

Preservings

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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

Emil Riesen next to Isfandiyar, the Khan
of Khiva, ca. 1913.

MENNONITE HERITAGE ARCHIVES, 158-1.0

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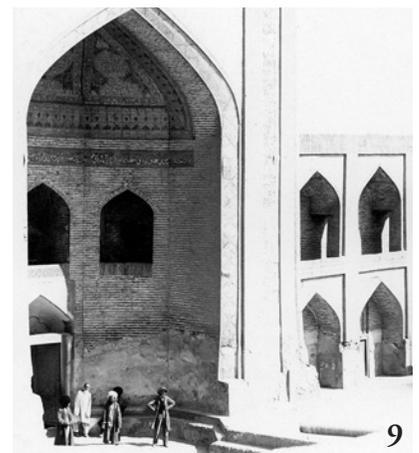
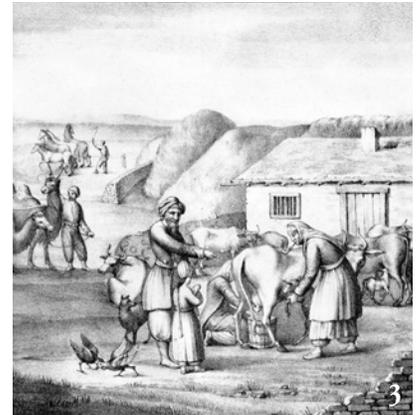
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FROM THE EDITOR

Aileen Friesen

During this pandemic, medical professionals, government officials, the media, and Mennonites themselves have raised the issue of neighbourliness. As we've been encouraged to make sacrifices for the protection of others, people have been asking: are Mennonites good neighbours? Future generations will pass judgement on this specific moment of crisis, but an argument can be made that historically we haven't concerned ourselves too much with the welfare of our non-Mennonite neighbours. This doesn't mean that we haven't helped in times of need; however, it is safe to say that Mennonites have a long tradition of focusing on the well-being of our own communities, circulating resources, compassion, and respect internally. While this detachment from the world served to create strong ties among us, it also limited exchanges and connections with those outside our ethno-religious communities.

Although Mennonite communities have been slow to foster neighbourly relations, individuals have shown a willingness to cross cultural boundaries. The cover of *Preservings* provides an example of one such person, Emil Riesen. Why is this Mennonite man, born in Prussia, seated next to the Khan of Khiva, Isfandiyar Khan? Riesen, who travelled to Central Asia with Klaas Epp's millenarian group in 1881, settled in Ak Mechet near Khiva (in present-day Uzbekistan). Possessed with a gift for languages, he quickly emerged as an important emissary between his own Mennonite community and local Muslim leaders. Although Riesen wore a suit in the photograph and remained steadfast in his Christian beliefs, he often dressed according to local custom and greeted others using the Islamic tradition of *salaam*, a low bow with his hand on his forehead. By immersing himself in Islamic texts and practices, Riesen could cross seamlessly between cultural realms, serving as a translator of world views for both Muslim leaders and Mennonites.

It was not only Mennonites who served in this role. Sometimes non-Mennonites found themselves in this position as well. In this issue, Albert Siemens describes how the "English" lawyer, J. B. McLaren, acted on behalf of Mennonites during land negotiations with the Canadian government. McLaren was quick to use his knowledge, position, and personal connections to forward the Mennonite cause, even if he believed the assimilation of this group was the ultimate goal. In the Molotschna region, Daniel Schlatter, a Swiss missionary, acted less as an intermediary and more as a critical observer of relations between Mennonites and

their Nogai neighbours. As James Urry demonstrates, Schlatter was an outsider with the necessary language skills to access both communities as an insider. This position allowed him to offer an account of the tensions and prejudices that shaped interactions between these neighbours.

The significance of language for basic understanding and communication can't be overstated. In Alan Guenther's article, the issue of language arises often as the Bartsch brothers navigated life as migrants and Bible salesmen for the British and Foreign Bible Society in the eastern reaches of the Russian empire. Yet, language only tells part of the story. Often overlooked is how the exchange of objects can be the pretext for dialogue between neighbours. In this case, selling Bibles offered an opportunity for the brothers to interact with local Muslim men at the market.

Such exchanges of physical objects could also solidify fleeting moments of encounter. The visit of five international agronomists to the Loewen household in Blumenort, Manitoba, was brief, but the exchange of a Bible for a Qur'an, which then stood on his father's bookshelf, imprinted the event on the memory of a young Royden Loewen. In the case of Ernest Braun, the sharing of a name served as the poignant reminder of a connection between families, forged in the most unlikely of circumstances. The quartering of German POWs in Manitoba during the Second World War is a little-known story. The relationship that developed between the German and Canadian Braun families crossed and bound generations in part because of the exchanges over these decades of food, gifts, and stories.

Even though most articles in this issue concern connections created by individuals, as Kennert Giesbrecht shows, community also has had a role to play. By sharing examples of missions and aid work initiated in Latin America, Giesbrecht emphasizes the communal nature of Mennonite interaction with their neighbours, and how this interaction changes over time depending on economic circumstances.

This issue of *Preservings*, along with the last, "Neighbourly Encounters," offers only a snapshot of Mennonite neighbourliness. More needs to be written about how gender, age, denominational status, and race have influenced our interactions with others. The topic of Indigenous-Mennonite relations, in particular, deserves much more attention. But perhaps the stories in this issue will encourage us to think about how we relate to those outside of our community.



Tatarische Frau.

A CRITICAL GAZE

Daniel Schlatter and Mennonite-Nogai Relations

James Urry

During the first half of the nineteenth century numerous outsiders visited the Mennonite colonies in southern Russia (present-day Ukraine). These visitors included members of other religious faiths and experts on agriculture and economy, mostly foreigners but also Russian government officials.¹ Most visits were brief in duration and visitors usually were shown only positive aspects of Mennonite industry and achievements. Only occasionally did visitors comment on Mennonite relations with their non-Mennonite neighbours. A notable exception is Daniel Schlatter (1791–1870), a Swiss missionary to the Nogai Tatars, a semi-nomadic Muslim people living close to the Molotschna colony. Schlatter first came to southern Russia in 1822 and made two subsequent visits until 1828. During his time in the region Schlatter interacted with not only Nogai but also with their Mennonite neighbours, especially Johann Cornies (1789–1848). Cornies was the leading Mennonite in the region in control of the economic development of the colony and neighbouring groups. He had a particularly close relationship with the Nogai, neighbours of the Molotschna Mennonites. Both Mennonites and Nogai were involved with sheep herding, at this point the major source of economic enterprise, as well as horse raising, and Cornies attempted to change their ways.² After he

finally returned home to Switzerland, Schlatter wrote a lengthy account of the Nogai which included comments on Mennonite-Nogai interrelations.³

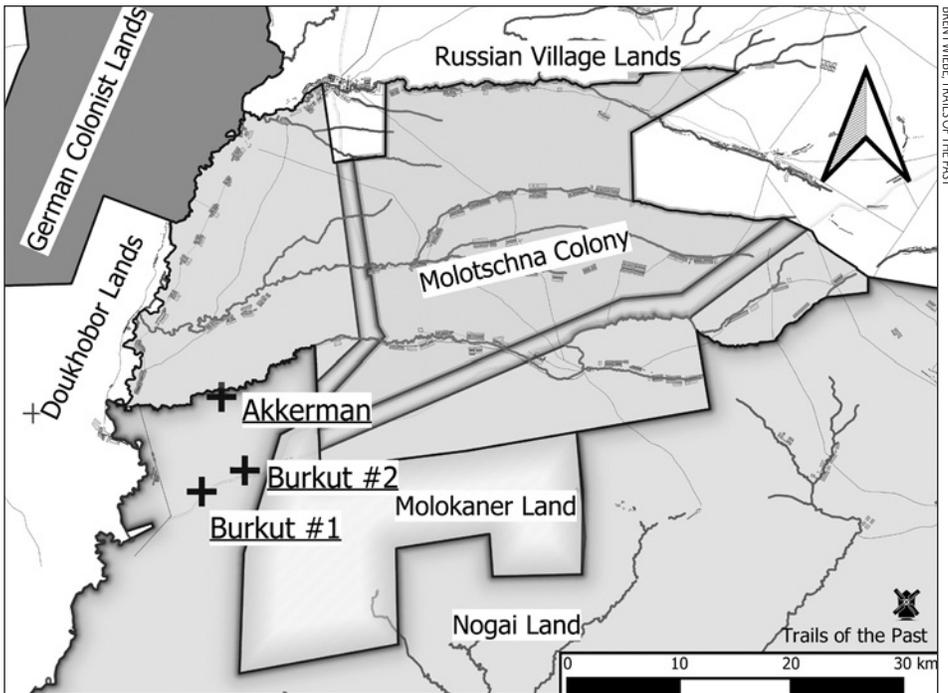
LIFE AND WORK

Schlatter was born into an established merchant family in St. Gallen, Switzerland.⁴ A number of his relatives, particularly his aunt Anna Schlatter-Bernet (1773–1826), were closely involved with the Swiss and South German Pietist movement. After working in the family business, Schlatter decided on mission work through his contact with the Basel Mission Society. In early 1822 he left St. Gallen to journey to Russia and begin work among a Tatar group. At this time other missionary societies, such as the Edinburgh Missionary Society, were working among Tatar and other Muslim communities.⁵ His journey took him through the city of Altona, where he met Jacob van der Smissen (1782–1832), a member of a wealthy Mennonite trading family, who provided him with introductions to Prussian Mennonites and even to Johann Cornies.⁶ Members of the van der Smissen family exchanged letters with Schlatter's aunt long before he left Switzerland. Schlatter spent time with Prussian Mennonites and gained knowledge of their beliefs and practices.⁷ While in Prussia, Schlatter gathered information on Mennonites who had emigrated to Russia, a movement that continued at the time of his visit.

On reaching southern Russia he first visited Chortitza. Proceeding to Molotschna he remarked on the variety of German colonists and other groups in the region, including Russians, Dukhobors and Molokans.⁸ Mennonite villages were “distinguished by their good construction and obvious prosperity, significantly ahead of those [other German colonists] on the right bank of the Molochnaia [River].” After having reached the Mennonite village of Ohrloff, located near the Nogai Tatars, he was uncertain as to how he would be received or how he could begin his mission work.⁹ He had undoubtedly been directed to Ohrloff to meet Cornies, whose extensive contacts with the Nogai included trading horses and using them as shepherds for his large flocks of sheep. Schlatter's first visit was short, as in late 1822 he went back to Switzerland, but he returned in early 1823 and stayed until late 1826. He spent most of his time in the Russian empire living among the Nogai, but he often visited Mennonites. In 1825 Cornies wrote to a friend, reporting that Schlatter “dressed like a Tatar,” and visited them in Ohrloff “every Sunday.”¹⁰ When Schlatter returned in 1827 it was again for a brief period, as ill health forced him back to Switzerland in 1828.¹¹ He would never return to Russia.

Cornies introduced Schlatter to a local Nogai, Ali-Ametov, who permitted Schlatter to live in his outbuilding in a nearby village. In return Schlatter worked for Ametov, caring for his horses

The Nogai, a semi-nomadic people who practiced Islam, lived close to the Mennonite colony of Molotschna.



BRENT WIEBE / TRAILS OF THE PAST

Mennonites and the Nogai lived as neighbours in southern Russia (present-day Ukraine).

and cattle while also performing various other menial tasks. Through this work Schlatter experienced Nogai life at first hand, gaining a basic knowledge of the Nogai language, including their written script, while acquiring an understanding of their society and customs. He adopted the strategy of wearing Nogai dress, and in 1823 an English mission journal reported that Schlatter lived “in a stable with their horses – drinking mares’ milk, and eat[ing] horse flesh.”¹² His own later account, however, details difficulties he encountered in his attempts to be accepted into the Nogai community, as they were suspicious of his intentions. Matters were further complicated as he tried to come to terms with their marriage customs and the ways they treated women.

MENNONITES AND NOGAI

During his time living among the Nogai, Schlatter continued to visit Molotschna Mennonites, especially Cornies. This is obvious from both Schlatter’s and Cornies’ letters during his time in southern Russia, and after he finally returned to Switzerland. Schlatter also gained access to important senior Russian officials, mostly members of the nobility, who approved of his work and provided support. Cornies undoubtedly

assisted him in making these contacts.

In a letter written in 1824, early in his second visit in the Molotschna region, to the English Baptist missionary William Angas, Schlatter was critical of Mennonites: “Your address to the Mennonites (calculated to produce in them both joy and shame) has been much read, and sought after by the settlers here.¹³ How much can God bring to pass through human means! ... How much have the English brethren done, and how little during twenty years past, have the Mennonites done, towards extending the kingdom of God among the Tatars in these parts! They are at present, however, beginning to make a stir among some, (though these are not many, God knows,) whilst others, opposed to the gospel under the garb of a humble piety, lead astray the simple and inexperienced, who, for want of knowing better, will hear of nothing new, and readily believe that Missionary efforts are opposed to the principles of their church, and, consequently, any interest taken in such efforts are regarded in the same light. They imagine, also, that such things would tend to produce a change of sentiment among the churches, as well as endanger the privileges which they already hold from the emperor. But as to the latter of these two suppositions, the reverse is

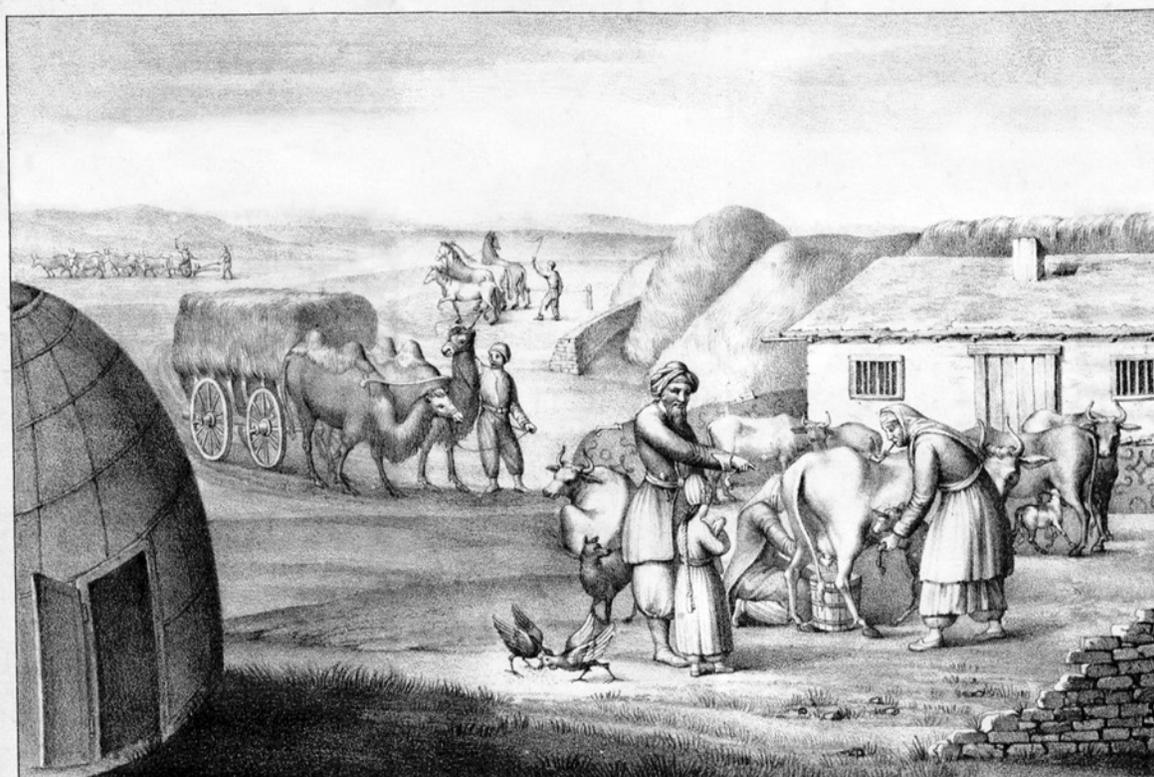
more likely to be the case, as the emperor and his council exhort their subjects, and encourage them to forward the good work, as a thing both praiseworthy and beneficial.¹⁴ It is my wish, as well as that of Mr. Cornies and other friends to humanity, that you would pay this colony a visit: so that, under a blessing, you might be a rod to the untoward, an instructor to the ignorant, a strengthener of the weak, and to confirm those still more who stand.”¹⁵

In August 1825, Schlatter reported that “Mennonites are too vain of their pious ancestors, as if it were a matter of course that their descendants on that account deserved the name Christians,” although “there are many who lend an attentive ear to the preaching of the word.”¹⁶ He later observed: “When a Nogai sees Christians around him who call themselves Greek Orthodox, Armenians, Catholics, Evangelicals, Mennonites, Doukhobors and Molokans, what can he think otherwise than that Christians are, if not worse, then also not better than themselves, whether they are called either Sunni or Shiite?”¹⁷ In addition, how much more dignified and more sensible, on the whole, is the behaviour and forms of worship of a Muslim than – one may say for the greater part – of those who call themselves Christian, especially in the larger churches! The Muslim also may complain about the decline of religion, but for their part they have not yet fallen in general as far as the Christians.”¹⁸

In his book on the Nogai, Schlatter blamed both the Mennonites and the Nogai for the failure to create a better understanding of each other. He wrote: “The fact that for fifteen, indeed more than twenty years, the German settlements close to the Nogai Tatars have exercised so little visible influence on the economic and moral condition of these neighbours is obviously the fault of both parties. The Tatars in general despise everything German and all things foreign and are extremely proud of themselves, as most people on a lower cultural level invariably are. These attitudes on the part of neighbours very often lead to mutual disdain and are the cause of quarrels and disunity, and particularly so since the Nogai allow



Tataren.



Tatarische Wirthschaft.

According to Schlatter, the Nogai showed little interest in copying the lifestyle of Mennonites. Bottom: A Nogai village.

their cattle to roam over Mennonite land and graze their fill.

“Although the Tatars observe that the Mennonites are more prosperous and live better than they do, they have little inclination to copy the Germans and adopt their lifestyle. Oriental custom and the style of life of the Tatars is too directly opposed to the German way of life to enable them to imitate them or to be attracted to them. Generally, the Tatars do not regard the German style of life as either pleasant or attractive. They say, ‘We aren’t Germans, of what concern are the Germans to us!’ Or, more succinctly, ‘That is not our custom.’

“As far as morals are concerned, one may observe that in general they still have a good example in the Mennonites; however, the bad is more obvious to them than the good and tends to set the greater example. In Tatar villages lying closest to German villages one can hear the Tatars singing about harlots in broken German and they reveal that the song has been explained to them. The Mennonites do not set a good example to their non-Mennonite neighbours. The frivolous among them are more talkative and active than their religious representatives. The conduct of the Germans to the Tatars does not convey respect and love. The Nogai are treated in a crude manner as recompense for their lack of respect towards the Mennonites. Many appear to believe that the Tatars are a forlorn people, deserted by God and beyond the pale. Even their outward appearance strikes the Mennonite, dressed in the old German style as he is, as repugnant in the same way as does the French or English style of modern dress. He regards the former as a blind heathen and the latter as a child of the world and the anti-Christ. The Mennonite – but others as well – thinks he has reason enough to believe that he can ridicule the Nogai but has no idea that he too is just as backward in many ways from other peoples’ perspectives. However, it is not only contempt but also fear which prevents closer social contact and the possible influence of the German on the Nogai. Every honest, unbiased German colonist, however, has to admit that he has



Schlatter's book provided new insight into the relationship of the Nogai with neighbouring Mennonites.

no reason to be afraid of the Nogai even if, here and there, the occasional Mennonite horse has been stolen by them.

“I personally experienced the resentment of the Germans towards the Nogai on several occasions when I was not recognized as a German. On an occasion when I inspected a garden plot beside the house of an elder or leader of the congregation,

a respectable German housewife, who knew no Tatar, attempted to chase me away with Russian swear words. I hesitated to speak German, but I did finally ask her to please treat the Tatars in a more pleasant manner. Granted, the patience of the Germans is put to severe tests when the Nogai come calling, because their snoopiness is very evident, and they

cannot be readily turned away.

“It must, however, be admitted that the Germans in general are much more pleasantly inclined towards the Nogai than are the Russians. Likewise, the Tatars hold the Germans in far higher esteem than the Russians. This is partially based on religious grounds: the religious service of the Germans is simple while the Greek [Russian Orthodox] service is all about pictures and ceremonials and thus in sharpest contrast to the simple and un-ceremonial worship prescribed by Islam.

“The proximity of the Germans has exerted some influence on the Nogai. Very little of this is obvious, however, and a valid comparison would require much more information pertaining to the circumstances and facts of the larger context. Presumably, the Nogai have acquired a greater love of agriculture based on their proximity to the Germans; in particular they now practice the planting of rye. In addition, they have improved the style of their houses as well as their farm implements and forms of animal husbandry, etc.

“There are some Germans who take a sincere interest in the fate of the Nogai and demonstrate empathy for their welfare. Also, they employ more and more Nogai for the hay harvest, at threshing time and as shepherds. The fact that they give the Nogai short rein is obviously based on many personal experiences. As the saying goes, ‘You give a Nogai a finger and soon he will go for your hand and then your head as well.’¹⁹

“The development of all good things in life can never be measured in giant strides. In the course of time the Germans will reduce their prejudices and their general disdain [for the Nogai]. However, the same cannot really be expected of the Nogai as long as they remain under the influence of their [Muslim] leaders.”²⁰

AN UNORTHODOX MISSIONARY

Schlatter was always short of money, as his endeavours were mostly funded by himself and supporters. He was forced to borrow money, including a “long-term

loan” from Cornies, but was then faced with repaying his debts.²¹ He was never, in any formal sense, a missionary attached to any religious group or mission board, although one did attempt to make him one of its missionaries. This was the English Baptists who, through William Angas, had been active in German-speaking areas of continental Europe since 1820.²² Angas established contacts with Mennonites in the Netherlands and Prussia.²³ He believed Schlatter could become a missionary supported by the Baptists.²⁴ In 1827, before he returned to Russia, Schlatter travelled to London to meet with English Baptists in order to gain financial support. But the meeting did not go well. Angas wrote that the “circumstances” for providing support for Schlatter “proved inauspicious” and after “due inquiry and several conferences” with him, “the negotiation was terminated.”²⁵ Schlatter would later write of his encounter: “Baptists, of whom there are a large number in England, have much in common with Mennonites, but differ from them in that the adults at baptism are completely immersed under water wearing white shirts, for which large pools are built in their churches. In country areas baptism also happens in rivers. Furthermore, unlike the Mennonites, they are zealous followers of the doctrine of predestination. They are very keen on the outward signs of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, meet very often, and pray seriously and a great deal for an unusually long time. Even though they pray very seriously, I could not help but be impatient with their pagan babble and by my thoughts of hypocrisy.”²⁶

Another factor in his lack of organizational support was that for all his time among the Nogai Schlatter had not produced a single convert. A report on Schlatter in about 1826, corrected by Cornies, stated that he did “no proselytizing among the Nogai” but instead his aim was merely to establish “how he can influence Muslim people and their rulers and lead them to true culture.”²⁷ This might best be interpreted as a “civilizing” objective that involved the Nogai changing their way of life and improving themselves as Muslims without necessar-

ily converting to Christianity.²⁸ Ahead of his visit to London in 1827, a letter from Ali-Ametov, the Nogai who had employed Schlatter and provided him with shelter, was published by the Baptists and enthusiastically reprinted by other missionary groups.²⁹ They all appear to have interpreted Ali’s letter as a sign of his conversion to Christianity; however, Ali declared himself to be a Muslim who appreciated Schlatter even though he had been taught from his youth to hold Christians in “as little [esteem] as possible.”

In many ways Schlatter was a highly unorthodox missionary. A French reviewer of Schlatter’s book noted that his “mission” strategy appeared to involve spreading “the light of civilization among” the Nogai “not by preaching . . . dogmas that they would not have understood, and which they would have obstinately rejected, but by putting before their eyes a practical model of the Christian virtues, and by striving to improve, as much as it would be in him, their physical and moral state.”³⁰ Schlatter’s activities once he returned for the final time to Switzerland from Russia in 1828 may best be understood in relation to his increasing rejection of established Christian churches, their dogmas, and even the value of missionary endeavours. In St. Gallen Schlatter re-entered commerce and married; the couple had one son who was named Abdullah after the son of his Nogai friend, Ali. Abdullah would become a merchant operating in Russia and Turkey.³¹

In about 1826 Schlatter stated to Cornies that he had “never belonged to the Reformed church” in St. Gallen “into which I had been born, though it was not my choice,” and therefore he reserved the right to reject any church whose membership required him to follow “principles I do not accept, from whose precepts I have distanced myself, and against which I must openly speak.”³² In 1832, he joined his brother-in-law Stephan Schlatter in forming a new religious group separate from the established Reformed church. But his attempts to distribute a pamphlet on the principles of the new group in the city was met with “protests and consequently rejec-

tion.”³³ The city authorities, dominated by the Reformed Church, considered all non-conformist religious groups “sects” and some, like Schlatter’s, were called *Wiedertäufer*.³⁴ Schlatter certainly believed in adult baptism but did not insist on rebaptizing any who joined his group. His followers refused to take oaths and there was also a concern with non-resistance. Stephen Schlatter had refused military service and had been given prison terms as a consequence.³⁵ All attempts to gain official recognition proved difficult and it was not until 1864 that the St. Gallen authorities recognized the small congregation as a legal entity.³⁶ A congregation descended from the original church still

exists as the “Free Evangelical Church” at Goldbrunnen and its website contains an account of its history and beliefs.³⁷

CONCLUSION

Schlatter continued to correspond with Cornies after his final return to Switzerland. He sent Cornies a copy of his book and Cornies’ letters often contained news of the Mennonites, other German colonists, and the Nogai.³⁸ Cornies also reported the death from cholera of Schlatter’s friend Ali in 1831, when the pandemic swept across Russia and the rest of Europe.³⁹ The last recorded exchange between them that is available was in 1837.⁴⁰

Schlatter’s book provides an important account of Mennonite-Nogai relations as viewed by an outsider, but one with an ability to look at the neighbours from an informed and critical standpoint. He spoke German and Nogai and had an understanding of both the Muslim and Christian faiths. It is interesting to speculate that although Schlatter remained a Christian after his return to Switzerland he may have been influenced by some aspects of the Mennonite faith while in Russia.

James Urry is a prolific writer of Mennonite history and a retired professor from the University of Wellington in Victoria, New Zealand.

