony, requested that the Bergthal deputies to America in 1873 look for land for his people as well. It was therefore natural that Johann



*The first church built by the Reinländer Mennonite Gemeinde (Old Colony) in 1876 in the village of Reinland. This photo was taken in the 1930s. Photo Credit: Plett Foundation collection.*

Wiebe was seen as the spiritual leader of immigrants from Fürstenland, Chortitza, and other 'Old Colony' settlements.

Wiebe homesteaded in the village of Rosengart. In 1876 the first house of worship was erected in the neighbouring village of Reinland, which was already the administrative centre of the 'Old Colony' settlement. However, attempts to encompass all 'Old Colony' members in 'Wiebe's Gemeinde' met with increasing resistance. Accordingly, the church decided in October 1880 to have a voluntary "signing in" of all who committed themselves to the Reinländer Gemeinde. About 23 percent opted not to do so. Most of these dissidents chose instead to identify with the West Lynne (Bergthal) Gemeinde led by Bishop Johann Funk.<sup>5</sup>

The Bergthal settlers who relocated to the West Reserve founded new villages east of the 'Old Colony' settlement. A degree of geographic separation thus remained between the two Gemeinden on the West Reserve. But most of the new 'Bergthal' members remained in their Old Colony villages and were consequently scattered throughout the West Reserve. That made it difficult for Bishop Stoesz and his ministerial colleagues to serve them adequately. In villages where different religious practices were tolerated or encouraged, local 'Bergthal' congregations developed. Bishop Stoesz supported and encouraged these groups by ordaining ministerial leadership (in Hoffnungsfeld) and encouraged them in erecting their own church buildings (in Reinland and Hoffnungsfeld) later in the 1880s.

Thus, all three original immigrant groups struggled for internal cohesion in the midst of rapid changes taking place around and within them. External factors provided another agenda.

For example, how should they respond to the Manitoba government's offer of financial support for their schools in 1877? Would this compromise the right to operate their own schools, a right granted in the *Privilegium* of 1873? The Kleine Gemeinde and Bergthal groups initially opted for such "public schools," but the latter withdrew in a couple of years.

Additional governmental assistance became an option in 1880 with the invitation to organize local municipalities on the Reserves. How would that local government, part of the provincial government structure, change the close relationship that had developed between the church and the *Gebietsamt*? The Bergthal community on the East Reserve accepted the municipal structure and the Kleine Gemeinde went along with it. The Reinländer (Old Colony) on the West Reserve resisted it, since they did not want to become 'unequally yoked' with outsiders.

The involvement of United States Mennonites in the Kleine Gemeinde with the work of Holdeman has been noted above. In the Bergthal settlement, especially those who had relocated to the West Reserve, General Conference home mission ministers arrived about 1880 and evangelized in their villages. Bishop Funk was generally open to this General Conference ministry although some tensions arose. A considerable majority of his parishioners, however, felt that Funk was too open to the General Conference teaching and program, leading to a division by the end of the 1880s. Those opposing Funk's group persuaded Bishop Stoesz of the East Reserve to ordain a new bishop for them in the early 1890s, giving rise to the Sommerfeld Mennonite church. In the Hoffnungsfeld area Mennonite Brethren missionaries from Minnesota were well received, leading to the formation of a Mennonite Brethren congregation in the 1880s.



*The General Conference Home Missions evangelist, John B. Baer, preached in West Reserve Bergthaler churches in the 1880s. He is picture here with his wife, Jennie Roberts. Photo Credit: Reinland: An Experience in Community, 206.*

The three bishops who led the emigration had hoped that the new context in Manitoba would lead to greater unity. Bishop Toews looked for a healing of the fractures in the Kleine Gemeinde. The two bishops Wiebe, Gerhard and Johann, believed that the Bergthal and Fürstenland Gemeinden who had elected them, could form one inclusive church in Manitoba. Instead, the Kleine Gemeinde split in two with the Holdemann revival. The Bergthal group did not manage to reunite with their Flemish ‘Old Colony’ brethren, but became Chortitzer on the East Reserve, Sommerfelder and Bergthaler on the West Reserve. And while the Fürstenland Gemeinde managed to absorb the majority of the old colony immigrants, others formed the Mennonite Brethren church or joined one or another of the Bergthal factions. It was not until the “outside” pressures of World War I that a united, unhyphenated common “Mennonite” approach to the government would emerge.

### Endnotes

- 1 A dissident portion of the Kleine Gemeinde chose to settle in Nebraska, leaving the Manitoba group with fewer than 700 persons.
- 2 A second “intervention” by USA Mennonites in the later 1880s gave rise to the *Bruderthaler Gemeinde* (later Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church). This offered families in mixed marriages (Kleine Gemeinde with Bergthaler), and Mennonites who did not feel comfortable in either the Kleine Gemeinde or the Bergthaler mainline churches a place to go.
- 3 John Dyck, “Edenburtg 1879–1947,” in Adolf Ens, Jacob E. Peters and Otto Hamm, eds. *Church, Family and Village: Essays on Mennonite Life on the West Reserve* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2001), chapter 21.
- 4 John Dyck, “Hoffnungsfeld: Community and Phenomenon,” *ibid.*, chapter 16.
- 5 Calculations based on John Dyck and William Harms, eds., *1880 Village Census of the Mennonite West Reserve* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1998). The highest percentage of dissenters included villages near the north-western part of the Reserve (Hoffnungsfeld, Burwalde, Waldheim) and the south-eastern (the strongly Pukhtin villages of Neuanlage and Silberfeld), although Reinland (the administrative and church centre of the settlement) also had a large number.

## The Mennonites of Mountain Lake

Ferdinand P. Schultz

*The following is an excerpt from a history of Mountain Lake, Minnesota written by Ferdinand Schultz in 1938. The Mountain Lake area was explored by some of the Mennonite delegates in 1873 but not by those representing Bergthal or the Kleine Gemeinde. A number of Bergthal migrants would, however, settle in the Mountain Lake area. Eds.*

Originally published as: Ferdinand P. Schultz, *A History of the Settlement of German Mennonites from Russia at Mountain Lake, Minnesota* (Minneapolis, MN: Ferdinand P. Schultz, 1938), 52-59.

Among the many hardships and difficulties endured by the early pioneers were several that stood out as especially severe and trying, namely, the long cold winters with their raging blizzards, and the grasshopper plagues. The winters of 1871-2 and 1872-3 were unusually rigorous. In the fall of 1871 the first heavy snowfall came in November, delaying the trains for some time. In the early part of December no trains were operated for over ten days,<sup>1</sup> and after the beginning of the new year the railroad was closed from January until the tenth of April.<sup>2</sup> During this winter two sons of Lader, a farmer near Mountain Lake, froze to death in one of the blizzards.<sup>3</sup> In the fall of 1872 winter set in with such severity before the middle of November that no passenger trains were operated for about a month.<sup>4</sup> The famous “Blizzard of 1873”, which caused much

suffering and some loss of life in Minnesota and neighbouring states, came in January and raged for three days, but did not take any lives in the community.<sup>5</sup>

Undoubtedly many of the pioneers were sorely tried by these successive hard winters, causing them to question the wisdom of the selection of Minnesota as their new home, or in the worst of the season to consider the possibilities of moving to a region with a milder climate, but the return of the warmer seasons usually dispelled these thoughts from their minds, causing them rather to look forward with renewed courage and optimism to the time when a rich harvest should reward them for their labors and privations. In 1872 the crops were very good in the region and the farmers were very hopeful about the future. The first part of the next farming season gave promise of good

returns until the grasshopper plague suddenly arrived in June<sup>6</sup> and not only swiftly devoured practically all vegetation, but also damaged other materials that are usually not considered edible. The devourers repeated their ravages for five successive seasons with results that will be discussed more fully later. It is sufficient to state here that many were reduced to poverty and want, so that state aid became an urgent necessity. Paul Seeger was for a number of years the local distributor of state relief goods at Mountain Lake.<sup>7</sup>

From the foregoing account it is apparent that Mountain Lake and vicinity was, in its origin and early development, similar to hundreds of other American frontier communities. With a few appropriate alterations and adaptations this tale might be made to tell with equal fitness the story of pioneer days in many other localities. Up to about September, 1873, no one would have undertaken to predict with any degree of certainty that the community would not always continue to be just like other American communities, especially its nearest neighbors, in all its essential aspects, but that it would undergo a change in one or more of its essential features so as to make it unlike all other American communities. Such a prophecy was, of course, never made, but that which would have been its fulfillment occurred in the years between 1873 and 1880, for Mountain Lake came to be a distinctly different community in one very important aspect: its inhabitants. Instead of continuing to be populated with the usual mixture of native-born Americans, naturalized Americans, and foreign immigrants of many different nationalities, it came to be inhabited almost completely by Mennonites whose cultural pattern was quite unlike that of the typical American.

The story of how the first Mennonite settlers came to Mountain Lake has already been told in the previous chapter. This first group of Mennonites, who came in the fall of 1873, became the nucleus around which the Mennonite settlement developed, for they were the magnet which kept a stream of their people coming to the community for about seven years, or until 1880 when Mennonite migration from Russia ceased. A total of about 295 Mennonite families, approximately 1800 individuals, made the long trek from Russia to the Mountain Lake community in these years. It will be of interest to note some of the details and incidents connected with their immigration and settlement that have not been lost with the passing of time.

The original group of Mennonite immigrants, who came to Mountain Lake from their former home in the Crimean Peninsula in 1873, did not find it at all difficult to obtain land, for unoccupied railroad land was still easy to find and could be purchased for about four to six dollars an acre.<sup>8</sup> William Seeger, who brought them to the community and resided there for some years,<sup>9</sup> was in the employ of the railroad company,<sup>10</sup> which granted to all the Mennonite immigrants who bought of its land free passage over its line. Before winter came all of the thirteen families, numbering probably about seventy-five individuals, had located on farms in the vicinity of the village. A few of them bought farms complete with all equipment, such as there was, from Americans who wanted to move on. Many of the latter seemed to be very anxious to sell all they had, except their personal belongings, at reasonable prices, especially so after the grasshoppers had devoured their crops for several seasons. One of the Mennonite pioneers of 1873, Aaron Peters,<sup>11</sup> remarked that some of the Americans, especially the bachelor Civil War veterans, became scared when the Mennonites came in larger

numbers and were anxious to get out of the community. Apparently they did not want to live with these strange foreigners.

From the very beginning of their settled abode in their new home the Mennonites became ardent boosters for their community by seeking to influence their relatives and friends to come and live with them in Minnesota. There were a number of good reasons why they so quickly manifested this typical frontier attitude. Having come to the community with the intention of making it their permanent home they naturally craved the presence of more of their own people to drive away the isolation and loneliness of the new and strange frontier by populating the open spaces about them and sharing with them the advantages as well as the hardships of their new life. Some thousands of their fellow-believers were definitely committed to the idea of coming to America, but few of them were sure of their ultimate destination in America, so it was perfectly natural for the Mountain Lake Mennonites to seek to influence them in favor of settlement in Minnesota rather than settlement in Kansas, Nebraska, Dakota, or Manitoba where the governments or railroads were offering more attractive inducements.

The influence exercised in this manner was largely of a personal character based on prior ties of kinship, friendship and association, and was brought to bear upon the prospective immigrants by means of personal letters which in all probability conformed closely to the usual frontier type in their expression of enthusiasm, optimism, and courage, their emphasis on or even the exaggeration of the local advantages with some depreciation or minimizing of inducements and attractions offered elsewhere, and their minimizing or complete silence about the darker side of frontier life. In the winter of 1875 the Mennonite settlers of Mountain Lake wrote a circular letter of about 1200 words, addressed "To Our Friends and Fellow-believers in Prussia and Russia", which exemplified the above-mentioned characteristics. It was signed by sixteen of the leading men and published in the Mennonite immigrant paper, *Zur Heimath*.<sup>12</sup>

Occasionally some of the men who had the means would go out to meet groups of Mennonite immigrants at strategic points along their route of travel from the eastern seaports to the frontier areas where they intended to settle. Upon leaving Russia the Mennonites usually traveled overland through Germany to Hamburg or some Belgian port when they embarked. Those who were definitely planning to go to Manitoba had to cross to England where they took passage in British vessels going to Quebec. From there they traveled over the Great Lakes to Duluth, thence to Fargo by rail, and then north down the Red River by steamboat. The majority, however, crossed the Atlantic on North-German Lloyd, or Red Star liners and landed at New York. Now and then a group landed at Philadelphia. At these ports they were usually met by numerous agents of railroads, land companies, or other commercial concerns who were interested in them as prospective settlers or customers. They were also met by friends or relatives who had preceded them, had located in one of the frontier states or territories, and now wanted them to go with them. Frequently the immigrants decided at these ports where they wanted to make their homes and the groups then broke up into smaller parties who proceeded to their chosen destination.

One such party left New York in the summer of 1875 with the intention of going to Manitoba. In Chicago they were met by David Schroeder, one of the Mountain Lake pioneers of

1873, who accompanied them to St. Paul, Minnesota, where they had to change trains. Schroeder took them out to lunch before they boarded the train which, they thought, would take them on toward Manitoba. After the train had left St. Paul Schroeder appeared and told them that they were on the way to Mountain Lake. There was much chagrin and dissatisfaction among the immigrants, but they went on to Mountain Lake, got off the train, and stayed.<sup>13</sup>

In the summer of 1877 the Jacob Balzer family landed at Philadelphia together with other Mennonite immigrants. They had received a very urgent invitation from their old friends, the Henry Goertz family, who had settled at Mountain Lake, to come to their state, but they decided to go to Newton, Kansas, and made preparations to depart from Philadelphia. Their son, Jacob, however who was seventeen years old at the time, was not satisfied and did not rest until his parents changed their plans and came to Mountain Lake.<sup>14</sup>

Several groups of Mennonites came to Mountain Lake after they had first settled elsewhere and found the location unsatisfactory. Twenty eight families<sup>15</sup> came in 1875 after spending one winter in Manitoba, where, they complained, the climate was too cold, the temperature being from forty to forty-five degrees below zero, so that the cattle suffered from frostbitten ears and legs. Erdmann Penner, whom they sent out from Manitoba to examine Minnesota and Nebraska, reported in favor of Minnesota.<sup>16</sup> Nearly this entire group located on farms in or near Butterfield township in Watownan County, thus forming the eastern part of the Mennonite community. Their locality has ever since that time borne the name of "Bergthal" because they came from the Mennonite colony of that name in Russia.

Early in the spring in the same year Henry Schultz visited the community and found it more to his liking than Yankton in Dakota Territory where he and his children and grandchild had spent the winter, and decided to move to Minnesota.<sup>17</sup> They traveled ten days by covered wagon from Yankton to Sheldon, Iowa, the nearest railroad town, and boarded the train which took them to Mountain Lake where they located about a mile southwest of the village.<sup>18</sup> The two or three horses which they brought with them from Dakota were the first to be owned by Mennonites in the community.<sup>19</sup>

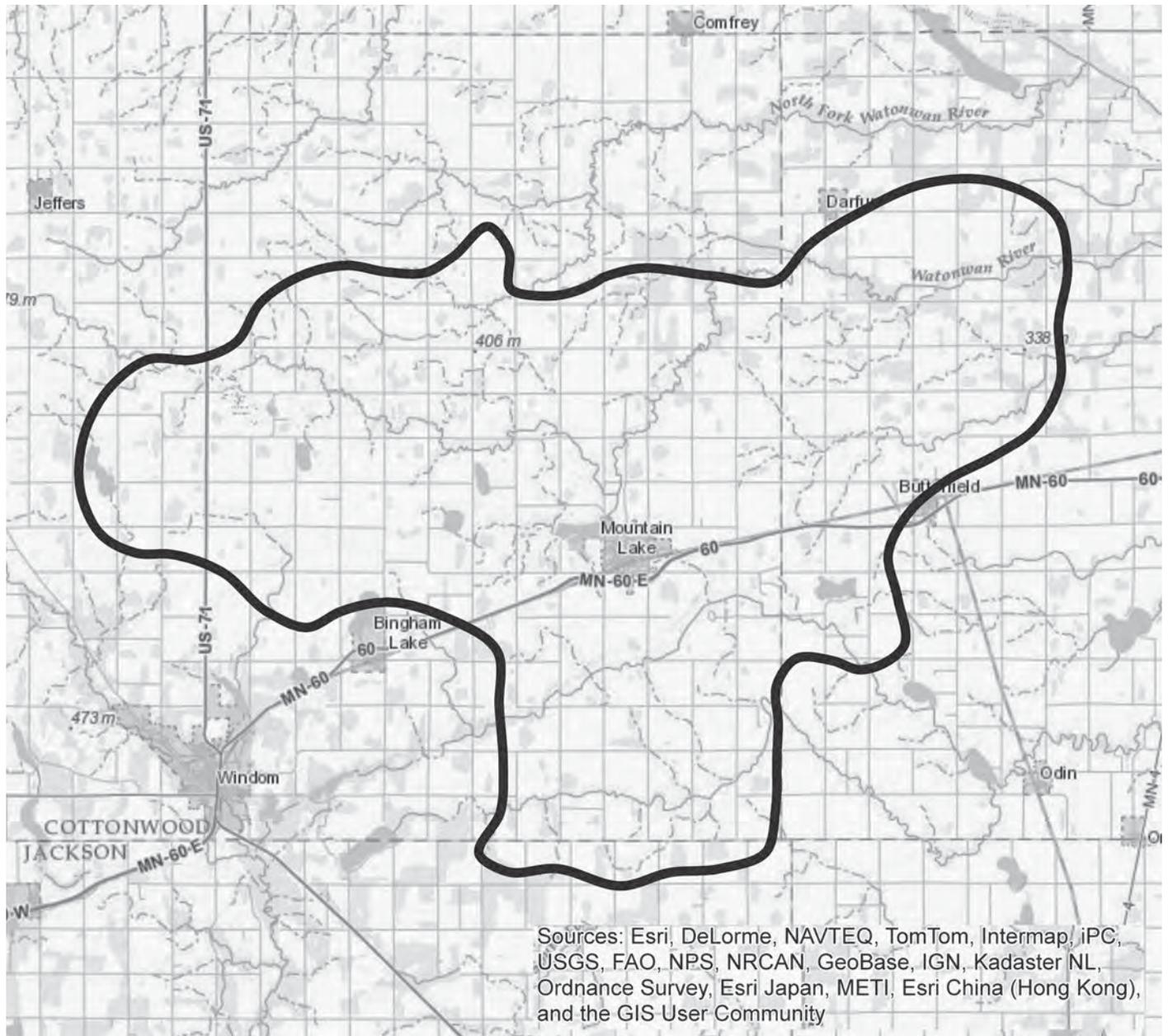
Local records have preserved sufficient data to make possible the compilation of fairly accurate figures showing the number of Mennonite immigrants coming to the community in each year from 1873 on. They are as follows for the years indicated:<sup>20</sup>

Year	Number of families	Approximate Number of Individuals
1873	13	80
1874	19	125
1875	97	590
1876	84	480
1877	33	210
1878	37	245
1879	11	65
1880	1	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>295</b>	<b>1800</b>

With few exceptions the Mennonite immigrants were farmers, so their first concern upon arrival was the matter of acquiring land on which to commence farming operations. When they came in large groups at one time it was impossible for all of them to find satisfactory land immediately and often the families had to find temporary shelter while the men sought for land. The railroad company met this situation by erecting near the station a large wooden structure which was known as the "Immigrant House". Newly arrived immigrants were allowed to use this building free of charge until they could find a permanent abode in the community.<sup>21</sup>

As the Mennonites came into the community, many of the American settlers left the locality, thus making room for the new arrivals and permitting more compact settlement than would have been possible otherwise. Fear or suspicion of the foreigners may have had some connection with this change, but it is more adequately accounted for by two other factors, namely the influence of the grasshopper plague, and the fact that a considerable number of the Mennonites were able to pay for their land with gold coin. The grasshopper plague, which one would naturally think of as a deterrent to immigration into an infested region, seemed to have the opposite effect in regard to the Mennonites. They seemed to have been less afraid of the scourge than were the Americans, and so they continued to come in spite of the presence of locusts in the area. More important, however, was the fact that the successive visitations of the plague had tried the courage and endurance of the Americans to the extent that they were very anxious to move away, but they were too poor to go without selling their farms, and so they offered to sell at very reasonable prices. The prospect of being paid in that precious frontier rarity [*sic*], gold coin, no doubt greatly facilitated the conclusion of sales that were advantageous to the purchasers. One Mennonite farmer bought a 160 acre farm with standing crops, two or three buildings, six head of livestock, and some machinery for \$1250 cash, which was less than eight dollars an acre.<sup>22</sup>

The Mennonite immigrants were on the whole much better off than the average foreign immigrant who came to America, but that does not mean that none of them were very poor. Most of them were reasonably well fixed financially before they left Russia, but some were so poor even then that they had to be aided by their people in Russia, by their fellow-immigrants, or by the Mennonite Board of Guardians which the American Mennonites established for that purpose in 1874.<sup>23</sup> All of those who had means suffered losses because the forced sale of their property made it impossible for them to realize its full value in terms of cash received. In this matter as well as in the exchange of currency the earlier immigrants were fortunate, for they were usually able to sell their possessions easily at a comparatively small loss, and the exchange rates on the money market were very favorable, the Russian ruble being worth about seventy-five cents in 1875. By 1878 it had become difficult to sell property for more than a small fraction of its actual value, for as more and more people emigrated there were fewer and fewer people left to buy the emigrants' property. The value of the ruble declined rapidly after 1875 until it was worth only forty-five cents or less by 1878. There was a wide range in financial status among the immigrants from those who came with three thousand dollars in gold in their pockets to those who came with little or nothing, the latter being much



A map of the settlement extent of Mennonites in Mountain Lake. Based on the map in Schultz, 107.

more numerous. Whether they were rich or poor, none seemed to have lacked opportunity to acquire land.

Among the Mennonite immigrants were a small number of individuals who, unlike the great majority of their people, took an interest in vocations other than agriculture. Business pursuits and trades such as served the needs of the growing community provided the best opportunity in non-agricultural activities and some half dozen Mennonites began the trend which led to Mennonite domination of the business interests of the village by establishing or taking over various business enterprises. The business men established residences in the village and soon formed a dominant element in its population.

Religion was so much more important to the Mennonites individually and collectively than it was to the average American frontiersman, especially those who had settled in the community, that the former dominated the character and the extent of religious life in the community. The non-Mennonite minority was too small to have any significant influence on

religious affairs, or upon the social life of the people, which was largely controlled and conditioned by the former.

Education was closely linked to the Mennonites' religion and so they sought from the time of their arrival to control it as fully as possible, in order to perpetuate their faith and the German language, the latter being regarded as essential to the former by many of them.

The Mennonites were practically forced by sheer weight of their own numbers to assume control of the affairs of local politics and government, and they readily recognized that their own needs in these matters could be best met by themselves, but they did not take to politics for its own sake as American pioneers frequently did, and usually manifested only mild interest in political affairs that were not directly concerned with local interests. Politically Mountain Lake became a very conservative community with the coming of the Mennonites.

Thus is ended the tale of the origin and early development of an ordinary American frontier community and its rapid and

unexpected transformation into a distinctly different community by the coming of the Mennonites who have ever since then largely determined its history.

### Endnotes

- 1 *Windom Reporter*, December 14, 1871.
- 2 John A. Brown, *A History of Cottonwood and Watonwan Counties, Minnesota: Their People, Industries, and Institutions*, Volume 1, (Indianapolis, B.F. Bowen, 1916), 81.
- 3 *Windom Reporter*, February 22, 1872.
- 4 *Windom Reporter*, December 12, 1872.
- 5 Brown, 54, 305-10.
- 6 *Windom Reporter*, June 26, 1873. Shortly after this date this weekly newspaper, the only one in the country at this time, was discontinued. It has proven to be a valuable source of information for the period in which it was published (September 7, 1871 to June or July 1873). There was no newspaper in the county until the *Cottonwood County Citizen* was founded in 1882, and consequently the present store of information about that period of nine years lacks the type of continuity that is made possible by such a source record.
- 7 Paul Seeger, Mountain Lake, Minnesota, to Governor Horace Austin, April 19, 1873 in the State of Minnesota Governor's Archives, File 640, Miscellaneous Correspondence. March, 1873 to June, 1873. In this letter Seeger reported the

receipt of a shipment of state relief goods.

8 *Zur Heimath*, May, 1875.

9 *Ibid.* Seeger states in a public letter to the Mennonites in Russia and Prussia that he has moved to the community. The county assessor's records show that he owned a quarter section of land two miles southwest of the village.

10 *Ibid.* Seeger was named as agent in an advertisement of the St. Paul and Sioux City Railroad.

11 Peters was then eight years old and is still living today. [1938, eds.]

12 May, 1875.

13 This information was obtained directly from Peter Wiens who was a member of this group.

14 Jacob J. Balzer related this incident in a personal interview with the writer.

15 Gerhard Wiebe, *Ursachen und Geschichte der Auswanderung der Mennoniten aus Russland nach Amerika*, 41.

16 *Zur Heimath*, 32-33.

17 *Ibid.*

18 This material was obtained from the records of the Schultz family.

19 This is a fact of common knowledge among the local pioneers.

20 The Rempel Chronicle contains a long list of the names of heads of immigrant families with the dates of their coming and the name of their former village in Russia.

21 *Zur Heimath*, May, 1875.

22 This party was Jacob Wiens, the father of Peter Wiens who related the fact in a personal interview.

23 *Zur Heimath*, May, 1875.

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## Daniel Unruh and the Mennonite Settlement in Dakota Territory

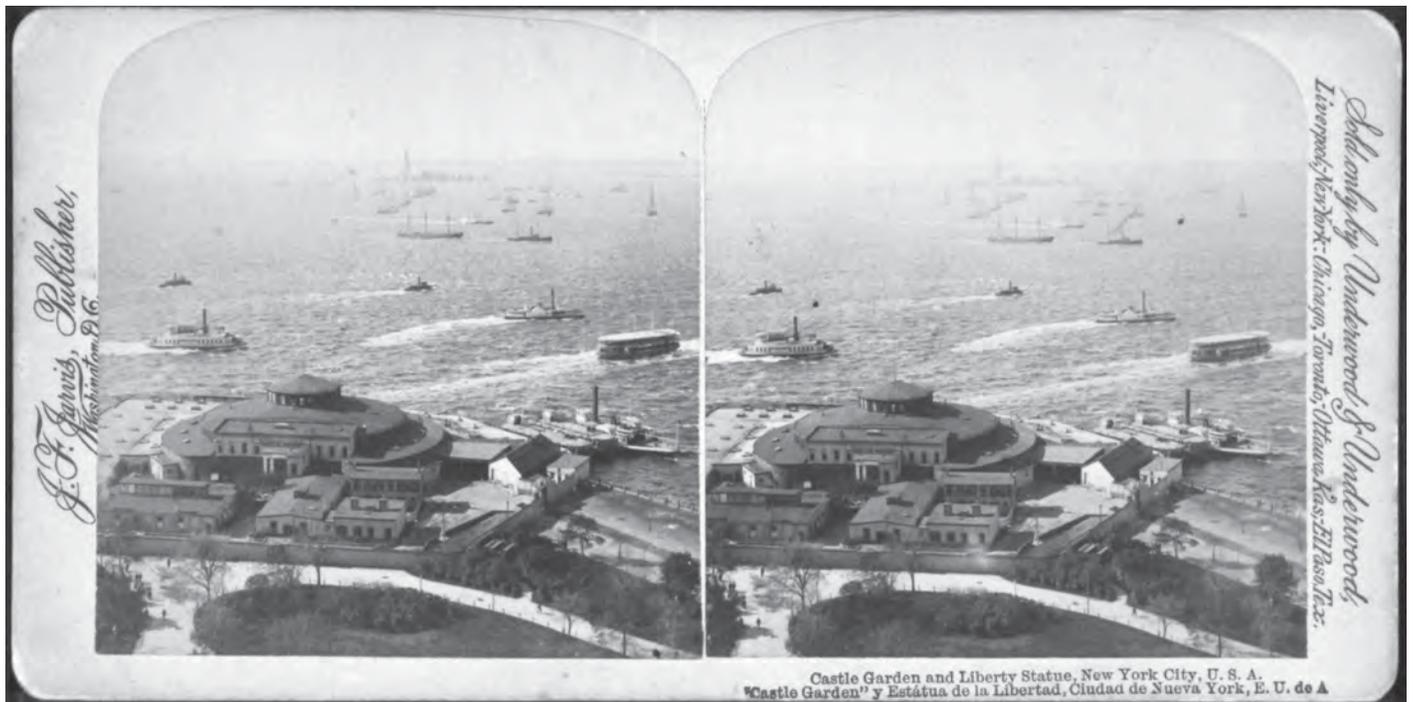
Originally published as: John D. Unruh and John D. Unruh, Jr., "Daniel Unruh and the Mennonite Settlement in Dakota Territory", *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 49, 3 (July 1975): 203-216. Used with permission.

The program of increasing militarization and Russification begun by Alexander II in the late 1860s made clear that the favorable position enjoyed by the German Mennonite "colonists" in Russia was to end.<sup>1</sup> Exemptions from military service would no longer be tolerated and the colonies would lose control of their school systems. All instruction would henceforth be in the Russian language. The problem led the older colonies to send a delegation of twelve to North America in the spring of 1873 to investigate the possibilities of settlement. The committee spent the summer examining potential sites in the midwestern states and provinces of the United States and Canada, returning in the fall to report their findings to their Russia brethren. During the next decade some 18,000 Russian Mennonites responded by migrating to North America.

Approximately 10,000 of these immigrants settled in the United States, most in the western states and territories of Kansas, Nebraska, Dakota, and Minnesota.<sup>2</sup> Surprisingly, however, the site chosen by the nearly 2,000 immigrants settling in Dakota had never been examined by the committee of twelve. Indeed, Andreas Schrag, the delegate of the Volhynian Swiss who comprised a substantial number of those ultimately settling in southeastern Dakota, had returned to Russia recommending settlement in the Pembina area far to the north near the Canadian border.<sup>3</sup> That a Mennonite settlement was begun on the prairies of southeastern Dakota was due not to the investigations and recommendations of the delegation of twelve but to the example and influence of Daniel Unruh, who had arrived in America in the late summer of 1873, long before the delegation returned to Russia with their report on the possibilities of settlement in North America.<sup>4</sup>

Daniel Unruh (originally spelled Unrau) was born in the Molotschna colony of southern Russia on March 16, 1820.<sup>5</sup> Virtually no information on his family background is available. The late Benjamin Unruh, Mennonite historian from Karlsruhe, Germany, who contended that the Unruh family came originally from Germany, claimed to have records tracing the family back to the ninth century in the days of Charlemagne. Another theory claims that all Unraus came originally from Holland, and that the Unruhs came from Germany.<sup>6</sup> It is not known whether all Unruhs derive from the same ancestor. According to some authorities, the first Mennonite Unruh was a military officer of high rank in Saxony who adopted non-resistance when he joined the Mennonites.<sup>7</sup> In the 1880 census reports for Turner County, Dakota Territory, Daniel Unruh reported that both of his parents as well as those of his wife, Marie Wedel, had been born in Prussia.

But in the early 1850s Unruh owned considerable land near the Molotschna village of Waldheim, where he was an influential member of the community.<sup>8</sup> However, due to the critical land shortages which had developed in the Molotschna and Chortitza colonies by the late 1840s and 1850s, a considerable number of Mennonites had begun to move to places where land was more easily obtained.<sup>9</sup> Some went south to the Crimean province. Included in this number was Daniel Unruh, who apparently made the move during the late 1850s, purchasing a considerable quantity of land near the village of Friedenstein.<sup>10</sup> Unruh's son John, who was twenty years old when the migration to America was made, reported several years before he died that they had paid twenty-seven rubles a dessiatine for their land in the Crimea, which they sold for thirty-seven rubles a dessiatine when they left for America in 1873.<sup>11</sup>



A stereoscopic view of Castle Garden, since renamed Castle Clinton. Castle Garden was the immigrant receiving center in New York City before the larger Ellis Island Immigrant Centre was opened in 1892. It is located at the tip of Manhattan in Battery Park and now serves as the ticket center for ferries going to Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty. Photo Credit: Wikipedia Commons: Robert N. Dennis collection of stereoscopic views.

Economically, living conditions in the Crimea were most favorable. The land was productive and the climate ideal. Despite the glowing tales about the Crimea which Unruh and his children often later told, however, the ominous portent of the impending military service led Unruh abruptly to sell his lands and leave Russia in the early summer of 1873.

