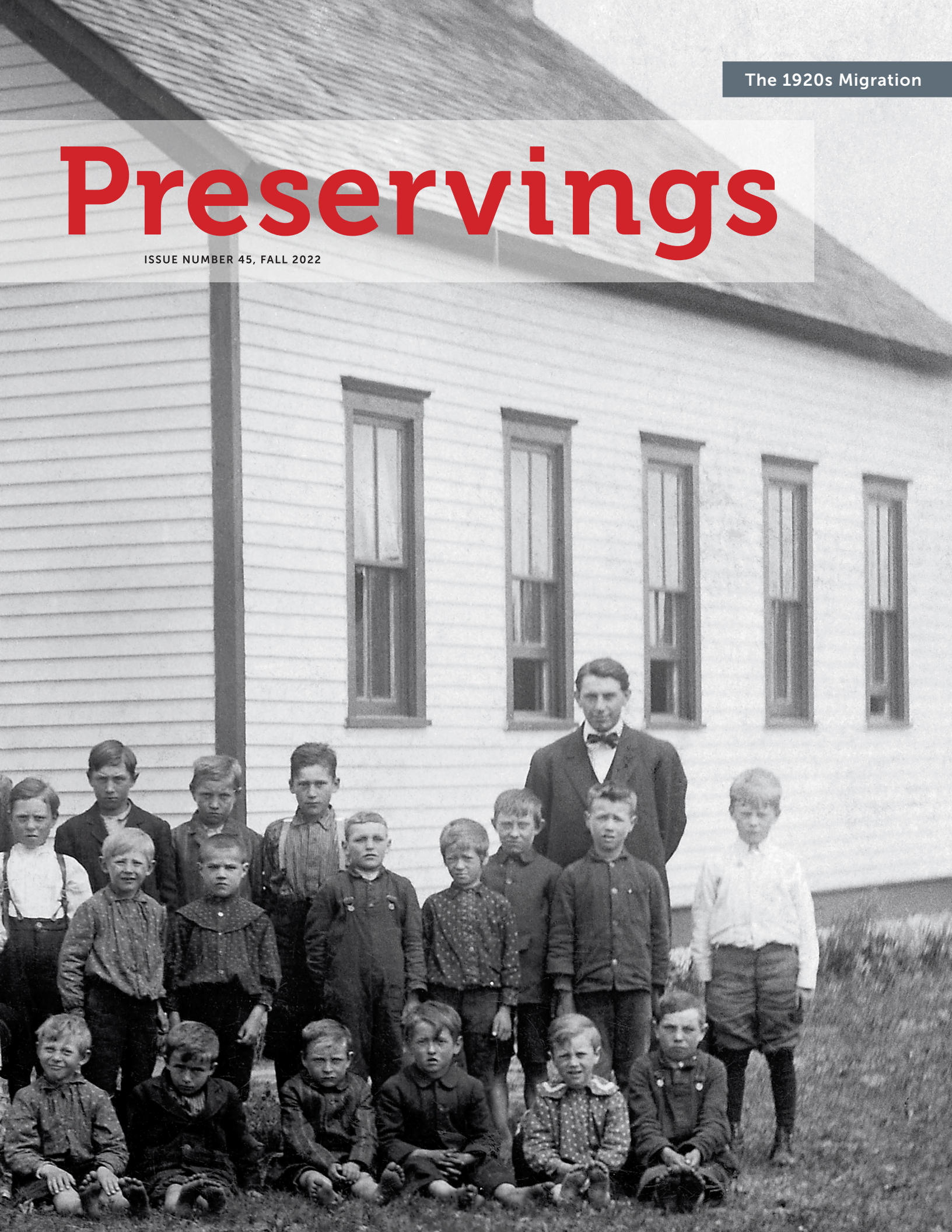




The 1920s Migration

Preservings

ISSUE NUMBER 45, FALL 2022



Preservings

ISSUE NUMBER 45, FALL 2022

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

ISSN 1914-7007 (Print)
ISSN 2563-7231 (Online)

EDITOR Aileen Friesen
MANAGING EDITOR Jeremy Wiebe
DESIGNER Anikó Szabó

PUBLICATION ADDRESS
Plett Foundation
University of Winnipeg
515 Portage Ave
Winnipeg, Manitoba
R3B 2E9

ARTICLE SUBMISSIONS
Aileen Friesen
+1 (204) 786 9352
ai.friesen@uwinnipeg.ca

SUBSCRIPTIONS
To subscribe and pay online,
visit plettfoundation.org/preservings

ADDRESS CHANGES
info@plettfoundation.org

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

MISSION

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

PLETT FOUNDATION BOARD OF DIRECTORS 2022–2023

Royden Loewen, Chair, Winnipeg, MB
Kerry Fast, Vice-Chair, Winnipeg, MB
Kennert Giesbrecht, Secretary-Treasurer,
Steinbach, MB
Leonard Doell, Aberdeen, SK
Robyn Sneath, Brandon, MB
Bruce Guenther, Abbotsford, BC
Ben Nobbs-Thiessen, Winnipeg, MB
Cornelius Reimer, Tillsonburg, ON

COVER IMAGE

A school in the Mennonite village of
Waldheim, Manitoba, in 1911.

MAID: MENNONITE HERITAGE ARCHIVES (MHA),
PP-PHOTO COLL. 166-219.0

CONTENTS

I NOTES FROM THE EDITOR

Features

3 MOVING TO MEXICO: A FAMILY STORY

Grace Dalke

9 PREACHING IN MEXICO: MINISTER DAVID M. STOESZ

Donald Stoesz

13 EMIGRATION TO MEXICO: THE CASE OF SWIFT CURRENT

Henry A. Friesen

19 THE MENNONITE PROBLEM: PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN SASKATCHEWAN

Leonard Doell

23 OLD COLONY AND RUSSLAENDER LAND TRANSACTIONS

Hans Werner

29 THERE AND BACK: A TALE OF TWO DECISIONS

Ernest N. Braun

35 LETTERS FROM PARAGUAY: THE MARIA NEUFELD FAMILY

Conrad Stoesz

41 CENTENNIAL CELEBRATIONS IN MEXICO

Kennert Giesbrecht



Research Article

43 A MENNONITE MATRIARCH: MARIA KEHLER LEMKE JANZEN

Pam Klassen

Histories & Reflections

51 A MÉTIS-MENNONITE ENCOUNTER: THE SHANTZ CAIRN

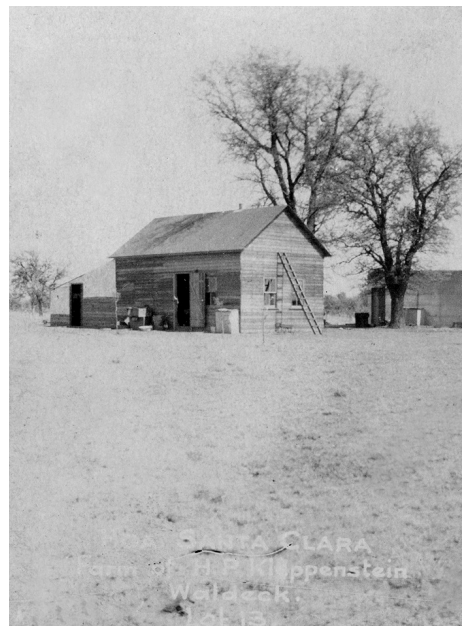
Armand Jerome & Ernest N. Braun

57 TWO WORLDS, ONE LIFE

Lisa Redecop

59 INTERCONNECTIONS: AN IMMIGRATION STORY

Ralph Friesen



FROM THE EDITOR

Aileen Friesen

This issue of *Preservings* continues the conversation of the 1920s migration of Mennonites from Canada to Latin America. While our spring issue, which published the memoir of Isaak Dyck, portrayed the factors that led to the migration of the Old Colony Mennonites, this one explores the relationships between family, community, and values which shaped and were transformed by the migration. The conflict between Mennonites and the governments of Manitoba and Saskatchewan over control of children's education was only one of several sets of tensions and animosities that were in play. In many ways, our feature articles address not what happened to Mennonites but rather the dynamic among them as families and communities decided whether their ideals required them to leave. These articles also broaden the story to include the perspectives of the Sommerfelder Mennonites, who moved to Mexico in smaller numbers than the Old Colony but made their own contribution to the fabric of Mennonite life in Latin America. Finally, serious consideration is given to the experiences of those families who returned to Canada, after finding the sacrifice of settling in Mexico and Paraguay too great or the opportunities too few.

Many of these articles show the significance of family dynamics in the decision-making process. Grace Dalke's article raises questions about the centrality of the school issue as a motivation for all participants in the migration, and demonstrates that assumptions about the implications of "conservative" versus "progressive" attitudes are not always useful. Individual families moved for a host of reasons, and not all were intertwined with religious values. In individual family histories, passed down through stories, we find that it was not uncommon for disagreements to arise within a family unit as to whether lives should be uprooted to migrate, and whether faith required such action. It is not difficult to imagine that in some cases differences in perspective fostered resentments and judgement that festered, changing relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, and among siblings. While the articles in this issue only hint at how migration weakened or broke family bonds, the pain experienced by many who made the decision to leave as well as those who decided to stay is palpable. Migration separated people; letters and infrequent visits could not maintain the intimacy allowed by regular contact. Not surprisingly, separation and disagreement over how to live a faithful life generated turmoil within families.

Familial tensions were often exacerbated by community

pressures. In the case of the Hague-Osler Reserve, described by Leonard Doell, the relentless prosecution by provincial authorities, often meted out by local official trustees and justices of the peace, some carrying Mennonite last names, created hostility within villages. Henry Friesen's article on the Swift Current settlement in Saskatchewan shows the important role performed by Old Colony religious leadership in pushing forward the migration process and the pressure felt by individual families to follow the group to Mexico or else lose their religious community. As Hans Werner demonstrates, attempts to sell Old Colony land as a block in Manitoba and Saskatchewan added their own complications and challenges, as community members required capital for the migration but struggled to close deals with potential purchasers. The simple solution of selling to the incoming Russlaender proved more difficult than many had originally imagined. These economic pressures, often overlooked, are essential for understanding the experience of the community.

For those who left, life in Mexico or Paraguay was initially extremely difficult. Grace Dalke, Ernest Braun, and Donald Stoesz each explore the theme of the *Rückkehrer* (returnees) who migrated to Mexico or Paraguay in the first waves and then decided to return to Manitoba, providing different perspectives on the experiences of the returnees. For the Isaac Friesen family, returning after three years in Mexico was a struggle but did not create insurmountable challenges, as Isaac's parents had not joined the migration. In contrast, for the Braun family who returned from Paraguay, social, economic, and familial losses, and the derogatory label of *Rückkehrer*, shaped their economic prospects and community standing for decades. The example of David M. Stoesz, a Sommerfelder minister, demonstrates another type of returnee experience. Minister Stoesz supported the migration, offered spiritual guidance in Mexico, and then became a return migrant to Manitoba. His status as a returnee, however, did not appear to affect his religious standing in the community.

Finally, Conrad Stoesz and Kennert Giesbrecht remind us that most Mennonites stayed in Mexico and Paraguay, building lasting communities. These communities continue to remember their past and plan their future with gratitude. For them, despite the hardships, leaving Canada was a moment for celebration, God's gift to their community. And all of these perspectives, these contradictory interpretations and experiences, exist together, reminding us of the richness of our history.



MOVING TO MEXICO

A Family Story

Grace Dalke

Isaac A. Friesen and Helena Wiebe were married on October 8, 1922. Three weeks later they moved to Mexico, together with Helena's parents, David K. and Helena Wiebe. Isaac's father, Abram Friesen, was a minister and farmer, born on March 24, 1863, on the southern steppe of the Russian empire (present-day Ukraine). He arrived in Quebec City on the SS *Moravian* with his parents on July 1, 1875. They initially settled in the village of Rosenfeld, in Manitoba's West Reserve (section SE 31-2-1W). He was one of six surviving children out of the twelve born to Isbrand and Maria (DeVehr) Friesen. Abram Friesen was baptized on June 2, 1884.

Isaac's mother, Maria Schroeder, was born on October 21, 1866. She arrived in Quebec City with her parents, Johann J. and Maria Schroeder, on the SS *Nova Scotian* in October 1874. They initially settled in the East Reserve. The Schroeders later homesteaded in Schoenhorst, east of Gretna, Manitoba. Her father, Johann, died before his land deed was granted. Her mother, Maria, with help from the church leaders, was named on the deed. This piece of land is where Johann Schroeder was buried.

Isaac's parents, Abram and Maria (Schroeder) Friesen, lived in the Rosenheim area. Their marriage produced twelve children, five of whom died as infants. Abram Friesen was elected to the ministry at Grossweide on February 26, 1908, and ordained on March 15 by Bishop Abraham Doerksen of the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church. Two of his brothers, Isaak and Wilhelm, also became ministers. During his time as a minister he delivered 1,578 sermons, and served at 523 funerals, 314 weddings, and many golden and silver anniversaries. Maria Friesen died March 5, 1933. Abram Friesen then married the widow of his brother Jacob, Katherina (Funk) Friesen. Rev. Abram Friesen died on August 29, 1942. Abram and Maria Friesen are buried in the Rosenheim Cemetery west of Rosenfeld, next to the land they farmed.

Helena's father, David K. Wiebe, also came from the Russian empire (present-day Ukraine) with his parents David

and Katharina (Klassen) Wiebe on the SS *Moravian*, landing in Quebec City on July 1, 1875. He was two years old at the time. Several Wiebe and Klassen family members immigrated with them. The women and children stayed in the immigration housing provided at Fort Dufferin, Manitoba, near Emerson, while the men went to look for the land on which they would settle. The Wiebes and Klassens homesteaded in what would become the village of Roseville (the original Rosenfeld), in the West Reserve (NE-31-2-1W). In 1880, David K. Wiebe's father, David Wiebe Sr., had forty-five acres of cultivated land, making him the second-largest farmer in the area. In 1880 he produced 340 bushels of wheat, 100 of barley, and 350 of oats.¹ David Wiebe Sr. was married to Katharina Klassen, who was a daughter of the family that fostered him after his own parents died. After she passed away in 1914, he married Katharina (Rempel) Sawatzky, who died in 1918.

Helena's mother was Helena Siemens. Her parents were Erdman and Helena Siemens. They came to Canada on July 6, 1875, on the SS *Sarmatian*. Helena Siemens was born five years later on March 9, 1880, in Weidenfeld, Manitoba. The elder Siemens couple are both buried in Weidenfeld, on section NE 25-2-2W.

David K. Wiebe and Helena Siemens were married on January 3, 1901. They moved to their own farm, south of present-day Rosenfeld. They were successful farmers, providing well for their family of five boys and four girls. The daughters dressed in the fashion of the times, with lace, ribbons, jewelry, and pointed, bowed shoes. The family bought new machinery and was among the first in the area to own a car. This car was used to take the female students, including daughter Helena (later married to I. A. Friesen), to Rosenfeld on a school outing.

Isaac A. Friesen was born in Rosenheim, on March 27, 1901. Helena Wiebe was born later that same year on December 21, in the Rosenfeld area. Isaac Friesen and Helena Wiebe were married on October 8, 1922. Rev. David Stoesz officiated. Helena wore a rust-coloured dress with an ivory lace inset for the ceremony. It was customary in the Sommerfeld church at that time for

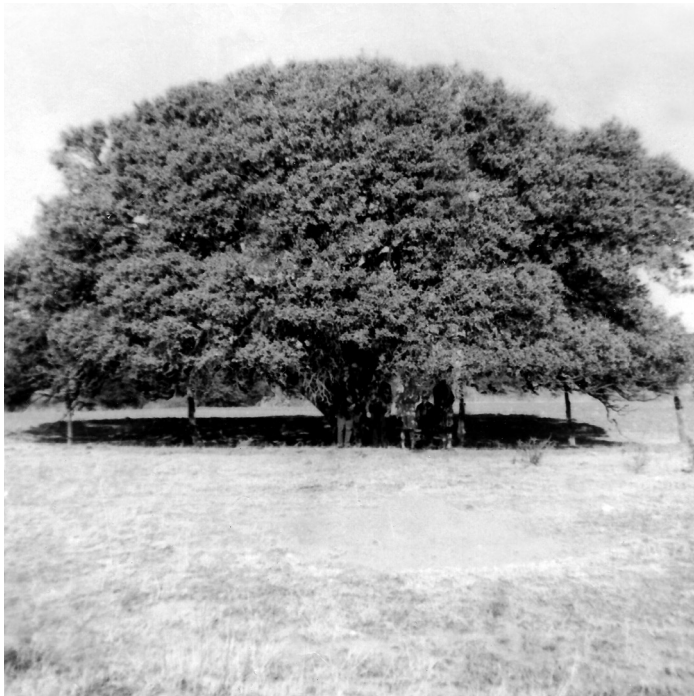
Helena (Siemens) Wiebe, who remained in Mexico, in front of her home in Halbstadt. Next page: Isaac Friesen (left) and David D. Wiebe posing in Mexico in the early 1920s.





brides to wear dark colors. She changed into a white dress for the reception and dance on her parents' farmyard. They had fiddlers who provided the music. Helena spent the night at her parents' place in order to help clean up the following day.

Helena and Isaac were the first of her family to be married. Three weeks after their wedding they packed up their belongings and made the decision to move to Mexico with the entire David K. Wiebe family. It was her father who persuaded Isaac



PRIVATE COLLECTION

The group sheltered under the "Siemens tree," which was near their destination in what became the village of Halbstadt, Campo 55, in the Santa Clara Colony.

and Helena to relocate after hearing accounts of what was available in Mexico from others who had gone to scout the land. Several of Helena's aunts and uncles also moved at this time. Her grandfather David Wiebe Sr. went with them as well, as did many of his siblings. David Wiebe Sr. was seventy-eight years old and had been widowed twice at the time of their departure. Likely David K. Wiebe wanted to keep his family together and therefore promised to help get the newlyweds set up in Mexico. The Friesen family, on the other hand, wanted them to remain in Manitoba.

The Wiebes were progressive in their farming practices and lifestyle. Therefore, it is curious that they decided to move to Mexico. Was it based solely on land availability for their sons who would soon be marrying and needing farms of their own? Did it have to do with the fact that many of their neighbours and extended family members, and those in church leadership, were immigrating? Perhaps a combination of the two? Questions that should have been asked now go unanswered.

The group immigrating to Mexico travelled by train, leaving Gretna on November 1, 1922. The train comprised of thirty freight and three passenger cars. The trip took ten days, taking

them to a station near Cuauhtémoc, approximately three hundred miles inside the Mexican border. The last leg of their journey took them forty-five miles north and was made by buggies and wagons pulled by horses; the people were in the buggies and their possessions filled the wagons.² Before they arrived at their destination, they were robbed by a group of bandits, who went through their belongings. Among the things taken were Isaac's accordion and Helena's white wedding dress.

The group sheltered under the "Siemens tree," which was near their destination in what became the village of Halbstadt, Campo 55, in the Santa Clara Colony. The tree was an old white oak that was reported to be sixty-six feet in diameter. During the first few weeks the family experienced three deaths. A nephew and an uncle of David K. Wiebe died within days of each other. His father, David Wiebe Sr., also passed away two weeks after arriving at their destination. Life was difficult as they lived in tents for two months until permanent housing was built nearby.

During their stay in Mexico, Isaac farmed with his in-laws. Farming in Mexico proved to be very different from farming in Manitoba. They had to adjust to the weather conditions and lack of adequate water sources. They started building their lives all over again by constructing houses out of wood, making shelters for the animals, and eventually setting up schools and churches. The land they farmed came with a two dollars per acre down payment requirement. Two daughters were born to Isaac and Helena: Katharina in 1923, and Maria in 1925.

Isaac's father, Rev. Abram Friesen, from Rosenheim, Manitoba, travelled to visit them in the fall of 1923. He probably also planned to check up on some of his former congregants while he was there. He toured the area and took note of how agriculture was carried out in this new land. There was a delegation from Manitoba that was sent out around this same time, which included Sommerfeld ministers. It is unknown if Rev. Friesen was a part of this group, but in all of his photos there are other men pictured with him.³ The bishop who had ordained him, Rev. Abraham Doerksen, also moved to and helped found Santa Clara in 1922.

The land was not what Isaac and Helena expected and they were unhappy with the decision they had made. David Stoesz, the minister who had married them, who moved to Mexico at the same time they had, moved back to Canada only one year after arriving.⁴ Isaac and Helena remained in Mexico until May 14, 1925, when they, too, decided to leave, passing through El Paso, Texas, en route back to Manitoba by train.⁵

Once back in Manitoba, Isaac and Helena moved in with Isaac's family. They lived in Rosenheim together with Rev. Abram and Maria Friesen, Isaac's sister and her family, and Isaac's single brother Diedrich. Their youngest daughter, Maria, passed away while they were living there, just before her first birthday. Later that year Isaac and Helena had a son, David. In 1927, they were able to move out on their own and rent land in the Melba School District. In 1928 they moved onto a farmyard in the Reichenbach School District where they would raise all of their eight children. Helena, Abram, Henry, and Esther were born on this yard. The



Helena with children Dave, Abe, Helen, and Teenie in Rosenfeld, Manitoba, in 1932. PRIVATE COLLECTION

doctor didn't make it to the farm in time to deliver Esther, so Isaac had to assist in her birth. The last two children, Edward Glen and John Dwight, were born in the Bethel Hospital in Winkler. During her first hospital experience, Helena was concerned that they would mix up the babies and give her the wrong child to take home.

Isaac and Helena bought land but also rented from landowners in Winnipeg, including Mr. J. V. Long. Starting farming in the depression years of the 1930s was a struggle. Low crop yields coupled with poor grain prices made farm life challenging. Isaac and Helena had some good crop years but they also had many years when flood waters made life difficult. Isaac's land was prone to both spring and fall flooding when the rains were heavy. During one flood, as the water rose, they had to move their livestock to a neighbour's barn down the road.

The Friesen family attended the Schoenthal Church north of Altona. The buggy wasn't large enough for the entire family, so the children took turns going with their parents. If the weather was bad they would hold their own services at home, with scripture reading and singing out of the *Gesangbuch*. As the children moved into their teen years most of them became involved in the Rosenfeld Bergthaler Church, both in the

choir and in the youth group.

Isaac's crops consisted of wheat, oats, barley, and sugar beets. His children spent many hours helping, driving tractor, hoeing and topping beets, and preparing and bringing food out to the men who were threshing. To supplement the crop income Helena raised turkeys and chickens. The eggs were sold in Rosenfeld. Their landlords frequently placed orders for turkeys as well as produce from the garden. One year the turkey chicks had lice and needed to be bathed in turpentine to be deloused.

The Friesen children all attended the Reichenbach School. They walked the two miles when the weather permitted, meeting up with the other children in the neighbourhood. Helena made sure her children had a lunch, often with cookies baked earlier in the morning. When the annual school picnic took place, she brought an iced cake with strawberries for her family. Isaac served on the school board for a number of years.

Helena was a wonderful seamstress and frequently sewed clothing for her children from clothes given to her. It was very important to her that her children wear something "new" for their Christmas programs at school. If it couldn't be an outfit, it was a hair ribbon or a piece of jewelry for her daughters.

Both Helena and Isaac were hard workers. Most falls they



Isaac Friesen with his team of horses and caboose ready to take his children to Reichenbach School, 2 miles away, 1930s.

would harvest thirty grain sacks of potatoes that they moved into storage for the winter. Isaac would also purchase a hundred pounds of fish, which Helena canned. They had their own sources for pork, beef, and chicken, as well as vegetables from their garden. There was an ice cellar near the pond where fresh milk and cream were kept. Almost as important to Helena as growing a vegetable garden were her flowers. She loved beauty and loved to make bouquets for visitors to take home with them. She continued to grow flowers into her nineties.

When Helena and Isaac left Mexico they knew it would be a long time until they saw Helena's extended family again. In 1935 her sister Tina and husband Cornie Sawatzky moved back to Manitoba. Their young family stayed with Isaac and Helena briefly until they could settle on their own. They eventually purchased land in the MacGregor area.

In 1947, for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, Helena and Isaac travelled back to Mexico with their oldest daughter Teenie and her husband, Bill Funk. They also took their youngest son, Johnny, who was three years old at the time. Helena had not seen her parents or most of her siblings during those twenty-five years. After Isaac passed away in 1968, Helena made another trip to Mexico with her cousins. By this time both of her parents had passed away. During these years of separation they kept in touch, sending letters and pictures. There was a time, though, when Helena could not afford the three cents needed for a stamp. Helena's parents, David K. and Helena Wiebe, never returned to Canada. They died in Halbstadt: David on January 6, 1948, and Helena on May 23, 1965, and are buried in the Halbstadt Sommerfeld Cemetery. They did

not get to know their Manitoba grandchildren.

The farmyard north and west of Rosenfeld was home for Isaac and Helena until health issues dictated retirement and a move into the village of Rosenfeld in 1962. They held a farm auction, having sold their land to a neighbour. This was a difficult day, but they settled into town life. Their home was always open to family, friends, and neighbours, where there was never a shortage of baked goods. Isaac enjoyed going for coffee when he went to pick up the mail. Helena continued to sew and grow a big garden with many flowers. Their home was filled with much activity and laughter, as children and grandchildren visited regularly.

On May 8, 1968, Isaac passed away very suddenly. Helena spent that summer in her home with grandchildren keeping her company. In the fall she moved into Winkler, staying with her daughter Helen and her family. She lived there until she moved into the Ebenezer Units in Altona, where she resided for approximately twenty-five years. During those years she continued to entertain, play the piano, grow flowers, crochet, and attend church. She passed away in 1995 after a short stay in the hospital. She is buried in the Rosenfeld Cemetery next to her husband. Both funerals were conducted in the Altona Sommerfeld Church.

1 John Dyck and William Harms, eds., *1880 Village Census of the Mennonite West Reserve* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1998), 109.

2 John Dyck, *The Lineage of Gerhard Wiebe and Anna Redekopp, 1806–2005: "Our Heritage"* (2005), 222, 297.

3 Mennonite Heritage Archives (MHA), Winnipeg, MB, Cornelius Krause fonds, items 47.0ff.

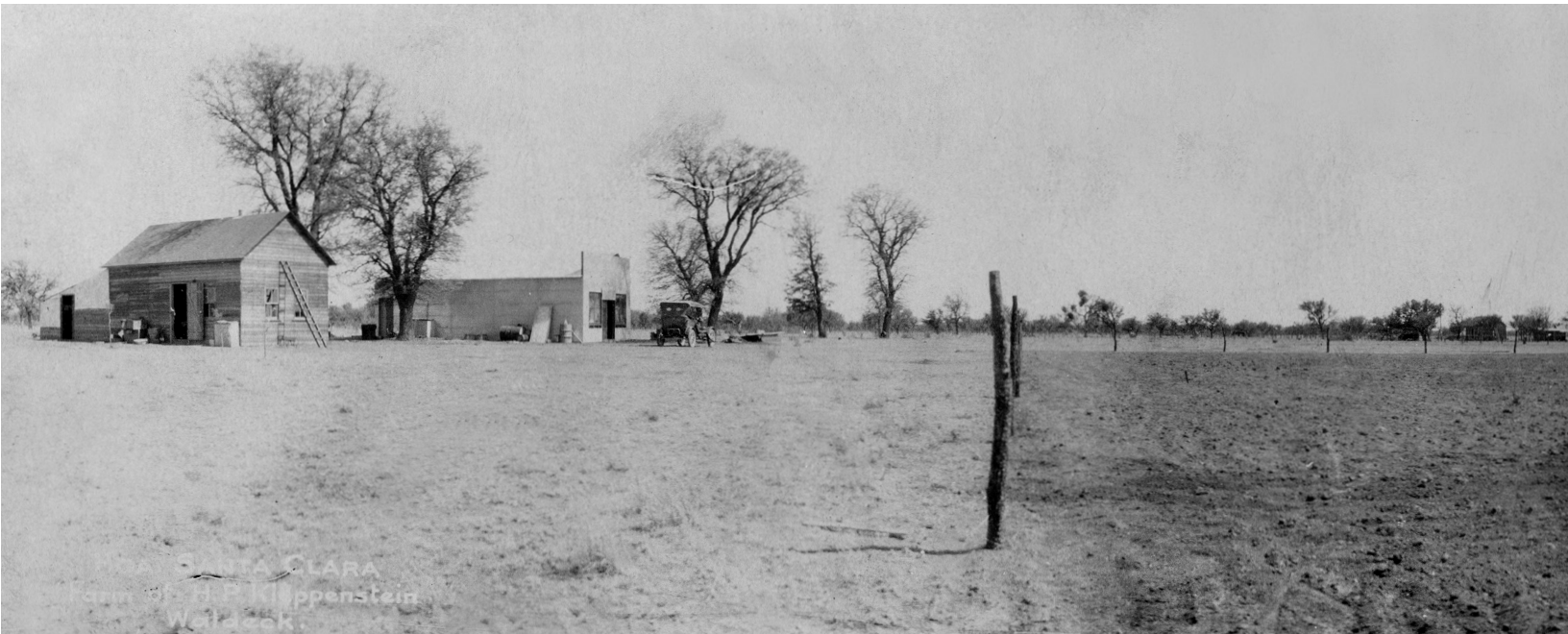
4 MHA, David Stoesz Family fonds.

