

From Canada to Mexico

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

Sommerfelder minister Abram Friesen
(fourth from left) visiting Chihuahua in 1923.

GRACE DALKE PRIVATE COLLECTION

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FROM THE EDITOR

Aileen Friesen

This issue of *Preservings* is unique in the history of the magazine. To commemorate the migration of approximately 8,000 Mennonites from Canada to Mexico and Paraguay that began a hundred years ago, we are publishing a translation of a memoir written by *Aeltester* (bishop) Isaak M. Dyck, an Old Colony leader. First published in Mexico in 1970, the year after his death, the text recalls the experiences of Mennonite communities in Canada, the decision to move to Mexico, and the early life of Mennonites in their new home. This is the first half of the memoir, *Auswanderung der Reinlaender Mennoniten Gemeinde von Canada nach Mexiko*, which was translated by Robyn Sneath. It gives voice to the concerns of the Old Colony and helps us to understand this period from their perspective. This was a tumultuous period in history, sharing some features with our own, in which war and a pandemic had polarized society, creating divisions within groups and mistrust towards the government. These circumstances likely served to exasperate insecurities felt by both the Old Colony and government officials as they searched for stable ground in a changing world.

Few sources have influenced our understanding of this migration more than Dyck's memoir. Community members as well as scholars have used Dyck's account to explore why Old Colony Mennonites decided to leave behind the prosperous farms and functioning communities they had built over the course of fifty years in Manitoba and Saskatchewan to start over again in a new country. Written in a sermonizing tone typical of an Old Colony minister, Dyck uses biblical references to offer guidance for the community's future through an interpretation and remembrance of its past. In his account, Dyck points to both internal and external factors shaping an uncertain environment of militarism, consumerism, and worldly temptations in which the Old Colony felt their faith and community life to be threatened.

Dyck, who was born in 1889 in the village of Reinland in Manitoba's West Reserve, offers a unique perspective on this historical period. He was the son of Maria Martens Loepky and Isaak Dyck, who both emigrated from tsarist Russia to Canada during the 1870s. Dyck's parents would meet and marry in the West Reserve after his mother was widowed in 1882. The family settled in Reinland as members of the Reinlaender Mennonite Church. Little is known about the family's early years in Manitoba, but by the age of eighteen Dyck was teaching at a private Mennonite school in the village of Eichenfeld. After

losing half of his students to diphtheria, Dyck moved to the Blumenfeld school, where he taught the children to read, write, count, and live with humility and piety.

A year after he married Susanna Peters, the Reinlaender congregation elected Dyck as a minister, at the age of twenty-three. Dyck must have shown gifts in both leadership and preaching to be given this important responsibility. Ten years later, the entire church, under the leadership of Aeltester Johann Friesen, began to board trains at southern Manitoba stations like Winkler, Plum Coulee, and Gretna to travel to San Antonio de los Arenales (today the city of Cuauhtémoc), in the Mexican state of Chihuahua. Unwilling to comply with the provincial government's demand that Mennonites send their children to English-language public schools instead of the German, Mennonite-run private ones, Mennonites had found a country willing to negotiate a new *Privilegium* (charter of privileges) that protected their right to educate their children according to their faith.

Dyck was a product of the private Mennonite educational system, who transitioned from student to teacher to community leader. As the memoir demonstrates, he had a deep knowledge of the Bible, a love of hymns (the source of nearly all the poetic verse he quotes), and a strong understanding of history; he was hardly the image of an ignorant Mennonite suggested by provincial government representatives. The example of Dyck demonstrates that Old Colony Mennonites were not against education; rather, they viewed school as an extension of the church instead of the responsibility of the state. For them, the pursuit of knowledge for material gain or personal achievement was contrary to their religious beliefs.

In the 1920s, Mennonites faced a decision that would have repercussions for future generations. As in tsarist Russia during the 1870s, a dispute with state officials forced Mennonites to take stock of their communities and consider whether they were following the right path. Mennonites had to decide whether they should consciously expose their children to the wider world by sending them to public schools, or leave. Some chose the former, finding accommodation with the government. They viewed this decision as being aligned with their religious values. Others, like Isaak Dyck, decided that they could not relegate instruction of their children to the state, and embarked on a new journey, one which would in time expand the footprint of the global Mennonite community across Latin America.



THE
MENNONITE
EMIGRATION
FROM
CANADA
TO
MEXICO

A memoir by Isaak M. Dyck

Translated by Robyn Sneath



— FOREWORD —

*Foreword to this book now in our hands,
written while alive by the one so well known to us all,
now deceased, Aeltester Isaak M. Dyck.*

Though we do not desire to write many words while introducing the purpose and nature of this book to the readers, suffice it to say that we, those now living, the remaining congregation, both young and old alike, would like to remember what was written by our forefathers, as a boundary stone, for it has been written for our instruction and edification.

“The memory of the righteous is blessed” (Proverbs 10:7). Those who have walked rightly are at peace, so that they may sleep and rest in their chambers and wait for the great resurrection on the great day of judgment.

The whole of this book has been written as a reminder of how we ought to live and walk according to the example set by the man who was a gift sent to us from God, a man who never allowed the burden of teaching the congregation to become too great, and who experienced and was confronted with so many tribulations all the way to the end of his not short lifetime. For he decided against his own welfare when he always applied his well-wishing mind to each day and took on everything with a benevolent disposition – it appeared that nothing was too difficult or too much for him, whether in season or out of season.

Whoever chooses to read this book without prejudice or preformed opinions, that person will find in it a lesson and will want



to imitate the example, for love does not think anything bad, it is not bitter, it does not seek its own, etc. Neither will it be perceived as annoying or tedious. No, love ought to be the sign by which all of God’s children are recognized.

And though he may often have directed his speech to his children, it could also be not just his own biological children, but any who accept his teaching, for there would hardly be one who would not have to say: “Yes, the entire speech and circumstances have touched me and I only wish that I too had such a spirit of wisdom and were so willing to endure with one’s children what he had to endure.”

We must be careful that we do not lose this as people die, but that while it is still so fresh that we erect it before ourselves as living stones of remembrance and that we attempt to conform our life and path according to the will of he who created us and has sustained us even to this day, the one who called us into his wonderful light so that we may be awakened by his forward motion and be ready to meet the Lord, our God, as we live according to his life, who will soon appear to judge and to deal unto each as he has dealt unto others. So let us from now on walk in all humility and lowliness so that we will forever be and remain with our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Above: Isaak M. Dyck (1889–1969), in a photo taken in 1950 by a Mexican magazine. This foreword might have been written by Dyck’s successor, Aeltester Heinrich Dyck. HOY, SEPT. 30, 1950, 94



MENNIONTELIBRARY. ANDARCHIVES. BETHEL COLLEGE. PHOTO. 2006-10-18

— INTRODUCTION —

What follows is an approximate description of the migration from Canada to Mexico that occurred in the year of the Lord 1922. It is left behind as a memento for my children and descendants, and for the dear congregation. “So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body... And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember those things” (2 Peter 1:12-13, 15).¹

“In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). And even in much distress and sorrow, it remains the true pleasure of the Christian if he sees or hears that the name of the Lord is glorified, and that Christ is preached in all places, “whether from false motives or true” (Philippians 1:18).

For what unimaginable grace of God is it that the word of God so pure and clear is in full swing among us and that through it we can find the way to true godliness. If only we knew how to rightly treasure this great grace and to honour God in the same

way, and use it for the salvation of our souls. But unfortunately, it appears that nowadays we show the same disgust for it as the children of Israel did for the manna in the desert, which was considered so offensive that they were seriously punished for it by the Lord God their father. And so it cannot and will not go any better for us if we do not exert our freedom of conscience which – God be praised and thanked – we still enjoy in this Mexican land, or if we despise the rich communication of the word of God, or if we fail to use it for our salvation, and for a true change of mind or new birth. Then it may be said of us, as the Lord spoke through the prophet Isaiah: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men. Therefore once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder; the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish” (Isaiah 29:13–14).

Let us pay attention to the time of the old covenant, and after the wisdom of the prophets let us look at the time of the new covenant, and also let us read about and consider all the centuries which the beautiful martyr’s book describes, which is read far too infrequently in our dark and unbelieving times and which is unknown in many homes and to many families.² It doesn’t look like anything else but that the upright children of God and followers of Jesus were only born into sorrow, suffering, and persecution, and as if God, from the beginning of the world up to our times, has wanted to test his church and his congregation like gold in a fire, so that its loyalty and steadfastness would be manifested to the whole world.

Namely, the entire holy Scripture, especially the Old Testament, seems to be nothing more than a martyr’s book, just as the entire letter to the Hebrews, but in particular the eleventh and twelfth chapters, pertains to the great cloud of witnesses by which we are surrounded, witnesses who have, through faith, endured, overcome, and conquered entire kingdoms. And so even the strongest demands of those in authority, even the sentencing of Christians to death, orders that were signed and sealed by princes and kings, have been changed and cancelled on your behalf, just as the whole history of Daniel illustrates, especially in the third chapter. And the reason for this is that your love for God is stronger than death: “Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away” (Song of Solomon 8:7).

If only we too, who carry the name of Christ (although there

Dyck viewed the teaching of Menno Simons, facing page, as a model for living a Christian life. Left: Mennonites from Manitoba and Saskatchewan travelled over 3,000 kilometres to reach their new home in Chihuahua, Mexico.





Reinlaender Mennonites leaving for Mexico from the Winkler train station.

are those among us who do not understand upon what this name is grounded) could behold the mysteries of God with the eye of faith, and delight in the law of the Lord, and speak of it day and night. "He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers" (Psalm 1:3). It would do us well to recognize that we are very far from following in the footsteps of our forefathers who eagerly desired to live holy lives in Christ Jesus and for that reason, in the words of 2 Timothy 3:12, had to endure so many sorrows, since the God whom they served and who made them so strong is our God also, and the Saviour, in whom they hoped,

is also our Saviour. The faith that they confessed and paid for with their blood is also our faith. The laws of God, which they held as the measure and the standard for their lives, are also our laws. They bent their knees before God during the holy baptism and they promised God obedience of the faith with their hearts and mouths, without wavering, and to remain constant before God the Lord and to live in holiness and justice. This is the only difference between them and us – they persevered in spite of heavy persecution until the end when they died gruesome martyrs' deaths, but "in your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of bloodshed" (Hebrews 12:4).



perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us” (Romans 5:1–5). “Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it” (2 Corinthians 5:6–9).

How instructive are the loyal fighters, the strong heroes of the faith, just as our dear old Aeltesten and ministers always advised and earnestly exhorted us. And for that reason Paul said: “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith” (Hebrews 13:7). Their deeds, their works, and their way of life must speak for themselves. For God’s truth needs neither people’s praise nor vainglory. A sharp eye of faith knows what the truth is worth. The truth is never more beautiful than when it appears totally naked and simply free of human understanding or worldly teaching. The holy martyrs, and so many witnesses of the truth, serve as confirmation of this fact, especially the two most influential reformers, Menno Simons and Dirk Philips, who came out of the dark cloud of the papacy. The Lord used them to weaken the papacy.

Their teaching, in particular the complete works of Menno Simons, may be seen as an outline or model of the Christian religion, which the authors and blood witnesses, because of their knowledge of the holy Scriptures, founded and fortified (during the confused times in which they lived) under much pressure, danger, fear, and trouble. Our forebears always identified the way of the cross, no matter how narrow, as the safest way of all by which to reach their goal, which was the salvation of their souls, even though they were contradicted from all sides, and though they were afflicted with persecution, burdens, and sorrow. As 1 Peter 1:9 says: “For you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” Their faith was so firmly based on the path of the cross that there was no doubt that a pilgrim who had followed the path until the end would finally arrive happily in upper Zion and bring his life as a prize (Jeremiah 39:18). And he will find it there with a thousand pleasures, according to the teaching of our Saviour. Mark 8:35–37 states: “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?”

Thousands, old and young, men and women, disciples and virgins, have chosen this as the safest way to salvation because they recognized through the footsteps of grief and suffering that this must have been the way through which our predecessor Jesus, with all his dear disciples and apostles, entered into the eternal life of joy. It is also recognized by the whole world that so many thousands of martyrs could not be dissuaded from their faith – neither through promises of human bliss nor earthly riches, nor through the threat of the bitterest death that people can inflict upon one another. Were their faith not so strong

But they overtook with force the blessed fatherland, the milk-rich Canaan, the true land of promise that flows with milk and honey, something that we have not yet done: “For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait patiently” (Romans 8:24–25). “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, for we know that suffering produces



Dyck encouraged Mennonites to read *Martyrs Mirror* to understand God's expectations of the church.

there is no way they could have left us such beautiful hymns as the following:

My God! I ask you that you would well
Prepare my arms,
For the cornerstone of your house,
Which also in eternity
Was founded on Jesus Christ,
Who himself can neither be touched nor moved
By hell's scent.
Let me bravely follow after him
In the crossroads which he broke.
Let me patiently overcome
Contempt, need, oppression, and adversity
And if the lord of the flesh falls hard
Then may you please let it be done,
From heaven strengthen your weak one.³

They left behind the message both written and orally that they found far more enjoyment, comfort, and peace in their souls in this way than ever before, when they belonged to the world and the world to them. From the faith of our forebears we have a clear pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night which is able to lead us through the cruel desert of life, so that it might

be said of us: "This is the way, walk in it. And a highway will there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it (Isaiah 30:21, 35:8).

Through this faith, love, and hope in God, a strong trust in God grew in our fathers, Aeltesten, and ministers, and enabled them to leave their so dearly loved home and fatherland Russia, and were able to keep the faith and a clear conscience (Acts 24:16) as they sailed their way across the large ocean. And were they, in their hope in God, put to shame? No, as a loving father he nourished his children in Canada, rather than in the desert, and there is no knowledge of a single one dying of hunger; rather, over time great treasures were amassed and were brought here to this country, Mexico.

When those who called after our parents as they left Russia said, if you immigrate to America [North America] you will surely die of starvation, the all-powerful God and creator of all things knew in his great wisdom that after a period of thirty years they would be begging through letters for help. I remember Aeltester Ohm⁴ Peter Wiebe reading such letters aloud in church: "Help us, help us, don't let us die of starvation." I was twenty-three years old at the time that the first plea for help from the Aeltesten regarding the hardships in Russia was made known.⁵ And I was moved with compassion and melancholy in my low position and ability to contribute a small gift. When after a long time the first thank-you notes from Russia began to arrive, describing how the need was so great that many had eaten their last piece of bread and didn't know what they would eat the next day, and how many thankful tears had been shed because of the help from America, I realized with humility, penance, and shame that I had contributed far too little. The Aeltester Ohm Isaak Dyck, of Russia, who was living at that time, wrote back to our Aeltesten: "You have treated us according to the words of Christ when he said: 'I was hungry and you fed me, etc.'" He concluded his letter with the remark: "Doing good reaps interest for eternity!" If only we could always keep this expression in mind, we wouldn't be so slow and thrifty with giving, because we would have learned our lesson. It is better to give than to receive (Acts 20:35).⁶

1 All quotations from Scripture are taken from the NIV Bible. In Dyck's original text, scripture is presented without quotation marks. In some instances, chapter and verse citations have been corrected.

2 Dyck is referring to *Martyrs Mirror*, the collection of Anabaptist martyr stories first published in 1660.

3 Dyck quotes portions of hymns from the *Gesangbuch für Mennoniten-Gemeinden in Kirche und Haus*.

4 The term *Aeltester* refers to the highest elected and ordained office of Mennonite churches. An Aeltester would serve several congregations. The Low German term *Ohm* was an honorific title used to show respect to religious leaders.

5 According to Dyck's description, this request for famine relief happened in 1912. This does not fit with the history of Chortitza, where Aeltester Isaak Dyck of Russia served. Likely Dyck is referencing the 1920s famine.

6 Isaak Dyck served as Aeltester in Chortitza, Russia, for 26 years. See Delbert Plett, "Aeltester Isaak Dyck 1847-1929, Servant of God," *Preservings*, no.21 (2002): 7-16.

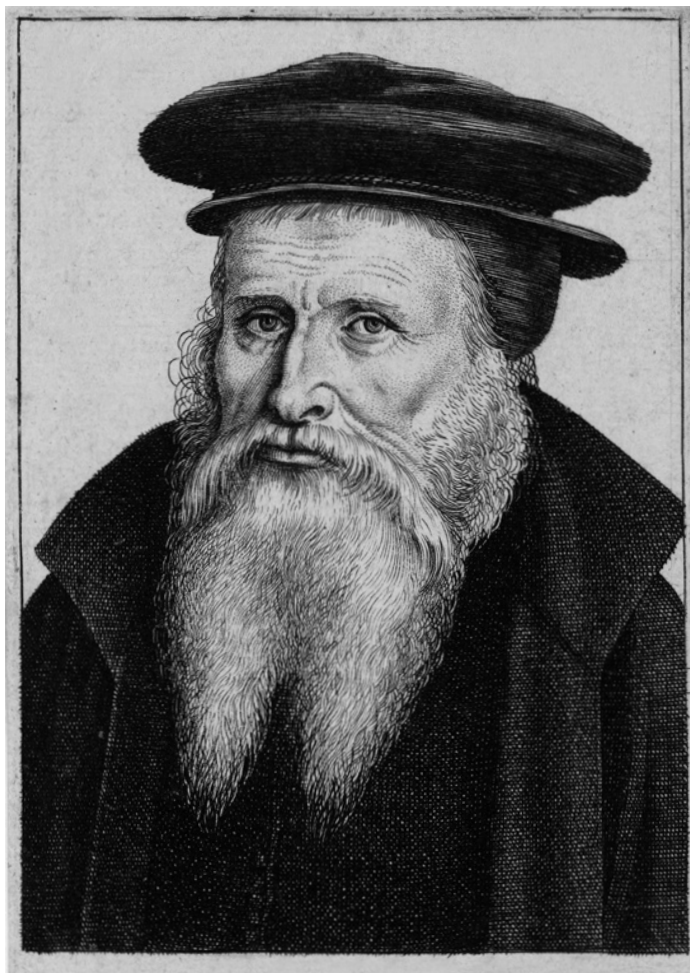
FIRST CHRISTIANS

If we, with our parents and ancestors together, cannot thank our God and father in heaven enough that we have been spared physical pain, martyrdom, and torment, and that we have not had to endure such heavy persecution as the first Christians, even so they [our people] have been constant wanderers in this world, as the following words demonstrate: “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus must endure persecution” [1 Timothy 3:12], because only in so doing do they experience that they have only been guests and foreigners in your sight, as were all our ancestors. Our days on earth are like a shadow, without hope (1 Chronicles 29:15).

The true origin of the Mennonites, where they had their beginning, appears, according to all trustworthy chronicles, old texts, and church histories, to be Holland, where our founding father Menno Simons lived during his time, and where he founded the congregation and restored the light of the gospel to the lampstand, which at that time had been completely obscured. Menno Simons was born in 1496 and, after he left the Roman Catholic Church, received the Christian baptism in water only in the year 1536, which was in the fortieth year of his life.

By whom he was baptized, when he went over to the Anabaptists, is not known. (It was later learned that Menno Simons was [likely] baptized by Obbe Philips.) His most faithful co-worker was Dirk Philips. On January 13, 1561, at the age of 66, Menno Simons entered his eternal rest as a weary warrior. He was buried in his own garden, as was the custom among the early Christians who were heavily persecuted. It was after this zealous witness for Christ, this loyal fighter for the truth of the gospel, that his first followers were named Mennonists, from which our name Mennonite was derived in later centuries.

We find the first persecution of the Mennonites in Holland. And though, as previously mentioned, our parents and ancestors had to leave the places of their birth with much grief and sorrow, it often seems that Christianity has only been spread through the walking stick; namely, from Holland to Germany, from Germany to Russia, from Russia to America and Canada, and from Canada to here, our present home in Mexico. The dear Lord has always ensured that if the freedom of conscience of the true Mennonites was revoked in one country or place, they were always able to find a new place which granted freedom in the churches and in the schools; the dear Saviour did not leave


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Dirk Philips worked with Menno Simons to spread the Anabaptist faith.

his promise unfulfilled, which was recorded in Matthew 10:23: “When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.”

We cannot thank our God enough for giving us such wise leadership, which up to this date has not burdened our consciences and has not demanded anything of us that is contrary to the teachings of Christ and his apostles; rather, it has allowed each of us (and especially in this Mexican part of the world) to live under the shade of his own vineyard and fig tree, and to serve the Lord without guilty conscience. If things would be right among us, then we would praise and



Mennonite village of Reinfeld, 1898. MAID: MHA, PP-22 - PHOTO COL. 639-72.0

thank God without ceasing, and we would never forget what the good he has done unto us. Psalm 103:2: “Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.”

And if we would search for the origin of the guilty conscience, and explore the texts of the martyrs, we would see that it does not come from God; rather, it comes from man’s great fall, through which the lord of darkness, as an enemy of human well-being, had ample opportunity, with the permission of corrupted humans, to introduce hellish evil into the estate of the human soul.

Therefore, let us not take this unfathomable grace of God

for granted; rather, let us beseech God that he might enlighten all people who come into this world more and more with his righteous light (John 1:9). That we would in this dark hour of evening desire to be in his light alone (Psalm 36:9). “But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up the spoils” (Luke 11:22). Therefore, O you great Lord of eternal light and salvation of all people, especially the believers, speak into us all without ceasing your omnipotent word of creation, which you spoke at the beginning of time into the dark void, when you said: “‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Genesis



God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12–13).