1 On early religious links with British Quakers and other evangelicals, see James Urry, “‘Servants From Far’: Mennonites and the Pan-Evangelical Impulse in Early Nineteenth-Century Russia,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 61, no. 2 (1987): 213–27. Most of the other experts came later, after the 1830s, and were not involved with religious issues.

2 See John R. Staples, “On Civilizing the Nogais: Mennonite-Nogai Economic Relations, 1825–1860,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 74, no. 2 (2000): 229–56, and for the wider context his *Cross-Cultural Encounters on the Ukrainian Steppe: Settling the Molochna Basin, 1783–1861* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

3 Daniel Schlatter, *Bruchstücke aus einigen Reisen nach dem südlichen Rußland, in den Jahren 1822 bis 1828. Mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die Nogayen-Tataren am Asowschen Meere* (St. Gallen: Huber, 1830). Another edition was published in St. Gallen and Berne in 1836 with few changes. The texts of both are available on Google Books and excerpts relating to Mennonites can be found at <https://chort.square7.ch/Pis/Schlatt.pdf>.

4 See entry in *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz* at <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/049218/>, and Ursel Kälin, “Die Kaufmannsfamilie Schlatter: ein Überblick über vier Generationen,” *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 48 (1998): 391–408.

5 M. V. Jones, “The Sad and Curious Story of Karass, 1802–35,” *Oxford Slavonic Papers* 8 (1975): 53–81; Hakan Kirimli, “Crimean Tatars, Nogays, and Scottish Missionaries,” *Cahiers du Monde russe* 45, no. 1/2 (2004): 61–108; Thomas O. Flynn, “Scottish Missionaries of the Edinburgh Missionary Society and Independent Scottish Bible Missionaries (1802–35) in the North Caucasus,” chap. 5 in *The Western Christian Presence in the Russias and Qājār Persia, c.1760–c.1870* (Boston: Brill, 2016).

6 “Biography of Daniel Schlatter...with revisions in Cornies’ hand,” in *Transformation on the Southern Ukrainian Steppe: Letters and Papers of Johann Cornies*, ed. Harvey L. Dyck, Ingrid I. Epp, and John R. Staples, eds., vol. 1, 1812–1835 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 50. The editors have dated this as “probably 1826.” Cornies and van der Smissen were known to each other and even met, see 142, 146, 243–45, 263–64, 408.

7 Schlatter, *Bruchstücke aus einigen Reisen*, 14–16.

8 His account of the Dukhobors published in his book has been translated into English with critical comments at <http://www.doukhobor.org/Schlatter.html>.

9 Schlatter, *Bruchstücke aus einigen Reisen*, 28.

10 *Transformation on the Southern Ukrainian Steppe*, 1:34.

11 See *Transformation on the Southern Ukrainian Steppe*, 1:161, 169.

12 *Missionary Register...of the Church Missionary Society* 12 (1824): 35.

13 The “address” mentioned here may be a pamphlet Angas wrote, *An die Aeltesten, Lehrer und Mitglieder der sämtlichen Mennoniten Gemeinden in West Preussen* (Danzig, 1823); see [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Angas,_William_Henry_\(1781-1832\)&oldid=144715](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Angas,_William_Henry_(1781-1832)&oldid=144715).

14 This comment refers to the support of Tsar Alexander I for the Russian Bible Society and missionary work by foreign religious organizations. On Mennonite involvement see Urry, “Servants From Far.”

15 Daniel Schlatter to W. H. Angas, Ohrloff, April 27, 1824, *The Baptist Magazine* 16 (1824): 545–46; also in the *The American Baptist Magazine* 7 (1827): 83–85.

16 Daniel Schlatter, letter from Ohrloff, August 1824, *The Baptist Magazine* 17 (1825): 409; also in *Missionary Register* 13 (1825): 395.

17 Sunni/Shi’a is the major divide in Islam. For a recent account see Laurence Louër, *Sunnis and Shi’a: A Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

18 Schlatter, *Bruchstücke aus einigen Reisen*, 151.

19 Variations of this saying occur in many languages. In German, “Gib jemandem den kleinen Finger, und er nimmt die ganze Hand”; in Russian, the hand and arm are removed to the elbow!

20 Schlatter, *Bruchstücke aus einigen Reisen*, 359–69; this translation is by Professor Jack Thiessen and the late Professor Al Reimer with minor changes.

21 *Transformation on the Southern Ukrainian Steppe*, 1:158, 190. On Cornies’ financial loans, see John R. Staples, “Johann Cornies, Money-Lending, and Modernization in the Molochna Mennonite Settlement, 1820s–1840s,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 27 (2009): 109–27.

22 See his biography in Benjamin Swallow and W. A. Blake, *Biographical Memoirs of Deceased Baptist Ministers from the Year 1800 to 1850* (London: Benjamin Green, 1850), 13–28.

23 F. A. Cox, *Memoirs of the Rev. William Henry Angas: Ordained a ‘Missionary to Seafaring Men’* (London: Thomas Ward, 1834), 97. Angas met with opposition from some Mennonites who suggested that “English Baptists were only a better sort of Roman Catholics” (his emphasis), 81.

24 *The Baptist Magazine* 15 (1823): 490.

25 Cox, *Memoirs of the Rev. William Henry Angas*, 97, 117.

26 Schlatter, *Bruchstücke aus einigen Reisen*, 427.

27 *Transformation on the Southern Ukrainian Steppe*, 1:50. This appears to be a draft biography written for a Russian government official when Schlatter was contemplating settling in the Empire.

28 The translation of the report might be inadequate here, but unfortunately no German text is available.

29 *The Missionary Register...of the Church Missionary Society* 15 (April 1827): 217–18; *The American Baptist Magazine* 7 (June 1827): 187–88; *Journal des missions évangéliques* 2 (1827): 66–70; reprinted yet again in *News from Afar, or Missionary Varieties, Chiefly Relating to the Baptist Missionary Society* (London: The Baptist Mission Society, 1832), 87–88.

30 “Le véritable missionnaire, Daniel Schlatter,” *Nouvelle revue germanique* 4 (1830): 395.

31 Ursel Kälin, “Die St. Galler Kaufleute Daniel und Abdullah Schlatter in Südrussland,” in *Fakten und Fabeln: Schweizerisch-slavische Reisebegegnung vom 18. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Monika Bankowski, Peter Brang, Carsten Goehrke and Robin Kemball (Basel and Frankfurt am Main: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1991), 335–63.

32 *Transformation on the Southern Ukrainian Steppe*, 1:49.

33 *Jahrbücher der Stadt St. Gallen...1835–41* (1842), 184; *Grundlage einer christlichen Gemeinde in St. Gallen* (St. Gallen: Wartmann, 1838). For an attempt to refute the new movement see *Gedanken und Andeutungen über Kirche, Kirchengemeinde, Abendmahl und Separation* (St. Gallen: Zollikofer’schen Offizin, 1838).

34 *Jahrbücher der Stadt St. Gallen...1835–41*, 180–86; see also Jolanda Cecile Schaeferli, *Auffällige Religiosität: Gebetsheilungen, Besessenheitsfälle und schwärmerische Sekten in katholischen und reformierten Gegenden der Schweiz* (Hamburg: Diserta Verlag, 2012), 297–99, 386.

35 See his entry in the *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz*.

36 “Beschluss betreffend die Dissidentengemeinde in St.Gallen,” *Gesetzessammlung für den Kanton St. Gallen* 1 (1868), 485.

37 <https://www.goldbrunnen.org/1447-revision-v1>

38 See for instance Cornies’ long letter of 12 March 1830 in *Transformation on the Southern Ukrainian Steppe*, 1:187–90.

39 Cornies to Schlatter, 11 March 1833, in *Transformation on the Southern Ukrainian Steppe*, 1:316.

40 Cornies to Schlatter, 22 July 1837, in *Transformation on the Southern Ukrainian Steppe: Letters and Papers of Johann Cornies*, vol. 2, 1836–1842 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 61–62.

SELLING BIBLES

The Bartsch Brothers in Central Asia

Alan M. Guenther

In the late nineteenth century, as Mennonite communities in Russia were undergoing rapid changes, Johannes Bartsch (1848–1915) began to work as a Bible colporteur, or salesman, for the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS).¹ He was subsequently part of a group of

Mennonites who migrated to Central Asia, following their teacher, Klaas Epp. These experiences brought Bartsch into close contact with Muslims, the first as an evangelist seeking to communicate the Word of God and the second as an immigrant dependent upon the welcome

and goodwill of Muslim rulers and neighbours. The story of these interactions is contained primarily in the annual reports of the BFBS and in a series of articles Bartsch published in the *Herald of Truth* in the early part of the twentieth century. His brother Franz (1854–1931) published a



Bartsch would likely have seen Muslims gather for communal prayer during his trips.



Hermann Jantzen learned the Uzbek-Turkish language, studying the Qur'an and other Muslim texts.

book, *Unser Auszug nach Mittelasien* (Our move to Central Asia), that gave further details of these encounters from his own perspective.

As Johannes Bartsch tells the story, his association with the BFBS began with his own recognition of his need for salvation in the summer of 1875, during a visit with his family and the Mennonite congregations on the Volga and on the steppes of Russia. His mother and two brothers, including Franz, had settled in the village of Hahnsau in the Am Trakt settlement after leaving Prussia. For several years Bartsch had worked in Germany as a wine merchant. During a two-month furlough in Russia, he was challenged to consider the future of his soul. Having made his choice, he agreed to stay in Russia and began to contemplate how to earn a living. He had a desire to serve in some full-time ministry, and was offered an opportunity by a visiting representative of the BFBS, who was looking to appoint someone from an evangelical denomination that could speak the German language to be a colporteur. Although he felt some aversion to “carrying around a bundle of books,” Bartsch felt this was the calling of God.

The Bible Society had been active in Mennonite communities in Russia since 1819.² In 1821, representatives of the society sought to impress upon the leaders of the Mennonite community of Molotschna their unique opportunity and consequent responsibility to evangelize their diverse non-Christian neighbours, including the Nogai who practised Islam.³ Mennonites showed little interest in this task. The Bible Society also requested the Basel Mission Society send a missionary who could learn the Nogai language in order to communicate the gospel to them.⁴ The young man who arrived, Daniel Schlatter, ended up working as a missionary among the Nogai.⁵ Almost sixty years later, Bartsch would establish a connection with the BFBS, sharing its desire to spread the word of God to Muslims in their own languages.

On January 1, 1879, Bartsch was appointed as a colporteur of the Bible Society and he began his ministry in Saratov and along the Volga River valley.

He was also asked to travel northeast to Siberia where his headquarters would be at Perm. From there he visited a number of mining sites in the Ural Mountains. As he travelled for the BFBS, Bartsch encountered Muslims in Orenburg, on the Ural River. A new edition of the “Kirghese-Tatar” New Testament had been published by Kazan University’s press, and Bartsch had been sent to Orenburg with another worker to circulate it as widely as possible. In their monthly reports they noted, “Notwithstanding the nomad state of the Kirghese [Kazakhs], nearly 100 copies were sold before the Mullahs [religious teachers] noticed the new book, and forbade its purchase.”⁶

At the end of July 1881, Bartsch resigned from his position to join the group of Mennonites who had moved to Central Asia the year before. A number of Mennonite families from the Am Trakt settlement and from the Molotschna region had decided to migrate to Central Asia, partly over the issue of military conscription, and partly in response to the millennialist ideas of Klaas Epp. Johannes’s younger brother Franz and his mother left in 1880 on this trek. As these groups travelled farther east, they encountered a number of diverse Muslim groups. On the Kazakh steppe along the Ural River they met Kazakhs, from whom they purchased feed for their animals as well as milk for their people. Franz Bartsch and his wife had acquired some facility in the Tatar language, which they could put to good use in speaking with the Kazakhs. He noted in his account that Kazakh, Tatar, and Uzbek-Sart were all Turkish dialects that were mutually comprehensible.⁷ However, apart from the occasional opportunities for trade, the Mennonites had little to do with the inhabitants of the land through which they were passing. Franz Bartsch did note several times, however, that the young men among them were quicker to become fluent in the Kazakh language.

One such young man was Hermann Jantzen, who joined the caravan as a fourteen-year-old boy along with his family. In his autobiography he recalled that a young Sart who asked to accompany the caravan to Tashkent taught

him the Uzbek-Turkish language daily as they travelled together.⁸ Because of his facility with the language, Jantzen would be invited to serve as an interpreter for Sayyid Muhammad Rahim Bahadur II, the Khan of Khiva, and would add the study of the Qur’an and other Muslim texts to his language study.⁹ Jantzen also described how he, as a young man living among the Mennonites that stayed in Khiva, was called as a missionary to the Muslims when an elder of the community, Jacob Toews, commented that with his language skills, Jantzen could become a missionary to the local population.¹⁰

In his account Franz Bartsch described the major Muslim urban centres through which they passed, including Turkistan, Tashkent, and Samarkand. He commented on the unique Muslim architectural features encountered by Mennonites during their journey. In one lovely valley in the Tien Shan mountains between Tashkent and Samarkand they heard that according to local lore, Muhammad had hewn a pass through the mountains with a hoe. A nearby inscription seemed to confirm the legend, but the travellers were unable to decipher it.¹¹ Samarkand was impressive, with its many old *madrasahs* (Muslim universities) and mosques with their beautiful mosaics, as well as the tomb of Tamerlane or Tīmūr Lang, the founder of the Timurid dynasty in the fourteenth century.

When the travellers crossed the Russian border into the region of Bukhara, they were forcibly compelled to return to Russian territory.¹² Through the advice of a sympathetic official, they began negotiations with Muslim leaders in Samarkand to settle on a tract of land straddling the Russian-Bukharan border. Since this was land set aside as a religious endowment or *waqf*, it was administered separately from the state under the supervision of an appointed *mutavali* (caretaker).¹³ The *mutavali* and other Muslim leaders agreed to lease the land to the Mennonites, but once again the Bukharan officials objected to their presence. Several Mennonite leaders were called to appear before the local *bek* (chieftain) who wished to assign another portion of land to them. In his

book, Franz Bartsch described how he hesitated when he was asked to explain their reason for undertaking the trek because he felt he lacked the necessary vocabulary in the Uzbek-Sart dialect to explain spiritual matters. He also provided his assessment of Islam in which he described the Prophet Muhammad's teaching as a mixture of Judaism, Christianity, and fantasy.¹⁴ Because of these sources, he wrote, Muslim teaching included a belief that the Antichrist would come only to be destroyed by the Christ when he returned. Bartsch felt he could use this concept to introduce the Mennonites' millenarianism which motivated their trek. But as soon as he mentioned *dajjāl* (the Antichrist), the *bek* objected violently and imprisoned the delegation for the night. The following day, they returned to the settlement with a contingent of the *bek's* soldiers, who forced them to pack up their belongings and move back to the city of Serabulak in Russian territory. Here other Muslims proved more hospitable as they willingly opened their village to the destitute Mennonites and even permitted them to use their mosque for Sunday worship services and weddings.¹⁵

Meanwhile, back in the Mennonite colonies along the Volga River, Johannes had resigned from his position with the BFBS in Saratov at the end of July 1881 in order to travel with another group of emigrants heading for Central Asia. He joined the caravan as it passed through Orenburg, where he was doing colportage work. He took a small number of Bibles to give away to Muslims and Jews along the way. When they arrived in Turkistan shortly before Christmas in 1881, the decision was made to winter in that city, and Bartsch took the opportunity to distribute his Bibles. Through certain incidents that happened on the journey, Bartsch turned from being an ardent follower of Klaas Epp to an opponent. Disillusionment had likely already set in that winter in Turkistan since he sent an account of his journey to the Bible Society and requested a consignment of books be sent from St. Petersburg, indicating his future plans. When the caravan arrived in Tashkent, he separated from the group and remained in

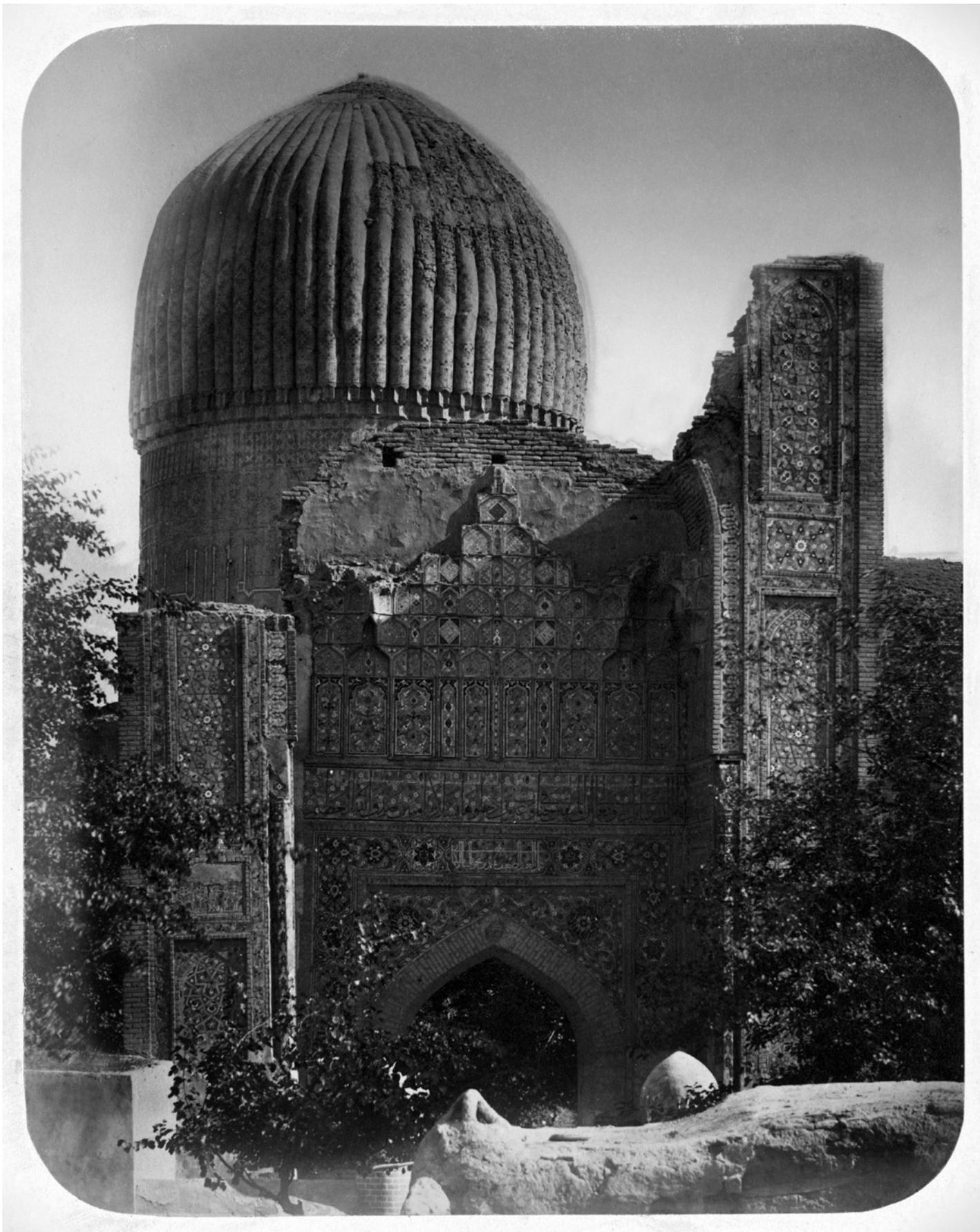
the city to establish a Bible depot, resuming his work as a colporteur with the BFBS. When the rest of the emigrants, including Klaas Epp, reached those in Serabulak who had departed a year earlier, Franz Bartsch also found himself out of favour with Epp, and decided to join his brother Johannes in Tashkent to assist in his Bible distribution ministry.¹⁶

Johannes Bartsch described in detail one of his first encounters with a Muslim as he began his work in Tashkent. The Muslim had hailed him and expressed a desire to see his books as he was on his way to the bazaar in the older part of the city. The Muslim characteristically declared "Bismallāh," or "in the name of God," as he took the book. When he inquired what kind of book it was, Bartsch replied that it was the gospel. After some reflection, the Muslim responded, "Injil 'Īsā!" meaning "the gospel of Christ." He then further indicated that he was aware of the other holy books: the *Taurat* of Moses, the *Zabūr* of David, and the Qur'an of Muhammad. He told Bartsch, "The Koran is good, give me the Koran; this book was not written for us."¹⁷ Bartsch replied that the gospel was for all people – for Christians, for Jews, and for Muslims. The Muslim began to leaf through the book and asked for the price. He was surprised at the low cost but tried to haggle with Bartsch and buy it at even a lower price. Bartsch, however, refused to budge, and the Muslim eventually bought the New Testament, took it in both hands, raised it to his lips and to his forehead, and murmured, "Bismallāh." The crowd that had gathered to witness the transaction were fascinated by the exchange and at Bartsch's insistence on the payment of the full price. His stock of that edition of the New Testament was soon sold out as a result.

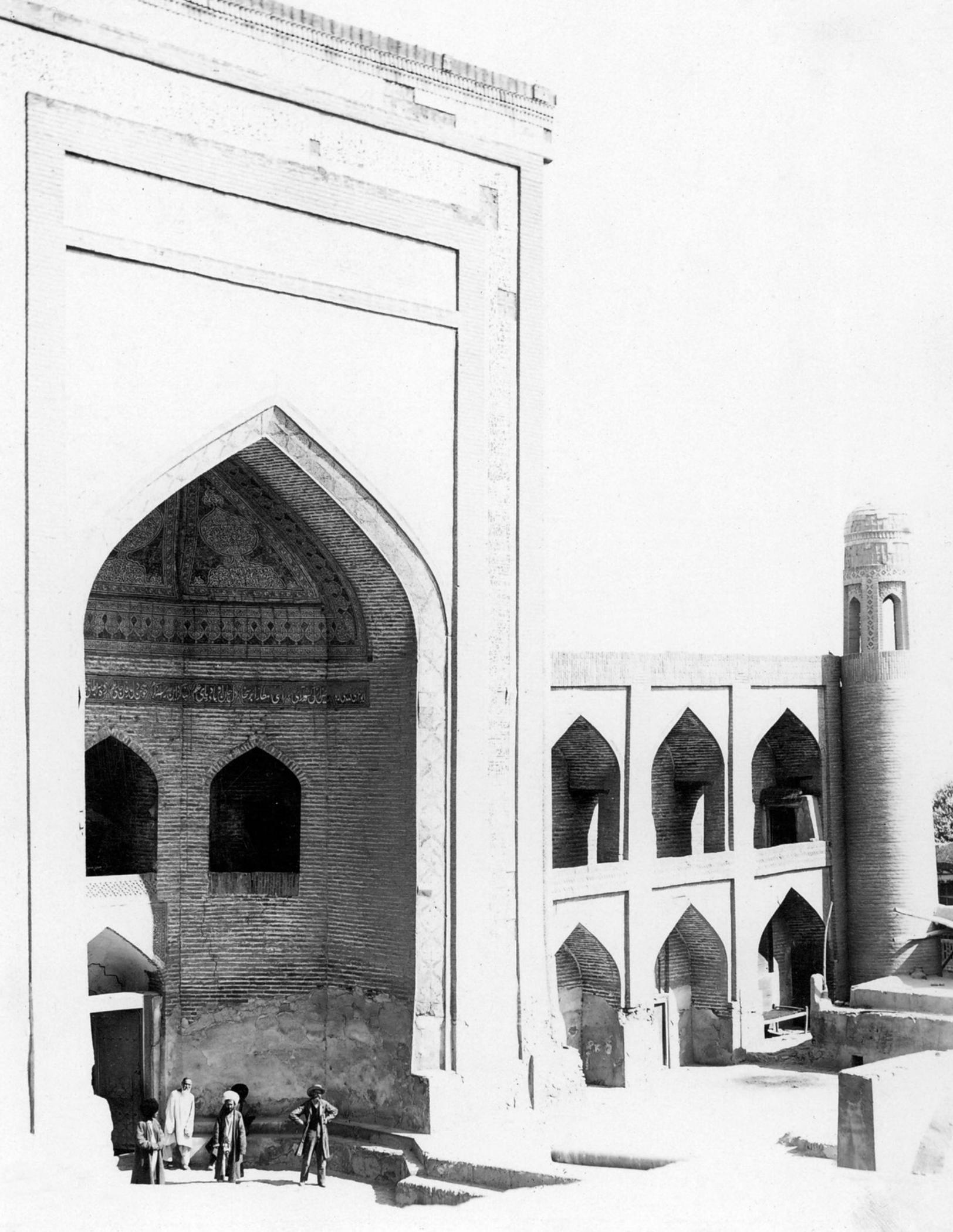
In the bazaar Bartsch found the selling of his books to be difficult. He realized he would have to stock many more languages because besides the Sarts and Tatars there were Persians, Arabs, Uzbeks, Afghans, Tungus, Hindus, and Jews. He also concluded that colportage work among Muslims was very different than among Christians, because Muslims were "avowed enemies of Christianity."¹⁸

Bartsch also stated that unlike his previous ministry along the Volga and in northern Russia, here he was prohibited from going into homes and had to conduct his business primarily in the bazaar and only with the men. The reason for this was the practice of *pardah*: the seclusion of women in orthodox Muslim families. Nevertheless, in his report to the BFBS Bartsch recounted a more favourable reception of his wares as time went on and as he became more known in the region: "As I make my appearance (I am beginning to be well known) some books are asked for, most probably Persian (which is the most currently used cultivated language in these parts). A book is bought, and the buyer begins to read aloud. The 5th chapter of Matthew made especially a deep impression. Some were sitting Eastern fashion, some standing, but from all or almost all an expression of wonder was heard. This was more marked still, as one day in my hearing the 22nd chapter of the Revelation was read, about Jerusalem the Golden. The deepest attention was given in order not to lose a word, and the necks of the hearers were stretched out towards the reader."¹⁹ During one of his first trips into Bukhara, Bartsch encountered a *mullah* from one of the colleges who objected to the books he was selling and declared them to be lies. Bartsch silenced him by exclaiming, "How can the Book lie which comes from Jesus and Mas[i]h Allah?"²⁰ He was appealing to the Muslim's belief in Jesus as a prophet sent by God and as the Messiah from God.