5 Manifest, US Department of Labor, Immigration Service, May 1925.

PREACHING IN MEXICO

Sommerfelder Minister David M. Stoesz

Donald Stoesz



CORNELIUS KRAUSE FONDS. MAID: MHA, PP-PHOTO 590-54.0

The fall of 1922 was an exciting time for Rev. David M. Stoesz and his family. They, together with one hundred Sommerfelder families from southern Manitoba, decided to move to Mexico with their bishop, Abraham Doerksen. An amendment to Manitoba's Public Schools Act in 1916 mandated the teaching of English in public schools, which allowed for only a limited amount of religious instruction. Attendance at these schools (or private English language schools that met the provincial standards) became compulsory with the passage of the School Attendance Act at the same time. Mennonites had established private schools to teach lessons in German and to provide a significant amount of religious content. This right was taken away. Almost 6,000 people, 5,400 from the Reinlaender community and 600 from the Sommerfeld Church, moved to Mexico between 1922 and 1926.¹

A hacienda (ranch) in the Santa Clara Colony.

In 1891, Stoesz, son of Chortitzer Bishop David Stoesz, and his wife, Agatha (Kehler), moved from the East Reserve to the West Reserve, settling in Gnadenfeld.² In 1912, Stoesz was ordained a Sommerfelder minister. He served in that capacity for ten years before moving with Bishop Doerksen to Mexico. Stoesz preached an average of thirty-eight times per year from 1912 to 1918 in Manitoba.³ His preaching increased to forty-four times per year from 1922 to 1923, when he was in Mexico.

FROM MANITOBA TO MEXICO

Stoesz was the only Sommerfelder minister from southern Manitoba to join Bishop Doerksen on this trek to Mexico. Because of this planned move, Bishop Doerksen held an election for a new Sommerfeld bishop on October 6.⁴ Rev. Heinrich J. Friesen was elected with a 71.5 percent majority vote (226 out of 316 votes).

As Stoesz prepared for his trip, he continued to serve

the Sommerfelder community in Manitoba. The autumn Thanksgiving holiday was celebrated in Manitoba on October 1, 1922.⁵ Rev. Stoesz preached on Jeremiah 5:22–24 in the village of Waldheim. Jeremiah chides the people of Israel for not being thankful enough for what God has provided. On October 8, Rev. Stoesz prepared the Sommerfeld members of Silberfeld, Manitoba, for communion. The text for that morning was 1 Corinthians 11:28.⁶ The passage underlines the importance of examining oneself before partaking of the elements of bread and wine. Bishop Doerksen preached on Revelation 3:20 at Schoenthal that Sunday.⁷ Revelation 3:20 speaks about Jesus standing at the door and knocking. Jesus invites believers to open the door and eat with him. What a wonderful text for communion preparation!

On the next Sunday, October 15, Bishop Doerksen ordained Friesen as the new bishop of the Sommerfeld Church of Manitoba. Bishop Friesen would serve in that capacity for the next seven years (1923–1930).⁸ Rev. Stoesz and the newly ordained bishop assisted Bishop Doerksen on the same Sunday in serving communion to 353 members in Sommerfeld, Manitoba.⁹ Only a bishop was allowed to bless the elements of bread and wine.

A train for Mexico departed the next day, arriving in Mexico on October 22.¹⁰ Rev. Stoesz was part of this initial wave of emigrants. Stoesz preached his first sermon on November 5 at an unspecified location.¹¹ He preached another sermon on November 12 in San Antonio, Mexico. The next train carrying Mennonite immigrants from Manitoba left on Saturday, November 11, and arrived in Mexico the following Saturday.

Matthew 9:9–13 and John 14:6 were the basis of Rev. Stoesz's first two sermons in Mexico. In Matthew 9:13, Jesus used his time with tax collectors to let people know that he had "come to call sinners, not the righteous." Jesus told his disciples in John 14:6 that he was "the way, the truth, and the life." "No one comes to the Father except through me." Stoesz preached two or three times a year on these two texts during his twenty-two years of ministry (1912–1934). He likely borrowed the Matthew passage from Bishop Doerksen, who preached twenty-eight times on this text from 1893 to 1922.¹²

BISHOP DOERKSEN'S TRIP

Bishop Doerksen continued to bless and distribute communion elements to church members in Manitoba during of the week of October 15–21.¹³ He served a total of 1,183 church members from the villages of Sommerfeld, Schoenthal, Rudnerweide, Reinland, Rosenbach, Grossweide, Kronsweide, and some in private homes.

A week later, on October 29, Doerksen was in Herbert, Saskatchewan.¹⁴ He preached on Psalm 73:23–24, in which King David declares that he is continually with God. God "holds my right hand." God guides him with God's counsel. On November 5, Doerksen preached in Star City, Saskatchewan. The text for the morning was Luke 18:8, in which Jesus declares that God will grant justice to the chosen ones. He also asks



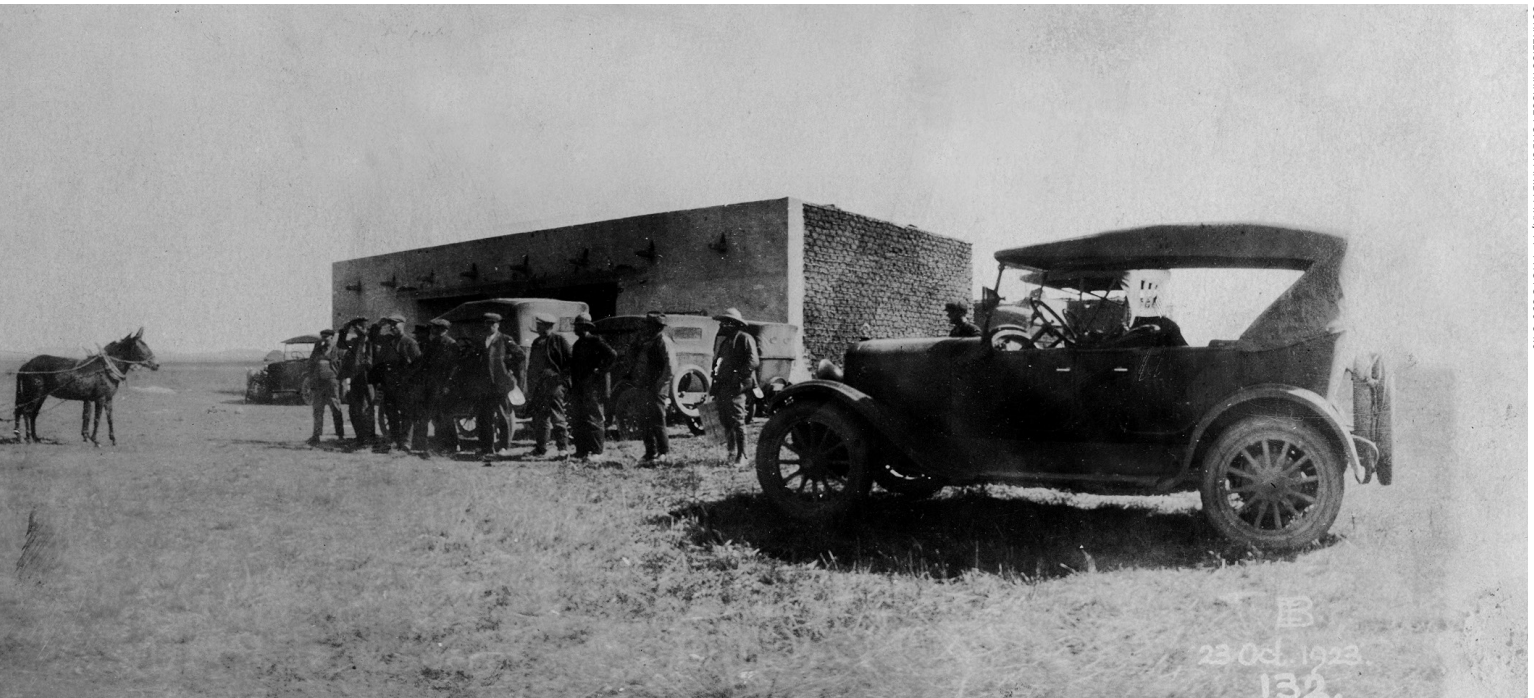
whether the Son of Man will find people of faith on earth. Doerksen preached twenty-three times on Psalm 73 and twenty-eight times on Luke 18 during his ministry in Manitoba (1894–1922).¹⁵

Doerksen would preach two more times before leaving for Mexico. He preached his one and only sermon on Luke 17:10 in Sommerfeld on November 19. Luke 17 speaks about having "done one's duties" as a servant of God. Abraham Doerksen gave his farewell speech on December 3 to the people of Altona.¹⁶ The text for the morning was Revelation 22:12. Revelation speaks about the Lord coming back soon.

As Doerksen's first sermon in Mexico was preached on December 17, 1922, he must have boarded the third train that left Manitoba after December 3.¹⁷ Doerksen would preach on a regular basis in the new Mexican villages of Agua Nueva, Sommerfeld, Neuanlage, and Silberfeld.¹⁸ These villages were located in the Santa Clara region, about 140 miles north of San Antonio. Rev. David Stoesz would preach all of his sermons in Halbstadt. This village, and the village of Bergthal, were located farther south, just north of the Mexican settlement of the Manitoba Old Colony (Reinlaender) Church and closer to the town of Cuauhtémoc.

LIFE IN MEXICO

Historian Adolf Ens makes several comments about Sommerfeld church life in Mexico. Olga Martens was the lone person baptized in 1923. An average of twelve baptisms were performed during the next five years. Communion was celebrated in two locations twice a year, in June and again in October. There were an average of one hundred attendees at each communion service. Twenty-one weddings took place and thirty-three deaths occurred between 1923 and 1928.



RETURN TO MANITOBA

During the fall of 1923, Rev. Stoesz preached on the same texts he had used in Manitoba: Jeremiah 5:22–24 for the occasion of Thanksgiving, 1 Corinthians 11:28 for communion preparation, and 1 Peter 2:24 for communion thanksgiving. But within two weeks of his thanksgiving sermon, Stoesz and his family (his wife and son, David A.) were back in Manitoba. They had decided that life in Mexico was not for them. Similar to his first Sunday in Mexico (November 5, 1922), Rev. Stoesz preached on Matthew 9:9–13 on his first Sunday back in Manitoba (November 4, 1923). The location was Schoenthal, Manitoba. It was almost a year to the day when he had first preached in Mexico. Upon his return from Mexico in 1923, Stoesz and his family settled in the village of Kronsthal.

MINISTERIAL LEADERSHIP IN MEXICO

To replace Stoesz, Jacob Abrams of Neuanlage was ordained as a Sommerfelder minister on February 24, 1924, in Mexico.¹⁹ This represents a four-month gap between the time Rev. Stoesz left (November 1923) and when Abrams inaugurated his ministry. There were presumably others, perhaps deacons as well as Bishop Abraham Doerksen, who were called to serve during this time.

Abrams was elected and ordained as a Sommerfelder bishop on January 19, 1930. This ceremony took place almost a year after Bishop Doerksen died on January 26, 1929.²⁰ Bishop Cornelius Hamm of the Bergthaler Church in Saskatchewan officiated at the ceremony. The grandson of Abraham Doerksen, Jacob G. Doerksen, also became a Sommerfelder bishop in Mexico.²¹

David Stoesz's preaching assignments demonstrate a rhythm to the church year that is representative of Mennonite ministers' use of Scripture. Luke 21:25–27 and Romans 13:11–14



Top: Almost 600 people from the Sommerfeld Church, including Rev. David M. Stoesz and his family, moved to Mexico between 1922 and 1926, eventually settling in the Santa Clara Colony. Bottom: A group of Mennonites with some of the produce from their new gardens in Mexico.

were used for Advent. 2 Corinthians 5:20 and 1 Peter 1:22–23 were preached on Sylvester Evening and New Year's Day. Romans 10:10 represented the signature text for catechism. 1 Corinthians 11:28 and 1 Peter 2:24 were commonly used for communion. Jeremiah 5:22–24 represented the standard text for Thanksgiving.

Classic biblical texts were used for high holidays: Luke 2 for Christmas and Mark 16 for Easter. Hortatory Scripture passages such as Matthew 9, Luke 15, and Romans 2 were used for evangelism. Matthew 15, Luke 18:15, and Ephesians 4 were used to speak about faith. Matthew 18, Matthew 20, and Galatians 5 were used for preaching on discipleship. Prayers of supplication were based on Psalms 88 and 102.

Rev. David M. Stoesz preached forty-four times on these



Although Stoesz and his family moved back to Canada, the Sommerfelder Santa Clara Colony continued.

passages of Scripture when he was in Mexico. He used these forty-four sermons 798 times during the course of his ministry (1912–1934). This represents 90 percent of the total number of sermons that he preached (887).

The collected records of sixteen other Canadian Prairie Mennonite ministers indicate they preached 663 times on these forty-four texts. These numbers represent 26 percent of the total number of sermons preached by these ministers (663 of 2,506).²²

CONCLUSION

Rev. David M. Stoesz showed loyalty to his bishop, Abraham Doerksen, by moving with him to Mexico in 1922. Further evidence of this loyalty is shown by Stoesz's use of Doerksen's sermon texts. Doerksen preached fifty-two times on five pas-

sages of Scripture (John 19:16–18, 30; 1 Corinthians 11:28; Colossians 3:12–18; Hebrews 3:12–14; 1 Peter 1:22–25). Stoesz replicated this pattern by preaching seventy-nine times on these same Scripture passages.²³

In spite of his loyalty, David M. Stoesz decided that life in Mexico was not worth it. He continued his ministry in Manitoba for another eleven years (1923–1934), serving under Sommerfelder bishops Henry J. Friesen (1923–1930) and Peter A. Toews (1931–1951). He would preach twelve times during the last year of his life (1934).²⁴ His preaching assignments started on New Year's Day with the text from 1 Peter 1:22–23. They ended on May 27 with a communion preparation sermon, based on 1 Corinthians 11:28. David M. Stoesz died on May 30, 1934, at the age of sixty-four.

1 These statistics are taken from table 15 in Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920–1940: A People's Struggle for Survival* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1982), 122. Compare with the statistics in table 1:2, Donald Stoesz, *Canadian Prairie Mennonite Ministers' Use of Scripture: 1874–1977* (Victoria: Friesen Press, 2018), 16–17. Reasons for the Mennonites' move to Mexico are documented in Adolf Ens, "Sommerfeld Mennonites at Santa Clara, Mexico," in *Church, Family and Village: Essays on Mennonite Life on the West Reserve*, ed. Adolf Ens, Jacob E. Peters, and Otto Hamm (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2001), 181–182, and Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920–1940*, 94–128.

2 A short biography of David M. Stoesz is included in Stoesz, *Mennonite Ministers' Use of Scripture*, 138–139.

3 Tables 6:2 and 6:3, Stoesz, *Mennonite Ministers' Use of Scripture*, 146–148, 153–168.

4 Peter Bergen, *History of the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church* (Altona, MB: Sommerfeld Mennonite Church, 2001), 78; Jacob E. Peters, "Ältester Abraham Doerksen (1852–1929)," in Ens, Peters, and Hamm, *Church, Family and Village*, 122.

5 Abraham Doerksen's worship schedule, which covers the period 1894–1922, indicates that Canadian Thanksgiving was celebrated on the first Monday of October, Bergen, *History of the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church*, 75. Canadian Parliament in 1957 declared that Canadian Thanksgiving was to be celebrated on the second Monday of October.

6 Donald Stoesz, *Mennonite Ministers' Use of Scripture*, 166. 1 Corinthians 11:28 was used 35 times by David Stoesz and another 34 times by three other ministers. *Ibid.*, 86.

7 Bergen, *History of the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church*, 76. Three other ministers preached 29 times on Revelation 3:20, Stoesz, *Mennonite Ministers' Use of Scripture*, 86.

8 Bergen, *History of the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church*, 98–106.

9 Bergen, *History of the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church*, 83.

10 Ens, "Sommerfeld Mennonites at Santa Clara," 184.

11 Stoesz, *Mennonite Ministers' Use of Scripture*, 168.

12 Bergen, *History of the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church*, 69–77.

13 Bergen, *History of the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church*, 83.

14 Bergen, *History of the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church*, 78.

15 Stoesz, *Mennonite Ministers' Use of Scripture*, 81–82.

16 Bergen, *History of the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church*, 70, 77.

17 For the date of Doerksen's first sermon in Mexico, see Ens, "Sommerfeld Mennonites at Santa Clara," 184–185. Adolf Ens's suggestion that Rev. Doerksen left on one of the first two trains is not possible, given the record of four sermons preached in Manitoba and Saskatchewan between October 29 and December 3.

18 Ens, "Sommerfeld Mennonites at Santa Clara," 185.

19 Ens, "Sommerfeld Mennonites at Santa Clara," 186.

20 Ens, "Sommerfeld Mennonites at Santa Clara," 187.

21 Ens, "Sommerfeld Mennonites at Santa Clara," 188.

22 Taken from tables 3:2, 3:6, and 3:7, Stoesz, *Mennonite Ministers' Use of Scripture*, 53–54.

23 David M. Stoesz's loyalty is also evident in his consistent use of lectionary texts. Of the seventeen ministers studied, he used 28 Scripture passages from the Lutheran lectionary. Only Bishop Peter Regier from Saskatchewan was more consistent, using 38 lectionary texts during the course of his ministry. *Ibid.*, 93.

24 *Ibid.*, 139.

EMIGRATION TO MEXICO

The Case of Swift Current

Henry A. Friesen

The resistance of Mennonites in Saskatchewan and Manitoba to efforts by their provincial governments to impose public schools, which intensified during the First World War, resulted in fines, property seizures, and prosecutions for violating new compulsory attendance laws. Community leaders petitioned their governments to respect the guarantee of the 1873 *Privilegium* letter that they would be allowed to operate their own private schools. The Manitoba Sommerfelder Gemeinde initiated a legal challenge in defense of this position in 1919, which went all the way to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London, but in July 1920 the Privy Council ruled against them, confirming the lower court's ruling that the 1873 letter did not exempt Mennonites from provincial education laws.¹ The ruling made it crystal clear that there would be no favourable outcome for the Reinlaender, or Old Colony, Mennonites on the Swift Current Mennonite Reserve (SCMR) in the matter of schools.

Their leaders in both Manitoba and Saskatchewan had anticipated as much and had begun to explore places to live outside of Canada before they even learned the verdict of the Crown. They looked for a country that would guarantee them more freedoms. Here is a description of an early delegation that went to look for another country to which their group might migrate: "In the summer of 1919 the Reinlaender Church met and decided to investigate emigration possibilities. They selected two delegates, who, together with Saskatchewan Reinlaender Church representatives, journeyed to Ottawa, and then on to Latin America. In Ottawa they made one final futile attempt to get the federal government to intercede on their behalf, and then proceeded to Argentina, Brazil and a number of other Latin American countries. None of these countries were willing to grant them the privileges they were looking for."²

From August of 1919 until August of 1921 the Reinlaender Mennonites from the SCMR, together with those from the Hague-Osler Reserve and from Manitoba, participated in eight land-seeking trips. Their delegates travelled to Quebec (the only option they explored within Canada), to Argentina and Brazil, to Mississippi, and to Mexico.³ Many, if not most, of the leading

members within the SCMR felt little compunction to give in to the government's demands regarding sending their children to the public schools nor did they feel a sense of loyalty to Canada. They saw their primary loyalty as being to God and to the way of life they felt that He had called them to live. For this reason they eagerly participated in the search for a new location for their people.

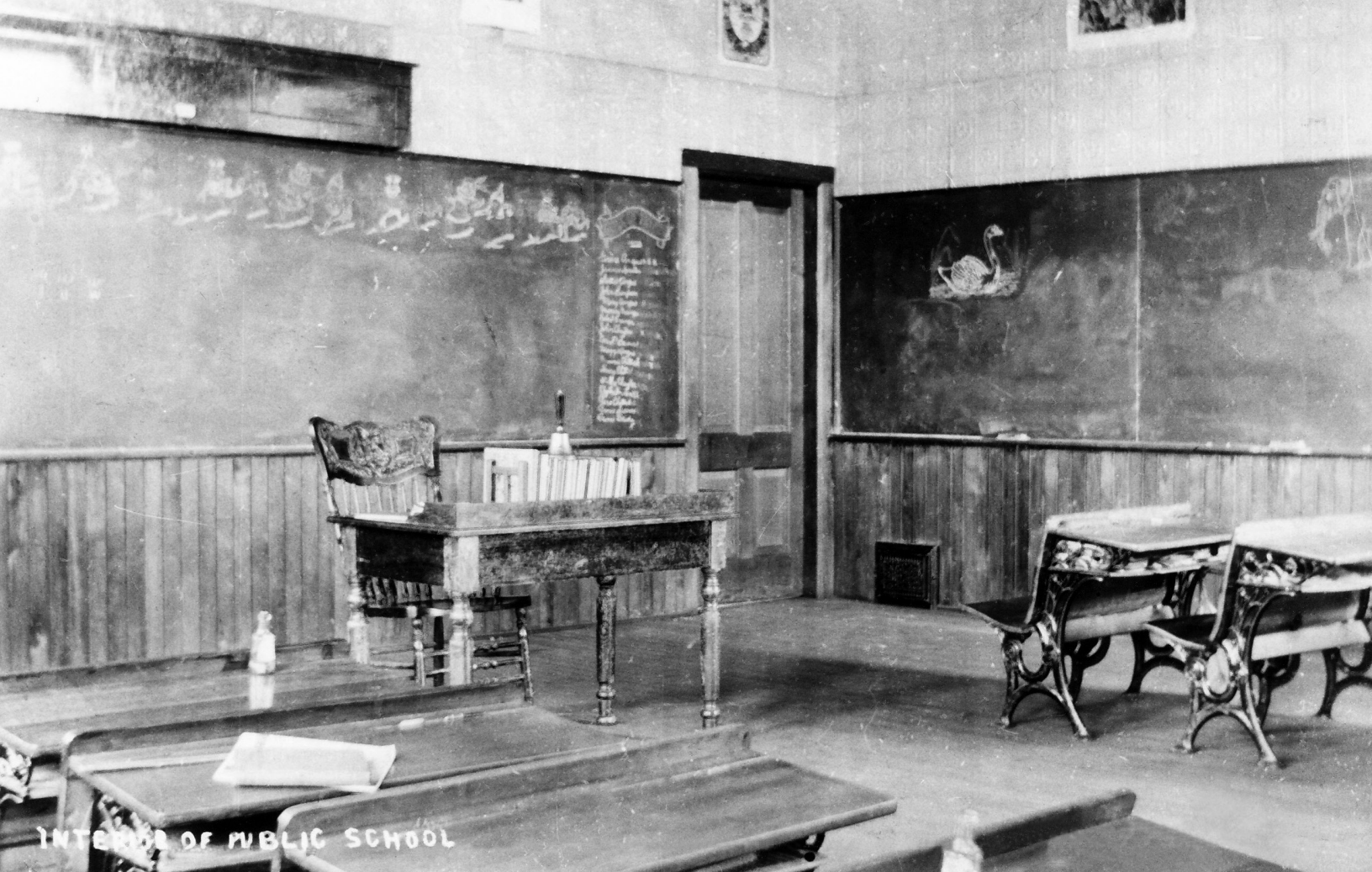
The search for a new area or country, however, was fraught with disappointments.⁴ The land they were offered in Argentina looked promising but the "request for a *Privilegium* [was met] with something less than enthusiasm."⁵ The guarantee of freedom regarding education and exemption from participation in military service was too important for them to risk being denied these privileges; after all, this is what had happened in Canada. The Reinlaender received an offer of land in Mississippi early in 1920. Their leaders agreed to purchase the land but in the process of finalizing the conditions for settlement and making a down payment on the land, their delegates were prevented from even entering the United States. The delegates and Reinlaender leaders saw this as a bad sign and abandoned this option.

These setbacks caused friction at home. The three groups of Reinlaender people – located in Manitoba's West Reserve, and



Blumenhof Mennonite settlement in Saskatchewan.

PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF SASKATCHEWAN P-42753



The migration of many Reinlaender out of the Swift Current Mennonite Reserve over the school question caused psychological, spiritual, and emotional pain for those who stayed. ARCHIVES OF MANITOBA, N32888

in settlements in Swift Current and Hague-Osler, Saskatchewan – struggled to maintain unity among themselves and solidarity within their respective communities. In some cases, the delegates were not of the same mind about the viability of the land they viewed, nor the trustworthiness of the promises offered by officials in the respective countries that they visited. In other cases, only delegates from two of the three reserves were able to go. This left their *Aeltesters* (bishops) and ministers with the task of maintaining and consolidating an enthusiasm for leaving Canada. It is easy to imagine the discussion among neighbours and family members as to whether to stay or go, and if to go, when would be the best time to sell their land and belongings. It didn't help that during all this time they had to run their farms and live with the ongoing pressure from the government to send their children to school.

It was Mexico that finally offered the Mennonites a glimmer of hope. In 1920 President Álvaro Obregón gave the delegation from Manitoba and Saskatchewan an audience. Having just emerged the victor from a revolution, President Obregón saw the potential immigration of the Mennonite settlers as a welcome development for the government of Mexico. He guaranteed their freedom from military service, the right to establish their own schools, and the right to run their own economic institutions.⁶ Once more the Reinlaender Mennonites successfully negotiated

a Privilegium; the Mexican president and his minister of agriculture approved and signed the document on March 1, 1921.⁷

CHALLENGE OF EMIGRATION

After more than a year of searching and after various possibilities had failed, the delegates and Old Colony leaders had become quite discouraged. It is no surprise then that when they finally found an open door in Mexico the delegates were relieved and excited. Their enthusiasm was short-lived, however, as on arrival back home they realized that migrating would mean leaving well developed villages and the growing prosperity that had been their experience in Canada. It remained for the Aeltester and other community leaders to convince their people that they should move. What had seemed to the delegates like such an obvious leading of God in Mexico now came up against the stark reality of giving up farms, friendships, and economic certainty, and all for what? Not surprisingly, Aeltester Abram Wiebe and the other ministers framed the decision to move as a matter of being faithful to God and to the baptismal vows they had made. The Aeltester in Manitoba, Johann Friesen, “challenged the people to accept anew the tribulations required of all people. . . . Suffering . . . was necessary for the testing and refining of the church.”⁸

The next step proved to be particularly difficult and confusing for the Mennonites on the SCMR who had committed them-

selves to leaving. All those who wanted to migrate needed to sell their land; unfortunately, putting all that land up for sale at once would flood the market, depressing the prices. An unexpected opportunity arose that appeared to promise a financial rescue. A Florida company offered to buy 107,000 acres of their land for five million dollars and the leaders of the SCMR struck the deal.⁹ Unfortunately, the landholding company was unable to secure the money, which in turn resulted in legal action on behalf of the SCMR to recover money that had been given as a deposit to the law firm acting as their agents. They lost the court case and had to “forfeit 10,200 acres of land in lieu of a settlement of \$222,000 and court costs.”¹⁰ With the joint sale for all the farms now impossible, every family had to sell their own land.

The whole process of finding a real estate company that was willing to buy all the land of those who wanted to emigrate to Mexico, then having that company fail and finally losing the court case to recoup their money, had left the would-be immigrants disappointed. It proved to be a difficult and trying time for many. Some left for Mexico unable to sell their land; others had implements and tools that they had also hoped to sell. In both cases the ones who were emigrating gave the responsibility of selling these items or land over to neighbours and relatives.¹¹

EMIGRATION AT LAST

Frank Peters, a resident of the village of Rhineland on the SCMR, kept careful notes as to the migration details; his records indicate that from 1922 to 1927 thirteen trains left from Swift Current transporting 1,892 of the Old Colony people from Saskatchewan to Mexico.¹² This represented 37% of the total population of the community.¹³ According to Peters, the first two trains carrying Mennonite passengers and their goods to Mexico left in March of 1922 and included 470 people. The eight-day trip ended at the cattle station in San Antonio de los Arenales (now called Cuauhtémoc) in the Mexican province of Chihuahua.¹⁴ Over the next five years (1923–1927) eleven more trains left Swift Current, with the final one leaving on March 1, 1927, carrying 62 people.

The emigration process was a mixture of confusion for those who felt swept up by the encouraging words of the Aeltester and at the same time felt fearful about what Mexico might be like or how they might make a living there. The major land sale fiasco, in which the Swift Current group was involved, was still in litigation when the first group of emigrants boarded the trains for Mexico. For some, not having sold their land or having had time to settle all their affairs added to the stress of moving.

The book *Patchwork of Memories*, the local history of the communities in the area around Swift Current, has very little detailed information about the move to Mexico itself or about the first months and years in which the Mennonites attempted to establish homes and farms in the new country. It does include a few pictures of the migrating families beside the railway cars, and one or two family stories mention the Mexican migration in passing. One picture, dated March 9, 1922, shows snow on the ground and people crowded around the railway cars.¹⁵ Several

other pictures are similar – people are standing around or moving toward the train. In another picture we see cattle and wagons which are waiting to be loaded.