How clear and distinct we see our church and our congregation depicted in this mirror. For it used to be, according to our previously mentioned words, that under the pressure and persecution, we immigrated to this country with such a good reputation, almost as a light of the world and as the salt of the earth among the people here (Matthew 5:13). But what is she [our church] now? Practically as if sunken in the impotence of the spiritual life, lying in a bed of sin, and the great equalization with this world, deathly ill. But you, daughter of Jacob! What a dangerous walk you have taken in your free time (Genesis 34). Because of this you have made a mockery of all of the ornaments of your virginity and your beautiful crown, because you abandoned your first love for your heavenly groom, and so your salt has lost its power and your light has gone out. Therefore, let us turn back, and gather oil, before the door of grace is locked. For:

He will not disappear for long,
 Therefore do not stay asleep.
 One sees the trees are blooming,
 The spring’s most lovely light
 Promises of refreshing times,
 The evening sky’s red shows
 The beautiful day in the distance
 Before which the darkness yields.
 Who would then be sleeping?
 He who’s smart is then awake.
 God comes to the world to punish,
 To practice fury and wrath
 On all those who aren’t watching
 And who along with the dragon
 Pray to the creature’s image.
 Therefore even the lion roars.

Now what do our hearts have to say about this? My dear children – and grandchildren – “for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now” (Galatians 4:19–20), how I have grieved for you, and borne a thousand worries because of you, even as your weak father. Do you not desire to be blessed? Will you not walk willingly together with me on the narrow way? And if that is what you want, then there is no other way than that which we are taught by the Saviour when he says: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it” (Luke 9:23–24).

The way of the cross aids greatly in enabling us to become disciples of Jesus, for it is far easier to tame and control our evil flesh and blood on the cross and in suffering than it is during good times. Therefore, dear children, do not wish for yourselves only good days, for during good times and times of great affluence, when in the temporal life things are good and happy,

1:3). Let the crystal light river, with all its sweetness, flow forth from under the threshold of your holy temple (Ezekiel 47:1), so that all the salty, cloudy, and unhealthy streams, rivers, and seas of all humanity would be made clear, bright, healthy, and sweet, so that nothing unhealthy would remain, except those who maliciously continue in their sin and have no use for your great grace and salvation, which has been granted to the entire human race. And therefore wish to remain in stinking frivolity, an eternal dwelling for all impure and hostile spirits (Revelation 18:2). “O that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of

then the person is in great danger of losing his salvation. It was for this reason that Paul said: “Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction” (1 Timothy 6:9). Rather choose the prayer of Solomon as the motto for your lives: “Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar. Two things I ask of you, O Lord; do not refuse me before I die; Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God” (Proverbs 30:5–9). Pray along with the poet:

The precious cross makes indeed each Christian precious.
It stays that way, do not try to persuade me.
If you, my God, still want me
To live my little life,
Do not let it be without crosses.
You children of God, so that you know:
The precious cross alone makes a precious Christian.

“I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth” (3 John 1:4). I have had, however, no greater sorrow than when my children walked in pride. For I have always experienced great displeasure from pride, for pride is an abomination in God’s sight (Amos 6:8). “But if you do not listen I will weep in secret because of your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly, overflowing with tears, because the Lord’s flock will be taken captive” (Jeremiah 13:17). Therefore, dear children, protect yourselves from all pride and conformity to this world, and seek instead (even after my death) to walk in humility, so that you may “receive mercy and find grace to help [you] in [your] time of need” (Hebrews 4:16). For who has been put to shame who has hoped in God? Who has been abandoned who feared the Lord? “For gold is tested in the fire, and those found acceptable, in the furnace of humiliation.” (Sirach 2:5) If we consider the effusive love and grace of the heavenly father, which has demonstrated to us for our entire lives, has it not been sometimes wonderful, and almost inconceivable?

God is never so near,
As when the need increases,
When human reason ceases,
His help does then appear.

Let us look now to the past; are not the monuments of God’s goodness and kindness proclaimed and obvious? It was said to Israel: “O my people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old – what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us” (Psalm 78:1–3). And Deuteronomy 32:7 states: “Remember the days of old; consider

the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders and they will explain to you.”

So I, too, can only proclaim or share in one part of the old stories of God’s glory, and his omnipotence and wonders, for I was born over there in Canada (July 15, 1889: “Alas, my mother, that you gave me birth” [Jeremiah 15:10]). But as soon as I matured and gained understanding, I eagerly loved to hear the dear elders tell old stories. My curiosity was especially awakened by the stories my dear mother would tell me in my younger years, about how she along with her dear parents came across from Russia to Canada and how they travelled across the big ocean, and about how they were on the water for twelve whole days. It is no wonder that I listened to such stories with wonder, because in my entire life I had never even seen a ship, never mind an ocean. She told us often about how they travelled on a ship together with the dear Aeltester Ohm Johann Wiebe, and that she had so much faith in her leader in her younger years that she had been totally without worry or care, and was of the opinion that if Ohm Johann Wiebe was on her ship, then it would be impossible for it to sink. But one evening, as a big storm rose on the sea, and the ship – especially in the bow – began to shake, everyone became very afraid. But before she went to bed for the



The SS *Sarmatian* brought Mennonites from England to Canada during their journey from tsarist Russia in the 1870s.

night, she noticed that the loving Aeltester went to every room on the ship where our people were, and encouraged them all to pray that the ship would not sink on the raging waves, and reminded them all of how the disciples were with the Saviour on a boat that was covered with waves, and Jesus was sleeping: “And the disciples went and woke him, saying, ‘Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!’ He replied, ‘You of little faith, why are you so afraid?’ Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. The men were amazed and asked, ‘What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!’” (Matthew 8:23–27).

And this is what my mother said! She said that they all prayed earnestly that the dear Lord would protect and keep them and that the ship wouldn’t go down. And the next morning as they awoke, the storm had subsided and the ship sailed on the smooth sea, so that it was impossible to imagine that such a storm had taken place the previous night. And they sang a song of praise to the dear God, and thanked him with a happy disposition

for his goodness and for the miracles that he performs for his earthly children. “Others went out on the sea in ships. They saw the works of the Lord, his wonderful deeds in the deep. For he spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves. They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths; in their peril their courage melted away. They reeled and staggered like drunken men; they were at their wits’ end. Then they cried out to the Lord in the trouble, and he brought them out of their distress. He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed. They were glad when it grew calm, and he guided them to their desired haven. Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men. Let them exalt him in the assembly of the people and praise him in the council of the elders” (Psalm 107:23–32).

The dear elders, the loyal leaders, those with grey hair, of whom only very few are still living, and most of whom have already fallen asleep, what did they not experience as they came in the year 1875 from Russia to Canada. And the thing that seemed to be the worst of all was the immense poverty. For they only owned enough supplies for the journey, and as soon as they touched [Canadian] soil, most of their supplies were gone, and yet bread had to be provided for the entire congregation. And yet, how happy and thankful were the dear elders that after a difficult six-week journey they could once again settle down on firm ground.

But it did not take long for the anxious question to arise as to how they would provide bread for the large families, the elderly and the crippled, which depended on the congregation for their care and welfare, when there was hardly any to be had? So the dear leaders – Aeltester Ohm Johann Wiebe and his fellow servants – out of concern and not knowing what else to do, often went into the small quiet room and, encouraging the congregation to pray earnestly and to seek guidance from our loving heavenly father, they did the same. And many times they had to ask, just as the disciples asked of the Saviour: “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” (John 6:5). But just as wonderful as when the Saviour fed the five thousand men with five loaves of bread and two fish, and according to the measure afterward there were more pieces left over than had been distributed, in the same way our heavenly father helped our forefathers in their need. He heard their prayers and saw their tears and opened for them the windows of heaven and let his grace and his blessing flow down like streams upon them. They were such fruitful times, such beautiful years that he gave them, that everything in the new land grew mightily. Each diligent farmer, after he had cared for his own plot and had helped those who were in need, still had his fill of bread. Not only that, but there were some who over time had gathered a nice surplus, in which the best and the most splendid intentions of our God were hidden, that the one who had reaped so richly and to whom so much had been entrusted should give to and help that more richly those who were poor and in need: to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves (1 Timothy 6:18–19).

The dear God and heavenly father fulfilled his promise to our ancestors, just as he once spoke to the children of Israel: “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will become my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:4–6). Our fathers tasted this; they experienced the nearness of God in themselves, and even if in great poverty, things nevertheless went well for them, because they followed the call of God out of Russia and often sang:

That which has come to pass,
Is truly for us not woe.
It should still get better,
Even in isolation.
Children don’t be anxious,
Disdain a thousand worlds,
Your enticing and your scolding,
And follow on your course.

And the thing that the dear Aeltester Johann Wiebe reminded them of right at the first meeting of the brotherhood, right after their arrival in America (as they gathered under a free sky), and which was unanimously advised, was that they must now take a step back – they had already gone too far in the world’s direction in Russia. He was referring to the higher education in the schools, the note-singing,⁷ and in general the great conformity to the world. And that is how it actually happened – they began building their homes in humility and lowliness, building first out of the earth and then building their huts on the ground. But did things remain in this lowly estate? How sad and wretched the situation became. It seemed that, as much as things improved in temporal wealth, in the same amount they moved away from humility. This soon became evident in the brightly painted houses, the worldly buggies with fine upholstery and ornamented harnesses, and the automobiles that soon were everywhere. And the trade industry grew like wild among us, out of which the necessity of learning the language of the land arose, and the public schools began to be seen as a need.

But keeping God’s word, following and obeying his voice, to this the eyes and the hearts became deaf. But for his part the Lord did not fail to punish us with various afflictions; he snatched away many elderly, middle-aged, and especially many innocent children from their mothers’ laps. Even the elements were unleashed upon us as a way of imposing the seriousness of God’s judgment. There were such terrible storm winds that huge trees in the yard were uprooted or cracked almost as if they were making way for, or bowing before, this omnipotence. And with many deadly, hot lightning bolts, here and there a house burned, in addition to a few costly human lives being offered up through deadly bolts of lightning.

And when the Lord took from the congregation the dear old Aeltester Johann Wiebe in the month of February in the year







1905, and the dear Aeltester Peter Wiebe in September of 1913 through death to be with himself in eternity, then the emptiness was felt by some God-fearing brothers and sisters, so that some sunk to their knees as if abandoned and orphaned and called

out to the Lord, "But why?" It was truly a sorrowful time when the dear Aeltester Ohm Peter Wiebe crossed over into eternity after a seven-day, very serious illness. I could hardly believe it, for I thought that the dear Lord would surely know better than

Previous page: Ornate houses, like this one in Schanzenberg, Manitoba, symbolized the materialism and worldiness that concerned Dyck. Above: Sommerfelder Mennonites near the village of Rosenbach, Manitoba, 1919.



did. But what a shock I received when I drove onto his yard on Saturday evening! It was full of people, as much in the house as on the yard, and the deep sorrow and grief that could be read on the faces of the guests confirmed for me that the dear Aeltester's sickness must be very grave. And as I hesitated to enter (for I felt totally depressed, because I hadn't pictured it this way), the dear Aeltester Ohm Abraham Wiebe from "Swift" (Swift Current, Saskatchewan) came out, and hurrying over to me, said, "If you still wish to see Ohm Peter Wiebe then don't put off going in any longer," for he believed that he would die soon.

And so I followed the Aeltester Ohm Abraham into the house, and as I approached the threshold, I could already hear Ohm Peter Wiebe wretchedly whining, sighing, and groaning, as one who was in great pain and danger. And so I walked through the large room to the doorway of the little room, where he lay in his bed, and his wife and children stood crying around him. I could not go forward, but stood still, believing that he must have already wrestled with death. But then I noticed that he raised his right hand a little, and gave me a small wave, motioning for me to come closer. And as I offered him my hand in greeting, he took me with both hands around my neck and drew me to his sick chest, and said with a groaning voice: "Now then, always remain very diligent and work for the Lord, so that we may see one another again in eternity." After me another elderly father came to say goodbye and asked him if he really wanted to leave the congregation and us. To this he replied, "I am reaching my hands out to the Redeemer." These were the last words that I heard from him in this lifetime. At approximately ten in the evening he gave his spirit up and went as a weak and tired servant into his eternal rest.

The next day, when I returned from the church in Gruenthal, I drove to Peter Harms's home for vesper [*Faspa*, the traditional Mennonite Sunday meal], where I met up with the dear Aeltester Ohm Jacob Wiens from the West,⁸ who upon hearing the news of his sickness had already come to Manitoba, and who now wanted to stay for the funeral. And, as usual, the dear Aeltester was not restrained or silent, but sought to comfort us concerning the all-too-early death of our dear Aeltester Ohm Peter Wiebe, and sought to wipe away and dry our many tears by speaking of the words from James 5:10–11, where it is written: "Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy." How comforting and refreshing it was to me to hear the sweet words that came out of his mouth.

At one point he spoke of Russia, and began to praise God's great works and told of how God had so successfully brought us over here from Russia to a free America, where the authorities left us to live quietly and in peace. I soon noticed that a prophetic meaning was to be understood in his story. It was when he mentioned that one day during the lovely summertime, he was busy making hay at this very address where the Peter

we people how necessary it was that he remain with us and with the congregation. It was for that reason that I waited a few days before I drove to visit him. It was partly because it was during the dry period of harvest, and partly because I wanted to comfort myself with the thought that he would not die so quickly. For these reasons I wished to wait until Sunday to visit him, for then I had to drive to Gruenthal anyway for church, which is what I

Harms family now lived in Reinland, for this had been his farmstead, before he had been called to the West at the request of the Aeltester Ohm Johann Wiebe to serve the congregation there with God's word. What sorts of thoughts he had while looking out over the fields and observing the beautiful high grass, and the swaying wheat fields with their beautiful ears. It was as if a voice from above said to him: "We will not be able to stay here forever; the congregation will once again have to take up the walking stick." But where? That was the question that arose in this time of deep reflection. And in his spirit he received the following answer: "If the congregation wished to maintain itself in the pure gospel, it would once again have to come among a heathen people." He did not mention a specific place, neither did he determine the country nor the government, where we would be led by God's all-wise direction. He kept repeating one thing: "Mennonites have never been under such a government, one which didn't know anything about our faith or our walk as followers of Jesus." Upon hearing this I had to take captive my reason and make it obedient to the rule of Christ. It seemed unbelievable to me. It was for me as it had been for the ancient father Jacob regarding the dream of his son Joseph. He did not believe what he had heard, and yet he kept all of the words in his heart (Genesis 37:11). The words of the dear Aeltester seemed to me like nonsense, and I did not believe it (Luke 24:11). And yet I held his words in my heart and pondered them there.

According to reason it was difficult to believe, for who was thinking of emigration? The congregation had peace throughout the entire country, and each worked his own land, and just as in Noah's time, planting, building, buying, selling, and peace reigned supreme. The harvest rarely failed, and their affluence became ever greater. These facts were confirmed in a valuable letter written to the congregation by Mr. McLeod of Morden, regarding the death of the Aeltester Ohm Peter Wiebe, in which he stated: "I am mourning the death of the dear Aeltester, who remained loyal to the end. My deepest sympathy to those who have been left behind. You have no danger to fear from the outside; if there is a threat, it is from within. 'You should live in safety in your land'" (Leviticus 26:5).⁹ It went for us just as it had gone for the children of Israel, so that it could also be said of us: "The Lord your God [has brought] you into a good land. . . . When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and your flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Deuteronomy 8:7, 10–14).

The promise God made to Israel was also fulfilled among us: "The Lord will open up the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty, to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands. You will lend to many nations but will

borrow from none" (Deuteronomy 28:12). Now and then it seemed peculiar to me when, in our meetings, I heard the dear Aeltesten and old ministers speak about our wise and praiseworthy government, and that we should never forget to pray for the authorities and to give thanks for them according to 1 Timothy 2, that we could live under their care in stillness and peace, and that we could live out our faith in our churches and schools. I know that others my age felt the same way as I did. What were we missing? Everything moved towards the comfort of the flesh and flourishing prosperity. The great poverty that our forefathers experienced in their first years here was totally unknown to us. And even if when the old people got together they occasionally reminisced about how difficult the settlement in America had been, it was still just a story to us. For this poverty-stricken and financially strapped time had long disappeared behind our silos that were filled to the top, and our loaded barns and cellars.

And this is how the time passed. The years ended as one year extended its hand to the next. And so, one often heard the old people say: "After one period comes another." The prosperity grows too great. One could also hear the common saying "Gut macht Mut. Mut macht Uebermut. Uebermut ist selten gut" (Wealth breeds boldness. Boldness breeds high spirits. High spirits are seldom good). And so in some houses the word of the Lord to Israel was fulfilled: "Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy" (Ezekiel 16:49).

And so time went on and on, until unexpectedly, through telegram, the news was carried into all the world that a big war had broken out in all of Europe, news which shocked almost the whole world, and it was a war with which England and Canada were connected. And if in the hearts of some parents the fear arose that in the dark future their children, their sons, could be forced into military service, there was no lack of those preaching peace who sought to pacify the people and to put them to sleep and who said: "No harm will come to us; we will never see sword or famine" (Jeremiah 5:12). And as the highest and very famous prime minister, Sir Robert L. Borden, announced through the presses in Ottawa that the contract with the Mennonites would be kept to the letter, regardless of whether it was forty or two hundred years old, a general sense of peace, quiet, and fleshly security was restored. But as much as our freedom from the federal government was valued and highly prized, we should have realized that it was but the calm before the storm, the sultriness that announced the arrival of a big thunderstorm, and ought to have made us anxious of the things that were coming to the world (Luke 21:26).

7 Mennonites in Russia had begun to sing hymns from numerical musical notation (*Ziffern*). Before this, hymn melodies were taught only in worship services by the *Vorsaenger* (song leader).

8 Jacob Wiens was Aeltester of the Old Colony Church in Saskatchewan.

9 Alexander McLeod joined J. B. McLaren's law practice in Morden, representing the legal interests of the Reinland Mennonite Association. See Albert Siemens, "A Sympathetic Lawyer: J.B. McLaren and the Hague Reserve," *Preservings*, no.42 (2021):21–24.

UNREST AND WARTIME

It did not take long before restrictions on our freedoms were introduced. Soon the congregation had to pay large sums of money to the Red Cross. And even if we weren't supposed to regard it as contributing to the military or war effort, it was money that went to strengthen the war effort all the same, a fact that was cause for serious reflection in the hearts of many well-meaning people. Few years had passed since the war had started and already one began to read in the papers that there was to be a general registry throughout all of Canada, from which the Mennonites were not going to be exempted. This war – the great European war – that broke out in August of 1914, was the cause of the registry.

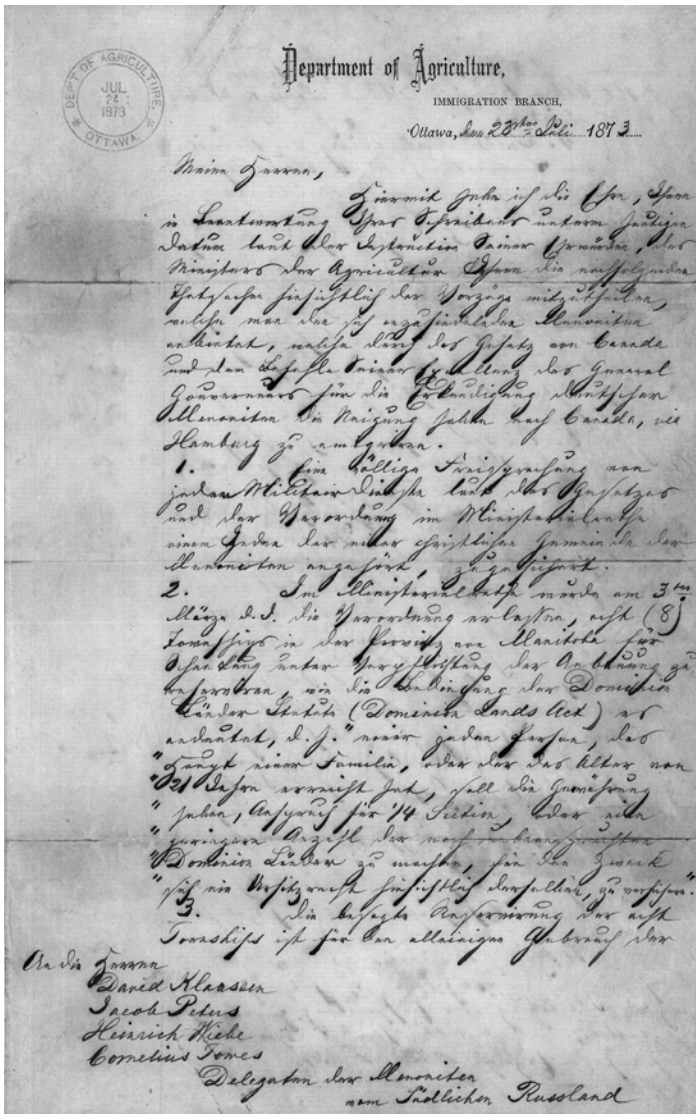
And when in December of 1916 it was announced that these registration cards, which were demanded by the government, had to have all twenty-four questions answered and filled out, the concern grew and became more general and the question of whether this might be the beginning of mandatory military service was seriously considered. It was because of this fear that the decision was reached in the entire congregation not to fill out the cards. Regarding this matter all of the brothers were called to a meeting in the church at Reinland where it was unanimously decided not to fill out the cards. Some were glad and felt light in their consciences that the congregation was unified and reached a decision collectively. But what happened next? As we were on our way back from the brotherhood and were on our way to Ohm Peter Harms for lunch, the registrar Bennett, as I recall, had already come to inquire about the outcome of our consultation.¹⁰ And as the dear Aeltester Ohm Johann Friesen explained in few words that, on that present day, more than five hundred brothers from all three congregations had gathered and had unanimously determined not to fill out the registration cards, this man's friendly countenance was replaced by a dark expression. He asserted that we would find no reasonable objection not to fill out the cards, and that if we would not do it of our own free will, then we would be persuaded by the law to comply. Finally the man asked the Aeltesten and all the other Ohms why we were so afraid to fill out the cards. Aeltester Johann Wall (who was the designated speaker) answered that we were afraid that by filling out the forms we would thereby be pulled

into military service. And we were afraid that if we offered our heretofore gracious government but a finger in this matter, they would take the whole hand. To this the registrar calmly replied that this registration in no way implied such consequences for us, but rather, was only a general census of the people to get an estimate, in order to make a calculation of how many people of each sort were in the country, and he even appealed to the passage in the Gospel of Luke, in the second chapter, where it is written: "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken in the entire Roman world (this was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria). And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him" (Luke 2:1–5). With this the man said, "If Mary and Joseph would take part in the census, why won't you?" The Aeltester and ministers were silent; they didn't know how to respond, so they asked the man for permission to call another meeting of the brotherhood to discuss the matter again. He readily agreed to this and with a friendly handshake bid them farewell and left hoping to see his wish fulfilled.

