

Preservings

~ A Journal of the D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation Inc.



Preservings \$20

Issue No. 35, 2015

"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



In this Issue	2	Feature Articles	4	Reflections.....	81
Table of Contents	2	Articles.....	64	News.....	87
Editorial.....	3	Family History	70	Book Reviews	88

In this Issue

An agonizing question across the centuries has been how to instill in the next generation those faith and cultural values that would sustain Mennonite identity into the future. In this issue the focus of our feature articles is the question of childhood and education. We begin with Ivan Carroll Janer, Colombian-born graduate student who explores the nature of childhood in Salamanca, a conservative colony in the Yucatan followed by Kennert Giesbrecht's reflections on children based on his wide travels among all kinds of colonies in South America. Bruce Wiebe takes us into the past to shed light on a little written about story of orphans and other children who were cared for in families other than those of their birth parents. We then have a number of articles that explore the continuity and changes in education in Mexico and Ontario.

An interesting conference celebrating the 225th anniversary of the Mennonite migration to Russia featured two speakers whose presentations are reproduced in our general article section. Mark Jantzen from Kansas and co-editor John J. Friesen offer new looks at the Prussian origins and early days of this migration. Co-editor Hans Werner was on research leave for the first six months of the year and his article on Mennonites in Belize and Bolivia comes from his observations while traveling to those countries in the spring of 2015.

Our Family History section has an excerpt from a lengthy family history study by Ron and Judy Plett. The excerpt tells the migration story of Abraham P. Reimer who was born in Kleefeld, Molotschna, lived in Blumenort and Steinbach, Manitoba, Lanigan, Saskatchewan, and Meade and Garden City, Kansas. David Toews tells the moving story of his memories of the accidental death of his brother while Ralph Friesen translates and offers insightful commentary on the obituary of Kleine Gemeinde Ältester, Peter P. Toews who made his own migration from the Kleine Gemeinde to the Holdeman church.

This issue again offers an article for readers' reflection. This time the subject is religion and faith and comes to us from the past. Glen Klassen has carefully and thoughtfully translated, annotated and commented on the noted church leader Christian Neff's 1901 reflections on the question of the theory of evolution—still an issue in many church education circles.

We are blessed with the continued writings on the Mennonite story and have a number of contributors who have reviewed recent books. Some crumbs of interesting news items round out his year's issue.

The editors

Our Cover

One of Heinrich Redecop's daughters, Helena (age 5), observes Ivan Carroll Janer, an anthropologist doing his fieldwork in the Salamanca Colony, Mexico, plant a small vegetable garden. Ivan explains that Helena, curious about this non-Mennonite gardening at their home, initially just stared at him while he worked, but in the end she and her sisters were a great help to him and they enjoyed planting the garden and tending the seedlings together.

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 and John J. Friesen, 1.204.488.8128, 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.

PRESERVINGS 2015

Table of Contents

In this Issue	2
Editorial.....	3

FEATURE ARTICLES: CHILDREN AND EDUCATION

Childhood in the Altkolonier Mennonite Colonies of Salamanca, Quintana Roo, Mexico, by Ivan Carroll Janer	4
Home can still be a Very Good School, by Kennert Giesbrecht	14
Agreements Concerning Mennonite <i>Pflegekinder</i> , by Bruce Wiebe....	16
Out with the Old and in with the New?: School Reform on the Manitoba Colony, Mexico, by Robyn Sneath	23
Origin of the "Kommitee Schulen," in the Manitoba Colony, Cuauhtémoc, Mexico, by Abraham B. Peters	29
<i>Amish Teachers who helped start the Committee Schools in Manitoba Colony, Cuauhtémoc, Mexico</i>	30
The Historical Origins of the <i>Conferencia Mennonita de México</i> , by Peter Rempel and David Friesen.....	35
The School at Quellen Colony, Chihuahua, by Eddy K. Plett	40
All in God's Time: The Establishment of Old Colony Private Schools in Southern Ontario, by Rosabel Fast	44

ARTICLES

"225th Anniversary of the Migration to Russia" Conference	
From Poland to Prussia to Russia: Mennonite Emigration out of the Vistula Delta, by Mark Jantzen.....	52
The 1789 Mennonite Migration that Should Not have Happened, by John J. Friesen	60
Mennonite Life under the Warm Sun of South America, by Hans Werner.....	64

FAMILY HISTORY

The Abraham P. Reimer Family: Blumenort, Lanigan, Kansas, by Ron and Judy Plett	70
Death in the Family: An Eyewitness Account, by David Toews.....	74
"Plant an Evergreen": Obituary of Peter P. Toews (1841-1922), translated with commentary by Ralph Friesen.....	77

REFLECTIONS

Modern Science and Our Faith, by Christian Neff, translated and annotated by Glen R. Klassen	81
--	----

NEWS.....	87
-----------	----

BOOK REVIEWS.....	88
-------------------	----

FOUNDATION NEWS.....	95
----------------------	----

In the last four or five years there has been much anxiety about what is happening to the Christian church. It seems that mainline churches—even ‘mainline’ Mennonite churches are in decline. In fact some say they are in precipitous decline. The Presbyterian Church in the United States, for example, began to decline in 1966 and has declined in membership every year since then. In 2014 alone the decline was an astounding 5.5%. (*The Layman*, PCUSA). Mennonite Conferences in Canada seem to be in turmoil with declining resources, insoluble issues and a general malaise that won’t go away.

As those with an interest in, or even a passion for history, one might be tempted to lay the blame firmly at the feet of the tendency to be modern—modern in the sense that the story of what was, how it came to be different, and what it means for today has not received a lot of attention in Mennonite churches. Mennonites in North America have drunk deeply from other wells. Along the way much of what our forefathers thought, how they lived and what they believed, has been considered irrelevant to our age. Many have been only too happy to drink from the many waters that flow in society. For many the attraction of North American evangelical streams—as diverse as they are—has significantly weakened their position on nonviolence, dulled their compassion for the poor, and raised their individualism to new heights. Others have equated trends in society with what the church should be. Their sense of the importance of salvation, ‘new birth’, and the centrality of being “in the world” but not “of it” has become ambiguous or even non-existent. The two divergent streams seem irreconcilable.

While some historians might argue that historical amnesia has contributed to the fracturing of the church others argue that it is in history that we can find explanation. Every five hundred years, or so, it is said, the church has undergone an upheaval that has ultimately made the church more relevant and vigorous. After the first 500 years of the Christian church Pope Gregory reformed worship and reworked the church’s theology. After 1000 years of Christianity, the Great Schism divided the church into a western (Roman Catholic) and an eastern (Orthodox) branch. Another five hundred years later we had Martin Luther’s Reformation that ultimately created a vigorous Protestant and reinvigorated Catholic Church. It also resulted in the birth of the Anabaptist version of Christianity. We are now 2000 years into the Christian era and there are those that suggest we are into another 500 year upheaval. Phyllis Tickle, who died recently, was one of the most recognizable of the theorists. She suggested the current upheaval has people asking for a “recovery of liturgy and connectedness to church history.”

In the Mennonite world it is difficult to be optimistic. The fragmentation that has characterized the history of the Anabaptist wing of the Reformation seems to be accelerating with a vengeance. It is quite likely that much like in the case of the Dutch Mennonite church of the 17th century we are on the brink of steep decline and the responsibility for carrying the banner of Anabaptism will likely fall on our conservative Mennonite friends. While they certainly have their own challenges, they may be the only ones far enough away from the

poisons of modernity to reinvent themselves as Anabaptists who can truly claim the legacy of their forefathers.

John J. Friesen Stepping Down as Co-editor

It is with some sadness that we have to announce that this will be the last issue where John J. Friesen will fulfill the role of co-editor of *Preservings*. John stepped into the breach when Delbert Plett died in 2004 and the Board of the Foundation made it a priority to keep publishing *Preservings*. John has been co-editor of *Preservings* for the last eleven issues, first together with Leonard Doell and then with Hans Werner. John’s wealth of contacts have done much to cultivate writers who have enriched the pages of *Preservings*. He worked hard at the details of production, editing many of the contributions to the last eleven issues of the magazine. For me the most telling moment was a visit with a minister in Shipyard Colony in Belize. He brought out a *Preservings* magazine that showed evidence of being read thoroughly and often. The minister pointed to an editorial written by John that challenged conservative Mennonites to improve their educational system in ways that would not compromise their conservative values. The editorial had obviously provoked serious thought for the minister and while he agreed wholeheartedly with John, he was unsure of how they might actually do it. John has a warm heart for the conservative Mennonites that showed in his writing and editing. He is able to be both realistic and supportive of conservative Mennonite faith and practice. Certainly a gentler spirit than his predecessor, Delbert Plett, he nevertheless challenged readers to take seriously conservative Russian Mennonites and took issue with the disparaging portrayal of their religiosity that has often characterized Mennonite writing about their conservative brothers and sisters. John will be continuing to serve on the Plett Foundation Board of Directors where we will continue to have access to his helpful advice. On behalf of myself and the readers of *Preservings* we wish John all the best in his ‘retirement’.

Hans Werner



John J. Friesen taught courses to Hutterites for some fourteen years. Here he is listening to tributes to him at a celebration at Canadian Mennonite University to honour his work among Hutterites. Photo Credit: Canadian Mennonite University.

Feature Articles: Children & Education

Childhood in the Altkolonier Mennonite Colonies of Salamanca, Quintana Roo, Mexico

Ivan Carroll Janer, Mexico City
Translated from Spanish by Naemi Thole

The author is a Colombian born graduate student in Anthropology at the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Mexico City. He received a grant from the Plett Foundation to study the Salamanca Colony near the Belize border in the Mexican state of Quintana Roo. (eds.)

This article is about children in the Mennonite colony of Salamanca and is based on a process of participant-observation that was begun in 2012 with occasional stays of weeks and months in the community. The project is part of a doctoral thesis in anthropology and is taken from field notes made at night while in the colony. The project was supported in part by a Plett Foundation grant.



The colony of Salamanca is clearly visible on a satellite image of the Yucatan jungle. It is just east of the town of Bacalar, which is on the highway that goes from the Belizean border at Chetumal to Cancun. Image Credit: Google Maps, Imagery ©2015 Landsat, Data SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO, Map Data © 2015 Google, INEGI.

Childhood Health Risks in Salamanca

The members of Peter Schmitt's family were a contrast to other families that I had lived with in terms of their wellbeing. I was worried by one boy in this home; he didn't talk at all. His father Peter, who stuttered, told me that "he is 7 years old but has the mind of a 3-year old." He explained that one day he just showed up like this, as if he had experienced a trauma, and was now very fearful. The boy was also afraid of me, which is logical since I was a stranger to him, but apart from just being quiet, he didn't even smile. Something out of the ordinary for a child his age. The only thing moving in his face were his eyes; they would either open wide or relax. In our society, we would pay more attention to something like this, but here, every child grows up and each one shows her or his abilities; any issues and problems that they may have are pushed aside. School is also a process of interaction and relating, but not enough to overcome the disadvantages of some children.

I was now at the home of Peter Schmitt, sitting with him and his wife Katharina in one of the small sheds where they kept rabbits and chickens. I was telling Peter that I had been working with his son, when his oldest daughter came in to feed the rabbits. She had a sore (a wound with scabbing and some type of infection) on the calf of her left leg; I shuddered because one part had a scab and the other part was infected, it was a large sore and must have been very uncomfortable for her. The girl was in her dirty dress and barefoot.

One of the families I lived with for a few weeks was that of Bernhard Schmitt. He had a boy who was paralyzed on the left side of the body. Bernhard told me that when he was born, he was informed at the hospital that his son would probably die within a few months. Later they gave him an injection and on the third day he started having convulsions. They handed [the boy] off to him and told him that he would have to take care of this child for the rest of its life. He didn't know that the boy could not move his left hand. He explained that upon leaving the hospital, he was handed a paper with "small writing" that he could not read and was forced to sign. He thought that the paper stated what his child was suffering from, but he never read it. When the child was six months old, they took him to a private doctor in Chetumal for a checkup. The diagnosis was that the child was not well and had issues with moving his left side. "That's when my wife and I became aware of the problem," Bernhard told me. Despite the child's health issues, Bernhard told me that since the treatment was very expensive, he and his wife decided that the child should continue growing up as he was and would be taken care of at home.

The boys and girls were very strong walkers, since they went barefoot almost everywhere, as I saw in the homes of Bernhard Schmitt, Heinrich Schmitt and Heinrich Redecop. The children went barefoot everywhere: inside and outside the house, on the grass, sometimes even around construction material, sharp [metal] sheets, tools and machinery. They had no sense of caution and when they got hurt a little, or even a lot, it would make them laugh; rarely did it make them cry. This sense of carelessness develops throughout their lives and later on puts them at risk in work settings. For example, recently a young man lost his foot in the sawmill because he was careless and slipped.

One morning as I was going to the home of Herman Hildebrand. I started walking from Campo 3 to Campo 1. On the way, a woman with two children (a girl and a boy) did me

the favour of taking me aboard their cart. I climbed up the back; the cart was slightly broken and the horse was slow. Even so I was extremely thankful because of the sun and the distance. The mother kept on giving the children soft drinks. Here, children start drinking soft drinks from a very young age, something that is as normal in this community as it is in many places in Mexico, despite their high sugar content and low nutritional value.

After having lunch at the home of Herman Hildebrand, we went to work on the construction of the new church on Campo 2 again. Heinrich Hildebrand (son of Herman) started telling me that in October 2013, one of these holes that are dug with the backhoe operated by Franz, one of the Schmitt boys, was left uncovered and filled up with water due to all the rain. A couple of small children, siblings, were playing close to the hole (which by this point must have been quite a deep pool). One of the children fell into the hole and sank. The sister started screaming and then the mother came out, screaming as well. At that moment Heinrich came running out, took off his boots and went in but couldn't find the child. Then his father (Herman) threw himself into the water and found the body, but it was too late, the child was dead. Heinrich told me that at several points the mother had wanted to throw herself into the water but she could not swim. The men around her would not let her go in because she also would have drowned. After this happened, it was decided that every hole in Salamanca dug with a backhoe was to be covered, so that children would not fall into them and drown.

During my stay at the home of the Redecop family I took advantage of the opportunity to do some activities with the children. Heinrich and Katharina had seven daughters and recently adopted two boys. I attended the burial of the mother



Children in the Redecop home. Photo Credit: Ivan Carroll Janer.

of the boys, who were now orphans since the father had already passed. However, by regulation of the *Waisenamt*, an institution that looks after the elderly and orphans, the boys could be adopted by a family in the community. And so Heinrich and Katharina decided to adopt both boys, Wilhelm and Johan. I was making a garden with the children; but this morning, the girls were helping more, especially the youngest two, Gertruda and Helena (Lena). To be honest, the adopted boys were not

participating at all, they did not seem happy in their new home, especially the oldest one, who did not like his new sisters.

Another day, at the Hildebrand family home, David (13), had a toothache, so his father decided to take him to the doctor to have it pulled. We went to see Doctor Jacob Wall, who also lives in Campo 2, although he used to live in Km 10. Doctor Jacob was originally born in Mexico but went to live in Belize and had now been in Salamanca for 10 years. Heinrich told me that Jacob delivers babies and that the women of Salamanca would ask him for injections to make the birth less painful. He was an older gentleman, who had a blanket hanging on the porch of his house so that people could not see in, and behind the blanket were two chairs. David sat in one and I sat down on the other, two meters behind him. David opened his mouth and the doctor inspected his mouth. Then the doctor went into the house to get a metal syringe (like the ones that were used a long time ago, not the disposable kind) and tried to give him an anesthetic, but the syringe got stuck; so he went back inside, adjusted the syringe and jabbed three times. Then he waited for three minutes, produced a pair of pliers and tried to pull out the tooth, which did not come out on the first try, only on the second. Afterwards I thanked him for his medical work here in the community and he thanked me for my help in building the church.

Babies and Upbringing

During lunch break I told Abram (24) that I wanted to see his firstborn son Cornelius, who had been born just over a year ago and also wanted to say hello to his wife, Sara. He told me that Cornelius was walking already. I told him to wait so I could get a couple of toys from a suitcase that I had brought. When we got to the house, I greeted his wife and took out the toys in front of her. They were a couple of small cars. Cornelius was delighted and right away started playing. For this thesis, it was important to see if they would accept these toys since the children in Salamanca in general do not get toy cars, but toys that represent agricultural or construction machinery.

On another day, Abram invited me to eat at a house he was building a little at a time. He told me he needed some tubes filled with concrete to make a roof in order to make shade and keep the home cooler. Now that Cornelius was walking, he went outside a lot. To prevent this, Abram moved the washing machine into the middle of the doorway and told me: "There! He can't get out!" Most people agree that the first child is the hardest to raise and that after the third or fourth, child rearing gets easier.

Some Things are Banned Beginning in Childhood, and the Reason Why

Wilhelm Schmitt (51) explained to me one of the reasons why television was forbidden in Salamanca and [why] it is not good for children: "One day a boy saw on the television how one man was pointing a gun at another man, causing him to raise his arms. So, the boy gets home, grabs a weapon and tries it on his dad. And it works. He then puts the weapon down and the father asks him: 'Why did you do that?' The boy replies: 'Because I saw it on TV and wanted to know if everything that I see on TV also happens in real life'". Therefore besides it being a distraction, for Wilhelm, television was also a learning tool for children of bad as well as good things. "What they see there, they want to do themselves later," Wilhelm said.

When listening to the word of God, I observed that there was always silence and respect. On a few occasions I would play readings from the Bible in *Plautdietsch* on my computer at a moderate volume, and would ask "Do you want to listen?" When they would hear the word of God or a chapter from the Bible, they would not speak. On the contrary, they would listen very carefully. Since they did not listen to the radio or watch TV, it was interesting to them that they could listen to the Bible on my computer, and in *Plautdietsch* at that. This would be the only thing they would hear from a machine during the day, since afterwards they would go back to their activities.

Heinrich (Enrique) Redecop told me that he no longer has a cell phone because their religion has clearly forbidden these, even the older models whose screens can only show alphanumeric characters. The pastors' explanation for this, according to Enrique, was that a cell phone is a cell phone and therefore must be forbidden. Enrique of course wanted to obey the religious edicts. Some young people, however, used cell phones on the sly and kept them on silent mode to avoid raising suspicion.

As to the forbidding of the use of cars, Heinrich Schmitt said, "If we use cars we won't be like this anymore, we will be like the [Mennonites] in Chihuahua. I like to live like this and I want my children to live like this." Heinrich added that he is "also afraid that the young people will leave." That is why he decided to purchase a new tractor, to get his children excited about working in agriculture. Heinrich explained that "sometimes they complained that they couldn't continue working because the tractor had broken down." It's much better for the young people to buy them a tractor, which then becomes a direct source of work, instead of a car for them to go out and have fun. Also, the value of a tractor is much higher than that of a car. Heinrich paid about 600 thousand pesos for the New Holland tractor he bought for his children.

Despite all these prohibitions children took part in some leisure activities that we have lost interest in, in our society; for example a family getting together to look at photo albums. That was the case on one of the many nights that I shared with the Redecop family. They took out a photo album. The children were sitting around the album; the adults standing. Jacob Wiens, the main worker, decided to turn the pages, while Heinrich shone a flashlight. We all laughed and enjoyed looking at them and although you could not really see all that well due to the sparse lighting, the mosquitos and the uncomfortable lack of space, it was as exciting as watching your first TV show or your first [movie] screening. This moment no longer exists in our city lives due to the high usage of information technology, and the lack of family gatherings, whether around a photo album or around the table to share a meal.

Obligations from Childhood to Adolescence

During breakfast at the home of the Schmitt family, I saw that Agatha, whose nickname is Utilia (8) was helping in the kitchen. She was organizing the plates and the cutlery. When she forgot the spoons, one of her older brothers, Heinrich, pointed it out by saying in a loud voice "*Läpel, Utilia*" and she quickly went to get him a spoon. Johan (11) was also helping in the kitchen preparing scrambled eggs but when Tina (7) behaved weirdly, it bothered him and he called her out on it. In the meanwhile, Heinrich was somewhat upset over the car that I had given to Nicolas because he would not stop playing with it and was making noises that did not allow Heinrich

(51) to clearly speak to his oldest son, Abram, whom he was informing about the day's tasks.

I bumped into Abram, husband of Gertruda Schmitt and son-in-law of Heinrich Schmitt. He told me they were going to pull beans. This is hard work; bending over to pull out the plant with one hand, and after you have a few plants in your hand, putting them in a pile on the ground. Some have told me that "the first few days you don't feel the pain, but after the third, you won't want to get out of bed; everything hurts!" Since Abram had no children, he picked up some girls from other families in his buggy to help him with the job. When the time came to harvest the beans, you would see a lot of boys and girls helping on the fields. It was like a game to them and they did good work.

The tomatoes, chilies and watermelons I had planted did not work out. "They didn't grow!", Heinrich (Enrique) Redecop told me. The pig barn however looked good; the wood was well placed and the floor sloped for good drainage. The girls bathed the piglets as well as the adult pigs on a daily basis. They also washed off the excrement and everything looked clean. To finish the cleaning, they would pour Pinol cleaning detergent on the ground to make it smell good. Of the girls, Maria, is the one who works most on this task.

While I was cleaning myself up, Eva, Sara (Sush), Tina (their mother) and Enrique sat down in front of the house to cut the kernels off the corn to make tamales for the next day, when they would celebrate the birthday of Enrique's mother. All the siblings would be there and I was invited as well. Heinrich (Enrique) told me that this was the first time he had helped his wife and daughters with kitchen tasks since he realized that it was a lot of work for them; therefore he decided to "give them a hand," he explained. I too joined in the task. We helped them not only with cutting off the corn kernels, but also with deboning the chicken; the women then mixed the ingredients to make tamalitos; this was done by pouring the mix into the corn husks and cooking them. Some were prepared with chilies and others were less spicy, mixed with salt only. Sush and Eva were taking pictures of me while I was cutting the corn and laughed a bit, as if to say and point out that a man was helping with kitchen tasks.

Eva was in charge of doing the laundry; she would separate the clothes by items and by color. She was also in charge of delegating tasks to her sisters, resulting in her character and tone of voice being stern on occasions. Most of the days Heinrich (Enrique) would be out buying groceries for the store. Today, for example, he traveled to Mérida, but even so his daughters kept themselves busy organizing and cleaning the inside and outside of the house. On this day most work was done by Eva and Maria, who would also instruct the younger girls on what to do. Sara in the meanwhile was in charge of the store, selling sweets, potatoes and soft drinks to the boys. Wilhelm was also learning to work by taking water to the workers.

The two oldest daughters of Bernhard Schmitt would take turns in the textile

store along with Eva, Heinrich Redecop's oldest daughter. I went to the textile store and brought in a pair of pants with a broken zipper. In addition to having the broken zipper fixed, I could also use this as an excuse to hang out in the store and observe. They did have zippers but none of the girls knew how to sew this type of item. So Eva said, "I don't know how to do it but my mother does. I'll give them to her so that she can fix them." I asked her then how much I owed her, and she said "Nothing." Later, I also brought in a shirt with a broken button, a snap fastener, used a lot here. Bernhard stated that 90 percent of people here use these kinds of buttons, but he of course did not like them. Eva knew how to put the snap fastener on, with a button press. She did a good job and I paid her.

At 16 years of age, Eva acts like a mother to her sisters. In fact this afternoon, the youngest girl, Helena, was misbehaving and Eva smacked her behind twice. The little girl did not cry but stopped misbehaving. There was no yelling, just once in a while a voice would be raised a bit; but in general, there was a good atmosphere of sociability. Later, Eva carried Jacob's youngest child around, demonstrating her capabilities; she will make a good Mennonite wife and mother.

As I participated in the work, the family I would be staying with in Salamanca would make me feel more at home. Besides eating and sleeping there, they have also washed my laundry in the different homes where I have stayed overnight. At the Redecop home for example, clothes were left in a basket and the daughters took care of washing them, at least that's what their father, Heinrich Redecop told me. In the beginning I was embarrassed but ended up leaving my clothes in the bathroom, and they would clean them and place them folded on top of my suitcase.

The girls would watch me as I was preparing the ground to make the garden; but before I could plant the seed, the youngest ones, Gertruda and Helena, took a rake and quickly finished working the plot, raking between the furrows like experienced farmers. Then, the exciting part of seeding. I gave them each seeds and they happily took them and planted two to three seeds per hole.



Helena and the garden we were making. Photo Credit: Ivan Carroll Janer.

Finally, we adapted a hose with holes to water the garden. Maria helped me with a drill. Every day we would water the garden until one day I could see that some seedlings were coming up. I called the girls right away to let them see and they counted more plants than I did. We got very excited. The little girls paid a lot of attention to this process. It then struck me that this social organization is like one big school. In the mean time Eva watched us from a distance as she was washing sheets and blankets.

Everybody in the Schmitt home was kept busy with work. While I was working on the typewriter in Heinrich's office, I saw through the window how Margaretha was hanging the laundry to dry in the sun. She had come from washing them on the other side of the house. Margaretha was a girl of twelve with a quiet manner and, as most girls [there] did, helped with the tasks around the house. I continued watching the way she was doing things; she turned around and blushed of course, being only a young girl. It was not my intention to make her blush, but I understand now that my job observing them made them feel uncomfortable sometimes, while other times it just made them laugh. Even so, she continued doing her job. That evening I noticed that her dress had come somewhat undone in the seams from all the laundry hanging, but that was not a problem since they had a sewing machine, and next day they fixed the dress.

Heinrich's sons had learned a great deal related to agricultural machinery and diesel motors. If these boys were to compete with any high school boys from any national school, when it comes to mechanics, these boys would probably come out way ahead.

Even though they only went to school until age twelve, what they have learned and experienced is very valuable.

One of the first chances I had to watch the boys working with a backhoe all day was when a large part of Heinrich's crop was flooded. They had planned to dig some channels and lay big pipes to drain all the water. Heinrich would tell the boys what to do, then he would leave for a while, come back and check on what they had done. He allowed plenty of freedom and took on more the role of supervision only, since his boys were all grown up now. When I first met them, Franz, the one operating the backhoe, was 16. Now he is about to turn 18.

Heinrich and I arrived on the buggy to check on his crops, past Campo 7, just before it got dark. His sons were working on the drainage. That afternoon they had dug a channel more than one kilometer in length and one metre in depth with the backhoe that was, in Heinrich's words, "old, but has done a lot of great work." Franz, one of his sons, was the one who worked fastest and best with the backhoe, so he was the one who was operating it. Of course when he got tired, one of his brothers would take over. When we got there, the drainage channel was done except for the last part, opening the passage between the field and the channel. As if they had planned it, the boys opened the passage the moment we arrived. It was impressive! I saw how the water left the field and flowed into the drainage channel. The crops were saved! Had they not done this, the seeds would have rotted.

Another day at the workshop I noticed they had acquired a press and another new machine. More fun for the boys. The floor was so dirty and strewn with things that I asked for a



Ana and Gertruda on top of the beans in the trailer. Photo Credit: Ivan Carroll Janer.

broom, a shovel and a bucket and started sweeping. I wanted to at least do something while I was observing. Each one of them had their specific tasks. Abram, the oldest, was the one most willing to accept work from outside, that is, external work. This was due to the fact that people came from other places and needed work done. But Wilhelm, for example, had a very specific task and told me that it required a lot of patience. He had to sand down some pieces for the motor so that they would mesh/interlock well. You did not understand what you were looking at first, it seemed like a puzzle consisting of motors, rotors, etc., but it all ended up in building big things; like the latest sprinkler with thirty watering jets, and with huge tires. All made by them. They called it 'the Spider'.

At the Redecop house, the morning went by normally. The boys arrived very early to continue drying the beans and put them in 40 kg bags. However, fun and play ensued as the girls got into the trailer with beans and started throwing them at the boys and the boys responded, all of this causing a lot of laughter among the children. The girls liked being on top of the beans although their dresses were getting dusty. They did not care about this and they were not scolded by their older sisters or their mother. A boy with a bandana and sun glasses (although he is not wearing them at this moment) was the one throwing most beans at them, making them play. There is no other entertainment here.

Clothing and Identifying Features in Childhood

Johan Wieler spoke only a little Spanish. I arrived at his home in Campo 10 but did not enter. The children were unwashed; soon after I arrived, the mother put them in the shower. Had I not been there, this would surely not have happened. I did not pay attention to this, at least not the way they were.

Before arriving at the house of Johan, I saw the children of Campo 10 walking to their homes from school. First came the boys and then, further back, the girls. It was interesting for me to see that even here on an open field, in a public place so to speak, the custom of men on one side and women on the other prevailed. The children were demonstrating this behavior even in places where they were not supervised.

Children did not participate in Sunday worship service at church because "they don't yet know how to behave," in Heinrich's words. As the children grow up and become adolescents, they go to church because now they know how to behave and will sing as the adults do. Eva, sixteen and Sara, fifteen attended church that Sunday, each wearing a dark green dress. However, children, including babies, do attend events that do not take place in church, such as a *felafness* (engagement party) and wakes; these take place in someone's house or machine shed.

For church I wore a black shirt in order to wear something dark; in general, adults would wear either dark blue or dark green, whereas the younger people would wear lighter blue, boys light green and the small boys yellow shirts. They also gathered to talk or play based on the color of their shirts. For example during a wake, I observed one group of boys with light green shirts, another group with yellow shirts, and separately, the girls who would also go in groups. All boys wore *schlaubekjsen* (overalls) or suspenders. I noticed that overalls were mostly used by adults, whereas the younger people tended to use suspenders, but this practice was not always followed.

One Sunday after church I was cutting my hair, and Eva and Sara started laughing at what I was doing. It had been difficult

asking them for scissors, and when they finally understood me, they gave me a huge pair of scissors, making it difficult to cut the hair, especially in the back. I tried to explain to them that this part was difficult for me since I could not see and asked if they could help me, but it was useless; we did not understand each other. The men in Salamanca must keep their hair short and they have to shave almost every day, because beards and moustaches are frowned upon in the community; they "represent filth," Heinrich told me. It is quite common that the males, be they adult or children, wear their hair very short. That is why in some houses there were only clippers but no scissors.

The Children Learn to Hunt

The children were very creative when it came to inventing games. They would have fun with any object in the house. For example, Helena, Wilhelm and Johan were jumping on my inflatable mattress. Even though the mattress was logically damaged after a short while, they had tons of fun and did not realize that if they jumped on it too much, it would get damaged. Among the Altkolonier Mennonites, children are usually called by their nicknames, even the children among themselves. For example, Helena would constantly emphasize that I should call Wilhelm by his nickname, "Voum," and not by his name.

As they grow up, however, the differences between the sexes becomes more clearly marked. The boys focused more on hunting with rifles while the girls preferred to play with dolls, singing and flying kites. I noticed that for David, Johann and Peter, shooting birds with a rifle, especially doves and hawks, was most fun for them. They would grab the rifle and go from tree to tree killing birds, or they would stay in one place and challenge each other's marksmanship, or simply point the rifle and wait for a bird to come by.

There were also other kinds of hunting. For example, one evening a huge grasshopper appeared and twelve year old Johann grabbed an axe to kill it. I yelled "No Johan, don't kill it!" He heard me, stopped, and did not kill it. His father Heinrich was also there and they both looked at me, so I asked, "Does this creature eat the corn?" Heinrich answered "Yes," so I replied, "Oh! I didn't know that!" It just goes to show that our sense of conserving and appreciating nature and animals makes no sense in agriculture.

In another instance, I wanted to see if they felt the need to kill all animals that are not barn animals. I was with a group of boys and told them that the day before we had seen a monkey. Heinrich Hildebrand, Herman's son, told me he would love to capture the monkey, but not to kill it, even less to eat it. He wanted to catch it to put it in a cage. He told me that his grandfather had a monkey tied up and that it played with the children a lot. So, they did not want to kill all animals other than farm animals.

When I was going to bed in the Hildebrand house, I found a toad on my bed; Heinrich (19) helped me take it out in a bag. I was ten centimeters away from the toad, situations we do not see living in the city due to being so far away from nature. These toads are pretty to look at but when they feel threatened, they puff up and release a toxic liquid. I saw two dogs die because they caught these toads with their mouths during my stay there. After two days there was nothing anyone could do for the dogs and they died of poisoning.

When night fell, the children would take flashlights; they also made sure that these had proper batteries in them. Every

night they would offer me the flashlight that was best charged and had the brightest light, since they did not need the flashlights that much, they were used to the dark.

The Girls Entertain Themselves with Singing, Flying Kites, Drawing and Playing

The songs that the Redecop girls sang were old church songs written in the 18th and 19th centuries by German composers, and some are still sung today by Mennonite congregations. Nowadays though they are sung very differently, such as in four part harmony and accompanied by instruments such as piano, violins, drums and sometimes guitars. The way the Redecop girls sang them every night was in unison and without any instruments.

I also want to point out that their German accent when singing these songs is very peculiar; no foreign influence is allowed in Salamanca, including on the children, and they have not updated their German language through contacts with Germany. If these songs were heard by contemporary Germans, they might understand the occasional word, but not entire phrases. Therefore, the people living in Salamanca speak a very particular mix of Plautdietsch and High German, the latter one not being updated.¹

At this moment, in the evening, I heard the girls starting to sing again; they made a very nice unison choir. During the day

I watched them play, run, smile and joke around. They were happy here; I had seen this. Everyone had their chores and obligations, in the present as well as in the future, since their destiny is to be part of the Altkolonier community.

When I was helping with the building of one of the churches I was impressed by the silence around me. Only the strong wind was blowing, but did not come by itself, since it also kicked up dust. As I was breaking rocks with my pick and digging



The Redecop girls singing in the evening. Photo Credit: Ivan Carroll Janer.



The Redecop girls flying kites. Photo Credit: Ivan Carroll Janer.

holes with my shovel, I could hear for a moment the children singing in school. It sounded more like the girls' singing. But from a distance, among picks and shovels, it sounded like angels singing.

During the many times that I played with the girls, I was transported back to my own childhood. In one instance especially, I was reminded of my father when we were flying kites. I had not done that since I was a boy. As I was flying kites with the girls, happy memories from my childhood came up, from the time when my father made a kite for us to fly. I remember all the materials used and how he glued all the parts together. At first I would fly it on an open field and then I wanted it to fly higher, so I would fly it from the window of the second floor and pull it hard so it would go higher. It was similar with the girls in Salamanca; there was a lot of laughter and playing. Mostly I flew kites with Maria and Katharina (Tina). We played for over an hour, we did not get tired and nobody interrupted us.

The smaller girls, Getruda and Helena (Lena), took out their toy strollers, each with their own baby doll, and took them for a walk around the house. I stopped them for a moment and asked them what the names of their babies were but they did not have names. I suggested some but that just made them laugh. I thought it was common for a girl's doll to have a name, but in this case the girls were playing with them even though they did not have names. It was unusual for girls to have strollers, since babies in Salamanca are carried around by their mothers. There is no room to take them in strollers, they are carried in baby carriers and in some instances, due to the heat, I have seen them be simply put on the floor of the house to stay cool.

In the house of Heinrich Schmitt there was a blackboard in the dining room. It is uncommon to have a blackboard, but this was due to Heinrich's interest in having his younger children practice writing words in German, English and Spanish. But this did not happen often. Tina used the blackboard and chalk to draw a three story house and a child entering the house, along with a stairway to enter the house. Utilia drew a house with windows and curtains, colorful and very pretty but without anyone by or inside the house. The blackboard gave these girls the chance to express themselves artistically. Utilia and Tina had different personalities, as one could tell by their different drawings and also by their behavior. Utilia would get up earlier and do more chores around the house and help her mother, whereas Tina would break the rules, get up later, prefer to play and help out less.

The Redecop girls showed me some drawing books today and wanted me to read them in German. Besides German, most of the books for coloring and filling out are in English. Maria, most of all, was also trying to teach me a song. She gave me the time to write it down, which was tricky for me. The girls had been my German teachers and had been very patient with me. We identified each of the drawings and I would ask the girl in German what that was, and sometimes she would tell me. I would also pretend that I did not know what that was, but any drawings that had to do with "romance" or "love," they would not tell me anything, since that is not a topic that was talked about, and would cause laughter among teenagers.

Childhood Curiosity even Though the Unknown Remains Distant

Since Heinrich Redecop is partner/administrator of the store, he will sometimes bring food home that did not get sold

in the store, such as instant soups that are prepared with hot water in three minutes. Knowing that they have little health benefits, I decided to prepare some eggplant at lunch; somebody had harvested these on Campo 10 and no one knew if they were edible or not. I wanted to show the Redecops one of the many ways to cook them. To my surprise, the girls were very helpful. Eva started helping by cutting tomatoes and eggplant; after helping me for a while, she went back to looking after the children. Besides her adoptive brothers and her sisters, the children of Jacob Wiens, her father's worker, had also been left in her care today.

When dinner came along, they served the eggplant and I was excited because they would get to try a new dish. However, only Heinrich and Katharina tried a little. The children did not want to and made gestures towards the dish to indicate their unfamiliarity with it. They preferred to eat soup with a lot of onion, chilies and chicken in it. Here, as in other parts of Mexico, they prefer spicy dishes. And, as in other parts of Mexico, any food that comes from outside is looked at strangely. Even the children will add a hot sauce called "La Botanera, La mera, mera" to food that they are already used to. This just shows the influence of Mexican cuisine and also proves that they are in a transcultural process, adapting Mexican cuisine into their culture.

Unknown vegetables as well as computers are strange to their traditions here; they are unfamiliar and therefore not easily assimilated into their culture. While I am staying in the Altkolonier Mennonite colonies, I think of my son in Mexico City, who is in a school that offers computer courses. Here in Salamanca most of the children have never even seen a computer, much less know how to use one. That is why the girls wanted to see more. I have to admit that at this point I wanted to close the computer, but since I had the blessing of the head of the house, Heinrich Redecop, I chose the movie *Alice in Wonderland*, and they had a blast. The laughter did not stop. However, after fifteen minutes, Heinrich told me that it was enough and to turn off the computer. Parents always fear that their children will like forbidden things and will try to do these in secret, and more often.

I felt strange showing the Redecops parts of my life on the laptop that I had brought with me; I showed them where I live as well as photos and videos. It was like exposing the anthropologist, but I also believe that is a part of the bicultural exchange, to show them who I am and where I come from. I also believe that since they consider themselves to be "western" and "chosen," they will continue with their daily lives, there is little I can do to change that in this community. The other, the profane, does not concern them; and even though they would want to and they are curious to know more about it, they know and realize that this is not the path, that the only path to salvation is hard work and a life of austerity.

The girls are very curious as well, they watch me writing this diary; especially Gertruda can spend a lot of time at my side watching me. On Saturday I was alone with the girls almost all day. They are left home alone and they can be left home alone, despite some security issues in Mexico. This place in Bacalar chosen by the Mennonites has been a "calm" place so far, although they are not immune to exposure from violence in adjacent communities. On Sunday after church, Heinrich and Katharina went out and the girls were left by themselves for the rest of the day. The older girls, Eva and Sara (Sush), invited

some friends and stayed here at home, having fun and laughing for a few hours. I think it is good that the parents give the girls this space since girls are expected to enter into marriage as virgins; they know they are not going to have sexual relations and this allows them to interact with friends. In fact, the room in the house designated for a boyfriend and girlfriend to get to know each other is for talking only, not for lying down. This getting to know each other process is very interesting, withdrawn from the public eye. The conversations take place in a private setting where not even the parents intervene.

Rebelling in Childhood and While Growing Up

One day while taking a break from everybody's activities, we went up to the car that was being changed from automatic to standard transmission at Redecop's house. The boys had put a USB stick into the car stereo. It was worship music, like carols, sung in English, Spanish and German. Everybody was listening carefully: the employees, the boys and girls and I. We listened to about ten songs before a man in a cart came by asking for Heinrich. They turned off the radio and each one went his own way to show that they were not doing anything forbidden. We continued working. Nothing happened but I felt weird because we had not done anything wrong, but I knew listening to the radio was forbidden in the colony. I think the others felt the same, for despite the fact that we were listening to worship music, it was forbidden. The only music that is sung and listened to in public are the songs that are taught in school or the ones that are sung by the girls at night. These are okay, everything else is considered profane.

During the time I helped out with the building of the new church, the young men were far from communicative with me. Therefore one Wednesday I told Heinrich Hildebrand (son of Herman) that I wanted him to take me with him that evening when going out with the other young men. Wednesday night is the night that young people are allowed to go out and get together to talk. But he and Herman (his father) had a serious conversation; Herman was upset over the activities of the young people. Next day I wanted to prove my theory and asked Herman if there were actually a lot of problems with the young people, and he answered "Some." So I asked him, "With the (music) recorders?," and he replied "They told you? Who told you?" I told him that nobody had told me anything, and after that, Herman did not want to continue talking.

On another day I arrived at the house of Peter Schmitt and when I was coming onto his property, I saw a young man. I asked him about Peter, and he said he did not know where he was. I did not really trust him; he was smoking a cigarette, and for a moment I thought it was marijuana. He did not look good overall; he had not bathed and was wearing dirty clothes. I tried to talk to him and told him in German that I wanted to plant tomatoes. Then, things changed; he started showing me the area where I could seed the plants. I asked him for his name, and he told me his name was Bernhard (20). He did not want to talk much and his Spanish was not very good. We looked at the garden plot and then started walking. I asked him if he wanted to smoke and he understood the opposite: that I wanted to smoke, so he took out his pack of cigarettes. I told him, "No thank you, I don't smoke anymore!" As we were walking, Bernhard started coughing as if his bronchi were congested from all the smoking. Then some people passed by in a cart and did us the favour of taking us to the store in Campo 3.

When I got back, I was upset with the older sons of Peter Schmitt, who unlike the sons of Heinrich Schmitt did not help their father with his work. They do not work on their father's land, and spend the money they make doing outside jobs on other things such as cigarettes. This bothered me because I observed the differences in this society between raising hard-working children and children that do not work for their dad and do not spend the money they make on their siblings and core family. I talked to Heinrich Redecop about this since he is the main partner and administrator of the store. And so, on another day while we were having breakfast, Heinrich told me that he had a signed letter stating that Peter could come pick up the money for the work his son had done. It is better this way, because the boy just wanted the money to spend on other things that are not for his family, such as cigarettes.

Adolescence is After School Years and Before Baptism

As I had mentioned earlier, when people asked me what I do, I explain it to them. However, on one occasion, as I was explaining that I was doing a job for the university, and had used the term "university" repeatedly, Herman Hildebrand asked me, "What is the university?" It had not really occurred to me that they did not really understand what the university was, so I explained to them that after school you go to a university to get a degree, then a masters and finally, a doctorate. Then Herman asked me what a degree was, and I explained to him that it is a professional education so that you can work in something later on. It seems that these standard terms that we use on a daily basis in our society are foreign to them, since in Salamanca you go to school until you are twelve years old, and what you learn there is enough to face the future. Whatever else you need, life will teach you.

On the other hand if you ask the adults and the young people if life is better in Belize or here in Salamanca, some will tell you it is better over there, and some will tell you it is better here. It depends mostly on how the family is doing financially. Heinrich, Herman Hildebrand's oldest son for example was happy that they had moved to Salamanca and told me, "Yes, I am happy to have come here!"

I came to the conclusion that it is not that the young people cannot leave the community; there is more to it than just leaving. I believe the two fundamental things keeping them here are work and religion. Here you will always find work if you want it; there is always something that needs to be done. Whereas in the outside world, there is a lot of unemployment. As for the second reason, religion promises them salvation, and choosing this path will always be better than going another path. Also, they are sure of their salvation and this also results in them staying in the community.

Yesterday I bought a big bottle of Coke to share with the boys that work for Redecop, and were working with me as well. I sent Wilhelm (Voum, one of the adopted boys) to the store with the money; at first when I gave him the money he did not understand why I was giving him money. One of the workers explained it to him and off he went to the store. He brought the soft drink back, but had not brought a cup, so I asked him to get one. We drank the entire bottle of Coke, all sharing the same cup. I had invited them to share this bottle with the expectation of becoming their friend, so they tell me things and I would not go unnoticed as just another worker. Despite the fact we laughed for a while and shared the same cup, if you do

not speak Plautdietsch, it is very hard to form a relationship. Then we sat down at the table to eat. Heinrich, everybody's boss, came and sat down at our table; here, everyone eats the same thing, no matter if you are a worker or the boss. This is something that you usually do not see in our modern times; the spaces where the workers eat are different than the ones where the bosses eat.

Besides offering products, the store also is used as a social gathering place, and for the boys, a place to meet. It is a great place for some to smoke a cigarette, whereas others just watch them. I watched the composition of both sides: those who find nothing wrong in this idleness, and those who view staying and smoking a cigarette as a bad thing. It is also a place where the boys look for work, and where others come to look for helpers, knowing that there are unemployed young men here. I also see young men having a soft drink here while taking a break, and by the looks of them, in their dirty clothes and with their sunburnt faces, they have a day of heavy labor behind them. Once I was at the store in the part where the boys hang out to smoke cigarettes, or look for work, or are simply resting after work. A young man suggested that I come to his house to help, because he had no male sibling. What would it have meant to accept? I told him no, that I was working for Heinrich Redecop. As an adult of over thirty years of age, I should be on my fifth or sixth child in this community. At this moment I wanted the others to see me as someone who had to sweat for his work, not someone who has wandered idly and is now hanging out at the store.

During the day, boys arrive at the store, asking for potato chips, soft drinks and packaged food in general. As they buy items, it is put on a tab for them. To get credit at the store, the young man's name is needed, which is written down on a piece of paper, so every time he requests something, the price is written down and he puts his signature beside the amount. When they have money, they pay off their debt or come to an agreement with their bosses to settle the debt when they are finished with their respective job. Normally days go by smoothly, but I should point out that lazy people are frowned upon and usually you do not see any of them around. In Heinrich Schmitt's opinion, "a woman is lazy because she likes to spend too much time driving around in the cart." This applies to men as well; the cart is generally used for work-related transportation, not for driving around idly.

As for courtship or choosing a partner, it is not such a random process as I had thought in the beginning. The girls get to know the boy's behavior through their work and as they grow up. Some boys work harder than others, and therefore the boy who knows how to work hard cannot only please a girl, but also his boss who could be a potential father-in-law. The girl's father on the other hand gets to know what kind of worker the boy is and how he spends his money; he gets to know his potential son-in-law.

Another thing I discovered during my multiple stays was that if a couple has a child out of wedlock, it is a given that they will get married later on. Before getting married, the couple will ride around the community in a cart, but the girl will wear a white cap covering her hair as a sign that she is no longer a virgin, and during the church wedding ceremony she must wear a black cap to cover her hair – also a symbol of her lost virginity. While this public chastisement is carried out, people do not talk about it in public; besides, people are busy with their work

and have other things to talk about in daily life. The topic of virginity might be talked about in a private conversation. This happened in the case of one of the leaders of the community, whose son had sexual relations with the daughter of one of the church singers.² Both were named Heinrich Schmitt, and the young man's name was also Heinrich Schmitt. What is even stranger is that when the baby was born, he was also named Heinrich Schmitt, although they did call him by his nickname, Kike. Both the community leader and his co-father-in-law are singers for the same church in the same community.

The way our society is designed, only a privileged few can afford to have their own house. In Salamanca, the goal is for everyone to have their own house. The problem is that young people do not value these significant differences, because they are not aware of what goes on in the outside world past Bacalar or Chetumal, which are valid, but insufficient, points of reference.

Conclusions

When I think of the children, I think the world of Salamanca is one that only few people have seen. For them it is everything, this is how they imagine life, this is how it works and there is no other way.

I constantly ask myself, "Who are these people with whom I am trying to carry out an ethnography?" As a Colombian anthropologist based in Mexico it means that everything that is strange to me has to be documented in some manner. Anthropologists say the view from the outside is important. I am getting more and more convinced that upon carrying out this ethnography on the Altkolonier Mennonites, I am also searching my heart with regard to my own 'Western' way of life.

That is, although it seems that here things are more restrictive, what this ethnography shows is that there is greater freedom in private life precisely because the private sphere is broader than the public sphere, unlike our modern societies. This is also the reason I believe that courtships and marriages are more solid than in our society, where privacy is now more public and supposedly there is more freedom for both genders.

There are people, most of them younger, who cannot imagine that anthropology is an actual profession. Here comes Eva, looking at me, so I explain to her what my profession is about; I show her pictures as well, and tell her that "I keep a field journal and write down everything that I see and everything that happens. I also take pictures to document my work." We both smile, and she walks off. I believe that they agree with what I do. I have told adults the same thing I told Eva, anybody who asks me what I do, I try to explain it; I have always been honest about my work. They do not see it as something bad, but they must ask themselves, "They pay him for that? How does he survive? Where is his wife? His child?" I know they are asking themselves that. I should be with my family, in my "own" house, which would be the normal thing to do; here, I am the strange one. The globalisation attached to this profession makes you the strange and different one in Salamanca. Ultimately, I am the stranger.