Why he led his family and a small group of relatives and friends to the United States is not known. Perhaps it was because he knew that the committee of twelve was then in American investigating the possibilities of settlement there. Jacob Buller, a delegate from the Molotschna colony, was an old friend of Unruh's, and it is possible that Buller had communicated with Unruh shortly after he had arrived in the United States.<sup>12</sup> More likely, however, Unruh had been drawn to the United States by correspondence with the Rev. Robert Neumann, a Lutheran minister in New York City who operated a mission to the immigrants for the General Council at the Castle Garden immigrant receiving center.<sup>13</sup>

"Pastor" Neumann, as he was usually called, apparently played an important but elusive role in the Mennonite migration of the 1870s. He was well enough known to some of the committee of twelve delegates, presumably through correspondence, that the two Hutterite and the two Kleine Gemeinde representatives immediately sought him out "to get some information and advice" the day after they arrived in New York.<sup>14</sup> Later in the summer of 1873 Neumann met the Daniel Unruh party on their arrival, one New York newspaper averring that it was through Neumann that the party had been "induced" to come to America. While the Unruh group was in New York, they spent considerable time in discussions with Neumann, who offered counsel concerning their future course of action, and who also conducted their Sunday worship services at Castle Garden.<sup>15</sup> The following year, when the

large tide of Mennonite immigrants began to flow into Castle Garden, Neumann was again active, especially in securing railroad tickets and making representations on behalf of the immigrants. An account in the *New York Times* even referred to Neumann as "the Mennonite missionary."<sup>16</sup>

Since leaving their Crimean homes in the Black Sea villages of Brudersfeld and Friedenstien for the Russian port of Feodosia, the Unruh group had spent some five weeks in travel, coming by way of Odessa, Berlin, and Hamburg.<sup>17</sup> Concluding their journey on the vessel *Hammonia*, they docked in New York on August 15. The *Hammonia* passenger list indicates approximately 100 Mennonite immigrants in the party.<sup>18</sup>

Their arrival in America occasioned laudatory comment by nearly every New York newspaper, and Daniel Unruh (spelled Unruhe by the press) and several of the other "principal emigrants" were singled out for an interview.<sup>19</sup> The party remained at the Castle Garden immigrant center throughout their four day stopover in the city, where they experienced some confusion due to the seemingly contradictory maze of orders and immigration officials.<sup>20</sup>

At this time there apparently was little agreement concerning the group's final destination in the American West, for the several newspapers in turn reported that the immigrants favored Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, and Texas in addition to Dakota Territory. Almost all the newspapers were impressed by the absence of elderly persons and the prominence of large families in the immigrant party. A study of the *Hammonia* passenger list indicates that only fifteen of the prospective settlers were over thirty years of age, with Daniel Unruh the second oldest at fifty-three.

Even more newsworthy for some of the New York dailies was the rumor – ultimately repeated by Chicago and Iowa newspapers – that the small band had brought with them a

considerable quantity of gold. Peter Isaac was reputed to be the wealthiest immigrant, possessing \$140,000 in gold. While the *New York Tribune* initially speculated that at least \$300,000 in specie had been thus brought to America, by the time the immigrants passed through Sioux City, Iowa, the sum was reportedly over \$1,000,000.<sup>21</sup> These idle speculations were quickly denounced by John F. Funk, prominent Mennonite editor and publisher who played such a key role in the Mennonite migration of the 1870s. Explaining that he knew Isaac well and that his property was worth no more than \$3,000, Funk railed against this unnecessary spotlighting of the immigrants to pickpockets and confidence men.<sup>22</sup>

Having refused to leave earlier because of religious scruples against traveling on Sunday, the immigrants departed New York on a rainy Monday evening, August 18. Traveling first via the steamer *Birbeck* to Jersey City and then with through tickets to St. Paul, Minnesota, on the Erie Railroad, the Unruh group stopped temporarily in Elkhart, Indiana, on August 20 to visit with friends and decide on their final location.<sup>23</sup> Noting their arrival, the *Elkhart Evening Review* reported that the Mennonite immigrants planned to locate in Dakota Territory but would remain in Elkhart until an advance party would report. While awaiting the final site selection in that city of 5,500, the young Mennonite men and women in the immigrant party advertised for work.<sup>24</sup> Funk labored diligently to find work for

the men and to secure suitable places of lodging during the subsequent eight weeks the main group remained in Elkhart.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the newspaper reports that the Russian contingent now in Elkhart planned to locate in Dakota Territory, Unruh with five other immigrants left Elkhart the following Monday, August 25, for Newton, Kansas, to investigate Santa Fe Railroad lands available in that vicinity. Cornelius and Peter Jansen, recently-arrived Russian Mennonites who soon decided to settle in Nebraska, joined the group in Newton from where they went to Council Bluffs, Iowa, to examine additional railroad lands. Going next to Chicago, the delegation was joined by Funk, who spent the next two weeks assisting the land-seekers, and by William Seeger of the Minnesota Board of Immigration, who was zealously promoting Minnesota lands.<sup>26</sup>

For the next two weeks the group examined lands in Minnesota and Dakota Territory. From St. Paul and Minneapolis they traveled to the Fargo area in the northern portion of Dakota Territory, and then to Breckenridge, Herman, Douglass, Morris, Mountain Lake, Windom, Worthington, St. Peter, and New Ulm, Minnesota, discussing terms with Seeger, with various railroad officials, and with agents of the United States land office. Between Funk's departure on September 17 and the return of Unruh and his colleagues to Elkhart ten days later, the delegation apparently viewed additional lands in Wisconsin and Iowa.<sup>27</sup>



*A view of Hamburg Harbour in 1883. Image Credit: Wikipedia Commons, Georg Koppmann.*



*Cornelius Jansen was born in Prussia and emigrated to Berdjansk near the Molotschna Colony in the 1850s where he served as a representative of Prussia. He was an active promoter of emigration in the 1870s and was banished from Russia in 1873 for his tireless activity. He subsequently moved to America, ultimately settling in Beatrice, Nebraska. Photo Credit: GAMEO.*

As the reconnoitering trip had revealed, choosing a location for settlement would prove difficult. Unruh favored lands he had seen in Iowa and would have personally preferred to locate there had he not felt responsibility both for the group which had traveled with him and for friends still in Russia who were anxiously awaiting word from Unruh before commencing the journey to America. Many of these possessed only meager financial resources and would be unable to purchase lands, as would be necessary in Iowa. Besides, Iowa was already quite densely populated and there simply would not be sufficient quantities of land available for the many immigrants assumed to be coming. Seeger, who obviously recognized this, felt confident that the entire company would decide to settle in the Mountain Lake region.<sup>28</sup>

Much to Seeger's disgust, however, James S. Foster, Commissioner of Immigration for Dakota Territory, chanced to encounter the Russian immigrant party in Elkhart and convinced the leaders to investigate the possibilities of settling in southeastern Dakota before any final decisions were made.<sup>29</sup> Before traveling to Dakota Unruh and his colleagues, accompanied by Funk, went to Chicago for further discussions on land terms with railroad officials on October 3. Then Unruh and another immigrant, in the company of Bernhard Warkentin

who, like Funk, had been assisting the Mennonite group in their travels and negotiations, journeyed to southeastern Dakota to examine lands in the Yankton area. By October 14 Warkentin telegraphed Funk that Unruh had decided definitely to settle in the Yankton vicinity, and by October 15 Unruh had returned to Elkhart to begin preparations for the long awaited final departure for the west.<sup>30</sup>

On Thursday, October 16, seventy-seven immigrants boarded the train in Elkhart for Dakota, accompanied by the ever helpful Funk, who went as far as Chicago to assist in changing trains. After watching their Chicago departure Funk wrote in his diary, "I saw them go on their way as the pioneer party seeking a home in the west for Conscience sake. My prayer was that God should bless them all. May they be prospered even more." The small band arrived on the Dakota Southern Railroad in Yankton, then the territorial capital, on October 18, 1873. The editor of the Yankton newspaper, pleased at the arrival of the first fifteen families of what was expected to be a much larger colony, remarked: "They are hardy, industrious people, of considerable wealth and will be a valuable addition to our population."<sup>31</sup>

Seeger, a determined and resourceful proponent of Minnesota, and well aware that subsequent Mennonites immigrants would be likely to settle where their brethren had already located, apparently also accompanied the group to Dakota and ultimately managed to entice several of the families to return with him to the Mountain Lake area. This success led him to predict erroneously that he would yet succeed in bringing all the Dakota Mennonite settlers to Minnesota.<sup>32</sup>

Unruh wintered in Yankton with his family, relatives, and friends, renting houses in the city while making preparations for moving out onto the prairies the following spring. When Unruh returned to Elkhart in mid-November, presumably to consult further with Funk, he reported satisfaction with the choice of Dakota for settlement. Unruh made a buying trip to Iowa, as a result of which a carload of wagons, a carload of oats, a carload of oxen, and a carload of horses were shipped to Yankton. Supplies, farming implements, and lumber were also purchased, and the well-organized prospective settlers even framed their houses and granaries during the winter so that they could be hauled out to the lands they had selected and raised with little loss of time.<sup>33</sup>

In late March or early April of 1874 Unruh made the first Mennonite settlement in Dakota Territory in Childstown Township of Turner County along the banks of Turkey Ridge Creek, a small stream flowing into Swan Lake.<sup>34</sup> This location was approximately twelve miles due west of Hurley or thirty miles north and east of Yankton. The records in the Register of Deeds office in Parker, Turner County, reveal that Unruh purchased four quarters during the spring and summer of 1874, paying \$400 for one quarter, \$450 for another, and \$500 each for two additional quarters. In the spring of 1875 he purchased another quarter for \$1,000. There is record of two additional land purchases – a half section for \$1,550 in the spring of 1877 and an eighty-acre tract for \$150 in the summer of 1879. There is no record that Unruh utilized either the Homestead Act or the Timber Culture Claims Act for the acquisition of land. Apparently all of his land (some 1,200 acres) was purchased outright from other settlers.

By mid-May the little settlement presented a lively appearance. Wells had been dug, many of the houses were almost

completed, and pioneers were busily at work breaking land with ox-teams. Non-Mennonite settlers were particularly intrigued by Unruh's unique attempt to introduce the village system of settlement. According to the provisions of the Homestead Act, settlement had to be made on the settler's actual claim. Since Unruh had purchased all his land, however, he experimented with the village plan so common among the Mennonites in Russia.

In the spring of 1874 seven houses were built on the same quarter of land. Six were built by Unruh – five for the married members of his family and one for himself and his wife. All the dwellings were built along a straight line approximately six rods apart. Unruh's was the largest, being 24 by 60 feet in dimensions. The remaining dwellings, also one and one-half stories in height, were smaller, approximately 20 by 24 feet. The houses were arranged so that the youngest son with his family was situated next to the parental home while the family of the oldest daughter lived farthest away. Unruh allotted a certain portion of land to each family member and furnished the farming utensils. By 1877 this system was abandoned, since it was considered impractical for everyone to drive back and forth several miles to the fields each day. The houses were then moved to the individual farmsteads. This is apparently the only instance where Mennonites attempted to establish the village

system of settlement in Dakota, it having been attempted here because of the filial relationship.<sup>35</sup>

There were ten children – five boys and five girls – in the Unruh family. Two of the boys and one girl died in childbirth. The other seven reached maturity, married, and had families. One son, Daniel, took his family to North Dakota after the death of the elder Daniel, and all of the daughters with their husbands and families also eventually left the state, migrating first to Oklahoma and ultimately to California. Thus of all the children, only Unruh's sons John and Cornelius stayed on the original land complex.

Unruh actively operated his sizable Dakota farm for ten years. Sheep, cattle, and horses were raised in addition to grain and corn culture. On occasion he made trips to Council Bluffs, Iowa, to purchase livestock, mainly sheep, but usually he remained at home. Politically, Unruh's fear of what a low tariff or free trade might do to the price of grain and especially wool led him to side with the Republicans who championed a high protective tariff.

His religious affiliation was with the Salem Mennonite Church, Unruh having belonged to this congregation from the time it was organized in 1786 until his death in 1893. Although he belonged to the Mennonite Church and had left Russia primarily because of the fear of military service, he seems not



*Until 1902 the Vohlynian Germans who settled in the Freeman, S.D. area worshipped in two churches. When a wind storm destroyed one of them they joined together to become the Salem-Zion Church. When that church became too small they built this church, the Salem (South) Mennonite church in 1909. Photo Credit: Freeman Heritage Hall Archives, [www.montanatreeline.com](http://www.montanatreeline.com).*

to have had scruples about the use of the oath in legal affairs, for he signed the required oath to support the constitution and government of the United States without qualification on November 7, 1876. Perhaps, however, his unfamiliarity with American legal practices or the English language (which he could apparently neither speak nor understand for at least the first fourteen months after his arrival in America) explains his use of the oath on this occasion.<sup>36</sup>

Physically, Unruh was about 5'10" tall, of average weight, with brown hair and blue eyes. He did not smoke, nor did he use liquor. In his later years his hearing was considerably impaired. He held a well-disciplined temper and commanded the respect and esteem of his acquaintances. He ate his meals in seclusion with his wife, who would go to the kitchen at mealtime, take from what had been prepared for the others, and returned with it to their private quarters. Likewise reflecting Unruh's assumption that certain prerogatives accrued to his age and position was his expectation that the team of horses he regularly drove should be hitched, unhitched, and cared for by others.

Despite this insistence upon the maintenance of personal authority and prestige, Unruh had a keen sense of humor which he sometimes used very effectively with his hired help. He had noted, for example, that one of his sheep herders was somewhat dilatory in keeping the sheep out of nearby cornfields. One evening he challenged the herder to a footrace, wagering a dollar that he could defeat him. Being considerably younger, the herder readily accepted the challenge. A specified distance was agreed upon and the race was run. The herder, as expected, easily won the race and Unruh dutifully paid his debt. However, to the delight of all the bystanders, Unruh told the herder that since it had been discovered that he was such a good runner the herder would now be expected to "run" after the sheep that strayed into the grainfields.

In the spring of 1884, when Unruh had reached the age of 64, he retired from active management of his estate and sold his land and personal property to his sons John and Cornelius. The records in the Register of Deeds office indicate that this transaction was recorded on March 20, 1884, and that approximately 1,200 acres were sold for \$10,000; the personal holdings, for approximately \$2,000.

During the following decade Unruh and his wife lived in retirement on the home place, enjoying good health until the last year. The end came on May 18, 1893, for Unruh, and on November 12, 1894, for his wife. Unruh's funeral was conducted by the Reverend Christian Kaufman, pastor of the Salem congregation and his intimate friend, and was held in the large family corncrib to accommodate the great number of friends and relatives in attendance.

In reflecting upon the story of Daniel Unruh, one can emphasize several areas in which his life significantly influenced Mennonite immigration and settlement. He was one of the first to leave Russia in search for a new homeland when the long-standing Mennonite privileges began to be revoked by the Russian government. So convinced was he of the necessity of leaving that he departed long before the Mennonite delegation sent to spy out America returned with its reports which then prompted the departure of many other Russian Mennonites.

Not only was Unruh instrumental in the exodus of the group traveling on the *Hammonia*, but he was also primarily responsible for the choice of Dakota Territory as the eventual place of settlement for many of the Russian Mennonite immigrants

who came in subsequent years. No committee of twelve delegates or, as far as is known, any other Russian Mennonites had ever traveled through southeastern Dakota before Unruh settled there. In addition, during Mennonite migrations there has always been a strong attraction for later arrivals to locate near where friends or acquaintances had already settled.<sup>37</sup> Thus, Unruh's prior selection of Dakota Territory as a place of settlement was of crucial significance to subsequent Mennonite settlement in what is now South Dakota. Eleven Swiss-German families from the Volhynia region in Russia under the leadership of Andreas Schrag, committee-of-twelve delegate of the preceding year comprised the next settlement group to arrive in Dakota. While it is unclear exactly when and under which circumstances Schrag and Unruh had become acquainted, it is certain that when Schrag learned that Unruh had located in southeastern Dakota he immediately scrapped his plans to settle near Pembina in the Red River Valley near the Canadian border. Instead, he purchased rail tickets to Yankton for his group because of his desire to settle close to Unruh's settlement. And almost immediately after arriving in Yankton, Schrag and several of his traveling companions journeyed to Unruh's farm to discuss with him the possibilities for locating in the vicinity.<sup>38</sup>

Of related significance to the choice of Dakota Territory for settlement by subsequent Mennonite arrivals was a delegation of five Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Mennonites who stopped at Unruh's settlement on a tour of inspection during the summer of 1874. These men desired to probe the settlers' impressions and to see what had been accomplished in the few short months since homes had been established. The delegates, as the local newspaper happily reported, were "perfectly delighted with the looks and resources of Dakota." Impressed by the soil, climate, water, and crops, they were "satisfied to report to all Russians whom they might influence that if they came here they would make a wise choice." The Pennsylvanians had previously investigated Nebraska and had planned on visiting Minnesota, but after viewing the land around Unruh's settlement they decided to eliminate the Minnesota visit and "gave up looking for any better or more attractive free lands, and started to direct for home, considering it impossible to find a better place than this."<sup>39</sup>

With this effective combination of influences – Unruh's continuing impact upon incoming friends from Russia, enthusiastic boosters for the Dakota settlements among Pennsylvania Mennonites active in advising and aiding incoming Mennonite immigrants, and a small but flourishing settlement of Swiss Volhynians expecting sizable additions later in the summer – permanent Mennonite settlement in Dakota was assured. During the summer a second large group of 53 Swiss Volynian families led by the Reverends Peter Kaufman, Christian Schrag, and Christian Kaufman did arrive, settling near the Unruh and Schrag groups. The leaders of the second large Swiss group to reach Dakota Territory in the summer of 1874 also first went to consult with Unruh before beginning to locate their homesteads.<sup>40</sup> Also arriving late that summer was a large group of Russian immigrants from the Molotschna Colony under the leadership of Derk Tieszen. Many others were to follow and ultimately this section became one of the most prosperous in the state.<sup>41</sup> Turkey Creek Valley in Turner County remains one of the most beautiful and productive sections of South Dakota. One can readily surmise the impression it must have made upon Unruh in 1873 when he first saw it. The reference

is probably apocryphal but it is quite possible that Unruh did say, as he has been quoted, "Here I want to live and die."<sup>42</sup>

Another area of Unruh's influence came in the early years of the settlement when the Mennonite immigrants were obliged to do considerable traveling to procure the necessities required for beginning new farms. Yankton, thirty or forty miles to the south and west of the various settlements, was the main center for supplies. Jacob Max, who was in the general merchandising business and conversant in German, did considerable business with the early settlers. Pioneer Mennonite farmers on their way to and from Yankton would almost invariably stop at the conveniently located Unruh place at the southern edge of the Mennonite settlement. Here was water for horses or oxen, a meal for travelers, and frequently lodging for the night. The house was large and Unruh and his wife were hospitable.

Not all of the early settlers that came from Russia were in favorable financial circumstances. In fact, many who came to Dakota had a real struggle to make ends meet. Until crops could be raised the need for assistance was almost inevitable. Credit had to be extended to make needed purchases. The part that Unruh played in providing such help is difficult to estimate, but it was considerable. In his booklet *After Fifty Years* (published in 1924 in connection with the fiftieth anniversary of the original settlement) John J. Gering, himself a son of one of the early Swiss immigrants, refers to the aid Unruh gave in this way: "Without him the poorer settlers would have suffered much more for he gave them financial aid when they could not get any elsewhere."<sup>43</sup>

Unruh had prospered in the Crimea and had made a favorable sale of his land there, bringing approximately \$40,000 to America with him.<sup>44</sup> This represented a small fortune during the panic years of the middle seventies. Unruh also prospered in Dakota, the large economic complex he operated and his sizable herds of cattle and flocks of sheep adding to his wealth. A local newspaper in 1879 characterized Unruh as "the wealthiest Russian of them all."<sup>45</sup>

This material prosperity afforded him opportunity to make numerous loans to those who needed assistance in beginning life anew on the virgin prairie. Some of his grandchildren recalled a small book in which he kept records of such assistance. Apparently no promissory notes were involved – only the entry in the book. Unfortunately the book can no longer be located and how many came for assistance in this way may perhaps never be known. In making loans Unruh's personal predilections often came into play. On one occasion two prospective borrowers visited Unruh. Both of these men wore moustaches – presumably to create an impression. When they made their wishes known Unruh quickly replied that he would make no loans to people who wore the moustache. When the men came again the razor had been applied and the loans were then consummated.

Unruh also made sizable loans outside the Mennonite community to Yankton concerns. One of several such loans was for \$10,000 to merchandiser Jacob Max. One of Unruh's grandchildren relates that on one of Unruh's visits to Yankton he stayed at the Max home and during the course of a meal offered to cancel all interest on the loan provided Max would pay the principal. Apparently Unruh had become concerned about this loan and was willing to sacrifice the interest to safeguard his original loan. Max, encouraged by his wife, accepted the offer and paid the amount owed. The reminiscences

of his grandchildren suggest that Unruh kept little if any of his personal wealth in banks, much of it apparently being stored in his personal desk.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, Unruh exerted continuing leadership in the community, especially during the critical first year. In the fall of 1874 he did some traveling on behalf of the Dakota Mennonites, including a trip to Lincoln, Nebraska, which nearly cost him his life. A German-speaking traveling companion invited Unruh to stop with him in Council Bluffs. The unsuspecting Unruh, after being induced to enter a house by his acquaintance, was seized, threatened with a razor, and robbed of his watch and nearly \$400 in cash and certified checks.<sup>47</sup>

Following the hard winter of 1874-75 when food was extremely scarce and aid was being received from some of the older Mennonite settlements in the east, Unruh, Andreas Schrag, and Derk Tieszen were natural choices for a local committee to survey the needs of the community. The three men also assisted in the distribution of the supplies sent by eastern Mennonites.<sup>48</sup>

In the early 1880s an "Oregon fever" struck Dakota and quite a few of the Mennonites were interested in moving farther west, especially after a Hutterite went to Oregon in the spring of 1882 and sent back glowing reports of the possibilities for settlement there. In company with Darius Walter from one of the Hutterite colonies west of Freeman, Unruh left on an investigation trip to Oregon in late June, 1882. Unruh and Walter were to examine the land and ascertain if conditions in Oregon would warrant leaving Dakota. After a good look at the land the two men returned with an unfavorable report. They found the land hilly and stony, as well as in need of irrigation, and reported that good land was scarce and therefore costly. Further, it appeared to them that the section where land was available was inhabited mostly by poor people – Chinese, day laborers, and shepherds. Once the two men came back with the pessimistic report the Oregon fever in the community subsided.<sup>49</sup>

Daniel Unruh kept no diary, he apparently wrote almost nothing, he sought no religious or political position. Yet his independence of mind, foresight, leadership, sound judgment, and generosity were instrumental in facilitating the trek of the Mennonite immigrants from Russia to the prairies of Dakota Territory in 1873 and during the following decade.

## Endnotes

1 John D. Unruh was born in South Dakota, is a graduate of Yankton College, and has done graduate work in history in the Universities of Minnesota, South Dakota, and Texas, receiving his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the latter two. In 1952 his history of the Mennonite Central Committee, *In the Name of Christ*, was published. His up-dated doctor's thesis was published in 1972 under the title of *A Century of Mennonites in Dakota: A Segment of the German Russians*. Dr. Unruh taught history at Freeman Junior College and Southern State College in South Dakota. John D. Unruh Jr., is Associate Professor at Bluffton College in Ohio. Professor Unruh has published articles in trans-Mississippi historical journals on the part the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad played in bringing Mennonites to Nebraska, 1873-78. His master's thesis on this topic was done at the University of Kansas (1962).

An earlier version of this article by the same authors appeared under the title "Daniel Unruh, 1820-1883," *General Conference Mennonite Pioneers*, Edmund G. Kaufman, comp. (North Newton, Kansas, 1973), 30-40.

2 Georg Leibbrandt, "The Emigration of the German Mennonites from Russia to the United States and Canada, 1873-1880," *MQR* VII (1933), 33.

3 C. Henry Smith, *The Coming of the Russian Mennonites: An Episode in the Settling of the Last Frontier, 1874-1884* (Berne, Indiana, 1927), 66; John J. Gering, *After Fifty Years* (Freeman, South Dakota, 1924), 23, 33.

4 While there are a number of contemporary references to Unruh's role in facili-

- tating Mennonite settlement in what is now South Dakota during the 1870s and 1880s, he remains relatively obscure in the historiography of the great Mennonite migration of the 1870s. There is, for example, no entry for him in the *Mennonite Encyclopedia*.
- 5 Daniel J. Unruh, "Dieses Rechenbuch." This schoolbook, now in the possession of the authors, was used by Unruh at age thirteen and a few family entries were subsequently made. This apparently is the only item extant in Unruh's own hand.
  - 6 Benjamin Unruh, personal interview with John D. Unruh in Karlsruhe, Germany, summer of 1949.
  - 7 Abe J. Unruh and N. van der Zijpp suggest that "Unruh (Unru, Unrau, Onrouw), [is] a widespread family name among the Mennonites of Prussia, Danzig, Russia, and America." "Unruh," *ME*, IV, 784.
  - 8 W. D. Buller, "Heinrich Buller" (Typewritten MS written March 19, 1915, now in possession of Eldon E. Smith, Marion, South Dakota), 7.
  - 9 Smith, 30-31, 34-36; David G. Rempel, "The Mennonite Commonwealth in Russia: A Sketch of its Founding and Endurance, 1789-1919 (Concluded)," *MQR*, XLVIII (Jan. 1974), 24-32.
  - 10 Buller, 7.
  - 11 This information was gathered in personal interviews with Daniel Unruh's son and grandson and others from the community who remembered him. Unless otherwise noted, the information in this paper was obtained in this manner. The Russian ruble was worth about 73 cents in American money at that time; a desiatina was equivalent to about 2.7 acres. Melvin Gingerich, "The Alexanderwohl 'Schnurbuch'," *Mennonite Life*, I (January 1946), 46.
  - 12 Gering, 20.
  - 13 Robert Neumann was born in Germany in 1823, was educated at the University of Berlin, and had been a missionary in China for some years. Having entered the ministry in 1849, he filled various charges in Pennsylvania and New York, apparently assuming responsibility for the Castle Garden mission in 1865, a task for which his renown as an accomplished linguist well qualified him. In late 1874 Neumann entered into an extended dispute with members of the Committee on Immigrant Missions of the General Council, a dispute which resulted in Neumann's dismissal in 1875. Following this acrimonious dispute Neumann resigned from the New York Ministerium after which his activities fall into obscurity, although when he died in 1890 he still lived in Brooklyn, where he may have continued as a pastor. Obituary notice in the *New York Times*, May 6, 1890; "Research Report" on Neumann prepared by Ted Mayes, December 7, 1973, kindly furnished to the authors by August R. Suelflow, Director of the Concordia Historical Institute, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, St. Louis, Missouri, in a letter of December 20, 1973; Letter of Davie J. Wartluft, Assistant Librarian, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, October 20, 1971, to the authors. For further information on the Castle Garden immigrant receiving station in New York harbor see Ann Novotny, *Strangers at the Door: Ellis Island, Castle Garden, and the Great Migration to America* (Riverside, Connecticut, 1971), 44-54.
  - 14 May 9, 1873 entry, J. M. Hofer, trans. and ed., "The Diary of Paul Tschetter, 1873," *MQR* V (April 1931), 120-21.
  - 15 *New York Sun*, Aug. 18, 1873; *New York World*, Aug. 16, 1873; *New York Journal of Commerce*, Aug. 19, 1873; *New York Evening Mail*, Aug. 16, 1873; *New York Daily Graphic*, Aug. 16, 1873.
  - 16 *New York Times*, May 8, 1874.
  - 17 *New York Evening Mail*, Aug. 16, 1873.
  - 18 *Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, 1820-97*, National Archives and Records Services, Microfilm No. 380 (Washington, 1962).
  - 19 *New York Evening Mail*, Aug. 16, 1873; *New York Evening Post*, Aug. 16, 1873.
  - 20 *New York Journal of Commerce*, Aug. 16, 1873; *New York Sun*, Aug. 19, 1873.
  - 21 *New York Daily Tribune*, Aug. 20, 1873; *New York Times*, Aug. 20, 1873; *Chicago Times*, Aug. 21, 1873; Elkhart, Ind. *Evening Review*, Aug. 21, 1873; *Sioux City, Iowa Times*, reprinted in *Yankton, Dakota Territory Press*, November 5, 1873. According to the Elkhart newspaper, the immigrants had quickly exchanged their gold for bank drafts.
  - 22 "Mis-statements of Newspapers," *Herald of Truth*, X (October 1873), 168-69.
  - 23 *New York Sun*, Aug. 19, 1873; *Elkhart Evening Review*, Aug. 20, 1873.
  - 24 *Elkhart Evening Review*, Aug. 20, 21 and 23, 1873.
  - 25 Aug., 20, 21 and 23, 1873 entries, John F. Funk diary; (MS in Archives of the Mennonite Church, Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana).
  - 26 Aug. 25, 26, 26 and Sept. 4-17, 1873, entries, Funk diary; Gustav E. Reimer and G. R. Gaeddert, *Exiled by the Czar: Cornelius Jansen and the Great Mennonite Migration, 1874* (Newton, Kansas, 1956), 85-86.
  - 27 September 6 to 17 and 27, 1873 entries, Funk diary; Reimer and Gaeddert, 86-87; Cornelius Krahn, "A Centennial Chronology, Part One," *Mennonite Life*, XXVIII (March 1973), 9.
  - 28 Daniel J. Unruh, grandson of Daniel Unruh, personal interview with the authors in Freeman, S. D., Aug. 5, 1973; Buller, 7, 12-13; "Official Report of the Hon. William Seeger to the Hon. Horace Austin, Governor of Minnesota, on Russo-German Immigration, St. Paul, Dec. 20, 1873," reprinted in Ernst Correll, ed., "Sources on the Mennonite Immigration From Russia in 1870's" *MQR*, XXIV (Oct. 1950), 341-42. In his report, Seeger claimed that before he had joined the Unruh and Jansen group in Chicago they had been prepared to settle in Kansas.
  - 29 *Yankton Press*, Oct. 22, 1873.
  - 30 September 30, Oct. 2, 3, 14 and 15, 1873 entries, Funk diary: *Yankton Press*, Oct. 8, 1873; "Official Report of the Hon. William Seeger," 342-43.
  - 31 Oct. 16, 1873, entry, Funk diary: *Yankton Press*, Oct. 22, 1873.
  - 32 Not all of the Mennonites in Elkhart had decided to accompany Unruh to Dakota, and some of these families also chose to locate in the Mountain Lake area. "Official Report of the Hon. William Seeger," 342-343; Kempes Schnell, "John F. Funk, 1835-1930, and the Mennonite Migration of 1873-1875," *MQR* XXIV (July 1950), 211; Smith, 67.
  - 33 Nov. 13, 1873 entry, Funk diary; *Yankton Press and Dakotaian*, March 16, 1874.
  - 34 *Ibid*.
  - 35 *Yankton Press and Dakotaian*, May 14 and 21, 1874.
  - 36 Unruh received his naturalization papers on July 8, 1879, and the authors have in their possession the original documents on which Unruh swore his allegiance to the government of the United States. For the reference to his unfamiliarity with the English language during at least his first year in America, see "Robbery," *Herald of Truth*, XI (Nov. 1874), 189.
  - 37 Gering, 27.
  - 38 The long-accepted story about the first meeting of Unruh and Schrag is in error. According to this tradition, Schrag and Unruh's old friend, Jacob Buller, both members of the committee of twelve, while departing New York in August, 1873, chanced at the dock to encounter Unruh who was just arriving from Russia on the *Hammonia*. In a short visit, culminated with prayers on the dock, Unruh and Schrag became friendly and thus it was that when Schrag arrived the following year he inquired where Unruh had settled and immediately followed him to Yankton. However, the analysis of the Schrag diary of 1873 makes clear that the two men did not meet in this fashion, Unruh having already departed for Elkhart (on August 18) by train before Schrag arrived in New York (on August 19) for the return journey to Russia. Buller and Schrag did, however, on August 21, meet a second group of Mennonite immigrants from the Crimea who arrived six days after Unruh's party of the *Holsatia*, and a short conversation on the dock did occur at that time. This second group of Crimean Mennonites also went to Elkhart before making their final settlements in America, and doubtless conversed with Unruh there. Perhaps correspondence between Unruh and Schrag was initiated because of these relationships, perhaps Unruh and Schrag had already met in Russia, or perhaps it was through Unruh's friend Jacob Buller that Schrag and Unruh became correspondents during the winter of 1873-74. Perhaps the two men never corresponded and Schrag did not learn of Unruh's settlement in Dakota until he arrived in New York in the spring of 1874. In any case, there is ample evidence that Schrag's plan to settle near the Canadian border, formed while he had toured the United States the preceding summer, had been changed by May, 1874, when he traveled instead to settle near Unruh's site in southeastern Dakota Territory. See Gering, 20, 23-24; F. C. Ortman, "Die Ankunft und Ansiedlung der Schweizer Mennoniten bei Yankton, S. Dakota, 1874," in P. R. Kaufman, ed., *Unser Volk und Seine Geschichte* (Basil, Kansas, 1931), 78-79; Smith, 65-66 and 158-159; J. J. Hildebrandt, *Chronologische Zeittafel* (Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1945), 249; Aug. 15-21, 1873, entries, Gary J. Waltner, ed., "Andreas D. Schrag: A Diary of a Visit to America, 1873" (seminar paper, University of South Dakota, July, 1966), 21-27; Leonard Sudermann, *Eine Deputationsreise von Russland nach Amerika vor vierundzwanzig Jahren* (Elkhart, Indiana, 1897), 77-79; *Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, 1820-97*.
  - 39 The five men were Amos, Jacob, and Daniel Herr, Gabriel Baer, and John Schenk. *Yankton Press and Dakotaian*, June 18, 1874.
  - 40 Gering, 29.
  - 41 For further details on the various Mennonite immigrant groups reaching Dakota in 1874 and subsequent years see John D. Unruh, *A Century of Mennonites in Dakota: A Segment of the German Russians* (Sept., 1972, from South Dakota Historical Collections, XXXVI), 22-24.
  - 42 Sioux Falls, South Dakota, *Argus-Leader*, April 18, 1965.
  - 43 Gering, 21; Ortman, 79.
  - 44 Buller, 7. An account appearing in a local newspaper in 1879, however, gave the much lower figure of \$10,000 for the fortune Unruh brought with him from Russia, Swan Lake, Dakota Territory, *New Era*, Jan. 11, 1879. Given Unruh's obvious wealth, John F. Funk's cryptic diary entry of October 28 is puzzling, unless the "note for \$25,000" he sent to Unruh by mail on that date referred to monies Unruh had left with Funk for safekeeping during the period he had been traveling through the western states viewing potential settlement sites.
  - 45 *Swan Lake New Era*, Jan. 11, 1879.
  - 46 *Ibid*.
  - 47 "Robbery," *Herald of Truth*, XI (November, 1874), 189.
  - 48 Gering, 34.
  - 49 "Berichte aus unsern Ansiedlungen," *Christlicher Bundes-Bote*, I (Aug. 1 and Sept. 1, 1882), 119, 135.