In Tashkent, Johannes Bartsch set up another depot – a bookstore where Bibles, Testaments, and portions of scripture in all the languages and dialects were sold and shipped to other points. As directed by his superior from the BFBS, he appointed another young Mennonite, Jacob Neumann, to assist his wife at the depot when he was away from home, and appointed two more colporteurs for Siberia and one in Khiva. Mennonite names listed in the annual reports of the BFBS included Johannes's brother Franz in Siberia, Jacob Hamm in Irkutsk and Siberia, and Jacob Stärkel in Khiva,²¹ who, when he immigrated to the United States



During his travels, Franz Bartsch saw unique Muslim architectural monuments, such as the tomb of Tamerlane, or Tīmūr Lang.



سید الشهدا علی مرتضیٰ کاشانی مدینه منوره
سید الشهدا علی مرتضیٰ کاشانی مدینه منوره

in June 1885, was replaced by Henry Ott. Franz Bartsch established a depot for Siberia in Omsk. Two years later he was joined by his brother-in-law, Heinrich Wölke, in his Siberian travels. Jacob Wiebe (described as another brother-in-law) was also listed along with Wölke for the Omsk region. Towards the end of 1889, Jacob Suckau and his son John joined Johannes Bartsch in Tashkent. With the addition of Cornelius Wall in Tashkent, it was felt that Jacob Neumann could be sent to help Franz Bartsch in Siberia.²²

From the BFBS base in Tashkent, Johannes Bartsch travelled through the surrounding areas, selling Bibles and scripture portions. Generally his wares received a more favourable reception from the Christian population than from the Muslims, but every report continued to indicate sales of the newly published Kazakh New Testament. In the opinion of the BFBS, however, opposition from Muslim was the greatest obstacle to their ministry in Central Asia, more significant than the difficulties of travel and climate: “The most serious drawback of all is the strong hostility of the Muhammadans. Their antipathy to the colporteur strengthens as the object of his visit is understood.”²³ The multiplicity of languages was also a problem, and the agent for the region, Mr. Nicholson, reported that Bartsch was anxiously awaiting translations of portions of the Bible in other local languages.

Bartsch gave an extended account of one of his journeys from Tashkent to Khiva in 1885. Because of rumours of war, he was forced to take a longer road, crossing the desert between Kazalinsk and Khiva. After one abortive attempt when he was deserted by his Kazakh guide, Bartsch joined a caravan also travelling that route. Bartsch described in detail his Muslim companion’s method of doing prayers and the ablutions that preceded them: “Before prayers, however, the ceremony of ablution or cleansing is observed, that is, the washing of the head, the hands, arms, feet, and limbs. But since there is no water to be had in the desert, they are



Gerhard Jantzen and children in Aulie-Ata. Eventually Franz Bartsch moved with his family to this Mennonite colony in Central Asia.

permitted to use the sand of the desert for the purpose. The manner in which this ceremony is performed is certainly rather comical, but ‘Mohammed Bey Gambar’ himself lived in the desert, and dedicated or consecrated the desert sand to this use. This ceremony is performed as follows: The Moslem sits down, pushes his chalat and shirt sleeve above the elbow, dips the outstretched hand into the sand, then withdraws it and rubs his face, his ears and his head; then after dipping his fingers into the sand again he rubs his arms, legs and feet. After repeating his ‘Bis milla’ several times, and closing with ‘La Allah,’ the ‘ablution’ is completed.”²⁴ On his way, Bartsch encountered a group of Mennonites travelling in the opposite direction. These families had broken with Klaas Epp and were now immigrating to America. Bartsch was able to persuade his drivers to delay their departure long enough to worship and visit with his Mennonite friends before they departed.

In 1889, Franz Bartsch decided to retire from his BFBS work because bouts of ill health and rheumatic attacks prevented him from conducting protracted journeys in the cold climate of Siberia as required

by the job. His brother Johannes was also suffering from increasing illnesses and retired the following year.²⁵ He moved with his family to the Mennonite colony at Aulie-Ata, and a few years later, to the United States.²⁶ But both in Siberia and in Central Asia other Mennonites whom the Bartsch brothers had recruited and trained continued the work of selling Bibles for several years to follow. In Aulie-Ata, a revival of faith in a time of economic hardship had resulted in a new missionary zeal among the Mennonites to win their Kazakh neighbours to Christianity. In his history of the Great Trek, Fred Belk notes that young people were the first to attempt to become conversant with the Kazakh religion, noticing that those Muslims referred to God by the Persian term “Kudai” rather than the Arabic “Allah.”²⁷ He also mentions the work of Johannes and Franz Bartsch, observing that by “becoming quite involved in teaching the natives, [Franz] gained for himself a profound understanding of many aspects of theology.”²⁸

In her analysis of Mennonite encounters with Muslims in imperial Russia, Aileen Friesen has rightly concluded that “many Mennonites showed a level of indifference to the religious identity of

A mosque in Khiva. MENNONITE LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES (BETHEL COLLEGE), 2004-0121



In Central Asia, Mennonites, focused on theological disputes related to the teachings of Klaas Epp, paid minimal attention to their Muslim neighbours.

their Muslim neighbours.²⁹ The story of the work of Johannes and Franz Bartsch with the British and Foreign Bible Society in selling Bibles in vernacular languages to Muslim groups in Central Asia is an exception to that general observation. Their spiritual convictions led them to join the efforts of others in this transnational, transdenominational organization committed to Bible translation and distribution. However, this commitment was slow to develop. Franz Bartsch's book, with its infrequent references to Muslims, demonstrates that Mennonite awareness

of their Muslim hosts and neighbours was largely eclipsed by concern for their own community. Instead of exploring aspects of the religious beliefs and practices of the Muslims around them, Mennonites were taken up with theological disputes and divisions related to the teachings of Klaas Epp. It was only after they had separated themselves from Epp's group that the Bartsch brothers truly focused on the work of the Bible Society. A contemporary of theirs, Heinrich Dirks (1842–1915), was the first missionary sent overseas by the Mennonite church in Russia to work in a

region of Sumatra in 1869 with Muslim and other populations.³⁰ But unlike Dirks, the Bartsch brothers were not commissioned by a Mennonite church but rather entered ministry on their own initiative. Their encounters with Muslims as they travelled through Central Asia as immigrants and as colporteurs constitute an understudied chapter in the history of Mennonites in Russia.

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 7 Franz Bartsch, *Unser Auszug nach Mittelasien* (Halbstadt, 1907; reprint, North Kildonan, MB: Echo-Verlag, 1948), 30.
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 10 Jantzen, *Im wilden Turkestan*, 37.
 11 F. Bartsch, *Unser Auszug*, 51.
 12 Jantzen, *Im wilden Turkestan*, 25–26.
 13 Jantzen, *Im wilden Turkestan*, 55. For more details, see Martin

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 14 F. Bartsch, *Unser Auszug*, 57.
 15 Fred Richard Belk, *The Great Trek of the Russian Mennonites to Central Asia, 1880–1884* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1976), 123.
 16 F. Bartsch, *Unser Auszug*, 62.
 17 Johannes Bartsch, "Reminiscences of a Bible Colporteur," *Herald of Truth*, Oct. 15, 1903, 330.
 18 J. Bartsch, "Reminiscences of a Bible Colporteur," *Herald of Truth*, Oct. 15, 1903.
 19 *Reports of the British and Foreign Bible Society* 79 (1883): 108.
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 21 *Reports of the British and Foreign Bible Society* 81 (1885): 112–115.
 22 *Reports of the British and Foreign Bible Society* 86 (1890): 112–116.
 23 *Reports of the British and Foreign Bible Society* 83 (1887): 137.
 24 Johannes Bartsch, "Reminiscences of a Bible Colporteur,"

Herald of Truth, Nov. 12, 1903, 362. The reference to Muhammad as *payghām bar* is to his role as messenger or prophet, one who brings a message or *payghām*.
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 26 Shortly after his arrival in the States, Johannes Bartsch published his history of the church, *Geschichte der Gemeinde Jesu Christi, das heißt: der Altevangelischen und Mennoniten-Gemeinden, Von der Zeit der Apostel bis in die Gegenwart* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Co., 1898). He discusses the trek to Central Asia in pp. 136–141.
 27 Belk, *Great Trek*, 146.
 28 Belk, *Great Trek*, 146.
 29 Aileen Friesen, "Muslim-Mennonite Encounters in Imperial Russia," *Preservings*, no. 26 (2016): 26.
 30 Alle Hoekema, *Dutch Mennonite Mission in Indonesia: Historical Essays* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2001), 86–90.

A BLUMENORT EXCHANGE

A Golden New Testament for a Green-Coloured Qur'an

Royden Loewen

In her diary entry for Sunday, June 21, 1964, my mother, Gertie (Klassen) Loewen, recorded the following: “Baptismal class took place this morning.” It was a perfunctory note by a farm housewife about an annual springtime ritual in the rural Blumenort Evangelical Mennonite Church (EMC) north of Steinbach, Manitoba. But then she added this unusual note for the afternoon: “Dave [my dad] went right after dinner [the noon meal] for 5 men from the university [of Manitoba]. They were from India and Pakistan and Formosa. Dave took them back after lunch [i.e., *Faspa*].”

My two older sisters, Beverly (now Doerksen) and Judy (now Goertzen), and I, then age nine, vividly recall these men. They were visiting agronomists who had been introduced to Dad when Rod Siemens, the local ag rep, identified our farm as a model turkey operation to the Faculty of Agriculture at the University of Manitoba. An earlier diary entry for June 8 noted that “about 45 university students came out to our turkey farm” for a tour, and it is possible that the five Asian agronomists had been part of that group.

In any case, a friendly exchange had been developed. A family photo taken that Sunday afternoon has all of us smiling, but a bit stilted. In an accompanying photo the Pakistani man has draped his arms around me, and two of the men are giving

a slight embrace to my little sisters, Bonita and Debbie. My sister Beverly recalls other details about that day, which speak to borders being crossed. My mother had been told that because of religious scruples, the man from Pakistan would not eat pork and the men from India would not eat beef. So, dutifully she made both, beef and pork, and placed both in a single dish. Alas, having done so, the Muslim and the Hindus declined to eat their designated meat. They both did eat her salads and desserts, and Dad took them back to Winnipeg without incident.

My father, despite his Grade 7 education, was a deeply curious man who loved meeting non-Mennonites. He was clearly enthralled with these Asian agronomists, and just three days later, on Wednesday, June 24, he again “went to Winnipeg to get a couple of men,” this time the “one from Formosa and one from India, to tell the children at school about their countries.” And then, Mom noted, “we took them back at night.” Clearly they were at our house again for a meal, and clearly Mom approved of the event as she travelled with Dad again.

But the encounter was not merely cultural; indeed, any form of multiculturalism was likely of secondary concern. Dad, as a good EMC, also had a strong sense of evangelical mission. Six weeks after this event, on Sunday, August 2,

Dad again travelled to Winnipeg; as Mom wrote, “we all went to Sunday School and church service . . . Dave went for the Indian men at noon.” I assume that “Indian” had now become shorthand for the same five men. And now it seems Mom had learned her lesson, as the meal included “potato salad, cabbage salad, tomatoes, cucumbers, garlic sausage, cold roast turkey, doughnuts, banana cake, matrimony cake, etc.” We will never know what the “etc.” was, and the garlic sausage remains a mystery – at least it wasn’t pork or beef roast.

On this occasion Dad seemed to have had an agenda, for he invited Mr. Henry D. Reimer, presumably a missionary, to drop by at five o’clock, after *Faspa*, “to show slides from India.” Dad also invited his close friend Alvin Doerksen, about to head out to Gouldtown, Saskatchewan, on an EMC home mission assignment with his family, to come and see the slides. There is no reason given as to why men from India should be shown slides about India by a southeastern Manitoba Mennonite, unless the slides were about mission work in India. Evidently the day was energizing, as my mom once again agreed to go “along when Dave took the men back,” a two-hour commitment. They even returned home in time to pick up the oldest four of her six children for *Jugendverein*, the monthly Sunday fellowship night at our church.



The visits with these men were not only bookended by church events, they were encased in faith and mission. My father, a successful farmer who had chosen not to move to Mexico with his parents and siblings in 1950, was also an overtly evangelical man. He cared about these men's souls. An event that I can only remember and is not recorded in my mom's diary is of a long summer evening with these very men in our farmhouse living room. Dad invited the men over to hear Rev. Ben Hoepfner, the locally renowned Steinbach Bible Institute instructor, outline the gospel to them. As a nine-year-old, I recall distinctly hearing about the country of Formosa and the tradition of Confucianism, as well as the country of East Pakistan and the religion of Mohammedanism. I can still hear Rev. Hoepfner, a beloved and excruciatingly

sincere man who would later be my Grade 12 Mennonite history teacher, inside that crowded living room, expositing the Bible.

But it is a memory of the hours before the event that is at least as clearly etched in my memory. At about four o'clock that afternoon, my dad rushed inside from the barn and exclaimed to my mom that these men were coming over to hear Rev. Hoepfner but we had no Bibles to give them. I remember Dad on the phone with the Gideons in Steinbach and being eventually directed to one Margaret (Friesen) Loewen (i.e., Mrs. Jacob T. Loewen, by happenstance my wife Mary Ann's grandmother), who apparently was the custodian of wooden crates of small, soft-covered, gold-coloured New Testaments. Mrs. Loewen assured Dad that she would have a crate ready for him if he came over. Dad changed out of his

barn clothes and within the hour was back home.

He was exuberant. This Mrs. Loewen had turned out to be a complete saint; she had been on her knees praying for these men's souls from the time Dad hung up to the moment he knocked on her door. And when Dad had exclaimed what a prayer warrior she was, she corrected him, saying that in comparison to our Catholic neighbours in La Broquerie, no Mennonite could claim to be a prayer warrior; the Catholics knew how to pray! Encouraged by Mrs. Loewen and Rev. Hoepfner, Dad handed out New Testaments that evening to the men in the room. My sister Judy still remembers Rev. Hoepfner standing in the middle of the room, smiling with these men at the end of the evening.

This was also the moment that something stupendous happened in this rural

Above: From left to right, back row: most likely two of the men from India, Gertie Loewen, Dave Loewen holding 1-year-old Mark, most likely the third man from India, and the man from East Pakistan (i.e., Bangladesh). Front row: the man from Formosa (i.e., Taiwan), 14-year-old Beverly, 7-year-old Debbie, 4-year-old Bonita, 9-year-old Royden, and 12-year-old Judy. Skippy, the family dog, is up front. Right: The Loewen children vividly recalled the agronomists who visited their home on June 21, 1964. PRIVATE COLLECTION

EMC home in Blumenort. Having received his copy of the New Testament, the Muslim from East Pakistan gifted my father a hard-covered, green-coloured, English translation of the Qur'an. It would become part of my dad's small library. In fact, it was there among his collection of three dozen or so books until shortly before Dad died in November 1998. No one from our family now knows what happened to it.

But why did the Qur'an stay there, for three or more decades? Checking my

mom's diary, it is apparent that my parents were deeply involved in the EMC – Dad was a conference delegate in 1964, a local school trustee, a member of the conference education committee, and a board member of the local Co-op, and Mom was an integral part of the local sewing circle. These neighbourhood and kin networks were exceedingly vibrant. My parents often entertained visitors who frequently arrived unannounced at noon and stayed till 7 p.m. They also readily crossed denominational lines, visiting the

Bergmans and Wiebes, Blumenort's two Mennonite Brethren families, or dropping by the Harders, who were Old Colonists from Mexico, or taking out Miss Penner or Miss Letkeman, our local teachers from Winkler and Lowe Farm, and by happenstance of General Conference affiliation. But such border-crossings pale in comparison to the evening in 1964 when my dad took a Qur'an in exchange for a New Testament, and respected it with a place in his library.

Perhaps he seemed comfortable with



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the Qur'an was because he also held a broader view of society. When my father asked a Bible school teacher to do the talking it wasn't that he himself shied from speaking in public. Indeed, a year after the first recorded visit by these Asian agronomists, on June 16, 1965, my mom wrote

that "Dave was asked over to the Co-op to speak about Co-ops to a group of university men from India and Pakistan." Again, there is no elaboration; the morning of the 16th my dad "sprayed the fields at home" and the morning after the Co-op meeting he "was in Beausejour all day," where we

had a 240-acre satellite farm.

Evidently Dad's fervour for sharing the gospel in the form of handing out Bibles never took off. Indeed, a wooden crate of twenty or so gold-coloured New Testaments, minus about five, was in my parents' house when we moved my recently widowed mom out to Oakwood Manor in Blumenort in the spring of 1999. He would support foreign missions and food aid programs – the Canadian Bible Society, the EMC Missions Auxiliary, the Canadian Foodgrains Bank – and he founded our church's men's prayer breakfast, but I don't recall that he was ever very good at personal evangelism.

I do recall that he had a genuine interest in non-Mennonites and loved when English, Ukrainian, French-Canadian, or Jewish sales folk dropped by the farm. And a not unusual entry in my mother's diary was the note that "Dave brought home three men" for lunch. And over the years there were other foreigners – from India, Jordan, Germany – who graced our home with repeated visits.

Significantly, my mom put up with this penchant of his. Indeed, Mom came into her marriage with her own sense of the outside world. Her diary, which she kept continuously until her death at ninety-three in June 2020, begins on May 1, 1944, when she was seventeen. The first line announced that "at present I'm working for Mrs. Medovy at 366 Niagara Street, Winnipeg." It turns out that Mom's employer was the wife of the renowned Jewish-Canadian pediatrician Dr. Harry Medovy, a public health guru often credited for having introduced fluoride in Winnipeg and the future head of pediatrics at the University of Manitoba. My mother was compelled to work in Winnipeg as she hailed from one of the poorest homes in Blumenort; my father, from one of the more well-to-do, was attracted to her, I am sure, because he loved any sense of the wider world, no matter the religious dimension.

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Dave P. Loewen feeding a young turkey flock with daughter Beverly in 1954. PRIVATE COLLECTION

A SYMPATHETIC LAWYER

J. B. McLaren and the Hague Reserve

Albert Siemens

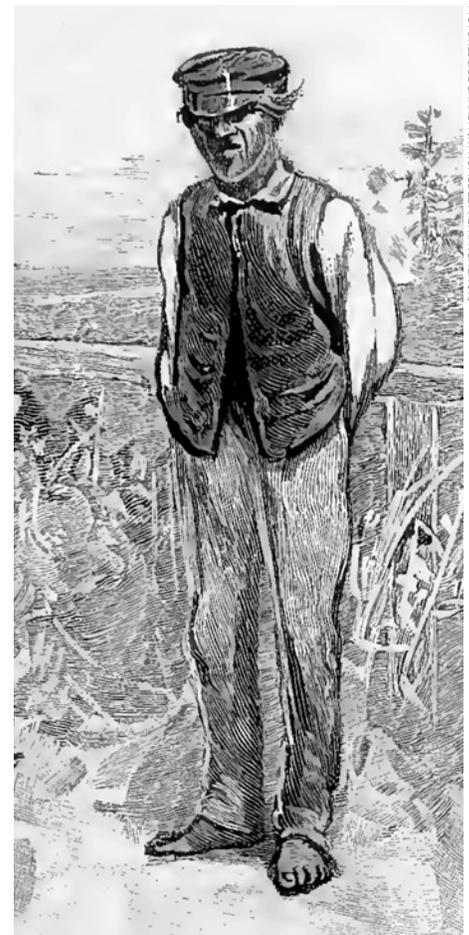
In 1881, John Brown McLaren, a young lawyer from Ontario, wrote an article on the Mennonites of Manitoba for *Picturesque Canada*, an illustrated survey of the nation's regions, edited by George Monro Grant. This article, based on McLaren's travels through the West Reserve, describes a people whose religion and culture were alien to him. He found them to be "honest, upright and moral," but said that the "filthiness of their domestic habits" brought them disrespect from "the 'white men' of the country." He claimed that the men were slow workers, and he noted that "a large share of the out-door work falls to the lot of the women." Nonetheless, McLaren declared them to be "excellent pioneers" and asserted that they would gradually adapt to Canadian ways.¹

Lamentably little attention has been directed at lawyers like McLaren who assisted the Mennonites of the West Reserve in their adaptation to Canada. In the reserve, he quickly earned the reputation as someone among the "English" who could be entrusted with Mennonite affairs. Having first established a law practice in the town of Nelson, he moved a few years later to the town of Morden, in the northwest corner of the reserve's original boundaries. McLaren was sought out by Wilhelm Rempel, the secretary-treasurer of the newly formed Rural Municipality of Rhineland, in 1884. It seems likely Rempel acted at the instigation of Jarvis Mott, an early legitimate homesteader set-

tlar near the "Menno-Canuck" line who was elected the first reeve of Rhineland, heading up a reluctant council of Mennonites.² The minutes of the municipal council record that J. B. McLaren was to be appointed solicitor for the municipality and that the clerk should notify him; McLaren accepted.³ In the years that followed he would play a significant role in settling legal disputes and navigating the intricacies of government bureaucracy for Mennonites.

A news item in the October 12, 1894, *Morden Herald* reported that a delegation was at work to secure a new reserve for Mennonites in the Canadian Northwest, and had recently met in Winnipeg with Thomas Mayne Daly, minister of the interior and Indian affairs in the Conservative federal government.⁴ A stream of new immigrants from Russia and the natural growth of families in the now prosperous West Reserve had produced a growing demand for land.⁵ Daly was noted as being sympathetic to immigrants generally, and the presence of Mennonites in his Manitoba riding must have made him familiar with their commitment to farming and their proven ability as settlers.

In negotiations with the government, McLaren acted as the representative for the Reinlaender (or Old Colony) Mennonites, who were under the leadership of *Aeltester* (elder or bishop) Johann Wiebe and *Obervorsteher* (overseer) Franz Froese. McLaren had already written to



PICTURESQUE CANADA (W. T. SMELLEY/E. R. TCHENORI)

A Mennonite man. Although McLaren supported Mennonite settlement, he claimed that the men were slow workers and noted that "a large share of the out-door work falls to the lot of the women."

the minister of the interior on February 21, 1894, requesting help in obtaining two widely separated townships.⁶ After being informed that these townships were not yet surveyed and not likely to be reached by rail for some time, McLaren

responded that his clients would consider adjacent townships.⁷ By the fall of 1894 their attention had shifted to the Prince Albert district.

The Department of the Interior was slow to respond to the request, as evidenced by a letter from McLaren to Daly on November 14, 1894. McLaren wrote, “I should be glad if you would let me know soon what has been decided in regard to the Application of the Mennonites for a Reserve of land in the Prince Albert District about which I called on you in Winnipeg with Mr. Froese and the Bishop.”⁸ Mennonites had applied for a reserve comprising township 40 in ranges 3, 4, and 5, and township 41 in range 4, all west of the third meridian.⁹ The proposed reserve would straddle the rail line built between Regina and Prince Albert, known as the Qu’Appelle, Long Lake, and Saskatchewan Railway. By December 24, Minister Daly wrote a letter to the governor general recommending the creation of the reserve for Mennonites.¹⁰

On January 7, 1895, McLaren again wrote to Daly to inquire about the matter. The letter smacks of frustration but also shows an understanding of the political situation: “Mr. Froese was in again today to enquire whether we had heard from you in regard to the Mennonite Reservation asked for in the Prince Albert District. I told him that I had not yet received your decision, but that owing to the death of Sir John Thompson [the prime minister] and consequent changes in the Cabinet your contemplated action in the matter might have been delayed. I promised, however, to write you again requesting to inform me as soon as you possibly could of your decision, as the people cannot make arrangements until they know it and they are anxious to begin their preparations at once.”¹¹ There must have been a degree of rapport between McLaren and Daly which permitted such bluntness.

On January 23, an order-in-council was issued reserving the even-numbered sections of the requested townships for Mennonite settlement. This was the so-called Hague Reserve. Mennonites, however, did not hear the news until late February. This delay explains why

McLaren wrote to Daly with impatience on February 20. He stated: “My clients are getting more and more restless every day, as the time is already at hand when preparations should be underway for their removal.”¹² The letter demonstrates the significance of McLaren’s role as an intermediary between Mennonites and government officials.

Since the odd-numbered sections of the reserved townships had already been granted to the Qu’Appelle, Long Lake, and Saskatchewan Railway, per

With migration starting in the spring of 1895, the Reinland Mennonite Association, under the direction of Froese, undertook to provide financial support for the aspiring farmers, largely poor and young, who intended to settle in the new reserve. Over the next years McLaren’s firm devoted significant time to placing the settlers on a sound legal footing with regard to homestead filings. It helped the association with the registration of liens against the quarter sections the homesteaders were allotted (although they



PRIVATE COLLECTION

Gerhard and Elizabeth (Dyck) Bergen, on their homestead south of Hague around 1898, arrived a year prior to the creation of the Hague Reserve.

government policy, an agreement had to be reached if Mennonites were to have exclusivity on these sections. At the prompting of Froese and Wiebe, McLaren wrote Daly suggesting they be reserved for a term of at least five years for a maximum price of \$2.50 per acre.¹³ Daly told McLaren to contact the Winnipeg office of the brokerage firm serving as agents for the railway.¹⁴ McLaren must have personally acted on this information as subsequently Mennonites occupied both the odd- and even-numbered sections. As this was happening, the *Mennonitische Rundschau* reported that Wiebe and Froese and “others” had made an agreement with the CPR to transport settlers from the West Reserve to the Hague Reserve.¹⁵ The unnamed others likely included McLaren, perhaps performing a crucial role in negotiations.

actually settled in traditional compact villages).¹⁶ For this service the firm charged a fixed sum of ten dollars per lien.

In January 1898, McLaren wrote Daly’s successor, Clifford Sifton, on behalf of the Reinland Mennonite Association, to request township 41, range 3, offering, if it was required, to exchange it for township 40, range 5. Mennonites reasoned this would make the reserve more compact and give it better access to water.¹⁷ Having received no response by early March, and with Mennonites anxious for an answer before a spring migration, McLaren sent another letter to the minister.¹⁸ A month later, with approximately seventy families preparing to leave Manitoba for the Prince Albert district, the exchange request was dropped in favour of simply adding the latter township.¹⁹ Sifton, who had served as attorney general and

minister of education in the Manitoba provincial government, was very familiar with Mennonites, and with McLaren personally. Mennonites would find favour with him as the type of “men in sheepskin coats” that were his ideal immigrants. By June 24, an order-in-council was proclaimed setting aside township 41, range 3, for Mennonites only.

In early February 1898, McLaren and his wife moved to Winnipeg, where he threw himself into his new position as a manager of the Canada Landed and

next two years. During two of the most protracted disputes, Black and McLeod accused officials of the Dominion Lands Office of obstruction and deceit for trying to resolve these claims in favour of the Ukrainians who had already settled on the land.²¹ Eventually both Mennonites abandoned their claims.