Endnotes

- 1 A comment made by Rogers Toews from Paraguay whom I met while visiting Winnipeg.
- 2 The reference is likely to *Vorsänger* (eds.)

Home can still be a Very Good School

Kennert Giesbrecht, Steinbach, Manitoba

I wouldn't consider myself a city-person, but I've also noticed that I'm not really a person who knows how to move around in a rural setting. So I really don't fit anywhere. But when I travel to the colonies, thanks to my work as editor and journalist for the *Mennonitische Post*, I often find myself awestruck at what all these little happy bundles of kids can do in the Mennonite colonies. Things that I can't do. Things that I should know how to do and that I would love to know how to do, ... but I don't! At an early age they learn how to saddle and mount the horse, they help dress their younger siblings, they fix the tire on the buggy, they go get the horse from behind the barn and hitch it to the buggy, and they help with countless chores in and around the house.

I grew up largely in a colony setting and loved to spend time outdoors. For more than 30 years I lived in the Menno Colony, in the Paraguayan Chaco. But horses and cows were never really a part of my life. Although my father-in-law has always made it clear that he loves and respects me, I'm pretty sure he was somewhat disappointed when I came to ask for his daughter's hand. I believe he had envisioned this future son-in-law to be a person that would also love to ride horses, lasso his wild Cebu, and chase down a calf that was unruly – just like he had always enjoyed doing until his bones would not hold up or he just plain got tired of doing those things. Well I never learned how to do those things and sitting on a horse chasing down a calf would have been a terrifying and maybe painful experience for me.



Cornelius Nikolei from Little Belize Colony is on the way home from the field. He is already confidently driving a tractor even though he is quite young. Photo Credit: Kennert Giesbrecht.

But then I visit some remote colony in Belize, Bolivia, Mexico or Argentina, and I see these kids doing amazing things. They look so independent, so confident when doing their chores. And then the question keeps popping up in my head: Why are we so critical of their school system when they are being taught so many good lessons in life? I must admit that I have been in colony schools and left very empty hearted when seeing how little the children learn – or should I say, how much emphasis is being put on memorization and how little on

actual learning. But then again, I have also been in schools and seen teachers that do an amazing job with the little material and resources available.

So life is not perfect in the Mennonite colonies – but neither is it in our self-proclaimed “modern society.” Sometime in August of 2015 I had a lengthy discussion with a lady from Canada. She had Mennonite roots and a large part of her family had moved to Mexico in the 1920's. She was delighted that her grandparents chose to stay in Canada. She told me numerous stories about “the sad and underprivileged Mennonites in Latin America.” She condemned their educational system and felt that everyone living in a colony was unhappy, living under immense pressure from the leaders and living a life under dictatorship. When asked if she had ever visited a colony she replied modestly “no.” When asked if her life here in Canada was perfect and if everything had gone as planned, again she replied “no.” And then she started writing to me about the hardship and the incredible struggles her family had gone through: incest, rape, depression, etc. Those things also exist in the colonies, but over the years I have learned to be very cautious and not point the finger at a whole community. Just because some boys and men raped some girls and women in a Bolivian colony doesn't mean all 35,000 Mennonite boys or men in Bolivia are rapist, sex addicts, abusive, etc.

There are good things happening in many colonies in Latin America, and there are countless good people in each and every colony. I repeat again, “life is not perfect in the colonies,” but there are most definitely more good things happening than bad.

I know a person here in the Steinbach community who is so negative and pessimistic about everything in life that it's not even funny. If a stranger would meet him on the street and ask him about life, the people, our community and so on, that visitor would be left with negative thoughts. I have a relative in a Paraguayan colony who is incredibly negative about absolutely everything in the colony: leadership, the economy, church, school system, family and so on. If you'd ask him, life in the colony simply isn't worth living. But then again, you have lots of people (by far the majority) both in Steinbach and in the mentioned colony that enjoy life to the fullest.

When I think about a child's life in a conservative Mennonite colony I tend to have mixed feelings. In a way I would like to see some of their potential developed more than is currently being done. But then again the colonies can also be a safe haven in a world where there is more turmoil than many people can take. Therefore, I have made a short list of things why kids in a colony have a good life and things that could or need improvement. Both these lists could easily be expanded.

Some benefits of life in the colony for kids:

- **They have “a lot of siblings”:** Have you ever wondered if a dad with twelve kids loves each child just as much as a dad with only two? Have you ever thought about whether a mom wouldn't grieve as much or shed as many tears if one of her fourteen children died as a mom who only has three children and then one passes away? Well let me tell you one

thing, and I don't need to be a mom or a dad to come to this conclusion. I've seen it often enough in the colonies to know that they love their children (or grieve a loss) just as much as parents that only have one or two children. Maybe they show this love a bit differently; maybe they grieve more in seclusion; maybe they don't share about the loss in public (or social media); maybe they don't overwhelm their kids with gifts and trips. But I can assure you they love them just as much. So why would a kid in the colony have an advantage over let's say a child in the city? And again, this does not apply to all families. If you have 6, 8 or even 14 siblings you grow up with, you learn many social values right there at home. Family values are being taught as you grow up. Probably the most important thing they learn in family situations like this is the fact, that "life isn't just about me! There are other people around me who are just as important." They aren't as self-centered and life isn't just about themselves.



The Jacob B.H. Redecop family of Neu-Hochfeld in the Durango Colony in Mexico. Old Colony children grow up in large families with many siblings. They learn from each other and the need for sharing is taught early and often. Photo Credit: Kennert Giesbrecht.

- **Work ethic:** I mean this is a no-brainer to me. If I compare what the children in the colonies do to what our kids do, it almost becomes a laughing matter. Yes I am aware that some readers might think that the children in the colonies are forced to do labor that is not safe and too hard for kids to do. Rarely have I seen kids in the colonies do work that I didn't see fitting for their age and capabilities. Feeding some animals, weeding, picking fruits or vegetables, helping with milking the cows, washing clothes or dishes, raking the yard, etc. can hardly be considered "too hard for children." It teaches them that life is not just about fun and pleasure. You have to earn certain things in life; something a high percentage of the children in cities and industrial countries don't seem to get anymore. Kids in our world want to be served and pampered.
- **The "art of creative playing":** When I was a 10 year old boy I had very few toys to play with. But that didn't mean I was bored. I would create my own toys. I would build roads, factories, and houses. With clay or sticks I would make my cows or other animals. I would set fire to my factory and then the fire truck would come and extinguish the blaze. I would build fences, corrals, bridges ... I don't ever recall



Sara Redecop of the Nuevo Durango Colony in the Yucatan in Mexico rakes squash seeds on her parents' yard to help them dry. Old Colony children have chores and an important part of their education outside of school is learning how to work. Photo Credit: Kennert Giesbrecht.

- being bored. There was always something to do. In the colonies children still have the opportunity to be creative when playing. The parents don't place everything into their lap and say "okay, now play!" Expensive toys from the store are limited. Colony kids still smile when you give them a small tractor or a doll to play with. They don't need Lego to develop their sense of creativity. I have witnessed amazing things when colony children play.
- **There has been endless criticism by many church groups from North America that children in the more conservative colonies do not attend Sunday morning church services or Sunday school.** Only at the age of twelve or thirteen do many children in those colonies start attending these services. The critics say that valuable years of teaching and learning pass before they come into church. There is definitely some truth to that, but one must also acknowledge that these children have spent six years in school where basically all they have learned is strongly related to the Bible and their faith. That is a complete contrast to what our children learn in the public school system in Canada and elsewhere. They might experience an hour of Sunday school, an hour of church service and an hour of some type of children's program during the week. So maybe it would be nice to bring the colony children into the church setting at an earlier age, but one can't really point the finger at these conservative groups and say "their kids aren't getting

the spiritual input and teaching they need to grow in their faith.” I have attended fundraisers in local churches where missionaries are claiming that the Old Colony children are not allowed to have Bibles. I’m sure these people have never been in an Old Colony home nor school. Because I have seen Bibles, New Testaments, Catechisms, and other religious books in every school I’ve been to. I must admit, however, I have probably “only” been in a hundred schools.

There are aspects of life in the colonies that need to improve for children:

- **Some – I repeat *some!* – not all, not the majority but *some* kids get exploited at home when it comes to work.** I have witnessed how some children at a very young age have to do work that grown-ups should do; work that is too hard and too challenging for a child; work that is physically too demanding; work that is way too dangerous for a minor. Some of the tragic deaths of children in the colonies stem from these situations. In some cases this limits the time of play and joy and the child doesn’t have the opportunity to develop those skills. It basically lives the life of a grown-up.
- **Education in schools:** I grew up in a very different school setting than what you find in many conservative colonies. I learned to read, write - and understand what I read and wrote - at a very young age. And that is something I wish for every child on this planet. I learned that you can have fun while learning. I learned that you can play and learn. I learned that you are allowed to make mistakes without being punished. When travelling into the Mennonite colonies – and I’m referring to the more conservative – I have seen both extremes when it comes to teaching and learning. I’ve come out of a village school super excited about what I’ve witnessed. But I’ve also come out deeply concerned and almost depressed by what I’ve seen. There are teachers who do an amazing job with their limited resources. And then there are those that should not be standing in front of a group of young and bright children, because they simply don’t have a clue what they’re doing. Education just isn’t a priority to the leadership of many colonies and therefore students are discouraged and not given the opportunity to develop their knowledge and skills. Many don’t even get what we would consider a basic education.

- **Health and hygiene:** There is no doubt that things are still done quite differently in many ways in the colonies. Some say they “do things the way we did it a hundred years ago.” There’s a truth to that – especially when we look at some of their traditions. Health is another area in life that does not comply with our current standards in Canada or other western countries. Many health issues that we would consider serious are dealt with internally. The *Doktasche* (doctor) or the *Trachtmoaka* (chiropractor) can solve many upcoming health problems and one only goes to the physician when it’s really serious. Most little babies see the “light of the world” for the first time in some colony clinic – or the home of a *Doktasche*. And all this is good – but not always the safest and best approach to treating some of the arising health issues. Due to this, the mortality rate – especially amongst infants and small children – is somewhat higher than in countries like Canada. I have no statistics to prove this but I’m going with what physicians who have worked in the colonies or who have treated colony people have told me. Also of concern can be the nutrition of the children – and grown-ups for that matter. Very little is being taught about healthy living and healthy food. It’s quite common to see small children running around with a bottle of Coke or bags of candy. Many children do not brush their teeth regularly. So it is no wonder that due to some of these issues people will be forced to get dentures at a very young age. These are just some of the health or hygiene issues that have come to my attention when travelling into the colonies.

Life can be a challenge – here in Steinbach and in any Mennonite colony for that matter. As parents we struggle to do the right things for our children no matter where we are. There are pros and cons to living in a colony, as there are pros and cons to bringing up your kids in Steinbach or any other community in the western world. To put them all on a scale and say “this is better” or “that is better” is not fair in my opinion.

I’ve seen smiling and happy children here - and in the colonies; I’ve seen underprivileged and abused children here - and in the colonies. I love the metaphor of “first sweeping in front of you own house” before you start sweeping somebody else’s yard. That has also become one of my principles when traveling to the colonies. Who am I to tell them how to do things?

Agreements Concerning Mennonite *Pflegekinder*

Bruce Wiebe, Winkler, Manitoba

Along with the Mennonite desire to live separately from the world came a gradual increase in their own institutional structures to deal with the ebb and flow of community life. The death of a parent or both parents was traumatic for children and thrust the responsibilities of their care upon the community. Mennonite communities gradually developed procedures not only to deal with the distribution of estates to address economic survival of children, but also practices to provide for the nurture and care of younger surviving children. While

family histories offer many examples of children ending up being *Pflegekinder*, children raised by adults other than their parents, little is known about the details of how the community structured such arrangements. Examination of the *Waisenamt* records offers a small window into the process of children becoming *Pflegekinder*.

The *Waisenamt* was established to look after the interests of orphans and a set of Regulations, the *Waisenverordnung*, specified how this was to be done.¹ The guiding principle was

based on Isaiah 1:17, “Learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.” (NIV) Essentially, children were to inherit one half of the estate at the death of a parent and the remainder at the death of the other parent, but their nurture and care was a primary focus of the Regulations. When it came to their personal welfare and the protection of their inheritance, no distinction was made between the needs of children who lost only one, or those who lost both parents through death. After the death of either one or both parents, their nearest blood relatives and local village authorities appointed two Guardians for their minor age children. Guardians were to be either near blood relatives or fair minded, impartial members of the Church, one of whom needed to live near the children and whose appointments were to be ratified by the Waisenamt. Their responsibility was to fill the role of father or mother or both parents and to provide genuine parental care ensuring the welfare and Christian nurturing of the children. Of course a surviving parent remained responsible for his or her own children, but in situations where children were not well treated by a step-parent, or where children were disobedient, there was provision for children to be removed from the home by the Guardians, Waisenamt Administrators and Village Authorities to be placed with other families. Where children were removed from a step-parent situation they were to be placed under the care and nurture of families who would provide reasonable treatment, faithful nurture, and Christian education. Those removed from their homes due to disobedience were to be placed with families where they could best be trained and educated to become useful and successful persons, noting that not severity but rather Christian upbringing and appropriate instruction brought best results.

The Guardians had a particular responsibility for children who lost both parents but without special permission could not take them into their own homes. They were to be placed in ‘*pflege*’, (nurture), or ‘*dienst*’, (service) with other good families belonging to the Church. In order to fulfill the obligations to their wards, it was absolutely necessary for the Guardians to visit them at their placement sites several times each year to inquire about their nurture, health and conduct. The Guardians were also to represent the interests of their wards by being present at both the evaluation of the estate assets as well as at their division. Although not specified in the Regulations, a surviving non-remarrying parent, perhaps without financial means or ability to provide proper care, could also voluntarily allow or request such outplacement. In all cases, the Guardians retained their mandated responsibilities for these children.

Detailed Waisenamt documentation together with signatures was required for all Estate Evaluations and Estate Division Agreements and all financial records were maintained in duplicate, but the Regulations did not require documenting the placement of children with other families. However, the *Reinlaender Mennoniten Gemeinde*, also known as the Old Colony Mennonite Church, identified fifty-six such situations in the Manitoba Church Register begun in 1880, where children were recorded with their birth families with a note that they were living with another family, or were listed again as *Pflegekinder* with their placement family.² An additional seventeen can be identified from other sources for a total of seventy-three of which three were children of non-Mennonite background who would not have had Guardians appointed.

As noted above, distinction was made in placements as either ‘*pflege*’ or ‘*dienst*’ which would appear to correspond with the age of the children; those of school age or under requiring care and those above providing a service. The younger ones were an economic liability until they left school when they were able to help their placement families while those already past school age immediately contributed to the family productivity. Although not recorded as such, some placements are identifiable as service by the deposit of earned wages into their *Waisenamt* account by a Guardian. Children were not allowed to enter into service or engage in financial transactions without the approval of their Guardians and logically their wages would thus be administered by the latter.

The *Waisenamt* Regulations prescribe in precise detail the devolution of estates according to the degree of relationship but recognize only blood relationships. Accordingly, orphan children were the heirs of their natural parents’ estates but were not considered as heirs of their *Pflegeeltern*. A child could live with a placement family unit and contribute his or her labor until the age of majority but never receive any compensation whereas the natural children with whom they had been raised would inherit the entire estate at the death of the parents. Often *Pflegekinder* were the children of younger, less financially established parents and therefore had only a minimal inheritance of their own, but having contributed their labor till majority with their placement families, they saw the latter’s natural children inherit more substantial sums from their by then older, more established parents.

This apparent inequity and the discord it caused may have been the reason for a surviving series of fifteen written Agreements entered into by Guardians of *Pflegekinder* and their wards’ *Pflegeeltern*, despite there being no requirement for, or even reference to such, in the *Waisenamt* Regulations. Their rarity would suggest that this was uncommon and their survival is attributable only to them having been deposited with the *Waisenamt* Administrators at *Hochfeld*. They date from 1887 through 1922 with the majority after 1917. The Agreements vary considerably but frequently cover certain points and contain similar wordings.³

The *Pflegeeltern* promised in a Christian manner to be father and mother to the child as if he or she were their own, to regularly send him or her to school and to provide adequate clothing. Some Agreements also note that the *Pflegeeltern* are entitled to reasonably put the children to work once they have sufficient physical growth and adequate health. Since the children were not considered as natural heirs of the *Pflegeeltern*, the *Pflegeeltern* promised to give to them items similar to those given to natural children, such as a horse or a cow, chest of drawers, bedding, Bible, Hymnal, Catechism and a specified sum of money, provided they remained in the home until the age of majority.

A more in-depth look at some Agreements

Bernhard Giesbrecht (*1881) and Agatha Bueckert (*1881) were married in 1900 and had nine surviving children at the time of Agatha’s death in December 1917 at *Einlage*. Two months later, February 1918, Bernhard was remarried to Anna Neufeld before himself dying on November 21 of the same year. Three days later, November 24, 1918, his son Jacob was born to his widow. On January 5, 1918 an inventory and valuation of Bernhard Giesbrecht’s assets was undertaken which totalled

\$9,550 from which were deducted his debts of \$7,463 leaving a net worth of \$2,087. The real property, 320 acres plus buildings, was valued at \$7,000. The valuation was attended by both Bernhard and the already appointed Guardians for his children. On February 2, 1918, prior to his remarriage, an Estate division took place at which Bernhard agreed to distribute half of his net worth, \$1,040, to his children as their maternal inheritance.

November 21, 1918 Bernhard died and the children's future was decided as per the following Agreement.

Einlage, December 10, 1918

It has been discussed and agreed between the guardians and the siblings of the deceased parents, Bernhard Giesbrechts, concerning the minor age orphans as follows:

Firstly, that the children, or orphans, can be placed with other families provided that they treat them with parental responsibility, remembering always that they have accepted an orphan whom God the Father of orphans will watch over.

Secondly, that whoever receives a child shall send it to school as required and if the child remains (with the Pflegeeltern) until it is baptized then the Pflegeeltern are committed to give them \$200 as an inheritance plus a good horse (for a boy), a good cow for a girl, and bedding, suitable clothing, books, and a chest of drawers.

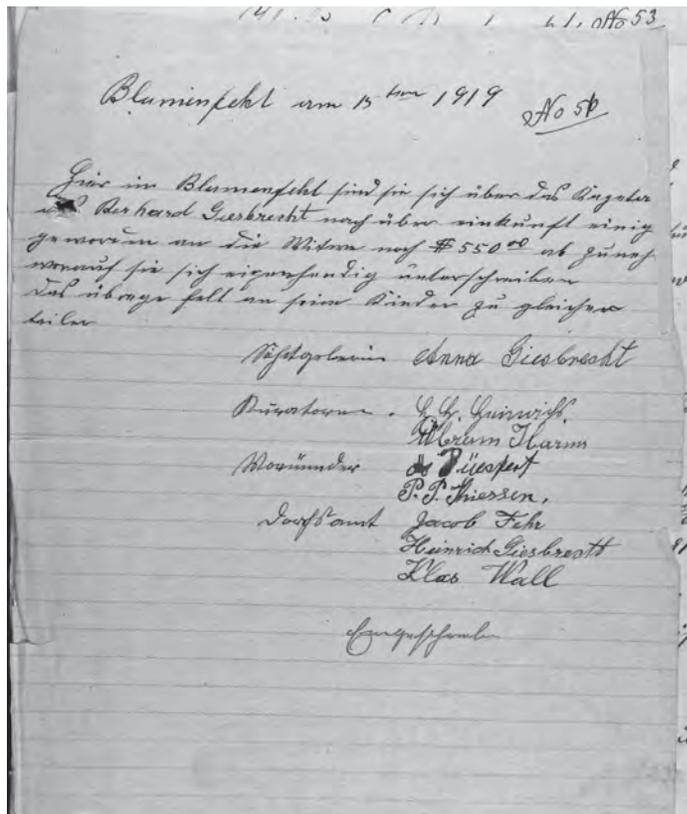
*This is confirmed by signatures of the Guardians
Abraham Bueckert
Peter Thiessen*

On December 20, 1918 a month after Bernhard's death, the Waisenamt conducted an auction of the estate which yielded \$16,576 of which \$10,226 was used to repay his Waisenamt debt.⁴ At this auction, held less than a year after having been evaluated at only \$7,000, the real property now sold for \$11,920. The earlier evaluation had come at a time when Bernhard was to distribute one-half of the estate to his children as their maternal inheritance. The apparent undervaluation was not surprising since Bernhard would have wanted to retain as much capital as possible without having to pay interest on it. At the time the interests of the children were perhaps not as well represented by the Guardians as they were subsequent to his death. As evidenced by an Agreement, after his brief nine month marriage, Bernhard's widow was only awarded \$550 rather than half of the estate.

Blumenfeld, 15th, 1919 [Month not recorded]

Here in Blumenfeld it has been agreed to deduct \$550 for the Widow from Bernhard Giesbrecht's capital with the balance going to his children in equal portions.

Distributor	Anna Giesbrecht
Trustees	H H Giesbrecht Abram Harms
Guardians	A Bueckert P P Thiessen
Village Authorities	Jacob Fehr Heinrich Giesbrecht Klaas Wall



The agreement allocated \$550 of the inheritance to Bernhard Giesbrecht's second wife when he died nine months after their marriage. This was not half the estate as specified by the Waisenamt Rules but it did compensate for the brevity of this marriage and the earlier undervaluation after the death of his first wife.

Agreements then followed deciding placements of the children with other families.

Chortitz, Nov 17, 1919

Contractual Agreement between the Cornelius P Thiessens of Hoffnungsfeld as Pflegeeltern to the deceased Bernhard Giesbrecht's children Margaretha and Jacob, and their Guardians Abraham Bueckert of Chortitz and Peter Thiessen of Einlage.

1stly, Above named Pflegeeltern will be as father and mother to the named children as would be required of father or mother of one's own children.

2ndly, Since the said Pflegeekinder are not considered as natural heirs of the Pflegeeltern, therefore, provided that they obediently remain at home until the age of majority that is 18 – 20 years of age, they promise to them the following remuneration: each child \$200 cash, plus the Pflegesohn Jacob will receive a good young horse whereas the Pflegeetochter Margaretha will receive a good cow. Furthermore they will each receive a chest of drawers, a bedstead with 2 blankets, 4 pillows, and 2 sheets, an overcoat, a headscarf, and all necessary clothing, plus the 'Ehrenkleider',⁵ a Bible, Hymnal, Catechism, and a good set of chairs.

3rdly, Should the Pflegeekinder die before having left school then the Pflegeeltern are not obligated to divide the money among their surviving siblings. However if they die between school leaving and majority, then impartial persons

will determine what amount of the money will be distributed in equal portions as an inheritance to their biological siblings.

Signed by all involved persons as confirmation of the above contract.

Pflegevater Cornelius P Thiessen
 Guardians Abraham Bueckert
 Peter Thiessen
 Village Authorities Jacob Enns
 Peter Wiebe
 Isaac Wolfe

That same day, Nov 17, 1919, an identical Agreement was made between Jacob Wall of Blumenfeld as Pflegeeltern to deceased Bernhard Giesbrecht's children Peter and Helena and their Guardians Abraham Bueckert of Chortitz and Peter Thiessen of Einlage whereby each child was also to receive \$200 if they remained at home till age of majority. The known Pflegekinder Agreements all concerned children who were age eleven or younger at the time they came to live with their Pflegeeltern which corresponds to them being of preschool or school age, which could be considered a care and not a service placement. Of the ten Giesbrecht children, the youngest, Heinrich, born just after his father's death, remained with his natural mother while, as evidenced by these Agreements, four of five children under the age of twelve were placed with other families. No Agreement has yet been located for the then 10 year old daughter Sara but the four older minor age children no longer in school were subsequently living with and

working for other families as evidenced by their wages which were deposited into their Waisenamt accounts by their Guardian Abraham Bueckert.⁶ These could be considered what the Waisenamt Regulations referred to as a service placements.

The duties of the Guardians allowed for a change in placement families depending on the situation. The placements were also not necessarily permanent, as described in these Agreements in the case of Abraham Thiessen's daughter Margaretha. On February 11, 1913 her Guardians, Peter G. Klassen and Cornelius Thiessen, both of Chortitz, placed her with the Johan Wiebe family, an older man in his third marriage with a younger widow who was in her second. Immediately after Johan's death on June 4, 1919 the Guardians placed Margaretha with Johan's son, the Peter E. Wiebe family of Blumstein. In both cases the Agreements were identical in that the Pflegeeltern were to give \$200 to Margaretha at majority age since she was not considered an heir.

Of the three non-Mennonite children identified in the Reinlaender Gemeindebuch as Pflegekinder living with Mennonite families, one is of particular interest. A couple, Franz and Agatha Enns of Gnadenenthal, whose only child died in 1908, had two Pflegekinder. Anna Dyck (*1898) came to the family after 1906 and a boy they named Jacob Enns (*1903) and only identified as coming from an orphanage, the Children's Home of Winnipeg, was adopted in 1911. Anna's contribution to the Enns household would appear to be the reason why, at the age of majority and after her October 1919 marriage to Peter Wiebe, she was given 40 acres of land. However, the title to this parcel had not yet been transferred to her name prior to the emigration to Mexico.

F 14

CUAUHTEMOC CHIH. SERVICIO DE MIGRACION
 REGISTRO DE EXTRANJEROS

NUM. 77767

SE EXPIDE... EL... 15... DE... julio... DE 1932.

A... ENNS, AGATHA NEUDORF DE.

CUYA LEGAL ESTANCIA EN MEXICO QUEDA COMPROBADA CON ESTA TARJETA.



JUL 15 1932



JUL 15 1932

(FIRMA DEL PORTADOR)

QUIEN ENTRÓ EN MEXICO POR... C. Juárez Chih. ... EL... 6 DE... junio de 1922

me.

MEDIA FILIACION DEL INTERESADO

CONSTITUCION FISICA... mediana

ESTATURA... 1.53 cmts. COLOR... blanco

PELO... castano cano CEJAS... escasas abiertas

OJOS... azules NARIZ... chata

MENTON... borlado BIGOTE... ---

BARBA... --- SEÑAS PARTICULARES... ningunas

DATOS COMPLEMENTARIOS

EDAD... 37 AÑOS. FECHA EN QUE NACIÓ... 1865

ESTADO CIVIL... casada PROFESION, OFICIO U OCUPACION... su hogar

IDIOMA NATIVO... alemán OTROS IDIOMAS QUE HABLA... ninguno

LUGAR Y PAIS EN QUE NACIÓ... CHORTITZ, EKATERINSOSLA RUSIA

NACIONALIDAD ACTUAL... canadiense

RELIGION... menonita RAZA... blanca

LUGAR DE RESIDENCIA... Camp. No. 22 Cuauhtemoc

NOMBRE Y DOMICILIO EN MEXICO DE PERSONAS QUE PUEDAN DAR REFERENCIAS DEL INTERESADO... J. O. Hempel, comerciante de esta poblacion

EL JEFE DE LA OFICINA DEL REG. DE EXTS. (FIRMA DEL FUNCIONARIO DE MIGRACION)

JOSE TRINIDAD RAMOS.

SELLO

The Mexican Foreigner Registration card for Agatha Enns.

CUAUHTEMOC/CHIH. F. 14. NUM. 76744

SERVICIO DE MIGRACION
REGISTRO DE EXTRANJEROS

SE EXPIDE EL 3 DE Julio DE 1925.
A ENNS GEINTER FRANZ G.

CUYA LEGAL ESTANCIA EN MEXICO QUEDA COMPROBADA CON ESTA TARJETA.

MEDIA FILIACION DEL INTERESADO
CONSTITUCION FISICA Fuertis
ESTATURA 1.75 COLOR blanco
PELO ent. cano. lacio. CEJAS esp. ca. abiertas
OJOS azul claro. NARIZ horizontal
MENTON horlado. BIGOTE
BARBA SEÑAS PARTICULARES

DATOS COMPLEMENTARIOS
EDAD 25 AÑOS. FECHA EN QUE NACIO 1873.
ESTADO CIVIL casado. PROFESION, OFICIO U
OCUPACION agricultor.
IDIOMA NATIVO aleman. OTROS IDIOMAS
QUE HABLA ingles, poco español.
LUGAR Y PAIS EN QUE NACIO, Ryarinoslaf, Rusia.
NACIONALIDAD ACTUAL, canadiense.
RELIGION menonita. RAZA, blanca.
LUGAR DE RESIDENCIA, Campo No. 22, -Cuauhtemoc.
NOMBRE Y DOMICILIO EN MEXICO DE PERSONAS QUE PUEGAN DAR RE-
FERENCIAS DEL INTERESADO, David Redekor, -Cuauhtemoc, Chih.

EL DIRECTOR DE LA OF. CENT. DEL REGIS. EXTRS.
(FIRMA DEL FUNCIONARIO DE MIGRACION)
JOSE TRINIDAD RAMOS. SELLO

QUIEN ENTRÓ EN MEXICO POR C. Juárez, Chih.
EL 8 DE junio de 1922.

mlg.

The Mexican Foreigner Registration card for Franz Enns.

Gnadenthal the 28 October, 1919

We the undersigned certify herewith that we give to our Pfl egetochter Anna Dyck, now Anna Wiebe, 40 acres of land from the 80 acres that we purchased from Johan Bueckert. The West Half of the East Half of the South East Quarter of 17-2-3. It shall belong to her for use, to rent out or to sell. However, if she should die without natural children then the land, or if sold, the proceeds thereof, are to be returned to the Pfl egeeltern. If there are natural children at the time of her death then it belongs to them.

Pflegevater	Franz Enns
Pflegemutter	Agatha Enns
Pfl egetochter	Anna Wiebe
Witnesses	Bernhard B. Penner
	Gerhard Friesen
	Peter Penner

However, the Pfl egesohn, now known as Jacob Enns, was still a minor in 1922 and accompanied his adoptive parents to Mexico. Franz Enns, perhaps as an incentive for Jacob to willingly accompany them, had already deposited a total of \$700 into a Waisenamt account for Jacob in 1918/19, which according to the Regulations, he only had access to at age of majority. These funds together with interest, a total of \$887, he received in 1925.⁷ Despite his 1924 marriage in Mexico to Katharina Wieler, he made repeated efforts to obtain documents that would allow him to return with his own family to Canada. Jacob Enns was born Fred Syce Lunn at Vermilion Bay Ontario to his father Flett Lunn and an unnamed mother

but his birth was never registered. In 1908 his mother died and Flett brought Fred, together with his older sister Olga and younger brother Ray, to the Children's Home of Winnipeg from where Franz and Agatha Enns adopted him in 1911. Despite his efforts Jacob Enns/Fred Lunn was never able to contact Ray who, unknown to him then, was adopted by David and Isabel Hall of Neepawa and later British Columbia, and last heard of as detained by the United States Immigration.⁸ Nor was there communication with Olga who coincidentally was also adopted by a Mennonite family, Peter and Katharina Lentzner who in 1916, were living in Herbert Saskatchewan.⁹ Olga, now calling herself Florence Lunn left the Lentzners and her last known whereabouts in 1930 were in Great Falls Montana.¹⁰ Eventually, in 1969, Fred Lunn/Jacob Enns acquired a Canadian Passport issued in his adopted name but this was by now much too late for him to do anything other than visit the country of his birth.¹¹

Not all Pfl egeeltern were financially able to provide a cash payment to their Pfl egekinder, as evidenced by an agreement involving Ältester Johan Friesen. Friesen and his wife, Maria of Neuenburg were the Pfl egeeltern to three sets of orphan siblings including Peter and Elizabeth Hamm, children of the deceased Peter and Elizabeth Hamm.

Hochfeld December 29, 1913

Contractual Agreement between Abraham Hamm and Peter Reimer, Waldheim, as guardians and Aeltester Johan Friesens as Pfl egeeltern to the late Peter Hamm's children Peter and Elizabeth.

All those who need to know are advised that Johan Friesens accept the above named children as their own chil-

3rdly Agreed that if one or the other of the adoptive parents dies, and the children have remained (at home) as agreed, then the remaining assets, which according to our Waisenamt Regulations shall be evaluated or sold, shall be divided and then the half to be distributed (to the heirs) shall again be halved in such a way that the one accrues equally to these two children, that is, one quarter of the assets. Should it happen that we adopt more children, then the latter shall inherit equally with the former. However, if this (death of one or both adoptive parents) should occur before the children are of the age of majority then both children's portions shall be paid into our Waisenamt and only paid out to the concerned child or children if he or they have obediently remained till majority with the surviving adoptive parent. Otherwise said portion accrues to the other rightful heirs of the deceased.

4thly If each child obediently remains with the adoptive parents until age of majority, and the latter are still living, he shall then receive a "Mitgift"¹² as is usual when circumstances allow.

Note, a further distribution as noted above will again occur when the surviving spouse dies.

This Agreement has been properly considered, agreed upon, and signed by all involved persons in the presence of the Neuhorst village authorities in 1922.

Father	Abram Giesbrecht
Adoptive Father	Abraham H. Wiebe
Adoptive Mother	Margareta Wiebe
Guardian	Heinrich Schellenberg
Guardian	Jacob Thiessen
Village Mayor	Johann W. Thiessen
Assistant	Abraham H. Wiebe
Assistant	Franz Schmitt

The Wiebe family also emigrated to Mexico where Margaretha died in 1927 and true to the terms of the Agreement, of the 3000 Pesos to be distributed from her estate, 1500 Pesos was designated for the Pflegekinder Abraham and Bernhard Giesbrecht. A year later Abraham Wiebe was remarried to a widow with children but prior to so doing he reconfirmed another provision of the Agreement by having both himself and his 2nd wife sign another Agreement specifying that Abraham and Bernhard would receive the same "Mitgift" as would her children.

In a similar manner in 1921 Jacob Fehr, who, together with Guardians Johan Friesen and Johan Redekop, placed his motherless two year old daughter Anna with Jacob and Helena Wiebe of Neuhorst. The Agreement was not open-ended in that it stipulated that she was placed by her father and accepted as a daughter by her Pflegeeltern until her age of majority. In essence, if there were no natural heirs Anna was to receive one quarter of the estate upon the death of each Pflegeparent. However, a clause was added which foresaw the possibility of her natural father Jacob removing her from the Pflegeeltern before the age of majority, in which case she would inherit nothing nor would she inherit if she herself disobeyed them.

In 1922 the wife of Jacob Neudorf of Schanzenfeld died after childbirth and their newborn son Franz, was placed with Johan and Katharina Neustaeter of Chortitz. In a variation, the Agreement between all parties, including the Guardians, Franz

Peters and Jacob Fehr, specified that should the Pflegeeltern have the financial resources, Franz would receive \$200 when he became an adult, but if the Pflegeeltern decided that he was to inherit as did their own children, then the \$200 would cease to apply.

The earliest such Agreement is dated 1887 and was not a separate document but part of a Teilungskontrakt, the division of an estate. Judith, the wife of David Dyck of Neuenburg, died leaving behind their nearly two year old daughter also named Judith. Just prior to his subsequent remarriage, in addition to promising to her a maternal inheritance of \$75, David gave his daughter to her maternal grandparents, Abraham and Nelke Friesen, as their own child for as long as her Guardians deemed it beneficial. Her grandfather Abraham, who was also one of her appointed Guardians, promised to give her an *Ehrenkleid*, a cow, chest, bedstead and bedding if she remained with them till majority. However, if David did not keep his word and later, with the approval of the Guardians, took Judith back, then he was compelled to fulfill his obligations. (Implied is payment of the \$75 maternal inheritance)

Grandfather Abraham Friesen died in July 1905, the same month that granddaughter Judith Dyck turned 20. Before the division of his estate she was, although not required by the 1887 agreement, given \$200. In addition, as the only child of her deceased mother, she received the latter's share of the estate as well.

A 1920 Agreement also concerned grandparents and grandchildren. Jacob and Helena Neufeld both died in 1918 leaving two orphan children with Helena's parents, Jacob and Helena Neustaeter of Kronsthal. These maternal grandparents agreed that, provided their grandchildren remained with them until age 20, they would treat them as their own children but that they would together inherit only their late mother's portion of the estate. Unusual in this Agreement was that it was also attested to by the paternal grandfather, widower Aron Neufeld. However, after emigrating to Mexico, when grandfather Jacob Neustaeter died in 1927, his assets of 6,687 Pesos were exceeded by his debts of 7,081 Pesos which precluded the possibility of an inheritance.

It is clear that Pflegekinder did not fall under the same inheritance rules that biological children benefited from when parents died. Although the above Agreements suggest some patterns in how Pflegekinder were treated, there were variations, particularly in the amount of cash, if any, they received at the age of majority or upon the death of their Pflegeeltern. They were, however, still protected by the community's insistence that their interest be represented by Guardians until they reached the age of majority.

The writing of the Agreements cited here was certainly guided by the nurture and care focus of the Waisenverordnung. Faithful adherence to the terms agreed upon was in keeping with Christian commitment and consistent with the meticulous standards evidenced by the Waisenamt itself.

Endnotes

- 1 *Waisenverordnung der Reinlaender Mennoniten-Gemeinde in Canada*, Der Nordwesten Publishing Company Limited, 1914.
- 2 *Reinlaender Gemeindebuch 1880 – 1903*, Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1994.
- 3 "Teilungskontrakt," Waisenamt Files, Cuauhtémoc Mexico, digital copies in the possession of this writer and at the Mennonite Heritage Center, Winnipeg.
- 4 "Ausrufen 1916 -1920," Waisenamt Files.
- 5 Directly translated, this would be "honour dresses" or "honour clothing." This

is assumed to be the clothing worn at baptism.

6 "Kapitalbuch A – 4", pp 290,291,296,297,334,335,368,369 Waisenamt Files.

7 "Kapitalbuch A—4", pp 376,377 Waisenamt Files.

8 1916 Census http://data2.collectionscanada.ca/006003/t-21928/jpg/31228_4363957-00219.jpg.

9 1916 Census http://data2.collectionscanada.ca/006003/t-21945/jpg/31228_4363974-00928.jpg.

10 1930 United States Census <https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/XCM5-9W8>.

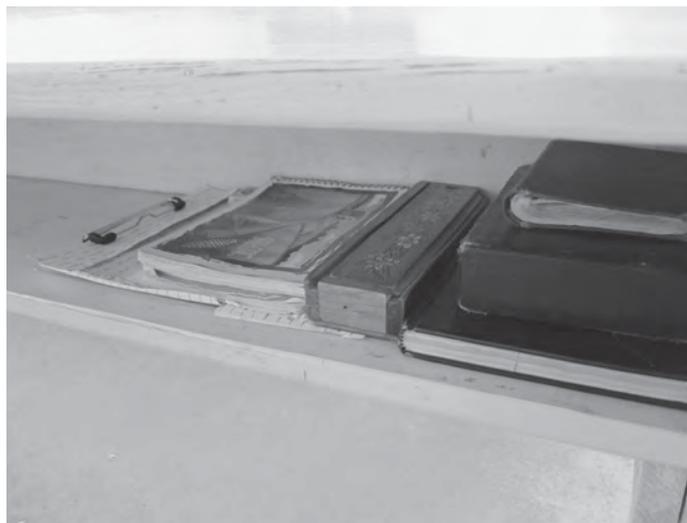
11 Details extracted from copies of Jacob Enns' correspondence provided by Jacob Enns Jr.

12 The term translates as dowry but refers to the usual items given to natural children by their parents such as a horse or cow, items of furniture, and Bible, Hymn Book and Catechism.

Out with the Old and in with the New?: School Reform on the Manitoba Colony, Mexico

Robyn Sneath, Brandon, Manitoba

It is a well-known fact among those with an interest in conservative Mennonites that the primary reason for the exodus to Mexico and Paraguay in the 1920s was to preserve their schools.¹ Rather than acquiesce to demands made by the governments of Manitoba and Saskatchewan, roughly eight thousand Mennonites left the Canadian prairies for Latin America in order to once again undertake the re-creation of their schools and communities in a way that honoured God and conscience.² And for nearly eighty years this is precisely what they managed to do. The schools—in both form and content—bore a strong resemblance to schools from hundreds of years earlier. The *Fibel*,³ the Bible, and the Catechism comprised the bulk of the curriculum, and teachers were selected from the men of community. The purpose of the school was to impart enough practical skills—basic literacy and numeracy, as well as a healthy dose of religious instruction—so that the students would be ready to assume their place as members of the community as adults.⁴



School materials, including books and a wooden pencil box, stored in a student's desk in a village school. The *Fibel*, the Bible, and the Catechism are the books typically used for instruction in village schools. Photo Credit: Robyn Sneath

Ultimately it was not pressure from without but pressure from within that created a deep and possibly irreparable fissure in the fabric of the school system. Under the direction of some of the more forward-thinking *Vorsteher* throughout

the Manitoba Colony, located in Chihuahua State in Northern Mexico, a school committee was established, the goal of which was to improve the quality of education within the colony. Men from the *Gemeinde* who were known to have an interest in education were elected to the committee and a head was appointed from among them.⁵ In 1998 the committee was established and began to meet regularly to discuss how to go about improving the schools, as it was believed that the school system was in dire need of reform.⁶ For the founders, it was as simple as '*die Schulen waren nicht gut*.'⁷ Since the 1960s the schools have been condemned as producing 'functionally illiterate' students.⁸ Rather than simply reforming the existing system, a competing system developed, one which, while providing many advantages over the village system nonetheless threatens many long-held traditions and practices. These 'committee schools', or '*Komitee Schulen*' as they have come to be known, now threaten the very survival of the traditional village schools which prompted the move to Mexico in the first place.

In fifteen years, the committee schools have grown rapidly. According to members of the school committee, already more than a third of the school-aged children in the colony attend one of four committee schools, with dozens more on waiting lists.⁹ Those who helped to establish the new system believe it is only a matter of time before the village schools cease to exist, or are subsumed by the committee system.¹⁰

Evidence for this paper is based on interviews conducted with several original members of the school committee and the *Vorsteher* who were involved. It is also based on visits to twelve schools (both village and committee schools), located throughout the Manitoba Colony and on interviews conducted with teachers at both types of schools.¹¹ The purpose of this paper is to provide an introduction to the committee school movement and to contrast it with the traditional village schools. This paper compares some of the major differences between the two systems and lays the groundwork for further work on the topic. It also highlights some of the key differences between the teachers and the changing beliefs about the purpose of schooling, though other key distinctions, such as curriculum, pedagogy, tuition, and assessment might just as easily have been explored.

Reasons given for reform are many, but the prevailing impetus is that the old system no longer adequately prepares students for their future lives.¹² The increasing scarcity of land has led to growth in manufacturing and commerce, and many leaders felt that their children lacked the skills necessary for

them to thrive economically, ranging from math and literacy to the use of computers and the ability to communicate in English and Spanish. Peter Ens, a former *Vorsteher*, went so far as to say that he feared their young people were being turned into ‘the white Indians,’ and went on to explain that he feared that the most technical, highest paying jobs within the Mennonite colony were being outsourced to educated Mexicans and the lowest paying, lowest skilled work was left to the Mennonites because they lacked the requisite skills for any other work. Ens, after participating on a Mennonite heritage tour to the Netherlands, Poland, and Ukraine compared the Mennonite school system to an airplane. He said that in the early years the plane was on the ascent, and continued to ascend until it reached the apogee in Ukraine and had been descending ever since, both in Canada and Mexico, and in fact had basically crashed in Mexico because of a lack of fuel.¹³ Their goal was to try to inject fuel into the system by improving the teacher education, the curriculum, and the school facilities. Most members of the early school committee blamed *Ältester* Isaak Dyck, leader of the migration to Mexico, for the poor quality of the schools.¹⁴ Dyck, in his memoir, *Auswanderung von Kanada nach Mexiko*, intimates his disdain for higher learning when he quotes Isaiah 29:13-14 as a warning for his people if they failed to acknowledge God’s provision for them in Mexico;¹⁵ the English New International Version translation captures

the sentiment best: “the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish.”¹⁶ These leaders felt that because Dyck was so critical of education and conflated knowledge with pride, the schools had been allowed to suffer. The difficult early years in Mexico were cited as further cause of the poor schools—because the communities were so focused on survival, the schools had been allowed to suffer, and because the teachers were only as good as their own teachers had been, the whole system gradually declined.¹⁷

One of the most striking differences between the competing systems is the teachers. According to Kelly Hedges, teachers in the village schools are chosen based on a combination of their level of orthodoxy and their need for employment, and are almost always men.¹⁸ In the committee schools, the teachers are almost exclusively women, and typically young, unmarried women, sometimes as young as fifteen years old.¹⁹ The reasons young women—referred to by many on the School Committee as ‘*Mädchen*’—are preferred are several. Initially the plan was not to create a separate system, rather, the goal of the committee was to reform the already existing village school system.²⁰ The committee found, however, that they struggled to implement their new ideas with the already established male teachers of the village schools.²¹ They found that the teachers were not as receptive to reform as the committee had hoped they might be. After what was considered a failed attempt to convert a



Teachers in the *Komitee Schulen* are typically young women. Here, a teacher reads to her students in a classroom decorated with brightly coloured pictures and learning materials on the walls and filled with individual student desks. Photo Credit: Robyn Sneath

village school into a committee school, it was decided that a new school should be established and governed by the committee.²² Eventually the village of Lowe Farm was selected as the location for the first committee school and the school was staffed with young women.

Another reason for hiring young female teachers is equally pragmatic. One of the primary goals of the school committee was to reduce class size to 15-20 pupils per class.²³ This was a serious reduction from the village schools, which could have as many as 80 pupils per teacher.²⁴ The reduced class sizes necessitated a drastic increase in the number of teachers required, which in turn meant that the salary paid to each individual teacher was considerably lower than the income earned by the village teachers, whose compensation was based on tuition paid by parents and the church. In addition to a salary, the village teachers were also provided with a home on the property and additional benefits, such as land.²⁵ It was expected that the teacher would be able to support his wife and children with his income. In contrast, the expenses incurred by a young woman living at home with her parents would be significantly lower. Several members of the school committee also stated that women make better teachers than men because there was a belief that they were more nurturing and provided a less intimidating classroom environment, a space in which children felt freer to ask questions.²⁶

A sketch of two teachers—Greta Dyck²⁷ from a committee school and Franz Thiessen²⁸ from a village school—is perhaps

one of the most effective ways to highlight the differences between the systems. Both were educated in the Old Colony village schools, were experienced teachers, and showed obvious commitment to their craft. Where one confounds the stereotype of the Old Colony teacher, the other confirms it.

At thirty-four years old, Greta Dyck is more than twice the age of many of her colleagues. She has been teaching fourteen years, as long as some of them have been alive. Until a suitable male head could be found, she served as the interim director of her school. Dyck, a tall, robust and capable appearing woman, met me at the front of the school clad in a black dress with a floral print under her school-issued light purple pinney with her title '*Lehrerin*' embroidered on it. The only thing more noticeable than her black socks tucked into sport sandals was her pregnant belly protruding from under her pinney. She served as my guide to the school.

The allure of the committee schools was easy to see.²⁹ The schools themselves were new, big, and bright in comparison to the often old, dimly lit village schools. Wide hallways led to different wings of the schools—primary and middle school years. Dyck's classroom, like most committee classes, was brightly decorated with hand-made High German posters featuring reminders about grammatical concepts.

She, like many committee school teachers, took pride in her High German and its pronunciation, which was becoming increasingly similar to conventional German.³⁰ The dearth of instruction in the Gothic script was another major point of departure from the village school. The increasing use of the ubiquitous Latin script rather than the German Gothic *Fraktur* style implied a shift in values about the purpose of education. As Hedges argued in her dissertation about literacy among the Old Colonists of Mexico, and based on fieldwork conducted in the mid-1990s, the purpose of the schools was 'primarily to provide the children of the Old Colony Mennonite church members with the linguistic knowledge and skills in High German necessary to eventually join the sacred, ritual life of the community. The communicative practices deemed essential are reading, writing, reciting, and singing.'³¹ The main written texts required for participation in the Old Colony Church are the Bible and the *Gesangbuch*, both of which were written in the German Gothic script. A lack of familiarity with the Gothic script could lead to a disconnection from one's faith.