On the following Sunday the brethren were once again summoned to the church in Reinland. Again, a unanimous decision was reached, but this time in favour of filling out the registration cards. It was decided that, as far as our human judgment was concerned, we had no reason not to comply with the wishes of this government representative; rather we desired to do what the government requested of us. But the Sommerfelder congregation was not at peace with this decision and so decided to send a delegation to Ottawa to inquire about a secure decision. This delegation consisted of the following persons: Aeltester Ohm Abram Doerksen, of Sommerfeld (Manitoba); Aeltester Ohm David Toews, from Rosthern (Saskatchewan); Preacher Ohm Heinrich Doerksen, of Niverville (Manitoba); Benjamin Ewert, of Gretna (Manitoba), and Klaas Peters, from Herbert (Saskatchewan). After a twelve-day absence these men returned with the happy news that they had been most pleasantly received by the federal government. They also brought back with them



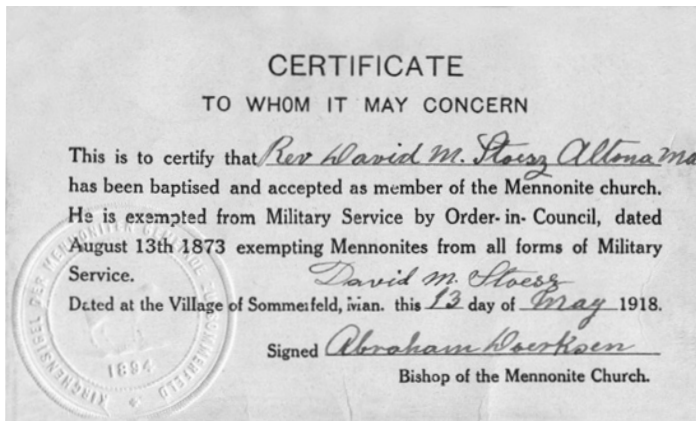




The German version of the "Privilegium" letter of guarantees, written by John Lowe, secretary of the Department of Agriculture, to the Mennonite delegates inspecting Canada for settlement in 1873.

the following news, both orally and in written form, which may be summarized roughly as follows:

We, the five delegates, were received by the high officials and ministers in the friendliest manner. After we presented our case the first minister, Rogers, took the floor and spoke at length about the present war, and the necessities thereof, and of their hopes of a total victory, and so on. He also spoke about how the Mennonites are an agricultural people, and how agriculture is a national service, because without proper nutrition, there is no way that the soldiers could win the war. The Mennonites ought to concern themselves with providing sustenance, and they ought to plant grains even more industriously than in the past. The *Privilegium*, which was granted to the Mennonites when they first immigrated, was still fully in effect, and would be respected by the government. We would not be forced into doing military service. Mr. Bennett then said the following regarding the registration cards: first, that they should absolutely be filled out, but that they represented no danger to us, and we were in no way obliging ourselves to military service through them.



Mennonite men received certificates attesting to their exemption from military service.

The purpose of the cards is only this: to find out what sorts of people were in the country – how many people were engaged in agriculture, and how many people there were who could do other sorts of work. Mr. Bennett then reassured us that the Mennonites would not be compelled to perform military service, first, because we were an agricultural people which provided an indispensable service, even during wartime. And also because we had a Privilegium from the government, which would be respected by the present one as well as all future governments, as long as Canada remained under the British flag.

If Canada did not win the war, however, then it was likely that the freedom that we Mennonites currently enjoyed in Canada would be lost. Regarding the registration cards, it was asked that we write "Mennonite" directly above the question section, so that it would be obvious to whoever read the cards whom they concerned. We also asked if it would be possible for those of our young people who had already committed themselves to military service to be released from that obligation. The answer was yes. But they had to want to be released. They would have to submit a written request for release to the commanding officer of their battalion and also send a copy to Mr. Rogers in Ottawa in order to have their request granted. This privilege, however, would only apply to those still in Canada. Those already across the ocean were beyond the control of the Canadian government. We also asked who qualified as a Mennonite – only those who were officially a part of the congregation, or also the unbaptized? The response was: "Not only those who are a part of the congregation, but anyone with Mennonite parents. But if they have joined a different denomination, then they will no longer be considered Mennonite."

This was the written news that the Sommerfelder delegates brought back with them from Ottawa. And although our congregation did not take part in this trip to Ottawa, it was nevertheless welcome news for us as well. The news was followed by a short period of peace, at least in the flesh, but it also served to strengthen a feeling of earthly security and godless living.

10 Since this meeting took place in Manitoba, Dyck is likely referring to P. C. Locke, the superintendent of registration in Manitoba, rather than R. B. Bennett, who was the director general of the National Service Board in Ottawa.

CHANGING SECURITIES

Our human nature is generally such that, when given a small measure of security, it takes for itself a greater measure. And the noble cross, which is only taken up by true Christians, is still eagerly escaped. Therefore, my dear children, I urge you, bend yourselves willingly under your crosses, because you will come into difficult times, or the congregation may be plagued by a spirit of confusion with many contradictory thoughts and opinions among the members, where one says, “Here is the Christ,” and the other says “there he is” (which means that each believes himself to be right). Then dear children! I encourage you along with the apostle Paul, who says: “Lust not after high things” (or higher learning) “but rather cling to what is lowly and do not consider yourself to be smart” (Romans 12:16–17). And if you hear about a poor, lowly, despised heap, which is despised and rejected by the world, cling to such a thing, and think on the words of the apostle Paul: “He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:28–30). And if you hear from the cross, it is Christ, with his spirit of grace and of prayer.

And even if the times are so changed,
That we nearly pass away from resentment
And the distress increases because of it
So that no goal is in sight
Have patience, it will soon be over.
Life’s difficult pilgrimage
Soon we will be taken away,
To where the plagues turn from us,
All the same guard yourselves against meanness and
extravagance,
Just as the little bird is troubled
Before it sees its foe,
That quickly will this day come upon us.

My dear children, read the Proverbs often, which among other things remind us: “For he guards the way of the just and pro-

TECTS the path of his faithful ones... For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. Discretion will protect you and understanding will guard you” (Proverbs 2:8, 10–11). “My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring you prosperity. Let love and faithfulness never leave you, bind them around your neck and write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man. Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding, in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and shun evil. Honor the Lord your God with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine. My son, do not despise the Lord’s discipline, and do not resent his rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in” (Proverbs 3:1–12).

Patience is difficult to bear,
While we are earthly beings.
That some here in joy
Suppose they are with God,
Who does indeed explain himself clearly:
“I punish those I love
And whom I highly grieve,
It’s them that I love dearly.”

As was already mentioned, through this good news from Ottawa relief was brought to many hearts, but unfortunately it did not remain this way for long. It was soon made known through the papers that the national registration cards had to be filled out, which again aroused not a small amount of concern throughout the entire congregation. Again the brotherhood was summoned, and Aeltester Ohm Johann Friesen along with the other Ohms and Vorsteher [civil leader] were sent to Winnipeg to inquire further. And if my memory serves me correctly, we were told by the authorities in Winnipeg that every male, but especially the young ones, was to carry his card with

him. And if he were travelling and was stopped by soldiers or military officials, he would be able to provide them with official documentation that he was indeed a part of the Mennonite congregation. These cards had to be signed by the Aeltester of our congregation and stamped with the church seal. Again peace and fleshly security reigned. But instead of regarding this outcome as a result of God's grace, things continued to decline morally in the congregation. Sin was heaped upon sin, and the great equalization with this world seemed to gain the upper hand. The watchmen on Zion's wall once again began to sigh and to preach freely from the pulpit.

Anger hasn't existed,
From the beginning of the world.
Anyone can read
What changes Christ has wrought.
Neither love nor faith exist on earth,
Everyone has his own trick and ruse,
The rich persuades the poor,
And wrings him of his sweat,
So that only his pennies ring.
Who can measure everything?
What drives the world with force?
With its drinking and eating?
Pride and great splendour.
God will not bear it for long.
Look, that we do not catch his judgment,
For then you are lost forever,
And chosen by the Devil.
It would be better to never have been born!
It would be better never to have been born!

Our situation was very much like that of Israel, which we read about in Ezekiel chapter 16: "And the word of the Lord came to [Ezekiel] and said: 'Son of man, confront Jerusalem with her detestable practices and say, "Your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, and because the splendor I had given you made your beauty perfect, declares the Sovereign Lord. But you trusted in your beauty, and used your fame to become a prostitute. You lavished your favors on anyone who walked by and your beauty became his"' (Ezekiel 16:1-2, 14-15). This has been fulfilled among us. And how could it be otherwise? It was sad to look at our young people. In the one pocket they carried the cards signed by the Aeltesten verifying that they were Mennonites and that they were therefore exempt from military service. And in the other pocket they carried their bottle of schnapps, and went calmly and surely into the drinking establishments and playhouses, indulging in a godless life without giving a thought to Solomon who said in the Proverbs: "Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat, for drunkards and gluttons become



Mennonites playing pool in Gretna, Manitoba. Old Colony leaders criticized how easily some Mennonites engaged with the world.





Men in Alberta wearing masks during the global influenza pandemic of 1918. Death rates among Mennonites in Manitoba were double those of non-Mennonites.

poor... Who was woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaints? Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes? Those who linger over wine, who go to sample bowls of mixed wine. Do not gaze at wine [or beer or brandy] when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly! It goes down smoothly, but in the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper” (Proverbs 23:20–21, 29–33).

Therefore protect us Lord from drunkenness,
And teach us to consider,
That drunkards languish in eternity,
Without a single bit of cooling.
Keep our lives here in sobriety,
And help us from this time forward,
To indulge in the drink of your goodness.

And so the war cry came ever nearer and it appeared that nothing was helping, and the hatred and envy of all citizens – the English – was almost at its peak, so that they began to say to us: “The Mennonite boys live no better than ours do. They live so godlessly and go openly into the whorehouses, and they dress and wear their hair the same way as the English. And yet our sons must offer up their blood, bodies, and lives for the fatherland and the Mennonites present themselves to the world as the same. We will see to it that in the next war they are taken into military service just as our sons are.” And after this devastating war had dragged on for about four years, we heard that a dangerous disease had broken out among those fighting, which had not only impeded the war, but in some places had brought it to a standstill. And with this the words of the wise David were fulfilled, which are written in the Psalms: “Come and see the works of the Lord, the devastations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear . . . [that] not one of the warriors can lift his hands” (Psalm 46:8–9; 76:5).



Some Mennonites willingly enlisted in the military during the First World War.

OPPRESSIVE SICKNESS

It was in November 1918 that this illness also found its way to Manitoba, Canada, and it didn't take long before the entire region was so devastated by it that any sort of medical help seemed to be in vain. Death had converted some homes into houses of mourning where fathers and mothers were torn from their children or parents were forced to give their children up. And so again the threat of a just curse of God broke out because of our sins and our sinful lives, as we read in Deuteronomy 28, where it is written: "The Lord will strike you with a wasting disease, with fever and inflammation, and with scorching heat and drought, with blight, and mildew, which will plague you until you perish" (Deuteronomy 28:22). How sad it was, for this sickness appeared to spread throughout the whole world as a judgment. I was twenty-nine years old when I too contracted it. I was still able, by mustering all my strength, to visit the sick ones in the village once a day. The dear Aeltester Ohm Johann Friesen was also very sick with the disease, so much so that he wasn't able to visit the church for two weeks. I was forced to miss one of the Sundays. And as soon as I got enough strength back to be able to drive, I was invited to a funeral almost every day. Small children, middle-aged people, and the elderly were all snatched away by the sickness. Most people were only sick for one week before they died. For the first few funerals after I recovered I was still so weak that I had to stand with a chair in front of me and I had to hold it with one hand to prevent myself from collapsing with exhaustion. How many people turned to God during that time, and out of feelings of fear confessed themselves before God and the congregation in an attempt to purify themselves. And as soon as the Aeltester was able to stand and walk, there was a long line of guilt-ridden sinners waiting to be restored to the congregation.

Yes, the Lord is knocking earnestly,
And trying to turn our heads,
Through sickness which touched everybody,
And laid us on our beds.
Yes, many to their deaths were called,
Without checking if they were young or old.
Therefore hear it – man be standing by,

For this is the day that you might die.

None of the dear Ohms died as a result of the sickness. It lasted about a month before the sickness (from Exodus 23:25) was taken from us and those who did not die quickly got better. It seemed that this disease had knocked the Great War to the ground and brought an end to it. And by Christmas of that year, the warring kingdoms had made peace so that everyone was glad and the school children with happiness in their voices let their wishes for the New Year ring out:

The Lord has given once again,
The world a little rest.
The weapons have been laid aside,
One asks, what happens next?

Now one might think it safe to assume that after the Lord had punished all humanity with war and disease that the word of God would be fulfilled, as it is written in Micah 4:3–4: "They will beat the swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the Lord Almighty has spoken." But how completely differently things actually happened. How quickly this judgment disappeared from people's hearts, and some among us forgot everything also – how they had promised during their sickness that if God would heal them they would walk with more earnestness and faithfulness before him and the congregation. And according to the previous change they would put off the old self, which they had corrupted through lust and error, and would renew themselves with the spirit of joy, and would put on the new person, which is created in God's image, in upright justice and holiness. It is described further in Ephesians 4: "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbour, for we are all members of one body. In your anger do not sin: do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but



Poster issued by the Provincial Board of Health of Alberta about the influenza pandemic of 1918.

must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:25–32).

What a good lesson, dear children! Everything we need to know to live a godly life and after that a blessed death is in that passage. The poor human has a lifetime to meditate on these few words that I mentioned from Ephesians 4. The Word of God is like a sea that can never be wiped out. Every time a person reads

from it he will find something new. Therefore, dear children, allow the Word of God to be the standard according to which your whole lives are lived. And you ought to read it at least once a day, so that if you should become ill or are in trouble or distress, you will remember the beautiful words and will be able to pray to God using them. Do not ever let circumstances or earthly concerns become so pressing that you don’t read a little from the Scriptures before you go to sleep at night. The more you read from the Word, the more God will bless you, both now and in eternity. The time and hour that a person spends in the Word of God, reading and praying, will be doubly blessed. And often in areas where he may least expect it. Do not just read from the hymnal, which is certainly not to be despised, but one can too easily grow accustomed to the beautiful words so that one will forget the Old and New Testaments, or will neglect to read from them. Do not just read from the New Testament, but read often from the Old Testament as well. “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4). (Read also diligently Menno Simons and the *Martyrs Mirror*.)

Yes, dear children!

Praise God with hearts and mouth,
For that reason we were given them.
It is a blessed hour,
In which one reflects,
Otherwise all time is wasted
That we live on earth.
We should become blessed
And remain that way forever.

And thus things were again very sad, sorrowful, and pathetic. It was not only that people once again lived so securely, and quickly forgot about the serious disease and the Great War and didn’t want to allow themselves to be disciplined by God’s Spirit and Word (Genesis 6:3), but it wasn’t long before once again the people and kingdoms of this world were preparing for yet another war. And this time they were preparing as they had never done before, and why? Because Germany, with its extraordinarily strong military machine, was almost not defeated. This military might and power in Germany was a result of the fact that an inextinguishable enthusiasm for the art of war, or militarism, was instilled in every child, from a very young age through the schools. And other countries, including Canada, now wished to follow this example. It didn’t take long before one once again began to read in the papers that Canada had decreed and made law that all citizens – even the Mennonites – were going to be made into hundred percent Canadians. Public schools were now to be built among the Mennonites everywhere, including in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. The founding of the schools was confirmed with the motto “One king, one God, one fleet, one flag, one all-British empire: love and self-sacrifice for the fatherland.”

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

It was so plain and obvious to all that no one had to wonder what the government intended in this particular situation. Again this news aroused much concern, sorrow, and anxiety and all those in their right minds and especially the leaders, as Aeltesten and ministers, looked to the future with heavy hearts. Would the Privilegium, which had been issued by the federal government, really be revoked? It seemed almost impossible that the loving heart, the heretofore gracious and well-wishing heart of the fatherland, could so quickly turn away from its Mennonite children, and demand of them duties which they could not in good conscience perform. But as it says in the introduction to one of the apostle Paul's letters, all who desire to follow Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

Even if it has not yet come to physical martyrdom, it is nevertheless persecution of our teaching and withdrawal of our educational freedom. Soon we were forced to witness what we didn't want to believe: highly educated and totally worldly school inspectors appeared in our towns and began selecting the

sites for the district schools, which were to be built in accordance with the new law. These men openly stated that if we did not hand our children over to be educated in these schools, our brothers would simply be persuaded to do so through prison sentences and military fines. The first school (as far as I can remember) was built in the village of Reinland. The second school was built in Neuenberg, at the end of the village, right near the home of the dear Aeltester Ohm Johann Friesen, and I'm convinced it was built there out of envy and malicious glee. To our great dismay, we soon learned that many of our false brothers, as traitors and conspirators, were working hand in hand with the government and were even giving officials advice on how to get us into their net quicker.

As I already mentioned, these inspectors did not hesitate to verbally assault the Aeltester with questions about why we wanted to oppose the government. They asked if the English language were not as holy as the German one, and if the English Bible were not as much God's Word as the German one. In



Eight boys inside the Mennonite school in the Neu Kronsthal district, north of Plum Coulee, Manitoba, in 1918. The families of at least two of the boys in this photo, Isaak Fast and Jacob Hildebrand (fourth and fifth from the left), joined the migration to Mexico. Next page: Mennonite children gathered around the Union Jack.





response to these questions the Aeltester answered that the issue was not the language but the fact that it was impossible for us to allow our children to be raised under the flag and under the enthusiastic expression of military zeal. And finally the Aeltester asked the inspector if he himself didn't believe that the school of today represents the church of tomorrow. Yes, he replied, but he added that it would take about ten or twenty years to come into effect. To another the Aeltester asked what the true meaning of flying the flag above the schools meant, if not the same thing that it meant when it was raised above the battlefields, to which the official had to concede a begrudging "yes."

But all of our protest was in vain. How often the Aeltester returned anxious and dejected from Winnipeg where he had gone to seek counsel, and how often in the Thursday assembly of the brotherhood he said to the Ohms that our situation was indeed very sad. For all of the lords, regents, and rulers of the land seemed to have turned their looks of friendly approval away from us as if they no longer wished to hear if we complained of our need.

I have already alluded to the extensive monetary offering to the Red Cross that was expected of our congregation during the war, which the government recognized at the time with warm thanks. It was also during the war that the region some seventy-five miles to the west of Morden – the hills of an English settlement called Deloraine – experienced severe crop failure because of a locust invasion. After a plea for assistance was issued to our leaders, we donated about \$4,000 and two loads of feed. Our donation was gratefully received and in return we received many moving letters of thanksgiving. Shortly after this our Aeltester and our Vorsteher, Uncle Johann Rempel, were called to Morden by an official, who may have had a high position in the telegraph service. When he arrived there, this man said he only wanted to thank him for all the help our congregation had given, and to say that they wouldn't have made it without us, and if there were ever anything that he could in return, he would be most happy to do so.

And as things were getting ever worse with the school issue, not only were our brethren being punished with fines and jail time, but the dear minister and servant of the congregation Peter Friesen was sent to Winnipeg as an "evildoer" and was sentenced to two weeks in prison. This awakened a considerable amount of anxiety throughout the congregation, especially because of the time of year – it was springtime, the time when Peter Friesen was supposed to prepare the young people for baptism. I can still remember how many tears were shed and prayers were said on his behalf!

And as the need of the church and the congregation grew ever greater, the thoughts of the Aeltester and Ohms turned once again to this man in Morden who had promised to help us. A delegation drove to Morden to see this man and to present our case to him, and to ask him if he would represent us to the rulers. For as soon as we could find a location, we intended to move away, but in the meantime we wanted him to ask the government to have patience with us and to give us more time. And he had

promised that he would help us if ever he could.

Yes, the man acknowledged, the Mennonites had done much for us, and had donated much money, but this is still not blood. He continued, "I have three sons: one died in the war and is now resting in his grave, the other is somewhere on the ocean on his way there and the third will be sent there shortly, so that I will have sacrificed all three of my sons for the war. And the Mennonite sons live no better than ours. Their sons have as much right to be conscripted as our sons do." And this was the sad answer of this man, with which the Aeltester and Vorsteher returned home.

And so the government continued with its school pressure. What made matters worse was that many in our congregation willingly conceded – even desired – to enroll their children in the public schools. They said, "We wish for our children a better education, higher learning than we received." And with this the foundation for the tower of Babel was laid. In Genesis 11 it is written: "Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, 'Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly.' They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, 'Come let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth'" (Genesis 11:1–4).