# British Newspaper Impressions of Mennonites in Transit

Reprinted from: *Advocate of Peace* (1847-1884), New Series, 6 (7) (July 1875): pp. 47-48.  
Published by World Affairs Institute.

We extract the following from the *British Friend*: - "The Russian Mennonites are Germans by origin, and a dialect of German is still their mother tongue. They have dwelt on the steppes of South Russia, wide areas of which they have reclaimed from a desert to fruitfulness, in villages of their own, free from the presence of Russian police, and maintaining a high standard of morality. They were first invited into the country by the Empress Catherine II., with a promise, repeatedly confirmed in writing by her successors, that they should enjoy liberty of conscience and worship, and exemption from military service.

"In 1871 the Russian Government, after the example of Germany, determined to adopt the principle of enforcing a period of military service on every male as he reached manhood, and gave notice to the Mennonites that their exemption must cease in ten years – viz., in 1881. This caused great alarm, and several deputations were sent to the Russian Court, but without any success such as would relieve tender consciences. The Mennonite congregations then seriously turned their thoughts to emigration, and sent trustworthy men to visit Canada and the United States, and report upon the prospects of a removal thither. A few families actually emigrated in 1873, and many others applied for passports. In the spring of 1874 the Emperor, unwilling to lose subjects so valuable, despatched the celebrated General Todleben to the Mennonite 'colonies' to calm the apprehensions of the people, and induce them to remain. His mission was incorrectly described in the newspapers as having been completely successful. From authentic private sources we learn the terms offered were in substance, that 'service in the fire brigades, in military workshops, in the dockyards, and in the forests, would be accepted in lieu of the ordinary military service.' General Todleben was 'extraordinarily condescending and sympathizing' (we have no doubt sincerely so), but he declined to put his offers into writing, and the Mennonite elders, having little confidence in verbal promises, there is no reason to think that his persuasions had any permanent effect.

"Pressing through all obstacles, a number, which we cannot accurately state, but not less than 5,000 Mennonites, emigrated in 1874 to Manitoba, in the dominion of Canada, and to Kansas, Dakota, Nebraska, and other of the United States in the far west. They have had to sell their agricultural property at a great sacrifice, and by order of the Government, to Mennonites only – a regulation which, while greatly decreasing its salable value, operates as a bribe to some to remain in Russia. Their passports have also been delayed, and have been only obtained at last by heavy pecuniary payments, in excess of the proper fee. This forced sale of property and grievous delay of passports, have not only exhausted the means of many, but have driven them into the late autumn for their journey and settlement, thus preventing their providing food for the winter, and even in many cases getting properly housed. The more affluent Mennonites have aided their poorer brethren, and the American and Canadian Mennonites have also raised as much as \$80,000, which sum has been almost wholly absorbed in expenses of transport by sea and land.

"The emigration this year (1875) is expected to reach the same amount as last year, viz., about 1,000 families, or 5,000 person, if no fresh obstruction is put in the way by the Russian Government."

The remainder of the article is from the *Liverpool Daily Post*.

## The Mennonite Exodus from Russia – The Sect and its Peculiarities

"The last of the Mennonites – the last of that unfortunate party of 328 Russian emigrants who, with the germs of smallpox among them, were sent down so ruthlessly from the metropolis to spread danger and dismay among the inhabitants of Liverpool – have now all left the workhouse, and we may congratulate ourselves that, through the prompt action of the workhouse authorities, we have been spared the outbreak of a malignant disease.

"The Russians all belonged to that peculiar sect of religionists called 'Mennonites,' undoubtedly entertained some of the distinctive principles propounded by Menno Simon [sic], and were most rigid in their adherence thereto. They expressed, for instance, the utmost abhorrence of war and bloodshed, and the reason assigned for their leaving Russia was that they were anxious to escape the laws under which they might have been called upon to serve as soldiers. One characteristic of the party was their remarkable docility, which has been thus spoken of in a report of the Clerk to the Vestry: – 'It is impossible to speak too highly of the conduct and behavior of the Russian emigrants, and of the fortitude and patience with which what must have been to them very grievous trials and disappointments have been borne; there have been among them neither murmurings nor discontent, and every direction given to them was most readily obeyed.' In their moral discipline they appeared to exercise great rigor and severity, and both women and men avoided anything approaching ornament or elegance, maintaining a gravity and simplicity in gesture and clothing which were striking.

"An insight to their real character was given immediately after their arrival in the workhouse. Having been separated from the females and deprived of their luggage – to which they submitted without the slightest complaint – the men were passed on to an apartment where tea and substantial food were in readiness for them; and it was supposed that they would very soon attack the good things provided. Had a party of Englishmen arrived at the workhouse under similar circumstances – after a long and tiresome journey of about 200 miles, on one of the very coldest days of the year – very little ceremony would probably have been observed, but on this occasion, when the governor entered shortly afterwards to see that they were all doing well he was astonished to find the whole party standing patiently by their seats, not one of them (as was explained afterwards) venturing to touch food until a blessing had been asked. This incident immediately marked them as a religious people. On retiring to rest they again all united in prayer and in singing a hymn.

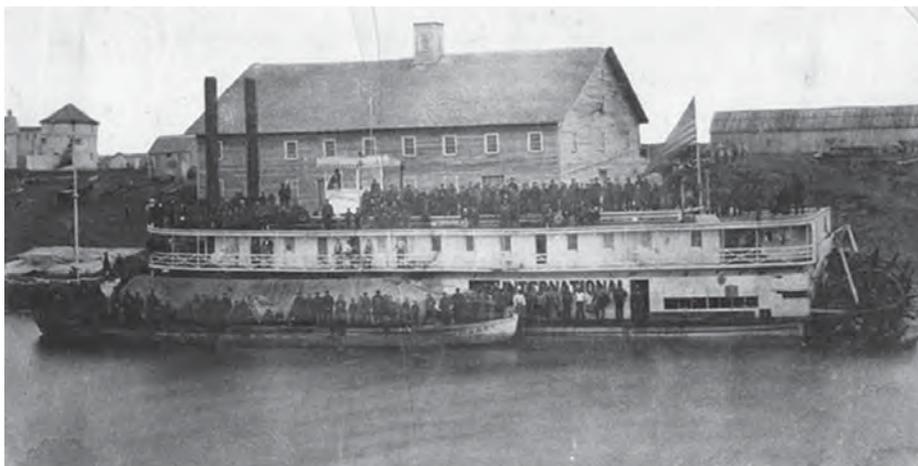
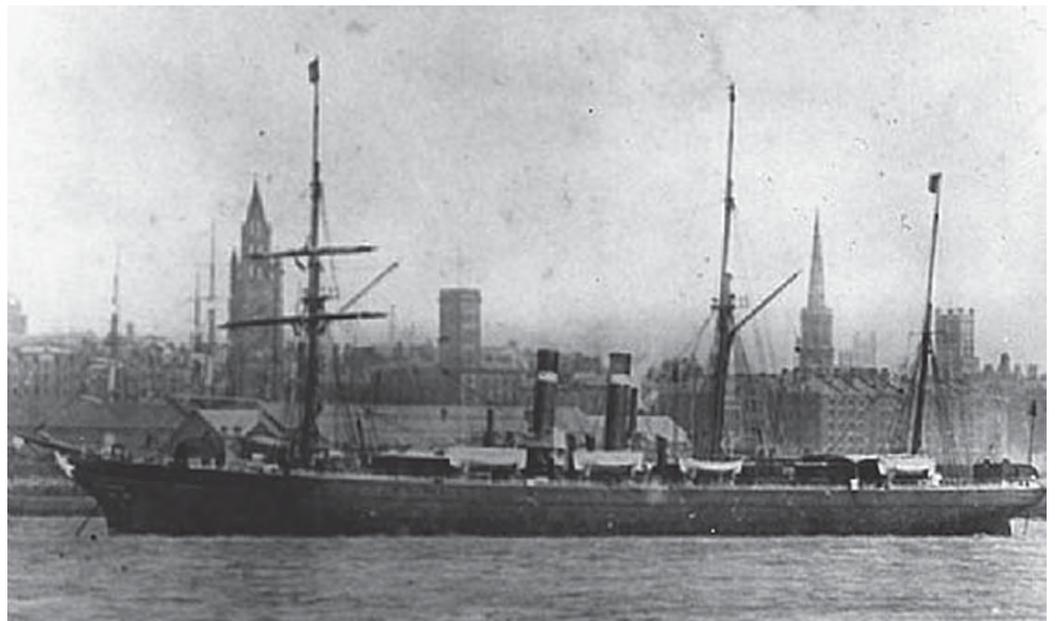
“It may be imaged by some that the docility which these men displayed was the evidence of a dull and listless nature. It is not so, however. Besides being men and women of fine *physique*, taken as a body, they showed themselves to be a spirited, devout and very cleanly people; and while devotion to their religion seemed to afford them comfort and to give them confidence under all circumstances, they were thoroughly united amongst themselves, and exhibited not the slightest secrecy or want of trust in each other.

“During their stay here great kindness was shown them, not only by the governor and officials, but by several ladies and gentlemen of the town and neighbourhood, and each emigrant was presented with a copy of the German Bible, as

well as religious tracts in the same language. This kindness they all seemed to appreciate, and after the departure of the 228 on the 18<sup>th</sup> December, their temporary leader sent a very kind letter to the governor, in which he warmly acknowledged his and their kindness, adding: – ‘I wish for you the gracious Heavenly Father and the precious Saviour may always spread the hand of grace over you and yours, and cause peace to rest on the Christian house of England in time and eternity. Also I ask you to remember us in your prayers: that the Almighty Heavenly Father may grant us favorable weather for our voyage, or prove us in storm and tempest to make us conscious of His omnipotence.’ A large number of these zealous Mennonites have already left Russia ‘for conscience sake.’”

## Making the Trip in the 1870s

*The S.S. Peruvian leaving Liverpool for Quebec City. The ship made at least three transatlantic crossings with Mennonites aboard. The ship could be powered by sail and steam and generally made the crossing in about two weeks. Image Credit: <http://www.clydesite.co.uk/clydebuilt/viewship.asp?id=17278>, Joe Macmillan Collection.*



*The iconic image (above) of Mennonites arriving in Winnipeg in 1874 on the paddlewheel steamer The International. When Mennonites came in 1874 there was no railway connection to Winnipeg from Eastern Canada or even the United States. The railway terminus was at Fargo. The photo to the right shows another steamboat, The Selkirk docked below the partially constructed railway bridge over the Red River at what would become Fargo. Mennonites had to transfer to steamboats for the five to ten day winding trip down the Red River. Image Credit: Archives of Manitoba, Manitoba Historical Society, <http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/steamboats/international.shtml> and Clay County Museum, <http://library.ndsu.edu/fargo-history/sites/default/files/unfinished-np-bridge-1.jpg>*

## A Brief History of the Migration of Mennonites to Ontario and the Formation of the Old Colony Church

Kerry Fast, Toronto, Ontario

Anne Peters had this to say about her family's first trip to Ontario from Mexico in 1954: crammed into a big truck "we were more than forty people, five families, each with seven or eight children, we were the only family with only five. The truck box was completely full, from corner to corner. Just a tarp tied over top. That's how we drove through the States."<sup>1</sup> The families on this truck—Cornelius F. and Anne Peters, the Jacob Ennses, the Cornelius Thiessens, the Peter Fehrs and one unidentified family—were of the very first Old Colony families to travel to Ontario from Mexico to work there for the agricultural season. They travelled together for twelve days from Cuauhtémoc, Mexico to Port Rowan, Ontario. Things did not improve immediately upon arrival. The man they had hired to transport them to Ontario was unscrupulous. He had promised them housing upon arrival and when that didn't materialize, they were forced to camp out on a property with an abandoned house on it. When it rained, the driver and his family stayed dry in their truck and the other families were forced to enter the house and sleep there. The families soon bought themselves a big house. In total they were forty-two people in that house.

After a few weeks they found work hoeing beets. Their driver worked as the foreman and garnered their wages to pay for their travel. He left them only enough money to buy bread. Anne Peters continued, "[We] weren't allowed to buy meat. He said we were so poor that bread and jam, bread and butter was good enough for us. We weren't supposed to buy meat. He paid us two dollars per day, right?" The Peters had pre-paid their trip but even so, their earnings were withheld. In this desperate situation, these families got in touch with the two other Mennonite families who were already in Ontario, the Abram Loewen family and the Dave Klassen family. These two families were living in the Niagara Peninsula and were working for Ontario Mennonites. They made known the plight of their fellow migrants and soon a General Conference Church collected household necessities, clothing and food for the newly arrived Old Colony Mennonites. They soon found work among Mennonites in the Port Rowan area and were now paid a more equitable wage, forty cents an hour, although that was probably still below minimum wage.<sup>2</sup> Mennonites from the Erie View United Mennonite Church near Port Rowan also assisted the Old Colony migrants with material donations.<sup>3</sup>

The coming of these families from Mexico marked the beginning of a migration to Ontario that has changed the landscape of the southwestern region of the province. There are now more than 10,000 Mennonites from Mexico in southern Ontario.<sup>4</sup> Many, particularly recent migrants, work at seasonal agricultural jobs like the early migrants did. By now, however, these Mennonites have lived in Ontario for more than sixty

years and have established themselves as a viable, permanent community. In this article I examine how this came about, or more specifically, how the Old Colony Church in Ontario—one of the most important institutions for many of the Mennonites from Mexico in Ontario—began. Many other factors come into play in the history of Mennonites from Mexico in Ontario, and the Old Colony Church is not the only church of importance for Mennonites from Mexico. It is, however, a significant one and understanding its beginning is a necessity in the history of Mennonites from Mexico in Ontario.

The early years of this migration were marked by economic hardship and isolation for many of the migrants, and so one of the purposes of this article is to examine what the conditions on Mennonite colonies in Chihuahua State, Mexico were like, that would motivate people to relocate. The other trajectory of this article, which is closely related to the first, is to examine how these early migrants established themselves as a community in Ontario. In particular, I will examine the formation of the Old Colony Church in Ontario, because this history reveals the forces, sometimes conflicting, that were at play as the migrants sought to establish themselves. But this article is not, strictly speaking, about the tensions within the community. Rather, it is about how their migration and the forces that shaped it were central to their identity as they formed a community.

Before I go on to describe the beginning years of the migration to Ontario by Old Colony Mennonites, I would like to say something about the sources that I am using for this article. In 1979 the Multicultural Historical Society of Ontario and Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo, Ontario, undertook an oral history project of Mennonite migration to Ontario. Mennonites who had migrated from Russia in the twentieth century and Mennonites who had migrated from Mexico in the mid-twentieth century were interviewed. Ron Sawatsky was engaged to conduct the interviews with first-generation Mennonites from Mexico. In total he conducted twenty-eight interviews with Mennonites from Mexico over the course of the summer.<sup>5</sup> In his interviews Sawatsky focused on life in Mexico and the reasons for migrating to Ontario, the experience of migrating, working in Ontario, the beginnings of the Old Colony Church and the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference (EMMC) in Ontario.

A Jacob Fehr family from the Steinbach, Manitoba area can be credited with beginning this migration to Ontario. They first arrived in Ontario in 1949. On a visit to Mexico in 1952—they had connections to Durango Colony<sup>6</sup>—their reports convinced the Abram Loewens, who ran a small store near Álvaro Obregón (Rubio), that Ontario held promise for the possibility of making a good living, and in 1952 the Loewens hired a driver to take them to Canada. They went first to Manitoba because



*The Wheatley Old Colony Church. Photo Credit: Essex-Kent Mennonite Historical Association, Walt Koop.*

Abram Loewen wanted to return to his place of birth, which he had left as a boy. The family spent two months there hoeing beets and then, after buying a car, they drove to Ontario.<sup>7</sup> The following summer they were joined by another family, the Dave Klassens, who came to Ontario only for the summer. The Klassens returned to Mexico for the winter but were back in Ontario again the following summer. It was the following year, 1954, that Anne and Cornelius Peters and the other four families in the story at the outset of this article came to Ontario in the over-crowded truck.

Mennonites moved to Ontario for the most part because life in Mexico was economically challenging. Every person interviewed in 1979 mentioned economic difficulties as the reason for their migration. The economic challenges that Mennonites on the colonies were facing in the mid-twentieth century become evident when we look at the conditions under which Mennonites were trying to make a living. In twenty-one of the twenty-six households represented in the interviews,<sup>8</sup> the families left their natal colony seeking economic opportunities elsewhere. Sixteen of those twenty-one purchased land on Nord Colony (or in its vicinity), a daughter colony of Manitoba Colony; six of these also described working off the colony, either renting land from Mexicans or working for Mexicans.<sup>9</sup> One purchased land on La Honda Colony, a daughter colony of Durango.<sup>10</sup> One family moved to the Mexican village of Juan Aldama (along with a few other Sommerfelder families) and farmed there.<sup>11</sup> In most instances, these families had not owned land on their natal colonies, and while they were able to purchase land elsewhere, they were not able to establish themselves even as land owners. Repeated crop failures plagued them. Of the remaining three who left their natal colonies, one moved to Cuauhtémoc and was employed by the Redekop family,<sup>12</sup> one moved to British Honduras,<sup>13</sup> and one family moved to Madera, several hundred kilometers from the Mennonite colonies, to do custom work for Mexicans.<sup>14</sup> Of the five households that did not relocate, all were landless; two families were abjectly poor.<sup>15</sup> The combination of land shortage and repeated crop failures made life difficult for many Mennonites.

Mennonites had been returning from Mexico to Canada since they first moved to Mexico in 1922. But up until 1952,

they had gone to Manitoba or Saskatchewan. They had been returning home to Old Colony communities that they were familiar with and where family ties remained. But nothing like that existed in Ontario so these early migrants turned to Mennonites in Ontario and once there were a few families living there, they supported each other. Abe Loewen, who was a teenager when his family moved to the province, described how his father Abram found a job in the Elmira area at a sawmill owned and operated by “Pennsylvania Dutch” Mennonites.<sup>16</sup> Not only did the Loewens work for these Markham-Waterloo Mennonites, they also “lived among” them and attended their church. Following the first winter in Ontario, the Loewens moved to the Aylmer area where they spent a lot of time with the Jacob Fehr family. After a few months they moved to the St. Catherines area in the Niagara Peninsula and again sought out a Mennonite church, this time a General Conference church. But even though they shared a language, the Loewens did not feel comfortable among these Russländer. Abe Loewen says of his parents, “they attended the General Conference church very regularly but that too was unfamiliar for my parents. My parents weren’t able to feel comfortable there.”<sup>17</sup>

Nettie Friesen, who migrated to Ontario in 1957, described the isolation she and her family felt: “there we met a family, they lived west of Thamesville, there we met a family, Jacob Fehrs from Durango, Mexico. We thought we had found life. We were all alone, no other *Dietsche*, nobody whatsoever who spoke our language. It was very difficult to learn English. I just about went crazy. So we got together with them. They wanted to move to this area [Wheatley] so we moved together to this area....Our biggest motivation was finding a church. There had to be more than what we had which was nothing.”<sup>18</sup>

I have already described how Cornelius and Anne Peters, the Ennses and the Thiessens sought out the few Old Colony families who lived in Ontario and how this in turn resulted in assistance from other Mennonites. For the Peters, this connection proved important. For three years they attended the Erie View United Mennonite Church near Port Rowan and held the pastor, Rev. Braun, in high regard. Rev. Braun offered to hold separate services for the Old Colony Mennonites in the area and his offer was accepted; about ten families attended the first



*An early photo of the H.J. Heinz plant in Leamington. Heinz was an industry that played an important role in the migration of Mennonites from Mexico to Ontario. Mennonites found work both in the plant and on the tomato fields that supplied the factory. Heinz closed the plant in June, 2014 but it has been purchased by another investor group. Credit: Essex-Kent Mennonite Historical Association.*

service. But it proved to be a controversial service, and just the one was held. Anne Peters described the service: “and then they also held an evening service in which the minister preached about how God was watching us, God viewed us not on what was outside, but what was inside us. God wasn’t concerned about clothing, what kind of clothes we wear.” Whether or not this pointed critique of Old Colony teaching about dress and nonconformity was intentional—and it is quite possible that it was—this sermon, with its evangelical bent, was not well received by some. Several attendees were offended “because he [Rev. Braun] believed that it wasn’t the clothing God was concerned about, but rather the heart. They [the offended attendees] believed God did take note of clothing, how we dressed was right, as we were accustomed to from Mexico.”<sup>19</sup> Others, such as Anne and Cornelius Peters, welcomed this new perspective.

The fact that Rev. Braun’s sermon exposed differences among the Old Colony migrants is not surprising because these differences already existed on the Mennonite colonies in northern Mexico from where the Old Colony Mennonites had come. By mid-century Mennonites in northern Mexico had become increasingly fragmented. In the 1930s the General Conference Mennonite Church had been established near Cuauhtémoc and Old Colonists looking for a more progressive, that is, evangelical, interpretation of Christian faith could join the General Conference Church. Even with the boldest of the dissatisfied Old Colony Mennonites becoming General Conference, however, the internal differences that existed within the Old Colony churches in Mexico were apparent. They came to a head in the mid-1960s when the *Áltestas* of Swift, Nord and Santa Clara colonies, along with large numbers of the colony members, moved to Bolivia to establish colonies there

in an attempt to thwart the modernizing forces prevalent on Mexico’s colonies. If there were Old Colony Mennonites who were committed to remaining faithful to their traditional ways, there were also others who insisted that modernization was imperative for economic and cultural survival. The flashpoint of this divide was the use of rubber tires on tractors by some colonists, which they claimed were necessary, given the harsh agricultural climate of northern Mexico. Working off the colonies with and for Mexicans, which some also claimed was imperative for their economic survival, was also problematic, as was owning a vehicle and fraternizing with more progressive/evangelical groups that were missionizing Old Colony Mennonites. For Old Colony Mennonites who were inclined to be more progressive, the Old Colony Church was intractable. Several interviewees describe being excommunicated, whether for returning to Canada, using rubber tires on their tractors, or owning a vehicle. Most Old Colony Mennonites who came to Ontario in the early years expressed at least some discontent with the Old Colony Church in Mexico. Jacob Wiebe, who would later become an Old Colony minister in Ontario, was one of several migrants who expressed his frustration. On Nord Colony he had had three years of crop failures and therefore had been unable to make payments for his land. This daughter colony had initially been purchased by the *Gemeinde* (church), so his creditor was his own community. After the third year of not being able to make payments, the *Vorsteher* of the colony demanded that he pay for the land. This injustice, Wiebe claimed, put the idea of Canada into his head. But first he joined his brother-in-law, Dave Klassen, in farming for Mexicans off the colony for a share of the crop. He did well in this, but when the Mexican land owner moved, they were forced to end this arrangement. He said,

*I wanted to be rid of them [the Old Colony]. I wouldn't have been able to make it work. We weren't supposed to work among the Mexicans—they were bad people—if you did, you were excommunicated. And of course we used their vehicles which we weren't supposed to do. But to return to the [Mennonite] villages, the colony? That wasn't possible. They didn't help, "you're on your own."...Those people who were doing alright, they received help, much more than those who needed it.<sup>20</sup>*

Wiebe was not excommunicated but his frustration with the Old Colony Church in Mexico was shared by other early migrants. It is no wonder that they looked for a religious life in Ontario that differed from the Old Colony Church in Mexico. This is not to say, however, that they wanted to abandon the Old Colony Church altogether. Although some left to join the evangelical church shortly after the Old Colony Church in Ontario had been formed, most migrants wanted to remain Old Colony, only not of the variety found in Mexico.<sup>21</sup> They wanted a more tolerant form of Old Colony religiosity, one in which excommunication was not used to ensure people's conformity as it had been in Mexico.<sup>22</sup>

The Mennonites who had migrated to Ontario understood the importance of establishing a church to foster their religious life and ensure that their way of life was maintained in the next generation. As Anne Peters said, "by then [a few years after they had arrived] there were a lot of Mennonites here and many had older children which we also had, old enough to want to get married and we agreed that we needed a church so that our children could get baptized and get married, etcetera. We met, all us *Dietsche*, to discuss the possibility of starting a church."<sup>23</sup>

A group of Old Colony Mennonites first started meeting in the fall of 1958 near Port Burwell.<sup>24</sup> Jacob Neudorf, who was an Old Colony minister from Manitoba, had come to southern Ontario to buy a car. He had heard that Mennonites



*Ältesta Cornelius Enns and his wife, Susanna nee Fast. The couple moved to Aylmer, Ontario in 1977. Cornelius was elected as Vorsteher of the Ontario Old Colony Church in 1986, minister in 1988 and Ältesta in 1989. He died in 2003. Photo Credit: Preservings 22(2003): 96.*

## People Interviewed:

Banman, Henry and Anna (Klassen)  
 Banman, John and Neeta (Klassen)  
 Dyck, Cornelius and Sara (Dyck)  
 Dyck, Peter  
 Friesen, Corny  
 Friesen, Nettie  
 Giesbrecht, Peter  
 Hamm, Diedrich and Elizabeth (Klassen)  
 Harms, John B. and Elizabeth (Reimer)  
 Klassen, Isaac  
 Loewen, Abe  
 Penner, Martin and Elizabeth (Rempel)  
 Peters, Cornelius and Anna (Wiebe)  
 Peters, Cornelius K.  
 Peters, Heinrich F.  
 Peters, Jake and Christine (Klassen)  
 Quiring, Cornelius Ältesta  
 Schroeder, Aaron and Margaret (Enns)  
 Voth, Heinrich and Maria (Dueck)  
 Voth, John D.  
 Wall, Aron S.  
 Wieb, Aaron N. and Sarah (Janzen)  
 Wiebe, Bernhard H. and Helena (Hiebert)  
 Wiebe, Jacob and Anna (Sawatsky)  
 Wiebe, Jacob D. and Anna (Klassen)  
 Wieb, Jacob Rev.  
 Wiebe, Ramon P.  
 Woelk, Peter and Helena (Klassen)

from Mexico had come to that area and so he made contact and held a church service. It is unclear whether Neudorf initiated this contact or whether he was sent by the Old Colony Church in Manitoba after it had received a letter from the group in Ontario asking for assistance. Neudorf continued to make periodic visits to Ontario to preach until 1965 when his evangelical intentions made him unwelcome in the Old Colony Church.<sup>25</sup> Another minister sent by the Old Colony Church in Manitoba also proved to be unsatisfactory. Peter Harder had originally been chosen by the Manitoba church as a minister in the 1930s but had not accepted the responsibility and thus had never been ordained. He moved to Mexico, but in the late 1950s he contacted the Old Colony Church in Manitoba stating that he was prepared to take up the responsibility of ordination if there was a place for him. The Manitoba church offered Harder's services as a minister to the Ontario group. They accepted. Harder, however, was a divisive force in the group and in 1960 he and about four families left southern Ontario for Rainy River to establish a church that would be free of the worldly influences of southern Ontario.<sup>26</sup> The support of the Manitoba Old Colony Church was vital in the establishment of the church in Ontario, Harder notwithstanding. In 1959 the church had its first *Füajaoasche Kjoakj*<sup>27</sup> and baptismal service for which the Ältesta of the Manitoba Old Colony Church, Jacob J. Froese, came to Ontario. The Ältesta and various ministers continued to visit Ontario to baptize and



*Jacob J. Froese (1885-1968) was the Ältester of the Old Colony Church after it reorganized in Manitoba in the 1930s. He was instrumental in establishing the Old Colony Church in Ontario where he conducted baptisms in 1959. Photo Credit: Preservings 16 (2000): 16.*

hold communion services until 1975 when the Ontario church elected its own Ältesta, Henry Reimer.<sup>28</sup>

While the group in Ontario had the support of the Old Colony Church in Manitoba, its leaders were hesitant to help organize it without first establishing to whose jurisdiction this fledgling group belonged. Because the group in Ontario had originated in Mexico, Ältesta Froese went to Mexico and discussed this with the Ältestas there who declined to be involved in the formation of a church in Ontario.<sup>29</sup> According to other interviews, the group wrote to Ältesta Isaac Dyck of Manitoba Colony in Mexico asking for assistance but he had declined to get involved. In 1960 the Ontario congregation elected Jacob Wiebe and Heinrich F. Peters as ministers and Peter Giesbrecht as a deacon.<sup>30</sup>

Institutionally, the Old Colony Church in Ontario was now established. But there was pressure from both sides—those Old Colony who wanted to withdraw from the worldly allures that southern Ontario offered, and those who wanted a more evangelical form of Christianity to dominate—through which the Old Colony Church in Ontario steered a course. These two forces were felt early on in the church. In 1958, even before the church was formally organized, twelve to fifteen families moved to Matheson in northern Ontario, with the intent of escaping the world.<sup>31</sup> Two years later Peter Harder took his group to Rainy River.<sup>32</sup> Then in 1977 the Old Colony Ältesta, Henry Reimer, took a group of about ten families to settle in Seminole, Texas, motivated largely by his fear that the world was

The following is a list of families who arrived in Ontario from 1949–1960. This information comes from the twenty-eight interviews I transcribed and translated. This list is undoubtedly incomplete and there may be errors. If anyone has additional names and dates of early migrants, I would love to hear from you. Please contact me at [kerryfast@gmail.com](mailto:kerryfast@gmail.com)

### **1949**

Jacob Fehrs

### **1952**

Abram Loewens

### **1953**

Dave Klassens

### **1953?**

Cornelius Walls

### **1954**

Cornelius F. and Anne Peters

Cornelius Thiessens

Jacob Ennses

Jacob F. Peters

### **1956**

Peter Giesbrechts

Jacob Klassens

Heinrich F. Peters

David F. Peters

Corny and Katarina Friesen

### **1957**

Gerhard and Nettie Friesen

John Banman

John Schroeders

### **1958**

John B. and Elizabeth Harms

### **1959**

Henry and Anne Banman

### **1960**

Isaac Thiessens

Cornelius S. and Sarah Dyck

Dave Friesen

Frank Klassens

Isaac Fehrs



*The children's choir of the Wheatley Old Colony Academy singing at the 2001 gathering of Ontario Low German speaking Mennonites in Chatham. Photo Credit: Mennonitische Post, Preservings 20(2002): 79.*

encroaching on the Old Colony Church in Ontario.<sup>33</sup> Equally divisive were those forces in the Old Colony Church that were pressing for evangelical reform. From 1961 to 1964 or 1965 the Old Colony Church in Ontario had a Sunday school which was run by Mr. and Mrs. Henry Wiebe, who were Russländer, and who introduced choruses and teaching on being born again. Some members met for Bible study.<sup>34</sup> These differences came to a head with the arrival of the EMMC in southern Ontario, and within a few years those Old Colony members who wanted evangelical reform had left the Old Colony Church; most joined the EMMC.<sup>35</sup>

It is not surprising that the beginning years of the Old Colony Church in Ontario were somewhat rocky. The Old Colony churches in Mexico were themselves undergoing significant transition and differences were bound to develop among its members. These differences existed also in the group of Mennonites who migrated to Ontario, even if this group tended to be of the more progressive Old Colony Mennonites. But the group's desire to establish itself as both connected to its roots in Mexico, and yet steering a new course in a new land, prevailed.