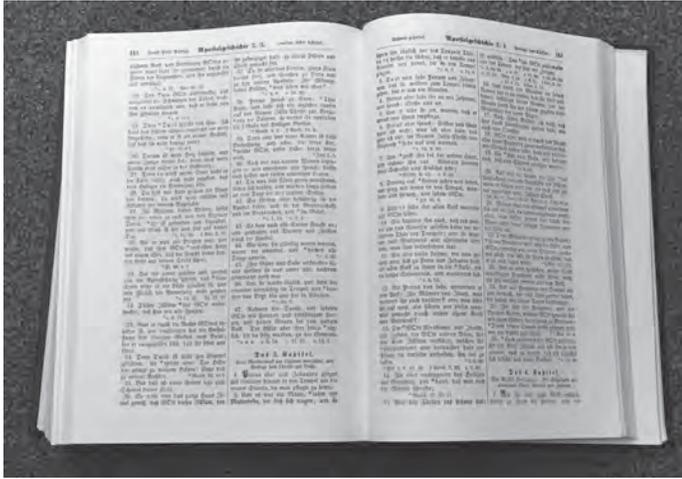
Certainly what has been added to the curriculum is every bit as noteworthy as what has been omitted. Instead of steeping themselves in the sacred scripts of the *Sindoagsche* realm,



The exterior of a village school. Photo Credit: Robyn Sneath



The exterior of a Komitee Schule. The building seen in the background is the primary school. Photo Credit: Robyn Sneath



The Bible in Gothic script was an important aspect of the village school curriculum. Photo Credit: Hans Werner.

students in the committee schools studied more ‘worldly’³² subjects like science and Spanish.³³ The introduction of Spanish in particular represents a major shift in thought about interaction with the wider world, considering that one of the reasons that the Old Colonists left Manitoba in the 1920s was because of the introduction of the national language in their schools.³⁴ To be sure, most Old Colonists did interact with their Mexican neighbours to varying degrees—from ordering in restaurants and shopping in stores, to communicating with doctors or for business purposes; teaching Spanish was an explicit acceptance of what was already common practice.

Dyck had a daughter in Grade Five and a son in Kindergarten. Both of her children attended the school but Kindergarten was only held Tuesdays and Thursdays. On the off days her son woke on his own, dressed himself, made himself breakfast and came over to the school—her family lived on the school property. He had a small desk in her class where he occupied himself throughout the day looking at *Das Blatt*,³⁵ drawing pictures on the whiteboard, and sharpening pencils.

Dyck’s husband has only known her as a teacher. She quit when she married but after six months off returned, after concluding that there was not much for her to do at home as a childless newlywed. After her second child was born, she came back to work when he was two months old; she hired a girl to look after him, and gave him a bottle. Dyck could not imagine not coming to work—she could not bear watching the children



Younger children play outside while older students chat in the shade on the school grounds of a Komitee Schule. Photo Credit: Robyn Sneath

come to school in the morning and not being a part of it. Her passion was evident as she deftly guided her students through a complicated math lesson while her son tugged at her dress.

At lunch she ate at her desk while the students ate at theirs, and then she went outside with her students to play the sport perhaps most loved by Mennonites—volleyball. To an outsider, a game of recreational volleyball during recess might seem so innocuous as to escape notice. A female teacher playing an organized sport during a school lunch with middle-school aged students of mixed gender, however, represents a drastic departure from long-held community mores.³⁶ And yet, part of the school committee’s mandate was to try to combat the ‘*ungehorsame Jugend*’ and sports were part of this approach.³⁷

Dyck, simply by continuing to work outside the home, challenged several community conventions and embodied the new possibilities for women introduced by the community schools. The feminization of the teaching profession expanded roles available for women within the community. One cannot help but wonder what sort of other heretofore closed doors this may help to open; if a girl may dream of being a teacher when she grows up, what else might she dream of becoming?

Where Dyck pushed boundaries—a working, pregnant mother teaching senior level classes—Franz Thiessen reinforced them. Also an experienced teacher, Thiessen confidently directed his class of thirty-five students, where children ranged from five to thirteen years old. During the winter months, when families were not in Canada as seasonal labourers, Thiessen’s school could swell to sixty children, which he managed on his own. In his school, as in all village schools, students started their school careers at the back of the class, and over the course of years worked their way towards the front of the school as they progressed through the texts. There were no formal grades, just as there was no formal graduation.

The smallest students sat in their row and practiced their letters and numbers on tracing paper while the older students worked on copying out longer passages or did oral recitations. Thiessen was suspicious of the committee school practice of introducing students to books and reading far too early, as early as five years old. He felt that it was dangerous to expose small children to too much information at such a young age. He was concerned that too much knowledge of worldly things could lead the children away from the faith and would also introduce hubris.³⁸

The way texts were manipulated varied greatly between the committee and village schools. In Thiessen’s class, students worked regularly with written passages, often paragraphs that had been written out and laminated. Rather than reading and discerning the meaning of the texts, the students in the village schools practiced copying out the paragraphs to work on their penmanship and to practice the different types of script. While this sort of copying practice still existed in the committee schools, the introduction of workbooks facilitated more of a comprehension-centric approach to texts.³⁹

Like Dyck, Thiessen worked carefully with the students and varied the activities throughout the day to include a mix of individual and group work. Long portions of the day were devoted to oral recitation, where students worked on memorizing passages from the catechism. He led the students through rhythmic, boisterous call and response questioning. Thiessen’s High German was more of a hybrid mix of High and Low German, a practice common among village teachers.⁴⁰ The students



Students in village schools sit at long desks with their classmates, girls on one side of the room and boys on the other. Younger children sit at the back and, as they get older and progress in their studies, they move forward toward the front of the classroom. Photo Credit: Robyn Sneath

seemed to follow along well, though as a speaker of High German, much of what was said was incomprehensible to me.

Also like Dyck, Thiessen played with the students during the lunch break, but his schoolyard was segregated by gender, and while the girls were left to play with a ball on one side on their own, Thiessen enthusiastically passed a ball with the boys. Thiessen was also a parent and had a number of his own children in the school, including his five-year-old daughter. Unlike Dyck's situation, where accommodating her son was a challenge, in this instance it was entirely normal for Thiessen to have his children there with him as they fit in with their peers of the same age.

Thiessen's school was a sharp contrast to the modern committee schools. It more closely resembled the one-room schoolhouse common on the Canadian prairies a hundred years ago than the committee schools. Two solitary light bulbs hung from the ceiling and a stove sat in the centre of the room. There was a cement floor, cement walls painted white on top



A teacher helping older students in the first row in a typical village school classroom. Photo Credit: Robyn Sneath

and light grey on the bottom, and students sat in rows of desks painted a high lacquer grey, separated by a wide aisle down the centre of the room with one side for girls, the other for boys. There were hooks at the back of the class, one for girls' wide-brimmed straw hats, and the other for boys' caps. Thiessen's cowboy hat hung on the boys' side.

Although many educational gains have been achieved through the committee schools, one cannot help but consider the cost. The village school, for all its many and obvious faults, offers several benefits that are lost in the committee school. One might argue that the worst outcome of the committee schools has been a rift in the community. Of the dozen village school teachers with whom I spoke, none had visited a committee school. Their attitude towards the schools seemed to be a mix of suspicion and curiosity and the primary criticism of the committee schools were that they encouraged arrogance. As one teacher put it, 'they are fancy schools for fancy people.'⁴¹ One teacher emphatically stated that no humble person had ever set foot in a committee school. As confirmation of this accusation, parents and former school committee members did not allow their daughters to participate in the common practice of loitering on the streets on Sunday afternoons, and in fact, their children only associated with other committee school children.⁴² It is conceivable that the committee schools could even be accused of fostering a sort of class division within the colony, where those of each system associate with their own kind, each condemning the other either as arrogant or ignorant.

One of the biggest reforms that the school committee introduced was to bring in outside help to train the teachers, mostly Amish Americans but also conservative Canadian Mennonite teachers. In addition to working alongside Old Colony teachers, the outside mentors also led a six-week teacher-training academy in summer. After ten years of involvement in the committee schools, an Amish teacher summarized the success of the reforms:

Yes, there was a very noticeable progress! Instead of the dark and gloomy atmosphere in the classroom, there was a cheery and willing attitude. Teachers were drilling comprehension instead of only memorization. Pupils used expressive reading instead of just chanting the words. Writing tablets and workbooks replaced the math cards and slates and chalk. There was order not only in their classroom, but also on the playground at recess.⁴³

While highlighting the success of the committee schools, the above quote also reveals the bias against the old system, which the author condemns as 'dark and gloomy' and lacking order. It also suggests a disregard for the Old Colony tradition of long-form singing and reading, which hints at a lack of understanding of the historical role of school as preparation for life in the church.

While there are obvious differences between the teachers, perhaps the most striking difference is what these reforms cumulatively suggest about the changing role of education within the community. It is not surprising that many of the community leaders involved with the school committee were financially successful and were concerned about promoting the economic viability of the colony.⁴⁴ Precisely how far the schools ought to go in preparing students for future vocations was neither clear nor unanimous among committee members.

The goal of the reforms were not to prepare students for new vocations, indeed, the committee schools did not receive government accreditation, rather to better equip students for the vocations in which the community was already engaged, such as farming and other labour-based trades.⁴⁵ Some felt that the young people should learn how to work with computers, while others felt that the schools had already gone far enough and that to be any more progressive would put young people at risk for wanting to leave the Old Colony church because they would find it too traditional.⁴⁶ One committee member felt that the reforms did not go far enough and he left the Old Colony church in order to establish his own school.⁴⁷

Certainly, there is much to be praised about these school reforms. While no formal studies have been done to date, visits to committee schools suggest improved levels of literacy⁴⁸ and interviews with committee members indicate a strong commitment to teacher training and to better outcomes for students. It should be noted that many of the village teachers are also committed to improving student outcomes and innovate within the parameters that are acceptable within their context.⁴⁹ The purpose of this paper is not to imply that the quality of teaching is better in the committee schools, rather that the new schools represent a changing approach to schooling.

On the one hand, the committee schools may keep those families within the Old Colony fold who otherwise might be tempted to leave and send their children to some of the more progressive schools, such as those run by the *Kleine Gemeinde*. On the other hand, by exposing its students to the wider world, the committee schools run the risk of opening up a door that could prove difficult to close. One cannot help but wonder if the committee schools will help to preserve the Old Colony in Mexico or hasten its demise. Walter Schmiedehaus, in his work on the Old Colony Mennonites in Mexico wrote, '[d]ie Schule bestimmt das Schicksal der Altkolonie.'⁵⁰ Only time will tell precisely what that fate will be.

Bibliography

- B., T. *Called to Mexico: Bringing Hope and Literacy to the Old Colony Mennonites*. Nappanee, IN: Old Colony Mennonite Support, Carlisle Printing, 2011.
- Crocker, W. A. *Telling Tales out of School: Principals' Narratives of the Relationship between School Literacy and the Home Literacy Practices of a Minoritized Culture*. Doctoral dissertation, The University of Western Ontario, 2013.
- Dyck, Isaak. *Auswanderung von Kanada nach Mexiko*. Third and revised edition published. Cuahtémoc, Chihuahua: Imprenta Colonial, 1995.
- Ens, Adolf. *Subjects or Citizens? The Mennonite Experience in Canada, 1870-1925*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1994.
- Epp, Frank H. *Mennonites in Canada: The History of a Separate People: 1786-1920*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1974.
- Hedges, K. L. "Plauditsch" and "Huuchdietsch" in Chihuahua: Language, literacy, and identity among the Old Colony Mennonites in Northern Mexico. Yale University, 1996.
- Janzen, W. *Limits on Liberty: The Experience of Mennonite, Hutterite, and Doukhobor Communities in Canada*. University of Toronto Press, 1990.
- Loewen, Royden. *Village among Nations: "Canadian" Mennonites in a Transnational World, 1916-2006*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013.
- Redekop, Calvin Wall. *The Old Colony Mennonites: Dilemmas of Ethnic Minority Life*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969.
- Sawatzky, H. L. *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971.
- Schmiedehaus, W. *Die Altkolonier-Mennoniten in Mexiko*. Steinbach, MB: CMBC Publications, 1982.

Endnotes

- 1 Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada: The History of a Separate People: 1786-1920*, Toronto: Macmillan, 1974, 333-359.
- 2 Adolf Ens, *Subjects or Citizens? The Mennonite Experience in Canada, 1870-*

1925. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1994.

3 The *Fibel* is a sort of early reading primer.

4 K. L. Hedges. "Plauditsch" and "Huuchdietsch" in *Chihuahua: Language, literacy, and identity among the Old Colony Mennonites in Northern Mexico*. Yale University, 1996, 152.

5 Although only the men are elected to the committee, many of the wives play a very active role, particularly the wife of the head of the committee.

6 Jakob Wall, former *Vorsteher*, interview with author, Manitoba Colony, 2 May, 2014. In an attempt to respect the identities of those involved, names of people and schools identified throughout this article have either been changed or omitted.

7 'The schools were not good.' (translation, mine), Jakob Wall.

8 Calvin Wall Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites: Dilemmas of Ethnic Minority Life*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969, 78.

9 Martin and Lisa Wall, interview with author, Manitoba Colony, 28 April, 2014.

10 David Friesen, school committee member, interview with author, 30 April, 2014.

11 These visits took place in April and May 2014. In order to protect the identities of those involved, names of schools and interviewees have been changed or omitted, and specific village names have also been omitted.

12 Jakob Wall.

13 Peter Ens, former *Vorsteher*, interview with author, Manitoba Colony, 30 April 2014.

14 Isaak Dyck, *Auswanderung von Kanada nach Mexiko*. Third and revised edition published. Cuahtémoc, Chihuahua: Imprenta Colonial, 1995.

15 1912 Luther Bible: 'Und der HERR spricht: Darum daß dies Volk zu mir naht mit seinem Munde und mit seinen Lippen mich ehrt, aber ihr Herz fern von mir ist und sie mich fürchten nach Menschengeboten, die sie lehren: so will ich auch mit diesem Volk wunderbarlich umgehen, aufs wunderbarlichste und seltsamste, daß die Weisheit seiner Weisen untergehe und der Verstand seiner Klugen verblendet werde,' quoted in Dyck, 3. Note: Dyck mistakenly cites Isaiah 2:13.

16 Isaiah 29:14, Holy Bible, New International Version, 1973.

17 Interview, Heinrich Reimer and Franz Wiebe, 30 April, 2014.

18 Hedges, 115.

19 The youngest teacher I encountered was a fifteen year-old Grade Five teacher.

20 Jakob Wall.

21 Jakob Wall, Martin and Lisa Wall.

22 Jakob Wall, Peter Ens.

23 Martin and Lisa Wall.

24 I heard a rumour of one school that had 140 pupils and a single teacher, but I was not able to visit the school.

25 Redekop, 76; H. L. Sawatzky, H. L. *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971.

26 Jakob Wall.

27 Greta Dyck is a composite of two teachers. It is based on visits to committee schools and on interviews and classroom observations, 30 April, 2 May, 2014.

28 Franz Thiessen, interview with author and school visit and observations, 25 April and 2 May, 2014.

29 I visited three committee schools, Schoenhorst, Lowe Farm and Gnadenthal, two of which were purpose built and one which was acquired from a non-Old Colony group which had intended the building to serve as a church.

30 There is a long history of controversy in the Manitoba Colony over the pronouncement of High German words, leading even to excommunication.

31 Hedges, 152.

32 Many village teachers decry the introduction of new subjects as dangerous, worldly knowledge, Franz Thiessen, interview with author, Manitoba Colony, 2 May, 2014.

33 Hedges refers to the learning in the village schools as training for the *sindeosche*, or Sunday realm of life, Hedges, 22.

4 W. Janzen, *Limits on Liberty: The Experience of Mennonite, Hutterite, and Doukhobor Communities in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990, 94.

35 *Das Blatt* is published for children as part of *Die Mennonitische Post* and circulates widely in Mexico.

36 Sawatzky.

37 'disobedient youth' (translation, mine), Jakob Wall.

38 Franz Thiessen.

39 B. T., *Called to Mexico: Bringing Hope and Literacy to the Old Colony Mennonites*. Nappanee, IN: Old Colony Mennonite Support, Carlisle Printing, 2011, 110; Hedges, 107.

40 Hedges, 161.

41 Jakob Martens, interview with author, Manitoba Colony, 2 May, 2014.

42 Martin and Lisa Wall.

43 B. T., *Called to Mexico*, 102.

44 Committee members and supporting *Vorsteher* were a mix of successful manufacturers, large-scale farmers, and business people.

45 Royden Loewen, *Village among Nations: "Canadian" Mennonites in a Transnational World, 1916-2006*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013, 231.

Loewen notes that most Old Colonists, in Mexico and elsewhere, eschew higher learning and devote themselves to working with their hands.

46 Jakob Wall, Martin and Lisa Wall.

47 Wilhelm Peters, interview with author, Manitoba Colony, 5 May, 2014.

48 Where literacy is understood as the conventional skills-based mastery of writing and reading and not the multiliteracies advocated by those who have researched literacy among Old Colony children. See W. A. Crocker, *Telling Tales out of School: Principals' Narratives of the Relationship between School Literacy and the Home Literacy practices of a Minoritized Culture* (Doctoral dissertation, The University of Western Ontario), 21, 24.

49 The issue of school control is a murky one. While the committee schools are governed directly by the School Committee (a school board) and fall more within

the secular governance of the colony (under the *Vorsteher*), the village schools fall more directly under the control of the Old Colony Church. Ministers hold different attitudes towards the committee schools, though there seems to be acceptance (albeit in some cases reluctant) of them within the community.

50 'The schools determine the fate of the Old Colony' (translation, mine). W. Schmiedehaus, *Die Altkolonier-Mennoniten in Mexiko*. Steinbach, MB: CMBC Publications, 1982, 129.

Origin of the 'Komitee Schulen,' in the Manitoba Colony, Cuauhtémoc, Mexico

Abraham B. Peters, Manitoba Colony, Mexico
Translated from German by John J. Friesen

In order to understand the history of schools among the Old Colony Mennonites in Cuauhtémoc, Mexico, we need to go back to Russia. In the 1870s our forebears believed that [in Russia] their schools, or their education, had become too advanced, and that these developments could have contributed to them losing their privileges in that country.

As the result of much effort and struggle, Canada gave them their desired freedoms. Isaak M. Dyck, *Ältester* of the Old Colony Mennonite Church in Mexico, in his book *Emigration from Canada to Mexico*, wrote about these things. Shortly after Mennonites arrived in America, and while they were still at the immigration sheds near present-day Emerson, Manitoba, the dear Ältester Johann Wiebe led a meeting of the *Bruderschaft* (all the baptized men of the immigrant group) outside under the open sky. At this meeting Wiebe proposed, and after discussion it was unanimously accepted, that here in America they would step back from those things in which they had aligned themselves too much with the world in Russia. In particular this included higher learning in the schools, use of hymns with notes, and anything that included being one with the world.

This is also the attitude with which our forebears came to Mexico in 1922. In addition, the great poverty in the years up to about 1945 naturally led to a decline since no one had the money, or the energy, to do anything about the schools. We could write a lot about this, but I do not want to offend anyone - there are very different opinions about this topic.

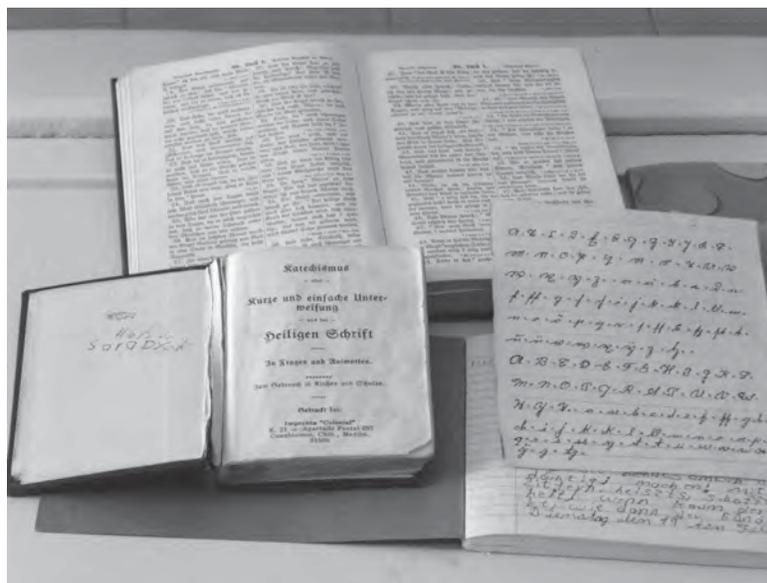
In the beginning of the 1990s, the government began to ask if we wanted to improve our schools. If not, then they would require improvements. We always responded that we would make improvements. However, nothing changed until 1997.

On May 10, 1997, at the gathering where *Ohm* Franz Kroeker was to be ordained Ältester, he asked the men if they were in agreement that changes be made in the school system. He felt that only if they made changes could he see a future for their young people. He said that those who were in agreement could indicate this with silence. No one spoke up. The writer of this article was present at this meeting.

In early 1998, the Manitoba Colony elected a School Committee. The first elected committee consisted of: Henry Dyck, Campo 9; Cornelio Wiebe, Campo 12 B Hoffnungsfeld North Side; Bernhard Loewen, Campo 26 Silberfeld; and Abram Peters Campo 1 B Neuendorf South Side. Each of these elected men was asked to choose a partner so that there would

be a committee of eight. I nominated Cornelius Janzen Campo 27 Neukronsgard, Bernhard Loewen nominated Franz Dyck, Neublumenthal. I don't remember the others.

None of us knew how a School Committee ought to function. Time and again we started something, but it was always wrong. At that time there were virtually no female teachers. At the beginning of 2000 we started a teacher training school with four young women. Abraham Wolfe was the teacher. Later the Amish helped us very much, and this help continues until today. For this we



The Bible, the Catechism and the Gothic Script remain pillars of educational resources among Low German speaking Mennonites in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin and South America. Photo Credit: Hans Werner

are very grateful. MCC [Mennonite Central Committee] also contributed greatly to this effort, for which we thank them.

It should also be noted that we experienced great opposition. The Amish always said that if it does not cost anything, it is also not worth anything. Today [2015] the School Committee is responsible for 54 female teachers, five large school buildings, a director for each school, and about 820 school children. There is still a lot of work to do.

From School Committee Minutes January 3, 2000

(The following review of the Committee School situation was written January 3, 2000, two years after the first School Committee was elected. It indicates some of the challenges faced by the School Committee. This report was submitted by Abraham B. Peters for this issue of Preservings. Editors)

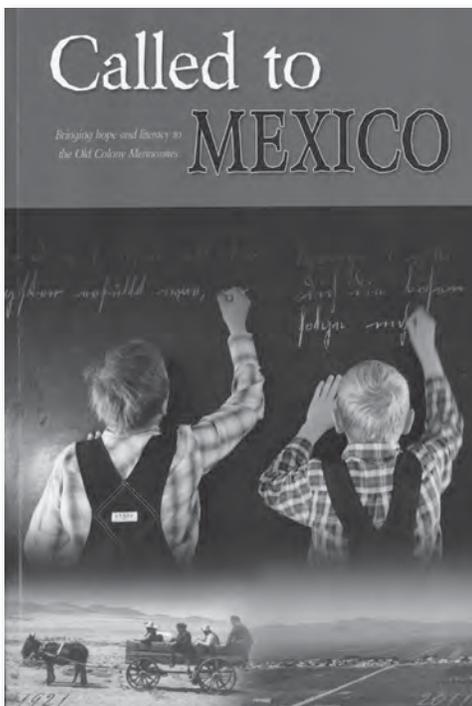
In the past two years we have experienced that in many villages we (the School Committee) are not accepted. We are even less accepted by the village schoolteachers. We feel that very few people actually accept responsibility. They say it is all the teacher's responsibility. The teacher says that he did not accept the responsibility to train their child. His role is to teach the child to write, do arithmetic and read. Many children can read, do arithmetic and write, but they have no understanding of their work. If they have no understanding, will they take responsibility? What shall we do, or not do?

According to our humble view we have come to the conclusion that from the standpoint of the School Committee we began our task in a very clumsy manner. In part this happened because having a School Committee was something new in our villages and we did not know how to start this project correctly. In part this also happened because there was not enough support from a large portion of the general membership. In



Learning numbers in a village school in Manitoba Colony in 2008.
Photo Credit: Hans Werner.

this case it is again our humble opinion that there is a lack of commitment. Many say it is the teacher's responsibility; that is why they pay the school tax. The teacher says he only has the responsibility to teach the students to write, read and do arithmetic. The School Committee says we all have a responsibility. In the first place, parents have the responsibility not only to pay the school tax, but to instill in their children a sense of responsibility. Regarding the teacher, we believe that if a person does not have an inner sense of responsibility, he will not accomplish anything, since he does not have the required commitment.



Amish Teachers who helped start the Committee Schools in Manitoba Colony, Cuauhtémoc, Mexico

(Excerpts from *Called to Mexico, Bringing Hope and Literacy to the Old Colony Mennonites*, Nappanee Ind.: Old Colony Mennonite Support, 2011. Used with permission.)

Manitoba Colony

“But the land, whither ye go to possess it, it is a land of hills and valleys, and drinketh water of the rain of heaven” (Deuteronomy 11:11).

In 1922, the first Mennonite settlers in Manitoba Colony saw only waving grasses in a wide-open valley, with sheltering mountain peaks all around. Little could they dream that not even one hundred years later, this area would be a bustling farming community much like Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, or Holmes County, Ohio. They would even come to have a major role in the agricultural economy of Chihuahua State. Then, too, they probably could not have imagined how many thousands of their people would cross these mountains to begin settlements in other parts of Mexico as well as Central and South America.

Present-day Manitoba Colony

It has been said that the Old Colony Mennonites are some of the most persistent peoples on earth. With firm conviction they have resisted outside forces for decades, clinging to the old ways.

However, things are and have been changing in Manitoba Colony, Mexico. Many no longer live the life their ancestors envisioned when they came here. The barriers that once protected this isolated group from the world are crumbling. By the 1990s, the Old Colony Church had lost much of its separation.

These changes came about largely through other Mennonite groups moving in with new ideas and lifestyles and migrant workers who seasonally went to Canada, bringing back many outside influences. There are three choices: stand firm in traditional ways, move to newer colonies in Mexico or Latin America, or surrender to change.

The rule of allowing only Old Colony members to own land in this area was not enforced by the leaders and as a result these other groups (General Conference, Kleine Gemeinde, Gemeinde Gottes, Evangelical Mennonite Church, MCC) now own much land in the Cuauhtémoc area. Some Mexicans live in the area also. There is still much farming done, and apple growing continues to be an important industry. But for many, farming is no longer the chief occupation.

Old Colony Mennonites and Old Order Amish meet

Summarized from Called to Mexico, pp. 23-33.

By 1994, Mennonites in northern Mexico had experienced a nine year drought. Mennonite Central Committee workers in the Cuauhtémoc area were trying to address some of the difficulties caused by the drought, but were not having much success. The Old Colony people were resistant to assistance from MCC workers because they feared their intentions were more about proselytizing than helping. What to do. Some MCC workers proposed that maybe Amish from the USA would be able to provide non-threatening assistance and advice. Both the Amish and Old Colonists saw themselves as being separate from the larger society, and might have a lot in common.

So in 1995 MCC arranged for a group of eight Old Order Amish men from Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Delaware to visit Old Colony leaders and members in the Manitoba Colony near Cuauhtémoc, Mexico. The visit and interactions were so successful that Abe and Anne Peters, local MCC directors in Cuauhtémoc, arranged for a group of Old Colony people to visit the Amish in their home communities in 1997. This visit also produced excellent exchanges and dialogue.

The result was that two years later, in 1999, the Old Colony Church in the Manitoba Colony formally asked the Old Order Amish to assist them in their schools. The Amish had in the meantime organized the Old Colony Mennonite Support Committee, which handled negotiations between the two groups.

In 2000 the first group of young Amish women teachers traveled to Mexico. This is where we pick up the story as told by a number of the Amish teachers who made the trip. The Amish women were to provide teacher training classes for the young female teachers in the committee or “new system” schools, as well as to provide general education for all ages.

Pioneering the New System Schools

Taken from Called to Mexico, pp. 108 - 119.

In the middle part of May 2000, Mary Fisher from Pennsylvania, Esther Miller from Ohio, and Carol Helmuth from Indiana, all teachers who had seen each other only once before, journeyed from their respective homes aboard Amtrak to El Paso, Texas. Also on board were Ben and Esther Troyer from Ohio, to serve as house parents. Two weeks later Elmer and Laura Mae Helmuth from Indiana came to be house parents and Bens went home.

We were met in El Paso by Franz and Tina Dyck. They had come in their Suburban. By the time we had all the luggage and people in the vehicle, it was a wonder we could close the doors! They drove us down to Manitoba Colony which is a six-hour drive from El Paso. It was after 11: 15 P.M. before we arrived at our Mexico “home.” Our house was a very short distance away from the main school, Gnadenthal, where we were to teach.

On the second day we were there, which was a Monday, we had a meeting with the new system committee. They helped us decide who goes where and does what. They also took us to visit some of the old system schools or *Dorf* (village) schools as they call them. This gave us a good idea where they were coming from.

We usually spent most of our day preparing for our evening classes which were from 8:00-10:00, Monday through Friday. Some of them asked what we do at home all day. We didn’t have a lot of resources to copy from, so we made up our own work. How thankful we were for a German-English dictionary! Planning for the next evening or week also took up our time. We didn’t have a copier in our house or at the school, so we had to go to a business several miles away.

After being there about a week, we teachers would go to the new system or “committee” schools during the day and help the teachers and students. Then in the evening we would teach adults and children at Gnadenthal School. Many nights it was 11:00 pm or later before we were in bed. Occasionally we would take naps after coming home from school.

One thing they did in their schools at that time was to have soda pop and snacks during last recess on Fridays. They also sang longer after noon recess on Fridays. They were amazed that we knew up to a week ahead of time what we wanted to teach. They were used to planning day by day.

In the evening classes we showed them (teachers in the committee schools) new ways to do things, such as different ways of using flashcards and timed drill sheets. We also spent a lot of time working with fractions, some on casting out nines, reading comprehension, and writing paragraphs or letters. They learned new songs from us and we from them. Other things that were new for them were alphabetical order and reading stories with expression. We also did various spelling bees.

One picture that sticks in my mind is having an addition flashcard race with two lines of teachers side by side, and the two up front both counting fingers as quickly as possible in order to answer first.

About two weeks after we were there, we also started having English classes in the evenings. Any age from school age on up could be in the classes.

As a rule we would have three or four rooms each night for classes. One was for school age or those just out of school, and

one or two were for adults. The English classes were divided the same way. Each of us teachers was in a room along with the house parents, and sometimes the Mennonites, to help us. Most of the time we had twenty or more people in each class, plus visitors and onlookers.

If we gave lessons that were too hard more than two nights in a row our attendance would drop. On the whole most of them wanted to learn. Many times whatever we did in the evening was seen the next day in the Mennonite school rooms. We learned things too.

We were thankful for the people who could speak English, German and Plattdeutsch! They tried to have a translator in each room as we did our lessons, as trying to explain some things in German was not easy. The second year was easier, but we would still get stuck from time to time. Usually someone in the room knew English and could help us out.

One evening some of the Mennonite girl teachers and we Amish teachers exchanged outfits and went to our classes that way. It brought wide eyes, many grins, and a few giggles and whispers when we walked into the classroom.

The first year we were down there we had much opposition. The immediate group we worked and interacted with did their best to make us feel welcome. However, once we got outside of that group we could feel a lack of reception. When we went to town, the Mexicans were friendlier than most of the Mennonites we met. By the second year that changed.

There were many rumors going around as to why we were there and what we were going to do. One day the owner of the local Mennonite radio station came over to our house to ask us questions. Later he then announced on the radio why we were there and what we were really doing.

Getting over the culture shock and adjusting to the language barrier took a couple of weeks. Some of their pronunciations of certain letters and sounds are different from what we are used to.

The first two years we were in Mexico from the middle of May until the middle or end of June.

The second year (2001) Mary Zook from Pennsylvania, Esther Miller from Ohio, Erma Miller and Carol Helmuth, both from Indiana, went to help teach. Levi and Katie Borkholder from Indiana went along to be house parents. Ben and Esther Troyer from Ohio came two weeks later to serve in their place. We were in a different house, even closer to the school.

Our reception by the Mennonites in general was more hospitable this time. We again helped in the new system schools during the day and taught classes at night. We had more resources to use for our lessons this year. We also had a copier in our house—a time saver! Our attendance on the whole was up this year. It was good to see so many willing to learn more.

The second year we basically taught the same things again. By not having classes regularly during the time we were gone they needed to review and practice some of the things they had learned before.

C.H. [Carol Helmuth]

Excerpts from Mary Zook's diary show day-to-day happenings of those early years:

Wednesday, May 23, 2001

Today's the day! Stomach butterflies are active this morning! Packing and the usual last-minute things to do before

heading. *Mexico*, the destination this time, traveling with a group of teachers I've never met to work among Old Colony Mennonites. These people have asked for help in upgrading their school system. A weighty responsibility. Lord, go with us. Guide and direct us each step of the way.

I boarded the train in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Slept several hours sometime after Pittsburgh, then woke up when we stopped in Akron, Ohio. The next thing I knew, a girl whom I expected to be Esther Miller walked down the aisle toward me. The conductor helped her locate "the Amish girl from Pennsylvania". So that is how Esther and I first met, around 2:00 A.M. We visited a while, then decided we'd have lots of time to get acquainted before reaching Mexico, and settled back for another snooze.

The rest of our group boarded in Nappanee, Indiana—Levi and Katie Borkholder, Erma Miller and Carol Helmuth. After three days and nights on the train, we arrived in El Paso.

Two Mennonite men, Franz Dyck and Bernhard Loewen, were at El Paso to meet us. After greetings and introductions, our luggage was packed into the vehicle—then the people! We were set for the six-hour drive to Manitoba Colony. For me, it was a journey into the unknown. I felt strange and apprehensive. Speaking High German to communicate with these folks—will I make the grade? Carol and Esther are already pros, having been here last year. Seems to me I could never get that good!

Six weary travelers welcomed a shower and a bed when we finally arrived at our house late Saturday night.

Sunday, May 27

To church Sunday morning then a gathering at the school-house in the afternoon, where we met the school board members and wives. There was some singing from their *Gesangbuch*. Then *Vaspa* was served.

An evening walk helped to relieve the tension of the day, yet my thoughts raced ahead. Tomorrow we start with classes. I'm nervous!

Monday, May 28

First on the list for today was finish unpacking and get things organized. The spacious pantry came in handy for extra storage. We would share a clothesline with neighbor Giesbrechts; also use their telephone, and they would give us their extra eggs. Good neighbors!

"Mama Katie" was soon efficient in the kitchen and "Papa Levi" pitched in wherever needed, besides wearing a path around the table worrying about the evening classes he'll need to conduct, in High German, among people who speak mostly Plattdeutsch. (He had my heartfelt sympathy!)

A school meeting in the afternoon. We were assigned rooms and introduced to the teachers we would be working with at Gnadenthal School.

(Carol Helmuth helped Elizabeth Loewen at Lowefarm School.)

Erma Miller with Anna Dyck - youngest group
Mary Zook with Elena Fehr - middle group
Esther Miller with Judy Froese - oldest group
Levi Borkholder - overseer on playground and our three rooms

On each blackboard was written:

Montag, den 28sten Mai, 2001

Gnadenthal, Campo 2A Apartado 54 Cuauhtémoc, Chi-huahua, Mexico 31500

Boys sit on one side of the room; girls on the other. The school no longer uses the long desks with benches. Pupils have individual desks with compartments at the side for their belongings. Cement floors, white walls, plenty of blackboard – although only one eraser per room. The walls are almost bare.

Only one map, a calender [sic] and incentive charts (an idea copied from Indiana schools). A table for the teacher's desk. Electric lights, a microwave oven, ceiling fans, running water (cold only) and flush toilets (in a smaller, separate building).

There will be sixty-six students in the three rooms. We were then informed that *Abendschule* would start *tonight!* Already on the first evening, we are expected to teach a class! To the task we went. As it turned out, there were only three groups instead of four, and I got to sit back and observe. I didn't protest at all!

Tuesday, May 29

Butterflies! Today I need an extra dose of prayer support and total reliance on a strength not my own. Fear of the unknown threatens to override. But... "God has not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind" (II Timothy 1:7).

Each of us went to our classrooms. We were told, "Go in there and teach our teachers how to have school the way you would at home." With such a contrast between these schools and ours, this was totally overwhelming at first. Where to start? The pupils are not placed in grades, and even those working in the same books may not be on the same page. Checking is not kept after, with no scoring, no records kept of academic achievement, and no report cards going out to parents. There is much emphasis on reciting in unison, memorization and proper pronunciation – yet very little explanation or reading comprehension.



Traditional desks are long bench-style desks. Copying from your neighbor is easy in this arrangement. Photo Credit: Hans Werner

With so much room for change and improvement, one had to zero in on a few basic areas, then concentrate on that. Make a schedule, organize classes, and introduce record keeping.

The teachers are shy and self-conscious (who wouldn't be, having a total stranger intrude?), but open-minded and easy to work with. Cornelius Janzen is a big help – he shows up almost every day. He speaks English, does lots of interpreting for us and helps us all to come to a better understanding of things.

Teaching is to be in High German, as well as speaking it on the playground. All of us – Mennonites and Amish – need to learn and practice this.

A copier was brought to our house, for convenience in preparing lessons. What a luxury!

My luck ran out this second evening, and I taught a youth group long division problems. "Taught" might not be the right word, for I know that my tongue got all twisted trying to use the correct terms in explaining this lesson in High German, and I doubt that anybody learned much.

I actually survived and told Erma, "And the morning and the evening were the first day!"

Wednesday, May 30

We got organized somewhat better. The pupils were divided into four groups in math. Now the next goal is to get them all on the same page in their books, and teach them to follow assignments rather than working ahead at their own pace. We will check the work daily and record scores.

The children were very agreeable and eager to learn, like normal children anywhere. They are excited about new games on the playground, as long as we help play. Dodgeball was today's game.

In the afternoon we visited Blumenort School, where Abram Wolf and his daughter Anna teach. She had the younger ones in a separate room. Visiting here was a good experience, seeing firsthand how an old system school operates. The pupils stood to greet us: "Guten Tag!" Then followed thirty minutes of singing and reciting, all by memory. Math equivalents, months, days of the week, times tables, and *Katechismus*.



These students are ready to return to their books after enjoying their recess break on the dusty playground. Photo Credit: Called to Mexico, 115.

Abram had a paragraph written on the blackboard, with blanks to fill in. The group did this together. They also did a lesson from a Bible workbook and we learned that he teaches some Spanish. These two would not be the norm in the old schools. It seems as if this fellow is more broadminded than some, and is progressing on his own.

This man keeps order, walking around with a pointer or sitting at his desk with a ruler at his fingertips, both of which have several uses. A rap means "silence, pay attention, or *tue selber* (think for yourself)!" When asked how long he's been teaching, the answer was, "Ever since I started!"

By the end of the week I am feeling more comfortable, both with Elena and children, and with evening classes. These are

held every evening from 8:00-10:00, mostly in three groups: youth, young adults, and teachers. We alternate, not always teaching the same class. Several of the Mennonites help with teaching/translating at times – Franz and Tina Dyck, Bernhard Loewen, Cornelius Thiessen, Cornelius and Mary Janzen, and Abe and Kathy Peters.

Saturday, June 2

Ah! The luxury of sleeping in and a break in routine. Cleaning and lunch, then took off for the afternoon, accompanied by five Mennonite girls. We shopped at their local stores and visited *Hoffnungsheim*, a home for the elderly.

Sunday, June 3

Pentecost, a three-day holiday for the Old Colony Mennonites, with church services all three days. “When you’re in Rome, you do as the Romans do,” although we Amish attended church only on Sunday and Monday. At Gnadenthal church on Monday we witnessed the baptizing of twenty-six youth.

Wednesday, June 6

Second week of school...Back on the job, feeling recharged after a four-day break.

Challenges...This week we made a stab at improving certain classroom habits. In the old system, when finished with a lesson, the child would announce, “Ich hab!” or “Jetzt hab ich!” (I’m done!) the teacher would then come to his desk and check the work or glance over it a bit, and that was it. Our goal was to collect all work, then check and grade it later.

Rules...Raise your hand and wait for permission to speak. Try to wait till recess for trips to the rest room and getting drinks. No copying from your neighbor. (This is a very common habit.)

I’d bought new erasers for our room, since there seemed to be a shortage. They had to borrow each other’s, and that was a

pain. I now decided to use these as an incentive, offering each child a brand new eraser if he can remember these rules. They tried hard to cooperate, but most of them forgot sometime or other, and only half a dozen received their reward on the first day. It took awhile, but eventually all of them got an eraser.

Surprises and changes...Our oldest girl quit coming to school. One of the boys was moved on to the highest class, and three girls back to the lower classroom. There are five -year-olds in there that should still be home with their moms! Having age limits and grade placement would be helpful in getting things on track, but that would be a totally new concept for these people. So far the measuring stick used is “how many winters in school,” rather than level of achievement.

We foreigners are here to help these people, not criticize them, so we vent our frustrations on each other around the kitchen table. We’re in this together. Here is mutual understanding. We talk and laugh and pray. This is therapy!

Monday, June 11

Another school week at hand. Still working for better order and a consistent schedule. The children are agreeable and trying hard. Bless their hearts, they are so dear! The two who speak some English come in handy as translators when we get stuck. “Ich kann nicht verstehen,” (I can’t understand) is a phrase used frequently. Elena also knows a little English and our communication is becoming better.

We are doing new things to replace the old system:

Writing better sentences, with capital letters and punctuation.

Studying a spelling list, for a test later in the week.

Reading stories (copied from *Let’s Read German*) and answering questions from the story.

Alphabetical order and syllables.

The children aren’t protesting. They are eager to learn and are soaking everything up like a sponge. It’s such a joy to work with them!



Women emerging from the Gnadenthal Old Colony Church after the service. Photo Credit: Preservings 14: 60.

Two men from Durango Colony and one from Bolivia visited school one day, and evening classes. The one from Durango gave a speech on the importance of a good education, especially reading comprehension. He supported his thoughts with Scripture. He spoke mostly Plattdeutsch. I only wished I could understand all of it.

Erma had a *Klasse* (Grade) 1 session one evening, with Carol, Esther, Jacob Fehr, and me sitting at the class table and acting like first graders. The onlookers were probably more amused than educated that time!

Ben and Esther Troyer (Ohio) arrived to serve as house parents, and Ben is involved at school. We've been challenged with a non-competitive spirit among the children, some making all kinds of excuses for not participating in games. Ben has been a positive influence on several who have an attitude problem.

An elderly bishop, Jacob Loewen, passed away this week. They expected at least 2,000 people at the funeral.

By Friday noon of this week, I "had it" – I was utterly exhausted and non-functional. Seems it all caught up with me, the daily schedule, classes each night until 10:00, and numerous other activities sprinkled throughout. In spite of my pupils' protests, I went home at noon and slept for several hours. That worked wonders!

Monday, June 18

Our fourth and final week for this round... Elena has decided not to continue teaching after this month. A Lisa has been coming to "look on" in our classroom, thinking she may be interested in the job. Then one by the name of Greta came, also. After three days Lisa dropped out; the family's going to Canada. Now Greta gave up, and Sarah Fehr is coming to observe. I'm told that she will teach when school takes up again in August.

Do we have a busy schedule, or what? Crammed into this week, besides five days of school were: two shopping sprees, two supper invitations, first time ever report cards to fill out, a visit to the Kleine Gemeinde school where five Conservative Mennonite girls from the States teach English and lunch with these teachers, four evenings of classes, and a farewell

get-together on our last evening here.

Lowefarm School closed last Friday, so Carol was free this week to help along wherever needed. That gave the rest of us a big lift. She prepared lessons for evening classes and helped Esther with laundry and cleaning.

Last day activities... We wrapped up the lessons, and I asked each child to draw a picture for me, as a keepsake. They were all into that. Some wrote a short note along with it. That was special.

They love stories, and I read an extra one today, their choice being "*Das Neue Jerusalem*," the last one in the book. We spoke of our desire to meet again in that beautiful Home.

Once more we all gathered in one room for singing and prayer. Ben showed on a map the route we would be traveling home and the states where we live.

School dismissed at 2:00. "Jetzt geht in Frieden... Auf Wiedersehen!" (Dismiss in peace. Farewell!)

Our Mennonite friends of all ages gathered at the school-house in the evening. There was singing, then talks by board members and Amish. All the teachers were given recognition certificates. Gifts, letters, and words of appreciation were showered upon us. This was humbling. Only a month to become so close in heart. The tears, smiles, and warm handshakes said it all. Painful parting!

This was truly an enriching experience. Living and working among people whose culture is so different, yet in many ways we could relate to them. We Amish have the same Anabaptist background, and our leaders are also cautious in accepting certain changes. People are basically alike the world over. We struggle to exist; we want to be understood and respected. Children also are eager to learn, and easy to love.

One of our greatest missions here is to dilute the misery of this world. With this in mind, I felt a responsibility to go when the door of opportunity opened. "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2).

The presence of God was felt, and the prayer support of the faithful. Praise His name!

M.Z. [Mary Zook]

The Historical Origins of the *Conferencia Menonita de México*

Peter Rempel, Cuauhtémoc, Mexico and David Friesen, Winkler, Manitoba
Translated from German by Hans Werner

In order to describe the beginnings of our CMM [Conferencia Menonita de México] churches, which emerged from the Old Colony and Sommerfelder groups that migrated to Mexico in the 1920s, it is necessary to mention a small group of refugees from Russia that also immigrated in the 1920s. A primary reason for the beginnings of our churches was a desire for improvements in education.

Russian Mennonite Immigrants establish a Church and School in Cuauhtémoc

The Mennonite Church in Cuauhtémoc began in the 1920s and was established by a group of Mennonite refugees from

Russia. They had arrived in the country between 1924 and 1926 via the port at Veracruz. Some of them had tried to settle in the area of Irapuato in the state of Guanajuato while others had attempted to settle at Rosario west of Cuauhtémoc.

As early as 1926 some of these Russian Mennonites also settled near the railroad station of San Antonio. By 1927 at least five families lived near the train station of San Antonio de los Arenales (present day Cuauhtémoc). Over the next few years, these families, and a few additional families that arrived later, opened various businesses that served the Mennonites who had arrived from Canada.

In 1938 the Russian Mennonites invited the Missions

Committee of the General Conference to send them a leading minister and schoolteachers. Under the leadership of the workers from the General Conference this group organized themselves as the *Hoffnungsaer Mennoniten Gemeinde*, which belonged to the General Conference. The congregation had a small church building and a small, but good school that was staffed by qualified teachers. During the 1940s and to the middle of the 1950s the Hoffnungsaer Church existed and functioned in Cuauhtémoc with a membership of refugee families that originated in Russia and emigrated in the 1920s.

In 1946, a group of Sommerfelder Mennonites from Santa Clara were trying to improve their schools and in the process hired a teacher from Cuauhtémoc who had been trained in Russia and had emigrated with the above mentioned group of Mennonite refugees. Even earlier, two families from the Russian refugee group had moved to the Santa Clara Colony and made it their home. This early school reform initiative was to become an important aspect of the prehistory of our CMM congregations. This important part of our history has been told by David Friesen in a detailed and informative article based on his personal memories. It is reproduced in full below:

Founding of Church and School in Santa Clara and Steinreich
by David Friesen, Winkler, Manitoba

Many Mennonites left the Soviet Union in the 1920s and immigrated to Canada. A small group of Mennonites, who were not granted visas to Canada due to health issues, went to Queretaro southern Mexico. When they heard that a few years earlier, starting in 1922, Mennonites from Canada had established a number of settlements north of the town of Cuauhtémoc in the state of Chihuahua, a few families from Queretaro decided to join them. The rest of the Mennonite

immigrants in Quaretaro left for Canada once their eye diseases had been cured.

Two of these families from Queretaro, the Toews's and the Goossens, settled in the Santa Clara colony about 125 kilometers north of Cuauhtémoc. When Kornelius Toews, a widower, arrived in Santa Clara, he married a local woman, and joined the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church. His adopted son, Mr. Heinz Goossen, who was married to Toews's daughter Maria, also settled in the community and joined the local church. (Some of the other immigrants from Queretaro settled in the town of Cuauhtémoc, and tried to join the nearby Old Colony Mennonite Church. Their request was, however, denied.)

For more than two decades, the two Russian Mennonite immigrant families in Santa Clara lived harmoniously within the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church. Then in 1946, after both Mr. Toews and Mr. Goossen had died these families, plus some original members of the Santa Clara community, felt that the level of education in the schools ought to be improved. Mrs. Maria Goossen was the driving force behind this move, and she arranged that Peter Janzen, a teacher and a minister from the Russian Mennonite group that had settled in Cuauhtémoc, be hired to start a new education program.

Janzen had graduated from a teachers' college in Russia. He was a teacher, a musician and a choir director. Janzen and his family moved to Santa Clara and started evening classes with adults and youth. One evening a week he conducted choir practices. However, late in the school year, in June 1947, a group from the Sommerfeld Mennonite community who had decided that this new school endeavour should be terminated, arrived at the school, and demanded that the Janzens leave immediately.