Mennonite homesteaders also encountered problems when in 1899 they began to apply for patents to their land after fulfilling the three years of residency required by the Dominion Lands Act.

Daly about the use of the hamlet settlement pattern. McLaren reminded Sifton that he had agreed to review the matter so that he could rectify the intransigence of the agents, either through ministerial order or by legislation.²² At Sifton’s recommendation an order-in-council was issued reaffirming the hamlet privilege for the Hague Reserve.²³

Ten years after their initial meeting with Minister Daly in 1894, McLaren and Froese requested another reserve for Mennonites in what would become the province of Saskatchewan. This request was made because the land near the Hague Reserve had been settled to the extent that further compact village settlement would not be possible. The area they requested, south of Swift Current, had been ignored by settlers and the CPR because of its semi-aridity. It was deliberately selected so that conflict with other settlers would be minimized. In early July 1904, Froese and fellow Reinlaender John Wall met with Sifton in Ottawa, unaccompanied by a lawyer, to discuss the proposed settlement. McLeod, not McLaren, wrote a lengthy letter of introduction to D. A. Stewart, of the Department of the Interior. Enclosed with the letter was an appeal from Aeltester Johann Wiebe. McLeod explained that “Mr. McLaren and Mr. Froese [had previously] waited on Mr. Sifton in Ottawa (just after the election, I think) and he arranged to provide a reserve for these people somewhere but nothing definite was done since then . . .”²⁴

The Reinland Mennonite Association sought an exclusive reserve of four and a half townships that could be settled using the hamlet privilege. Sifton questioned the suitability of these lands for settlement, but nevertheless rapidly acceded to the request, and recommended to the Privy Council that six townships be set aside for Mennonites. Odd-numbered sections adjoining even-numbered homesteads would be made available for purchase at three dollars an acre.²⁵ An order-in-council to this effect was issued on August 13.

By 1905, McLaren’s role had devolved to the status of senior advisor; correspondence and advocacy fell to McLeod and Black, who were running the Morden law



PRIVATE COLLECTION

Cornelius D. and Maria (Fehr) Fehr arrived from Manitoba in 1912, settling in the Old Colony village of Gnadenthal, south of Swift Current.

National Investment Company, which he had served as an agent for years. By this time he had added two partners to his law practice in Morden, A. McLeod and J. H. Black. Although McLaren remained involved, much of the minutia of correspondence regarding the Reinlaender Mennonites fell to them.

The settlement of the added township was one matter McLeod and Black had to address on behalf of the Reinland Mennonite Association. The Commissioner of Immigration in Winnipeg and the Dominion Lands Office in Prince Albert had settled Ukrainian immigrants on that land in 1898 before they received the order-in-council reserving it for Mennonites.²⁰ Conflicting claims by Mennonite and Ukrainian settlers were the subject of much legal correspondence over the

These applications were refused on the ground that they had not cultivated separate homesteads. Instead they had settled in villages and farmed the land of their pooled quarter sections according to a waiver to the Dominion Lands Act known as the “hamlet privilege,” which was first granted in Manitoba. Under his discretionary power, Minister Daly had promised Mennonites this privilege when they requested the Hague Reserve, but Dominion Lands officials refused to acknowledge this exception to the law.

McLaren took up the matter directly with Minister Sifton, his long-time political friend. In November 1899, McLaren, accompanied by Froese, met with Sifton on his private railway car as he returned through Winnipeg after a tour through the West. In a letter after their meeting, McLaren recapitulated the agreement with



PRIVATE COLLECTION

In 1890, the Qu'Appelle, Long Lake, and Saskatchewan Railroad was completed, which opened the land for settlement. Some Mennonites resided in railcars in 1895, until they could move onto their land.

office. About this time, in March 1905, Sifton was replaced by Frank Oliver as minister of the interior. McLaren's firm took extra care to make sure the issue of conflicting claims was not repeated at Swift Current, which they emphasized in correspondence with Oliver.²⁶

While negotiations for the Swift Current reserve were underway in the summer of 1904, some eighteen homesteads were filed by non-Mennonites on the site of the future reserve. McLaren's firm responded by instructing Dominion Lands officials that further homestead entries should only be approved to persons holding a certificate from Obervorsteher Froese.²⁷ The McLaren firm was engaged

again in 1906 to ensure homesteads could be registered under the hamlet privilege, which became an issue because not enough families had migrated to the new reserve to constitute a hamlet.²⁸

In late 1906 the Reinlaender *Bruderschaft* (brotherhood) requested that Froese meet directly with government officials in Ottawa. Froese would only agree to such a trip if he could take along a lawyer. McLeod accompanied Froese to a meeting intended to protect Mennonite homestead entries despite not yet meeting the requirements of the hamlet clause. At this time McLeod delivered a cheque from Froese in the amount of \$7,696, held in trust, for payment of pre-emptive land

purchases in the Swift Current reserve.²⁹

West Reserve resident Peter A. Elias mentioned in his memoir that the trip cost the Reinlaender "the tidy sum of \$335." He questioned the community's frequent use of a lawyer, "seeing that such a person argues against our teaching" and "only works for the money." He continued, "It has almost come to the point in our *Gemeinde* that nothing can be done without a solicitor, be it an inheritance or any business transaction."³⁰ One wonders if this was an indictment against McLaren, McLeod, and Black in particular or lawyers in general.

McLaren's attitude towards Mennonites was generally sympathetic. Cordial relations and strong business connections developed between them. However, differences still existed. While McLaren vigorously represented and defended the peculiar interests of Mennonites (such as the hamlet privilege) during negotiations with government officials, he still held a personal belief in the necessity of Canadianizing and integrating foreign settlers. Many Mennonites would eventually fulfill his prediction, first made in Grant's *Picturesque Canada*, and adapt to their adopted homeland.

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1 J. B. McLaren, "The North-West: The Mennonites," in *Picturesque Canada: The Country as it Was and Is*, ed. George Monro Grant, vol. 1 (Toronto: Belden Bros., 1882), 324.
 2 Gerhard Ens, *The Rural Municipality of Rhineland, 1884–1984: Volost & Municipality* (Altona, MB: R.M. of Rhineland, 1984), 49. One wonders if Mott viewed his role with Mennonites as a "Canadianizing" influence. The "Menno-Canuck" line redrew part of the western boundary of the West Reserve to account for land at the reserve's edge that had been settled by squatters from Ontario.
 3 Minutes of the RM of Rhineland, Jan. 3, 1885, p. 9.
 4 *Mordern Herald*, Oct. 12, 1894, 4.
 5 Franz Froese made a trip to British Columbia and the North-West Territories prior to July of 1894. He probably included Price Albert on his itinerary travelling on the newly constructed rail line from Regina.
 6 Adolf Ens, *Subject or Citizens? The Mennonite Experience in Canada, 1870–1925* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1994), 87.
 7 McLaren to Secretary, Department of the Interior, April 18, 1894, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), RG 15, D-II-1, vol.

652, file 270476. Available at Canadiana Héritage (<https://heritage.canadiana.ca/>), reel T-14401.
 8 McLaren to T. Mayne Daly, Minister of the Interior, Nov. 14, 1894, *Ibid.*
 9 Daly to A.M. Burgess, Nov. 3, 1894, *Ibid.*
 10 Minister of the Interior to Governor General, Dec. 24, 1894, *Ibid.*
 11 McLaren to Secretary, Department of the Interior, Jan. 7, 1895, *Ibid.*
 12 McLaren to Daly, Feb. 20, 1895, *Ibid.*
 13 McLaren to Daly, Apr. 2, 1895, *Ibid.*
 14 Daly to McLaren, May 2, 1895, *Ibid.*
 15 *Mennonitische Rundschau*, May 1, 1895, 1.
 16 LAC, RG 15, D-II-1, vol. 718, file 379364 consists of documents relating to these liens. See Canadiana Héritage, reel T-12446, images 1034–1319. Thirty-two liens had been registered as of Dec. 17, 1898 (image 1273).
 17 McLaren to Minister of the Interior, Jan. 27, 1898, LAC, RG 15, D-II-1, vol. 652, file 270476.
 18 McLaren to Minister of the Interior, Mar. 8, 1898, *Ibid.*
 19 McLaren to Minister of the Interior, Apr. 7, 1898, *Ibid.*

20 Agent of Dominion Lands at Prince Albert to Department of the Interior, Oct. 6, 1898, *Ibid.*
 21 McLaren, McLeod & Black to Secretary, Department of the Interior, June 21, 1900, *Ibid.*
 22 McLaren to Clifford Sifton, Minister of Interior, Nov. 24, 1899, *Ibid.*
 23 Extract from a Report of the Committee of the Honourable the Privy Council, Mar. 6, 1900, *Ibid.*
 24 McLaren to D.A. Stewart, Department of the Interior, July 6, 1904, LAC, RG 15, D-II-1, vol. 940, file 917620. See Canadiana Héritage, reel T-14532.
 25 Clifford Sifton, Memorandum for Mr. Smart, July 14, 1904, *Ibid.*
 26 A. Ens, *Subjects or Citizens*, 101n46.
 27 *Ibid.*, 93.
 28 McLaren, McLeod & Black to Secretary, Department of the Interior, Dec. 4, 1906, LAC, RG 15, D-II-1, vol. 940, file 917620.
 29 A. McLeod to Secretary, Department of the Interior, Dec. 4, 1906, *Ibid.*
 30 Peter A. Elias, *Voice in the Wilderness*, trans. and ed. Adolf Ens and Henry Unger (Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2013), 78.

MY UNLIKELY NAMESAKE

A German POW in the East Reserve

Ernest N. Braun

Historically, the Mennonites of Manitoba's East Reserve have been conscious of its unique position as an island surrounded by the outside world. There is a Low German phrase that applies: "Wo'ra se de Welt mett Pankuake too-henje," translated as "where the world is hung shut with pancakes." In this case the Clear Springs settlement, occupied by Ontarian and British homesteaders, immediately abutted the reserve to the northeast. North and west of the East Reserve was Métis reserve land. Part of the land east and south was also Métis land with scattered French-Canadian settlements. The story of East Reserve Mennonites is interlaced with encounters with these neighbours. However, there was another neighbouring community, localized and very short-lived, that few people know: a temporary work camp at La Rochelle three miles due west of the reserve. It was occupied in 1945 by two hundred prisoners of war (POWs) from Germany.¹

The quartering of hundreds of German-speaking enemy soldiers on the farm of the French-speaking Catellier family just a few miles from the East Reserve was an interesting bureaucratic decision. The juxtaposition of German military prisoners and German-speaking Mennonite pacifists created some unusual consequences, one of which was to affect my entire life.

The arrangement in La Rochelle was based on demand for farm labour in the

new sugar beet industry, which was tied to the sugar refinery in Winnipeg run by the Manitoba Sugar Company. At that time, sugar beet cultivation was heavily dependent on manual labour. Since thousands of Manitoba men had enlisted in the armed forces, there was a shortage of labour for thinning, hoeing, and harvesting the beets. Yet sugar was in even greater demand, and the industry was growing. To resolve this problem, captured German soldiers were trucked into the area around the communities of La Rochelle, Dufrost, and Ste. Agathe to work for minimal wages. A compound was constructed north of what is now Provincial Trunk Highway 23 on the Catellier farm, between the gravel road (now PTH 59) and the Rat River, where a bend in the river created a peninsula, largely a meadow. Here they lived in tents behind a barbed-wire fence patrolled by armed guards, and worked long hours in the surrounding beet and corn fields. The farmer paid \$2.50 per day for the work, of which the prisoner received 50 cents. The government took two dollars for "room and board."²

Mennonite men were drafted into the military but often received a farm exemption. For this reason it was inevitable that Mennonites would end up interacting with the POWs. On the Catellier farm the lead hand was a Mennonite, as was the Manitoba Sugar Company truck driver who drove the men from farm to farm and in fall hauled the harvested beets to what was known as the "sugar factory."

One Mennonite farmhand noticed the restricted diet of the hard-working POWs.³ As a result, he and his wife invited those men who wanted additional food, and who were willing to take the risk, to come after dark and have supper with them. During part of the season this meant sweet corn on the cob. The men would crawl under the barbed wire to have a late meal with the family. Twenty years later I heard enthusiastic descriptions of the taste of that corn, and the warmth of the kitchen where Mennonite High German encountered standard European High German, causing some amusement on the POW side.

When I began to research the work camp in the early 1990s, the former POWs did not remember the name of the Mennonite farmhand who had welcomed them, making it difficult for me to track the man down. Well over a year elapsed before I found a clue to the name and, fortunately, a telephone number in Edmonton. I wondered how I would broach the topic, and how I would clinch the identification. Then I remembered the amusement of the POWs at the antiquated German that the Mennonites spoke so confidently. Armed with that knowledge, I called the number out of the blue, and asked the man whether he had ever worked on the Catellier farm in La Rochelle while the POW camp was there. Somewhat cautiously, he said yes. Then I asked whether he spoke German, and he said yes again. I warned him I was about



ICRC ARCHIVES (ARR), GUERRE 1939-1945, MANITOBA, PRISONNIERS DE GUERRE ALLEMANDS ENVOYÉS EN HOLLANDE, V-P-HIC-03381-27A

The quartering of hundreds of German-speaking POWs in Manitoba created opportunities for interaction with local Mennonites.

to ask an unusual question: “If you were going to serve some food to a visitor to your home and wanted to say ‘Don’t be shy, help yourself’ in German, what would you say?” He replied, “Well, I would say, ‘Sei nicht blüde.’” I replied, “You’re the man I want to talk to. I have a friend in Germany who would like to thank you personally for the sweet corn you fed him and his fellow inmates in the 1940s. Can I give him your phone number?” He agreed, maybe not entirely believing that this would happen. What the Mennonite man did not understand, and what I did not tell him, was that in modern High German “sei nicht blüde” does not mean “don’t be shy”; it means “don’t be stupid”! No wonder the POWs were somewhat taken aback, and amused.

There was also a Mennonite from Grunthal who drove truck for Manitoba Sugar. He was not eligible for the draft

because years earlier in a lumber camp he had lost his trigger finger, so during the war he worked part of the year in the agricultural industry. It did not take long for him to connect with the prisoners since he was fluent in German, and moreover bore a quintessentially German surname. Not surprisingly, in the La Rochelle camp there was a prisoner with the same surname, and the two struck up a friendship. This resulted in some unusual interaction. The prisoners, who had nothing but time on their hands during their off hours, had begun to exercise some entrepreneurial talents, one of which was to produce postcards and market them through the YMCA’s War Prisoners’ Aid effort. Some of these original postcards are now in the hands of farmers in Ste. Agathe and Glenlea. Selling artwork was another way some men raised money.⁴ A more unusual enterprise was making ships in bottles.

This was complicated since clear wine bottles needed to be obtained, and the only way was to have a sympathetic outsider smuggle them into the camp, such as the Mennonite truck driver. Moreover, the endeavour was of no use unless those ships in bottles could be sold. Again, it was the Mennonite truck driver who took the bottles to Winnipeg after establishing connections to sell them. He then brought new bottles and the money back into camp on the next trip. To this day, occasionally such a ship in a bottle will show up in a Winnipeg antique sale.

What does all this have to do with me? The story is too long to be told here in detail, but the long and short of it is that one of the POWs in La Rochelle carried the name Ernst Braun, a corporal from Nürnberg who befriended the Mennonite truck driver, my father’s brother, Peter Braun.⁵

Some background may be helpful to give the larger context for this improbable scenario. In 1941 Adolf Hitler attempted to help the Italians with their African campaign by creating the Afrika Korps under "Desert Fox" Erwin Rommel, to establish a second front which would weaken the British forces that were pressuring the Italians. This initiative, code-named Operation Sunflower, was treated with considerable fanfare in Italy, even to the extent of getting the Vatican to have a commissioning ceremony where Pope Pius XII blessed the German troops before they left for Tripoli in early 1941. The media happened to cover the event and a photo was taken of the pope speaking with a few Wehrmacht soldiers on their way to Africa. That photograph was published in *Der Spiegel* in October 1997.⁶ As coincidence would have it, one of the soldiers shown conversing with the pope was Ernst Braun.

Braun had served on the Eastern Front (where he narrowly escaped death from a random shell near the Mennonite colonies in Ukraine) as well in several other countries before being recruited for the Afrika Korps. After many months in that theatre of war, on May 28, 1942, he was captured by the British some twenty-five kilometres south of Tobruk while on a reconnaissance mission, and taken through Egypt to various camps in Palestine along with hundreds of other captured German and Italian soldiers. After several hearings Braun was transferred to Camp 310. The camp prisoners were shortly evacuated south through the Suez Canal, but he had learned about their destination and decided he did not want to go there. Braun intended to escape once the camp was empty. He hid under the floor of a tent for three days until a new contingent of soldiers, Italian this time, was brought in after new British victories in North Africa. He revealed himself to the new group, which was delighted by his subterfuge and feted him. In the meantime, Braun heard through the POW grapevine that a new POW camp was being constructed near the mountains in Alberta, Canada. He made up his mind that if he had to spend the rest of the war as



Some POWs produced postcards and marketed them through the YMCA's War Prisoners' Aid effort.

a prisoner, he wanted to go there. When the Italians were evacuated within a day or two, Braun discovered the destination was not Alberta, so again he decided to hide, this time behind a false wall in the long multi-stalled latrines. The next day another group of Italian POWs arrived. Braun revealed himself to them, but this time he was betrayed to the camp com-

mandant, probably inadvertently. Braun was promptly ordered to appear before the commandant, who congratulated him on deceiving authorities twice, but sentenced him to twenty-eight days of solitary confinement. Then, with some smugness, the commandant stated that Braun would be sent so far away that he would never rejoin the German forces. On August 17, 1942,



Onkel Ernst and the author in 1991.

the prisoners, Braun among them, were marched to the Suez Canal and loaded onto the SS *Pasteur*, a troop ship of the Royal Navy, and sent to Alberta.

It seems that throughout his life, Onkel Ernst, as we refer to him even today, was always a step ahead. As he boarded the ship with thousands of other POWs, he anticipated the realities of what lay ahead. Knowing that the lower decks of the ship would certainly become unbearably hot, he slowly worked himself backwards in the queue until he was right near the end of the seemingly endless line of men being loaded onto the *Pasteur*. As a result he got to be housed on the topmost deck, which provided not only comfortable living conditions but also a good view as the ship travelled more than halfway around the world. In addition, this position offered some hope of survival in the event of an attack by German U-boats, one of the greatest dangers of the trip, whereas should the ship be torpedoed by his countrymen, anyone in the lower decks was doomed. Onkel Ernst promised himself that he would see Rio de Janeiro, and to that end volunteered temporarily for slop duty. Unimpeded by confinement, he managed to experience a view of the magnificent

city glistening in the sunshine.

After a month at sea aboard the overcrowded *Pasteur* the prisoners arrived in Halifax on September 18, and were loaded directly onto a special closed train bound for Ozada, Alberta. Windows could only be opened a crack, and armed guards stood at each end of the car with two more nearby; even the bathroom doors were removed. At stops, the train was surrounded by soldiers with fixed bayonets.⁷ After five days of breathing stuffy air, Onkel Ernst disembarked and inhaled the pure mountain air; he would remember that moment for the rest of his life.⁸ From the station they were marched to a temporary tent camp, Camp 133, near Ozada, which was on the Stoney Nakoda Indian Reserve, just south and west of the intersection of the Trans-Canada Highway and the Kananaskis Trail (Highway 40). They would stay there until the permanent Camp 133 being built in Lethbridge was completed, in late November. When we visited the former camp site in 1991, stone rings were still visible in the grass. These rings had been placed on the tent flaps to prevent the penetrating November wind from lifting them and chilling the soldiers. Handmade light fixtures also lay

in the grass. The tent camp was guarded by a company of the Veterans Guard of Canada, as were most of the POW camps, since younger able-bodied soldiers were mostly in Europe.⁹

On December 1, 1942, the entire camp population was moved to Lethbridge, one of the two largest camps in Canada, where Onkel Ernst spent the next two and a half years behind barbed wire. Lethbridge was built to accommodate 12,500 POWs in dormitories each housing 350 men, and included two large recreation halls, six mess halls, education huts, and workshops. Prisoners could play sports or musical instruments. Soccer tournaments and orchestra performances were regular events. In winter some played hockey. The POWs also hosted craft sales featuring paintings, postcards, and ships in bottles.

When the war ended in May 1945 the detainees were given a choice: stay interned in Lethbridge or work in a labour camp for minimal wages. Onkel Ernst chose the labour camp and on June 18 ended up at La Rochelle, where he came to know my uncle Peter. Peter used his beet run to Winnipeg as an opportunity to supplement the POWs' rations with sausage, flour, and other provisions he could acquire in those difficult times. It was through Peter that Onkel Ernst met my father, who would correspond with him regularly from 1947 onward. After spending the summer in various farm activities, from hoeing sugar beets, working in the corn fields, harvesting wheat, and topping and piling sugar beets in fall, Onkel Ernst was transported by train to Medicine Hat Camp 132 for another five months. Then on February 5, 1946, since he was a prisoner of the British (not Canada), he was transported back to Halifax and shipped to the United Kingdom, where German POWs were forced to provide labour as a form of war reparations. Sent to a farm in Wales, he characteristically forged a personal bond with the farm family for whom he was forced to work, and after the war took his family back there several times to visit. The camp in Lethbridge finally closed on June 30, 1946.

After almost four years of captivity in Canada, Onkel Ernst had accumulated



N-G-Lager 133

Ozada, Kanada 1942

A sketch of Camp 133, near Ozada, Alberta. When we visited the former camp site in 1991, stone rings were still visible in the grass.

a collection of documents, photographs, and his sketches, which he was forbidden to take with him. With a false bottom in his duffel bag and creative lining in his boots he managed to smuggle some of these back all the way to Germany, where I got to see them twenty years later.

After almost a year in Wales, Onkel Ernst was repatriated to a devastated homeland. The food situation in Germany after the war was dire. Shortages began in May 1945, when the destruction of farmland, livestock, and machinery, plus labour shortages and adverse weather, limited the supply of food available to German civilians to only 1,000 calories a day. Moreover, the practice of shipping goods from occupied countries to Germany had ended with their defeat. This reality was exacerbated by restrictive American food policies for occupied Germany, designed to “have it driven home to them that the whole nation has been engaged in a

lawless conspiracy against the decencies of modern civilization,” as President Roosevelt put it.¹⁰

As a result of my family’s new connection to Germany, the Canadian Braun family became aware of the need, and when international aid agencies were

allowed into the country we regularly sent care packages of food to our namesake family, the earliest arriving while Onkel Ernst was still in captivity in Wales. In 1967, when I visited Germany for the first time, his elderly mother told me that if it had not been for that food, the family



To earn extra money, POWs created ships in bottles to sell in Winnipeg.



This pewter beer mug with the initials "EB" was gifted to the author in the summer of 2019. It is a poignant reminder of the link between the two Braun families.

would have been starving.

When I was born in late 1947, and the matter of which biblical name I was to bear the rest of my life came up, my mother declared that there were enough Jacob and Peter Brauns already. Dad proposed old Germanic names: Friedrich (Fritz) and Nicolas (Claus). These names did not fly with Mom. The next day, Dad had an idea: the name of his new German friend in Nürnberg, Ernst. Just after my first birthday in 1948 I received a German picture book as a Christmas gift from my *Namensvetter* (namesake) Ernst Braun, and our lives became intertwined from that moment to this day. My father died tragically in a traffic accident when I was eight years old, and from then on Onkel Ernst took on the role of surrogate father. Each Christmas we had two Christmases: first, the somewhat limited one that my widowed mother could afford, and then the "Onkel Ernst Christmas," with German chocolate, toys, *lebkuchen*, and German novelties arriving in a big box a week or two before Christmas and anticipated with great excitement. At the time I did not think having a Christmas package sent from Germany was anything out of the ordinary; as children we accept what happens as normal. Only as I grew up did I realize how rare and precious this experience was. Although he passed away in 1999, we still correspond and visit back and forth with his widow and his family.

In 1967, during my university years, I had the opportunity to experience Germany as a work-exchange student. My namesake, by now a successful businessman in Nürnberg, was delighted to meet somebody from my family for the first time in twenty-two years. While I was there, I asked Onkel Ernst whether he felt cheated having to spend the best years of his life as a prisoner. He was genuinely surprised at my question and made me answer it myself. He said, "You have now been in Germany for months; how many men of my age have you seen?" I suddenly realized that the only men his age were those with missing limbs trying to sell pencils on the sidewalk, or lying shell-shocked in various public places. He added, as I recall it: "I am exceptionally fortunate that I was captured early in the war, and that I was able to serve my time in Lethbridge in a beautiful setting which was really a university, for there was a professor of every discipline in the world in the next barracks, and none of us had anything else to do but learn from them." He was an extraordinary man, later becoming an authority on the Holy Roman Empire and on Rome itself, which he visited regularly. And wherever he went he always made friends.

For reasons that Onkel Ernst never understood, around 1944–45 all prisoners in the camp received a new Westclox DAX Style 3 pocket watch, which he took home and used for decades until it broke down and was replaced by a wristwatch. Now missing its glass and stem, I proudly dis-

play it in my house.¹¹ Onkel Ernst wanted me to have this reminder of his time in Canada after he died, and his widow sent it to me in about 2000. Another poignant reminder of the link between the two Braun families is a 1960 pewter beer mug with the initials "EB" engraved on the lid, one of their most prized wedding gifts, which was gifted to me by the German Braun family in the summer of 2019, since I am now the only member of the family carrying those initials.

Shortly before his death, Onkel Ernst called, and we talked for a while as usual. At the end he thanked me for the good connection we had been able to have. I was a little surprised, but the meaning would soon become clear. Those were his last words to me; a few days later his wife called to say he had just died.

Building a POW camp near the Mennonite East Reserve set up an extraordinary juxtaposition of German soldiers next to German-speaking pacifists. I was fortunate to get to know one of those soldiers. But I did not know the soldier – I knew only the man. After a lifelong friendship with Onkel Ernst, I understood this distinction in a whole new way, and how my life had been immeasurably enriched by the fortunate connection that we shared.

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1 Other reports indicate that the camp was in operation for several years. My story focuses on 1945.

2 Chris Teetaert, "German POW Camp Near St Pierre," *Steinbach Online*, July 28, 2010, <https://www.steinbachonline.com/local/german-pow-camp-near-st-pierre>. It is revealing that although the farmer offered to buy the building erected at the camp, the government preferred to bulldoze and bury it.