The Abram Wiens family, who lived on land seven miles southeast of Wymark and on whose land the village of Hochstadt stood, recalled: “In 1924 all the residents except us moved to Mexico.”¹⁶ They say nothing else about the details of the move. The writer of a short history of Wymark states that in 1921 two trains “with 25 carloads of settlers and their belongings” left for Mexico.¹⁷ (Probably it was in 1922, as there is no other record of Mennonites moving to Mexico prior to that year.)

Perhaps it is not surprising that so few stories about the Mexican migration or the first years there are told in *Patchwork*. After all, the ones who stayed in Saskatchewan are the ones who wrote the family histories for the book. Harry Leonard Sawatzky details those early years in Mexico in his book *They Sought a Country*. He makes it clear that the transition was very difficult. It was, however, not the political interference of the Mexican government that created those challenges. The major problems rose from unfamiliarity with the land and how best to farm it; the new immigrants also had to adjust to lack of adequate rain for their crops. There was a decided lack of infrastructure in the area of Mexico where they had settled and, to top it all, there was harassment and sometimes violence that came at the hands of some *agraristas* – ranchers who had no title to land but who, prior to the arrival of the Mennonites, had run their cattle on the land that the Mennonites now occupied.¹⁸

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

The emigration of one-third of the Reinlaender population from the SCMR deeply affected those members of the reserve who stayed. Many no doubt agreed that the measures the government imposed regarding English schools and the ways it had enforced those measures were unfair, unreasonable, and even unjust. Certainly the government’s posture and action toward the various Mennonite churches and their congregants appeared to be contrary to the Privilegium. But other individuals and families in the community were less sure that their own leaders should have been as intransigent as they were throughout the process.

There were human costs involved. Siblings were divided over the issue of emigration as were adult children and their parents. My maternal grandparents, Wilhelm and Katharina Rempel, are an example of a family that stayed in Saskatchewan and struggled with the departure of siblings and parents. They lived in Rosenhof from the time of their marriage in March of 1917. In Wilhelm’s family only he and his younger brother Jacob, who lived in Blumenort, Manitoba, decided not to go to Mexico; his parents and all his other siblings emigrated. In Katharina’s family it was only her older brother Bernhard Rempel (b. 1885) and his wife Maria (Teichroeb), besides herself, who stayed in Canada. Her parents and the rest of her siblings – many of whom lived in nearby Rhineland, Saskatchewan – moved to Mexico in 1923. And while I do not know in what ways or how stridently Wilhelm’s own parents pressured him to move or take sides in the

schooling debate, there is evidence of the difference in opinion between him and Katharina's father. In a letter Wilhelm received from his father-in-law, Bernhard Rempel (b. 1860), in October of 1929, Bernhard writes this: "Recently we have received two letters from you, one from September 12 and the other September 30. Yes the letters from there are very valuable, but if you should come here it would give us even greater joy. Your brother Joh. Rempel recently said to me that he had been in Canada too long, and you have been there for several years. We greatly pity you, and your children are receiving a great loss through the worldly schools. The scriptures say that when the prophecy is completed, the nation becomes wild and desolate. You write in your letter that if Paul should travel through the congregations, he would have to say to you, as he once wrote to the Galatians: 'You have begun in the Spirit, do you want to finish in the flesh?'"

"Yes, there are people here who write to you, if they had not already moved here, they would not do so now. When we began the emigration, we all thought unanimously, that we could no longer stay there because of the worldly schools, but now it seems that the worldly schools are no longer a hindrance; but it is written in the scriptures, that if one knows the scriptures from childhood, it can lead to salvation. But when children instead of the scriptures learn the worldly caricatures in worldly schools, it cannot lead to salvation, and when they have completed learning, they are no longer valuable to Mennonitism. They are wild children, and who is to blame for that? The door has been opened for us to flee."

If Bernhard Rempel was this critical of his daughter and son-in-law's decision to stay in Canada six years after his emigration to Mexico, what had he been like prior to this, that is in 1921 and 1922 when the villagers of Rosenhof and Rhineland were debating the move? It is not hard to imagine that there were some pointed discussions in at least some of their exchanges during those years. Was the same tension present in many other families in the area? Again it seems safe to assume this was the case. Although no overt tension is mentioned, the Abram Giesbrecht family who lived in the Highfield (Hochfeld) area was split on moving to Mexico; several of the oldest ones stayed behind while their parents and the younger ones emigrated in 1925.¹⁹ Not everyone in the Peter Janzen family wanted to move to Mexico either, as their family story says: "Some of us older children were not in favour of going to Mexico. A couple of us said we would go only to see how things were and then turn around and come back again."²⁰

Starting the whole pioneering process again in another country did not appeal to many families on the SCMR, certainly not those who were relatively young and had children. They also may have, like my grandparents, just started their farming operations or were seeing them nicely develop. Then too there is some indication from what these grandparents valued in later life that there was a reticence to emigrate for another reason. Both sets of my grandparents had a view of education and of the world which was somewhat different from the view held by the church leaders who had promoted the move to Mexico. They were less afraid of English schools or more confident that they could adapt to or

modify the demands of the provincial government.

Bernhard Rempel (b. 1885) obviously felt the same as his brother-in-law Wilhelm Rempel did for he too refused to leave. Unfortunately for Bernhard, he was caught in the fallout from the failure of the land deal with the Florida entrepreneurs. His land was part of the court settlement. He and his family were able to live on it for a few years, but eventually Bernhard and Maria lost their farmland, their farm buildings, and were unable even to harvest their final crop. Bernhard hired a lawyer to fight their case but even he was unable to facilitate the return of the land and farmyard for them. In the end they moved, first to the village of Rhineland and then in 1927 to a rented farm in the village of Hamburg.²¹

NO MORE REINLAENDER

The Reinlaender Mennonites who remained on the SCMR felt leaderless because among those who went to Mexico were Aeltester Wiebe, all the church ministers except one, and many of the families who had created stability in the community and on the reserve. The Aeltester took with him the church records – a tangible and powerful symbol that their church community (Gemeinde) was no longer on the Swift Current Reserve in Saskatchewan. The one service that the church leaders who were now in Mexico provided to the Mennonites on the reserve – presumably to those who intended to migrate later – was a twice-yearly visit to Swift Current by some of their ministers for the sake of baptismal instruction, baptisms, communion, and a thanksgiving service. But after the last train left for Mexico in 1927 these visits ended, and those who remained on the reserve were on their own when it came to spiritual nurture.²²

The message that the Aeltester clearly communicated to those who refused to join the migration to Mexico was this: you are being influenced by the world and are not maintaining a true faith. Other leaders and ministers supported the Aeltester's ruling; that is, families who planned to stay would no longer be part of the Gemeinde, in fact, no longer part of the true church. Perhaps being told that they were being disobedient to God's will created an even deeper wound. Some who remained struggled with a sense of guilt and uncertainty as to matters of faith; the impact on the spiritual life of those who stayed was significant.

My own paternal grandparents' struggle with the loss of the Reinlaender Church perhaps typifies the confusion and uncertainty experienced by those who felt their church had abandoned them and shamed them in the process. During the years when there was no church in Rosenhof (approximately 1924–29) my grandfather Jacob J. Friesen and his wife Justina (Wiebe) would on some Sundays gather their family together and lead them in a short service, sing some well-known hymns, and then most likely read a sermon. It wasn't until their oldest son Jacob W. Friesen was to be married to Eva Martens in 1929 that Jacob Sr. and Justina joined the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church which had come to take the place of the Reinlaender Church that had functioned in Rosenhof from its beginning.

Other villagers on the SCMR for whom regular worship in a

church was important were in a similar quandary as the Friesens. So much had changed: neighbours were gone, land nearby was changing hands, families were grieving the loss of their siblings or parents, and churches were no longer there to provide direction and stability. Gathering as Reinlaender congregants, without ministers, was not an option. For at least a half-dozen years there were limited community church services on the reserve.

It was only in the late 1920s that those who wanted to worship God and receive the spiritual nurture that church services could provide looked to the one other Gemeinde in the area that had church services similar in style and format to their own – the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church (SMC). A few of the villages invited the ministers of this church to conduct services in their communities. The historical records that describe the work and ministry of the SMC during this period of transition do not suggest that there was an overall plan on the part of the SMC’s ministers to take over the Reinlaender church buildings on the reserve and install their own ministers. The evidence suggests rather that they responded to invitations from the villagers and that even this happened on an ad hoc basis.

In *Patchwork of Memories* a few of the village and family histories speak about the loss of the Reinlaender Church and the formation of Sommerfelder congregations. Jacob and Susanna Knelsen, for example, lived in the village of Chortitz, Saskatchewan, and in their family’s story they recall that there were no church services for a number of years after the Reinlaender people left for Mexico. The Chortitz village’s history states: “The remaining people here then asked the Sommerfelder Mennonite ministers, Reverend Peter Dyck and Reverend Abraham Peters of Dunelm, to come and serve them.”²³

ECONOMIC CHANGES

In addition to the psychological, spiritual, and emotional pain experienced by those who stayed in Canada, there were economic effects as well, particularly related to land ownership. The family stories written by those who lived on the reserve after the migration indicate that some purchased farms from those who moved to Mexico. Philip Lang, for example, bought land from Jacob Hiebert of Reinfeld.²⁴ Diedrich Dyck took over his father’s homestead near Blumenhof when the family moved to Mexico in 1922.²⁵ Similarly, Abram and Gertrude Heinrichs purchased land in the McMahan area from his sister and brother-in-law who had moved to Mexico, and Jacob Schlamp bought Jacob Klassen’s house in Rhineland and the farmyard that lay just west of the village itself.²⁶ The writer of the Iris School District’s history remarks: “Many of the Old Colony Mennonites [Reinlaender] decided to move to Mexico from 1922–1927 because of religious reasons so they sold their homesteads. The land was excellent for grain farming so it was quickly purchased by new families.”²⁷ Part of the reason for the quick sales was that the sellers, who were already in Mexico, were usually quite desperate to sell and were in no position to hold out for a higher price.²⁸

One other change on the reserve was the influx of new families who wanted to farm the land. Ironically many of these were also Mennonites and often referred to as the *Russlaender*. They were the ones who were arriving in Canada from the Soviet Union at the same time as the Reinlaender members were moving to Mexico. Some of these new arrivals were eager to farm and took the opportunity presented by those who wanted to and probably needed to sell their farms.

Reinlaender land-seeking delegations, 1919–21

DATE	DESTINATION	GROUPS REPRESENTED
Aug. 4–Nov. 24, 1919	Brazil, Argentina	Manitoba, Hague, Swift Current
Jan. 15–29, 1920	Mississippi	Manitoba, Hague, Swift Current
Apr. 12–29, 1920	Mississippi	Manitoba, Hague
May 14–25, 1920	Mississippi	
Aug. 19, 1920	Quebec	Manitoba, Swift Current
Sept. 8–Oct. 9, 1920	Mexico	Hague
Oct. 9–Dec. 1920	Paraguay	Hague
Nov. 11–Dec. 31, 1920	Mexico	Hague, Swift Current
Jan. 24–Mar. 12, 1921	Mexico	Manitoba, Hague, Swift Current
Apr. 5–May 9, 1921	Mexico	Manitoba, Hague, Swift Current
July 1921	Mexico	Manitoba, Swift Current
Aug. 12–Sept. 10, 1921	Mexico	Manitoba, Swift Current

Reproduced from Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920–1940*, 110

Abram Hiebert tells the story of his father Kornelius who came to Canada from the Soviet Union and, at the age of fifty-nine, “started farming six miles northwest of Neville.”²⁹ Abram and Elizabeth Froese came to Canada from Soviet Ukraine in 1923 and two years later moved to Reinfeld where they leased and farmed the Peters’ farm, which presumably became available after the migration to Mexico.³⁰ Also in the same district were Mr. and Mrs. H. D. Pauls, who had come from the Soviet Union in 1924 and moved to a farm in or near Reinfeld.³¹ Justina Wernicke tells the story of her parents (Mr. and Mrs. Ben Kehler) who came from the Soviet Union in 1926 and moved to Schoenfeld, where they began to farm.³² The arrival of these Mennonites was not always a happy occasion though. Elizabeth (Olfert) Wall tells the story of her parents Abram and Maria Olfert, who had rented land in the Highfield area. Their landlord sold his land to some Mennonites from the Soviet Union rather than offering it to her parents.³³

The emigration to Mexico brought upheaval to the Mennonites who remained on the SCMR. For some like my grandparents it was a time when they experienced both the loss of family and the loss of a church community; they felt this loss for many years. For individuals such as Bernhard Rempel (b. 1885) it was the loss of his land that no doubt left the most bitter taste in his mouth. There were those who surely missed their neighbours, friends, and family members from whom they heard perhaps only occasionally. Moreover, among those who stayed there was a feeling of uneasiness if not guilt – a feeling that the church leaders, who believed emigrating to Mexico was the will of God, had planted in their minds and hearts.

The stories that *Patchwork of Memories* includes are by and about the families who did not move to Mexico. Nevertheless, several of the stories speak about the direct impact emigration had on their lives for these were families that returned after having lived in Mexico for a year or more. The Pete Giesbrecht family, for example, moved to Mexico in 1926 and returned in 1928 “flat

broke.”³⁴ Johann and Maria Schapansky returned from Mexico in 1923 having gone there the year before.³⁵ John Wiens was sixteen years of age when his family (Isaac and Elizabeth Wiens) moved to Mexico (1923). They returned in 1926 “having traded the farm in Mexico for one of equal value in Reinfeld.”³⁶ Peter and Maria Friesen who lived in Schantzenfeld (near Wymark) moved to Mexico in 1924 but returned the same year.³⁷ Henry and Agatha (Friesen) Froese had been married nine years when they decided to move to Mexico along with her parents in 1927, but ill health forced them to return a short time later.³⁸

Nonetheless there were some positive changes on the reserve following the exodus to Mexico. Those who stayed soon began to send their children to the public schools. Whether it was the absence of someone telling them this was the wrong thing to do or simply the changing attitude of the Reinlaender Mennonite families is hard to say, but it really was not that long before both parents and children started to enjoy all that came from having new teachers and new ideas such as were introduced in the public schools. Many Mennonites on the SCMR began to see learning English as an asset rather than a danger. Some, because of more opportunities to purchase or rent land, enjoyed the opportunity to expand their farming operations and help their children to begin to farm as well.

The Russlaender Mennonites also helped to broaden the community’s horizons as they shared about their former lives and introduced new ideas and skills to the reserve. While not directly related to the loss of family and neighbours to Mexico, those who stayed were able to continue with their farming operations, which by this time were, for the most part, quite well established. Thus there were some good farming years – years when the harvests were good and the prices reasonable. More and more families were able to afford better equipment and improve their lives, that is until the 1930s, but that is another story.

This is an excerpt from Henry Friesen’s new book, *The Swift Current Mennonite Reserve 1904–1927, 2022*.

1 Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920–1940: A People’s Struggle for Survival* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1982), 107.
 2 Delbert F. Plett, ed., *Old Colony Mennonites in Canada, 1875 to 2000* (Steinbach, MB: Crossway Publications, 2001), 18.
 3 For more on the trip to Mexico, see Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920–1940*, 110, and Harry Leonard Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 31–55.
 4 Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 31–49.
 5 Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 32.
 6 Plett, *Old Colony Mennonites in Canada*, 18.
 7 Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920–1940*, 113.
 8 Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920–1940*, 115.
 9 Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920–1940*, 118.
 10 Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920–1940*, 118, and Adolf Ens, *Subjects or Citizens? The Mennonite Experience in Canada, 1870–1925* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1994), 209.
 11 Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 49.
 12 George E. Rempel, *Our Story* (Aylmer, ON: Mennonite Community Services, 2017), 58–59.
 13 Ens, *Subjects or Citizens*, 214.
 14 Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 1971, 49, and William Schroeder and Helmut T. Huebert, *Mennonite Historical Atlas* (Winnipeg: Springfield Publishers, 1990), 146.
 15 Wymark & District History Book Committee, *Patchwork of Memories* (Swift Current, SK: Wymark & District History Book Committee, 1985), 35.
 16 Book Committee, *Patchwork of Memories*, 1047.

17 Book Committee, *Patchwork of Memories*, 999.
 18 Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 67.
 19 Book Committee, *Patchwork of Memories*, 776.
 20 Book Committee, *Patchwork of Memories*, 293.
 21 Frank Rempel with Martin M. Culy, *About Our Father’s Business: An Autobiography* (Winnipeg: Word Alive Press, 2015), 9–10.
 22 G. Rempel, *Our Story*, 61.
 23 Book Committee, *Patchwork of Memories*, 757.
 24 Book Committee, *Patchwork of Memories*, 609.
 25 Book Committee, *Patchwork of Memories*, 276.
 26 Book Committee, *Patchwork of Memories*, 400, 497.
 27 Book Committee, *Patchwork of Memories*, 569.
 28 G. Rempel, *Our Story*, 59.
 29 Book Committee, *Patchwork of Memories*, 298.
 30 Book Committee, *Patchwork of Memories*, 593.
 31 Book Committee, *Patchwork of Memories*, 619.
 32 Book Committee, *Patchwork of Memories*, 682.
 33 Book Committee, *Patchwork of Memories*, 439.
 34 Book Committee, *Patchwork of Memories*, 704–705.
 35 Book Committee, *Patchwork of Memories*, 709.
 36 Book Committee, *Patchwork of Memories*, 633.
 37 Book Committee, *Patchwork of Memories*, 904.
 38 Book Committee, *Patchwork of Memories*, 676.

THE MENNONITE PROBLEM

Public Schools in Saskatchewan

Leonard Doell

As early as 1902, the Old Colony Mennonites in the Hague-Osler area, north of Saskatoon, were confronted with the issue of public schools. They had only arrived in Saskatchewan a few years earlier (the Hague-Osler Reserve started in 1895) and were now threatened with the closure of their private schools. The earliest school districts to be formed were in the Hague area. To increase its tax base, the Hague School District wanted to have a large catchment area that included four nearby Old Colony Mennonite villages. The residents of the villages sent petitions

the school district carefully cut its boundaries leaving out the Old Colony villages.

To build a public school, school districts needed to purchase land. They had trouble doing so in the Hague-Osler Reserve as all of the land was owned by Mennonites. In places where they managed to find land, some of the sellers claimed they were coerced. For instance, in the village of Hochfeld, a Mr. Bartsch sold his land where the publicly funded Passchendaele School was built. However, he wrote: “I have sold this land under threat from the school inspector and the official trustee of the above named school district. They threatened to prosecute me if I refused to sell this site.”³

Teacherages also had to be constructed immediately in these districts because there was no housing that could be acquired for teachers in the village. The Department of Education found it almost impossible to get a teacher in the Old Colony Mennonite villages if there was no house for them to live in.

In 1919, the provincial government built four schools in the heart of the Mennonite reserve against the wishes of the Old Colony Mennonites. There was Venice School at Blumenthal, Renfrew at Blumenheim, Passchendaele at Hochfeld, and Pembroke in Neuanlage. The government also named the schools after First World War battle sites. The names were intentionally chosen to aggravate the Mennonites because of their pacifist beliefs and their resistance to public schools.

The government also hired several teachers, including some with a Mennonite background who were not opposed to public schools. Some were from accommodating Mennonite groups while others were former Mennonites who spoke Low German but were now Seventh Day Adventists, or Swedenborgians. They also chose official trustees who reported if the children attended school and generally kept the government informed as to the development of these schools. Some of these men were also of Mennonite background. Old Colony Mennonites were often frustrated with these trustees and their insensitivity and lack of compassion as they carried out their responsibilities to the letter of the law.



PRIVATE COLLECTION

The Reinland German School located in the Old Colony village of Reinland. Taken in 1908, it included Old Colony and Bergthaler students.

to the Department of Education stating their concerns and their opposition to these public schools, since they had their own schools and did not want to support another one. They were told by Mr. J. A. Calder, deputy commissioner of education, “that even if they had their own private schools, it would not relieve them from the liability to taxation in the Hague School District.”¹

Calder then suggested a solution to this problem, stating that “as [the] Mennonites to whom you refer are opposed to public schools, it would be advisable if at all possible to so arrange the boundaries of the district that when the vote is taken, a majority would be in favor of it.”² His advice was followed in these areas:

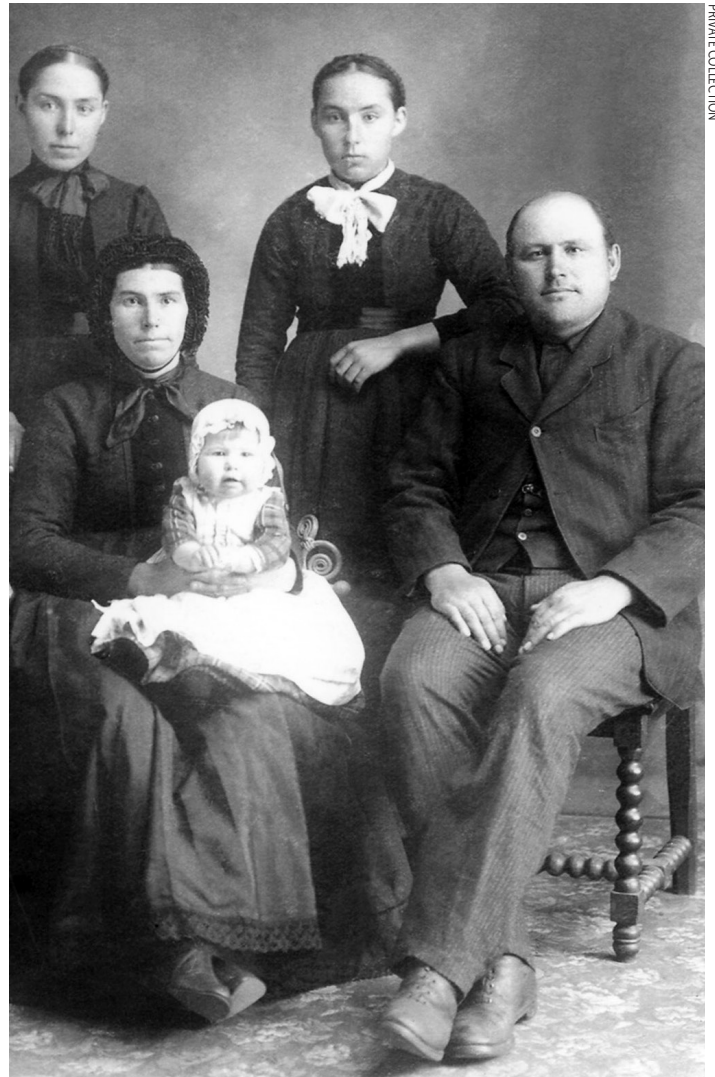
The biggest challenge that the government encountered was attendance. As early as 1915, the provincial government began to prosecute Mennonites for not sending their children to public schools. Canada was at war and there were very strong feelings in support of everything British and against everything German, especially Germans who did not serve in the military. There was no alternative service at this time, which also “contributed to the strong feelings against Mennonites. The unwillingness of Old Colony Mennonites to accept public schools was just one more factor.”⁴ Bill Janzen describes how the government intensified the push toward public schools: “In this war-time atmosphere the provincial government, in the spring of 1917, passed the School Attendance Act. In effect this law made it compulsory for all children between the ages of 7 and 14 to attend a public school where English was the language of instruction, if the children lived within a public school district. The government now also had the power to create public school districts if the people living there did not want to do that on their own. Further, the government could expropriate land, have schools constructed, appoint official trustees who would then hire teachers, and impose fines and prison terms if children did not attend.”⁵

At first “the government . . . took enforcement actions mainly by fining people. It decided not to send parents to jail, lest they appear as martyrs. But it did not fine people in every village, only in some, counting, presumably, on a demonstration effect.”⁶ They chose rather to focus on the villages of Hochfeld, Neuanlage, Blumenthal, and Blumenheim initially, where many of the church leaders lived and church institutions were dominant. According to Janzen, the treatment of non-compliant Mennonites was harsh. He notes the following: “Eleven Mennonite districts paid a total of \$26,000 in 1920–21 in fines and court costs. That was a lot of money in those years, enough to construct and furnish five one-room country school buildings with teacher’s residences.”⁷

The result of this relentless prosecution of Old Colony Mennonites through fines and prison sentences was extreme poverty. The intent of the government was to gain compliance by force, through starvation and poverty. Rev. Johann P. Wall, in a letter to the minister of education on February 12, 1923, wrote: “There are so many people who are weakened so much in a financial respect through the many, many prosecutions that it is a great loss to the country, especially to the District, since they have been unable to do their farming to the usual good methods. Yes, many of them could not support themselves any more and would be in need and misery if they had not been supported by others. But the credit is exhausted and paying the school fines will eventually cease. And when the farmers are deprived of their working stock they cannot do their farming. . . . Have mercy with our poor people. God will reward you for it. If you cannot keep the exemption that was granted to our people, please give us a few years to settle our affairs, we pray.”⁸

Johann F. Peters of Neuanlage sent a letter to Saskatchewan Premier W. M. Martin that expressed the dilemma that the Old Colony Mennonites faced because they were opposed to the

public schools and the continuous prosecution they experienced: “If we send our children to public schools, we violate God’s commands in not holding to that which we promised our God and Saviour at holy baptism. If we do not send them, we offend against your laws. Does Mr. Martin want us to transgress against God’s commands in order to keep his? . . . Oh how difficult it is



PRIVATE COLLECTION

Johann F. and Anna (Driedger) Peters and daughters. The Peters family was part of the first group to arrive in Saskatchewan in 1895 and settle in the village of Neuanlage.

to be a true Mennonite! . . . And we came here precisely because of the freedom which the government promised us in full.”⁹

The process of fining Mennonites started in 1915 and lasted until at least 1934. Mennonites were pursued by the local official trustees, attendance officers, justices of the peace, and the police. From 1917 to 1928, the Saskatchewan Provincial Police enforced the School Attendance Act. Later the Royal Canadian Mounted Police [RCMP] assumed this responsibility. The detachments at Vonda and Saskatoon were largely responsible for the Hague-Osler Reserve, including Aberdeen. Many Mennonites would argue that the police stridently carried out the letter of the law, but there are also a few stories of those who showed compassion

and did not issue a fine. Mennonites from Manitoba and Swift Current left for Mexico as early as 1922, whereas the bulk of the Hague-Osler people began to move after 1924. The added years of heavy fines, jail sentences, and seizure of assets added to their poverty and strained relations between them and the authorities. According to the records of the Prince Albert Penitentiary, seven-

and the people suffered severe hardships. Now the fine is a joke to those who can pay and the squatters of the villages are suffering. The people of the villages have become quite embittered against these men, who they say come every month in their big cars and take their last dollar and often their seed wheat and spend it to buy bigger cars."¹⁰



PRIVATE COLLECTION

Passchendaele school class taken in 1942. The Passchendaele school was named after a European First World War battle site by the Saskatchewan Department of Education.

teen Old Colony men spent time in jail, sentenced to anywhere from ten to thirty days for being unable or refusing to send their children to public schools. Among those jailed were one Old Colony minister and three German school teachers.

In a September 1927 letter, inspector of schools A. J. Loeppky described the process used at Hague to deal with offenders: "Mr. A. H. Klassen, who is the official trustee for some of the districts, is also the Justice of the Peace. The system of punishment is very systematic. Mr. H. W. Fisher, who was formerly a Justice of the Peace, is attendance officer for School District #4116 and Mr. H. J. Friesen, the janitor of the Hague School, is the attendance officer for School Districts #4115 and #4117. At the end of each month, the summons are prepared and each attendance officer serves them. In many cases people do not want to appear in court and the attendance officer collects the fine when he serves the summons. The fine has been reduced as follows: the fine is \$1.00, JP costs are \$1.50 and serving the summons is \$1.50. This brings the total up to \$4.00. This amount is collected quite regularly. The number of convictions for June last year was 64. This brings a monthly income of \$64.00 to the Government of Saskatchewan, \$96.00 for Mr. A. H. Klassen and about \$40.00 for Mr. H. J. Friesen and a smaller amount to Mr. H. W. Fisher and the other attendance officers. This has been carried on for many years, formerly the fine and court costs used to be higher



PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF SASKATCHEWAN, P-3368

Some Mennonites spent time in prison for refusing to send their children to public schools.

The bishop of the Anglican Church of Saskatchewan, the Right Reverend George Exton Lloyd, in a letter to the premier of Saskatchewan, confirmed the words of Inspector Loeppky. He writes, "190 papers were issued by the same Constable from this Magistrate H. W. Fisher. I am told that over 150 were fined on that Saturday morning and as the cases were undefended, this unique representative of British justice is said to have pocketed over \$400.00 for a piece of work between himself and the Constable. . . . In the meantime, this Justice is reported by

Mennonites to have said that ‘he would prosecute them as long as Mennonites remain in the land.’ After your exposition of the school law, I do not hold the Attorney General responsible for the law but I do hold him responsible for the sort of men who are appointed to represent the King’s justice.”¹¹

In 1928, a promise was made by the deputy minister of education to end the fines, but they continued even as Mennonites continued to pack up their belongings to move to Mexico. In July of 1932, the Department of Education threatened to remove children from homes and also to use the RCMP to force children to attend school, rather than using justices of the peace.

