

Preservings

ISSUE NUMBER 40, 2020



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A JOURNAL OF THE
D. F. PLETT HISTORICAL
RESEARCH FOUNDATION, INC.

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Preservings is published semi-annually.
The suggested contribution is \$20.00 per year.
Cheques should be made out to the
D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation.

MISSION

To inform our readers about the history of
the Mennonites who came to Manitoba in the
1870s and their descendants, and in particular
to promote a respectful understanding and
appreciation of the contributions made by
so-called Low German-speaking conservative
Mennonite groups of the Americas.

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COVER IMAGE

"Railroad Bridge in Einlage" by Henry Pauls,
located at the Mennonite Heritage
Archives in Winnipeg.

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FROM THE EDITOR

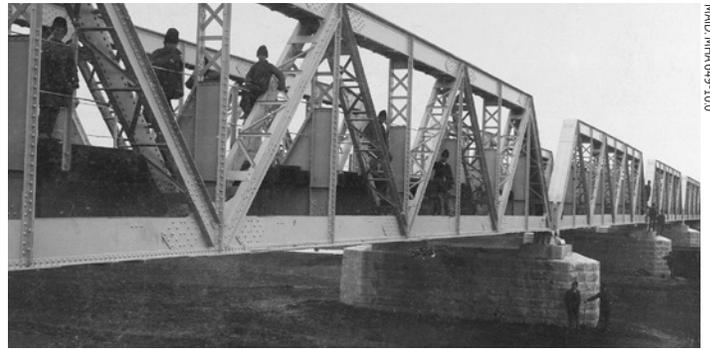
Aileen Friesen

Welcome to the first summer issue of *Preservings* in over a decade. After our abnormal spring, perhaps engaging with our history is exactly what is needed, as we reflect on the values and principles that matter most to us as individuals and communities. Lately, I've been thinking about how much we take for granted the movement of people and goods. Experiencing limited travel options and shortages on grocery shelves serves as a reminder that abundance is not guaranteed and that trains, planes, and trucks move more than just goods and people. Movement often makes possible the lives we wish to live, and moments of immobility allow us to ponder those aspirations.

Movement has been a defining theme in Mennonite history, and since the second half of the nineteenth century trains have performed an essential role in this story. As the last issue of *Preservings* showed, the railway shaped Mennonite life on the prairies, changing the fortunes of individuals and towns and altering the values of their communities. This current issue extends the conversation by tackling the global context. While we see some of the same themes, particularly related to economic development, the examples of Paraguay, Mexico, and Russia show how railways can help us to understand themes of entrepreneurship, collective memory, and dependency in Mennonite history.

Two of these encounters with the railway emerge out of the exodus of Mennonites to Latin America in the 1920s. We are approaching the centennial of this historic event, in which thousands of Mennonites responded to the nation-building policies of the Canadian government by leaving for new places where specific privileges related to their communities would be protected. It is interesting to think about the role of the railway in facilitating the movement of Mennonites as they spread across the region, and in connecting these newly established communities with agricultural markets.

Mexico served as the initial entry point of Mennonites into Latin America. In this issue, Patricia Islas Salinas and María Miriam Lozano Muñoz describe how Mennonites remembered the train ride that brought them to Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua, Mexico, in the 1920s. This article focuses on how the emotion of the journey solidified into collective memories for the community, which were passed down to subsequent generations. The difficulties encountered both on the train ride and after their arrival would be used to support a collective narrative of the community's perseverance and commitment to their beliefs.



MARDI MHA 649-100

The Tokmak Railroad crossed over the Molochna (Molotschna) River.

The railway also performed an important role during the migration of Mennonites to Paraguay's Gran Chaco. The picture that introduces this article, a desolate railway winding into nowhere, in many ways represents the establishment of Menno Colony in this region. As Burt Klassen Kehler demonstrates, from the outset of their negotiations with the Paraguayan government, Mennonites viewed the construction of a railway as essential to their economic survival. Even though they had left Canada, their goal was not to flee from the world, but to limit its interference in their lives. Yet, as Kehler shows, Mennonites were dependent on others. Despite their strong desire for the railway, without money and connections, the ability of Mennonites to influence its construction was limited. The issue of transportation routes plagued the community for decades, shaping how they interacted with their new homeland.

In contrast, as Conrad Stoesz demonstrates, Mennonites brought an entrepreneurial spirit to the railway cause in Russia. As the example of Johann Wall attests, prosperous Mennonites took advantage of the construction boom of the early twentieth century, benefiting financially from the expansion of the railway across the empire. The photographs for this article are especially fascinating, as they depict the material and cultural fruits of railway construction as beautified train stations became community spaces beyond those of churches and schools, where people could seek out entertainment, excitement, and adventure. These new secular social spaces created by the railway have often been overlooked in Mennonite history in favour of themes of town-planning and access to markets. But they are no less important for understanding how the railway transformed Mennonite community life.



THE CASADO RAILWAY

Mennonites in the Chaco

Burt Klassen Kehler

In 1921, the President of Paraguay posed a question to the Mennonite land investigators after they had returned to Asunción from the Chaco: "...What do you think, will your people come to the Chaco to settle?" They responded: "... We believe they will come provided the railway is built up to the settlement area..."¹

FRED ENGEN

Tensions arising with the Canadian government during the First World War encouraged some Mennonites from Manitoba and Saskatchewan to explore the possibility of settlement in Mexico and South America. Initially, within South America, they focused their attention on the countries of Argentina and Brazil; however, these states would not grant their requested privileges. In contrast, the Paraguayan government offered to grant the Mennonites all their requested privileges. In 1919 Fred Engen, an American with Norwegian roots who had tried his luck being a farmer and as an agent but had not registered a lot of success in either of these endeavours, came in contact with Mennonites in North America and fell in love with their principle of pacifism. In that same year, Engen travelled to Paraguay on behalf of the Mennonite migration project. During this trip a number of people tried to talk him out of his ambitious adventure into

the Chaco, telling him that he would not make it. But Engen was a stubborn man. He planned on exploring settlement options for the Mennonites on that white spot on the map of Paraguay: the Chaco. As he deposited his money in the bank in Asunción before taking a ship to Puerto Casado, the bankers in Asunción tried to convince him not to make that trip into the ill-reputed Chaco region, known as the "green hell." They assured him that he would never survive such an adventure. But Engen entered the Chaco accompanied only by some Toba Indians on the back of a few mules. It is said that Engen went during the best time of the year for seeing the natural beauty of the Chaco. They traveled until they found wonderful lands, which in Engen's eyes, were ideal for Mennonite settlers to engage in wheat production. A month after he started his journey, Engen was back in Asunción. His first act was to send a telegram to Samuel McRoberts, who had taken an interest in Mennonite settlement in Paraguay. Its content was short but convincing, stating: "I found the promised land."

CARLOS CASADO DEL ALISAL

The land where the Mennonites intended to settle was owned by Carlos Casado del Alisal. To understand the magnitude of properties or estates that Casado owned, it is important to dig into

the background of his company: The S. A. Carlos Casado Ltd. After the War of the Triple Alliance (fought between Paraguay and the alliance of Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay from 1864 to 1870), the land and population of Paraguay was devastated. Rebuilding the country from the ground up was one of the first things that had to be done. The first obstacle was finances. Estates, however, were one of the few ways that Paraguay could raise money. Since Paraguay had many estates, the government created laws that opened the doors to investors who intended to buy huge amounts of estates.

Carlos Casado del Alisal was one of those investors. Born in Villada, Palencia (Spain), Carlos Casado was different than lots of Spaniards. He was one of the few Spanish immigrants who knew how to make his 'south American dream' come true. Before he bought his estate in the Paraguayan Chaco, he founded a bank, built up a railway, and contributed to the beginning of wheat production in the Rosario area in Argentina (he is considered one of the pioneers of wheat production in the southern hemisphere). The estate he acquired in the Chaco was estimated to be 7,500,000 hectares (approximately 18,700,000 acres), which equals the surface of the Netherlands. It reached from the Paraguay River through to the Pilcomayo River. The main target was the exploitation of tannin, that was taken from the hard woods of the 'quebracho colorado' – *Schinopsis balansae*. For that

¹A railroad line extending from Puerto Casado toward the Mennonite settlement through the Chaco bush. Despite the promises received by the Mennonites, the line would not reach their settlement.



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In 1919, Fred Engen (second from the right), performed an important role in helping Mennonites to settle in Paraguay.

reason, he founded the city of Puerto Casado, built the tannin industry (an export product), and developed a railway on his estate. In a productive year, the trains of Casado would transport up to 70,000 quebracho logs from the interior of the Chaco to the tannin industry in Puerto Casado.

MENNONITES FROM CANADA

In 1921, the first delegation of Mennonites was designated to inspect the land sought out by Engen and McRoberts. This land had to be acquired from the S. A. Carlos Casado company which owned the territories. The delegation consisted of six men, including Jakob Dörksen from the Chortitza Church, Bernhard Töws, and Isaak Funk from the Sommerfeld Church (both churches from Manitoba), the ministers Jakob Neufeld and Johann Friesen from the Saskatchewan churches of Rosthern, and the so called “Mennonite lawyer,” Johann Priesz, from Altona in Manitoba.

Bernhard Töws wrote about this trip in his diary, explaining in detail why the Casado company, the land, and local

infrastructure appeared as a paradise for Mennonite settlers. He wrote that Casado brought them to the port of Puerto Casado on his private ship, and even gave the delegates private cabins. Töws described the schools of the city, and all the reasons why Paraguay would be a good fit for Canadian settlers.

When the Mennonite delegation started their adventurous journey into the Chaco wilderness, they had the advantage, in comparison to Engen’s trip, that they could use Casado’s railway for the first 60 kilometres. Of course, this was not a normal railway like those found in Canada. The railways in Argentina and Paraguay were normally built on the estates of the tannin magnates in the Chaco region. Typically, they started at a port on the banks of a river and entered into the almost unlimited surface of the owners’ land. These railways were so called ‘narrow gauge railways’ meaning that they have a narrow width in comparison to the ‘standard gauge railway.’ But this small train and the railway of the Casado Company turned out to be a lifesaver for Mennonites arriving from

Canada. The significance of the railway can be summarized as follows: it was a necessary condition to make Mennonite colonies feasible; it was the only means by which the settlements were connected with the outside world; it was the only way of supplying the colonies; it was the means for the sale and transport of agricultural products to the markets; and it offered employment for the settlers.

LAPSES IN CONSTRUCTION

The contract for the Mennonite Chaco land deal concluded between the American settlement company, the Intercontinental Company (founded by Samuel McRoberts and responsible for moving the Mennonite settlers from Manitoba and Saskatchewan to the Paraguayan Chaco), and the Casado Company included the construction of a railway up to the settlement area. It was clear and self-evident that if a settlement in the distant interior of the wilderness was to emerge, a railway had to be in place. However, this railway became a complicated affair in the prospective colonization of the Chaco. The American company was

responsible for the emergence and the initial development of the settlement; the Casado Company in return, was responsible for the extension of the railway to the colony. Once the Chaco became the targeted destination of the settlers, the only option was to migrate into its interior, approximately 170–180 kilometres from the Paraguay River, as this land was better suited for agriculture.

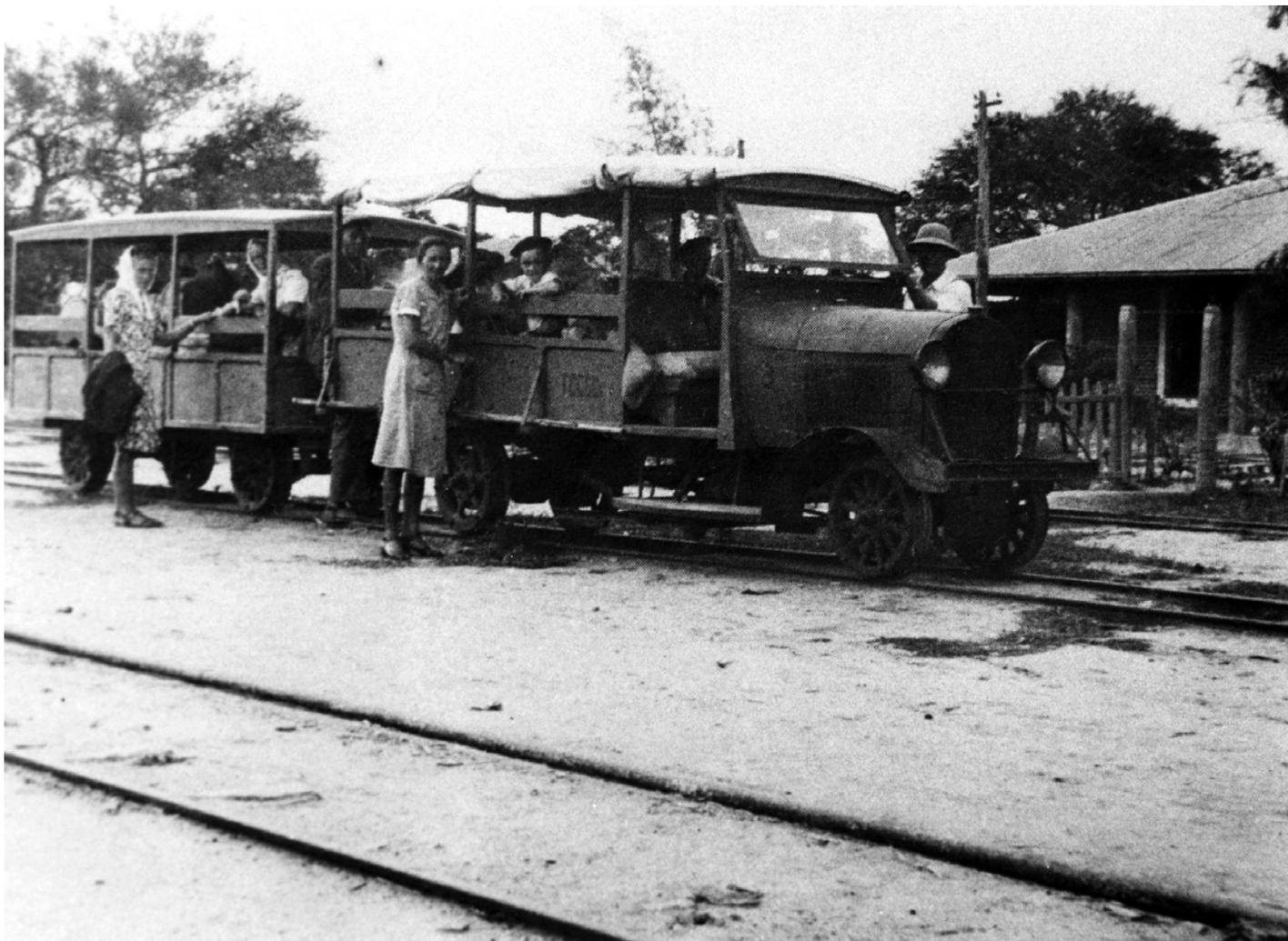
During 1927 approximately 1743 Mennonites arrived in Puerto Casado from Canada. By that time, they already wanted to settle on their farms but the surveying of the estates had not been completed. Instead they had to live in camps in Puerto Casado for 16 months. Initially, six families departed into the wilderness on 12 February 1927. In 1921 when the Mennonite delegation came to visit the Chaco the railway went until the kilometres 60 mark and they requested that

it should be extended until the location of their proposed settlement site. One can imagine the disappointment when these families travelled into the wilderness and could only go by train for 77 kilometres until the railway ended at a point called 'Pirisal'. From that spot they had to travel another 100 kilometres on wagons pulled by oxen.

The most remarkable extension of the railway was made between 1927 to 1928. A total of 58 kilometres of railway was built during this time. That was in large part due to the work of the 'Corporación Paraguaya' (the name adopted by the Intercontinental company in Paraguay). The total length by that time was 135 kilometres of railway. But negotiations with the Casado Company to extend the railway faster did not succeed. On 18 December 1926, Mr. J. C. Marsh, an appointee of the North American settle-

ment company in Asunción, wrote the following report home: "The railway is part of the tannin factory operation. The Casado Company builds the railway where most of the Quebracho trees are found. So, if this tendency persists, the result will be that the railway will not get to be near the settlement area. We want to negotiate about this with the Casado Company. Before we make the second payment for the land purchase and before the Mennonites select their land for settlement, it must be clear that the railway is [to be] built up to the settlement area... if the distance from the Paraguay River does not exceed 200 kilometres. The Casado Company will certainly be prepared to cooperate provided it can be assumed with certainty that the settlement will take place..."²

However, the Casado Company did not cooperate as the railway's direction did not



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The railway of the Casado Company turned out to be a lifesaver for early Mennonite settlers.



Despite problems with transportation, Mennonites would establish farming communities in the Chaco.



Mennonite farmers that wanted to sell their products had to travel significant distances to get to the train station.

point to the Chaco settlements anymore. Instead it pointed to the richer quebracho woods. In 1929 the railway concluded at Kilometre 145 (later followed a short extension to Kilometre 160 for the purpose of the Chaco war that did not bring the settlers any advantage). At kilometre 145 a train station was built. This train station was the only gate to the exterior. Despite the fact that the 'Corporación Paraguaya' had made contracts and paid in advance so that the railway would be built faster, nothing could make the Casado Company finish the railway all the way to the settlements. The following report by Alfred A. Rogers, the director of 'Corporación Paraguaya', confirms these intentions "... The railway extended into the Chaco wilderness is built as quickly as Paraguayan conditions allow. We have concluded a new contract with the Casado Company... Now, the Casado Company receives a payment whenever it has pushed the track forward a distance of 15 kilometres. The earlier contract provided for

one payment once a year. The new payment will speed up construction..."³ In reality, nothing sped up the construction of the railway to the settlements, which made settling into the interior of the Chaco almost impossible.

TRANSPORTATION ODYSSEY

Farmers that wanted to sell their products had to transport them by ox-wagons (at a rate of 3–4 kilometres per hour) to the train station. A wagon could normally carry 800–1200 kilograms and every wagon that went to the station was obligated to bring flour back to the villages. The difficulty of transportation in the Chaco can be demonstrated with the following examples. In October 1928, the co-director of the Corporación Paraguaya, Rodney N. Landreth, wrote from Paraguay to his superiors in the United States the following concern: "... We are having enormous problems with transportation in the Chaco. This particular issue has slowed the progress of

the villages. Every month around 300 bags of flour have to be transported from the train station because the fields don't produce enough food for the families. This trip from the villages to the train station takes around a week of time with wagons of oxen if everything goes well; if it's rainy it can take up to two entire weeks. In some cases, we've had villages where half of the oxen existing in them couldn't work the land due to exhaustion..."⁴ The distance from the villages to the train station was around 70 to 75 kilometres, depending on where the village was located. The other fact that made this task so difficult was that the boys who actually should work the land, had to travel to get the vital flour for the families. According to Peter K. Kauenhowen, a village could send its boys on 36 occasions to the station. Based on that, you can estimate how many weeks they were not home.

It was not only the time it took to get flour from the train station that contributed to the early hardships for Mennonites



The conditions of transportation were so bad that even MCC offered to help extend the railway.

in Paraguay. For Mennonites travelling to Asunción, it took a significant amount of time to get to the capital of Paraguay and back. To travel from the villages to the train station took approximately 1 to 4 days. From there Mennonites had to travel a day to Puerto Casado and then another 1 to 2 days to arrive in Asunción. Abram W. Hiebert, a businessman who traveled back and forth between the villages and Asunción to negotiate business contracts for the Menno Colony, shared that due to a number of setbacks (which were also not out of the ordinary), one of his trips took a little longer than normal. This time his trip to Asunción and back took three weeks and because communications were so meager, when he arrived back home he was told that his son had become sick, died, and was buried while he was travelling.⁵

Abram U. Kehler, who settled in the region, described the difficulties faced by Mennonites without railway access. He gave his anecdote the title, ‘The problem with the beans’: “We had harvested

three bags of beans and had bought flour and fabrics for the family on credit at Mr. Krahn’s store in Reinland. We transported them to the train station kilometres 145 where Mr. Troxler, the administrator, bought some and rejected the rest, telling us that they were full of bugs. We couldn’t leave before we received flour for the villages which had to arrive from Puerto Casado, so we had to wait for three entire days. So, I hired some Indians to help me sort out the good beans from the bad ones. Suddenly Mr. Troxler passed by seeing what we were doing. He said they weren’t as bad as he had thought and took them all.”⁶

It would take at least three decades before this issue could be solved. The conditions of transportation were so bad that even the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) at one point offered to help in a project to extend the railway. They helped to improve the road from the train station to the settlements in the decades of 1940 and 1950 by sending machines and technical support. In 1950 during

a session between the leaders of Menno Colony (called Sommerfeld by then) and two men from MCC, Cornelius J. Dyck and Cornelius P. Lohrenz, MCC revealed that it was willing to provide \$5000 for the railway extension.⁷ The Casado Company, once again, was willing to take over construction. But the project never progressed; nonetheless, a little light of hope started to shine with a proposal to construct the Transchaco Highway. It took, however, until 1961 for this highway, which connects Loma Plata, Neuland and Fernheim (Mennonite colonies) with the rest of Paraguay, to be completed. The odyssey had finally ended!

1 Martin W. Friesen, *New Homeland in the Chaco Wilderness* (Loma Plata: Historical Committee of the Menno Colony, 2009), 211.

2 *Ibid.*, 212.

3 *Ibid.*, 215.

4 *Ibid.*, 444. Translated by the author.

5 Gerhard Ratzlaff, *Die Ruta Transchaco: wie sie entstand* (Asunción: [s.n.], 1998), 39. Translated by the author.

6 Letter from Abram U. Kehler, translated by the author.

7 Protocol of a session of the Chortitzer Komitee dated 22 June 1950. Translated by the author.

HOPES AND DREAMS ON THE RAILWAYS

Mennonites in Mexico

Patricia Islas Salinas & María Miriam Lozano Muñoz

Translated by Abigail Carl-Klassen

The story of Mennonites as an ethno-religious minority group in Mexico began 8 March 1922 when they decided to migrate from Canada to Mexico. From the moment they arrived, children who were born in Mexico obtained birthright citizenship; however, upon their arrival, the Mennonites decided not to allow their members to integrate into the dominant Mestizo community, as they believed that their customs and beliefs would be affected.

In order to protect their identity, they remained isolated from the dominant community, not just geographically, but also ideologically. In this way, their dress, language, customs, and beliefs were passed from generation to generation, creating a group with a deeply rooted cultural identity that can be observed to this day in Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua, Mexico. In the nearly one hundred years since their arrival, many generations have been born and raised in this multi-cultural region that has experienced joy and great achievements as well as suffering setbacks and hardships.

Today their lifestyle is shaped by precepts and convictions that have their

Mennonites wait at the station in Hague, Saskatchewan, to board the trains that would take them to Mexico.



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origin in the beginning of their religious movement, which later became an ethno-cultural group. The community of Mennonites in Mexico has its own characteristics that make it special and unique in the world. In the case of traditional (or conservative) communities, members conserve their customs (lifestyle and original dress), language (the majority of women, children, and the elderly only speak *Plautdietsch* or Low German) and their primary activity is subsistence agriculture. In the case of liberal Mennonites, many of them can speak at least three languages – Spanish, English, and German – in addition to *Plautdietsch*, their dress is modern, and their economic activities are related to commerce, agrobusiness, and large-scale agriculture.

This article discusses the journey of Mennonite migrants from Canada to Mexico through testimonies collected through oral history. Additional testimonies collected from two books published by the State of Chihuahua and translations (German to Spanish) of the personal diaries of the first Mennonite minister in Cuauhtémoc, Isaak Dyck, were used in this research.

Through our analysis of these collected materials, we argue that the train is a social space that allowed for the negotiation of spaces by Mennonites who created meaning and symbolic representations of themselves through their migration. In this way, they not only brought their building materials, their animals, and their food on these train cars, but also their hopes and dreams and the possibility for a promising future.

THE JOURNEY

During their history, Mennonites developed a close relationship with railways as trains became an important mode of transportation to travel from one country to another. In this article, only the exodus from Canada to Mexico will be discussed. Railways were the most important bridge of communication between the Mennonites' isolated communities and the cities which provided the necessary tools and materials for their agricultural work and daily life. Paradoxically, it was

the railways that caused the communities to leave their isolation, facilitating commercial and economic relationships.¹

The train – its cars and rails – constituted an important part in the story of the Mennonites. Not only did this mode of transportation allow Mennonites to make a new beginning and preserve themselves as a group, but the rail cars were also transformed into a social space that created layers of meaning between travelers. Togetherness fostered unity and camaraderie between travelers. The train cars had become their homes; the mothers cooked and cared for the children, the fathers made relationships and plans for their arrival, and the children laughed and played in the aisles. This was how a network of social relationships was created between families, touched by pain, fear, laughter, and hope. Social theorists would argue that the prominence of the journey in Mennonites' collective memory indicates the significance of this experience to the group.²

The Ältester (bishop) Isaak M. Dyck described the journey from Canada to Mexico in a published memoir. His narrative reveals the emotions experienced by the migrating group, including the collective pain of leaving home. Yet emigration was also an expression of faith, and as Dyck relates, "One night before their departure, the community gathered to have a service and put themselves in the hands of God."³

On the day of the departure, many friends and acquaintances met at the train station to say goodbye to those who were leaving. Families were separated, friends were left behind, and the security of food and shelter was abandoned in defense of their way of life. As Dyck remembered, "We left quiet and calm without much talking, saying a prayer for the journey, looking back at how our dear Manitoba disappeared along with the property we had left unsold."⁴

When the train crossed the border with the United States, it gained speed. The first night very few people could sleep, because of the goodbyes that still weighed on their hearts. The hours passed and the deafening sound of the train running on



the tracks and the speed that it reached made the women and children cry in anguish, as they were afraid for their lives. As Dyck recounted: "When we went to talk to the conductor to tell him he should not go so fast because he could cause an accident that would end throwing us and the animals out on the tracks, he answered that the train was not our responsibility and that there was a bet between the railway companies in the United States to see which would have the honor and victory of getting us to Mexico in the shortest time. The only thing left was to pray that we arrived ok."⁵



Before Mennonites migrated to Mexico, they sent a delegation to inspect the land. This photograph is from that trip.

THE ARRIVAL

The migrants arrived at the border with Mexico four days after their departure. They experienced fear and uncertainty as they observed Mexican people, “with their dark faces,” surrounding the train. Hundreds of curious people drew close to observe the Mennonites who looked so different from themselves. “Before the train departed, twenty soldiers got on, armed to the teeth, and walked amongst us. It was customary in Mexico for them to patrol the train to avoid attacks, but at first, we were very afraid. Women and children looked at the soldiers terrorized,

hiding their faces and crying, but they were friendly and we got used to the new company and we understood that they would take care of us.”⁶

Upon seeing the inhospitable landscape from the windows of the train, their hearts raced as they felt disillusioned and started to believe that the decision to travel to Mexico was an error. After one day and one night of travelling, they arrived in the capital of Chihuahua, where they had more encounters that increased their pain and worries. First, the railway men had divided the train into two parts, which worried the Mennonites. When they

asked for an explanation, the railway men explained that from this point onward to San Antonio de los Arenales, there were tall hills and deep valleys and very long bridges and that it was impossible for a single locomotive to pull the entire train. They assigned the first cars to people and animals; household goods and cargo went in the other cars. Mennonites were now uncertain if they were going to be reunited with their belongings. As Dyck recalled, “We had been travelling for two hours when we found ourselves on enormous bridges surrounded by giant rocks that looked like they would fall on top

of us. It was almost dawn, around six in the morning, when we arrived in a valley, our stop San Antonio de los Arenales, and though we were happy to have finished the difficult journey and we thanked God, for many of us, we could not recover the joy we had in Canada.”⁷

Mennonites were also disappointed with the landscape that they encountered upon their arrival. Only a couple of earthen houses and a shack that appeared to be a post office existed. They were uneasy as a Mexican woman collected their letters to family members in Canada and threw them together a wooden box. Despite their apprehension, they soon discovered that the letters arrived at their destination and that they could receive mail in an orderly and timely fashion.

The train cars needed to be unloaded within two days for their return trip to the United States and the Mennonites started their journey to the location they had been assigned (what is today Campo 7B), arriving at eleven o’clock at night. They were very tired and suffering tremendously from the terrible cold. While the train cars had heating, they had to sleep under a practically open sky in a tent that had very little protection against the icy night and the suffocating heat of the day.

A fortunate few had brought small metal stoves where the families gathered and heated coffee for breakfast. Although they had to eat on the ground, they enjoyed their meal and were thankful for the food. They felt close and an atmosphere of love and solidarity filled the camp despite the bad conditions. As Dyck remembered, “There were insects that caused many problems, like worms under the skin, mosquitos so small they couldn’t be seen that wouldn’t let us sleep and devoured us. We scratched until we hurt ourselves.”⁸

Mennonites settled in a valley surrounded by hills. Unfortunately, their expectations with respect to the weather were not met; they found that days were hot and nights were cold, in addition to the prevalence of large dust storms. This deluge of dust affected the health of families and smallpox appeared soon thereafter. Several people died and their

animals also started to suffer and die after the feed that they had brought from Canada ran out, as there was no grazing land available because it had all been burned.

During their first six weeks, they wore the same clothes they had arrived in, lived in tents, and the children were sick with typhoid fever, in part because of the large dust storms that assaulted the countryside. In the face of sadness and physical pain, prayer served as an emotional life-saver. Finally, they were able to obtain wood to build their houses and shelter themselves from the weather. “Under all the tents, there were sick children that needed to be attended to. Many times we could not distinguish between the moans and cries of the children and the sound of the wind storms that battered our hearts. In our worry, we couldn’t control anything. Only He who controls the winds and the storms could, with a petition from his disciples, calm the children until everything quieted down.”⁹

PRESERVING MEMORIES

The following testimonies describe the experiences of Mennonites during their time on the train and how these experiences influenced the travelers as a group. Their analysis reveals the importance of preserving stories across generations. Before passing away, grandparents gave their descendants the gift of their lived experiences so that the memory of Mennonite identity could be preserved. In this way, some of the ancestors’ experiences remain, particularly how they travelled on the train in search of a new beginning.