## Endnotes

- 1 The digital recordings of all interviews quoted in this article are part of an oral history project on Mennonite migration to Ontario, conducted in 1979 by the Multicultural Historical Society of Ontario and Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, Ontario. The interviews are available at the Mennonite Archives of Ontario (MAO), Conrad Grebel University College. English transcripts of these interviews are available at the MAO and at the D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation offices, University of Winnipeg. Cornelius F. and Anne Peters interview.
- 2 This was probably less than minimum wage. I was unable to find figures for the minimum wage in the Province of Ontario for 1954. In 1957 in Manitoba, the minimum wage for men was 60 cents/hour and for women it was 54 cents/hour. (<http://www.gov.mb.ca/labour/labmgt/wages/histmin.html>). In 1965 in Ontario, it was 95 cents/hour for women in rural Ontario and \$1.00/hour for men (<http://srv116.services.gc.ca/dimt-wid/sm-mw/rpt2.aspx?lang=eng>).
- 3 Cornelius F. and Anne Peters interview.
- 4 Opening Doors, "An Overview of Migrations", <http://openingdoors.co/an-overview-of-migrations/>.
- 5 In addition to the twenty-eight interviews with Mennonites from Mexico, Sawatsky also interviewed service providers who worked with the immigrant Mennonites and church leaders whose congregations were composed of Mennonites from Mexico.
- 6 Nettie Friesen interview.
- 7 Abe Loewen interview.

8 There were twenty-eight interviews in total, which represented twenty-six households because two of the interviewees were teenagers when they moved to Ontario and as such, did not have their own household. Their parents were also interviewed.

9 Henry and Anne Banman,\* Cornelius and Anne Dyck,\* Peter Dyck, Corny Friesen, Nettie Friesen,\* Peter Giesbrecht,\* Diedrich and Elizabeth Hamm, John B. and Elizabeth Harms, Martin and Elizabeth Penner, Cornelius F. and Anne Peters, Jakob F. Peters (son Cornelius K. Peters interviewed), Heinrich F. Peters, David F. Peters\* (son Jake Peters interviewed), Ältesta Cornelius Quiring, Raymon Wiebe, Rev. Jacob Wiebe.\* The asterisk indicates those interviewees who worked for Mexicans or rented land from them.

10 Aaron Wall interview.

11 Heinrich and Maria Voth interview.

12 Jacob and Anna Wiebe interview.

13 Bernhard and Helen Wiebe interview.

14 Peter Klassen. Son, Isaac Klassen, and daughter, Christine Peters, were interviewed.

15 Aaron and Margaret Schroeder, Peter and Helena Woelk, Jacob D. Wiebe, Abe Loewen and Aaron and Sarah Wiebe.

16 In all likelihood these were Markham-Waterloo Mennonites. Loewen describes them thus: "There's one group that drives cars, painted black cars, black bumpers."

17 Abe Loewen interview.

18 Nettie Friesen interview.

19 Cornelius and Anne Peters interview.

20 Rev. Jacob Wiebe interview.

21 Ibid.

22 John and Neeta Banman interview.

23 Cornelius and Anne Peters interview.

24 Rev. Jacob Wiebe interview

25 Rev. Jacob Wiebe interview; Cornelius K. Peters interview. Rev. Neudorf was also later dismissed from the ministerial of the Old Colony Church in Manitoba. He joined the EMMC.

26 Rev. Jacob Wiebe interview.

27 The service prior to baptism when the Catechism is recited by all those intending to be baptized.

28 Isaac Klassen interview.

29 Rev. Jacob Wiebe interview.

30 Rev. Jacob Wiebe interview

31 Aron and Margaret Schroeder interview; Abe Loewen interview.

32 The community in Matheson lasted only a few years as farming was not viable that far north. Some returned to southern Ontario and others joined the group in Rainy River. In 1979, the community in Rainy River still existed but it had become Reinländer and was no longer Old Colony. (Peter Giesbrecht interview.)

33 Peter Dyck interview.

34 John and Neeta Banman interview; Abe Loewen interview; Cornelius and Anne Peters interview; Henry and Anne Banman interview, Cornelius K. Peters interview. For a discussion on the differences between evangelical and Old Colony religious belief, see Ältesta Cornelius Quiring interview.

35 Cornelius F. and Anne Peters interview; Cornelius K. Peters interview; John and Neeta Banman interview; Henry and Anna Banman interview; Corny Friesen interview; Abe Loewen interview.



of better quality. In a few cases whole villages ceased to exist.

The Manning creek, with at least four tributaries that drained Townships (Twps). 7-6e, 6-6e as well as waters coming from La Broquerie, discharged its waters into the NE of Twp 7-5e. The Chortitz Creek was much smaller and drained water from the NW of Twp 6-6e and discharged its waters into Twp 7-5e. Penner's Creek, now called South Lateral, drained water from the east side of Twp 5-6e and flowed in a NW direction to discharge its waters into Twp 7-5e. Lastly there was the Tourond Creek which originated in the RM of La Broquerie, coursed through Twps 5-6e, 5-5e, Twp 6-5e and then discharged its waters into Twp 7-4e.

What all of these creeks had in common was that they flowed from SE to NW, from poorer land toward some of the better land in the East Reserve. Also it appears that at 800 ft above sea level their natural channels ended with the result that the water spread out and flooded the flat lands of Twps 7-5e and 7-4e (indicated with circles on the accompanying map). What may not have been fully realized at the time was that the underlying reason for these flooding problems in the north of the reserve was the elevation difference between the south east and the north west of the reserve. The south east is 200 ft higher than the north west corner. This is over a distance of thirty miles with 175 ft drop occurring in just twenty miles. By comparison the Red River drops 221 ft from Fargo ND to Winnipeg, a distance of 221 miles.

In 1888 and again in 1899 (Twp 4-6e) the Dominion Government transferred thirty-five quarter sections to the Province of Manitoba. This land, mostly in Twp 7-4e, was deemed unsuitable for settlement. It was then soon bought up by land speculators. Around 1900, with the arrival of the Ukrainians and the Lutheran Germans, some of the land in townships 6,5,4, land which the Mennonites had rejected, was settled by these people.

At about the same time the provincial government was aware that economically the East Reserve was lagging behind the West Reserve and that something needed to be done. As a result Drainage District Number 5 was established in 1906. This meant that government money, equipment and expertise were available to do what the RM of Hanover had hitherto

been unable to afford. Three projects, the Manning Canal, the D20 and the Tourond Canal were constructed and completed by 1908.

These new drains were of great benefit, but subsequent years proved they had some design flaws. They were narrow with steep sides which made maintenance impossible. They were soon grown in with willows and cat tails. The spoil pile alongside also had the effect of trapping snow. The result was that the drains were still clogged with snow when the water would arrive from the south which caused the water to overflow the drain. These drains were later improved in the 1940s and '50s by making them wider with more sloping sides and dikes or roads on both sides, because at times the water within the drain was higher than the surrounding land. In 1994, with the help of a federal infrastructure grant, the RM of Hanover excavated and improved 100 miles of rural ditches. In the last ten years some farmers are using large tractor-driven pumps to dewater their fields by pumping the water over the dike into the major drains, much as was done in Holland and the Vistula Delta.

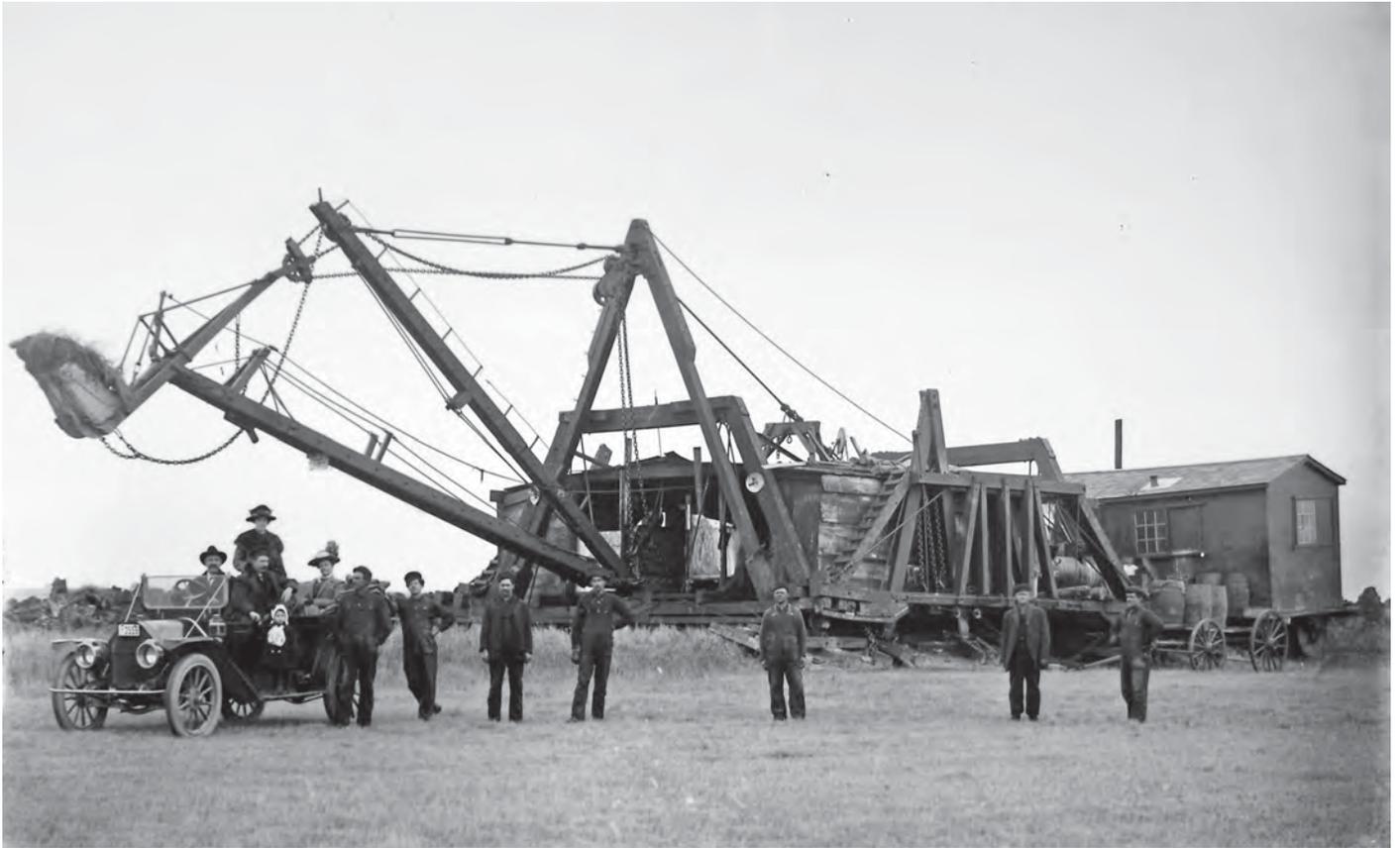
### The Evolution of and the Role of Machines in the Reclaiming of Land

For approximately the first thirty years this reclaiming of the land was done by human and horse power. The Hanover Council minutes indicated that much of its time was spent organising statute labour (*sharwerk*) to build roads and bridges. These were essential to linking the villages. The first machines used for this were the Scoop pulled by two horses and the larger Fresno pulled by four horses.

While these implements were adequate for building low level roads they were not well suited for digging deep canals with steep sides. Around 1926 H.I. Fast and Sons of Kleefeld started using their newly built ditcher to do drainage and road building in various parts of the municipality. This machine could dig a ditch and deposit the dirt in a windrow which would then be leveled to form a road. The later local use of the more versatile drag line performed the same function. In the 1980s the Track Hoe Excavator appeared in the south eastern part of Manitoba. This machine revolutionized rural drainage. It could build flat bottom ditches with nice sloping sides and do



On the left is an example of a Fresno scraper being used in a demonstration of traditional equipment in the American badlands in 2006. Photo Credit: Lloyd Griswald, <http://www.wilderness.net>. The scoop on the right was used in the East Reserve before the Fresno scraper and was not nearly as efficient. Photo Credit: Orlando Hiebert.



*Machines made providing drainage on a large scale possible. Famous Winnipeg photographer L.B. Foote took this posed shot of one of the massive drag lines used to dig major drainage canals. Photo Credit: Manitoba Archives, Foote, 208, 1914.*

this in almost any conditions, even while sitting in three feet of water. It could even go through swamps. Together with laser guidance, very accurate grades could be achieved. In 1994 the RM of Hanover, with a federal grant, used this machine to dig and improve 100 miles of rural drainage.

### **The Challenge of the Bush**

At first the only means of clearing the bush was to fell the trees using an axe and then drag the felled trees off the land with horses. But this left the stumps which had to be dug out, pulled out with horses, burnt out, or in some cases blown out with dynamite. In the mid- to late-1940s, Fast Bros. of Blumenort were cutting down bush in the area. They had attached a V plow with a sharp cutting edge which would shear off the trees at ground level to a TD 9 bulldozer. This worked well in lighter stands of trees, but in heavier stands this unit lacked the

power to push its way through. In typical Mennonite fashion, this problem was solved by putting another TD 9 behind the first one and connecting the two by means of a push bar. Later as bigger bulldozers became available, Fast Bros. used two TD 25s. A heavy logging chain with a very heavy steel ball in the middle strung between the two bulldozers was used. With this unit a wide swath of bush could be flattened in a single pass. With all the trees laid in one orientation, pushing them into windrows was much easier. If this was done when the ground was not frozen, the majority of the trees were simply up-ended with roots and all, so that when the trees were pushed into windrows the roots came along too.

### **The Stones and Rocks**

In clearing stones and rocks the story is much the same as with clearing the bush. Rocks and stones were found primarily



*Modern trackhoe creating drainage. Photo Credit: Orlando Hiebert*



*Bush Breaker plowing. Image Credit: Orlando Hiebert.*



*Bush Breaker plowing. Image Credit: Orlando Hiebert.*



*A 1952 image from a newspaper story about the Fast Brothers of Giroux removing stones from a field near Friedensfeld, southeast of Steinbach. Image Credit: Orlando Hiebert.*



*A small trackhoe digging stones south of the Rosengard ridge in August 2014. Photo Credit: Orlando Hiebert.*

in Twps 6,5, and 4. Those stones that could be handled by hand were loaded onto a stone boat drawn by horses and carted off to the edge of a field. Later as bulldozers became available the bigger rocks were dug out and often pushed into piles. Even now when one tours these townships, one sees bluffs of brush and trees scattered in an otherwise open field. One can be quite certain that there is a rock pile in them. The later use of the track hoe excavator which could dig smaller, deeper holes faster allowed most of these rocks to be buried. The picture of breaking new soil south of Steinbach reveals what our pioneers

were up against. Even today in 2014 this small track hoe is still being used to deal with the rock problem.

### **The Results**

Over the last 140 years farming has diversified and prospered. Grain and hay production can now be found throughout the East Reserve. The RM of Hanover now has the largest concentration of hog production in the province. Industries have sprung up as well. For this we owe a debt of gratitude to the perseverance of our pioneer forefathers.

# Cemeteries and Country Cafés: Where Old Friends Meet

Glen Klassen, Steinbach, Manitoba

A few years ago, not having enough to do, I suppose, I got involved with a local history research group. Before I knew it I had agreed to do some ‘ground-breaking’ research: I was supposed to get the GPS readings for every cemetery and burial plot in the RM of Hanover (the Mennonite East Reserve) and somewhat beyond. I thought that would be a few dozen; I am now up to 127.

I had done a lot of research in my life, but never anything so close to the ground. How to go about it? Of course I had to comb through everything that had been published on graveyards, but my basic approach was to take a week-day morning, go to a selected district, find the oldest guy in the neighborhood (or gal, although all my contacts were guys), ask him to show me where the bodies were buried and then take him for lunch in the nearest country restaurant. In Blumenort it was noodle soup and burritos, in Kleefeld at the time it was pumpkin soup, in Niverville it was a fried chicken snack, and in Grunthal it

definitely included the best fruit pies. It never cost me more than a twenty.

Many of the graveyards are well documented. For the Chortitzer graveyards and burial plots, which form the majority in the region, I thank deacon Jake Klassen, who produced an accurate and complete record of all the Chortitzer Mennonite Church cemeteries and plots in 1988. For the *Kleine Gemeinde* (EMC) graveyards, the work of the late Bernard P. Doerksen and Garth P. Doerksen was invaluable. For the Steinbach Pioneer Graveyard the source was Ernie P. Toews, and for Clear Springs it was Ed and Alice Laing. The local guides who helped me explore cemeteries and cafés included Abe U. Klassen, Ernest Klassen, William Heese, Philip Hiebert, Jake Banman, Ernie Braun, Henry Fast, Helen Fenuik, Garth Doerksen, Harold Dyck, and Jake Harms. I apologize to those who didn’t get a lunch out of it. I also thank the Dyck brothers and their magnificent dog who allowed me to explore their farmyard in Rosengard.

In the course of all this grave hunting I came across interesting stories, some sad, some hilarious, some bizarre, and some verging on the macabre.

One of the funniest stories I heard was of the lady buried in Felsenton (right beside the Steinbach Waste Facility) who had a lot of trouble with one of her legs before she died. Apparently she decreed that the leg should be buried separately. She didn’t want to have anything to do with it in the afterlife. I can’t vouch for the truth of this tale, but I sometimes feel that way too.

Speaking of tall tales reminds me of the day some of us history geeks went to the site of the immigration sheds near



*Abe U. Klassen at the first Blumenort Village cemetery. All photos by the author unless otherwise noted.*



*The Dyck’s farmyard in Rosengard. Photo Credit: Ernie Braun*



*Roland Sawatzky and Glen Klassen at the site of the immigration sheds. Photo Credit: Ernie Braun.*

Niverville (two miles south and half a mile east of Wm Dyck & Sons), because there are supposed to be some graves there. As we wandered around the site we noticed a distinct low ridge to the north-east perhaps 300 metres from the corner. Surely they would have buried people high and dry, wouldn't they? Yes, but the ridge would probably also have been used as a trail or road, maybe even the famous Crow Wing Trail which went from Fort Garry to the United States. Would they have used a roadside? All this logic, of course, got us nowhere. We needed evidence.

I think this is where the great witching debate got started. Apparently there is a man who can, with the aid of two bent metal bars, tell where bodies are buried. Should we perhaps get a hold of him? One of us, a true believer, was willing to give it a try. Another, a disciple of the sceptic David Hume, was adamant that our whole integrity was at stake. If anything, we should try ground-penetrating radar, like they did with the Vollwerk cemetery near Mitchell. We resolved nothing except that when we heard that the talented grave detector could not only find graves, he could also tell the direction in which the head of the buried person was pointing, as well as whether the corpse was lying flat on its back or on its stomach, we had a good laugh. A likely tall tale.

What is important about the position of the corpse? Actually it's all quite macabre. The universal rule was that a person should always be buried with the head pointing west so that on resurrection morning, when the body would rise to the vertical and stand on its two feet, it would face Jerusalem to the east. Except that suicides were buried the other way around, because...well you know the answer. I doubt that this rule was always followed. More likely suicides were sometimes just buried outside the fence of the cemetery. This may actually have happened at the village of Schoenenberg where Ernie Braun and Roland Sawatzky found the old village graveyard, and sure enough, there is an isolated grave not far away, pointed out to them by Peter Broesky.

But what if some bodies were found to be lying on their stomachs? They were never buried that way, so the inference would be that they rearranged themselves *after* burial, meaning that they were buried alive! What a gruesome thought. But plenty such rumours have been common in many cultures. Actually I have a theory about these rearranged skeletons, but more of that a little later.

Just a bit more about the direction of burial. The rule was that the feet should point east or approximately east. Many of the East Reserve Mennonite villages were laid out at an angle, because they followed the course of a creek. All of the village lots would then be at an angle perpendicular to the creek. The graveyard, which was usually placed near the center of the village at some distance from the main street, would be aligned to the village lots and the graves would be parallel to the graveyard fence, oriented to the south-east or the north-east - as long as it was *approximately* east. Usually it's one or the other, but at the Steinbach Pioneer cemetery, both directions can be found.

The only exception to this practise I have found in Hanover is at Hochstadt, between Kleefeld and Grunthal. The little graveyard in the ditch beside the road has about half a dozen headstones listing *Kleine Gemeinde* Mennonite and Lutheran names, and they are all oriented to the *west!* The other two Hochstadt cemeteries have the easterly orientation. It may be that they sensibly thought that since the stones would be mostly

viewed from the road to the west that the stones should be easily readable. Sometimes practicality trumped tradition. I am surprised that the Lutherans went along with this, because at the magnificent Lutheran cemetery just south of Steinbach on Highway #12, where they have the same problem, they have engraved the family name on the back of the headstones so that they are readable to people approaching the graveyard from the highway. Also very sensible, but respectful of tradition.

Back to the immigration sheds. The problem is to find lost graves. Since ground-penetrating radar is expensive, it is tempting to find more direct methods. If you have a bulldozer handy, you could scrape off the topsoil down to about a foot and see if there is evidence of grave-sized disturbed soil. This has often been successful. Uncle Abe U. Klassen in Blumenort showed me the place where this had been done beside Twin Creek Road to reveal the graves of several of my great uncles and aunts, some of whom died as children and were buried behind the Peter Klassen orchard at Neuanlage. It is amazing that even after more than one hundred years you can still see the disturbed soil. This kind of 'research' was also done at the Doerksen burial plot at Schoenhorst.

As we were exploring the immigration shed area I ventured off the road a bit and almost put my foot into a badger hole. This led to my proposed new method of finding lost graves: follow the badger!

It is well known that badgers like to dig deep holes in the ground to find mice and earthworms and to create home burrows for themselves and their young. They like grasslands because they can conceal themselves, being very low-slung



*Badger hunting in an old, neglected graveyard. Ernie Braun almost meets the badger.*



*An excavated grave. Animals such as badgers often find cosy homes there.*

animals. They also like disturbed soil which is easy to dig into. You guessed it: they like old overgrown graveyards. Ernie Braun and I recently visited just such a graveyard in the middle of a field. The grass and weeds were waist-high and we had to tear out the foliage just to see the gravestones. The most recent graves were from the 1930s. Actually the plot was surrounded by a very nice cable fence with stainless steel posts. I wandered toward the center of the plot and noticed a big pile of sandy soil and then I almost stepped on a badger. Knowing their reputation for aggressive behaviour, I quickly removed myself, but Ernie moved closer and said he could smell the musky smell of an infuriated badger. Then we noticed that the area was riddled with badger holes.

Actually, Linda Buhler, in her article about Krongard in *Historical Sketches of the East Reserve* mentions that the “use of this gravesite (Krongard) diminished sharply when a badger made its home there in 1922 and unearthed a braid and some fabric remnants from a recent grave.” There are also reports on the internet about how badgers are a real problem for old graveyards in England. Apparently some vicars have to collect unearthed bones all the time and rebury them. Even skulls sometimes. A lot of ancient burial grounds have been discovered in Europe by watching where the badgers dig.

So I proposed that instead of hiring the wand-witching guy, we simply follow the badgers to the lost graveyards. This may also explain the “face-down” burials. Rather than imagining a wretched soul twisting and turning in the grave, we can simply see a badger family rearranging the furniture. Almost like the talking badgers who fought for Aslan in Narnia.

The ghosts of the immigration sheds will keep their mystery a little longer. As for us, we went to the Subway in Niverville for a good lunch and the regular chin-wag. We agreed that there should be a memorial at the shed site for those who came all that way from Russia by train, ship, laker, and riverboat, only to end their long journey at the edge of the promised land. Like Moses, really.

Sometimes graves are elusive not because we don't know where they are, but because someone has moved them. The atlas produced in 1988 by John Rempel and William Harms has a picture of a little private graveyard on the former Wohlgemuth farm just a quarter mile southeast of the Blumenort corner on the ridge. I went to visit the site only to be told that the two graves had been moved. All I could see were the depressions in the ground where the graves had been. I knew that Heinrich E. Wohlgemuth and his two-year-old daughter Maria had been buried there and that the family belonged to the ‘Holdeman’ Church. I jumped to the conclusion that the graves must have been moved to the Greenland cemetery since that is the closest Holdeman cemetery. But then I happened to bump into Norman Wohlgemuth at MJs in Steinbach. (Betty and I don't go out for breakfast a lot, never more than once a day, but that is how I have learned everything that has happened in Steinbach over the last forty years while I was away professoring in Winnipeg.) I asked Norman about the Wohlgemuth graves and he directed me to his cousin Winston who told me later that he had personally been involved in the grave movement. Surprise! The graves were moved to the Blumenhof cemetery, mostly occupied by *Kleine Gemeinders* (EMC). There are, however, other Wohlgemuth relatives there as well. New grave stones were installed, with Maria Wohlgemuth's little stone hugging her Daddy's bigger one. The graves were moved because it



The moved Wohlgemuth graves in the Blumenhof cemetery.

was thought that the village of Blumenort would develop to the southeast.

Other graves have also been moved, mostly because of road construction. All of the Lutheran graves near the junction of Highway #59 and the Niverville road as well as those a few miles north near Prefontaine Road were moved to the Niverville town cemetery as a result of Highway #59 upgrades. A beautiful monument has been erected at the Niverville corner. I have visited the site a number of times and it always makes me sad to read there of the many diphtheria deaths in the early days. The site also serves as a parking lot for car-sharing commuters. I suppose it's good for the environment.

Sometimes graves have been disturbed by road building machinery. This happened some time ago at the Schoenfeld village site near Kleefeld. Three graves were dug up to reveal three skeletons. It was not feasible to re-enter the bones at the same site so someone collected them and brought them to the Anthropology Department at the University of Manitoba for identification. The bones turned out to be the remains of one adult and two children. Their identities were never determined, and after about fifteen years at the University, the bones were returned. Since there is no active cemetery in the Schoenfeld area, the Chortitzer Mennonite Church decided to bury them in the historic graveyard at Chortitz (Randolph), several miles to the north. There, on a blistering hot day in October of 2010, three small varnished boxes were buried with touching ceremony. The Chortitzer *Ältester* preached a short English message and then we sang “*Was Gott tut dass ist wohl getan*” (What God does is well done). How many people have the honour of being buried twice and having two funerals?

By the way, because I used to be a geneticist, I can say that it would have been possible to find out whom the bones belonged to by using DNA. DNA has been usefully extracted from bodies as old as ten thousand years or more, and so, since these bones were only about one hundred years old, it should have been easy. After getting the DNA out of the bones you would have to collect DNA samples from living relatives of people known to have ancestors in Schoenfeld and you would likely be able to identify the families involved. After that it would have been detective work using the GRANDMA database of more than a million Mennonites. To get a DNA sample is as simple as swabbing the inside of a cheek with a Q-tip. Nonetheless, all of this would have been more trouble than it was worth. Mennonites are notoriously unsentimental about their dead. Whereas Catholics, Lutherans and Presbyterians almost always buried their dead in neat centralized church cemeteries, the early Manitoba Mennonites preferred private plots near the farm, especially for



*The re-interment service at Chortitz for the Shoenfeld skeletons.*

young children. The tiny village of Neuanlage just south-west of Blumenort has at least six burial sites within half a mile.

Sometimes a grave is not a grave. Most early Ukrainians were buried in the church graveyards so I was surprised to learn of a 'Manyluk grave' north of Sarto. My contacts in the Ukrainian community had never heard of this grave and did not recognize the name. I went to the site and found a concrete block in the corner of a field. The farmer, who graciously let me examine the site, had for years been carefully skirting the block during field work. Not all farmers are so conscientious. After talking to more local Sarto historians I began to realize that the block was not a grave marker at all. Instead, it was a pedestal for a roadside cross, one of three erected by early Ukrainian settlers. Beside this one, there was one just west of Sarto and another one close to Trentham. Nothing remains of the latter two crosses. Apparently the crosses were raised during the settlement process to reinforce the idea that Jesus was with the settlers, and that Jesus

'rested' at the cross sites, blessing the new land. This reminded me of the twelve crosses that were erected in England to mark the places where the body of Eleanor, queen to Edward I, rested for the night as they brought her home to London. The last one is now Charing Cross. I would encourage the Ukrainian community to restore the cross site as a historical project.

The Clearsprings cemetery is one of the best kept and best documented graveyards in the RM. It is also eminently historic, containing perhaps the oldest marked grave in Hanover, that of two-year-old Robert Matthews, who died in 1877. There is also a memorial for 21 year-old John Gorrie, killed at Vimy Ridge in 1917 and buried in France. Tom Hasted also was killed in action in WWI. William Acres got to Manitoba because he was part of the Wolseley Expedition sent here by way of the Dawson Trail to quell the first Riel Rebellion. An early Clearsprings teacher, John Code, left teaching to join forces against Riel in 1881 and was actually killed in the conflict. However, he is not buried at Clearsprings. Another military man buried at Clearsprings was Alexander Shilstra, Steinbach's first real doctor. He interrupted his Steinbach practise to serve in Mesopotamia at the Tigris front in 1917. Lots of history here.



*The Anna and Alexander Shilstra gravestone at Clearsprings. Alexander was Steinbach's first real doctor and Anna was its first female doctor.*



*One of a number of old wooden grave markers in a Mennonite cemetery marked with a cross. How did that happen?*

Is there room for romance in an account such as this? The story of David and Lauretta Unger, buried side by side at Clear Springs, is poignant. The beautiful Lauretta, widow of William Acres, married David in 1891. They both died in 1938 after a long life together. Such Mennonite-Presbyterian marriages were rare even though the two communities were on very good terms at all times. Ellis Penner tells me that he was named for a neighbor by the name of Ellis Duckworth. Was the church displeased with his bold marriage move? Did they realize how close the Presbyterians were to the Mennonite ethos? One small example of this is the fact that you see very few crosses at Clearsprings, just like a Mennonite cemetery. I was quite

surprised when visiting the Rosengard cemetery at the former CMC Church to find a row of very old wooden markers with crosses on them.

My contacts for the Clearsprings area were Ed and Alice Laing. But I don't think I have yet taken them to a country café for lunch. Sorry Ed and Alice.

Occasionally graveyard cairn inscriptions lead to the comment: 'oops!' At one cemetery someone has taken the trouble to mount an engraved cross on the gate listing the people buried there. Unfortunately, the name of the village is badly misspelled. At another, the family has gone to the trouble of mounting a brass plaque on a carefully constructed memorial, but one of the names has been hijacked by the notorious German vowel combination: "ie" or is it "ei"? as in Thiessen, Wiebe, and Reimer. Apparently this happens even within the City of Steinbach, where an expensive plaque had to be replaced recently because someone didn't use their spell-checker. When such a mistake is first noticed I imagine it is very hard to keep from saying an appropriate, but not very nice expression.

Another surprise was to find a well-pump on a graveyard south of Steinbach. A shallow well on a graveyard? Hmm... Great for watering the flowers, I suppose, but certainly unusual.

The inscriptions on the grave stones of women are sometimes revealing of old attitudes about them. Sometimes a woman will be identified simply as "Mrs. John Friesen." More often her Christian name is given, followed by "wife of ...". Sometimes her full name, including her maiden name, is used, but there are denominational differences. The old *Kleine Gemeinde* graves are most likely to name just the husband. Chortitzer graves are much more likely to have the woman's given name. It seems that we *Kleine Gemeinders* were more patriarchal than our Chortitzer neighbors. Nonetheless, both groups produced very strong women who were admired by all. Two that come to mind are Katherine Hiebert of Niverville, a legendary midwife, and Gertrude Klassen of Kleefeld, a healer and foster parent.

Many historic Mennonite graveyards that are no longer being used are almost totally neglected. When the villages

disbanded often the graveyard was abandoned. We could be ashamed of this, but there might be another side to the story. When visiting graveyards in England and Germany, I noticed the same contrast. English graveyards looked neglected, but I found them romantic in the same way that a ruined castle is more interesting than a restored one. In Germany everything was trim and orderly...and uninteresting. I sometimes wonder whether the restoration being done to graveyards now-a-days, with the long straight cement pedestals and remounted headstones (when they didn't crumble during the process) is the way to go. We saw some Ojibwa graves at Ear Falls in Ontario recently. They were basically little picket fence enclosures. The wood was weathered and mature poplars grew right in the grave. Apparently they deliberately allow the graves to age and eventually melt into the environment. Sounds biblical to me.

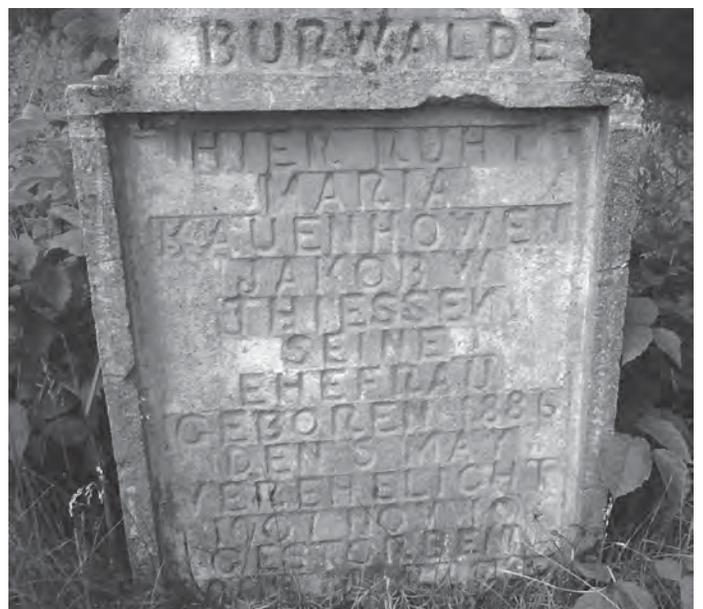
I haven't said much about country cafés. They were, however, indispensable to the cemetery field work. In the end, the payoff for research is the chance to share it with sympathetic conversationalists. Once we get to the café the time has come to brag, tell jokes, argue and generally have a cracking good time. This is what really charges the batteries. The greatest reward is if the waitress can't resist a tiny little smile after serving our table. Of course, generous tips follow. Unfortunately, these sessions always generate a huge list of more things to do that rivals the menu at Gan's in Niverville.