The group who had hired Janzen tried to negotiate with



Sommerfeld, Santa Clara Colony school students and their teacher outside the mud brick school building. The teacher is Heinrich Friesen, standing in the middle. The photo likely dates from the 1920s. Image Credit: Mennonite Heritage Centre, CA MHC 639-18.0



Peter Janzen and his wife Elizabeth (Dueck) with their son John in front of their sod house. The photo is likely taken in El Trebol, where some of the Mennonites who came to Mexico from Russia in the 1920s tried to settle. Image Credit: Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, NP025-07-011.

this group by asking that they be allowed to complete the school year. For the sake of peace they would even conform to the curriculum of the Dorfsschule (school in the village). To no avail. The Janzen family had to depart, and left for Cuauhtémoc the next morning.

Mrs. Goossen now took the initiative to get a teacher through the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) to start a new separate school. (At that time MCC administered a relief and health care program in the Cuauhtémoc and Santa Clara areas.) Agatha Friesen from Saskatchewan was hired to teach for one school year, 1947-48, but returned to Saskatchewan after the school year was completed. Mrs. Goossen had a fairly large homestead in the village of Weidenfeld (#51), and converted one of the buildings into a classroom.

During the next school year, 1948-49, Mrs. Penner, from the Santa Clara settlement, was appointed to teach. Her family had migrated to Mexico later than most of the other residents in Santa Clara and she thus had had public school education in Saskatchewan before her family emigrated. The school committee felt this qualified her to teach in the new school. In the following year, 1949-50,

another MCC worker, Mr. Voth, from Kansas, took over the teaching position. His expertise was experimental farming. He agreed to teach in the mornings and work in the fields in the afternoons. (The students remember that Mr. Voth was a monotone and in order to get the children to sing, he used an old gramophone. He wound up the gramophone, put on a record, and the children sang along whole heartedly.)

In September 1950, under the auspices of MCC, a young enthusiastic teacher, Daniel Peters, from the village of Blumenort near Gretna, Manitoba, came to teach. The school was now on the yard of my parents, Heinrich P. and Katharina Friesen, still in the village of Weidenfeld. David Redekop, an immigrant from Russia who lived in Cuauhtémoc, had purchased a fairly large piece of land in the Santa Clara region bordering the Sommerfeld settlement. It was known as the Redekop Ranch. He had some buildings available on his ranch and offered these as residences for the MCC workers, and as space to open a clinic for the community. The nurses resided at one end of the building and a clinic was located at the other end. The male staff, including Peters the new teacher, lived in another building across the yard. The manager of Redekop's ranch, Mr. Fehr, had



Daniel and Elma Peters. Daniel was a long time teacher and church leader in Mexico. Image Credit: www.mennonitechurch.ca

school children. Fehr provided a horse and buggy so that the teacher and the children could attend school in the village of Weidenfeld.

After a month and a half of classes, on October 12, 1950 all seven households who supported this school were excommunicated by the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church. The school continued in spite of this opposition.

During the year, this group of school supporters, now excommunicated from the local church, began to meet for worship in the living room of my parents. One evening a week Peters conducted choir practices.

Shortly after New Year 1951, the group decided to build a school. My grandfather, Peter A. Friesen, donated the land. In May of that year, before the school building was finished and before the school year was done, Mexican government officials from the immigration department came to the schoolyard and closed the school. With advice from Walter Schmiedehaus, the leaders of the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church at Santa Clara and the Old Colony Church at Cuauhtémoc had reported to the immigration department that these workers were in the country only on a visitors' visa. The officials told Peters to close the school and leave the country. His face was pale and he was very nervous. As a rule Peters asked one of the students to say the Lord's Prayer at the end of the school day, but this afternoon he led in prayer himself.

That evening the supporters of the school held a farewell party for their teacher and for all the MCC staff who were in Mexico on tourist visas. The immigration officials ordered all of them to leave the country immediately, but nobody was officially deported. This was the end of the school year.

This expulsion ended MCC's relief, education and health care programs in the Santa Clara region. (By 1957, MCC had transferred responsibility for its programs in Cuauhtémoc area to the General Conference Mennonite Church Mission Board.)

In February 1952, David and Aaron Redekop, owners of the ranch, offered the buildings that had been occupied by MCC staff and clinic to the group in the Santa Clara colony who wanted to pursue better education. The nurses' residence and the clinic were converted into a teacher's residence and classrooms. On Sundays, the classrooms were rearranged for church services. The GC Mission Board commissioned Heinrich and Anna Neufeld from Oklahoma as teachers and ministers.

This arrangement continued for nine years until 1961. Teachers and pastors who served the little worship group were: John and Mary Friesen, Helen Ens, and Jake and Trudy Heinrichs. By 1961 some people from this group moved away from Santa Clara, others didn't have school age children any more, and the one remaining family joined the village school. The school closed.

However, the church services and Sunday School continued in Santa Clara; not on the Redekop Ranch, but in homes. This continued for several years until a small group on Steinreich Farm, in the Old Colony settlement of Ojo de la Yegua, identified as Campo #38 ½, expressed their desire to improve the teaching methods for their children.

These families' grandfather, Mr. Giesbrecht, knew Daniel Peters who had earlier taught in Santa Clara. After leaving Santa Clara, Peters had returned to Manitoba, married Elma Thiessen, taught several years in southern Manitoba, and

spent five years teaching at the Russian Mennonite elementary school in Cuauhtémoc. Daniel and Elma Peters were in Manitoba when Giesbrecht invited them to come to the Steinreich Farm to start an elementary school and to serve as minister to the local group. With the involvement of the GC Mission Board, Daniel and Elma Peters and their three girls were scheduled to come to Steinreich Farm in October 1962.

However, Peters had a severe accident on the farm in Manitoba, and the family's move to Mexico was delayed until August 1963. Abe E. Rempel, teacher and lay minister under the GC Mission Board, who was teaching in the Russian Mennonite School in Cuauhtémoc, became the contact person between the Mission Board, Steinreich Farm and Santa Clara. Under Rempel's mentorship, I, a native of the Santa Clara settlement and a graduate of the Mennonite school in Cuauhtémoc, was asked to start the school on Steinreich Farm. The school opened January 15, 1963.

At first, Steinreich families went to Santa Clara for worship services and Sunday school. Before long though, the growth of the worship group at Steinreich made it more convenient to hold the worship services at Steinreich Farm. The pattern developed that after the Sunday morning worship services at Steinreich, the minister traveled to Santa Clara to conduct worship services Sunday evenings. For many years this minister was Daniel Peters.

The school at Steinreich continued to grow. It started in a small room next to the blacksmith shed. Then a free standing one-room classroom building was constructed. As the number of students increased, more room was required so that eventually three classrooms were built. Since most students did not live in the immediate community, it was decided to build a boarding house (Kinderheim) where the students could stay during the week. The GC Mission board provided house parents for the students in the residence. Daniel and Elma Peters were teachers at the school until 1972, after which Peters continued as minister in the local congregation for some years.

Thus, what started as an attempt to improve the level of education in the Santa Clara Sommerfeld Mennonite settlement resulted in the formation of a residential school and church on Steinreich Farm 50 kilometers south in the Old Colony settlement of Ojo de la Yegua. Over the years the elementary school has expanded to include a junior high program, although it is no longer a residential school. Across the street from the elementary school there is today a large Bible school, which further expands the vision of providing education for young people in the surrounding Mennonite community.

The small worship group which developed around the school at Steinreich Farm has become a sizeable congregation within the GC Mennonite Church in the area. The General Conference worship group in the Santa Clara settlement has disbanded, although at least one of people in the settlement is a member of the church at Steinreich.

Ex-Old Colony people join Cuauhtémoc Hoffnungsauer Church

In the later 1950s some Old Colony people in the Manitoba Colony were banned due to the use of rubber tires on their tractors. These people soon also bought their own automobiles and

began driving to the Hoffnungsauer Church worship services. They were welcomed there and experienced good Sunday Schools for children and adults, and worship services—all conducted in good High German. Some even began sending their children to schools and were pleased to see their children receiving German and Christian instruction provided by educated teachers.

In the 1950s an Old Colony farmer and businessman got to know a teacher from Manitoba named Daniel Peters, who had been sent to the Russian Mennonites in Cuauhtémoc by the General Conference. Because he was concerned that his boys had not received an adequate education in the *Dorfschule*, he asked this young teacher if he would come and teach evening classes to his boys (and others if they were interested). He was banned from the Sommerfeld Church only because of this teacher's evening classes in his home. He then purchased an automobile and began attending worship services in the Hoffnungsauer Church and sent his school age children to the Hoffnungsauer Church school. Others were also banned because of rubber tires, or the use of motorized vehicles, and they also began attending the Russian Mennonite Church where they became aware of how important a good education was.

By the 1960s there were a number of fathers in the Manitoba Colony that had been banned because of rubber tires or automobiles and who had begun attending the Hoffnungsauer Church and were sending their children to the church school.

In 1962 a small group of Old Colony (the Heinrich Friesens and Peter Neufelds, and somewhat later the David Friesens and the in-laws of these three families) started a school and a church. They had requested Daniel Peters, the teacher mentioned previously, to help them as teacher and minister. Peters had consented, but due to an accident he could only come months after he had planned. As a result 18 year old David, the son of Heinrich Friesen from Steinreich, was hired as teacher. On January 15, 1963, David Friesen from Santa Clara became the first teacher with a better education to begin teaching in an Old Colony school that was to offer a better education while they waited for the Daniel Peters family to arrive to establish a church and a school on the Steinreich Farm. That was also the beginning of the Steinreich Church. This development meant that there was not only a group of “*Konferenzer*” in Santa Clara at the far north of the Mennonite settlements and one at the south end in Cuauhtémoc, but also between the two extremes in the middle at Steinreich.

In the meantime the small school organized by the Redekops in Cuauhtémoc and the building across from the regional hospital for the higher grades had become too small for the additional students that came from the villages every year. The fathers from the villages, who by now had become the majority in the Hoffnungsauer Church and school agreed to build a larger school on the Quinta Lupita Ranch outside of Cuauhtémoc that would serve both them and the Russian Mennonites of the city.

In 1962/63 this development prompted the *Vorsteher* and *Ältesten* of the Old Colonists to criticize the Hoffnungsauer (Russian Mennonites) in Cuauhtémoc because they were in fellowship with those that had been banned and were encouraging them in their disobedience. They also threatened to boycott the businesses of the Russian Mennonites.

By 1963 there were only a few families of the Russian Mennonites left in Cuauhtémoc, some having migrated to the USA

and Canada in the intervening years. In the spring of 1963, the Russian Mennonites advised the missionaries sent by the General Conference, (namely their leading ministers, teachers, and the nurses serving in the hospital) that the Hoffnungsauer Church no longer required their services and that they should return to Canada. All of the workers from the General Conference were included, whether they were in Steinreich, Santa Clara or worked in Cuauhtémoc. This decision was made in larger part to avoid conflict in their business relations with the Old Colonists. The Hoffnungsauer Church was effectively disbanded by this decision.

Ex-Old Colonists establish their own Church and School at Quinta Lupita, later Blumenau

However, that same year the banned Old Colonists asked the conference workers to stay and help them, even if the Russian Mennonites no longer wanted them. “We need you. We have just started and find everything to be so good, namely the worship services, the Sunday School in good High German, and particularly the Christian school with educated teachers that teach in good German, which in the village schools is inadequate and on top of that, often incorrect. (For example the ‘AU’ rather than ‘A’, etc.) Please stay here and help us, we have started to construct a building on private land outside of the city and colony where we can have church and school.”

The missionaries agreed and somehow made the arrangements with the Missions Board. So it happened that a building was completed and in September, 1963 school and church was begun. Using lawyers, opponents soon discovered that under Mexican law school and church could not be under one roof and the new group was reported to authorities.



The Alvaro Obregon school at Quinta Lupita. Photo Credit: Gäste und Fremdlinge, 46.

Two new missionaries, Nurse Lora Klassen (later Mrs. Philip Dyck) and Ruby Penner, the cook for the mission workers in the “Main House,” were deported because the opposition had reported them and because these two had only returned days earlier and only had a Tourist Visa they were not allowed to work. Somewhat later nurse Lora Klassen came back and the *Comite Mennonita de Servicios, A.C.* that had been established in 1956 obtained her working visa and those of the other conference workers.

An increasing number of families in the Steinreich area began sending their children to the Quintal Lupita School and participated in the worship services. Many fathers and some wives were banned because either they had automobiles or because they sent their children to Conference schools. In 1967, under the leadership of *Ältester* Jacob C. Schmidt (from Saskatchewan), the Mennonite Church of Mexico was established.

The first members of this group came from Santa Clara, some from Steinreich and area and some from the Manitoba Colony, namely Quinta Lupita. Reverend Menno Bergen was the first leading minister of the Quinta Lupita group and Reverend Daniel Peters the first leading minister of the Steinreich Farm group.

Church at Swift Colony at Burwalde

In the 1970s there were families in the Swift Colony that also wanted to start a Conference Church. Others took over the leadership of the church in Steinreich so that Daniel Peters could begin the church at Burwalde. In the mid-1970s, under the leadership of Pastor Aaron Epp, the three Conference churches, Quinta Lupita (later Blumenau), Steinreich, and Burwalde, began to become more independent sister churches. Each had a their own pastor as leading minister, rather than an Ältester for all three. It would probably have been good if we, as three local churches, had established something like the General Conference of Mennonites in Mexico during this period of change, before the last leading minister to be sent from North America left us.

However, because that did not happen, the three Conference Churches continued on independently in spite of the fact that the educational institutions, such as the primary and secondary schools, were administered jointly by the Board of the *Comite Pro Mejoramiento Educacional Mexnonita, A.C.*; the entire Mission work and the Bible School was jointly administered by all three churches.

Three Churches form the Conference of Mennonites in Mexico: Blumenau, Steinreich and Burwalde

Possibly exactly for this reason, the General Conference requested in the 1980s that the three sister churches establish a Central Committee with representatives from all three churches that would deal jointly with the Commission on Overseas Ministries (C.O.M.), rather than each working on its own. For many years the Central Committee had a coordinating role between the churches and the General Conference. However, we steadily became independent and our congregations realized that although we were quite independent of each other, there were many areas where we worked together, for example the mission work, the schools and the High School and Bible Schools.

In 1990, with facilitation of the Central Committee, the churches of Blumenau, Steinreich and Burwalde organized the small Conferencia Menonita de México.

The Conference Board is comprised of the following of-ficers: President, Vice President, Secretary, Vice Secretary, Treasurer and Vice Treasurer. These six officers are elected for three year terms at annual conference sessions (they can be elected for two three year terms). Additional members include the chairs of each church council, the President and Directors of the School Association, Mission and Bible Schools, and recently the Recreation Committee. The leading minister of the local churches are also members and play an important role as advisors and informants, but do not vote.

The School at Quellen Colony, Chihuahua

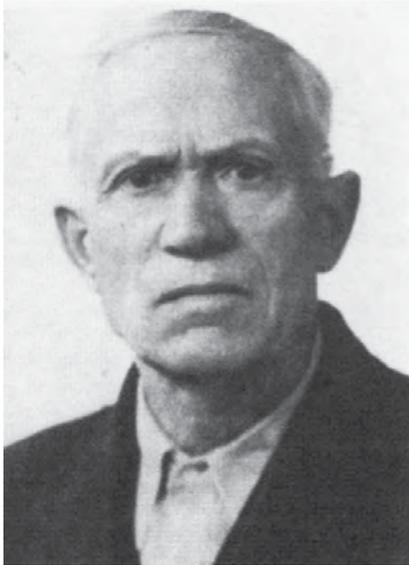
Eddy K. Plett, Quellen Colony, Chihuahua, Mexico

Among the reasons for the 1948 *Kleine Gemeinde* migration from Manitoba, Canada to Chihuahua, Mexico, was the issue of school. While it was not the sole reason, it strongly influenced the decision.

While the Old Colony *Gemeinde* and many *Sommerfelder* families left Canada in the 1920s, the *Kleine Gemeinde* adapted to the changes in the Manitoba education system. As a friendly act of the Manitoba government the district schools could be adapted to Mennonite settlements so as to give the Mennonites the chance to be more separate from other cultures. At a ministerial meeting of the *Kleine Gemeinde* held in Kansas in 1937 it was decided that, as it was an obligation for schools to have licensed teachers, they should select some spiritually grounded young people from their own circles to be trained for teaching positions. Many schools were also blessed in those years by the new immigration of *Russländer* fleeing the Russian Revolution. As these new immigrants already had higher education, there were Mennonite teachers available to serve in the schools.

During the years higher education had also brought more young people to Winnipeg where some of them, such as my aunt Liesbeth Plett, later Mrs. Willie B. Dueck, had become licensed nurses, which of course later turned out to be a great blessing for the new pioneer settlement in Quellen-Kolonie, Chih, Mexico.

In response to the question of whether teacher training should be encouraged among Kleine Gemeinde, the 1937 conference concluded: "In light of the fact that the private schools are gone, and our children are being taught by people who do not necessarily subscribe to our faith, we believe, in spite of the dangers such training would entail, it would be good to train some of our people to do our part in educating our children. Therefore we encourage young men and women who have interest in teacher training to register this with the ministerial, who will process them. Those who show mature faith and commitment to our faith and traditions will be encouraged to take training. They will be presented by the church to the principal or school board as teacher-training candidates. The latter will be informed about our concerns [regarding] our faith and practice (Rom. 1:16; Matt. 19:14). We have similar ideas and concerns when it comes to Bible schools." Harvey Plett, "Ministerial Meeting of 1937" in Seeking to be Faithful: The Story of the Evangelical Mennonite Conference (Steinbach, MB: Evangelical Mennonite Conference, 1996), 173.



Peter P. Reimer, born in Blumenort, Manitoba in 1877, was a Kleine Gemeinde Ältester who was influential in leading the 1948 migration to Mexico. He died in 1949 after 23 years of service to the church. Photo credit: GAMEO.org, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Reimer,_Peter_Plett_\(1877-1949\)](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Reimer,_Peter_Plett_(1877-1949))

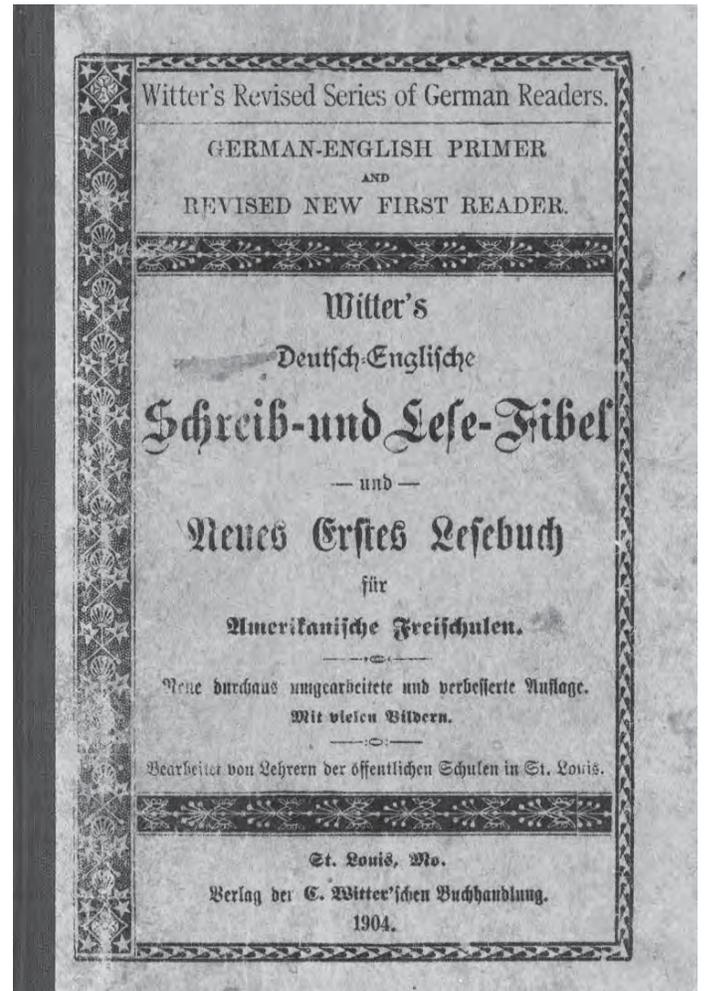


Students and teachers in front of the Kleine Gemeinde school in Steinberg, Quellen Kolonie in the 1960s. Photo credit: Eddy K. Plett

By the later 1940s many changes had taken place in the Kleine Gemeinde churches in Manitoba. Whether due to good or evil influences changes had come from: the public school system that was against the German language; young people attending the church owned Bible school in Steinbach; the influence World War II on those of draft age; young people working in Winnipeg; or simply the normal tendency of life in this world – by 1946 the Kleine Gemeinde in Manitoba underwent a not so obvious split in the church with the more conservative minded settlements leaning to one side and the more liberal minded to the other side.

In 1948 the migration to Mexico by one part of the church took place. It turned out that some of the immigrants were of a more conservative mindset than had been realized and upon arrival in Mexico, this tendency became obvious, to the dismay of some others within the group. Grandparents had had enough in Canada. Being in a country where decisions regarding education were once again their own, they would of course return to German, the language that they themselves used, and to their familiar Germanic script, the fancy 'Sütterlin', the so-called 'Götisch'. The *Katechismus* (catechism), Bible and Bible stories became, of course, a part of educational instruction as well.

But as with every influence that one has, so it was here: the ancestors of these people had been under the influence of the



The Herald Press Fibel was a reprint of the Witter Fibel first published in St. Louis in 1881. http://mki.wisc.edu/Education/Schools/Witter_primer/Witter_cover.jpg

school reforms of Johann Cornies in Russia, (and had to some extent collaborated with it, and had even learned a second language in their school, had the *Schulprüfungen* [school exams] and had adapted the new style of classroom buildings). This part came along to Mexico as well.

Before arriving in Mexico they had already printed German mathematic books for use in Mexico. The German *Herald-Fibel* and different volumes of the reader *Deutsches Lesebuch* by the *Bildungskomitee* of the Mennonites in Manitoba, Canada, soon became an important part of the curriculum in Mexico. The fantastic German language course by Richard Lange was soon a part of the system in Mexico as well. Our people were fortunate to have people along like Peter F. Dueck and many others, who played a very important role in the development of the new school system in Mexico, trying to return to the previously seldom-used German language again. In Canada the *Evangeliumsliederbuch* had been in widespread use by then, so even the singing out of the old *Gesangbuch* had to be practiced again.

The younger generation of settlers, although already married when they arrived in Mexico, was not very pleased with all these changes. Where they had had a fairly high quality public school education in Canada, many simply could not adapt to this big change. Therefore consistent efforts were



A teacher helps a grade nine student with a mathematics assignment, Quellen Colony, 2013. Students in this classroom have access to computers, seen in the background of this photo, as part of their schooling. Photo credit: Eddy K. Plett



Students participating in the Schulprüfung (school exams), 2013. Students receive a trilingual education in the Kleine Gemeinde schools, as can be seen in the lessons written out in Spanish, English, and German on the blackboard. Photo credit: Eddy K. Plett



A teacher instructs her kindergarten students in spelling basics, 2011. Photo Credit: Eddy K. Plett.

made to improve the education in Mexico. As is told of Martin Friesen, the elder of the early settlement in Paraguay, Friesen had had enough “better” education during the 1920s in Canada, (in those few years between when the Old Colony and Sommerfelder emigrated to Mexico and other Mennonite groups emigrated to Paraguay), he just could not adapt to what seemed a low-class education. So it was at Quellen Colony in Mexico.

Constant meetings, *Schulprüfungen*, and constant teacher training, along with the desire to once again teach the students English, led to slow but gradual changes in the schools over time.

The pendulum of language has gone from one extreme to the other over the years. Today, Quellen Colony’s school system is trilingual – German, English and Spanish. The primary



An old-style school building in the foreground and a new school building in the background in Quellen Kolonie. Photo credit: Eddy K. Plett

aim of the schools is to teach the Bible and biblical values. Although the school is not registered with the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* (Secretariat of Public Education, or SEP), it offers education from kindergarten through high school in all required subjects. It has left the traditional village school system with which it started behind, but all the village school buildings are still used to house the different grade levels. School buses carry the students from their villages to the school that corresponds to their grade level in the central village of Ebenfeld, and returns them to their home villages at the end of the day. Most villages have more than one classroom, with Ebenfeld having as much as eight rooms.

The education is costly and is paid for by the taxpayers of the colony. The general rate is 4 percent of all income. Businesses pay according to their commission level. The benefit of this system of taxation is that money for funding the school system is normally not a problem. School tax is paid by all inhabitants of the colony above the age of twenty-one until their death. All church groups in the colony are free to send their students to the schools, as long as they cooperate with the system, which they usually do. Different churches are permitted to start their own schools; however, until now the only ones that have chosen not to participate in the school system are the home school groups.

The needs of the Quellen Colony schools, including the ever-increasing demand for sound Christian school material in the German language, has resulted in the establishment of the educational publishing house *Centro Escolar Evangélico*. Several hundred thousand school books are printed and shipped each year, with the Old Colony schools in Mexico and Ontario being the biggest customers. One public school in Alberta, Canada is also using the material for their German classes. *Centro Escolar Evangélico* has also started to move in the direction of supplying educational material in Spanish for the Christian schools in Latin America. For these schools, they



Elementary school students on a fieldtrip to the Centro Escolar Evangélico printing facility in 2015. Photo credit: Eddy K. Plett

offer the possibility to donate for the purpose of subsidizing the material. *Centro Escolar Evangélico* has also been translating some of the Christian Light Education curriculum publications into German and Spanish.

The school in Quellen Colony has an enrollment of 250 students with twenty teachers. In addition to this school, the church has also started to operate a Spanish mission school with approximately a dozen of students.

In order to get a more complete picture of the *Kleine Gemeinde* schools in Mexico, we would need to look at the different colonies. There are altogether around twenty different *Kleine Gemeinde* schools in different colonies and states in Mexico, with close to 2,000 students. One of the main differences between the schools at Quellen Colony and the other *Kleine Gemeinde* districts is the order of languages. They all



The Kleine Gemeinde school in Gnadenthal, Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua, Mexico. Photo credit: Eddy K. Plett

start with German as the first language of instruction, but all schools except Quellen Colony have Spanish as their second and English as their third language, whereas Quellen Colony has English as second and Spanish as third language. In Camello, a colony that borders the United States, the school is operated in partnership with the Old Colony 'Komitee Schule' (Committee School).

We strongly believe that knowing the scriptures from childhood on will help our youth to find salvation more easily (2 Tim 3:15). God has blessed the efforts made and to Him belongs glory and honor.

All in God's Time: The Establishment of Old Colony Private Schools in Southern Ontario

Rosabel Fast, Toronto, Ontario

Mennonites from Mexico have been coming to southern Ontario since 1952.¹ The migration began as a trickle. By the mid-1970s immigration numbers were increasing substantially. Many of these newcomers came to work on vegetable farms as seasonal workers. They gradually ended up staying over winter and eventually settling in Ontario permanently. Needless to say, many were poor. They were poor enough to need all the additional earnings a family could glean from the physically taxing work in vegetable fields in the heat of Ontario summers. Mennonites from Mexico in southern Ontario today typically have roots in the Old Colony Mennonite church system.

The establishment of an Old Colony *Gemeinde* in Ontario began in 1959 with visits from Manitoba by Bishops Jacob J. Froese and Jacob Penner, and Rev. Jacob Neudorf. On November 22, 1960 the Manitobans presided over an Old Colony ministerial election. Rev. Jacob Wiebe and Rev. Heinrich Peters were chosen as ministers and Peter Giesbrecht as



Bishop Jacob F. Penner in 1970, a few years after his trip to southern Ontario where, together with Bishop Jacob F. Froese and Rev. Jacob Neudorf, he helped to establish the Old Colony Gemeinde in Ontario. Credit: Kristine Friesen, Preservings 19 (2001): 103.

deacon. This event marks the beginning of the Old Colony Mennonite Church in Ontario.²

This article tells the story of how Old Colony Mennonites in Ontario addressed the critical issue of providing good quality education for their children in Canada. As long as they were seasonal workers who returned to Mexico at the end of picking season, the school question could not be addressed. School attendance by Mennonite children in Ontario was officially required but infrequent in reality.

Once they started settling in Ontario this changed. It soon became clear to many adults that their own level of schooling was inadequate for life in Canada. Getting established in Ontario was a challenge, partly because of this education gap. Learning English was the first urgent matter. Women who were at home with young children felt isolated. Men and young people who got jobs, picked up enough English to get by, but were limited to low paying or jobs that did not require much English.

Some were successful in piecing together education and training wherever they could find it. For adults and young people there were programs available for upgrading their education. English classes for mothers with young children provided child care and supported mothers in many ways, besides teaching them to communicate in English. George Rempel, director of Mennonite Central Committee Ontario's (MCCO) Mennonite settlement program taught citizenship classes. Driver training courses were another practical offering for adults.

But for families from Mexico who decided to stay in Canada, the education of their children remained a very serious concern. Earlier arrivals had placed their children in public schools as required, and had often seen them suffer exclusion, ridicule and outright racist discrimination. Other children had happier experiences. In both cases, parents watched with concern as the public school system turned their children into English speaking, secular thinking Canadians. Some parents accessed the schools of other conservative groups like the Amish and Old Order Mennonites for their children. Some kept their children out of school and taught them at home as best as they could. For home schooling they used the *Pathways* series, which they obtained from the Old Order Mennonite school system. These parents wanted something more for their children than the education they had had themselves, but for many, the public school system was not a good option.

For younger children, the best that was on offer in public schools were principals and teachers who made considerable efforts to provide a safe space for newcomer Mennonite children and made generous allowances for attendance issues for the children of seasonal workers. These efforts need to be acknowledged and should not be overlooked.

At the same time, for Mennonite parents, acknowledging that the German village school model in Mexico was inadequate for life in Canada did not mean they were willing to give their children over to the state to be educated. They wanted two things for their children: adequate schooling and a faith-based education. Over time this longing became a reality.

One effort on the part of MCCO to support Mennonite parents was creating an ad hoc Inter-Mennonite Parents Association (MPA) that included Mennonites from Mexico. This group communicated with the public education system in efforts to make schools more sensitive to the children's needs. The following is an excerpt from a letter the MPA addressed to Ted Cuniffe, Director of Education for the Elgin County Board of Education. The letter demonstrates the supportive role played by the MPA and refers to positive efforts made by the public system. It also points out what parents considered the most crucial issue. In the excerpt we also see evidence of looking for an alternative approach, perhaps one outside of the public school system.

The MPA appreciates the sympathetic ear which has often been shown by the public school system. Nevertheless there are some concerns which continue to be high to members of the MPA. One has to do with the erosion of religious and moral education in the public school system. It is ever more difficult to retain a curriculum with freedom in a school environment, to teach morals and the values and beliefs that are important to many parents, for their children's spiritual and moral development. [...]



George Rempel worked extensively in helping Mennonites deal with government social agencies and the school system in Ontario. He became office manager for the Ontario Mennonite Immigrant Assistance Committee in 1980. Photo Credit: Mennonite Archives of Ontario, CA MAO 1990-5 9

Three Birds with One Program

The East Elgin Job Development program was a particularly innovative initiative for Mennonites from Mexico who were seeking employment. It addressed three core needs in one package: employment, further education and adequate shelter. Mennonite families working on vegetable farms often lived in substandard housing. For those who stayed for the winter, substandard housing became unacceptable and dangerous when the cold seeped through cracks, windows and un-insulated walls. The Job Development program took on twenty people who were on social assistance. Over the course of twenty-four weeks, the participants spent half of the time in training and the other half on getting on-the-job experience. Training included English, Math, Job Skills, Labour Standards and Problem Solving Methods. On-the-job experience started with winterizing homes. Sometimes this simply involved placing plastic sheeting over the windows, caulking cracks, and ensuring that water lines had enough heat to keep them from freezing. In some situations the workers restructured wood-burning stoves so that they had proper chimneys to operate safely. In total the team winterized fifty-four homes while also upgrading their level of education (Janzen, 31).

What Discrimination Feels Like

Jacob was a Mennonite child from Mexico, who attended public school in Ontario. He recounted the experience like this: "My parents moved a lot. This plays a role in life. I went to school in Straffordville and Port Burwell. They were not bad schools as such, but it wasn't easy to move from one school to another. My parents also went to Mexico in between so I missed school in Canada. Grade 7 and 8 in Canada was the worst. I had negative experiences with the teacher. Our cultural differences, our food, our clothing were different. We were expected to take part in gym, wear gym clothes, take part in activities that we were not used to. There were children in the school who were unkind. They called us Mexicans. We got picked on for being different. I dreaded school every day; I just didn't want to go. In the 1987-88 year I just quit. After the Spring break I just didn't go back."

Sarah got all her basic education in the public system as an Old Colony Mennonite child. As an adult and mother she still feels anxious when she drives on to a public school yard. She is currently homeschooling her youngest, reflecting, "[m]aybe I am just still afraid that what happened to me would also happen to him." (The names of these individuals have been changed to protect their identity.)

Many Mennonite families face great difficulty when they arrive in Canada to try to integrate their children into a strange cultural and sometimes insensitive education system. The gap between where these children come from and what they are expected to adapt to can be huge. For their parents, this creates conflict, ambivalence and sometimes fear of losing control over matters that are very important to them. This situation needs to be addressed more creatively and sensitively than it has. We believe that there are good, viable educational options that would go a long way to meeting the needs and concerns of Mennonite families. We feel very strongly that these alternatives should be considered.³

There were other indications of a move toward seeking alternatives to the public system. In 1987, for example, a new private school, run by the Evangelical Mennonite Conference (EMC), opened in Mount Salem. The school attracted families from various Mennonite, including some from the Old Colony church, and non-Mennonite groups. Dealing with a different Mennonite denomination, said one Old Colony parent, was still a better option than facing the obstacles they ran into with the public system. The new school may well have spurred Old Colony families on to seriously consider a private school of their own.

There had, indeed, been some work done on organizing an Old Colony school, but financing was not forthcoming. This initial effort failed but it was also an important beginning. People were starting to think and talk about what they needed. "We wanted a school that had God in it," is how one mother expressed it. The people were also beginning to see that they might be able to make it happen. And then the time was right. Old Colony Mennonite parents in Ontario were ready to step forward. They started by exploring options for a model that would give them the kind of schools they wanted for their children. Such schools would be Bible-based and run under the church umbrella. They would also have to provide adequate schooling for the Canadian environment in which the children were growing up.

"All in God's timing," Old Colony Deacon Cornelius Reimer reminded me, when I spoke with him about the miracle of what evolved out of these discussions. Cornelius was involved in the process of implementing a vision for private schools from the outset. "It was difficult, serious, hard work and yes, exciting," he said, "but unless the Lord keeps the city, 'the watchman waketh but in vain.'"⁴ In the planning and implementing their own school system, God was there at each step.

What follows is the story of establishing an Old Colony private school system in southern Ontario, as told by various people who were involved in the early stages of the project. In June, 2001, *Preservings* published an article called *Old Colony Mennonite Schools in Ontario*. It was compiled and written by Henry R. Friesen of Wheatley, Ontario. Henry was involved from the beginning, in envisioning, attending meetings and in the planning of the new school system. He served as deacon in the Old Colony Church and was the first principal of the new school in Wheatley. He and his wife Betty were also classroom teachers. The 2001 *Preservings* article provides the base for this article. It lays out the faith aspect that was behind the project; the people's faith in God, and their trust in the church to guide them in their faith. The entire process of planning and implementing these plans was done with an understanding and knowledge that, "Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it."⁵

A First Step

Rev. Peter Dyck of Wheatley was one of a group of people closely involved in establishing their own school system. In an interview, he shared a point of surprise and encouragement that the group encountered at the outset of the challenging task of envisioning and developing such a large and complex project:

What we found exciting as we began to work toward organizing our own schools was the discovery that the government was not against it. We had already spoken with various people. Then we travelled to London [Ontario] to meet a government official in the public system. He knew the Amish and Old Order Mennonite schools in the region. He respected them and encouraged us to organize an Old Colony private school. So we visited several conservative Mennonite schools in the Elmira and Listowel area. We saw that they had their own schools and we thought we could do the same. We started with meetings. I was still working at the factory at that time, which meant that I could not attend as many of these meetings as I would have liked to.

It is clear, however, that Peter Dyck was very much involved throughout the process.

A Sample Sets Things in Motion

Peter Dyck attributed at least part of the idea for an Old Colony school system to a visit from Manitoba. In the Interlake region of Manitoba, the Morweena EMC church near Arborg was also experiencing an influx of Mennonites from Mexico. Relatives from the *Kleine Gemeinde* Quellen Colony in Chihuahua, Mexico, were “returning” to Canada. Willy Dueck, a long time member of the church, was on the Advisory Committee of MCC’s *Kanadier* Concerns Department. This department addressed the needs of Mennonites from Mexico who were facing poverty and adjustment issues in Canada. The EMC Mennonites of the Interlake had established their own private school using the Accelerated Christian Education (ACE) program. The program was organized in a format that allowed teachers without formal training to conduct classes with a prescribed self-contained curriculum. Willie Dueck had noted the need for an alternative education system among Old Colony families in Ontario. He took it upon himself to travel to Ontario together with Pastor Henry Friesen, to invite Old Colony leaders to take a look at the ACE model. The Old Colony group was immediately interested. ACE looked doable and other groups had already shown that it worked.

In the end, although they decided not to accept Dueck and Friesen’s invitation, the visit of the two brothers from Manitoba had opened a window for envisioning what might work for the Ontario Mennonites. Their investigation of options continued and a suitable program was found. This was the Christian Light Education (CLE) curriculum. The content to be learned in the CLE curriculum is packaged in units of study that was followed independently by the students, under the guidance of the teacher. The curriculum was also recognized by the Ontario Department of Education.

A Meeting in Michigan

Anna Bergen is a parent from Wheatley who was very interested in the process of getting their own schools. She described a meeting she attended as part of the planning process. Together with about twelve people, including ministers, community leaders and potential teachers, she travelled to a CLE centre in Shelby, Michigan. There the group took a course designed for potential board members, principals/teachers and administrators who were planning to open a CLE school. The Ontario group came from Walsingham, Aylmer, Dresden and Wheatley.

Anna recalled, “We were given about eight to ten books to work through. Peter Peters, who was a CLE director, was our instructor. Some of the topics covered were Administration, How to Teach Grade One, and the whole system. We sat in cubicles and worked independently. Our work was scored and graded. Those who could not finish in the time allotted, were trusted to take home the units and finish them there. I took mine home.” When I asked Anna what it felt like to be part of opening their own school, she replied. “We were excited – and scared, because we really didn’t know what we were getting into. But we *knew* it was the *right thing* to do. That made a big difference.”

From meetings like this, while also counting on God’s timing, the process of establishing their own school system

evolved. Having completed the training, the leaders behind the process were now concretely on their way to opening their first schools. In 1989, two schools were opened, one in Wheatley and the other in Aylmer. They were followed by two more in 1990 in Dresden and Glen Myer.

The Wheatley and Dresden schools provide two contrasting examples to show what opening a new school entailed.

The School in Wheatley



The school building in which the Old Colony Mennonite School in Wheatley was initially established.

The following description is taken from the 2001 *Preservings* article mentioned above:

Several years ago, a conscientious group of Old Colony church members attempted to institute a private school. Unfortunately they were not successful. Last winter, church members, along with their ministerial counterparts, pulled together to form a volunteer board and to provide the necessary funding. Thus the Old Colony Christian Academy was established.

[Today], the reality of the effort and hard work put into this project is evident and can be seen throughout the Sunday School building of the Old Colony Mennonite Church from which the school functions. The hallways are filled with smiling, friendly faces and the school yard rings out with laughter and discipline. On the front of each desk is the young occupant’s name card, done in the pupils own hand writing. Inside, the compartments are filled with books and necessary tools of knowledge. Mr. Henry Friesen fills the role of principal and teacher at the Academy.⁶

Anna Bergen remembered those beginnings like this:

The teachers had never been teachers, so were very new to everything, but they did not have to plan lessons. The children followed the lessons on their own. The children came in at different levels so they had to be placed. Some had fallen behind in their previous schools. One of the students was 14 years old but he couldn’t read. So we didn’t know any other way than to put him in Grade One. Up to Grade Nine the teachers could manage all the units they had to teach. But most couldn’t teach high school. When we started with high school Mr. Peter Sawatsky came to help us out.

Anna was very involved in the school for the first ten years and also taught German on Fridays. For the teachers, working

together in a new program was meaningful, rewarding and also stimulating. As Anna explained, “[I]t was so much fun. We did field trips to Jack Miner Bird Sanctuary, Uncle Tom’s Cabin in the Chatham area. We had track and field days, picnic activity day and so on.” (Of course, such outings were only a small part of the school program.) The CLE system made it possible for eager and enthusiastic, but inexperienced, teachers to successfully navigate their way through the first year.

It is significant that in 1988 Mr. Peter Sawatsky retired from teaching in the public school in Leamington. With the free time he now had, he was able to add his support to the new private school. He taught Math and the higher grades. He knew the public system. He also held the CLE system in respect and noted the high quality of education it provided.

A Day at the Academy

Starting a day of school is basically the same every day. We, the teachers, arrive sooner than the students, so, we have some quiet time to get ready. After we all arrive we go into our staff room and start the day with devotions together. Then we go our separate ways and finish preparing our classrooms, making sure we have the schedule put up and answer keys set out.

Soon the students start arriving. At ten to nine we blow the whistle, which calls all the children in. It’s a bit rowdy in the morning, but eventually we get them all settled down. We start our day as a whole school with a song and a prayer. After that we close our doors and begin our classes. In class we start off with devotions. Normally one student will read the required Scripture passage, as well as the moral. We discuss it for a few minutes and then carry on. Homework assignments are handed in, and attendance is taken. The students begin working independently with their books for the next hour, so I can work classroom-style with another grade. Recess is at ten o’clock. One of the teachers goes out on duty with the students. After the fifteen minutes are up, we blow the whistle again. Another hour and forty minutes go by with classroom-style work before lunch. Then we all pray together. By then the lunches are warmed up. We eat and at twenty after twelve the students go outside. One teacher will again go out on duty.

The afternoon hours are similar, with classroom-style work and recess. At the end of the day we close together with a song and a prayer. Then the students are dismissed. We, as teachers, stay until all have left and we have cleaned up for another day. Then we also take our leave (Friesen, 132).

Tina Schmidt

The leaders of the new school movement had set a complex program in motion. At the right time, they got assistance from outside when they needed it. Mr. Sawatsky represents another point in God’s timing.

The right system had also been found. Parents, community leaders, the ministerial leadership and the Old Colony church as a whole, had longed for schools that would do two things: immerse their children in Christ-centred education that would also prepare them for life in Canada. Step by step they had been led to exactly this point.

Today the Wheatley school is housed in a large former public school with plenty of classroom space, an office, a library, teachers’ resource room and a large playground. The school was purchased in 2000.



This is the current building housing the Old Colony Mennonite school in Wheatley, with an attendance of 275 children.

The School in Dresden

The school in Dresden officially opened in 1990. But God’s timing had already been at work before that. In May 1988, the Peter Dyck family bought a farmstead in Dresden. They were following family members who had recently done the same. At that time there were very few Low German Mennonites in the area. The Dyck family decided to home school their children, with son David, aged fifteen, as their teacher. Soon the cousins from the other farmstead joined the home school. David worked through the lessons in the Pathways Readers and the Phonics and Math books on his own. Then he taught the lesson to his younger relatives. By now more families from Mexico were buying farmsteads in the area. They, too, were interested in sending their children to the home school. But the rooms upstairs in the Dyck home could only hold so many children.

At this time the Mennonite parents decided they needed a schoolhouse. Their first building was a rented, very old, rundown school. Besides David, his brother Abe and Tina Fehr took on the task of teaching. This was the first version of a private Old Colony Mennonite school in southern Ontario. The school caught the attention of people in MCC and others who were providing assistance to newcomers from Mexico. This is how Rev. Henry Dueck, who was a pastor associated with MCCO, stepped in to support the new school for a couple of days a week.

In January 1990 the group of parents running the school bought an old church, which they then used for their school. The school was still following the Pathways curriculum at that time. Shortly thereafter, the CLE curriculum was introduced. Peter Peters came out to train the teachers in how to use CLE materials.

David Dyck recounted his experience as teacher-principal:

I was only fifteen when I started teaching my siblings and only seventeen when I took the CLE training session. We had one week of training with four trainers, who each covered different topics. I took on the position of principal of the school and also taught Grades Two to Four. Tina taught Grade One. Henry Dueck was now hired as a teacher. He taught Grades Five to Eight. Parents carpoled to bring their children to school from Wallaceburg, Blenheim, Thamesville and the Dresden area. The highest number of students we had was 105 with about twenty-five families. There were forty-five pupils in my class. Tina had about twenty and Henry Dueck about thirty-five.

Henry Dueck was a good influence on me and on the school. He was a support, mentor, assistant and role model. He helped me see things in a different way. He also let me be the principal; but he was there behind me, showing the way. For example, I had no experience with settling disagreements. In one case the parents and teachers disagreed about when to teach German. The teachers wanted to teach it for thirty minutes every day. Parents favoured the more traditional way of teaching German all day on Fridays. Henry was good at settling such cases. He stayed on for three years once he was hired for a full-time position.

The Dresden Old Colony School could be said to have started in the Peter Dyck's home. From there it moved to an old school building. Then an old church was purchased, providing a place for a good sized school. The school had a staff of three teachers, a sound curriculum and recognition from the Ontario government. The children's education was accredited by the province. Equally, or even more importantly, the children were growing and learning in a godly environment. All this had come to pass "in God's time."

The presence of Henry Dueck, like Peter Sawatsky's role in Wheatley, was one of the timely gifts from Above. At a time when a young school principal, a teaching staff with no prior teaching experience, and a group of parents were headed down the untraveled road of operating their own school, a seasoned outsider was exactly what was needed. Today the Dresden school, like the one in Wheatley, is housed in a large, former public school. The school is located in Turnerville. Mr. Peter Sawatsky, at age 84, is still helping out with Math in the Wheatley school, albeit now as a volunteer.

Five Motivating Factors

Searching for an education system for their children lay heavy on the hearts of Old Colony parents who had moved from Mexico to Ontario. This short history has described the steps involved in finding and founding a school system that fit their needs. The achievement was remarkable. But it is not an achievement based on human strength alone. Those who were involved understood that as pieces fell into place one by one, or as they were met with setbacks, an Unseen Hand was at the helm.

The logistics of setting up a school system and then operating the schools was guided by a particular framework. This framework, as outlined in *Old Colony Mennonite Schools in Ontario*, using the Wheatley school as an example, comprises five parts or motivating factors:⁷



School in Dresden



Mennonite school boys in the Dresden School, ca. 1989-1990.



Mennonite girls in the Dresden School. This photo was taken in their first schoolhouse, near Wallaceburg, ca. 1989-1990.



Dresden in the school on Walnut Street, ca. 1991-1993. The building was a Jehovah Witness church building before it was renovated into a school with three classrooms in 1990-91.

Motivation 1. Children in the public school were experiencing difficulties due to cultural differences.

It was the Academy's function to eliminate previous learning difficulties for students. The new schools provided a sense of equality and shared beliefs. Teachers and students shared a common background, which was also reflected in the curriculum. This harmonized structure served to raise the quality of learning and understanding among the students.

Motivation 2. Parents desired a better quality of education for their children.

The CLE curriculum was chosen for its reputation and record of exemplary quality.

Motivation 3. The calibre of the program was important but the religious element was *essential*. It was one of the strongest motivational forces behind the establishment of the Academy (private schools).

The Christian Mennonite faith at centre of the CLE curriculum was devoted to the values and principles in Christianity on which the Old Colony church is based.

Motivation 4. The religious element and quality of education should go hand-in-hand.

The CLE curriculum works on the following premise: as the students move upward in the academic structure, they will grow mentally, physically and spiritually. Such growth prepares them for daily life and, more importantly, for eternity. This preparation, when achieved by the student, serves as a testament to belief in eternal life, which is at the heart of Christian faith.

Motivation 5. For many of the children, English was not their first language. They spoke Low German at home and

learned to read in German, the language of the church. Language was hindering many of them from achieving quality education in an English-language public school.

In the Academy, children were required to speak in English. Because they could do so in an environment where they knew they would also be understood if they could not express themselves in English, the language barrier that newcomer children faced did not need to obstruct their learning.

Christian Light Education

The CLE curriculum was developed by Old Mennonites in Harrisonburg, Virginia. The content to be learned is packaged in units of study that can be followed independently by the students, under the guidance of the teacher. Pre-service training, followed by annual Alumni courses, prepares teachers for guiding their students through the program and managing a classroom.

Financing and Community

The new schools did not receive any government funding (and still don't to this day), which meant that financing the schools was a big challenge. At the same time, looking after their own financing simplified the process of running the schools. It also served to unite the community "in a very special manner." The main concern of the new venture was to remain community-centred as it served to understand the needs of, and to nurture, each individual student. Any child wishing to be educated in the system was given the opportunity to participate.⁸



Many Old Colony schools in southern Ontario had their beginning in church basements or small buildings, like this one in which the school in Kingsville had its beginning.