For instance, Greta’s story recalled the hardships that occurred during the journey: “Greta Unrau, hurry up!” she heard her mother calling over the noise of the railway station. “I’m coming,” replied Greta, a 10-year-old girl, as she quickly boarded the train. Her parents and fourteen siblings were already inside, along with many others who were going to Mexico. Greta sat in the empty seat next to her older sister, Sara. The train whistle blew and the journey began. Greta spent her first ten years in Canada, but when a group of Mennonites decided to immi-

grate to Mexico, her parents decided to go with them. Now, here they were like family on the train that would take them to Mexico. There was no turning back. Greta was very agitated and wondered, “What will Mexico be like?”¹⁰

These testimonies also shed light on the feelings and emotions that marked the beginning of the journey. As one testimony recalled: “The winter of 1922 passed quickly and the first train to leave Canada for Mexico left 1 March from Plum Coulee. The day of goodbyes was suddenly upon us, the train was already loaded and the goodbyes caused many tears, saying goodbye to all the family members and friends, it wasn’t easy to leave their beloved country and birthplace, where one day they had their bed and now they were going to an unknown land and an unknown people to start over. On 1 March, when everything was ready for the departure, the signal was given and the train started to move very slowly, with much care, with its very heavy load.”¹¹

Other stories focused on people’s feelings regarding food scarcity. As one Mennonite man shared: “My great-grandparents came to Mexico in 1923. They had fifteen children and one of them was my great-grandmother. She was five years old. A lot of other people came on the train. When they were already far into their journey to Mexico, some people’s food ran out. My great-grandmother, then a five-year-old little girl, gave some food to the other people.”¹²

Time and space are resources that groups need to build their cultural identity. The collective practices that are remembered create bonds between people that can be talked about as the years pass. This is the case with the following testimony about what occurred on one of the train cars: “What happened was that they were in the train in the back and were asleep and did not wake up until the train left. A little later, the cars in the back, where the children were, became unhitched. The children slept and slept. But suddenly, they woke up and saw where they were and asked why they weren’t moving forward and why they were alone in the car and the train was not moving. Soon, they



Mexicans waiting to sell their wares to passengers disembarking the train.

realized that the train was no longer there. The children's parents realized quickly that they were not there. They had to make a deal with the engineer. They asked the engineer if they could go back for their children and the engineers said that they would only go back if they were paid more money. The parents had to pay a lot of money so that they could go back and get their children."¹³

Other stories focus on the work they did on the train and the surprising landscapes they passed through. As one person recounted: "They brought horses and cows, the train had to make stops so they could milk the cows. The train passed through high mountains that it almost couldn't climb because of its heavy load. The Mennonites had never been to the mountains and were afraid because they believed that the mountains could fall on top of them. My great-grandparents were originally from Russia, then they came to

live in Canada, and then from Canada to Mexico where they lived in Campo."¹⁴

The following narrative expresses the same sentiment: "The journey was not easy because it went through very steep mountains. The locomotive could hardly climb the mountains. After a ten-day journey, on 10 January 1924, they saw Mexico. In those times there were only two buildings in Cuauhtémoc. Franz, who was six years old only went to one day of school in Canada. So they had to leave."¹⁵

Mennonite testimonies also contextualize the journey, their arrival in San Antonio de los Arenales, and their first interactions with Mexicans. As they arrived in an unfamiliar location, not only in terms of geography but also language, they began the challenge of establishing their communities. One testimony recalled a family story about these early impressions of Mexico: "It was in February 1922 when my great-great grandparents came

on the first train to Mexico. They had five children then, and one of them was my great-grandfather. He was nine years old. When they got off the train there were some Mexicans selling candy, and it was very important for my grandfather because that is where he learned his first word in Spanish. The Mexicans repeated, "*dulces*" (candy) and "*chicle*" (gum). At first, he didn't know what they were saying, but little by little he understood them. Then, they hired some horses and carts to continue the journey. They had put a lot of effort into preparing for the big journey; later they arrived at a large prairie where there was a lot of grass. At the end of the day they had to pitch their tents so they didn't have to sleep outdoors."¹⁶

Reminiscence about those early years was even a topic of conversation between neighbours. As one Mennonite recalled: "This was a story that a neighbor told us, from his lived experiences, though he has



MAD/MHA, 592-23-0

A photo, taken from one of the last train cars, of a steam engine pulling a long train as it rounded a bend near Chihuahua, Mexico, ca. 1923.

since passed away. He said that when he was a child he got off the train after travelling for two weeks. They arrived in San Antonio de los Arenales. Soon after, the train stopped. This neighbor, his name was Abram Abrams and his parents left Canada to come to Mexico. When they got off the train there was a great crowd of people that looked like an ant hill. They ran from one side to another, because they didn't know what to do first. Everything was so unfamiliar to them that they felt unsure and started to feel nostalgic for their country of origin. Abram's father, like many of the others didn't know the language. But the Mexicans talked to

us through signs they made with their hands and feet to show they wanted to help us, and they pointed toward the west to show the path of the sun from the east. Though we didn't understand much, we worked together."¹⁷

CONCLUSION

Communities draw life from their shared lived experiences in the construction of their identity. This perspective is regenerative and life-giving for the oldest members to pave the way for the youth to continue on in the same spirit. For Mennonites, the primary means for the preservation of their identity is religion.

Currently, the population of Mennonites in Mexico is approximately one hundred thousand people, with traditionalists comprising eighty per cent of the group. These Mennonites are closed off from globalization and try to avoid, when possible, their women and children having contact with the dominant population. In contrast, the liberal factions see economic and educative evolution as necessary for the preservation of their identity. They are interested in commercial relationships with the Mestizo community and even allow mixed marriages between the cultures. They only comprise twenty per cent of the Mennonite population of Cuauhtémoc.

Collective memory plays an important role in the Mennonite community in Mexico. The process of transmitting their history has generally been oral, which is to say, adults telling children what their parents and grandparents, in turn, told them. There are only a few people from within the community who wrote about the Mennonite migrations. The retrieval and recording of information with regard to the journey from Canada to Mexico is an important part of the historical work that contributes to the preservation of cultural identity.

Hermeneutical analysis shapes this ethnographic research because a people's feelings can be interpreted from the stories they tell or write. This article recognizes the values transmitted from generation to generation, including religion, family, work, and unity, which served to form an identity that was then reinforced over the rails and the train cars that brought Mennonites to a life in Mexico filled with challenges, but also with satisfaction.

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 2 J. C. A. Vázquez and M. A. P. Ariosa, "Tiempo, espacio e identidad social" [Time, Space and Social Identity], *Alteridades* [Otherness], 2 (1991): 31–41.
 3 Isaak M. Dyck, *Anfangs Jahre der Mennoniten in Mexiko*. (Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua: Imprenta Colonial, 1995).
 4 Ibid.
 5 Ibid.
 6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.
 8 Ibid.
 9 Ibid.
 10 Gobierno del Estado de Chihuahua, *Soy Menonita, y esta es mi historia... [I'm Mennonite and This is my Story]* (Ed. ICHICULT -Talleres gráficos del Estado de Chihuahua, México, 2012), 61.
 11 A. Peters testimony, in Gobierno del Estado de Chihuahua, *Crónicas y testimonios de la vida y migración Menonita a Chihuahua* [Chronicles and testimonies of Mennonite Migration and Life in Chihuahua] (Ed. ICHICULT- Talleres Gráficos del Estado de Chihuahua, México, 2011), 34.
 12 Gobierno del Estado de Chihuahua, *Soy Menonita, y esta es mi historia*.

13 Bergen testimony, in Gobierno del Estado de Chihuahua, *Soy Menonita, y esta es mi historia...*, 135.
 14 A. Thiessen testimony, in Gobierno del Estado de Chihuahua, *Crónicas y testimonios de la vida y migración Menonita a Chihuahua*, 20.
 15 A. Neufeld testimony, in Gobierno del Estado de Chihuahua, *Soy Menonita, y esta es mi historia...*, 147.
 16 N. Klassen testimony, in Gobierno del Estado de Chihuahua, *Crónicas y testimonios de la vida y migración Menonita a Chihuahua*, 18.
 17 E. Harder testimony, in Gobierno del Estado de Chihuahua, *Crónicas y testimonios de la vida y migración Menonita a Chihuahua*, 16.

THE TOKMAK RAILWAY

Mennonites in Russia

Conrad Stoesz

Sixteen well-dressed men pose for a photo in the park in Berdiansk at the head office of the Tokmak railway in Russia. These are the principal actors in what became the Tokmak railway in southern Russia (present-day Ukraine). The Tokmak railway was built because of the expanding agricultural surplus created by the region and the need to bring it to market. Its construction fits into a

much larger story of industrialization in Russia and how the state supported the expanding transportation industry across the country.

Russia was crisscrossed with a series of national, private, and cooperative ventures between the state and private companies that date back to the Tsarskoye Selo line, completed in 1837.¹ After the Crimean War ended in 1856, Russia moved ahead

towards fuller industrialization.² In the 1860s and 1870s over 50 railway companies were started in Russia and by the mid-1870s private companies owned approximately 18,000 kilometres of track. This expansion was made possible by the state's financial support, guaranteed income from stock and bond capital, credits, loans, and the great authority given to companies in building and operating the



MAID: MENNONITE HERITAGE ARCHIVES (MHA), 649.1

The principal actors in the establishment of the Tokmak railway included leading local industrialists.

lines. In the thirty-year span between 1851 and 1881 the population of New Russia had doubled from 2.4 to 4.8 million people and agriculture was increasingly becoming commercialized.³

In the 1880s, the Russian state began to buy the rail lines to help strengthen the economic prospects of the empire. By the 1890s the state began to regulate construction and maintenance of private lines and acted as a private partner, major creditor, and shareholder. The railway system continued to expand rapidly across Russia. Between 1907 and 1917 there were twenty-nine new rail companies. To support this expansion the government sold bonds, which helped to pay its foreign debts. In 1917 over 1,550 million rubles were owed to foreign creditors and of this, 87% was held by France (48%) and Germany (39%).⁴

Foreign interests, the Russian state, and Russian banks saw the railway as a crucial factor in the development of Russia's vast natural resources. The banks would hold the large initial investment and dole out funds as needed. However, because such a large amount of capital was needed to start, the banks had a large influx of funds on which interest was charged, benefiting the banks. But the banks were not only involved with holding the funds for the railways; bank personnel were also

becoming personally involved. It was common for a president of a bank to also become the president of a railway company.⁵

As in many regions of Russia, the economy in Molotschna was booming. According to Peter M. Friesen, in the Halbstadt district in 1908 there were 191 industrial and commercial establishments worth over 1.2 million rubles, including 37 windmills and 27 motor driven mills, 7 factories, 18 brickworks, 2 printeries, a soap works, a book and music shop, a photo studio, locksmith, and cheese factories. Neighbouring Gnadenfeld district had 100 establishments valued at 493,750 rubles.⁶ Agriculture and agricultural exports from the Mennonite regions grew rapidly. More land was put into production to meet the export demand. Between 1879 and 1889 wheat was grown on half the crop area with barley, rye, and oats taking up the other half. With so much more wheat being grown than other crops, the millers in these agricultural areas had a lot of grain with which to work.

Brothers Johann Wall (1867–1934) and Jacob Wall (1870–1922) came from a wealthy family. After their father Peter Wall (1843–1882) died, their mother Maria Goossen (1844–1917) married Gerhard Wall. As young men in 1889, Jacob and Johann traveled to the United

States where they spent a year visiting and considered establishing a homestead but instead returned to Russia, believing that America had “too much freedom and not enough law.”⁷

In November 1890, Jacob married Maria Albrecht and together they had seven children. Jacob bought land outside the Molotschna colony, immediately east of the Wintergrün estate owned by Jacob's uncle, Jacob Goossen. This land became the Marianovka estate totaling 6,700 acres. Later Jacob bought the Sandhof estate from his father-in-law and changed its name to the Katerinovka estate, which totaled 4000 acres of land. These three estates (Wintergrün, Marianovka, and Katerinovka) were situated between Orekhov and Pologi, north of the Molotschna colony.⁸

George Wall, son of Jacob and Maria Wall, compiled some of his memories in “Memoirs of George Wall (son of Jacob P. Wall) 1906–1994.” George recounted a great deal regarding his father's involvement in the establishment of the Tokmak railway. According to George, Jacob bought the flour mill from his stepfather in Bolshoi-Tokmak around the year 1900. Jacob bought large amounts of wheat in fall when the price was low and then operated his mill around the clock, six days a week, tripling the mill's prof-



Train stations, like the one in Tokmak, became gathering places for people in the community.



Eleven young men, constituting the Tokmak Railroad band, posing for a photo with their musical instruments. Jacob Wall, who led the band, is seated in the middle with a baton.

its. Around 1900 the Molotschna colony farmers were working 300,000 acres of land. To get grain and other products to the nearest port of Berdiansk, loads of wagons would make the 100-kilometre journey. A bit of rain made the dirt roads into a muddy mess.

A railway was proposed that would run through the Molotschna colony to the port, but Wall's son George said the idea was rejected by regulators. Jacob Wall was then encouraged to submit another application. Jacob took up the challenge and presumably worked with architect Johann Peters to design the eight stations and bridges and where the tracks would be laid. The bigger stations included a house for the station agent, his family, switchmen, and other staff. The line would run in a sideways "V" shape, with the opening on the west and the point of the "V" joining at the station Tsarekonstantinovka in the east. It intersected with two other

main rail routes that ran north-south. The southern portion of the Tokmak railway ran through the northern portion of the Molotschna colony and just to the south of the city of Tokmak and the three family estates. There were nine major shareholders supporting the project including Gerhard Wall, Johann Wall, Jacob P. Wall, brothers Peter and Abram Ediger, Johann Peters (architect), Mr. Gleckler, Mr. Foch, and Mr. Kleinert.⁹ The Russian Ministry of Transportation approved the project by telegram on 8 June 1910 and there was an organizational meeting of the shareholders on 21 June 1911. Total investment was 1.75 million rubles¹⁰ plus debenture stock valuing 633,000 rubles, guaranteed by the Russian state.¹¹ Work began in the fall of 1911.¹²

Land was purchased from individuals, most of whom were willing to sell, as they saw the economic advantages for the line.¹³ Most of the work was done with small

carts pulled by one horse because there were few large earth moving machines at that time.¹⁴ Work began in the eastern portion of the line and as the line was laid trains already began steaming along the line, bringing workers and supplies to where work was taking place.¹⁵ When sand was discovered on a 27-acre parcel of land near Landskrone, a spur line was built to supply construction across the line with sand. A huge dredge was brought in from Germany to dig the sand and dump it into awaiting rail cars. The dredge became a local attraction with tourists visiting the site to see the machines in action.¹⁶ A telephone line was added along the rail line that was to be finished by 1 April 1912.¹⁷

According to the family the railway was finished on Wall's birthday, 27 July 1912, and there was a celebration.¹⁸ As part of the celebration, Jacob Wall hosted government officials for several days. Jacob was rewarded with an invitation to visit Tsar

Nicholas II. Presumably Johann Peters was also given an invitation because he was presented with a gold medal from the tsar celebrating the Tokmak railway's completion.

In addition to bringing goods to and from the area, the train stations became gathering places for people. Henry Tiessen recalled, "As teenagers we often would go to the station and have a good time. At the station we always could buy a few refreshments and quench our hunger.... Of special interest was the locomotive repair shop. We watched how the big machines were turned around on a big swivel."¹⁹

Not everyone was supportive of the railway. Some were concerned how the trains spooked the horses, while others had more serious concerns.²⁰ While the railway made it easier to export goods to market, it was also easier for unwanted influences to enter the community. Johann Willms of Hierschau, Molotschna, expressed concerns that the railway would encourage "bandits and other undesirables" to come into the region. During the Civil War, both Red and White armies used armoured trains that could launch shells six kilometres from the tracks.²¹

The Tokmak railroad led to more opportunities and financial success for Jacob Wall. He bought a glass factory in Pologi and built a paper mill. He bought another 2,500 acres that produced good quality wheat. He imported Simentoller cows from Germany and work horses and riding horses from England. Jacob Wall owned four cars and so, out of necessity, he also had his own mechanic, chauffeur, machine shop, and gas station. Jacob



MAD, MHA, 649-70

The Tokmak railroad led to more opportunities and financial success for Jacob Wall. He bought a glass factory in Pologi and built a paper mill.

also had a pleasure boat on the Sea of Azov, which he used to entertain business guests. Jacob and his family lived in Berdiansk where the children went to school and in the summer lived at their estate. The family employed servants at both residences.

George Wall recounted how his father was a generous and kind man who gave loans, extended credit, and helped people in need. Wall also built a school and hired a teacher in Novo-Karlovka because Wall wanted to improve the literacy of the children in that place. People saw Wall as successful and sought his advice on finances and labour problems,²² since he had experience in labour issues when the workers on the railroad went on strike.²³ Early in 1914, according to his son, Wall wanted to sell his holdings and take their boat and start sheep farming in South Africa. Wall had made significant prog-

ress on this front but the agreements made were worthless when the government nationalized the rail system in 1917.

The Tokmak railway benefitted many Mennonite families and businesses, not only those who were the shareholders. A railway serving the Molotschna colony was a natural development as the country became more industrialized and agricultural exports grew. With the new rail system, their goods could be brought to market with much less effort and new materials could be imported from outside the colony. The expansive rail system was supported by the Russian government, Russian banks, foreign investors, and wealthy individuals. However, everything changed for the people once the Bolsheviks took control of all the rail lines. The communities along the rail line still benefitted from its service, but profits now went to the state.

1 V. V. Zhuravlyov, "Private railway companies in Russia in the early twentieth century," in *Journal of Transport History* (1983): 51–54.
 2 James Urry, *None but Saints: The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia, 1789–1889* (Winnipeg: Hyperion, Press, 1989), 229.
 3 Urry, 229.
 4 Zhuravlyov, 51–54.
 5 *Ibid.*, 57–61.
 6 Peter M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia* (Fresno: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1980), 866–869.
 7 George Wall, "Memoirs of George Wall (son of Jacob P. Wall) 1906–1994," Mennonite Heritage Archives (hereafter MHA), vol. 5346, file 1, page 3.
 8 Conrad Stoesz, "Jacob P. Wall fonds," accessed July 26, 2019, <https://www.mharchives.ca/holdings/papers/Wall,%20>

Jacob%20P.%20family%20fonds.htm.
 9 George Wall. See also "Excerpts of maps showing the Tokmak railway, Wintergruen, Marianovka, and Katerinovka estates," Jacob P. Wall fonds, MHA, vol. 5346, file 2. There is disagreement regarding who the shareholders were. In the Tokmak railway photo album the shareholders are identified as Mr. Foch, Mr. Glechior Sr., Mr. Kleinart Jr., Mr. Kleinart Sr., Abraham Ediger, Gerhard Wall, Jacob Wall, Peter Ediger, Johann Wall, and Mr. Glecklor Jr.
 10 Helmut T. Huebert, *Mennonites in the Cities of Imperial Russia, volume 2*, (Winnipeg: Springfield Publishers, 2008), 410.
 11 Email from James Urry to author, 13 November 2008, which included an excerpt from the "Parliamentary Paper of the British House of Commons 1912–1913," annual series of trade reports: serial nos. 4827 to 5041, for the session 1912–1913 (trade, navigation, shipping: annual and miscellaneous series), 23. MHA, vol. 5465, file 8.

12 Huebert, 410.
 13 George Wall, 5.
 14 Henry B. Tiessen, *The Molotschna Colony* (Kitchener: Henry B. Tiessen, 1979), 78–79.
 15 Huebert, 410.
 16 Huebert, 410.
 17 Huebert, 410.
 18 According to Huebert (p. 410) the first trains ran 20 December 1913. George Wall (p. 1, 6) says the railway was finished on Jacob Wall's birthday, which was 27 July 1912.
 19 Tiessen, 78.
 20 Tiessen, 78.
 21 Huebert, 411.
 22 Wall, 11.
 23 Huebert, 410.

MENNONITE SETTLERS

in Prussian Lithuania

Erwin Wittenberg & Manuel Janz

Preface by Glenn Penner

The story of the Mennonites of Prussian Lithuania has rarely been told. Most descendants of the Old Colony (Chortitza colony) are not aware of our connection to this group. These Mennonites (and the region where they lived) have been referred to by many names – Plauschwarren (the location of the church and name of the congregation), Tilsit (the name of the nearby city), Memel (the name of the nearby river whose lowland the Mennonites settled), East Prussia (the Prussian province where these places were located for most of the time that Mennonites lived there), Gumbinnen (the name of the East Prussian district), and Lithuania (the present-day country and, for many centuries, the commonly used term for that general area).

Nearly all of the Prussian Mennonite immigrants to the Chortitza colony were from Flemish congregations. The Plauschwarren congregation was Frisian. As a result of the immigration of nearly 50 families with connections to Lithuania between 1788 and 1795, the Frisian congregation of Kronsweide was established. In the 1795 census of Chortitza colony, there were 257 families counted. This means that nearly one-fifth of the Chortitza colony settler families had previously been part of the Lithuanian Mennonite congregation.

People who have ancestry in the Chortitza colony with names such as Arend, Banmann, Eds/Eitzen, Ewert, Falk, Franz, Froese, Funk, Goertzen, Harms, Heinrichs, Hiebert, Janzen, Kettler, Krause, Martens, Neufeld, Nickel,

Pauls, Siemens or Vogt, may be descended from one of the Lithuanian Mennonite families who settled in the Old Colony.¹ Fortunately, part of the Lithuanian Mennonite church records was micro-filmed before they were destroyed at the end of World War Two, and transcriptions are available.²

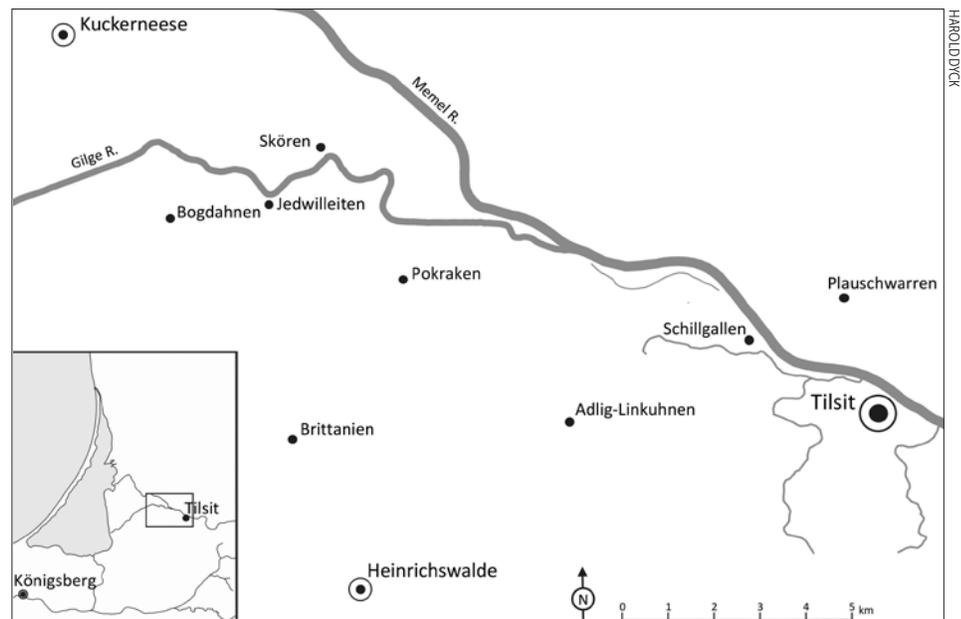
THE FIRST SETTLEMENTS

At the beginning of the first half of the seventeenth century, nearly 15,000 Mennonites lived in western Prussia (Polish Prussia, later West Prussia). By the end of the seventeenth century, the narrow Vistula Valley at Graudenz was overpopulated and more land was desperately needed for the settlement of large

families. In 1709–11, an unanticipated opportunity appeared because of the devastating plague in East Prussia.³ The Great Plague depopulated large stretches of land in northern East Prussia. In the northern regions of Memel, Tilsit, Ragnit, Insterburg, and Labiau, more than 53 percent of the population (160,000 inhabitants) died. Almost 11,000 farm settlements were desolated.⁴ In 1710, with the plague still raging, the Prussian government became concerned over these empty tracts of land. During this period, we can already find mention of “Mennonites” in a document discussing how to find people of means who are capable of farming such large tracts of land.⁵

At the same time, Mennonites remaining in Switzerland endured strong threats of persecution. The Anabaptist communities of Holland and Hamburg begged the Prussian King Friedrich I to intervene on their behalf; in response he advocated for the free emigration of the Anabaptists. However, there is no indication that Swiss Mennonites settled in East Prussia. Instead, they chose to settle in the Netherlands and in the United States of America.

The Mennonites of West Prussia and the Palatinate were invited by messengers of the king to settle in Prussian



A map of the Mennonite region of Lithuania.

Lithuania. The king's interest in the West Prussian Mennonites probably arose from reports originating from the Polish area. Mennonites had developed a reputation for being competent and industrious farmers who could transform uncultivated areas, often wetlands, into productive agricultural land. In overpopulated West Prussia Mennonites showed great interest in the king's invitation. They were to settle in enclosed areas: "These Mennonites are not to be scattered over the land ... but live as closely as possible to one another in adjacent districts."⁶

In 1713, the first Mennonite settlers from Polish West Prussia arrived in the Tilsit Valley. The Prussian government informed the king that these were not Swiss Mennonites,⁷ but rather they originated from the neighboring diocese of Kulm. Among the settlers one could find not only Frisian Mennonites, but also some Flemish. They were allowed to settle in one of three outlying villages: Alt and Neu Sköpen as well as Neusorge. In their contract, these Mennonites were given far-reaching rights: freedom to practise their religion, as well as freedom from all military service, billeting, and military obligations for themselves, their descendants and their servants. They were allowed to buy and operate a mill, to fish in their waters, to brew brown beer, and to have up to three beehives without paying taxes, as well as operate a ferry. This contract was drawn up for thirty years with forty-two tenants. In 1714 Mennonite families from Polish Prussia took over the outpost Calwen.⁸

It appears that the first Mennonites farmed successfully, as in subsequent years more families moved to the region. In 1718 the "*Preussische Teutsche Amtskammer*" announced that Mennonites from Poland wanted to settle in Königsberg or in the country. However, this particular petition was denied by the government, although Mennonites received a positive evaluation as having "people of good means among them." On the whole, however, the Prussian government continued to press forward with repopulation. On 4 December 1721, Mennonites were again invited to settle in Prussia "since they

strive to live a pious, quiet, and honorable life wherever they are."⁹ Astonishingly, in 1721 sixty thousand *Hufen*¹⁰ of unsettled land in Prussian Lithuania was still available.¹¹

ORIGIN OF THE SETTLERS

The state archives of Berlin have detailed information about new settlers to the region, such as names, spouses, ages of the children, places of origin, as well as conditions of ownership. However, this was not the case for Mennonite settlers. Nonetheless, from legal files of the 1720s it can be concluded that Mennonites from the Vistula Valley arrived from Graudenz and Kulm (congregations of Schönsee, Montau and Przechowka), but also from the Vistula Delta (around Elbing and Danzig).¹²

Families settled under difficult conditions in the Memel Valley. Although they found suitable pastureland, they had to build their houses and barns at their own expense. This was evident from a report by a delegation of Mennonites from the Danzig congregation which travelled to East Prussia in June 1714 to visit the "new congregation in Samland." Although they founded "a beautiful congregation, consisting of over three hundred fifty brothers and sisters" – approximately one hundred families – their living conditions were "wretched." The report described the situation as follows: "They have beautiful estates; however, they are without buildings and most of them have to build their own homes; on the whole they are poor, owning nothing. We found many families living in old barns, many on fields in small huts." It also anticipated that more Mennonite families from West Prussia would arrive in the region because of the situation in Poland.¹³ Finally the report communicated that the settlement could only develop by "receiving much encouragement and financial aid from the Dutch Mennonite Church."¹⁴

Under these conditions, some Mennonites gave up and left. Already in the first year of settlement they suffered a flood in the region of Kuckerneese and as a result had to plead for a suspension of their tax payments. However, the skills they had

brought from the Vistula and the Werder helped them to overcome their difficulties and have "significant achievements" (as state documents confirm) in reclaiming the former desert-like, uncultivated land, prone to flooding without the security of dams or ditches. At their own expense they drained the low-lying land by digging ditches. In 1718 they dammed the Alte Gilge in Sköpen.¹⁵

The quality of the land, which was especially suited for pasturing and grazing cattle, as well as their own ingenuity helped Mennonites to become extremely successful farmers. They were trailblazers particularly in the area of cheesemaking. Within a five-year period, by 1723, they had increased the production of "Mennonite Cheese" by 245 percent (or 370,000 kg).¹⁶ Within a short period of time Mennonites were so well respected by the officials in the area that in 1723 the president of the war and dominion office told the general director, "the Lowlands would be considerably improved if more Mennonites would move there." They were viewed as being not only capable farmers, but also as leading a "humble and sober lifestyle."¹⁷

CHURCH REVIVAL

Some people who belonged to other faith-based groups were attracted to the Mennonite faith. This was especially true of the domestic help that had come to Lithuania with Mennonite farmers. The congregation in the Memel Lowland is the only one of the Mennonite congregations in East and West Prussia in which a significant number of conversions to the Mennonite faith took place.¹⁸ The rest of the Mennonite congregations were not particularly keen on these conversions because they were not accustomed to recruiting members of other confessions. This trait was obvious in a letter to the Lithuanians sent on 21 April 1724 by the congregation in Amsterdam. It stated that the baptism of those belonging to other confessions was very seldom performed and should only be done with the utmost caution.