I am fast approaching my seventy-fifth birthday. Life is so short and death is so final and formidable. While travelling around the cemeteries of Hanover I was always conscious of this even though the research was enjoyable and the company of other old people was often stimulating. I did not feel that we were ever in denial in the face of the awesome reality of approaching death. We rest in the confidence that the faith of our fathers and mothers, joined with our own, will meet the faithfulness of God at the end.

What! No footnotes? This time you will just have to take my word for it. This is your reward for trying to read my previous *Preservings* articles with all their turgid prose and endless footnotes.



A cemetery with a shallow well!?



Maria Kauenhoven's 1909 grave in Burwalde. Upon reading the stone more carefully we find that she was actually Mrs. Jakob W. Thiessen!

# General Samuel McRoberts' Photos of Mennonites in Paraguay, 1926-1929

Conrad Stoesz, Winnipeg, Manitoba

"The world is small, but the Mennonite world is even smaller," stated Canadian Mennonite University (CMU) student Rodger Toews. That was his impression after he completed his practicum at the Mennonite Heritage Centre (MHC) in the winter of 2014. Toews is a history student from Paraguay, studying at CMU in Winnipeg. The practicum attempts to match projects with the student's interests. "My expectations were exceeded by far," exclaimed Toews as he encountered an abundance of archival materials directly related to the Mennonite experience in Paraguay. Toews learned to read German gothic script handwriting and helped organize collections of letters, journals and photographs mostly related to Mennonites in southern Manitoba, some of whom moved to Paraguay in the mid-1920s.

One of the collections about Paraguay that Toews used was a set of six photograph albums, totalling 231 photos, which were donated by the family of former New York banker, General Samuel McRoberts (1868-1947). These photos provide some of the earliest images of the settling of the Paraguayan Chaco by Mennonites from Saskatchewan and Manitoba. McRoberts proved to be an important player and ally for these immigrants, without whom it would be hard to imagine the migration to Paraguay.

During and after World War One, new legislation was enacted in Manitoba and Saskatchewan eliminating bilingual schools (German-English in Mennonite areas) and requiring that English be the only language of instruction. The provincial governments also closed private schools, requiring all students to attend government approved schools. The aim of this legislation was to Canadianize the increasingly diverse immigrant population.

Some of the Mennonite groups in Manitoba and Saskatchewan decided to adapt to these new regulations. The majority of Mennonites in these two provinces, however, were the traditional Mennonite church groups (Old Colony, *Sommerfelder*, *Chortitzer*, Saskatchewan *Bergthaler*), who felt that losing control of their schools would jeopardize their faith and their future, and so they decided to emigrate. They sent delegations to Quebec, Mississippi, Mexico, and to several South American countries, looking for land and favourable terms that would allow them to live by their faith principles.

In an effort to find land and financing, Johann J. Priess of Altona, of his own accord, traveled to New York in 1919 to meet with Minneapolis real-estate broker, Alvin Solberg, who had helped bring Hutterites from the USA to Manitoba.



*Samuel McRoberts was an American banker who was persuaded to help Mennonites to emigrate to Paraguay. Although initially reluctant, his wife, the writer and poet Harriet Skinner McRoberts persuaded him that helping the Mennonites find a home was a worthy Christian cause. Photo Credit: "Gen. Samuel McRoberts, an Appreciation," American sugar refining Company, 1947.*

Through Solberg, Priess also met with New York financier Samuel McRoberts, who was vice-president of the National City Bank of New York. McRoberts had connections with the Paraguayan ambassador to Washington, Manuel Gondra. Priess also met Fred Engen who was enthusiastic about the options for settlement in Paraguay and became a colleague of McRoberts.<sup>1</sup> Priess was a good friend of Saskatchewan Bergthaler Bishop, Aron Zacharias.

The first delegation to South America, representing three Old Colony groups: Manitoba, and the Hague and Swift Current colonies in Saskatchewan, left in August 1919. They were unsuccessful in getting any country to provide them with the assurances they were seeking. In 1920, a second Old Colony delegation from Hague was sent to investigate possibilities in Mexico.<sup>2</sup>

In January 1921, a delegation of six people from the same three Old Colony Mennonite groups travelled to Mexico, saw the land, and met with President Álvaro Obregón. From him they received

a *Privilegium*, which he signed on behalf of the government.<sup>3</sup> The *Privilegium* provided for exemption from military service for fifty years, the right not to swear the oath, control over their own schools, the right to use German as the language of instruction in the schools, and the right to purchase large tracts of land and to lay out villages on this land. The Old Colonists found these terms acceptable, decided to move to Mexico, and began the emigration in 1922.

The Sommerfelder and Chortitzer Mennonite churches in Manitoba and the Bergthaler Church in Saskatchewan also looked for emigration possibilities. A delegation of six from these churches left for Paraguay in February 1921, with instructions to also investigate settlement possibilities in Mexico. They returned from their trip in September.

On the way to Paraguay, together with Johann Priess, the delegates stopped in New York to see McRoberts. He helped them with their papers, but was initially not interested in their proposal to emigrate. However when he mentioned the Mennonite delegation's pending visit to his wife, Harriet, she insisted the delegation come to dinner. Bernhard Toews writes in his journal (jokingly?) that McRoberts took a special interest in Toews because of the extra work it took to prepare his travel papers. Toews reports they were served bread, meat, baked potatoes, coffee, and an assortment of other delicacies. The Mennonites provided the evening entertainment with the singing of a German and a Russian song. Harriet Pearl Skinner McRoberts, a poet and songwriter whose writings can still be



*Jacob J. Priess was co-founder of the Altona Machinery Company and part owner of the first automobile in the Altona, Manitoba area. When the emigration began he established an office to assist with land titles and other legal issues. He moved to Paraguay in 1927 to help with settlement. He died in the village of Laubenheim in 1945.*

purchased today, gave a copy of one of her songbooks to Bishop Aron Zacharias.<sup>4</sup> She was impressed with the delegation and insisted that the Mennonites were good, God-fearing people, and that helping them “would be a real service to Christianity and the church.”<sup>5</sup> McRoberts was convinced, and promised the delegation help and financial support.

The delegates left for Paraguay, and on May 20, 1921, they reached the most westerly portion of their exploration of the Paraguayan Chaco, where they erected a cross with their names engraved. Reports came back from the delegation that the land was “satisfactory in every respect.” The delegates also had a fifty minute meeting with now President, Manuel Gondra, and presented to him their petition for a Privilegium. Gondra gave them assurances that his government could accept all their key points, including the right not to swear the oath, have their own schools, use the German language in schools, maintain their *Waisenamt* and inheritance laws, set up their fire insurance organization, and appoint executors and trustees of their organizations and estates.<sup>6</sup> They were also given assurances they could organize villages in compact settlements.<sup>7</sup> Before the end of July, the Paraguayan Senate and Congress passed the necessary legislation to guarantee these privileges.<sup>8</sup> The delegation also visited Mexico, but was not favourably impressed with the land, or with the assurances given by President Obregón.

When the delegates returned from their visits, they reported to their respective church groups in Manitoba and

Saskatchewan, and recommended migration to Paraguay. Many formal and informal meetings followed as the church leadership, together with the members, weighed their options: to stay or to migrate, and if to migrate, then where? McRoberts, Engen, and Solberg visited Manitoba in November and December of 1921, hoping to ensure that Mennonites would buy their land in Paraguay and not follow the Old Colony to Mexico.<sup>9</sup>

In the fall of 1921, another delegation of Sommerfelder Mennonites left for Mexico. They met with President Obregón, and received assurances on virtually all their requests. They returned and recommended migrating to Mexico. On a subsequent trip to Mexico, some Sommerfelder bought land in Mexico. By the late fall of 1922, about six hundred Sommerfelder, together with their bishop, Abraham Doerksen, had moved to Mexico. They founded the twelve thousand acre Santa Clara settlement just north of the two Old Colony settlements, Manitoba and Swift Current, near the town of Cuauhtémoc.<sup>10</sup> This decision resulted in a split in the Sommerfelder Church about where to migrate.

Plans for migrating to Paraguay came to a halt in late 1921 due to the economic crisis that saw the American stock market devalued by forty-seven percent from a high on November 3, 1919 to its low on August 24, 1921.<sup>11</sup> Canadian land and grain prices also fell sharply. Without the backing of McRoberts and the much lower value of their land, Mennonites could not raise enough funds to emigrate and buy land in Paraguay.<sup>12</sup>

By 1925, the financial situation had turned around, allowing McRoberts and Mennonite leaders to continue their plans for emigration. McRoberts founded the Intercontinental Company (I.C.) in Winnipeg to handle the liquidation of Mennonite farm lands in Manitoba and Saskatchewan (43,998 acres worth an estimated \$902,900) and the emigration from Canada. In Paraguay, McRoberts founded the company *Corporacion Paraguaya* (C.P.) to handle the immigration into Paraguay, including the purchase of land and assistance in settlement.

Both companies, the International Company in Winnipeg and the *Corporacion Paraguaya*, stood to make huge profits, according to the German Consul in Winnipeg. He reported that the C.P. purchased 137,920 acres of land in the Chaco from the Carlos Casado Company at a cost of \$1.25 to \$1.50 per acre,<sup>13</sup> and resold it to Mennonites for \$5.00 per acre. In Manitoba the I.C. bought farm land from the Mennonite emigrants for an average of \$35 per acre and was selling it to new Russian Mennonite immigrants coming to the Canadian prairies for \$65 per acre.<sup>14</sup>

Thus by 1925, the three Mennonite church groups, Sommerfelder, Chortitzer, and Saskatchewan Bergthaler, had decided to emigrate. However, enthusiasm for emigration to Paraguay had diminished since 1921. In the Chortitzer church, the bishop and most of the ministers were in favour of emigrating; however, only about forty percent of the membership was ready to follow. Since the Sommerfelder Church bishop, plus some of the ministers and six hundred members had moved to Mexico, only a small portion of the remaining large Sommerfelder church was prepared to emigrate to Paraguay. In the end, only about 350 Sommerfelder emigrated. An even smaller number of Saskatchewan Bergthaler decided to emigrate.<sup>15</sup> The majority in all three church groups were not convinced they should emigrate, and remained in Canada.

On November 28, 1926, the emigration to Paraguay started with high hopes. The departing emigrant group consisted of about 279 families totalling 1,785 people. They included 1,201 people from the Chortitzer Church, 357 Sommerfelder, and 227 Saskatchewan Bergthaler.<sup>16</sup> The decision was made to have the whole group emigrate at one time, despite advice from A.M. Roger, the Vice President of the Intercontinental Company, to send an advance party of only one hundred families to ascertain the conditions and make preparations.<sup>17</sup>

Upon arrival, the immigrants experienced a series of setbacks because the C.P. was unable, under Fred Engen's leadership, to prepare sufficiently for their arrival.<sup>18</sup> The immigrants left Canada at the onset of winter and arrived in a tropical climate in the hot summer season. Further, the land was not surveyed so the immigrants had to live in crowded tents and make-shift shelters for many months in Puerto Casado on the Paraguayan River, far from the land on which they were to settle.<sup>19</sup> Hot weather and cramped, unsanitary living quarters gave rise to illness and disease, including typhoid fever.<sup>20</sup> Friends and family back in Canada grew anxious and informed McRoberts of the dire situation.

McRoberts arrived in Paraguay and, together with the Mennonites, organized an expedition to make land selection in July 1927. They journeyed into the uncharted land, making short trips to the right and left of the trail looking for agricultural land, trees, and good water. At the end of August the survey of land was finally started, but this too moved slowly. Growing

impatient, some struck out on their own into the Chaco. In frustration, some returned to Canada.

It was only in April 1928, almost two years after arriving in Paraguay, that the immigrants could move onto their land and begin to settle. Fourteen villages were established in 1928. Each village consisted of 16-20 households. Each household received 160-200 acres of land. Four more villages are added by the end of 1932. They decided to name the settlement "Menno Colony" after the early Anabaptist leader who gave his name to this branch of the Anabaptist movement.

### The Establishment of Villages

Year	
1928	Bergthal, Laubenheim, Waldheim, Gnadenfeld, Weidenfeld, Reinland, Bergfeld, Osterwick, Blumengart, Schoental, Halbstadt, Strassberg, Chortitz, Silberfeld.
1929	Neuanlage
1930	Lindenau
1932	Gruenfeld, Gruental

The long journey and extended stay at the company town of Puerto Casado exacted a large toll on the group, both physically and mentally. On the trip to Paraguay six people died. While waiting at Puerto Casado, 121 people died. Forty-eight people died on the way from Puerto Casado to their new land, with another twelve dying once they had arrived in the newly established villages. By the end of 1928, 187 people, of a total of 1785 immigrants, had died.<sup>21</sup> It should also be noted that 371 people gave up on the Paraguayan dream and returned to Canada at their own expense.<sup>22</sup> Thus, within two years of arriving in Paraguay, almost a third of the immigrants had either returned to Canada or died.

In early 1928, the Intercontinental Company was making plans for more Mennonites to move from Canada to Paraguay. In February 1928, McRoberts' Intercontinental Company representative, A.M. Roger, wrote an upbeat and energetic letter inviting Henry Klippenstein, the "Waisenamt men," and "a few other ministers" of the Chortitzer church still in Manitoba, to a meeting to report, discuss, and view photos and "a lot of exhibits."<sup>23</sup> Roger's view seemed to be that since the major immigration and settlement hurdles in Paraguay had been overcome, the Intercontinental Company was looking to accommodate successive waves of immigrants to Paraguay.

Klippenstein met with Chortitzer ministers and they decided not to meet with Roger. They also asked that the pictures of their relatives in Paraguay not be shown. Klippenstein stated that he and the ministers were concerned that the photos would create too much excitement.<sup>24</sup>

A day later, February 25, 1928, Roger replied, expressing surprise and concern. "I think you are making a very great mistake. I am sending your letter to Bishop [Martin C.] Friesen and the ministers in Paraguay. I can see no reason at all why the people should not see their relatives and friends and what they are doing. Such action on your part looks as though someone wished to prevent people from going to Paraguay...."



*McRoberts photo number #84 shows C.R. Funk from the village of Reinland illustrating how much a plant could grow in one day.*

[Nevertheless] until you change your minds, we will not show the pictures to your people. The pictures will be shown on the West Reserve and if other people ask for them we will show them to them."<sup>25</sup>

There appears to have been a lot of talk about these photos. Roger wrote another letter to Klippenstein two days later to quell fears surrounding the viewing of the photos. He assured Klippenstein that the photos would not be shown in churches, but only in private homes. Roger intended to reassure, but likely raised alarm instead, when he revealed that the Intercontinental Company was offered money to have the photos shown in "all the moving picture houses in the United States," but that they declined, stating, "the pictures are only for non-combatant people."<sup>26</sup>

With family and friends anxious about the living conditions of their family members, they were relieved to hear settlement had finally taken place. By the end of 1928 and the start of 1929, McRoberts took another series of photographs of the settlers in their new homes. The photos, and the descriptions that were provided by Engen, suggest that they were taken to show the successful development of the Menno Colony villages and farms, possibly to encourage further migration and settlement. Each image is identified by village; often the owner is identified as well. They show flourishing gardens, nurseries, and fields filled with a variety of crops such as cotton, peanuts, sunflowers, potatoes, sorghum, beans, pumpkins and watermelons. They also show animals, including pigs and chickens. The theme of the photos is to emphasize the progress of the settlement by showing homes, barns, fertile fields, and favourable growing conditions. In photo eighty-four, the



*J.U. Kehler family in front of their home in Halbstadt. McRoberts photo #171.*

caption reads “the distance indicated by the man with his hand represents the growth of the plant in one day.”<sup>27</sup>

There is a progression in the photos with a few photos of the make-shift housing in the long lay-over in, or near, the town of Puerto Casado followed by the images showing the clearing of the land for agricultural uses. It is interesting to note that in some photos Paraguayan Aborigines are helping to clear land and build homes for the immigrants. Most of the photos show the successful farms that were established. While the aim of McRoberts was a mix of humanitarian aid and personal financial gain, the Intercontinental Company that was established was financially unsuccessful.<sup>28</sup> There was no subsequent wave of immigrants to Paraguay as McRoberts had hoped. Mennonites in Canada had made adjustments and accommodations, and news of the difficulties in Paraguay discouraged emigration.

For Mennonite Heritage Centre practicum student, Rodger Toews, these photos were an exciting discovery. “To see a photo with *Altester* Martin C. Friesen sitting at a table with my grandfather as a child is very special since my family has very few photos of this era.”<sup>29</sup>

These photos provide a unique glimpse into the early years of the Menno Colony in Paraguay. However, over time these photos have suffered from the acidic glue used to affix them to the pages in the albums. The glue has migrated to the surface of the photos, severely damaging them. At this point the details in the damaged areas are still visible, but the photos will continue to deteriorate over time. The good news is that with digital technology the photos can be restored. If you would like to help fund the costly, but important restoration of these photos please contact Korey Dyck (kdyck@mennonitechurch.ca) or me, Conrad Stoesz (cstoesz@mennonitechurch.ca) at the Mennonite Heritage Centre.

## Endnotes

1 M.W. Friesen, *Canadian Mennonites Conquer a Wilderness* (Loma Plata: Historical Committee of the Menno Colony, 2009), 13. See also Peter P. Klassen,

*The Mennonites in Paraguay: Kingdom of God and Kingdom of this world*, volume 1 (Hillsboro, Kansas: Peter P. Klassen, 2003), 24-25.

2 Adolf Ens, *Subjects or Citizens? The Mennonite Experience in Canada 1870-1925* (Ottawa: The University of Ottawa Press, 1994), 208.

3 *Ibid.*, 204, 208, 209.

4 Bernhard Toews, *Tagebuch meines Lebens: Bernhard Toews 1863-1927* (Asuncion: Geschichtskomitee der Kolonie Menno, 2005), 37.

5 Joseph Winfield Fretz, *Pilgrims in Paraguay: The Story of Mennonite Colonization in South America* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1953), 13. See also Harold S. Bender, “McRoberts, Samuel (1868-1947)”, *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (1957), retrieved 4 July 2014, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=McRoberts,\\_Samuel\\_\(1868-1947\)&oldid=118554](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=McRoberts,_Samuel_(1868-1947)&oldid=118554).

6 Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?*, 248, 249.

7 Walter Quiring, “The Canadian Mennonite Immigration into the Paraguayan Chaco, 1926-27”, *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 8 (Jan. 1934): 35.

8 Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?*, 211.

9 Toews, *Tagebuch meines Lebens*, 157-158. See also a review of Toews’ published diary by John J. Friesen in *Preservings*, no. 13 (Dec. 1998): 133.

10 Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?*, 213.

11 “Depression of 1920-21”, *Wikipedia* (2014), retrieved August 12, 2014, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Depression\\_of\\_1920%E2%80%9321](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Depression_of_1920%E2%80%9321). Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?*, 212.

12 Quiring, “The Canadian Mennonite Immigration into the Paraguayan Chaco, 1926-27”, 36.

13 *Ibid.*

14 Peter P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay: Kingdom of God and Kingdom of this world*, volume 1 (Hillsboro, Kansas: Peter P. Klassen, 2003), 60. The gross amount collected from the sale of Canadian lands suggests a lower average closer to \$20/acre.

15 Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?*, 214.

16 *Ibid.*

17 Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay*, 60-61.

18 There is some debate about Fred Engen’s role in settling the immigrants. Quiring says Engen was “a good-hearted man but one who lacked the necessary strength of character and firmness of will as well as the essential organizing ability to successfully perform the task assigned to him.” Quiring, “The Canadian Mennonite Immigration into the Paraguayan Chaco, 1926-27”, 38. Others, such as J.J.R. Funk, writing from Puerto Casado, considered Engen almost an angel. M.W. Friesen, *Canadian Mennonites Conquer a Wilderness*, 30. Engen died in Puerto Casado in 1929. A street in Menno Colony Paraguay is named in his honor. Edgar Stoesz, *Like a Mustard Seed: Mennonites in Paraguay* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2008), 27.

19 M.W. Friesen, *Canadian Mennonites Conquer a Wilderness*, 127-129.

20 Quiring, “The Canadian Mennonite Immigration into the Paraguayan Chaco, 1926-27”, 39. Quiring uses the term “abdominal typhoid”, which is also known as Typhoid fever and is spread by drinking water contaminated by fecal matter.

21 *Ibid.*, 39.

22 *Ibid.*, “The Canadian Mennonite Immigration into the Paraguayan Chaco, 1926-27”, 42. See also Fretz, *Pilgrims in Paraguay*, 18. Fretz quotes the number 355.

23 Letter from A.M. Roger to Mr. Henry Klippenstein, February 13, 1928. Mennonite Heritage Centre, volume 1417, file 9.

24 Letter from H.G. Klippenstein to A.M. Roger of the Intercontinental Company, February 24, 1928. Mennonite Heritage Centre, volume 1417, file 9. “... das es besser ist nicht zu viel Aufregung unter uns zu machen.”

25 Letter from A.M. Roger to Henry Klippenstein, February 25, 1928. Mennonite Heritage Centre, volume 1417, file 9.

26 Letter from A.M. Roger to Henry Klippenstein, February 27, 1928. Mennonite Heritage Centre, volume 1417, file 9.

27 Samuel McRoberts fonds, Mennonite Heritage Centre. Description by Fred Engen, translated from Spanish to English by Rodger Toews, 2014.

28 Harold Bender, “Intercontinental Company, Limited”, *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (1955), retrieved 29 August 2014, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Intercontinental\\_Company,\\_Limited&oldid=104872](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Intercontinental_Company,_Limited&oldid=104872).

29 Samuel McRoberts fonds, Mennonite Heritage Centre, book 2, photo #71.



The photo of the railway track from Puerto Casado to the new colony is an example of the kind of damage the photos have suffered. McRoberts photo #4.

# Part I: Walking with “Die Alcatraz Brüder”

Dora Maendel, Fairholme Community, Portage la Prairie, Manitoba

One of the challenges every Hutterite German Teacher faces is how to teach Hutterite history effectively, especially in the elementary grades. Typically, storytelling is the *modus operandi*, supplemented with using some of the *Väterlieder*, or traditional songs of our forefathers, many of which lend themselves well to telling a specific background story. Fortunately, in the mid-seventies, the Manitoba Department of Education under the instigation of Mr. Karl Fast, consultant for languages other than French, arranged for an annual in-service training day for Hutterian Teachers of German. Many excellent ideas were shared at this in-service held at James Valley Colony near Elie, Manitoba, and it became a significant influence for improved education in Manitoba Hutterite communities – a force that continues to this day.

In November 1988 the in-service agenda included a special guest presenter: Bodo Hildebrand, a doctoral candidate from the University of Marburg in Germany, who was conducting field studies on his dissertation on the Hutterite education system. The topic of Remembrance Day had piqued his interest and he urged delegates to use it as an opportunity to honour another kind of hero, namely the people who gave their lives as Anabaptist and Hutterian martyrs. Hildebrand proposed presenting the story of a specific person or persons, whose heroism centred on faithfulness and devotion even in the face of brutality and possibly death. Hildebrand cited the story of young Felix Mantz, one of the founders of Anabaptism who, together with Georg Blaurock and Conrad Grebel, participated in believer’s baptism on that fateful January 21, 1525. Mantz was subsequently arrested, tried and sentenced to death. He was drowned in the Limmat River in downtown Zurich in the autumn of 1526.

Another inspiring incident, found in *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren*, involves a young Anabaptist known only as *der Müllerknab*, the millerboy. While youthful heroes render these stories relevant, others have immediacy because they occurred relatively recently, and they answer a historic question. The story of the Alcatraz Brothers explains why the Hutterites emigrated from the USA in 1918 to settle on the Canadian Prairies.

Like other historic peace churches, such as the Quakers, the Amish and the Mennonites, Hutterites reject violence and military service. Religious leaders, however, had been unsuccessful in persuading the American government to develop a conscientious objector program before World War I broke out. In 1917 the Conscription Act was passed and Hutterites were advised that anyone receiving a letter of conscription must report to the designated military camp and appeal to the commander there for exemption from military duties. Four men from the Rockport Colony at Alexandria, South Dakota presented at Fort Louis, Washington. Subsequently, they were court-martialed for insubordination, steadfastly refusing to don the military uniform, and sentenced to twenty years in the prison of Alcatraz in the Bay of San Francisco, where they were beaten with iron rods and otherwise so severely mistreated that two of them later died from the resulting complications. This event became the catalyst for Hutterian leaders’ decision to initiate inquiries about immigrating to Canada.

This teacher followed Hildebrand’s suggestion to use the story of the Alcatraz Brothers as a Remembrance Day lesson, and was invited in August 2004 to present her lesson plan at the International Conference for Hutterian Educators (ICHE) in Aberdeen, South Dakota.



Water Colour by: Don Peters, Plough Publishing, Walden NY, 2014.



Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay was a military prison when the four Hutterite young men were imprisoned there in 1917. Alcatraz became a federal prison in 1933 intended for criminals who could not be rehabilitated. Photo Credit: Christian Mehlführer, Wikipedia Commons.

In November 2005, one of our HBN IITV (Hutterian Broad-band Network for Interactive Instructional TV) high school teachers conducted a writer's workshop in our school for her combined grade nine and ten English Language Arts (ELA) class, involving students from more than a dozen different Manitoba colonies. She had invited Joe McLellan, Winnipeg storyteller and educator, to assist her.

Near the end of the day, Mr. McLellan asked the class for a favour. He had a different kind of story for them, he said, adding that he was an American draft dodger who had immigrated to Canada during the Vietnam War, because he was opposed to violence. Profoundly moved when he encountered the Alcatraz Brothers story, he was planning to write a picture book version of it. Would they help by listening to it and offering a critique? "It is really your story, so you may notice errors and omissions of which I couldn't be aware."

One young man offered a striking suggestion. "This story should be told with some of our church songs included, since these Alcatraz Brothers most likely sang such songs during their imprisonment – that was always our forefathers' source of strength and support when they suffered persecution, torture and imprisonment."

In preparation for telling the story at the inaugural Winnipeg International Storytelling Festival (WISF) in spring of 2006, McLellan urged Dora Maendel to select and insert appropriate songs. Three were chosen and Kenny Wollmann, director of the Hutterian Brethren Book Centre, and director of the Baker Community Choir, agreed to perform the songs with his male quartet of young men from Baker.

An adult version of the Alcatraz Brothers story was compiled using *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren*, court martial documents and letters written by the brothers. Joe McLellan and Dora Maendel told the story together that day. Due to the acoustics in the Carol Shields Auditorium at the Millennium Library and to Kenny Wollmann's directing, the quartet's singing was profoundly moving. His arrangement of the one *Väterlied*, "Mein Eifer tut mich dringen," with the first line sung solo, added a mournful, even haunting quality that was unusually effective.

That evening, at the supper hosted for all WISF performers at St. Paul's College at the University of Manitoba, Dora Maendel was asked to share a synopsis of the story, with the quartet singing the main song.

That fall, when Dr. Royden Loewen, Chair in Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg was planning the "War and the Conscientious Objector" (CO) Conference, he was alerted to the Alcatraz Brothers story by Agnes Thiessen Dyck, who had heard it at the Millennium Library. Although the major focus of the conference was COs of World War II, Dr. Loewen agreed to feature the Alcatraz Brothers story, as the concluding presentation of the Friday evening, because Hutterites belong to the historic peace church family.

The theatre was packed and despite the fact that two of the quartet members could not participate, the audience response was enthusiastic and warm. Afterwards, the Hutterites were approached about whether they would be willing to tell the story in area Mennonite Churches as part of a longer, peace-themed program that might be video taped at one point. They promised to consider and discuss it in their respective communities.

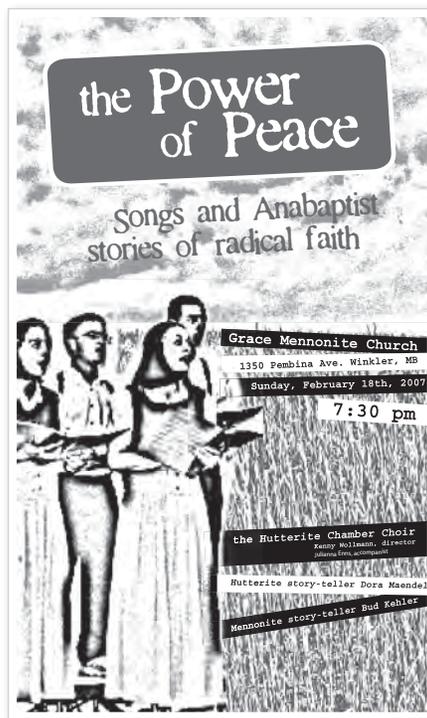
Soon after the CO Conference, Bernie Loeppky of the Evangelical Anabaptist Fellowship (EAF) in Winkler, Manitoba contacted Kenny Wollmann. They were planning a special presentation featuring several peace-themed stories interspersed with singing, and wanted Hutterite participation, specifically the Alcatraz Brothers story with quartet singing, as well as some choir singing. Kenny agreed to prepare the required number of songs with his Baker Choir as well as male voices for the songs within the story. Tizrah Maendel, graphic designer at the Hutterian Brethren Book Centre, created the advertising poster, and the name "The Power of Peace Program" was chosen. A practice run was conducted at the Trileaf Hutterite Colony near Baldur, Manitoba. The whole community gathered in the communal dining room after supper; the audience was captivated and it was clear that many were deeply moved.

Two weeks later, on February 18, 2007 in the Grace Mennonite Church in Winkler, the first program took place. It included, in chronological order, stories from the First and Second World Wars through to the fatal shooting in 2006 of five Amish girls and wounding of five in West Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. Audience members were as moved by the Alcatraz Brothers story as the folk in Trileaf Colony had been.

On several occasions, Conrad Stoesz concluded with a powerful anecdote involving the life-saving role of stories for some of the islanders during the time of the December 2004 Tsunami in Indonesia. Driving his young family home from a Christmas gathering in a western Canadian province, Mr. Stoesz tuned in to a late-night CBC program to help him stay awake, when the story caught his attention.

Rescue and disaster relief workers in the area were startled to note that amid the devastation and ruin of the tsunami, one island remained alone as having experienced no loss of life. In response to the foreigners' questions the islanders explained that many years earlier their island had been hit by a tsunami causing many deaths and great hardship. That is when they decided to teach the necessary precautionary steps to the next generation. And the next. "When the earth starts to shake, and the water moves out," they repeated frequently and regularly, "run for the highest spot on the island!" This simple story enabled all the inhabitants of this island to make it to safety. "Which stories do you remember during difficult times?" Stoesz asked. "Go in peace."

Over the next three years the "Power of Peace Program" was presented in nearly a dozen Mennonite churches, to almost capacity audiences. On a number of occasions, the choir of a colony located



Poster for the first "Power of Peace" presentation at the Grace Mennonite Church in Winkler in 2007. Credit: Tizrah Maendel, Hutterian Brethren Book Centre. 2007.

nearer to a particular church took the place of the Baker Colony choir. One weekend, the Baker Choir drove to Saskatchewan to present in the Mennonite Church in Osler on Saturday evening and in Saskatoon the next morning.

Some churches requested a Sunday morning presentation, in order to reach their whole congregation. During each Power of Peace Program an offering was taken, with the proceeds going to the Evangelical Anabaptist Fellowship (EAF). Later, a script was written based on the Alcatraz Brothers story. Organized in the format of a newscast and narrated by Jesse Hofer, it was filmed for use as a teaching resource and included on *The Radical Followers of Jesus* DVD, produced and distributed by EAF.

The story was also told in at least a dozen Hutterite communities, often as a special part of the high school graduation program, with the songs performed by the audience or the young men of the colony. More recently it was told over the HBN IITV system in response to the request of one elementary grades teacher as part of her Remembrance Day program and

numerous other schools were able to participate.

In preparation for the “Muted Voices Conference and Symposium” at the National World War I Museum in Kansas City in October 2017, the story was told at the Baker Community this past spring, by Duane Stoltzfus, Jesse Hofer and Dora Maendel. Led by Benjamin Maendel, the minister, the audience sang the songs within the story.