The perception in the Mennonite community was that the attendance officers and justices of the peace were not acting ethically, often charging more than legally required and pocketing the rest. They understood the fine should have been \$4 per family per month and not \$4 per child per month. This may or not have been true, but it is accurate to note that Mennonites were desperate as the government depleted their assets, while they could see the defenders of the law becoming wealthier.



PRIVATE COLLECTION

Some Mennonites from the Hague-Osler Reserve moved to Durango, Mexico, instead of complying with the province’s school attendance laws.

RESISTANCE

Mennonites showed resilience in the face of the steady onslaught of pressure and practiced various forms of civil disobedience. In 1921–22, official trustee J. J. Friesen said that some of the Hague area schools had to be closed because there were no students. Teachers were in schools without children, drawing their monthly salaries. In 1920, provincial school inspector J. E. Coombes visited Renfrew School and found that only one child out of forty-three in the community was in attendance. The father of the boy was almost blind and poor. The Old Colony ministers visited this man to see why he sent his child to school, and the man told them that he was too poor to pay the fine, and if the church paid it he would keep the boy at home.

In addition, when government officials came to Mennonite homes with children potentially of school age, the parents would refuse to give them their children’s names and ages. Likewise, when these same officials showed up at the private schools looking for similar information, the teachers refused to cooperate.

I once met an older woman from our community who told me about an experience she had when she applied for Old Age Pension. She found out that she was actually two years older than she thought. It turned out that her parents had given officials a younger age to avoid paying fines.

There were also parents who sent their children to villages that did not have public schools to stay with relatives that were not being harassed. In some cases, the families moved out of their homes to other villages where they lived as squatters in tents, sheds, and summer kitchens. In other cases, they moved out of the three-mile radius that encompassed the school district and squatted on other people’s farmland. My great-grandfather had fifteen to twenty families squatting on his land just outside the Pembroke School District around 1920 to avoid paying fines. It was not long before new schools were built in these areas and Mennonites would move again, rather than send their children to school or pay fines.

There were Mennonite families assessed fines for not sending their children to school as late as 1933. In 1934, some of these families moved to Mexico, some moved to Peace River Country in northern Alberta, and some went to other remote parts of western Canada. Rev. Jacob B. Guenther, a Bergthaler minister from Aberdeen, continued to hold German school at his home near the Hague Ferry up until 1946. He attempted a move to British Honduras in 1951 that failed but in 1962 he moved to Bolivia with a small group of followers.

CONCLUSION

Many people who were in favour of public schools, including government officials and neighbours to Mennonites, became extremely frustrated and angry with the Old Colony Mennonites. They sought to find ways to compel them to comply with the law that would make them into desirable Canadian citizens. Throughout the correspondence on Mennonites and schools, the issue is referred to as “the Mennonite problem.” Our Mennonite people wanted to be respected as people with integrity who contributed to the betterment of life in Canada but in ways that did not conflict with their value system.

1 Hague SD #759, Letter from J. A. Calder, Deputy Commissioner of Education Regina, SK, to Heinrich Harder (Reinfeld), Feb. 13, 1903, Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan (PAS).

2 Passchendaale SD #4084, Letter from Johan Bartsch, Hochfeld, SK, to Department of Education, Regina, June 7, 1919, PAS.

3 Altona SD #859, Letter from Deputy Commissioner of Education, Regina, to W. Wilson, Osler, SK, Sept. 11, 1902, PAS.

4 William Janzen, *The 1920s Migration of Old Colony Mennonites from the Hague-Osler area to Mexico*, Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan Occasional Papers, no. 2006-1 (presented to the Annual General Meeting of the Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan, Hague, SK, Mar. 3, 2006), 6.

5 *Ibid.*, 7.

6 *Ibid.*, 8.

7 *Ibid.*, 9.

8 *Ibid.*, 16.

9 Adolf Ens, *Subjects or Citizens? The Mennonite Experience in Canada, 1870–1925* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1994), 147.

10 Pembroke SD #4115, Letter from A. J. Loeppky, Inspector of Schools, to Deputy Minister of Education, Sept. 26, 1927, PAS.

11 Letter from the Right Rev. George Exton Lloyd, Anglican Bishop of Saskatchewan, to Premier Dunning, Premier of Saskatchewan, Dec. 28, 1922, PAS, M6-Y-101-4-1.

OLD COLONY AND RUSSLAENDER LAND TRANSACTIONS

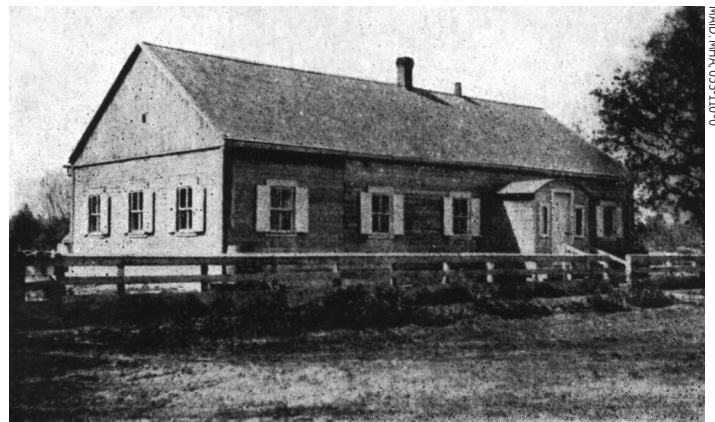
Hans Werner

This year, 2022, marks the centenary of the start of the Mennonite migration from Manitoba and Saskatchewan to Mexico, a milestone celebrated by tens of thousands in the Manitoba Colony in Mexico. Commemorations are also planned for next year to mark the centenary of the arrival of the *Russlaender* Mennonites, who left the Soviet Union to make a new home in Canada. On March 1, 1922, the first train of Old Colony Mennonites left Plum Coulee in Manitoba's West Reserve bound for Mexico. The people boarding the train that day believed emigration to be the only option to protect their children from the state and its nationalistic education system. Just over a year later, on July 21, 1923, the first Russlaender Mennonites arrived at the train station in Rosthern, Saskatchewan. They viewed Canada as their salvation from revolution, civil war, and communism.¹

Both groups of Mennonites faced serious challenges with the question of land. Those emigrating needed to sell their Canadian land to finance the purchase of land in Mexico. Those arriving in Canada had promised to settle on the land but needed to acquire it to fulfill the promise. The lands still available for homesteading were hardly prime farmlands, and required clearing or living with stones. Effectively that meant land would have to be purchased for Mennonites arriving in Canada. For Manitoba Mennonites who had adapted themselves to the new educational system and were not migrating to Mexico, the purchase of the ordered Old Colony villages and farmlands by the Russlaender made a lot of sense.

For Old Colony Mennonites, converting their land to capital was an immediate and pressing issue. At a meeting of Old Colony members in May 1921, the decision was made to sell their Manitoba lands as a single block. David Harder, a witness to those events, noted in his memoirs that the Manitoba land was to “be sold as a community, so that all would receive the same price per acre.” Dwellings were to be considered part of

the land “and no valuation should be made for them.” However, in the case of those who only had a home, but no farmland, the buildings were to be assigned a value. Payment was to be made for those buildings out of the entire pool of funds created by the sale.² In a subsequent document that attempted to frame this understanding in legal terms an exception was made for a mill in the village of Rosengart, which was to be sold separately.³ The plan to liquidate their land not only included selling it as a block, but also envisioned an economic equalization, at least to a limited extent.



A private Mennonite school in Manitoba ca. 1900.

Selling their land as a block using this valuation and payment scheme set aside the quality of individual landholdings and the value of buildings for those who owned both. Harry Leonard Sawatzky's study of the Mexican Mennonite colonies offers one of the few explanations of why Old Colonists chose to sell their land in this way. He suggested that a block sale offered the prospect of providing the necessary down payment for the land purchase in Mexico, it would free up the largest group to emigrate as a body,

and it would eliminate speculation in land on the part of those choosing not to emigrate. He also asserted that it would bring outsiders into the reserve, thereby so upsetting “the accustomed way of life of those who remained behind that they would soon be prompted to follow to Mexico and, promising obedience in the future, seek reinstatement in the church.”⁴

Although the idea that Old Colony leaders believed this sales scheme would bring other Mennonites in the reserve to their senses seems somewhat conjectural, the plan to sell the land in a block offered some of the advantages that Sawatzky outlines. It is not entirely clear, however, how Old Colony Mennonites preparing to emigrate arrived at the decision to sell the land as a single block using an agent. It is apparent that by early 1921 Old Colony leaders had concluded that they needed assistance for undertaking this mass migration. The Old Colony Mennonites relied on an old friend, the non-Mennonite lawyer John H. Black from the town of Morden, with whom they had dealt before. By the early 1920s there was considerable social capital invested in the relationship between the conservative Mennonites and the Morden legal firm of McLeod, Black, and MacAulay. The firm had faithfully served the interests of conservative Old Colony Mennonites in their prolonged conflict with the state over the education of their children and was a natural choice to help with the legal challenges that would come with selling their land.

The early discussions with Black about selling the land appear to have envisioned obtaining agreement from individual owners to use the legal firm as the single intermediary agent for the sale of their land. On April 4, 1921, over a month before the formal decision to sell in a block was made, Black had already drawn up a draft sales agreement and indicated to the Mennonite civic leader, *Vorsteher* Franz Froese, that if approved he would prepare five hundred copies of it for use in selling the land.⁵ By the next meeting five days later between Black, officials of the Old Colony orphan’s institution (the *Waisenamt*) and John W. Rempel of Blumenort, more thought had been given to the sale. The need for the land to be sold for cash was established, although there was already concern that this might be difficult. It was also noted that potential purchasers would have to purchase the villages, including the livestock and implements. The notes of the meeting suggest a “proposed commission on the sale of farms” of five percent on the first \$1,000 and 2½ percent on the remaining value, suggesting transactions would still be individual sales. The exact method of distributing the proceeds of an eventual sale seems to have been discussed but remains unclear in the surviving notes of the meeting. Black simply noted, “as to valuation, probably the Saskatchewan method will be carried out.”⁶ In a follow-up letter to the meeting Black broached the subject of commission more directly. Black suggested 2 percent, which he thought under the circumstances, could be “fairly called a reasonable commission.”⁷ In a personal letter to Rempel where he reported on his work to secure naturalization papers for Rempel’s family, Black commented again on the question of commission. It appears that the discussion of commission had somewhat jeopardized the social capital implicated in the negotiations to that point. Black assured

Rempel that he did “not wish to insist on any particular rate of commission that is not satisfactory to your people, for it is more important to me that I should be in agreement with you, than the question of any amount of money involved.”⁸

The method of sale to be used became clearer in subsequent meetings. On April 21, 1921, the Old Colony civic leadership met without Black to formally decide on the terms under which their lawyer would be given exclusive rights to sell the land in a block. The terms agreed to on that date were recommended to the Old Colony membership at a meeting held on May 21, 1921, and it appears that some time thereafter they met with Black to formally draw up an agreement. The agreement set out many of the points that had been negotiated earlier and clearly envisioned a block sale of the land. It was dated the same day as the Reinland meeting where the formal decision to sell the land in a block was made. The contract specified J. H. Black as the agent for the committee charged with selling all the land. It referred to a contract that authorized the agreement with Black, which was to be signed by individual landowners by June 1, 1921. Although the agreement’s expiry date of August 1, 1921, suggests optimism for an early sale, the agreement also anticipated that Black might not be able to sell the land. Accordingly, there were provisions for paying his expenses, agreement that he would exert himself even if he were not the seller, and provisions for other possible agents. According to David Harder, the agreement to sell in a block expired on August 1, along with the exclusive listing given to Black, but was subsequently extended several times.⁹

Peter A. Elias’s memoir noted that the agreements drawn up by Black were “to be handed to the village administrators and everyone intending to emigrate was to sign a release of his land to the barrister.”¹⁰ David Harder’s memoir acknowledged that “certainly some found this a little difficult, to surrender their land, which they considered as of better quality and upon which they had exerted so much effort and work to maintain it in a more profitable condition.”¹¹ Relying on Harder’s memoir, historian Frank Epp suggests that “there was pronounced resistance” to the proposal of the Old Colony leadership to sell the land as a block.¹² Despite this resistance, it is remarkable to note that some of the major players in the emigration were well-to-do farmers. For instance, Klaas Heide, a prominent Old Colony civic leader advocating migration, owned land in Manitoba and Saskatchewan and a “huge barn” that “accommodated 40 or more horses” on his yard in the village of Grünthal, near Gretna.¹³

The decision to sell land in a block was severely tested over the next few years and in the end proved unworkable, at least in Manitoba. Although Harder suggested that Black had a potential buyer in mind when the deal was made, there were no offers in the summer of 1921. The first concrete offer worthy of documentation came from the Similkameen Fruit Company in the fall of 1921. This company offered to buy 100,000 acres for \$50 per acre, which was considerably lower than the \$75 per acre that had been believed possible. A second offer that year brokered by Hugo Carstens, a Winnipeg land agent and publisher of the German newspaper *Der Nordwesten*, involved both the Mexican

and Canadian lands, but the price had fallen to \$35 per acre.¹⁴ By early 1922 Black had realized that he would not be able to sell the land but continued to exert efforts to help his Mennonite clients. He drafted the documents when General H. D. B. Ketchen, a prominent figure in the Winnipeg General Strike a few years earlier, was appointed as agent for a specific sale in early 1922 at \$35 per acre.¹⁵ There were other potential buyers with diverse origins and interests. In December the monthly newsletter of the more

all the land in Manitoba and Saskatchewan.¹⁸

To relieve their financial stress, by August 1923 a despondent Old Colony leadership tried to reduce the amount of land they had purchased in Mexico. A copy of a letter to their Mexican creditors illustrates how frayed the resolve to complete the migration had become. After outlining the problems with the Mexican and Canadian crops, the writers noted, "A lot of our people down there have lost their courage already and several of them have



MMD: MHA 629-P-800

The residence and farmyard of Peter J. Peters in Reinland, Manitoba in the 1930s.

liberal Mennonites, *Der Mitarbeiter*, discounted rumors circulating that the land had been sold to Italian and Jewish buyers.¹⁶

The rumors were not without foundation. Between December 1922 and March 1923 there were negotiations with the legal firm of Monteith, Fletcher, and David, which was acting on behalf of the Jewish Colonization Association. By that time the land price had fallen to \$27 per acre with only 60,000 acres available for purchase. Later that year negotiations were underway with the Municipal Debenture Corporation of Quebec, which had some Italian connections. In one letter their agent noted that "the Italian government did not have the necessary authority to guarantee the Bonds to be issued by the Municipal Debenture Corporation of Quebec," presumably to finance a purchase of the Manitoba lands.¹⁷ Mennonite real estate agents also tried to work on a large block sale of the land. On August 21, 1922, J. F. D. Wiebe, a farmer, minister, and real estate agent from Herbert, Saskatchewan, who had been involved with the inspection and purchase of land in Mexico, wired Heide that he had buyers for

come back to Canada, as you will probably be aware of yourself, consequently such happenings give such bad reports here that it causes a change of mind among our people and a number of them seem to stand back from their intentions to move to Mexico. . . . There seems to be very little hope to be able to sell our lands here at present, and we therefore can see no way out to meet our payments in the future unless we are able to arrange something to lessen our debts to you in some way or another."¹⁹ The colloquial English used in the letter seems to indicate that Mennonites, instead of John Black, wrote the letter. It is also not clear if the letter was ever sent, as the signed copy in the file is missing the signature of Klaas Heide, one of the important negotiators of the Mexican land deal.

Declining land prices and the difficulty of finding potential purchasers seem to have prevented any of the block sale offers for the Manitoba land to be realized. In Saskatchewan the initial attempts to sell the land fared even worse. In 1921, the Hague-Osler Old Colonists had an offer for their land at \$40 per acre

that fell through, and they had to repossess their land. Swift Current Old Colonists had also secured a deal with a syndicate of Florida investors using Swift Current lawyers as agents. When payment was not forthcoming, they ended up owing their lawyers 10,200 acres in commissions. The validity of the mortgage on the acreage to guarantee the fees to their lawyers was contested in court and went through several appeals, but the Privy Council in London ultimately decided in favour of the lawyers.²⁰ The affair cost a lot of money, time, and embarrassment.

The opportunity presented by the Old Colony emigration was not lost on Canadian Mennonites who had adapted themselves to the new educational realities and were looking to assist Mennonites emigrate from war-torn and now communist Ukraine. Labelling themselves as “progressives,” they began to organize to bring over their coreligionists, and sought to find a way to settle them on lands being vacated by those emigrating to Mexico. A meeting of various church groups in Altona in April 1922 agreed to form a corporation of American and Canadian immigration committees that would “have as its task to purchase the Old Colony lands for our Russian brothers.”²¹ The envisioned corporation was the seed for the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization. The delegates at the April meeting discussed how Old Colony land could be purchased. There were two plans that had circulated among immigration leaders. H. H. Ewert, a teacher at the Mennonite Collegiate Institute who later acted as chair at the founding meeting of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, advanced a plan whereby a syndicate of Mennonites would raise \$150,000, which would be used to buy one village and its lands. The village would be sold to Russlaender immigrants who would mortgage their properties to provide the funds for purchasing a second village. The transactions would be made using the Waisenamt, which also acted as a mutual aid credit agency. The process would be repeated until all the Old Colony lands had been purchased and resold to the Russlaender. The second plan, advanced by David Toews, and the one that the Board would adopt in June 1922, involved creating a corporation that would raise ten million dollars by selling \$100 shares to Mennonites across North America. The corporation would purchase Old Colony lands and sell them to the arriving Russlaender.²² Although the envisioned corporation never came to pass, at its June 1922 meeting the Board also authorized an offer to be made to the leaders of the Old Colony in Manitoba’s West Reserve at \$25 per acre, Swift Current and Hague-Osler at \$20. Half of the purchase price was to be paid in cash and the other half in two to five years.²³ The offer was also not acted upon.

With the arrival of Mennonites from the Soviet Union beginning in 1923, the acquisition of land became an acute problem for the Russlaender migration. The Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization and the affiliated Mennonite Land Settlement Board were torn in their approach to finding land for the arriving Russlaender. A. A. Friesen, the head of the Mennonite Land Settlement Board, confided in W. T. Badger, the manager of the Canada Colonization Association (a subsidiary of the Canadian Pacific Railway), that the “members of the Board are more in

favor of wild lands whether homestead lands or railway lands.” The preference for the cheaper “wild” land reflected the Board’s concern for the repayment of travel debts. Friesen acknowledged, however, that the immigrants “seem to be decidedly in favor of improved lands” and the Board had “hesitatingly” begun negotiations for the purchase of Old Colony lands.²⁴

In 1922, 1923, and 1924, individual land speculators also made several offers for the land. Some of these prospective buyers



Brigadier General H. D. B. Ketchen, a prominent figure in putting down the Winnipeg General Strike, was briefly appointed as an agent to sell Old Colony land in 1922.

had a quick sale to Russian Mennonite immigrants in mind. J. F. D. Wiebe saw the opportunity to buy from Old Colonists and then sell the land to the Russlaender; however, finding financing for such a transaction eluded him. In a 1924 letter to the Old Colony Vorsteher Franz Froese, Wiebe noted that there “was considerable disunity regarding settlement” because the Russlaender were now able to “purchase lands without a down payment with ten years to pay. That makes it difficult for those of us working to have them buy your villages in Manitoba.” He rhetorically asked whether Froese would not sell “the village of Rheinland [*sic*] if Johann Warkentin in Winkler, others, and I would give our word. If we could get a start in Manitoba, we could make it work. We would see to it that you received payment for everything.”²⁵

Despite the 1921 decision to sell the land in a block, smaller groups of Mennonite farmers began to list their lands separately almost immediately and over time more land was sold on a piecemeal basis. As early as August 1922, a representative of the legal firm Monteith, Fletcher, and David appeared in the West Reserve village of Blumengart, obtaining signatures for the purchase of the village by one of its principals, Ernest Fletcher. In October of the same year Fletcher sold the village and its farmlands to John Hofer, David Hofer, and Jacob Hofer of the Millbank Hutterite Colony.²⁶

Most of the Old Colony land in Manitoba’s West Reserve was sold to individual purchasers over the next ten years with a host



Russlaender Mennonites, arriving in Canada from the Soviet Union, were interested in the farmsteads left behind by the Old Colony.

MAID: CENTRE FOR MENNONITE BROTHERS STUDIES, NP214-01-05

of different transactions and arrangements. Detailed research of land titles by Bruce Wiebe indicates that even though many of the villagers of Gnadenthal left for Mexico in 1922, sales of land only began in 1924. Many of those who left in 1922 transferred their properties for one dollar to other villagers who were planning to leave later. Wiebe's detailed listing of Gnadenthal land transactions suggests that Old Colony properties often went through several hands before Russlaender immigrants acquired title to land in West Reserve villages.²⁷ Other arrangements involved renting to own or financing from relatives. Gerhard and Anna Rempel Ens purchased land in Reinland from her second cousin, Abram Rempel, in 1923. The Enses lived with the Rempels until the latter moved to Mexico. The purchase price of \$14,000 included 480 acres, the village housebarn, livestock, and equipment. The Enses financed the purchase over ten years at 6 percent interest with the down payment provided by Abram Rempel's brother Franz from Blumenort.²⁸ Some West Reserve

farmers increased their holdings while others purchased Old Colony lands and resold them to Russlaender immigrants. The *Morden Times* reported that Winkler businessman John Enns and his son purchased 275 acres and buildings from a Letkeman in Schanzenfeld for \$22 per acre. Letkeman was moving to Mexico and the newspaper reporter thought the buildings alone could have cost Letkeman \$5,000. Two years later the newspaper reported that the Ennses had sold the farm to a Russlaender immigrant named Stobbe for \$50 per acre including buildings.²⁹

Notable among individual purchasers in the West Reserve were the Jewish merchants from Plum Coulee and Winkler who had mediated the market for conservative Old Colony Mennonites since the 1890s. Ernest Sirluck's biography notes that his father's lifelong dream had been to farm, and when the Mennonites could not sell their land in a block, it created an opportunity for his father to "farm for himself." The Sirluck and Nitikman families eventually purchased 4,000 acres of land; they farmed some and

the rest was rented to others on a crop share basis.³⁰ The Rosner and Brownstone families of Plum Coulee also purchased land south of the village in the 1920s. Saidye Rosner Bronfman notes that her father “acquired several farms from the Mennonites who left Canada for Mexico.”³¹ In some cases the land purchases made by Jewish merchants turned the tables on the traditional relationship between conservative Mennonites and Jewish merchants. The purchases made by Nitikman and Sirluck were financed by the owners who now lived in Mexico. A few years later when the agricultural economy was hit by the Depression, Sirluck was forced to renegotiate the terms of his mortgages with his Old Colony Mennonite financiers. The traditional role of the Jewish merchant as intermediary for the market and “worldly” capital was reversed; Jewish merchants were now indebted to Mennonite farmers.³²

The 1924 purchase of the Hague-Osler lands was the only successful attempt to broker the sale of a large block of land between the two groups of Mennonites. In that year, *Der Bote*, the new Russlaender immigrant newspaper, reported that lands were available for purchase at \$18.50 per acre from a London land agent and financier who had purchased the land from the Old Colony Mennonites. The Russlaender had to pay 10 percent down and, due to the exchange rate between the English

pound and the Canadian dollar, they had to pay an additional 10 percent; they were able to borrow an additional \$5.00 per acre from the financier to begin farming. The entire debt had to be repaid over a period of twenty years with an interest rate of six to seven percent.³³

While Old Colonists were at best ambivalent about selling their land to immigrating Russlaender, those arriving from the Soviet Union preferred to settle in the well-ordered and improved villages of the Old Colonists, which almost felt like home. Old Colonists needed to convert their farm assets into cash to pay for the land in Mexico, to finance their transportation, to build homes, and to plant their first crops. The Russlaender arrived in Canada with nothing, facing huge debts to the railway for their transportation, and needing even more credit to begin anew. Declining land prices worked against a quick sale of all the Old Colony land in a block. While lower prices benefited the arriving Russlaender, the benefit was difficult to realize given their poverty. The needs of the two groups made a simple and quick block sale impossible to achieve. However, despite these problems and roadblocks, some villages, such as Gnadenthal, became Russlaender villages. Many others changed in character with neighbours who had different experiences and outlooks on education, the state, and “the world.”

1 Portions of this article were published previously as “Restoring the Commons: Land Deals and the Migration of Manitoba Mennonites to Mexico in the 1920s,” *Journal of Agricultural History* 87, no. 4 (2013): 452–72.

2 David Harder, “Schools and Community: The Recollections of the Village School Teacher David Harder from Mexico,” trans. Delbert Plett, *Preservings*, no. 23 (2003): 12. David Harder was a schoolteacher who participated in the migration of the 1920s. His memoirs were published posthumously as *Schule und Gemeinschaft: Erinnerungen des Dorfschullehrers David Harder von Mexico* (Gretna: Jakob Rempel, 1969).

3 “Denkschrift des Vetragens gemacht diesen Einundzwanzigsten Tag im Mai A.D. 1921,” Mennonite Heritage Archives (hereafter MHA), vol. 4297, Mexico Mennonite Files (II), file 4, “Contracts and Correspondence Re: Land Sales, 1921–1924.” Many of the same documents were photographed by Bruce Wiebe in Mexico as part of the Hochfeld Waisenamt Collection. The collection is in MHA, Digital Media vol. 119.

4 Harry Leonard Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 47–48.

5 John H. Black to Franz F. Froese, April 4, 1921, MHA, vol. 4297, file 4. Old Colony Mennonite leadership was vested in the *Vorsteher*, who was the leader in civic matters, and the *Ältester* or bishop, who was the main religious leader.

6 “Points Mentioned at Meeting of John W. Rempel and the *Waisenamt* in Mr. Black’s Office,” Apr. 9, 1921, MHA, vol. 4297, file 4. Johann W. Rempel was a former *Vorsteher* and, at this time, a retired farmer. He was fluent in English, which may be the reason for his participation. Gerhard E. Rempel, “Vorsteher Gerhard J. Rempel (1893–1988),” *Preservings*, no. 23 (2003): 79.

7 J. H. Black to J. W. Rempel, Apr. 11, 1921, MHA, vol. 4297, file 4.

8 J. H. Black to J. W. Rempel, Apr. 19, 1921, MHA, vol. 4297, file 17.

9 Harder, “Schools and Community,” 12–13.

10 Peter A. Elias, *Memoir 2*, 64. Peter A. Elias died in 1925 and wrote several versions of his memoirs after his retirement from farming, purportedly one for each of his children. Photocopies of the extant German originals are located in MHA, vol. 1079. Excerpts from the memoir referred to here, *Memoir 2*, were translated by W. J. Kehler (Altona, MB) and are also in the above location; page references are from this version. For a short biography and description of Elias’s writings, see Adolf Ens, “Peter A. Elias (1843–1925),” *Preservings*, no. 27 (2007): 79–80.

11 Harder, “Schools and Community,” 12.

12 Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920–1940: A People’s Struggle for Survival* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1982), 119.

13 Sally Harms, “Klaas Heide (1859–1926), Delegate,” in *Old Colony Mennonites in Canada, 1875–2000*, 2nd printing, ed. Delbert F. Plett (Winnipeg: D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation, 2011), 117.

14 MHA, vol. 4297, file 4.

15 MHA, vol. 4297, file 4. Brigadier General H. D. B. Ketchen was the commanding officer of the Winnipeg military district during the Winnipeg General Strike. He was responsible for organizing the “special police force” to deal with strikers. David Bercuson, “The Winnipeg General Strike,” in *On Strike: Six Key Labour Struggles in Canada, 1919 to 1949*, ed. Irving Abella (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1974), 22.

16 *Der Mitarbeiter*, Dec. 1922, 95.

17 Unsigned to Franz Froese, Jan. 2, 1924, MHA, vol. 4297, file 14.

18 J. F. D. Wiebe to Klaas Heide, Aug. 21, 1922, MHA, vol. 4297. For more on J. F. D. Wiebe and his involvement with the land purchase in Mexico, see Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 36ff.

19 F. Froese et al. to Mr. and Mrs. Madero, dated Aug. 24, 1923, at Reinland, MB, MHA, vol. 4297, file 8.

20 *Canadian Annual Review of Public Affairs for 1921* (Toronto: Canadian Annual Review, 1922), 797–98; *Manitoba Free Press*, Oct. 24, 1924, 1. See also Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 40–43.

21 “Protokoll der am 11 April 1922 zu Altona, Manitoba, abgehaltenen Sitzung von Vertretern verschiedener Mennonite-Gemeinden in Manitoba bezüglich der Einwanderung der russischen Mennoniten nach Canada,” as published in *Der Mitarbeiter*, Apr. 1922, 27.

22 H. H. Ewert, *Der Mitarbeiter*, July 1922, 47–48. See also Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus: The Rescue and Resettlement of the Russian Mennonites Since the Communist Revolution* (Altona: D. W. Friesen, 1962), 115–16.

23 “Protokoll der 2. Sitzung der Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization am 2. und 3. Juni 1922 zu Rosthern, Sask.,” from photocopies at MHA. The originals are at Mennonite Archives of Ontario, XV-1.1. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 186.