During this time the people of Canada also began to mock us and yearned to have everything unified under one sceptre, one school, and one language, in order to make for themselves a great name among the nations, and so that in the next war they would be that much stronger. And Genesis continues, "Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other" (Genesis 11:7). If we hold up God's Word as a mirror, we will see that we are far from innocent of this Babylonian idolatry. As Revelation 17:2 states: "With [Babylon, the great prostitute] the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries."

These suspicious tracks could already be seen clearly back then, and this seed secretly grew among us far quicker and stronger than many would believe. For if we still wanted to boast that we were a people set apart, and if we wanted to humbly follow Christ, in spite of the hatred, ridicule, and contempt of the world, there was a lot of pride, exuberance, and arrogance among us, which only made the tower of Babel grow upwards in many of our hearts and homes. For it seemed that everyone wanted to be the most honoured, the most educated, and most respected, and each was trying to outdo the other. And this all came about because some had begun to doubt the command "thou shalt not covet." And the great enlightenment with the improved schooling was a net, a dangerous trap, whereby many parents unknowingly allowed their children to be caught. For the enemy, a juggler, a master orator, knew exactly how to convince people that they could comfortably enjoy eating the forbidden fruit. If only he would receive honour, then he didn't mind if



Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Gretna became a symbol of higher education among Mennonites.

the people continued reading God's Word and tried to clothe themselves from head to toe in the dead words. It came to the point where it seemed that everything that was godly had collapsed – people were flying flags not only in the cities, but also in every town, and the powerful zeitgeist threatened to overtake everything. Our situation was just like the one described in 2 Thessalonians, where it says: "He will oppose or exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God" (2 Thessalonians 2:4).

And with the appearance of holiness, the word of God was partly incorporated as blindness or a larva, behind which the merely natural person would not immediately recognize Satan and be frightened. And it was said: "God's Word is still being taught and the national language will never hurt us." Should God have spoken? (Genesis 3:4). And the decline was already so extensive that many among us could not decide whether to obey the law and send their children to the worldly schools or not. Many said that if only they could send their children to the public schools without the threat of them having to bear arms, then they wouldn't have a problem with it. Because of this sort of thinking, mass confusion erupted, which could only divide us further. It was not only because of this issue that the emigration question arose, but it damaged the congregation in other ways as well. People began to envy their neighbours. There were many who didn't want to hear anything about the worldly schools. Others laughed about it and said: "We can teach the children the Word of God in the churches – we don't need the schools for

that. We should feel obligated to obey our rulers." On and on it went like this. All of these dissenting opinions were indicative of a huge rift forming among us. If only we had been of one mind and one heart when we were confronted with the school question, then the government would have been forced to say: "Yes, there is a worthy people." And the dear Lord would have let us enjoy the favour of the citizens of the country, so that we may have been able to stay a while longer in peace and quiet in Canada.

The people of Israel were once in a situation very similar to ours. If they had stood in obedience before God and had followed his ways and his laws, then they would have been privileged among other peoples, as we read in Deuteronomy 4: "See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me. . . . Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today? Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live" (Deuteronomy 4:5, 6–9). This was, however, because of our decline, no longer possible. Therefore the words of our Saviour are that much more relevant: "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined" (Matthew 12:25). Thus it would



Students in Altona, Manitoba, celebrating Victoria Day with schoolteacher H. H. Hamm.

be impossible for our poor congregation to survive the present confusing situation unless it would renew itself, rouse itself, and through righteous atonement and a change of heart seek to live a better life, which would be evident through the fruit borne by the congregation, and through which we would demonstrate that we “hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful” (Hebrews 10:23). And yet the emigration question became ever more serious, so much so that I often heard the dear Aeltester Ohm Johann Friesen saying that it was high time to flee and to “humble [our]selves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand” (1 Peter 5:6).

It wasn’t only because of the school issue that we began to consider leaving Canada. It was also because we were becoming too much like the world – because of the automobiles and the ostentatious clothing. And the only thing that could preserve our simplicity in Christ would be if we were to again take up the walking stick. But where would we go? Again the brotherhood met with great anxiety and many tears, and through prayer and supplication sought guidance, and we discussed at length with the brethren how we wanted to do this. In fact, in total, twenty-one meetings of the brotherhood were called to discuss the topic of emigrating. And so you see, my dear children, moving from one land to another is not an insignificant matter.

And it really was high time to move, because many of our brethren were becoming sleepy and indifferent, and began to comfortably eat the forbidden fruit along with our mother Eve. If the Canadian government had not taken such an aggressive

step by saying that it wanted to make us all into hundred percent Canadians, I am convinced that most of our congregation members would have stayed in Canada. This seemed to many to be a risky situation, so when the dear Aeltester Ohm Johann Friesen finally asked at a meeting of the brotherhood how many were in favour of moving, the answer was unanimous – everyone wanted out! Many brothers expressed their desire for us to find another country where we could have total religious and educational freedom and still be able to make a living, even if we couldn’t accumulate the same earthly treasures that we were able to in recent years in Canada. Many of those who had come under the most pressure regarding the school question thought only of the words of the apostle Paul when he said: “But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. . . . For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it” (1 Timothy 6:8, 6).

But there were many who did not share this sentiment, for many looked with high hopes and great expectations to the future. And so the goal of our wandering – the land far across the Atlantic – Argentina, in South America, a rich and fruitful land, good for growing wheat, shone with the promise of continued economic prosperity. But we were not thinking of the words of the prophet Isaiah, who, speaking for the Lord, says: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts’” (Isaiah 55:8).

FREEDOM SOUGHT IN SOUTH AMERICA

The dear Lord in his wisdom had decided that our plans would come to naught. And so it was decided by the three congregations that two delegates would be selected from each congregation, and that these six representatives would be sent across land and sea into the far reaches of the earth. From our Manitoba congregation, Uncle Klaas Heide and Uncle Cornelius Rempel were selected. From the West – the Saskatchewan congregation – the preachers and ministers Johann Wall and Johann P. Wall were selected. And from the Swift Current congregation the minister Ohm Julius Wiebe and Uncle David Rempel were also chosen to take part in this dangerous journey. It was no small undertaking for these men to agree to embark on this journey, to set out for an undetermined period of time, to leave their wives and children behind, to tear themselves away from the congregation with heavy hearts, not knowing if they would see us again in this lifetime. But they went with the comfort that God’s hand was upon them, and with the promise: “You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. . . . If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast” (Psalm 139:3, 9–10). Their journey was in many ways like a wide fog-covered field, and just as one cannot see through the fog, we had no idea what our delegates would encounter on this journey. Above all else, their trip was the fulfillment of what the poet says:

No trip is without adversity.
The life’s path also has its woes!
One doesn’t walk on beds of roses.
The bridge is narrow, many are the foes
Who would lead us from the goal.
One must often bump into thorns.
Through many dry deserts we must journey,
Where no way out can be seen.

But! Just as it was decided by the brotherhood that the delegates would leave from the port city New York, it was also decided that they should stop in Ottawa on their way and see if they couldn’t beseech the rulers and the highest officials to

change their hearts towards the Mennonites, as it is written in 1 Peter 2:14 where it talks about honouring the king.

The elderly and well-known Mr. McLeod of Morden was invited to travel along as mediator, whereby he sought to demonstrate once again with all eagerness his willingness to serve us Mennonites. They arrived without difficulty in Ottawa (as Uncle Klaas Heide later told me), and were warmly received and welcomed. And after the delegates had made their desires known, Mr. McLeod movingly pleaded the Mennonites’ case. He began by telling of how they came from Russia in 1875, and how they had built up and developed the wild land, and how they had been on the verge of starvation, but how they pushed ahead and eventually made the land into the fruitful, blessed, crop-bearing countryside that it now was. He then told of all the money the Mennonites had donated to the government, both during wartime and peacetime, and how they had always held their gentle hand of generosity out to the government. And he continued that after all the Mennonites had done, the government should not now be so unmerciful to them. For they were not asking for anything new, only that the Privilegium which had been granted to them when they first came to Canada, and had been promised to them and to their children and to their children’s children, not be revoked. He reminded them that the Privilegium had been sealed with the promise that as long as the British flag flew above Canada, the Mennonites would be able to enjoy their freedom in that land. Mr. McLeod then closed his speech with the following statement: “You know, most honoured of men, that these six men have been sent out by their congregations, to cross the Atlantic Ocean, and to search out for themselves a new homeland. But I assure you, yes I plead with you gracious men, let these people be with their simple private schools, and they would turn with thankful hearts, and head straight back home, and try to stop any attempt to emigrate, for I know that they would much rather remain in Canada. Again, I ask of you, please just let the Mennonites have their private schools!”

No one said a word. It was so quiet that the hearts of the delegates began to pound with hope that Mr. McLeod’s compelling speech would be accepted. Finally one of the highest ministers

began to speak. He said that they had determined to make hundred percent Canadians of all citizens through the new school law, and they could not revoke the law. Again the delegates pleaded with them. How about if they made a large donation to the government? Or what if they left Manitoba and settled in a different province? In response to this, the minister replied: "The war ruined everything. The freedoms that the Mennonites had previously enjoyed can no longer be granted, even if you were to move to the northernmost tip of the country."

Once more, the delegates implored the ministers to only let them keep what had once been freely given. And to this the minister responded in a most serious tone: "Yes, you were once given your freedom, but now the government recognizes the folly of such a decision. "And," pointing to himself he continued, "if I were to put my coat on backwards or inside out in the morning, it doesn't mean that I would be obliged to wear it that way the entire day." This was a most depressing answer for our delegates, for they were forced to abandon all hope of staying in Canada.

From the truthful presentation of Mr. McLeod to the ministers in Ottawa, we can see the love and devotion with which Mr. McLeod and Mr. Black always worked to promote the welfare of the Mennonites to the government of Canada. They helped the leaders, ministers, and Aeltesten of our congregation out of countless emergencies. We only learned in times of trouble how much these honourable truth- and peace-loving men meant to our people. At the time when this happened, when we were forced to leave Canada, these men were already getting on in years, and I can remember well their grey heads, when we met with them to discuss our options.

And even though these men would only accept meagre payment for the assistance they provided us, we can only hope that their greatest reward will be in the next life as we have been taught: "Each will be rewarded according to his own labour. . . . And we know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free" (1 Corinthians 3:8, Ephesians 6:8). And even if they (Mr. McLeod and Mr. Black) are not one with us in belief, it is nevertheless a scriptural truth that "God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34). Why else would some Jewish elders approach Christ in Capernaum on behalf of the centurion to heal the latter's servant, even though the centurion did not acknowledge himself as a Christian? Because, the elders explained to Christ, the centurion "deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue" (Luke 7:5).

With great sadness the delegates left the Parliament buildings in Ottawa, and went immediately to work, preparing their passports for travel to South America. After a few days, everything was ready, and full of anxious fear, interspersed with doubt and hope, they boarded the ship with the wish and the prayer that God would lead them as much by sea as by land, that he would be their guide and their protector, and that they would happily survive their journey over the swelling waves and return alive and healthy, and that they would find what they were looking

for. The month was August of 1919. And thus passed the days and weeks, in anxious anticipation, especially for the families of the delegates, that they would see their loved ones again in this lifetime. And as much as everyone hoped for some news, for a time they heard nothing. Each asked the other if any news had come; word was sent even from western Saskatchewan, inquiring if we had heard anything. Nervous concern mounted in the congregation: "Why was there no news?" "Why hadn't we heard anything?" "Was it possible that there had been an accident?" To be sure, many in the congregation wished to express the thoughtless statement: "Our delegates will without a doubt have a pleasant journey, and certainly it will be blessed with success, because the dear Ohms have gone along." But that only showed that we hadn't taken the Word of God to heart, where it is written: "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? . . . Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty? They are higher than the heavens – what can you do? They are deeper than the depths of the grave – what can you know? Their measure is longer than the earth and wider than the sea. If he comes along and confines you in prison and convenes a court, who can oppose him?" (Romans 11:33–34, Job 11:7–10).

Immediately the news circulated through the congregation that a telegram had arrived bearing the tragic news that the dear minister Ohm Johann Wall had died in Curitiba, South America [Brazil]. What a scare that was, and how it sent ripples of dismay throughout the entire congregation, especially because no one knew what the cause of death was, or that he had even been ill! And so, our Aeltester Ohm Johann Friesen along with some of the other Ohms headed west, to take part in the funeral with his family and dear congregation members.

Again for a long time there was no word. It got to the point that people were wondering if the dear Ohm Johann Wall had actually died. After about two months letters began arriving from South America which confirmed that it was indeed true, that the dear Ohm had died of a bowel obstruction and an intestinal infection, and after suffering for six days, had died a natural death. Shortly after the Ohm passed away, the other Ohm Johann Wall wrote a letter to the deceased's family, which I have included here:

Brazil, Curitiba. September 29, 1919.

My dearly beloved sister in Christ Jesus!

It is with a very heavy heart that I am writing to you at this early hour of the morning about the last days of your warmly loved father and husband. This duty weighs so heavily upon me. My eyes are so full of tears that they are spilling over and covering my face. My heart is filled with such deep sorrow that I almost don't know how to put into words so important a thing, for the wound that is bleeding in my heart is still so fresh. But though my heart is already feeling part of my own deep sorrow, how

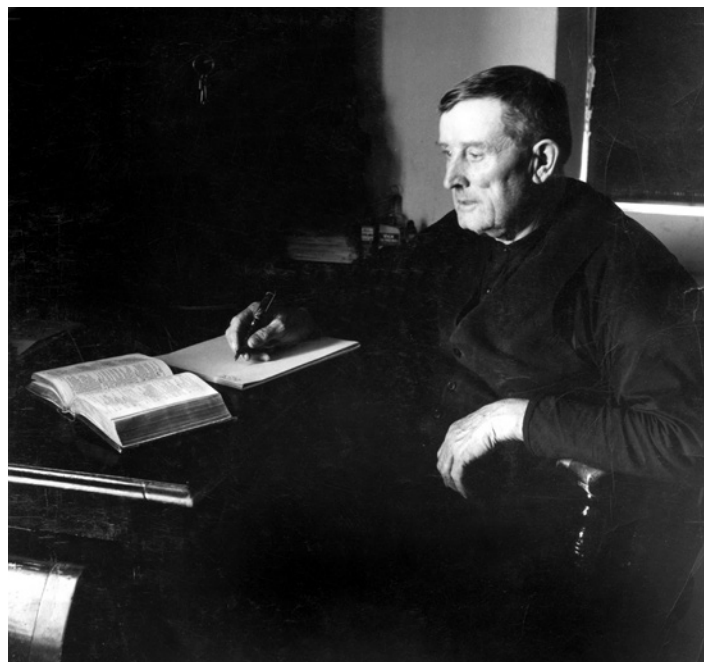
much greater must be your grief and that of your children. The news of his death you have undoubtedly received by now. For as soon as it was morning, I sent a telegram to you telling you of the devastating news. Because I know that you are longing to know more regarding the circumstances, I did not want to waste any time before writing to give you some more information. I know that he wrote you and told you that we had arrived in Brazil. We did not wish to spend much time in this country, but rather had hoped to use their rail system to pass through because it was on our way to our actual goal, which was Argentina. And yet, after we had been admitted by the authorities, things were progressing much slower than we had hoped. We hurried from one location to the other, as the government suggested more and more places for us to look at.

And so, on Sunday, the 21st, we left here and travelled to Curitiba, where we arrived Monday evening. We planned to stay here only one or two days, and then continue on to our planned destination. On the way here – a very physically arduous journey – I didn't notice that anything was wrong with him. We arrived here around 8 p.m., ate some supper, and then went directly to bed. The next morning, which was Tuesday, the 23rd, as we went to breakfast, I noticed that he wasn't doing well but he still managed to eat some breakfast. This was his last meal – his last in this world, but not his last in that world. As we went about our affairs with the government, he stayed at the hotel. Our schedule was so busy that day that I couldn't spend much time with him, because we wanted to be done there by the next day. We all wanted to get to Buenos Aires where we were hoping to receive some news from home.

On the way here, the two of us had wondered numerous times if bad news was going to be waiting for us because both of our hearts were filled with such a deep pain, a strange presentiment that weighed us down. That evening in his room, however, I noticed that things were not improving. The pain in his body was getting worse. We tried to rest, but he didn't sleep at all. I spent a lot of time at his bedside.

When morning finally came, we sent for a doctor, because the pain kept getting worse, and he was totally constipated. Leaving Curitiba was out of the question. The doctor finally came around noon, and when he saw him, he knowingly shook his head. When he returned in the evening, things still hadn't improved. In fact, they had only gotten worse. The prescribed medicine didn't bring any relief. He advised us to call another doctor, which we did immediately. At ten in the evening he returned with another doctor, who has the reputation of being the best doctor in Brazil. After examining him, they determined that they would wait until morning, and if there still was no improvement, then they there would be nothing left to do but operate.

And though the pain did seem to subside somewhat, there was no improvement. He was having difficulty breathing. And when the two doctors came on Thursday and saw that he was no better, they decided that he had to be moved to the hospital. And although we did not want to be separated, we all agreed that day and night one of us would always be at his side. At one o'clock



MENNONITE LIFE, OCT. 1961, 185

Johann P. Wall (1875–1961) broke the news of Johann Wall's death in a letter to his fellow minister's wife. This photo was taken shortly before Johann P. Wall's death.

the ambulance came and took him to the hospital. There we were given a large room with two beds to ourselves. He stayed there until Sunday at four in the morning, almost constantly in severe pain. I did not leave his bed, other than to eat. I must honestly say that he suffered terribly in the flesh. He did not want to let them operate, and we, or at least I, counselled him against it. But on Saturday morning, when the doctor mentioned it again, he was not opposed to it, for the pain was almost unbearable. Together we got down on our knees and cried to God our father in our need, as we had done so many times before. Right at that moment the doctor called me out of the room and wanted to discuss the operation, but just as I left the room, we heard talking coming from inside. I hurried back in and saw that God had heard and answered our prayer. The stool had moved. I hurried to find the doctor to tell him the good news. Dubious, he came to see with his own eyes, and alas, beheld the impossible. He stood there speechless and in awe. It was like a stone lifting from our hearts. The doctor stopped the preparation for the operation and was as hopeful as we were. By noon the pain had subsided considerably, and by the afternoon even more so. And yet, the invalid was so frail and so weak. And though he was more hopeful than he had been, he was not nearly as optimistic as we were. His pain was not as intense, but he still felt very oppressed. But not in his soul, oh no! Just in his body. His heart and soul were longing to be released. Because I hadn't left his side up to that point, and because he appeared to be doing so much better, it was decided that I would go back to the hotel to try to get some rest. But then he took a turn for the worse, so I decided to stay after all, which made him glad. He said it would be his last night and how he yearned to be set free and to be with Christ. This night was cruelly difficult, and he cried out to God throughout

the night. I sat on his bed with him and cooled his tongue with an ice cube, and his forehead with a water bottle. It went on like this until about 3 a.m.

At that point he didn't want any more assistance. Until this point he had only laid on his right side, because any other position hurt too much. But at this point he turned onto his back, straightened himself out, and lay fairly still. It was almost four, and after we had said our goodbyes he lifted his arms to the sky. As his hands came down we realized that it was over. By four the soul had freed itself from its earthly ties, and hurried toward its home of eternal peace. It was over, his wish had been fulfilled and his prayer answered. I closed his eyes, eyes that would no longer see the evil of this world. My heart is nearly broken, and I am almost numbed by this overwhelming pain. I must mention that the other delegates were also with him on the last night. We hurried on Sunday to get his earthly remains into the ground. We didn't do it too quickly, although it will likely appear to you that way. We were able to buy our type of coffin. We dressed him as well as we were able, and led him to his earthly rest.

Now dear sister, you and the children are probably thinking that I haven't said much about his hopes for the future, but that is what I intend to now do. I'm certain that neither you nor I have any doubt that he is now at peace. His faith was secure that he would appear before God as a sinner redeemed through the blood of Jesus Christ, as he had so often wished and prayed for. And he also hoped, dear sister, to one day meet you and the children in God's presence. Dear children, you were so often on your father's heart. There are a lot of things he asked me to say to you, which I will do, if God grants me the grace and strength to return home. And to you, dear sister, he asked me to say that he holds you dear in the innermost heart of his spirit, and that he took leave of this life with one last kiss from you. And he also remembered his dear mother and siblings. And the Aeltesten, Ohms, and the congregation. If I forget to mention something, which you thought he would have said, please don't hold it against me, for the grief is overwhelming me sometimes so much that my thoughts are barely coherent and it would be very easy for me to forget something. Though I hope that you will be able to look beyond what is missing and will be able to put yourselves in our (I will not say "my") position. Although this dear husband and father would have preferred to have ended this battle in the company of you, his loved ones, it was not to be. Instead, he was not afraid in the least, even here in this foreign land, to allow his body to decay, even if he could have gotten better, which he did not want, but went to meet Christ all alone.

Comfort yourselves with this hope, and use this uncertain time to prepare yourselves for eternity. God has given it to us out of his grace, through Jesus Christ, amen.

Now Johann, the most difficult task falls to you. You must try to lighten your mother's load wherever possible. Show yourself worthy of this task and take it as a man. Get rid of everything that is not seemly for a Christian man, and muster all your strength in order to fulfill your duty. Fulfill your father's wish and will, and be careful how you use the present – this period of grace – because it

is followed by the long eternity. And if time has already helped to alleviate your family's pain somewhat, then my prayer would be partly answered, for I feel with you. Please don't hold it against me that I didn't write to you last night, but it would have been impossible for me to have done so. Though if we could have left here today, I would have done whatever was necessary. But alas, we are planning to leave here tomorrow morning for Argentina.

I would like to be able to offer you some words of comfort, but my own heart is in need of consolation, for I too have lost very, very much. And there will be others who will comfort you, so I will leave it at that.