It has been a tremendously enriching experience to become so intimately familiar with this inspiring story and to watch so many different people, including students and children, respond to the Alcatraz Brothers story with the same thoughtfulness and depth of emotion. In recognition of its power to move people, it is exciting to be involved in plans for sharing this story in 2017 with people in the USA, the country where it took place; it is their story also. Particularly gratifying is the involvement of two fellow-Hutterites, Ian Kleinsasser of Crystal Spring Colony and Jesse Hofer of Silverwinds, who represent the next generation of Hutterite history teachers. Mr. Fast would be pleased.

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## Part II: Remembering Muted Voices

Jesse Hofer, Silver Winds Community, Sperling MB

When Englishman Andrew Bolton first heard the story of the Alcatraz brothers through the *Plough* magazine published by the Bruderhof, he was profoundly moved. He knew immediately that this was a story that needed to be shared with the wider world. Andrew had come across the Darvell Bruderhof in England in 1987, and he and his family have visited a number of times and lived there for a year in 1992-93. Andrew’s father was a soldier in World War II for seven years and experienced

difficulties afterwards that caused much anguish and hardship for Andrew’s mother and his three brothers. When Andrew understood as a teenager the truth about his father’s horrific experiences in war he knew he must oppose war. This commitment was reinforced by the fact that in many of the villages and towns he visited he encountered war memorials with long lists of names of those who had sacrificed their lives in the First World War. “What are we (churches and other groups

opposing war) doing to keep alive the stories of those who opposed the War?” he wondered. “What can we do to honour the memory of those who witnessed for peace and paid dearly for it?”

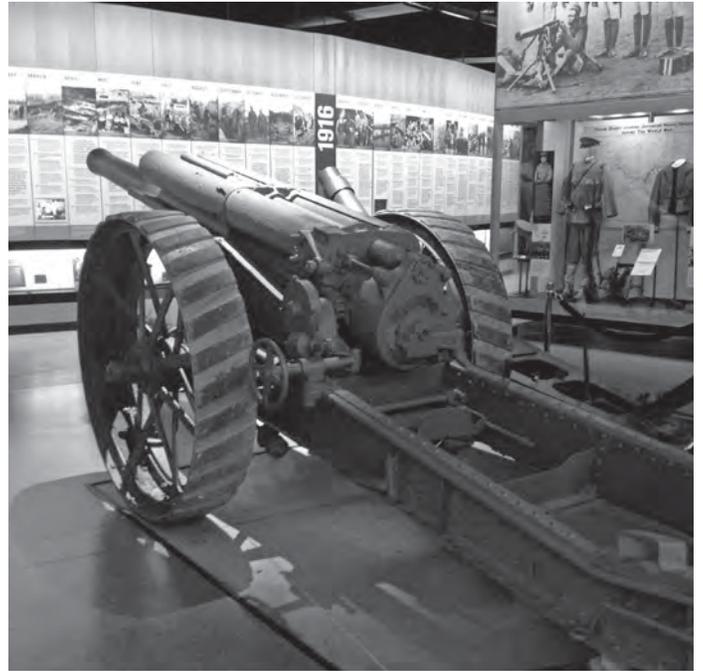
We are currently remembering the centennial of World War I (1914-1918) and Andrew was interested in doing something meaningful to acknowledge resisters and conscientious objectors to the “Great War” during these years. He now lives in metropolitan Kansas City where the USA National World War I Museum is located. His friend, Matthew Naylor, a fellow-member of the Community of Christ Church, had recently become the President and CEO of the museum. The museum is also just a 30-minute drive from Fort Leavenworth where Joseph and Michael Hofer died in 1918. Matthew Naylor’s openness to doing something related to conscientious objectors in World War I opened a



*The Liberty Memorial, home of the The National World War I Museum in Kansas City, where the “Remembering Muted Voices” conference will be held in October 2017. Photo Credit: Wikipedia Commons.*



Some of the exhibits in the National World War I Museum. The *Remembering Muted Voices* exhibit will be one of the museum's exhibits before becoming a travelling exhibit. Photo Credit: Jesse Hofer.



unique opportunity to gather a group of people who would be interested in commemorating the sacrifices made by those who refused to participate in the war.

Under Matthew Naylor and Andrew Bolton's leadership and in collaboration with the USA National World War I Museum, a group of individuals has been working for nearly a year planning a conference and a traveling exhibit focusing on the lesser known stories and contributions of those who raised their voices against the war. The conference, "Remembering Muted Voices: Conscience, Dissent, Resistance, and Civil Liberties in World War I through Today" will take place October 19-21, 2017 at the museum. Plans are for the traveling exhibit, to be built by the Kauffman Museum at Bethel College, to be ready in time for the conference and for subsequent travels across North America after its exhibition at the National World War I Museum. The group at Kauffman Museum also built "The Mirror of the Martyrs" exhibit, which toured North America between 1990-2007, appearing in fifty-five locations in twenty-one states and five provinces.

Since the story of the Alcatraz brothers is to play a key role at the conference and particularly via the exhibit, Mr. Bolton and other planners deemed Hutterite representation on the working committee to be crucial. Because Dora Maendel had extensive experience with the story through her story-telling experiences and her participation in the EAF-sponsored "Power of Peace Program," she was a natural candidate for the committee. Ian Kleinsasser's familiarity with the World War I era, gained through his work of assisting elder Jacob Kleinsasser in compiling a historical record of the war years, was also a logical choice. My own involvement with the project relates to my role as a student and teacher of Hutterite history and my belief that this is a project worth supporting, especially at a time when our world seems to be experiencing an alarming escalation of armed conflicts.

I was invited to join the committee by Duane Stoltzfus, whom I had first met in the summer of 2013 during a study

trip with Kenny Wollmann to the Mennonite Church archives in Goshen, Indiana. Duane is the author of *Pacifists in Chains*. It is an excellent recent publication from Johns Hopkins Press that uses archival material, newly-discovered letters from the four Hutterite men and others imprisoned during the war, as well as interviews with these Hutterites' descendants to explore the tension between a country preparing to enter into a world war, and a people whose history of martyrdom for their pacifist beliefs goes back to their sixteenth-century Reformation beginnings.

Meeting Duane again in Kansas City in January 2014 presented the opportunity to organize a special event at Baker Community this past May where we could test a presentation format in anticipation for the conference in 2017. Collaborating with Duane and Dora (my role was to read excerpts of the brothers' letters written from prison) was a tremendous honour; both have devoted much energy into studying and sharing this remarkable story. The rich historical details from an American perspective provided by Duane gave important depth, texture and context to the familiar narrative. I was quite familiar with the story already, but the combination of the fresh historical background details shared by Duane, the personal, persuasive story-telling delivered by Dora, and the raw emotional effect of reading aloud the letters penned by the brothers made the narrative come alive and real in a powerful way.

Readers may justifiably wonder how the unlikely partnership between the peace churches and other organizations interested in protecting religious and civil liberties, and the nation's official World War I Museum came about. Andrew has a deep respect for the Anabaptist and Quaker traditions and understood the importance of sharing stories of resistance to war with the broader public with the centennial of World War I approaching. But it was his friendship with Dr. Matthew Naylor, CEO of the National World War I Museum that has been the key to opening this door. Dr. Naylor and his staff readily agreed that the museum could participate and



*A peaceful scene. One can only hope this young Hutterite boy and other pacifist young people will never have to face the torture and ridicule for their pacifist beliefs that his forefathers did during World War I. Photo Credit: Jesse Hofer*

co-sponsor a conference on the topic of resistance to World War I. After all, in Dr. Naylor's words, "The museum is not a military museum; it is a social history museum." As such, its mandate also involves documenting and exploring responses to the Great War that fall outside the mainstream narrative.

From there, Andrew began assembling a working committee including representatives of the Hutterites, the Mennonites, the Bruderhof, the Peace History Society and the National World War I Museum. All groups participating in the working committee are also co-sponsors of the project, along with others such as the American Friends Service Committee (Quakers) and the Brethren Historical Library and Archives. The circle of support is still widening. The wonderful collaboration between this diverse group is exciting and encouraging and can be recognized as the work of God's Spirit.

Members of the working committee, along with several people playing a supporting role in other capacities, met in person at the National World War I Museum in Kansas City on January 1-2, 2014 to plan the preliminary details of the project. The delegates had the opportunity to tour the state-of-the-art museum and learn more about the economic, social and political circumstances that contributed to the war. Matthew and Teri Naylor graciously hosted us at their home for supper and fellowship. Our time together confirmed my hope that good things would emerge from our work.

In the next three years, a smaller planning committee comprised of Dr. John Roth (Goshen College), Andrew

Bolton (Community of Christ/Graceland University) and a representative of the Peace History Society will continue to plan the details of the conference. Another group based at the Mennonite Kauffman Museum, Bethel College, Kansas—Dr. James Juhnke, Rachel Pannabaker and Chuck Regier— will work on the traveling exhibition. The working committee will be updated through regular conference calls; a further task for the working committee is to consider how Hutterites might want to remember the two Hofer martyrs who died at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, when that centennial happens at the end of 2018.

Persons or organizations willing to contribute to the Remembering Muted Voices project should send cheques made out to the National World War I Museum to:

**National World War I Museum  
Remembering Muted Voices**

**2017 Symposium/Exhibition b**

(indicate which you want to support in the memo)

**100 W. 26<sup>th</sup> Street**

**Kansas City, Missouri 64108 USA**

For further information about the project, please contact Andrew Bolton, [abolton@cofchrist.org](mailto:abolton@cofchrist.org) or Andrew Bolton, Council of Twelve, Community of Christ, 1001 W. Walnut, Independence, MO 64057, USA.

# Biographies

## The Seven Isaacs: Remembering the Days of Old

Royden Loewen, Steinbach

Presented to the Loewen gathering at Loewenhill Farm, Blumenort, June 29, 2014

Every family or clan has its legend, or indeed legends. They arise from times of storytelling, and they may be hinged to a sacred text, such as Deuteronomy 32:7 which states, “Remember the days of old, consider the generations long past, ask your Father and he will tell you, your elders and they will explain,” and in doing so you will discover that “the Most High gave the nations their inheritance.”

What the ‘father’, that is our grandfather, Isaac P. Loewen, told us, was the story of ‘Six Isaacs,’ that for six generations the eldest son of each family was an ‘Isaac.’ That is, until his, the sixth generation. Evidently our Grandmother Maria (nee Plett) did not like the name and thus reserved Isaac for her ‘fourth’ and not ‘first son,’ and evidently for a baby which she knew would not live, for that baby Isaac died just a week after being born. But who were the six Isaacs? How did they live their lives of commitment, of discipleship? What can their lives shed on the “days of old,” on the process by which a clan received its faith inheritance?

Of course, one thing any “father” story teller would tell us is that no extended family is created by a patriarchal lineage. Women in fact do the birthing, they bring the babies into this world, and thus, even though history has often ignored them, they are there – our mothers, grandmothers, etc., passing on the faith and visions of faithfulness to their children. If we are going to ask ‘who were the fathers of our grandfather,’ can we stop first, and ask, ‘who were the mothers of our grandmother?’ Who was the mother of Maria? We know about Maria, whose life spanned 1895 to 1973: born on a farm exactly one mile to the northeast of her and husband Isaac’s farm on the hill south of Blumenort; she gave birth to ten babies; later she was a migrant to Mexico at the behest of her husband Isaac; she came back to the Blumenort area sometime after Isaac’s death in 1963 and died in Canada a few years later.

Grandchildren will have their own memories of Maria. I have mine, one of a blessing she spoke to me on her deathbed, words mumbled that I could not make out, but addressed to me, ‘Reij’ (pronounced the way Texans say ‘Ray’), her name for me, and ones I took at the time as a young man. Of course, no memory of grandmothers is always positive: I still feel the sting of her put-down when during a moment of bread-baking during the summer of 1963 my older sisters asked if they too could eat a bit of dough, presumably to test the texture or the salt, and she consented. But when I asked if I too might taste the dough, she snapped, ‘*nay, du best en Jung.*’ Oh well, setting the boundaries of gender is surely also the duty of grandmothers.

So, if Grandmother Maria is known to us, surely with our own stories, some elaborate, others consisting of fleeting images, who was her mother? Well, introduce Helena, born Koop



Grandmother Maria Plett Loewen visiting with David K. Klassen's wife. Photo Credit Blumenort, 195. Maria is to the left in the photo. Photo Credit: Royden Loewen, Blumenort, 19.

(1865-1940), a child on a farm just over a mile southwest of Isaac and Maria’s farm. Helena was the wife of David L. Plett, mother to fifteen children. I never met her, have no memories, but an existing photograph of her places her on the right hand side of two of her sisters, and if you look closely, you will see Helena’s face sparkle a bit, a hint of a smile, especially apparent if you contrast her face to the rather sober looks of her sisters.

And who was Helena’s mother? Well, introduce, Katherina, born Barkman (1832-1923), wife of Johan Koop, born in Russia, a young married woman in 1874 at the time of the migration, mother ultimately to ten children, a woman who lived to be ninety-one. The only statement that relates to her is that apparently she would reminisce about the olden days in Russia where she and Johan ran a large and successful farm that employed Ukrainian or Russian workers. She recalled that although their workers were taken good care of, it was a shame that collectively Mennonites in Russia did not. A woman with a social conscience that bridged gaps of ethnicity and faith.

And who was Katherina’s mother? Introduce, Gertrude Klassen, born in 1800, and dead at the relatively young age of forty-seven or so, wife of Jacob J. Barkman, the elderly widower who surely must have been one of the very eldest Mennonite immigrants to Manitoba in the 1870s, one who came to Blumenort and is the only person born in the 1700s buried at the old Blumenort cemetery. We know virtually nothing about Gertrude, except that she was the mother to five babies, and that according to *Kleine Gemeinde* ministerial records



Three Koop sisters. Helena Koop Plett is the one on the left. She is sitting with her sisters, Gertrude and Katherine. Photo Credit: Royden Loewen, Blumenort, 284.



Grandfather Isaac P. Loewen who told the stories of the 'seven Isaacs'. Photo Credit: Royden Loewen, Blumenort, 371.

brought to light by Delbert Plett (see *Pioneers and Pilgrims*, 280), she was the recipient of a letter in 1845 signed by the entire Kleine Gemeinde ministerial council asking her to do her part in bringing back to the Kleine Gemeinde fold her errant and for-some-time excommunicated husband, Jacob. What he was disciplined for we do not know, but that in this unusual request, the ministerial would identify her as a person of the moral certitude and personal strength who could affect her husband, on behalf of the church, surely speaks of her reputation in the community.

We have no knowledge to date of who Gertrude Klassen's mother was, although it is likely that the GRANDMA database might. In any case here is a lineage of grandmothers, like Lois of the New Testament, who passed on their faith to their daughters, until it reached Grandmother Maria, who passed it on to her children.

At Maria's side of course was Grandfather Isaac P. Loewen, who among other people, received his guidance for life from his father. Grandchildren will have their own memories of him, but we know that he was born in 1891, died in August of 1963; that he farmed on his own as a bachelor from the time of his Dad's death when Isaac P. was twenty-four till he married Maria just before he turned twenty-seven; that he farmed in the old village site of Blumenort until in 1937 he built a brand new house and barn on the hill which is now home to the historic farm; that he was a respected community leader, secretary of the local cheese factory as well as the migration committee to Mexico, that he farmed in a small way in Mexico where he also operated an English bookstore. My own memories are mostly of that summer of 1963 when he and Grandma came up from Mexico, a short sojourn in Manitoba which ended when Isaac died of a stroke in August of that year. My own father always mused that Grandfather Isaac came back to the beloved Canada to die. Nevertheless I recall vividly Isaac telling stories that summer; in fact we have a photo of my sisters, Beverly and Judy, snuggling up to him in our dining room, and I still recall his strong voice as Dad taped an interview with him. I recall how cool it seemed that a man who needed a white cane to denote his sight impediment would nevertheless ride a bicycle around the tear-dropped driveway at the historic Loewenhill farm. He spoke many words, but ones that my father told me about were that at the time of Grandparents' migration to

Mexico, Isaac stated that the "true Christian is never at home in this world, and should never become too comfortable in any one country." True followers of Christ live simply and peacefully, surely, but they are also pilgrims and strangers, merely passing through this world.

So, who was Isaac P.'s father? Meet Isaac J. Loewen (1857 to 1914), a mere boy at the time of the migration to Manitoba in the 1870s, a boy who, according to his grandmother who lived in Nebraska had an exceptionally fine hand-writing. He lived with his family in Rosenort until, as a young man seeking work (natural for the eldest son of any family), he came across the river to Blumenort. For whom he worked I don't know, but evidently he fell in love with Elisabeth, the eldest daughter of Abram and Margaretha Penner. A story told to me by Aunt Tina Plett of Mexico tells how Isaac and Elisabeth came to be married even though the very idea had been thoroughly dismissed by her father, Abram, because as the eldest child, and daughter, she was needed at home, to serve her five brothers, and two baby sisters. The story goes that one day, returning from a multi-day trip to Winnipeg along the ridge road that connected Blumenort to Isle de Chênes, the way station to Winnipeg, Abram came upon a smartly dressed young Isaac Loewen heading northwest from Blumenort, reportedly to a Wiebe family living near Hochfeld, two miles distant, and given his Sunday attire on a work-day it was also evident to Abram that young Isaac was going to court one of the Wiebes' daughters. Arriving at home he told Elisabeth (and we can imagine that she would have dutifully run out to help her father unhitch his horses from the long trip he just endured) that she could forget about Isaac Loewen as he was on his way to court Wiebes' daughter at Hochfeld. Elisabeth, it is said, broke down and sobbed so bitterly that Abram was touched, hurriedly re-hitched the horse to the buggy, and then raced after Isaac. He found him just at the Wiebe driveway, and pulling up to him said curtly, '*Caust de Lies ha.*'

This happy note is unfortunately one of the only of a life that turned out to be bitter agony, for Isaac and Elisabeth would endure the death of seven of their eleven children, three alone from the typhoid epidemic of 1900, but others to other causes, a number in their infancy, denoted by the simple word '*Kind*' that accompanied the name 'Isaac J. Loewen' on the cenotaph at the Blumenort cemetery. We have no record of how Isaac

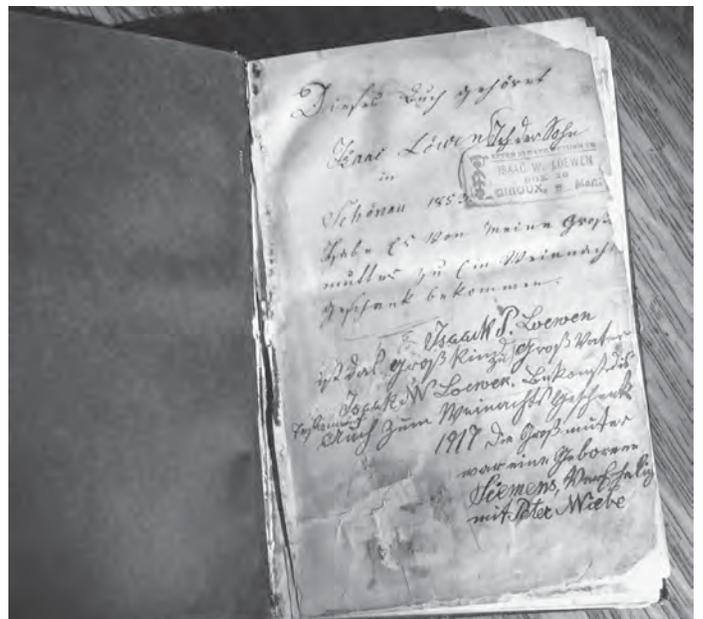


The home of the Isaac J. Loewen in the East Reserve village of Blumenort. It stood on its old site until 1937. Photo Credit: Royden Loewen, Blumenort, 69.

felt, but shortly after the death of a number of these children he wrote a fatherly epistle addressed to the surviving children – Isaac, Elisabeth, Abram and Peter. It is a moving admonition to be faithful and live in simplicity, with a special note paraphrased from Romans 12 (it would seem) to “not strive after the mighty things, but holding onto the simple,” to never take advantage of the weak, but to look out for ways to help them. Other stories could be told of his generosity in the final days before his untimely death from cancer at age forty-eight in 1915.

And who was Isaac J.’s father? Meet Isaac W. Loewen, born in Russia in 1845 and died in 1926. He seems to have been everything his son Isaac J. was not: he lived to the ripe old age of eighty-one, and seems to have been an exceptionally outgoing and even ambitious man. Several stories told to me by Elisabeth Loewen Plett, the wife of Peter K. Plett of Blumenort, depict Isaac W. as a strong-willed, somewhat flamboyant village mayor of Rosenort. One account tells of how Isaac would chair the village council meetings, meetings held in his own rather sizeable house and consisting of all land-owning male householders. When the farmers would begin quarreling rather than seeking consensus, Isaac would excuse himself, declare that he was going to the kitchen to hang out with his wife and children, and that the farmers could summon him back to the council meeting once they had reached consensus. Another account depicts a rather impatient, even aggressive Isaac: in it he reputedly readily passed slower buggies or wagons, even on Rosenort’s narrow bridge, and at such a speed that it didn’t

matter if the two outside wheels of the buggy hung out over the creek, spinning in mid-air. We know Isaac to have been an outgoing farmer: in 1904 after his first wife died and he married the widow Margaretha R. Dueck of Steinbach, he purchased the



The opening page of a Bible received by Isaac W. Loewen when he was eight years old. Photo Credit: Royden Loewen.

Tomenson farm, a quarter section two miles north of Steinbach, where he built a large two and one half storey house which stood until the mid-1970s when it was moved to make room for an expanded #12 highway: he would later sell the farm for \$100 an acre, that is during the wheat boom that followed World War I. And he was a public person: read the *Steinbach Post* from the early 1920s and you will find reference to Isaac W. Loewen dropping by the Post Office just to say hello. Isaac W. would outlive his own son Isaac J. by a dozen years.

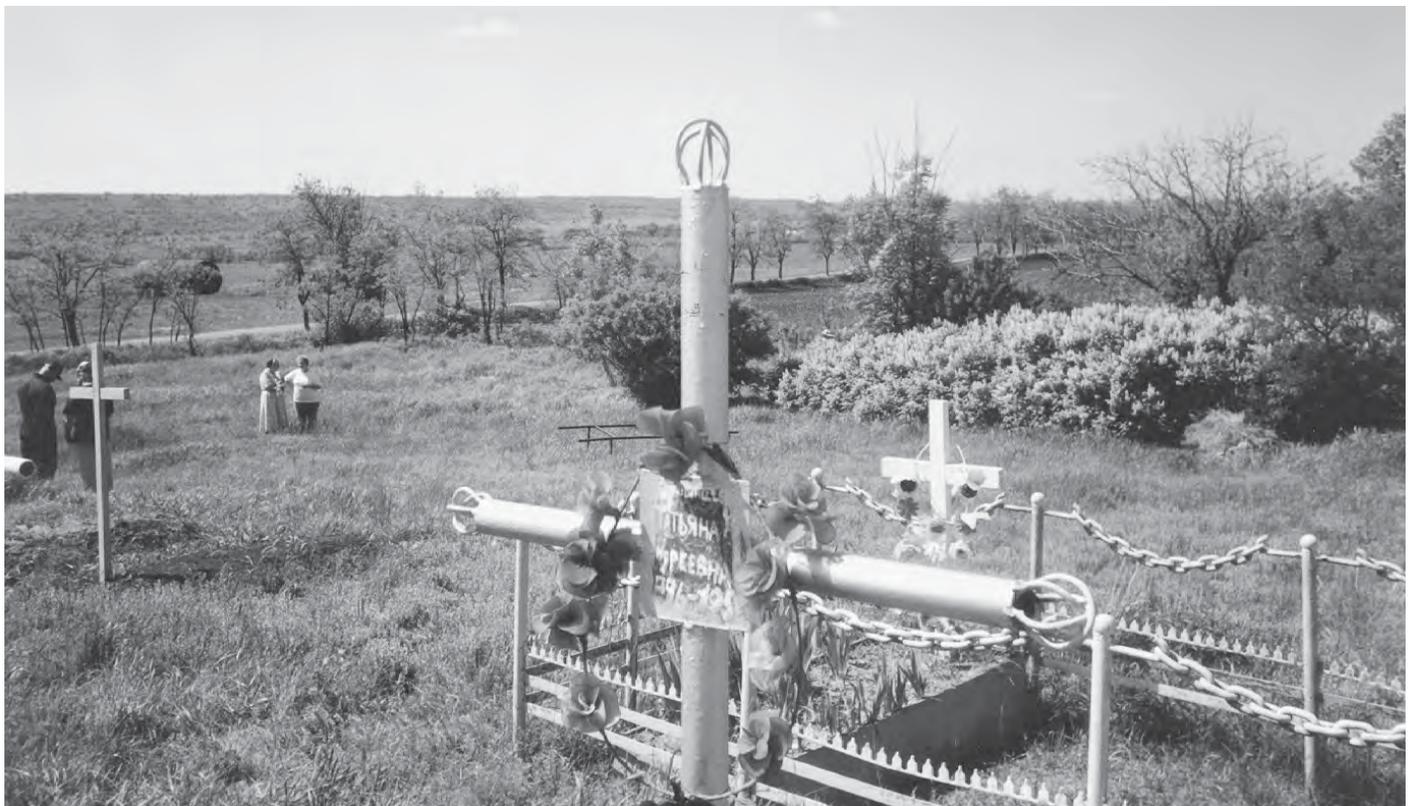
And who was Isaac W.'s father? Well, meet Isaac W. Loewen the first. Born in 1815, this Isaac was one of twelve children raised in Lindenau, Molotschna Colony, Russia, one part of a Loewen dynasty, but himself with a short life. According to Delbert Plett's *Leaders of the Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde* (514) both Isaac and his wife Anna (Wiebe) died in 1856 at early ages, Isaac at about forty-one, from a typhus epidemic connected to the Crimean War, that is, from the so-called 'soldier's disease.' From some source I recall that he had served as a teamster for the Russian army battling the British not far south of the Mennonite communities, and it may have been from that contact that he contracted the disease. They were the parents to only four children, Isaac W. Jr. and Peter W., the latter a minister in the *Kleine Gemeinde* who settled in Blumenort (East Reserve) and two sisters who remained in Russia during the 1870s migration to North America.

Much more is known about this Isaac W.'s father, an Isaac E. Loewen, or, because he was for a time a deacon in the *Kleine Gemeinde*, the only person in this lineage of Isaacs to hold a church office, I have come to call him 'Deacon Isaac.' This Isaac was remarkable in a number of ways. Born in 1787 he lived until 1873, just a week shy of turning eighty-six, a very, very old man for the 1800s. He was also most likely an

only child (his only sibling Jacob apparently dying at a young age) allowing him a strong economic base of a full farm at a relatively young age. Then there is the reference in a German-language newspaper that in 1850 two agronomy students from Germany visited Lindenau, Molotschna to study silk worm farming methods from the 'master' of the craft, Isaac Loewen.

Still, Deacon Isaac's life was difficult. First, having been elected a deacon in the 1830s he was stripped of this office a decade later when he was cited for having become complacent spiritually in that he did not divulge to the *Kleine Gemeinde* ministerial that he knew that his son-in-law, Cornelius S. Plett, the wagon wheel maker from Kleefeld, Molotschna, had beaten the family's maid, an act strictly prohibited by the *Kleine Gemeinde*. Then in 1861, a full dozen years before his own death, he lost his wife Margaretha, a woman he obviously revered, as in a letter after her death Isaac used memory of her to severely chastise his son Heinrich. This son Heinrich proved to be a huge concern to Deacon Isaac, especially in 1863 when he left the *Kleine Gemeinde* to marry Maria Doerksen of the *Grosse Gemeinde*, an apparently attractive woman who enjoyed fashionable clothes and was thus less than enamored by the *Kleine Gemeinde*'s teaching on humility. This union solicited a strong response from Deacon Isaac; he penned a very lengthy letter, quoting scripture readily from a wide variety of biblical books, as well as the writings of Menno Simons, Pieter Pietersz, Peter Twisk, Heinrich Balzer and Thielman van Bragt, suggesting a very well-read person. In his letter, Deacon Isaac is unrelenting: the path chosen by Heinrich and Maria is a worldly, unspiritual, destructive path of pride and ostentation.

A second letter that very year, this one addressed to Maria, is almost eerie in that it now describes a terrible and ominous



A photo of what is believed to be the last resting place of Deacon Isaac E. Loewen (1787-1873) in Heuboden, one of the villages of the Borosenko Colony. The cemetery was visited on a 1998 *Kleine Gemeinde* heritage tour led by Delbert Plett. Photo Credit: *Preservings* 12(1998): 41.

tragedy in which Heinrich has been killed by a bolt of lightning sitting between two of his brothers at lunch by an open window, a death that followed Heinrich taking communion in his new church. In this letter Deacon Isaac is clear that in his understanding the death by lightning came at the hand of God angry at Heinrich's sinful life. That Deacon Isaac writes in such a way to Maria, clearly suggesting that her own faith choices had contributed to his death, seems rather insensitive, yet it is clear that Deacon Isaac is himself grieving intensely for his son.

A third letter, this one from three years later, in 1866, addressed to minister Peter Toews, suggesting that Deacon Isaac was centrally involved in a schism affecting the small Kleine Gemeinde, he offers, by the way, that now that he is a widower he lives successively with his various children, and especially with the young widow, his daughter-in-law, Maria. Even though he had earlier been rather harsh with her, this letter suggests that he is rather fond of her: he notes that she still dreams of her husband Heinrich and thus is refusing the advances of numerous suitors, a fact itself that suggests an attractive young woman, who despite being mother to a small daughter is attracting men. The letter suggests that Isaac is a very devout and conscientious Kleine Gemeinder, but also capable of great affection and a rather forgiving spirit. A subsequent letter to his granddaughter Maria suggests a kindly and caring grandfather.

Isaac E. Loewen's father, Isaac, is a very obscure person to us. We don't know the name of his mother, and thus we don't know his middle initial, although we do know his dates, 1759 to 1834. We know that he was the person who migrated

to Russia as one of the founding families of Molotschna, the 'new colony' founded in 1804. Plett's *Leaders* (510) reproduces a note from a census of 1808 identifying Isaac as a "Tischler," that is carpenter, in addition to running a farm, medium in size, judging from his ownership of one wagon, half a plow, five horses and seven cows, as well as an inventory of unthreshed wheat shocks and twenty-three loads of hay. Plett also cites a writing by Peter P. Toews about Isaac Loewen of Lindenau but I am not aware of it; nevertheless it notes that Carpenter Isaac built a house in the early days in Molotschna that stood for over 100 years.

Given recent genealogical research, the search for more Isaac Loewens has yielded a seventh Isaac, even though according to my uncle Dietrich Loewen, my grandfather never spoke of 'seven Isaacs' but of only 'six Isaacs.' According to genealogist Henry Schapansky of British Columbia, Carpenter Isaac's father was indeed also an Isaac. He was born in 1715 and lived till 1797, at age 82 this would make him another Isaac with rather remarkable longevity. We don't know the name of his wife, but know that he was the father to three children, carpenter Isaac of course, but also to two daughters, Khristina and Eliesabeth, and that he was resident in Tiegenhoff, West Prussia.

The story of the 'Seven Isaacs' covers a range of human experiences, a variety of emotions, and multiple faith expressions. Overall it is a story of the passing of faith and faith teachings from one generation to another. It is a story come alive by asking 'the father' to tell of the 'accounts of times long past' and in the process learning about a lineage of discipleship, of non-violence, of teachings on humility and simplicity.

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## Cornelius J. (CJ) Dyck Teacher, Scholar, Churchman

John J. Friesen, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Cornelius J. Dyck, or CJ as he preferred to be known, died at Normal, Illinois on January 10, 2014 at the age of 93. CJ was a long-time professor of historical theology at the Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, one of the founding schools of the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

CJ was born August 20, 1921 in the village of Lysanderhoeh, in the Am Trakt Mennonite settlement near the Volga River in Russia. His parents were Johannes J. and Renate (Matthies) Dyck. CJ was the second youngest of a family of nine children, three boys and six girls.

After the communist revolution in 1917, the Dyck family lost most of its land, experienced the famine due to grain requisitions, and only survived because of relief supplies from Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). In the 1920s, CJ's



father became the leader of a farmer's cooperative in the Am Trakt settlement which tried to re-establish productive agriculture in the area.

By 1927, Johannes Dyck realized that the more left-leaning communists were taking control, that farmer's cooperatives were going to be liquidated, and that there was no longer a place for him. So he sold his property, bought rail and ship tickets to Saskatchewan for his family of eleven, transferred as much money in American dollars to Canada as he could, and left. The Dyck family passed through the Red Gate on the way to Riga, only a step ahead of agents sent to arrest Johannes.

In Saskatchewan the family purchased a farm near Hawarden, south of Hanley. Here CJ received most of his elementary school education. In 1934,

due to poor crops in the area, the family sold the farm and purchased better land at Tiefengrund, near Laird. Here CJ attended school, and in 1940 graduated from Rosthern Junior College.