24 A. A. Friesen to W. T. Badger, Nov. 5, 1923, MHA, vol. 1286, file 722.

25 J. F. D. Wiebe to Franz Froese, Aug. 30, 1923, MHA, vol. 4297, file 12.

26 Bruce Wiebe, “The Move to Mexico: The Sale of Three West Reserve Villages,” *Preservings*, no. 30 (2010): 36.

27 Wiebe, “The Move to Mexico,” 39–43. See also “Gnadenthal Village Papers,” MHA, vol. 2198, file 8, and Elizabeth Peters, *Gnadenthal, 1880–1980* (Winkler: Gnadenthal History Book Committee, 1982), 22.

28 Delbert F. Plett, “Gerhard Ens (1867–1949),” in *Old Colony Mennonites in Canada*, 184–85.

29 *Morden Times*, Mar. 26, 1924, and Mar. 17, 1926.

30 Ernest Sirluck, *First Generation: An Autobiography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 12.

31 Saidye Rosner Bronfman, *Recollections of My Life* (Montreal: printed by the author, 1986), 28.

32 Frank Brown, *A History of Winkler* (Winkler: printed by the author, 1973), 36.

33 “Kurze Nachrichten von Ueberall,” *Der Bote*, May 14, 1924, and Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 194.

THERE AND BACK

A Tale of Two Decisions

Ernest N. Braun

I have always known that I was a descendant of that small but infamous group who returned from Paraguay after leaving Manitoba. The term for us, *Rückkehrer* (returnees), was used with cruel intent for an entire generation, ridiculing those who emigrated in the 1920s only to return shortly thereafter.¹

This reflection will be an addendum to the usual 1920s emigration narrative, a minority report of two decisions: one, to sell everything our family had in Manitoba to avoid compromising our faith in the 1920s, and the other, even more significant, to jettison everything in Paraguay a few years later to return to Manitoba and face that compromise.

I want to address the polarization that occurs within a group of people when a question of ideals separates them. This had also happened with the 1870s emigration from tsarist Russia, as well as earlier migrations across northern Europe. In each case it took the shape of all kinds of negative interplay between the ones who felt they needed to emigrate to preserve their values, and those who felt they could adapt. In the 1920s in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, the same polarization played out between the more liberal Mennonites and the conservative ones, dividing families and communities. Those who emigrated were denigrated by those who stayed, and vice versa.

Then, when a year or two later some of the emigrants returned, the situation repeated itself. Now they were characterized as weaklings or even cowards in the face of the hardships of pioneering by those who stayed to tough it out in the new land, and back in Manitoba they were ridiculed for not being able to live up to the high principles they professed.

My Braun family's decisions placed them in a no man's land. In the early 1920s, they were key figures in the earliest emigration movement, but by 1929 they belonged to neither camp: not to the group that stayed in Manitoba, nor to the group

that remained in Paraguay.² Those two decisions were to have repercussions far beyond those immediately foreseen.

FIRST DECISION

It all started as the school and language debate escalated after the First World War, when my great-grandfather Braun lost faith in the Canadian government and became a vocal exponent of emigration. His daughter-in-law, my grandmother, a strong-minded, vivacious woman, likewise refused to stay in Canada

where the school would now be used to assimilate them as British citizens and would prepare her sons for the military, instead of preparing them for an agrarian and communal life shaped by the Sermon on the Mount. It was too much to sacrifice, once it became clear that another country would take them on acceptable terms.

In 1921, 65 percent of the Chortitzer Mennonites on the East Reserve decided to emigrate, but a series of factors beyond their control postponed the actual emigration by about four years.³ The entire emigration movement had been entrusted to General Samuel McRoberts, an American financier. He had

made the original link to Paraguay and offered to fund and organize the land exchange. But a severe economic crisis struck all of North America in late 1921 and he postponed his offer indefinitely. However, the emigration was in motion and before it became clear that the move was not going to happen any time soon, the Brauns had already sold everything. The delay hit our family particularly hard, unlike the others who sold their land later in 1926.

That first decision had two parts: emigration and immigration, each with financial and human costs. Emigration meant liquidating all material assets and leaving everything familiar for the unknown. Immigration meant encountering the unknown for good or ill.

Emigration for my grandfather Jacob Braun was particularly

“I want to address the polarization that occurs within a group of people when a question of ideals separates them.”



devastating. He was a successful farmer and partner in a threshing outfit when at thirty-five his farmstead in Alt-Bergfeld was sold lock, stock, and barrel to Winnipeg druggist William McCullough in a package sale of the entire village.⁴ Grandpa resisted strongly, because he really did not want to emigrate, but as his parents and his wife did, he resigned himself to it. When the emigration was delayed, Grandpa was forced to construct a temporary house and barn in primitive fashion near the village. By selling garden produce and digging seneca roots, his family avoided spending their capital, knowing they would need it for their new start in Paraguay.

By 1925, things improved, and McRoberts renewed his offer. Finally in late 1926, the Braun family left the train station at Carey with the first group in the middle of a blustery November night, traveling “off to paradise” as they said in their farewells. Nearly three years later less they disembarked from the train onto the same station platform in Carey, but they were not the same people.

The family duly arrived in Puerto Casado on December 31, 1926, and everybody getting off the riverboat *Apipe* that night was astounded to see electric lights on the shore.⁵ The safe arrival was telegraphed to Manitoba, but the extraordinary challenges of the second part of the decision, immigration, became

apparent within hours – namely, that almost nothing had been done in Paraguay to settle them on their land. The land reserved for the Mennonites in the interior had not been surveyed, the railway that was to provide access was not built, and the overcrowded camp life with its unrelenting heat and insects made life miserable.⁶ For the next sixteen months the immigrants were completely powerless to do anything about their situation, waiting either at Puerto Casado or one of the camps inland, with no income, inadequate temporary shelter, polluted water, poor diet, poor hygiene, and nearly impassable waterlogged landscape between them and the land they thought they had purchased. All these constituted a recipe for disaster, which arrived quickly.

Dysentery ravaged the tent camp from the start, taking small children almost weekly to the Catholic cemetery in Casado. My aunt remembered that at the time people were always singing. As a very little child she did not realize that she was experiencing a funeral every few days. Then the adults began to get sick, and poor medical care resulted in many avoidable adult deaths of typhus in what was known as “the Great Dying” (*das grosse Sterben*).⁷

In our family, immigration brought disaster almost immediately, as my grandmother became very ill. The German-speaking doctor serving the Casado village could do nothing, but said to



ERNEST N. BRAUN

Ernest N. Braun's great grandfather (Jacob Braun) with luggage at the train station in Carey on November 23. Facing page: Jacob J. and Katherina (Falk) Braun posing just weeks before departing for Paraguay.



ERNEST N. BRAUN

my grandfather, “You have yourself to thank for this! What were you thinking bringing a pregnant woman with a long-standing abdominal hernia to this wilderness?” At the end she sang *Gesangbuch* hymn number 247: “Farewell, world! I am tired of you and want to go to heaven” (*Welt ade! Ich bin dein müde, ich will nach dem Himmel zu*).

Some of her last words, as repeated to me thirty years ago by a bystander at her deathbed, were: “Well, since you want it this way, I guess I will have to die.”⁸ These inexplicable words may have been addressed to God, and not the family, but they speak to the abject despair she felt as she surrendered to her fate. After saying farewell separately to each of her children, she died in agony, after fewer than ninety days in “paradise,” the primeval Chaco that turned out to be a grotesque parody of Eden, where every plant bore thorns and barbs. There was Grandpa, with six little children and no wife, in a strange climate, culture, and language, in a place he didn’t want to be, waiting for promises to be kept.

An unusually capable man, he was installed as a camp manager, and later operated a supply store at Kilometre 135, while my father as an eleven-year-old played in the river with the other boys, rough-housing, fishing, and in general having a good time. In later years he regaled my mother with tales of outrunning the train, walking around the tent camp on stilts, and nearly drowning in the river trying to rescue another boy.

On the other hand, Grandpa’s state of mind can be seen in a conversation he had with his youngest daughter Mary on an evening’s walk, possibly to see the grave of his wife in the Casado Catholic Cemetery. Aunt Mary told me sixty-five years later that she had complained of not being able to sleep at night, and Grandpa had said, “If you can’t sleep at night, then you simply must pray, pray until you can.” Her headstone says: “Rest easy in your grave until your Jesus calls you.”

Grandpa’s sacrifices at emigration were the same as those of all the other emigrants, but as the immigration chapter began and his wife died, his spirit simply broke and all he wanted was to return to Manitoba. But his father still exercised some control over the finances, so he was trapped there, biding his time until his father decided in August 1929 to use his last resources to take those who wanted back to Manitoba.

SECOND DECISION

The decision to return had its own unique complications, beginning in Paraguay. Since emigration to Paraguay had been on a collective British passport, return to Canada would require individual passports with all the personal details provided to the British consul in Asunción, as well as the signature of the group’s leaders that these persons were bona fide members of the group. After a stiff threat from the British consul, the settlement overseer Alfred Rogers reluctantly obliged, but the bishop declined, thus trapping everybody in Paraguay until many exhausted their means to return to Manitoba.⁹ That was the final straw. They had no choice but to stay with the group. That might go a long way to explain why 85 percent of the Manitoba group decided to stay.

Out of utter brokenness of spirit, disillusionment with the

project and its leaders, both secular and religious, and despairing of pioneering in the wilderness, my grandfather obtained his passport in Asunción and joined two other siblings to return with their parents. The Brauns were fortunate: they were among the very few who had enough money to return without having to go into debt. Grandpa’s father could still buy each of his sons a quarter section of unoccupied Métis grant land in the Rural Municipality of De Salaberry, and here each son started over.



Opposite page: Funeral for Katherina Braun who died at age 36 after less than three months in Paraguay. Above: Grave marker for Katherina Braun who died in Puerto Casado in March 1927, and is buried in the local Catholic cemetery.

When Grandpa obtained his quarter section, it was virgin scrub land, mainly bush, stones, and slough. Here they built a small house of saplings stacked between upright posts and covered with mud. Compared to the kind of house-barn he left in Alt-Bergfeld (now occupied by newly arrived Russlaender immigrants), it must have been heartbreaking to see.

That second decision kicked the entire Braun family down Maslow’s hierarchy of needs right back to the bottom, where food and shelter became the entire focus, the wealth accumulated over three generations was wiped out, and start-up from zero began in poor, unbroken land, isolated from familiar ground, and derisively called the Chaco by everybody else.

These losses, in addition to the heartbreak of losing his wife,



ERNEST N. BRAUN

An antique clock purchased by the author at the auction of a retiring Grunthal farmer who told the story of how he had managed to return from Paraguay to Manitoba by borrowing money from the Braun family.

left Grandpa, once known as *Groote Bruhn*, a shadow of his former self, to face starting over during the Great Depression, amid the ridicule of both those in Paraguay and nearby. Nor was the damage limited to him: my father's life was disrupted, and instead of becoming a prosperous farmer, he was forced into day labour, and coming home from work one day he was killed at age forty by a drunk driver. Even my own childhood was impacted. Only when I finished high school, when two older siblings had already sacrificed school and postponed career for the family, did the consequences of the Braun family's fateful decisions abate for my generation.

CONCLUSION

In view of the disastrous beginning in Paraguay, why did only about 15 percent of the Manitoba settlers despair and return?¹⁰ There is no easy answer. With both decisions, it was a matter of reaching a breaking point. Before the initial departure (emigration), the question was: how much compromise to principle can we live with before we take desperate measures and leave? Upon arrival in Puerto Casado (immigration), the parallel question was: how much misery and loss can we live with before we abandon principle and return to compromise?

The answers to these questions varied with each settler family. It should be noted that the families that emigrated were already the ones who had a high standard of principle, and a high tol-

erance for hardship, and, coming from poor land on the East Reserve, less to lose. It is difficult to discover what factors led some of these hardy pioneers eventually to give up, after sacrificing so much for principle. Who knows in advance what the breaking point of a person's spirit is?

Today, I still have many relatives in Paraguay who are descendants of families whose spirit did not break. They survived and eventually prospered. As my great-uncle Abram Braun said to me in Loma Plata in 1973: "In the first generation it was death, the second it was need, and only in the third generation was it bread" (*Die erste Generation erntete den Tod, die zweite die Not, die dritte das Brot*).¹¹ He did not address the fourth generation, but today they are prosperous, successful farmers, businesspeople, and professionals, attending universities abroad and living lifestyles identical to ours. So, although almost everything that could go wrong did go wrong in their wildly outrageous endeavour, the vast majority of the pioneers carried through despite the cost, supporting Alfred Rogers's assessment in 1928 that "we will not find another people who would do what these Mennonites did."¹²

However, for our family I must conclude that while in the first decision, principle trumped compromise, despite the cost, in the second decision, the cost in death, loss, and disillusionment trumped principle, despite the compromise. Throughout Mennonite history, emigration on religious principle was absolutely irreversible, and if anyone did turn back, it was an unforgivable betrayal of that principle. That was the ultimate price of our return to Manitoba.

About forty years ago I bought an antique clock from a retired farmer near Grunthal, a *Rückkehrer* himself, who told me that he had emigrated in 1927, but disillusioned and broke, he could only return because somebody gave him the money, and although that person came back himself, he never asked for the money back. That person was my great-grandfather Jacob Braun. Broken in spirit and despairing of a future, my Braun family had compassion on another desperate family and demonstrated a greater principle: love thy neighbour as thyself. Whenever I see that clock on my desk, I am reminded of how I came to be here: by a return perhaps as costly to Grandpa's spirit as the death of his wife. But I understand, and, within the bounds of Mennonite humility, I hold my head high.

1 Articles and letters to the editor published in the *Steinbach Post* attest to the ridicule returnees faced.

2 Great-grandpa Braun was one of the motivating spirits of the emigrant group out of Grunthal.

3 Martin W. Friesen, *Neue Heimat in der Chaco Wildnis* (Altona, MB: D. W. Friesen & Sons, 1987), 137.

4 The village sale consisted of 3,512 acres, fourteen farmyards, a school, livestock, and machinery, offered at \$75,508. The precise date of the sale has not yet been determined.

5 The Brauns travelled with the first group aboard the SS *Vasari* of the Lamport and Holt Line.

6 The promised railway was extended somewhat but was never built all the way to the colony. In time the Trans-Chaco Highway served as the link to the markets in Asunción.

7 Of 1,743 immigrants (including those who returned), 9.8 percent died in the first two years.

8 In Low German, "Na, wann jie daut soo welle, dann woa etj woll stoawe motte."

9 Friesen, *Neue Heimat*, 308–11.

10 Friesen, *Neue Heimat*, 277.

11 An age-old German saying familiar to Mennonites.

12 Friesen, *Neue Heimat*, 360.

LETTERS FROM PARAGUAY

The Maria Neufeld Family

Conrad Stoesz

In 1926, members of a Neufeld family travelled from Canada to Paraguay during the mass migration of Mennonites over the school question. The matriarch of the family, Maria, wrote letters to keep in contact with the adult children she left behind in Canada. These letters offer a portrait of early Mennonite life in Paraguay and depict the significance of letter-writing to maintaining family connections.

Maria Kroeker was born in 1870 in the Chortitza colony in the southern steppe of the Russian empire (present-day Ukraine). As a six-year-old she was part of the long voyage to Manitoba in 1876 along with her parents, Jacob Kroeker (1836–1914) and Anna Zacharias (1836–1883), and six siblings. The Kroeker family settled in the village of Schoenwiese on the Mennonite West Reserve, as members of the Reinlaender Mennonite Church. Staying first in a *semilin* (sod house), the family soon built a regular house. They grew their farming operation quicker than most others in the village, increasing their livestock, and the acres cultivated, as well as improving their machinery.¹ Likely this advancement was possible because the children were old enough to contribute to the farm, though not old enough to have farms of their own.

The family was dealt a blow when Anna and two of her children died in November 1883; in December 1884, another two children succumbed to *halskrankheit* (diphtheria).² Shortly after Anna's death, Jacob married widow Helena Dyck (nee Helena Fehr), on March 18, 1884, and she brought several Dyck children into the family. Jacob held an auction sale and the new family moved to the nearby village of Reinland.³ Maria Kroeker was part of this blended family.

On July 13, 1890, Maria married Johann A. Neufeld. The couple was part of what became known as the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church. Johann was born to Abraham Neufeld (1830–1877) and Margaretha Bergen (1831–1913) in the village of Heuboden, Bergthal colony, in imperial Russia, on August 15, 1869. The Neufeld family moved to the Mennonite East Reserve in 1875, and sometime after the death of Abraham in 1877, Johann moved to the West Reserve. In 1910 Johann filed an

application for a homestead in Saskatchewan (section SW 30-49-16 W2), and in the spring of 1911 he and Maria moved their family to Lost River.⁴ Maria's now-blind father, Jacob Kroeker, joined them in 1912.⁵ Their first shelter was a log granary measuring ten feet by twelve feet. By the second winter they had built a sixteen by twenty-four foot log house and a barn of equal size attached to the house.⁶

Money for staples could be hard to come by. In the winter of 1912 or 1913, Johann walked to Star City, some thirty miles, to try to find work for a few hours so he could buy salt, flour, and sugar. The large garden supplied a good source of food, and the root cellar kept the food long into the winter. In 1913, with funds from Maria's father, the couple built a new two-story framed house. This meant no more dirt floors that had to be wetted to keep the dust down. In Lost River, Johann was known as the community blacksmith. During the summer he was kept very busy sharpening plows and fixing harrows, discers, and seed drills. In 1915, Johann spearheaded the construction of the Bergthal church building in the Lost River area. In the winter, logs were dragged to the Peter Brown yard where they were milled into boards for construction.⁷

Just when the family was feeling established, Johann and Maria made the decision to move and start life over once again in Paraguay due to the school question. But the family was not unified in the decision to emigrate. The oldest children, Jacob (1891–1972) and Maria (1892–1982), and youngest child, Nicholas (Klaus) (1913–1996), moved to Menno Colony in Paraguay, leaving behind Margaretha (1897–1984), Johann B. (1902–?), Helena (1904–1997), and Cornelius (1907–1937). The letters Maria wrote, contained in a collection at Mennonite Heritage Archives in Winnipeg, were the ties that kept this family together. At times the letters are ascribed to Johann and Maria, but often it is clear that Maria is writing them.⁸

The Neufeld family left from Plum Coulee, Manitoba, on a cold December day in 1926, and on December 24, at three in the afternoon, they began their ocean voyage. On Christmas Day many on board were sick.⁹ When they were feeling well enough,



they encouraged each other by singing hymns. On board the weather was a comfortable twenty-one degrees.¹⁰ Maria wrote: “The long trip from Canada to Paraguay was not a pleasure to me, even though we saw many impressive sights. It felt like we were fugitives, in flight from one city to another . . . two days [on the] train to New York.” Their first stop was Barbados, where the ship sent and took on mail, and then sailed on to the Brazilian port of Rio de Janeiro, where they stayed for two days, followed by a stop in Montevideo, Uruguay.¹¹

Once in Paraguay, families lived in Puerto Casado for many months under difficult conditions. Of the 1,700 immigrants, about 10 percent died, and another 323 returned to Canada.¹² Here the enormity of the decision to leave was emphasized. As Maria wrote, five weeks after leaving Plum Coulee: “Beloved, five long weeks’ ride now separate us from each other.”¹³ In addition to the emotions of separation, money was quickly running out for the Neufeld family. In a letter likely written in 1927, Johann encouraged the family members that remained in Canada to pool their resources and send two hundred dollars. Neufeld was not only a farmer but also a blacksmith – something hard to do if your tools had been stolen: “I gather from your letter that prospects for payment are not good. I have an idea that if all of you ‘posted’ together, to send us \$200, we could get by. Our money is practically gone. By the time we buy a cow it will be gone except for a few dollars. We must have a cow as soon as we get to our land. In any case, when we get to the Chaco, I need to borrow some money if possible. The blacksmith tools are very expensive; the cost will be over \$100. The thread-cutting equipment and drill bits were stolen on our journey.”¹⁴ By April 28, son Klaus wrote in English that they “ordered blacksmith outfit, saddle, 22 rifle, gauge 12 Texas range full choke single barrel shotgun. Flour is \$7, for 154 pounds of flour.”¹⁵

Living in a hot and cramped tent city, drinking dirty water, and eating unfamiliar food was a recipe for disaster. Maria reported that her son Jacob was ill and in his delirium hallucinated about his brother Cornelius coming to visit.¹⁶ Maria’s fourteen-year-old granddaughter Maria Bergen died on February 17, 1928, in Paraguay.¹⁷ Gertrude Wiebe, the wife of Jacob Neufeld, Johann and Maria’s oldest son, died on May 23, 1927, a victim of a cholera outbreak. Jacob poured out his grief in a letter to his siblings back in Canada: “My sad heart is aching for my dear loved one. Many a time I sit and cry to my heart’s content. When I look up I am still at the same place as before. I go out to look but return – there is no heart to hold my bosom.” Maria believed moving to Paraguay was God’s will for them even through these difficulties, writing, “It appears that our dear God has given us a difficult test in this separation to find out if we as a family can pass it, in sickness or in death. Many tears have flowed – many prayers prayed with sighs and sobs – dear God, only you know!”¹⁸

In November 1927, Maria provided an update to the family in Canada. After offering encouragement to her daughter Helena,

recovering from the birth of a new baby, she asked for prayers for herself as she struggled to let go of the home she had left behind. She wrote: “Dear children . . . we are glad to hear that after so many depressing days you are restored to health along with baby girl. . . . You have had lots of moisture which I wish we could have, the earth here would take a lot! The weather, in general, is very warm. When the temperature reaches 30 degrees or more I find it very oppressive. . . . Some nights I cannot sleep because of the heat. . . . We keep the tent wide open at night so everything is free to come in at will. . . . We have left the bed fleas behind in Canada. People are still sick and dying. . . . There have been many partings from loved ones whom they hope to meet again. . . . Please intercede for us; you all know how short my patience is; so I find myself standing on a battlefield between patience and frustration. When I allow my thoughts to dwell on the home we left behind I have to concentrate on the words of Jesus: ‘Do not love this world, nor the things of this world.’”¹⁹

While living in their tents, the Mennonites prepared to establish their communities. Delegates like Johann were elected to organize the move. He wrote: “In Puerto Casado . . . we had to make communal plans and organize, regulate, and assign people to various positions of leadership. . . . From each church group four men were selected, amounting to twelve. Regrettably, none of our first choices went out with those who made forays into our promised land. . . . In the Saskatchewan group were John Penner, Henry Dyck, John Wall from the East Reserve; John Hiebert, John Harder, Peter Doerksen, and John Doerksen from the West Reserve; Isaak Funk, Peter Reimer, Peter Friesen and David Peters. . . . The piece of land we have selected, we also divided. By means of casting lots we established ownership. . . . Our lot turned out to be on the eastern end.”²⁰

Relocating to their new farmland was a large task and interfered with letter-writing. On April 23, 1928, Maria apologized for the long delay in writing but reported that they were now on their own land in Bergthal, Paraguay: “We are settled on the new settlement called Bergthal. There is a lot of work ahead of us. . . . We have made a metal-roofed shelter and catch rainwater for our use. So far we have had rain each week. . . . Jacob and Klaus are preparing to go to the end of the railroad this afternoon to pick up some of our belongings that we were to bring with us when we first came. There are still our boxes with the good bedding, and many other things left at the end of the rail. Which causes me some anxiety. . . . We have already dug the soil for a garden and have planted a variety of seeds. Not all are growing, possibly because they are too old. Beans, peas, sweet potatoes and manioca, melons and peanuts are all growing. . . . Till now we have bartered with the native Indians, but by the time you come we will have our own supplies. Most of all the natives want our clothes of which we have only enough for ourselves. Many products are scarce. We have had meat once. . . . Many of the villagers here have lacked lard for a long time. . . . The older people tell us that when they first came to Canada, conditions were even worse. We are hoping for better times ahead.”²¹

The family in Canada encouraged Johann and Maria to return

Maria Kroeker (pictured in 1889) wrote letters from Paraguay to her children in Canada.



to Canada. Maria acknowledged it had been very difficult on her physically and emotionally: “Father’s eyes are sore . . . although he eats well, he is losing weight. . . . I had sore hands so I could not do laundry or knead dough. . . . All these difficulties, especially the loneliness, depresses me to disinterest in everything. I have said to father that being a mother and raising children has often been hard, but has brought us many joys and pleasures, but being ripped apart from you, our beloved, is much harder. Until the last

Abram R. Bergen showing a nice crop of beans with pods 14 inches long.

hour we were always ‘so together.’ Suddenly we were torn apart. Seeing each other again seems impossible. However, with God nothing is impossible. He can change these hardships for good.”²²

But she said returning was not possible – it would be against their conscience, and they did not have the funds to do so. As she wrote: “You are wishing that we would return to Canada? When we consider the reason we cited for making this move, namely for the sake of our faith, our conscience will not let us return. Also, we don’t have the means to start over again. We still hope, God willing, to see you all again. . . . My main work is food preparation



MAJD MHA 713-PR2-042

it is so different and we don't get used to it. Everything we have learned from childhood has to be relearned, and a new beginning made. . . . I regret I can't be what I should be. And this leads to heavy inner struggles. When trials come people want to go home . . . and more are going home. . . . There are many things I like better in Canada, but now that we are here we have to adapt to things like heat, etc. Flour [usually has] tiny bugs in it . . . and then there are also tiny worms. With a very fine sieve, we can remove them. . . . Most of the time our cooking is unsatisfactory because of the saltwater here in the village, but the wells in the grazing pasture produce much good water. . . . We cannot say how life will turn out for us – we have nothing to boast about, and we cannot speak of comforts. Everything is still bothersome. . . . I feel blest when I can lie down to sleep and forget! Yes, dear loved one, you are grieving because we have all these difficulties to deal with. We ourselves are not always pleased with the way we have chosen to take this cumbersome pilgrimage, but we cannot undo what has been done. Therefore, remember us with love. It is not your fault that we have made this choice. If we can walk this road in faithfulness and patience it will pay in the end.”²⁵

While some of Johann and Maria's children remained in Saskatchewan, others joined them in Paraguay, including their daughter Maria (1892–1982), who had married Abram R. Bergen (1890–1859) in 1913. Abram was elected as a minister of the Mennonite church in the newly formed community. In the archival collection containing Maria's letters, there are two files of letters from the Bergens. On September 30, 1928, Bergen wrote: “Today was a specially good day for harvesting. Memories frequently take us back to Canada. Our crops are different: some of our citrus trees are bearing fruit, like oranges and grapefruit, which grow very large.” With some hyperbole, Bergen observed, “regarding languages we use: Henry and Abram speak primarily German; then also Spanish, English, and native Indian. It seems that many children here now speak Indian better than German.”²⁶ Throughout the letters there are references to connections with the Indigenous peoples of Paraguay, whom Bergen and Neufeld call “Indians.”²⁷

The family circulated letters from family and friends and kept in contact through the *Steinbach Post* weekly newspaper. Through these letters families exchanged thoughts, feelings, photos, encouragements, reflections, and mementos such as dried leaves and flowers. At times Maria used the letters to parent her children: “Dear son in your catechism for church membership – I wish for you to have the right attitude and that God's holy spirit will renew, lead, and direct you in all your ways. We also wish you success in your work so you can make an honest living. We greet you and remain your loving parents.”²⁸

In the early years of starting life in Paraguay, the letters refer to “the company” or “the corporation,” referencing the Intercontinental Company that banker Samuel McRoberts established to help in the settlement process.²⁹ Maria reported in a 1928 letter: “The corporation has lent us oxen to plough the land but because of the hard dry soil it didn't work. Then on October 10, we had a soaker rain after which ploughing worked

and mending clothes. We seem to eat a lot of bread. . . . Back in Canada, we had too much on the table to choose from.”²³ Later in 1928, Maria reported on more departures: “Here in our village, three large families are preparing to go back to Canada. It is scary when those whom we trusted are leaving us, such as old Mrs. Bergen. Where is faithfulness in our day? Immigrants before us have remained truer than these people.”²⁴

Maria continued: “I don't want to downplay the creation as it is here. For this country, it is as good as anywhere else. God said, ‘Everything is good,’ after he made everything. However, for us,



Johann Neufeld weeding the fields in Paraguay with oxen ca. 1929.

better. . . . October 15, a strong warm north wind is blowing. It is the warmest it has been since April. Most nights we have slept comfortably in the tents. Tents cool down better at night than the tin roof houses. Roofing grass is not available now. . . . We spent two days making bricks and one day I did the laundry. We now have Sara Penner and Maria Harder helping us make bricks. We have done one thousand, one hundred, but we need five hundred more. . . . Regrettably I can help very little – I am weak. Father also finds work hard because he is in his sixties and is sickly. He sees poorly but can distinguish light from dark. . . . Today we received a variety of garden seeds from the company. We have to plough more land before we can seed. . . . The company is helping us buy flour. . . . Much ripe grain is standing in water and cannot be harvested.”³⁰

Over time the community changed, and the letters revealed internal disagreements. On July 3, 1937, Bergen wrote, “Our little village is deeply saddened because 14 families have left us and gone over (another church perhaps) so we are alone again.”³¹ Progress was also noted: moving from the tent cities and into villages, and the shift from oxen to horses. Maria wrote in January 1938, “I now weigh 105 pounds, working with horses is a big improvement over oxen, all four of ours are well trained obedient and ‘no nonsense.’”³² Maria was also coming to terms with the likelihood that she would never see her children in Canada again: “Our hopes to see you here are growing dim but I am firm in my faith to be reunited with all of you in the presence of Jesus.”³³

1 Old Colony tax assessment for the village of Schoenwiese 1880–1883, Mennonite Heritage Archives (MHA), Winnipeg, MB, microfilm #654.