Please greet everyone warmly who intercedes on our behalf, for we need intercession more and more. Sometimes my heart feels like it is in despair. O! Aeltesten and Ohms, and congregation overseers, please be diligent for our sake. And to the dear flock and congregation, please pray for us, and may God in heaven hear and answer through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Written by your brother who is bound to you in love and who suffers with you in distress.

–Johann P. Wall

And so the plans of the people were frustrated, and the five remaining delegates returned home safely after a three-month absence, but with the depressing news that they did not find any country willing to grant the requested freedoms. So again we looked to the future with anxious hearts. And what made matters worse was that the Canadian government continued to fine and imprison members of our congregation to try to persuade us to send our children to the public schools. This served only to inspire our search, not to hinder it.

Dear children, you were once small and carefree, and all you needed to be happy was to be near your mother and father, or to take your parent's hand. But what has it come to? How many sighs, tears, and prayers have been sent to God above because of the children? The parents, who could see the danger the children's souls were in, feared for them. Think back, dear children, to the way things are in Canada, where the young people are being conscripted into the military. And imagine if the Aeltesten and Ohms and the congregation had not been bold enough to leave? Whom do you have to thank that we have now been in Mexico for nearly half a century with our simple private schools and our freedom from governmental intervention so that we can teach our children the Word of God as we see fit? Not only the dear Lord, but also the dear elders, Aeltesten and ministers, and many of those with grey hair in our congregation, though most of them have now passed on. "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith" (Hebrews 13:7).

As I recall it was not long after the delegates returned that we received an offer from Quebec, because that provincial government believed that if we were to settle in the forests that we would be able to maintain our own schools. And so arrangements were made with the provincial government to see the land. But things were not working out – the land was so densely for-



JOÃO BAPTISTA GROFF / DIRETORIA DE PATRIMÔNIO CULTURAL DA FUNDAÇÃO CULTURAL DE CURITIBA

A six-man delegation travelled to Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina from August to November 1919 to investigate potential settlement sites. Along the way they visited impressive cities like Rio De Janeiro and São Paulo. Above, a street in Curitiba, where Johann Wall took ill and died.

ested, and the ground would be extremely difficult to cultivate, and the government couldn't guarantee us what we asked for. Again the time passed with anxious expectation regarding our fate. It was only during this period that we finally understood the words of the poet:

It costs more than one initially thinks,
 To stay faithful to that which we were given,
 And in the power of the first love to remain,
 Until one sees us leave the battlefield.

Therefore you parents and you children!
 Do not forget the way
 Which brought us to this place,
 Lest you will miss your help
 When hard times do befall.

We received word through land agents that the state government of Mississippi, in the United States, was interested in having us settle there, if we would agree to clear the land and to cultivate it. In return they were willing to grant us our schools and military exemption. A delegation was sent down there and the land was examined and the officials met with, and it really seemed as if we had found what we were looking for.

Shortly thereafter, at a meeting of the brotherhood, it was

decided that, God willing, we would prepare to move to the south and settle in their forest region. Our congregation leaders began depositing large sums of money into the bank in Winkler, Manitoba. But then what happened? Again the words of Moses were fulfilled: "At midday you will grope about like a man in the dark. You will be unsuccessful in everything you do; day after day you will be oppressed and robbed, with no one to rescue you" (Deuteronomy 28:29).

It really seemed as if the Lord was letting us wander around in the darkness, for exactly at that time when the transaction was supposed to go through, the border was closed and we were informed that we would not be allowed into the United States. To this day no one knows what the reason was. As I later heard our dear Aeltester Ohm Johann Friesen describe the situation, it was simply one of those things that we had to attribute to the mysterious ways of the Lord, as is written: "All this also comes from the Lord Almighty, wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom" (Isaiah 28:29).

And once more our situation was like that of the Israelites who wanted out of the land against God's will. It is written, "Whenever the Israelites went out to fight, the hand of the Lord was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress" (Judges 2:15). And just as there were many grumblers in Israel, the unrest also continued to mount in our congregations. The leaders of the congregation

were accused of not doing their jobs properly. There was no shortage of masters, but a real lack of workers who were willing to humble themselves, fold their hands, and ask God for guidance. But people's motives were not right; they lacked broken hearts and contrite spirits, the only sacrifice which God will not despise (Psalm 51:17). We lacked that sense of conviction for our sins; we were missing the balm of Gilead (Jeremiah 8:22).

No oil flows without being pressed,
No balsam without effort,
So it seems then if a Christian be stressed
Under pressure more nicely blooms.

Exodus 2:23–25 states: “The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.” And so we continued to look for somewhere to go to escape what surely was in store for us were we to remain in Canada. And the time passed in this way, and the summer of 1920 passed and still we did not know where to go, and we were exasperated: “The harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved” (Jeremiah 8:20). And the Canadian government pressed aggressively ahead with its agenda. And when a few of our leaders appealed to the government to have patience with us, for we were clearly looking for a new home, the response we received was quite hostile. We were told: “And if we give you more time, until you find a new home, in forty years you'll still be looking but won't have left, and you'll still be on your knees begging for more time, but in truth, you have no intention of leaving.”

Fines and prison sentences were becoming ever more frequent. It seemed that the more seriously we sought a new homeland, the more seriously we wanted to leave, and the more intense became the hardship we had to endure. But then our thoughts turned again to Israel, and how Egypt was for them an “iron-smelting furnace” (1 Kings 8:51).

How applicable the Israelite story was to our own, as we read in Exodus where Pharaoh talks to Moses and Aaron and says: “Why are you taking the people away from their labour? . . . They are lazy; that is why they are crying out, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to our God.’ Make them work harder for the men so that they keep working and pay no attention to lies.’ . . . The Israelite foremen realized they were in trouble when they were told, ‘You are not to reduce the number of bricks required of you each day.’ When they left Pharaoh, they found Moses and Aaron waiting to meet them, and they said, ‘May the Lord look upon you and judge you! You have made us a stench to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.’ Moses returned to the Lord and said, ‘O Lord, why have you brought trouble upon this people? Is this why you sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble upon this people, and you have not rescued your people at all.’ Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Now you will see what I

will do to Pharaoh: Because of my mighty hand he will let them go; because of my mighty hand he will drive them out of the country” (Exodus 5:4, 8–9, 19–23, 6:1).

How we finally had to abandon our own ideas about how things would go. The dear Lord took us in a totally different direction than we had anticipated. How many lacked the joyful courage to continue the struggle, to persevere, to hold on patiently through all the trials, hardships, and crises that confronted us. Especially I, a poor servant, who was supposed to be a practiced fighter, a leader, I too was nearly defeated. The words of the poet often spoke right to my heart:

You head with all your wit and senses
Toward a thousand worries
And you wonder what on earth
Will finally become of you.
And yet you say my countenance
Should be your guide your whole life through,
But yet you don't believe
Anything but what your eyes can see.
Only what you create will be
Your head, your light, and your master.
What you did not elect,
You dismiss as lost.
Now see again, how much and oft
What you had certainly and firmly hoped
To hunt down with your own hands
Is shamefully knocked over.
Then again, how sometimes it is
That when these things happen all around,
No person, no counsel, no mind
Could conceive of such things.
How often you have gotten into big trouble,
On account of your own will.
You mistook your blind sin and death
For life.
And had God allowed you
To fare according to your own work and deed,
Just as you intended it,
Then you would have collapsed.
Oh! How many times he remains quiet
But does what's good for us.
But in the meantime our will and hearts consider,
Searching here and there and finding not,
We want to see but lack the light,
We want to wriggle out of fear
But cannot find the way.
But God continues straight ahead,
In his ways of wisdom.
He goes and brings us to the place
Where wind and storm abate.
And only after, when the work has happened
Can the person finally see,
What governs him, and guides him.

DESTINATION MEXICO

This was exactly the way it all happened; it seemed that when our need was the greatest, God's help was there. We received word from God, a message, that we might find our freedom in Mexico. It wasn't long before we heard that a man from Mexico had come up to our congregation in western Saskatchewan and had cordially invited us to consider moving to Mexico, where we would be granted everything that we requested.

This man's name was Salez Lopez, and he established himself as a mediator between us and the Mexican government. At first we were all very skeptical of him, because the thought of moving to Mexico didn't suit our tastes, because we had heard that the Mexican government was very unstable and that thieves and robbers had free rein and that criminals from other lands sought solace there. The news from this man caused a stir among the congregation members. The thought of moving to Mexico was contrary to our nature. Many were scared away immediately by the news, and others later on, so that it seemed that only a small percentage remained who wished to demonstrate their loyalty to God and the congregation. And most of the people determined that they would rather give in than make a new home in that foreign, thief-infested land. They would rather have the delightfulness of sin than share in the adversity of God's people. They would rather send their children to the district schools, to let them be raised as proper citizens of the world, than to leave and let their children be taught in the ways of our dear Saviour.

It was just as our Saviour said: "When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another (even if it is not physical persecution but if the Word of God is forced out of the schools and we can no longer teach about Christ). I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes" (Matthew 10:23). But in spite of all the unfounded rumours and frightening news that circulated through the towns about Mexico there were a few God-fearing men and women who saw this call from Mexico as a sign from God, as a route whereby we would preserve our religion. Surely through this the words of Jesus would be fulfilled: "What is impossible with men is possible with God" (Luke 18:27). Even I wondered to myself, would the words of the dear Aeltester Ohm Jacob Wiens finally be proven after so many years? For a long time ago he had said to Peter Harms that he believed that we Mennonites would find our freedom in a land of heathens. And as an example he cited our predecessor Menno Simons who, when he was most persecuted, and denied refuge everywhere even though he had

a wife and children, finally found solace with a cruel and greatly feared nobleman. He allowed Menno Simons to live on his land in peace in what had formerly been a forest of oak trees. For this protection each family had to pay one silver coin a year, and were then free of all taxes. God, in his great foresight, saw that it was fitting that these poor refugees be protected by such a cruel man, a man who was feared by all who lived in the region.



A street view of Chihuahua, Mexico, taken in the 1920s.

CORNELIUS KRAUSE FONDS MAND. MHA. PP-PHOTO522.14.0

If our argument was that all who wished to live a godly life had to endure persecution, well, we had to know that the dear Lord would accompany us even down such a path. But even this could not deter us from following the Lord, and instead of becoming disloyal, it made us all the more loyal. After many changes, with much fear, doubt, and hope, the first group of delegates set out for Mexico in the fall of 1920. At first there were only a couple of delegates from the West: Preacher Ohm Johann Wall and Vorsteher Benjamin Goertzen. And though they did not return with a written Privilegium, they were quite certain that after seeing the land, meeting the people, and negotiating with the federal government, we had finally found that for which we had searched for the last three years.

In January of 1921, shortly after New Year's, the three congregations each selected two delegates and sent them on their way. From our congregation we again sent Uncle Klaas Heide and Uncle Cornelius Rempel. From the Swift congregation, minister Ohm Julius Wiebe and Uncle David Rempel were chosen, and from the West, minister Ohm Johann Loepky and Vorsteher Benjamin Goertzen. They returned from Mexico sometime in March full of joyful hope, because in their hands they brought back a written Privilegium, signed by President Obregón himself with his left hand. They said it had been very difficult to obtain these privileges, but after much patience, and about ten days of pleading and imploring the president and high government officials, their requests were granted, even though these men could

not understand why we were insisting upon such privileges. The turning point came when the president asked what sort of people we were. That we were Mennonites he knew, but he wanted to know what characteristics the Mennonites possessed. The answer finally came that we were just simple farmers and to this the president exclaimed: "It is precisely that sort of people that we desperately need." As simple agriculturalists we were more than welcome, for the country had its fill of tradespeople.

But where has our side of this agreement gone? It seems that now the spirit of commerce has poisoned almost the entire congregation, the effects of which may be felt all over in the drinking establishments that our brethren introduce into their stores. I must admit that many of the tradespeople in our congregation are more worldly than we ever were in Canada. And those who sell alcohol and tobacco contribute to the triumph of the Babylonian whore that is mentioned in Revelation 17. It is written about Israel: "So you were adorned with gold and silver; your clothes were of fine linen and costly fabric and embroidered cloth. Your food was fine flour, honey, and olive oil. You became very beautiful and rose to be a queen. And your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, because the splendor I had given you made your beauty perfect, declares the Sovereign Lord. But you trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute. You lavished your favors on anyone who passed by and your beauty became his. . . . By your many sins and dishonest trade you have desecrated your

LEONARDO DELL PRIVATE COLLECTION



An Old Colony delegation to the Durango area in the early 1920s.

sanctuary. So I made a fire come out from you, and it consumed you, and I reduced you to ashes on the ground in the sight of all who were watching.” “You have increased the number of your merchants till they are more than the stars of the sky, but like the locusts they strip the land and then fly away” (Ezekiel 16:13–15, 28:18; Nahum 3:16). And through the powerful struggle to be respected, and an unjust desire for Mammon, the charity of God is restricted and repressed. And although the loving God has given us the day for work and the night for rest, many, in their desire to increase their wealth more and more, ignore this arrangement.

Therefore the Lord says: “Woe to you who add house to house, and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land.” “They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud a man of his home, a fellowman of his inheritance” (Isaiah 5:8; Micah 2:2). Now let us return to the point when our delegates returned home with the written Privilegium, which initiated a movement among the people. Many were of the opinion that after wandering around in the dark, as a blind person wanders at midday, we were finally able to see the red glow of morning light on the horizon (Deuteronomy 28:29). Many hoped that we had found the hope that would not disappoint us (Romans 5:5) and that the day was breaking when we would once again enjoy the costly freedom in our churches and our schools for which we had searched for so long. Listen to the words of the poet:

He will surely spoil you
 With his comfort for a while
 And act on his part
 As if in his mind
 He had negotiated with you.
 And if you in fear and troubles should waver,
 And if he doesn't ask about you,
 He nevertheless will find
 That you have remained faithful,
 And he will then deliver you,
 If you believe it in the least.
 He will absolve your heart
 Of its heavy burden,
 Which you have hitherto carried,
 Without an evil end.

It didn't take long before the brotherhood was called and the proposed Privilegium was read aloud to all three congregations and the decision to move was discussed. I can still remember it so vividly, as our Aeltester Ohm Johann Friesen asked our two delegates to report on their findings, on the land, the people, and the government, on whether we would be able to find our daily bread there, etc. Uncle Klaas Heide took the floor first and said that because Uncle Cornelius Rempel was older than he, and because he would be able to give a better description, he should speak first. Uncle Rempel, God bless him, stood up before the brotherhood, and in a quiet voice began to share the following:



The Vaughan Street Jail in Winnipeg. Parents who refused to comply with new compulsory school attendance laws were fined, and some were even jailed.

“I will try, as far as I am able, to share with the dear congregation our impression of Mexico. We travelled through many cities and rural areas, visited many different regions, where the Mexicans try to sustain themselves with such a simple lifestyle that it would shock many of us. For to live as we do here in this richly blessed land of Canada, to live in such comfort and excess, would be impossible in Mexico.”

He began to speak about how likeable the people there were. And if a farmer there had a wooden plow, a couple oxen, a few acres of corn and beans, he was content and could feed his family with that. It was also similar with the food. When the woman finished baking the corn cakes they would spread some beans and *Pfefferschotensirop*¹¹ on it and they would sit (often without a table and chairs) and eat that, and that would be the whole meal. And both parents and children appeared nice and healthy. As Uncle Rempel was talking, I thought of the poet who said:

God knows a thousand ways
 To rescue one from death.
 He nourishes, he provides food
 In periods of hunger.
 He makes cheeks nice and red and rosy,
 Often with the slightest meal.

And those who now are trapped there,
 He pulls them from the anguish.

He closed his speech with the remark that the freedoms of church and school were a sure thing in Mexico, and if he had to choose between living with his family in much poorer conditions in Mexico or staying in Canada and living in fortune and comfort, but having to sacrifice his children to the world through the district schools, he would far rather live in Mexico. And with this he took his seat. Everyone sat in contemplative silence, considering the things that we had just heard.

At this point the Aeltester asked them what their opinion of the government was. Now Uncle Klaas Heide stood up and said, “It is just as Uncle Rempel has described. As for the government,



it seems to be run according to the Russian style.” He then turned and faced the men and added, “Many of the older men will remember how in Russia there were always night watchmen, and how there was a lot of theft. I imagine it would be quite similar in Mexico.” Again a heavy silence hung in the air, for what did we, who had been raised in Canada, know about stealing and break-ins? For even those of us who had come from Russia were either in our parents’ arms at the time or were held by their hands. What could we know about such crime, we who had been raised under the shadow of our own vines and fig trees (Micah 4:4)? One could rightly say of us:

We who were born in the foreign land
Coddled and nourished,
A land came to our ears in spirit
A land of great worth;
Therefore we set out upon a journey
To the place, which we chose,
For the rest of our lives.

This last comment was only experienced by many in the later years. And regardless of whether the comments of these two men were favourable or not, it was apparent that both of them had

Above: Mennonite motorcycle riders in Morden illustrated the type of worldliness that Old Colony leaders worried would infect the next generation. Next page: Mennonites left behind prosperous farms in Manitoba.



MADONNA 202-20

and quiet – at least by all appearances – to this day, thank the Lord. But though they may appear to be peaceful and quiet on the outside, on the inside the enemy has wrought much unrest, misery, and need, and has caused confusion, and has launched some dangerous bombs and grenades into the human soul. And then we recognize that we are in this deep valley, surrounded by steep sides and high mountains, and we think about God’s precious promise with an inner joy and sense of peace, which he has given to his church here on earth, and we remember what is written in the Scriptures: “Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, both now and forevermore. The scepter of the wicked will not remain over the land allotted to the righteous, for then the righteous might use their hands to do evil. Do good, O Lord, to those who are good, to those who are upright in heart. But to those who turn to crooked ways the Lord will banish with the evildoers. Peace be upon Israel” (Psalm 125).

But again we began to see how the enemy attacked us, through the sinful desires which warred against our souls (1 Peter 2:11), and that the high mountains which surrounded us did not protect us. The enemy was paying close attention and knew exactly when to attack. As we enjoyed the outward peace and quiet we grew indifferent and sleepy and forgot to watch and pray. It was just as the poet had written:

He who seems, he lets keep standing,
 Watch that he doesn’t fall;
 The tempter creeps after us everywhere,
 Wherever we go.
 Peter, if he missed it,
 With the Lord in death to go,
 And forgot to keep watch,
 Would soon stand in tears.
 The enemy stands armed,
 He doesn’t ever slumber;
 So why would we then sleep?
 That wasn’t well done!
 You keeper of your children,
 You who do not sleep and slumber not,
 Make us into conquerors,
 To avoid every sin.

determined to leave Canada and to make a new home in this foreign land. This example influenced the congregation more than the words that the men spoke. Alas, a piece of land on which to start their new lives was still missing. This, however, did not concern the leaders or the delegates, for they knew that in Mexico land was plentiful. But we knew that it would be impossible for us all to live in one single colony. And so many trips were made back and forth in preparation of the move southward, and as the delegates later told us, there is no way everything could have worked together without prayer and supplication. For the needs of the entire congregation needed to be taken into concern, particularly those of the poor and landless. Finally land was found and purchased for us and the Swift Current congregation in the state of Chihuahua, where the colonies have lived in peace

I am sad to admit, the lusts of the flesh began to reign. Not only were we becoming like the world through our arrogance and luxury, but there were also obvious sins and vices among us. Even those sins for which 24,000 Israelites died on one day (as we read in Numbers 25:9) began to manifest themselves among us, and we began to wonder if the threat of the Lord would be fulfilled among us: “Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways. . . . And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you. . . . Keep my requirements and do not follow any of the detestable customs that were practiced before you came and do not defile yourself





with them. I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 18:24, 28, 30).¹²

For the congregation in Saskatchewan (the Hague-Osler settlement) a parcel of land in the state of Durango was selected and purchased, and they were granted the same freedoms that we received in Chihuahua. For as the president signed the Privilegium, he told the delegates that they were free to search out land which they felt best suited our needs, for the Privilegium was valid in all of Mexico. And thus we did not hesitate long before making decisions. But as usual, after a period of clear and sunny skies, a thunderstorm was bound to strike. In autumn of that same year, Uncle and delegate Cornelius Rempel took ill, and after two weeks of suffering, his dreams of emigrating were over. And how many times he had counselled us to hurry with the emigration, and even on one particular Sunday, when we were visiting at his home, he said to me: “Hurry, hurry, and flee for your lives. Don’t look back, and don’t stop anywhere in the plain” (Genesis 19:17).