The Aylmer Old Colony Church, June 10, 1989. The first Old Colony school in Aylmer was housed in the basement of the church until its expansion, first into extra portables, then into the basement of the brand new church, and today into its own purpose-built school building. Image Credit: Mennonite Archives of Ontario, CA MAO 1989-5 54

The Old Colony School System Today

Out of a small but ambitious beginning in 1989 has grown a large network of Old Colony schools in southern Ontario. Schools that were held in church basements or small buildings have been replaced with large buildings, often former public schools, with well-equipped playgrounds, gyms, kitchens, as well as roomy classrooms. The school in Aylmer, one of the first four Old Colony schools, serves as an example of how these schools developed and expanded.

In 1989 the newly established Aylmer school was housed in the church basement. From there it expanded with the addition of portables. When a new church was built, its large basement was used for the school. Today Aylmer has a new, purpose-built school, built by the community itself. It has fifteen classrooms, a large gym, a principal's office, a staff-resource room, a library and a kitchen. The new school opened in September 2014. This year (2015) it has thirteen classes, plus one English as a Second Language (ESL) class. The school has ample room for the 288



A classroom at the Wheatley Old Colony School on a Saturday—ready for the next week's invasion of students. Photo Credit: Hans Werner

students who are currently enrolled. The Aylmer school offers a full high school program, as do at least six other schools in the system.

Rev. Abram Dyck, who is one of the two school administrators, outlined how the Old Colony school system operates. All schools follow the CLE curriculum and use CLE courses, but they are not official CLE schools. Each school is registered separately with the provincial government as an Old Colony school. Schools supplement the CLE courses with other materials such as books from the “Rod and Staff” curriculum and German readers and grammar books produced by *Centro Escolar Evangélico* in Mexico. The scheduling of classes is adjusted to meet local requirements. A typical school year runs for 186 days. This allows students to work with their families on farms during the summer months. The lost time is made up by keeping the schools open on some public holidays and eliminating Spring break.

Rev. Dyck and Rev. Jacob Neudorf, who is the other school administrator, provided the following list of all the current Old Colony schools in the system, together with the number of students who were enrolled in each in the previous academic year (2014-15). The larger, more established schools offer full high school programs.

East Side Schools

SCHOOL	ENROLMENT (2014-15)
Aylmer	228
Walsingham	225
Glen Myer	120
Tilsonberg	106
Brussel	101
Virgil	98

West Side Schools

SCHOOL	ENROLMENT (2014-15)
Wheatley	275
Kingsville	216
Cottam	210
Dresden	184
Charing Cross	64

Endnotes

1 I would like to thank Marvin Dueck, former director of Mennonite Central Committee Ontario's program for Mennonite newcomers, who provided photos and helpful background information about the early years of establishing the Old Colony schools in Ontario, and Rev. Jacob Neudorf, who provided the school photos included in this article.

2 W. Janzen, *Build Up One Another: The Work of MCCO with the Mennonites from Mexico in Ontario, 1977-1997* (Kitchener: Mennonite Central Committee, 1998), 7.

3 Janzen, 40. (Italics by the author.)

4 Psalm 127:1 (King James Bible).

5 Psalm 127:1 (King James Bible).

6 Henry R. Friesen, “Old Colony Mennonite Schools in Ontario,” *Preservings* No. 18 (June 2001): 131.

7 Friesen, 132.

8 Friesen, 132.

225th Anniversary of the Migration to Russia

From Poland to Prussia to Russia: Mennonite Emigration out of the Vistula Delta

Mark Jantzen, Newton, Kansas

“On September 13, 1772, we came under the Prussian government and therefore we called a general gathering [of leaders] from the congregations that were now under the King of Prussia. We met at Peter Regier’s in Traulauerfeld.”¹ With this sentence in his diary, Heinrich Donner, the Elder of the Orloffersfelde congregation in the Vistula Delta, documented the transition of most Mennonites along the Vistula River from Polish rule to Prussian. Mennonites had been living under Polish rule in the area since the 1530s. Now after almost two hundred and fifty years, the territory on which they lived had been transferred from one state to another and they would have to reorient themselves to a new political reality. This first of two Mennonite “migrations” did not involve a physical move, but signified rather a change of government and a momentous shift in Mennonite history that sixteen years later would lead directly to the beginning of Mennonite migration to Russia. In some ways this move was analogous to the experience of Quebecois who came under English rule after 1760 or Mexicans who lived in northern Mexico before it became part of the United States in 1848.

Church leaders, according to Donner’s notes, took three decisions at their meeting in response to the change of government. One was that those entering into mixed marriages should no longer be accepted into church membership, an extraordinarily odd reaction to exchanging one king for another, but as we shall see, this issue was closely related to issues of



Mark Jantzen giving his presentation at the “225th Anniversary of the Emigration of Prussian Mennonites to New Russia” event at the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg, November 15, 2014. Photo Credit: Gladys Terichow



The Great Refectory in the Castle of the Teutonic Order, Malbork, Poland (formerly Marienburg, Prussia). The castle was built between 1272 and 1457 and is one of the largest medieval fortresses in Europe. Photo credit: Hans Werner

political pressure, religious freedom, and military service. Thus the ruling on mixed marriages was actually linked to another result, namely that a request be sent to the new king asking that he “grant us freedom of religious practice and freedom from military impressment and registration.” The third action was to send a present to the royal kitchen to be used for the homage feast to be held in the nearby Marienburg/Malbork castle on September 27, a food package that consisted of two steers, 20 wheels of cheese, 400 pounds of butter, 50 braces of ducks, and 50 of geese.²

What had happened to Mennonites during Polish rule to cause these three decisions to be the logical ones for church leadership to make upon becoming residents of a new country? And how did the “migration” to Prussia lead to the migration to Russia? These three resolutions indicated that Mennonites had clearly been trained by their Polish experiences to be sensitive to political conditions related to military service, mixed marriages, and to religious freedom or toleration. Less overt in their decisions perhaps is a focus on economic issues, but deploying wealth to their own

political advantage in the forms of “gifts” and bribes as they did here can hardly be decoupled from paying attention to the economic framework that applied to earning their livelihoods, a major concern for them during this first “move.” Thus as all Mennonites in the Vistula river valley transitioned between two or three countries in the span of less than twenty years,

they were responsive to seeking out the best combination of political, military service, religious, and economic conditions that would preserve the viability of their communities and they discovered that for different individuals different best conditions would prevail.

The story of Mennonite migration to Russia in 1788 has traditionally been understood as leaving Prussia for new opportunities in Russia, starting from scratch a pattern of migration that for some Mennonite groups continued via the United States and Canada to Mexico, Paraguay, Belize, Bolivia, and beyond or back to Germany until today.³ That view is not wrong but neither is it complete. The transition from Poland to Prussia shaped the Mennonite approach to Russian immigration in profound ways. They had, for example, accepted endogamy before leaving for Russia and thus were already primed for the isolation from neighbors prescribed by Russian colonist law. During their time under Prussian rule they had also significantly reshaped their community to deal with a highly centralized state and hierarchical system of government oversight.

In addition, paying sustained attention to the Polish state and its economic conditions highlights the migrations within Poland and to Ducal Prussia and back throughout the eighteenth century that actually began important patterns of Mennonite resettlements. The Mennonite migration to Russia was thus neither the first group movement in a long time nor the originator of a Mennonite migratory model, it was simply the first move to Russia. A final lesson that can perhaps be learned from looking at a longer and Polish prehistory of the 1788 migration deals with Mennonite motives. Modern observers often asked if religious, political, or economic considerations drove Mennonite decisions. However, unlike our own societies, which tend to experience these four categories as separate spheres, eighteenth-century Europeans saw them all as intimately related, so that it is not possible to lift out a single concern as the “main” reason driving emigration.

Conditions in Poland

The Mennonite communities under discussion were founded by emigration into Poland mostly from the Low Countries in the sixteenth century, although a few came from southern German territory as well. The Polish Commonwealth was highly decentralized and built socially on a system of multi-tiered social classes and privileges. The central government was relatively weak, illustrated by the election of the king by the entire *szlachta*, although in practice the most important noble families, the magnates, dominated the electoral process and the state. In the eighteenth century this system became polarized between competing and overlapping blocks of political interests that included factions favoring Russia in foreign policy and the

interests of the Orthodox internally, another favoring Prussia and the small number of Protestants, a block of Polish nobility who favored the status quo of a weak monarch and more noble autonomy, and a reformist group around the last king of Poland, Stanislaw-August Poniatowski, the Czartoryski clan, and some elements of the Catholic church who favored modernizing the state to eliminate foreign interference and the internal privileges that limited state power. In this rich and ever-shifting political mixture, Russia actually controlled the balance of power in Poland throughout the eighteenth century.⁴

The province centered on the Vistula Delta where most of the Mennonites lived was known as Royal Prussia after 1466 because the crown that year took over the territory from the Teutonic Knights, acquiring thirty-nine percent of the land. It had its own political structure and deliberative body, the Prussian Diet (*Landtag*). The nobility, Catholic clergy, the three large cities of Danzig/Gdańsk, Elbing/Elbląg, and Thorn/Toruń, and collectively the smaller cities all had representation in this Diet. Uniquely in Poland, the three large cities each had veto power over this regional Diet’s decisions, important for Mennonites since the cities owned 10 percent of the land. Thus the crown and the cities were both important Mennonite landlords and potent political actors.⁵ In addition, the main economic engine of the entire kingdom, the trade that connected grain grown in the Vistula River basin with urban centers in the Netherlands and along the Baltic Sea, had its center in





Stanislaw August Poniatowski (1732-1798) was the last King of Poland. He is remembered as a great patron of the arts and sciences, but is controversial in Polish history as the one who failed to prevent Poland's ruin. Painting by Marcello Bacciarelli. Image Credit: Wikipedia Commons.

Danzig, giving its city council unusual economic influence.⁶

To the east was Ducal Prussia, former territory of the Teutonic Knights that in 1525 had been turned into a Duchy when the last Grand Master of that order became Lutheran and secularized his land. In 1618 the Duchy came under the Hohenzollern family whose most prominent title was Elector of Brandenburg. While the Elector was one of the most important nobles in the Holy Roman Empire, Ducal Prussia was in Poland and there the Elector as Duke was subject to the Polish king until the Hohenzollerns gained full sovereignty for the territory in 1657. In 1701 the Elector Frederick III had himself crowned Frederick I, King *in* Prussia, a title he was not allowed to use in the Holy Roman Empire, but after 1772 this became the most important title for the family and the state of Brandenburg became identified as Prussia and the title of Elector was replaced by King.⁷

Drilling down even closer to the main area of Mennonite settlement in Royal Prussia in the Vistula Delta, Danzig tended to look to Russia as a counter-balance to Prussian influence over nearby Elbing, whose finances Prussia managed since 1698 as a result of disagreement over Polish payments to the Elector. Within both Danzig and Elbing, merchant oligarchies ruled in

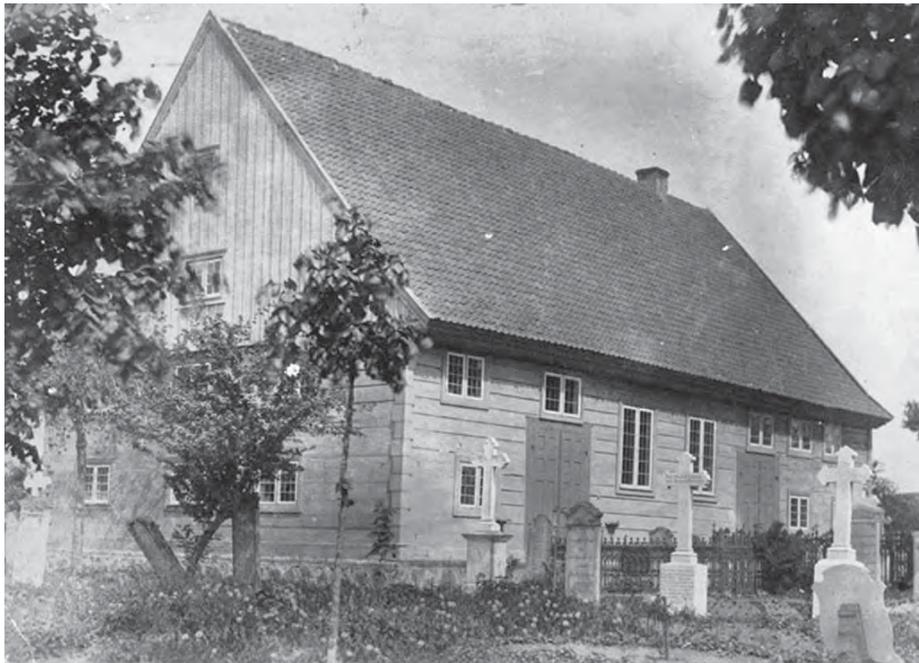


Frederick I, King in Prussia (1701-1713). Image Credit: Wikipedia Commons.

a system of three orders, the first that of an oligarchy of elected wealthy city council members, the second of appointed judges, and the third of representatives of the guilds who often had little effective power but feared competition from Mennonite craftsmen. Especially just outside of Danzig the local Bishop had lands and villages of his own, which he attempted to develop economically in competition with Danzig merchants.⁸

In terms of religious tolerance, Poland had an excellent record during this time. Given the strong presence of Reformed believers among the nobility and Lutherans in the northern cities, tolerance instead of warfare was the norm in Poland for most of the period. In practice this meant that the state was less involved in religious decisions or involved in a different way than elsewhere in Europe. To cite just one example of many, in 1768, when four large congregations in the delta wanted to build churches, they applied to the local Catholic bishop, not the state, for permission. Heubuden, Tiegenhagen, Fürstenwerder, and Ladekopp were allowed to construct church buildings provided they did not look like churches. In addition, they had to build and maintain a chapel for the bishop at their expense.⁹

Thus Mennonites in Poland existed in social structures with many foci of power. Sometimes they were caught between royal and provincial policies, or between nobility and clergy, wealthy city leaders and guilds, or city interests and clerical landlords, each of whom had at different times granted Mennonites different privileges. Always they looked for, and usually found, a local protector to shield them from a local adversary. The multi-tiered system of authority in Poland meant that



The Fürstenwerder Church was built in 1768 and survived with minor alterations until 1990 when it was destroyed by fire. Image Credit: GAMEO, Mennonite Library and Archives, 2003-0144

Mennonites could appeal laterally as well as up and down the social hierarchy from city to bishop to provincial Diet to king in order to find relief from expulsion and extortion efforts. While the system usually worked in the end to preserve the status quo, Mennonites clearly also became adept at paying bribes and making gifts as a matter of course. Thus the payments in food made in 1772 were not remarkable to Mennonites at the time.¹⁰

One important trump card that Mennonites sought to obtain and play was the Charters of Privileges granted directly by the Polish kings. The earliest preserved example from 1642 was granted by King Władysław IV but clearly based on previous royal charters going back to the sixteenth century. He assured Mennonites that they retained “all rights, freedoms and customs which they have used in the past.”¹¹ Since these rights were not enumerated, enforcing this charter really depended on Mennonites lining up other defenders in the Polish political system. A later charter from King Augustus II in 1732 was more specific, showing that Mennonites had learned to be more precise in their requests to rulers. Now Mennonites were promised “free exercise of religion,” and freedom to baptize, to marry, to bury their dead, including unbaptized infants, in their own cemeteries, and to educate their children as they saw fit.¹²

Mennonites had little trouble with military service in the Polish Commonwealth for the simple reason that there was no significant standing army. There were small Polish garrisons in Elbing and Marienburg. More typical, however, were the numerous private armies of Poland held by the magnates that combined together with the royal army in times of need. The largest such army in the Vistula Delta would have been that maintained by the city of Danzig. Mennonites there had to pay different rates at different times to avoid guard duty and other related military duties, sometimes they cooperated by standing fire watch during sieges.¹³ Other times they did not have to do anything to avoid military service, which was thus not a major source of contention for Mennonites in Poland, was not

as central to their identity as it became under Prussian and Russian rule, and was not therefore ever explicitly covered in their Polish Charters of Privileges. Mennonite attention to military service matters did indeed date from their time in Poland, as we shall see, but not to their contact with the Polish army.

Patterns of Migration in Polish Times

Beginning the story of Mennonite migration in 1788 misses at least six significant Mennonite migrations from earlier in the eighteenth century. These initial movements share a number of similarities with the better-known Russian migration. Many of them were related to challenges of population growth and finding new economic opportunities especially for young people. There were additional, smaller migrations in and out of Poland besides the six mentioned here, including those to and from Königsberg. These six were, however, the most characteristic of the type of migration to Russia that followed. For example, a

dearth of clerical leadership marked these migrations, making new settlements dependant on the older Vistula Delta congregations, just as happened with the first Mennonite settlement in Russia. Church leaders were nonetheless involved in many aspects of promoting and assisting such movement. Thus all of these key aspects of the 1788 migration were already well-practiced features of Mennonite life in Poland.

The first of these eighteen-century migrations took Mennonites in 1713 to Ducal Prussia along the Neman River in Prussian Lithuania. Plague had decimated the population and in 1711 King Frederick I had invited Mennonites who were being expelled from the Canton of Bern in Switzerland to migrate to his territory. Most of the Swiss went to Penn's Woods in the British New World instead, but some 100 poor Mennonite families mostly from up the Vistula River valley settled there. Mennonites were promised freedom of religious practice and freedom of military service, but the latter at this time applied in any case to all new colonists coming to Prussia as a matter of course. A number of Lutherans travelled with the group, working mostly as hired hands. In this isolated setting, many of those Lutherans joined the Mennonite church, some during a revival in 1717. Several marriages between formerly Lutheran men and Mennonite women are documented.¹⁴

These so-called mixed marriages became a matter of great controversy in 1724 when military recruiters from the king's army swept through the settlement despite assurances that Mennonites would not be impressed into the Prussian army. A new king was now on the throne, Frederick William I, and he was nicknamed the Soldier King for good reason. He was obsessed with the army, especially a crack unit, the Potsdam Guards, comprised only of tall men. Some of the men caught up in the raid were tall enough for this unit and thus came under extra scrutiny, even coming to the king's attention. The happenstance that some of them were former Lutherans who had become Mennonite and then refused to join his favorite unit

led the king to revoke Mennonites' privileges in the Duchy, thus leading to the second migration of the century as now some 160 families returned to Poland. Many were integrated back into existing settlements, but others were settled on a large tract of meadowland that was purchased at the village of Tragheimerweide/Barcice south of Stuhm/Sztum along the Vistula River. Additional meadowland in surrounding villages was purchased as well so that a new Mennonite settlement in Poland was established at this time. They built their first church building in 1728. The fact that this settlement was the result of expulsion orders from a king of Prussia weighed on Mennonite leaders fifty years later when they came under Prussian rule. The role of mixed marriages in provoking that expulsion was the reason for their decision in 1772 to ban any future such unions in their congregations, although it was another couple of decades until the decision was accepted everywhere among Vistula Mennonites.¹⁵

The third major Polish Mennonite migration of the eighteenth century was a return in the late 1750s to Prussian Lithuania. The territory since 1740 had a new king, Frederick II, who valued taxpayers above soldiers among his citizens since he could use the money to hire mercenaries. Thus Mennonites from Poland were invited back to Ducal Prussia and settled near Tilsit starting in 1758. This settlement also began without an Elder, so that until 1769 the congregation that emerged was dependent on the home congregations back in Royal Prussia for communion and baptisms. They were allowed to elect their own Elder after eleven years on the condition that they abide by the decision of the four sponsoring congregations – Montau/Mątawy, Schönsee/Sosnowka, Thiensdorf/Jezioro, and Tragheimerweide – not to allow mixed marriages so as not to run the risk of royal expulsion again. Over two hundred Mennonites were living there at that time.¹⁶

A fourth migration out of the Vistula River valley was

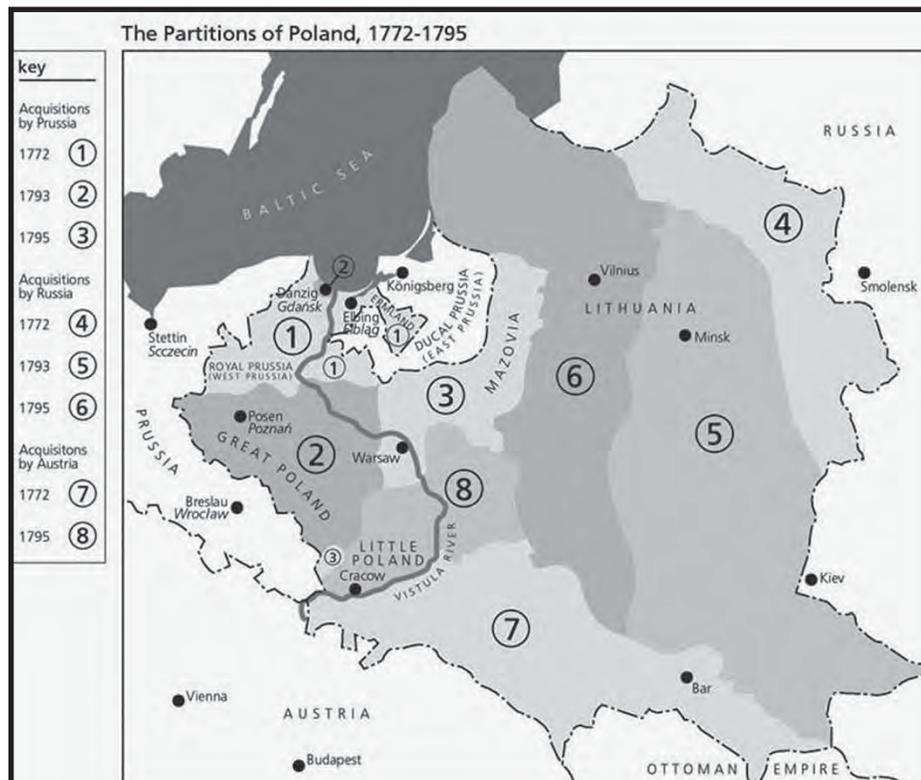
instigated by problems with a lease from a Polish nobleman. In the early 1760s he asked his Mennonite tenants to perform labor on his land as part of their payment, service akin to that of Polish serfs. Dissatisfied Mennonites began looking for better offers and discovered one made by Frederick II of Prussia. In 1765 a group of thirty-five families from the Old Flemish congregation in the Culm lowlands took up the offer of land from a Prussian government official, Brenkenhoff, who Frederick II had given charge of finding settlers for land along the Netze/Noteć River northeast of Frankfurt an der Oder in the Prussian territory of Brandenburg. Like the settlers in Frederick's Duchy of Prussia, they were promised freedom from military service. The congregation that developed here in the settlement of Brenkenhofswalde/Blotnica was deeply influenced by the pietism of the Moravian Brethren, including an emphasis on education. They later transmitted these values to Mennonites in Russia when the entire group emigrated to the Molotschna colony in the 1830s because they refused to pay high new taxes and faced restrictions on buying land imposed on them in 1830 by the Prussian government. In the Molotschna colony they founded the village and congregation of Gnadenfeld, an early center of education for Mennonites in Russia and later a center of the Mennonite Brethren movement.¹⁷

The final two Mennonite migrations before Mennonites started moving to Russia were interconnected moves up the Vistula River toward Warsaw. Two settlements and congregations were founded in Deutsch-Kazun/Kazuń Nowy near Nowy Dwór Mazowiecki northwest of Warsaw and Deutsch-Wymysle/Nowe Wymysle near Plock. Migration to these areas apparently happened in a trickle over much of the eighteenth century resulting in many different years being cited as the founding dates, although both settlements were clearly established before the migration to Russia. Erich Ratzlaff argued that some of this migration was a result of Mennonite unease

with Prussian rule, making these settlements in territory that remained Polish from 1772 to 1795 the first option for Mennonites who had were unhappy under the new king. Most of these settlers come from down the river at Montau, Schönsee, Przechowa/Przechówko and Obernessau/Mała Nieszawka.¹⁸

Conditions in Prussia

When Mennonites came under Prussian rule in 1772 they moved to a political system that was highly centralized and focused on operating an efficient military, something Mennonites knew from their migrations in and out of Hohenzollern territory in the eighteenth century. No longer could they shift around within the territory or region looking for new settlement opportunities if they ran into trouble with local officials. Now there was really only one authority that made decisions concerning the conditions of Mennonite life. In addition, this contact with a more hierarchical government forced the Mennonites to become more structured in their own



internal dealings, a shift that was well under way before they moved to Russia and developed a different type of internal hierarchy there.

The move to a centralized government was not, however, complete or instantaneous in Prussia. The monarchy remained highly dependent on the officials who led its bureaucracy to make judgments about how to formulate and implement policy.¹⁹ Thus for the first several decades under Prussian rule Mennonites confronted policies that ran on official and unofficial tracks, the latter unpublished, punitive, and a source of immense frustration.

Official policy ran through the time-honored practice of Charters of Privileges. Thus the Mennonite gift to the royal feast at the homage festival was tied, as we have seen, to a request for a charter that would preserve their way of life, including attention to religious freedom, freedom from military service, oaths, and restrictions on economic activity.²⁰ All of these requests were finally granted years later in a charter issued in 1780 which promised the Mennonites that they would “remain eternally free from military registration and personal military service and their enjoyment of religious freedom and freedom of commerce ... will be undisturbed and protected.”²¹

Freedom from military service came with a price that was stipulated in the charter, a collective annual payment of 5,000 *Reichstaler*. This money was used to support the Culm military academy, a military high school started by the provincial administration to train Polish noblemen’s sons to be Prussian army officers, thus the tax was nicknamed cadet money. For Mennonites this was seen as simply an additional tax or payment analogous to many others they had made over the years.²² Given that 100 *Reichstaler* was a decent annual salary at the time, this tax was a significant cost for the community. Since they had to make quarterly payments to the government of 1,250 *Reichstaler*, they developed a highly structured method of collecting money from all the congregations that factored in the number of males and females, land ownership, and even capital wealth. Once this system was up and running, Mennonite leadership could raise large sums of money at their regional meetings just by deciding to impose fractions or multiples of the cadet money, an important example of Prussian governmental hierarchy strengthening the Mennonite hierarchy.²³

The promise of freedom of commerce was the realm in which Mennonites confronted the unofficial nature of Prussian rule. Economic considerations were key to the entire project of partitioning Poland. The first partition brought an additional million *Reichstaler* in annual income to the King of Prussia and financed approximately one-eighth of his army. With an eye to subsequent partitions that came to pass in the 1790s, Frederick II worked to throttle the economy of Poland in general and the city of Danzig in particular. He ordered the occupation of Neufahrwasser/Nowy Port, the outlet of the Vistula River to the Baltic Sea, thus gaining control of the river on both the north and south sides of Danzig. He then imposed custom duties of twelve percent on goods that passed through Danzig and only 2 percent through Elbing, which he tried to establish as an alternative port. When in 1783 the city tried to halt the Prussian collection of these duties, Frederick responded with a complete blockade of all trade until the city allowed him to resume collection. Especially the area around Danzig that was still part of Poland until 1793 suffered economically as a result of these Prussian tactics.²⁴

This economic targeting of Danzig territory is perhaps reflected in the overrepresentation of Mennonites from this area in the first migration. Roughly 10 percent of the families in the first wave of migration, that is twenty-two out of 228 families, came from the Danzig area, which comprised only 4 percent of the Mennonite population.²⁵ Furthermore both of the deputies who traveled to Russia to investigate the possibility of immigration there, Johann Bartsch and Jakob Höppner, came from Danzig city territory. In addition to the particularly difficult economic conditions, however, was the fact that as part of Poland, which was still under Russia domination, migration to Russia could be fostered in Danzig territory, whereas in Prussian territory it was actively discouraged.²⁶

Along with a general decline of economic activity around Danzig, Mennonites faced a targeted form of economic discrimination, the charter’s promise of freedom of commerce notwithstanding. Already in Polish times the city government of Elbing had tried to limit the sale of land to Mennonites in order to protect the tax base of local Lutheran parishes. Mennonites had been required to obtain special permits to purchase land that were not always granted.²⁷ Now under Prussian rule, while Lutheran pastors continued to complain that Mennonites were buying out their parishioners and not paying taxes to support them, this practice was also linked to military service. The Prussian military recruited from cantons, large districts that were required to supply a set number of soldiers. Registration was by hearth or household, not by individuals. So if a Mennonite bought a farm, all the people in the household were taken off the military service list. To prevent this, government officials on their own initiative blocked sales of non-Mennonite real estate into Mennonite hands except in cases of bankruptcy or small plots of land, leading to speculation that they did so to keep land prices down for their own personal purchases.²⁸

Already on June 14, 1773, the West Prussian Cabinet informed the Mennonites that they would need a special permit to buy property.²⁹ Petitions and delegations to Berlin followed, with much discussion by both Mennonites and officials of different options, including a proposal by Minister for West Prussia Leopold von Gaudi to limit Mennonite land permits to those with two Mennonite parents, linking the issue of mixed marriages with economic restrictions. Mennonites hoped that after having secured a Charter of Privileges in 1780 they would now have the freedom to buy real estate, but Prussian officials never intended the charter to be applied that way.

Restrictions in Elbing sparked the earliest protests after the charter was awarded. Already in 1782 the congregation there petitioned Berlin for relief, noting that the lack of permits, “makes it absolutely clear that in a short time, to the detriment of your royal income and to our own ruin, we will gradually be eradicated and expelled from your royal majesty’s lands.”³⁰ Mennonites tried various strategies to get around the permits, for example, putting non-Mennonite cottagers on new land to show that a family was still there who could serve. These strategies became more and more expensive and thus out of reach for most. Finally in 1786 five men, Martin Kröker, Gils Jantzen, Jacob v. Riesen, Abram Janzen, and Frantz Pauls, adopted the simple strategy of buying land without permits. They farmed their acquisitions for a year before the government caught them. Prussia was now under a new king, Frederick William II, who agreed with his officials’ recommendation to

crack down on the Mennonites. By June 1787 all five had been evicted from their properties.³¹

Already in August 1787 the first requests from two families wanting to emigrate from Prussia to Russia were registered with the government citing the difficulty of acquiring real estate. The initial reaction was to let them go but to keep lists of Mennonites leaving.³² Three of the five names of evicted farmers appear on the list of settlers in Chortiza by 1790, Gils Jantzen, Jakob v. Riesen, and Frantz Pauls all in the village of Kronsweide.³³ Thus the ever-tightening restrictions on Mennonite land buying led directly to the migration to Russia.

This practice was one that began in the Elbing area but was soon widespread throughout Prussian territory, the first importance lesson for Mennonites in how a centralized government left them no room to maneuver. Using economic levers to pressure religious minorities fit a long-standing pattern in Europe, Frederick II, for example, simply expelled the poorest Jews from his new acquisitions in Poland.³⁴

A final factor in pushing Mennonites to migrate was a change in religious policy in Prussia underway since 1786 when Frederick William II came to the throne. Although his uncle Frederick II had been famously indifferent, or even hostile, to religion, the new king was quite devout. His policies moved to strengthen traditional orthodoxy and weaken the rationalist approach his uncle had promoted. Mennonites were caught up in a general review of religious policy that result in a new Edict Concerning the Future Establishment of the Mennonites being promulgated in 1789. This edict codified the unofficial economic restrictions on Mennonites, lifting them to official policy status. It also noted that children from mixed marriages could not have access to Mennonite privileges, which means that boys from these marriages would be liable for military service. Since those who accepted even liability for service were banned from the congregations, this edict had the effect of also backing and extending the congregational prohibition on mixed marriages with the force of law. Finally the edict imposed a new set of taxes on Mennonites to support local Protestant parishes, the piece that accorded with the king's drive to strengthen traditional religion. All of these restrictions, however, would be lifted on Mennonites who converted to the Protestant or Catholic religion, demonstrating how economic, family, tax, and religious policy were all of one piece for early modern Europeans and making it difficult to cite a single motive as driving migration.³⁵

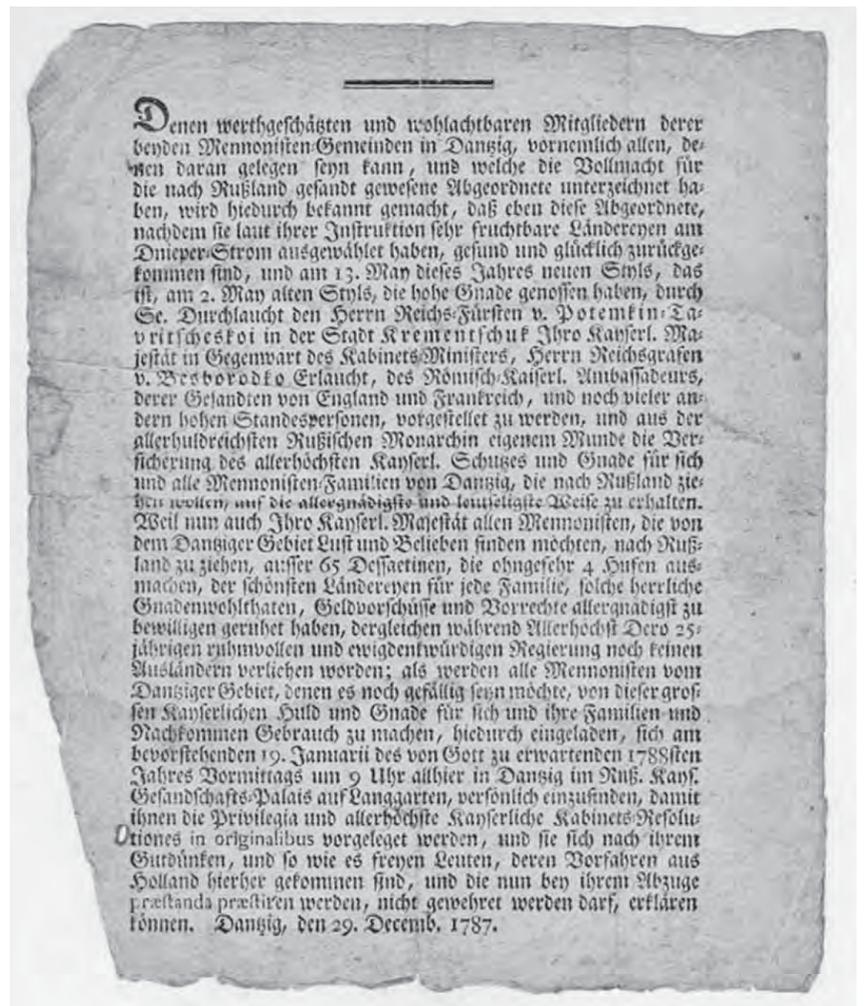
Conditions in Russia

The Mennonite migration to Russia was carefully prepared and heavily promoted by the Russian government. Conditions there constituted a clear and attractive pull that lined up just in time with the strong Prussian push that was putting especially poor and young Mennonites under pressure to conform to new Prussian government expectations that were finally being clearly documented in the late 1780s. The two Mennonite deputies to Russia who traveled

there from 1786 to 1787 to find suitable land also made specific requests of the Russian government. They wanted guarantees of free exercise of religion, free land, freedom of commerce, and assistance with moving and getting established. Since these demands lined up with the colonizing policies of the Russian state, Prince Potemkin, who was acting as Tsarina Catharine II's agent in these matters, agreed to grant them.³⁶ Migration of over 100 families ensued in 1788.

Mennonites in Russia found themselves, like in Prussia, in a country with a highly centralized government. They had already been trained to look to the top for a final decision on conditions. Unlike Prussia, where unofficial agenda set up requirements that were not disclosed in writing to Mennonites for years, in Russia the actual policy and the official documents lined up more closely from the beginning, which is not to say they were not subject to change over the years. Likewise, Russian colonist policy did not require military service for colonists settling in Russia, so extending military freedom to Mennonites was nothing special. Their experience in Prussia, however, made them desire to have that point reaffirmed in writing. They were required to refrain from converting the Orthodox population to their faith, but given the existing ban on mixed marriages and the inability of converts in Prussia to get military service exemptions, this stipulation was in effect nothing new.

At church services on New Year's Day, 1788, Georg von Trappe, the colonist recruiter for Russia who accompanied the



deputies on their trip, had flyers distributed outside of the two Mennonite congregations on Danzig city territory. The main promise listed was an offer for approximately 180 acres of free land along with travel and settlement cash assistance and “the most gracious rights and privileges.”³⁷ Those more specific rights were spelled out in a document the deputies had gotten from Potemkin, the gist of which had also been communicated to Mennonites. Clearly the free land was the biggest draw that attracted people to a meeting at the Russian consulate on January 19. A number of families committed already at that meeting to emigrate and left on March 22, 1788.³⁸ By 1789 over two hundred families from the Vistula River area arrived at the new Mennonite settlement at Chortitza along the Dnieper River. The biggest difference for Mennonites between Prussia and Russia was the Russian government not only provided for freedom of commerce, they actively supported Mennonite economic development instead of vigorously opposing it.

Conclusion

In the course of roughly twenty years after the first partition of Poland in 1772, Mennonites adapted from living in a decentralized Polish state to living in two highly centralized, autocratic states. Formerly they had dealt with Catholic bishops on points of religion or permits to build churches, noble or city landlords for leases and land tenure, and various political powers including the provincial Diet and the royal court for formal Charters of Privileges and paid taxes and other fees to all levels of authority. Within twenty years of Prussian rule, all of those areas became linked together under a comprehensive royal policy and tied to military service. Mennonite existence became more political as political doctrine set in the capital expanded to encompass more aspects of family, religious, and economic life than it ever had in Poland. Mennonites had become tied to a royal lineage just as royal houses in Central and Eastern Europe became more closely associated with national loyalties, complicating Mennonite efforts in the nineteenth century in both Prussia and Russia to maintain their religious identity. These two migrations mark a significant pivot for Mennonites in their relationship with both their neighbors and their states.

Especially in Prussia opposition to military service now began to move for the first time to the forefront of Mennonite identity, a process that only increased in intensity over the course of the nineteenth century. For Mennonites in Russia that process began with the Napoleonic wars in the early nineteenth century and reached a climax with the imposition of the draft after the Crimean War just as matters were coming to a head in Prussia as well, so that the next phase of international migration to North America for these Mennonites was again a joint project.³⁹ Resisting military service as an impetus for identity has dissipated in Germany and North America in the absence of a draft, resulting in a reformulation of Mennonite identity where something other than such resistance is front and center, a return of sorts to the Polish experience.

Endnotes

- 1 Archiwum Państwowe w Gdańsku, Syg. 836 (Jeziernik/Schönsee), no. 1 (Pamiętnik H. Donner dot. spraw menonitow, b. 1735,1774 – 1803), 33.
- 2 Ibid., 3-4. On September 27, 1772, sixty-five guests of high standing were served in the summer refectory in the upper castle and the remaining three hundred in the great refectory of the middle castle. Thus the Mennonite contribution presumably covered most of the meat and dairy needs of this royal meal, Max Bär,

Westpreussen unter Friedrich dem Grossen (Leipzig: Verlag von S. Hirzel, 1909), 1:41n2.

- 3 James Urry, *None but Saints. The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia, 1789-1889* (Winnipeg: Windflower Communications, 1989), 41-55. Peter Hildebrand, *From Danzig to Russia. The First Emigration of Mennonites from the Danzig Region to Southern Russia*, trans. Walter E. Toews with Adolf Ens (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 2000), Lawrence Klippenstein, “The Mennonite Migration to Russia, 1786-1806,” in *Mennonites in Russia*, ed. John Friesen (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1989), 13-42, George Epp, *Geschichte der Mennoniten in Russland*, 3 vols. (Lage: Logos-Verlag, 1997-2003), 1:31-101, Peter J. Klassen, “Barriers to Emigration From Prussia,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 72, no. 1 (Jan. 1998): 84-95, Diether Götz Lichdi, *Die Mennoniten in Geschichte und Gegenwart: Von der Täuferbewegung zur weltweiten Freikirche*, 2nd ed. (Weisenheim am Sand: Agape Verlag, 2004), 135-41. On the ongoing nature of Russian Mennonite migration, see John N. Klassen, “Mennonites and Their Migrations,” in *Europe: Testing Faith and Tradition*, Global Mennonite History Series (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2006), 181-232, Jaime Prieto Valladares, *Latin America: Mission and Migration*, Global Mennonite History Series (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2010), 27-66. On the move back to Germany from the former Soviet Union, the most recent publication is Heinrich Löwen, *Deutsche Christen in Russland und in der Sowjetunion: Grundzüge des historischen und theologischen Hintergrunds russlanddeutscher Freikirchen* (Hamburg: disserta verlag, 2014).
- 4 Norman Davies, *God’s Playground: A History of Poland*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 246-83, 386-411, Hans-Jürgen Bömelburg, *Zwischen Polnischer Ständegesellschaft und Preussischem Obrigkeitsstaat. Vom Königlichen Preußen zu Westpreußen (1756-1806)* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1995), 131-5.
- 5 Bömelburg, *Zwischen Polnischer Ständegesellschaft und Preussischem Obrigkeitsstaat*, 68, 96-130. See also Karin Friedrich, *The Other Prussia. Royal Prussia, Poland and Liberty, 1569-1772* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- 6 Bömelburg, *Zwischen Polnischer Ständegesellschaft und Preussischem Obrigkeitsstaat*, 64-96.
- 7 Wilhelm Mannhardt, *The Military Service Exemption of the Mennonites of Provincial Prussia*, ed. Mark Jantzen and John Thiesen, trans. Anthony Epp (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 2013), xv.
- 8 Bömelburg, *Zwischen Polnischer Ständegesellschaft und Preussischem Obrigkeitsstaat*, 96-130, Friedrich, *The Other Prussia*, 150-88, Peter J. Klassen, *Mennonites in Early Modern Poland and Prussia* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 48-74, Horst Penner, *Die ost- und westpreußischen Mennoniten* (Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1978), 1:160-77, H. G. Mannhardt, *The Danzig Mennonite Church: Its Origin and History from 1569-1919*, ed. Mark Jantzen and John Thiesen, trans. Victor Doerksen (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 2007).
- 9 Klassen, *Mennonites in Early Modern Poland and Prussia*, 13-18, 117, Penner, *Die ost- und westpreußischen Mennoniten*, 185-86.
- 10 Examples of such payments can be found in Penner, *Die ost- und westpreußischen Mennoniten*, 1:160-8 and Klassen, *Mennonites in Early Modern Poland and Prussia*, 48-74.
- 11 Klassen, *Mennonites in Early Modern Poland and Prussia*, 199.
- 12 Ibid., 202. A concise list of all the royal Polish charters is given in Erich Ratzlaff, *Im Weichselbogen: Mennonitensiedlungen in Zentralpolen* (Winnipeg: Christian Press, 1971), 15-17.
- 13 Mannhardt, *Danzig Mennonite Church*, 126-7, Edmund Kizik, *Mennonici w Gdańsku, Elblągu i na Żuławach Wiślanych w Drugiej Połowie XVII i w XVIII Wieku. Studium z Dziejów Małej Społeczności Wyznaniowej* (Gdańsk: Gdańskie Towarzystwo Naukowe, 1994), 102-7.
- 14 Christian Hege, “Gumbinnen (Kaliningrad Oblast, Russia),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1956, accessed 12 Dec 2014, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Gumbinnen_\(Kaliningrad_Oblast,_Russia\)&oldid=121119](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Gumbinnen_(Kaliningrad_Oblast,_Russia)&oldid=121119), Horst Quiring and Nanne van der Zijpp, “Lithuania,” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, May 2014, accessed 12 Dec 2014, <http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Lithuania&oldid=122187>, Mark Jantzen, “The Trouble with Marrying Prussian Lutheran Boys: The End of Exogamous Marriages in the Mennonite Community in the Polish Vistula Delta, 1713-1808,” in *Sisters: Myth and Reality of Anabaptist, Mennonite, and Doopsgezind Women, ca 1525-1900*, ed. Mirjam van Veen, Piet Visser, and Gary K. Waite (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 285-6, Erich Randt, *Die Mennoniten in Ostpreußen und Litauen bis zum Jahre 1772* (Königsberg, 1912), 7-12, Mannhardt, *The Military Service Exemption of the Mennonites of Provincial Prussia*, 114-21.
- 15 Horst Quiring and Nanne van der Zijpp, “Lithuania,” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, Jantzen, “The Trouble with Marrying Prussian Lutheran Boys,” 285-301, Mark Jantzen, *Mennonite German Soldiers: Nation, Religion, and Family in the Prussian East, 1772-1880* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 50-59, Randt, *Die Mennoniten in Ostpreußen*, 30-36.
- 16 Nanne van der Zijpp, “Plauschwarren (Kaliningrad Oblast, Russia),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1959, accessed 12 Dec 2014, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Plauschwarren_\(Kaliningrad_Oblast_](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Plauschwarren_(Kaliningrad_Oblast_)

Russia)&oldid=119420, Jantzen, *Mennonite German Soldiers*, 51-52, Randt, *Die Mennoniten in Ostpreußen*, 91-95.

17 Klassen, *Mennonites in Early Modern Poland and Prussia*, 86-87. H. G. Mannhardt, "Brenkenhoffswalde and Franztal (Lubusz Voivodeship, Poland)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1953, accessed 15 Dec 2014, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Brenkenhoffswalde_and_Franztal_\(Lubusz_Voivodeship,_Poland\)&oldid=124388](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Brenkenhoffswalde_and_Franztal_(Lubusz_Voivodeship,_Poland)&oldid=124388), Jantzen, *Mennonite German Soldiers*, 115-17.

18 Ratzlaff, *Im Weichselbogen*, 22-42, W. Kerber and Harold S. Bender, "Deutsch-Kazun (Masovian Voivodeship, Poland)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, September 2014, accessed 15 Dec 2014, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Deutsch-Kazun_\(Masovian_Voivodeship,_Poland\)&oldid=124591](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Deutsch-Kazun_(Masovian_Voivodeship,_Poland)&oldid=124591)

Robert Foth, "Deutsch-Wymysle (Masovian Voivodeship, Poland)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1956, accessed 15 Dec 2014, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Deutsch-Wymysle_\(Masovian_Voivodeship,_Poland\)&oldid=124657](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Deutsch-Wymysle_(Masovian_Voivodeship,_Poland)&oldid=124657).

19 Reinhart Koselleck, *Preußen zwischen Reform und Revolution: Allgemeines Landrecht, Verwaltung und soziale Bewegung von 1791 bis 1848*, 3rd ed. (Munich:Deutschen Taschenbuch Verlag), 1981).

20 The history of this Prussia charter is long and complicated. The most complete list of Mennonite demands from 1773 is in Mannhardt, *The Military Service Exemption of the Mennonites of Provincial Prussia*, 131-32. See also *ibid.*, 127-42, Jantzen, *Mennonite German Soldiers*, 15-48.

21 Jantzen, *Mennonite German Soldiers*, 256.

22 Mennonites collected money to help finance Dutch wars against the Spanish in the Netherlands as early as 1572 and were rewarded with privileges of tolerance there. In the 1670s this scenario was repeated on a large scale in Friesland, Piet Visser, "Mennonites and Doopsgezinden in the Netherlands, 1535-1700," in *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism, 1521-1700*, ed. John D. Roth and James M. Stayer (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 318-19, 340. And payments were made in Danzig over the centuries to avoid serving in the military there, as we have seen.

23 Mark Jantzen, "Wealth and Power in the Vistula River Mennonite Community, 1772-1914," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 27 (2009): 93-107.

24 Edmund Cieslak and Czeslaw Biernat, *History of Gdańsk* (Gdańsk: Fundacji Biblioteki Gdańskiej, 1995), 263-5.

25 Franz Harder, "Die Auswanderung aus der Danziger Mennoniten-Gemeinde nach Rußland," *Mitteilungen des Sippenverbandes der Danziger Mennoniten-Familien Epp-enhowen-Zimmerman*, (1937), 102.

26 Klassen, "Barriers to Emigration From Prussia."

27 Klassen, *Mennonites in Early Modern Poland and Prussia*, 67.

28 Jantzen, *Mennonite German Soldiers*, 35-42, Bömelburg, *Zwischen Polnischer Ständegesellschaft und Preussischem Obrigkeitstaat*, 445-61.

29 Geheimer Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz (GStA), Berlin, Hauptabteilung (HA) II (Generaldirektorium), Westpreußen (WP), Materien (M), Titel (Tit.) 109 (Mennonitensachen), no. 1 (Wegen der von den Mennonisten-Gemeinde in Ost-, Westpreußen u Litauen nachgesuchten Privilegii zu ungestörte Fortsetzung ihres Gottesdienstes, Nahrung und Gewerbes, auch Befreiung von der naturellen Werbung und Enrollierung, incl. gebetener Erlassung derer sowohl an die katholische als lutherische Geistlichkeit zu entrichten jurium stolae u[nd] sonstigen Abgabe und Calenden, etc.), vol. 1 (1775-1787), fol. 10, Marienwerder Cabinet to the Mennonite Congregations of Royal Prussia, 14 June 1773.