3 One POW told me that after the war ended, reports of the treatment received in Germany by Allied prisoners so incensed the British government that rations in Canadian camps were to be reduced to 800 calories a day. Canadian camp administrators objected, and eventually a compromise was reached: German POWs could be fed normal rations provided they served in work camps.

4 Michael O'Hagan, "Tag Archive | Camp 133 – Ozada," PoWs in Canada, <https://powsincanada.ca/tag/camp-133-ozada/>.

5 This is an abridged version of a more detailed private article I have written with permission from POW Ernst Braun's family in Germany.

6 Rudolf Augstein, "Das ist eine Schande," *Der Spiegel*,

October 19, 1997, 106.

7 Eric J. Holmgren, "Prisoner of War and Internment Camps in Alberta" (unpublished essay, Edmonton, 1983).

8 In August 1991, when my brother and I took him back there, he was disappointed with the air quality, but I reminded him that my car had air conditioning, and the 1942 train did not.

9 Camp Ozada 133 was scenic and prompted several artists among the POWs to sketch or paint the setting. See <https://powsincanada.ca/tag/camp-133-ozada/>.

10 Cited in Christopher E. Mauriello, *Forced Confrontation: The Politics of Dead Bodies in Germany at the End of WWII* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 13.

11 I have contacted noted collectors and pocket watch experts, but nobody seems to understand why Westclox would donate thousands of these pocket watches to returning German prisoners of war. From the Westclox website it appears this style of clock was not made after 1938, and perhaps sales were interrupted by the war and this was one way of entering the European market and at the same time disposing of old stock.

BUILDING BRIDGES

Mennonites and their Neighbours in Latin America

Kennert Giesbrecht

Establishing a new Mennonite colony in Latin America involves a lot of work, hardship, and suffering. Daily life is a struggle for survival: food must be on the table, income is virtually nonexistent, and expenses are huge. Emotions are a roller coaster, up and down, over and around. A good life, the kind of life one dreams of, exists only in the distant future. Help and support make new beginnings in a strange place much easier. When Mennonites in Latin America refer to neighbours, they are usually thinking about people in their own villages. Mennonites don't spend much time thinking about their non-Mennonite neighbours outside of the colony. And yet their relationships with these neighbours are often critical as they determine how the colony will develop.

Mennonite settlers in Latin America soon notice that their locally born neighbours are important for the life of the colony; financially, the colony could not survive without them. Neighbours, in many cases, offer important advice to help Mennonites establish themselves quickly. I hear this often when talking with settlers in the new colonies. They speak of friendly contacts with native-born residents of the area. They emphasize the importance of positive relationships and speak enthusiastically about how people already living in the towns and settlements around new colonies are willing to work together with Mennonites.

One hears from local residents how

important Mennonite settlements are for local economic development. Taxi drivers, business owners, and others outside of the colonies often talk about how eager they are to work with Mennonites. Words like “trust,” “punctuality,” and “honesty” are heard repeatedly in these conversations. I heard these sentiments from Juan, my taxi driver, during one trip to the Bolivian colonies in 2015. As the road was muddy and poor, the drive to Swift Current Colony took significantly longer than we had expected, which gave us time to talk. Juan mentioned how he had come to know

Mennonites and how he had worked together with one Mennonite business owner for ten years. “I couldn't wish for a better *patrón*,” he said. “He is understanding, pays me promptly, is very hospitable, and always invites me to eat with him and his family. He gives me advice and asks me for advice. He is simply a very good man.”

Not all speak so positively about Mennonites, however. A few years before I met Juan, I was driving in similar conditions, to the same colony, with a different taxi driver. It had rained, the roads were bad, and we had to drive slowly. Jorge also



DIEMENNONITISCHE POST

In the Bajío Verde Colony in Bolivia, Franz Schmitt hired non-Mennonite workers to saw wood from downed trees and make charcoal when Mennonites began clearing the land in 2015. Here Johan Wall, Cornelius Braun, and Abram Peters stand in front of the sacks of charcoal.

told me a number of good things about Mennonites, but he wasn't quite as taken with the life and work of Mennonites as Juan. "Never again will I drive in the colonies on a Sunday," he said. "It is simply too dangerous there for us Bolivians when the young people are on the streets. They stop us, spit at us, say all kinds of nasty things to us, threaten us, and throw mud or sand on our vehicles. No, I don't want to be in the villages when the young people are on the streets." While Jorge's words saddened me, I knew exactly what he was talking about. I had often heard about the problem of young people on the streets, not only from the local residents but also from Mennonites themselves.

Mennonites in Latin America are accused of racism, and I must admit that the accusation is not always undeserved. Since most of the colonies are somewhat isolated geographically, they often function almost as states within a state. They have autonomous administrations, their own schools, and their own laws and rules. This easily leads Mennonites to the conclusion that "nobody can tell us what to do." There is a certain feeling of power, a sense that they can't be touched. One often hears Mennonites use disparaging terms about their neighbours. Negative statements like "you can't teach them anything," or "they're lazy and good for nothing," or "they have no clue how to work and get ahead" are too often heard. Just because people live, think, or do things differently than Mennonites doesn't mean that they are lazy, useless, and good for nothing. Especially if we want to call ourselves Christians, we should be careful not to look down on other people. In God's eyes, we're all equal.

By sharing some examples, I hope to convey the positive and constructive side of how Low German-speaking Mennonites have engaged with their neighbours in Latin America. For this article I will focus on missions and aid work, but there are clearly many other stories that could be told about these interactions.

PARAGUAYAN ENGAGEMENT

Mennonite colonies in Latin America are generally involved in missions and

development work among their neighbours, and Mennonites in Paraguay were intentional about evangelizing their neighbours from the beginning. However, the founders of Menno and Fernheim colonies, the first colonies in Paraguay, did not come to this landlocked country in the heart of South America to engage in mission work. Their needs and concerns in the early years of settlement went in a different direction; their overwhelming concern was simply survival. Often it was individuals who took the initiative to evangelize. As the colonies developed, they became more interested in missions and development work among their neighbours.

Various Indigenous groups lived in the Paraguayan Chaco when the first Mennonite settlers arrived in the late 1920s. Mennonites quickly picked up words and phrases in the languages of their Indigenous neighbours, and some Indigenous people similarly learned Low German. In this way, a hybrid language developed in the Chaco which was a mixture of Low German and local languages. In Menno Colony, the Indigenous people were mainly from the Enlhet group. Over time, many Enlhet became fluent in Low German, and some Mennonites learned the language of the Enlhet so well that they could preach and teach in it. The New Testament was translated into this language, and by now the entire Bible has been translated into Indigenous languages.

Mission work among the Indigenous population of the Chaco led to the establishment of many churches, as some Indigenous people accepted the Christian faith and called themselves Mennonites. Many even took Mennonite names, often of an employer or some other respected person. Since Indigenous people were not registered in the records of the government, they could select any name they wanted. Often siblings would have different surnames, such as brothers Peter Funk and Johann Friesen.

The fact that many Spanish-speaking Mennonite congregations now exist in Paraguay demonstrates that evangelization of their neighbours has become important to many churches and colonies.



Missionizing in Indigenous communities began early in the Chaco, led by churches from Fernheim Colony. This was later extended to the local Latin Paraguayan population, and by the 1950s the churches of Menno Colony also actively joined in this effort. In recent decades, mission efforts directed at Indigenous and



Paraguayan neighbours have continued to grow. There are more churches and aid organizations that focus on development work, support educational programs, and undertake many other activities in order to help their neighbours.

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) performed an important role in the formation of a Christian service initiative in Paraguay. Mennonite immigrants from Canada who founded Menno Colony in 1927 were given privileges by the

Paraguayan government under Law 514. On the basis of this law, many Mennonites emigrated to Paraguay in the succeeding years and decades, from Canada as well as from the Soviet Union. Paraguay accepted all of them generously, including those

Non-Mennonite traders and merchants travel through the Bolivian colonies on a regular basis to sell and purchase goods. Here three grandsons of Peter Friesen, in Riva Palacios, sell empty aluminum cans to a travelling merchant.



Sufferers of Hansen's disease (leprosy) singing while waiting for treatment at Kilometre 81 in 1960.

who were elderly, ill, or incapacitated. In gratitude for this accommodation from the Paraguayan government, MCC, together with Paraguayan Mennonites, established a thanksgiving project, the relief organization for Hansen's disease (leprosy) sufferers commonly known as "Kilometre 81" (Km 81). This initiative, named for its distance from Asunción, is as familiar to native Paraguayans as it is to Mennonites. The program had two aims: to assist people suffering from Hansen's disease, and to plant the ideal of Christian service in local Mennonite congregations.

For decades, the focus of the hospital was on those suffering from Hansen's disease, who were generally ostracized by society. In recent years there has been increased emphasis on tuberculosis treatment. The "Hospital Menonita" offers people from the region comprehensive

medical care, which they receive either free or at low cost. Thousands have been treated here, and many have been cured. People crippled by the disease have received footwear that allows them to walk and to work.

Since its inception in 1951, hundreds of people from the colonies have volunteered at Km 81. Although the hospital was planned and initiated by MCC, Paraguayan Mennonites have been an active part of the program from the beginning, and eventually took over full responsibility for the hospital, and for Hansen's disease treatment in all of Paraguay. Many of the donations that make the work at Km 81 possible, both in money and in goods, are provided by the colonies.

Organizations like ASCIM (Asociación de Servicios de Cooperación Indígena-

Menonita) have undertaken important initiatives among their Indigenous neighbours. This organization aims to support interethnic development work in the Chaco. According to the *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay* encyclopedia, it has five main objectives: "(a) to accompany the Indigenous communities in their economic and social development; (b) to support their efforts to secure their land base; (c) to maintain advisory services to support their subsistence on their own soil; (d) to support educational programs to equip the younger members of the Indigenous population with the knowledge and the ability to participate successfully in their new social setting; and (e) to support preventative healthcare and medical treatment in the Indigenous settlements, and to offer medical consultation." Some of its successes have included

helping with the return of 160,000 hectares to the Indigenous people, which allowed for the creation of fifteen new farming settlements for three thousand Indigenous families.

In the colonies of East Paraguay, Mennonites also live in close proximity to their Latin Paraguayan and Indigenous neighbours. Contact with these neighbours has always been more intense and personal than in the Chaco. This is mainly due to the fact that the population density was much higher in East Paraguay. Latin Paraguayans and Indigenous people lived next to and even in the middle of the colonies. People bought and rented land from their Latin Paraguayan neighbours. Over the decades, various aid organizations, often through private initiative, have also been established.

AID IN MEXICO

Representatives of the five colonies in the Cuahtémoc area of Mexico met in December of 2005 in the colony centre in Lowe Farm. The purpose of the meeting had been circulated in advance with a simple question: “Do we want to help in Chiapas?” The answer was clear and

came without hesitation: “Yes!” Enrique Letkeman, chair of the relief committee, along with Franz Peters and *Vorsteher* Peter Enns, showed pictures of the devastation that had recently been caused by Hurricane Stan, and reported on the situation. They shared that the hurricane had brought three days of heavy rain. Large stones were carried along by the rushing water. A river, normally twenty-five metres wide and only a few feet deep, topped its banks and caused devastating mudslides along both sides. Entire residential districts had been washed away or buried. The group had also travelled to Mexicalapa, where, of fifty-two homes, only one tin shack and the church remained. People from this area had never experienced such flooding, and rain-softened dirt slid from the slopes and buried roads and houses.

The representatives at this meeting agreed that they wanted to help. They decided to collect money in the colonies and churches, in order to build homes for the victims of the disaster. This meeting was the beginning of a much longer relief effort in Chiapas by Mennonites from Mexico. They travelled throughout the

Cuahtémoc colonies and reported on the extent of the disaster. It wasn't long before hundreds of thousands of dollars in aid had been collected. These donations were channelled to a relief committee, which organized and implemented the relief plan in Chiapas, in close collaboration with MCC Mexico.

It is interesting to note how organizations established during natural disasters can end up doing more than just disaster relief. This was the case with the children's home Brazos Abiertos (Open Arms) in Nuevo Casas Grandes. It started when a group of people from the region around El Valle offered help to Haiti after the earthquake in 2010. The organization created to carry out this work was called Corazones Humanitarios de Chihuahua (Humanitarian Hearts of Chihuahua). When their assistance to Haiti, which consisted mainly of sending relief supplies, was finished, people wanted to continue helping in other areas.

They found need everywhere. It was decided to start a children's home in Nuevo Casas Grandes. This city is approximately fifty kilometres north-west of the El Valle Colony. The children's



MAPD: MENNONITE HERITAGE ARCHIVES, 280-970-001

An Indigenous family in Paraguay helped by Asociación de Servicios de Cooperación Indígena-Mennonita in 1981.

home was dedicated in January of 2016 under the name Brazos Abiertos. Voluntary donations funded its construction. Some thirty farmers from the El Valle area supported the organization with a small portion of their harvest. They committed themselves to give the proceeds of one hectare of cotton (or other crops) to the children's home project. The farmers received the cost of seed and other expenses from Corazones Humanitarios, but all the profit went to the organization. Business owners and other private donors

ability could learn to work with wood or leather or to sew with the help of some employees as well as volunteers. Most of the profits realized from the sale of these goods were then returned to the clients as payment. In addition to the workshop, this organization created several facilities where clients could work at physical rehabilitation in a focused way. People who previously had only been able to crawl or use a wheelchair learned to walk again. In October 2013 this organization was recognized with an award and hon-

associated with this project. Here, another ninety children can be offered meals and care. As Bergen says, "The demand is great. All we need is more facilities, financial support, and volunteers to run the programs." Bergen led this work until his retirement in 2016; John Loewen took on the task as his successor.

CONCLUSION

Many other initiatives by individuals or groups from the Mennonite colonies could be added to this list. I have often heard of sewing circles that make blankets, mats, or clothes, or women's groups that collect clothes, blankets, and shoes to distribute to people in need. Sometimes groups of congregations collect foodstuffs to distribute to victims of famine. Financial donations from the colonies even reach disaster-affected areas in Africa and Asia. MCC alone received more than \$100,000 (US) in 2017 from the Mennonite colonies in the Americas when funds were solicited in response to the famine in South Sudan.

Mennonites in the colonies generally are glad to help when they see that their money is used to meet a specific need. For the most part, established colonies can do more for their neighbours than new ones. And that is logical. In the early stages of a colony, it is important to resolve any problems in the community before looking outward. The colony is completely absorbed in its own struggle for survival. Often the burden of debt and payments is so heavy that it is difficult to think of the needs of others. And occasionally there are also people in these new settlements whose own food resources are scarce.

One thing is clear to me: Mennonites rely on their neighbours while establishing a new colony. However, the people around the colony, be they Indigenous or local residents, also eventually benefit from its presence. This kind of mutual benefit often goes unnoticed but shouldn't be forgotten.

Kennert Giesbrecht is the editor of *Die Mennonitische Post*. He grew up in Menno Colony in Paraguay and has travelled extensively through Latin America.



VICTOR ENNS

The opening ceremony of the children's home in Nuevo Casas Grandes. Victor Enns (centre) from El Valle Colony was the chair of the supervisory board for several years.

also supported the project. In this way enough money was gathered to purchase a lot and begin construction.

By the end of July 2017, sixteen children were in Brazos Abiertos. Many were homeless, as their parents, often addicted to drugs or alcohol, were unable to care for them. The work in the facility is mostly done by Mexican women and girls living in the city. A committee from the colonies has oversight and ensures that there are sufficient finances and food to care for the children.

In 1998, Isaac Bergen Thiessen, a missionary from the Mennonite conference of Mexico, established an aid organization named *Un Sueño Realizado A.C.* (A Dream Come True), in Cuauhtémoc. Bergen initiated this project to help people who, because of a physical or other disability, were unable to find work. A workshop was established, where people with a dis-

abled person was employed and trained for its social services by the state government of Chihuahua. At that time it was listed as one of the top five aid organizations in the country.

Another project, *Ampliando el Desarrollo de los Niños* (Expanding Children's Development), was initiated by Bergen and the church in Cuauhtémoc. It is also located in the city of Cuauhtémoc, in a low-income neighbourhood. Children here are often alone at home for hours after school because their parents are working. *Ampliando el Desarrollo de los Niños* addresses this issue by offering an afterschool program; two hundred children receive a meal, some additional instruction, and also help with their school homework. Volunteers run this program.

The building and the dining room they use is at full capacity. As there is still much demand, they plan to add another location, on the second floor of the church

A PANDEMIC IN SASKATCHEWAN

Leonard Doell

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a catalyst for people searching to understand the effects of past pandemics and epidemics on the world.¹ It is an opportunity to explore how individuals and communities, including faith communities like the Mennonites, survived and responded to past health crises. How Saskatchewan Mennonites experienced the 1918–1919 flu pandemic raises some interesting parallels to our present situation.

When the First World War ended on November 11, 1918, a new war against a deadly flu had already begun in Saskatchewan. The saying “after war comes the plague” held true in this case.² The flu pandemic arrived in three waves: the spring of 1918, the fall of that year, and then the spring of 1919. Saskatchewan was hardest hit in the fall of 1918. In Saskatoon, the city shut down, with the closure of schools, churches, and a ban on meetings in public spaces.³ The 1919–20 annual report of the Saskatchewan Department of Public Health put the number of deaths at 3,906 from October to December 1918. During 1919–20, 1,010 more deaths took place. Many of these deaths occurred in the 20–40 age bracket.⁴

The flu spread primarily among young adults, bypassing the oldest and youngest family members. People who seemed healthy suddenly developed serious symptoms. As Eileen Pettigrew describes: “The flu often began like a cold, with a cough and a stuffy nose, progressing to a dreadful

ache that pervaded every joint and muscle, a fever that shot as high as 104 degrees and a marked inclination to stay in bed. If it stopped, the patient was usually back to normal in a week but when it developed into pneumonia the outlook was grave indeed. With no antibiotics to rely on, doctors could only turn to their time-honored cures: rest, liquids and lots of hope.”⁵

MENNONITE EXPERIENCES

The pandemic was one more event that created significant hardships for Mennonites. The First World War had created a strain between Mennonites and the Canadian government, as well as with their neighbours. Mennonite church leaders were trying to affirm conscientious objector status for their young men to keep them out of military service. There was intense pressure for Mennonites to purchase Victory Bonds, which they did after receiving assurances that their contributions would go towards alleviating suffering rather than abetting the war machine. And Old Colony, Bergthaler, and Sommerfelder Mennonites were being prosecuted through fines and jail sentences for not sending their children to English public schools.

In 1918, the Mennonite population in Saskatchewan consisted of pockets of settlers in rural areas. Two Mennonite reserves had the bulk of the population: the Hague-Osler Reserve, stretching from Warman to Rosthern, including Aberdeen, and the Swift Current Reserve, with lands south of Swift Current extending to

Wymark, including Dunelm. Other concentrations of Mennonites could be found in Herbert, Rush Lake, and Waldeck; Drake and Guernsey; Borden, Great Deer, and Arelee; Carrot River and Lost River; Dalmeny, Langham, and Hepburn; and the Laird and Waldheim area. Few Mennonites, if any, had moved into cities by this point.

When the flu appeared, Mennonites were hit particularly hard. They tended to live in tight-knit communities and had large families, which made it easier to pass along the disease to others. It arrived in the fall, at the end of the harvest season, which was a time of social gatherings including pig butchering. Many workers on threshing crews became sick, which disrupted their work and income. It was also the time for celebrating communion in Mennonite churches, which was done with a common cup. As the epidemic raged into the Christmas season, extended family gatherings created further



Swift Current Sommerfelder Aeltester David Derksen and his wife Maria (nee Friesen). He was ordained as a minister in 1909. Between December 1910 and January 1911 they lost five children in a span of thirteen days due to a diphtheria epidemic. In June of 1911, he was ordained as the Aeltester. His life experience helped him in extending love and compassion to his flock during the flu epidemic.

PRIVATE COLLECTION



PRIVATE COLLECTION

John Janzen, a husband and father of a young family, died of the flu in the makeshift hospital in the Rosthern school. He was from the Old Colony village of Rosengart, west of Hague.

opportunities for the flu to spread.

I searched the Old Colony Mennonite and Bergthaler Mennonite church registers from the Hague-Osler Mennonite Reserve for the number of deaths that occurred in 1918 during October, November, and December. In total, 92 people died during this period, which is

one person per day. I assume that not all of these people died as the result of the flu, but out of 92 deaths, at least 76 took place in the month of November, at a rate of 2.5 deaths per day. The average age of death was nineteen years. While single males and females were affected, so were many young mothers and fathers, who

left small children behind. It is not clear why some Mennonite villages and families were hit harder than others. These statistics do not include Mennonites from other churches who lived in the area, or non-Mennonite deaths.

MENNONITE RESPONSES

The community of Rosthern was hit by the flu in the middle of October 1918. On October 17, 1918, the *Rosthern Enterprise* (predecessor to the *Saskatchewan Valley News*) reported that the first victim of the flu in Rosthern was a man who had recently returned from Winnipeg, where he contracted the disease. The following week, the paper reported that the Rosthern school had been closed on October 23. On October 31, 150 cases of the flu were reported in the district and the first death had occurred: Henry H. Kinzel. By November, nearly everything was shut down. To address the crisis, the school was repurposed as a hospital, with the front rooms being used as wards for the sick, while the north room was a temporary morgue.⁶

During this crisis, Rev. Gerhard Epp tended spiritually to many sick and dying people. In his diary, Epp recorded visiting this temporary hospital on November 12: "There was a large room with two rows of beds where all the severely sick lay, a very sad sight!" In one room he found John Janzen from Rosengart, who lay on his bed struggling for breath. Janzen recognized Epp and told him, "I know that I have a Saviour." He died later that evening. The next day Janzen's brother David sought advice from Epp regarding a funeral for his brother. The funeral was held on November 15 in the home of Janzen's parents Abram and Aganetha at Rosengart. Both parents were sick in bed, as well as other children. Epp conducted the funeral and Janzen was buried in the Eigenheim Cemetery, west of Rosthern.⁷ Rev. Epp would become sick during the pandemic, passing away in April 1919.⁸

In his history of the Eigenheim Mennonite Church, Walter Klaassen noted the helpful role of the church, and in particular, Rev. Epp, during this time: "Rev. Epp walked through the immediate

neighborhood of the church to minister to the sick in every household. His daughters Judith and Helena assisted in caring for the ill in several homes and then also became ill. In Friedensfeld, where four members of one family died within one week, a trio of men made themselves responsible for dealing with the unprecedented emer-

all, were sick in a home. To all those who volunteered to assist in any way and those who were instrumental in opening up, a hearty vote of thanks is due from the town and district. The school building has been fumigated and disinfected and it is expected to open again next Monday.”¹⁰

After the emergency hospital closed,

group in a closing prayer.¹²

In the town of Langham, officials responded in a similar way to the emergence of the flu. Schools, churches, and the poolroom were quickly shut down at the end of October.¹³ The school would be closed for three months.¹⁴ These preventive measures were not enough to help the



L–R: Peter Pauls and Maria Reddekopp were married on June 31, 1918, near Hague. Peter died in November, leaving behind his pregnant wife. Rev. Jacob Penner, a Bergthaler minister, died of the flu on February 23, 1919. He left behind his wife, Helena (Guenther), and seven young children. Rev. Heinrich D. Martens with his third wife Helena (Nikkel). Martens was a Bergthaler minister who cared for the sick, dying, and dead. He delivered many funeral invitations across the South Saskatchewan River by boat during the epidemic. PRIVATE COLLECTION

gency amongst their own people but also among their non-Mennonite neighbors. Johan Andres made the caskets, Bernard A. Friesen arranged for the funerals and minister Johan A. Dueck comforted the sick and dying and saw those who died to the grave. They did many funerals together, remembers Helen Friesen Letkeman. The Eigenheim community seems to have been spared the worst ravages of the epidemic.”⁹

On November 28, 1918, the *Rosthern Enterprise* reported that the emergency hospital located in the public school was closed. As the article explained, “The hospital has done its duty – it is creditable to Rosthern that it was opened up, and has no doubt been the means of lifting a great cloud of anxiety off the minds of quite a number, where all, or practically

church groups in Rosthern organized services of thanksgiving. According to the *Enterprise*, the Lutheran church planned to hold a service along with communion. The newspaper described how “the church is going to be decorated in evergreen . . . and the pastor expects every member to be present to join the nation in thanks and praise to Almighty God for the conclusion of the war and restoration of peace.” A special funeral service was also planned in memory of the ten members of the congregation who had died of the flu.¹¹ The Rosthern Mennonite Church also organized a well-attended thanksgiving service. It had been a month since the church had met due to the pandemic. Rev. Johan Dueck gave a sermon “offering God thanks” and Rev. Gerhard Epp spoke on Psalms 46. Rev. Kornelius Ens led the

Peter C. Epp family. The Epps’ youngest son, Diedrich, passed away at the age of eighteen, “after being ill for a few days, [with] an illness marked by a high fever, coughing and severe aching.” He was soon followed by their married daughter Katherine Wheeler, who left behind her husband George and eight young children. Peter C. Epp and his wife buried both children in the Langham Cemetery.¹⁵

The influenza hit other areas of the province. In Waldheim, when the flu broke out, the school and the local hotel were used to house the sick. Helene Warkentin recalled how “her parents and family stayed in the hotel and her father died there of the flu. They had as many as three coffins there at one time with the dead in them, standing in the lobby and waiting for burial.”¹⁶ The Henry H.



Isaac Loewen (with his wife Susanna (nee Rempel) and their family) was a well-known and respected businessman from Osler. He died of the flu on December 7, 1918, at the age of fifty-three.

Dyck family, who had moved from Corn, Oklahoma, to Waldheim as a consequence of the United States joining the war, also ended up in this thirty-room hotel. The family remembered that many people in the hotel were sick with the flu. Luckily the family did not contract it.¹⁷

Six members of the North Star Mennonite Church in the Drake area died of the flu. This church, established in 1906 by Mennonites arriving from Kansas and Oklahoma, had to close during the pandemic. Unable to hold funeral services

inside the church, at least one was held outside.¹⁸ In the Dalmeny community, Anna (Peters) Thiessen suffered a tremendous loss when her husband, Wilhelm, a popular, gifted, and highly respected teacher, died of the flu in November 1918, after a few months of marriage.¹⁹ The newspaper *Der Wahrheitsfreund* offered the following words of comfort: “God’s ways are often for us as people very dark but someday we will understand.”²⁰

In the town of Herbert, the spread of the flu became serious by October 1918.