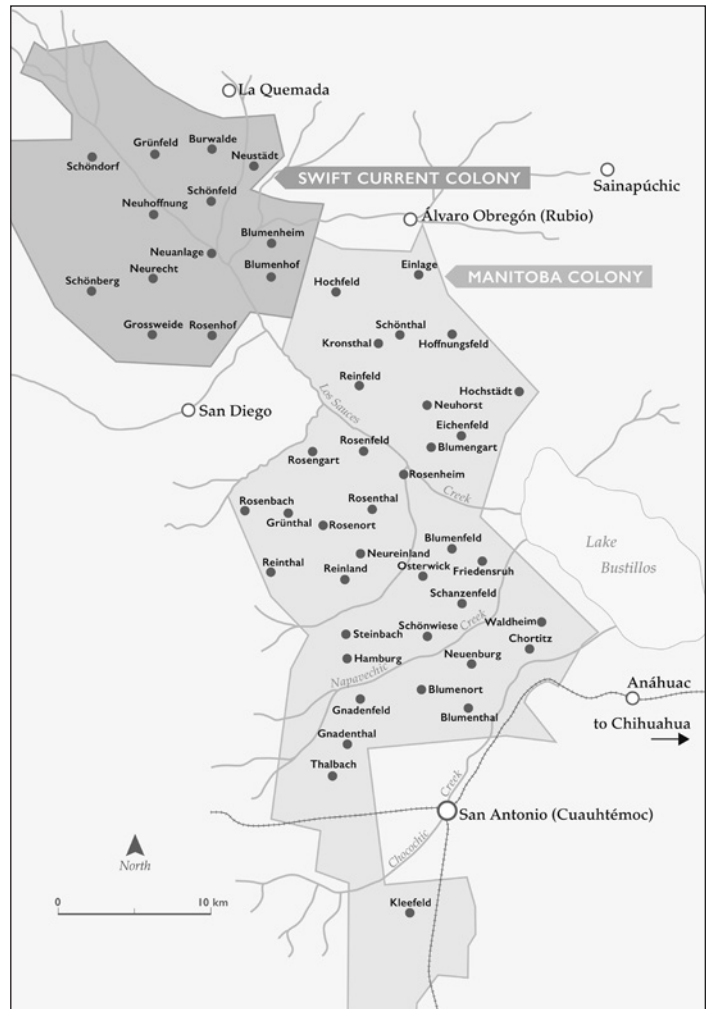
No one would have thought that he would have left Canada under such circumstances and that he would have moved on to that blessed land, about which the poet writes:

I often think with expectation
 About what awaits our people there.
 There in the lovely land of Canaan
 Where everything is beautifully natured.

It was a very sad funeral. As the coffin was being carried out, the dear friend Salez Lopez pushed his way through the crowd, stopped at the coffin, and spoke the following words in English: “The dear congregation has lost a lot through the death of this good friend. I have seen his great seriousness and his untiring enthusiasm for the congregation. I rode with him on the back of a donkey over the high mountains in Mexico. One time when he was sick and the other travellers rode on ahead, I alone stayed back with him. I myself placed a rock under his head as he tried to rest in spite of his pain. It is a real shame that he had to die.” And with this the coffin was covered with the tears shed by members of the congregation, and quietly carried to the cemetery.

And we thought of the word, which was spoken by the prophet: “The righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death” (Isaiah 57:1–2).

Preparations for the move were made more quickly. But the congregation was forced to make an important decision. Because the revolt in the congregation was so big, and because those who had fallen away were wreaking havoc, and if they had had their way, would have squelched all thoughts of moving away, the Aeltester Ohm Johann Friesen had to act. He issued an announcement, stating that whoever wished to maintain his membership, which had been entered into via holy baptism, had to identify himself to the Aeltester and move with the church to Mexico. Whoever felt that too much was required and wished to go over to another church, he would no longer be considered a member of the church.



The Chihuahua colonies. Manitoba Colony was the first Mennonite settlement in Mexico. Swift Current Colony was established by Old Colony Mennonites from Swift Current, Saskatchewan.

But how many of those, who signed that book, have since left Mexico and returned to Canada, and are now sitting in the lap of the world, because like Demas, they loved the world and could not leave it? (2 Timothy 4:10). And they accept whatever the world demands of them, even though they entered into the communion of one faith, one baptism, and one Lord (Ephesians 4:5) with us. And they send their children to the public schools, and come here as skilled automobile drivers to visit us. And they are allowed to use anything that would here be punishable, as long as they do not misuse it. As it is written in 2 Peter, so it is with them: “If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning” (2 Peter 2:20). But what does the Lord say to the disobedient Israelites? “Go and serve your idols, every one of you! But afterward you will surely listen to me and no longer profane my holy name with your gifts and idols” (Ezekiel 20:39).

¹¹ This could be hot pepper syrup or salsa.

¹² The sins to which these passages refer are sexual sins.

EMIGRATION TO MEXICO

The winter of 1922 passed quickly with a thousand cares and worries. The trains were reserved: the first one was set to leave from Plum Coulee on March 1, and the second from Haskett on the second. Ohm Franz Loewen and I were set to travel on these trains. Loading went very quickly, as there were many willing hands and hearts. All at once the day of departure stood at the door and knocked. Before the cars were loaded we all gathered in the school house in Blumenfeld for a devotion, and to encourage ourselves one final time with God's word, and to ask our dear heavenly father for his grace and protection on our fateful and daunting journey. Some tears were also shed, and I must confess that it was not easy for me to leave my dear fatherland and birthplace, the place where my cradle once stood. For the thirty-three years I had lived there, God had only done good to me – even me, his poor and weak and sinful servant. The service was concluded with the words of the well-known poet:¹³

Our childhood home,
Our school, our church,
Where we gathered together in prayer,
So many times, but no longer.
The time, it changes back and forth,
This life it is a walking stick.
Jesus, lead our steps,
In this world, at this time,
Until we stand in the holy, blessed middle
With you one day in eternity!
Only then will the time of wandering be over,
Once we have entered the Father's house.

As much as we might have hoped at that moment, time did not stand still. It was the second of March, and a beautiful morning, as we departed. The train was ready to pull out; we had loaded it all the previous day. Many friends and acquaintances had gathered around the train to wish us farewell. With much sadness, sorrow, and tears, we bid goodbye to our dear friends, parents, and siblings, not knowing if we would ever see them in this life again. Around eight o'clock the engineer gave the signal that the train was ready to go. Quietly and carefully the big train slowly rocked into motion. Calmly, without much talking, we



PLETT FOUNDATION ARCHIVES

Mennonites leaving Canada for Mexico by train.

gradually pulled away from the place of our birth, Manitoba, Canada, from the town Haskett. How we turned our hearts and prayers heavenward at that time! O Lord, look upon us

and our entire people with your grace, through the will of your son Christ. Lead us happily through this cruel and angry world. Protect us from all harm on this journey.

Do command your angel guard,
To stay with us day and night.

Forgive us all our sins, which we have committed since childhood. For we are so poor and weak and unworthy of your grace. But you are our Saviour, our help in times of trouble, and you have shown us time and again that when our need is greatest, your help is nearby.

You know all of the sins,
That we have all committed,
Whom else could we find,
Than you who can help us.

Lord, keep us, and cover us with the wings of your omnipotence, so that no plague, distress, or sickness may come near to us. Let your gracious promise be fulfilled, as it is written: "For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone" (Psalm 91:11–12). I stood at the window and looked back, and I saw our beautiful earthly home, our house, yard, and field, which we had to leave without selling. And as I could no longer see Blumenfeld, Rosengart came into view. And soon all the towns, and with them the dear fatherland, had vanished from before my eyes, but not from my heart. And again, I thought of the words of the poet, who says:

Should I be driven from one place,
From one place to another,
The way toward heaven will remain
For me open and free,
For no tyrant can prevent
Where your word leads me.
As long as this pass stays open for me,
Then I have travelled well.

As soon as the paperwork was all in order, and everything was set and we were allowed into the United States, the train began to double its speed, and only seemed to get faster and faster. The first night we barely slept at all, for our hearts were too heavy with the memory of our recent farewell. We raced into the black night accompanied by the horrific noise of the two huge locomotives. We were so afraid and anxious because of the high speed, the women especially, that we decided to talk to the engineer to see if he could slow the trains down, because we didn't want to end up in a serious accident with all of our cattle. His casual response was that the train was not our responsibility and we ought to leave it to them, as they were in a race against the other railroad companies to see who could make it to Mexico the quickest. And so we realized that we had no other option but

to put our trust in God, and to rely on his grace and protection, and to pray along with David: "Give us aid against the enemy, for the help of man is worthless" (Psalm 60:11).

How thankful we were to God and the engineer when we arrived, barely four days later, at the border town of El Paso. At this point we had to transfer trains, a fact of which we were not previously aware. How our delegates tried to caution us before we crossed the border into Mexico! And at once a feeling of fear swept over us, but once we entered Mexico, it was as if we were the children of Israel. At first when they saw the Canaanites, they were afraid and said: "The land we had explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size" (Numbers 13:32). And for anyone who did not have enough faith, and who had not been strengthened in his faith through trials, experiences, and patience, the question undoubtedly arose: "Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder" (Numbers 14:3).

Our first encounter with the Mexicans was with the Mexican engineer. Our new train went much slower than the previous one. Our second encounter with the Mexicans was when they surrounded our train because they had never before seen Mennonites. This made us uncomfortable, for we had never seen such dark people, who crowded around our train by the hundreds to get a look at us. These were to be our neighbours? We were supposed to live and feel at home among these people? How strange and unfamiliar everything was. Before we left the border town of Juárez, about twenty heavily armed men boarded our train and wanted to accompany us, as was the custom, to protect us from hijackers. But this caused such fear and timidity among our women and children, and though I wanted to trust the men, I too could not help but be afraid. But the soldiers were very friendly and benevolent, and so we quickly grew accustomed to our new companions. Even so, everything felt strange and unfamiliar. In the previous four days, as we made our way through the United States, we had watched how beautifully spring was moving through the land, how the rain and melting snow had soaked the earth, and how the winter wheat stood there in splendid green and how the fruit trees were in full bloom. Things were quite different in Mexico. Already we had to remind ourselves that it was God who set all of the boundaries of the earth right from creation and that each land possesses its own character (Psalm 74:17).

As soon as we crossed onto Mexican soil, everything appeared to be dead. The grass was totally dry; the cattle were skinny and wandered around miserably, and gnawed hungrily on the brush that grew in the land. The whole first day we drove from one unproductive region to another. How disappointed some of our people were. It was as if a deep silence hung over and oppressed the group. The one asked the other if he thought it was like this throughout all of Mexico. Others asserted that surely it would be different when we reached our destination. Overall the mood was sad. After we had driven for one day and one night since crossing the border, we finally arrived at Chihuahua, the capital



Mennonites leaving for Mexico from the Hague train station in 1923.

city of our state. But instead of our fears being relieved, they only increased upon arriving, and our hearts filled with more anxiety and sadness. They began separating our train in two, and when we asked why this was being done, we were told that it was because the rest of the trip was too treacherous for the train to make in its present state. We would have to drive over high mountains and through deep valleys, and across high bridges, and there was no way that the long train could make it. So the passenger cars were separated from the cattle and the freight, and the latter train was hooked up to two locomotives. This aroused no small amount of worry and served as a motivating force for us to entreat the Lord to let us arrive safely at our destination. We pulled out of Chihuahua about an hour before sunset, and it wasn't long before we realized that the drivers hadn't lied to us – for less than two hours into our journey we encountered steel bridges, and high mountains, and drove so close to the side of the mountain that it seemed as though it would fall on us at any second.

The first time we drove through a dark tunnel through the mountain, we were overcome by the fear that the mountain was going to collapse on top of us. And then it was back up the mountain; one of the hills was so steep that even after the engine had exerted all of its steam power, it still could not make it all the way up, so we were stuck near the top for a while. Many of the women came to where Ohm Franz Loewen and I were sitting and confessed that they had not prayed enough in preparation for this important journey, and it was because of them that we were having all these difficulties.

But this is what I thought: “How can one sell oil to another when one's own lamp is almost dry and about to go out?” Often, when it seemed that the train was about to start sliding down the hill backwards, I couldn't help but think that as difficult as the journey to our new home had been, it was nothing compared to the challenges we would face once we got there. And I even thought about the journey to blessed eternity, which is all the more difficult, just as the poet says:

Before in need and distress
 One had to huddle a little here.
 Until the time of suffering is over
 And the cross mountain has been crossed over.
 Thereupon our Saviour's hand,
 Leads us into his heavenly fatherland,
 Into eternal rejoicing.
 But also! Christ himself helps us,
 And stands by in impossible things.
 And step by step he builds,
 And enters into heaven.
 No mountain is too high,
 No valley laid too low,
 That man cannot overcome
 When God's our strength and carries us.

We eventually made it through the mountains, and when I looked back I was relieved to see that the second train, the one carrying our cattle and freight, had made it safely through as well. At sunrise the next morning, at about six o'clock, we arrived at our new home, the city of San Antonio [present-day Cuauhtémoc], thankful and praising the Lord. And although we were happy that our fateful trip was over, many of us did not feel the joy and high spirits that had been fostered in Canada, and a general sense of disappointment pervaded the air. The first disappointment was with the city itself; it wasn't exactly splendid looking. There were a number of dilapidated brick houses, a train station, and also a falling-down boarding house. There were a few very small stores and a humble hut that was supposed to be the post office. If we wrote letters and wished to send them back to Canada, we had to bring them to this hut. An old Mexican woman ran the place, and when we would come in, she'd throw our letters in a wooden crate. The only way we knew she ever made any order out of the mess was the fact that our letters found their way to Canada and we received the replies in a relatively timely manner. At that time that was the whole city.

The second major disappointment was with the quality of the earth. There were as many stones in the city as there were in the fields and the ground was very hard and all vegetation appeared to be totally dead. But standing around and wallowing in our disappointment wasn't helping anything:

Let us not too much survey,
 The child's play along the way.
 Through hesitation and delay,
 One becomes enslaved and slow.
 It does not concern us,
 Keep on through thick and thin.
 Turn in your light minds,
 It is almost done.

As we prepared to exit the train, the railroad officials sternly informed us that we had two days to empty the wagon cars because after that the train was being sent back to the US. And

unlike in Canada where we had had so many extra helping hands loading our belongings, this time it was each one for himself. And I in particular was on my own because my children were too small to help. We were surrounded by Mexicans who were practically throwing themselves at us in their offers of assistance, but we didn't know what to do with them. We couldn't talk to them, and anyways, at that time we still thought there was something suspicious and off-putting about them and we would just as soon have had them far away as up close.

At one point two large men approached me, climbed into my car, and grabbed a few things to indicate that they were willing to help me unload. I stood there speechless, not only because I didn't speak their language, but because I didn't know what to say. Finally, they each raised a finger in the air and with the other hand made a motion which implied sun-up to sun-down. This was to say that they would work from morning until night for one peso a day. I had barely finished nodding and they were already at work. It seemed to me that God, in his great providence, had sent me these two strong souls to help me in my time of need. The two days weren't even up and these men had already unloaded everything. The next morning I gave them their well-deserved wages and they went thankfully on their way.

The next morning, however, one of the men was back at my side offering to help again. When our wagons were loaded and the cattle tied up, we set off on our way. The first goal of our trip was the Rosengart village plan, some eighteen miles away. We had not gone far, though, when evening surprised us and night followed quickly behind. The cattle were not used to walking and were tired, and the children began to cry and complain, which led many of the fathers to suggest that we stop and sleep in the open field under the wagons. But then we thought of the mothers with babies and small children and decided that it would be too cold for them out in the open. And at that point we were unfamiliar with the campfire, the technique used by the natives. So we decided to keep going, but slowly, and thus we arrived at the place designated Rosengart at around 11 p.m. We quickly set up the tents and about an hour later – 12 a.m. – the little village was finished. We went to bed that night completely exhausted and praying for God's protection, and thinking of the verses which say: "I will grant peace in the land and you will lie down and no one will make you afraid" (Leviticus 26:6) and "I will lie down and sleep in peace for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety" (Psalm 4:8). When we awoke the next morning, everything felt strange and unfamiliar. The first thing we noticed was the huge change in temperature from sleeping in the warmly heated train cars to tents on the open prairie, which offered little protection from the frost and heat. That was definitely something for which we were not prepared. The children who relied on their mothers' warmth and care were to be pitied the most.

With melancholy, pain, and sadness,
I think about the little ones,
Who, in the freezing wintertime,

So often had to cry.
In cold and frost and adversity,
In storm and weather without shelter,
One often hears them wailing.
So according to God's counsel,
We have had to endure many cheerless times,
Both early in the early days and recently.
Both under the tent and wagon,
And seeking homes on the ground.
Many cares have burdened our hearts,
So that we had to groan.
Forgive us Lord, the misdeed
And give us what we desire.
Give us, O Father, further counsel,
That we might nourish ourselves honestly.
Accord us henceforth good times,
Happiness, nourishment, peace, and unity,
Health, salvation, and blessing.
For this reason many parents' hearts
Have tread before God's throne
With groaning, supplication, and prayer.
And yet he has called into his kingdom
Many out of the world
Through sickness into his heavenly tent.

Those in the group who had brought small cast iron stoves along were very happy. Thankfully we were among those who had, and it didn't take long before the ovens were on and began heating the tents. Not everyone had one, so we had a number of guests for breakfast that morning. There was enough space for everyone, because we were all just sitting on the floor. I have to say that for a long time now breakfast hasn't tasted as good as it did that morning.

We all loved each other so much during that time! When I think back to that period, I wish it could have stayed like that forever. And even though we realized right from the start that our days would be filled with hardship – frost and heat, toil and trouble – it still often went quite well. We can almost echo the words of the poet, when he says:

The mother above holds us together,
And sends to us below the heavenly flame.
No differences among us are to be found,
For humility our hearts together has bound.
Where individuality, quarrels, and hate do govern,
The sparks of love cannot be known,
Neither can one be led to the choir of the heavenly throne.

Unfortunately things didn't stay that way for long, for the enemy did not sow his weeds among us in moderation. The first seeds he sowed were those of dissension, envy, selfishness, and self-love, so that some began to look with hatred and jealousy to others' land, and claimed that they had been given poorer land than the others. Overall, the region where we settled seemed

totally foreign to us. The mountains were very close and very high, so that our colony was in a valley and we were surrounded on all sides. One day, as I was on my way, I met up with the dear Ohm and fellow servant Julius Wiebe, who remarked the following to me: “About this place it may surely be said: ‘As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people both now and forevermore. The scepter of the wicked will not remain over the land allotted to the righteous, for then the righteous might use their hands to do evil. Do good, O Lord, to those who are good, to those who are upright in heart. But to those who turn to crooked ways the Lord will banish with the evildoers. Peace be upon Israel’” (Psalm 125:2–5).

It would have been beautiful if it had actually been true of our congregation. But the roaring lion, about which the apostle Peter warns us, was already on the loose: “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings” (1 Peter 5:8–9). I tell you the truth, he found his way here, and determined from the outset to destroy the goodwill and good intentions with which many of us had left Canada. We quickly became aware of the fact that our salvation was not solely dependent upon us leaving Canada. For these mountains offered little protection against the fleshly lusts that warred against our souls (1 Peter 2:11). Many again turned to the world and stretched out their hands to injustice, and yearned for the arrogant life with both the lust of the eyes and the lust of the flesh. We were like the children of Israel living as slaves in Egypt, making bricks for Pharaoh. Bearing in mind the God of their fathers, they complained about their work and cried out to the all-powerful God. And “God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob” (Exodus 2:23–24). But after God saved them and brought them into a good land, they forgot the Lord and lusted after wealth and became stiff-necked, then it was said of them that if they eat and become full and fat they will turn to other gods, and will serve them, and will blaspheme my name, and will ignore our covenant. And if they encounter misfortune and fear, then they should see this as a witness of their unfaithfulness (Deuteronomy 32). And this song should be remembered throughout the generations, “For I know how rebellious and stiff-necked you are. If you have been rebellious against the Lord while I am still alive and with you, how much more will you rebel after I die!” (Deuteronomy 31:27).

My dear children, never think that it is not necessary to read what was written by the prophets and in the Psalms, “for everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4). In fact, much of what is written in the Scriptures is especially pertinent to a migration that was initiated on account of faith.

I have already mentioned how strange many things seemed to us in our new home of Mexico. The weather, in particular, with its unpredictable precipitation, was very foreign to us. For

we thought – and we were told – that because Mexico was so far south, the weather would be warm and the climate would be comfortable. We learned, however, in our first days here, that this was hardly the case. Even in March the days got as warm as 18 degrees Celsius, which made the tents very humid and uncomfortable. And though the days were so warm, the nights could go down as far as minus 8 Celsius. Obviously, such drastic changes in weather soon began to affect our health. The so-called red chickenpox and the measles broke out in the congregation, and several families soon became ill, and a few people even died.

The Mexicans, who surrounded our village as if it were under siege, were constantly trying to sell us things – firewood, grain, horses, pigs, and slaughtered cattle. We found them rather repugnant, not only because we couldn’t speak to them but because it didn’t take long for us to notice their disloyalty and deceitfulness. We soon realized that many of the things they were trying to sell us were items that they had stolen. It also happened that one of our members bought an ox from a Mexican, which he intended to slaughter, but the next morning found that the rope had been cut and the ox disappeared for good. It is possible that the salesman was also the thief. Coming from Canada we were not used to such goings-on, and we soon began to think and to say: “As long as it doesn’t get any worse.” The words of the delegate Ohm Klaas Heide about Mexico being similar to Russia rang in our ears.

The first Sunday after our arrival we wanted to gather, if only under a tent, for a church service. It was a lovely morning, the kind that everyone wishes for; it was so beautiful that one could not help but think the following:

Give thanks for such a morning,
Which gives us time for goodness.
This is one’s greatest worry,
If a person’s thoughts are on God
And if one prays and sings from the heart,
So that it penetrates the clouds.

But before we could all gather, an immense storm appeared out of the southwest, which lifted so much dust into the air that the air turned black. To hold a service was unthinkable – every father had to try to tie down his tent, otherwise it would be carried away by the strong winds. By evening the storm finally let up, but by then the cold had set in and sent a chill right through the tents. The horses were the worst off, because they were outside tied to the wagons and had to weather the storm, rain, snow, frost, and heat. Monday morning we had to drive back into the city to pick up our things from the station. It was a miracle, though almost a shame, to see how fresh and happy the horses were and how they eagerly took us back into town. As soon as we had the wagons loaded and turned toward home, however, their heads fell sadly and they had no desire to go. They had thought that we were taking them back to Canada

Next page: Mennonites leaving for Mexico from the Gretna station.





to their warm stalls and their nice mangers. They knew what awaited them if they had to return to that misery. For during the day they were drenched in sweat because it was so hot and they had to pull such heavy loads, and during the night it was freezing cold and they had to stand outside tied to the wagons. It is truly a wonder how much understanding the all-powerful God and creator instilled in the dumb beasts of burden, which makes us as humans think:

Observe the mass of creatures does abound,
 That demonstrate his power;
 But there is nowhere to be found,
 One who compares to you.
 You alone are in God's image,
 Can reason and consider,
 Determine and make your choice,
 To choose for good or evil.
 Now God has raised you up,
 So he expects from you,
 That you would praise him and would fear him,
 With eagerness.
 And reflect him like a picture.
 Yes, holiness and love
 Consecrate the heart of virtue.
 Never follow the pursuit of sensuality.