The Lutheran congregations of the Memel Lowland protested strongly

against these apostates and demanded an investigation by the state. Also, Berend Janson from Brattwin near Graudenz denounced the Mennonite congregation for attempting to convert people to the faith. He had been excommunicated from that congregation but his son, Berend, had moved to the Memel Lowland and had re-joined the religious community. An investigation was conducted over several weeks in June 1772 by a representative of the state from Königsberg. Another case under investigation was that of adultery against the Mennonite Hans Quapp. He had impregnated his maid and then fled to Poland. A report about the case is still available in the state archives of Berlin. It not only includes sixty names and accurate information about possessions and origins, but also paints a lively picture of events during that time.¹⁹

EXPULSION OF 1724

For Mennonites, this investigation of conversions had a tolerable outcome: under pressure from the Lutheran consistory and with dire threats of punishment they were warned not to tolerate or accept any members of another confession in their congregations. However, dark clouds were beginning to form. In February and September 1723, the Prussian military tried to forcibly recruit young Mennonites. They attempted to incorporate sixteen young Mennonites into the elite unit of large soldiers called the “Tall Fellows” (*langen Kerls*). Two Mennonites were especially mistreated, probably because they were former Lutherans.²⁰

The incarcerated Mennonites remained true to their faith principles. George Grubert describes the pain and torture to which they were exposed as their beards were forcefully cut off and for many days they received no food or water. This report shows the strength of the faith of these young men (“they can do no more to us than what God allows”).²¹ Although they were set free, Mennonites were no longer sure of their rights. In response, they cancelled their rental contracts with the king in case their rights would not be respected. Friedrich Wilhelm I did not hesitate in his response. He had no patience with

such a “rogue nation” that did not want to become soldiers and Mennonites were asked to leave the country.²² Although they had cancelled their rental contracts, they did not expect to be expelled from the country.

A report from the War and Dominion Chamber in December 1723 provides evidence that Mennonites had paid 3,604 *Taler* in rent as required.²³ Furthermore, the chamber explained that a substitute for this amount could hardly be obtained elsewhere. In February of 1724 the chamber pointed out that Mennonites should be compensated for their investments because they had built their houses with their own means.²⁴

Mennonites were unsure of their next destination. They wished to remain together, but they were aware that this might not be possible.²⁵ During the first months of 1724, the congregation in Danzig, the congregations in Holland, and the congregation that was to be expelled desperately tried to find a permanent place for the exiled. Those exiled favored emigrating to Holland because they feared reprisals if they settled in Polish Prussia (especially because they had converts from the Catholic and Lutheran churches among them).²⁶ The congregations in Holland, however, refused this solution. They advised them to delay the emigration to Poland as long as possible because of the threat of persecution, and then to move to “the Gross and Klein Werder, to Schönsee and other places.” Financial support from congregations in Hamburg and Danzig was guaranteed.²⁷ The king’s deadline for the expulsion was extended from 1 May to 10 June 1724 (Trinity Day). On this date one hundred sixty Mennonite families – approximately three hundred fifty to four hundred people²⁸ – were supposed to leave the Tilsit Valley.

David Penner, an elder of the Mennonite Church in Prussian Lithuania, wrote the following letter in March 1724 shortly before the expulsion from East Prussia: “Now, worthy and beloved friends in the Lord Jesus, according to the holy will of our God, it is no longer possible to do anything else except to leave this country. With all our heart, like Abraham,

we want to be obedient to the holy will of God and ask to which place we are called. We do not yet know where we are going, but we want to leave that up to our God. He will take pity on us and give us the ways and means to do this according to his will. We want to immerse ourselves completely into his holy will and leave everything behind, begging and pleading that, through the strength we receive from Christ, he will make us worthy and skillful to bear all our trials in the faith patiently in order to honor him.”²⁹

Despite these words, there was great confusion among Mennonites. A number of the settlers left several weeks before the deadline. As Penner wrote, “Already twenty families have left, but only the young, who do not yet possess any of the king’s property.”³⁰ It was assumed that more would follow in order to be “divided up between the congregations in the Klein and the Gross Werder, in Schönsee and in Danzig.”³¹ “In addition some [of the expelled] escaped to the Netherlands.”³² Several people of the congregation who were not yet baptized (converts), secretly fled – probably sometime during 1724 – and asked for baptism in Amsterdam.³³ Finally, several members of the congregation remained in the country incognito, which is evident through entries in Evangelical Church records of that time. No reasons were given as to why this happened.³⁴

A number of the wealthy families could rent or buy land, at least in their congregations of origin in West Prussia. But to house practically destitute refugee families (two compilations of the Dutch support funds of 1724 and 1726 list 115 families)³⁵ proved to be a challenge for the Dutch and West Prussian congregations. Nevertheless, the West Prussian congregations showed willingness to help. In the congregation of Thiensdorf each landowner agreed to provide housing for one family as well as grazing land for two cows. In Elbing’s Klein Werder, forty-five destitute families could hardly be accommodated and another eighteen settled there temporarily. Eleven families found temporary accommodation in the Gross Werder, another twenty-three

families in “Culmschen,”³⁶ thirteen families in “Montauschen,” and two families in the District of Danzig. The makeshift accommodation must have lasted longer than a year and the situation was described as “extremely difficult.” It was especially difficult for approximately forty completely destitute families.

MARIENBURGER WERDER

On 10 November 1724, two immigrants from Prussian Lithuania purchased two thirds of Tragheimerweide from representatives of Große Werder for 2,200 Prussian guilders and became the founders of the last large Mennonite settlement in West Prussia.

In the same year, fourteen Hufen from Rudnerweide were allocated to Mennonites from the Tilsit Valley. Further pastureland in Schweingrube, Zwanzigerweide, Montauerweide, Zieglershuben, and Klein and Gross Schardau was entrusted to Mennonites. A closed settlement, therefore, began in the second quarter of the eighteenth century. A congregation with a Frisian outlook was formed. It became known as “the Lithuanian congregation in Schweingrube.”³⁷ At first the new congregation was situated in Schweingrube, later it moved to Tragheimerweide. Already in 1728 it received permission from the Bishop of Kulm to construct a church building. Originally most of these settlers came from the congregations of Montau and Schönsee.³⁸

JEZIORKEN

In 1726, twenty-three families from Prussian Lithuania settled in the region of Culm (congregation Schönsee). Some of them bought or rented land in the vicinity. In 1727, twelve families from the Old-Flemish congregation of Schönsee took over a deserted strip of land (possibly near the area of Jeziorken). They had originally planned to move to Lithuania, but then changed their plan. Financially over-extended, they had to plead for help from Holland several times.³⁹ Pastors Heinrich Nickel and Gabriel Frantz were among these settlers. Their correspondence with the *Dutch Commissie voor Buitenlandsche*

Nooden (Committee for Foreign Needs) is found in the Mennonite archives in Amsterdam. It describes the situation of Mennonites in Schönsee around the year 1730.⁴⁰ The other half of the refugee families who found shelter in the Culm region (at least ten of the twenty-three families listed)⁴¹ accepted the offer – together with those expelled from other congregations – to resettle in the area of Prussian Lithuania and Dannenberg.

DANNENBERG

Likely in the fall and winter of 1726–27 forty impoverished families had the opportunity to settle as renters on the estate Rautenburg belonging to Count Truchsess in Waldburg, East Prussia. The exact time period is not given anywhere, but most sources assume it was “shortly after they were expelled.” The later Dannenberg settlers are still reported to be in their original regions in a list from 10 October 1726. However, in a letter of 19 March 1727, Dirk Wiechert, the teacher of the Frisian congregation of Schönsee, reported that several families had moved to Lithuania and settled on thirty Hufen.⁴² Therefore, a significant number of the Dannenberg settlers must have arrived from Schönsee and the surrounding area. Obviously not all the families belonged to the Frisian group. Based on the similarity of their names, however, it is probable that members of the Old-Flemish congregation of Przechowka were among the settlers. Furthermore, the congregation at Dannenberg later called itself the “Frisian, Flemish and High German congregation of Dannenberg.”

RENEWED EXPULSION

In 1732, these Mennonites also received the expulsion order of the Prussian king. At this point immigrants from Salzburger had arrived, and the king probably thought he did not need this difficult group of Mennonites. Count Truchsess of Waldburg, who had put Mennonites in charge of his estates, advocated for them. Several times he spoke favorably about Mennonites to the king. He also mentioned the damage this renewed expulsion would cause as they had made fertile the

desert-like land where only straw and mud had existed.⁴³

The hope of some Mennonites that the count would successfully intervene soon proved to be misguided. All one hundred fifty persons had to leave the country by Friday before Trinity day. They moved along the Memel toward Poland and camped in the fields. Finally, they were allowed to stay in Prussia for three months in order to sell their possessions. Some Mennonites, however, had already left on their own. At the end of 1732 several Mennonites had left the Dannenberg region (*Rautenburgische Güter*) including those who did not immigrate to Holland. In the dukedom of Rautenburg no Mennonite family names appear on a list of farmers from the year 1752.⁴⁴

Interestingly, Königsberg developed differently: here the magistrate intervened to stop the expulsion of Mennonites. The city leaders had emphasized that Mennonites distilled the best liquor, paid a lot of taxes and were important for the economy. They were wool-combers, silk-dyers, had several weaving looms, and gave nourishment and bread to fifty-two evangelical journeymen. Even those Mennonite Königsbergers who had already sold their possessions and left the country were allowed to return.⁴⁵

IMMIGRATION TO HOLLAND

Due to the expulsion of these families, the Dannenberg settlers were split up once again. The earlier plan to go together to Polish Lithuania, about ten to fifteen miles away from Tilsit, was discarded after a short time.⁴⁶ About half of the Dannenbergers, 24 families altogether, (another source speaks of 29 families or 180 souls)⁴⁷ decided to settle in Holland while the rest moved to the Werder or turned north toward Polish Lithuania.

Those who went to Holland had planned to return to their area of origin permanently. However, their trip to Holland turned out to be extraordinarily difficult. In November 1732 several people had been asked to check out the land in Wageningen. In December 1732, the deal was closed. In the meantime, those who had been expelled were on

SPECIFICATION

Der Kuben Zahl des Dorffs Sedvela 1738

	A			B			C			Total
	Pruchigte Graben	besante Weide	Unland Wege und Land	guth Land	guth Land	guth Land	guth Land	guth Land	guth Land	
	3, Mo	2, 1/2 Mo	1, 1/2 Mo	3, Mo	2, 1/2 Mo	1, 1/2 Mo	3, Mo	2, 1/2 Mo	1, 1/2 Mo	3, Mo
Laack Abraham	38			19			28			19
Ferrard Stabbe		1	8				60		35	9
Jacob Eck		2		4	188		150	1	114	1
Jans Quapp							102		27	148
Einrich Jans							112	1	12	245
Tobias Barthel							100	1	6	213
Jans Pauls							92	1	10	274
Gottfried Schepansky und							96		28	170
Hardt Eckert							96	1	5	99
David Pennert							84		16	249
David Unruh		22					222	1		177
Peter Quapp		2124					1	136		19
Schert Gortz		236							4	53
Erantz Quapp		1					200	1		20
Mrian Zebahrt		152					150			20
Abomon Janserts		264					196		20	99
Johann Schroder							1	284	1	13
Jacob Jans							1	12	1	247
Diedrich Jans und							180		16	25
Peter Jergse										9
Jacob Abraham							2	28		69
Demern Stuet							11	13		5
Vollmische Stuet									2	22
Total Summa		8	206		15	239		17	220	19
										23
										238
										21
										6
										3

NO BOLS.

This is one of the oldest documents related to the Mennonite Settlement in Prussian Lithuania.

the ship going to Holland. Just before Christmas, their situation took a dramatic turn. On 20 December 1732, their ship was stranded due to ice floes and the settlers had to be rescued. They found shelter in just a few rooms. Following this event, they settled in Wageningen and on the Island of Walcheren.

From the beginning, however, their stay in Holland was destined to fail. Already by 1736, the settlers in Wageningen had moved away, some back to Prussia, others to Walcheren. In 1738–39 almost all the Walcheren settlers turned their backs on the land of their dreams. By 1739, most of the families could be found in West

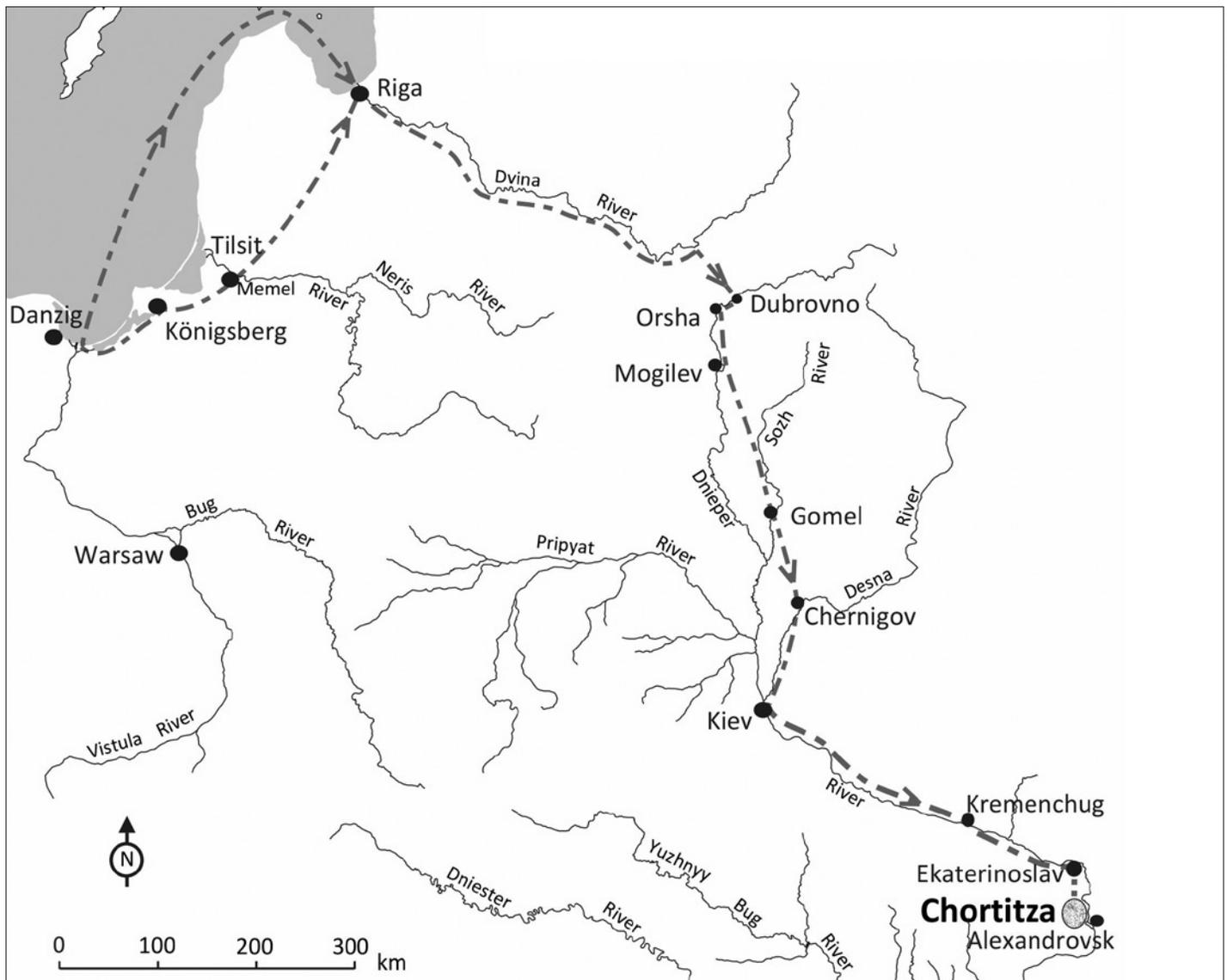
Prussia again. Only a few members of the Block, Grunau, Lucht and Pauls families stayed in Walcheren. In later years some of the family members who had left returned to Walcheren. This is evident from the entries in the church records of the Mennonite congregation of Middelburg from 1742 to 1759.

DUTCH AID

The Dutch Relief Fund for Foreign Needs played an important role in supporting the expelled Mennonites of 1724 and 1732. The Mennonites in Poland, Switzerland, the Palatinate, and Prussia were subjected to countless recrimina-

tions and persecutions. Collections were taken up for the congregations in Danzig (1660), Poland (1662), Moravia (1665), Switzerland (1672), and the Palatinate (1674 and 1678). At the beginning of the eighteenth century collections were taken up for the congregations in Polish Prussia. The reason for setting up a permanent fund was the oppression experienced in Polish Prussia that caused Mennonites to immigrate to Prussian Lithuania.

Those controlling the fund blamed the failure of the settlers in Wageningen and Walcheren on the stubbornness of the East Prussian Mennonites. For this reason, in 1744, it was decided not to support



Many members of the Mennonite congregation in the Memel Valley participated in the immigration to South Russia.

anyone who resettled out of their own free will. Only those who were expelled and thus impoverished due to their faith or to circumstances beyond their control (such as war, flooding, and fire) would receive support.

The Amsterdam Commission also received word that some of the settlers who had fled Lithuania had secretly returned to Prussian Lithuania before 1740. The commission sharply condemned this independent action and decided that these settlers could not count on support from the Dutch Relief Fund for Foreign Needs.

FRIEDRICHSGRABEN

The situation of Mennonites in Prussia changed radically when Frederick the Great came to power in 1740. The

enlightened monarch advocated for the return of Mennonites to his domain. Already on 14 August 1740 an invitation was issued.⁴⁸ It was to be printed in the weekly announcement notices or distributed in the so-called *Intelligenzzettel*. The Prussian representatives were to announce this invitation in Danzig and the Hague.⁴⁹

On 3 March 1741, the Chamber of War and Domains suggested the land belonging to the farms of Seckenburg, Ginkelsmittel, and Polenzhof as well as those in Friedrichsgraben be made available to the newly arrived Mennonites from Prussian Poland. The contract of 21 November 1741,⁵⁰ was signed by Abraham Görtzen and Michael Schütt and named 32 tenants for the farms. The most important promises of the contract

included: the freedom to practise their religion and permission for a building for this purpose; the right to choose the leaders and teachers of their confession; the right to perform their own church discipline; and freedom from military service.

According to an inspection of the land, it was in terrible shape. A report from Labiau dated May 18, 1740 shows the conditions of that time. It stated that the livestock and the horses could not be put out to pasture but had to be fed in their stalls.⁵¹ There was also a lack of feed, and flooding in the region. Because of these adversities, and because they had brought their own building material for houses and barns, Mennonite settlers were granted a tax-free year.

The difficulties in this region con-

tinued. Crop failures contributed to many renters not being able to pay their taxes. In June 1744, Jan Pauls, Jan Görtzen, Salomon Kohnert and Cornelius Gronau from the Marienburg area reported that they and their fellow citizens could now also settle in Seckenburg because the Mennonite settlers could not pay their taxes and were in danger of losing their land.⁵²

In December 1746 Mennonite settlers were exempted from outstanding payments, but the conditions for how this should happen were not accepted. On 8 May 1747, the head landholder Posser demanded that Mennonites leave their farms within eight days and pay their debts, otherwise their possessions (buildings and livestock) would be auctioned off and their land given to others. Consequently, Mennonites tried to pay their debts with the help of money lenders (probably the businessman Brunwish from Königsberg), but they were not successful. The sale went on, “over their heads, and everything was sold dirt cheap.”

On 15 December 1747, the contract was dissolved and in May 1748 other settlers took their place. The documents do not indicate where these Mennonites went. At the beginning of 1748 they sent a petition to the Prussian king. According to this petition, 50 families originally from Polish Prussia had settled on this land. Due to incidents, it was reported, 50 souls had already moved away. The rest were left completely impoverished and would have to leave their land. An offer to settle in other places (Prussian Lithuania) was not possible because those concerned were impoverished. They pleaded that they should receive the same conditions as the “new” landowners, paying 13 Taler per Hufe instead of the required 30 Taler per Hufe. Furthermore, other Mennonites “from their West Prussian colony” were interested in settling in Prussian Lithuania.⁵³ In a petition of 23 January 1750⁵⁴ they informed the Prussian king in great detail about the wrong that had been done to them and noted that twenty families had already left their land. They were now only 34 families and were suffering because they only had 320 head

of cattle, no land of their own, and high payments to make.

Unfortunately, the documents yield no information as to which families had already left the land and which ones were still waiting for a favorable decision from the Prussian ruler. It can be verified that nine families that settled in the region of Friedrichsgraben were tenants in various places in the Memel Valley. It is known that one family went to Holland (Walcheren).

In spite of these difficult circumstances the congregation seems to have survived. In the first Mennonite list of names of congregational leaders (*Naamlijst*) of 1743 the congregation Litauen was already mentioned. It belonged to the “*Waterländern*” (Frisians). The church elders were Adrian Sievert (Siebert) and Hans Vooth (Voth), pastors Hendrik Dirksz (Dirks), and Hendrik Casper.⁵⁵ There was also evidence of pastors during the years after they left the region of Friedrichsgraben.

THE CHURCH

It is interesting to compare family names in the church records of Plauschwarren after 1769 with those of the expelled settlers of 1724. It is evident that about half the expelled families never returned to East Prussia. Also, some of the settlers of 1741 left the country because of difficult circumstances. The number of Mennonite families in Prussian Lithuania after 1769 and especially after the exodus to Russia in 1789 diminished greatly, even though some new family names were added.

Close ties between the congregation in Plauschwarren and congregations in West Prussia were maintained. At special occasions such as a baptism or voting for a church elder in Plauschwarren, at least one elder from West Prussia was in attendance. In the beginning, the Plauschwarren congregation was not allowed to vote for their own church elder. The West Prussian congregations were too concerned that (as in 1724) they would be forced to support this congregation due to some rash or thoughtless action. In earlier entries for baptism in the congregation Thiensdorf (transferred to the church records of the congregation Orlofffelder) during the years of

1758, 1759, and 1763 there are names which are designated “aus Littauen”. It is obvious that the ties of the congregation Thiensdorf to the Plauschwarren congregation were especially strong due to the fact that so many brothers of the faith had settled there in 1724. Eventually the West Prussian congregations arrived at the conclusion that it was a significant burden for them to lead the congregation from such a distance. In 1769, a meeting in the Stuhmsche (Schweingrube/Tragheimerweide) congregation was arranged and it was determined that the trips for the elder were difficult and costly. The Plauschwarren congregation was given permission to elect its own elder.

In 1767 the congregation in Plauschwarren was able to build its own church. The document of permission from the Prussian king stated: “According to our all gracious lord, the kingly majesty of Prussia, Mennonites and inherent renters of the outlying estate *Plauschwarren* in the region of Belgrade in Prussia, have with all due respect, petitioned that in order to practise their free religious exercises as per rental agreement and with the gracious agreement of permitting them to have their own schoolmaster, would request that on the aforementioned estate, at their own expense, they would build a house of prayer and a school class room. Considering the given circumstances, his kingly majesty, seeing that neither the Prussian government nor the Gumbian military domain office has objected, graciously concedes this request. Not alone the request of constructing a house of prayer and a classroom, but we also grant them all the rights and freedom of other similar houses of prayer here in Prussia. However, it must be understood that, like other houses of prayer, they must keep their rental agreement and give their dues to the Tilsit church as well as to other churches and those serving in the schools, as per the rental agreement. If this agreement is kept, then the Prussian government and its offices must pledge to obediently and respectfully protect, as needed, the aforementioned Mennonites and renters of the estate Plauschwarren. May it be witnessed that this present

concession is signed by us and imprinted with our royal seal. Thus, taking place and determined in Berlin, July 31, 1767. Friedrich (L.S.).”⁵⁶

Soon after this decree (around 1776) a pastor’s office (*Predigtstube*) was prepared in Grigolienen. This property was bought and shared by seven Mennonite families. The stately residence with nearby fields was purchased by the Elder Heinrich Janz. On 1 May 1776,⁵⁷ the congregation bought a room from him which was to serve as a pastor’s office.

The room in Grigolienen proved to be too small and the congregation soon searched for a larger space. The owner of the estate known as Adlig Pokraken had to sell it due to difficult economic circumstances and it was purchased by Dietrich Janz, an elder of the congregation. He soon encountered financial difficulties and lost everything he owned. Four Mennonites

then purchased the estate for 25,000 Taler. The congregation bought the residence for 1,000 Taler.

A number of factors affected the growth of the congregation. Like everywhere at this time, the death rate of children in the Mennonite community was extremely high. In the first ten years during which church record dates are available (1769–78) there were no fewer than 70 children (ages not noted) listed among the 105 deceased. In 1782, a year in which there were especially many deaths, 35 children out of 40 died, and at least 16 were below the age of seven. Jacob Ewert (born ca. 1755), for example, experienced the deaths of seven of his fourteen children.

Another factor which slowed church growth was the so called “*Außentrau*” (outside marriage). In a report in 1789, the Elder Heinrich Jantzen complained that since 1775 the tendency to marry

outside the Mennonite faith (especially to a Lutheran partner) had increased among Mennonites of the Memel Valley. In 1765 two out of three marriages occurred outside the fold. A mutual prohibition in the West and East Prussian congregations was not, however, obtainable.

IMMIGRATION TO SOUTH RUSSIA

Many members of the Mennonite congregation in the Memel Valley participated in the immigration to South Russia beginning in 1789. At least 40 families from the congregation Plauschwarren searched for a new home in the Chortitz region. This resulted in the loss of one third of its adult members. Mostly young families emigrated. Out of forty-three new young couples, twenty remained in East Prussia, and twenty-three immigrated to South Russia.

1 Henry Schapansky’s book *Mennonite Migrations and the Old Colony* (2006) provides some details on which of the Chortitz colony settlers had Lithuanian connections.

2 <http://www.mennonitenealogy.com/prussia/PlauschwarrenBirths1769-1855.pdf>, <http://www.mennonitenealogy.com/prussia/PlauschwarrenBaptisms1771-1862.pdf>, <http://www.mennonitenealogy.com/prussia/PlauschwarrenMarriages1778-1862.pdf>, <http://www.mennonitenealogy.com/prussia/PlauschwarrenDeaths1769-1869.pdf>

3 This article has been translated and adapted from Erwin Wittenberg and Manuel Janz, “Geschichte der mennonitischen Siedler in Preussisch Litauen,” *Mennonitische Geschichtsblaetter* 74 (2017): 73–97.

4 Andreas Kossert, *Ostpreußen. Geschichte und Mythos*, (Munich 2008), 108.

5 GStAPK, II.HA, Abt.7 II, Nr.7971.

6 Erich Randt, *Die Mennoniten in Ostpreussen und Litauen bis zum Jahre 1722*, Königsberg 1912 (contains the rescript of 1.7.1711 on p.8).

7 GStAPK, II. HA, Hofkammer, Tit.45, Nr.6.

8 Wilhelm Mannhardt, *Die Wehrfreiheit der altpreussischen Mennoniten. Denkschrift*, Marienburg 1863,118.

9 GStAPK I. HA, Rep.7, Nr.68.

10 1 Hufe (pl. Hufen) = 30 Morgen = 41 acres.

11 GStAPK, II. HA, Hofkammer, Tit.45, Nr.7.

12 Art. Lithuania, in *Mennonite Encyclopedia* Glenn H. Penner, Mennonites Expelled from Lithuania in 1724 (Internet, called up on the 15.2.2012): Mennonites from various Frisian congregations in West Prussia began settling in what is now Lithuania in 1713. Even Randt stated that the settlers in Sköpen, Neu-Sorge and Calwen originated “from the Weichsel Valley (*Weichseltal*)”. Randt, *Die Mennoniten*, 11.

13 *Gemeentearchief Amsterdam* AA C701, letter of the Elder of the Danzig congregation, July 13,1714.

14 *Gemeentearchief Amsterdam* C 720, letter of 5.3.1724.

15 Randt, *Die Mennoniten*, 24.

16 *Ibid.*, 28.

17 *Ibid.*, 29.

18 *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, Horst Quiring and Nanne van der Zijpp, accessed 14.4.2016.

19 GStAPK, XX. HA, EM 38d, Nr.29 (Investigation report of 1722).

20 *Gemeentearchief Amsterdam* C706 and C713.

21 *Gemeentearchief Amsterdam* C713, 3.

22 GStAPK, II.HA, Abt.7, XCI.Nr.6101.

23 *Ibid.*

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Gemeentearchief Amsterdam* C724 from 1.4.1724.

26 *Ibid.*

27 Antje Brons, *Ursprung, Entwicklung und Schicksale der Taufgesinnten oder Mennoniten in kurzen Zügen übersichtlich dargestellt von Frauenhand*, Norden 1884, 27.

28 *Gemeentearchief Amsterdam* C735.

29 *Gemeentearchief Amsterdam* C720; the Elder of the congregation David Penner in a letter in March 1724 shortly before the expulsion from East Prussia.

30 *Gemeentearchief Amsterdam* C734, Letter of David Penner, May 18, 1724.

31 *Gemeentearchief Amsterdam* C737.

32 Johan Sjouke Postma, *Das niederländische Erbe der preußisch-russländischen Mennoniten in Europa, Asien und Amerika*. Dissertation, Marburg/Lahn 1958.

33 *Gemeentearchief Amsterdam* C735, Letter of 9.3.1725.

34 Furthermore, it seems that some East Prussian settlers of 1724 did not leave, but rather stayed in the country. In the Evangelical Church records, one finds occasional mention of “ex-Mennonite” or “part Mennonite.” In 1729 the Mennonite, Peter Jahne, (who later settled in the district of Friedrichsgraben and in Plauschwarren) had settled in Hohenwiese. In 1731 an infant of the “part” Mennonite Greger Fryer and his Mennonite wife Anna is baptized in Neukirch. In Killucken (church records of Kaukehmen) the birth of Helena Rosenfeld, daughter of Dietrich and Anna Rosenfeld is noted. Relating to Jedwilleiten, a report of 1892 declares that “the forebears of Peter Goetzke did not emigrate and they have had a canton’s position since 1740.” Other names found in the list of the exiled of 1726, are Peter Goetzke, at that time settling in the Gross Werder and Jakob Goetzke, settling in the Klein Werder.

35 Horst Penner, *Die ost- und westpreussischen Mennoniten in ihrem religiösen und sozialen Leben, in ihren kulturellen und wirtschaftlichen Leistungen, Teil:1526 bis 1722*,

Kirchheimbolanden 1978, 407f.

36 *Ibid.* Penner lists these families as “in Stuhmschen” which is probably a misspelling. Culmschen refers to the Schoensee congregation and Montauschen to the Montau congregation. Both were Frisian Mennonite congregations.

37 *Gemeentearchief Amsterdam* 1632. Letter of Jan van Hoek (Danzig) from October 1736.