During the war, CJ was called up to do military service, and applied for Conscientious Objector (CO) status. After his hearing before a judge he was granted a postponement for the duration of the war. Since his father, in his latter 50s during the war, was not well, and his brother Peter was serving as CO in England, CJ was assigned to serve on the family farm.

At the end of World War II in 1945, at the age of 24, CJ volunteered for service with MCC, serving initially in England and the Netherlands. In 1946 he was assigned to the British Zone of Germany, working with all in need of food, clothing, and emigration help, but mostly with refugees from Eastern Europe and Russia. He initiated the daily feeding of about 100,000 children in North Germany with food supplies sent by Mennonites in North America through MCC, aware that in the famine year of 1921 in Russia, it had been MCC food sent to Russia that saved his life.

Dyck was assigned by MCC to work in South America during 1949 to 1951. His main responsibility was resettling refugees from Germany and Russia in Paraguay, Uruguay and Brazil. One of the achievements he was most pleased about was working with Mennonites in Paraguay to find a location for, and initiate the founding of a hospital and treatment centre for lepers at Kilometer 81 in Paraguay.

In 1951 Dyck left MCC work and returned to North America. He became pastor at the Zion Mennonite Church in Elbing, Kansas. In the following year he married Wilma Regier, who came from his home community in Tiefengrund. They had three daughters, Mary, Jennifer and Suzanne. CJ was pastor in Elbing until 1955. During these years he completed a degree in history at Bethel College, North Newton, and a Masters degree at the University of Wichita.

From 1955-1959 he completed a Bachelor of Divinity and a Ph.D. in history at the University of Chicago, while serving as business manager at the Mennonite Biblical Seminary, located in Chicago at the time. As business manager he planned the seminary's move to Elkhart in 1958.

In 1959 C. J. Dyck was appointed to teach historical theology at the Mennonite Biblical Seminary, and taught until 1989. Significant additional responsibilities came his way in the next few years. He was appointed director of the Institute of Mennonite Studies, the seminary's research and publishing agency, serving for twenty-one years. During these years he organized many conferences and facilitated approximately fifty publications, including *The Politics of Jesus* by John Howard Yoder and *Yahweh is a Warrior* by Millard Lind.

In 1961 CJ was appointed executive secretary of Mennonite World Conference and served until 1973. He played a crucial role in articulating MWC's global vision, claiming in 1972, that "[MWC] must be a part of the mission Mennonites are being called to in the world – not just white, Western Mennonites, [but] all Mennonites . . . Unless MWC can become an integral part of what all Mennonites want to be and do in the world, it cannot have a real future." (MWC News release).

In the early 1960s, Dyck was an observer at the Vatican II sessions, the only Mennonite who was present. Carrying journalist credentials through *Mennonite Weekly Review*, he reported his observations. Janeen Bertsche Johnson, AMBS campus pastor, noted, "Mennonite views toward Catholics

changed over time, and CJ's reports from Vatican II had a major influence on that."

CJ's facility in languages, including English, German, French, Dutch, Spanish, and Low German, enriched his teaching, made him an ideal representative at Vatican II, allowed him to communicate with Mennonites world-wide as MWC executive secretary, and enabled him to include ideas and research from these various cultures in his own writings.

During the years, CJ also wrote and edited a significant number of books, and wrote many book reviews and articles. Two of his best known books are *Twelve Becoming*, and *Introduction to Mennonite History*, which has been used as a text book for many years. Together with Dennis Martin, he edited volume V of the *Mennonite Encyclopedia*. A select listing of CJ's writings is provided below.

In addition to his regular teaching schedule and heavy administrative work, CJ found time to be involved in local church and community affairs. He was on the founding board of Oaklawn Psychiatric Centre, served on the Elkhart Urban League, the YMCA, and on numerous conference committees, including the General Conference Mennonite Church Business Administration committee. He was involved in starting Church Community Services in Elkhart, an ecumenical organization that provides assistance for low-income families.

CJ was an excellent teacher, making history come alive for his students. He had a wealth of personal experiences from which he could draw, was deeply committed to the Anabaptist/Mennonite faith heritage, and had a love for the church. He had an engaging style of lecturing and a great sense of humour. C.J. made a significant contribution to the Mennonite community and to the larger society as a teacher, scholar and churchman.

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### Credits:

MWC news release, 26, February, 2014, "In Memoriam: Cornelius J. Dyck (1921-2014)"  
AMBS News release, Jan. 13, 2014. "C.J. Dyck, professor emeritus, died Jan. 10"

## Salvation, the Self, and the Mennonites

Ralph Friesen, Nelson, B.C.

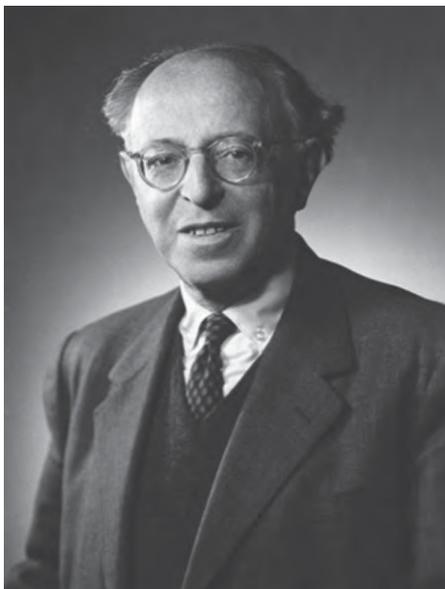
Paul and Silas, in their missionary journeys, came to the Macedonian city of Philippi, where they exorcised a demon from a young woman who brought her masters money through her soothsaying. After that, the woman was of no further use to her masters, so they brought Paul and Silas to the rulers of the city, with angry accusations of trouble-making. The rulers commanded the two men to be beaten and thrown into prison. At midnight, as Paul and Silas prayed and sang, an earthquake happened, opening the doors of the prison. The jailer, supposing that the prisoners had escaped and that he would be held responsible, despaired and drew his sword to kill himself. But Paul prevented him, reminding him that all were still there. Trembling, aware that he was confronting something or someone from a different world than his, the jailer fell down before Paul and Silas, and cried out: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"<sup>1</sup>

It is the great human question. Most of us will ask it, at one time or another, in a state of personal crisis like the Philippian jailer, or in a state of calm reflection, or just because someone else told us to. Although most of us who grew up in one or another of the Christian traditions have been taught that we need ask it only once, provided we find the "proper" answer, our day-to-day experience teaches us that, in fact, the question arises many times. Repeatedly, in our lives, we are reminded of some "unsaved" quality, something missing, lacking, or even intentionally hurtful that we do. We're reminded of our sinfulness.

Paul and Silas' answer to the jailer is familiar to most readers: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house."

The words are familiar but questions remain. What did the jailer have in mind when he said that word, "saved"? What did he think he needed saving from? Or, when we ask the question ourselves today, what do we think we need to be saved from?

The answer I and other children learned in Sunday School in the Steinbach Evangelical Mennonite Church basement in the 1950s, is at the ready and unequivocal, springing directly from the infallible (as we were told) word of God: you are born a sinner, and being a sinner, damned to hell and its torments, for eternity. You need to be saved from damnation.<sup>2</sup>



*Robert Friedman was a prominent scholar of Anabaptism. He was born into a liberal Jewish family in Vienna. He was imprisoned briefly in 1939 and emigrated, going to the United States upon his release. He taught at Western Michigan University. He published many articles on the Hutterites, a tradition he appreciated deeply. Photo Credit: GAMEO.*

We don't know whether the Philippian jailer thought that; presumably, as a pagan Greek he had been schooled to have different assumptions about sin and punishments than the ones Paul and Silas had, or the ones which have developed since over thousands of years as the Christian religion found a multitude of expressions. But we do know that it is questionable as to whether our Anabaptist ancestors, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and later, had that Sunday School, Fundamentalist-fueled preoccupation with our sinful state and the consequent punishment of it. Here's Robert Friedmann in *The Theology of Anabaptism*:

*Man is not only and not primarily a sinner deserving eternal punishment save for the unmerited grace he receives through faith. The Anabaptists would rather say: As man receives grace a new life arises in his heart and makes him ready to be a follower of Christ, and as such to be a lover to his neighbour . . . .<sup>3</sup>*

Well, somebody should have told my Sunday School teachers! As well as the travelling evangelists who descended upon the already over-churched town, usually in spring, to deliver fiery "you're a sinner bound for hell" sermons to the mostly decent but nevertheless frightened and self-doubting throngs of Mennonites who assembled in the tabernacle or under the great canvas tent.

The Anabaptists would say: as we receive grace a new life arises in our hearts, and this life makes us ready to be a follower of Christ—and as such, a lover of our neighbour. What did this mean to them, and what does it mean to us? Our ancestors lived in a much more communal social environment than our own. Many of our Mennonite compatriots, especially in Mexico and in South America, still live in such an environment. We have been made painfully aware, through various media reports and stories, of some of the heart-rending problems plaguing some of these communal societies. It's evident that in some respects these societies are very much in need of learning. And yet it is still possible for us to ask, whether with reference to our ancestors or to present-day traditional Mennonites, if we might learn something from their response to the Philippian jailer's question.

In searching thus, we come up against a slippery, unstable, and mind-boggling construct—the self. The question is: "What

must I do to be saved?" But what sort of "I" asks this question? What sort of "I" can be saved, or not saved? Fundamentalists have popularized the term "soul," as in: "souls to be won for Jesus." We are told we can make a decision to save our souls—or not. In such phrasing, the word "soul" has an impersonal and rather abstract sound to it, given further impersonality when evangelists and churches tote up statistics on numbers of "souls" saved. If we think of "soul" as a word that echoes the teaching that we are created in God's image, then our souls have no need of salvation; they already participate in divinity. What needs salvation is "I"—my small ego self.

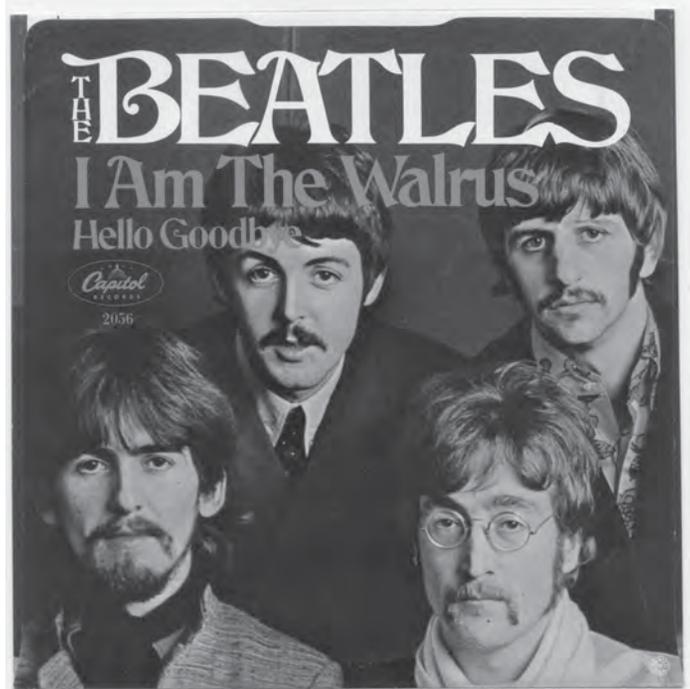
In communal societies all over the world, historically and today, the self is not something conceived of as a distinct, enclosed entity. In some way, there is no such thing as an individual, and many of the ostensible boundaries between self and other are fluid. Back to what Paul and Silas told the Philippian jailer: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house." And so it turns out. We are not told what the jailer says in response to the invocation to believe, but we learn that he takes Paul and Silas from the jail, washes their stripes, and gives them a meal. He and all of his family are baptized, and we are told that they all do believe. It seems like a communal experience more than an individual one—the jailer doesn't consult with his household first to see what they think of this belief issue. The distinction between self and others, which seems so real to us moderns, doesn't seem to exist in the same way for the ancients.

The existentialists and post-modernists have shown us that the "reality" of the perceived distinct and individual self is actually constructed, through the choices a person makes, or by the social and cultural influences impinging on all persons. Also, for centuries the Buddhists have put forward the mind-boggling teaching that there is no hard entity we can call a self—it's an illusion. Even as we acknowledge the possible validity of such ideas, however, we continue to experience ourselves as . . . well, as distinct selves. I feel that I am I, and not you, regardless of what the Beatles might have sung.<sup>4</sup> But somehow we aren't satisfied with this lonely conclusion of self-enclosed isolation. We long for a greater sense of connection, and sense that our every-day little "I" with our collections of habits and our repetitive rounds of worries, and our personal little aches and pains, and our needs, and our endless, recurring wants—this is all rather paltry and inconsequential. There must be something more than just me!

Here's a contemporary psychotherapist's depiction of this modern, bounded ego-self, and how it has come to be. Does it resonate?

*Various historical forces and events, such as the loss of a sense of community and the needs of post-World War II capitalist economies to stave off another worldwide depression, combined to create in the United States and Western Europe an economy based on the continual consumption of non-essential and quickly obsolete consumer items. . . . The consumer society was achieved through the constructing of a self that was empty, a self that feels naturally and irresistibly driven to consume in order to fill up the emptiness.<sup>5</sup>*

Acquisition of "stuff" does connect with one of life's basic energies; we must acquire at least to some extent, or perish.



*I am a Walrus was released by the Beatles in 1967. The first line is "I am he as you are he as you are me/And we are all together" Photo Image: [www.alldyland.com](http://www.alldyland.com)*

Well-off as we are, though, we can quickly recognize that there's more to life than this, and that acquiring and consuming can become habit-forming, alienating ourselves from ourselves, not providing the fulfillment that advertisers so tantalizingly promise. What must we do to bring salvation to such a capitalist-consumer constructed self and its drivenness and emptiness? (Of course the question still pertains for atheist-communist societies and the empty selves constructed by such societies, but our concern begins with our own situation.) Do we simply believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and become instantly and immediately and permanently saved, as, for example, the American fundamentalist preacher John R. Rice (1895-1980)<sup>6</sup> taught?

That's tempting, too. Yet our everyday human experience indicates something profoundly different. First, there's something appallingly self-centred in the idea of saying a few magic words and thus saving your own soul, others, literally, be damned. Second, being human, we know that we become fearful, we offend those we love, we fail to consider others, we feel superior to outsiders, we lie, we over-indulge our appetites—and this still happens, even after we've had an instantaneous conversion experience. Our own lives teach us that, whatever else salvation might be (the Latin root is *salvus*, safe) it is a *process*. One moment in time will not provide us with on-going safety from thenceforth. As life-changing as a given moment of grace can be, there follows another moment, and another, and before long we are confronted with our everyday situation and everyday self-perception again. We walk a path, a way. The walking itself is inherent to our salvation; in some sense it *is* our salvation.<sup>7</sup> We do it with conscious intention, each of us individually. But we never travel the way in splendid isolation; we can only do it in relationship with others.

What was our ancestors' understanding of all this? For early Anabaptists, said Robert Friedmann, the belief prevailed that

one cannot come to God (that is, attain salvation) except as one comes to Him together with one's brother. The brethren, the body of believers, constitute the Christian realm; hence brotherly love, agape, is more than mere ethics. It is one of the basic qualifications of living in the kingdom in the here and now.<sup>8</sup>

To practice this agape, this brotherly love, is to walk the narrow way, with discipline. This is love, not necessarily showing itself as warm fellow-feeling (though such feeling is not excluded), but with a quality of self-sacrifice. Living in the kingdom is living in relationship; living in relationship requires that, at times, the demands of the ego be set aside.

Such love is not easy. Our ancestors were aware of the difficulty, and often evoked the image of the cross as an illustration. Through the cross we are redeemed, not by "the isolated event at Calvary alone but the cross that every believer faces when consistently living a life of discipleship."<sup>9</sup> To be an Anabaptist meant to live in some form of community; to live in community meant to live in obedience to the rules of the community, the *Ordnung*. And to live faithfully under the *Ordnung* required a spirit of yieldedness, quite contrary to the demands of the ego for self-assertion, or perhaps self-aggrandisement:

*Sin in its deepest sense means disobedience to God, a reliance on self-will and self-righteousness. . . . Hence the disciple has to learn one thing above all: the art of self-abandonment (in German called Gelassenheit, yieldedness or resignation).<sup>10</sup>*

What must I do to be saved? According to Friedmann's rendering of Anabaptist teaching, I must abandon my "self," insofar as "self" and "ego" are equated. And this is an art, to be

consciously cultivated and practiced daily, whether painfully or joyfully. Salvation is not then an idea of self-fulfillment, except insofar as we become more truly ourselves when we practice *Gelassenheit*. Rather, it is an idea of self-sacrifice—symbolically, self-crucifixion.

I don't know about you, dear reader, but I shudder to think of being "saved" in this way. But the shudder is just a natural reaction, isn't it, to the prospect of the extinguishing of one's self? To the prospect of death, in short? Hans Schlaffer (martyred in 1528) spoke of the "depth, the lowliness and resignation into which everyone is led, and it is called hell. . . . Into this depth all men have to go who long to be saved in Christ."<sup>11</sup> So is *that* hell? The experience of ego-death in the service of a communal ideal? There appears to be some terribly painful intersection here, of hell and the cross. Every Christian must go to hell, in this sense. If we push further, through the shudder, we find a long tradition, mainly mystic, in pursuit of just this kind of ego-death, whether through fasting, meditating, solitude, or ingesting artificial or natural substances.

Here in Nelson, B. C., where there may be a greater interest in altering one's mind than in most Canadian communities, my wife and I recently attended a one-actor production of "Medicine," a play by T. J. Dawe. Dawe himself performed an autobiographical monologue about his experience with taking the Peruvian psychotropic shamanic plant medicine ayahuasca. It was a brilliant play, we thought. Graphically, humorously, and compassionately, Dawe described the death of his ego brought on by the medicine, and his emergence on the other side of this experience as . . . changed. Not that all his problems (he had been quite transparent about them in



An Amish buggy on a road in Lancaster County. The term *Gelassenheit*, yieldedness, resignation, 'let it be', is an important aspect of the conservative Mennonite ethos. Photo Credit: Ad Meskens, Wikipedia Commons.

his presentation) disappeared. “Ayahuasca doesn’t solve your problems. It shows you what you need to see, but it’s up to you to do something about it.”<sup>12</sup>



*Boiling Ayahuasca produces a psychedelic brew. It was first described in academic literature in the early 1950s. The plant was used by indigenous peoples in the Amazonian Peru for divine and healing purposes. Photo Credit: Wikipedia.*

Those who ingest ayahuasca almost all find that they have to vomit afterward, and Dawe’s description of what happened to him is both repellent and hilarious. Interestingly enough, even here we can find a connection to our theme of losing one’s self. In Philippians 2:7, Paul states that “Jesus emptied himself.” The Greek verb is *kenōsis*, the action of emptying, from *kenoun*, to purge, empty, from *kenos*, empty. Commentators have interpreted this to mean that Jesus relinquished divine attributes in becoming human, and thus showed us the way of “self-emptying of our own will so that we can become entirely receptive to God’s divine will.”<sup>13</sup>

Traditional Mennonites were not in the habit of experimenting with mind-altering substances, even if we can acknowledge that breweries were owned by some Mennonites in 18<sup>th</sup> century Prussia. Yet they were, and are, acutely aware of the need for us to alter our minds and empty ourselves. The way of true *Gelassenheit* is perhaps just as frightening and painful as Dawe describes his experience with the Peruvian hallucinogenic as being. But it’s not something you can ingest, experience, and emerge from. It’s a long way—life-long. It manifests itself in obedience, forgiveness, self-sacrifice, and love. It has its dangers and pitfalls as do other paths; the “artist” of *Gelassenheit* is subject to self-righteousness, rigidity, guilt, suspicion—and, yes, neglect—of him- or herself. He or she needs to remember that after the crucifixion comes the resurrection.<sup>14</sup> Yet the way of *Gelassenheit* stands in quiet dignity in contrast to the way of the self-involved, self-gratifying modern individual.

Having believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, our task does not end. Really, that’s only the beginning. We then still have risks to take, self-denial to practice, and, above all, we have the challenge of continuously creating the kingdom through loving our neighbour.

For good or bad, our ancestors in South Russia, as also latter-day Mennonites in the United States and Canada, seem to

have manifested a particular genius for getting quite rich, materially, even in a communal setting, and possibly aided by that setting. Our ancestors viewed this genius with great caution; they saw the dangers in it to their salvation. In more modern times material wealth is enthusiastically pursued, helped by the adopted Calvinist notion that this pleasant turn of events is the natural consequence of being God’s people and getting God’s blessing. But surely this rationalization can be seen for the self-serving shallow sham that it is. The *Gelassenheit* artist cannot be overly preoccupied with making money, especially when this involves taking advantage of his neighbour. That path leads to quite a different kind of kingdom.

David Schroeder notes a fascinating difference in the interpretation of salvation between evangelical Mennonites and conservative Mennonites: “In the evangelical churches it is customary to emphasize the past tense of salvation (I have been saved) whereas the conservative churches have in the past emphasized the future tense of salvation (I will be saved).”<sup>15</sup> Both are biblical, he says, though they produce different mind-sets and result in different iterations of Christian faith. But as we have seen, there is evidence that early Anabaptists, at least, believed that salvation was also manifested in the present, in the Christian’s daily walk: “. . . man cannot come to God except together with his brother.” Or, just to keep gender from getting in the way: “woman cannot come to God except together with her sister.” In other words, the brother, the sister, the neighbor, constitutes an essential element of one’s personal redemption.<sup>16</sup> My salvation cannot be accomplished without you, as yours cannot be accomplished without me. Maybe the Beatles were onto something, after all.

## Endnotes

- 1 The account is found in Acts 16.
- 2 Of the many Fundamentalist expositions of this interpretation, one of the most clearly representative is that of John R. Rice (1895-1980), for example in his booklet, *What Must I Do to Be Saved? – The Plan of Salvation Made Plain to Sinners from the Word of God*, still available online at: <http://www.wholesomewords.org/resources/saved.html>. Apparently millions of copies of this tract have been distributed, some, no doubt, from my father P. D. Friesen’s store on Steinbach’s Main Street, the Evangel Book Shop.
- 3 Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1973), p. 74. Whether the fact that Friedmann was born a Viennese Jew has any bearing on his interpretations of Anabaptist thought I will leave for you to consider.
- 4 “I am he as you are he as you are me / And we are all together”: from “I Am the Walrus,” lyrics by John Lennon and Paul McCartney, 1967.
- 5 Philip Cushman, *Constructing the Self, Constructing America: A Cultural History of Psychotherapy* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1995). Excerpt in *Psychologica*, Official Magazine of the Ontario Association of Consultants, Counsellors, Psychometrists and Psychotherapists, Vol 32, Number 1, Winter 2010, p. 11.
- 6 I choose this example because Rice was influential in re-shaping the thinking of many North American Mennonites.
- 7 “The good life is a process, not a state of being. It is a direction not a destination.” (Carl Rogers)
- 8 Robert Friedmann, “The Doctrine of the Two Worlds,” in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, ed. Guy F. Hershberger (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1958), p. 113.
- 9 Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism*, p. 85. See also Luke 9: 23: “And he said to them all, if any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.”
- 10 Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism*, p. 66.
- 11 Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism*, p. 83.
- 12 T. J. Dawe, *Medicine*, 2012.
- 13 Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenosis>, retrieved March 29, 2014.
- 14 See Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for our True Self* (New York: Jossey-Bass, 2013).
- 15 David Schroeder, “Evangelicals Denigrate Conservatives,” *Preservings* No. 15, December, 1998, p. 47.
- 16 Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism*, p. 81.

# Book Reviews and Review Essays

## I am Hutterite

Mary-Ann Kirby, (2007)

## Removing the Hutterite Kerchief

Rebecca Hofer, (2010)

## Hutterites - Our Story to Freedom

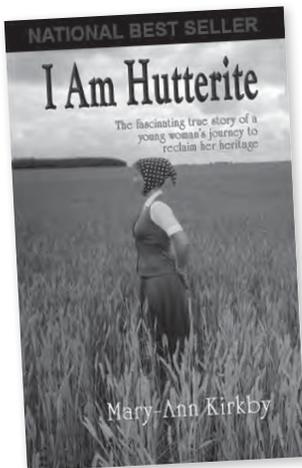
The Nine, (2013),

## Secrets of a Hutterite Kitchen

Mary-Ann Kirkby, (2014)

## Since We Told the Truth

a sequel by The Nine, (2014)



These five books, written by Hutterites after they left their home communities, provide outsiders a glimpse of Hutterite life. All the authors tell the stories of their lives from the perspective of those who, for one reason or another, decided to leave. All suffered pain, disappointment, anger, and betrayal when they left. All look back at their former lives through the lens of hindsight, and to some extent from the need to justify that their leaving was necessary. All express feelings of having found freedom, or a new religious life, or a new sense of wellbeing.

For the communities from which they came, and for many other Hutterite communities, these books are understandably painful. The communities also have feelings of anger, disappointment and betrayal. Their own children, those whom they taught and nurtured, and who they thought would one day become contributing members and leaders, have turned their backs on them. Their children have written their negative stories for the whole world to read. The home communities may well fear that not only will these writings give Hutterites a bad name, they may also lure others to leave.

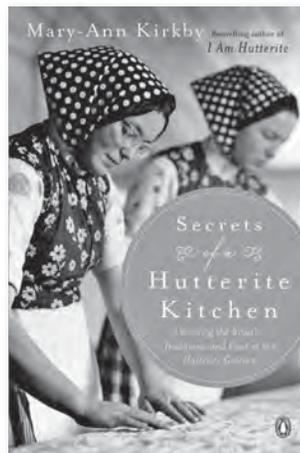
Mary-Ann Kirby, in her very successful books, is both critical and positive about Hutterite life. She is critical of the experiences in her home community which resulted in her family leaving, but she is positive about the values, strengths, and beauty of communal life when it works as it is intended to work. As she indicates, she tries to draw back the veil of secrecy around Hutterite daily life to allow outsiders to see the support, nurture, beautiful rhythm and joy of everyday life. Her lament is

about those situations where community life breaks down, as it did for her family.

Rebecca Hofer's book expresses sentiments similar to those voiced by Kirby. Even though most of her book critiques life on her home community, Hofer's group was not opposed to communal living. They left because, according to Hofer, communalism had broken down, financial records were falsified, discipline was arbitrary, factionalism decided who was in and who was out, essentials like food were withheld, and there was a general spirit of mistrust. Attempts at reconciliation within the community, and by the leaders of the larger Hutterite Church, were unsuccessful. Hofer relates how after years of failed attempts at restoring fellowship, her group finally left.

Hofer's book illustrates that communalism can be both the best of worlds, and the worst of worlds, to paraphrase Charles Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities*. When community life works as it should, and as it does in many Hutterite communities, it is positive, as Hofer describes it when she observed how other colonies functioned. However, when community life breaks down, it can become destructive and harmful for its residents. In other words, it takes respect for all members, servant leadership, and patience to create the 'best of worlds' in a community.

The two books by The Nine are sharply negative about Hutterite community life. The Nine say they left in order to be obedient to the Lord's calling, to find new personal spiritual life in Jesus Christ, and to become more fully



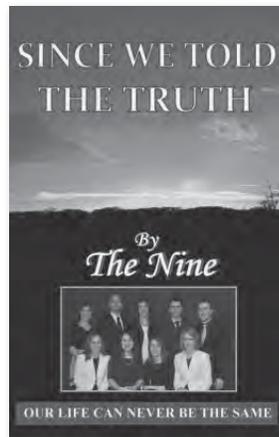


part of the Canadian and American societies. The lure of personal shopping, banking, owning property, and simply being Canadian or American, are recurring themes in their stories. They wanted to wear 'regular' clothes like jeans and tops, have a driver's licence, be in charge of their own finances, enjoy "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" (quoted from the US Declaration of Independence), experience a personal faith, and receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

At the heart, though, of their desire and critique, was their search for a new personal Christian faith. They feel they found this new faith within an evangelical, Pentecostal context outside a Hutterite community which they call 'The Ministry', a small church led by a charismatic leader.

These two books by The Nine reveal the "culture clash," or the "religion clash" between Hutterites and the larger society. In communalism the identity of the individual is formed by being part of the community, by taking on roles and responsibilities within the community, by seeing the good of the community as greater than the wishes of the individual, and by nurturing faith in God through age-old patterns and rituals in church, school, and home. All of this The Nine rejected as man-made rules and traditions. Much of what The Nine were searching for could not be granted by their home communities, since to do so would have forced their home communities to cease being communal, and Hutterite.

There are, however, some things which The Nine wanted in their communities which could have been granted. More personal expressions of faith do not necessarily undermine communal living, and numerous Hutterite communities are moving in this



direction. Equitable and even-handed exercise of power and authority where the voices of all are respected strengthens communal living - rather than threatening it. The Nine lamented the lack of higher education. Numerous communities today are offering more education, and investing heavily in new schools, with the latest in equipment and resources. Some communities are part of an IITV system in which students can complete their high school education. Others are enabling their young people to study at Brandon University in the Hutterite Education Program (BUHEP), at Canadian Mennonite University, or at the University of Manitoba. A recurring theme in the stories of The Nine is internal conflicts in the communities, some going on for generations. Resolving conflicts does not undermine communal living - it strengthens it.

These five books, all but one of which is self-published, provide readers with a view of Hutterite life from the perspective of their unhappy experiences. In the process, the books highlight some of the challenges and issues facing Hutterite communities. Only to a limited extent, primarily in Kirkby's books, do readers see the potential strengths and blessings of communal living.

Based on my years of contact with Hutterites, these books do not provide readers with a balanced view of life in Hutterite communities. Many Hutterite leaders and members are well aware of the challenges and problems facing their communities today, and are seriously trying to address them by making positive changes.

Despite these changes which are happening among Hutterites on a large and rapid scale, even if not in all communities, some young people will continue to leave. Some will leave because they are impatient at the rate of change, or because in their particular community problematic issues are not addressed adequately, or because they desire the individualized lifestyle or faith expressions of the larger society, many of which are incompatible with communal living. Many will, however, stay and help build communities that witness to the central Christian faith affirmations, and historic Hutterite beliefs, of love, commitment, forgiveness, sharing, and caring for each other.

John J. Friesen  
Winnipeg, Manitoba

## All My Puny Sorrows

Miriam Toews, Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2014,  
321 pages, hardcover, \$29.95

Whatever else can or will be said about Miriam Toews' latest novel, *All My Puny Sorrows* (the title is taken from a Coleridge poem), her sheer courage must be acknowledged and celebrated. In 1998, Toews' father, Melvin, a Steinbach teacher, stepped in front of a train at Woodridge, Manitoba, after suffering for years from severe depression. She documented her father's struggles, and the family's response, in a memoir called *Swing Low*, published in 2000. In 2010, Toews' older sister Marjorie followed almost literally in her father's footsteps; she stepped in front of a train in Winnipeg. Miriam

Toews' response was, again, to write. You might have thought she would be stunned into grieving silence, especially after Marjorie's death. But again, she has found words to describe, to question, to comment on these heart-breaking circumstances. And she does so with her usual narrative signature, an ironically humorous voice. This in itself is miraculous.

It is, of course, nothing new to make art out of one's suffering. A large part of world literature has emerged that way. Yet there is a particular kind of *angst* for survivors of family members who commit suicide that those of us not burdened in

that way can barely comprehend. Or not truly comprehend, at all. Survivors must struggle with guilt...could they have done something more, or differently, that could have steered the loved one away from self-destruction and made it possible for life to go on? There cannot be a “final answer” for a question like that.

In 2004, Toews published her best-selling novel, *A Complicated Kindness*, set in “East Village,” Manitoba, a thinly disguised Steinbach. *Swing Low*, *A Complicated Kindness* and *All My Puny Sorrows*—or, to use Toews’ own acronym, *AMPS*—are in some way all part of a continuous narrative, the story of a family, a father, a mother, and two daughters. The names may change but the characters are quite consistent. It is a beleaguered family, and a brave one, struggling with depression and the misunderstanding and callous judgements of outsiders or “perpetual disapprovers”, as the narrator in *AMPS* calls them. And always the narrator, whether she is named Miriam or Nomi or Yolandi, fights fiercely for her dear ones. It could even be said that she lifts them up, memorializing them, justifying them, celebrating them, when in their own community they have been demeaned, underestimated, criticized, judged.

It happens that the family whose story is told in these books is known by many of us personally. It is a family descended from the first families who settled Steinbach in 1874. Melvin Toews (1935-1998) was the son of Heinrich A. Toews (1902-1963) and Anna J. W. Reimer (1906-1995). Melvin’s great-grandfather was pioneer teamster Peter P. Toews (1839-1882) and his great-grandmother Elisabeth R. Reimer (1843-1918), was the sister of my own great-grandmother. Anna’s grandfather was the prominent merchant Klaas R. Reimer (1837-1906)— a brother to Elisabeth R. Reimer and to my great-grandmother.