The town council recommended that public facilities be closed. In the stores, people wore masks. A special constable, Anthony Haughlin, ensured that people followed the rules. Many people pitched in to help with the sick, including Dr. Funk, who often slept in his car as he tended to patients. Local women with training as nurses and midwives also helped as the town hall was converted into a hospital. With some men sick and others still at war, farmers had a difficult time bringing in the harvest.²¹

GOOD SAMARITANS

In nearly every community in Saskatchewan there were good Samaritans who helped their neighbours, at risk to themselves. In some cases they were trained medical people, but most of the time they were simply caring lay people. Johan and Margarete (Flaming) Strauss moved to the Brotherfield area near Hepburn from Kansas at the turn of the century. Since the doctor was in Saskatoon, Johan used his lay medical knowledge to help neighbouring families cope with the flu. As he travelled to neighbouring homesteads, his wife and children kept the farm going.²²

Ministers performed an important role by offering spiritual comfort to the sick and their families during home visits. In the community of Arelee, Rev. Luka Krowchenko, who served as a minister in the local Mennonite Brethren church, struggled to keep up this work. Krowchenko related to his family that during a home visit he discovered “the husband dead in bed and the wife too sick to move to care for herself or inform anybody of his death.”²³

Funerals were conducted daily. The dead were buried as soon as possible and sometimes with more than one person in the grave. In the village of Chortitz, Jacob Reddekopp and Peter Fast were buried in one grave, and Mrs. Heinrich Goertzen and her nephew Peter Reddekopp were placed together in another. Many volunteers were needed to dig graves in the frozen ground; some were themselves also weak from the flu. A resident of the Dunelm district recalled “dark days when death stalked up and down the land. The air was cold and

foggy, the earth was bare and brown with no snow. Anyone with strength was on hand to help dig graves. With picks they chipped away at the hard sod. Sometimes a grave was not even completed before another person died. The men instead of digging another whole grave would broaden the base at one side at the bottom

of infectious diseases.”²⁶ More research needs to be done to see if the Holdeman Mennonites in Saskatchewan used the same burial practices.

During this difficult period many Mennonites tried to help their neighbours. According to their daughter, Johan and Maria (Bergmann) Braun made a

I wanted to see what had happened to my playmate. Houses were left without a mother, the next one without a father, almost entire families were wiped out or maybe one small baby would remain. All you need to do is visit the cemeteries and they tell the tale.”²⁷ The two local grave diggers, John J. Neufeld and Abram S.



L-R: Johan Heppner died of the flu in the fall of 1918. He and his wife Helena (Bergen) had five children together. Franz Dyck of Hochfeld died of the flu on December 2, 1918, one day before his twenty-sixth birthday. Siblings Maria and Peter Reddekopp from the village of Chortitz, west of Hague. Peter died of the flu at the age of sixteen and was placed in the same grave as his aunt Susanna (Reddekopp) Goertzen in the Chortitz Cemetery. PRIVATE COLLECTION

of the grave so that there was enough room to slide a casket into the cave-like hollow. Then there was space for the second casket as well.”²⁴

Linda Buhler of Manitoba has done extensive research on Mennonite burial customs. She discovered that the Greenland Church of God in Christ (Holdeman) burial patterns during the 1918 flu epidemic were “different in the way that coffins used at the time were constructed with a glass panel in the lid so the viewing could take place through the rectangular or oval insert.”²⁵ As she explained, “the coffins were often fabric covered and were built with higher sides so that viewing was only from the top. . . . The glass panels being used [permitted] viewing without opening the coffin. A number of people from the Greenland area remembered these as well, seemingly when people had died

strong effort to care for their neighbours near their homestead at Lost River. Johan would visit nearby houses to make sure that the basic needs of people and animals were being met. At the home of H. G. Neufeld, he found the parents unable to care for their young baby. Johan took the boy home to his wife. As his daughter Tina remembered, “If you ever saw excited kids, [it was us with] a little boy among five girls. ‘When is it my turn to hold him?’ I am sure we figured this was the biggest blessing on this side of heaven. Our father never got the flu, he was too busy doing chores for the neighbors. Mother did not get the flu because she was pregnant.” Others were not so fortunate. As Tina recalled, “I well remember in February 1919, Anna Neufeld, a ten-year-old girl, died from the flu. Some men were able to make a coffin and I went along with my mother to see her dress the corpse.

Bergen, had to dig twenty-one graves over the course of only a few weeks.”²⁸

HOME CURES

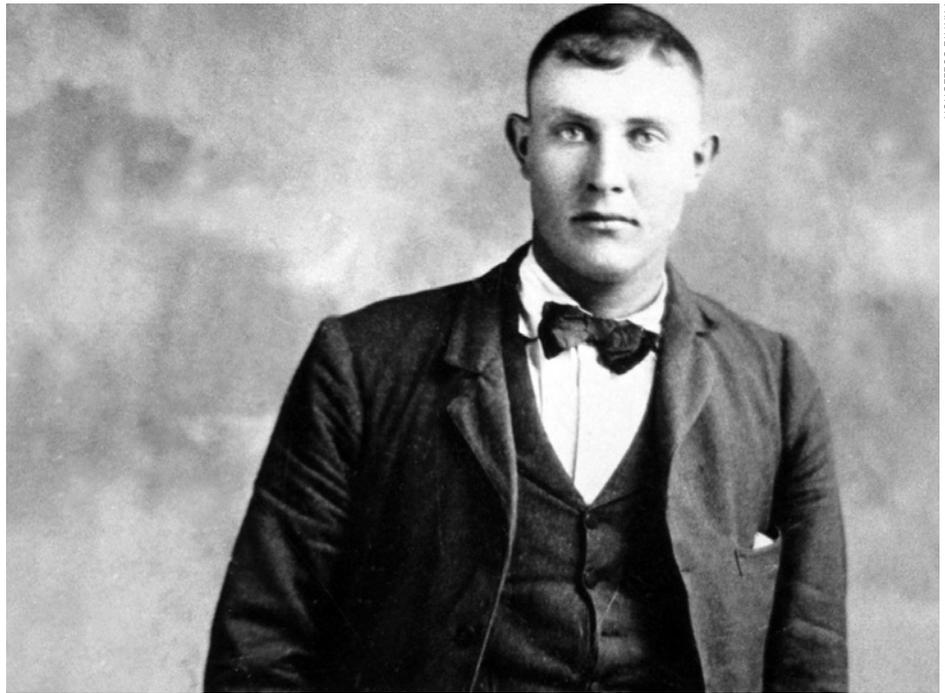
People often attempted to use home cures to alleviate the symptoms of the flu. Tina Peters recorded that Mennonites used a specific recipe of “onions cooked in milk, cooled slightly and then thickened by adding rye flour. It was spread between cloths to form a poultice and applied to the chest as hot as the patient could bear. With continued applications, relief of the congestion was usually achieved in an hour.”²⁹

The Gerhard and Maria (Heppner) Neufeld family, who homesteaded at Lost River, told the story of how, after being very sick for days, Gerhard announced he craved fresh fish. According to family lore, “he went to the river, chopped the net out of the ice, [and] came home covered

with ice and five fish. After a good feed he regained his strength and was able to do the chores, and to bury the dead.”³⁰ The daughter of Herman and Katharina (Dyck) Unger recalled how the family was spared “the flu because we all had to take a good dose of red liniment every night.”³¹ Jacob Hildebrandt, a young talented druggist and businessman in Hague, thought brandy might protect him from the flu. Unfortunately, it did not work. His death was a huge loss to his wife and eight children and the wider community.

CONCLUSION

Most sources state that the 1918–19 flu killed fifty thousand people in Canada and fifty million worldwide. Maureen Lux places the number of deaths in Saskatchewan at five thousand, with one in four experiencing the flu.³² As she describes: “The peak of the epidemic came in November 1918, but there were more than 1,000 flu deaths in 1919 and a further 102 in 1920. It took twenty months before the epidemic finally waned. Northern areas, unaffected by the 1918–1919 wave, were attacked in the 1920s. The effects of the epidemic reverberated throughout the province. There were increased calls for rural hospitals and plans for university courses to train women in nursing and housekeeping. There were demands for more efficient public health



Jacob Hildebrandt was a talented druggist and businessman in Hague. His death from the flu was a huge loss to his wife and eight children, and the wider community.

care in Saskatoon, where the brunt of the fight against the flu was carried by volunteers. And nationally, a Dominion Bureau of Health was established in early 1919.”³³

Vanessa Quiring observes that the mortality rate for influenza in the general population of Canada was 6.1 per 1,000. However, among Mennonites in Hanover, Manitoba, she found the mortality rate was more than double at 13.5 per 1,000. She argues that patterns of

socializing account for the higher rates of deaths among Mennonites.³⁴ Figures for Mennonites in Saskatchewan, and patterns of transmission, were likely similar.

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1 A version of this article was previously published as “Saskatchewan Mennonites and the Spanish Flu of 1918–19,” *Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian* 26, no. 1 (2021): 1–13.

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5 Pettigrew, *Silent Enemy*, 16.

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9 Walter Klaassen, *“The Days of our Years”: A History of Eigenheim Church Community: 1892–1992* (Rosthern, SK: Eigenheim Mennonite Church, 1992), 47.

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JACOB PENNER

A Mennonite Communist

Dan Dyck

In 2000, the city of Winnipeg honoured the late alderman Jacob P. Penner by naming a park after him.¹ It very well may be the only park in Canada honouring a communist. Even more unusual, this communist was from a *Kleine Gemeinde* and Mennonite Brethren background. An immigrant to Canada from the Russian empire, Penner would become a prominent figure in Winnipeg's civic politics.



PRIVATE COLLECTION

In 2000, Winnipeg renamed Notre Dame Park in honour of the late alderman Jacob P. Penner.

EARLY YEARS

Jacob P. Penner, a small-framed, soft-spoken Russian Mennonite, arrived in Quebec City on August 4, 1904. The mild summer weather likely felt familiar to that of the home he had just left in Ekaterinoslav (present-day Dnipro, Ukraine). He had been born in 1880 in the western borderlands of the Russian empire. His great-grandfather, Peter P. Penner (b. 1799), settled in the Molotschna colony, in the village of Prangenau, where he became a respected *Kleine Gemeinde* minister after joining the church in 1835.² Peter's son, also named Jacob, moved from Prangenau to Friedensfeld, near Nikopol, in 1867,

where he and his wife, Helena (Dueck), established a large estate. Jacob had been active in the *Kleine Gemeinde* church before the move, having placed fourth in a ministerial election in neighbouring Neukirch with twenty-seven votes out of 110.³ During their time in Friedensfeld, the Penners would eventually join the Mennonite Brethren church.⁴

The Penner family thrived in Friedensfeld until a downturn in the rural economy jeopardized their standing. Having purchased many thousands of acres on credit, the senior Jacob Penner found himself unable to pay back the loan. According to his nephew, Johan W. Dueck, "The mortgage holders from whom Uncle Penner had bought the land threatened to repossess it, if it was not paid for by a set deadline. Through all this trouble and worry it happened that Uncle Penner died of a heart attack after he had lain speechless for three or four days.

"After Uncle Penner's death the mortgage holders took the land, livestock, equipment and so on, all of which had also been given as security. So the Penners were completely bankrupt and came into poverty. Aunt Penner died some years after this bankruptcy."⁵

Jacob Penner's eldest son, Peter D. Penner, was a man who chose to follow his own path. He married Margaretha Unger, who was the daughter of Abraham Unger (1825–1880), the early Mennonite Brethren leader from Einlage, in the Chortitza colony. Personal faith was important to Margaretha. Peter, however, was said to have held no strong

religious convictions.⁶

Margaretha shared stories with her granddaughters about having a pleasant early married life. Russian servants did the housework while she cared for her children and enjoyed passing the time with needlework. Wendy Dueck, a great-niece to Jacob P. Penner, said, "My mother was quite close to her grandmother, and she told my mother that when she was first married and had Jacob and Peter and Helen and the children, she said, 'All I had to do was take care of my babies. I didn't have to do any cooking or washing or cleaning.'"⁷

Margaretha's own family had wealthy origins. Her father was the first Mennonite to construct wagons with spring suspension, and his son Abraham (1850–1919) was credited with enlarging his father's wagon factory in Einlage. Except for Margaretha, the Unger clan chose to stay in Russia, a decision that would have dire consequences for the elder Unger's son Abraham and grandson Abraham. They were tortured and murdered by anarchists on the night of October 28–29, 1919.⁸

Peter D. Penner had an entrepreneurial bent and was apparently comfortable with risk. In 1894 he mortgaged the family estate to buy a larger one 250 kilometres southeast, near Rostov in the Don River valley. How he managed to purchase this estate, given his father's bankruptcy, is unclear. Wendy Dueck said anecdotally that Peter, "being the eldest son, had taken advantage of his dad's money and invested it here and there without a lot of family discussion."⁹ More loans were made to purchase machinery and hire labourers to bring the land into agricultural production. Four years of drought further compromised the situation. Although the family records are not entirely clear, it appears that drought led to foreclosure. The year of foreclosure is not known.

Peter then acquired a flour mill in Riga, Latvia, in 1900, where the family minus eldest child Jacob P. relocated. The once wealthy family proceeded to fall deeper into hard economic times.¹⁰ However, Wendy Dueck notes that in a photo including all the married siblings, which was taken sometime after the family



The Peter D. Penner family, ca. 1900.

relocated to Riga, Peter's wife, Margaretha, is "wearing a lovely [light-coloured] dress and all her sisters and sisters-in law are wearing black. I think she had already moved on to her Riga status."¹¹ By 1900, Riga was a well-established port city and had become "one of the most industrially advanced and economically prosperous cities in the entire Empire."¹²

While the family established itself in Riga, Jacob P. Penner created a life in Ekaterinoslav. He had already done a four-year course in normal school, starting at age twelve, and taught for a year, which he disliked. He was assigned to Ekaterinoslav after studying land surveying and joining the civil service. Penner became politically active after witnessing the brutality of the Russian political system when a group

of Cossacks beat, without mercy, striking workers at the Briansk Metal Works in 1902.¹³ This event convinced him to become involved in an underground reading circle. As his granddaughter Cathy Gulkin describes, "When Jacob was a young man in Russia, he began associating with a circle who were reading and discussing Tolstoy. Which eventually led to the study of Marx and Engels and to Jacob's conversion to socialism and communism from Christianity."¹⁴

Penner chronicled this conversion in his own words: "When I was a boy in Russia I came in contact with the Marxists and became immediately interested in their viewpoint – participated in underground, secret meetings in the forest on the outskirts of the city, protected by a sentry." He

also recalled, "My parents – very religious, orthodox Mennonites – were greatly disturbed and alarmed that I would land in the clutches of the regime. Father was always very much opposed to my views . . . My views did not break up the family, but our relationships were strained, quite strained sometimes, because I would always start a discussion with my socialist viewpoints."¹⁵ Though he rejected a religious path, he acknowledged that science and religion were both valid ways for humans to understand the world. This understanding was part of his identity in a deeply rooted way. He seemed to have had a passion for the ideals of the social gospel imprinted on his soul.

Fearing that their son's growing profile as a social justice activist and revolution-

ary might land him in hot water with the tsarist regime, Penner's parents pressured him to leave the empire. He resisted. Though the family desperately needed to move to find financial stability, Penner's parents refused to emigrate without him. He finally acquiesced. The failure of their flour mill in Riga and the danger of Siberian exile – a likely risk for their politically active son – spurred the family's migration to Canada.

MOVE TO CANADA

After landing in Quebec City in August 1904, the Penner family travelled to Winnipeg. Having left farming years earlier, they stayed in the city. What resources they had were invested in a rooming house which they established as a bed and breakfast to host rural Mennonites travelling to Winnipeg on business. It was largely run by Margaretha and her daughters. Wendy admired Margaretha for adjusting to this new life without servants. As Wendy remarked, "Guess who was cooking and cleaning."¹⁶

With no Mennonite churches established at the turn of the century in Winnipeg,¹⁷ the family connected with the First German Baptist Church. Whether Penner ever attended services here with his family is unknown. "[Later] in the 1920s there were quite a few of the Penner family, siblings, children, and so on, who were members," said Wendy. The family's partial Mennonite Brethren roots likely helped them find a home in this church, as German Baptists had some influence on Mennonite Brethren doctrine and practice in Russia.¹⁸

Penner's first impressions of Canada are captured in a letter to a friend in Odessa. He commented on the huge "American-style" retail organization called Eaton's – a large department store where he would later briefly work as a clerk. The letter reflects his recognition of the exploitation of workers in Winnipeg at the behest of wealthy businessmen.¹⁹

Penner's early years in Manitoba were beset by homesickness and ill health. In a 1907 letter to an unnamed uncle still in imperial Russia, he apologized for not writing sooner and reported that "from

the beginning I was not well here." The letter described the pros and cons of his new homeland. The advancement of telephone communication, he lamented, would "do away with the writing of letters." Nonetheless, he noted the difficult

Americanism."²⁰

Shortly after his arrival in Manitoba, Penner attended Mennonite Collegiate Institute (MCI) in Gretna, where H. H. Ewert was principal. He was at MCI from September to November 1904, since he



PRIVATE COLLECTION

The Unger clan chose to stay in Russia, a decision that would have dire consequences.

social aspects of isolated rural living, with farms being so far apart. Penner noted the many good sides to his life in Canada, but observed that "we have had a hard time adjusting to the new circumstances, customs, and views – indeed to

needed a Canadian certificate to teach. This certificate enabled him to teach in an Altona school from December 1904 to June 1905.²¹ Ewert was a strong and demanding leader with an uneven temperament who headed the school for

many years; he was well regarded and respected by Penner.²²

Penner later recalled: “Quite often Ewert would invite us to his house to have dinner there. And there was a lot of conversation. Ewert and the students were very interested in the conditions in Russia. They dwelt on the socialist movement in Russia a lot. They knew I was a confirmed socialist. They were not horrified, but they doubted the correctness of my viewpoint that the tsarist regime was coming to an end. They did not believe that at all. The students were entirely opposed to the idea of socialism and so was the teacher. But surprisingly Ewert would not express himself to that effect, and I noticed he was quite a leftist.”²³

A PARTNERSHIP

Jacob felt most at home in Winnipeg’s North End, where many eastern European immigrants lived. Their cheap labour helped to build the “Chicago of the North,” as Winnipeg was often called. Jacob saw the toll of factory work on impoverished families whose parents were made to put in long shifts and six-day weeks for low wages. He made connections with labour activists and with advocates for the poor, and attended organized labour meetings. It was at a lecture by the American political activist Emma Goldman, organized by the Winnipeg Radical Club, that he met his future wife, Rose Shapack, likely in March 1908.²⁴

Jacob’s background provided for an immediate bond with Rose, who was born in Odessa around 1890. Rose (registered as Rachel with Manitoba Vital Statistics) was raised in the village of Zakharovka. Her mother Eva died when Rose and her identical twin sister Bertha (also called Beckie) were toddlers. Their father, Chaim Ben Shapack, remarried Sima, a young widow who favoured her own child from a previous marriage, Anuta, and then later Lillian, conceived by Ben and Sima’s union.²⁵

Chaim’s children by his first marriage were routinely not given fresh bread, which was reserved only for Anuta and Lillian. Rose recalled having her first taste

of fresh bread one Easter when the twin sisters were on the run during an anti-Jewish pogrom, in which the local Christian population ransacked Jewish homes and businesses. A Christian man took them in and fed them some bread.²⁶

Around ages eight or nine, the twins were sent to work as chocolate dippers and

grate during the thirty-year period prior to the First World War. Three hundred arrived in Winnipeg in 1882, and by 1911 Winnipeg’s Jewish population had grown to almost 9,000.²⁸

Prejudice in Winnipeg was not limited to Jews. Ukrainians, Poles, and Latvians who lived almost exclusively in Winnipeg’s



Margaretha, Peter, Jacob, and Louise Penner.

candy wrappers in one of Odessa’s famous candy factories. In 1905, during a time of civil unrest and political upheaval, they participated in the famous Odessa general strike, and observed aspects of the sailors’ mutiny that was commemorated in the classic Sergei Eisenstein film *Battleship Potemkin*. The strike was crushed.²⁷

Rose quickly became active in Winnipeg’s Jewish radical and cultural life. With her brother, twin sister, and others, they formed the Winnipeg Jewish Dramatic Club. Meanwhile, Jacob became a literature agent for the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC).

Being partnered with Rose would have exposed Jacob to anti-Semitism in Winnipeg. This type of prejudice would have been familiar to him. The violent persecution of Jews in the Russian empire was one reason why some chose to immi-

grate during the thirty-year period prior to the First World War. Three hundred arrived in Winnipeg in 1882, and by 1911 Winnipeg’s Jewish population had grown to almost 9,000.²⁸

North End, where the Penners resided, faced great disparities in living conditions compared to people of British origin. The rate of infant mortality in the North End, for example, was 372 per 1,000 births, well over three times the rate in the city’s predominantly British south side.²⁹

Newcomers of eastern European origins were often racialized in the news. George Fisher Chipman published two articles in *Canadian Magazine* attacking the character and intelligence of “foreigners” living in Winnipeg’s North End. These newcomers had only a few defenders, such as J. S. Woodsworth, who operated the All People’s Mission. He pleaded for help and tolerance for the new arrivals.³⁰ At a meeting in 1912 Penner met Woodsworth and later came to greatly admire this “Methodist with a mission” who preached the social gospel.

Jacob and Rose were united in their compassionate support of vulnerable people and supported political action that sought equal human rights for the working class and those of foreign cultures. Whether one's motives for social reform and basic human rights were driven by religious convictions or political ideology did not seem to matter to Jacob; he understood both motivations. Even though he and Rose were self-declared atheists, as their son shared, "Our family lived the social gospel."³¹

Jacob and Rose had an atypically long engagement for the time, characterized by romantic strolls in Winnipeg's Stella and Kildonan parks, attending operatic and theatrical events, and boating on the city's rivers and streams. In a move that was highly unconventional at the time, in 1912 they gathered friends to announce their commitment to one another without any form of religious ceremony. Much later, on January 9, 1930, they were officially married in a ceremony officiated by the Methodist minister and labour rights activist Reverend William Ivens, "for the sake of the children."³²

The late 1910s and 1920s were busy times for Jacob and Rose. Seven children arrived. A daughter, Norma (1918), lived just over one week.³³ Next came Walter (1919), Norman (1921), and Alfred (1922). Alfred had Downs syndrome. He was eventually institutionalized at a facility in Portage la Prairie where he died at age eleven. Jacob's son Roland recalled, "He was sent away because the neighbours petitioned to put Alfred away out of fear of their own children . . . Grossmomma [Margaretha Penner] got him a new sailor suit and a toy train, because he was going away on a train."³⁴ Twins Roland and Ruth arrived in 1924. Roland would become a lawyer, and later Manitoba's attorney general.

Like many families of the time, the Penner parents saved money by growing a garden. Jacob, in particular, had a green thumb. As Roland recalled, "We always had a garden; he was a good gardener – corn, potatoes, vegetables, flowers in the front yard. Verbena was one his favourites, and all of us had to take turns to weed

the lawn – there was not one weed in our lawn."³⁵ Paid by piecework, Rose and the children would supplement the family income by wrapping candies at home for the Galpern Candy factory.

The family became known in the neighbourhood as "the Red Penners." Whether in defiance or in embrace of the



In 1908, Jacob met his future wife, Rose Shapack, at a lecture by American political activist Emma Goldman.

label, some of the Penner children and their friends fell into the practice of raiding local market gardens. When tomatoes were in season, the youngsters, who called themselves "the Red Raiders," would go out armed with a paring knife and a pre-sliced loaf of the locally famous City rye bread,³⁶ appetites at the ready. On one occasion, they liberated watermelons and cantaloupes from a producer, loudly proclaiming, "The Red Raiders are here!" The owner stood up from behind his hiding spot and the chase was underway. Though they escaped, word did get back to Jacob, who "sternly made it clear that this activity was now at an end, as indeed it was."³⁷

ACTIVISM

In his adopted homeland of Canada, Jacob Penner would contribute to a grow-

ing labour rights movement through his political activity. Though Mennonites could be uncomfortable with Penner's politics, he remained connected to the community. H. H. Ewert, of MCI, made visits to Penner at the Trades and Labour Hall during events that eventually led to the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike. The purpose of these visits is not known.³⁸

As a literature agent for the Social Democratic Party of Canada, which he co-founded in 1910–11 after breaking with the SPC, Penner imported books that championed Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, as well as translations of writings by Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin. He and two associates, John Queen (who would later become mayor of Winnipeg) and Charles Manning, organized and conducted a "socialist Sunday school." They wanted to teach alternatives to conventional capitalist political models to the children of the working class, dominated by immigrants. Being fluent in Russian, German, and English would have made Penner well suited for these roles, though his linguistic capabilities and accented English also raised suspicion among his political foes.

In Canada during these years, Penner was open and completely transparent about his political leanings and activities. But his German background, anti-war tendencies,³⁹ and opposition to conscription during the First World War were disliked by customers at the flower shop where he worked, and his views eventually led to his dismissal in 1918.⁴⁰ Such anti-German sentiments, as well as harsh opposition to his outspoken political ideology, would follow him throughout his political career.

He soon found brief employment as a clerk at the Eaton's department store in downtown Winnipeg, where he quickly became involved in the newly formed clerks' union.⁴¹ Again, his political activity soon put an end to this job. He then became a salesman at the L. Galpern Candy Company, owned by Rose's brother-in-law. "A person more ill-suited to a job you could never find," said his son Roland.⁴² With a generous heart and fondness for children, he became known in the

neighbourhood as the “candy man.” By the time he had walked the two blocks to Main Street to catch the streetcar and begin his daily rounds, half the candy from his large sample case would be given away.⁴³ In the 1920s, Penner became a member of the Bakery and Confectionery Workers’ Union. According to Roland, he was never a union executive or organizer, but concentrated on action in the political realm.⁴⁴

Penner supported activities that led to the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919, but he could not be officially named as a member of the strike committee. Organizers feared that his perceived German-Russian background would only confirm their opponents’ claim that the strike was a Bolshevik conspiracy, and that this would be used to destabilize the movement in a public relations war.⁴⁵ When the leaders of the Winnipeg General Strike

were arrested and the strike crushed in June 1919, Penner became active in the Defense Committee, which raised money to defend the leaders of the strike against charges of seditious conspiracy.