38 *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, Horst Quiring and Nanne van der Zijpp, accessed on the 14.4.2017.

39 *Gemeentearchief Amsterdam* A1581. Letter from Peter Bekker from Schönsee 9.3.1727.

40 Herbert Wiebe, *Daß Siedlungswerk niederländischer Mennoniten im Weichseltal*, dissertation, Marburg/Lahn 1952, 11.

41 *Gemeentearchief Amsterdam* C844.

42 *Gemeentearchief Amsterdam* A1581.

43 GStAPK II.HA, Abt.7, Ostpreußen II. Nr.6102 *Acta wegen Wegschaffung der Mennoniten aus Preußen*, 1732.

44 Horst Kenkel, *Bauern der Rautenburgischen Güter 1752, Verein für Familienforschung in Ost- und Westpreußen, Altpreußischer Geschlechterkunde 1959*,143-148.

45 GStAPK. Also see *Gemeentearchief Amsterdam* A1581.

46 *Gemeentearchief Amsterdam* C752f.

47 *Gemeentearchief Amsterdam* C758.

48 GStAPK, II. HA, Rep.5. Title 151, No.17. Also see *Gemeentearchief Amsterdam* A1581.

49 Randt, *Die Mennoniten*, 77. Also see GStAPK, II.HA, Abt.7 II, Nr.7971.

50 GStAPK, II. HA, Gen. Dir., OPR and Litauen III. AEmter Nr.391.

51 Randt, *Die Mennoniten*, 88.

52 GStAPK, 92. Also see Randt, *Die Mennoniten*, 77.

53 *Ibid.*

54 *Ibid.*

55 *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1957 Article, Horst Quiring and Nanne van der Zijpp, accessed 16.4.2017.

56 Wilhelm Crichton, *Zur Geschichte der Mennoniten*, Königsberg 1786, insertion B.

57 Church Records B 787,165.

MARTIN B. FAST

in Civil War Siberia

Katherine Peters Yamada

This is the second part of a two-part series on the life of Martin B. Fast. For Part I, see *Preservings* issue 39.



MLA-P-0162

The letters came back to Reedley after wandering around the globe for a year and a half. To his surprise, the rubles were still in the envelopes and he deposited them in Reedley's First National Bank vault.

He, along with many other Mennonite families in the Reedley area, began receiving even more urgent appeals from Siberian Mennonites. Due to the ongoing Civil War in this territory vital supplies, including warm clothing necessary to survive the coming winter, were scarce. Although he had long before given up his desire to be a foreign missionary, Fast felt that he could address this tangible mission need by providing warm clothing. He wrote to the American Red Cross, the Quakers, and the Old Mennonites and learned that clothing could indeed be sent to Siberia.¹

The logistical challenges were discussed in Mennonite publications. Some recommended that the clothing be shipped via the Atlantic Ocean. Fast, however, argued that items sent that way would not reach their intended Siberian destination. After making inquiries in San Francisco, he learned that the items could be sent to Seattle, Washington, and then be shipped directly to Vladivostok on a Russian freighter by the Pacific Ocean. Fast proposed such a route within Mennonite newspapers and many approved of this approach and soon boxes of clothing and bedding began arriving in Seattle.²

After obtaining official permission (Number 44451) from the War Trade

Board in Washington, D. C., Fast and other volunteers began collecting boxes of clothing and bedding. During his many trips to Seattle, Fast found support and hospitality from J. F. Harms and his wife. The two men had much in common as Harms had also served as editor of the *Mennonitische Rundschau* (1880–1886) and, like Fast, had previously toured his Russian homeland, visiting many congregations. After the First World War, Harms also took on a prominent role in the promotion of relief work to alleviate the suffering among Russian Mennonites.³

Fast wanted to follow the crates to their Siberian destination, but he did not have travel money or a passport. On his return to Reedley, he found a letter from Harms, urging him to follow the shipment. Fast shared this proposal with his wife and together they prayed for guidance. Then, a letter from Kansas arrived with an anonymous offer to pay his expenses. At the county courthouse in Fresno he learned that very few passports were being issued. Putting his faith in God's guidance, he sent in the application and despite the clerk's warning his new passport arrived some three weeks later. Many came to bid him farewell and old friends from his days in the Midwest and new friends he made in California sent "fitting wishes for a safe trip and blessings on his work."⁴

ON THE PACIFIC

Fast had planned to travel with Wilhelm Neufeld of the First Mennonite Church in Reedley. However, two days before Fast was to leave, his intended travel partner told him, "Brother Fast, the wind has shifted at our place." Instead, Neufeld was making plans to visit his daughter, a missionary in China.⁵ Despite this setback, Fast was determined to proceed on his perilous journey. On the last day of June 1919, Fast left San Francisco on the *Shinyo Maru*. The next morning Fast saw some familiar faces onboard, including Dr. R. A. Torrey, an evangelist, pastor, and writer, who had recently been appointed dean of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles. During the one-week sail to Honolulu,

Martin B. Fast, who immigrated to the United States with his family in the 1870s, was a key figure in Mennonite aid to Russia during the Civil War.

After the First World War ended in 1918, a Civil War continued to rage in Russia. Although he was no longer affiliated with any publications, Martin Fast continued corresponding with – and sending contributions to – Mennonites in Russia, including those in the Siberian colonies. From Reedley, he watched as the financial conditions in Russia worsened. Advised to send Russian rubles, Fast purchased several, sending them in registered letters. He waited for answers to no avail.

Fast, Torrey and others conversed about the teachings and basic beliefs of the Mennonites, including non-resistance and foot washing.⁶

After a few hours onshore in Honolulu, the passengers re-boarded the *Shinyo Maru*. During the eleven-day crossing to

his belongings inspected, he stepped out onto dry land. “For good or evil, I was now in the land of banishment (exile), a place which nearly every Russian thinks of with horror and fear.”⁹ He was back in Russia, ready to help his fellow Mennonites in the settlements near Omsk.

Work, Gratis,” to his Russian visa, assuring him that the crates could enter the country duty free.¹¹ The second was from P. A. Wiebe, a church official in Lehigh, Kansas,¹² who had been “moved by the spirit” to send Fast a recommendation signed and stamped with a church seal.¹³

Fast was grateful for both documents and found them helpful when he was making arrangements to ship the crates to Omsk. But he quickly discovered that the documents were of no value at the customs house. There he discovered that the crates had arrived much earlier and were buried deep in the building. After a lengthy search, he was happy to see the big ‘W’ that he and Harms had drawn on each one. He walked along the rows of crates, touching each one. “So many people in America had prayed for these crates. And now I could welcome them in Russia.”¹⁴ Informed by customs officials that he would have to pay full duties on their contents, Fast appealed to the U.S. consulate in Vladivostok, but was told that only the Red Cross had an exemption and even the YMCA paid full customs. Fast persisted, but eventually, he was forced to accept the conditions in order to get on with his task.

Feeling isolated and having no one to consult, Fast sought out a church. He found a Russian Baptist church that held prayer meetings four times a week, and there he found fellowship with like-minded believers. He also learned of two families, Enns and Thiessen, who had earlier endured a forty-two-day trip from the Siberian interior to Vladivostok hoping to find a way to immigrate to the United States. He visited the two families and gave them some financial assistance with

Japan, Fast abstained from games, picture shows, and other forms of entertainment, especially dancing. Some of them seemed to be totally innocent, he noted; but he harkened back to his youth in Rückenau, where, as a young boy, he had seen the trouble caused by people dancing in the local tavern. He recalled his mother’s admonition that “a person who dances will never go to heaven!”²⁷

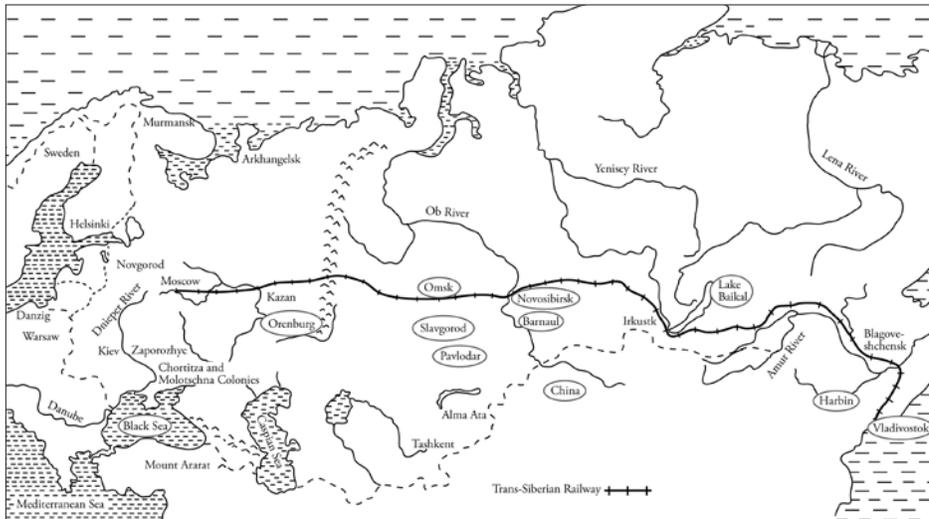
Fast and others were honored with an invitation to tea at the home of the president of the shipping line. After docking at the port near Tokyo, the guests boarded a streetcar to travel to his house, situated well out of town within a stone grotto and near a waterfall. Fast noted that the luxurious dwelling and the extravagant fare was “worth the trip.”²⁸

The next leg of the trip was a twelve-hour train ride to the port city of Tsuruga on the Sea of Japan. The weather was very unsettled during the crossing to Vladivostok and Fast was relieved to arrive at his destination. He had been in transit for nearly a month. Eager to leave the ship, he mentally prepared to deal with Russian bureaucracy. Finally, with his passport and

ALLIES AND CUSTOMS OFFICIALS

Fast discovered that Vladivostok was a staging area for Allied troops sent to assist in the Civil War. The American Red Cross, also headquartered in the city, was charged with treating Russian military personnel and civilians suffering from disease and malnourishment along the 4,100-mile-long Trans-Siberian Railway. Their main task was dealing with typhus, which was spreading quickly across the region. The Red Cross’s Inter-Allied Typhus Train, which became known as the ‘Great White Train,’ was a rolling clinic with facilities for bathing and delousing typhus victims along the railroad line.¹⁰

Fast did not let the turmoil in Vladivostok distract him. He found a hotel and headed for the customs house on the other side of the city’s huge bay. He had two goals: first to find the crates of supplies that had been shipped from the U.S., and second, to get them on a Red Cross train to Omsk. He had brought two important documents to Russia. The first was from the Russian Consul George F. Romanosky who had added “Relief



From Vladivostok, Fast took the Tran-Siberian railway to deliver necessary material aid to Mennonites in the Omsk region.



Vladivostok was a staging area for Allied troops sent to assist in the Civil War. Mennonites sent boxes of clothing and bedding to help their co-religionists in the region.



Refugee women receiving aid from a Red Cross railway car. Women struggled to provide for their families in the midst of war.

monies provided by Br. J. J. Flaming of Dinuba.¹⁵ In turn, the two men assisted Fast at the custom house. They were “very helpful in dealing with the complications.” The three men would often cross the bay, “only to be greeted with the sign *zavtra* (tomorrow).” On August 12, the doors were finally open.

The men began opening the crates so the officials could calculate the duty. To Fast’s dismay, the stacks of clothing, so carefully ironed and packed by the women in Seattle, were thrown about by the cus-

the sorting while Fast watched over the re-packing and Enns repaired the broken crates and nailed all of them shut. Despite their precautions, items began disappearing and Fast realized that he would have to act quickly. He invited the officials to select what they needed: trousers, shirts, overcoats, and other items. Fast also gave several small children, very shabbily dressed, clothing. Then one of the guards, armed with a rifle and bayonet, approached. He had no shirt and was wearing little else. Fast dressed him

U.S. consul had estimated the fee at about 5,000 rubles. But Fast was stunned to receive a bill for 23,200 rubles (some \$380.00 U.S. dollars in 1919).¹⁹ The bill did not include other expenses – such as crossing the bay more than thirty times – or any personal expenditures. With no options but to pay the horrendous sum, Fast immediately contacted the U.S. consul in Omsk. He advised Fast to write a short letter explaining who the Mennonites were, where they had originated and where they now lived, and to explain why he was attempting to bring clothing and other items to Siberia. Fast did this and also included in the report how much he had paid in customs duties.²⁰ In addition, he submitted an official request for reimbursement of the duty fees and arranged that as soon as the U.S. consul received the money, it was to be deposited in an account for the support of poor Mennonites and the poor wives of Russian soldiers.

While fighting for a reduced customs bill, Fast was also negotiating a way to get the crates to Omsk – free of charge. Once again, he visited the U.S. consulate to ask for free transport, submitting his testimonials, words, and recommendations. Soon after, he received a letter from the director of the American Red Cross, a Mr. Strong, which “everywhere opened hearts and doors.” In another letter, a Mr. Cook, also of the Red Cross, promised to store the fifty-two crates in their warehouse and load them on the next westbound train. However, Cook added, this was very indefinite due to the “present military situation.”²¹

With his work nearly complete, Fast boarded a streetcar, headed for the Red Cross office and then to the customs house, which would soon be closing. The streetcar was, as always, very crowded. “You hang on if you can; others are simply left standing [on the curb].”²² As they approached the first stop, he reached for his pocketbook. It was gone. Everything was gone, his passport, his important documents and his rubles (approximately thirty-five U.S. dollars). He was not the only victim; several others were robbed that day. One lost 65,000 rubles. Fast



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Across Siberia, typhus caused countless deaths during the Civil War. The American Red Cross performed an important role in saving Siberian children from its effects.

toms men. Fast summoned his courage and, brandishing his passport and the two official documents, grabbed one of the men. In Russian, German, and English he said, “You see, don’t you, that these are shirts? Why are you tearing everything apart?”¹⁶ After that, the Russians showed more respect for him and for the contents of the crates.

The U.S. consul in Vladivostok had warned him to stay with the items and that, as soon as they were weighed, to quickly re-pack them and close the crates to avoid theft. Thiessen stayed with

up “American style.” Due to Fast’s quick thinking, the thefts stopped almost completely, and he thanked the “good Lord for the opportunity” to do some good.¹⁷

During this time, Fast received a letter from his wife, Elisabeth, informing him that Neufeld was on his way after all. Much relieved at the news, he often ran down to the harbor to meet the twice-weekly passenger ships, hoping that Neufeld would arrive and help him “with word and deed in the difficult work.”¹⁸

After nearly five weeks, the customs agent presented him with the bill. The



Many people suffering because of the Civil War asked for relief at the American Red Cross office in Omsk.

placed a notice in the local newspaper requesting that the finder bring the wallet to the American Red Cross, but there was no response. The fifty-two crates were scheduled to be unloaded at the Red Cross headquarters the next day. He had no choice but to return to the U.S. consulate and apply for an emergency passport.

The next day, at the customs house, Fast rented several barges to carry the crates across the bay. He and his helpers had just begun loading them when a Russian man appeared, then several more and “soon the whole so called ‘Union.’”²³ They told Fast that he would have to hire them at a cost of 1,200 rubles. He took the group leader aside and negotiated a 350-ruble fee. The men carried the crates down to the water and helped load. The trip was long and difficult, as the barges were small and the weather was bad. Despite the wind and the rain, they eventually deposited the crates at the Red Cross headquarters. On September 1, the fifty-two crates were loaded onto a train that left for Omsk under military guard. The crates traveled

at no cost, thanks to the above-mentioned testimonials and to the direct intervention of the U.S. consul.

DEPARTURE FOR OMSK

Neufeld arrived the day after the crates had been loaded and sent on their way. The two men shared their accounts of what had transpired since they had last met in Reedley and then prepared themselves to follow the crates as soon as possible. Fast reported, “That was no easy thing because travel in Russia has always been accompanied by difficulties. And now it was at least ten times worse.”²⁴ A week later, they boarded a train bound for Omsk, in the heart of Siberia. Situated on the Irtysh River, near its confluence with the Om River, the city of Omsk was close to Siberia’s first Mennonite villages that had developed close to the Trans-Siberian Railroad. The city was also the junction point for several other railroad lines, including one leading to the Mennonite settlement near Slavgorod.²⁵

Omsk had served as the headquar-

ters of Aleksandr Kolchak’s provisional government during the Civil War. The Bolsheviks’ Red Army had entered the city in late 1919, forcing Kolchak and the White Army to retreat eastward along the Trans-Siberian towards Irkutsk.²⁶ Because of the destruction wreaked by the Red Army, trains had not traveled between Vladivostok and Omsk for some



American Red Cross workers used trains to offer aid to suffering Russian citizens in Siberia.



During the Civil War, a city of refugees arose on the outskirts of Omsk.

time. Fast recorded his impressions as he and Neufeld traveled westward, stopping briefly in Irkutsk. "Bridges were partially destroyed, railroad cars were lying on top of each other along the railroad tracks, and shattered glass covered railroad buildings and cars."²⁷ After a journey of several days, the two men arrived in Omsk, still in the final throes of the Civil War. Additionally,

the dreaded typhus was spreading in nearby villages.

Would Fast have set off for Siberia if he had known he would be entering a danger zone? He documented his trip in a book published soon after his return and often referred to his 1919 trip in later writings, but he rarely indicated concern for his own personal safety. He wrote extensively

about the people he encountered and the hardships they were enduring; he only commented on the Civil War if the story involved suffering Mennonites.

He also did not give any ink to the importance of Omsk itself. Although he apparently sought out the U.S. consul when he first arrived, he didn't inform his readers of that. Instead, he immedi-



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crossed the Red River near Winnipeg, Manitoba, under similar weather conditions. Barkman's boat had overturned and he had drowned. "We folded our hands in prayer and finally, after a zig-zag course, we landed on the opposite shore."²⁸ They were in the Siberian Mennonite settlements at last and were greeted with coffee and freshly baked bread, complete with butter, at the home of the Thessman family.

Fast and Neufeld soon separated in order to visit more people. As he traveled, Fast was greeted with open arms in village after village. Despite their impoverished conditions, his hosts fed him and housed him and transported him to the next village. It was early September, the time for threshing. In one field, he watched as workers attempted to harvest the grain. "Most of the grain lay loose in the fields. They had not been able to buy any binding twine."²⁹

In his report, Fast referred briefly to the ongoing conflict, explaining that refugees, along with soldiers and officers with their families, were often quartered with the same families that took him in. "There always seemed to be room for an American and everywhere we enjoyed a most wonderful hospitality."³⁰ On one of his first Sundays in the Omsk region, he attended a church service in Chunaevka, listening as the Sunday school teacher led his pupils in song. He took every opportunity to talk with the people he met. An elderly woman who had operated a flourishing orphanage about sixty-five miles away told him that the "Reds stole all the provisions, destroyed what they could not use, and scattered the children."³¹

As he traveled on to Smolianovka, he found the ride through the grain fields and the neatly divided fields and forests belonging to the Mennonites to be very pleasant. "Earlier and particularly in the last few years these owners had made large contributions to help the poor. Now they were faced with quartering people. And the many refugees, who filled the streets and roads, had to be fed." That night he stayed with the Konrads. "This family had suffered a great deal at the hands of the Reds, when they were active there. They

had all been bound and thrown into the cellar. They were robbed of their valuables and 22,000 rubles, which at that time were worth considerably more than now. It is certainly something different to hear about such experiences than it is to read about them."³²

He visited several poor families. At the first dwelling, the children were "half-naked" despite the cold, wet weather. When Fast shared his concern at their welfare, he was told they were all wearing everything they owned. "Even today I can still see that mother and her little ones standing in front of me! I wish from my heart that I could have taken a picture of them – but I will never forget what I saw."³³ Conditions in the next home were



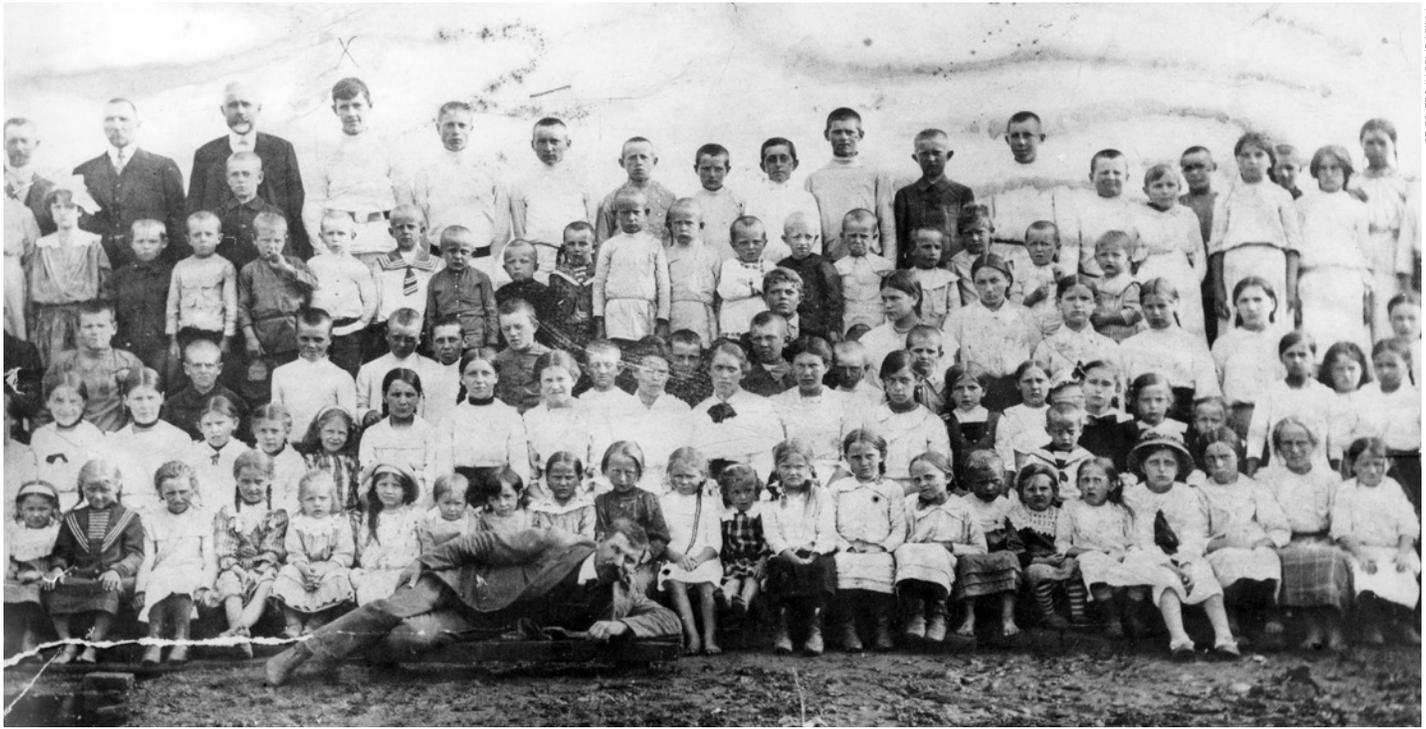
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Refugees in the region built temporary shelters to shield their families from the weather.

even worse. The last of the flour had been used and there was nothing to eat. He visited more homes and found the same story. The husbands were gone and the families had no food and very little in the way of clothing. He instructed each of the women to go the miller and get all the flour they needed and that "the Americans" would pay for it.³⁴

Fast attended church services and impromptu gatherings at schools or in someone's home. There, he heard more stories and listened to the weeping of women whose husbands were to leave for the front early the next morning. He listed the names of Mennonite men who had been shot by the Reds. At a church in Margenau, he spoke to Sunday School students who listened attentively as he talked about the fifty-two crates then on their way. Later, one little girl suggested to

ately launched into a description of the Irtysh, "a very large river," which he had to cross to get to the Mennonite settlements located west of the city. No ferries were in sight, but he and Neufeld were so eager to reach their destination that they rented a small boat, loaded their luggage and started off in the rain. Fast thought of his uncle, Jakob Barkman, who had



Even during the turmoil of the Russian Revolution, Mennonites in Slavgorod continued to hold celebrations within the community. This photograph was taken during a children's festival in 1917.

her mother that they go to America with Fast. She was sure that he could just pack her and her mother inside one of the crates and get them out of Siberia.

He visited farmers who were well to do, but they also had stories to tell. One family was caught in the middle of a fierce battle in which brother fought against brother. "Scarcely one man out of a hundred knew for what he was fighting."³⁵ The brothers finally reached home again, relatively unscathed. Along the road and in the forest, they saw many who had been captured in the battle. They had been stripped to the waist and shot in the back.

During the course of his visit, Fast crossed the Irtysh many times. The ferry, a small steamboat, carried both people and cargo and the loading and unloading process was very tedious. Travelers often waited thirty-six hours to board. Plus, there was a toll. But with assistance from a local Mennonite man, Gerhard Wiens, and the U.S. consul in Omsk, along with the letter from the American Red Cross, Fast was able to board the ferry immediately and cross toll-free. "We are very grateful to the Lord who guided the hearts of the authorities."³⁶

He met up with Neufeld, who had been

at his sister's home. Together they entered Omsk, planning to travel to the Slavgorod area. After some protracted negotiations, they received permission to leave Omsk. They boarded a steamer along with a "thousand or more persons, most of whom were poor Russians or refugees." Then a military officer confiscated the vessel, ordering everyone to disembark. The ship was reversing directions. "There was nothing we could do, we had to get off."³⁷

The two men tried to get on a train; however, in order to buy a ticket they had to show their certificate of permission to an official who had closed his office at two o'clock. "Again we found ourselves in a bad situation." Fast hired a carriage to take him to the American consul: "He gave me a signed note and with that, we had no difficulty in buying a ticket."³⁸ In the meantime, the train to Slavgorod had left and they were forced to spend the night in the waiting room. Finally, morning came and a train arrived. Once in Slavgorod, they hired a carriage. Neufeld got off at a friend's house, while Fast and another traveler, Cornelius Klaassen, continued on, with the young coachman driving in deep mud, to their host, Peter Klaassen. There, they were able to wash themselves

with hot water and put on clean clothes after their strenuous trip.

The next day was Sunday and Fast went to church, despite the snow, which was falling in large flakes. At the afternoon service, Fast described his relief work and then later attended a funeral for a very poor woman who had died of typhoid fever. Her daughter had died several days before and her husband and another child were also ill. They were among many others who had died of typhoid fever in that area in recent years.³⁹ He wrote of yet another woman who had used up the last of her flour and as she put the dough in the oven, prayed, "Lord, help us and give us our daily bread." He also wrote of her joy after he purchased some flour and had it delivered to her.⁴⁰

Fast was stunned by what he saw and the stories that he heard, particularly in Slavgorod, where the accounts of atrocities committed by the Reds filled him with horror and revulsion. He related an account of a man named Unruh who owned delivery wagons. One day, Unruh was accosted by men on horseback who demanded to know if he was the owner. When he replied, "yes," they commanded him and a neighbor standing nearby to

come with them. They were taken out of town, stood up on the edge of a pit and shot. They were found dead the next morning, with their ears cut off. “They had done no harm to anyone and were considered among the most active and best men in the city. No one dared to say a word about it or ask about it.”⁴¹

Fast and Neufeld then went their separate ways. Neufeld went with Isaak Friesen while Fast and J. G. Wiens left for the Pavlodar settlement. In Pavlodar, Fast was again greatly affected by the dire straits of mothers and their children trying to survive without a father. In the village of Nadarovka, he visited a woman who, despite the cold day, was barefoot and inadequately dressed, as were her two children. As he sat in their mud hut and looked around, he realized there were no beds. He emptied his satchel, giving her nearly everything he had with him. He saw the same conditions at nearby homes. “Just rags on their bodies that did not cover their nakedness.” When Fast asked where the children slept, the mother told him that at night they brought straw into the house and used that for bedding. Fast felt like admonishing her, but the words died on his tongue. “The misery was too great.”⁴²

There were happier moments. In mid-October in Sofievka, Mennonites came early from far and wide for Harvest Sunday. By the time Fast arrived, every seat in the main building and in a temporary addition was filled. After two men had preached and the choirs had sung, they were treated to “delicious borscht” and other dishes. During the meal so many asked questions that the program was extended, giving Fast the opportunity to tell them about his experiences while in Siberia.⁴³

He was amazed at the close connections between the Mennonites in Russia and those in America. They inquired after relatives and friends and, in most cases, he could provide the information. In turn, they handed him letters and requests for help, which he promised to deliver. After a fitting closing, the whole gathering was treated to coffee and zwieback. Slavgorod celebrated an annual festival while he

was there. The town was full of visitors – and of soldiers who confiscated the local school for themselves. Later that night a battle was fought in the nearby forest, which left “everyone feeling uneasy.”⁴⁴

THE CRATES ARRIVE

Fast was informed that the crates had finally arrived in Omsk, but that somewhere along the way, thieves had forced their way through the roof of the baggage car, opened two crates and stolen several items. Fortunately, the other fifty crates

his money and his clothing, and cruelly beaten. He did not know where his family was or whether they were still alive. Listening as Braun prayed, many were deeply moved and “prayers for him and his family rose to the Throne of Grace.”⁴⁵ Later Fast spoke, thanking the Lord for the many blessings he had experienced on his mission of mercy and thanking everyone in the church for the love they had shown him. Many shook his hand as he left.

It was getting dark as his host, H. H. Warkentin, took the men to the train



On one of his first Sundays in the Omsk region, Fast attended a church service in Chunaevka. The Chunaevka Mennonite Brethren congregation would survive the Civil War, continuing to meet into the 1920s.

were still securely closed and a local man, Isaak Braun, was accompanying the crates to Slavgorod to prevent this from happening again.

A committee was formed to distribute the goods. Recalling all he had seen and heard, Fast realized that distributing the items to those who needed them most would not be easy. He told the men not to treat all the supplicants alike; the most deserving families should be at the top of the list.