30 Jantzen, *Mennonite German Soldiers*, 39.

31 GStA, HA II, WP, M, Tit. 109, no. 1, vol. 1, fols. 237-75.

32 *Ibid.*, fols. 280-81.

33 Benjamin H. Unruh, *Die niederländisch-niederdeutschen Hintergründe der mennonitischen Ostwanderungen im 16., 18., und 19. Jahrhundert* (Karlsruhe: Selbstverlag, 1955), 211-2. Given the common recurrence of names among Mennonites and the uncertainty of spellings, it is possible that these three are not the same three evicted and/or that the other two evicted showed up in Chortitza under a variant spelling.

34 Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 238-65, Jantzen, *Mennonite German Soldiers*, 35-42.

35 Jantzen, *Mennonite German Soldiers*, 50-59, the text of the edict is in *ibid.*, 256-60.

36 D. H. Epp, *Die Chortitzer Mennoniten*, 2nd ed. (Steinbach, Manitoba: Delbert Plett, 1984), 10-25.

37 Hildebrand, *From Danzig to Russia*, 16. The copy reproduced here is from the Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, KS, SA.II.55.

38 Epp, *Die Chortitzer Mennoniten*, 29-37, Mannhardt, *Danzig Mennonite Church*, 143-46, Hildebrand, *From Danzig to Russia*, 16-20. The full English text of the flyers distributed on New Year's Day, 1788, is in *ibid.*, 16-17.

39 Leonhard Sudermann, *Eine Deputationsreise von Rußland nach Amerika* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonitische Verlagshandlung, 1897).

The 1789 Mennonite Migration that should not have happened

John J. Friesen, Winnipeg

I was asked to speak about the Mennonite migration to Russia, especially focusing on the "ins and outs" in getting the migration underway, and on the challenges of settling the Chortitza colony in New Russia. This afternoon, Mark Janzen will discuss the conditions in Poland, Prussia and Danzig prior to the Mennonite emigration to Russia.

Before we launch into the migration story itself, it may be helpful to step back and look at the big picture in order to note the significance of the Mennonite migration to Russia 225 years ago.

The first observation we can make is that the migration to Russia set the stage for an explosion of Mennonite population.



John Friesen speaking at the 225 Anniversary Event. Photo Credit: Gladys Terichow

Up to 1789, the Mennonite population in Poland/Prussia region had hovered around twelve to fifteen thousand people. After the migration to Russia, where Mennonites lived in separately administered colonies, and in a setting where acculturation into the host society was not attractive, the Mennonite population increased rapidly, and soon surpassed that in their homeland. By the time of the Russian Revolution in 1917, the population in Russia numbered more than 100,000, even though about 17,000 had emigrated in the 1870s. Throughout that whole time, and even by the time of World War II, the number of Mennonites in Danzig, Poland and Prussia still totaled only about 15,000.

The migration to Russia set the stage for a Mennonite “Wanderlust.” Today we have the image of Mennonites as people who migrate from country to country. That was not the image in 1789. At that time the Dutch, Flemish and German Mennonite migrants who had settled in Poland along the Vistula and Nogat River valleys in the sixteenth century, had lived there for about ten generations. The image of Mennonites being international migrants, moving from country to country, creating an international village, as Royden Loewen has called it, has happened since the migration to Russia, and after Mennonites from Russia began to move to North America.

Maybe this is enough to make the point that the migration to Russia had a profound impact upon the subsequent worldwide Mennonite story. And yet, when we look at the obstacles and difficulties encountered, the migration to Russia in 1789 should likely not have happened.

Let me briefly set the context for why Mennonites wanted to migrate at all. A good place to begin is the first partition of Poland in 1772. During the 18th century, Poland’s government became increasingly weak and dysfunctional, and constantly subject to interference and control from Russia. In 1772 Russia, Austria and Prussia decided to each help themselves to portions of Poland. Prussia thus regained control of the ancient province of West Prussia, renamed Royal Prussia by the Poles, and now West Prussia again. The city state of Danzig, with its surrounding villages, however remained semi-independent, but under Polish over lordship. Thus the majority of Mennonites along the Vistula and Nogat Rivers lived under Prussian jurisdiction after 1772, with a sizeable number still living in the city state of Danzig on farms or engaged in businesses or crafts.

Discussion of Prussia’s new laws about military recruitment, and restrictions on the purchase of land, I will leave for the session this afternoon by Mark Jantzen.

Suffice it to say, that these changes resulted in Mennonites becoming deeply concerned about their future in the expanding state of Prussia. This concern was deepened in 1786 when Frederick II died, and his son, Frederick William II more strictly enforced the laws against Mennonites’ purchasing additional land. The number of poor and landless families, already a problem, was clearly going to increase. Mennonites looked around for options. If the Prussian laws could not be changed, would Mennonites have to migrate to a new country?

The option that presented itself was to move to Russia. Catherine the Great, Russia’s ruler since 1762, had continued Russia’s push southward, taking over large portions of territory from the Ottoman Empire, and forming a region named New Russia. New Russia included the southern part of present day Ukraine, from the Caspian Sea to the Bug River, including Crimea, was organized almost as a separate principality. Catherine appointed Grigorii Potemkin, a one-time lover, and court favourite of Catherine’s, to administer this new domain. To open this land for settled agriculture, Catherine in the early 1780s forced the Zaporozhye Cossacks, whose centre was on the Dniepr River at the Isle of Chortitza, to relocate to the Kuban region in the Caucasus.

In 1762, the first year of her rule, Catherine issued a Manifesto inviting immigrants to New Russia. In the year following, she issued a revised Manifesto, with more specifics, which “promised new immigrants and their descendants a wide range of rights and privileges including grants of land and



Catherine the Great and Gregorii Potemkin were key figures in the migration of Mennonites to Russia in the 18th Century. Image Credit: Wikipedia Commons. Painting of Catherine the Great is by J.B. Lampi. The painter of Gregorii Potemkin is unknown.



A 1790 map of the Chortitza area. This map dates to the time of arrival of the first Mennonites that settled in Imperial Russia. Source: 1790 General Survey Plan Ekaterinoslav Province, 5. Ekaterinoslav County. <http://book-old.ru/BookLibrary>. The copy used here is from *Mennonitische Geschichte und Ahnenforschung*, <http://chort.square7.ch/Buch/Ch1790.pdf>

money, tax exemptions, freedom of religion, and exemption from military service.”¹

Potemkin, as administrator of New Russia, attempted to get settlers for this large region. He advertised and recruited vigorously. Soon various German and other European states closed their borders to his recruiters to prevent their residents from leaving. Those settlers who did follow his invitation to come to Russia, founded settlements most of which failed. So, Russia was eagerly looking for settlers who might be able to succeed as farmers.

About the same time, the Russian government was informed that Mennonites in the Danzig area might be looking for new settlement possibilities, and when Georg Trappe offered to contact the Mennonites, this offer was eagerly taken up. Trappe said he knew Mennonites. He had lived in the Danzig area at one time and spoke their language, Low German.

So in 1786, Georg Trappe came to the Danzig area. He met with *Ältester* Peter Epp from the Danzig Mennonite Church, and with other men, including Jacob Hoepfner. This led to a meeting between Mennonites and the Russian Consul General in Danzig. Since the Mennonites at this meeting seemed interested in a move to Russia, but wanted definite assurances from the Russian government on a number of items, Trappe suggested that Mennonites select two or three delegates to inspect the lands in New Russia and negotiate terms of immigration. The Consul General in Danzig thought this was a

good idea, and suggested Hoepfner as one of the delegates, since he already knew him, and that two more be selected.

An immediate problem was who would select and authorize the delegates. No Mennonites in the Prussian areas could be involved, because Prussia had forbidden Russian recruiters to operate in its territory. Peter Hildebrand, in his later recollection of these events, says that Mennonites in Danzig also held back in their support of the migration, because of the envy of Danzig residents.”² So in the end, 60 individual Mennonites from the Danzig region signed for the three delegates to go to Russia to inspect the land and meet with government officials. The three delegates selected were Jacob Hoepfner, Johann Bartsch, and Jacob von Kampen. The prospect of a long trip into unknown territory, with great personal danger, was daunting. Many Mennonites thought the trip was foolhardy. Before they departed, von Kampen withdrew, giving the official reason that he was ill.

The decision was that since Tzarina Catherine would be going to the Crimea in the spring of 1787, the delegates, accompanied by Trappe, would meet her in south Russia. So in October 1786, Hoepfner and Bartsch left Danzig to go to Riga, and overwintered in Dubrovna on the Dvina River. In spring they left for the southern Ukraine, where they inspected various parcels of land, finally selecting fertile land at Berislav, close to the Black Sea. On May 13, 1787 at Kremenchug, they had the privilege of presenting their petition to Catherine. The

petition included: 65 desiatini of arable land for each family, access to pasture land, hay and timber, rights to fishing grounds, permission to establish craft industries and mills, freedom of faith, the right not to swear oaths, and exemption from military service for all Mennonites and their descendants. They also requested loans of money, building materials, tax concessions, and that Trappe be director of their settlement. Looking to the future, they requested that land be set aside in the Crimea for future Mennonite settlements.

Since these requests largely fell within the terms advertised by Russia, they were assured they would have no trouble gaining their acceptance. But the delegates wanted the Russian government's official guarantee. They were invited to accompany Catherine's entourage to the Crimea, and then travelled to Petersburg to get official assurance of these terms. Here they waited for many months until they finally got an audience with the Crown Prince Paul, later Tzar Paul I, and received their written assurances. Thus in the fall of 1787, after almost a year's absence, the two delegates after travelling to Warsaw to inform the Polish King of their emigration plans, since Danzig was under the jurisdiction of the Polish crown, arrived in Danzig where they reported to the Russian Consul and the Mennonite community.

Mennonites were overjoyed to see Hoepfner and Bartsch, since many believed they would never return. Plans for emigration began almost immediately. Even before the delegates returned, six families living in Prussia, sold their land, moved to Danzig and received emigration papers. They had already arrived in Riga when Hoepfner and Bartsch came through Riga on their return from Russia. Upon the delegates return to Danzig, the Russian Consul General invited people to meet with him on January 19, 1788 if they wanted to emigrate. In March, 1788, a group of 50 people left Danzig, going over the Frisches Haff by horse and sleigh, on their way to Riga. From Riga they went to Dubrovna, to overwinter on an estate owned by Trappe. By the fall a total of 228 families had arrived in Dubrovna.

It appears that the most important motivation for migrating was the lack of land. The result was that the majority of emigrants were landless people, thus relatively poor. Also, the churches could not agree on sending a minister with this group of 228 families. So, during their stay in Dubrovna, regular church services could not be held, so the group asked some members to read sermons by J. Kroeker, and to lead in singing some hymns. When a dozen young couples asked to be married, there was no ordained minister to perform the ceremony. The leaders wrote to the churches in Danzig asking that an Ältester, preferably Epp, be sent to Dubrovna, to ordain ministers. Epp was too old, finally reluctantly agreed to go, and died before he actually left.

In the ensuing correspondence, the council of Ältesten in Danzig area recommended that the people in Dubrovna meet under the leadership of Hoepfner and one other person, and elect people from their midst who would be suitable to be ministers. So the group in Dubrovna elected a list of six, with two having by far the most votes. They sent the names and their respective votes to Prussia. The Prussian Ältesten in a meeting, selected the two with the highest votes, and by lot chose two from the ones with less votes. One of them was Bernhard Penner, who received few votes. Those four were confirmed as ministers by return mail. The desire of the 228 families was that they form one congregation, not two, Flemish

and Frisian. However, since the four chosen by the Ältesten were all Flemish, the Frisians felt excluded from leadership, and this created problems later.

In spring the trek to Berislav began. Those with belongings sent them by crates on barges down the Dniepr, and those who had fewer possessions went by wagons. The wagon route was arduous, and difficult. When they arrived at Kremenchug, they were told by Potemkin there was a change of plans. Instead of getting land at Berislav, they would receive land at Alexandrovsk, now Zaporozhye. The reason given was that the area around Berislav was not safe. The real reason was likely that Potemkin owned the land around Alexandrovsk, and wanted to fill his own land with settlers, and get the revenue this would provide.

The settlers were disappointed at this change in location. Alexandrovsk was further from the Black Sea, the markets were more distant, the temperature was colder, rainfall was less, and the land was of poorer quality. Appeals to Potemkin were fruitless.

A large portion of the supplies sent down the river in barges got wet, or were damaged, or were stolen, and the boxes filled with stones. Thus, many did not get the supplies they had brought with them. When the lumber promised by the government arrived for building their barns and homes, much of it was stolen enroute, or at the docks, or was of such poor quality that it could hardly be used. The money that was promised was slow in coming, and given to them in such small installments that it was practically useless. Many had their horses stolen. Trappe, whom the Mennonites had requested to be their Director, was replaced upon arrival with Jean von Essen, an impoverished Major, as Peter Hildebrand describes him, whose main aim was to fill his pockets.³ The people were impoverished, discouraged, and felt betrayed.

In the summer of 1789 villages began to be laid out. Chor-titza was the central village. Others rented facilities in Alexandrovsk in the fall and winter of 1789, called a Fortress, and refused to start building, hoping for a change in location. People grumbled, complained and accused the delegates Hoepfner and Bartsch of being to blame for these terrible conditions.

When Hoepfner and Bartsch each built a house for themselves, they were accused of using colony money for personal gain, even though all settlers knew that Hoepfner and Bartsch, as the official delegates, had been promised special privileges by the Russian government. False accusations were made against the two delegates, accusations which were supported by the new director, Baron Johann von Brackel.⁴ He was opposed to the delegates, as Hildebrand says, because the delegates would not pay him bribes.

Eventually both delegates, Hoepfner and Bartsch, were excommunicated by the Flemish church, and accusations against them brought to the Russian government. Bartsch apologized and was reinstated in the church, but Hoepfner's apology was not accepted. Hoepfner was eventually fined, his property sold to pay the fine, and he was imprisoned for a year. He was released in 1802 when he was pardoned by the new Tzar after Paul I's assassination. When Hoepfner was released he joined the Frisian Church. Eventually he became quite well-to-do, but a bitter legacy had been built. In the process of these controversies, the leadership of the Chor-titza colony, as well as the safe keeping of the official records, passed from the delegates to the church leaders.

Hanging over the colony was the matter of church leadership. The four ministers had been confirmed by letter in Dubrovna. One of the four, Bernhard Penner, was elected *Ältester*, even though earlier in Dubrovna he had had the least number of votes in the election of ministers. But he was still not properly ordained. He asked for an assistant. Johann Wiebe, the nephew of Gerhard Wiebe, *Ältester* of the Elbing-Ellerwald Mennonite Church, but Wiebe declined because he felt too young and unprepared. Two years later, in 1791, after Penner had died, Johann Wiebe was elected again, and this time he accepted on the condition he have an assistant. David Epp was elected as assistant.

The conflicts regarding delegates and church leadership, however, continued, so Wiebe went to Prussia in 1793 to ask that someone be sent to help bring order into the community. *Ältester* Cornelius Regier from Heubuden and minister Cornelius Warkentin of Rosenort came. They settled some of the conflicts, dismissed charges against some people, and properly ordained the Johann Wiebe and David Epp in the Flemish Church, and Cornelius Froese as *Ältester* of the Frisian Church.

The Frisian group, many of whom settled the villages of Kronsweide, Einlage, and Insel Chortitza, were dissatisfied with the leadership of the Flemish, and founded a separate church, with Cornelius Froese and David Schott, or Schuetz, as ministers. Both had been on the list of nominees in Dubrovna, but passed over when the selection was made by the ministers in Prussia. In 1792, Froese was elected *Ältester* of the Frisian Church, and ordained, as mentioned above, by *Ältester* Cornelius Regier from Prussia.

In the years 1793-96, after the second partition of Poland when Danzig itself came under Prussian rule, about 118

families of new immigrants arrived, many of whom were Frisian. The Frisians established the village of Schoenwiese, just outside the city of Alexandrovsk, as well as the village of Krongarten. By then about a quarter of the Mennonite population of the Chortitza settlement was Frisian. The Prussian Frisian-Flemish division was thus solidly established in Russia.

In 1800, the church leaders of the Chortitzer settlement negotiated a new *Privilegium*, which Tzar Paul I (1796-1801), who became Tzar when Catherine died, signed into law. This provided Mennonites in Russia with their legal framework until the reforms of the 1870s.

Mennonites who moved to Russia faced many difficulties, any one of which could have sunk the venture. As I said at the beginning, given all the difficulties encountered, this was a venture that probably should not have succeeded. But the people persisted, and the migration was finally successful. As they constructed a new community, they brought with them many of the old ways from Prussia/Poland. However, they entered a new world, a new set of conditions and legal requirements, which would shape quite a new character, a character that would become uniquely Russian Mennonite. Russian Mennonites have made a profound contribution to the larger Mennonite story, the results of which are still evident today.

Endnotes

- 1 James Urry, *None But Saints: The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia, 1789-1889* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1989), 50
- 2 Peter Hildebrand, *From Danzig to Russia. The First Emigration of Mennonites from the Danzig Region to Southern Russia*, trans. Walter E. Toews with Adolf Ens (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 2000), 3.
- 3 Hildebrand, 26.
- 4 Hildebrand, 38.

Articles

Mennonite Life under the Warm Sun of South America

Hans Werner, Winnipeg, Manitoba

To a northerner, Bolivia and Belize have similar climates, although the rhythm of when it is dry and when rainy, differs. In the colonies south and east of the city of Santa Cruz, Bolivia the wettest months are November to February, while in Belize the most rainfall occurs between June and November. Both are warm year round. In Belize the monthly average daily high temperature is always between 30 and 34, while in Bolivia it is between 24 and 30.

In January and February of 2015, I was able to escape the cold of Manitoba to explore Mennonite life in Bolivia and Belize. Some of the most conservative groups on the Dutch-North German spectrum are found in these two countries. With the possible exception of the taxi drivers that bring them to town and city, most Bolivianos or Belizeans are not sure where the conservative Mennonites came from, do not know whether they are Christian or something else, and have little interaction with them outside of daily commerce.

Belize

We left Winnipeg on January 12th when the temperature was -27 and arrived in Belize City the next day when it was +27. We drove up to the town of Orange Walk in northern Belize and checked into a delightful small hotel that would be our home for the next two weeks. Orlando and Cindy, owners of the Hotel de la Fuente proved to be wonderful hosts and we enjoyed our breakfasts and conversations with them immensely. For us, Belize had the advantage of being an English speaking country, so we could interact freely with the non-Mennonite local population.

The first Mennonites to arrive in Belize stepped off the boat on the Hondo River in 1958 to begin a new life on lands chosen by their delegates from Mexico. The first to come were members of the Old Colony from Mexico who had chosen to settle the hilly area of Blue Creek adjacent to the Mexican border. The heat of tropical British Honduras, as it was then, and hilly



The road leading up to Blue Creek. When Mennonites from Mexico arrived here in the 1950s they found it difficult to make the climb up to the land they had purchased in the hills with their horses. Photo Credit: Hans Werner.

terrain immediately created problems for a way of life based on travel by horse and buggy. These challenges gave rise to a second settlement closer to the town of Orange Walk on land that bordered on the New River. On one corner of the land there had been a boat building enterprise at one time, which gave the colony its name of Shipyard. This second settlement was established on 17,083 acres of fairly level ground.¹ The Old Colony migrants who had chosen Blue Creek gradually migrated to Shipyard or Bolivia while those who remained adopted vehicles and drifted away from the Old Colony to the *Kleine Gemeinde* or Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference (EMMC). While Blue Creek's Mennonites became modern, Shipyard remained a conservative Mennonite colony for the most part.²

Large families and a strong desire to remain an agricultural community has meant the pressure to find land has been a constant reality of conservative Mennonite life in Belize. Shipyard purchased additional land adjacent to the colony in 1970 and then established daughter colonies: Little Belize in 1978 and Indian Creek in 1989. The colony leased additional land adjacent to the colony in 1997 and 1998. The purchase of Little Belize involved 23,687 acres of land north west of Orange Walk, a larger area than the original colony. At the time of our visit another daughter colony, Neuland was being settled. To establish Neuland, 16,000 acres were purchased in 2011 and by the time of our visit some 80 families were living in the new colony.³

At the same time as Old Colony Mennonites chose land in the Orange Walk District of Northern Belize, *Kleine Gemeinde* delegates from the Quellen Colony in Mexico chose land in the Cayo district in southern Belize to establish the colony of Spanish Lookout. Spanish Lookout has also become a modern Mennonite community; in fact it takes great pride in how modern and progressive it has become. The subtitle of its 50th



The sign that greets visitors arriving in Spanish Lookout, proclaiming the settlement to be an agricultural settlement. Spanish Lookout thinks of itself as a modern and progressive community in Belize. Photo Credit: Hans Werner.

anniversary history book is "Progress in Action," a tourist website boasts that it is "Belize's most modern Mennonite community," and its prominent welcome sign in German and English asserts its prominence as a modern agricultural community.⁴ Not far away from Spanish Lookout are some of the most conservative Mennonites in Central and South America. The Upper Barton Creek community is a combination of people from Shipyard, Spanish Lookout, and Mennonites of Swiss origin from Pennsylvania. I had an engaging conversation with a woman from Upper Barton Creek in a Spanish Lookout bookstore whose mother was of Dutch-North German background while her father was a Swiss Mennonite. An American who



A horse taking a break in the shade while the Barton Creek couple who came with it spend some time in a Spanish Lookout bookstore. The bonnet left on the seat points to the Swiss-Russian Mennonite mixture of Barton Creek people. Photo Credit: Hans Werner

lived near the Upper Barton Creek community for nine years had this to say about the Barton Crikkers (as they are called in Low German):

I meet a lot of environmentally conscious young people here.... People wanting to live “green” and “sustainably” but the 500 or so Mennonites here in my area are the real deal. They are truly old school and it is not a passing fad. I suspect all of them put together generate the carbon footprint of an 8-year-old boy in the suburbs of North America. I admire many things about the people in this community and the fact that they are committed to a lifestyle that takes little and gives much is something we can all learn from. I don’t know that I could live that life but I have great respect for those that do and I see things in the way they live their lives that make me want to be a better man.⁵

Lower Barton Creek is also a very conservative Mennonite community whose members were primarily drawn from Shipyard. Both Barton Creek communities are distinct from other conservative colonies in that they have no machinery powered with anything other than horses, and their men wear beards. The Barton Creek colonies have spawned a number of daughter colonies. When we visited Lower Barton Creek a large truck blocked our way into the colony and the driver indicated that he was there to move the belongings of families that were relocating to Green Hills. Green Hills, Springfield, Pine Hill, Richmond Hill and Pilgrimage Valley are conservative daughter colonies that have emanated from the Barton Creek communities.⁶



The road to Lower Barton Creek offers a sense of how its people try to live away from the world’s attractions. Photo Credit: Hans Werner

Mennonites in Belize are significant to the economy of the country. They dominate commercial poultry production and take credit for having transformed the country from being a net importer of chicken to self-sufficiency, and it now boasts one of the highest rates of per capita consumption of poultry and eggs in the Western Hemisphere.⁷ Mennonites also produce rice, soybeans, corn, edible beans, sorghum, and operate the only dairy in the country. The shortage of land has meant that many Mennonites are involved in metal and furniture fabrication, wage labour, and a variety of other industries and services. One young man I visited in Little Belize believed as much as fifty percent of household income on their colony could come from sources other than the agricultural production of their home farm.

By 2010 the Belize census indicated there were 11,574 ethnic Mennonites in Belize, comprising 3.6 percent of the country's population. In addition there were 479 people who indicated their religious affiliation as Mennonite, but who were not of Mennonite ethnic background. Shipyard, Little Belize and Spanish Lookout remain the largest colonies and frequent migrations to Bolivia and some to the Yucatan in Mexico have held the rate of growth of Mennonites in Belize in check.

Table 1.
Population of Selected Mennonite Colonies in Belize, 2010.⁸

Colony	Population	Male	Female	Households	Average Size
Little Belize	2650	1346	1304	427	6.2
Indian Creek	904	468	436	150	6.0
Shipyard	3345	1706	1639	621	5.4
Lower Barton Creek	193	110	83	30	6.4
Spanish Lookout	2253	1151	1102	482	4.7
Blue Creek	407	217	190	111	3.7

We took the overnight Mexican ADO bus from Orange Walk to Cancun Airport and spent the weekend in the very commercial and built up Hotel Zone that attracts the tourists

from North America and increasingly other areas of South America. From Cancun we flew to Lima and then Cusco, Peru to tour the famous Inca ruins at Machu Picchu. The climate of the higher altitudes of the Andes meant more layers of clothing were the order of the day. It is quite an experience to imagine the civilization of the Incas when you look down on and wander among the ruins of the city high in the mountains.

Bolivia

After our tourist adventures in Cancun and Peru we flew to Santa Cruz, Bolivia, arriving there at 2:00 am and grateful for the English speaking driver and ride that our apartment manager had arranged for us. We had rented an apartment close to the city's main plaza and within a short walk of 6 de Agosto Street where Mennonites from all over Bolivia come to catch up on the latest news, connect with family, and do their business. The apartment was also a short walk from Centro Menno, the office for MCC's Low German program in Bolivia.

Sieghart Schartner characterizes Bolivia as the haven for conservative Mennonites fleeing the modern world.⁹ Although not all Mennonites in Bolivia are equally conservative, the largest number ride horses and buggies, wear bib overalls and dark coloured pleated dresses, and cover their heads with white cowboy and wide brimmed straw hats. They do not connect to the electrical grid, but have generators and propane appliances to provide power for basic farm needs and household uses. Bicycles, watches, cell phones, and other technologies should not be owned and while they use modern farm equipment with rubber tires, tractors are steel wheeled. They also do not



A view of the Inca ruins at Macchu Picchu, an iconic place to visit. Photo Credit: Hans Werner.



6 de Agosto Street in Santa Cruz, Bolivia where Mennonite from all over Bolivia gather to do their business and catch up on their extended families and former neighbours. Photo Credit: Hans Werner

drive automobiles or pickup trucks, although they make use of taxis extensively.

The first Mennonites to arrive in Bolivia came from Paraguay in 1954. These early arrivals left the Fernheim Colony in Paraguay in search of a better climate. They established the colony of Tres Palmas, one of a number of Bolivian colonies that have disbanded for various reasons. The original settlers were soon joined by other families who, in addition to seeking a better climate also wanted to escape modernizing trends in the Menno Colony. They established the Canadiense I colony four kilometers from Tres Palmas. The two colonies were located on the alluvial plain about 25 kilometers northeast of Santa Cruz,¹⁰ Bolivia's largest and fastest growing city, in the area that would become the core area of Mennonite settlement. These eastern lowlands, or Oriente, have sandy soils able to sustain both crop and animal agriculture.

Since the 1980s colonies have also been established in the wetter areas in the Department of Beni to the North and in the much drier areas near Charagua and Yacuiba in the south. Here the Oriente gives way to the Gran Chaco, the same landscape as that of the Mennonite settlements in Paraguay.

Our days in Bolivia were divided up into visits with Mennonites on 6 de Agosto Street, research and writing, visits to colonies and dropping in to visit with the Leonel Elias, the Interim Director for the MCC Bolivia Low German program. There we also visited with Mennonites who dropped in to pick up the *Mennonitische Post*.

Visits on 6 de Agosto Street and in the colonies highlight the vastness of the conservative Mennonite diaspora. One morning on 6 de Agosto I visited with two Hildebrand brothers

one from the Riva Palacios Colony, near Santa Cruz, the other from Charagua, 560 kilometers to the south. They casually mentioned an uncle who was a Barton Crikker in Belize, while a relative not wearing overalls who was in Bolivia for a visit came to chat. He now lived in Grande Prairie, Alberta and was working in the oil fields. I also met a couple from Steinbach, Manitoba who were on a visit to family in Bolivia. In Santa Rita, a fellow on a buggy whom I asked for directions, had lived in Winkler, Manitoba for a year and his parents still lived there. He had moved back to Bolivia because he had a "Schatz" here, as he put it. After they were married, they had wanted to move to Canada but there were problems with "the papers." Sometimes people had siblings in Canada, but they were not sure where. And so it goes, families are spread throughout the Americas, sometimes too far away to ever see in person.

It is also astounding how the Mennonite presence in Bolivia has mushroomed. The changes in the number of colonies and internal migrations between them makes keeping track almost impossible. The latest of David Enns's periodic maps and map books showed 75 colonies and communities as of 2013.¹²

Not unlike their counterparts in Belize, Mennonites in Bolivia have become an important

Table 2.
Mennonite Population in Bolivia

Year	Population ¹¹
1997	33089
2000	38236
2003	42445
2007	49813
2010	61065

part of the Bolivian economy. The main settlement east of Santa Cruz is located on soils that one source claims “appear to have the highest potential for sustainable agriculture”¹³ in the Amazon basin. Although the majority of Bolivian colonies resist the adoption of certain technologies, they are credited with bringing the production of soybeans to Bolivia and adopting the latest herbicide-tolerant varieties.¹⁴

Table 3.
Hectares Cleared in Mennonite Colonies in Bolivia

Year	Hectares Cleared ¹⁵	Colonies ¹⁶
1986	22501	15
1988	24649	16
1990	52060	17
1992	89954	20
1994	147914	22
1996	223965	33
1998	188485	42

The Mennonite presence in Bolivia is not without tensions. Evo Morales, Bolivia’s first indigenous leader, has championed many policies that if rigidly implemented would threaten Colony life as Mennonites know it. The government has espoused many environmental policies that would restrict Mennonite land clearing, while threatening land reform that would negate Mennonite land purchases going back 15 to 20 years.¹⁷ Many of these measures have remained threats only and while land clearing has drawn back from its peak in the mid-1990s, it has not stopped.

In both Bolivia and Belize one cannot help but be amazed at how Mennonites have created an agricultural landscape in the midst of the jungle. As in so many other ways they do not subscribe to values that have become more prevalent in the North. We have become much more sensitive to the influence development has on the creation we have inherited from our forebears. It is unclear how they will adapt colony life when clearing more land to grow soybeans is no longer possible.

Endnotes

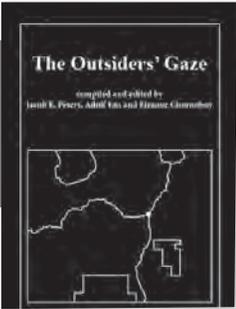
- 1 Isaac Rempel, “Map of Shipyard Colony”, Shipyard Colony, October 1999.
- 2 In recent years a small group of Shipyard Old Colony Mennonites have become members of more evangelical groups. For an analysis of this development, see Carel Roessingh and Tanja Plasil, “From Collective Body to Individual Mind: Religious Change in an Old Colony Mennonite Community in Belize”, *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 24 (2006): 55-72.
- 3 Rempel, “Map of Indian Creek”, “Map of Little Belize” and “Map of Neuland.”
- 4 Book Committee, *Spanish Lookout Since 1958: Progress in Action*, (Spanish Lookout, Cayo, Belize, 2008).
- 5 Jim Britt, “Seriously Old School,” BelizeBritts Blog, <https://belzebritts.wordpress.com/2011/11/10/seriously-old-school/>
- 6 Carel Roessingh, “Mennonite Communities in Belize,” *International Journal of Business and Globalization* 1(1) (2007): 116.
- 7 Belize Poultry Association, <http://www.belizepoultry.com/AboutBPA/History.aspx>. In 2015 all the members of the Board of the Association had Mennonite last names.
- 8 *Belize, 2010 Census, Population Section*, The Statistical Institute of Belize.
- 9 Sieghard Schartner and Sylvia Schartner, *Bolivien: Zufluchtsort der konservativen Mennoniten* (Santa Cruz, by the author, 2009).
- 10 Schartner, 55-60.
- 11 The 1997 to 2007 numbers are from Schartner, 48-49. The 2010 numbers tabulated by Isbrand Hiebert, unpublished.
- 12 David Enns, “Die 75 Mennoniten Kolonien in Bolivien (bis June 2013),” Santa Cruz, 2013.
- 13 Susanna B. Hecht, “Soybeans, Development and Conservation on the Amazon Frontier,” *Development and Change* 36(2) (2005): 378.
- 14 Hecht, 378.
- 15 Hecht, 380.
- 16 Schartner, 48-49.
- 17 *Mennonite World Review*, October 13, 2014.

The Outsiders' Gaze:
Life and Labour on the Mennonite West Reserve,
1874-1922

200 pages of

INTERESTING COMMENTARY

on the Mennonites by
travellers, government
officials, and others.



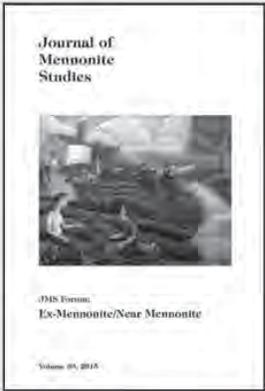
Published by the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society
\$30.00

New Issue
Journal of Mennonite Studies

Theme: Ex-Mennonite/Near Mennonite

- A Mennonite-Muslim
- Not an Atheist by Choice
- A Prairie Prosperity Gospel
- Ex-Converts & Missions
- Mystics & Mennonites
- Anglican-Mennonites
- Post-Anabaptist Thinkers

Plus other new research &
21 book reviews of the
best of 2014!



To subscribe, email: r.loewen@uwinnipeg.ca
Cost: \$28/year

Family History

The Abraham P. Reimer Family: Blumenort, Lanigan, Kansas

Ron and Judy Plett, Lloydminster, Alberta

Abraham P. Reimer was born to his parents Abraham R. Reimer and Helena Poetger in 1862 in the Village of Kleefeld, in Molotschna, Ukraine (referred to as Russia at the time). The village of Kleefeld was the second largest village in Molotschna; after Alexanderkrone which was the next village immediately east of Kleefeld. Alexanderkrone and Kleefeld were only one or two miles apart. In 2012 there was still a large brick windmill (Flourmill) in the village of Alexanderkrone, built by the Mennonites in late 1800's. The wooden support beams for the top drive-works had been struck by lightning and damaged by fire. The large wooden wind blades had burned. Some of the large gears and the huge stone flour grinding wheels had fallen to the ground level inside the Mill. The 60 to 80 foot high brick structure was otherwise still in sound condition. The modern day Ukrainian/Russian name of the village of Alexanderkrone is Grushevka.

As a young boy, Abraham P. Reimer's family moved several times. He was born in 1862 in Kleefeld, then in 1865 they moved to Markuslandt, not many miles east of the current city of Zaporoshe, Ukraine where they settled for a very short while, in the village of Friedrichstal. Almost immediately (between 1866 and 1867) they moved again, this time to Borosenko. Borosenko was started in 1865. It was a Kleine Gemeinde settlement where they owned the land.

Off to North America

In 1874, when Abraham was twelve years old, his family joined the emigration movement and moved to Manitoba, where they settled in Blumenort, five miles north of Steinbach. In the same year, young Abraham P. Reimer attended school with teacher Cornelius P. Friesen and learned the art of *Schön-schreiben* (fanciful art-like writing) – Four examples of his work are printed in *Preservings*, June 1995 Issue on pages 55 and 56.

Baptism and Marriage

Abraham P. Reimer was baptized upon confession of his faith on February 22, 1882, by Bishop Abraham L. Friesen of Jansen, Nebraska and became a member of the Kleine Gemeinde church. Just over a month later, on March 29, 1882, he married Anna Brandt (1860-1910), daughter of Heinrich R. Brandt (1838-1909) from the neighboring village of Steinbach, Manitoba. For the first year after their marriage, Abraham and Anna made their home with his in-laws, who owned Wirtschaft #4 in the village of Steinbach.

The move to Steinbach was interesting in that Abraham's father was a large scale farmer and blacksmith in Blumenort with sufficient means to make substantial loans to his neighbors, including some Clearspring farmers. All of Abraham's brothers remained in Blumenort, including Klaas P. Reimer,



The ruins of the former Mennonite-owned flour mill in Grushevka, the former Alexanderkrone in the Molotschna Colony. Photo Credit: Ron Plett.

who also became a large scale farm operator in his day. Abraham's help was apparently badly needed in the Heinrich Brandt operation in Steinbach, as Anna's oldest brother was only 15 years old and her other brothers were much younger. Because there were two Abraham Reimer's in Steinbach of approximately the same age, Abraham P. Reimer acquired the nickname "Brandt" Reimer to distinguish him from his cousin Abraham W. Reimer. In May 1883 Abraham and Anna's first and only son Abraham B., my father, was born.

Farming in Steinbach

In 1883 Abraham and Anna started farming on their own and built a set of buildings on the west side of Main Street in Steinbach on the "Kattstelle" for Wirtschaft # 6 previously owned by Cornelius P. Goosen. Goosen sold half of his Wirtschaft in 1882 or 1883 and it appears it was bought by Abraham P. Reimer.

Brandt Reimer immediately built a new set of buildings on the west side of the street, which were built in the traditional style with house and barn under one roof. It was built so well that when the building was demolished in 1940 much of the lumber could be reused.¹ These buildings were insured for \$400 and stood where the R.M. of Hanover offices used to be located – today part of the Steinbach Dodge & Fiat dealership parking lot on Main Street in Steinbach, Manitoba.² These buildings are clearly visible on a photograph of Steinbach's Main Street taken in about 1900.³ Later these buildings were occupied by August Schulz, a local labourer. By 1884 Abraham P. Reimer's assessment was \$625, consisting of 20 acres cultivated land, 200 acres pasture, a house at \$400, 2 horses, 3 oxen, 2, cows and a yearling.

Great Grandma Anna's Illness

In 1884, Anna had a traumatic accident which was to seriously alter her life. She was sitting with her one year old son in her arms and had to rise to reach for something. In the meantime her chair was taken away without her noticing. When she sat back down she flopped down on the floor. This caused her to become very ill. Prior to this accident Anna had always been a healthy woman.

Ann was mostly bed-ridden after the accident and in 1886 the family decided to seek more outside help. They heard of a Doctor (or *Trajchtmoaka*, Low German name for a chiropractor) by the name of Mrs. Thiessen in the West Reserve town of Winkler who might be able to help.⁴

Brandt Reimer loaded his wife onto a wagon, bed and all and they were off on their anxious journey. It was too far to get there in one day and as the sun was sinking in the west he started to look for a farm house where they could get accommodation for the night. Finally, he saw a house that looked promising because it was not overly pretentious; it looked as if humble people lived there. He took the horses and wagon into the yard and inquired if they had room for them for the night. "No Way!" was the answer; they would have none of that.

By this time of the evening it was too late to be choosy. The next farm was a very up-to-date, well-to-do looking place. Nevertheless, Brandt Reimer pulled in and asked for accommodations. Well, these people had a different attitude and in fact, they could not do enough to make things pleasant for the Reimer's. Subsequently, Brandt Reimer always said, "we cannot judge people by what we see outwardly". After many weeks

of treatments, Anna Reimer felt so good that she sat upright on the return journey back to Steinbach. This they regretted later as she subsequently had a setback which caused her to be a sickly lady for the remainder of her days (of 24 more years).

In 1888 the family was established enough to have a maid to help Anna with the household chores. By this time she was also pregnant with her second child, daughter Anna (Mrs K.P.L.Reimer). Grandfather Abraham F. Reimer recorded that on September 26th, "Brandt" Reimer was at the young Cornelius Friesen's. He wanted a maid from them but he did not get one. Their other maid had left on Sunday. His wife is in the (sick) bed again. They are busily threshing in Steinbach."

Daughter Anna was born on December 12, 1888 weighing only two pounds, which seems very light, but is the number in the original source. Evidently some of the neighbour ladies came over to help look after the baby (and mother). When Brandt Reimer overheard them talking and saying that "it would be a good thing if the baby would die", he sent the women packing. Brandt Reimer dearly loved the little girl. He must also have realized, given his wife's health that this would likely be her last birth. He decided to look after the baby himself. But, after she had been making a fuss the entire first night his resolve was tested severely. Finally he gave the baby a slap, after which he had no trouble with her.

Farming and Threshing, 1889 – 1896

Brandt Reimer was an aggressive farmer. In addition to his original farm buildings, which he insured for \$400 with an additional \$75 for furniture, he added \$150 of feed and inventory to the fire insurance coverage in 1891. On August 25, 1892 he added insurance for a barn at \$200 and then a further \$50 was added on December 24, 1892.

By 1894 Abraham P. Reimer was in the threshing business himself, operating in partnership with Cornelius P. Kroeker. In that year they purchased a new Case 15/30 steam engine. Somewhere along the way, there was a short period of time when, Peter R. Dueck (later elected Bishop) was a partner to Reimer & Kroeker.



Peter R. Dueck became Abraham P. Reimer's partner in a threshing business. He later became Ältester and purchased his farm when the former moved to Kansas. Photo Credit: Ron Plett

Saskatchewan Beckons

In 1905, A.P. 'Brandt' Reimer's only son Abraham B. Reimer followed the call of the west to free land in Saskatchewan. My Grandfather Abraham B. was only 22 and Grandmother

was 21 years old. They had a two year old daughter and grand-ma was expecting a child who was born within three weeks after they arrived at the Lanigan homestead.

This was near the peak of Great Grandpa's operation in Steinbach, Manitoba and he continued to operate his larger farm without his son's help. By this time their daughter was eighteen and no doubt a considerable help to her Mom and Dad. One wonders why my grandfather would leave the opportunity to take over a large, successful operation to start over in Saskatchewan. In August, 2011 Peter Reimer told us that Abraham B. Reimer went west with great hopes. He also said there occasionally appeared to be some tension between great grandfather and his son. The tension seems to be confirmed by an August 11, 1911 letter from the son to his father where he tells him that he forgives him.

Tragedy strikes and Kansas Calls

On July 27, 1910, "Brandt" Reimer's wife of 28 years, Anna died at the age of 50 yrs. The following year grandfather sold his 320 acre farm on 26-6-6-E to his friend and one time threshing company partner, Bishop Peter R. Dueck. However; he still had considerable other assets, including land, left after this sale. In 1912 Abraham P. Reimer traveled to Kansas to visit family and friends. While in Meade, Kansas, he married for the 2nd time. He married Margaret Sawatzky (1852-1924), widow of Jacob B. Friesen. They planned to settle in Meade, Kansas but first had to go back to Steinbach to take care of greatgrandfather's farming and business operations.

Margaret came from the conservative Kleine Gemeinde community in Meade where they felt it was wrong to have your picture taken. Fortunately we have one photo of her which is believed to have been taken by surprise. When Abraham P. Reimer and his wife Margaret and her youngest daughter Maria (or Mary) Friesen came back to Steinbach, they ended up staying in Manitoba for several years while great grandpa Reimer liquidated his extensive holdings. While in Manitoba Maria (Mary) Friesen met a young man by the name of Abraham L. Reimer at the Blumenort church. When great grandfather Abraham and his new wife Margaret moved to Meade, Kansas in the spring of 1915, young Abraham L. Reimer followed and he and Mary were married in Meade in April 1915.

While living in Steinbach for those years, Abraham P. and Margaret (Sawatzky) Reimer lived on SE-14-7-6, two miles northeast of Steinbach. Brandt Reimer had purchased this land from someone named Jamison. Abraham, his new wife, daughter Anna and his new wife's daughter Maria lived here from 1913 to mid-1915 when they all moved to Kansas. When Abraham P.'s daughter Anna married, she and her husband Klaas P. L. Reimer also lived on this property. This land was later purchased by Brandt Reimer's brother Klaas P. Reimer of Blumenort. In October 1916 my grandparents who had moved to Lanigan, Saskatchewan also bought land in Kansas. Abraham B. Reimer purchased a quarter section in the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren community northeast of Garden City, Kansas. Over the next year more of the Reimer family purchased adjoining parcels of land in the area. By the spring of 1917 our entire Reimer family had moved to farms northeast of Garden City (on Mennonite Rd). Here great grandfather Reimer, together with his children and stepchildren, purchased seven quarters of adjoining land. This land was purchased over a three year period, from four families who appear to have been

the original homesteaders. The last q section was purchased in January 1920. This "togetherness", especially to be close to his father; was what our grandfather Abe B.Reimer had longed for. In grandfather's letters to his father he expressed this keen desire.



Margaret Sawatzky (1852-1924) the widow of Jacob B. Friesen became Abraham P. Reimer's second wife. She belonged to the conservative Kleine Gemeinde community in Meade, KS who did not permit photographs. This photo was likely obtained without her consent. She lies buried in Meade, KS. Photo Credit: Ron Plett.

Great Grandfather's Second Loss

On December 3, 1924, Abraham P. Reimer's 2nd wife (Margaret) died. The pre-funeral was held in the A. P. Reimer home. Only a few of the neighbors attended. I had the privilege of sitting on grandfather A.P. Reimer's lap during the service. After the service the casket was loaded onto the back seat of Grandpa's touring car and then Grandpa, himself, took Margaret's body to Meade, Kansas. The official funeral and burial took place there. Only our parents from the immediate family attended the funeral in Meade, along with the Friesen families and friends and neighbors who lived in Meade.

In 1925 A.P. Reimer married for a third time; this time to Anna Neufeld (1876-1957), widow of Daniel Schmidt. Her sister Neta (Aganetha, 1874 – 1965), a spinster, also joined the family at this time, so, Abraham P. built a small addition to the house for her to live in.

Abraham P. Reimer passed away in his home on the Garden City, Kansas farm on August 12, 1933. He suffered from liver and stomach disease and was sick for almost a year before he died. The last few weeks he suffered extremely and often prayed "that if it be the Lord's will, that he would be released from his suffering. He was 71 years old when he died.

A Tribute to our Great Grandfather

A Good Man Passes - Abraham P. Reimer

Abraham P. Reimer passed away at his home in the Mennonite settlement Saturday afternoon at one o'clock. (August 12, 1933) He was seventy-one years old. His body will lie in state at the Garnand Funeral Home Tuesday, so that friends may see him. Thursday the body will be taken to Meade for burial.

Mr. Reimer has lived in Finney County since 1917. He was one of the largest land owners in the Mennonite settlement in the northeast part of the County. For the past years he has been a sufferer from cancer of the stomach.

Finney County lost a citizen Saturday who might well be held up as an example to everyone as one who lived an exemplary life. That man was A. P. Reimer of the Mennonite settlement. Mr. Reimer was perhaps known to few outside the Mennonite settlement except some Garden City business men with whom he had come in contact during the past sixteen years that he has lived in Finney County.

Like most Mennonites he preferred to live his own life in his own ways and took no part in activities that would bring him into the limelight of any except those in his community. Through thrift, simple habits and industry he accumulated all he needed of this world's goods to make himself comfortable and give his children a good start on the farm.



Abraham P. Reimer with his third wife, Anna Schmidt (Neufeld). Photo Credit: Ron Plett

Aside from his family and limited circle of friends and his church he cared for little else. He lived comfortably on the land he improved and was at peace with the world. If he ever had an ill feeling towards anyone, it is doubtful if he ever let it be known. Unquestionably there have been times when he was imposed upon, but apparently he never let such things disturb his peace of mind. He enjoyed his friends, both in and out of the church and was happiest when he could be with them.

Mr. Reimer lived up to the teachings of the Mennonite church as he understood them. We know little about the church except that it is the avenue thousands of people choose to take to a better hereafter. But if everyone would waver no further away from the teachings of their chosen church than did A. P. Reimer there would be little need for lawyers and courts and the army of political job holders we now have to keep us straight.

All honor to A. P. Reimer and his kind.

This Tribute is believed to have been written either by Mr. Garnand, owner of Garnand Funeral Home in Garden City, Kansas, or possibly a newspaper editor of the day. It was hand copied by Katherine Reimer, (age 11) who lived in Satanta, Kansas in 1933.

Endnotes

- 1 As per K.J.B. Reimer, aged 90.
- 2 Telephone conversation with Royden Loewen, April 2012.
- 3 See *Preservings* (8) (June 1996): 8-9.
- 4 Katharina Thiessen was a noted chiropractor and physician who was taken to court by Morden doctors for practicing without a license in 1895. Hans Werner and Jennifer Waito, "One of our own: Ethnicity Politics and the Medicalization of Childbirth in Manitoba," *Manitoba History* 58(2008): 2-10.

Death in the Family: An Eye Witness Account

Dave Toews, St. Albert, Alberta

A similar version of this article appeared in the *Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian* 2 (2015): 8-12. (eds.)

Friday June 23, 1950 dawned sunny and bright. There was no hint of the tragedy in the air that would descend upon this quiet farm setting before the day would end. The disastrous Korean War would start June 25 before a funeral would take place. Our father, Peter John Toews, forty-eight, and mother Helen A. (Kroeger) Toews, forty-five, were up at 5:30 am, already hard at work milking the cows, feeding the horses and chickens. Rudy, eighteen months, the youngest of four children was up first as he didn't want to miss helping father feed the pigs. He had his ten pound Rogers Golden Syrup pail that father would help him fill at the concrete stock watering tank. He would then empty the pail into the pig's slop trough. Stumbling along on uneven ground trying to keep up with father, slopping the hogs was one of Rudy's greatest pleasures.