2 Glen R. Klassen and Conrad Stoesz, “Diphtheria Epidemics of the 1880s in the Mennonite West Reserve in Manitoba,” *Preservings*, no. 31 (2011): 41–42.

3 William Rempel, *Mennonitische Rundschau*, Apr. 9, 1884, 1.

4 Newfield School and District History Book Committee, *Search for Yesteryears: A History of Newfield School and Districts of Elkhorn, Little Bridge, Murphy Creek, Newfield and Teddington* (Codette, SK: self-pub, 1984), 355.

5 Conrad Stoesz, “Genealogy of Conrad Dwayne Stoesz: Volume I of III, Essays” (independent study, Canadian Mennonite Bible College, 1993), 74.

6 Newfield Committee, *Search for Yesteryears*, 355.

7 *Ibid.*, 356–357.

8 These letters were saved and later some were translated by Mary (Enns) Epp in 2007 in a compilation entitled “Waiting for the North Wind: Letters from South America 1926–1979.” The original letters, including letters not translated, can be found at MHA, vol. 5732.

9 Letter from Maria Neufeld letter, Dec. 1926, in “Waiting for the North Wind,” 4. All further references to letters are to translations in this compilation.

10 Letter from Jacob and Gertrude Neufeld, Dec. 28, 1926, 5. Throughout the letters Maria and Johann report the temperature in Celsius, not Fahrenheit or Réaumur.

11 Letter from Johann and Maria Neufeld, Aug. 18, 1927, 23.

12 Abram B. Giesbrecht, *Die Ersten Mennonitischen Einwanderer in Paraguay* (Kolonie Menno, Paraguay, 2019), 85–95.

13 *Ibid.*, 25.

14 Letter from Johann A. Neufeld, presumably 1927, 5.

15 Letter from Nicholas Neufeld, Apr. 28, 1927, 14.

16 Letter from Maria Neufeld, ca. 1927, 21.

17 Giesbrecht, *Mennonitischen Einwanderer*, 90.

18 Letter from Maria Neufeld, Aug. 18, 1927, 23.

19 Letter from Maria Neufeld, Nov. 17, 1927, 27–30.

20 Letter from Maria Neufeld, Aug. 18, 1927, 23.

21 Letter from Johann and Maria Neufeld, Apr. 23, 1928, 30.

22 Letter from Maria Neufeld, July 29, 1928, 32.

23 Letter from Maria Neufeld, Apr. 23, 1928, 30.

24 Letter from Maria Neufeld, Oct. 14, 1928, 40–41.

25 Letter from Maria Neufeld, Oct. 14, 1928, 38–43.

26 Letter from Abram R. Bergen, Sept. 30, 1928, 36.

27 For an Indigenous perspective, see *Don't Cry: The Enlhet History of the Chaco War*, ed. Hannes Kalisch and Ernesto Unruh, trans. Nicholas Regan (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022).

28 Letter from Maria Neufeld, Nov. 17, 1927, 27.

29 See Conrad Stoesz, “General Samuel McRoberts' photos of Mennonites in Paraguay, 1926–1929,” *Preservings*, no. 34 (2014), 57–61.

30 Letter from Maria Neufeld, Oct. 14, 1928, 40.

31 Letter from Abram R. Bergen, July 3, 1937, 51.

32 Letter from Maria Neufeld, Jan. 9, 1938, 53.

33 Letter from Maria Neufeld, Aug. 27, 1939, 55.

CENTENNIAL CELEBRATIONS IN MEXICO

Kennert Giesbrecht

The five days of events commemorating the hundred years of Low German Mennonites (LGMs) in Chihuahua, Mexico, is something you would not want to miss if you are a Mennonite historian, or if you have any connections with Mexican Mennonites. For years it was in the planning, but then came Covid-19, and suddenly everything was in limbo. In late 2021, the organizers realized they had better get started if they still wanted to celebrate this milestone event, the first of its kind for Low German Mennonites in Latin America.

Although the official date of this centennial anniversary was March 8, the main celebrations were planned for August 10–14, 2022. One of the reasons was the weather: the chances of nice sunny weather without sandstorms are greater in August than in March. Travellers coming from other states or countries soon realized that booking a hotel would be a challenge. Some had to book as far away as Chihuahua City to find a room for those dates. Many families in the hosting colonies – Manitoba and Swift Current – opened their homes to strangers, families, and friends.

At the grand opening ceremony on August 10, one could really appreciate the magnitude of the event. Tens of thousands of people, largely LGMs from across the Americas, were present. There were many commonalities, among them the Low German language – it was spoken everywhere. Dozens of food stands also showed that one was among Mennonites; however, Mennonites who had been deeply influenced by Mexican culture. Enchiladas, tacos, burritos, and so much more have made their way into Mennonite kitchens. These dishes have become such an important part of Mennonite life that most Mennonites in Mexico would already consider these foods part of their culture, their traditions. Typical Mennonite cuisine, such as *Verenkje* (perogies), chicken noodle soup, and *Rollkuchen enn Erbuess* (Rollkuchen with watermelon), were available as well.

Over the past one hundred years in Mexico, one can assume that many things have changed. The parade on the first day proved how much this is the case. The parade depicted life in

blocks of twenty years, demonstrating how things have evolved over the century. While horses still played a relevant role in the earlier decades, they were pushed aside by modern and faster machinery and vehicles in the later decades. The roughly ninety-minute parade was such a huge success that organizers decided to hold it another two times. And each time thousands of curious folks from far and wide gathered on the side of the road to watch the dozens of participants pass by.

Air shows, multiple parades, dozens of stands, and so many other aspects of the celebrations showed the history and the present circumstances of the colonies. At the museum one could take a tour and get a deeper understanding of how things used to be, and how much they have evolved.

Officials from multiple levels of government were also present to congratulate Mennonites for their many accomplishments. A representative from the National Bank of Mexico even came to hand over the first special twenty-peso coin that the government made to commemorate the centennial. The government



In August, Low German Mennonites held 5 days of events to celebrate their centenary in Mexico.

KENNERT GIESBRECHT



Air shows, multiple parades, dozens of stands, and so many other aspects of the celebrations showed the history and the present circumstances of the colonies. KENNERT GIESEBRECHT

produced 4.5 million coins and distributed them throughout the country in the weeks following the centennial event. The beautiful coin shows a Mennonite family of four, an arriving train to their one side, a grain field to the other. It says in Spanish: “One hundred years since the arrival of Mennonites in Mexico.” Such a coin shows how much Mennonites are appreciated in this country.

The celebrations were planned by a group of people from a variety of churches and organizations. For many months they laid their differences aside and worked together to make these festivities a reality. Hundreds of volunteers made the celebrations a success. Local police forces made sure that everything was safe. The Old Colony people, by far the largest group in the two host colonies, played a key role in the planning and realization of the celebrations.

This event was not just for the 24,000 people living in these two colonies. It was a celebration for most of the LGMs in Mexico, Canada, and beyond. Many other colonies in Mexico have roots in Manitoba or Swift Current. And tens of thousands of LGMs living in Alberta, Ontario, and Manitoba, as well as thousands of LGMs living in Texas and Kansas, call Mexico

“home.” Tens of thousands of LGMs in Argentina, Paraguay, and Bolivia were either born in Mexico or had ancestors who lived there.

Two of the current *Vorsteher* (civic leaders) of the Manitoba Colony, Wilhelm Fehr and Jacob Dyck, spoke of the huge success of the event. They both felt bolstered by the unity and collaboration of so many different people in the community. Abraham Schmitt, who played a crucial role in organizing the celebrations, reflected, “We had no accidents worth mentioning. We were able to feed tens of thousands of people. The dozens of people who had stands, where businesspeople, entrepreneurs, artists, cooks, presented their products, went home content. The visitors enjoyed the displays, presentations, parade, music, food, and so much more. The visiting with friends from far and wide was a highlight for many. In the end, it was just an all-around success.”

The two Mennonite colonies celebrating their centennial have changed a lot over their one-hundred-year existence. And change will continue to happen. One can only hope that leaders and residents will continue to embrace their history as well, and do everything possible to preserve it.

A MENNONITE MATRIARCH

Maria Kehler Lemke Janzen

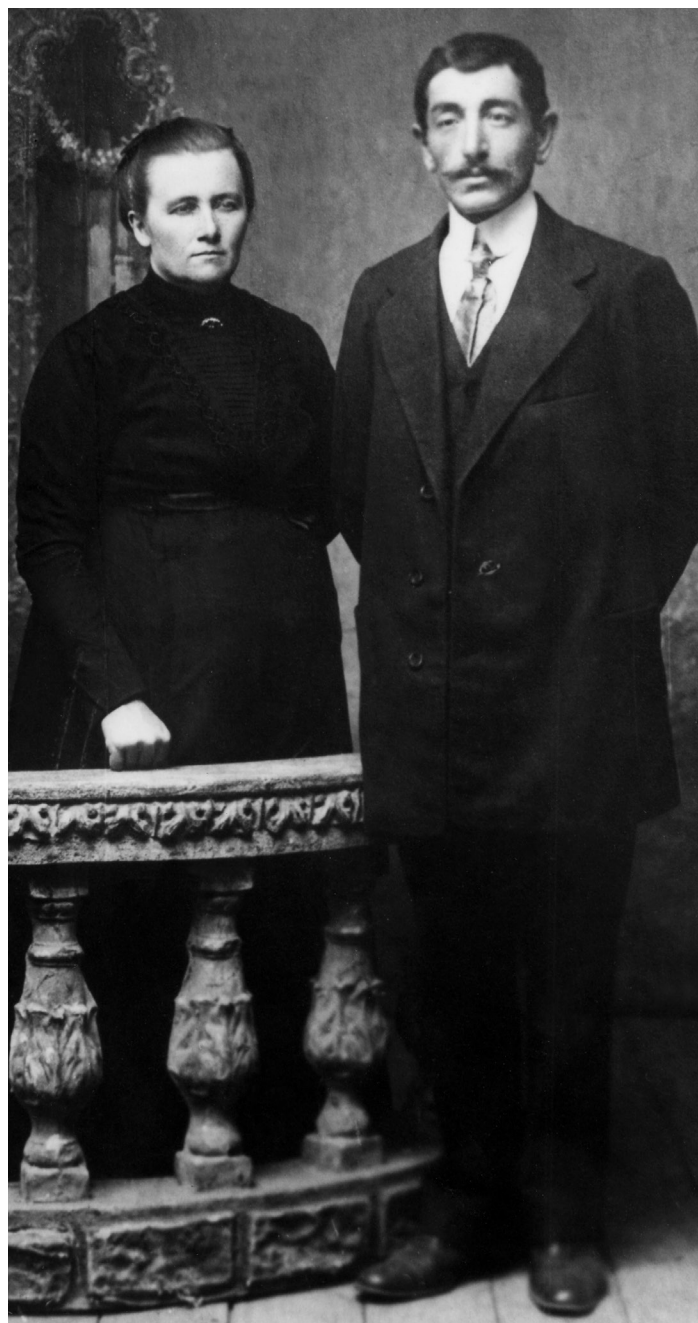
Pam Klassen

A trail of correspondence published in the newspaper, *Die Mennonitische Rundschau* connects the descendants of Michael Kehler (b. 1779) and Elisabeth Loewen (b. about 1783). Established in 1880, the *Rundschau* was an inter-continental Mennonite German-language newspaper that contained dedicated space for personal letters and, as such, functioned like a social media platform for the Mennonite diaspora. In this trove of personal letters, we can find an engaging narrative about Michael and Elisabeth's daughter, Maria Kehler, and her married life in the Mennonite village of Gruenfeld (present-day Zelene Pole), in the Schlachtin colony. Relatively little is known about Schlachtin and the neighbouring Baratov colony, which together formed an administrative unit, in part because the records of the congregation have disappeared. Even less is known about its women. The Kehler letters, particularly when read in tandem with available memoirs of Schlachtin-Baratov, provide glimpses into typical events in the lives of women and show their critical labour that kept the community intact. Though Maria Kehler's family story is by no means representative of all Mennonite women in tsarist Russia, it is a valuable account of one Old Colony matriarch and the people she loved.¹

EARLY CHILDHOOD

Maria's parents were children when they immigrated to New Russia (present-day Ukraine) in 1789. Elisabeth Loewen was about six years old when she accompanied her family to Neuendorf.² Michael Kehler was around ten years of age when his family began the journey to Schoenhorst, then to Rosenthal.³ Both the Loewens and the Kehlens were among the original settlers at Einlage, the village where Michael and Elisabeth were married sometime in early 1803.⁴ By 1806, Michael owned his father's farm.⁵ On November 6, 1814, at Einlage, daughter Maria Kehler was born.⁶ Maria was a middle child with eleven or twelve siblings.

The Kehlens belonged to the Mennonite church in Chortitza. As such, Maria and her siblings would have received a community-based induction into the faith, including the rite of adult baptism. Maria would have attended the village school, where she and her classmates received the prescribed Mennonite



MAD: MHA-PP-4-004-4560

Maria Kehler's grandson, Martin M. Schmidt, with wife Maria Klassen

curriculum. We know she could read because in 1905 her husband alluded to that fact.⁷

Michael Kehler likely died before 1850. It appears that his widow, Elisabeth, remarried a Peters. By 1852 she was widowed once again and was living with her son Gerhard Kehler, along with grandson Peter Blatz, in the district of Aleksandrovsk.⁸ It is possible that she died before 1859 because she does not appear on the subsequent register of people living outside of the Chortitza colony.

In Maria's journey toward adulthood, she became acquainted with a young man named Johann J. Lemke, the son of Johann and Elisabeth (Arend) Lemke. He was born January 23, 1809, probably at Nieder Chortitza.⁹ After his father's death around 1811, Johann J. was taken in by Jacob and Elisabeth (Nickel) Nickel of Kronsweide.¹⁰ Sometime between 1832 and 1837, Johann Lemke and Maria Kehler were married.

Until the late 1840s, the Kehler-Lemkes appear to have lived in the Chortitza colony, probably in Kronsweide.¹¹ Between 1837 and 1848, Maria bore nine children of whom five reached adulthood: Jacob Lemke (b. June 16, 1837), Maria Lemke (b. about 1841), Elisabeth Lemke (b. Sept. 6, 1843, at the Chortitza colony), Johann Lemke (b. Dec. 22, 1844, at Kronsweide), and

Katharina Lemke (b. about 1848).¹²

In 1848, the Kehler-Lemkes left the Chortitza colony and, with permission from church and secular authorities, began farming land on the estate of Daniel Peters. They lived in their own home with their five children.¹³ Maria's brother, Michael Kehler, and wife Anna were also farming on the Peters estate. Two years later, Johann Lemke was recorded at Kronsweide with the family of Jacob Nickel. In 1859, the colony register shows Maria and Johann Lemke and their five children residing on land belonging to Peters, along with brother Michael Kehler, who was listed with a younger wife named Helena.¹⁴

Maria Kehler Lemke's years from early adulthood into mid-life contained much happiness, wrote grandson-in-law H. P. Peters. The family was close-knit, as depicted in correspondence published in the *Rundschau*. We can imagine that as an Old Colony mother Maria concerned herself with maternal work of raising children who were acceptable to her community. The family expanded: Jacob Lemke married Helena Janzen (b. Feb. 24, 1840), daughter of a Franz Janzen, who figures prominently in this story. This couple lived in the Yazykovo colony, then moved to the Schlachtin-Baratov area, settling at Gruenfeld. They had at least five biological children and several foster children.¹⁵ Their



The Martin Schmidt residence at Gruenfeld.



Another family that settled in Gruenfeld, Peter and Maria Froese. MAID: MHA, 629-F-56.0

daughter Maria Lemke married Martin Johann Schmidt (b. about 1840), and they settled at Gruenfeld with two children.¹⁶ Daughter Elisabeth Lemke married Jacob Jac. Thiessen (b. Jan. 15, 1845) in the Chortitza colony, where they would settled at Einlage with six children.¹⁷ Son Johann Lemke was baptized on June 8, 1864, in the village of Chortitza, Chortitza colony.¹⁸ On February 2, 1869, he married Maria Johann Dyck (b. Jan. 20, 1848), and they settled at Neuenburg with nine children.¹⁹ On May 26, 1887, son Johann Lemke remarried to Sara Jacob Friesen (b. Nov. 21, 1856, at Neuenburg). They lived at Neuenburg and had at least five children.²⁰ Daughter Katharina married Jacob Heinrich Martens and they settled at Gruenfeld. They had at least four children.²¹

Sometime in the 1860s, Johann Lemke passed away.²² He and Maria had been married for about thirty-three years. During this period of Maria's life she also lost her sister Elisabeth (d. 1863) and her brother Phillip (d. 1871).²³ In 1873, Maria Kehler Lemke married the widower Franz Janzen of Neuenburg, the father-in-law of her oldest son, Jacob Lemke.²⁴ Little is known about

Franz Janzen's background. According to Franz's own words, he was born on February 29, 1821.²⁵ However, 1821 was not a leap year, so this birth date must be an estimate. He may have been the Franz Janzen of Kronsgarten (b. about 1822), son of Julius Janzen, whose family in 1836 transferred to Kronsweide.²⁶ He also may have been the Franz Janzen of the Agricultural Commission who in February of 1872 helped supervise an auction at the newly purchased Baratov estate.²⁷ As well, it is possible that he was the Franz Janzen of Ivanenko who purchased Rev. Jacob Epp's property at Gruenfeld.²⁸

Decades later, speculating about public reaction to the Kehler-Janzen union, grandson-in-law H. P. Peters wrote: "When Grandmother entered her present marriage, some of her friends, who have now been settled in the earth for a long time, probably thought that the arrangement would not last long, because by then she was already called 'alte Lemkesche.'"²⁹ And yet, much more life was ahead of the well-known fifty-nine-year-old bride. Her second wedding occurred during a time of great change in the Mennonite colonies: many Mennonites were preparing

to leave tsarist Russia to homestead in a place they referred to as “America.” And so, as Maria and Franz Janzen became reaccustomed to married life, three of Maria Kehler Lemke Janzen’s brothers – Jacob, Johann, and Gerhard – joined the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean to colonize Treaty 1 territory in the newly formed province of Manitoba. Maria and Franz Janzen decided against leaving the Russian empire. The “push” factors of russification, landlessness, and conscription that likely influenced the emigrating Kehler brothers evidently did not induce the Janzens to migrate. Besides, for Maria, the “pull” factor of family must have been powerful, as none of her children emigrated. For the time being, the Janzens resided at Neuenburg, close to her son Johann Lemke and his family.³⁰

CHALLENGES IN GRUENFELD

Sometime before 1877, Maria and Franz moved to the bare steppe at Gruenfeld, in the Schlachtin colony, an offspring colony of Chortitza.³¹ It is possible that the Janzens were among the first colonists in the street village, as three families with that surname are listed among the original families.³² Matrilocality may have played a role in this decision: Maria had other Kehler family members who lived in the area at a place called Ivannenky or Ivanenko, which was populated by Mennonites from the Chortitza colony. The authors of *The Berliner Kehler Clan* refer to this area as “Ivankov’s Land,” and states it was leased land that became known as Gruenfeld.³³ The author of Aron Schultz’s obituary of 1924 used the name “Ivanyenkov’s Land,” stating that it was rented land at Gruenfeld; however, the writer may be implying that the area was settled prior to the official birth date of 1873 for the Schlachtin colony.³⁴ Several *Rundschau* letters suggest that Ivannenky was located outside of Schlachtin and that it may have eventually been absorbed by the colony. Maria’s son Jacob Lemke, for instance, wrote that he lived at Ivannenky prior to moving to Schlachtin around 1877.³⁵ Her brother, Michael Kehler, was also known to have lived on this estate.³⁶ More research is needed to clarify the relationship between Ivanenko and Schlachtin.

The Kehler family chronicle is a valuable glimpse into village life at Schlachtin.³⁷ Located in the district of Krivoy Rog (present-day Kryvyi Rih), Schlachtin consisted of two villages, Steinfeld and Gruenfeld. Gruenfeld was located on the open prairie and was settled largely by colonists from Einlage who belonged mainly to the Kronsweide Gemeinde.³⁸ At Gruenfeld the group became part of the Neu-Chortitza Mennonite Church. Maria and her fellow congregants met in homes, at the local school, and in machine sheds.³⁹

There are many reasons why the colony should never have worked. How could a group of farmers succeed in an area far from markets and with inconsistent water access?⁴⁰ At a place whose land purchase price, it was said only half-jokingly, included “the jackals which continued their Juliet-song by the windows at night”? In which the first baby had to be born in a sheepfold?⁴¹ The settlers’ horses ran back to the Old Colony during their first night at the new location. The first years were marked by fail-

ure. Former resident Walter Wiebe, in his address at Gruenfeld’s 130th anniversary celebration, described the initial conditions: “Many died of illness, cold, or malnutrition. At the beginning they lived in *semilins*, or sod houses. What they finally owned was hard to come by.”⁴²

In 1875, the colony’s first crop failed.⁴³ Two years later, a plague (perhaps blackleg) gripped the cattle. After the first death, Maria’s son-in-law Martin Schmidt took swift and innovative



Mr. and Mrs. Knals Rempel (née Katharina Lemke), pictured with daughters Maria and Tina and grandson Kornelius.

action: “He immediately blocked his driveway. His boys had to change their clothes every time they came from the village before going to the stable. He was also personally strict about this. If he went out, he changed his clothing before entering the stable. However, he managed to keep his herd from infection.”⁴⁴ Consequently, with no small thanks to the women who washed baskets of extra laundry, the Lemke-Schmidt farm was spared. Otherwise, only a few calves remained in Gruenfeld.

In 1886, the colony was hit by total crop failure. The crop was so poor that many of the local farmers did not bother to harvest anything for themselves, let alone for their cattle. The

Chortitza colony helped amid ongoing tension about the debt of Schlachtin colony.

The pioneer labour of Maria and her fellow Gruenfelders would not have been very different from that of her brothers who were homesteading half a world away, as documented in a variety of sources.⁴⁵ Walter Wiebe described some of the hard work of the Gruenfeld colonists to replicate the good life as they had known it: “They operated exemplary businesses. They ran

WHIRLWIND OF WORDS

Toward the end of the 1880s, many of the Kehler siblings and their children began using the *Rundschau* to maintain family ties. The decision to take public the family correspondence was spurred in 1887 by Maria’s brother, Jacob Kehler of Manitoba: “Now, my dear ones, since the private correspondence between us seems to be an arduous matter, I ask you to entrust something to the dear *Rundschau*. She likes to take messages from friends



MAD: MHA-412-200

A group of school children at the Gruenfelder school, circa 1910.

horse and pig breeding, and brought the famous German red cow, later renamed the *Rote Steppenkuh*. They had blooming gardens. On the streets they planted fruit trees and white acacia trees to bear honey. All of this led to prosperity.”⁴⁶

In the mid-1880s a technological marvel arrived: the train. As a result, markets became available to the farming community. The Gruenfelders were conflicted about the change. Jakob Redekopp recounts how government officials had thought they were acting in the Gruenfelders’ best interest by building the railway station conveniently at the end of the village. The Gruenfelders, however, disapproved of the idea that their young people would have an easy way out. They would lose their children to the world! And so the government was flooded with protests. In response, the station was situated a few kilometres away and peace was restored. Critical to Maria Kehler’s story, this new form of transportation helped create a tangible link to the world: an increasingly accessible and reliable mail delivery system.

with her on her round trip to delight others.”⁴⁷ And so it was that the *Rundschau* was delivered and read and shared in the homes of Maria Kehler’s family, both near and far.

The sheer volume of published letters connected to the Kehlers may prove their legendary verbosity: the clan’s conversations spilled across hundreds of *Rundschau* pages, sometimes even with several missives per issue. Although Maria’s voice did not appear in the first person, others wrote on her behalf, and the Manitoba Kehlers of Sommerfeld (West Reserve) and Hochfeld (East Reserve) regularly and affectionately referred to their beloved married sister and aunt, Mrs. Maria Janzen, back in the old country. The correspondence contains priceless scraps about the everyday and the sacred in Maria’s life at Schlachtin: weather and farm reports, church news, and personal updates about births, deaths, marriages, changes in living arrangements, illnesses, and the daily workload.

The first Kehler-Lemke family contributor to the “group chat”

was eldest son Jacob Lemke of Neuenburg, who was active in the *Rundschau* during the late 1880s and early 1890s.⁴⁸ Jacob and his Kehler uncles in Manitoba bantered back and forth, accusing each other of not writing often enough, of forgetting each other's existence, and even of being dead. In one letter from 1889, Lemke mentioned that he thought he'd read that a Johann Kehler in Manitoba had passed away.⁴⁹ Lemke received the following swift and tart response (written in third-person perspective, no less): "Johann Kehler, Sommerfeld Man, tells his nephew that he himself, as well as all of his relatives who bear the name Johann Kehler, are healthy and well."⁵⁰ In fact, added Uncle Johann, he writes to his nephew Lemke faithfully every year and hears nothing in return!

When reporting about his mother, Jacob Lemke wrote most regularly of her illnesses. During at least three consecutive winters his mother was sick with various diseases that swept through the villages. In early 1889, Lemke reported that "except for our mother, we are all in good health."⁵¹ However, he mentioned that his "old Aunt Blatz," Maria's sister, who had been living with his family, was unwell and "quite weak."⁵² A few months later, toward the end of March 1889, Jacob and Helena Lemke's son-in-law Abraham Wiens passed away due to an unknown cause, leaving behind his devastated and ill young wife.⁵³ It was around this time that the Kehler-Janzens moved temporarily back to Neuenburg. The reason for the change is unknown but illness may have been a factor.

Next, Maria was sick for the entire winter of 1889–90, perhaps with the influenza that son Jacob said had swept the area. He acknowledged that he also had been so ill with the flu that he could not go outside to do chores. By early April, his mother was well enough again to be out and about. Jacob said, in fact, that on April 8 his parents came from Neuenburg, where they were still living at the time, to visit him at Gruenfeld.⁵⁴

The following winter, yet again, Maria's name appeared on a sick list published in the *Rundschau*. In a December 1890 letter, son Jacob shared his worry about his seventy-six-year-old mother's condition: "My dear parents were guests here in August and . . . we were their guests in mid-September. Now we have found out that dear Mother is sick. But we do not know the exact details; we would have been there already, but the way to Neuenburg is over 100 *Werst*, which is no small thing in winter."⁵⁵ One can only imagine how difficult frequent illnesses were on a female colonist like Maria, given the heavy daily workload she would have experienced on the farm.

However, Maria recovered and was well enough the following year to leave her Neuenburg home, together with her husband, to stay with son Jacob on his farm more than a hundred kilometres away. The reason for the visit may have been Jacob Lemke's poor physical condition. Since about the time his three Kehler uncles sailed across the ocean, Jacob had suffered from an unspecified illness. Around 1891, Franz and Maria Janzen went to Gruenfeld to stay at their son's home and, while Maria was helping with the farm work, she had the misfortune of breaking her left arm. "As far as we know," wrote Lemke the

following year, "it's pretty much restored."⁵⁶

Before Christmas of 1892, after several decades of declining health, plus the onset of tuberculosis, Jacob Lemke died. His daughter, Mrs. Maria Derksen, reported: "My dear father Jacob Lemke, also from Gruenfeld, who had been very ill for 20 years, died on November 30th at the age of 55 years, 5 months, 14 days, after an eight-week serious illness. . . . Mother is still quite sprightly. Her children, the Kornelius Rempels, now live with her. Mother is disposed to continue the farm with the children: she still has a daughter at home and a foster son of 13 years."⁵⁷ At the time of Jacob's passing, it seems that Maria was still living at Neuenburg. The *Rundschau* letters do not indicate whether she was able to attend her son's winter funeral.

Sometime after her son's death – and well before June of 1903 – Maria and Franz moved back to Gruenfeld, as did their bereaved daughter-in-law, her children, and her second husband, Dietrich Rempel (b. August 4, 1823).⁵⁸ This return to Gruenfeld appears to have been a final move for Maria and Franz. Many of their grandchildren were settled at this area, and so they would have been well positioned to witness and support the family's growth.