With his mission accomplished, it was time to return to Vladivostok. Fast attended one last event, a harvest festival in Chunaevka. A large crowd had gathered and the hour of prayer was led by Isaak Braun, who, not long before, had been driven from his home, robbed of

station. The area had become quite unsettled and mounted soldiers with rifles and bayonets were stationed on every street corner. In the darkness their carriage slid, and they nearly collided with one of these soldiers, who cursed and lashed at them with a whip before they could move on. The men boarded an express train, courtesy of the American consul. They were carrying letters and sealed packets from various consuls and officials and these items could not be entrusted to the Russian postal service. They were charged with handing the items to officials at various stations en route to Vladivostok. The train traveled slowly and during one night near Nikolsk, did not move for several hours. Toward morning, they heard a strange noise and, looking up, saw planes

buzzing above them. They were dismayed to learn that the Bolsheviks were making their way east. Finally, the train moved on.

They arrived in Vladivostok after nine days of travel and discovered that eighty-seven more crates, sent from Seattle by Harms, had arrived. They worked for more than a week authorizing a firm recommended by the Red Cross to transfer the crates from the customs office to the Red Cross warehouse. The costs of transporting the crates to Omsk were to be borne by members of the church in Chunaevka.⁴⁶

After some final business, including retrieving his stolen passport, Fast bid farewell to Neufeld, who was staying on, and retraced his journey back to San Francisco. He arrived in good health in Reedley on November 25, although he weighed nearly twenty pounds less than when he had left for Siberia nearly five months earlier. Fast recorded the miles he had traveled since his June departure until his return: 22,624 miles by automobile, ship, train, and carriage and approximately 65 miles on foot in Vladivostok.⁴⁷ His appeals had

raised donations totaling \$43,963.10. He distributed \$10,480.00 of this as food drafts, and the rest as general relief.⁴⁸ He also wrote a book detailing his relief trip to Siberia, *Historical Report How the North American Mennonites Helped their Poor Brethren in the Faith in Russia, Now and Earlier*. This book was distributed by the popular and widely read in the German-language newspaper, *Vorwärts*, edited by J. G. Fast.⁴⁹

Only a few days after his return, Fast and his wife, Elisabeth, embarked on a speaking tour, visiting nearly all the Mennonite churches in Kansas. Fast drew large audiences eager to hear news of their relatives and friends. As he described the perils, the hunger facing so many and the stark poverty of the women whose husbands had been conscripted into the military, he exhorted his audience to work together to provide continuing relief to those in need.

Fast and Neufeld's relief efforts – and their trip reports – were closely observed by fellow Mennonites. As Hiebert wrote, “When these brethren had returned from

their eventful mission, they told in graphic words of the famine conditions as they found them. People streamed together in large numbers to get all the information possible, and also to find an opportunity to share in the mission of benevolence in a truly Christian spirit.”⁵⁰

During his speaking tour, Fast met with representatives of Midwest Mennonite congregations in Hillsboro, Kansas. At the January 4, 1920, meeting, after hearing Fast's stories for themselves, the men organized a committee with three representatives from each denomination. Fast (the only non-Kansas resident selected) represented the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren, along with Rev. D. E. Harder and Rev. J. J. Friesen, both of Hillsboro, Kansas. Later this committee was formalized as the Emergency Relief Committee of the Mennonites of North America. P. C. Hiebert (who would later head the newly formed MCC) was elected Chairman; D. E. Harder as Recording Secretary; D. J. Regier as Treasurer; and M. B. Fast as General Secretary.⁵¹

1 In 1915, a year after World War I had begun and two years before the United States entered the conflict, Fast was called to Chicago to create a German-language publication, *Der Wahrheitsfreund*, published by the KMB conference.

2 A. L. Schellenberg, editor of the *Zionsbote*, a Mennonite Brethren publication, and *Vorwärts*, a newspaper, was one of those who supported Fast's plan. Through Schellenberg's intervention, the financial portion of the trip was underwritten. See Orlando Harms, “Mennonite Brethren Publishing House,” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1957. Web. 10 Feb 2019. http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite_Brethren_Publishing_House&oldid=133236.

3 John H. Lohrenz, “Harms, John F. (1855–1945),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1956. Web. 10 Feb 2019. [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Harms,_John_F._\(1855-1945\)&oldid=144157](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Harms,_John_F._(1855-1945)&oldid=144157)

4 M. B. Fast, *Geschichtlicher Bericht Wie Die Mennoniten Nordamerikas Ihren Armen Glaubensgenossen in Russland Jetzt Und Früher Geholfen Haben: Meine Reise Nach Sibirien Und Zurück, Nebst Anhang Wann Und Warum Die Mennoniten Nach Amerika Kamen Und Die Gliederzahl der Verschiedenen Gemeinden*, trans. George Reimer (Reedley, CA: M. B. Fast, 1919), 10.

5 M. B. Fast, “Mitteilungen von etlichen der Grossen unter den Mennoniten in Russland und in Amerika. Beobachtungen und Erinnerungen von Jefferson Co. Dann noch von meinen vielseitigen Erfahrungen aus der frühen Jugend bis jetzt.” [hereafter “Mitteilungen”] trans. George Reimer, in *Wahrheitsfreund* (Inman, KS: Krimmer Mennonite Publishing Committee, 1935), 80–83. Fast, 11.

7 *Ibid.*, 13.

8 *Ibid.*, 15.

9 *Ibid.*, 17.

10 Irwin, Julia F. “The Great White Train: Typhus, Sanitation, and U.S. International Development during the Russian Civil War,” *Endeavour*, vol. 36,3 (Sept. 2012): 89–96, <http://sites.bu.edu/revolutionaryrussia/files/2013/09/The-Great-White.pdf>.

11 Fast, 19.

12 Pete V. Wiebe, “Springfield Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church (Marion County, Kansas, USA),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* [hereafter GAMEO], 1959, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Springfield_Krimmer_Mennonite_Brethren_Church_\(Marion_County,_Kansas,_USA\)&oldid=117610](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Springfield_Krimmer_Mennonite_Brethren_Church_(Marion_County,_Kansas,_USA)&oldid=117610), accessed 10 Feb 2019.

13 Fast, 19.

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Ibid.*, 33.

16 *Ibid.*, 20.

17 *Ibid.*, 21.

18 *Ibid.*, 20.

19 *Ibid.*, 22.

20 *Ibid.*, 26.

21 *Ibid.*, 25.

22 *Ibid.*, 23.

23 *Ibid.*, 25.

24 *Ibid.*, 30.

25 Cornelius Krahn, “Omsk Mennonite Settlement (Siberia, Russia),” GAMEO, 1959, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Omsk_Mennonite_Settlement_\(Siberia,_Russia\)&oldid=135021](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Omsk_Mennonite_Settlement_(Siberia,_Russia)&oldid=135021). <https://www.greatrussianguifts.com/oms/>, accessed 10 Feb. 2019.

26 “Omsk,” Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 18 Dec. 2018, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omsk>, accessed 10 Feb. 2019.

27 Fast, 30.

28 *Ibid.*

29 *Ibid.*, 35.

30 *Ibid.*, 34.

31 *Ibid.*, 62.

32 *Ibid.*, 43.

33 *Ibid.*, 44.

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*, 54.

36 *Ibid.*, 36.

37 *Ibid.*, 54.

38 *Ibid.*, 55.

39 “Typhoid fever,” Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 4 Feb. 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Typhoid_fever, accessed 10 Feb. 2019.

40 Fast, 56.

41 *Ibid.*

42 *Ibid.*, 65.

43 *Ibid.*, 66.

44 *Ibid.*, 73.

45 *Ibid.*, 75.

46 *Ibid.*, 43.

47 *Ibid.*, 84.

48 P. C. Hiebert, *Feeding the Hungry, American Mennonite Relief Operations under Mennonite Central Committee*. (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Central Committee, 1929), 33.

49 Christian Neff and J. W. Nickel, “Ewert, Jacob G. (1874–1923),” GAMEO, 1956, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Ewert,_Jacob_G._\(1874-1923\)&oldid=145037](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Ewert,_Jacob_G._(1874-1923)&oldid=145037), accessed 10 Feb. 2019.

50 Hiebert, 35.

51 Guy F. Hershberger and Atlee Beechy, “Relief Work,” GAMEO, 1989, http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Relief_Work&oldid=143711, accessed 9 Feb. 2019.

ANNA THIESSEN

Nurse and Midwife

Eleanor Chornoboy

As long as I can remember, stories of Mennonites who migrated to Paraguay in 1948 captured my imagination. I did not know any of the migrants until 1992 when I was invited to Colonia Sommerfeld to help expand the existing preschool program to include children with intellectual disabilities. At that time, I had the opportunity to meet Anna Heinrichs Friesen Thiessen. She had a particular interest in this issue because her son David was a young man with Down

syndrome. When I was invited back to Paraguay almost twenty years later to promote inclusion in the school system, I asked for an interview on her work as a midwife. Soon after her death in 2018, I interviewed Anna's daughter Christina Klassen (Altona), and Anna's sister, Barbara Penner (Winkler), who shared their memories of Anna. Letters that Anna wrote to Manitoban editors about the conditions in Paraguay are available in the archives of the *Mennonitische Post* in

Steinbach and at the Mennonite Heritage Archives in Winnipeg. What follows is based on the stories I learned about Anna.

"Ever since my youth I had a desire to be a nurse," wrote Anna Heinrichs Friesen Thiessen in her 1997 booklet entitled *Pioneer Nursing in Paraguay*.¹ Born to Johan and Aganetha (nee Hildebrand) Heinrichs on September 8, 1923, Anna grew up in Straszburg, Manitoba, where her parents farmed.² Her parents objected to her becoming a nurse; as the eldest of fourteen children, they expected her to stay home on the farm to help with domestic chores, care for her younger siblings, and work on their mixed farm, including helping to build the family's house.³

In the 1940s, Mennonites who had settled in Canada in the 1870s developed some of the same concerns as the group who had left Manitoba for Mexico and Paraguay in the 1920s. The 1920s group was prompted to leave Manitoba because of their opposition to the municipal



MAID, MENNONITE HERITAGE ARCHIVES (MHA) 416-10

Anna Thiessen learned bedside nursing at Concordia hospital in Winnipeg before leaving for Paraguay.

form of government, compulsory school attendance, and mandatory registration for military service. In addition to the concerns of the 1920s group, some of the 1940s group felt that hydroelectricity was too modern; others were concerned about the threat to the Low German language and that it might be lost. There was also a growing concern among Manitoba Mennonites that there could be increased intermarriage between the Mennonite youth and those from the neighbouring French Catholic communities.⁴ Some

not have a doctor, they should at the very least have a trained nurse. To achieve this goal, Neufeld persuaded Anna's father to allow his daughter to be trained as a nurse. Both men understood that a young girl moving to the city alone was worrying, but Anna could train to be a nurse, just as she had wished. According to some, Neufeld funded Anna's medical education.

Twenty-two-year-old Anna began her nurse's training in St. Joseph's Catholic hospital in Winnipeg. After three months of theory, she was assigned to

the Canadian National Railway train to leave Letellier, Manitoba, for Quebec. The *Altona Echo* reported that the "scene at Letellier on Tuesday was full of pathos... About 1,000 persons gathered in the early morning hours to bid farewell to their departing relatives and friends. Many were leaving brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, children and grandchildren behind."⁵ In Quebec they would board the Dutch ship *S. S. Volendam* and head for South America. While the adults understood the loss of lifelong relationships, Anna's younger sister, fifteen-year-old Barbara Heinrichs and her best friend Susie Neufeld, experienced the move as an adventure. It was their first train ride, their first time on an ocean liner, and they were moving to a new land without snow. Everything was new and exciting.⁶

Anna reported that they arrived in Buenos Aires, Argentina, after spending twenty days on the ship. From there, they travelled north by train for three days and arrived in Villarrica, Paraguay, where they stayed in unused buildings and granaries. Anna's sister, Barbara, recalls how their family lived on a cement granary floor where families demarcated their space by making a border with suitcases. The toilet was a box, set over a hole in the ground, surrounded by four poles with burlap draped over the poles for a modicum of solitude. Only night could afford them privacy as they took soap and a towel to the nearby stream to bathe.⁷ They may have been friends, neighbours, and relatives, but in the absence of privacy and necessities, such as access to water, tensions mounted in the small transitional space.⁸ Before long, a large number of the migrants moved to Independencia, a German colony.

Anna's medical career started early on the trip when measles broke out on the *S. S. Volendam*. Anna went into full gear, nursing patients on the ship. In Paraguay, Anna's nursing talents would be stretched far beyond anything she had been taught in her licensed practical nursing courses. Shortly after their arrival, Anna wrote in her travel journal that "Dysentery and possible Cholera broke out in critical proportions. Small children dehydrated



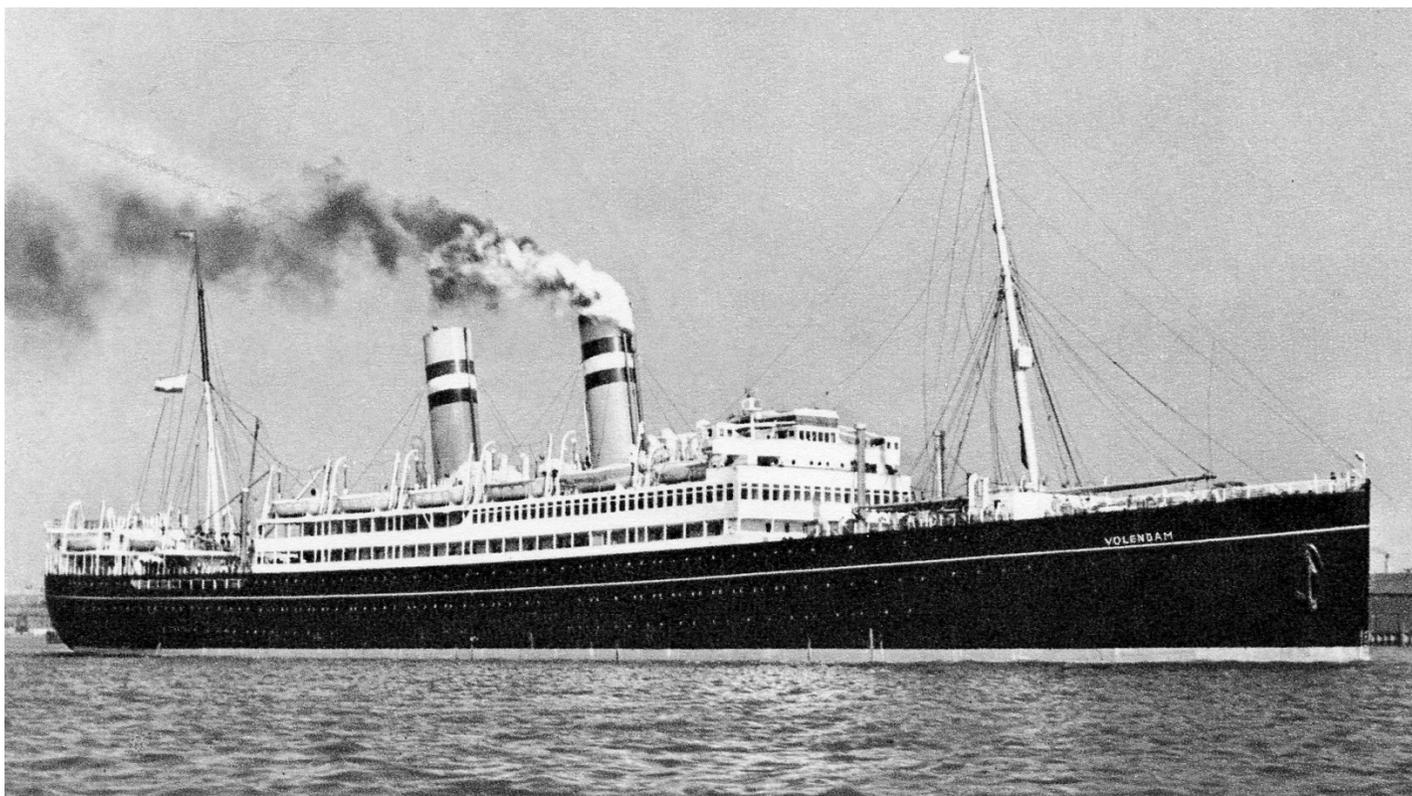
Anna Thiessen retired to the senior facility in Colonia Sommerfeld, Paraguay, where she received many visitors.

immigrated for the adventure or sought the economic benefit they were told existed in the Paraguayan jungle. These were not Anna's immediate concerns; however, she understood that if her family moved to Paraguay, she, as a single woman, would join them.

In 1944, a delegation from southern Manitoba flew to Paraguay to survey land where the Mennonites could settle and be free of the concerns they were experiencing in Canada. Once an agreement was made with the Paraguayan government about access to land, some Manitoba Mennonites began to plan yet another epic move. Minister Bernhard Neufeld recognized the need for medical professionals to accompany the migrating Mennonite population. If they could

the Concordia hospital where she was taught bedside nursing, how to administer medications, and how to give injections. Anna also suggested that "[she] had some training in delivering babies and administering anesthesia. At that time only ether was used." She continued to work at the Concordia hospital for a few more months after her graduation in January 1948. By June the young nurse was ready to move to Paraguay. Without knowledge of what she would need and what supplies she could buy in Paraguay, she packed a few hemostats, small clamps, and Wonder Oil, an alcohol-based medication that could be purchased over the counter for both internal and external use.

On the morning of June 22, 1948, Anna, along with 415 people, boarded



In Quebec, Anna Thiessen, along with 415 people, would board the Dutch ship S. S. Volendam and head for South America.

quickly... Many children died since medical intervention was of little use. Some died within five to six hours of being stricken. One day three died, two from dysentery and one from measles complications.... I don't know how many died in all."⁹ Within a short while, thirty Mennonite children were buried in the cemetery in Independencia.¹⁰

Anna realized that the supplies she had packed were not enough; she needed forceps, medications, and more. Her father gave her one hundred guaraníes, worth about twenty-five dollars at the time, to buy fever and pain pills, a few antiseptics, and sulfa drugs. Anna performed all the nursing functions required in the new colony, and in the absence of a qualified doctor, she often performed the role of a physician in the tradition of midwives. Until she had access to a generator, Anna performed surgeries by flashlight or a kerosene lamp.

According to Anna, the Colonia Independencia public health officer "wasn't that much help." She made this discovery when she "asked him to help with the delivery of a first-time mother." From time to time, he would arrive in

the colony, flaunting his baggy pants, gripping the ever-present cigar between his teeth, and admonishing Anna that "babies should be born under a blanket. What goes on under that blanket should not be seen." She took his advice with a grain of salt, knowing he would not be around again for a while; Anna worried more about the mothers and children than about this official.

On August 29, 1948, one month after she arrived in Paraguay, Anna married John Friesen, a teacher whom she had met when he was a patient in the Concordia hospital. They were the first couple from the migration to be married in Paraguay. Anna's sister Barbara recalled that the couple, their chosen minister, their parents, and a few other people had to walk three kilometres to their civil wedding necessary for their marriage to be legal. Anna remembered being "elbow deep in bread dough when I received word to go for our civil wedding. I was so nervous I don't remember if I removed my apron or not!"¹¹ The service, interspersed with applause, ended with the Justice of the Peace telling the couple that they could now sleep together. Celebratory wine

followed the legal ceremony. Later, the minister (Ältesta) Isbrand Friesen conducted a "proper" wedding followed by a meal of smoked ham, which Anna's family had brought from Manitoba, *Moos* (a sweet soup made with local berries), and cabbage *Borscht*.

Only a few months after their wedding, Anna and John left Independencia on a three-day trek with all their possessions. They arrived at what would become Campo Tres, Colonia Sommerfeld, where no public health officer interfered with Anna and she had free reign to care for her patients as she saw fit. As Anna wrote: "In the first six years we were without a doctor and I was alone as the only trained nurse. I learned a lot during this time with many experiences and doing treatments even when I felt incapable. I sent patients out for medical help when possible and went along if necessary."¹² Whenever she could, Anna's mother helped her.

In 1949 Anna and John built their first house and soon started their own family. Patients approached Anna and John's yard clapping their hands, as was the custom, to get Anna's attention. They sought treatment for tropical diseases previously



In later years, Mennonite women were required to have their first babies in hospitals.

unknown to Anna, intestinal parasites, malaria, tapeworms, hookworms, snake bites, polio, and more. People also needed help with cuts, fevers, farm accidents, and toothaches.

Mothers came to the house to have their babies, or Anna went to their homes to help with deliveries. Any time during the day or night, expectant fathers came to their yard on horse and buggy, tractor or oxcart, clapped their hands, and Anna vanished into the night to help their wives give birth. She did not have to battle with snow and sleet as she would have in her native Manitoba, but muddy roads challenged the most expert drivers as they carved their way through the deep and

slippery ruts of red mud.

“Caesarean sections are very common now,” shared Anna from her room in the Colonia Sommerfeld senior facility in a 2010 interview, “but for the most part they are performed for the benefit of the medical staff. It is much faster than a natural birth.” Anna never performed a Caesarean section – she did not have the proper tools. Instead she patiently waited for the arrival of each new baby while attending to the expectant mother.

Births came with complications. Anna was confronted by babies who presented face first, babies with umbilical cords wrapped around their thin necks, babies who tried to enter the world shoulders

first, and babies who would be faced with challenges all their lives. “Over the years of nursing and midwifery, I never lost a mother,” Anna proclaimed, “but sadly there were a few still births. Fortunately, only a few.” In the interview, Anna explained that “after attending over 600 births, I stopped counting, but I probably helped women give birth over 1,000 times.”¹³

Women commonly gave birth to ten or more children. Some families had a new baby annually. After delivering a ninth baby for one such family, Anna caught a ride home on a truck with an Amish gentleman. “What were you doing?” he asked Anna to strike up a conversation. “I



MALCOLM CENTRE FOR MENNONITE BRETHREN STUDIES, NP019-01-59

had no place in their hearts to welcome yet another baby. Sometimes that was due to postpartum depression, a condition not understood by parents or professionals. In those cases, Anna could only prescribe happiness and gratitude for their babies.

Initially, Anna was only notified of a pending birth when the father came clapping his hands at their yard hours before the expected delivery. After two or three years in Paraguay, Anna insisted that all expectant mothers who wanted her assistance should visit her prior to the due date. She needed to assess the condition of the mother and the unborn child and she directed them “to have old sheets, old linens, or cotton rags washed, boiled and ironed to use at the delivery if no rubber sheet was available. If possible, I wanted them to make large pads from several thicknesses of newspapers with old sheets basted together.”¹⁴ While many families were fastidious in keeping their homes as antiseptic as the red, dusty earth allowed, there were exceptions. Sometimes Anna had to wash the family’s sheets or use sheets she had brought from home. In one case, she made the bed with clean linen, tidied the “birthing room,” helped with the delivery and because she was so tired and pregnant herself, laid down next to the new mother. The father had arranged to have Anna collected, but he had not made plans to return her home.

The pregnant women were usually also attended to by their own mothers and grandmothers. The older women tried to be helpful, offering advice, telling their own birthing stories, and innocently interfering with Anna’s work. “Heat a sack of oatmeal and place it on your stomach to strengthen your contractions,” a mother advised her daughter, forgetting that oatmeal was not available in Paraguay. “Straddle a dish of warmed up alcohol and let the vapours travel up your legs to your birthing area. That will strengthen contractions,” another woman advised a young mother-to-be. “Perhaps you should apply ‘Pushex’ salve to strengthen your contractions,” suggested yet another woman, even though no such ointment existed in Paraguay. “I’ve heard that drinking chamomile tea and applying it to the

birthing area is very good for giving birth,” one misinformed woman exclaimed.

Some women complied with Anna’s directions. Others chose to take the advice of their own mothers who counseled, “you don’t need to see that Nurse Anna before the baby. That is just a waste of time.” One woman who took her mother’s advice realized that she had made a poor decision. Her first baby, a healthy infant, had been born without incident and without the benefit of a pre-visit, so why should the second baby be any different? “Everything will be just fine,” she must have thought. When the second baby was ready to be born, it presented with his shoulder and got stuck in the birth canal. By the time Anna was summoned and arrived at the couple’s home, she could tell the baby was already “in the loving arms of God.” In this case, Anna had only a little ether on hand which she administered to the mother writhing on the kitchen table. Lovingly and with great care, Anna amputated the still shoulder. She gently pushed the baby back into the birth canal and pulled the infant from the ether-induced woman. She cut the umbilical cord but could not place a wriggling little one at its mother’s breast.

After Anna had helped deliver the village children, John educated them. Things were good for the Friesen family. But then in 1958 John succumbed to a “heart problem.” No medical knowledge could save him. He passed away, leaving Anna with six young children and baby Christina on the way. She had no choice but to carry on. A “trustworthy girl” who had been their domestic help before John died stayed with Anna, making it possible for her to continue her work. In addition, her sister Barbara helped care for the children. Anna balanced her life of raising her family, caring for the sick and injured, delivering babies, and being an active community and church member.

In later years, women were required to have their first babies in hospital. The first hospital in Colonia Sommerfeld was built in 1959. There was no electricity, except on Mondays, which was laundry day, when the hospital used power from Diedrich Hildebrand’s generator. When

was helping to deliver a baby,” she replied. “It was their ninth baby and their eldest child is eight years old,” Anna offered. “Impossible!” he exclaimed.

Most anticipated the arrival of another baby with joy, especially after the first trimester of pregnancy when morning sickness had passed. Some, however, were weary from their endless back-breaking gardening, laundering, cooking, and farm work without the benefit of electricity or running water. Their bodies were exhausted from the demands of pregnancy and the varicose veins in their legs ached. When women miscarried or their children died at a young age, they viewed it as God’s will and carried on. A few women

the laundry was done, hospital staff alerted Mr. Hildebrand to turn off the power by turning on a hospital yard light. In 1981, when there was hydroelectricity in the village, a new hospital was built.

Some resisted this change. In other cases, when the women were required to stay in hospital, their husbands often wanted to stay with them. Anna persuaded the expectant fathers that they could manage at home and their wives would be well taken care of. Furthermore, if they had children at home, she reminded the man he had the responsibility to care for his family in his wife's absence – even if arrangements had been made for someone else to look after the children. Women revelled in an eleven-day rest in hospital. For just a little while, they could leave their responsibilities with someone else.

Anna administered preventative and responsive health care to the entire community. Even though equipment and medications were often in short supply, Anna administered smallpox vaccinations to children. In order to ensure that a maximum number of children were vaccinated, she transferred a scab of a smallpox vaccination from one child onto the scratched skin on the left arm of another.¹⁵ For her family, twice a year she gave her children a square of chocolate Ex-Lax (a laxative) before bedtime, and the following morning, she gave them a de-wormer. The children felt sick but were rewarded with not having to do any work that day. By the afternoon they could eat oranges and by supper, they had chicken broth.¹⁶

Sanitation was a critical concern to Anna. Before she had rubber gloves when working with her patients, she washed her hands with soap and hot water, and then applied alcohol. When she finally got rubber gloves, she made sure they

were washed and sterilized after each use. Until 1978, when supplies became more readily available, she washed and boiled glass syringes and needles to sterilize them. When menopausal women came to her for vitamin B12 shots, Anna visited with them while she took the time to boil each syringe and needle before administering the shot.

Christina Klassen, Anna's daughter, recalled that her mother had always stressed the importance of taking the time to visit.¹⁷ When company came or when couples or individuals came to Anna for advice, she dropped whatever work she was doing and invited her "guests" to sit with her as she listened. While Anna adhered to a strict code of professional confidence, it is not clear if she ever noticed her curious young daughter eavesdropping on private conversations opposite the closed door or knew that the girl snooped in her cabinet of supplies that held a primitive stethoscope, clamps, scissors, and disinfectants. Her mother's nursing had always intrigued Christina. It was no surprise that she chose to be a nurse like her mother.

For years Anna wrote letters to the *Mennonitische Post* about the progress made on the farms, the livestock, her age ("on my next birthday I will be ninety,") the crops, her own health, and her many opportunities to give thanks.¹⁸ She provided news of Colonia Sommerfeld but little about her nursing career, except on October 24, 2012, when she wrote: "... after nursing for 30–35 years. Only the memories now remain." Several times she mentioned how her son David, who had Down syndrome, attended a day program and spent weekends with his siblings. Anna's biggest disappointment was that David could not have access to a formal education. She was confident that, with appropriate education, David

would have learned to read and write.¹⁹ Anna also let the readers know of her daughter Christina who was studying to be a nurse in the Chaco, about six hundred kilometres from her village.

In addition to writing in the *Mennonitische Post*, Anna wrote to acquaintances in Germany and the Chaco region, as well as to friends and family in Altona, Halbstadt, and Sommerfeld. Her letters were filled with news and information.²⁰ She wrote on both sides of the paper, filling every possible space, including notations in the corners of the pages. Christina Klassen remembers how Anna would prepare supper for her family and then tell them since she cooked, the children could eat and clean up. Anna skipped supper to lose weight and retired to the living room to write, read, or crochet, often late into the night.

Klassen said their family was not rich, but they always had enough to eat. Between 1956 and 1990, Anna's cash earnings were primarily made by pulling teeth. Payment for helping deliver babies came in several forms. One poor couple had little, but the diligent mother raised animals and paid Anna with a piglet. Some couples paid in cash while others could only say "*Danke Schön*" [thank you very much].

Anna retired to the senior facility in Colonia Sommerfeld where she received visits from friends and family in large numbers. She kept busy writing letters, making dolls and teddy bears for her grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and other important people in her life. She passed away at the age of ninety-four years in Colonia Sommerfeld, Paraguay, on Wednesday, August 22, 2018. Anna left a legacy with deep footprints in the Mennonite communities and beyond during her life of service in Paraguay.

1 Anna Heinrichs Friesen Thiessen, *Pioneer Nursing in Paraguay* (Winkler, MB: Pembina Printing, 1997), 2.

2 For more genealogical information, see *Karl and Anna Hildebrand 1859-1997*. Available at the Mennonite Heritage Archives.

3 Interview with Barbara Heinrichs Penner, January 30, 2019.

4 Patricia Harms, "Gott es hiea uck: Gender and Identity in an Immigrant Family from Paraguay," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 22 (2004): 39-57.

5 "1700 Mennonites Leave for Paraguay," *The Altona*

Echo, June 23, 1948.

6 Interview with Barbara Heinrichs Penner, January 30, 2019.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Heinrichs Friesen Thiessen, *Pioneer Nursing in Paraguay*, 4.