During the Winnipeg General Strike, Penner was likely following news of the civil war back in Russia that had been precipitated by the revolutions of 1917.⁴⁶ Penner did not consider the General Strike a move toward revolution. “It was purely a trade union strike,” he said, with the main aim of having “the principle of collective bargaining recognized.”⁴⁷ In the years that followed Penner would commit himself to the communist movement. At a secret meeting in Guelph, Ontario, in 1921, the Communist Party of Canada was founded. Penner was named Western Organizer. However, the party decided not to publicly announce its formation out of fear that Section 98 of the Criminal Code,

enacted to crush the Winnipeg General Strike, might be employed to indict the leadership of the new party. It operated under the name of the Workers’ Party of Canada, which included communists and non-communists, until in 1924, when it openly became the Communist Party of Canada, affiliated with the international Communist movement.⁴⁸

Politically, these years must have been a blur for Penner. He was roundly defeated in a 1921 run for federal office, and again in 1927 for provincial office, before eventually being elected as a Communist candidate to Winnipeg’s city council. In the next issue of *Preservings* I will continue to explore the political career of Jacob P. Penner.

Dan Dyck is a self-directed student of history. He is distantly related to Jacob Penner through both his parents’ lineages. This was discovered midway through the research for this project.

1 Special thanks to Kathy Penner, Cathy Gulkin, Lori Penner, Wendy and Ron Dueck, Conrad Stoesz, Mennonite Heritage Archives, Chris Kotecki, and Manitoba Provincial Archives, for their assistance and freely sharing of resources. Thank you to first readers Conrad Stoesz and Randy Penner, who made excellent suggestions for improvements. Any errors are my own.

2 Delbert Plett, “Penners of Friedensfeld, Russia: Part Two,” *Preservings*, no. 9, part 1 (1996): 26.

3 Plett, “Penners of Friedensfeld, Russia: Part Two,” 28.

4 Johann W. Dueck, “The Johann Dueck (1801–1866) Family,” in *History and Events*, ed. and trans. Delbert F. Plett (Steinbach: D. F. Plett Farms, 1982), 87.

5 J. Dueck, “Johann Dueck Family,” 86.

6 Wendy Dueck, “The Penners of Friedensfeld, Russia: Part One” *Preservings*, no. 8, part 2 (1996): 34.

7 Wendy and Ron Dueck, telephone interview, Nov. 20, 2020, quoted with permission.

8 Profile # 707378, GRanDMA (The Genealogical Registry and Database of Mennonite Ancestry) database, v6.2.49 (California Mennonite Historical Society).

9 Wendy and Ron Dueck, interview. Ron recalls reading that Peter D. Penner’s family looked down on him for the way he had used family estate money that siblings felt belonged to them.

10 Roland Penner, *A Glowing Dream: A Memoir* (Winnipeg: J. Gordon Shillingford Publishing, 2007), 16.

11 Wendy and Ron Dueck, interview.

12 Wikipedia, s.v. “History of Riga,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Riga.

13 Roland Penner, *Glowing Dream*, 16.

14 Cathy Gulkin, email correspondence, Aug. 20, 2019.

15 Jacob Penner, television interview, Eye to Eye, CBC Manitoba, 1962, Cathy Gulkin collection. For more of Jacob Penner’s own words, see Jacob Penner, “Recollections of the Early Socialist Movement in Winnipeg,” *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 7, no. 14 (1974): 366–378.

16 Wendy and Ron Dueck, interview.

17 The first Mennonite church in Winnipeg was the Winnipeg City Mission, which began in 1907. In 1913 it was officially organized as a congregation, as the North End Mennonite

Brethren Church.

18 Wendy and Ron Dueck, interview.

19 Roland Penner, video interview, 2000, Cathy Gulkin collection.

20 Victor G. Doerksen, trans. and introduction, “A Letter from Winnipeg in 1907,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 15 (1997): 191–196. Jacob apparently worked for a time in the fruit orchards of British Columbia upon his arrival in Canada, though precise dates are not clear. In the letter to his uncle he writes glowingly of conditions and opportunities in that province. This episode of his life is not noted in son Roland Penner’s memoirs, although this letter is reprinted there. One can speculate that the presence of family drew him back to Manitoba.

21 John Dyck, comp., “Manitoba Mennonites Attending Post-Secondary Schools, 1890–1924: Brief Biographical Sketches,” ed. Adolf Ens, *Preservings*, no. 27 (2007): 68.

22 Gerhard J. Ens, “Die Schule muss seine”: *A History of the Mennonite Collegiate Institute* (Gretna, MB: Mennonite Collegiate Institute, 1990), 50.

23 Ens, *History of the Mennonite Collegiate Institute*, 51.

24 Roland Penner, *A Glowing Dream*, 17–18. Rose’s story is worthy of its own research and study.

25 Roland Penner, *Glowing Dream*, 17.

26 Ruth Penner, video interview by Cathy Gulkin, 2000, Cathy Gulkin collection.

27 Roland Penner, *Glowing Dream*, 17; see also Ruth Penner, interview.

28 Jim Blanchard, *Winnipeg 1912* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2005), 189–212.

29 Stefan Epp-Koop, *We’re Going To Run This City: Winnipeg’s Political Left After the General Strike* (University of Manitoba Press, Winnipeg, 2015), 11.

30 Blanchard, 209.

31 Roland Penner, interview.

32 Roland Penner, *Glowing Dream*, 25.

33 Jacob Penner’s GRanDMA profile (#789820) shows two infants, one unnamed, and one named Norma, who did not survive childhood. Manitoba Vital Statistics lists only one of these infants, a child named Leonora. Surviving family members Wendy and Ron Dueck speculate that Norma and

Leonora are the same child. There is no family memory of the unnamed child in the GRanDMA database.

34 Ruth and Roland Penner, video interview by Cathy Gulkin, background for *A Scattering of Seeds*, White Pine Pictures, episode 33, 2000, Cathy Gulkin collection.

35 Ibid.

36 City Bread is a North End Winnipeg kosher bakery that produces a light rye bread said to be unique to Winnipeg.

37 Roland Penner, *Glowing Dream*, 244n22.

38 Ens, *History of the Mennonite Collegiate Institute*, 51.

39 Although son Roland and other sources describe Jacob Penner as a pacifist, he himself in a video interview said, “I was not a pacifist . . . but I disagreed with World War I. I regarded it as a trade dispute between Great Britain and Germany. I considered that Canada had no interest in this dispute.” J. Penner, interview.

40 Roland Penner, interview.

41 Penner was one of the originating members of the Retail Clerks’ International Union and was still a member at the time of the Winnipeg General Strike. Roland Penner, *Glowing Dream*, 159.

42 Roland Penner, interview.

43 Roland Penner, *Glowing Dream*, 27.

44 Roland Penner, *Glowing Dream*, 159. This claim is contradicted by another source that claims Penner was General Executive Secretary of the Food Workers’ Industrial Union, headquartered in Winnipeg. – John Hanley Grover, “Winnipeg Meat Packing Workers’ Path to Union Recognition and Collective Bargaining,” (Master’s thesis, University of Winnipeg, 1996), 52–53.

45 Roland Penner, *Glowing Dream*, 24.

46 We know Penner had some direct access to news from Russia. A report by an undercover agent to the Royal Northwest Mounted Police dated July 3, 1919, says Penner admitted having in his possession two anti-Bolshevik newspapers, brought back to Winnipeg by his brother after a visit to Siberia. Roland Penner, *Glowing Dream*, appendix 3.

47 J. Penner, interview.

48 Roland Penner, *Glowing Dream*, 26.

A HUTTERIAN PROPOSAL

Dora Maendel

On a frosty, September morning in the Hutterian village of Hutterdorf in the Molotschna district of South Russia, Michael Mändel and his eldest son were milking their cows when Jacob first expressed his startling wish.

“I think I want to get married!”

“Mensch, why would you do that?”

“*Tja* – with Waldner David and Glanzer Paul married last Sunday, it’s time I started looking around too, no?”

“You are almost twenty.”

“That’s David’s age, and Paul is eighteen.”

“I was twenty when I married your mother; she was twenty-one. Who is your *Hullerstaugen*?”

“Oh, no one in particular ...”

“Well, if you want my advice, go and talk to Kleinsasser Susie. On that acreage near Scheromet.”

“You mean the Jacob Gross widow?!”

“Die Sohn, jo!”

“Oh – maybe I should wait then.”

“There’s nothing to hinder you, not even the Johann Cornies rule, ‘No marriage before mastering a trade!’ You know farming as well as I do.”

“Let me wait some yet.”

* * *

The Mändels were Hutterites, whose Anabaptist forebears had fled to Moravia early in the sixteenth century to escape persecution. The Peasants’ War of 1524–25 had been unsuccessful in achieving any degree of improved living conditions for the peasants. The group followed Anabaptism’s two most important tenets: nonviolence and believer’s baptism.

In 1528, two hundred people left a group of Anabaptists who had been living

in Nikolsburg to go to Austerlitz. On the journey they camped in a deserted village, where necessity inspired their leaders to spread a cloak on the ground and urge their people to lay their possessions on it to be shared by everyone according to need, in the pattern of the early apostolic church after Pentecost. Known as “community of goods,” this practice was quickly recognized as a brilliant survival technique and a valid form of expressing Christian love.

In 1529, Jacob Hutter, pastor of the Anabaptists in Tyrol, Austria, arrived in Moravia to investigate the possibility of bringing his congregants to Austerlitz to escape persecution. In 1533 he was elected to the position of *Vorsteher* (elder). In addition to escorting small groups to Moravia, Hutter provided strong, decisive leadership, which led to the group being given his name.

Hutterites were expelled from Moravia in 1622, after which they sojourned in Hungary and Transylvania, where continued persecution weakened the community. By 1690 they had abandoned community of goods. In October 1755 a group of Lutheran refugees from the province of Carinthia in Austria arrived in Transylvania near the beleaguered Hutterite settlement of Alvinz. The Austrian Lutherans attended Hutterian services and became inspired by the community of goods teaching, prompting the Hutterites to revive communal living, an event known in Hutterite history as the Carinthian Revival. The Lutheran family surnames of those who eventually joined the Hutterian group included Glanzer, Hofer, Kleinsasser, Waldner, and Wurtz.

In October 1767, sixty-seven Hutterites began the arduous trek over the Carpathian Mountains into Wallachia, Romania, where they succeeded in building communities and established a variety of trades. Less than a year later, however, war broke out between the Turks and the Russians. The Hutterian communities were raided by both Russian and Turkish soldiers. On April 10, 1770, the Hutterites migrated north into the Russian empire, arriving in present-day Ukraine on August 1 to settle on the estate of Count Peter Alexandrovich Rumiantsev. The village of



CHRISTOPH ERHARD

The Mändels were Hutterites, whose Anabaptist forebears had fled to Moravia early in the sixteenth century to escape persecution.



The Hutterites settled on the estate of Count Peter Alexandrovich Rumiantsev, who was a Russian military general.

Vishenka was established on the Desna River, northeast of Kiev, with supplies ordered by Rumiantsev.

In 1771, it was decided that Paul Glanzer should return to Wallachia and Transylvania to convince family members who had converted to other faiths to rejoin the community in Russia. From 1771–1795 seven such journeys were undertaken, some more fruitful than others, and fifty-six people chose to travel to Vishenka and become part of the community. En route through Transylvania and Hungary, Hutterite travellers also encountered Mennonite communities in Poland and Prussia. From these, fifteen families, with the names Decker, Entz, Gross, and Knels, joined the Hutterites and went to Vishenka. In Hungary, former Hutterites, named Mändel, Tschetter, Walter, and Wollman, were persuaded to join.

Upon the death of Count Rumiantsev in 1796, his sons attempted to make the Hutterites their serfs, and in 1802, on the advice of a Russian state representative,

the Hutterites moved to Radichev, thirteen miles northeast on the Desna River. Although the community flourished initially, the death of the older brethren left a new inexperienced generation that was untried by tribulation and therefore less disciplined. In addition, the land in Radichev was of poor quality and unable to support the population. Conflict resulted and a split developed over the practice of community of goods.

The group led by Jacob Walter, which wanted to abandon this practice, took its share of the property and moved almost six hundred kilometres south to settle near Mennonites at Chortitza. Later at Radichev, a fire in 1819 destroyed most of the buildings, and the remaining property was divided up among those who had remained.

Upon hearing of the dissolution of the community of goods, Walter's group returned to Radichev. Some large buildings were used communally, but the land and livestock were divided among the fifty families who now lived individ-

ually. Half of these families moved across the Desna River and the rest remained at Radichev.

After this, community life steadily deteriorated, and by 1842 many young people were illiterate. Under the guidance and supervision of the Mennonite reformer Johann Cornies, they moved 640 kilometres south to the Molotschna area, where they established the community of Huttertal, modelled after Mennonite villages. Learning modern farming methods from Mennonites, they soon flourished. Children attended village schools; adults attended night school.

Hutterites continued to elect their own ministers and to use the old sermons from the seventeenth century, though there was distinct uneasiness when ministers read the Pentecost sermons, based on the second chapter of Acts, with its description of living in common. In 1852 a second village was established and named Johannesruh in honour of Johann Cornies. By 1868 there were five Hutterite villages, including Hutterdorf

and Scheromet.

In 1859, as a result of the efforts of three ministers, Jacob Hofer, Michael Waldner, and Darius Walter, and a miraculous vision experienced by Waldner, the practice of community of goods was renewed, forty years after it had been abandoned. Waldner and Walter each established communal living in Hutterdorf, one group at either end of the village. In the centre were those who continued to live individually, led by their minister Jacob Wipf, a teacher.

In 1864, the Russian state began to introduce a series of reforms that transformed Mennonite and Hutterite communities. An edict was enacted that made Russian the language of instruction in schools, and a few years later the state announced it would establish universal military service. A delegation of Mennonites, and Hutterites travelled to North America to investigate settling there. Paul and Lorenz Tschetter were the Hutterite representatives; Paul, a minister, and Lorenz, his nephew, were from a noncommunal Hutterite group. Paul kept a diary of this journey, from April 14 to June 27, 1873. On June 7, 1874, the two groups of Hutterites who were living communally boarded the SS *Hammonia* in Hamburg, Germany, arriving in New York on July 5.

Lorenz Tschetter returned to Russia specifically to persuade minister Jacob Wipf and the people of Johannesruh to immigrate to the United States, which they did in 1877, but it was 1879 before the last of the noncommunal Hutterites left Russia. In the United States, Michael Waldner's group became known as "Schmiedeleut," because he had been a blacksmith (*Schmied*), Darius Walter's group became known as "Dariusleut," and Jacob Wipf's group became known as "Lehrerleut," because he was a teacher (*Lehrer*).

* * *

Michael Mändel (b. 1833) and his wife, Anna Waldner (b. 1832), were in the non-communal group. They were married on November 21, 1853, and had seven children. Jacob (1855), Maria (1860), Anna (1862), Michael (1865), Johann (1867),

Joseph (1868), and Paul (1871). Jacob's birth occurred thirteen years after the move to the Molotschna area, so he and his siblings attended school and benefitted from the rich, rural lifestyle made possible by the South Russian climate, the fertile

ing farewell to the trees whose growth they had helped foster by watering and weeding. The trees had just begun bearing plums and pears when the Mändel family abandoned them.

After the marriage conversation with



PRIVATE COLLECTION

Jacob Mändel, the patriarch of the Maendel families in Manitoba.

land of the steppe, and the gardens and fruit-tree planting program organized and imposed by Johann Cornies. They learned livestock production and had contact with other people of German background – in contrast to the isolation they experienced in Radichev. Years later, in North America, these siblings would reminisce and relate to their grandchildren their heartbreak-

his father, Jacob naively – or cleverly – brought it up again. Again, Michael Mändel suggested that Jacob speak to Sohn (an abbreviation of the name Susanne), the widow.

"She has three children and she is nine years older than me!"

"Yes. She is a brave woman and good and *klug* [smart] – and she has a property!"

When Jacob continued to waffle, his father responded with an order: “Go and harness our horse to the wagon. We are going to visit Sohn!”

Together they drove over to make their proposal, and Sohn accepted. On November 2, 1874, Susie Kleinsasser and Jacob Mändel were married. On August 26, 1875, a daughter, Anna was born to the Mändels, but she died in infancy. Their son Jacob was born on November 28, 1877.

Like many of the noncommunal Hutterites, Jacob and Sohn homesteaded a quarter section of land in Hutchinson County, South Dakota, ostensibly with the intention of doing it for the colony (a term used in America for Hutterite communities where communal living had been established). There is evidence that Sohn expressed some concern about being on their own, away from the colony. Homesteaders were required to break the land, dig a well, and build a fence or a house during their first year to lay legal claim to it. Jacob promised Sohn that it was temporary, and he would return to the colony when she wished.

It was the ideal life for Jacob; he relished the freedom and the interaction with his non-Hutterite neighbours. His language became colourful and he took up smoking. When the year of homesteading was over, he was far from ready to settle down in a Hutterite colony. “There is plenty of time,” he assured Sohn. The story has it that he even placated the colony minister by signing over ownership of the homesteaded land to the colony while continuing to enjoy his freedom.

One day Sohn gave Jacob an ultimatum. Sohn’s three children, Susanna (1867), Paul (1869), and Maria (1871), were approaching adolescence. She had watched her children returning from school and it struck her how happy and comfortable they were as they laughed and chattered with their non-Hutterite schoolmates. “Jacob,” she said, “it’s now or never that we return to the colony. If my children marry non-Hutterites, I am not returning to the colony!” It is not difficult to picture Jacob sadly smoking a final pipe before beginning preparations to move.

“Good,” he told Sohn that Sunday. “Get everyone ready. We are driving to Bon Homme Colony in time for church!” At Bon Homme he formally requested of the minister to join and was accepted. Later when they visited their Lehrerleut relatives at Elm Spring Colony, they were aghast. “Why would you join a Schmiedeleut colony? They hardly have anything to eat!”

“They live a more genuine communal life, though!” Jacob retorted.

Jacob and Sohn had five more children: Michael (1880), John (1882), Joseph, (1886), Peter (1888), who died in infancy, and Anna (1891).

Jacob made his presence known in the colony. Once, during winter woodcutting, the minister of the colony called a brotherhood meeting to deal with an infraction by one of the men. As was customary, another brother was sent to call him to the meeting, but he refused the summons. Later, out in the woods, Jacob saw this recalcitrant brother working among the trees. Picking up a stout stick, Jacob walked over to him and said, “Listen! The next time you are called to *Stübl* (a brotherhood meeting), I would suggest you respond. Otherwise, you and I will deal with the matter back here.” He brandished the stick sternly in the man’s face. Thankfully, the brother complied.

Another time, Jacob was at the colony mill watching the water flowing beneath the huge wheel, not high enough to turn it. After studying it for a while, he announced, “We can easily fix this by damming the flow downriver!” He was right. By strategically erecting some boards, the water was trapped, and the raised water turned the millwheel.

Later, however, Jacob Wipf, the Lehrerleut elder complained that damming the river that way effectively prevented his colony from harvesting the fish as before. Not a popular man, Wipf never spoke the Hutterian dialect. Instead, he always spoke the standard High German he had learned in a Mennonite school, which gave him a haughty air. When he heard that damming the river was Jacob Mändel’s doing, he expostulated in impeccable German, “Ober Jakob! Du hast uns unsere Fische beraubt! Du verstehst doch,

wo die Fische herkommen?” (Goodness Jacob, you have robbed us of our fresh fish supply! Surely you understand where fish come from?)

Jacob replied, “Jo, ich weiss es – von unter deiner Tucht kummen sie!” (Yes, I understand! They come from underneath your feather quilt!)

When our Fairholme uncle John told us this story, he always chuckled and added, “It was not a nice reply at all, but . . .”

In 1914, just four years before the Hutterites immigrated to Canada, Sohn Ankela (Grandmother Susanne) passed away at the age of sixty-eight, and was buried in the cemetery at Rosedale Colony, near Mitchell, South Dakota. A year later, on June 13, 1915, Jacob married Anna Waldner, a Lehrerleut woman. They had one daughter, Rebecca.

In his senior years, Jacob found his forced inactivity difficult and spent as much time as possible sitting outside. One summer day, he was enthralled by an oriole singing in a tree right by his house. Calling his grandsons over, he instructed them to go to the horse barn and pluck some long hairs from the horses’ tails. When they returned with these, he tied them together to create a snare. Then he told the boys to place the noose on the grass and place some worms inside it as bait for the oriole. “Now give me the other end,” he asked, and sat patiently holding it. Later, when the oriole hopped over to eat the worms, he pulled the end of the horsehair string and caught it. Then he placed it in a cage inside the house and waited for it to sing as beautifully as it had outside. To his great disappointment, the bird remained silent, and he sadly let it go again.

Jacob Mändel died on August 16, 1934. He is buried in the cemetery at Rosedale Colony, Elie, Manitoba. He was the patriarch and Sohn was the matriarch of the Maendel Hutterian families in Manitoba.

Dora Maendel grew up in the New Rosedale Hutterite Colony, but lives and teaches in the daughter colony of Fairholme, near Portage la Prairie, Manitoba. She heard the story of her great-grandparents Sohn and Jacob from her local aunt and uncles, and from Maendels in far-flung colonies.

RETURNING HOME

Martin B. Fast in Molotschna Colony

Katherine Peters Yamada

In the opening pages of his book *Reisebericht und Kurze Geschichte der Mennoniten* (A travelogue and brief history of the Mennonites), Martin B. Fast wrote that he had long wished to make a trip back to his homeland in South Russia.¹ This wasn't such an unusual idea. Many people who had left the colonies in the 1870s returned to visit those who had remained. Fast, who was the editor of *Die Mennonitische Rundschau*, distributed in North America, Europe, and Russia, hoped to contact not only friends and relatives, but also church and community leaders he had become acquainted with through his work.



Fast's boyhood church, Neukirch Mennonite Church. Photo ca. 2000.

Sailing from New York in May 1908, he disembarked in Bremerhaven and boarded a train for Hamburg, where he visited Hinrich van der Smissen, the pastor of the Hamburg-Altona Mennonite Church. Van der Smissen was also editor of the *Mennonitische Blätter*, which had the distinction of being the oldest periodical of German Mennonites.

As the two men walked to the church, Fast observed that the parsonage and the

church buildings, both built of brick, were already quite old. In the library, van der Smissen showed him many old and valuable volumes and a letter written in Menno Simon's own hand. Fast was allowed to take two small books home and wrote that he planned to publish an excerpt in the *Rundschau*. Although the church's membership was quite large, Fast learned that many members lived some distance away and only a few attended services. When he returned the next day to celebrate Ascension Day, he wasn't surprised to see just eighteen worshippers in the large sanctuary.

FROM BERLIN

The next morning, Fast left for Berlin. He informed his readers that "Berlin's streets are beautifully clean and the imperial castles, the government buildings, and the residences of the wealthy are all more or less practical and massively built." After seeing the sights from a tour bus, he made his way to the large station on Friedrich Street and waited for the train to Warsaw, which would take him into the Russian empire.

Warsaw's station was crowded and busy. Fast quickly realized that he did not know which train went to Molotschna, and help was not forthcoming. Fast observed: "No one knew anything about Halbstadt." Luckily he recalled the German village of Prischib, on the outskirts of the Molotschna colony.

He was able to purchase a third-class ticket that took him as far as Kiev. In that historic city, he visited several churches and observed the rites of the Greek

Catholics. "I saw much there that I found very interesting," he wrote. Fast showed curiosity about the religious culture of the city, commenting: "For centuries Kiev has been the holy seat (of the Orthodox church) and even today it is the centre to which every Russian makes a pilgrimage if at all possible. Huge sums were collected in Russia in order to build the great churches. The golden cupolas shine and gleam in the sunshine."

He left Kiev on the evening train. At the next stop, Fast spoke to two young German-speaking men who were just boarding. They advised him to take the train to Aleksandrovsk and then hire a carriage to Schoenwiese, an industrial centre on the edge of town. There he could rest before continuing to Prischib.

In Schoenwiese, Fast received a friendly welcome from the village elder named Siemens, who invited him to spend the night. His wife told Fast about a violent pogrom against the Jewish population that took place in 1905. Fast informed his readers that Frau Siemens had witnessed unrest among the population and "a number of Jews [had] fled to her place. She took the women and children under her wing." During this pogrom, local inhabitants destroyed Jewish businesses and left more than thirty Jews dead.

The next morning, Fast was awakened at three o'clock and driven back to Aleksandrovsk, where he boarded the southbound train. "When I finally found a seat, the sleeping passenger sitting across from me seemed familiar. And sure enough, quite unexpectedly I was among brethren. Brothers Suckau and Abr. Isaak I still remembered, although I couldn't recall their names immediately. There were more brothers on the train; they had just come from Kotlyarevka, where they had participated in a conference of the Mennonite Brethren and were returning now to Rueckenau."

TO MOLOTSCHNA

Fast and his new companions departed the train at Prischib station, which was some distance from town. When he saw the onrush of the carriage drivers, he was "glad that [he] had not come alone or in



Martin B. Fast, editor of *Die Mennonitische Rundschau*, visited the Molotschna colony in 1908. Photo ca. 1908.

the evening.” They engaged a carriage and headed for Prischib, just outside the Molotschna colony. Now their travelling party included Brother Braun of Neu-Halbstadt and his elderly mother, who had just returned from the far north. The road to Prischib was very poor. Fast learned from his companions that this was normal: “Brother Suckau said that the road is always bad – a lot of dust in the summer and in winter all mud. We swallowed as little dust as possible, but it was really very unpleasant.”

They came to the Molochnaia River. The bridge and the embankment were high, but Fast reported there was no water in the riverbed. For Fast, crossing the bridge had symbolic meaning: “We passed over the bridge and found

ourselves in Mennonite territory.” He noted that the tall poplars, “which used to stand so splendidly and offered cool shade to the passersby,” were withering away. As they drove through Halbstadt, Fast looked for changes made after he left in 1877. He noted that everything seemed familiar, except the addition of a large steam-driven mill.

When they crossed the “Wolfslegt,” which was just as “deep and crooked” as it had been when he was young, Fast knew they were close to his birthplace, Tiegerweide. His fellow travellers gave the Russian driver instructions to enter the yard of Fast’s uncle, Bernhard Fast. On the yard, no one recognized him. After he identified himself, Fast’s aunt responded, “Well, now, I’ll first go get a picture.” He

then passed on greetings from his family, cleaned the dust off his clothes, and had coffee. Later, they walked outside to look at the yard where he had played as a child.

Fast recalled that “Tiegerweide used to be off the beaten path.” In his day, the school building was small and unattractive – the teachers changed frequently. “In six years, I had five different teachers. And they were not allowed to change the pronunciation of the old Low German alphabet. How much has changed! Now a massive school building stands along the street and the equipment and furnishings – everything is modern.”