No less depressing were the conditions in which the cattle were forced to live. How sadly they looked at us, as if to say: "How we long for food!" "How the cattle moan! The herds mill about because they have no pasture" (Joel 1:18), and "the ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand" (Isaiah 1:3).

I have already mentioned the two Mexicans who were so loyal and diligent in helping unload my rail car, and that the one returned again and again to offer his assistance. And help me he did! It took about three weeks to move all of our things from the city to our village, and every time I rode into town he was there already waving his hat in the distance as soon as he saw me, and hurried over to me and made friendly gestures that I could not understand. He helped me load my wagon every single time, always with the utmost effort. He watered my horses, and rode with me a ways out of the city and then hopped out, gestured thankfully, and went back into town. And the next time I came into town he was there waiting for me. And of course, now and then I put a coin in his empty pocket, and sometimes he very happily shared the meal that my wife had sent along, for just as we learn in Matthew, "The worker is worth his keep" (Matthew 10:10). One Sunday, a long time later, after we were already living in real houses, and I hadn't been to town in a long time, this loyal soul came riding into our village. He had asked others where we lived, and so he came and knocked on our door. As we invited him in, I noticed right away that it was my old friend, who had rendered me such loyal service. We invited him to join us at the table, for we were just sitting down for vesper. After we



Abraham A. Wolfe and his children in St. Paul, Minnesota, on their way to Mexico. Abraham served as a leader of the first trainload of migrants. This photo accompanied a news item that was syndicated in several American newspapers.

had eaten and drunk, we sat for a while at the table with him and our children without saying a single word. We all just sat and looked fondly at one another. After he had looked around in our house, and looked benevolently at our children, he bid us farewell and rode away. How often I have wished that the dear Lord would richly repay this loyal friend for all his work, just as he has blessed me. Through this experience I came to understand what our precious Saviour meant when he said: "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings" (Luke 16:9). And though we were initially afraid of the people of this land, it didn't take long for us to realize that we had a lot to learn from them, especially regarding the cultivation of the soil, such as the proper time and luck required for planting. Mostly we learned to appreciate their simple and modest lifestyle, and though we may have found some of their practices distasteful, we learned from their patience and contentment, just as the poet writes:

Patience is necessary,
 When worry, grief, and sorrow,
 And what will nearly kill us,
 Pierces in the heart,
 O chosen number!
 And if death doesn't kill you,
 Then patience is required,
 I'll say it one more time.

They were indispensable helpers when it came time to work. Their service when it came to brick laying and building houses was invaluable. When some of our people would inconsiderately demand that the government remove all natives – meaning the Mexicans – from our land as quickly as possible, I often reminded them and even read to them what the Lord promised Israel: The natives living among you must not be mistreated.



Children wait in front of a train in St. Paul, Minnesota. The migration to Mexico was seen as necessary to preserve faith and culture.

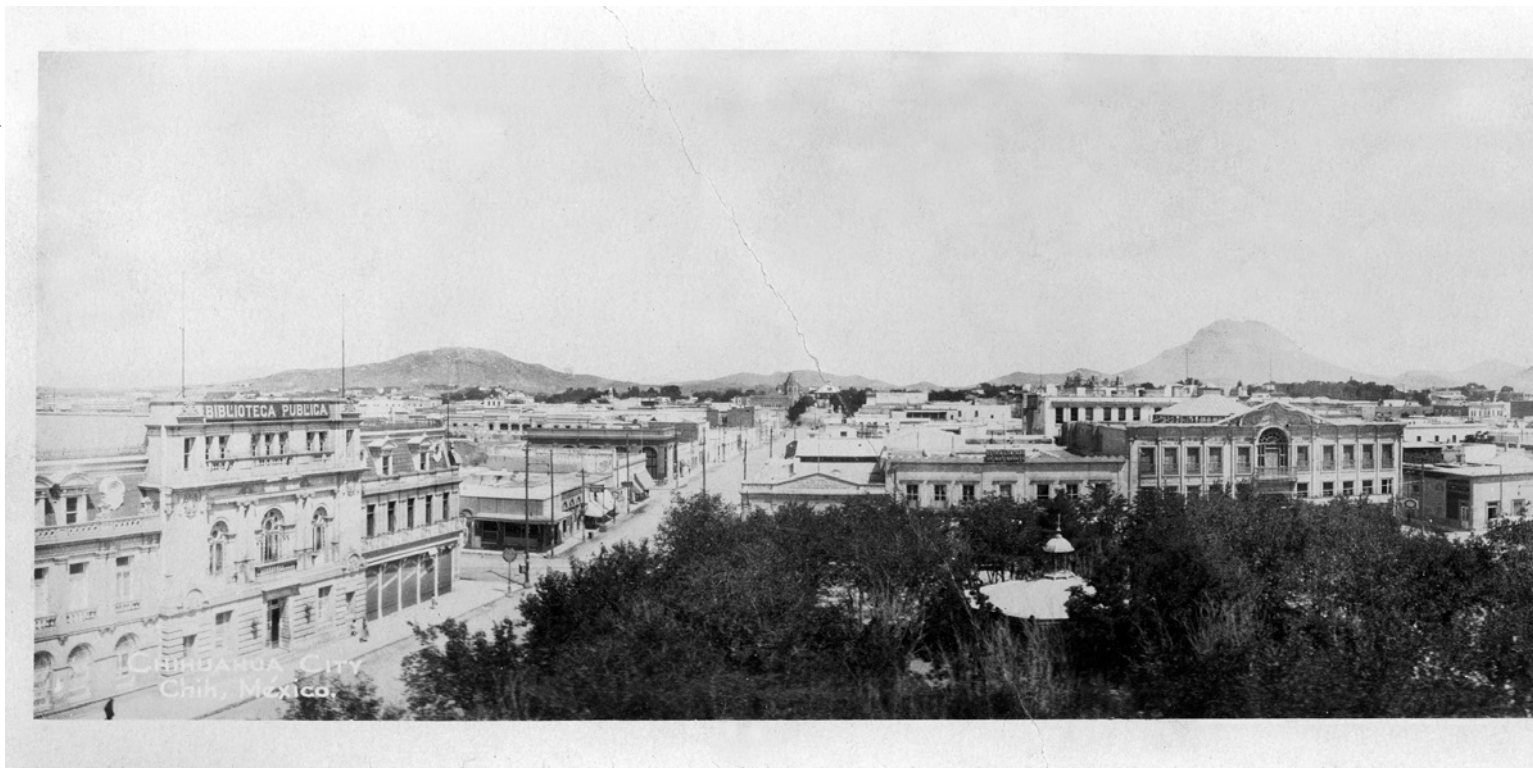
Love him as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt” (Leviticus 19:34). And also: “Do not be terrified by them, for the Lord your God, who is among you, is a great and awesome God. The Lord your God will drive out those nations before you, little by little. You will not be allowed to eliminate them all at once, or the wild animals will multiply around you” (Deuteronomy 7:21–22). Dear children, if you desire to live with good fortune and full days, and to know little of poverty and hard times, then read this book often to remind yourselves of our difficult beginning here in Mexico. But if our dear heavenly father lets the odd drop of sorrow fall into your cup of joy, accept it, for time won’t stand still. We would still be able to say (or at least I know I could) along with the poet:

The emigration that did happen,
Is for us truly not a sorrow.
Things should still get better,
Even into isolation.
Therefore children, don’t be anxious,
Disdain a thousand worlds,
Enticements, and scolding,
And go along your path.

And if we spent the first six weeks, day and night, in the same clothes, and the first three of those weeks in tents, and the entire time were nursing sick children, you can easily imagine that it wasn’t exactly the best of times for our physical bodies. But for the inner spirit it was very healthy and salutary. It was a great motivating force for prayer. The reason we lived in tents for so long was because we couldn’t find enough wood to build our houses. When we were finally able to nail some raw boards together to build a makeshift house, we thought our sick son Benjamin would get better, but the heavenly father, in his wisdom, decided otherwise.

One day, the fifth of April, as I returned from a funeral, my wife – your dear mother – came out to meet me, and with tears in her eyes she spoke the following words: “About our dear Benjamin it can now rightly be said”:

Out of the prison I’m going out,
Out of the misery and fear,
Because God has called me into the heavenly house,
He calls me out of the earthly chamber.
Why do you lament death in such a way
When it has done nothing awful to me?



A street view of Chihuahua, Mexico, taken in the 1920s.

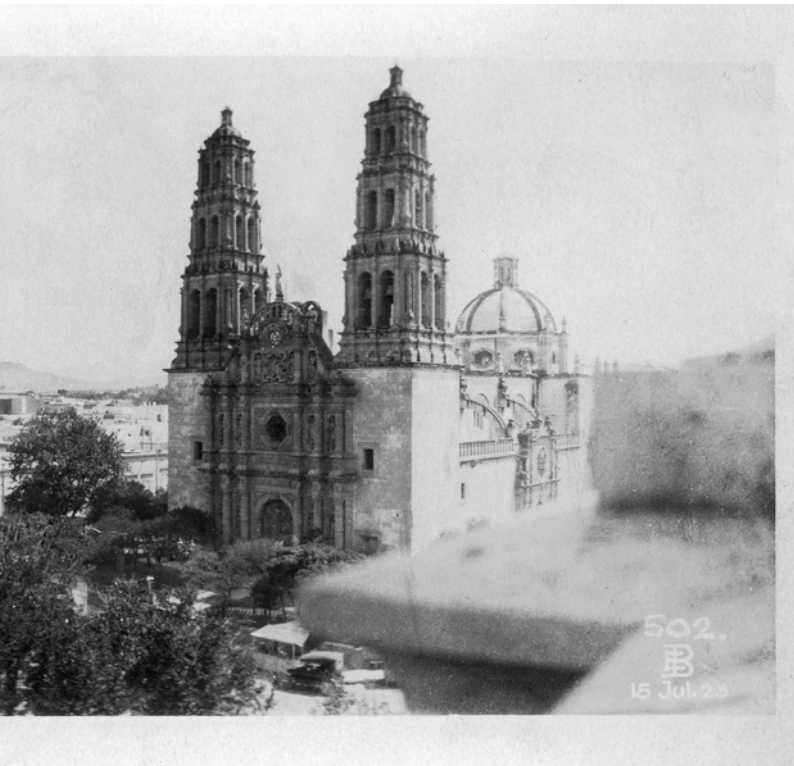
Some cross-bearing and adversity we had to take as love, for if the dough was frozen on the table in the morning and the coffee frozen on the stove, it wasn't a rare occasion. Anyway, as humans we could still cover ourselves up warmly at night and we could still eat until we were satisfied, but it was the poor cattle that suffered the most. And the inconvenient weather caused even more sickness and death.

And as the first settlers in the region, we had to spread out so as to occupy the entire area designated for our colony, which made funerals rather inconvenient. One day I received an invitation to a funeral for our sister in the faith, Mrs. Abraham Wiebe, and I was told that she had settled in village no. 1, Kleefeld.¹⁴ But how was I to get there? It was supposed to be about eighteen miles away, but in which direction I wasn't totally clear, because it was often difficult to tell which way was north and which was south. On the specified day I set out very early in the morning, and I drove over paths and bridges and sticks and stones for hours in the direction which I thought was north, without a single indicator of our people or a village. I drove so long that the sun already indicated that it was midday, and still there was no sign that my goal was in sight. The horses were weak and tired and wanted to rest, so I could only proceed at a slow pace. Finally I happened upon an old well-used Mexican road. I stopped here and determined that this road must come from the southwest and headed into town. I decided to follow the road into the city and to try to find my way to Kleefeld from there.

I hadn't gone far along this path when I encountered an elderly Mexican couple, each person riding on a little donkey. When they saw me they gestured with deference, and I thought to myself: "If only I could speak but a few words with them,

then I could ask them about this road and if they know the way to Kleefeld." I motioned to them to stop, and attempted to ask them, using all sorts of signs and gestures, if there were any people like me in this vicinity. After exerting myself considerably I noticed that the wife seemed to grasp what I was asking and after discussing it with her husband she began motioning with her finger back toward the east. She made a big arc toward the east and then a quick one to the south. According to her signal I had already wandered too far to the west, which the nearness of the mountains confirmed. They indicated that I should turn around and drive back down this road and then turn off to the south. How often during this trip my thoughts turned to David and his musings on the sorry state of affairs of humanity after the fall, and how people are by nature utterly confused and lost, and stalked like a sheep by a wolf which grows ever more confused because it runs without considering where it is going or where it will end up. In the same way the human has no idea what destination his soul will reach. In the Psalms it is written: "I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek your servant" (Psalm 119:176). And I thought to myself, just as easily as one loses one's way on the physical path and struggles with great difficulty to find it again, so it is on the spiritual path if one is not vigilant in prayer and supplication. One must always keep the word of God before one's eyes, and be ever aware of the impulses of one's evil heart. For:

One can unknowingly commit
So many sins.
God then will have the thought
To stand by his handiwork.



A single mangy sheep,
Corrupts the entire flock.
Who is standing then see to it,
That he does not also fall.

How careful and vigilant is the person who has lost his way; how carefully he watches every marker on the path, looking with hopeful expectation in all directions, hoping that somewhere he will see a sign that will point him in the right direction. If only one would pay such close attention on the narrow heavenly way. And if we realize that we were mistaken, or that we have missed something or sinned against God or neighbour, then we must anxiously seek to find the right path through conviction, penance, and forgiveness of sins:

An Ezra leaves the narrow way,
For yonder city of blessedness.
Situated extremely dangerously,
Only the width of a human foot,
And blaze and water shut him in.
That's how difficult it is to be a Christian.

The person will only notice these things, however, if he desires to live rightly before God, and wants to be better, more pious, and more holy. But one will encounter unspeakable resistance, so much so that it is often hard to know if one has turned to righteousness, and with that change has truly repented. The penitent sinner will sometimes feel driven into a corner, as if night has fallen on a dangerous journey, and he has once again lost his way, so much so that he will cry out:

Oh, if only we were almost across!
Oh, what mountains and heights
I see when I look around,
There is no path to be seen.
I'm going more back than forward,
I fear that I am being beguiled
By some sort of ghost light at this place;
My God and Lord!
If only we were almost across.

But we know that even on the heavenly path there may be ghost lights that seek to lead us astray, especially if we rely too much on ourselves, on our own strength, and our own feelings and understanding. For if our own understanding, our reason, is not constantly being illuminated by God's Spirit, then it may deceive us miserably.

Reason goes where it wills,
The devil, he can turn it.
If God's spirit doesn't help you,
Then it will happen to you.

"Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness . . . and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him" (1 John 2:9, 11). Therefore Jesus said: "You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you" (John 12:35). And in another place Jesus says: "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.' Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, 'What? Are we blind too?' Jesus said, 'If you were blind you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains'" (John 9:39–41). And Paul says: "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:4).

Now let me return to my story of my journey to the funeral of the deceased sister in the faith. Following the advice of the elderly Mexican woman on the donkey, I turned back and tried to follow her directions exactly. After I had driven quite a long way down the road, straining my eyes all the while to the south just as she had said, I spied a pile of hay in the distance. I knew that the Mexicans didn't make hay piles for the winter, so I knew that our people must be somewhere close by. I guided my nearly exhausted horses in that direction, and as I approached the hay pile, I noticed that they had built their village along a riverbed, which was now dry. Those gathered for the funeral were anxiously awaiting my arrival and had begun to fear that I had had an accident and that I wouldn't be able to make it. They were all happy to see me and they asked why I was so late. I told them the whole story, about how I had gotten lost, and about the Mexican couple, and about how I had all but given up hope that I would find my way here. They were very understanding



Dyck described the chaos of the Mennonites' arrival in Mexico.

and they invited me to stay for lunch and they told me that they had also invited the dear Ohm and preacher Gerhard Friesen of Neuenburg, and that his luck wasn't any better than mine.

So I suggested that we wait for a while before beginning the funeral – perhaps he would still come. After we had eaten lunch we went and sat outside the door and looked in all directions to see if perhaps we could see him in the distance. Finally we spotted two heavily armed soldiers riding over the hill, with the dear Ohm positioned in between them like a criminal. They rode over to our gathering and the two soldiers climbed off their horses and greeted us in the friendliest manner. We could read neither fear nor fright in Ohm Gerhard's face, and in the most relaxed

tone he told us that he too could not find his way here and that after searching for a long time, he had finally happened upon these two soldiers, who had been sent at the request of a well-known Mexican to act as our guards. The soldiers unbridled their horses and sat down obediently outside along a wall and listened attentively to the funeral sermon. They also accompanied us to the cemetery, probably just so they could witness a Mennonite burial. After they had eaten the vesper meal, they expressed their gratitude and headed happily on their way. Alas, the ride home went much better. The horses had rested and eaten during the funeral, and before the sun had set I was back at home with my dear members.



And this has also been our stick and our staff throughout our many trials, that we have turned our tear-streaked faces upward, and have remembered the miracles that the Lord performed for our fathers and for the Israelites. And yet, thirty-seven years later, we looked back on that time and anxiously wondered again what we would eat and what we would feed our cattle, for all the grass was burned and the open fields, which were supposed to be our home, could be compared to black heather, and the little grass that had survived was so dry that its nutritious benefits were practically negligible. And with prayerful hearts we looked to the sky for clouds and hoped for rain and fruitfulness, but we had to learn that God helps us in his time, as the poet says:

If the wise God doesn't record
Hours, time, and measure,
Then do not ask what he's doing.
For he isn't starting just today
To care for you.
For nothing is hidden from him,
The God who is able to help you.

Instead of rain we received windstorms and dust, as if the Lord “called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain . . . on whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of [our] hands” (Haggai 1:11). Often we were happy when the day was finally over, for the storm was generally strongest during the day. And so without hesitating I can say that our first days and weeks and months in the tents were spent in prayer and work and watchfulness, in frost and heat, and that we endured much adversity. And as weak as I was, and as much as I struggled to stick with the work that we had started, we were driven by our need to our heavenly father. When Sundays came we were happy if we could gather together under the large tent for a service in spite of the inclement weather. Through singing and prayer we would praise and thank our loving God for his indescribable grace, love, and goodness, which he gave to us sinful people, and that after much searching and anxious waiting he once again brought us into a land where we could enjoy our precious freedoms in our schools and in our churches.

And we would thank him for keeping us all together, and for delivering us safely to this place. He did so much for us that we would often turn our thoughts and senses heavenward and exclaim: “Thank you dearest Lord Jesus a thousand times over!” And to Israel it was said: “It is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people. Remember this and never forget how you provoked the Lord your God to anger in the desert. From the day you left Egypt until you arrived here, you have been rebellious against the Lord.” But when the Lord, in his wrath, raised his hand to punish or to destroy Israel, then Moses, his chosen one, prostrated himself and beseeched the Lord, saying: “Sovereign Lord, do not destroy your people, your own inheritance that you redeemed by your great power and brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Remember your

But the high costs of settling a new village could only be realized over time. And even if in general we had more about which to be thankful than to complain, remember always, my dear children, that moving from one country to the next is not something to be taken lightly. Only after one has fled from one country to another can one properly appreciate what it feels like to go to sleep in one's own bed in a warm room and sleep peacefully knowing that the animals too are under a roof and are well fed. These are all things that we had to forego. About our forefathers it may be said: “Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands” (Psalm 78:7).

servants Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Overlook the stubbornness of this people, their wickedness and their sin. Otherwise, the country from which you brought us will say, 'Because the Lord was not able to take them into the land he had promised them, and because he hated them, he brought them out to put them to death in the desert.' But they are your people, your inheritance that you brought out by your great power and your outstretched arm" (Deuteronomy 9:6-7, 26-29). And so we could only consider what God had done for us to be an undeserved gift, and we dared not feel worthy of such grace. And what we could not grasp with our understanding or our foolish reason, that we simply had to leave up to the all-wise leadership of our God. And if we would seek at all times to be righteous children of God, and to allow ourselves to be led by his good Spirit, then we could place our trust in him, regardless of the circumstances, be it need, crisis, pressure, danger, or trouble. We could place all of our concerns upon him, and as children rush to their father, we could approach God with fervent love.

My dear children, how young and innocent you were when we first settled here (Isaak was about six, Susanna four, Peter twelve, and Katharina fifteen). And when the others died, it was often you who taught me what real faith was. And some evenings I came home so weak and tired, and had worked the entire day under a thousand concerns and complaints in the congregation, and had travelled around with Ohm Franz Loewen, and I had neither the counsel nor the means by which to solve people's problems, and one complained of this and the other of that. So often I was just relieved that another day was over, but then you children came to me so happily and cared for me as if you didn't have a care in the world, and I was so overcome by your joy that it brought tears to my eyes. And sometimes you too would have sorrows, or you would have an accident, and you came to me crying, and told me what was wrong, trusting that either your mother or I would comfort you and share with you in your pain.

It was during these times that you taught me with your child-like confidence that I too could approach my father in heaven and cast all of my cares upon him because "he will never let the righteous fall" (Psalm 55:22).

Why, poor heart, do you always worry like a heathen,
About what tomorrow will bring?
What good is all your daily grieving?
We know God will
When all is still
Consider what you are needing.