We three older children - Anna Marie, six and a half, David, five, and Ernie, three - would get up when mother came in from the morning chores with fresh milk and cream for breakfast. A large bowl of oatmeal and a pot of coffee bubbled happily on the rear of the wood fired kitchen range that mother had started before she went out to do chores. Breakfast of oatmeal,

milk, coffee, homemade bread and butter was consumed right after father read the daily morning devotions from the Bible and the *Abreiß Kalender* (German devotional leaflets). Anna Marie had to help clear the table and dry the dishes as she was considered old enough for these household duties. Ernie and I (David) went out to play in the sandbox that was situated right in front of the ice cellar/house. There, mother could keep an eye on us from the north facing rear dining room window.

Rudy, just back on June 18th, had spent three weeks with our cousins, Beth and Henry Loewen, on their farm at Colonsay and was very happy to be home with his family. To make it easier for father to cope with the three older children, Anne Letkeman from the nearby district of Bluebird had been enlisted to help with child care during this time. You see, mother had just returned home from the hospital in North Battleford on June 17th. She was recovering from hysterectomy surgery. The doctor bill was \$100.26, pills \$3.92 and medicine \$4.00. All this was meticulously documented in father's *Anschreibe Buch* (income and expense ledger Jan 1947 to Dec 1951). The Mammoth 5 Cent Scribbler consisted of forty-two pages written



A family photo take in March 1950. L-R Ernie, Peter, David, Rudy, Helen, Anna Marie. All images provided by the author.

alternately in German and English and one can see that father's English improved as the years progressed. There are two months on each facing page. *Einnahmen* (income) are on the left with three columns: *Wirtschaft* (farm business), cream and eggs. On the right are *Ausgaben* (expenses): *Wirtschaft*, *Küche* (kitchen) and Personal. It is interesting that father put Family Allowance under the farm income heading! Perhaps another column with only two entries per page was deemed unnecessary. Also noteworthy is the regularity of donations; to the local Mennonite church, the annual church levy, Bible schools, home and overseas missions.

The spring field work of seeding and cultivating the summer fallow had been completed so father was working around the farmyard repairing fences, corrals and buildings. The family was all together again; it was the start of what should have been a wonderful summer. The home quarter of the 320 acre mixed farm was situated at NW 13-46-12-W3, one and a half miles south of the hamlet of Mayfair, Saskatchewan. The land had been purchased from the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) in 1927. On May 3, 1950 the ledger shows a land payment to the CPR for \$900.00. Nestled in the centre of the rolling Thickwood Hills area of north central Saskatchewan, the Rural Municipality of Meeting Lake was not an easy place to make a living. It was a scenic area with many bluffs of trembling aspen and choking willow thickets surrounding ponds of tepid blue green water. But it also had large patches of non-arable alkaline soil and an abundance of rocks and stones to deter even the hardiest of pioneers. This was where the seven remaining Mennonite families of the Mayfair *Hoffnungsfelder Gemeinde* (Fields of Hope Congregation) had cast their lot to endure after fleeing the anarchy of southern Russia in the 1920s. Thirty-three other families had moved away earlier, seeking greener pastures, mostly in British Columbia and Ontario.

The noon meal that day, as was so often the case in the Toews household, consisted of homemade egg noodles, *Kloese* cooked and then fried with onions in a bit of lard and fried *Schinken Fleisch* (smoked, home cured ham). There was bread and butter, plenty of milk to drink and handpicked, home-preserved Saskatoon berries for desert.

After lunch mother, father, Ernie and Rudy went for *Med-dachschlop* (afternoon nap) while Anna Marie and I played quietly in the parlour. After his nap, father went to weed in the garden and mother joined him there later. She took great pride in her large vegetable and flower gardens. We older three children were given a stern warning, "Watch out for Rudy, make sure he doesn't wander off and get into trouble somewhere". Farms can be dangerous places for everyone in the family, especially curious young children.

Our Uncle John and Aunt Helen Toews with their family of eleven surviving children lived just half a mile south of us on their farm. Their children ranged in age from twenty down to two years. There was Bernie, Johnny, Art, Helen, Walter, Mary, George, Elizabeth, Hilda, Arnold and Dorothy. Their youngest son, Lawrence, born with a heart condition (blue baby), had survived only two days and had passed away Oct 10, 1949. Lawrence was born at home on the farm and when they realized he was in serious trouble they asked our parents to take him to the hospital. Aunt Helen was still too weak to travel so father and mother took Uncle John and Lawrence in our car to Rabbit Lake. It was all in vain; Lawrence died in our mother's arms just as they reached the hospital. Some

people said this was a bad omen, but we as Mennonites do not believe in omens - elements of superstition that conflict with faith in God.

At approximately three-thirty in the afternoon the phone rang. It was Aunt Helen. Aunt Helen and mother could talk on the phone for hours, they were true soul mates. They would review all that happened within our families, friends, Canadian and overseas relatives, church and community. Mother would then share all the updated news with all of us. It kept us in contact. At about four-thirty mother said good-bye and hung up the phone. She had an ominous intuition. She rushed to the front door panic in her voice, "Where is Rudy?" she shouted. She looked at us. No one knew. Father came running from the garden. For some reason she ran straight for the water trough, the rest of us behind her. Mother Screamed! There lying face down motionless in a few inches of water was Rudy, his syrup pail floating nearby. Together they grabbed him, pulled him out and gave him artificial respiration as best they knew how.

I, in my naivety kept saying, "See if he can walk, see if he can walk," until I was told to be quiet.

Father carried Rudy into the house as mother ran ahead to call the John Toews's house. Aunt Helen made a long ring - at the sound of the long ring all the neighbours on our rural telephone line would pick up to hear what the news or emergency was.

Cousin Art with Aunt Helen and Uncle John were the first ones to arrive. Soon the yard was full of vehicles; everyone wanted so desperately to help. The men were working Rudy's arms and pumping his chest, mucus was running from his nose and mouth into a bowl on the floor, his head held extended over the small parlour table.

To shield us from this dreadful scene we were sent out along with our young cousins Elizabeth, Hilda, Arnold and Dorothy to sit in Ed and Islae Johnson's new car, with Art to supervise. A squabble ensued in the backseat and Art had to mete out discipline. There were tears.

At one point in the evening mother was in the upstairs bedroom praying, beseeching and crying out to the Lord to spare her beautiful young son. It would be to no avail; her prayers would go unanswered that day.

Doctor James Lanskail and acting RCMP Corporal Francis Brien arrived together from Hafford. This brought some calm to the chaotic scene. Dusk was gathering, no one had eaten, our young Toews cousins had gone home, friends and neighbours were leaving. Our kind next door neighbour Mrs. Islae Johnson took the three of us to their home for a rare treat of store bought white bread sandwiches with bologna and mustard. When we returned Islae brought sandwiches and a clear Pyrex pot of coffee for all who were left.

Doctor John Storey from Rabbit Lake had arrived. His preliminary diagnosis for cause of death was shock because Rudy had bumped his head on the concrete trough when he fell in. This is inconsistent with cause of "death by accidental drowning," as stated on the death certificate later signed by Doctor Lanskail.

Only Aunt Helen and Doctor Storey still remained; mother was inconsolable, father stone faced, each bearing their terrible grief in their own way. Aunt Helen now encouraged mother to hold Rudy close and kiss him for as long as she wanted. After his body began to cool they took it and placed it on the ice in the ice cellar. A terrible pall was cast over our home and farm.

The next two days, Saturday and Sunday, June 24 and 25, were a blur. Mother's single, very close and only sister, our Aunt Mary, as well as Grandmother Maria Kroeger arrived Saturday shortly after lunch. They were picked up from the bus at Fielding by Johnny Toews. Aunt Mary was a great comfort to mother, she also helped with the cooking, cleaning and child care. The funeral was scheduled for Monday as funerals did not take place on Sundays and there was much to be done. Food had to be bought and prepared; journal entry \$4.33 for bread, coffee and cheese; relatives in British Columbia and Ontario had to be notified; journal entry \$3.65 for telegrams. The coffin was built and donated by John and Justina Balzer, members of the Mayfair Mennonite *Hoffnungsfelder Gemeinde*.

The finishing touches to the coffin and lining were done by mother's oldest brother and his wife - our Uncle John and Aunt Mary Kroeger from Hanley. With all this activity around us, Ernie and I still found time to play in the sand box. Every two to three hours mother and Aunt Mary would pass by and go down into the ice cellar where they applied rubbing alcohol to Rudy's body. This was the simple and the only method of partial embalming available to us at that time. I was surprised when I looked down at Rudy's pale waxen form on the ice. In my childish way, I had already forgotten what had happened in the last thirty-six hours. Today at age sixty-three Monday June 26, 1950 still looms large in my mind. I have relived the experience a hundred times as I write this. I may be mourning more now than I did as a five year old child.

Shortly after breakfast Rudy's body was brought up out of the ice cellar and prepared for the funeral by mother, Aunt Mary and Aunt Helen. He was dressed all in white, "as an angel," mother always said and laid out in his coffin in the back yard in the bright sunshine. The coffin was tilted forward slightly on its bench to allow a better angle for pictures to be taken. The pine trees seen behind the coffin are two of seven that were carefully transplanted into the garden from the fields when the land was broken. Once the rest of mother's Kroeger relatives had arrived from Dundurn, Hanley and area and we had lunch, a short service was held in the back yard led by *Ältester* (Bishop) Gerhard Warkentine.

After everyone else had left for the funeral service at church mother took some pictures of the three of us children on the farm yard. And as usual she reminded me to try to smile, something that has dogged me all my life and can be seen here on our family picture. Always looking contemplative! After



Rudy in his coffin in the back yard June 26, 1950.

that we followed the coffin, which was transported in the back of John Toews's truck, driven by Johnny with Aunt Helen and Uncle John in the cab. The obituary contains most of the details of the funeral service.

The obituary of Rudolph Gerhard Toews, from *Der Bote* July 12, 1950 edition. Translated from German by Mary (Kroeger) Loeppky.

Job Chapter 1, verse 21: "The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord."

Great sorrow entered the Peter Toews home the 23rd of June. The mother was working in the house and the father was in the garden. The children were playing in front of the door. The mother was only home for several weeks after she had a serious operation and still needed to have a lot of rest and do only light duties. The children were to keep an eye out for their little brother, Rudy, who was only home for a week after being away. Relatives had cared for him so that his mother would have an easier time to recuperate. All were happy again, mother was at home once more and also little Rudy. When the question was asked, where is Rudy? Mother immediately ran out and found him in the water trough that had few inches of water in it. The pain that a mother has to suffer in finding such a situation is almost unbearable and impossible to describe. Every attempt to revive him failed. Two doctors were called out but could not come for two hours because of the very poor roads. They diagnosed his death as shock.

Monday, the 26th of June, the small body was placed in the ground. The funeral service took place in the Church of the congregation at Mayfair. Loving friends, acquaintances and relatives came to take part in the grief of the sorrowing family.

*In the home of the parents they sang the hymn, "Wirf Sorgen und Schmerz ins liebende Herz des mächtig dir helfenden Jesus" (Throw all of your sorrows and pain into the loving heart of Jesus the powerful helping Jesus). After the song *Ältester* Gerhard Warkentine, Dundurn, used the text found in *Job Chapter 1, verse 21*, quoted above, for a short sermon. When Abraham was asked to sacrifice his only son it caused him much turmoil. Here also the parents were deeply sorrowful, yet the Lord had spoken and they wanted to be quiet before Him and obey.*

*In church Reverend Frank Enns from Mayfair spoke on the text taken from *Mark 10, verse 13-16*, after singing the song, "Wenn kleine Kinder sterben, so Buße man sie nicht ein" (When small children die they do not have to repent). With moving words he showed the sorrowing parents the way to the true friend of children and that their small child would have been taken up away from all sin. He also warned us to take advantage of the time at hand and to use the time wisely to be ready when the Lord would call us away.*

*Pastor Duerksen read a portion from *Revelation Chapter 21*. His message was in English. He spoke from his own experience to give comfort to the parents. Two small children and one adult child had been taken from them. Heaven has become closer to them through this. He emphasised that only those that have their names entered in the *Book of Life* will be able to go through the doors of the *New Jerusalem*, nothing unclean or unrighteous will be tolerated there.*

When the coffin was being carried out they sang the song, "Lasst mich gehen", (Let me go). At the cemetery (referred to as God's Acre) Ältester Gerhard Warkentine blessed the grave and prayed with the mourners. "Lord teach us to consider that we also have to die, so that we become knowledgeable."

Little Rudolf Gerhard was born the 1st of September, 1948 and died the 23rd of June, 1950. He leaves to mourn, his parents and three siblings.

Signed John Kroeger

After the graveside service had concluded Johnny Balzer and Art Froese were helped down into the grave to nail the outer coffin box shut; each hammer blow rang with the finality of the circumstances. Almost everyone was in tears as the first shovels full of earth thumped down onto the coffin box. Realization of what was happening finally struck my five year old soul to the core and I broke into uncontrollable tears, sobbing. Lawrence and Rudy, the two young Toews cousins now lay side by side in the cool damp earth. There was lunch in the church basement for all and everyone offered their heartfelt condolences to our family.

After the funeral relatives and friends gathered back at our home on the farm. The regular chores of milking, gathering eggs and feeding the animals still had to be done as always. Mother's brothers helped father with these duties. As is often the case during difficult times, talk turns to the mundane, and farmers will talk farming and business. In the fall of 1949 we had had an excellent crop, the oats especially were of high quality. The ledger shows two entries where father sold seed oats to our uncles, Henry Kroeger (June 26th: \$25.00) and to Peter Kroeger (June 27th: \$15.00). Father also sold 35 chickens to Ältester Gerhard Warkentine, (June 26: \$21.77). Income was very hard to come by in those years and these opportunities could not be passed up.

I find it strange that there is no reference to Rudy's death or funeral in the ledger. Of course, the ledger was not a diary



David at Rudy's graveside June 27, 1950, the day after the funeral.

or was father in denial? By Tuesday, June 27 everyone had left except for Aunt Mary. She stayed on for a few days to help and to comfort us. Our whole family took her to the bus on June 30 (\$1.75: car gas to Fielding).

Our mother was never quite the same after that. For a long time she was in such deep mourning that she had difficulty caring for the family's everyday needs. One day as she was hunched over crying beside the kitchen range, she saw a vision of an angel enter the room leading Rudy by the hand. Instantly her inconsolable sorrow was relieved and she could function again. Mother remembered Rudy's birthday and death date every year until the day she died.

Endnotes

1 With contributions by Anna Marie (Toews) Boyes, Ernie Toews and Mary (Kroeger) Loeppky. Some of the details are a composite of memories and may vary slightly from what actually took place.

"Plant an Evergreen": Obituary of Peter P. Toews (1841-1922)

Translation and commentary by Ralph Friesen

Ältester Peter P. Toews (1841-1922) was arguably the *Kleine Gemeinde* leader whose writings and actions most deeply affected the development of that group, especially after immigration to Canada. Many of his extensive writings have been translated from the original German and published in Delbert Plett's series of books on the *Kleine Gemeinde*. Plett published a comprehensive biography of Toews in *Leaders of the Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde in Russia, 1812 to 1874* (Steinbach: Crossway Publications, 1993), 819-858.

Toews resigned as Ältester and left the *Kleine Gemeinde* to become a minister of the Holdeman (Church of God in Christ Mennonite) Gemeinde in Manitoba following the evangelization efforts of John Holdeman in the early 1880s.

At the time of Toews's death an obituary was published in the *Mennonitische Rundschau*.¹ To my knowledge, it has not been previously translated and published, so I've made an attempt at translation, in the hope that more light will be shed on Toews's remarkable, productive life. The obituary was written by Toews's eldest son (his older siblings having died in infancy or childhood) Peter P. W. Toews (1874-1949). Toews Junior left Manitoba to take up a homestead in Swalwell, Alberta, in 1905, and became a land agent who helped settle other Greenland, Manitoba farmers in the Watchan Valley on Arrow Lake, B.C. Peter was joined by his brothers Johann and Isaac at Swalwell, and they built a home for their parents who came from Manitoba to join them there.² Swalwell and Acme



Peter P. W. Toews (1874-1949) was Peter P. Toews' eldest son. After his father's death, Peter P. W. Toews wrote the obituary that appears below, which was published in Die Mennonitische Rundschau on December 6, 1922.

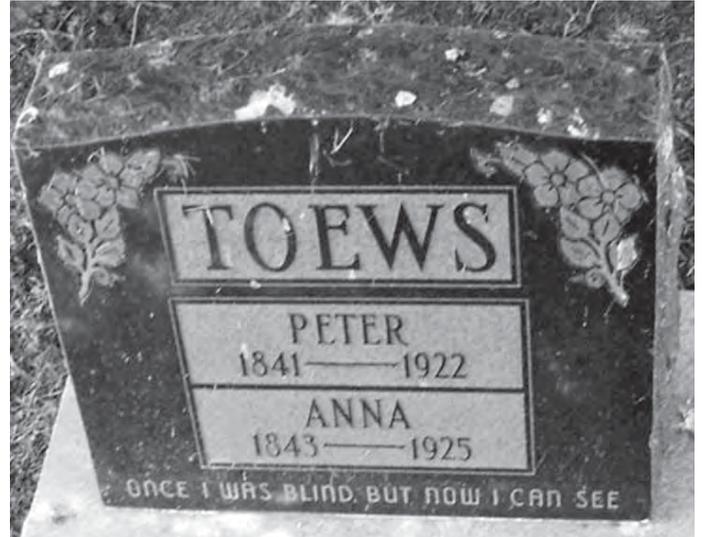
(cited in the obituary) are hamlets located in Kneehill County in central Alberta.

Peter Toews married Anna Warkentin (1843-1925), whose story, "Anna: The Bishop's Wife," is recounted by Margaret Penner Toews in *Preservings*, part two, #10, June, 1997. This article gives a background of much loss and sorrow for Peter and Anna—a number of their children died, but they carried on.

Almost all of the Kleine Gemeinde immigrated to Canada in 1874; Peter and Anna and about thirty other families remained in South Russia until May, 1875, so that Toews could "ensure the orderly completion of the emigration."³

Like most of the obituaries of the pioneer generation, more emphasis is placed upon the actual death experience than on the achievements of the deceased person. Peter Toews, 81 years old, partially blind and suffering from a heart ailment, was one moment speaking to his wife, and in the next fell to the floor in front of her, breathing his last. Anna, completely blind, could not see what had happened, though she must have known. Their granddaughter Marie first called for help and then ran back into the room to see her grandfather breathe his last. She could not lift the body on her own, so she placed a pillow beneath the old man's head, and waited. The writer, her father, notes that it is somehow suitable that Marie, principal caregiver to her grandparents, should be the one to perform this last service for her grandfather.

The story of people who had been attending a funeral at the church now hurrying to the Toews house to find their leader



The headstone marking the graves of Peter P. Toews and his wife, Anna Toews in the Linden Church of God in Christ Mennonite Cemetery in Linden, Alberta also highlights the spiritual theme of blindness and the role this important symbol had in the later life of this couple. This photo was taken in 2013. Photo credit: Henry Martin Hamm via CanadianHeadstones.com

and patriarch dead, attended by his loving granddaughter Marie, has an elegiac tone which Mennonite obituary writers generally did not permit themselves at that time.

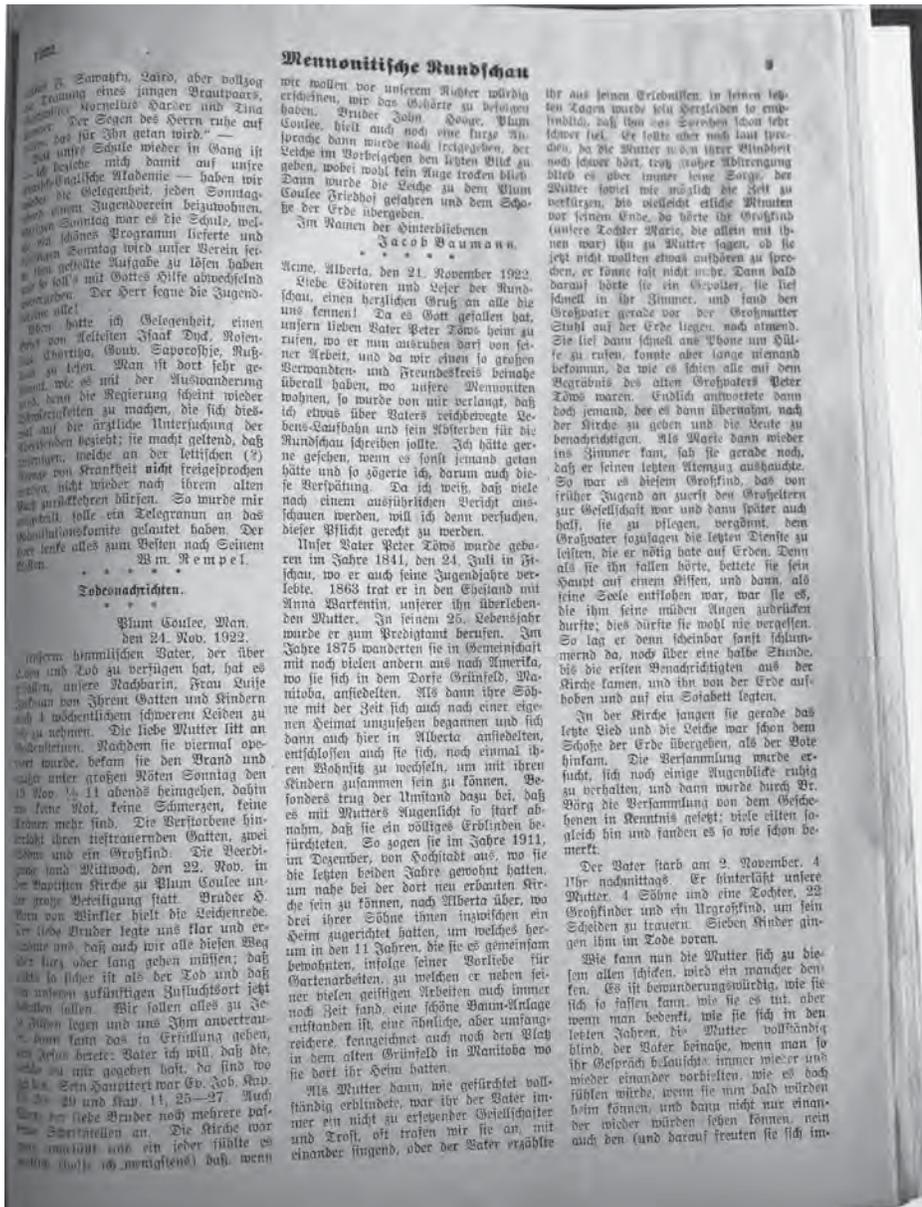
The subject of blindness also becomes a spiritual theme in the obituary, as Peter W. Toews picks up the remembered conversations of his parents, who often spoke of seeing each other again, after death, in heaven. Although his mother is blind and his father deceased, Toews Junior writes confidently of "their eyes of belief" which are fixed on the gate through which they will soon pass, "to places of eternal delight."

This expressed confidence in the soul's destination was contrary to the Kleine Gemeinde tradition from which both Peter and Anna came, which did not allow for presumptions or predictions, but were consistent with the Holdeman views on assurance of salvation. Even when still a Kleine Gemeinde Ältester, however, Toews used more assuring language than some others did—as in his "Easter Sermon, 1867."⁴

Peter P. W. Toews also refers to his father's extensive literary output. Toews Senior wrote many sermons, letters, poems, and songs. He also compiled a mass of genealogical information. The history of the Kleine Gemeinde would have been much poorer without his contributions.

The song "Our Monument" with which Peter P. W. Toews concludes the obituary expresses the writer's confidence that, believing in Christ, his faith stands on an unshakable foundation. The reference to planting an evergreen tree on his grave, symbolizing eternal life and the resurrection, was taken literally by his sons, and even taken further than he might have intended:

They planted two evergreens at the head of each of their parents' graves. For good measure—for evergreens were not easily nurtured, and lacking a certain amount of faith—they planted two more at their feet. Today in the cemetery at Linden [Alberta] sway eight tall evergreens, alive and flourishing.⁵



First page of Peter P. Toews's obituary, as it was originally published in Die Mennonitische Rundschau on December 6, 1922. Image credit: Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives

OBITUARY

Mennonitische Rundschau, December 6, 1922
Acme, Alberta, November 21

Dear Editor and Rundschau readers, a heart-felt greeting to all who know us.

Since it has pleased God to call home our beloved father Peter Toews, where he now can find repose from his work, and since we have such a large circle of relatives and friends from almost everywhere that we Mennonites are living, so it has been asked of me to write something for the Rundschau of Father's very active life's journey, and his death.

Our father Peter Toews was born in 1841 on July 24 in Fischau, where he also spent his youthful years. In 1863 he entered into matrimony with Anna Warkentin, our mother, who survives him. In his 25th year he was called to the ministry. In 1875 they, with many others, emigrated to America, where they settled in the village of Grünfeld, Manitoba. When

in time their sons began to search for homes of their own and settled here in Alberta, they again decided to move from their home, so as to be together with their children. At the same time Mother's eyesight began to weaken, so that it was feared that she would become totally blind. So in December, 1911, they moved from Hochstadt [Manitoba] where they had lived for the previous two years so as to be close to the newly built church, to Alberta, where in the meantime three of their sons had built them a home. Here they lived together for 11 years. As a result of Father's love of gardening, for which he always found time in addition to his spiritual work, there is now a beautiful grove of trees, similar to the one they had at their home in Grünfeld, but more extensive.

When Mother became blind as had been feared,⁶ Father became for her an irreplaceable companion and comforter; often we found them singing together, or Father would tell her stories of his life. In his last years, however, his heart troubles became so painful that speaking became very hard for him. But he had to try to speak loudly, as Mother, in addition to her blindness, had become hard of hearing. In spite of having to make such strenuous efforts it always remained his concern to help Mother pass the time as well as possible, until, perhaps just a few minutes before the end of his life, his granddaughter (our daughter Marie, who was alone with him) heard him say to Mother, whether she would not want him to stop speaking, as he almost could not manage it anymore. Soon after she [Marie] heard a thud, and ran quickly into his room, where she found her grandfather lying on the floor by her grandmother's chair, still breathing.⁷ Then she ran quickly to the phone to call for help but was not able to reach anyone, as it seemed all were at the funeral of the old Grandfather Peter Toews.⁸ Finally someone answered, and took it upon himself to go to the church to inform people of what had happened. When Marie went back to the room, she was just able to see him exhaling his last breath. So it happened that this grandchild, who from early childhood had been first a companion and then a caregiver to her grandparents, was given the opportunity, so to speak, to perform the last service needed by her grandfather on his earth. For when he had fallen, she supported his head with a pillow, and then, after his soul had fled from him, she was the one who pressed shut his weary eyes; all this she will never forget.

And so for more than half an hour he lay there as if asleep, until the first of those who had been in the church came and picked him up from the floor and laid him on the sofa. In the

church they had just sung the last song and put the body in the earth, when the messenger came. The gathering was implored to be still for a few moments and then Brother Baerg informed them of what had happened. Many hurried away, to find the situation as has already been described.

Father died on November 2, at 4 in the afternoon. He leaves behind our mother, 4 sons and one daughter, 22 grandchildren and one great-grandchild, to mourn his departure. Seven children predeceased him.

How will Mother deal with all this now, many will be thinking. It is astonishing how she understands, how she does it, but when one remembers how, in the last years with Mother completely blind and Father almost so, one overheard them, again and again, speaking to each other of how it would feel when they would be able to go home, and then would not only be able to see each other again, but also (and this always gave them the most joy), those whom they had sought to serve, those who owed them so much thanks for keeping them ever on the only once-trod narrow way, and those whom they led and guided through many a dark hour, to meet them there, to be able to be with them forever—then one understands it. Such and similar comments and thoughts were the order of the day. Now we children and relatives will, in our weakness, try to pick up the thread where our father left off. Although their natural eyes of this world are now closed, their eyes of belief which see so clearly are raised instead to their near goal, to that gate through which they too will soon be able to enter, to places of eternal light.

She [Mother] tells us now of what she has dreamed, and how, in her dreams, she has always been able to see so clearly, and her thoughts and words are oriented more to the realm above than here with us. If those relatives who cannot visit her personally would write her letters, that would be a great help.

I must however go back a little. As everyone knows, Father left behind a large number of writings, and numerous poems, especially. By nature he was a lover of singing and good songs, and he composed some songs especially for young people.⁹ Even on his last day he made the proposal that at his funeral a song, “Gedenk an deinen Schöpfer” [Think on Your Creator] from our small songbook be sung. When, years ago after a failed eye operation in Calgary, Mother had to accept the sad certainty that she would never again on this earth be able to see, her words gave rise to song number 401 in the small songbook. Another song, which he had composed a few years before, was sung at his funeral: “Ich lege es bei, es mag hier folgen” [What I sow, that may also be reaped]. A memento for many, which he has left for us.

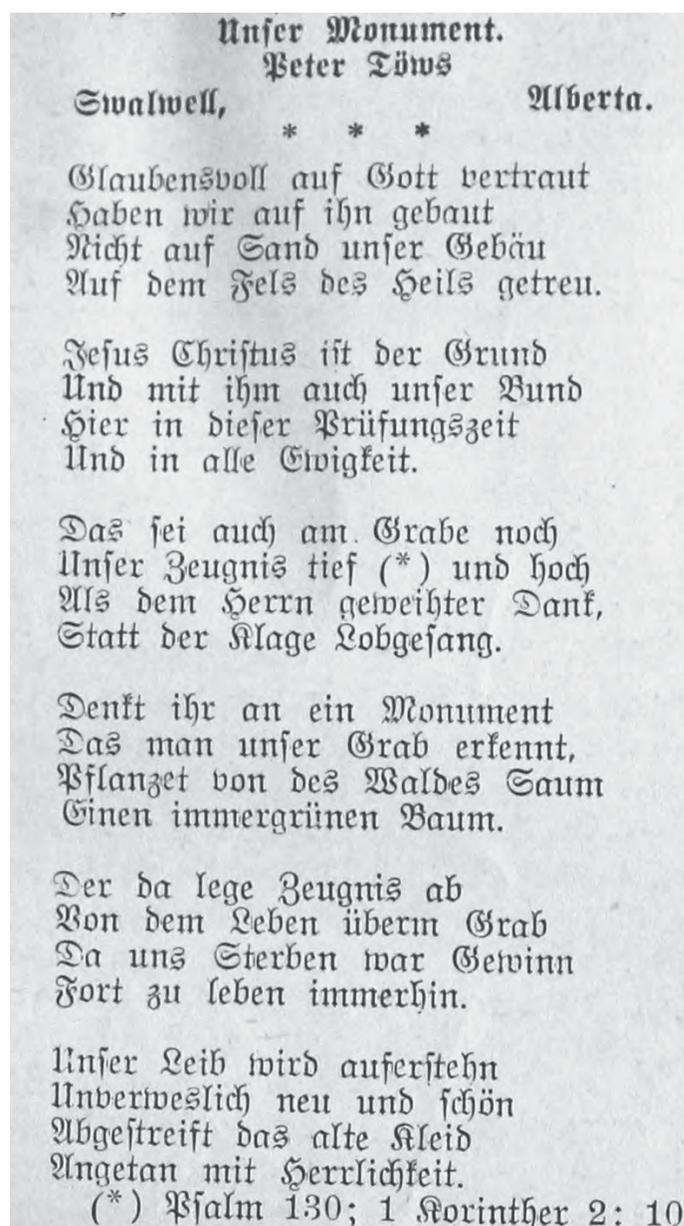
The writer of these words, his eldest son, had driven to a Hutterite colony at the time of his death to get some grain milled, and came home only 24 hours later, having however received the news when half-way home. Our eldest son was on his way to California in his Ford car and could not be informed; our daughter Anna, Mrs. John Fricke, was notified by telegram, and another telegram was sent to our Gemeinde in Manitoba. In response the Abram Isaacs of Kleefeld and Brother Cornelius Wohlgemuth of Clear springs [sic] came for the funeral. Brother Abram Isaac gave the funeral oration and other ministers, including Brother Wohlgemuth, gave speeches which were all deeply felt, going straight to the heart.

I will leave off now. I'm very far from thinking that I have done a satisfactory job of discharging the task I set myself; anyone else could have done it better, yet feeling that we owed this much to our and Father's relatives and friends, I have tried my best. Anyone wanting to know more can write us.

I have no more news of sickness other than colds and other indispositions.

My father-in-law left on a trip a few days ago which will likely take a few months. He planned on going first to Manitoba, then Kansas, and other places too. A warm greeting to him, wherever he should happen to read it.

Peter P. W. Toews [1874-1949]



Peter P. Toews was a prolific writer and his literary output included poems and songs. His son, Peter P. W. Toews, included Toews's song "Unser Monument" ("Our Monument") as part of his tribute to his father in the published obituary. Image credit: Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives

Our Monument.

Peter Toews, Swalwell, Alberta.

Glaubensvoll auf Gott vertraut
Haben wir auf ihn gebaut
Nicht auf Sand unser Gebäu
Auf dem Fels des Heils getreu

Jesus Christus ist der Grund
Und mit ihm auch unser Bund
Hier in dieser Prüfungszeit
Und in alle Ewigkeit

Das sei auch am Grabe noch
Unser Zeugnis tief (*) und hoch
Als dem Herrn geweihter Dank
Statt der Klage Lobegesang

Denk ihr an ein Monument
Das man unser Grab erkennt
Pflanzt von des Waldes Saum
Einen immer grünen Baum

Der da lege Zeugnis ab
Von dem Leben überm Grab
Da uns Sterben war Gewinn
Fort zu leben immerhin

Unser Leib wird auferstehn
Unverweslich neu und schön
Abgestreift das alte Kleid
Angetan mit Herrlichkeit

(*) Psalm 130; 1 Korinther 2:10

Endnotes

- 1 Thanks to the Mennonite Heritage Centre and especially Conrad Stoesz for locating and scanning a copy of the original obituary for me.
- 2 Delbert Plett, *Dynasties of the Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde in Imperial Russia and North America* (Steinbach: Crossway Publications, 2000), 479-80.
- 3 Delbert Plett, *Leaders of the Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde in Russia, 1812 to 1874* (Steinbach: Crossway Publications, 1993), 837.
- 4 In Plett, *Leaders*, 886ff.
- 5 No author given, "Peter Toews," in H. Gratz, ed., *Footprints on Mi-Chig-Wun: Memoirs of Sunnyslope Pioneers* (Sunnyslope, Alberta, n.d.), 443-4. Quoted in Plett, *Leaders*, 853.

6 She had cataracts. Delbert Plett, *Leaders*, 850.

7 The grandmother was present. Another account says: "Suddenly his wife heard a thud. 'Peter,' she cried. But her husband lay silent . . . the granddaughter tried vainly to phone, number after number, but no answer. To her and her blind, helpless grandmother the hours were very long until help arrived to lift his body off the floor." *Leaders*, 851.

8 Apparently a cousin of Peter P. Toews. *Leaders*, 851.

9 In 1906 he edited the first Church of God in Christ hymnal, *Unparteiisches Liederbuch*, which included about 30 of his own songs. <http://www.mennonite-church.ca/programs/archives/holdings/papers/Toews,%20Peter%20fonds.htm>.

Reflections

Modern Science and Our Faith

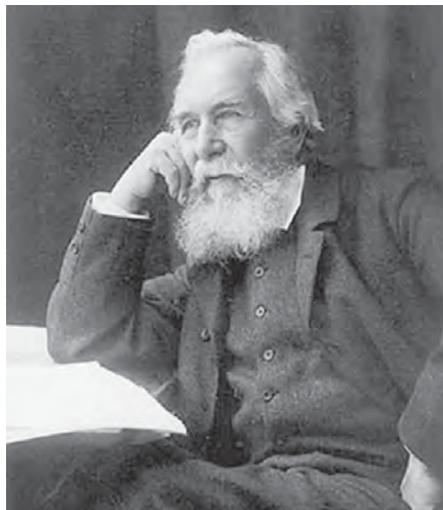
Christian Neff

Mennonitische Blätter 48:13-15, 22-23, Feb. 1 & Mar. 1, 1901

Translated and Annotated by Glen R. Klassen, Steinbach, Manitoba

Theology and science have been engaged in a war of words for many years. The battle has now been reignited by the recent appearance of Ernst Haeckel's *Die Welträtsel*¹ in which the renowned scholar from Jena, who can be said to have brought Darwinian evolutionary teaching home to Germany, claims, among other things, that the four gospels were proclaimed as normative historical sources only as a result of gross deception at the first ecumenical council. Professor Loofs of Halle has taken him to task for using sources to support his pronouncements that are known to be false, a mistake totally unworthy of a scientist.*

(*Unfortunately, the same error is made repeatedly, even by church



Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919). Image credit: Wikimedia Commons

historians. For example, the myth that the Anabaptists were the forefathers of the Mennonites is not allowed to die. All contrary arguments are of no avail and so this claim is perpetuated, and the masses think that because it is in print it must be true. The Publisher)²

But it has done no good, Haeckel has made no reply. A new edition of his book has just been released but its original content remains unchanged, and the great majority of the people agree with him. It is as though theology and Christian faith are in hopeless opposition to science and natural history. This opinion is becoming ever more widespread, especially in so-called educated circles.

So it is high time for us to hear a thoroughgoing explanation based on

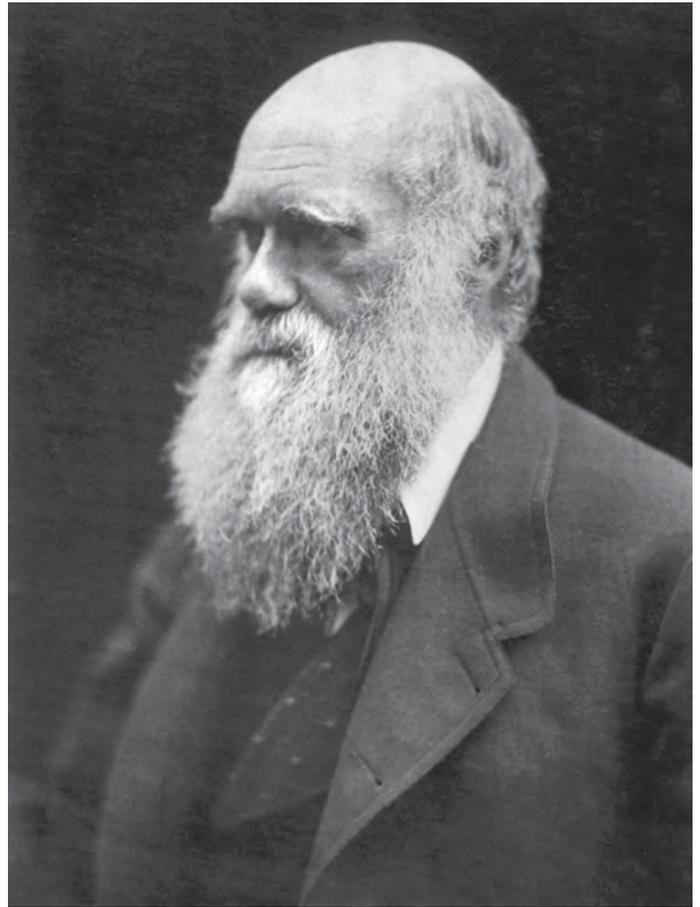
facts that will show that such an opinion is unwarranted. Lic. Steude of Dresden, in a paper published in the apologetical journal *Beweis des Glaubens* (vol. 5 and 6, 1900), has tried to show that Christian faith can actually benefit from the findings of modern science.

He quite rightly rejects a view that is often common among Christian believers that makes them think that every advance of science in our time is a dangerous threat to faith. Are not the most faithful Christians unhesitating and thankful recipients of the blessings of modern science as it provides in incredible ways for the physical needs of mankind? Science also helps to provide for the thousands of daily needs in Christian institutions such as orphanages. One need only think of the great strides taken in surgery, the invention of the endoscope, the discovery of X-rays, the development of the diphtheria antiserum and many similar advances. If we accept the practical results of modern science and apply them to profitable ends in a grateful spirit, why should we reject scientific ideals which are innocent of religious dogma? Why do we blithely ignore them or distance ourselves from them as though they were our enemies? And how can we sense the revelation of God in nature, sing nature psalms, celebrate outdoor worship services, and still think that research in science, which teaches us to read ever more and more from this book of revelation, is bad for our spiritual lives, although it may not be wrong in itself?

According to Stuede there are two hypotheses that are universally accepted among scientists. The first is the Copernican cosmology and the other would be the theory of evolution, first understood and taught by Darwin. Biblical creation teaching shows how little the latter theory is in conflict with the fundamental principles of the Bible. Such teaching agrees that the present condition of the earth and its inhabitants is the result of stepwise progress from a chaotic beginning through a sequence of creation epochs.³

But we may still ask what benefit there is for our life of faith in a moderate and prudent scientific discussion and evaluation of these two hypotheses. It appears at present as though faith has been made superfluous by the achievements of modern times, replaced by science which will soon have “conquered all areas of life and solved all mysteries.” Scientific investigation of nature has made enormous progress. The words of the poet are more relevant now than ever in last two thousand years: “Many powerful entities exist, but nothing is more powerful than man.”⁴ We probe the farthest reaches of the heavens with our instruments and calculations, we analyze the chemicals in the sun, we trace the formation and the dissolution of the universe and predict with unquestioned certainty and accuracy the positions of the planets and the time of appearance and disappearance of comets. We recount the history of the earth, we determine the ages of its rocks, and we throw light on its most hidden life. We remove mountains or tunnel through them. We divert rivers and join together seas that have been separate for thousands of years. We encircle the world with a net of wires on which the written and spoken word flies back and forth like lightning. We force the fearsome power of lightning to flow along predetermined paths, and protect ourselves very effectively from water and fire, the elementary forces. We measure brainwaves and remove or restore outer and inner parts of the body.

It is not surprising when such successes awaken immense hope in the human heart and inspire us to expect to reach



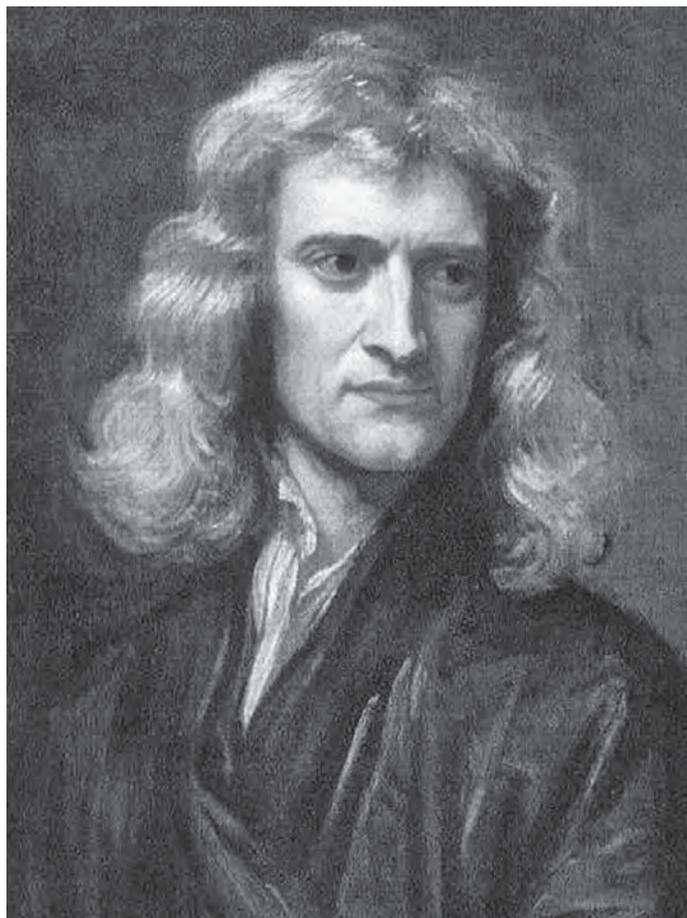
*Photo of Charles Robert Darwin (1809-1882) taken at age 59 in 1868. Darwin was an English naturalist and geologist and is most famous for his 1859 work *On the Origin of Species*, which explored his theory of evolution. Image Credit: Julia Margaret Cameron, Wikipedia.*

impossible goals. Already “...many proponents and followers of science behave as though there are no limits to research and as though they and they alone can be trusted to save mankind and to shower us with blessings.” They think that the time is near when all the mysteries of nature will be uncovered and when all obstacles and hindrances to the prosperous and peaceful and happy development of human life will be done away with.

But it is precisely the scientific accomplishments of our time that must submit to a searching and profound judgment, since all human understanding and knowing has been given a limit: thus far but no farther. In the words of the poet: “In nature’s innermost being an uncreated spirit moves”⁵ as the scriptures say: all knowledge is patchwork,⁶ but it is valuable for today and for all time.⁷ A few examples may suffice. We understand that in the beginning our solar system was a giant gaseous sphere, its red-hot mass spinning in the infinity of space. This ball of gas lost heat by radiation, cooled and contracted into a solid mass. This resulted in a tremendously accelerated motion which caused small parts of the large mass to separate into independent entities that became planets. But one may ask: Where then did this great gaseous ball come from? What was its origin? Where were the colder spaces into which the ball of gas could radiate its heat, since all of space was already occupied by the fixed stars which also consisted of gas? Why don’t all of the planets have the same time of rotation, as would follow from the theory? How is it that many heavenly bodies

move in different, or even opposite directions? In short, even with this theory, the riddle of the universe remains irresolvable.⁸ We have tried to explain the diversity of life by means of evolutionary theory, and indeed, much light has been shed into the darkness. But no one has succeeded in explaining the origin of human life.⁹ The assumption that life arose by spontaneous generation has shown itself to be scientifically untenable, since it can be established neither by observation nor experiment. And if the first life has to be placed in the fiery primeval gas cloud, it then becomes nothing but a symbol of inscrutability. At that point nothing can be proved. And in particular, a clear explanation of the origin of perception and consciousness has shown itself to be impossible. The thought, volition, and emotion of the human spirit have all been explained as mechanical movements within the brain. But it has never been shown how these components of the brain relate to one another to produce spiritual activity, and no one will ever be able to come closer to explaining it.¹⁰

Science can never give a complete and satisfying answer to the how, why and wherefore of the world and human life, nor can it resolve the riddles of the universe and of life in an adequate and appealing way. This has been admitted again and again by its most competent representatives. Newton, the great scientist, refused to accept praise, saying that he and his learned friends seemed to him to be as small children by the seaside gathering pebbles, and that he had the fortunate privilege of finding here and there smoother or prettier ones than those found by the other children.¹¹



Godfrey Kneller's portrait of Isaac Newton, painted in 1689. Image Credit: Sir Godfrey Kneller [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

It is also reported that Darwin said, "We do not know how unknowing we are." Du Bois-Reymond, the German scholar, declared, "*Ignoramus et ignorabimus.*" We know nothing and never will. And Tyndall, the English scholar, introduced a series of six lectures at Manchester with the words, "Often in the springtime it has occurred to me to follow the progress of the sprouting leaves, the grass, and the flowers, to observe the universal joy brought by the return of life in nature, and then to ask myself: Is it possible that there is no being in nature that knows more about these things than I do? Is it possible that in my ignorance I am describing the highest form of knowledge existing in the universe?"

The fact is that our thirst for knowledge is not satisfied by the results of modern science. New riddles are constantly emerging. The farther we press toward a knowledge of the things of this world, the more we experience its coming and going, its change and inconstancy, its essence and being. Our awareness of the inadequacy of human knowledge and the boundaries set for it become ever clearer and more tangible. At the same time the deep longing of the heart is for a perfect world, where the veil will be taken away and all our questions answered, where all riddles will be solved and where, with uncovered faces, we will be allowed to see everything in wonderful clarity.