TO RUECKENAU

They arrived in Tiegerweide the day before Ascension Day. Fast had already

celebrated this holiday in Germany at the Hamburg-Altona Mennonite Church, which used the Gregorian calendar. But Russia was still on the Julian calendar, and therefore thirteen days behind western European countries. The next morning, Fast and two of his cousins drove to Rueckenau for the meeting. “The road to Rueckenau was still the same as it had been years before,” he noted. This was the village where his mother, Aganetha Barkman, had been born and raised. In 1904, just four years before Fast’s visit, a huge fire had broken out and destroyed the buildings in at least thirty-five farmyards.²

While the road was the same, the fire had changed the village. As Fast remarked, “There lay the village before me; completely different from how I had left it thirty-one years ago. The tin roofs and the beautifully painted gables, etc., show from a distance that everything is new.” They drove down into the village and saw that a few of the old fences were still standing; however, little else remained from the former town. Fast sought landmarks, “but

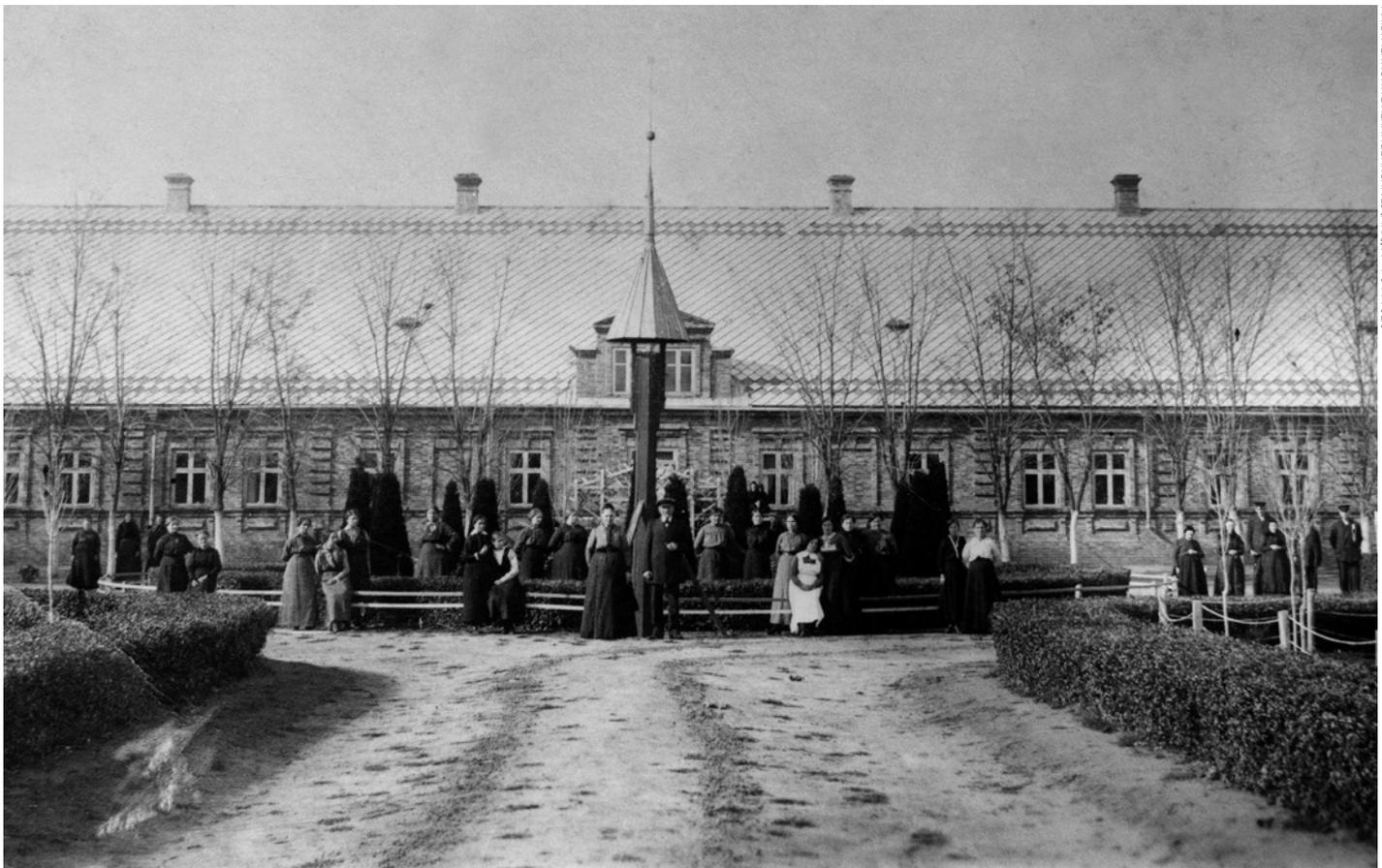
everything looked strange.” He eventually recognized the Mennonite Brethren (MB) church at the northern edge of the village.

At the door of the church they met Brother Wilhelm Loewen, from Alexanderkrone, who invited Fast to sit in front of the pulpit and speak to the congregation. This was a new experience for Fast. He had grown up in the Mennonite church in Neukirch, and had not been permitted to attend services in the Mennonite Brethren meetinghouse in Rueckenau. “I saw many brothers and sisters at the meeting, grey-haired and in some cases even white. In those former days you wouldn’t have believed that you would ever meet them, or even see yourself, in an MB church.” Afterwards, he greeted many old friends, commenting, “It is remarkable how you get carried away with emotions in such circumstances.”

Fast spent the night with Brother and Sister Gerhard Martens. “Brother Gerhard is – I really am not sure what title to give him – maybe a sort of arch-deacon.” Fast listened in astonishment

as Martens recounted all his activities. He was impressed: “The MB churches in the Molotschna [colony] have already built and maintain a number of meeting houses. I think we in America can learn something from this.”

In the afternoon he walked with his friends to the home where his Barkman grandparents had lived. His grandfather, Martin Barkman, who was born in 1796 in Prussia, left for Russia in 1818 with his older brother to avoid military conscription. Travelling by night, they hid under grain stocks by day. Martin married Katharina Epp Regier in 1819 and they acquired a farm (*Wirtschaft*) in Rueckenau. It included a brick hay shed, which only the more established farmers could afford. He served as mayor of the village for a time. Martin and Katharina had nine healthy children; they all grew to adulthood, married, and had their own families. Their seventh child, Aganetha, married Peter Fast and gave birth to Martin B. Fast in 1857.



MAID Mennonite HERITAGE ARCHIVES (MHA), pp.4-044-7010

On his way to Tiege, Fast passed the Kuruschan home for the elderly.



TO NEUKIRCH

Fast later attended a service in his boyhood church at Neukirch. This church was organized in 1863, when Fast was about six years old, as an offshoot of the Ohrloff Mennonite Church, the oldest congregation in Molotschna. The Neukirch church building was erected two years after the congregation was founded. In 1905, the church had 402 registered members.³

As Fast drove into the churchyard, he saw the sand-strewn walkway, and thought back to the time when, as a young boy, he was “so proud that this was my church too.” He had only been in the *Ohm-Stübchen* (anteroom) a few moments when Brother Gerhard Epp and “dear ‘Uncle’ Abraham Goerz, the church elder,” entered. Goerz had ministered to

Jacob Dick’s residence in Steinbach.

his family before they had departed from Russia. Fast was overcome with emotion: “My heart was so full.” As he entered the church, he saw a large assembly with young people seated in front, “because after all it was the Sunday before Pentecost!”

After the service, they drove to Alexanderkrone to visit family. The main streets of the two villages were connected by a bridge over the Iushanlee (Juschanlee) River, and Fast saw many vehicles driving over. Learning that there was a baptism in Lichtfelde, he expressed a wish to attend. He discovered that the baptismal candidates were from Rueckenau. Fast commented, “The people who had been tested about their faith in Rueckenau on Thursday [Ascension Day] were now being baptized here. In Rueckenau the water was too shallow but there was still a lot [of

water] in the Juschanlee near Lichtfelde.”

They also visited a Mennonite Brethren home for the elderly in Rueckenau started by the minister and historian P. M. Friesen. As Fast observed, “The widows and the old men all seemed to be happy. The furnishings are very simple. Thank God that among our people there are now a number of lovely homes in which the elderly who have no home can lead a carefree life.”

TO TIEGE

During the evening, Fast heard about the Maria School for the Deaf in Tiege. He asked his friend Jakob Neuman to drive him early the next morning to meet the children and their teachers before they left for the school break. On their way west to Tiege, they passed another home for the elderly, Kuruschan Altenheim. At the time there were forty-nine residents,



including “twelve married couples, nineteen widows, three unmarried women, and three fallen women.”

The grounds of the home included a cemetery. Fast shared with his readers that the director, David Epp, had asked the residents to select a plot where they would be buried. As Fast explained: “[Epp] didn’t set it as a condition but he did say he would like to fill one quarter [of the cemetery] first. The next morning they each brought their copy of the plot plan and on it their designated spot. But no one had chosen the quarter that was to be filled first!”

Fast and Neuman continued southwest, following the road along the Kuroshany (Kuruschan) River. He saw several farms that reminded him of the United States. Fast noted: “It looks just as if you were driving down a section road

in Nebraska or Kansas. To be sure, the building style is still that of our fathers but there are a few deviations from the old style. You see large, beautiful gardens and plantings; also a large factory where metal roof panels are made, located near the old large sheep farm.”

After a long drive, they finally arrived in Rosenort. The rows of houses looked the same as when his grandparents lived there. His grandfather, Bernhard Fast, had been the schoolmaster for thirty-eight years in both Rosenort and Johannesruh. His grandmother, Justina Isaak, was a sister of historian Franz Isaak.

Blumenort was not far away and Tiege, the next village over, was their destination. Tiege, one of the earliest villages of the Molotschna colony, was established in 1805 on the south bank of the Kuroshany River. The location reminded

one settler of the Tiege River that flowed through his home village in Prussia and he had requested the name. In addition to the Maria School for the Deaf, the village boasted a girls’ school and a doctor’s office.⁴

Fast was impressed by the school for the deaf. He commented that the building was “beautiful and built massively.” He was introduced to teachers Unruh and Janzen, who took time from their busy schedules to present the students to him. The school, named after Tsar Alexander II’s wife Maria, offered a nine-year elementary education, along with training in woodworking, sewing, basket weaving, and other skills. An annual sale of crafts raised funds for the school. Considered one of the finest schools of its kind in Russia for its low student-teacher ratio, it had well-trained teachers who

were properly paid.⁵

They drove on as far as Ohrloff, which had 510 residents and numerous businesses, several schools, a church, and a hospital, before returning to Tiegerweide for night.⁶

TO MARGENAU

After more visits, Fast packed a satchel and left Tiegerweide with his friend G. Plett, who drove him to his cousin Jul. Barkman's home. Barkman lived in Alexanderwohl, founded in 1821 by a Flemish congregation from West Prussia. The village received its name after a chance meeting with Tsar Alexander I as the congregation migrated to the Molotschna colony. The tsar wished them well (*wohl*) in their journey and they named their village in memory of this event. The entire village left for Kansas in 1874 and other Molotschna colony residents moved into Alexanderwohl after their departure.⁷

Fast left Alexanderwohl early in the morning for Margenau. Minister Jakob Thiessen of Neukirch drove him there to attend a Pentecost service and an ordination. Fast wrote: "Peter Friesen, the son of Jakob F. Friesen of Tiegerweide, was for some years the elder of the Margenau congregation. He had died about a year previously and the congregation had elected Plett from Hierschau as elder. He was willing to take over the responsibilities of an elder but only under certain conditions; one of the conditions was that he be allowed to introduce foot washing, something the majority of the congregation was against. In the end, however, the congregation gave in and the ordination date was set."

By the time Fast and Thiessen arrived, the small, old church was already filled. "We went into the 'Ohm-Stübchen' and were astonished to meet a large number of preachers, deacons, and bishops there. It was suggested and then agreed to that the 'American' would open the service. I am not ordinarily so shy but facing this large assemblage I felt a bit weak. The church could not contain all the guests. All three

Students at the Maria School for the Deaf. This school, named after Tsar Alexander II's wife, offered a nine-year elementary education.







Fast visited the Maria School for the Deaf to meet the students and teachers.

floors and the corridors were crowded.”

After Fast spoke, Koop, the elder of the congregation in Alexanderkrone, gave an address appropriate to the occasion. After Plett had answered the usual questions, he was ordained and blessed by Koop. As Fast recalled, “All the preachers and elders were given the opportunity to welcome him. The goodwill wishes and blessings were of varying lengths, some short, some long, some poetical, others in prose.”

Plett then gave a “serious and all-encompassing address. Among other things, he said that he has taken up the work not as a *kirchlich*, nor as a Baptist, nor as a separatist – but rather as an evangelical. We were pleased at the courage that he showed in saying this.” After the service, Fast returned with Thiessen to Alexanderwohl, where they enjoyed the usual holiday meal.

In the morning, the second day of

Pentecost, they drove back to Rueckenau for a service. Fast described the religious atmosphere of the meeting: “We were happily surprised to hear so many brothers and sisters pray. The missionary Abr. Friesen preached to the children.” His friends, the Gerhard Dicks of Alexanderkrone, and their children were there, just back from Siberia, and he lunched at their table in the church dining room. There, he met many friends. In the afternoon, holy communion was observed.

TO STEINBACH

After the meeting, he left Rueckenau with Brother and Sister Gerhard Enns and travelled to Steinfeld. Fast wanted to make his way to Gnadenfeld for a mission festival. Toward evening, Enns drove Fast to Steinbach; he would be able to continue to Gnadenfeld in the morning. This was Fast’s first visit to a Mennonite-owned

estate. Most Mennonites had settled in villages, but others rented land for large farming operations. Steinbach, established by Klaas Klaas Wiens, was considered the first estate owned by a Mennonite. Wiens and his wife, Anna, had arrived in South Russia in 1803 and he was delegated to plan, organize, and lay out what became the Molotschna colony.⁸ In 1812, Wiens leased a large estate from the Russian state. It was along the Iuschanlee River at the southern edge of the colony, between Steinfeld and Elisabethal. Wiens covered much of the land with new trees. Six years later, Tsar Alexander I was so impressed on his visit to the estate that he granted Wiens a large landholding.

The couple had four children, including a daughter who married Peter Schmidt. When Wiens died in 1820, ownership of the estate was transferred to Schmidt. It was still in the Schmidt family when Fast



MAID Mennonite Heritage Archives, pp. 22 - PHOTO COL. 639-170



MAID MHA, pp. 22 - PHOTO COL. 639-200

Call for Artefacts

Mennonite Emigration from Canada to Mexico

Andrea Klassen

On March 8, 1922, the first train carrying Mennonites from Canada arrived in the Mexican town of San Antonio de los Arenales (now known as Cuauhtémoc). During the 1920s nearly eight thousand Mennonites from Old Colony, Sommerfelder, Bergthaler, Chortitzer, and Kleine Gemeinde communities would leave Manitoba and Saskatchewan for northern Mexico and, beginning in 1926, for Paraguay.

In 2022, Mennonite Heritage Village, in partnership with the Plett Foundation and the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada (MHSC), will be marking the hundredth anniversary of this milestone event with an exhibit focusing on the story of Mennonite emigration from Canada to Mexico. The planned exhibit will be displayed in the Gerhard Ens Gallery at Mennonite Heritage Village from May to November 2022. After this initial display, a smaller version of the exhibit will be made available to host organizations across Canada. We aim to reach communities that are important to this history, including those with descendants of the original migrants who have returned to Canada in recent years.

This exhibit will highlight the factors that led to Mennonite emigration. In 1874, Mennonites arrived in Canada from Russia after receiving special privileges from the federal government. The concessions included the freedom to educate their children as they saw

fit, according to their religion and in the German language. Those freedoms were upheld until 1916, when the Public Schools Act in Manitoba was amended making attendance at publicly inspected, English-language schools compulsory for all children between the ages of seven and fourteen. Saskatchewan followed with similar legislation a year later. Not willing to give up their freedom of education, Mennonites in Manitoba and Saskatchewan petitioned their provincial governments for the right to continue with their German-language, private schools. When this effort failed, Mennonites refused to send their children to the government-run district schools, often facing steep fines, confiscation of property, and even jail time for their non-compliance.

Why was the question of schools so important to traditionalist Mennonites in Canada? Aeltester Isaak M. Dyck, writing in the 1960s about the migration, saw the new education legislation as having significance beyond what and how children learned in schools: "We were afraid that if we shared our schools – the place where seeds are first sown in the human heart – with the world, then our churches would not be able to remain separate. For in order to maintain the faith and a clear conscience, our forefathers were always travelling . . . and now we too have come into the position where we could no longer remain in Canada with its public

Do you have historical documents related to the Mennonite migration to Mexico?

Mennonite Heritage Archives is looking for archival materials that tell this story, including oral interviews, photos, correspondence, diaries, and journals.

Contact Conrad Stoesz at cstoesz@mharchives.ca



schools that were forced upon us with prison sentences and fines. Our forefathers always took the school question very seriously, because they understood well that what the school is, the church will become." At stake for these Mennonites was not just the future of education for their children, but also the freedom to practice their religion as a community.

The exhibit will also explore how the departure of these traditional Mennonite communities had a profound effect on Canadian Mennonite life and identity. Non-Mennonites will learn the story, often untold outside of Mennonite circles, of how an ethnoreligious minority group left Canada over matters they considered crucial to the exercise of their religious freedom. Their migration challenges the narrative of Canada as a peaceful haven for ethnic and religious minorities. It is a story about competing conceptions of religious freedom, and of tensions between religious, linguistic, and educational rights on the one hand, and the obligations of citizenship on the other.

The legacy of this migration was also felt throughout Latin America, and in the United States as well. The move to Mexico marked the beginning of a vast transnational network of Mennonite commun-

Do you have an object with a story to tell about this history?

Mennonite Heritage Village is looking for artefacts, which could include clothing, items related to farm and home life, travel items, toys, or any other item with a story to tell that relates to the emigration of Mennonites from Canada to Mexico.

Contact Andrea Klassen at andreak@mhv.ca



If your organization is interested in hosting the travelling exhibit, which will to travel to locations throughout Canada from December 2022 to December 2024 please contact the co-chair of MHSC's Canadian Emigration Commemoration Committee for more information.

Contact Jeremy Wiebe at treasurer@mhsc.ca

ities spread throughout North, Central, and South America. Canada has seen the return of Mennonites from these communities, especially in southern Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta.

The travelling exhibit is currently in development and will be available to travel to locations throughout Canada from December 2022 to December 2024.

Left, above: A group of Mennonites wait at the train station in Altona, Manitoba, for the train that will carry them to Mexico. Left, below: Three women, at the Altona train station, saying goodbye to friends and family leaving for Paraguay.

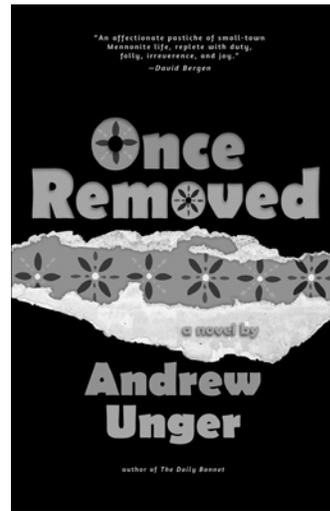
Once Removed

By Andrew Unger

Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2020

pp 280. Softcover

Reviewed by Lukas B. Thiessen



Andrew Unger prefaces his 2020 novel *Once Removed* with a declaration that his book is fiction and so readers will not find allusions to real people, places, or events. And yet, Unger is the founder of the satirical Mennonite website *The Daily Bonnet*, and one may assume his statement was sworn on a copy of the *Walrus* instead of a John Deere catalogue and so holds little merit. He probably made it with his fingers crossed. After all, he squeaks in on the last page that Mennonites live in constant fear of being called before the church elders.

Unger lays out an examination of southern Manitoba's Mennonite culture with the simple elegance of a cold midday fropa. The "sinister as Hitchcock" tale proclaimed in a blurb on the back cover by comic novelist Armin Wiebe does not appear. Unless the sinister element is the lurking possibility of Mennonite annoyance, to which Unger playfully refers, or the oppressive influence of community leaders over main character Timothy Heppner, who fears he will lose his job with the Parks and Recreation department if he publishes his gigantic tome on the history of his hometown of Edenfeld. There is nothing here so sinister as the real-life Mennonite response to the oeuvre of Miriam Toews who, disclaimer notwithstanding, is alluded to in the character of the mysterious Elsie Dyck.

Unger's novel is all about exposure, and how problematic it is for Mennonites to plumb the depths of the community. Heppner, a modern, small-town Mennonite man, spends a large part of the story wrestling weakly with his conscience. He is drawn

toward understanding the past of Edenfeld, an amalgam of every southern Manitoba town of Mennonite origin, but faces opposition from BLT Wiens, the progress-oriented mayor who loves big-box stores and disdains the preservation of historic landmarks. The conflict brings to mind the reaction of Mennonite readers to Rudy Wiebe's groundbreaking 1962 work *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. Wiebe later observed, "They got angry. I was talking from the inside and exposing things that shouldn't be exposed." *Once Removed* reminds readers that exposure is inevitable with its seasonal structure: starting in *Somma*, then *Hoafst*, then *Winta*, and ending in the time of resurrection and rebirth of *Farjoah*. The past lives anew.

The novel's title is given very different connotations on the front cover and in the story itself. On the cover is an image of a traditional Mennonite painted kitchen floor pattern, discovered and recreated by artist Margruite Krahn. The image shows the pattern visible under beige linoleum, which itself is layered with mystery, an inky emptiness. The metaphor may be that when one removes the heavy shroud which hangs over the identity of *die Stillen im Lande*, one finds plainness, and then when one looks deeper, there is carefully crafted beauty. In the story itself, the title comes into play in a much less sublime context – in fact it is a moment which is both starkly uncomfortable and blasé. When Heppner and his wife Katie have intercourse, the fact of which is referenced only obliquely, the narrator describes how all he can focus on is that they are fourth cousins. His wife reminds him,

to lessen the discomfort, "Once removed." This incident suggests that for Mennonites, intimacy is uncomfortable – the cause for disgust or a dismissive, yet winking, shrug.

It is difficult to tell if this book could make it on a bestseller list besides Winnipeg's McNally Robinson's. We have a dense Mennonite population in southern Manitoba, and as Mrs. Friesen explains to City Sheila, both members of Edenfeld's Preservation Society, during a discussion of Elsie Dyck's novel *A Doll's Housebarn*, Sheila's origins prevent her from recognizing the amusing material, subtext, and inside jokes.

The book is a tour-de-force through Manitoba Mennonite stereotypes, while also asking the community: But do we know who we are? Near the end of the book, Heppner's friends Randall and Brenda from Loans search Russia for the first colony to be named Edenfeld. Neither Randall's historic atlas nor the tattoo on Brenda's back of all the Mennonite colonies in Russia is helpful. Mennonites may be unsuccessful when they try to find their roots, but as always, it is the journey, not the destination. For those apprehensive about acknowledging the past, Unger provides encouragement from Brenda on the topic of her first tattoo: "It was painful and I worried what my mother would think. I was also worried it wouldn't turn out well . . . There was a lot I was worried about, but I know if I didn't do it, I'd never do anything."

Henry E. Plett Memorial Award

The Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society invites submissions for the Henry E. Plett Memorial Award for Family and Community Histories.

The goal of this competition is to promote and encourage the writing and publication of family and community histories among high school or university students in Manitoba. Two cash prizes of \$300 will be awarded for the best essay (2000 words, or 10 pages, double-spaced) and the best multimedia (painting video display, etc) submission. Submissions will be evaluated for originality, innovation, and creativity.

The deadline for the contest is April 30, 2022.

For more information, email mhs@mmhs.org

Journal of Mennonite Studies

A peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary, academic journal published annually by the Chair in Mennonite Studies and the Centre for Transnational Studies at The University of Winnipeg.

The journal seeks to deal with Anabaptist-Mennonite issues from the Reformation period to the present.

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Once Removed is not a historical account or a critique of today's Mennonites. The novel is a warm, calm tale of small-town life, as richly textured with inside jokes as the hidden decorations on old floors, which may never be found or known and could soon be forgotten, unless others are willing to pull back the covers and share what they find beneath.

In the Next Issue

Our December issue, *Mennonites and Alcohol*, will explore how Mennonites have historically addressed the spiritual, social, and economic implications of alcohol production, consumption, and sales in their communities.



If you are interested in contributing an article on any of our future themes—the 1922 Mennonite Exodus to Mexico, Mennonites and Natural Disasters, the Making of the Russlaender, When the Kanadier Met the Russlaender, or Mennonites and Humour—please email Aileen Friesen.

We also invite the submission of articles, biographies, local histories, and 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. 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 2 MB in size.

MENNONITE STUDIES CONFERENCE

MCC at 100

**MENNONITES, SERVICE, AND
THE HUMANITARIAN IMPULSE**

**Virtual Conference
September 30–October 2**



In 1920 North American Mennonites formed Mennonite Central Committee in response to famine ravaging Mennonite communities in the Soviet Union (Ukraine).

This centennial conference presents papers that examine the past, present, and future of MCC.

Participants will reflect on Mennonite responses to the biblical call to love one's neighbor through practical acts of service.



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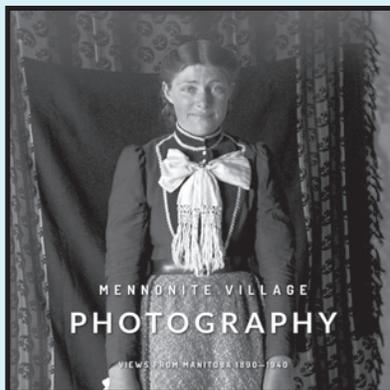
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Offering grants in support of historical research and projects related to the foundation's mandate. Past projects have explored Mennonite history through exhibits, books, films and research trips.



D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation



**PETER H. KLIPPENSTEIN
1878-1900**

SEVERAL OF KLIPPENSTEIN'S PHOTOGRAPHS, MANY OF THEM TAKEN IN THE 1890s, ARE KEPT AT THE CENTRAL ARCHIVES OF THE MENNONITE VILLAGE.



Margrute Krahn's exhibition celebrated hand-painted floors created by earlier generations of Mennonite women in their housebarns.



DEADLINES
MARCH 15 / SEPTEMBER 15
plettfoundation.org

The Mennonite Historic Arts Committee produced a beautiful collection of photographs by four Manitoba Mennonite photographers.