10 Harms, "Gott es hiea uck," 44.

11 Heinrichs Friesen Thiessen, *Pioneer Nursing in Paraguay*, 5.

12 Heinrichs Friesen Thiessen, *Pioneer Nursing in Paraguay*, 13.

13 Interview with Anna Heinrichs Friesen Thiessen, 2010.

14 Harms, "Gott es hiea uck," 44.

15 Interview with Christina Klassen and Barbara Heinrichs Penner, January 30, 2019.

16 Ibid.

17 Interview with Christina Klassen, 2018.

18 Letter from "Witwe Anna Thiessen, Kol. Sommerfeld#4, Box 69, Asunción, PY to *Die Mennonitische Post* (Steinbach, MB), 24. Oktober, 2012.

19 Interview with Barbara Heinrichs Penner, January 30, 2019.

20 Interview with Christina Klassen, January 30, 2019.

NEUBERGTHAL RE-EXAMINED

Graham Schellenberg

In this article, I will re-examine the oral tradition of Neuberghthal's origin, which suggests the village was founded in 1876.¹ This founding date has been challenged yet remains an active part of village history despite it predating the secondary migration of Mennonites from the East to the West Reserve by approximately two years. Through my research of new material, I propose that the oral tradition is incorrect, and advance an alternative founding timeline which closely aligns with the

secondary migration of Mennonites from the East to the West Reserve in Manitoba.

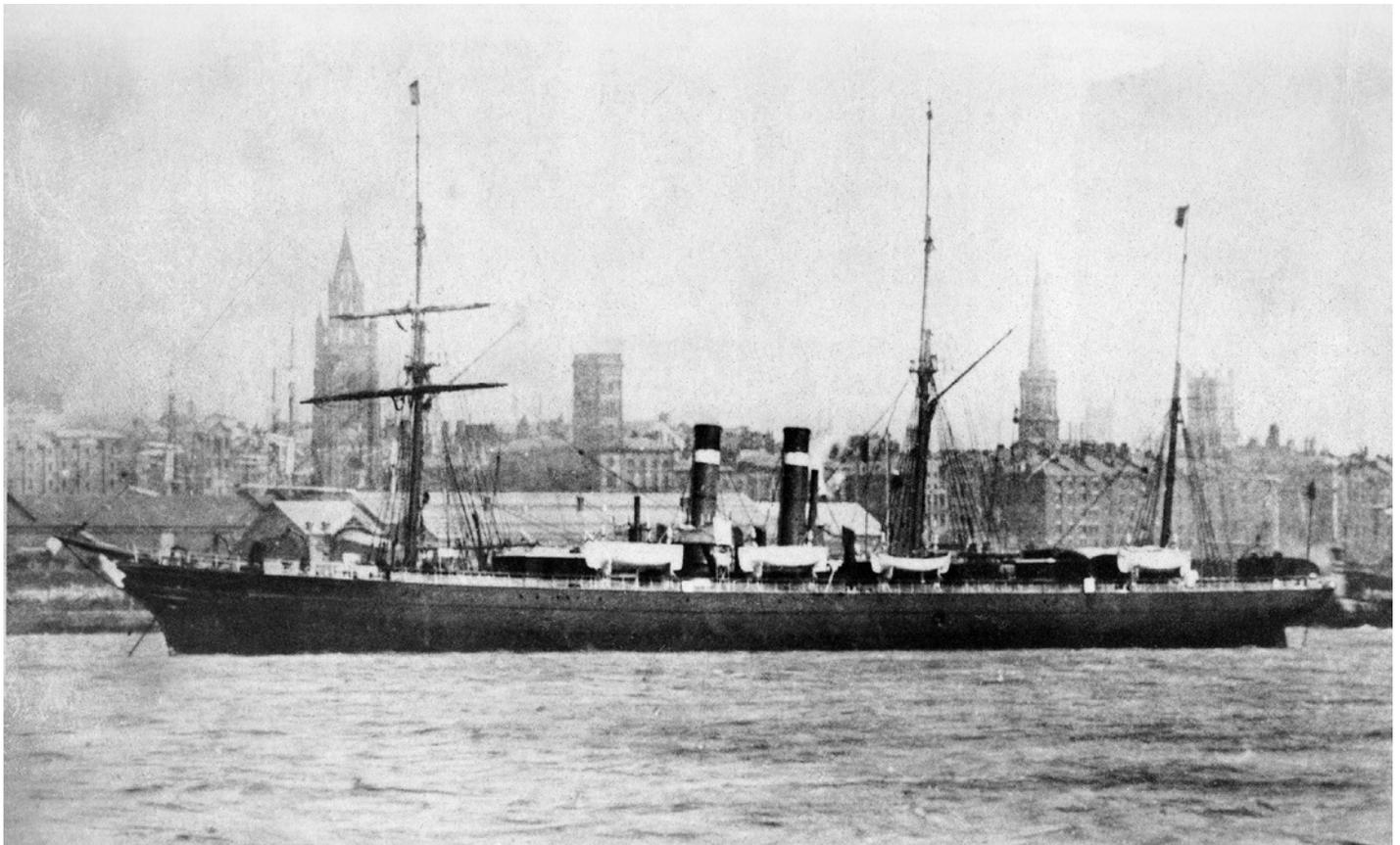
FOUNDING FATHERS

In this re-examination, it is important to highlight its first residents. As recalled by early Neuberghthal resident Peter G. Hamm, the founding fathers of Neuberghthal consisted of nine men: brothers Bernhard and Peter Klippenstein, Martin Friesen, Martin Klaassen, Heinrich (Henry) Klassen,

Bernhard Funk, Cornelius Dyck, Martin Kehler, and Gerhard Wall.² Examining the familial connections of these settlers, Frieda Esau Klippenstein writes: "Clearly [Neuberghthal] was largely, if not entirely, constituted along kin lines... Peter and Bernhard Klippenstein were brothers; the wives of Heinrich Klassen and Martin Friesen, Katherina and Margaretha, were their sisters."³ The family connections continued with the children of these settlers, many of whom filed the first land entries in Neuberghthal.⁴

All these men were born in South Russia (present-day Ukraine) and immigrated to Canada and settled in the East Reserve between 1874 and 1876. Cornelius Dyck and Gerhard Wall were the first to arrive in Canada. On July 27, 1874, the *S. S. Nova Scotian* docked in Quebec, where Cornelius and Gerhard are listed with their families. Martin Kehler arrived with his family the same month, sailing on the *S. S. Peruvian*.

The families of Bernhard Klippenstein,



The S. S. Peruvian.

Peter Klippenstein, Martin Friesen, Heinrich Klassen, and Bernhard Funk arrived July 6, 1875, aboard the *S. S. Sarmatian*. Martin Klaassen arrived with his family in July 1876.

THE EAST RESERVE

As E. K. Francis notes, “the East Reserve had never been meant to accommodate all Mennonite immigrants from Russia.”⁵ Mennonite delegates were initially skeptical regarding the East Reserve land, and “had requested the privilege of selecting, at a later date, some other portion of the country” resembling their previous agreement under terms with the Dominion Government.⁶ The land later known as the West Reserve was long understood to be desirable, and an Order-in-Council dated April 25, 1876, designated this area “for the exclusive use of Mennonites from Russia.”⁷ This accommodated Chortitza and Fürstenland Mennonites who in 1875 settled directly in the West Reserve’s western half, thereby leaving the eastern portion open for potential settlement.

One month before this Order-in-Council, Bergthal minister David Stoesz indicates in his diary that on March 9, 1876, “several men went to [Fort] Dufferin, on the American border, to get flour.”⁸ It is possible that on this trip, men from Bergthal, East Reserve – including the Klippenstein brothers, Peter and Bernhard, both of whom lived in the village – surveyed land near latter-day Neuberghthal, located some twenty-five kilometers west of Fort Dufferin in the eastern portion of the West Reserve. The oral tradition of Neuberghthal suggests a similar story involving the Klippenstein family, as Peter and Bernhard Klippenstein are said to have visited the West Reserve in 1876 in search of better land.⁹ To conflate this unverifiable scouting trip with the founding of Neuberghthal is premature, and official records contrast the local oral tradition which suggests permanent settlement occurred when “the first families settling at ‘Neuberghthal’ arrived in 1876.”¹⁰

Delbert Plett noted that “the oral tradition that Neuberghthal was founded in 1876 is questionable,” especially con-

sidering that “the secondary migration of Bergthalers from the East to West Reserve only started in 1878.”¹¹ To establish a firm founding date for Neuberghthal it is necessary to examine each founding father individually to determine their presence in the East Reserve after 1876.

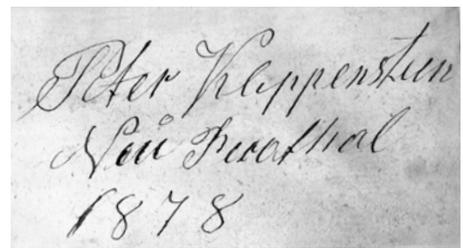
Regarding the 1876 *Chortitzer Brotschuld* and the 1878 *Chortitzer Gemeinde Buch*, Ernest N. Braun writes that the former “constitutes the earliest ‘census’ of the Bergthal East Reserve villages,”¹² and the latter can be considered a “quasi ‘census’ of the Chortitzer element of the E. R. [East Reserve],”¹³ Seven of the nine founding fathers are listed in the *Brotschuld* as residing in the East Reserve villages of Bergthal, Ebenfeld, and Schoenwiese,¹⁴ while the *Gemeinde Buch* lists all nine founding fathers.

Of the nine men, Martin Friesen and Heinrich Klassen both applied for homesteads in the East Reserve in 1877, while Gerhard Wall, Peter Klippenstein, and Bernhard Klippenstein applied for homesteads in 1878. Wall, Friesen, and Klassen all later cancelled their East Reserve homestead entries.¹⁵ In addition to this evidence of their remaining in the East Reserve, the 1878–1879 Manitoba Directory lists seven of the nine founding fathers of Neuberghthal as residing in the East Reserve. The traces of each founding father in the East Reserve after 1876, whether through land entries or church records, confirms they remained there after 1876 and likely participated in the secondary migration to the West Reserve with other Bergthaler Mennonites after 1878.

THE WEST RESERVE

A local hypothesis suggests that work in Neuberghthal, inferred as a sign of permanent settlement, began as early as 1876,¹⁶ with families travelling back and forth between the East and West Reserve as they prepared to settle the village. This is unlikely considering Klaas Peters’ writings about these years. Peters’ book, *The Bergthaler Mennonites*, is a first-hand account of the Mennonite immigration to and life in Canada. Discussing the East Reserve, Peters writes that even after the

devastating failures of 1875 and 1876, “we were determined to stay and cultivate this land. Not until the question whether we could endure it here in the long run became urgent, did some begin to look around for better land.”¹⁷ While Neuberghthal’s oral tradition suggests that Margaretha Klippenstein, Peter’s daughter, travelled by covered wagon to the West Reserve with two of her brothers and settled in the village, where they lived out of a wagon and “began to break the virgin soil,” to have done so before 1878 would



The inscription “Peter Klippenstein Neu Bergthal 1878” near the end of a nineteenth-century sermon book is the first known documented reference to Neuberghthal.

have been a significant signal to some in the East Reserve, or simply the Bergthal village, that their prospects of success were best pursued elsewhere.¹⁸

Lawrence Klippenstein outlines the impetus for moving, writing that “rainfall in 1878 was even worse and several settlers decided to move to higher ground in the West Reserve while others strongly urged people to stay.”¹⁹ Further wet years in 1879 and 1880 meant “there was no stemming the determination to move,” Klippenstein posits.²⁰ The move itself was difficult, according to Peters, as “the 65 to 70-mile trip had to be made with ox carts – some had little travel money and some none at all.”²¹ Peters writes that many did visit the West Reserve to preselect their land, before settling permanently, although the limited resources and his observations of these Mennonites suggests it is unlikely preparations in Neuberghthal occurred before 1878.²²

The earliest documented reference of Neuberghthal in diary entries and miscellaneous documents is in a nineteenth-century sermon book. An inscription on the second last page reads “Peter Klippenstein Neu Bergthal 1878”



Six individuals, presumably a family, pose for a photo in front of the Peter Klippenstein housebarn, pre-1950. The Klippenstein barn is now the event venue known as the 'Commons Barn' in Neuberghthal.

in consecutive lines.²³

This minimally suggests that Peter Klippenstein seriously considered, made preparations for, or even visited the West Reserve in 1878, going as far as to name his future home community before it had actually been formed. It also confirms former Neuberghthal resident Jake Krueger's claim that "the Neuberghthal people had already chosen the name of the village they were going to establish" before settling the village.²⁴ Nevertheless, evidence of Peter's connection to Neuberghthal in 1878 is apparent, and aligns with the death of his sister and re-marriage of his brother-in-law, Heinrich (Henry Klassen) to Helena Kauenhofen. Helena had been widowed twice, first by Jacob Braun and then by Johann Sawatzky. After travelling from Mapleton, North Dakota,

to the West Reserve in 1878–1879, the Braun family registry states Helena married Heinrich Klassen in Neuberghthal on February 4, 1879,²⁵ suggesting Heinrich settled or visited Neuberghthal during the winter of 1878–1879. His first wife, Katharina Klippenstein, sister of Peter and Bernhard Klippenstein, died on November 6, 1878, though it is not clear where this occurred.²⁶

After an initial land purchase by Peter Klippenstein from the Canadian Pacific Railway on July 26, 1879, the first land purchases and homestead entries were filed for land in and around Neuberghthal in September by the following men: Henry (Heinrich) Klassen, Gerhard Wall Sr., Gerhard Wall Jr., Bernhard Klippenstein, Peter Klippenstein, John Klippenstein, Jacob Hamm, Johann Hamm, Gerhard

Hamm, and Bernhard Funk.²⁷ Homestead patent applications filed by Johann and Gerhard Hamm state that they began residing and cultivating land around Neuberghthal in August and September, respectively, of 1879, signaling the second wave of Neuberghthal's settlement. While they may have begun to break the land, it cannot be inferred to suggest that all of these families settled in Neuberghthal in 1879. Of the men listed above, only five filed homestead entries that year: Johann Hamm, Gerhard Hamm, Bernhard Funk, Gerhard Wall Sr. and Gerhard Wall Jr. The remainder, having purchased land near Neuberghthal in 1879, returned in 1880 when they filed their own homestead entries. Cornelius Dyck, Bernhard Funk, Jacob Hamm, Bernhard Klippenstein, Peter Klippenstein, Martin Klaassen, and



Neubergthal is a National Historic Site of Canada because it represents early pioneer and Mennonite life in Western Canada.

Martin Friesen all state in their applications initial residencies beginning in 1880.²⁸ Neubergthal resident Johann Funk, Bernhard Funk's father, wrote in an 1893 letter to the Minister of the Interior that he first homesteaded the land in the fall of 1880.²⁹

In an 1897 letter to the Minister of the Interior regarding a land arrangement between himself, Bernhard Funk, and Johann Hamm, Martin Kehler states the three settled in Neubergthal between 1881 and 1882.³⁰ While these dates conflict with Hamm and Funk's

own correspondence, it may indeed have taken some time for the first villagers to establish themselves in the West Reserve. The 'Commons Barn' – a heritage building now used by the Neubergthal Heritage Foundation as an event venue and tourism destination – is said to have been built by Peter Klippenstein in 1877 in Bergthal, East Reserve, disassembled, and brought to the West Reserve sometime around 1880–1881, where it was reassembled in Neubergthal.³¹ The Klippenstein brothers, Peter and Bernhard, only cancelled their East Reserve fire insurance in 1881,

suggesting both families maintained connections to their prior home for some time after moving to the West Reserve.

No further documentation discusses the secondary migration to Neubergthal. Furthermore, entries in *Die Mennonitische Rundschau* regarding Neubergthal or its founding families do not mention when the village was founded. Therefore, we can conclude that the first members of Neubergthal likely arrived during the winter of 1878–1879, with others following between 1879 and 1882.

CONCLUSION

It would be unfair to completely disregard the oral tradition of Neubergthal, as it is partially correct. Community members from Bergthal, East Reserve, did travel to Fort Dufferin in 1876, although we cannot infer that this relates to the founding of Neubergthal. Too much evidence contrary to the oral tradition suggests that the settlement and founding of Neubergthal was closely aligned with the secondary migration of Bergthaler Mennonites from the East to West Reserve after 1878. What is of the utmost importance is to remember that regardless of when Neubergthal was founded, it remains a National Historic Site of Canada because it represents early pioneer and Mennonite life in Western Canada.

1 Frieda Esau Klippenstein, *Neubergthal National Historic Site: A Cultural Landscape History* (Winnipeg: Western Canada Service Centre, Parks Canada, 1997), 27.
 2 Joyce Friesen and Rose Hildebrand, *Neubergthal: A Mennonite Street Village, A Sense of Place with Deep Roots* (Neubergthal: Neubergthal History Book Committee, 2013), ix.
 3 Frieda Esau Klippenstein, 30.
 4 Ibid.
 5 E. K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia: The Mennonites in Manitoba*, 2nd ed. (Steinbach, MB: Crossway Publications, 2001), 61.
 6 Francis, 61.
 7 Francis, 61–62.
 8 Jacob Doerksen, "Bergthal," in *Working Papers of the East Reserve Village Histories, 1874–1910*, ed. John Dyck (Steinbach, MB: The Hanover Steinbach Historical Society, 1990), 17.
 9 J. C. Fehr, "Neubergthal a pretty village," *The Red River Valley Echo*, August 22, 1984, <https://www.mharchives.ca/holdings/JCFehr/No%2029%20Neubergthal.pdf>
 10 Frieda Esau Klippenstein, 31.
 11 John Dyck, "Hamm Family Journals," *Preservings* 26 (December 2006): 57.
 12 Ernest N. Braun, "Index to the 1876 Chortitzer Brotschuld Register," in *Settlers of the East Reserve: Moving in – Moving*

out – Staying, ed. Adolf Ens, Ernest N. Braun, and Henry N. Fast (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2009), 71.
 13 Regarding the Gemeinde Buch, Braun notes that when the move to the West Reserve occurred, "for the first number of years the Bishop served both sides of the river and so there would not have been any change in the church register...even if the family had moved to the W. R. [West Reserve] by that time." Ernest N. Braun, e-mail to author, November 21, 2018.
 14 Considering Bernhard Funk was twenty-one upon the move to Canada, his presence is inferred through his father Johann, who is listed in the Brotschuld and made a homestead entry in the East Reserve in 1876. A Martin Klassen is listed in the Brotschuld under Schoensee, though the author is unable to confirm whether this is the same person who later moved to Neubergthal.
 15 The Klippenstein brothers received the title for their 1878 homestead entries in 1884 and cancelled their fire insurance in the East Reserve in 1881.
 16 Ray Hamm, private conversations with the author, 2018.
 17 Klaas Peters, *The Bergthaler Mennonites* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1988), 37.
 18 Friesen and Hildebrand, *Neubergthal: A Mennonite Street Village*, 10.
 19 Lawrence Klippenstein, "Bergthaler Mennonite Resettlement

to the West Reserve, 1878 to 1882," in *Settlers of the East Reserve*, 306.
 20 Lawrence Klippenstein, 306–307.
 21 Peters, 37.
 22 Ibid.
 23 The book was uncovered in Neubergthal while researching.
 24 Jake Krueger, *Memorabilia* (Altona, MB: Friesen Fast Print, 1998), 154.
 25 Mapleton is located a few miles west of Fargo, North Dakota. Wm R. Braun, *De Schwoate Bruhne, Johann and Sara Schwartz Braun* (Winnipeg: by the author, n.d.), 5.
 26 No burial site for Katharina Klippenstein is known to exist in Neubergthal.
 27 John Klippenstein is likely the son of Peter Klippenstein. Frieda Esau Klippenstein, 78–80.
 28 The author is unable to locate the homestead patent application indicating initial residency for Gerhard Wall Sr.
 29 Johann Funk, letter to the Minister of the Interior, May 31, 1893, microfilm, MHA, reel 638. Digitized by Bruce Wiebe.
 30 Martin Kehler, letter to the Minister of the Interior, July 14, 1897, microfilm, MHA, reel 638.
 31 Shaun Friesen, Ray Hamm, and Joe Braun, private conversations with author, 2018.

THE RAILWAY ARRIVES

on the East Reserve

Ernest N. Braun

Although the name William Hespeler is most often associated with the founding of the town of Niverville, Manitoba, historically it is Joseph Whitehead who by virtue of his contract for the Pembina Branch Railway was the prime mover. He was the first European to make improvements on this part of Treaty One land.

POLITICAL BACKGROUND

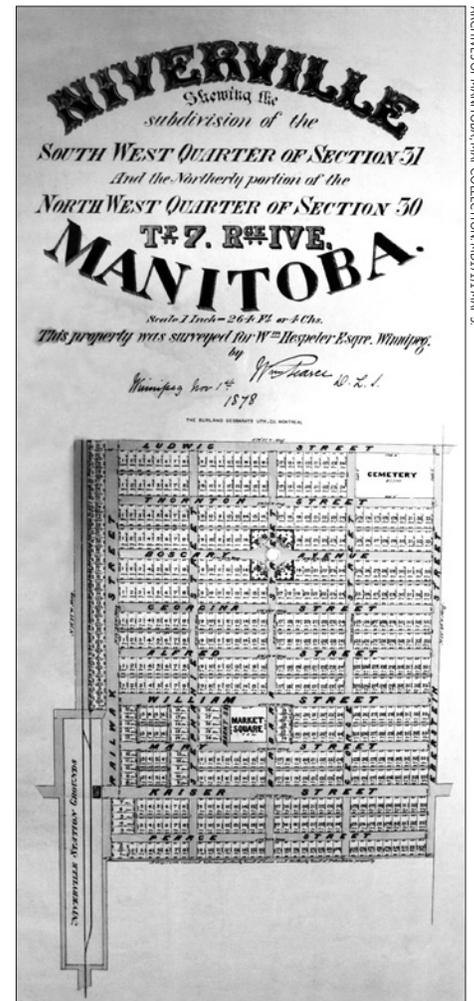
The construction of the railway between the Manitoba communities of Emerson and St. Boniface occurred during a prolonged period of complicated and tumultuous political changes at the federal level. In 1870, Louis Riel's stand had forced the Government of Canada to create a new province, Manitoba, but Ottawa retained control over Crown Land in anticipation of realizing Conservative Prime Minister John A. Macdonald's dream of a transcontinental railway. That railway would link the new postage-stamp province and the great Northwest to Central Canada. Failing that, there was little chance of any large-scale settler movement from either English-speaking Ontario or French-speaking Quebec, although great efforts were made to that end. The railway was also justified as a way to link Manitoba to Central Canada and make it less vulnerable to annexation by the United States. The threat of Fenian raids in 1871 lent credence to that possibility, and occasioned the Second Red River Expedition and the establishment of a militia garrison in Manitoba to "pre-empt foreign aggression, stabilize the frontier, and provide law and order."¹

Moreover, in 1871 a condition of British Columbia's entry into Confederation was the promise of a rail link to Central Canada.

In 1872, however, Macdonald's plan for a transcontinental railway ran into serious complications when competing syndicates vied for the contract, one that was potentially extremely lucrative not only for the construction itself, but also for the power that control of the railway would bestow. One syndicate, headed by Sir Hugh Allan (of the Allan Shipping Line), involved American investors and a route to BC running west in part along existing railways in the US, and then back up to Manitoba, instead of going straight west over the Canadian Shield. The other one was headed by David L. Macpherson, and included investors from England who demanded an all-Canadian route. No amount of negotiation succeeded in amalgamating the two rival syndicates. Finally, in late July 1872, with a national election campaign already underway, Prime Minister Macdonald proposed an "agreement" that would give Allan the presidency of the new Canadian Pacific Railway on the condition that Macpherson would play along as joint contractor. This agreement was kept secret until after the election, and perhaps as a result Macdonald managed his very slim majority in October 1872. Then, as the new session of Parliament opened in March 1873, the Throne Speech declared that the "charter" for construction of the Pacific Railway had been granted to a "body of Canadian capitalists." Later in the session, the government

was challenged by a Liberal Member of Parliament who charged the Conservatives with accepting American money for their election campaign, effecting widespread bribery, and making a secret deal with Allan for his support.² The affair later known as the Pacific Scandal, a reference to the grandiose idea of rail line to the Pacific, ultimately caused the fall of the Conservative government in November 1873. Immediately after Macdonald's resignation on November 5, Liberal Alexander Mackenzie, as leader of the opposition, was appointed prime minister, and was elected to that office in the January 1874 federal election.

The new Liberal government had a radically different view of the railway,



This town plan is part of a two-part map commissioned by William Hespeler and drawn up by surveyor William Pearce in 1878. William Pearce, *Map of the Grain Producing Red River Valley, Manitoba, Shewing the Position of Niverville.*

preferring to go a small step at a time, even if it meant the route would not be an all-Canadian one. One such step was the contract to build a line from Emerson, on the US border, to St. Boniface, a line known as the Pembina Branch of the Canadian Pacific Railway.³ At Emerson the line would link up with the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad segment to be built from Moorhead to the border. This route south through the US around Lake Superior is eerily similar to the ill-fated Allan plan that caused such opposition just a year before.

JOSEPH WHITEHEAD

Enter Joseph Whitehead. In August 1874 the Liberal government contracted with Joseph Whitehead, former Liberal MP for Huron North, Ontario, to build the new line on the Canadian side.⁴ Whitehead had been a railway man in England, and also a railway contractor in Ontario before entering politics. As the lowest bid contractor for the Pembina Branch, it was now his responsibility to do the grading for the entire section between St. Boniface and Emerson.

Although no record exists of the reason the Whitehead chose the northwest quarter of Section 30-7-4E for a railway station, or the date, the choice of the site that would become Niverville was strategic. The entire route of the railbed ran east of the Red River, where he could avoid the expense of building a bridge over it, and still end in St. Boniface. This specific location also provided Whitehead with a second staging area just 22 miles from the first one in St. Boniface and exactly one-third of the way to the US border. Secondly, at Niverville the rail line would intersect with the Crow Wing Trail, the traditional land route for freight by Red River cart. Placing a rail station at that point would capture any remaining freight from the outback, should there be any, but more importantly served to make a statement; namely, that the Trail now served no purpose. Thirdly, positioning the station at the edge of the best prairie land along that route made sense, as William Hespeler immediately understood when he was apprised of it. Grain for export

had already been gathered from this area and shipped south by river steamers, and Hespeler anticipated a steep increase in this, witness his prompt contract with Surveyor William Pearce for a town plan, and the commissioning of a grain elevator even before the rail line was completed.

What Whitehead did not know before his choice of the location or before his investment there was that the station would lie at the edge of the Mennonite Rat River or East Reserve, an area whose settlers dreamed of becoming a grain-producing breadbasket as they had in Ukraine. Apparently unaware of difficulties developing about the new line at the political and financial level, Whitehead had a sod-turning ceremony in late September of 1874, and began grading the railbed. He invested heavily in the Niverville site. In the October 10 edition of the *Manitoba Free Press*, he issued an advertisement for 150 teams of horses and 500 labourers, who should report to the site “about 20 miles south” of Winnipeg immediately, each preferably with his own blanket. This is without doubt the Niverville site.

Right from the beginning, the grading was not to be without its own problems. There was dissatisfaction on a number of fronts: the quality of the food on the part of the workers, the importing of labour from the US, the lack of preference for local settlers wiped out by the grasshoppers, and of course the slow pace of the project, as well as a lingering resentment about the location of the railway route east of the Red River instead of west. One newspaper commentator also noted that really those immigrant settlers who had brought enough supplies to get established should not be given these jobs (an oblique reference to an earlier comment saying that Mennonites were standing ready to take the jobs), and reported with some satisfaction that none of them took advantage of the opportunity anyway. When winter closed in, only a small part of the grading had been done, even though Whitehead had publicly speculated he could have it done in six weeks.⁵ Reports vary that between six miles and “a considerable portion” had been graded by freeze-up, when

Whitehead returned to Ontario.

Realizing that his prediction for the completion of the grading in six weeks had been unrealistic, and that the project would probably extend into the whole of the next year, Whitehead wrote the Department of Interior on December 15, 1874, from his home in Clinton, Ontario, requesting permission to purchase the west half of Section 30-7-4E. He had built “shanties, storehouses and stables” and dug a 65-foot well. He planned to break some land there and seed it to oats in the spring of 1875 to feed the hundreds of horses needed for the grading of the rail line. The well likewise would serve the men and the horses. He already had a hired man living there ready to cut rails needed to fence in the land.⁶

John S. Dennis, Sr., as Surveyor General, responded immediately on behalf of the Department of the Interior to Whitehead’s request. He advised Whitehead that the land in question “is contained within the limits of the block set apart for Mennonite immigrants,” and that he would have to contact Jacob Y. Shantz about whether this purchase was possible.⁷ In late December 1874, a letter from the Dominion Lands Office to Shantz explained the request and asked Shantz to reply about the possible “dissatisfaction” that the Mennonites might express in this regard.⁸ Perhaps surprisingly, Shantz evinced no reluctance about the request, and in fact welcomed it, saying in part that “it would be well to have a Town started there to get a Post Office too there.”⁹ With this positive response it is curious to see that although the Dominion Lands Office immediately opened a file for Whitehead’s homestead application, nothing came of it, and it lies incomplete to this day.

In late May 1875, Whitehead returned to Manitoba, and work on the grading recommenced, continuing until early November when Whitehead paid off most of his workforce. It was clear by then that there would be delays in construction of the railway itself, for although the grading was complete, the contract for laying the steel had not even been tendered by the end of 1875, and indeed the project stalled

NIVERVILLE.

THE TOWN of NIVERVILLE, situated on the Canada Pacific Railway Branch, 20 miles south of the City of Winnipeg and 40 miles north of the Town of Emerson, is to the east supported by the flourishing Mennonite Reserve, in which are 560 families residing.

These settlers all pursue farming, and had, in the year 1878, 9,416 acres of land under cultivation, which that year produced 196,090 bushels of grain.

Adjoining this settlement to the east, are the thriving settlements of

CLEAR SPRINGS & POINTE DE CHENE,

With an aggregate area of 3,600 acres of land under cultivation.