THE YEARS THAT FOLLOW

In their beloved corner of imperial Russia, Franz and Maria (Kehler) Janzen reached their golden age and became the honoured oldest couple in the village. In about 1898, the couple celebrated their silver anniversary. They had taken great joy in the proceedings.⁵⁹ Their grandson-in-law Heinrich P. Peters said that around the time of the anniversary, in what might have been a new spirit of self-reflection, Maria and her husband built in Gruenfeld a charitable institution called the Ebenezer.⁶⁰

Significant changes to Maria's family's structure occurred during the final two decades of the nineteenth century. The grandchildren were getting baptized, marrying, and developing households. Maria's grandson Johann Johann Lemke, for instance, moved to Orenburg to help settle Chortitza #1.⁶¹ While the younger generation emerged, the family bade farewell to Maria's brother, Michael Kehler, who passed away in May of 1896, and to sister Helena Kehler Thiessen, who died on March 25, 1900.⁶²

As the family grew and changed, so did their beloved village. Starting about 1906, the colony experienced an economic boom, driven by migration to Siberia.⁶³ Maria's grandson-in-law, Kornelius Peter Rempel, described Gruenfeld's appearance: "Our former hometown, with about 650 *Einwohner* [renters], was beautiful at the time when in the dear fatherland there was still a desire for peace. The large [Froese] factory, 2 steam mills at the end of the village, the railway line, all the beautiful orchards, lent a romantic impression."⁶⁴ Indeed, extant village photographs show a broad street with lovely homes cradled by fences and shielded by trees. A new school had been built back in the 1890s; by 1908, over a hundred children were enrolled. Dotting the landscape were two windmills. One prominent local structure was the Froese factory for agricultural machinery. The railway line was crowned with a grove of trees. Somewhere in this pretty

village, troupes began performing Low German plays written by Jacob H. Janzen.

In a significant spiritual shift for the colony, the Mennonite Brethren church reached Steinfeld at the end of the nineteenth century.⁶⁵ More than half of the Steinfelders are said to have joined the new church through immersion rebaptism; it is not hard to imagine the tension this must have caused in the area. Jakob Redekopp wrote about how the colony's young people took

cooks, and runs her small chicken farm every day. She is already more than 88-and-a-half years old.”⁶⁹ To sign off, Mrs. Peters referenced 1 Samuel 7:12: “Then Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Ebenezer, saying, Hitherto hath the LORD helped us.”

Interrupting the pastoral scenes of Maria's golden years was a particularly tragic period late in the summer of 1903. On August 27, her granddaughter Elisabeth, daughter of Johann Lemke,



This Mennonite Brethren choir in Gruenfeld demonstrates a significant spiritual shift in the Schlachtin colony by the end of the nineteenth century.

MAID: MHA, PP-4-044-720.0

part in Bible studies and prayer hours.⁶⁶ Regarding the older generation, Redekopp added: “They probably didn't want to slip off their track anymore.” Perhaps the Janzens were among those who were influenced by this spiritual awakening and this manifested in their building of Ebenezer. We do know it was announced in early 1908 that Gruenfeld was finally to receive its own church building after more than a quarter-century of existence.⁶⁷

Living in “this peaceful village,” Maria kept herself busy, even into her eighties and nineties.⁶⁸ As late as the summer of 1903, she continued her everyday farm routine, both indoors and on the yard. Maria Martens Peters, in correspondence published in June 1903, stated that her grandmother “is still alive, works,

died of a hemorrhage.”⁷⁰ Around the time that the young woman was laid to rest, a wind caught sparks from a locomotive and tossed them onto a straw roof.⁷¹ According to Sara DeFehr, “the factory sirens whistled incessantly,” and the train hauled water from the Dolginzovo, nineteen kilometres away, to extinguish the blaze.⁷² Grandson Jacob David Derksen (b. June 18, 1884) reported on the devastation: “A fire broke out in the house of one of the *Anwohner* [cottagers], and . . . 22 homes were burned, including our things and all the grain. Except for cattle and wagons, everything was turned to ashes. And so we were forced to buy again everything that was useful and necessary.”⁷³ As the Johann Lemkes grieved the loss of their daughter, who had been

ill since the spring, their yard was hit hard by the conflagration: they lost their *Nebenscheune* (barn), chaff, straw, and farm implements. Fire remained a perennial threat in the Schlachtin colony. Maria and Franz's home, in fact, burned down twice during their marriage. Early September of 1903 was the date of the first fire.

At this time, the old grandparents gave up their own yard and moved in with their children, the Jacob Martenses, "in the little house on the farm."⁷⁴

The life story of Maria Kehler Lemke Janzen will continue in the next issue of *Preservings*.

1 I would like to thank Glenn H. Penner, Conrad Stoesz, and my parents for their help with this article.

2 Peter Rempel, *Mennonite Migration to Russia, 1788–1828*, ed. Alfred H. Redekopp and Richard D. Thiessen (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2000), 33; Benjamin Heinrich Unruh, *Die niederländisch-niederdeutschen Hintergründe der mennonitischen Ostwanderungen im 16., 18. und 19. Jahrhundert* (Karlsruhe: self-pub., 1955), 241, 248.

3 "Chortitza Mennonite Settlement Census for 1 September 1801," available at Mennonite Genealogy (website, hereafter cited as MGW); "Chortitza Mennonite Settlement Census for October 1816," MGW; Rempel, *Mennonite Migration*, 12; Unruh, *Niederländisch-niederdeutschen Hintergründe* 242, 246, 258. Unless otherwise specified, all references to sources on the Mennonite Genealogy website are linked from the Russia index page, at <https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/>.

4 "Funds Loaned to Mennonite Settlers in the Chortitza Settlement: 1788-1793," MGW; "Chortitza Colony Vital Records: 1801-1813," MGW.

5 Rempel, *Mennonite Migration*, 12.

6 "Chortitza Colony Settlement Census lists for Nov. 1815, May 1816, and Oct. 1816," MGW; Henry Schapansky, *Mennonite Migrations (and the Old Colony)* (self-pub., 2006), 709; *Mennonitische Rundschau* (hereafter cited as MR), Jan. 20, 1904, 9; MR, Feb. 10, 1904, 4–5.

7 MR, Mar. 8, 1905, 10.

8 See entry #83 of "Register of Persons Living Outside the Chortitza Colony in 1852," MGW; Schapansky, *Migrations*, 396.

9 "Chortitza Mennonite Settlement Vital Records: 1809-1812," MGW.

10 "Chortitza Mennonite Settlement Census for November 1811," MGW; Unruh, *Niederländisch-niederdeutschen Hintergründe*, 278. Foster father Nickel was a weaver.

11 *Chortitza Family Registers*, vol. 1, 238, MGW.

12 "Register of Persons Living Outside the Chortitza Colony in 1852"; Schoenhorst Church Register, 137 (index at MGW); *Chortitza Family Registers*, 1:238; Berlin Document Center, A3342-EWZ50-E081/0568.

13 "Register of Persons Living Outside the Chortitza Colony in 1852," MGW.

14 "Register of Persons Living Outside the Chortitza Colony in 1859," MGW. Michael Kehler (age 40) is listed with wife Helena (age 20) and children. There is a Johann Lemke listed as an *Anwohner* in 1863 at Kronsweide in "Chortitza Colony Village Lists for 1863," MGW.

15 "Register of Persons Living Outside the Chortitza Colony in 1852," MGW; West Abbotsford Mennonite Church Records (per the Genealogical Registry and Database of Mennonite Ancestry [GRanDMA]).

16 MR, May 27, 1891, 3; Feb. 7, 1894, 1; Jan. 17, 1906, 2; "Register of Persons Living Outside the Chortitza Colony in 1852"; MR, Jan. 17, 1906, 2; MR, Apr. 12, 1911, 10; MR, Jan. 28, 1914, 7–8.

17 "Register of Persons Living Outside the Chortitza Colony in 1852"; Schoenhorst Church Register, 137; MR, Jan. 28, 1914, 7–8; MR, July 14, 1965, 5; various other references in the family's GRanDMA profiles.

18 MR, Apr. 13, 1904, 9; Apr. 12, 1911, 10.

19 Ibid.; MR, Dec. 18, 1912, 9, 12.

20 "Register of Persons Living Outside the Chortitza Colony in 1852"; *Chortitza Family Registers*, 1:238; Berlin Document Center A3342-EWZ50-E081/0568. He may have owned a brick factory at Neuenburg, as indicated on Viktor Petkau and Willi Vogt's *Ziegelfabrik* list, "Ziegelwerke der Mennoniten in Russland," Mennonitische Geschichte und Ahnenforschung (website), <https://chortitza.org/Buch/ziegel.php>.

21 Jakob Martens, *So wie es war: Erinnerungen eines Verbannten* (privately published, 1963); Berlin Document Center A3342-EWZ50-B046/2870. Currently, J. H. Martens is labelled in GRanDMA as #339145 and #1428054. "Register of Persons Living Outside the Chortitza Colony in 1852"; MR, Jan. 28, 1914, 7–8; Berlin Document Center A3342-EWZ50-F032/0852; "Mennonite Passenger Lists for Refugee Transport to Paraguay in 1930," MGW, <https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/latin/paraguay1930.htm>.

22 MR, Feb. 16, 1910, 13.

23 See their respective GRanDMA profiles.

24 MR, Feb. 16, 1910, 13.

25 MR, Apr. 6, 1904, 5. In later letters, Janzen and other *Frindschaft* mention slightly different dates for his birthday while that of his wife remains consistent.

26 See family #3 on the list "Mennonites from Krongarten in the Chortitza Colony Who Requested Transfer to the Chortitza Volost (May 1836)," MGW.

27 John Friesen, *Against the Wind: The Story of Four Mennonite Villages (Gnadental, Grünfeld, Neu-Chortitza and Steinfeld) in Southern Ukraine, 1872–1943* (Winnipeg: Henderson Books,

1994), 21.

28 See Epp's diary entry of May 22, 1875. Harvey L. Dyck, trans. and ed., *A Mennonite in Russia: The Diaries of Jacob D. Epp, 1851–1880* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 391.

29 MR, July 10, 1907, 9–10.

30 MR, Jan. 20, 1892, 2.

31 MR, Feb. 6, 1889, 1. It is possible that Maria Kehler had already moved to Schlachtin with her first husband, as a certain Lemke is known to have been an original settler at Gruenfeld, according to Friesen, *Against the Wind*, 26.

32 Friesen, *Against the Wind*, 26.

33 Al Reimer, Syd Reimer, and Glen Kehler, *The Berliner Kehler Clan: A History in Portraits* (Kelowna, BC: Rosetta Projects, 2009), 11.

34 MR, May 14, 1924, 7–8.

35 MR, May 5, 1909, 7.

36 Ibid.

37 See Jakob Redekopp, *Es war die Heimat: Baratow-Schlachtijn* (Curitiba, Brazil: Tipografia Santa Cruz, 1966), for his revealing and amusing account of how the delegates – Klassen, Toews, Wiens, and Zacharias – inspected and selected the land.

38 Friesen, *Against the Wind*, 43–46.

39 Ibid.; Redekopp, *Es war die Heimat*, 32; *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, s.v. "Neu-Chortitza (Baratov Settlement, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, Ukraine)."

40 Sara Heinrich DeFehr, ed., *Im Wandel der Jahre* (Winnipeg: Regehr's Printing, 1975), 123.

41 Likely Anna Reimer Siemens, GRanDMA #163908. DeFehr, *Im Wandel der Jahre*, 122.

42 Walter Wiebe, "Dass sich solches niemals wiederholt: 130 Jahre Grünfeld," Mennonitische Geschichte und Ahnenforschung, <https://chortitza.org/WWiebe.htm>.

43 Friesen, *Against the Wind*, 27.

44 Redekopp, *Es war die Heimat*, 24.

45 See, for example, Reimer, Reimer, and Kehler, *The Berliner Kehler Clan*, and Gerhard K. Kehler's life writing, involving a catastrophic fire and the difficulty of making do on fire insurance money, *Preservings*, no. 8, part 1 (1996): 41–42.

46 Wiebe, "130 Jahre Grünfeld."

47 MR, Mar. 2, 1887, 1.

48 Ibid.

49 MR, Feb. 6, 1889, 1.

50 MR, Mar. 6, 1889, 3.

51 MR, Feb. 6, 1889, 1.

52 Ibid.

53 MR, June 12, 1889, 1.

54 MR, June 18, 1890, 1.

55 MR, Dec. 24, 1890, 1. In the same letter, Lemke notes the recent death of esteemed local minister Jacob Epp.

56 MR, Jan. 20, 1892, 2.

57 MR, Mar. 15, 1893, 1. The identity of the foster son is not known.

58 MR, June 10, 1903, 9.

59 MR, July 10, 1907, 9–10.

60 Ibid.

61 "Chortitza Nr.1: Erste Ansiedler im Jahr 1894," Sipai Kanzerovka Droj (website), <http://sepai-kanzerovka.de/ahnenforschung/chortitza-nr-1>.

62 The death dates for brother Peter and for the sister who married a Blatz are not known except that both siblings predeceased Maria.

63 Redekopp, *Es war die Heimat*, 32.

64 MR, Apr. 30, 1924, 11.

65 Redekopp, *Es war die Heimat*, 21.

66 Ibid., 23. See MR, Aug. 26, 1953, 11.

67 MR, Apr. 1, 1908, 13.

68 Ibid.

69 MR, June 10, 1903, 9.

70 MR, Apr. 13, 1904, 9; May 18, 1904, 4–5.

71 Friesen, *Against the Wind*, 66; Redekopp, *Es war die Heimat*, 30.

72 Redekopp, *Es war die Heimat*, 159.

73 MR, Apr. 12, 1905, 5.

74 MR, Jan. 20, 1904, 9.

A MÉTIS-MENNONITE ENCOUNTER

The Shantz Cairn

EastMenn Historical Committee

On May 12, 2022, the EastMenn Historical Committee unveiled the Shantz Cairn at the historic site of the Shantz immigration sheds. Armand and Kelly Jerome, master Red River cart builders, who brought a cart replica for the event, gave a speech on the lifestyle and culture of the Red River Métis. After their speech, Don Thiessen led the group in the singing of “Now Thank We all our God” (*Nun danket alle Gott*), first in English and then in German. During the German version, Armand Jerome, representing the Métis who built the sheds and brought the Mennonite immigrants from the Rat and Red River landing, and Ernest N. Braun, representing the Mennonites, carefully unveiled the plaque. Braun then delivered his speech, “Campfire to Hearth.” The program ended with Christian Mennonite Conference Bishop Dave Reimer dedicating the cairn and giving a closing prayer. The following are condensed versions of the event’s main speeches.

THE RED RIVER MÉTIS

Good afternoon everyone, and welcome here on Manitoba Day. My name is Armand Jerome. I am a Métis Red River Cart builder, and next to me is my wife and cart assistant Kelly Jerome. We would like to thank our dear friend Ernie Braun for asking us to participate in today’s event

We feel honoured and privileged to be included in this most important ceremony honouring the beginnings of the Métis and Mennonite journey.

Approximately twenty years ago, on my first cart journey to the Manitoba Indigenous Summer Games in Winnipeg, the Crow Wing Trail representatives approached the group I was involved with, asking that we journey their trail. A short time later, reps from the Mennonite Landing Site committee requested that we do a reenactment of the 1874 Mennonite landing during our ride. This extra adventure was received with great enthusiasm by our cart group, as well as from both the Mennonite commu-



Ernie Braun and Armand Jerome in front of the Shantz Immigration Sheds Cairn, between a Red River cart and the flag of Manitoba.

ity and Crow Wing Trail members. It was a great success.

The cart you see before you is all that remains of the carts we used on that journey and we so proudly display it to you today.

Little did I know at the time that I’d be standing here twenty years later celebrating another historic marker honouring both Mennonite and Métis heritage. I sincerely hope that the continued sharing and celebration of our two cultures continues into the future. In this way we learn and grow with one another.

Ernie Braun has asked us to discuss how we build and drive our Red River carts and to provide some insight into the deep connection between the Métis and Mennonite peoples. The events

of 1874 mean Red River carts played a huge part in your culture and history here in Manitoba, too. They are, in fact, the tie that binds our two cultures forevermore.

The cart you see here today would have been very close to the carts that the Métis would have used in bringing the Mennonites to the Shantz sheds that are being honoured here today. My Métis ancestors would have done all they could to help with the first harsh winter by supplying deer meat, teaching traditional medicines to help with illness, and demonstrating survival skills.

fire. In winter, if a dogsled or carriage became bogged down, the men would dawn their snowshoes and run in front on the dogs, breaking trail

The Métis women could also hold their own in hard work. During traditional hunts they generally walked with the children following the hunters, and it was their job to skin the buffalo, prepare the meat for pemmican, and tan the hides that would then be used to create their clothing – the most famous of Métis clothing would be the elaborate beaded buckskins and dresses.



RODER LARSEN

A Red River cart at a Métis farm in Manitoba, c. 1870.

Prior to the arrival of the Mennonites, the Métis lived in this area, as indicated by names such as Tourand, St-Pierre-Joly, St. Adolphe, and Île-des-Chênes. Their housing would have consisted mostly of log cabins, as their culture was quite advanced for the time. They would have made a living by farming, freighting, trapping, droving, and in gathering buffalo bones for use in the manufacture of fertilizer and refining sugar. Their existence focused on day-to-day survival, as life was harsh and could be cruel.

The Métis people were a resourceful, talented, and deeply hard-working people. Métis men were well known for how tough they were and feats of great strength were not uncommon. For example, during buffalo hunts a Métis man would take his horse at a full run steering only with his knees, while holding his musket upright in order to spit musket balls into the end, keeping the musket in the upright position until parallel to a buffalo, at which time he would very quickly drop the muzzle into position to

The Métis hunts would consist of approximately a thousand Red River carts and hundreds of Métis families. The amount of work required to pull all this together is astounding. These hunts determined their winter survival. The Métis riders were so skilled that much of the trick-riding they did to practice prior to a hunt was adopted by the RCMP Musical Ride you see today

Besides the amazing beaded articles the Métis created, there were the traditional sashes you see Métis people wearing to this day. These take about an hour an inch to finger-weave, and the sash is about eight feet long. The colours and beads on each sash represent where the Métis family comes from, how many children they have, and their ancestry. A symbol of the Métis nation is the infinity flag, the oldest Indigenous flag in Canada

I've been building carts for over twenty years now, and my wife Kelly, who is of Ukrainian descent, has joined me in this venture for the last thirteen of those. Being a citizen of Métis ancestry, I have been involved with the promotion and display

of Métis culture for a number of years now. Canada is presently in a period of a resurgence of Aboriginal culture, which consists of First Nations, the Inuit and the Métis Nation. Having played a part in this resurgence, I've seen the revival and restoration of our music and dance, beadwork, the language, and other aspects of the Métis culture that make it distinct from all others. My part in all this has been to revive the craft of building Red River carts, which I have researched and tested by trial and error over the years.

The carts we presently build take about four hundred hours from beginning to end, including acquiring the woods needed, curing, milling, construction, and final coating. This for us is a labour of love.

The Red River cart is similar to many two-wheeled carts seen around the world, but the technology of its construction that suited the seclusion of the Red River area and the lay of the land makes it unique from all others. As the area was landlocked and without any roads to transport heavy metals and machinery, the people needed a vehicle that could be constructed using local woods, and that could withstand an unforgiving terrain. This cart was constructed of local hardwoods such as oak or ash for the wheels and body, elm for the hubs, due to its resistance to cracking, and willow or birch for the basket. The wheels were over five feet high, allowing it to cross most shallow streams, and dished to add stabilization to the cart over uneven terrain. It had a tapered axle that was tapered only on three sides to allow proper alignment for dished wheels, and heavy-duty bolsters that had multiple duties, such as holding down floor boards as well as an anchor for basket corner supports, to bring incredible strength to the basket. No metal parts were used in its construction, and every part was held together with dowel or rawhide. Some call it an oxcart, but in truth other animals like horses and mules were also used.

We have travelled by cart thousands of miles across Manitoba and Saskatchewan, with the longest journey being approximately eight hundred miles by trail from south Winnipeg to Batoche, Saskatchewan, over nine weeks. We used mainly horses but the odd time an ox, the reason being a horse travels between four to six miles an hour and can cover up to thirty miles a day, while an ox averages two miles an hour, so even ten miles a day becomes a challenge. Though an ox has strength for heavy loads, the horse has the distance advantage. On our journeys we keep the distance at fifteen to twenty miles a day to reduce the hardships.

The most cherished thing we walk away with after these journeys is a deep understanding of what my Métis ancestors had to overcome, and the bringing together of all the various cultures we encounter on the trail, from First Nations to Hutterites, Mennonites, and the local people from each community we pass through – and at one point, visiting Europeans, who took back with them tremendous stories of their experience with us. We sit in sharing circles each night and deeply encourage people to discuss their cultures and historic stories. In this way we learn and understand and move forward in acceptance of one another.

—Speech by Armand Jerome

CAMPFIRE TO HEARTH

About twenty-five years ago a small group of Mennonites set up a large marble stone at the Rat and Red River landing, and in 2019 another small group erected this stone here.¹ Today I want to ask: What do these stones mean? I will try to answer that question as if our grandchildren were standing here and wondering. I don't claim to know everything about it, but I will try in broad strokes to identify two significant aspects of that meaning, aspects that are almost at odds with each other.

The first most of us already know, although our grandchildren may not. Mennonites arrived here in the mid-1870s from what is now Ukraine (then New Russia) as a result of social, economic, religious, and political upheaval in their home country. By the early 1870s, having lived there for almost eighty years, they were faced with a number of changes by the government, changes they thought would affect every aspect of their lives, especially their understanding of how they should live out their Christian faith: specifically, how to love your enemy.

Having enjoyed an exemption from military service during their time in the Russian empire up to that point, it appeared Mennonites would now lose it, and their young men (if selected)



The SS. International arriving with the first Mennonites in Winnipeg.

would, within a decade, need to spend four years in military service to the country, although this requirement was quickly converted to alternative service. Moreover, the language of school and colony administration would become Russian, and Mennonites would be assimilated into the great Russian empire. Moreover, landlessness, social and religious differences, and other factors precipitated a need for new space to settle in the early 1870s. Coincidentally, the new province of Manitoba, created in 1870, desperately needed reliable settlers for the land to establish Ottawa's claim to the new territory, and at least in part to ward off American expansionism.

The end result was that between 1874 and 1880, about seven thousand Mennonites arrived in Manitoba, half of them coming to the East Reserve. This stone, this cairn, is a reminder of that arrival, and a way of honouring the man who made it all possible. At the Canadian government's behest, Jacob Y. Shantz, a middle-aged Mennonite businessman from what is now Kitchener,



Jacob Y. Shantz constructed immigrant sheds for the newly arrived Mennonites immigration, similar to these ones built in Winnipeg.

Ontario, came to Manitoba in 1872 for an exploratory trip, and wrote back to the minister of agriculture in Ottawa that the emergent province of Manitoba would be a good place for Mennonite farmers to settle in block settlements.

His involvement did not stop there: Shantz wrote a pamphlet about the journey in German, and it was distributed widely among the Mennonites in imperial Russia. Then he accompanied the Mennonite delegates in 1873 as they toured the province. When it became clear that settlers would actually arrive in 1874, Shantz contracted with the federal government to construct immigration sheds in exchange for four quarter-sections of land on which they would be built. At first, he selected four quarters two miles from here, but when that did not work he chose

quarters 17, 18, 19, and 20, intersecting right where the cairn now stands. He bought the timber in Minnesota to be rafted down the river to the confluence of the Rat and Red Rivers. When it finally arrived in late June of 1874, he employed a group of local Métis men to build the four sheds. They were slapped together with no foundation, no floor, no shingles on the roof, so that it always rained a little longer inside than outside. Each shed was twenty feet by one hundred feet, and divided into twelve sections, six on each side, with a communal dining area in the centre, together accommodating forty-eight families at a time. He invested \$3,000 of his own money, and received land valued at \$640 in return.

Just days after the buildings were done, the first group of



MANITOBA ARCHIVES, ELWOOD BOLE 6 N13803

arily. Some overwintered here, placing sod against the outside walls, and grass bundles on the roof, and boarding the inside so that the *Free Press* claimed they had “perfectly warm rooms.”² Even more arrived in 1875, although later that year, two sheds were dismantled to build a warehouse instead, since people who bought things in Winnipeg needed temporary storage until their houses in the villages were completed.

Life in the sheds came at the end of a long six- or seven-week journey, the accumulated stress of which was revealed in the death of many children either in the sheds or on the boat prior to landfall. Several adults died as well. A total of over thirty-five burials have been identified as having taken place in the cemetery just northeast of this spot in unmarked graves still needing to be found.

By the fall of 1876 it was clear that few additional settlers would arrive, and the buildings were left standing empty. Shantz had committed to keeping the buildings available for five years, which would have been until 1879. That is also the exact time that the railway came through and made steamboat transportation obsolete. Little is known about the fate of the timber, but local lore has it that at least one barn in the area was constructed of the recycled wood.

That brings us back to our initial question: What then does this cairn now mean to the Mennonites who descended from those immigrants? Naturally, it stands for the migration itself: a migration that often encompassed everything from complete bankruptcy at one end, to opportunity for a new start at the other. Migration also meant loss for the emigrants, selling everything at fire-sale prices, leaving small children or young wives to be buried at sea or in foreign lands, breaking new land amid floods, grasshoppers, mosquitoes, and unusually hard winters and shorter growing seasons than they were used to.

While we have studied the settler experience in-depth, we have not done a good job of considering the impact of this sudden migration of thousands of Europeans to the Manitoba prairie on the peoples who inhabited that prairie, the First Nations and Métis peoples. This is the second part of the meaning of this cairn and “the rest of the story.”

The cairn reminds us that these sheds were a symbol of another traumatic dislocation. Life before European arrival on the prairies was as it had been for centuries: a life in which one expected to move across this large expanse of land, live by hunting wild game peculiar to each part of the landscape, and gather wild fruits in their seasons. A sophisticated tradition of preserving food for the winter and retreating into the forested areas to the east to shelter from the prairie winters completed the cycle. Before the Europeans came there were no cows, no domesticated poultry for meat and eggs, no horses, no hogs, not even cats for pets. That had all begun to change with the coming of the fur trade and guns around 1700, horses in the 1750s, the development of a whole new people, the Métis, and, not least, First Nation migrations from the east and from the south. The first hundred years saw the fur trade become the core of all economic activity in what is now Manitoba: Europeans dictated the value of furs for fashion

settlers arrived at the Rat and Red landing site by steamboat from Moorhead (Minnesota). Again, it was the go-to people of the day, the Métis, who carted the luggage and the elderly or infirm the five miles to the sheds. It took three days to haul everything from the riverbank for that one boatload. Women and children lived in the immigration sheds here, while Métis carters who knew the area took the men across the reserve to see the land for which they would apply for a homestead, and to lay out villages in which to build houses. Then the men would return to fetch their families, and allow later immigrants to use the same buildings for the same reason, this continuing for three years.

During that first year almost 1,500 Mennonites arrived in successive waves, most of them using the sheds at least tempor-

in England, First Nations were wooed to trap in exchange for weapons and European goods, Métis became freighters and intermediaries as pemmican suppliers. But little agrarian settlement occurred until, with the arrival of the Selkirk settlers in 1812, that too began to change, particularly at the Forks, north along the Red River and west along the Assiniboine. By the middle of the 1800s, as Armand Jerome mentioned earlier, several parishes had already been established on other river lots where Métis and French Canadians settled as farmers, particularly as the bison disappeared and the fur trade went into rapid decline. By 1850, it was clearly the end of an era, yet by 1872, when Shantz arrived, what we know as southern Manitoba still had little evidence of settled life beyond those river lots. Surveyors working at this time found few hand-built structures on the open prairie, except some isolated Métis families who ventured out from the main rivers and settled along creeks, like the Rat River Settlement in Otterburne. Shantz reported that between the US border and what is now St. Norbert, there were no settlements at all, merely places where stagecoach horses could be exchanged along the trail.

Just two years later, the sheds were constructed, and within two more years, this land east of the Red River and north of the American border saw over thirty villages, with another twenty-five to be built within ten years. The horizon was dotted with houses, albeit primitive, with smoke curling out of the chimneys every morning.

How could this even happen? The answer is, at first gradually. By the 1850s, the lifestyle followed for thousands of years by Indigenous peoples had been radically altered by the Europeans, well before the Mennonites came. The legal framework for the changes that would follow the sheds had been crafted in Ottawa in 1870 for the Métis, which we are honouring today, and the legal framework for the First Nations was enacted at the Stone Fort one year later in 1871 as Treaty 1.

What did those legal frameworks actually mean? Up to 1874 they were largely words in an agreement, but now they assumed reality in the form of four long wooden structures, the first tangible evidence of the sudden, drastic paradigm shift that the First Nations and Métis would face. Within days of their completion, hundreds of Europeans crowded into them on their way to establishing their way of life on the prairie. This paradigm shift had no stronger symbol than what was built on this site in 1874, the largest buildings on the prairie here since the beginning of time.

But what happened to the way of life already on the prairie? The gradual transformation begun by the coming of Europeans now took a radical turn, eclipsing even the impact of the fur trade, as literally overnight hundreds of people arrived to pursue a sedentary agrarian lifestyle that would absolutely make a hunter-gatherer lifestyle impossible ever again. In just three years one would be expected to live in one place all year, get almost all one's food from crops one had planted, and from animals one was feeding – the role of nature in supporting human life had completely changed.

The ramifications are simply enormous: this transformation

is from the firepit or campfire to the hearth. The time of the campfire, a time when a cooking fire was made anywhere, was over, and the time of the hearth, where fire is made within a permanent building, had come.