And how glorious, how eternally glorious it will be when once we glimpse the grandeur of the real implications of a scientific view of nature. A scholar has constructed a circular star map with a diameter of 60 cm which includes all the northern stars visible with a telescope having a 7 cm aperture. This map



The Milky Way in the night sky, as seen from Black Rock Dessert, Nevada on July 22, 2007. Image credit: Steve Jurvetson, via Flickr

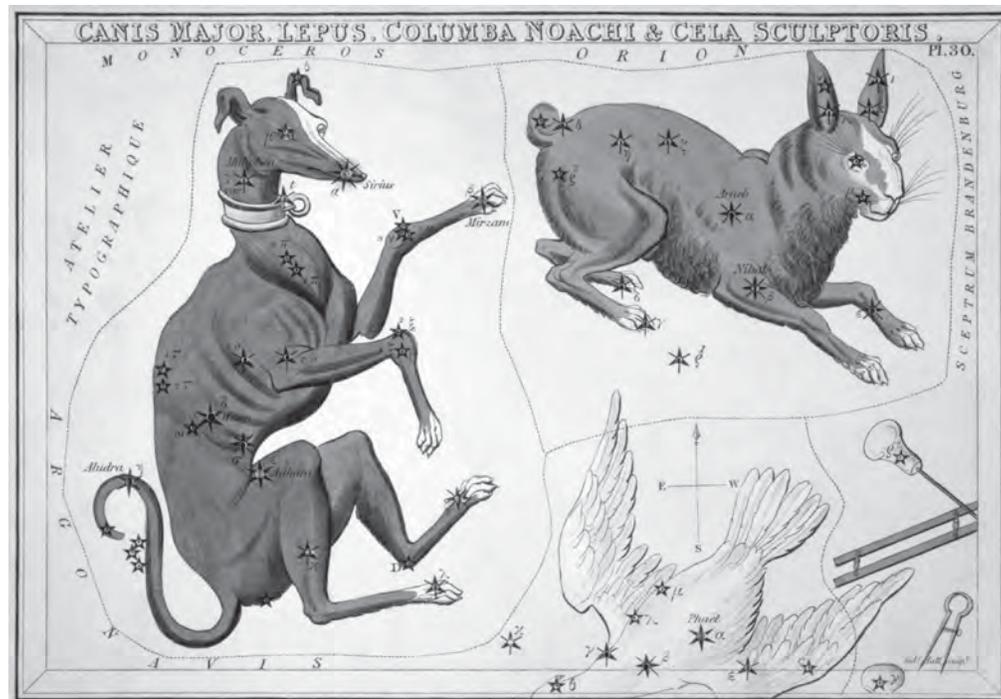
includes 324,198 stars, which is 150 times as many as can be seen by the naked eye on the darkest and clearest nights. There are now telescopes of such wonderful design that the observer can see 20 or 30 times more stars in the same part of the sky. The number of comets in the solar system has been estimated at about 100,000. Estimates by other astronomers have been as high as 17.5 million.

A splendid astrophysical observatory can be found in the central Asian city of Tashkent. A scholar there, W. Strahnof, has dedicated himself to the study of the Milky Way, and has found that it consists of a great number of star clusters and nebulae arranged in endless layers, one behind the other, so that all we see is a band of faint light in the sky. No one knows how large these clouds of stars might be. Only this is certain, that if a mortal should be transported into such a nebula, he would see above him a cloud of stars much like ours and also a band of light, a milky way in whose mist of stars our own sun and the fixed stars which twinkle in our sky, are lost. And in North America astronomers are busy photographing the clouds of stars in the Milky Way. Wonderful results have been obtained. A new observer has tried to prove that the Milky Way, with all the stars we believe to be within and near it, is an immeasurable cosmic spiral whose coils consist of countless clusters and streams of stars. Within these spiral coils, far from the center, may be found our sun together with all the other stars that twinkle each night in our sky. (*Daheim*, No. 9, 1901, page 18) The quoted article ends with a beautiful statement: "What is presented for our understanding is fantastic, but it represents only a crude outline of the structure of the universe. The limits of this cosmic order cannot be imagined; human speculation falters and reason fails to make the infinite comprehensible.

Fortunately, however, we find a quiet joy in the fact that man from his narrow point of view is still able to have such a view of the universe, for as the sage Goethe has said so beautifully and so accurately: The greatest good fortune of a thinking person is to have found out that which can be found out, and to have left in peace that which cannot."

The noted scientist J. Herschel, speaking of the sun says: "It is a giant in form, a giant in power, but a benevolent giant, the care-giver of the Almighty, the chosen giver of light and warmth, the direct source of all our comforts, indeed, the only source of our very existence." And so it is. From the center of the solar system the sun firmly holds and moves it all, illuminating, warming, and animating it like the most artful and bountiful lord. It is a giant ball with a diameter of 185,000 miles, a circumference of 571,000 miles, and surface area of 115,000 million square miles, a volume of 3700 trillion cubic miles and a weight of quadrillion centners (100 quadrillion pounds).¹² Its diameter is 107 times that of the earth's; it is 1,450,000 times the size of the earth, and all the planets and moons together make up only one six hundredth of its volume and one-seven hundred and twentieth of its weight.¹³ A traveler who covers 10 miles a day would circle the earth in 540 days but would require 162 years to do the same on the sun.¹⁴ If we imagine the earth to be situated at the center of the sun's mass, then the moon's orbit around the earth, which has a radius of 50,000 miles, would still fall inside the sun's radius.¹⁵

What a colossus! And yet it is a dwarf compared with another heavenly body which can truly be called a giant sun. It is Sirius, the famous dog star of the ancients, located at the mouth of the Great Hound and which, next to Jupiter, is the brightest star in the sky. This beautiful star, which appears



The constellations *Canis Major* (left), *Lepus* (right), *Columba Noachi* and *Cela Sculptoris* (both of these are cut off), plate 30 in *Urania's Mirror*, a set of celestial cards engraved by Sidney Hall that accompanied *A Familiar Treatise on Astronomy* by Jehosphaphat Aspin, published in 1825. Sirius is the major star depicted at the tip of the dog's nose in this drawing. Image credit: United States Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs division, digital ID cph.3g10075 [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

as just a bright point of light when seen through the biggest telescopes, is located 1,069,000 solar distances from us (to an accuracy of 20 geographical miles) and is actually a sphere which radiates such a vast amount of light and heat that if it were in the sun's place, every living thing on earth would be burnt up in its red hot rays. It is a sphere of truly monstrous dimensions. The disc of Sirius has an area that is 286 times that of the sun's, with a diameter and a volume that are 17 and 4860 times that of the sun's, respectively. At the same time this giant sun moves at far greater speed and in a far greater orbit than does the sun, which with its family of planets moves not less than 400 kilometers per minute.

And what astronomy tells us about the movement of other heavenly bodies is no less astonishing. For example, the six large stars of the Great Bear each year cover a distance equal to 9 1/2 times that between the earth and the sun, 20 million miles,

making a total trip of 190 million miles. Our astonishment is multiplied when we realize that these stars are racing through space in all possible directions and at different speeds. And how infinitely vast the universe is shown to us by the distances to the stars. The brightest star of the first magnitude in the southern hemisphere is also our nearest fixed star. Were we to travel there with the speed of a train (96 kilometers per hour) we would arrive in 48,663,000 years. The nearest fixed star in the northern hemisphere is 56 trillion kilometers distant, and Fugis, 160 trillion kilometers. But who can grasp the idea of a trillion? If you would count to three every second, you would have to count day and night for 10,000 years to reach a trillion. The distance from our solar system to the stars of the Great Bear is calculated to be 12 1/2 times the radius of the earth's orbit, which, in miles, is the number 25 followed by 13 zeros. It takes light 200 years to travel from that star to earth, so that the light we receive is 200 years old. (according to Steude a.a.D.)

What visions of cosmic vastness and exaltedness such descriptions present to the eyes of our souls! Our finite minds are at a standstill, they cannot grasp this reality. What is man compared to all of this? Ps. 8. A droplet in a full pail of water, a grain of sand on the vast, vast seashore. How great and how worthy of worship is the God who has created it, who sustains it and rules over it all. Anyone who truly contemplates the results of such scientific research and calculation should be as overawed as was one who upon seeing the ocean, cried: "How insignificant was I in this hymn of nature!"¹⁶ The sublime reality all around me overwhelms me. Tears start in my eyes and without knowing why I am weeping, I fall upon my knees! What is man? And Thou God art from eternity to eternity. Have mercy on me! Kepler closed his greatest work with the words: "I thank thee, my Creator, that Thou hast given me this joy in Thy creation and this delight in the work of Thy hands.

I have proclaimed the glory of creation to mankind insofar as my human intellect could grasp Thy infinitude. If I have said anything that is unworthy of Thee, in grace forgive me."

Commentary

Glen R. Klassen

Christian Neff's response to Ernst Haeckel on Evolution, 1901

Christian Neff (1863-1946) was a German Mennonite pastor who made significant contributions in all areas of Mennonite church life, especially so in published articles, being an associate editor of *Mennonitische Blätter* from 1891 to 1941.

At the time Neff wrote "*Die Naturwissenschaft und unser Glaube*" for *Mennonitische Blätter*, he was thirty-eight years old and fourteen years into his forty-five year tenure as pastor of the Weierhof Mennonite Church in the Palatinate. He had presumably just read Ernst Haeckel's latest best-seller, *Die Welträtzel (The Riddle of the Universe)* in which Haeckel spoke strongly against Christianity in the name of science. Neff informed himself on the astronomy of his day and used it to speak to the Church about science and to scientists about humility.

Ernst Haeckel was easily the most well-known and respected scientist in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century. In contemporary terms, he was Carl Sagan, Richard Dawkins, and Stephen J. Gould all rolled into one. He was addressed as "*Excelenz*", and each new book was a bestseller. He could claim a number of "firsts" in biology – he coined the word "phylogeny," he named many species of invertebrates, he "proved" that "ontology recapitulates phylogeny" and he initiated his own philosophy ("Monism") which boasted many followers.

Haeckel was an extremely gifted and hard-working zoologist at the University of Jena. After establishing himself as a formidable authority in zoology, he used his fame to speak loudly on a multitude of subjects both in academic and popular venues. He would often make pronouncements to support his theories whose only basis was found in his imagination. To support his idea that black people were more closely related to apes than white people he declared that black people had longer and more prehensile toes, just like tree-climbing monkeys. Even more reprehensible was his assertion that babies are born deaf. This was to support his idea that children and fetuses have less value than adults. Had he not had quite so much self-assurance, he could have asked Mrs. Haeckel whether this was really true. Haeckel's devaluation of children is consistent with the hypothesis that his writings were a major encouragement to the Nazis. This is still controversial (Daniel Gasman, *The Scientific Origins of National Socialism: Social Darwinism in Ernst Haeckel and the*



Ursa Major (Great Bear), constellation card engraved by Sidney Hall, first sold in 1824 and then sold with A Familiar Treatise on Astronomy by Jehosphaphat Aspin in 1825. Image credit: United States Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs division, digital ID cph.3g10058 [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

German Monist League, 1971, and Haeckel's Monism and the Birth of Fascist Ideology, 1998).

Haeckel enjoyed universal praise throughout his life, but unfortunately, his scientific legacy has been seriously compromised. His pet theory (ontology recapitulates phylogeny) is dead except for some very weak versions of it. Simply stated, this theory proposes that an embryo goes through (recapitulates) the species' evolutionary history as it develops (ontology) in the womb. We now know that the DNA in the fertilized egg is the same as that in every cell of the adult body. There is no evolution in the womb. Again, to prove his doomed theory, Haeckel went so far as to "enhance" his diagrams of embryos to support his idea.

Even Haeckel's understanding of Darwinism has been questioned. It seems that he was more a follower of Jean Lamarck than of Charles Darwin. Lamarckism proposed that changes to the body of an animal acquired during its life-time could be inherited by the next generation. Even though there is a new branch of biology (epigenetics) that is somewhat Lamarckian, Lamarck's mechanism as the main impetus for evolution lies in the dust-bin of the history of science. The application of Lamarckism to agriculture by Trofim Lysenko in the Soviet Union in the 1930s was a disaster for the country.

Except for his work in taxonomy (classification and naming of species), which earned him the highest award in the field (The Linnean Medal, 1894), Haeckel's lifelong self-confidence has been shown to be unwarranted. Little did Christian Neff

realize when he wrote his response to Haeckel's book, that this outstanding man of learning would indeed be sneered at in the next generation. Neff has been vindicated for seeing that the problem with the science of his day was its arrogance.

Neff's message to the Church was that science was not to be feared because it could make a positive contribution to faith. Neff had no time for the 'warfare between science and religion' model that was to dominate church-science relations for the next century, especially among conservative faith communities. Even Darwin's evolutionary theory was not a threat for Neff, and Darwin himself was held up as an example of scientific humility. Neff probably did not have a deep understanding of Darwinism and its bleak outlook, but neither did most of the great scientists of his day, including Haeckel and the overly optimistic Edmund Spencer in England. They invested evolution with a rosy glow of progress and purpose, a view drawn largely from the *Naturphilosophie* of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the German poet-scientist. Darwin himself did not harbor these illusions, but unlike Friedrich Nietzsche, he kept his despair largely to himself.

Neff's spirited foray into astronomy as seen through the eyes of faith could be dismissed as yet another naive presentation of the 'argument from design.' This approach was famously taken by Archdeacon William Paley before the Darwinian revolution but it is now assumed to have been banished from the arena by Darwin's 'natural selection.' But Neff, in his article, wisely avoids this form of the design argument. The wonders of astronomy do not prove to the skeptic that God must exist, but they are consistent with an exalted view of God as the creator and sustainer. For Neff the universe makes more sense if it is a creation, for only then can it be a satisfying object of the scientific quest.

Endnotes

1 The full text of Ernst Häckel's *Die Welträtzel* (The Riddle of the Universe) is available on-line at archive.org/details/riddleoftheunive034957mbp. English trans-



Christian Neff. Image credit: GAMEO.org



The Linnean Medal has been awarded to a botanist or zoologist by the Linnean Society of London since 1888. Photo credit: Public domain via Wikimedia Commons

lators insist on the singular form of the translated title even though *Die Welträzel* is plural and it is clear that Haeckel had more than one riddle in mind.

2 Neff interrupts his paper with his pet peeve: the confusion of Mennonites with Anabaptists. In 1913-14 he wrote three pamphlets making the point that Mennonites are not Anabaptists or Baptists, and certainly not Methodists. It is ironical that Harold Bender, the author of "The Anabaptist Vision," 1944, is also the author of Neff's biography on GAMEO.

3 Neff seems to be referring to the "Day-Age" interpretation of Genesis which was accepted by conservative scholars in the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth. This view accepted the old earth (as opposed to six literal days) and equated the days with geological eras. This interpretation has been abandoned by most contemporary evangelical biblical scholars because it imports science into the Bible unnecessarily and violates hermeneutical principles.

4 Sophocles, *Antigone*.

5 "*Ins innere der Natur dringt kein erschaffener Geist*" The poet was Albrecht von Haller, 1708-1777, a prominent botanist and poet of his day. He anticipated the *Naturphilosophie* of Schelling and Goethe.

6 The German word used here is *Stückwerk*.

7 I Cor. 13:9 (not an exact quote)

8 Most of these quandaries have been solved in the last century.

9 It is still true that we do not understand origin of life. The origin of *human* life may mean something else. We certainly understand a lot about the evolutionary origin of humans.

10 This is a pretty good summary of our failure to explain consciousness. However, this line of argument is vulnerable to "the God of the Gaps" error. As the gaps in our understanding are closed, God ceases to be relevant to nature. The point Neff is making is that we need to be humble in light of the limitations of science.

11 Actual quote from Newton: "*I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.*"

12 Actual diameter = 865,000 miles, circumference = 2,717,000 miles, surface area = 2,350,000 million square miles, volume = 339,000 trillion cubic miles, weight = 4.35 x 10exp30 lbs.

13 Diameter: 109 x earth, volume: 10,400,000 x earth.

14 Actual: 2500 days for earth, 743 years for the sun.

15 Actual: Moon is 238,000 miles away on average. Moon's orbit would still fall within sun.

16 "*Wie klein war ich in diesem Hymnus der Natur!*" Author unknown to me.

News

Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society unveils new cairn at Fort Dufferin

A new cairn commemorating the West Reserve settlement was unveiled at Fort Dufferin by the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society (MMHS). From 1874 to 1880, approximately 7,000 Mennonites came to Manitoba, mostly from Russia - the area now known as Ukraine. Some settled on the east side of the Red River near Steinbach while others settled on the west side passing through Fort Dufferin.

Almost 400 people gathered at Fort Dufferin near Emerson on Sunday, September 13, 2015 to relive the Mennonites settling on the West Reserve 140 years earlier.



(L-R) Conrad Stoesz - Vice Chair of MMHS, Abe Ens - Chair of WestMenn History Committee of MMHS, and Dick Remus - Past Chair of Post Road Heritage Group.

Photo Credit: steinbachonline.com

Executive Director Speaks to Low German Mennonites in Ontario

In October 2015, Plett Foundation Executive Director, Hans Werner made two presentations in southern Ontario to Low German speaking Mennonites addressing the question of why their ancestors left Ukraine to come to Canada in the 1870s. The presentations were in Aylmer and Leamington and were made in Low German.



Minister Franz Dyck offered an opening meditation at the Leamington Low German Treffen. Photo Credit: Menno Dueck.

Book Reviews

A Collected History: Mennonite Heritage Village

Roland M. Sawatzky and Andrea M. Dyck,
Steinbach, MB: Mennonite Heritage Village, 2014, 67 pages, softcover, \$20.00

The modest title of this engagingly written, beautifully designed book should not obscure the fact that it is a superb example of how a museum preserves a community's heritage. Organized to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Mennonite Heritage Village (MHV), *A Collected History* features a full-color photograph and interpretive description for 38 objects and activities that collectively reveal the story of Russian Mennonites who settled in Manitoba.

The co-authors, the former and current MHV curators, write that they will share this history "through the lens of material culture" (p. 7). By this Sawatzky and Dyck mean that they will tell the stories of faith, migration, and settlement through the things of everyday life. In *A Collected History*, everyday life includes three interdependent facets: artifacts, architecture, and activities. Artifacts range from an immigrant cradle of the 1870s (p. 35) to the 1890s safe of the *Waisenamit* community assistance organization (p. 41), and a 1970s replica of a *Brommtopp* used by Mennonite youth for New Year's Eve entertainment (pp. 42-43). Architecture at Mennonite Heritage Village includes historic buildings moved onto the museum grounds such as the Old Colony worship house of 1881 (pp. 12-13) and the Barkfield Public School of 1919 (pp. 48-49) as well as reconstructions such as the Windmill completed in 2001 (pp. 16-17) and the immigrant-style sod hut (*Semlin*) built in 1994 (p. 28). Activities begin with bread baking (p. 22) and milling (p. 25) and continue through the book to the final spread on Pioneer Days, the annual summer event that features many history-based demonstrations including threshing (pp. 60-61).

This deliberate coverage of artifacts, architecture, and activities is evidence of how Mennonite Heritage Village has integrated two distinct and often competing museum styles: object-based exhibitions versus the "living history" approach of reconstruction and reenactment. For over fifty years, MHV has been uniquely successful in balancing these approaches as it built an admirable reputation for preserving and interpreting the story of Russian Mennonites in Manitoba.

Yet *A Collected History* goes beyond the richness of these three organizing facets of Mennonite Heritage Village. Sawatzky and Dyck also chose to tell the story of the Chortitza Oak Tree planted from an acorn brought from the Chortitza



Colony in New Russia (p. 19) and to interpret the life-size sculpture "Grandma" created in 1997 by artist William Epp to honor the Mennonite women who came to Canada as refugees in the 1920s. By extending its collections to include the natural landscape and art, MHV has enhanced its ability to be a place where material culture serves as "touchstones of memory and meaning" (p. 7) so that we can more fully learn how the past has shaped us.

A message implicit in *A Collected History* is that the preservation of our heritage should be intentional: we need to collect material culture to more fully understand our community's story. Too often

history is told through documents of those with status and authority, or those who are the "winners" of social and political conflicts. Too often the things of everyday life are passed over in favor of the "valuable" or the "unique." But in this book Sawatzky and Dyck have selected both the elegant silk and lace dress worn in 1890s Russia by Maria (Toews) Heese (pp. 30-31) and the child's shoe discarded from the Blumenhof settlement (p. 34) to interpret the experiences of Russian Mennonite families.

Collecting and sharing the past inevitably rely on "dedicated volunteers" whom the co-authors acknowledge in the preface (p. 7) and who are featured in photos throughout the book. And sharing artifacts and traditions also depends on financial support such as the book's sponsors who are cleverly acknowledged with vintage photographs. We can all learn from things if objects, how they were used, and what they meant have been collected for us, and if they are made available to us in a community museum setting.

A Collected History is an attractive, affordable, and accessible souvenir—a keepsake of a visit to Mennonite Heritage Village, a token of shared traditions, and a reminder of a "goodly heritage" (Psalm 16:6).

Rachel K. Pannabecker
retired director, Kauffman Museum
North Newton, Kansas

The Steinbach Saga: The Story of the Vogt-Block Family & the Reimer-Wiebe Family

Erich Vogt,
Altona, MB: Friesens, 2013. Soft cover

For a small city on the Manitoba prairie, Steinbach has gained an extraordinary amount of fame or notoriety. It, or some approximation of it, is the subject of a best-selling novel (Miriam Toews' *A Complicated Kindness*), a play and poetry (Patrick Friesen's *The Shunning* and various of his poems), other works of fiction (Al Reimer's *When War Came to Kleindarp* and other short stories), several histories (Abe Warkentin's *Reflections on Our Heritage*; Gerald Wright's *Steinbach, Is There Any Place Like It?*; my own *Between Earth & Sky*), at least two book-length memoirs (Clint Toews' *In Search of My Father* and Elizabeth Reimer Bartel's *About Those Reimers*), many short nostalgic articles in publications like the *Mennonite Mirror*, occasional journalistic pieces in major news outlets.

Will the real Steinbach please stand up? Add to this list a family history by the late Erich Vogt, who went to Princeton and established a reputation as one of the foremost physicists in Canada. Vogt, who died in February of 2014 at the age of 84, was working on an extensive history of his own family and of the family of his wife, Barbara Greenfield, at the time of his death. He had in fact completed and self-published two separate volumes, one on the Vogts and one on the Greenfields, and intended to combine them in one large book, when illness and death interrupted his plans.

A segment of his Vogt family history can also be read as a history of Steinbach, seen through the eyes of one who lived there from his birth in 1929 to 1947 when he left to go to university. Although he surely returned to the town at intervals after leaving, there is a sense in which the period of his childhood and youth there remained frozen in time, and that "still life" Steinbach is portrayed in *The Steinbach Saga*. Those of us who grew up in the Steinbach of the 1950s and 1960s have still another portrait of the place, and it is fascinating to be introduced to this one, by a scientist-turned-historian.

The Vogt family were part of the first wave of post-Russian Revolution Mennonite immigrants to Canada, arriving in Steinbach in 1923. They were of the Schoenwiese Vogts; Schoenwiese was located directly across the Dnieper River from Chortitza. Erich's paternal grandfather was a fabrics merchant and a minister of his church and he and his wife, nee Aganetha Block, were well enough off to send their children to Germany to be educated. Erich's father Peter developed a passion for opera and an appreciation of good manners: "throughout his life he never understood sons who claimed to be professors but did not wear neckties."

Peter soon found employment in Steinbach in the K. Reimer Sons general store, which brought him into contact with



young Susanna Reimer, daughter of Jacob W. Reimer and granddaughter of the patriarch of the clan, the merchant Klaas Reimer. The marriage of Peter and Susanna was the first in Steinbach between a "Russian" immigrant and a "Canadian," and as such it attracted special attention. "The two groups," says Erich, "had great mutual disdain." Nevertheless, Susanna Reimer and Peter Vogt overcame their cultural differences: "this marriage between persons from the two contending sides worked."

Vogt's portrait of Steinbach is unapologetically nostalgic, and curiously critical of modernism for one who took

such a dynamic part in the modern world: "The quasi-medieval village in which I grew up has had a metamorphosis, through an agent called progress, from a beautiful butterfly into an ugly worm." The "butterfly" of 1930s-1940s Steinbach, inhabited by about one thousand villagers, was characterized by its Main Street, where Peter Vogt had his general store and the family resided. The unpaved street was traversed mainly by horses and pedestrians. In summer a bugler walked the length of the street early each morning, summoning the cows from the individual yards, on the way to the community pasture at the western edge of the village. Barefoot children ran along the hot wooden sidewalks, or in spring, got stuck in mud puddles. The creek, which ran behind the Vogt Economy Store, became swollen at spring thaw, carrying boys who poled along on make-shift wooden rafts. Traditional Mennonite house-barns still existed on many lots. The Vogt yard had two outhouses, one for store customers and the other for the family. They kept chickens and ducks and a pig for slaughter in the fall: "As a child I had no problem in accepting that the animals we kept were to be sacrificed following the commonplace practice of many centuries in almost all cultures."

As a boy, young Erich was an excellent student, as might be expected of one who was to become the founder of a national laboratory for particle and nuclear physics, and a recipient of the Order of Canada. But at home he was kept busy helping plant and weed and harvest in the large garden, or cutting endless piles of wood for fuel in winter. He recalls that the house was also kept warm by piling manure around the exterior foundations. "The manure was not a barrier which kept out rats or mice. While falling asleep I would be comforted by the sound of mice, and perhaps larger rodents, running through the walls of the house. My mother had a pioneering spirit and would attack rats with a broom."

Young Erich, like his older brother Ernest, helped out in his father's store. For religious reasons, the three established "Reimer" stores in Steinbach would not sell tobacco, an important commodity for many Mennonite farmers, and also for

nearby French Canadians and Ukrainians. “Thus there was a merchandising niche into which the Vogts could provide.” Vogt recounts homely details of the daily operation of his father’s Economy Store, which offered staples like flour and sugar, kerosene (for lamps), rings of garlic sausage, ammunition and tobacco:

The wooden floor was heavily oiled each week and swept often, because of the propensity of some customers to spit their chewing tobacco on the floor. This was an occupational hazard for store clerks.

Vogt gives warm honour to his conservative Mennonite heritage, but doesn’t hesitate to offer criticisms as well, exhibiting a clear bias for the liberal (Vogt) side of the family. At times he creates family mythology, as when he attributes the naming of Steinbach to his great-grandfather the merchant Klaas R. Reimer (1887-1906), for which there is no evidence that I know of. He goes so far as to lament the advent of antibiotics, which drastically reduced the death rate in the village: “Even as children we were often confronted with the sight of a dead neighbor or relative. This gave us a sense of the reality of death”

On the other hand, he’s not overly impressed with his ancestor, the founder of the Kleine Gemeinde, Klaas Reimer (1770-1837), other than Reimer’s formidable legacy of descendants, which Vogt estimates at around 12,000. For Vogt, the schism in the Mennonite church that occurred when the Kleine Gemeinde was founded had less to do with religion, and more

to do with “the quest for personal power and control.” While expressing great admiration for Kleine Gemeinde historian and apologist Delbert Plett, Vogt also accuses Plett of manifesting “no balance, perspective or critical thinking as a historian.” Had Delbert been alive to read these words, the result would no doubt have been a challenge to public debate. Both “debaters” now being dead, we are left to imagine how it would have turned out.

They would, however, have shared a dislike for the evangelical revivalists that heated up the religious atmosphere in the village in Vogt’s growing-up years: “These meetings, held in the barn-like Steinbach tabernacle, built for this purpose, had all of the charm and subtlety of the Nürenberg rallies conducted by Hitler.”

It is not an exaggeration to say that Erich Vogt was an intellectual genius. Of course Steinbach could not hold him—which small community could have? He left after graduating from high school in 1947, and made his mark in the larger world: “I wanted to leave the petty religion of the village of Steinbach and devote myself to a world of ideas.” But in his 80s, researching and writing this family history, he returned in his imagination to the place of his birth, and his great affection for that simple and unpretentious place is evident in this account.

The Steinbach Saga also is replete with photographs and extensive family trees of the Vogt-Block family and the Reimer-Wiebe family.

Ralph Friesen
Nelson, British Columbia

Von Mexiko nach Paraguay: Mexikanische Mennoniten finden in Paraguay ein neues Zuhause

(From Mexico to Paraguay - Mexican Mennonites find a new home in Paraguay)

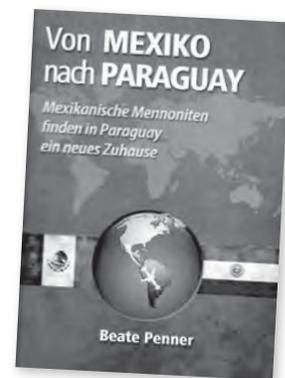
Beate Penner,
Asunción, Paraguay: Liberty Books, 2014, 28 pages, hard cover, \$44.95

The book *Von Mexiko nach Paraguay* came to be published thanks to the vision of a group of men from the Mennonite colony, Rio Verde, in eastern Paraguay. It begins to partially fill a large gap in the availability of historical material about the many Old Colony settlements in Central and South America, especially in Bolivia and, to some extent, in Mexico and Paraguay.

The author, Beate Penner of the Friesland Colony, but originally from Menno Colony, was commissioned by the group from Rio Verde Colony to write this history. The book is written in German. She begins her book with a short, clear, simply-written overview of the history of the Mennonites since the Reformation in the sixteenth century. This introduction begins with the Reformers and Menno Simons and his activities, and touches on the history of Mennonites in the Netherlands, Prussia, Russia, Canada, Mexico, Paraguay, and Bolivia.

In broad terms, Penner describes the emigration of Mennonites from Canada to Mexico and the Mennonite way of life in Mexico, including the various difficulties that Mennonites had to deal with in Mexico since their beginnings there in the 1920s. Within several decades the lack of good, inexpensive farmland for the next generation became a pressing issue. In addition to this, the repeated problems with squatters trying to occupy their lands led some Mennonites to look for a chance to migrate to another country. Renewals and changes within the colonies and communities in Mexico also influenced the decision to emigrate.

Penner provides a brief description of the founding of the colonies Rio Verde and Mexico in the jungle of eastern Paraguay and Mennonite life in both locations. The book also includes many personal contributions from some of the pioneers and citizens of the colony themselves, which give the book a special character. The text concludes with a description



of the migration of a group from Rio Verde to Bolivia in 1997, where they founded the El Tinto Colony.

The photos and brief captions that Penner has included in the book contribute to an easy understanding of the history of the Mexican Old Colony settlements in Paraguay, especially for a general audience, and also provide important information that is not covered in the text. Although it is not explicitly stated that the residents of Rio Verde are allowed to use rubber tires on their tractors and combines (unlike most Old Colony settlements in Paraguay and Bolivia), for example, this deviation from that general rule is clearly conveyed in the photos. In an appendix Penner also briefly describes another Old Colony settlement, the Manitoba Colony, established in 1982 in eastern Paraguay, as well as the Santa Clara Colony, established

by Sommerfelder in 1972. Nueva Durango, another Old Colony settlement in East Paraguay, is not mentioned in the book.

Although the book is published as a hardcover, the binding lacks quality. The cover is attractively designed, showing the flags of the two countries on either side of a globe depicting North and South America.

The book could (and should) be used as a manual for teachers, or even as a textbook in the Rio Verde colony, as well as in the many Old Colony schools in Paraguay, Bolivia and Mexico. This book should also have a place in the libraries of Mennonite churches, schools or colonies where German is still spoken.

Isbrandt Hiebert
Steinbach, Manitoba

The Outsiders' Gaze, Life and Labour on the Mennonite West Reserve, 1874-1922,

Jacob E. Peters, Adolf Ens, and Eleanor Chornoboy,
Winnipeg, MB: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2015. 198 pages, soft cover, \$30.00

Much has been written about Mennonites on the Mennonite West Reserve by Mennonites. In this book the editors have collected articles and other writings by outsiders which allow us to see their observations, impressions and views about Mennonites.

The book consists of 22 articles written by a variety of people. Another nine short articles provide additional perspectives on how outsiders viewed Mennonites. The book concludes with a map of the West Reserve Mennonite area.

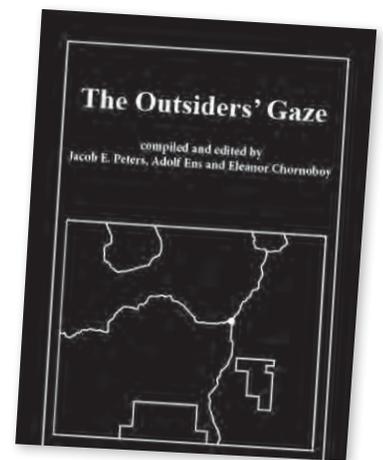
Who are these writers and authors? One report was written in 1901 by J. S. Woodsworth, at the time a Methodist minister, who wrote extensively, and accurately, about Mennonites, trying to dispel people's false impressions of these immigrants. Another article is by Fr. Jean-Theobald Bitsche, a French Catholic priest who was also fluent in German. In 1884, on his way from West Lynn near Emerson to St. Leon, his new parish, he passed through the Mennonite West Reserve and wrote his impressions of the inhabitants, noting differences and similarities with Catholics. An entry in the Acts and Proceedings of the Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1905 writes about mission work in the Plum Coulee and Winkler areas, and concludes, "Out of this work no permanent Presbyterian congregation can spring, but if spiritual life is deepened among these people, and some are led to Christ, the labour of our missionary will not have been in vain."

Other observations are by officials, for example by an RCMP officer, Victor Joseph St. George, stationed in the village of Reinland in 1890. His main function was to deal with smugglers from the USA, and while there made observations about the residents in the area. Philip Locke, the chief registrar of Manitoba, filed an official report after his meeting with Old Colony Mennonite leaders in February, 1918, in which Locke tried to convince Old Colony Mennonites to register in a national manpower registration drive by the Canadian government.

One of the scholarly articles by an outsider is written by J. F. Galbraith, who in 1900 published the book *The Mennonites in Manitoba 1875-1900*, in which he recounted their history, and described their communities. Another article is by the geographer Alexander McIntyre, who in his book *The Canadian West*, published in 1902, is effusive in his praise of Mennonites, stating that they "have made the settlements of Steinbach, Gretna, Rosenfeld, and Winkler among the most prosperous in the country."

Most of the writers selected in this volume viewed Mennonites positively. They commented about how quickly and well Mennonites had laid out attractive villages. They were favourably impressed with Mennonites' industriousness and with their ability to turn a wilderness into well-appointed farmyards and productive fields. Some, like the Russian Prince Kropotkin, after commenting favourably about the communitarian strength of the Mennonites in their village organizations, were critical of the Mennonites' lack of a good education system, and especially their lack of science education.

Writers also acknowledged that they were keenly aware of people who viewed Mennonites negatively, and many of their writings were designed to correct false impressions and misinformation about them, and provide a more accurate view of these valued immigrants. One might conclude from these comments that during the almost fifty years covered by this book, Mennonites were poorly understood by many, and often resented. Exactly why this was the case is not addressed by the writers. A few hint that the Mennonites' relative isolation from the larger society, and even from other immigrant groups, had resulted in a general lack of knowledge about them.



The book is interesting and informative. The editors have chosen a wide array of writings by people from different backgrounds and vocations. The book *The Outsiders' Gaze* makes a significant contribution to the understanding of Mennonites on the West Reserve during their first 50 years in Canada.

This volume is the seventh in the West Reserve Historical Series. The series is "devoted to producing original documents

and historical photographs, and publishing new research papers relating to life on the former Mennonite West Reserve of southern Manitoba." The editors of this series are to be congratulated for producing another fine addition to this series.

John J. Friesen
Winnipeg, Manitoba

Spanish Lookout Since 1958: Progress in Action

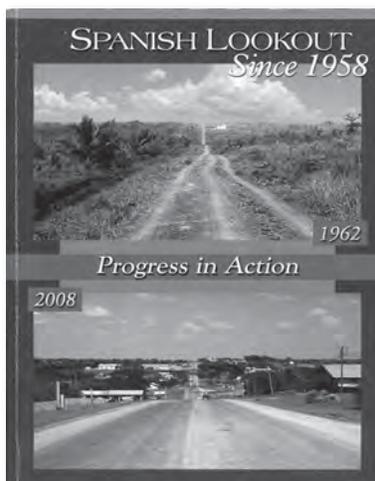
Heinrich D. Penner, John D. Reimer, and Leonard M. Reimer
Cayo, Belize: Spanish Lookout Colony, 2008. 234 pages, soft cover

This is a 50th anniversary volume on the history of a settlement of Mennonites in the Central American country of Belize. This Kleine Gemeinde church group had been living in northern Mexico in the Quellen Colony since 1948, when they left Manitoba. In 1958 75 families decided to emigrate to British Honduras (in 1981 called Belize). Their five decades of entrepreneurial energy has brought settled agriculture to Belize, where Mennonites in Spanish Lookout and elsewhere dominate agricultural production.

Most of the 86 authors of this collection lived during the times they describe. (Unfortunately only 5 authors are women.) Their first-person accounts are organized by subject matter into 30 chapters, with one of the chapters (pp. 172-231) consisting of images (ca. 360). None of the 30 chapter titles refers to religious beliefs, church organization, or God. Clearly such divine subject matter is assumed in an account of this massive communal effort; in the eyes of those who assembled this book, it appears that the church equaled the community and the community equaled the church.

Of course, the book lacks the kind of unity that one author could provide. (An earlier book in 1991, *Pioneer Years in Belize*, by Gerhard S. Koop, has more unity and fewer details than this volume.) Also, no documentation is given (except for 5 pages of typed letters, 167-171), especially problematic when many persons are describing the same events, which offers fertile ground for discrepancies. Also missing is a true index of persons, images, and subject matter. The section labelled "index" at the end is only an alphabetical list of article titles within the chapters—of limited usefulness. The reviewer encounters difficulty evaluating any comprehensive interpretation of these events, since the book, with 86 authors, provides no unified interpretation. One theme which does not receive an extended discussion is the Kleine Gemeinde relationship with the significant numbers of non-Kleine Gemeinde Latinos, who have been attracted by employment at Spanish Lookout. Also missing is a thorough account of those who left the Kleine Gemeinde and joined the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference.

The reader could fruitfully focus in many of the articles on the complex interplay of communal and private finances.



The amount of communal effort required to settle this humid jungle region is staggering. Purchasing 18,724 acres, surveying and selling and clearing the land—providing for roads, bridges, drinking water, water for crops, schools, churches, and health care—all out of nothing but the raw geography of Belize. This was not and is not a Hutterite-style economy; private enterprise also played a large role; individual families purchased acres from the community (p. 55) and many eventually created their own small businesses.

One receives a hint of the broad scope of Mennonite history in the letter (p. 107) written in 2001 by Menno and Mary Loewen to "Her Royal Highness, the Princess Anne" on

the occasion of the British royalty's visit to Belize. The personal deference and politeness of "your thankful subjects" reflects at least four centuries of Mennonites pleading to monarchs for special considerations to accommodate their communal and theological identities. Princess Anne receives an Anabaptist history lesson, beginning in Holland during the Reformation and continuing to Poland, Russia, Canada and Mexico. The Loewens assure Princess Anne that they are thankful for her mother, Queen Elizabeth, and that Mary Loewen in 1937 saw her grandparents, King George VI and Queen Mother Mary, in Winnipeg. On behalf of Spanish Lookout the Loewens "ask for forgiveness. . . if there have been failings," and they tell Princess Anne that their son-in-law Menno Penner was kidnapped and never returned. The Loewens liken their theological situation to the people of Israel, as described in Jeremiah 29: 4-7, where the exiled Israelites dig deep roots in a foreign land and "look for the prosperity of the country you live in. If the country prospers, you will prosper."

This book records in detail how this small diasporic Mennonite group has fashioned their own prosperity and created it for others in this Central American country. It will function as a kind of archival source for any subsequent interpretive writings about this fascinating story.

David Rempel Smucker
Winnipeg, Manitoba

Historical Atlas of the East Reserve: Illustrated

Ernie N. Braun and Glen R. Penner, eds.,
Winnipeg, MB: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2015. 256 pages, hardcover, \$50.00

The editors of this new atlas have heightened our sense of place for what was, and is, the Mennonite East Reserve in Manitoba. A pleasing blend of historical maps, images, text, and new maps makes both the past and the cultural and physical landscape of this part of Southeast Manitoba come alive. It has obviously been an all-consuming passion and it shows. The Atlas serves as both a reference and an aesthetically pleasing work. The Atlas will be a welcome addition to any coffee table and an important contribution to our understanding of Mennonite history, the history of the settlement of Manitoba, and the local history of a dynamic area of modern Manitoba.

The Mennonite East Reserve was a block of eight townships set aside in the 1870s for settlement by Mennonites from Russia. The northeastern corner of the reserve is approximately thirty kilometers south and slightly east of the City of Winnipeg. It is currently home to many Mennonites, but also a diverse population of other ethnicities and histories. The City of Steinbach, a former Mennonite village, now dominates, while the farms that inherited the landscape now grow grains and canola, and extensive hog, dairy, and poultry enterprises dot the landscape.

Braun and Klassen's *Atlas of the East Reserve* is organized into three main parts. The first fifty-five pages explore the context of the East Reserve. The editors briefly provide the geological and physical context, document indigenous people's presence in the area, early European contact and settlement, settlement after Manitoba joined confederation, the origin of Mennonites who came, and Metis, Ukrainian, and "English" neighbours. This section features a number of historic maps that in some way portray the context of the East Reserve. Included are reproductions of the maps of the Bergthal Colony area in Russia that were acquired by the late William Schroeder and launched him on a productive map making career. There are also newly created maps, depicting the origins and migrations of Russian Mennonites before they made the move to Manitoba. The authors also honor other predecessors, notably a foreword by John Warkentin whose 1950s research produced a dissertation that was subsequently published by the Hanover Historical Society, and a tribute to William Harms and John Rempel, who produced an earlier East Reserve Atlas.

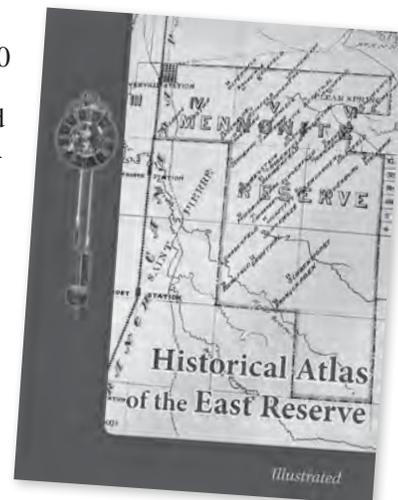
The main portion of the Atlas is taken up with detailed reconstructions of the eight townships that became the East Reserve. The first part of this reconstruction reviews the locations, establishment, and demise of the street villages (*Strassendorfer*) on the Reserve. The placement of villages is reviewed from some of the earliest maps by James Hamilton in 1876 to the current state of knowledge about how many and where Mennonite villages were established based on the authors' research. The eight townships of the Reserve are then featured on four maps for each. One map, created by the editors, documents the original homesteaders, location of villages, Hudson Bay Company lands and other noteworthy landmarks. The second map is a reproduction of the original township map created by the first surveyors that offers a glimpse of the landscape before Mennonites arrived. A third map, also created by the editors, uses colour to show the lands that belonged

to the various villages and the unoccupied parcels. A fourth map shows the locations of historic sites in the township. Interspersed with these standard views is a rich sprinkling of historic and new maps that tell a story unique to that township. Each township section also features an aerial photograph dating from the 1940s.

The final section of the Atlas delves into areas not generally seen in earlier historical geography of the East Reserve. Not everyone was enamored with the agricultural potential they saw for the lands on the designated eight townships and the Reserve has had intermittent out-migration for these and other reasons. Some settled immediately near present-day Morris on the Scratching River Reserve. Others migrated within a few years of settlement to make their homes around Altona on the West Reserve, which was opened to Mennonite settlement in 1875. By 1890 settlement spilled over the boundaries of the East Reserve into nearby townships, while others sought their futures in California, Oregon, Texas, the Dakotas, Minnesota, Rosthern, Didsbury and Swift Current. The difficulties of the school question after World War I led to migrations even further from the Reserve to establish the Menno Colony in the Chaco of Paraguay. Still others moved to Mexico after the Second World War, or to other places in Manitoba or the Clay Belt of Northern Ontario. Each of these migrations is concisely documented with new maps and engaging text. In an appendix the ever changing political boundaries that had an impact on the East Reserve are carefully documented.

The main strength of the Atlas is its careful attention to geographic detail. It is astonishing how much detail the editors have been able to seek out to add to the maps and text. We learn about the intricacies of the Ridge Road, the *Koagels* of Alt Bergfeld, and the details of the various trails that predate the road system of today. Many more examples could be given. The requirement to document these details carefully has in some sense also come with the price of not being able to do other things. The Atlas does not feature many thematic maps that could offer a clearer window on how the East Reserve changed in the rhythm of time in areas such as religious development, or changing land use patterns. While one can ferret out some of these developments they are not generally the focus of the maps that have been created. To point out such wishes is only to highlight how important this atlas is. It remains a monumental collection of maps and the stories they tell and will serve its readers well for many years to come.

Hans Werner
Winnipeg, Manitoba



Contributors:

Rosabel Fast - RFast@edu.yorku.ca

David Friesen - dady@mymts.net

John J. Friesen - djfriesen1@shaw.ca

Ralph Friesen - prfriesen@shaw.ca

Kennert Giesbrecht - kennertgiesbrecht@mennpost.org

Ivan Carroll Janer - bhaktivan@yahoo.com

Mark Jantzen - mjantzen@bethelks.edu

Glen R. Klassen - grklassen@gmail.com

Abraham B. Peters

Eddy K. Plett

Ron and Judy Plett

Peter Rempel

Robyn Sneath - robynsneath@gmail.com

David Toews - dmtoews@gmail.com

Hans Werner - h.werner@uwinnipeg.ca

Bruce Wiebe - fraunzwieb@hotmail.com

D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation, Inc.

2015-2016 Board of Directors

Royden Loewen, Steinbach, MB, chair

John J. Friesen, Winnipeg, MB, vice chair,
and co-editor of *Preservings*

Kennert Giesbrecht, Steinbach, MB,
secretary treasurer

Leonard Doell, Aberdeen, SK

Ralph Friesen, Nelson, BC

Abe Rempel, Winkler, MB

Kerry Fast, Toronto, ON

Hans Werner, Executive Director of the
D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation, Inc,
and co-editor of *Preservings*

Andrea Dyck, Executive Assistant

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

or

John J. Friesen, telephone: (204) 488-8128
or email: djfriesen1@shaw.ca

Subscription Form

I wish to subscribe to *Preservings* for

- the year 2016 (issue 36) \$20.00 _____

- the year 2017 (issue 37) \$20.00 _____

Total: _____

Please make cheques out to the D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation and mail to:

D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation,
University of Winnipeg, 515 Portage Ave., Winnipeg Manitoba, R3B 2E9.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Foundation News

Plett Foundation Funds Preservation of Major Church Records

The Plett Foundation recently provided grants to assist in the preservation of important collections of records from two Manitoba church conferences. The grants were provided to the Mennonite Heritage Centre to assist in bringing to the archives the records of the EMC (Evangelical Mennonite Church) (*Kleine Gemeinde*) and CMC (Christian Mennonite Conference, formerly Chortitzer Mennonite Church). A major find in the boxes in the CMC church basement was the Department of Agriculture document, known in German as the *Privilegium*. It outlined the privileges promised in 1873 to a delegation of Mennonites representing multiple groups in Europe. It outlined military exemption, a fixed quantity of land per male and the freedom to operate schools outside state oversight. “The original invitation from the government of Canada to the Mennonites — that was in our basement, along with a German version of it, original and stamped,” said CMC bishop Dave Reimer. “Even the historians here didn’t know there was a German equivalent.” The collection also includes records from the migration to Paraguay in the 1920s and a German sermon that predates the migration to Canada in the 1870s. The Foundation also provided funds to assist with the transfer to the Mennonite Heritage Centre of 383 boxes of records from the EMC Church. The grant also provided funds to hire a contract archivist to write archival descriptions that will make these records accessible to researchers.



From left, Ernest Braun, Conrad Stoesz and Jac Doerksen look at a document from the early 19th century at the Christian Mennonite Conference office in Steinbach, Man. Photo Credit: Dave Reimer/CMC

2015-2016 Plett Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship Recipient: Aileen Friesen

Dr. Aileen Friesen has been selected as this year’s recipient of the D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation’s Postdoctoral Fellowship. The fellowship is intended to encourage new scholars who are pursuing research in the history of the forerunners and descendants of the 1870s Mennonite migrants to Manitoba. Most recently, from 2013-2015, Friesen was a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Postdoctoral Fellow at the Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She brings a rich background in exploring Russian religious history generally, and Russian Mennonite religious life more specifically, at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.

Friesen’s project, entitled “In the Opposite Direction: Russian Mennonite Migration to the West and East,” focuses on Mennonite migrations into Russia in the 1780s, out of Russia in the 1870s, and within Russia in the 1890s. While the theme of migration features heavily in many scholarly works on Russian Mennonites, Friesen argues that the concept of “mobility,” which has not been studied in the case of Russian Mennonites, can introduce a new way of understanding both how and why Mennonite migration unfolded as it did during the second half of the nineteenth century. In addition, Friesen notes, that studies of these different Russian Mennonite migrations “exist in isolation from each other, which has limited their contribution to broader questions of the structures that enabled Mennonites to move, [...] the meaning they ascribed to movement, and how Mennonites fit into the larger story of mobility under Russian authorities.” The project will explore German and Russian language sources from archives in Odessa, St. Petersburg, Zaporizhzhia, and Winnipeg.



Aileen Friesen is the 2015-16 Plett Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow.