To the west, Niverville borders on the fine lands in the

HALF-BREED RESERVE,

And those in the Red River Belt, which have all now come into market. Niverville is also the

NEAREST RAILWAY POINT TO RED RIVER,

Between Emerson and St. Boniface, also the nearest railway outlet to that flourishing Canadian settlement west of Red River.

Niverville had its first building started in the month of April, 1879, and within three months after had one general store, one hotel, two dwelling-houses, and a large

GRAIN ELEVATOR,

With a capacity of 30,000 BUSHELS, erected.

That Niverville will be one of the most important stations on the Canada Pacific Railway is, under existing circumstances, a settled fact, and offers an unrivalled opportunity to business men and capitalists. Niverville has a daily mail and telegraph office, and a GRIST MILL is about to be started.



Niverville looking south from Kaiser Street (Main) in about 1900. The flat Ogilvie warehouse (extreme right) was moved to Main Street in 1928 to become a community centre, and the original station just left of it burned down in 1922.

shortly thereafter as it became clear that the American side was still 90 miles from the border.

Work on Whitehead's project came up against the realities of the worldwide economic recession that had begun with a financial crisis in the US in October 1873, and that soon affected the Canadian economy. By early 1875 the entire Pacific Railway project had ground to a standstill, including the tiny 63-mile Pembina Branch. All of Whitehead's plans and investment (totaling \$1700–1800 for Niverville alone) were now in abeyance. South of the border the newly formed St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba Railway stalled completely in the aftermath of the crash, and there was no point to building the Canadian part to the border without having the American rail line there.

The hiatus lasted more than two years. Then in spring of 1877 the project was reactivated with Whitehead again in charge, this time with a contract to lay the steel and run the line. He had purchased a slightly used locomotive and shipped it to Fisher's Landing in Minnesota. In the meantime, the Governor General and Lady Dufferin had nailed down the first spike of the track in St. Boniface on September 29, 1877, at the precise loca-

tion where the Dawson Road crosses the CPR line, a carefully selected symbolic place.¹⁰ Track-laying began the same day under the supervision of G.C. Swinbank, a long-time subcontractor for Whitehead and great-grandson of George Stephenson, the inventor of the first locomotive in Britain. On their return journey to the US, the vice-regal couple encountered the locomotive at Fisher's Landing, Minnesota, on October 2, 1877. Whitehead promptly named it the *Countess of Dufferin*, and changed its number from CPR No. 2 to CPR No. 1. The locomotive and several railway cars arrived in St. Boniface on Tuesday morning, October 9, 1877, to great fanfare, Whitehead himself pulling the steam whistle as the riverboat *S.S. Selkirk* pushed the barge on which it sat to No. 6 warehouse where the public could examine the "iron horse." Then the *Selkirk* steamed to below the Point Douglas ferry where the track had been laid to the river's edge on the east side of the Red. Church bells pealed across the city. Ironically, the *S. S. Selkirk* had just brought the instrument of its own demise, for the train would soon make the riverboat obsolete. Moreover, the arrival of a locomotive west of the Great Lakes would now facilitate the building of

the rest of the Canadian Pacific Railway across Canada to British Columbia. The celebration was justified, for indeed the arrival of the railway was a game-changer for the Mennonite Rat River Reserve, for Winnipeg, for Manitoba, and for Confederation.

The task of laying the track was broken into several sectors, the first from St. Boniface south, the second from Niverville (one third of the way) south, and the third from Pembina north, designed to meet at Dominion City. The contract (Contract No. 5, one of several railway contracts held by Whitehead) stipulated that the work needed to be done by a deadline usually given as December 1, 1878. Perhaps in view of the urgency of the deadline, the crew worked on Sunday, November 24, a transgression duly reported by an Emerson clergyman, and netting each of the workmen a fine. In St. Boniface Whitehead erected a sawmill near the station to cut his own sleepers, but there is no evidence that Whitehead invested anything beyond the minimum at most of the other nodes along the line, like Otterburne, or Dufrost. The other sites where significant capital and effort were expended were Dominion City, where a trestle bridge needed to be built to cross

the Roseau River, and Arnaud, where the track crossed Mosquito Creek. Niverville was unique in that there was no river to cross. The intersection with the Crow Wing Trail appears to be the main advantage of the site, in addition to its placement one-third of the way to the border.

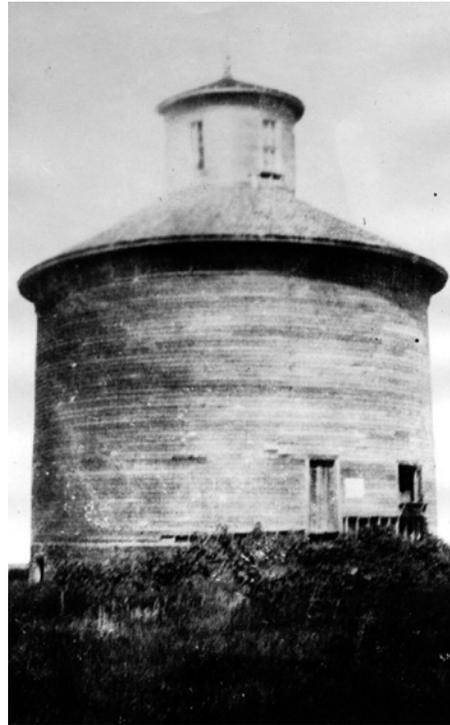
On December 3, 1878, the last spike was driven in at Dominion City by the 18-year-old daughter of the section foreman, to the chagrin of the men who had with varying success taken a crack at it. The *Countess* brought Canadian officials to the site, and an American train carrying American dignitaries met them there. In that moment Manitoba entered the industrial age, connected at last by rail to Central Canada, even if not by an all-Canadian route. Isolation, the main factor that made Manitoba unattractive to settlers, was now moot. Goods could be shipped both ways at competitive rates, immigration would become attractive, the cost of living in Manitoba would normalize, and the rail connection to the US would make completing the transnational railway possible in western Canada.

THE RAILWAY CHANGES THE EAST RESERVE

The implications for the province of Manitoba were significant, and for Mennonites no less so. Perhaps the most immediate advantage, as Shantz had predicted in 1874, was the establishment of a new post office in Niverville in May of 1879. Prior to this point all mail addressed to the Mennonite East Reserve accumulated in Fort Garry until somebody brought it back to the Reserve with them and distributed it to friends and relatives. The first postmaster on the East Reserve was Otto Schultz. He and his business partner Erdman Penner had moved here seeking to capitalize on the promise the railway offered. Other significant village centres on the Reserve, like Chortitz, Hochstadt, and Steinbach, only received a post office in 1884, five years later. This early postal address explains the otherwise puzzling references in many “Pioneer Portraits of the Past” articles to families having “first settled near Niverville” on the East Reserve before migrating to the West

Reserve, whereas genealogical information clearly shows that in fact very few came from there. This likely reflects the fact that Niverville was the post office for much of the Reserve until 1884.

Then, as early as November 1879 a new station was built in Niverville, with telegraph service. This meant that



MENNONITE ARCHIVES OF ONTARIO: M-193-1994-14-687

The first elevator west of the Lakehead commissioned by William Hespeler at Niverville in 1878 to service the thousands of acres of grain that he anticipated would be grown each year and exported. It ceased operation in 1904. This photograph appears to have been taken well after the elevator was no longer in use.

passengers and freight could now be conveyed directly between St. Boniface and the Reserve. This also meant that the depot at the Shantz sheds just south of Niverville was no longer needed to store freight carted from the Rat River and Red River junction, as had been done since 1874. The storehouse built there by Shantz in 1875 had served in the interim. Purchasing agent Abraham Doerksen (1827–1916) would trudge almost thirty miles to Fort Garry on foot from his homestead in Schönthal, make purchases on behalf of the Mennonite settlers, and arrange for a river steamer to deposit them at the confluence of the Rat and the Red rivers. Here they could be picked up directly by the Mennonites or carted to the

Shantz storehouse five miles away.

Because of its location on the line, Niverville was also a good place for a water tank, which was constructed in November 1880. To service this tank, the CPR commissioned a new well in 1881, nine feet in diameter and lined with bricks. This tank at the Niverville station made it an important stop since that water source was critical for the steam locomotives, and few of the other stations boasted that amenity. The tank was used until the 1950s, when steam locomotives were retired in favour of diesel. When the station was closed due to the decline of passenger traffic in the mid-1960s, the well was covered with railroad ties and dirt. The station itself, built after fire destroyed the first one in 1922, was dismantled by the Wittick brothers of Niverville, and residences were built with the lumber. The well site was lost until 2012 when a tractor driven by a town employee broke through the rotted sleepers and fell into the well. Only the large three-point hitch mower saved the driver from serious injury. The town decided to fill in the well with rubble, despite the fine brickwork revealed by the accident, brickwork that confirmed the opinion of the *Manitoba Free Press* of it as “one of the best on the line.”¹¹ Local historians hope to have the well restored to create a pocket park celebrating the role the railway played in the founding of Niverville.

Although it was Whitehead who selected the site, its potential value was apparently better understood by William Hespeler, who as immigration agent for Manitoba and the North-West Territories was likely apprised of the site choice by Shantz. Hespeler wasted no time in purchasing the land around the station from its owners, Abraham Friesen and Peter Bernhard Dyck, converting eighty acres into a town plan by 1878. He commissioned William Pearce to survey the site and draw up a detailed town plan. Dated November 1, 1878, it included a market square and back lanes. The street names were those of the Hespeler and Pearce families. Clearly Hespeler anticipated a demand for town lots in the new railway town, which would have all the amenities needed for a large population.

Then, not content to have others build those amenities, Hespeler commissioned the construction of a grain elevator in 1879, with a capacity of 25,000 bushels (later upgraded to 30,000), expecting that the grain-producing potential of the area would merit the investment. He also built a hotel and a livery barn. Erdman Penner, noted Mennonite entrepreneur, relocated his store from Tannenau (an abandoned village nine miles due east of Niverville, where he had expected the railway to run) and set up shop just east of the tracks. Within a year of the completion of the rail line, Niverville was set to be a major service centre for the entire Mennonite East Reserve.

An even more significant implication of the railway for the East Reserve was its potential for the grain and flour industries. Up to 1876 Manitoba was a net importer of flour, but with the harvest of 1876 wheat was in fact exported, local demand having been met for the first time since the coming of the Selkirk settlers. The elevator was the signal that grain could now be brought to the larger market in an economically feasible way, as opposed to the previous situation in which the river steamer held a monopoly on the shipping, at rates that rendered Manitoba wheat less than competitive. Wheat became the single greatest product of the prairies within five years of the arrival of the railway, and rural flour mills quickly grew to service local demand, while gigantic mills that used new roller technology to produce flour for export were constructed in Winnipeg. What neither Hespeler nor Whitehead anticipated was the delay in Niverville's becoming a depot for bulk wheat delivery. The reason was the impenetrable swamp to the east of Niverville, which made hauling wheat to the station difficult until the land was drained by the Manning Canal in 1908, almost twenty years later. By that time some advantage had been lost, since a railway now ran through Giroux just northeast of Steinbach, and roads to Winnipeg had improved. As a result, the town that Hespeler envisioned did not materialize until the population boom of the bedroom commuter demographic in

the 1970s, and more particularly at the turn of the twenty-first century, when Niverville continued to be the fastest growing community in Manitoba, but not because of the railway.

While wheat was not a major factor in the development of the southern townships or villages like Grunthal, Gruenfeld, Bergfeld, or even Steinbach, the railway did nonetheless promote growth and productivity in the East Reserve. The markets that were needed were for farm products ranging from potatoes to eggs and poultry which could now be sold to agents in Carey, Otterburne, or Niverville, and thereby save the farmer a trip to Winnipeg. What had taken several days of travel, bribes at the bridge or market square, and long hours of stand-up sales could now be done in half a day.

The completion of the Pembina Branch of the railway had two further ramifications that went well beyond Niverville or even Winnipeg. First, trade with the US increased significantly, with a daily transportation mechanism much cheaper than the steamboat monopoly, which had been strangling the province. Secondly, this reliable and affordable access to the rest of the industrialized world made work on the rest of the track to British Columbia possible. Without it the track west from Georgian Bay would have been delayed significantly to the point that BC legislature might have issued a secession bill again, this time successfully.

CONCLUSION

Joseph Whitehead entered the history books of the CPR through his role in constructing the railway, and he will be forever associated with the *Countess of Dufferin*, the iconic symbol of the rise of Manitoba

from an isolated Red River Colony to the Keystone Province which would soon boast a city known as the Chicago of the North. Whitehead later laid more track both north to Selkirk, and east to Kenora, a contract that involved some bidding shenanigans. He continued to operate the Pembina Branch until the new Canadian Pacific Railway incorporated in 1881 and subsequently took over the operations from him. Moreover, it was his locomotives that were used to construct the track westward to British Columbia where the *Countess* eventually was retired.

However, he has never received his due as the ultimate founder of Niverville. Hespeler got the credit for founding the community, and even had the town named after him for a short while, but "Niverville," the name given by the railway, soon eclipsed his name. Although the promotional flyer for the town, produced and circulated in 1880, touted it as "one of the most important stations of the Canada Pacific Railway" and as "an unrivalled opportunity to business men and capitalists," in fact neither of these assertions materialized, in part at least due to poor access through the swamps east of Niverville, and likely in part because of the high tariffs set by the government to protect Central Canada's interests. Niverville did become a service centre within two or three years, and a very important one for East Reserve Mennonites. However, it remained a relatively small village for almost a century. When the boom came, it did so not because of the railway, but because of the automobile, which enabled commuter traffic and spawned the concept of a bedroom community.

1 Peter Burroughs' three objectives of the Expeditionary Force as cited by David Grebstad in "Outpost: The Dominion of Canada's Colonial Garrison in Manitoba, 1870 to 1877," *Canadian Military History* 28, no.1 (2019): 15.
 2 Pierre Berton, *The National Dream: The Last Spike* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 74.
 3 Technically, the Canadian Pacific Railway did not exist as a legal entity until the company was finally incorporated in 1881. However, the name was used widely. (Also "Canada Pacific Railway," used by Whitehead in correspondence in 1874.)
 4 Harold A. Innis, *A History of the Canada Pacific Railway* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1923), 89.
 5 *Manitoba Free Press*, September 19, 1874, 5.

6 Library and Archives Canada (LAC), RG 15, D-II-1, letter to Minister of the Interior dated December 15, 1874, Clinton, Ontario. Later referenced as vol. 2367.
 7 LAC, RG 15, D-II-1, vol. 2077, letter to Whitehead, December 15, 1874.
 8 LAC, RG 15, D-II-1, vol. 2185, letter to Shantz, December 29, 1874.
 9 LAC, RG 15, D-II-1, vol. 2480, letter to J.S. Dennis, the Surveyor General, December 31, 1874, Berlin, Ontario.
 10 See address of James Rowan to Governor General and the Countess of Dufferin on September 29, 1877.
 11 *Manitoba Free Press*, August 31, 1881.

THE HISTORY OF THE REMPEL FAMILY

Henry Unger & Abe Rempel

The Rempel family story begins with Peter and Margaretha (Thiessen) Rempel who lived in the village of Rosengart in the Chortitza colony in Russia. They would move to the village of Neuenburg in Canada during the 1870s.¹ Peter P., the only son of Peter and Margaretha was thirteen years old when the family moved. He kept an informative diary of the trip from Russia to North

America, writing: “On May 12, 1876 at 4:00 a.m., Peter and Margaretha began their journey across Europe. The family began their travels by boat, beginning in Chortitza, passing Nikopol, and Beryslav, and arriving at Kherson on the mouth of the Dnieper River. Seven hours after arrival they left for Odessa, arriving at 7:00 p.m. on March 13. Upon arrival in Odessa, they immediately drove to the

railway station where they began the next leg of their travels by train. Peter’s family began a six-day train voyage which would take them to Berlin, Germany. Their passports were checked in Woloschenks during an hour stop, and with no apparent problems they continued on their way. The family arrived in Berlin on May 19, where they had a short four hour wait until the next boarding, which would take them to Hamburg. The family arrived in Hamburg in the evening of May 19. From Hamburg the family took a ship that brought them to Hull, England. They had a day wait before boarding the ship on May 21 for a two-day voyage. Peter and his family arrived in Hull and there they continued with a seven day train ride to Liverpool. At Liverpool there was another rest of two days. On May 27, Peter’s family boarded the SS Sardinian at 7:30 p.m. to embark on an eleven-day voyage to North America. They arrived in Ireland the next



PRIVATECOLLECTION

Peter P. Rempel married Anna Dyck. They had one son, Peter C., born in Neuenburg on 10 January 1887.



PRIVATE COLLECTION

Peter C. Rempel and Susanna (Friesen) were married on July 21, 1907.

day where they were delayed six hours because of high winds. On average the ship would sail 250 miles in one day, varying with the weather conditions. When the winds lifted, there was tremendous fog, so much that on one occasion the ship hit an iceberg. One June 4 around noon, the sky was so foggy the ship hit an iceberg with such force that some ice landed on the deck of the ship. This ice was from 4.5 to 5 yards thick. [...] Peter records in his journal the excitement of seeing land again before their arrival in Quebec. The land was hidden and then visible again the next day. The ship ported in Quebec

on June 7 at 3:00 p.m. The total miles the ship sailed on the trip was 2,800.

The family left Quebec six and a half hours after they arrived. They travelled by train to Montreal where they arrived on June 8. From Montreal they travelled to Toronto and from Toronto to Collingwood. On June 10, they boarded a ship which was leaving port at 10:00 p.m. to cross Lake Huron. The family was on this ship until the 15 of June, for a total of five days. They passed through two locks on June 12, stopped in at Storei and Thunder Bay on June 14. They landed at Duluth, Minnesota at 12:30 p.m. on

June 15. Peter and Margaretha's family spent the night in Duluth and continued on their way the next day at noon. At 8:00 p.m. they arrived at Brennt where they spent the night. They arrived in Glyndon at 3:00 p.m. to complete their travels to Fargo. On June 18, Peter Rempel's family arrived in Fargo and went to stay with their friends, the Jacob Siemens. [...] From Fargo there was one more stop for the family in Maple River. Peter and Margaretha finally ended their thirty-eight-day pilgrimage to North America."

Peter and Margaretha settled in the Maple River area with a large group of Mennonite families. The family likely remained in this area for at least four years before making the decision to move to Manitoba. Peter Rempel visited the West Reserve numerous times. Why they decided to move is not clear, but Peter had a brother-in-law, Peter Elias, living in Blumenfeld. They purchased the David Friesen property (Lot 20) in Neuenburg. They joined the Sommerfelder Gemeinde.

PETER P. REMPEL

As the only son, Peter P. Rempel inherited the farm from his parents. Little is known about him. Johan Friesen, whose family was a neighbor to the Peter C. Rempels, before the exodus to Mexico, described him "as a wealthy man with a lot of land and machinery. His farm was well organized with a white house which paralleled the street and a red barn. He was often seen traveling in an expensive buggy and fine horses."

PETER C. REMPEL

As the only son of Peter P. Rempel, Peter C. Rempel took over the farm when his father's health began to fail. The Rempel family owned most of the lots on the south side of the village street. These lots were purchased during the 1920s after the exodus of some Mennonite families to Mexico. Peter C. Rempel was a successful farmer but the difficult 'dirty thirties' encouraged him to diversify and he began a blacksmith shop.

Family lore has it that Peter was

much more interested in constructing gadgets than in farming. This diversification would allow him to explore his imagination to the fullest. With the encouragement and assistance of A. A. Kroeker he set up his first blacksmith shop on the west yard (west end of the Rempel property) during the 1930s. After Peter moved to the yard east of the first shop, he built a new shop in 1943–44. There was an increase in demand for his products. By this time his children began to look after the farming for him and he spent more time at his shop.

He constructed potato boxes for Kroeker farms. He also built barrels and stoves and equipment as needed. He rendered a valuable service to the community by meeting the needs of the many farmers in the area, including repairs required for his own farm. Jake Rempel described the shop in this way: “He had order in his shop and nobody messed with it.”

In 1945, the National Selective Service [Conscientious Objectors or COs] requested an outline of the Peter C. Rempel farming operation in connection with his appeal for the services of his son, John. He outlined his operation as follows: “Our total farm acreage is 459 acres, of which 259 acres will be in grain, 130 acres in corn and sunflowers and 25 acres in Argentina rape [seed] and 54 acres in pasture and farm site...Owing to the unusually wet fall, no fall plowing could be done and we will have to spring plow 213 acres and double disk 112 acres before seeding and planting. We also have to haul about 200 loads of manure before corn planting and sunflower seeding starts.

We are members of the Canadian Seed Growers Association and are specializing in the growing of registered and common seed corn and sunflower seeds. This necessitates a great deal of hand labour during the growing season. As well, this crop must be gone through, at least once, with hoes in order to kill any weeds that grow too close to the plants to be destroyed by the cultivator. One man on the tractor, cultivating between the rows five to six times during the growing season, has to work nearly all day for several months to prevent any weed growth. Sometimes, we

have eight to ten helpers, hired among neighbours and with our own family helping and supervising the work, we have always been able to accomplish a very satisfactory job.

According to the Canadian Seed Growers Association (1943–1944) report, we were the only growers in the whole

and November. Due to a wet fall in 1945 we had our sunflowers combined on December 6. After combing, the seed is usually cleaned and graded before marketing in the fall or sometimes in the spring.

Since we have our own threshing machine we are unable to secure a permit for the purchase of a combine. We cut



Peter C. Rempel's blacksmith and repair shop, built in the 1940s, with gas handpumps in front.

Dominion of Canada successfully growing a crop of about two hundred bushels of registered Rainbow Flint seed corn in 1943. In 1944 we grew about 625 bushels of the same variety of corn for seed purposes and about 1,500 bushels of another variety. In 1945 we planted about the same acreage as in 1944.

The picking of corn usually begins about October 1 and takes about fifteen to thirty days. Picking, which is done by mechanical corn pickers, involves the labour of four men and two teams for the whole time. After the picking is done the selecting of seed cobs starts. This is very tedious work as every cob has to be hand selected and closely inspected by expert graders and it takes from 195 to 225 cobs to make a bushel of seed. The quantity of the cobs to be selected can be easily figured out. After drying during the winter months, the selected seed cobs are shelled, cleaned, sacked, government tested and sealed during the months of February and March. It is then ready for market.

The sunflowers are usually harvested by a combine during the months of October

our grain with a power binder and stook it, later threshing it which requires six men, besides myself, to run the threshing machine.

This is a brief outline of the many phases of work connected with farming, especially the growing of corn and sunflowers for seed, not to mention the other hundred and one other jobs which include building wells, fence repairing, painting, tree planting and pruning, tending a vegetable garden of about one acres, etc. We have four work horses, thirteen head of cattle, thirty hogs, three brood sows and about one hundred twenty-five chickens. In April two hundred fifty chicks will arrive.

Machinery: two tractors, one drill, one double-disk, one tractor plow, one horse plow, two cultivators, one set of harrows, one power binder, one corn picker, one rake. One mower, one manure spreader, one thresher, one corn planter, four wagons, etcetera. We have our own workshop with a complete line of tools and machinery for our own repairing and overhauling.”



Peter C. Rempel, on a tractor he built, planting his crop with a seed drill.

THE NEW SCHOOL

According to Abe Rempel, Peter C. was also involved in education in the village and favoured establishing the English school system even though many of the Old Colony were very much opposed to this system under provincial jurisdiction. The organization and formation of the public school in Neuenburg appears to have had problems from the very beginning. The construction of the buildings and the acquisition of equipment delayed the opening of classes. Attendance was also an issue. Finally, communication between the newly hired teacher and the Department of Education was tainted with misunderstanding.

The Birkenhead School was administered by J. F. Greenway until 1929 when a local board was established. During the interim between 1921 and 1929, Mr. Peter C. Rempel from the village represented the district in all communications with Mr. Greenway. The site on which the school was constructed was purchased from Peter P. Rempel for \$300. In most districts the site was a three-acre square piece of land. Peter P. Rempel, however, favoured a rectangular shape measur-

ing ten rods wide by forty-eight rods in length. Greenway accepted the plan.

CHURCH LIFE AFTER 1920

The Mexico migration left those that remained without a church and as a result a number of the families of Neuenburg opted to join the Sommerfeld Church. The Peter C. Rempel family was one of those families. Peter A. Rempel, oldest son of Peter C. Rempel, served the Sommerfeld Church as a *Vorsänger* at Reinland, Manitoba, before he was ordained to the ministry in 1948. According to his granddaughter, Tara Penner, Peter “felt he was inadequate to meet the needs of the church. His knowledge was small, he had received no special training and was skeptical of his ability to be a leader in the church. He knew he must trust God to guide him as he entered this new turn in the road. Peter realized he could not accomplish this new feat on his own strength, but with God’s.”

In 1957 the Sommerfeld Church split, creating the Reinland Mennonite Church. The Peter A. Rempel family joined the new fledgling church where he continued to serve as a minister. In

1959, after Bishop Nickel left for Bolivia, Peter was elected bishop.

Bishop Peter A. Rempel’s service was not confined to his church in Manitoba. In 1979, when the Old Colony Church in the Swift Current Colony, Mexico, experienced grave conditions, he was summoned by them for assistance. His daughter, Anne, describes her parents’ experience in Mexico as follows: “Rev. George Krahn, a Minister of Reinländer Church from Rainy River, Ontario, had many brothers and sisters who still lived in Mexico. He was therefore aware of the desperate situation in which the Old Colony people in Mexico found themselves. The churches had been closed because there were no ministers who were willing to serve in them. The buildings themselves were in a state of disrepair. There were many young couples who desired to be married but were not able to do so because the rule was that they need to become church members before a minister would marry them. A plea had come from Mexico for assistance so Rev. Krahn then approached Bishop Peter A. Rempel asking that he go to Mexico to give some assistance. Bishop Rempel’s initial response was: No! He

could not go because he was not in the best of health, he had never been to Mexico, his big family needed him here, and there was farm work to be done.

[Then] the people from Mexico phoned Rev. Krahn asking whether Rev. Rempel was arriving and explaining that there were men who would be ready to meet Rev. and Mrs. Rempel at the airport when they arrived and stating that Rev. Rempel was to come as soon as possible. Rev. Rempel finally consented with the comment that if there was so great a need he would not leave those people without assistance.

Rev. and Mrs. Rempel consented to go on Friday. On Monday Jake, their son, took them to the airport in Grand Forks, North Dakota and they left for Mexico. Also travelling with them were Rev. George Krahn from Rainy River, Ontario, and Rev. George Klassen from Saskatchewan. They did not know who was to meet them in Mexico, but God directed them to the right person. That night they stayed in a hotel and in the morning they had to wait for their bus to be repaired before they could leave on it. The bus was overcrowded but they arrived at their destination, the Swift area, that evening. They stayed with a poor family that night. Since they had not eaten all except for a loaf of bread which they had purchased at a bus-stop during their trip, supper had to be prepared for them after they arrived.

During the next few days meetings were held with some of the men in the area. The church building was repaired and prepared for services. Early on Sunday morning people heading for the church walked past the place where the Peter Rempels were staying. There were no pews in the church; the seating consisted of planks. Many had come early so that they would have a place to sit. Before the service began the Choristers (“Vorsänger”) as well as some of the congregation felt the need to take a break from sitting so they walked out of the church to have a smoke.

Rev. Rempel preached in Low German and for many this was the first time they had heard a sermon preached in Low German. They were able to understand

the Word of God and were excited about that. Their singing was from the Old Hymnal but the style of singing was the drawn out chanting (*Lange Wies*) which they were used to but which was unfamiliar to the Rempels.

The Rempels remained in Mexico for three weeks, during which time there were many meetings. Two ministers, Rev. George Neufeld and Rev. Peter Bueckert, were elected and ordained. These men found it very difficult to lead the congregation after Rev. Rempel left since they



Helena (Braun) and Bishop Peter A. Rempel.

had no experience in doing this. Later, in spring of that year, Rev. Rempel went back to Mexico to conduct baptism and serve communion. In November, the Rempels went back once more to oversee the election of more ministers, a deacon, and a bishop. George Krahn was chosen as deacon, George Neufeld as bishop, and Peter Bueckert and Heinrich Wall as ministers. The name of the congregation was not Old Colony as before but rather Reinländer, just as Rev. Rempel’s church in Manitoba was called. In 1982, Rev. and Mrs. Rempel returned to Mexico to check on the growth of the congregation. The congregation had grown and worshipped in several different church buildings in different villages when the Rempels returned to Mexico in February of 1985. While they were there this time, Rev. Rempel officiated at a funeral and conducted communion in churches on Sunday mornings and afternoons.

While they were there in 1985, the Rempels received the news that Anna Neufeld, Mrs. Rempel’s sister, had passed away, and since Rev. Rempel had power of

attorney for her estate, they had to return to Canada. That was their last visit to Mexico. The church grew and many lives were changed during and following the visits of the Rempels.”

As Anne also recalled, “...My parents lived in Neuenburg for fifty-two years and moved to Winkler in 1986. My father had promised grandfather that the farm would stay in the family. My brothers bought the land and after a long and difficult decision, he let my sister move onto the farmyard. He wanted so badly that one of the boys would move onto the yard to carry on the Rempel name. My parents moved to Winkler on 3rd Street South and bought a house without consulting any of the children. We were very sorry they had bought such an old house as my mother had always lived in an old house. Father bought an extra lot behind the house so the children would be able to park their cars when they came to visit. The family gatherings became less frequent as the family was getting so big that there was not enough room for everyone in their house.

My father’s health started to deteriorate. He had small strokes and Alzheimer’s started to set in... He was in Salem [Home] for four years. He slowly deteriorated to the point where he lost all his speech but when he heard the familiar songs and the sermons on his speaker he would cry. In his last days the family was sitting with him day and night. I sat with him some of the last nights and read the Gospel of John to him. We felt the presence of the Lord with us. We, his children, sang one of his favourite songs, “Es geht nach Haus zum Vater’s Hause, wer Weiss vielleicht schon Morgen,” while he was dying. He had served in the church as minister for twenty-two years and as bishop for twenty years. He had been in the ministry for forty-two years. He reached the age of eighty-five years and three days. He died on March 28, 1996 and was buried in the Schanzenfeld cemetery.”