One cannot imagine a more radical change. Before, people were dependent on the natural landscape to provide meat, fruit and nuts, fuel, clothing, and shelter. Success in this lifestyle depended on knowing the landscape intimately, knowing where the animals are and when, where the fruits are and when, and how to preserve them for the winter. Now, suddenly, in just five weeks, these huge sheds appeared: visible evidence of the irreversible metamorphosis to a hearth lifestyle. This perspective on the immigration sheds is indeed very sobering, and we should pause a bit and examine it. We see that with the sheds came an unimaginable transformation, complicated by factors nobody anticipated. Europeans had brought horses, guns, and disease, all with ramifications that might have been anticipated, but by then it was too late, even as the results became obvious. Moreover, with these changes gradually taking over the prairie, a new era arrived in European society too, as industrialism created a larger demand for raw materials, and suddenly new lands were urgently needed.

The new legal frameworks responded to that demand, but for both the First Nations and the Métis the result was immediate and overwhelming. The new paradigm brought a new understanding of ownership of land, a concept completely foreign to First Nations, and one that would have vast implications for their ability to travel and hunt. Moreover, the bison had been wiped out by settlement and subsequent habitat loss, and by overhunting here on the prairies, so that by the 1870s, the bison stopped being a sustainable source of food in Manitoba. Every tree cut down destroyed some habitat, every acre cleared to prove up one's homestead eliminated it as hunting ground, and every homesteader claim caused legal barriers to travel and hunting. Moreover, the centuries-old fur trade had evaporated as Europe went on to other fads. In 1871 the First Nations of southern Manitoba were placed on small reserves as part of the treaty, along with certain guarantees, but those guarantees were at best poorly kept and in many cases ignored.

For the Métis, who had participated actively in the fur trade and were instrumental in the early settlement chapter of Manitoba, the result was every bit as traumatic as the federal government bungled the promised allocation of their Manitoba Act lands. Thousands of Métis, seeing a bleak future without land, the bison, and the fur trade, migrated westward. What took their place was everything that the sheds symbolize: the first large-block European agricultural settlement of the Manitoba prairie by Mennonites.

So, I ask, what does this cairn mean? This stone stands to remind us of how we Mennonites got here, but it also reminds us of a much larger story. May it continue to do so.

—Speech by Ernest N. Braun

1 I am grateful to Dr. James Urry for looking over my text and making helpful suggestions.

2 *Manitoba Free Press*, Dec. 19, 1874, 2.

TWO WORLDS, ONE LIFE

Lisa Redecop

There I am. My cold fingertips press against the glass window and my eyes stare at the outside world. It's like looking at a blank page, cold and lifeless. What am I doing here? I ask myself. Too bad I don't know the answer.

It's 2019. More importantly, we're in January. The saddest month of the year. I always say if January was a candy, it'd be a black jellybean, bitter, nasty and hated by most people. Christmas is over and I can't seem to get my jolly self back. I never can. At least not in the past three years I've been trapped in Ontario. You see, we are Low German-speaking Mennonites from Mexico, and only half of our life is in Canada; the other half is in Durango, Mexico. My other home. I grew up there. When in Mexico, we live in a house that was built by my grandparents and my dad lived there his whole life, too. My grandparents passed away when I was three, so, ever since then, we've been taking care of the property every winter. Or we did, until Dad decided to stay here for three years straight for, in my opinion, no logical reason. It's hard to explain, but it's my ancestral home. It's a part of me. How do you think I feel when I haven't been connected to that part of me in over three years? It's very hard.

"Lisa, go run outside and get the mail, would ya?" my mom yells from the kitchen. My brain snaps from fantasy back to reality and I reply.

"Are you kidding? It's like minus 60 degrees out there! Plus, I can't even see the mailbox through all the snow from here!" I say in a snarky voice.

"Hey, I don't need the attitude and overexaggerating. Just dress warmly and you'll be fine. It's like three feet from the house."

I grab my coat and start for the door.

"Now look who's exaggerating," I mutter under my breath. Thank goodness she didn't hear it.

I smack the mail on the table, almost injuring my frozen hands, and dash toward my room. I lay in my bed to ponder my thoughts. I feel sad and incomplete. Almost like I'm forgetting my culture. I think to myself, I'm not meant to be stuck in a house all winter. I'm made to be outside, to feel the sun on my face,

to work and to learn by seeing things in real life. I can't do any of those things rotting away in this huge house. I start thinking about how much of my Low German language I've forgotten while living in English speaking Canada. Even worse, my younger siblings have forgotten almost the entire language. It isn't fair. Do my parents not care if my brothers grow up knowing almost nothing about our culture in Mexico? This question makes me sad. Why can't they care about it as much as I do?

These thoughts and feelings are putting me in a very depressed state of mind. I feel like I don't even know who I am anymore. I curl myself into a ball and I feel like I never even want to leave my room. I hear my door opening and the light starts seeping into my room. It's my mom coming in.

"Hey, what are you doing in here?" she asks.

"Oh, nothing, just resting a bit I guess." I lied. I just tell her what she wants to hear.

"Okay, well I thought you'd like to know that our neighbours invited us over for supper tonight," she said very excitedly.

"And why on earth would I want to know that?" I reply with an eye roll.

"Hey, you used to get so excited to see Katie! Where's my happy girl?" she asks in a tone that made me think she really didn't know the answer to her obscure question.

I really try to hold back my frustration, but it feels impossible. I feel like I'm going to explode!

"Where do you think she is?!" I snapped. "She's in Mexico! She's watching the sunset by the mountains. She's dancing through the warm breeze with her cousins she hasn't seen in years! She's looking up in wonder at all the different kinds of birds. She's learning about wildlife and going to school to learn more Low German. She's hanging out with people of her culture, so she has someone to talk to. That's where your happy girl is! But her body is trapped in this house, so you'll have to accept the version you have of me right now."

I look at my mom. She looks stunned and I feel scared to hear what she says next. Suddenly she starts smiling. No, not smiling,



KENNETH GIESBRECHT

Not a grain of sand out of place. It stayed exactly how we left it three years ago. The cows are still grazing on the green fields, their calves not far off.

laughing! Is this funny to her?

“Oh sweetheart,” she says, taking my hand. “You never let me finish. We are going to our neighbours’ to discuss when we want to leave. Leave for Mexico. You’re right. It’s high time we paid our home a visit.”

I freeze. I literally don’t even know what to say.

“We’re going home?” I ask, holding back my tears. Then my mom nods her head up and down.

That night we decide to leave the 14th of January and my neighbours will fly out on the 15th.

It is now January 14th and we are beginning our three-and-a-half-day trip on the road. Our whole family of eight people is in our big white van, together, and happy. I’ve missed this so much. Throughout the whole trip we all bond so much. We talk about things we usually never would. We sing songs out of our High German *Gesangbuch* (songbook) and recite the *Wenschen* (High German poems) that we had memorized for Christmas. Though I’m most excited to get to our destination, the journey is such an insightful experience as well. I guess I shouldn’t have trash-talked January so much because it’s brought me many blessings right now.

We finally reach our destination, our home. We all crawl out of the van like ants eager to get out of the sand. We breathe in that warm Mexican fresh air so deeply I can taste it on my tongue. It’s funny how not a single thing is different. Not a grain of sand out of place. It stayed exactly how we left it three years ago. The cows are still grazing on the green fields, their calves not far off. The chickens start clucking and our dogs start barking like they haven’t forgotten and are so happy to see us. Our house still stands tall and strong. I don’t know how the house doesn’t crumble to the ground, considering all the memories it holds. This house is a rock, strong, sturdy, and it’s never coming down. My brother opens up the shop and reveals our beautiful ATV, still in perfect shape.

“You wanna go for a ride? It’ll be just like old times,” he says.

“Heck yeah!” I reply enthusiastically.

We stealthily grab our helmets to avoid having to help unpack, hop on the ATV, and drive. We own a huge field, so we drive down our favourite trail that we always used to explore as kids. We drive so fast the birds seem jealous. The sun shines on our faces and the wind slips through my fingers as I lift both arms into the air. Suddenly the sky fills up with birds – so many you can hardly see the blueness of the sky. They chirp and surround us like we’re stuck in a snow globe made up of birds. I almost forgot what this feels like. I feel free. I feel like myself again.

Within the four short weeks in Mexico I reunite with my family, eat so much Mennonite food, and learn so much about Mennonite culture, especially amongst the youth. My brothers learn to speak our language again and I feel like the hole, the thing that was missing in our hearts, is completely filled with this experience. I love living in Canada and I love living in Mexico. Both countries play a big part in my life. I realize I need both in my life forever. Mexico is like a little reminder of who I am and where my ancestors lived before me. I think my whole family and I have learned a valuable lesson, to take time to remember where we are from and experience the things that make us who we are as people and as Mennonites. This gives me an idea.

I run outside to find my dad packing up the van.

“Hey Dad, you’re born in Mexico, right?” I ask.

“Yes, I am, your mom and I, both,” he replies with a bit of confusion.

“Wow, I wish I was born in Mexico,” I replied.

“Now why would you wish that? You’re a Canadian, be proud of that. You’re lucky. You get the best of both worlds. The Canadian world and the Mexican world,” he replies very firmly.

“Well, I am proud, but I just feel more like myself in Mexico, I guess. But I need my other home in Canada, too,” I say, building up suspense.

“So . . . ?”

“Well, I wanted to ask if you’d help me get dual citizenship. I’m not eighteen yet so there should be no problem and then I can officially have the best of both worlds,” I appeal convincingly.

“Well, I’m not sure it’ll make all the difference, but if that’s what you want, we can definitely do that,” he says with a smile.

“Trust me, it’ll make a difference and it’s the only thing I want. I want to belong to both places, so, thank you,” I say with an even bigger smile.

It’s our last night in our Mexican home. I lie outside on the trampoline looking up at the stars. It’s a warm night and the stars are shining extra brightly. There are so many of them. It’s like God just took a can of glitter and sprinkled it all over the sky. There’s just nothing that compares to the Mexican night sky. I like to think my grandparents are watching from up there. They deserve to be in such a beautiful place. I thank them for helping me find myself again, for allowing us to nurture their place and keeping their memory alive.

“Ahhh, a dual citizen.” I whisper to myself. “I like the sound of that.”

INTERCONNECTIONS

An Immigration Story

Ralph Friesen

IMPERIAL RUSSIA TO AMERICA

The other day I pulled a file called “Rempel Family” from my cabinet, where it had hung suspended and ignored for years. “What’s in here?” I wondered. I found several photocopied documents written in the old German *Schrift*. These things are tantalizing to me – I can’t just read them as they are, as I might if they were in English or even in German with conventional handwriting. I never know if they contain gems of information, or just

mundane stuff, until I sit down and painstakingly transcribe and translate them. I saw that one was entitled “a description of my parents’ journey from Russia to America, 1876.” It looked promising. My maternal grandfather, Peter F. Rempel (1875–1967) of Meade, Kansas, had immigrated to the United States that year, so I concluded that he had made a written copy of the original, written by his father Gerhard Rempel (1843–1879).

I began to transcribe. I was surprised to find the village of



On their way out of imperial Russia, the family travelled through the town of Volochisk near empire’s western border with the Austro-Hungarian empire.



Hochstädt (present-day Oleksandropil) as the starting point for the epic journey described by my great-grandfather. As I'd never heard of it, I looked it up in William Schroeder and Helmut Huebert's *Mennonite Historical Atlas*. I found out that Hochstädt was located in the Borosenko colony, roughly twenty miles north of Nikopol, a trade centre on the Dnieper River in present-day southern Ukraine. That made sense. My Kleine Gemeinde ancestors had moved to Borosenko from the larger Molotschna colony

in the 1860s. But some Old Colony (Chortitza) people had also moved there: Hochstädt was an Old Colony village. As Gerhard and his wife Katharina (nee Friesen, 1846–1903) had originally settled in Rosenfeld (he is listed in the ministerial election there in 1869), I would have expected that village to be their departure point. Instead it was Hochstädt, about four miles to the northeast. Most of the Kleine Gemeinde had already emigrated in 1874–5, meaning that the Rempels had lagged behind.

Some Mennonites travelling to North America during the 1870s passed through the impressive Lemberg (Lvov, Lviv) train station ca. 1868.



They left with a larger group of Mennonites on June 23, 1876, at eleven in the morning.¹ Gerhard says nothing about their children, but genealogical records show there were six: Gerhard, age 11, Katharina, 10, Abraham, 7 going on 8, Elisabeth, just turned 6, Margaretha, 3, and Peter, my grandfather, 1.

They must have started out by horse and wagon. Gerhard methodically lists every stop along the way. They arrived at a station (I cannot make out the name; it looks like “Litowog”) at nine in the evening on that first day, and after a two-hour stop, boarded a train and travelled all night to Kharkov (Kharkiv), a

major town in the northeast with a population of over 50,000. It was likely the first time any of them had been on a train, or seen a town of that size. They waited in Kharkov for nearly a day before boarding an evening train that chugged west to Kremenchuk and Yelisavetgrad (now Kropyvnytskyi in central Ukraine).

Early on June 27 they arrived at Volochisk (Volochny’sk) near imperial Russia’s western border with the Austro-Hungarian empire, where their passports were examined. After another all-day journey, they crossed the border, arriving in Pidvolochysk (Podwołoczyska, Podvolitchisk), in present-day Ukraine,

where they transferred to “Austrian train cars” and pushed on to Lemberg (Lvov, Lviv). Today Lviv is one of the larger cities in western Ukraine, but at that time it was part of Austro-Hungarian Galicia. They progressed to Kattowitz in Germany (present-day Katowice, Poland), and on June 29 at four in the morning they reached Kassel. The next day, late in the afternoon, they arrived in Antwerp, Belgium. “Here we were taken to lodging,” writes Gerhard, without supplying any details. If they had read the *Martyrs Mirror* they might have reflected on the stories of the Mennonites executed centuries ago for their faith in that city.

On July 1 they went to the harbour to board the SS *Vaderland*, where they were given a medical examination, which they passed. The *Vaderland*, part of the Red Star Line, was a 320-foot three-master with a steam funnel and a speed of thirteen knots, only a couple of years old in 1876. It made regular voyages between Antwerp and Philadelphia.

The *Vaderland* proceeded down the Elbe with its Mennonite cargo. The following day, the ship sailed into the North Sea, and the Rempel family went for three days “without seeing land.” Gerhard inserts one of the few details other than times and destinations: “On Monday evening old Hiebert, father of our leader Nikolai Hiebert of Lichtfelde, died and was buried at sea the same day at six in the evening.”²

Nikolai (Klaas) Hiebert (1834–1920), the immigration group leader, would eventually settle in Minnesota, where he became a cabinet maker and a member of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren. Lichtfelde (present-day Hrushivka) was a Grosze Gemeinde village in the Molotschna colony, so he was not a Chortitzer. Had a small number of Kleine Gemeinde and an unknown number of Chortitzer joined a Grosze Gemeinde group under Hiebert’s leadership? A quick check of a few names on the extensive *Vaderland* ship list shows that the families originated from Fischau, Margenau, Fuerstenau – all Molotschna villages.

The *Vaderland* arrived in Philadelphia at four in the afternoon on July 15 after a thirteen-day voyage, “travelling day and night,” according to Gerhard.³ The travellers stayed overnight in Philadelphia and the next day boarded a train for Pittsburgh, where they arrived on July 17, once more at four in the afternoon. As Gerhard wrote: “Here we transferred trains and arrived in Chicago at 10 a.m. Horses and wagons took us to our lodging. On Monday, July 19, at 10:30 we left Chicago and at 4:30 we crossed the Mississippi River. Tuesday the 20th at 11 a.m. we arrived in Omaha and on Wednesday at 9 a.m. we left Omaha and arrived at DeWitt⁴ at 4 in the afternoon, where friends came to get us.”

This is how the document ends. Presumably the people who received the Rempels in Nebraska at DeWitt brought them to the Kleine Gemeinde settlement in Jansen, twenty-six miles south. Approximately thirty families had settled in Jansen, arriving on the Hamburg-America Line vessel *Hammonia* in 1874. The Rempels settled in the village of Heuboden, about half a mile south of the church and a little northwest of Jansen.⁵ Katharina’s father and stepmother, who had been part of the 1874 group travelling via New York, were in all likelihood among the “friends”

who came to collect their children from DeWitt. One day by horse and wagon, seven days of train travel in imperial Russia, the Austro-Hungarian empire, and Germany, a two-week ocean voyage, and six more days by rail in the United States with a one- or two-day trek by wagon at the end, and the Rempels had finally arrived at their destination.



A train near Philadelphia ca.1874.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS LC-USZ62-57222

ON THE VOYAGE

At first, the Rempel family’s information on the *Vaderland* passenger list, printed in the volume *Brothers in Deed to Brothers in Need*, confused me. There was a 32-year-old “Gerad” and a 31-year-old “Catharine” – my great-grandparents. There were six names of their children corresponding with those appearing in GRanDMA Online. No surprise there. But then there was another “Gerad,” (Gerhard), aged 59, another Catharine, aged 37, a 23-year-old Elizabeth identified as a “servant,” and another “Peter,” aged one-half year, who was not my grandfather.⁶

Who were these other people? A cross-check with GRanDMA made it clear: these additional Rempels were my great-great-grandfather, Gerhard (1817–1888), with *his* family. The younger Gerhard makes no mention of them in his travel account, and their sudden appearance at the end of the journey introduces a new twist in the plot.

The families must have met up somewhere along the way. The elder Rempels had not moved to Borosenko with their children in the 1860s, but stayed behind in Mariawohl, Molotschna, and must have begun their journey from there. Did they first travel all the way from Molotschna to Borosenko, a distance of about seventy miles, so they could then accompany their children? Or did they meet in Antwerp, having come a different route, and then all leave for Philadelphia together? A somewhat random check of names of heads of families on the ship list (there are 104) and their church affiliations show that most came from Molotschna villages, and a few from the Bergthal colony. The Rempels appear to be the only Kleine Gemeinde family.

There are some errors in the list. The senior Gerhard Rempel’s wife is called “Catherine,” whereas in fact she was Elisabeth, age 35. The supposed 23-year-old “servant” Elizabeth was

actually Maria, Gerhard Sr.'s 25-year-old daughter from his third marriage.

FIVE WIVES

And here is where the story takes another unexpected turn. Looking more closely at GRanDMA, I found that Elisabeth (nee Friesen, 1840–1922) was Gerhard Sr.'s *fifth* wife. (The second, Sara Adrian [1816–1849] was Gerhard Jr.'s mother and my great-great-grandmother.) Each of the previous four women had died prior to Elisabeth and Gerhard Sr.'s marriage in 1862, when she was 21 and he was 45 and the father of five.

What then? About a year later Gerhard Jr. married Elisabeth's younger sister Katharina (1846–1903) when she was just 17. The younger Gerhard was 20 years old on the day of his wedding. Mind-bogglingly, this means that my great-grandmother and my step-great-great-grandmother were sisters. When Katharina married, Elisabeth became her "mother."

Would that even have been allowed? In those days, the *Gemeinde* often had a say as to who married whom, and what match was appropriate. They would oppose the marriage between a widower and the sister of a deceased spouse. I imagine they would have had some questions for both Gerhards, or for Katharina and Elisabeth's parents.

The younger Gerhard's account tells us nothing about the actual experiences of the travellers – what it was like for them to journey by train and ship for the first time in their lives, to see large population centres with great and beautiful buildings, to spend endless hours in confined spaces with little children. What did they eat? What kind of washing and toilet facilities did they have? Who else went with them, and what stories did they tell? What fears or excitement did they feel? How were they treated by train conductors and ship stewards? All this has to be filled in with our imaginations.

And what about that second "Peter" on the passenger list, the one who was half a year old? It appears he was the child of the elder Gerhard. As such he would have been a grand-uncle to my slightly older grandfather. But a note on GRanDMA suggests that he may not even have been a Rempel, since Gerhard Sr. already had a son (1848–1908) by that name, who remained in New Russia (present-day Ukraine). But that suggestion only deepens the mystery: why would the elder Rempels be travelling with a young infant not their own? Elisabeth actually would have been capable of having a child. In any case this little boy did not survive into adulthood.

Maria, the young single woman who was not a servant but a daughter of the elder Gerhard, got married two years after arriving in the United States, to Klaas P. Friesen (1854–1926). Just to tangle the web a bit more, Klaas was a first cousin to Abraham Friesen, father of the sisters who had married the Rempels, father and son.

Grandfather Peter F. Rempel used to say he hadn't forgotten anything about Russia. An attempt at humour, of course, as he was too young to remember anything. He also said he learned to walk on that journey but didn't specify if it was on a train car

or the ship. Only a few years after the Rempel family settled in Nebraska, disaster befell them when my great grandfather Gerhard, the writer of the travel account, was killed in an accident. He was standing on top of a hay wagon that was backed up to the barn. When the barn door was opened, a rooster flew out, startling the horses. Their sudden movement threw Gerhard to the ground where he struck his head. He died on November 29, 1879, at the age of 36.

By that time two more children had been born. Katharina, a widow at age 33, could not run a farm and raise all these children on her own, but she did not re-marry, as often happened in such circumstances. Instead, some of the children were given to other families. Peter, my 4-year-old grandfather, was passed from household to household in the community, like an orphan. His longest stay was with his eldest brother Gerhard (another Gerhard!), but this family was also poor, and Peter grew up that way, working hard, deprived even of shoes that fit properly.⁷

From our modern perspective we marvel (or are appalled) at the marriage pattern of Gerhard Sr. In my peregrinations in search of information, I found a website called the "Sperling Harms Penner Jost Family Genealogy and History site," and was surprised to discover a Rempel connection. The site has a page called "the Abraham Penner story and connection with Gerhard Rempel."⁸ I found scanned pages from a notebook with entries from several individuals, including the oft-married elder Gerhard Rempel.

Gerhard's laconic entries simply document the dates of his various marriages, his wives' deaths, and the births and deaths of children. He first married in 1839 when he was 25, to the widow Helena Wiens Wall. She had a daughter by her first marriage, but this child did not survive. Helena herself died a year or two later and in 1841 Gerhard married another widow, Sarah Adrian Penner, who had had four children in her first marriage, of whom the first three died in infancy. She was pregnant when her husband died and this little boy was two months old when Sarah married Gerhard.

Sarah had five children with Gerhard (three survived) and died on May 28, 1849, when her youngest was eight months old. Six weeks later, Gerhard married Maria Warkentin and fathered three children with her (one died in infancy). Only a month after Maria's death, Gerhard married Gertruda Barkman, who gave birth to four children, none of whom survived. At last, as mentioned, Gerhard married Elisabeth Friesen two months after Gertruda's death in 1862. The two children from this marriage, presumably including the mysterious Peter, did not survive.

What can we take from these basic facts? We have this pattern of serial marriages in my great-great-grandfather's story, of a very high rate of infant mortality, and a high mortality rate of the women, some of whom, we presume, died in childbirth. The time intervals between marriages are brutally short by today's standards. To some extent they were normal for that time and in that culture. Any widower with young children and no one to help raise them would be in serious financial trouble, quite quickly. And, though it seems crass to say so, a new wife (almost



RALPH FRIESEN

The grandfather of Margaret Rempel (photographed with her husband), Gerhard Rempel, wrote a journal of his trip from imperial Russia to Canada.

ATTACHED TO HIS PIPE

Gerhard Sr. outlived his son by eight years. We get a glimpse into his character from Klaas Reimer's 1885 letter written when Gerhard was 68, living with Elisabeth in Jansen: "I should also inform you that Abraham S. Friesens were in Nebraska; they were at [the] Gerhard Rempels' place and found them all to be in good health. However, our aged uncle cannot forget his wife and whenever they speak of her his tears start flowing. Seemingly he is also preparing to enter the eternal life and is concerned about his former life and whether it will prevent him for entering heaven. One notices immediately that he has meant business. He used to be so attached to his pipe of tobacco that he could hardly abstain. This he has not used for a number of years according to what I have heard. One can well imagine the effort it takes to quit such a habit. Otherwise things are not doing so badly, and they always have sufficient to eat and drink. Uncle Gerhard Rempel was still up and around, but his strength is failing and he has aged very much. He sent his greeting along to everyone."⁹

The Kleine Gemeinde strongly opposed tobacco use, so Gerhard must have been on the receiving end of severe admonitions for this perceived sin. But who was the wife he could not forget? Besides Elisabeth, there were four. Sarah Adrian Penner is the most likely one, as that marriage lasted the longest, and resulted in the most living children. What would Elisabeth have made of her husband's continued mourning for a woman who had died thirty-five years earlier?

ANOTHER CONNECTION

I want to connect the dots of one last family link. The above-mentioned Abraham S. Friesens were my great-grandparents on my father's side. Their son Klaas, my grandfather, married into the Abraham L. Dueck family from Kleefeld, Manitoba. Mrs. Dueck was Elisabeth Rempel, a first cousin to Gerhard Jr. Through this connection my parents, Peter D. Friesen and Margaret Rempel, were third cousins. They were also third, fourth, and fifth cousins via twelve other family relationships, but we don't want to make ourselves dizzy by following all those trails.

My siblings and I have gone further afield in searching for our spouses, including non-Mennonites. I am sure that is true for my numerous Rempel and Friesen cousins as well. The closely knit family and cultural and religious patterns which prevailed only a few generations ago are gone forever. Common understanding and a shared worldview are also things of the past. Our grandchildren have no knowledge of that world, and theirs is entirely different. But that is the world from which we came.

always younger than the previous one) also offered the opportunity of having a new sexual partner. Gerhard Sr. was more than twice as old as his last wife when they married. The entire system, of course, was deeply patriarchal. We find the web of family relationships involving step-children and step-parents and half-siblings impossibly complex, but our ancestors seemed to have figured these things out.

1 Gerhard uses the Old Style (Julian) calendar throughout and I have stayed with that in this article. For the equivalent in North America where the New Style (Gregorian) calendar was used, add thirteen days to each date mentioned.

2 The elder Klaas Hiebert was born in 1801 in Horsterbusch, Prussia.

3 The Gregorian calendar date used by the immigration authorities and recorded on the ship list is July 28, 1876.

4 DeWitt was established in 1872 when the railroad was extended to that point.

5 Delbert F. Plett, *Dynasties of the Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde in Imperial Russia and North America* (Steinbach: Crossway Publications, 2000), 401.

6 Clarence Hiebert, ed., *Brothers in Deed to Brothers in Need: A Scrapbook about Mennonite Immigrants from Russia, 1870-1885* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1974), 295.

7 His story is told in *A History of the Peter F. Rempel Family* (Beaverton, OR: printed by A. Dale Aufrecht, 1995).

8 <http://freepages.rootsweb.com/~sperling/genealogy/penner/claasen.html>, accessed May 12, 2021.

9 Klaas R. Reimer, letter to Bernhard Rempel, Oct. 20, 1885, quoted in Plett, *Dynasties*, 400-1. Reimer was a nephew to Gerhard Rempel.

In the Next Issue

Our spring issue of *Preservings* will explore the making of the Russlaender Mennonites in honour of the centenary of the 1920s migration of Mennonites from the Soviet Union to Canada.



If you are interested in contributing an article on any of our future themes—When the Kanadier Met the Russlaender, Mennonites and Machines, Mennonites and Natural Disasters, 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.

CTMS ANNUAL CONFERENCE

THE RUSSLAENDER MENNONITES

WAR, DISLOCATION
AND NEW BEGINNINGS

July 14–15, 2023

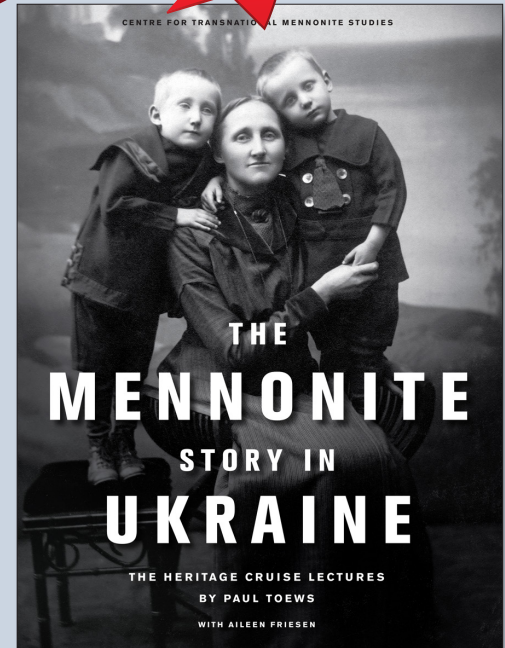


This centenary conference will explore the development of the Russlaender, from late imperial Russia, through war, revolution, and upheaval in the early Soviet Union, to their relocation to Canada.

CTMS CENTRE FOR
TRANSNATIONAL
MENNONITE STUDIES

REGISTER FOR FREE AT
ctms@uwinnipeg.ca

Free
Shipping



Give the gift
of history

**SECOND
EDITION**

Includes a new reflection
on Mennonite history
and the war in Ukraine.

\$39 Free Shipping

SPECIAL OFFER ENDS DECEMBER 17

ORDER online:
therussianmennonitestory.com