Elvira Toews, Miriam’s mother, is a Loewen. She and her sister Mary (Mrs. Ben Hoepfner) are the the last surviving children of their family. Their parents were lumberman Cornelius T. Loewen (1883-1960) and Helena Friesen (1892-1950); their paternal grandparents were early Steinbach residents Cornelius B. Loewen (1863-1928) and Anna Toews (1863-1902); Anna Toews was a sister to Peter P. Toews (above). On Elvira’s mother’s side, her grandfather Abraham M. Friesen (1834-1908), of Blumenort, had a reputation during his lifetime as the most learned man in the East Reserve.

Miriam Toews’ parents, Melvin and Elvira, were therefore distant cousins, sharing a common ancestry like many other Steinbachers of their generation—a fact which finds its way into the *AMPS* saga, as do other historical facts. Yet Melvin—depressive, somewhat unassertive, slender—and Elvira—ebullient, forceful, more rounded —were hardly alike; if anything, they were a classic illustration of the truism that opposites attract.

Miriam Toews deviates from some of the actual Toews/Loewen history for her fictional family in *AMPS*. The father is named “Jacob Von Riesen,” and his parents come from a

Mennonite village in Siberia, having endured atrocities in the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Jacob suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and by the time the novel’s action commences, he is already deceased, having committed suicide. The surname of the mother, Lottie, is, however, “Loewen,” Elvira’s real name.

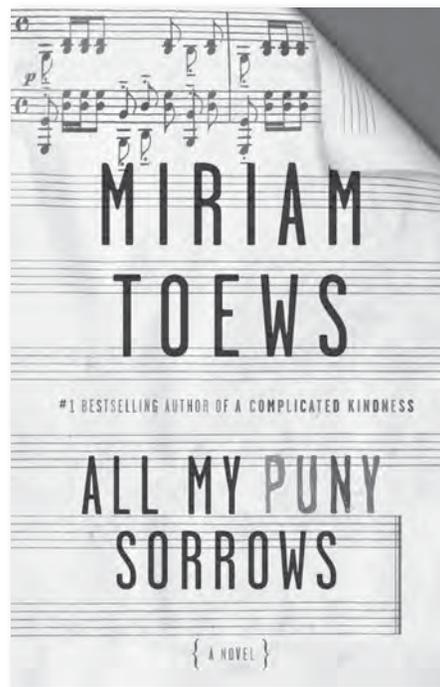
The tension in the novel concerns the narrator’s sister, Elfrieda (“Elf”), a world-renowned concert pianist who cannot bear living and actively wants to die. Will she succeed in killing herself? Will her loving sister, Yolandi, actually aid her in fulfilling this dark wish? Insofar as the novel tends to follow actual events, readers can guess the answer to the first question, if not the second. But now we also come to know what it is like for those who love a family member to contend with that person’s depression, and try to keep her alive.

It is soul-searing work. One would think, or hope, that love would be enough. Sadly, it is not. Elfrieda is surrounded by some of the most loving characters imaginable—her husband, her mother, her sister, her nephew and niece, her agent. Her wish to die is stronger than the support of all these. As she did in *Swing Low*, Miriam Toews has harsh words for the psychiatrists who tried to treat her loved ones, and as with her father, suggests that more committed or competent therapy might have kept her sister alive. Yet after all she does not seem altogether convinced of that.

In the actual history of Steinbach, the model for “East Village”, not much is known of the story of depression or suicide amongst our ancestors, yet we do make inferences about the attitudes of that time and place, which are not so different from those still persisting among us today. These things were looked upon as shameful or weak. If you were a Christian in good standing with God, then why would you be depressed? That would be a sign of lack of faith, an issue that could be corrected by the proper movement of will. On the other hand, our ancestors were also not devoid

of compassion and understood that not every facet of human life yields itself to doctrinal strictures.

In his diaries, my father, Peter D. Friesen, who served as a minister in the Steinbach *Kleine Gemeinde* from the 1930s to the 1950s (and who officiated at Melvin and Elvira’s wedding in 1956), cites five suicides. All were men, all from Steinbach and area except for one in the Morris district. They used rifles, or cut their throats, or, in one case, a man gassed himself by running his car in his closed garage (January 1944). This was the only non-Mennonite of those mentioned, Frank Tarnopolsky, the owner of the local cinema. My father, who had campaigned for the closing of the theatre, simply notes the event, with no further comment. He does, however, refer to the suicide of a *Russländer* man in 1939 as a “horrible act,” and continues: “God speaks very serious. In this case we can see the power of Satan, what he really is.”<sup>1</sup> This is a judgment, of course. But my father refrains from an outright condemnation of the man himself. The suicide is evidence of the power of Satan,



putting it beyond the reach of everyday human understanding. Sometimes God does not win.

Miriam Toews does not suggest that the East Village/Steinbach “oppressive patriarchy” (Tasha’s term in *A Complicated Kindness*) is directly to blame for her sister’s suicidality. But that patriarchy is the social-religious system against which Elfrieda feels compelled to rebel. Toews borrows, it seems, from an actual incident occurring in the Steinbach Kleine Gemeinde church in the early 1950s. Progressives were pitted against conservatives in a divisive debate about whether a piano might be allowed in the church. The issue had still not been decided when some church deacons saw an ad in the paper for a piano at a good price; they went ahead and bought it and had it moved into the church, without permission from the “authorities.” My father, as pastor, had been trying to keep the opposing factions from splitting and now was very concerned. When the conservative minister, David P. Reimer of Blumenort, came to preach in Steinbach, my father had the piano covered with a blanket. Reimer gave his sermon but did not mention the shrouded object so obvious to everyone in the building. Eventually the crisis passed, the piano stayed in the church, and the conservatives reluctantly accepted it.

I don’t know if Miriam Toews knew of that story when she wrote *AMPS*, but she presents a version of something like it, only transferring the time frame to the early 1970s and the setting to the “Von Riesen” household. The Von Riesens possess “a secret piano, covered with sheets and gunny sacks when the elders came to visit.” When the church elders discover that the Von Riesens harbour this sinful instrument in their home, they discuss excommunicating Jacob, but decide against it “as long as my parents oversaw that Elf was using the piano only as an instrument for the Lord.” (14) When the elders make a visit to see how that’s going and to show their concern about her “indiscreet longing to leave the community” (12) (study music at university), Elfrieda plays Rachmaninoff in another room. The elders, chastised by the ferocious independence of her playing, quietly leave.

Whether such a thing could have happened in 1970s Steinbach, I don’t know. Did the Evangelical Mennonite Church (EMC), previously Kleine Gemeinde, to which the Toews family belonged, even have “elders”? Such a thing could certainly have happened perhaps a generation earlier, when the Kleine Gemeinde was painfully transforming itself into the EMC, and when there was still a strong sense of a community ethic to which individuals were bound to submit.

In that moment of pounding out Rachmaninoff, “Elf took control of her life.” She did, indeed, but the novel goes on to tell the story of a young woman who fell under the spell of a larger power than her will to live—her wish to die. Did that wish arise from some unfortunate genetic predisposition, or chemical imbalance? Was it simply a manifestation of mental illness? Miriam Toews doesn’t explore these questions very much, but she does repeatedly describe Elfrieda’s struggle to be an individual, independent of the community’s religious idea of who or what she should be. In the conflict between a desiccated set of prohibitions masquerading as true religion and the individual desire for freedom, did Elfrieda find that she was overburdened and give up? It is a conflict which somehow belongs at the centre of the story of Steinbach, and no doubt, many other communities as well. One could imagine Jacob and Elfrieda (Melvin and Marjorie) as warriors or artists who

dared to rebel against the existing authority and paid a high price for it. Do they represent a new, reverse kind of martyr? Was there truly so little compassion for them amongst the church community? Or is that just how it looks from a devoted and loving daughter’s/sister’s perspective?

Perhaps the individual rebel is condemned to longing. Miriam Toews, in her honesty and humility (quintessential Mennonite virtues) creates characters who are individual, free, and...often lost. They do not have the option of reconciliation to the narrow-minded religion they’ve managed to escape. But still, they yearn for spiritual community. This community by definition cannot be the church. For Toews it is the family. As young Nomi Nickel, heroine of *A Complicated Kindness*, declares:

*The only thing I needed to know was that we were all going to live forever, together, happily, in heaven with God, and without pain and sadness and sin...we were supposed to stay together, it was clear to me. That was the function, the ultimate purpose, the entire premise for the existence of the Nickel Family. That we remained together for all eternity.*

Nomi’s touching words might well be Miriam Toews’ manifesto, the reason she writes. Her best work—*Swing Low, A Complicated Kindness*, and now, *All My Puny Sorrows*—tells the tale of a family, beset by all manner of troubles, but ever faithful, ever loyal to its own members. This faith is present in every word of *AMPS*. Jacob killed himself, yes. Elfrieda killed herself, yes. A cousin did the same. Uncles and aunts are dead (on the mother’s side of the family). Yet the connections and the love continue, “in heaven with God.” Not the heaven of the ancestral faith, but something else, hardly defined, perhaps similar to what the late mythologist Joseph Campbell was talking about when he wrote:

*I’ve lost a lot of friends, as well as my parents. A realization has come to me very, very keenly, however, that I haven’t lost them. That moment when I was with them has an everlasting quality about it that is now still with me...there’s a kind of intimation of immortality in that.<sup>2</sup>*

When Yolandi, narrator of *AMPS*, tries to persuade her sister that she might have a reason to live because her life is a gift, Elfrieda responds: “Don’t preach, okay? Gift of life. You sounded like an old Mennonite, like what’s his name.” Yolandi answers, “I am an old Mennonite. So are you.” We don’t escape our communal matrix entirely. Our individual decisions determine the plot-line of our lives, but they occur within the context of the family and the community we’re born into. We can’t change that. We can write about it though. And that’s what Miriam Toews continues to do, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against her.

Ralph Friesen  
Nelson, British Columbia

## Endnotes

1 P. D. Friesen diary, June 21, 1939.

2 Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), p. 282.

# Upholding the Old, Embracing the New: The Life of P.J.B. Reimer – Teacher, Minister, and Mennonite Historian

Diane Hildebrand, Steinbach: Sydney Reimer, 2014,  
303 pages, softcover, \$20.00

Mr. Peter J. B. Reimer (P.J.B.) was a school-teacher, church minister, Mennonite historian, and *Kleine Gemeinde* stalwart. He played a leading role in founding Steinbach Bible College, creating the Mennonite Heritage Village, and establishing Eden Mental Health Centre – all the while, for forty-one years, serving as a fulltime schoolteacher in six different Mennonite communities in southern Manitoba.

In *Upholding the Old, Embracing the New: The Life of P.J.B. Reimer – Teacher, Minister, and Mennonite Historian*, Diane Hildebrandt chronicles Reimer's life through his own writings – journals, articles, reports, and letters. At one level, Hildebrandt's work is a record of Reimer's thoughts, impressions, and feelings on momentous events (and not so momentous) in his life and in the life of his family, church, community and the Evangelical Mennonite Conference (EMC). On another level, it is an intimate portrayal of a man and his innermost thoughts and motivations. At times you want to cheer him on, swept up with empathy and *eenijchtjeit* ('of one mind'), at other times you feel his weakness and hurt and want to look away, and still other times you are moved by his thoughtfulness and insight. It is as though P.J.B. is sharing his personal life and thinking with you, the reader, alone. Hildebrandt makes this possible by using lengthy quotes, mostly from Mr. Reimer's journals, and interweaving them smoothly and seamlessly. Her editorial comment and framing is minimal, seemingly



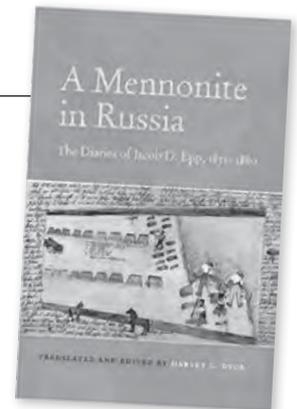
only in the service of coherence and context. What is left is Reimer's voice – unvarnished, independent, and true.

In the end, the reader gets a sense of a man who struggled mightily, and vulnerably, with reconciling his progressive impulses with the conservative leanings of the *Kleine Gemeinde* (EMC) – a church conference to which he was deeply committed; and of someone who wanted to be understood for his views and recognized for his contributions, but admitting to needing to 'leave it in God's hands,' as, after all, it was 'all God's work.' At the same time, in the background, the reader perceives a church community that is also struggling – a historically conservative conference seeking to reconcile its theology and adapt its practices

to a new country in a rapidly changing world.

In his writings – articles, letters, reports, and personal journals – Peter Reimer gave us a gift: insight into who he was, and the times and places in which he lived. The book, *Upholding the Old, Embracing the New* is a unique and invaluable resource for understanding the man, his times, his faith – and *Kleine Gemeinde* history. Thank you P.J.B. Reimer, for your words and your life. Thank you Diane Hildebrandt for gifting us with P.J.B.'s voice.

Lloyd Kornelsen  
Winnipeg, Manitoba



## A Mennonite in Russia. The Diaries of Jacob D. Epp, 1851-1880.

University of Toronto Press, 2013, xiv + 456 pages, paperback, \$39.95

The decision to release this fine work in paperback (originally published in hardcover in 1999) provides us all with the opportunity to re-evaluate *A Mennonite in Russia*. Not all works stand the test of time, but this one clearly has. It is worth asking why.

Jacob D. Epp deserves much of the credit for this. We might call him a true "renaissance man". Born in 1820 into a family of prominent churchly leaders, Epp was by turns a lay minister, elementary school teacher, village secretary, farmer, husband and father. He died in 1890, having lived in several different settings including the original Khortitsa colony, a mixed

Jewish-Mennonite settlement, and a Mennonite daughter colony.

For all that, Epp lived a modest life, and might have slipped away without notice but for two reasons.

The first is this: he wrote interesting diaries. Indeed, he wrote a diary for more than forty years, starting on the very booklet where his recently deceased father's diary had left off. And he continued to write until close to his death. What do we find in his daily jottings? We find a great deal actually, for what makes Epp so fascinating is that he was so fascinated by the world around him.

Thus he records the seemingly mundane matters of agricultural cycles and climatic changes (though we now know that drought and climate change are not trivial matters in our time); but he cared no less about Mennonites as a people. A devout Christian, he could not help but notice when some Mennonites strayed far from their faith even as others held it fast. He recorded sexual transgressions as confessed by others, natural disasters from floods to fire, but he also recorded his own oft repeated prayer that he might stay faithful to his Lord. Indeed, one of the great beauties of this book is that a reader can open it up almost randomly and simply start reading. In every sense the stories will carry you.

There is a second reason why Jacob D. Epp and his diaries have not disappeared from view, and that is the vital role played by Harvey L. Dyck, the work's editor and translator. Both roles are vital and Dyck is masterful throughout. Dyck has edited the diary entries to approximately a third of the original (p.6). He removed repetitions. This volume also reads so well because Dyck wisely chose to translate and edit Epp's prose in a living, organic manner; what Dyck calls "a relative free rendition." It clearly works.

As importantly, Dyck begins this volume with a strong

introduction. Readers could do worse than purchase the book for this alone as Dyck places the life of this 'everyman' – Jacob Epp – against the full backdrop of nineteenth century Imperial Russian and Mennonite history. Though Epp's story is only part of the whole, Dyck is able to use it in such a way as to illuminate the larger picture.

So why should non-academics bother with this book? I want to suggest that this work can play a vital role in our understanding of the Mennonite past, let alone its present. Too often Russian Mennonites have been cynically portrayed as a rather faithless people who sold their souls for material wealth and lived in isolated villages until crushed by a revolution that they somehow deserved. But Epp – in Dyck's skillful hands – reminds us that such a reading is more caricature than reality. In truth Mennonites in Russia lived real lives, and were fully alive to the larger empire. It is their very humanity that shines through in *A Mennonite in Russia*, and makes it an important read for our time.

Leonard Friesen  
Waterloo, Ontario

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## Village among Nations: 'Canadian' Mennonites in a Transnational World

Royden Loewen, Winnipeg: University of Toronto Press, 2013,  
pp. 301, softcover, pictorial, maps, index, \$32.95

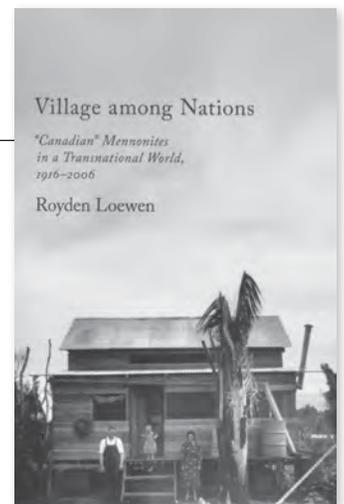
In *Village among Nations: 'Canadian' Mennonites in a Transnational World*, author Royden Loewen describes a group of people at home in many nations across the Americas, but not rooted in any of them. My chance encounter on a recent visit to the Low German Mennonite colony of La Honda in the North-Central Mexican state of Zacatecas demonstrated this powerfully. Mrs. B moved to Paraguay as a young child, then to Belize as a recently remarried young widow. Circumstances brought her back to Paraguay, where the death of her second husband occasioned a fourteen year sojourn in Canada. Now she was settled in a very modest but comfortable home with her third husband in La Honda in Mexico. She has children and step-children in numerous countries in North and South America. Though she has Canadian citizenship, she is now putting down roots in Mexico, which is her fourth country of residence.

Her experience is a snapshot of what Loewen calls the transnational identity of these by now some 300,000 so-called Low German Mennonites or *Kanadier*, who left Canada in the 1920s to settle in Mexico and Paraguay, and from there moved to Bolivia, Belize and Argentina, and back (and forth) to Canada. The book follows this story roughly chronologically, and uses source materials like academic studies, primary sources such as some twenty years of the *Mennonitische Post*, and interviews conducted over a number of years. Through many and varied examples across all elements of the Low German Mennonite spectrum, Loewen demonstrates the 'village'

mentality of the people, characterized by loyalty to values unrelated and often foreign to their country of residence, and a language, Low German, that remains the unifying link, despite utilitarian accommodations to the languages of their country of residence. Always the story is told in the lives of real people, revealed through their letters and journals, and coaxed into view by careful and patient interviews.

The Low German speaking or Kanadier Mennonites have been viewed in many ways by mainstream Mennonite culture, and by the wider world. They are occasionally viewed as stirring examples of people able to wrest a living from inhospitable places by dint of hard work and the capacity to collaborate and cooperate. They are sometimes viewed as people locked in the darkness of ignorance and conservatism whose lives must be illuminated by education and progress and evangelical Christianity. They are also viewed as objects of curiosity—a fascinating cultural anomaly and historical throwback. The lens offered by Loewen in this study offers us a vehicle to understand and appreciate them without needing to change or 'fix' them.

The premise of this book is engaging, and its conclusions are borne out time and time again in conversations and interactions with Low German Mennonites from Canada, and from Mexico and Bolivia. In many ways, these people are living out in radical terms our call as Christians to embrace an alternative allegiance—an allegiance to Jesus Christ and the



kingdom of God rather than any temporal national allegiance. In significant ways, these transnational Low German Mennonites demonstrate what an article in the *Canadian Mennonite* called 'discipleship as citizenship' (December 16, 2013), '... God's kingdom...manifest in service rather than dominion, vulnerability rather than coercion, love rather than fear'. The transnational people described in this book have demonstrated this powerfully in a variety of countries over the generations since the 1920's. The call to live faithfully according to their interpretation of God's standards is much more significant to them than the demands that any country of residence may try to impose on them. They are willing to go to extraordinary lengths, and suffer significant hardship and deprivation in order to faithfully live out this alternative allegiance.

But there is also a shadow side to this view of faith and the world, and, if there is a deficit in Loewen's book, it may well be the fact that this shadow side is not explored in sufficient detail. The perception that people are living above, or at least parallel, to the laws of any given country removes some of the checks and balances that more active and engaged 'citizenship' brings with it. Seeing nations only as resources of land and opportunity where one can live under specially negotiated

rights and 'Privilegien' results in an inadequate understanding of the compensatory responsibilities. The negative effects of these perceptions on the lives of ordinary transnational Low German Mennonites are painfully obvious in many communities. This is not to say that these negative effects are visible everywhere, or that they are the dominant feature of this group of people. But they do need to be named and confronted as another manifestation of a 'transnational' identity.

In conclusion, I am grateful for this book, and for the opportunity to view the history of a people I have known peripherally all my life through this lens. As a Low German Mennonite who has not shared their experience of living transnationally in a 'village among nations', I am challenged by their example. My understanding of these people has grown, and I am grateful for that. Thanks, Royden, for telling 'the remarkable story of a Canadian-descendant people who moved among the nations of the Americas to contest and implicitly critique a nation-centric world'.

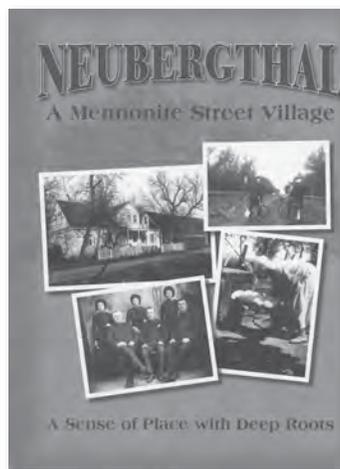
James Schellenberg  
Winnipeg, Manitoba

## Neubergthal: A Mennonite Street Village, A Sense of Place with Deep Roots

Joyce Friesen and Rose Hildebrandt, eds., Neubergthal History Book Committee: Neubergthal, Manitoba, 2013, pp. 205, hardcover, \$60.00

As any historian will attest, primary source material offers an incomparable, yet necessary depth to our understanding of bygone days. As many will also verify, primary sources can oftentimes be incredibly difficult to locate. Sifting through archives in search of any possible material that will illuminate daily life in a particular place and the customs, thoughts, and beliefs of its people is not a task for the faint of heart. The twelve-person local 'History Book Committee', headed by writers and editors Rose Hildebrandt and Joyce Friesen, compiled, researched, and scripted *Neubergthal: A Mennonite Street Village*. This impressive collection of primary sources fills in a number of gaps in our understanding of both pioneer and contemporary Mennonite life in Manitoba and illuminates a community history and memory that is matchless and rich in culture. This book is an exciting anthology of life histories, photographs, family memories, maps, and folklore from an important group of researchers (people who have for generations called Neubergthal 'home') that will serve as an invaluable resource for scholars, community historians, and the descendants of Neubergthal's settlers, alike.

Neubergthal is located along a single street in south-central Manitoba at the crossroads of Provincial Road 421, and Road 1W, 117 kilometers south of Winnipeg. It consists of six sections of land within the boundaries of the once-upon-a-time



designated Mennonite West Reserve. As detailed in "Chapter 2: Village Patterns," Neubergthal was settled in 1876 by a group of Mennonite families who had, only a few years prior, emigrated from Russia. In contrast to the East Reserve settlements, the agricultural potential of the land on the West Reserve was apparent, despite the difficulties of settling on open, tall grass prairie, the scarcity of wood, and its distance from a water source. With steadfast persistence, the village was settled in a way that reflected the pioneers' collective experience and worldview—a merging of Dutch, German, and Russian architectural styles, and a combination of private and communal spaces for farming and dwelling. In 1989, The National Historic Sites and Monuments Board recognized the village as a 'National Historic Site,' for this Mennonite single street village, or *Strassendorf*, possesses a great deal of architectural significance, resource integrity, and a unique sense of place. This book communicates the village's distinctiveness.

Today, the village maintains nostalgic charm, reflective of its near 150-year history. The village street is neatly lined with the now tall, arching Cottonwoods and Manitoba Maples, planted by the original settlers. Perpendicular to the street are the narrow lots and homes of village residents. Some residents continue to live in traditional housebarns that are original to the settlement. In front of the homes are immaculate gardens;

behind them are stretching acres of farmland. “Chapter 1: Remembering Our Roots,” which makes up nearly half of the book, details the settlement tales and generations of family memories from each yard in the village, while “Chapter 12: Neuberghthal Now,” brings readers to the present day. The clever accompanying village maps inside the front and back covers help readers to follow along with generations of “yard stories,” while providing a clear sense of locale and peoplehood. These pioneer tales and family memories offer readers honest reflections of the hardships, sorrows, and humorous delights of village life.

“Chapter 3: Agricultural Life in the Village,” stands out in its communication of everyday village life, alongside seasons of seeding and threshing, hog butchering, chicken coops, and sugar beets. Particularly striking are the photographs and stories of harvest time through to the 1930s. Depicted here are farm crews and their families gathered around long tables set with china and hot meals, in the midst of a partially harvested crop. So the story goes, most women also owned a special pie cabinet for harvest season, which could hold up to five warm pies. Such a tool made it possible to transport even *cream* pies to the field (115)!

“Chapter 4: The Role of Women,” offers an intergenerational social history of the changes accompanied by the advent of modern conveniences such as home electricity and refrigeration. Though pioneer women’s roles were defined according to their gender, meaning child rearing, gardening, cooking, canning, and cleaning were central to their daily lives, this chapter also reflects on women’s esteemed innovative abilities

(learning how to cook with plants and berries that grew alongside the Red River), artisan dexterities (colorfully hand painted housebarn floors, quilts, and weaving), and their efforts to preserve traditions surrounding gardening (saving seeds that are still used in Neuberghthal gardens today).

“Chapter 5: Social Life in the Village,” another favorite, is an exceptional collection of written villager accounts of unique social and cultural customs in Neuberghthal. From descriptions of the tradition of *Fensta beluere*, or window watching, to *Brommtopp* songs and mumming on New Year’s Eve, Lover’s Lane, Sunday courting rituals, impromptu country dances, and ever-changing fashion, this chapter details a distinctly edifying community memory of fun and home.

As an historian of culture and emotion among Mennonites in Manitoba, this book has served me well as a collection of primary sources. Though this is not a scholarly text, evident with its lyrical style, lack of citations, and emphasis on photographs, this is a community history filled with descriptions of long lost customs, and in its recollection, of a place central to West Reserve Mennonite culture and memory. *Neuberghthal: A Mennonite Street Village* will be a treasured source for scholars with an interest in early migration to the prairies, the complexity of religious history, and memory. More specifically, this book will be an important source for those keen to uncover some of the intricacies in the relationship between an evolving ethno-religious people and a place.

Susie Fisher  
Gretna, Manitoba

## News

### 140<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration held at the Chortitz Heritage Church

Andrea Dyck, with files from *The Carillon*

The 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary of arrival of the first Mennonites at the juncture of the Rat and Red Rivers in Manitoba was celebrated at the Chortitz Heritage Church in Randolph, Manitoba on August 2, 2014. Organized by the Chortitz Church Heritage Committee, the evening consisted of an *a cappella* choir, which performed songs in German and English and was led by Karen Peters, and a lecture given by Ernest Braun. The event closed with a time for visiting over watermelon and homemade *rollkuchen* for all who were in attendance.

Braun’s lecture outlined the various factors that combined to create the conditions that led to Mennonite emigration from Russia, including external changes in Russian society and its worldview, and internal changes that were re-shaping Mennonite communities at this time. Russia’s loss in the Crimean War in 1856 ushered in numerous reforms in politics, education, and its military, which threatened the traditional Mennonite faith and way of life. At the same time, Mennonite communities

themselves were experiencing changes in their social, religious, and economic lives. The opportunity to emigrate in order to maintain their traditional faith and community-oriented way of life was therefore welcomed by thousands of Mennonites living in Russia and so, on August 1, 1874, the first of these newcomers, numbering seven thousand in total, arrived to start their new lives in Manitoba.

The venue chosen for the anniversary celebration event, the historic Chortitzer church in Randolph, was a fitting choice for a service that remembered the legacy of these 1870s Mennonites. The church was built by the Chortitzer Mennonites from the Bergthal Colony in Russia and is the second church built on the site, the first having been completed in 1877, but which succumbed to fire twenty years later. This second building was constructed in 1897 and was used until 2010, when it was decommissioned by the Chortitzer Mennonite Conference. During its lifetime, the building has

been the backdrop to key events in the life of the Chortitzer Mennonites in Canada, including hosting crowded farewell ceremonies for Mennonites emigrating to Paraguay in the early 1920s, following changes to provincial school legislation, and again in 1948, after the First World War. For its role in the history of the East Reserve, which later became the Rural Municipality of Hanover, it gained status as a Municipal Heritage Site in January 2014 and is being restored

by a committee of committed volunteers, led by the Chortitz Church Heritage Committee.

The evening provided an opportunity to appreciate the rich history held within the walls of the Chortitzer Heritage Church, but also, and to a greater extent, to consider the challenges faced by the original Mennonite settlers arriving in Manitoba in 1874 to start their lives in a new country and the legacy of faith and community that they passed on to following generations.



*The interior of the Chortitz Heritage Church, with the a cappella choir performing at the anniversary celebration. Photo Credit: Ernie Braun*



*The Chortitz Heritage Church hosted the anniversary celebrations on August 2, 2014, with a Red River Cart, an artifact loaned from the Mennonite Heritage Village for the occasion, symbolizing the arrival of Mennonites at the junction of the Red and the Rat Rivers. Photo Credit: Ernie Braun.*

# A Friend Goes Home

On September 29, 2013 Isaac Fehr, minister of the El Temporal colony in Campeche, Mexico, died at 80 years and 1 day, of a suspected heart attack in Hopelchen park, two months after the passing of his second wife. The following is a tribute to him by Galen Nissley from Mennonite Mutual Aid, a Beachy Amish outreach program centred in Hopelchen. According to their newsletter it was "Isaac's letter of May 1995 to Steve L. Yoder requesting aid for the drought-stricken Mennonites of northern Mexico that led to the formation of Mexico Mennonite Aid. Over the years, he was a good friend and a valuable colony connection for the MMA board and staff."



a few books from our library. Then, as it was a slow day, he sat down across from our desk and began a normal conversation. Soon, though, he began to ask a few more personal questions, like - how are you doing? -and so on. Meaning, are you going to be ok? On another occasion he said, "You are understanding more of our language than you let on." He said, "I can tell, because you are giving some facial expressions as people talk our language when they are making phone calls." I did not realize how much of an encourager Isaac was until later. (He was also the only man I knew who had extra holes in his hat. I asked him about them and he said with a twinkle in his eye that it's his air conditioning.) Once Isaac transcribed an entire long sermon he'd preached from the old German script to the present-day letters so I could read it. There were several note-book pages of this handwritten message. Isaac's fluency

## A Stable Figure of My Time in Mexico, Galen Nissley.

As I look back over our time in Mexico, there are many memories that come to mind. One memory that is etched in my mind is of one day when the going was a little rough - homesickness! A man by the name of Isaac Fehr came into the office. As usual he took

in English speaking was often a great help.

Mexico Mennonite Aid, Update, January 2014

## Preservings

### 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 understand and appreciate their Mennonite heritage.

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.

### For subscriptions and address changes, write:

Andrea Dyck,  
D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation,  
University of Winnipeg,  
515 Portage Ave.,  
Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3B 2E9

### For editorial matters, contact one of the co-editors:

Hans Werner, telephone: (204) 786-9352  
or email: [plettfoundation@gmail.com](mailto:plettfoundation@gmail.com)

or

John J. Friesen, telephone: (204) 488-8128  
or email: [djfriesen1@shaw.ca](mailto:djfriesen1@shaw.ca)

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*It was a cold October day when the Plett Foundation Board met in Winkler, Manitoba. Here (l-r) Kerry Fast, Hans Werner (Executive Director), Abram Rempel, Kennert Giesbrecht, John J. Friesen, Ralph Friesen, Royden Loewen (Chair), and Leonard Doell offer a shivering pose in front of the Ens Housebarn in Reinland, Manitoba, south of Winkler. Photo Credit: Andrea Dyck*

## **Contributors:**

Ernest N. Braun - [erbraun@nlis.ca](mailto:erbraun@nlis.ca)

James Urry - [James.Urry@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:James.Urry@vuw.ac.nz)

Adolf Ens - [aaens@mymts.net](mailto:aaens@mymts.net)

Kerry Fast - [kerryfast@gmail.com](mailto:kerryfast@gmail.com)

Andrea Dyck - [plettfoundation@gmail.com](mailto:plettfoundation@gmail.com)

John J. Friesen - [djfriesen1@shaw.ca](mailto:djfriesen1@shaw.ca)

Orlando Hiebert - [ohiebert@nlis.ca](mailto:ohiebert@nlis.ca)

Glen Klassen - [grklassen@gmail.com](mailto:grklassen@gmail.com)

Dora Maendel

Jesse Hofer - [jesse@silverwinds.org](mailto:jesse@silverwinds.org)

Royden Loewen - [r.loewen@uwinnipeg.ca](mailto:r.loewen@uwinnipeg.ca)

Conrad Stoesz - [cstoesz@mbconf.ca](mailto:cstoesz@mbconf.ca)

Hans Werner - [h.werner@uwinnipeg.ca](mailto:h.werner@uwinnipeg.ca)

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*Approximately 140 years before this photo was taken Wilhelm Ewert, Tobias Umuh and Paul and Lorenz Tschetter, four of the twelve delegates touring North America, probably stood on this spot on Pembina Escarpment near present-day Walthalla, North Dakota to look east over the land they had just surveyed. Photo Credit: Hans Werner*