And Jesus asks us: "Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? . . . If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:9, 11)

If we as humans could only get beyond our disobedience and our half-heartedness and our despondency. And how often we scold or try to master the all-wise and wonderful leading of

our God, so often that we should hardly trust him to continue to lead our young and our old, and we ought not expect that he would bless us with our sustenance here on this hard dry land. But he, who is able to do overwhelmingly more than an earthly father, has not left his promises to us unfulfilled. For he has shown us nothing but love and compassion. And what do we owe him? When we consider his effusive goodness, which he has showered upon us to this very hour, we are reminded of the godly promise: "See I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Pay attention to him and listen to what he says. Do not rebel against him; he will not forgive your rebellion, since my Name is in him. If you listen carefully to what he says and do all that I say, I will be an enemy to your enemies and will oppose those who oppose you. . . . Worship the Lord your God and his blessing will be on your food and water. I will take away sickness from among you" (Exodus 23:20-22, 25-26a).

All the things that we encountered during the difficult settlement period should have fostered in us a true mutual love. For it is natural that if one person undeservedly receives an act of kindness from another person, it engenders feelings of love and appreciation and the recipient of the act considers how he might repay the other. And if we do such things naturally, then how much more should we love him who first loved us (1 John 4:19).

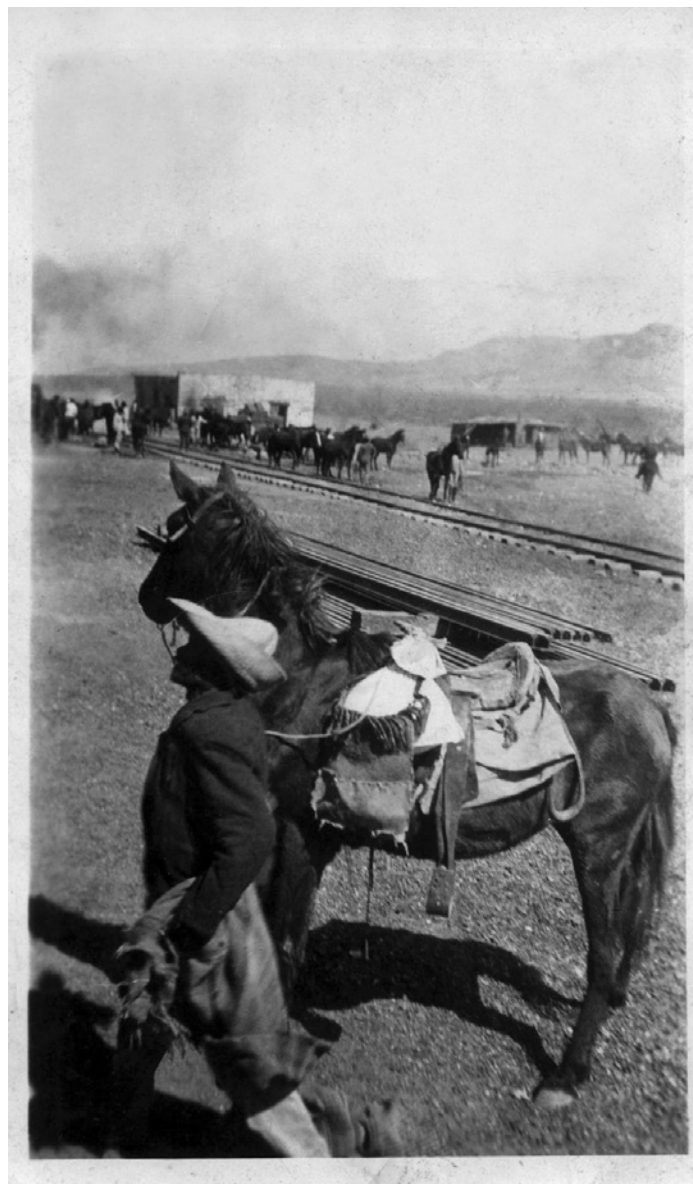
How moving and encouraging those sermons were for us on Sundays. How we yearned for the beautifully built churches and houses of prayer that we left in that beautiful country that we used to love, Canada. It is only during the hard times that one learns to understand the following words: "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty! My soul longs, even faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young – a place near your altar, O Lord Almighty, my King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you. Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of Baka, they make it a place of springs. . . . They also go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion" (Psalm 84:1-7). And so it went with us. Instead of being meeting in nice warm rooms in big churches in the fatherland that we loved, we had to bend down to the dust, and we didn't hesitate to kneel on the raw earth, the hard fields, before our God and creator. And there we planted many seeds of tears and sighs, and praying along with the poet we said:

Refresh us Lord with your blessing,
Just like a soft evening rain.
Refreshment, in this world of tears,
Where we, as pilgrims walk even as we are dying away,
And as foreigners in oppression stand.
O God! Be our protection and our hero.

We read there about the Israelites, how at God's command they went out of their master's house Egypt, and how through a high hand he taught them to walk in obedience in his ways and in his laws, often through promises of blessing but also by threats of all sorts of punishments. Deuteronomy 28 states: "If you do not obey the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you . . . the sky over your head will be bronze, the ground beneath you iron. . . . You will sow much seed in the field but you will harvest little" (Deuteronomy 28:15a, 23, 38a). And with such and similar thoughts we often went about when we considered the many sins and transgressions which made us guilty before our God, and one often heard God-fearing souls say that in general we went too lightly to the side of emigration and did not spend enough time as true children of God trusting in God and in Christian patience and isolation. And then there was the dried-up earth, which at that time really could be compared with iron; we had to wonder if the Lord our God allowed it to happen for our sake. For if the ground had not been so hard, our difficult beginning would have been a great deal easier. Had it only been possible, we would not have shied away from building huts in the earth just as our parents had done in Canada, to protect ourselves from the powerful storms, cold, frost, and heat. And even if nothing really strange happened to us, and even if because of our sins we didn't deserve anything better, we could not help but feel sorry for the innocent children, whose crying voices could be heard in the cold nights in the tents. Soon many of the dear little ones became ill because of it and through death were carried away from all the misery. The same may be said of the cattle, which were often on the verge of starvation, and which cried out for food because of hunger, but we were unable to provide it, as if the cattle too had to carry our sins and misdeeds. For the feed that we had brought along from Canada was quickly consumed and when we inquired of the Mexicans whether more feed could be purchased in town, it was for them a totally foreign question, for the Mexican worries little about cattle, and little stock is placed in whether it survives the long drought in the dead winter. And what only increased our distress was the fact that because of the poor housing conditions and the variable weather, many of our dear elderly, on whom one could still lean and in whom one could take comfort, soon became sick, and as weak and weary pilgrims laid down their walking sticks and, after this short life with all its hardships and nuisances, entered into that peace which exists for God's people (Hebrews 4).

The first funeral occurred the second week after our arrival, and it was that of Mrs. Johann Loewen of Rosengart. It was with just cause a sad funeral. Not only because the children and the dear mothers and members were crying because they, in spite of their best efforts, had not been able to properly care for her, but also because the very hard ground made it nearly impossible to make a grave. With the utmost exertion and with the help of two Mexicans, it still took until noon of the day of the funeral to finish it. Moreover, a violent storm made us all scared and anxious, for it seemed as though we, along with the

tents, would be picked up and carried away. I stood full of fear and disquietude in the middle of the tent, in the gathering, and in my weakness delivered the funeral sermon. At one point the storm broke through the overhead beams, which supported the tent, so that it seemed that the whole thing was about to collapse. Immediately several brothers grabbed the broken beam



CORNELIUS RAUSE/FONOS MAID/MHA-PP-PHOTO:992-300

The local people helped Mennonites when they initially arrived in Mexico. Next page: Mennonites viewed their move to Mexico as the fulfillment of God's promise to them.

with their hands and held it up until the funeral sermon was finished. Almost every family had a sick child in its tent that desperately needed care, so that when many of the other tents were ripped down by the storm, the whining and crying of the children was indistinguishable from the howling of the storm. And in our great need and affliction we had nowhere else to turn but to the one whom the wind and the weather obey, and who, when called by his disciples, calmed the wind with one word (Matthew 8:26). So many times we turned in prayer to the who said: "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).







As Mexicans didn't make hay piles for winter, Dyck used their presence to confirm he was near a Mennonite settlement.

And during the long drought we often sighed:

God, give us a mild rain,
 For my heart is dry like sand;
 Father! Send from heaven blessing,
 And quench your thirsting land;
 Let the Holy Spirit's gifting
 Flow down on me from above,
 Like the mighty rivers flowing
 Filling my heart with love.

How beneficial, how strengthening, and refreshing it was for us the first time we saw a beautiful rainbow in the clouds. I think it was the beginning of April, as small rain clouds moved in above us, and gathered in the east, that the little rainbow let itself be seen in the clouds. Never before have the words of the poet touched me so deeply in my heart as here in the new homeland, when I saw that rainbow of grace after so many worries, trials, and cares, when he says:

God is still well-disposed toward us,
 See what the Father does,
 He paints for us the rainbow
 In his own son's blood!

Then we remembered the promise that the Lord made with Noah and his seed as is written in Genesis 9:12–15: "And God said: 'This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all

generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life."

And then we thought, God has been so loyal and true in keeping his promises, and wishes to keep and maintain his covenant that he established with us and all living creatures on earth after the flood, up to the thousandth member. We too ought to keep the covenant that we established with him when we underwent baptism, when we promised and consented to live in holiness and justice, as gives him pleasure. And so it was just as good when he let us see his rainbow here in this foreign land as if he had said that he would not let his promises to us go unfulfilled: "I will not take my love from him, nor will I ever betray my faithfulness. I will not violate my covenant or alter what my lips have uttered. Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness – and I will not lie to David – that his line will continue forever and his throne endure before me like the sun; it will be established forever like the moon, the faithful witness in the sky" (Psalm 89:33–37). And then we would surely say:

My dear God, on your side
 Let this covenant firmly stay.
 And even if I should it deride,
 Do not let me lose my way.
 Accept me, your child through grace,
 Even if I have brought disgrace!

One soul that was moved by the power of the godly word to flee out of Babylon, is worth, according to the Word of God and his precious promises, more than “thousands of pieces of silver and gold” (Psalm 119:72).

How comforting and encouraging is it not, in various sorts of distress and trouble, if the rich and those who have had their fill only try to escape the cross, especially in a new settlement where initially everything is foreign and unfamiliar. The soul eager for salvation, the person who hungers after the justice of Jesus, though confronted with a thousand obstacles in his path, will strive to be ever more firmly in the grace of God.

How eagerly this soul gathers all the crumbs that are spread here and there throughout the Word of God, so that not even the slightest of them will go bad or be neglected. One learns, indeed, that trouble teaches one to pay attention to God’s Word (Isaiah 28). This sort of soul learns that in all external trials and suffering and various types of poverty and deprivation that have been dispersed throughout a settlement as if on a black moor that the Word of God can often strengthen far better than any human comfort, and that the Lord will rescue it “from every evil attack and will bring [it] safely to his heavenly kingdom” (2 Timothy 4:17–18). And it is often then that one grasps the stick and the staff, in order to lift up casual praying hands and tired knees, and

who pours contempt on nobles made them wander in a trackless waste. But he lifted the needy out of their affliction and increased their families like flocks. The upright see and rejoice, but all the wicked shut their mouths” (Psalm 107:31–42).

Now dear children, because I have gotten too far ahead with my story, I will have to go back a ways, to the time when our emigration train was passing through the United States. As I already described, the trains drove through the United States extraordinarily fast, so that at times we were afraid and anxious. Now what helped to seriously increase our concern was this: as the train was stopped for about an hour in Kansas City, a stranger unexpectedly boarded the train. In my opinion, I would have judged him as a learned man, one who was well trained and well taught in the wisdom of this world. He asked in his High German language if there wasn’t among our traveling party a minister with whom he could speak. This question was immediately answered by some of our own with a yes, and he was directed to the bench on the train where I sat with my family. He came immediately over to me, sat down next to me, and asked me my name. Full of fear and anxiety, I told him my name, knowing full well that he, with his higher education, wished to initiate a discussion with me. How different it would be if during such hours one could hold to the words of Jesus



The farm of H. Hildebrand at Kleefeld.

to pay careful attention to all God’s promises, as it is written: We ought to thank the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonders, that he has done for all humanity. And we ought to praise him in the congregation and among the elders. “He turned rivers into a desert, flowing springs into thirsty ground, and fruitful land into a salt waste, because of the wickedness of those who lived there. He turned the desert into pools of water and the parched ground into flowing springs; there he brought the hungry to live, and they founded a city where they could settle. They sowed fields and planted vineyards that yielded a fruitful harvest; he blessed them, and their numbers greatly increased, and he did not let their herds diminish. Then their numbers decreased, and they were humbled by oppression, calamity and sorrow; he

when he gave us the promise: “Do not worry about what to say or how to say it . . . for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (Matthew 10:19–20). It is for that reason that prayer for the Holy Spirit, which enlightens our minds, is so necessary, but we do not do it on days that are going well, so that when such tests come, we are unprepared. To my great luck, the dear fellow servant Franz Loewen was sitting right near me, and listened quietly and comfortably to the words that the man was saying to us. He first wanted to know what sort of people we were, where we were coming from, and where we wanted to go. We told him that we were Mennonites, and that we were driven out of our fatherland Canada because we could no longer have freedom in our schools. “So!” He said,

“You’re willing to make such a big sacrifice just because of your private schools, and the government in Canada is willing to leave your religion and your beliefs?” “Yes,” we said, “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, namely from Holland to Germany, from Germany

can’t you see from the prophets, and the revelation to John, that in the last hour the Antichrist will appear again and will try to bring everything under his sceptre and to force everything under his beliefs?” (Daniel 7:25; 11:36–37; Revelation 13:5–6, and ch. 17; 2 Thessalonians 2:3–4). He continued, “And if, in the sixteenth century, kings and emperors had taken power from away from the pope in Rome to such an extent that he was forced to stop the bloody persecution of Christians, even then

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Sommerfeld school in the Santa Clara Colony.

to Russia, from Russia to Canada, and now we, too, have come into the position where we could no longer remain in Canada with its public 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. And in Mexico we found what we had lost in Canada, namely full freedom of conscience and the expression of our religion, as much in the schools as in the churches, and a contract from the government to ensure it.” After listening attentively to our speech, he reflected deeply and replied, “Very good that you have taken this step for your children.” But as a people he was very sorry for us, for if we, on account of our faith and religion, wanted to flee, then we ought to have chosen a different country than Mexico, for things would not go well under the Mexican government. We said that we didn’t rely only on the government, for the God of our fathers had always stood by our forefathers, Aeltesten, and ministers and had helped them out of trouble and tribulations and he could help us too, and if we would walk in his ways and his laws, then he would not abandon us in Mexico. “Quite right,” he said, “but

he swore on his throne that he would once again set his foot on the grave of Protestants (Protestant means all confessions that protested the papacy, for instance, the Reformers, Lutherans, and Mennonites). And because Mexico was largely Catholic, he was of the opinion that in recent times this danger was greatest in Mexico. And with this he bid us farewell most respectfully and left the train. I still feel badly that I did not ask this man for his name.

Now we were all depressed anew. Such words of wisdom from such a well-spoken, highly educated man were like a drop of bitter wormwood in our cups of joy. We would gladly have heard otherwise. We were already lacking in courage, comfort, and determination without this man’s prophecy because we had undertaken the emigration with much consideration, fear, and doubt. Again we felt like the children of Israel; it was as if the Red Sea stood in front of us with the frightening question: what all would we meet with in Mexico? How would we get along there? Who would protect us from the evil that this man had prophesied? But Pharaoh was behind us with his whole army, namely, the powerful school pressure, and each one knew that

turning back to Canada meant willingly bringing one's children under the flag, under militarism, and throwing one's children into the river of this world.

Dear children! If the whip of discipline had not been constantly behind us, few members of our congregation would have remained in Mexico during the difficult settlement years.

Now, we will have to leave it up to the all-wise guidance of our God to determine how true the sayings of this man were, and depending on whether we are worthy or unworthy the hour of judgment will also come upon us. But in any case, it was a nice motivation for prayer. And even if I spoke little to our people about this man, and I too did not want to believe what he told us, I still held his words, and considered them often in my heart. And it seemed that the more familiar we became with the conditions in Mexico and over time had some bitter experiences with the people of this country and with the government, the more I thought about this man. The seasons in Mexico, which were determined by God, were also very foreign and unfamiliar to us. And then also the promise, that he made to us right at creation, when he says: "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease" (Genesis 8:22). "It was you who set all the boundaries of the earth" (Psalm 74:17).

It seemed as though when the time finally came for us to plant, plow, and seed, it was nearly fall in Canada. Alas, before the planting season is over here in Mexico, in Canada the fields are ripe for harvesting. This was all a big change for us, which demanded a strong faith in God, and a firm reliance upon the promises of grace in God's Word. While news from Canada arrived over here through letters that everything was in its best growth there, and that an especially nice, richly blessed harvest was in view, so that they were rightly singing "the wheat is growing with force, let young and old rejoice, etc.," everything was arid and dry. The common expression "May makes all things new" had no meaning in Mexico. There were no green grass or plants to be found, and the poor cattle had to pathetically hunger through it, and many cattle fell to their deaths through lack of fodder.

During this long dry period several trains carrying immigrants arrived from Canada. I think about one train a month arrived. For these new immigrants there were also some disappointments. Some of them felt that the difference between Canada and this place was so large that they felt that they had been driven out of paradise, which, if we wanted to understand it spiritually, could also be said of us. For, just as Adam and Eve could not remain in paradise because of their transgression and disobedience, the same could be said of us. For had we not reached out our hand toward the forbidden fruit, stretched it out to the great equalization with this world, so that with respect to house, yard, clothing, and vehicles we were no longer in the humility, in the simplicity of Christ, we could have remained there a while longer. The Fall corrupted everything.

It was around this time that the dear Aeltester Ohm Johann Friesen came to us from Canada, in order to serve the congrega-

tion with baptism and communion. He brought us comfort and encouragement, and ardently wished us rain from heaven and fruitful times, lest we lose courage or become timid. One day he was in Rosengart at Jacob Loewen's for the funeral of a small child. He mentioned in his funeral sermon the words of Jesus: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29). He laid these words very near to our hearts, and wanted to strengthen us with them, even if we couldn't see much good, that is, as far as the earthly realm was concerned, in Mexico. We were supposed to believe that the dear God could nourish and sustain us just as well here as in the richly blessed Canada. Never before had I found so much comfort, guidance, strength, and confidence in these words of our precious Redeemer as when I heard the dear Aeltester so trustfully speak about these words through the Spirit of God. Finally, it appeared as if our prayers were answered, and the long-awaited rainy season had begun. It was July 2, the first year of our settlement, that it had finally rained enough that we could plow the garden near the house.

That was refreshment that brought joy to both young and old. How diligently people plowed, though mostly just in the garden. Some, but only very few, planted some oats, because in our opinion it was already too late for everything. But we soon saw through the growth in the garden and in the fields, which soon emerged out of the earth nice and green and strong, that the soil in this foreign land was fruitful, a fact which filled our hearts with courage and glad hope. As the meadows soon turned green and were covered with the most different sorts of flowers, we thought of the words of the poet:

What formerly seemed dead,
Spirit and sap have now acquired.
Fields, meadows, forests, and heather,
One now sees with delight and joy,
How splendidly they now turn green,
That which once seemed to have died,
And so let us also arise,
And go to our Jesus;
And the cold and sluggish heart
Becomes soft with regret and pain.
Let us cultivate true love,
And put off all sin and desire;
Let us again be renewed,
And ready to serve God,
To start a new life;
Through a spiritual desire
Strengthen what was dead,
And always show improvement.

¹³ This passage of verse is taken from a migration ballad that appears to have been written by evangelist and poet Bernhard Harder (1832–1884), on the occasion of the migration of Mennonites from Russia to North America in 1874. Peter Unruh Schmidt, *The Peter Unruh Genealogy, Beginning with Unrau, Born about 1675* (Newton, KS: Herold Publishing, 1941), 123–128

¹⁴ The Mennonite settlers organized their colonies into numbered villages or *campos*.

Departing Canada, Encountering Latin America

Reflections on
the Centenary
of Mennonite
Emigration from
Canada to Mexico
and Paraguay

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SCHEDULE

DAY ONE

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 21
9:45AM-5PM

PANEL 1: Mobile Families

PANEL 2: Conditions of Departure

PANEL 3: Education and Identity

7PM-8:30PM

Centenary Documentary Screening

DAY TWO

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 22
10AM-5:15PM

PANEL 4: Gender, Labour,
and Foodways

PANEL 5: Indigenous-Mennonite
Encounters

PANEL 6: Change and Persistence

In the Next Issue

**Our December issue
of *Preservings* will
continue exploring how
Mennonites pulled up
their roots in Canada
and migrated to Mexico
during the 1920s.**

If you are interested in contributing an article on any of our future themes—Mennonites and Natural Disasters, the Making of the Russlaender, When the Kanadier Met the Russlaender, or Mennonites and Humour—please contact us.

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 and photographs 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) for clarification or additional information about submissions. If sending material electronically, please be sure to submit high-resolution photographs. They should be at least 2 MB in size.



LEAVING CANADA

THE MENNONITE
MIGRATION TO MEXICO



Featuring artefacts, historical photographs, and original interpretive content, Mennonite Heritage Village's new exhibit *Leaving Canada* tells 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.

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**“IF WE SHARED OUR SCHOOLS,
OUR CHURCHES WOULD NOT
REMAIN SEPARATE – WHAT
THE SCHOOL IS, THE CHURCH
WILL BECOME.”** ISAAK M. DYCK



EXHIBIT OPEN TO NOVEMBER 30