¹ This text was compiled by Abe Rempel from Henry Unger, *The Survival of a Community: A History of Neuenburg and Birkenhead School District* (Morden, MB: self-published, 2012). Used with permission.



Winds of Change

The Plett Foundation in Cuauhtemoc, Mexico

John J. Friesen

The eight members of the Delbert F. Plett Historical Research Foundation board, plus three staff and one spouse, spent three packed days of meetings and visits in the Cuauhtemoc area of Mexico in early December 2019. The board meets twice each year, in spring and fall. Every second year its fall meeting is away from Winnipeg, in a larger conservative Mennonite community. This fall meeting was the board's first outside of Canada or the United States, providing an opportunity to visit Old Colony and Kleine Gemeinde communities and meet church and civic leaders.

The largest of the original settlements in the area is Manitoba Colony, founded in 1922 by Old Colony Mennonites from Manitoba, hence the settlement's name. Because of its large original size, 3,200 immigrants, the majority of the more than 200,000 Old Colony Mennonites in the Americas have roots in this colony. The Manitoba Old Colony Church community today consists of about 15,000 people, including members and children.

The overall impression gained from visiting this area is change. Compared to half a dozen visits in previous decades, the changes in community life are impressive. Economically, the area has evolved from a poor, largely subsistence agricultural community to an agricultural, manufacturing, and business powerhouse. Agriculture consists primarily

of dairy, corn, pinto beans, and apples, largely supported by irrigation systems. Many businesses have sprung up along the 40 km four-lane, and in parts six-lane, paved highway connecting Cuauhtemoc to Rubio. Hardly an acre along this stretch is undeveloped. The price of land along this commercial corridor is about \$100,000 to \$150,000 US per acre. Numerous small, and some not-so-small, factories have sprung up, creating products for markets near and far. Service establishments, like restaurants and motels, advertise their presence. Farm implement dealers import machinery from

the United States, and have made this strip the primary farm machinery marketplace for all of Mexico.

Every workday about seven thousand Mexicans from the nearby cities of Cuauhtemoc and Rubio drive into the colony to work in businesses and factories. During the apple picking season, this number expands greatly. And yet this economic dynamism does not create enough jobs for Mennonite young people. To alleviate the land and job shortage, the colony has bought land in Argentina, and will assist young families to establish a new colony consisting of numerous villages.

Education is also changing. A number of decades ago the traditional one-room village school with one teacher provided most of the formal education in Manitoba Colony. More advanced education was provided by a small school supported by the Mexico General Conference Mennonite Church.

During the past decades colonists realized that the village schools were inadequate, and started a new school system with the assistance of Amish educators



Roy Loewen, the president of the Plett Foundation, with Old Colony leaders in a library build by Delbert Plett in Manitoba Colony.

from the eastern United States. With their help, and advice from Kleine Gemeinde in the nearby Quellen Colony, the Manitoba Old Colony Church has sanctioned the establishment of an education committee that oversees a new, and parallel, school system. These schools are called "Committee Schools." The teachers are young, usually unmarried women who are trained by the Amish. They use a German language curriculum produced by the Kleine Gemeinde. Tuition is



Left, above, a traditional Old Colony school in Manitoba Colony. Left, below, Museo Menonita (Mennonite Museum), in Manitoba Colony. Above, children engaged in their daily lesson in a traditional Old Colony school



Some members of the Plett Foundation group standing in a field in Manitoba Colony (L-R Andrea Dyck, Kennert Giesbrecht, Conrad Stoesz, Jeremy Wiebe, Robyn Sneath, Leonard Doell, Kerry Fast).

about the same as the cost per student for the village schools. Children are bussed to the schools.

Of the more than two thousand Old Colony elementary school children, more than half attend one of these church-sanctioned Committee Schools, and the number is growing. A new Committee School is being built to be ready in 2020. Feeling the competition, the village schools are upgrading and reforming.

The small General Conference school (called the Alvaro Obregon School) has expanded to more than nine hundred students. It has an impressive program from kindergarten to grade 12, including a government-recognized university preparation program. In addition, many Old Colonists have joined Kleine Gemeinde churches established in Manitoba Colony, and send their children to the Kleine Gemeinde schools, which in terms of quality are a further upgrade from the Committee Schools.

Today the majority of children in Manitoba Colony are getting a good education that prepares them well for life in the com-

munity. Students in the Obregon and Kleine Gemeinde schools receive Spanish and English language instruction, in addition to German. Numerous high school graduates continue their education at Mexican universities.

Change is also happening in Old Colony church life. About a decade ago groups of people started meeting for Bible study, singing, and fellowship. To some these meetings looked suspicious. But when the bishop, after attending one or more of the sessions, indicated that he did not see anything wrong with the meetings, they began to flourish. After some time, these meetings were organized into what is known as *Abendschulen* (evening schools), which meet every Thursday throughout the year.

Today there are seven or eight such groups meeting regularly at various places in Manitoba Colony. The Plett Foundation group was invited to attend the Lowefarm Abendschule Christmas program at the Lowefarm Old Colony Church Gymnasium on Saturday, December 8. The Gymnasium is a large sports hall built to

accommodate multiple sports events, including volleyball. The Lowefarm Abendschule consists of young people 15 to 25 years of age. It has met for two years, so this was their second Christmas program. The crowd in attendance was estimated by locals at about 1,500 people. This shows that the program had strong church and community support.

The Plett Foundation group was invited to sit in the second row, right behind the *Aeltester*, ministers and *Vorsteher* (civic colony leader). The program

started with eight children, three boys and five girls, about 10 to 12 years of age, singing in unison "Alle Jahre wieder kommt das Christuskind" (Every year again comes the Christ child). As they sang, the choir members filed in, softly joining the singing of the eight young people. The choir of about 170 youth filled the riser benches in front of us, men on our left and women on the right. One row of women took up the men's back row.

The program included about eleven songs, all sung in unison,



The Plett Foundation group was invited to attend the Lowefarm Abendschule Christmas program at the Lowefarm Old Colony Church Gymnasium.

unaccompanied, and without a conductor. Three of the hymns were from the Old Colony *Gesangbuch* and sung in *Lange Wies* — that is, the traditional Old Colony singing style which adds musical ornamentation to the melody line. The rest of the songs were Advent and Christmas songs, sung in non-*Lange Wies* style. There were three “Readers’ Theatre” presentations, called “*Geschichten*” in the printed program, read by male and female choir members. Opening and closing comments were made by the two leaders, Jacob Banman and Cornelius Janzen. In addition to the usual welcome and concluding remarks, they included some practical advice, for example, drawing attention to a booklet explaining the dangers of alcohol and drug addiction.

The program ended with a long line of speeches, more than half an hour in total, some short, others longer. Since the Abendschule as well as the Christmas program are relatively new, it appeared that the organ-

izers were concerned to have the church and community leaders publicly pronounce their blessing upon this event. The Abendschule leaders, all men, thanked the young people for their participation, and in good Old Colony style, apologized for any mistakes they might have made, or offenses they might have caused someone, and asked for forgiveness. Minister Isaak Dyck, after some hesitation in which all the ministers looked at each other to see who should speak, spoke on behalf of the ministers and the Aeltester. Some of the language used by the local speakers was quite evangelical in tone, including expressions of personal salvation and commitment that seemed new in an Old Colony context. This language may indicate the influence of evangelical mission churches in the area.

Kennert Giesbrecht, *Die Mennonitische Post* editor and a Plett Foundation board member, spoke on behalf of the Plett board and staff, introducing the board and its mission. Abe Rempel, an

Old Colony minister from Winkler, Manitoba, and a Plett Foundation board member, was invited by the local ministers to speak. This invitation seemed to be an affirmation of Abe, and of our Foundation group. The program concluded with a gift exchange among the choir young people. A buffet-style *Faspa* was prepared for all present.

In a meeting with the Aeltester and a number of ministers we asked about the influence of the Abendschulen. With about two hundred young people meeting at seven or eight locations, the schools touch a lot of people in the colony. The responses by the leaders were uniformly positive. They said the schools provide young people with wholesome evening activities and opportunities for socializing. One of the ministers said the police have even noticed the positive influence, and have said that in villages that encourage attendance at the Abendschulen there are significantly fewer incidents police have to attend.

Old Colony Mennonites near Cuauhtemoc are often seen as victims: as poor, struggling immigrants, unjustly pushed out of Canada, trying to eke out a living in the harsh, dry, and windy conditions of the valley near the Sierra Madre Mountains. Or they may be seen primarily as immigrants to Canada from Mexico who often lack some of the necessary life skills needed to transition into Canadian society.

What we saw on this visit was that neither of these views is a complete, or accurate, picture of Mennonites in Manitoba Colony. What we saw was Mennonites for whom, within the past one hundred years, Manitoba Colony has become home. Here they have rooted their families, businesses, farms and churches. The people and communities are creative, dynamic, changing, optimistic, confident, and proud (humbly so) of what they have accomplished against considerable odds. The visit, short as it was, was inspiring and enlightening.



JEREMY WIEBE

A view across Manitoba Colony from a lookout point near the town of Rubio.

Dad, God, and Me

Ralph Friesen

How many of us have told a story and had someone say, “You should write a book”? And we think, “Maybe I should,” but for various reasons we never do it, and the story goes unpublished, and when we die, it dies with us. The world loses that story.

Which also would have happened with this story, of my father, and of my spiritual journey as it was shaped by him. Except that I was determined that this story should not be lost. Actually, no one suggested that I write it – this was my idea. Other biographies of church leaders of his time have been published, and I thought: “If them, why not him?” He was not as strong a personality as some others, and his influence on church affairs was not as great as that of some others, but even so, he had his moment in history, and it mattered, and I wanted to give him his due.

I also wanted to give the story of my own rebellion, apostasy, lack of faith – whatever you want to call it; I wanted to put this “forbidden” stuff out into the world. We have many biographies that are essentially hagiographies and we have many spiritual memoirs in which the writer endures trials and emerges victorious and blessed, and that’s all good. My purpose was different.

A grant from the Plett Foundation enabled me to have the book edited, designed, and laid out by professionals, and also to make it available to a broad audience online. *Dad, God, and Me* was published in late December of 2019, so there’s been time for some readers to respond, and share their thoughts with me. Many have been moved to share their own

stories of their parents and siblings, and their experiences with faith and doubt. I invite whoever reads these words into the dialogue, too.

This is a book I’ve had in me almost all my life. It was a labour of love, and my hope is that you, the reader, will finish the circle by engaging with it. The following is an excerpt from the introduction.

“My father was Reverend Peter D. Friesen, pastor of the Kleine Gemeinde / Evangelical Mennonite Church in Steinbach during the 1940s and 1950s. Twelve years ago, talking about him with my wife Hannah over breakfast at the Corner House Café in Nelson, BC, I was surprised by a sudden upwelling of sadness. I began to weep. Those tears were the seeds that developed into this book.

We were six children in my family – Alvin, Donald, Mary Ann, Vernon, Norman, and me, Peter Ralph, the youngest. When my father had his paralyzing stroke on August 11, 1958, we made our individual visits to the hospital to see him. We didn’t go together.

To whom would it have occurred to bring all of us together and ask: “What does each of you need? What can you contribute? What shall be done now, now that you have lost your father?” (Or for my mother: “your husband.”) To no one, apparently – it didn’t happen. And this is one of the things that struck me at breakfast that day – that we each dealt with the situation alone.

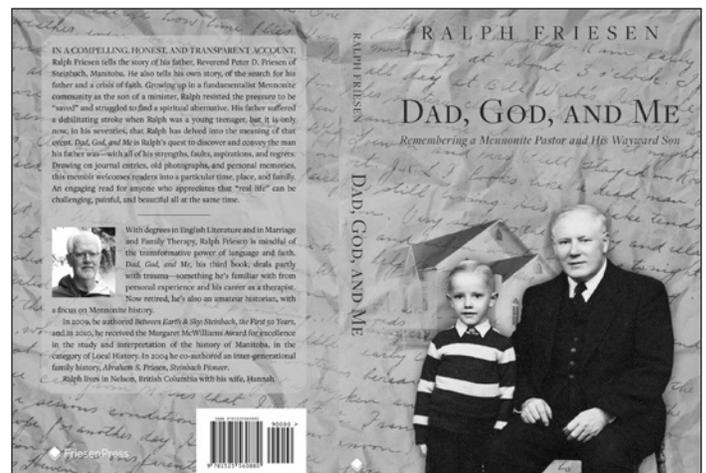
“Loss,” I say of Dad, although he didn’t die. But we treated him like an imposter. This paralyzed imitation of a man, whose brain didn’t function properly anymore, was not our father. I believe we

all thought that, without talking about it.

And we were wrong. Why was I crying at the Corner House? In my adolescence, after Dad’s stroke, I was embarrassed by him. He tried to be of good cheer, despite the horrendous blow that had slammed his body and brain with such terrible force. I had always thought of this effort at cheerfulness as artificial – absurd, even. But now I was struck by his lonely courage. He carried on, as best he could. He must have known that we, his children, viewed him from a cool distance after his stroke, that we didn’t try to understand his situation or connect with

and Dad gone, Vern gone, and Cornie Loewen gone too for that matter, and the Corner House Café transformed into a different restaurant, I wish for us to gather again and reconsider that time in our lives, more than 50 years ago. Perhaps this book is a kind of gathering, and reconsidering.

I have collected everything I could find of my father – his diaries, a few letters, postcards, sermon notes, pictures. I have also drawn upon my mother’s diaries and letters. I have interviewed my siblings and a number of people who knew my father as a businessman and as a church pastor. In this process, I have



him. But he did not complain, or ask for sympathy. He was a brave man, far braver than I ever realized, and I had failed him. Understanding this for the first time, I wept that August morning.

When Mom died in 1983, Steinbach businessman and family friend Cornie Loewen met with us siblings regarding the settlement of the estate. He congratulated us on our spirit of cooperation. He saw that we had something, as a family. Whatever our differences, we were kindly disposed to each other.

There is for me in the memory of that estate meeting a hint of the guidance that we needed (and could not find among ourselves) after Dad’s stroke; I’m still grateful to Cornie Loewen for bringing us together and giving us encouragement. Even today, with Mom

made discoveries, and have come to know Dad more completely than when he was alive.

I have also told my own story insofar as it intersects with his. So this is both a biography of a man, written by his son, and a memoir of parts of that son’s boyhood. The task I set myself was not only to get to know my father better, but also to get to know myself better. Even if you know nothing about him, or me, you do know something about your own search for what has been lost, your own attempts at self-understanding. Our mutual searching, our need to know and understand – these things can connect us.”

For more information on this book, please visit www.ralphfriesen.com

Welcome to Hope!

By Arden Thiessen

Self-published, 2019, pp. 223. Softcover.

Reviewed by Ralph Friesen

On the back cover of Arden Thiessen's new book, *Welcome to Hope!*, stands a tongue-in-cheek warning: "This book may offer more hope than some readers may appreciate." What does he mean? Likely he's talking about his views on eternal punishment. Essentially, he does not believe in such a thing. Thiessen has dispensed with the need for a hell of eternal, literal fire. Biblical references to an eternal hell, he says, should be understood figuratively. Further, he believes that God's grace is so great that it extends beyond death – so the billions once assumed "lost" by literalists may be "found" after all, in God's greater scheme of things.

That is indeed more hope than some readers may appreciate. Thiessen does affirm his literal belief in a triune God and the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ. But many of his readers, including those in his own Evangelical Mennonite Conference (EMC), may fear that a figurative understanding of any part of Scripture opens a Pandora's box of doctrinal ambiguity and confusion.

Nevertheless, Thiessen forges cheerily and hopefully ahead with an optimistic narrative that sometimes is not easy to distinguish from the declamations of prosperity gospel types such as Joel Osteen. (Not that Osteen doesn't have some valid things to say about the inherent worth of the individual in God's eyes). Thiessen admits to having pessimistic tendencies, but these are hardly to be found in *Welcome to Hope!* (with an exclamation mark).

Thiessen does allow himself to

engage with the problem of evil in the world, especially human evil, and again his answer is not what I would have expected from an EMC pastor: God is not in control. Apparently, Thiessen has been reading Harold Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Basically, God gives freedom to humans, and regrettably, we take advantage of this gift to do bad things. Further, God gives freedom to nature, putting in place nature's laws, but not deciding how they will come into play at any given time or place (much less influencing the outcome of football games).

In the context of literalist evangelicalism all this must feel like radical "stuff," to use one of Thiessen's favourite words. He self-publishes, so he can say what he wants. And, although well into his eighties, he is a going concern, having produced a book in each of the last four years. No wonder that, for him, Heaven is not a static place of rest, but a dynamic environment of growth and learning.

It happens that I am working on translations and interpretations of a Kleine Gemeinde minister who wrote and preached his sermons about 130 years ago – my great-grandfather Abraham L. Dueck of Kleefeld. It occurred to me that I might look at Thiessen's book in the context of my ancestor's beliefs, which in turn are probably a fairly accurate reflection of the beliefs of the Kleine Gemeinde in his time. The Kleine Gemeinde, of course, being the church from which the EMC sprung, and the church also of Thiessen's ancestors.

Thiessen himself does not evince much interest in the past, or in looking to the past for guidance: "the high priest of this mythical religion of the past is the historian," he says. He doesn't like historians? In his view we should be looking instead to the future to give us direction. "Our God is the God of forward progress." I must apologize, ahead of time, if my method of comparison to texts from the past is unfair to Thiessen's premise. Or could Abraham Dueck's thinking provide some instructive context for Thiessen's approach?

I have translated four of Dueck's sermons, written from 1895 to 1896, and will quote from these, apologizing once more (this is our tradition!) for any inaccuracies or misrepresentations resulting from my sometimes impatient grappling with my dear ancestor's opaque, almost stream-of-consciousness German, rendered originally in the old *Schrift* (or script).

Dueck often speaks of the hope he and his congregants had, as traditional Mennonites. For example: "We as believers, firm in our hope, understand that it has been freely promised to us that we can be in right relationship to God, and place all our cares upon him" (April 1896). This is perhaps not so very different from Thiessen's hope (and belief) that God is lovingly present with us in even the darkest times. Dueck, however, places more emphasis on the importance of right relationship – so his hope is somewhat more conditional. For Dueck, right relationship requires both repentance of one's wrongdoing and offering forgiveness when wronged by others.

Thiessen devotes several pages to "forgiveness," which Dueck also addresses in his sermon in preparation for communion (April 1896). Both quote Matthew 6:14: "If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you." Dueck, however, makes sure to include the next verse: "But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." Thiessen, less stringent, is open



to at least the possibility of divine forgiveness even for those of us who stubbornly hang on to our hurts and grievances. Even so, he says that "accepting forgiveness involves admitting to the shame and embarrassment of our sins." Dueck favours "repentance," Thiessen "confession." Maybe there's not much to choose between them here.

Both authors concern themselves with righteousness, or right action. Thiessen seems to believe that righteousness is only made possible through Christ: "He came to create a new community of purified and holy people who would move out into the world and build the kingdom of God, both by their exemplary living and by their verbal witness." Dueck does not speak of moving out into the world – the kingdom of God is to be built in his own community. Not that this will be easy: "Before all else practice righteousness, and see to it that wickedness, envy and vindictiveness are silenced through true repentance and renewal" (April 1896). He adds that, in ourselves, we are powerless to do good, so we should "always seek out God's grace and mercy, so that we never put our trust in any matter, or in any of our deeds, allowing ourselves to think of them as great." This last is a bit more pessimistic or cautious than Thiessen's emphasis, though not in contradiction to it.

Both writers are concerned about the end times. Thiessen disagrees with Hal Lindsey-style apocalyptic scenarios of death and destruction, saying that Christ's return will instead bring about a renewal of heaven and earth. Dueck frequently warns his listeners not to be complacent: "We all concede, do we not, that we now live in the end times?" he asks rhetorically (November 1896). His concern with this situation is invariably ethical – if we are living in the end times, in a period of grace, then it is of the utmost importance to behave like a true follower of Jesus. Dueck and Thiessen both quote 2 Peter 13: "We are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells," and both take this more as a hopeful promise than a vengeful threat.

In his chapter "Hope in the Presence of Death," Thiessen helpfully outlines three answers that Christian scholars have given to the question of what happens when a person dies. In one, the person is "totally dead," but held by God until the end-time resurrection. In another, the body dies but the soul continues, to be held in some intermediate state, waiting for the resurrection. In the third, people are "transformed at the point of death into their eternal form" and enter into heaven – resurrection is immediate. Thiessen cautiously favours this last idea but acknowledges that, whatever the case, "resurrection is an inexplicable mystery."

Dueck employs a metaphor that his peasant farmer congregation would readily have understood, saying that after death we are "gathered together either to be stored as wheat in God's granary or as chaff to be burned with eternal fire" (February 1896). He expresses the traditional Kleine Gemeinde position that the dead rest in some sort of suspended state until the resurrection day and the Last Judgement. Only then will each person be sure of his or her eternal destiny: "You cannot have confidence in eternal salvation, though I dearly hope that all of us may attain it" (April 1896). Dueck's "dear hope" is much more

tentative than Thiessen's bold statements of what happens to us after death.

Essentially, Dueck says: "We don't know." For his part, Thiessen does not tolerate not-knowing very well; it seems to undermine his idea of hope, which is wrapped up in certainty. Eventually Christ will be victorious and end all evil. "Without the hope of this final victory over evil, the huge question of why the Creator allowed his beautiful world to be invaded by sin would remain an eternal mystery."

Dueck does not seem to seek an answer to this question, perhaps because he sees God as unknowable, and does not wish to presume. He certainly wrote many more sermons than the ones I have had access to, so maybe he says something about this elsewhere. But in the record that I have, he is not much concerned with a triumphantly victorious Christ. He gives many warnings against evil and wrongdoing; perhaps he just got into the habit of battling endlessly and was afraid to relax his guard. The closest he comes to imagining a future without evil is this: "Then all true believers will find themselves together with each other again, no longer saddened by death. There we will be found in the steady hand of the Creator, and there unhindered springs of peace will flow, in that homeland with no tears, where the conqueror has prepared a city of noble peace, a hope for all who have fought for so long and all life-weary wanderers, where no one will get tired of life any more (February 1896.)"

Given an expanded definition of "true believers," Thiessen could probably agree with such a vision. The Kleine Gemeinde passed from an inward-focused ethical Christianity to an EMC born-again missionary theology – with (mostly unacknowledged) notions of superiority and exclusion common to both. Now Thiessen seems to want to take it to a new manifestation, allowing for a more egalitarian and accepting faith. Will that happen? We can hope, but we can't know.

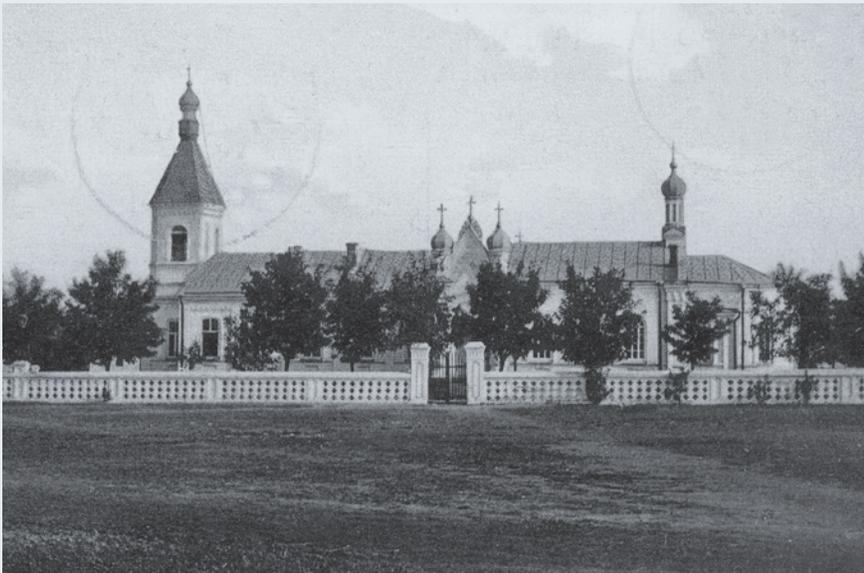
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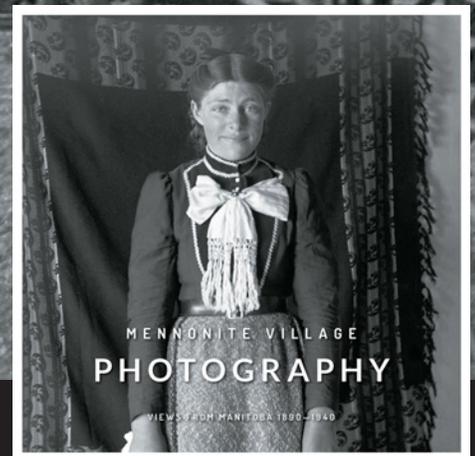
We are soliciting articles for our fall 2020 issue on the theme of “Mennonites and their Neighbours”

Submissions are due June 30, 2020

Over the course of several centuries, Mennonites have lived next to and interacted with a variety of peoples. In this issue, we will explore the relationships – positive, neutral, and negative – between Mennonites and the many different groups that Mennonites have called “neighbours” in North and South America, as well as western and eastern Europe. If you have an interest in contributing an article on this theme, please email the Plett Foundation.

We also invite the submission of articles, biographies, local histories, reflections, as well as translated diaries, letters and other archival materials for publication on topics related to Mennonite history, especially pertaining to Low German-speaking communities in the Americas.

Submissions of manuscripts may be sent to the editor, Aileen Friesen, by email to ai.friesen@uwinnipeg.ca, or via mail to the Plett Foundation, University of Winnipeg, 515 Portage Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3B 2E9. Feel free to contact the editor by email or by phone (204-786-9352). If sending material electronically, please be sure to submit high resolution photographs. They should be at least 2MB in size.



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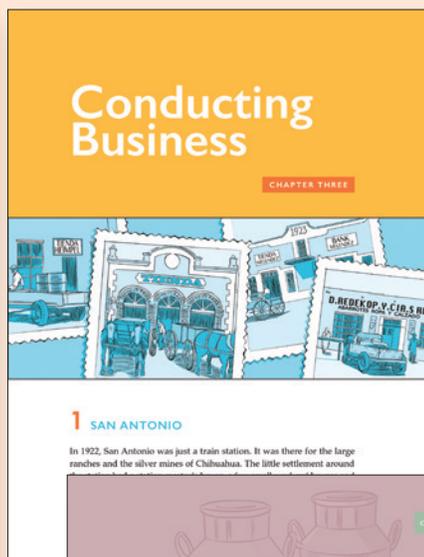
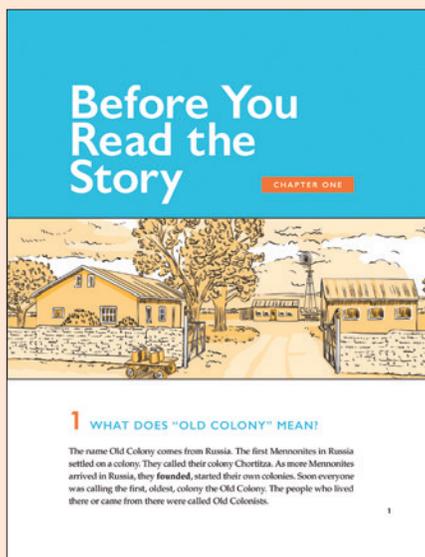
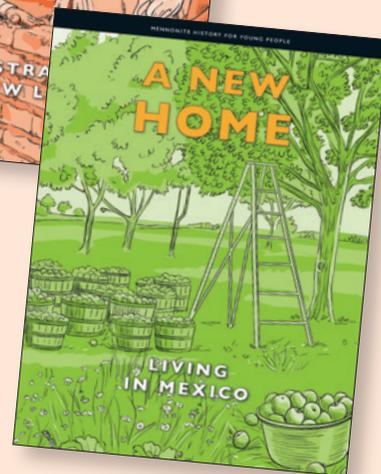
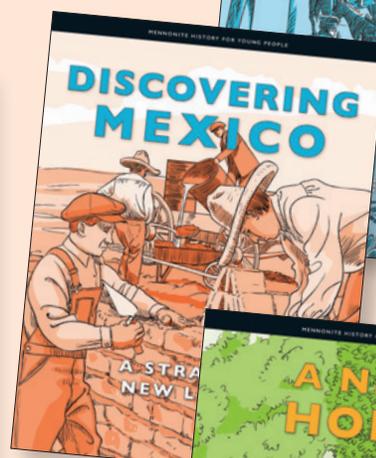
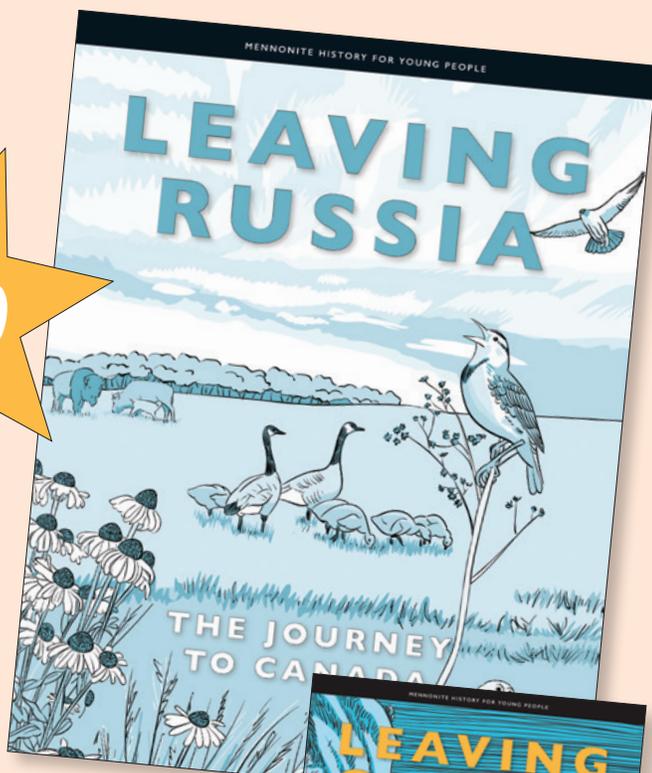
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