

Mennonite Historian

A PUBLICATION OF THE MENNONITE HERITAGE CENTRE and THE CENTRE FOR MB STUDIES IN CANADA



Children's church choir performing in a birch forest in the village of Apollonovka, Omsk, region, June 2010. Photo credit: Aileen Friesen.

On Mennonites and others in Siberia today

by William Yoder

Moscow – Someone wandering through a pristine village like Mirolyubovka, 80 km west of the West Siberian city of Omsk, could think that he/she was in Paraguay or Mexico. Little girls in pigtails and long dresses run about; one speaks and laughs in Low German (*Plattdeutsch*). One gets to hear their surnames if one asks: Reimer, Klassen, Wiens, Wiebe, Schellenberg and Sawatsky. Village life is centred around agriculture. Church services often only begin after the milking is done at 10 p.m. The churches involved are the Mennonite Brethren – a split off the larger Mennonite church (*kirchliche Mennonites*) which occurred in the southern Ukrainian region of Zaporozhe in 1860. The first Mennonites of Dutch and Prussian origin arrived in Ukraine in 1789. After 1890 groups of them moved onward to Western Siberia and neighbouring Kazakhstan. The forced deportation of Germans eastward in August

1941 brought many more Mennonites to the region. Others did not arrive until the 1950s.

Most of these Mennonites are gathered in a regional association known since 1996 as the “Omsk Brotherhood.” This organisation's roots go back as far as 1907; its re-founding in 1957 occurred after three decades of serious persecution. Its lay historian, Peter Epp from Isilkul on the border with Kazakhstan, reports that the organisation had consisted almost strictly of Germans in 1987; a fifth of them though were Baptists. Virtually all of these ethnic-German Baptists have since then emigrated.

Today the Brotherhood consists of roughly 950 baptised women and 450 baptised men – it had been 2,306 in 1987. Surprisingly few of these Mennonites have left for Germany since then – only around half. Perestroika brought with it

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Exploring the Mennonite Story in Siberia: International Conference in Omsk, Russia

by Aileen Friesen

Building on the tradition of international scholarly exchange on Mennonite history established by Dr. Harvey Dyck through conferences held in Chortitza, Ukraine in 1999 and in Molotchna, Ukraine in 2004, a recent conference featuring Mennonites in Siberia took place in Omsk, Russia from June 2-4. This conference was co-sponsored by F.M. Dostoevsky Omsk State University (Dr. Tatiana Smirnova), the University of Winnipeg (Dr. Royden Loewen) and Fresno Pacific University (Dr. Paul Toews) and showcased new scholarship on the history and culture of Mennonites in Siberia.

In the last several years, there has been a renewed interest in the Mennonite Siberian story. In 2002, Marina and Walter Unger, Paul Toews and Olga Shmakina established a relationship with Dr. Andrei Savin of the Russian Academy of Sciences with the result being two books of document collections (with a third still to be published) related to Mennonites in Siberia. These types of initiatives reflected a deep interest in the Mennonite community to explore the neglected history of the Mennonites who settled this vast region both voluntarily and involuntarily. Dr. Peter Penner, currently residing in Calgary and who was born in Siberia, played an inspirational role in pushing forward the agenda of holding a conference in Siberia. Like the previous conferences in Chortitza and Molotchna, conference organizers aimed to bring together scholars from diverse linguistic, methodological and cultural backgrounds. This type of international event allows for the cross fertilization of ideas about the Mennonite story in Siberia.

Participants from Russia, Canada, the United States, Germany and Kazakhstan presented papers which illustrated various aspects of Mennonite religious, familial, social and political experiences in Imperial Russia, the Soviet Union and current-day Russia. Presentations on Mennonite settlement in Siberia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries challenged the dominant image of Siberia as a place of exile and suffering. These papers demonstrated that the first Mennonite settlers, such as Peter J. Wiens,

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Omsk Conference

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arrived in Siberia with great hopes—for themselves, their families and their communities. These papers also showed the commonalities between Mennonite settler life in Siberia and in other parts of the world. Weather, land, gender roles, families and faith shaped how Mennonites envisioned and experienced Siberia, which parallels Mennonite resettlement in places such as the Canadian prairies. These similarities encourage a comparative approach to foster an understanding of Mennonite migration in a global context.

The majority of the conference presentations addressed the experiences of Mennonites during the Soviet period. A number of Russian scholars, such as Andrei Savin and Alexei Gorbatov utilized archival sources from the Soviet secret police, the NKVD, to uncover the treatment and the responses of Mennonites to the state's repressive policies. Gorbatov spoke about how Mennonites took on leadership roles in interconfessional organizations, which brought them to the attention of Soviet authorities. Repression followed, in which Mennonites lost their homes, employment and freedom.

Scholars from the former Soviet territories have advanced our knowledge

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Opening plenary session of the Omsk conference showing (l-r): D. Frik, T.B. Smirnova, A. German, Royden Loewen and Paul Toews. Photo credit: Marlene Epp.

of archival sources, which in some cases are the only remaining record of events and people targeted by the Soviet regime. Unfortunately, due to changes in the political climate in Russia, some archival files that previously were available, are now no longer accessible to scholars working in the archives. At the conference, a resolution was proposed to protest against this trend. Fortunately, the publication of document collections from Russian archives in recent years has ensured that at least some of these documents are now a part of the public record.

Many presentations focused on how Mennonites as individuals and as communities experienced life under the Soviet regime. The atmosphere of repression and uncertainty influenced the relationship between Mennonites, Baptists and Evangelicals in Siberia. Dr. Iraida Nam described how the loss of religious leaders during the Stalinist repression created religious bonds and cooperation between different religious groups. In the case of the Tomsk region, the release of Mennonite ministers from prison after Stalin's death revitalized Mennonite identity briefly, until the start of Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign saw the exile of their leaders once again.

Participants in the conference had the opportunity to view many of the themes presented firsthand, as the cultural

program of the conference included a visit to a number of Mennonite communities west of Omsk. Rev. N.M. Dikman (Dueckman) gave an emotional account of the persecution he experienced for his religious beliefs, in which he called the GULag "his bible study." Religious leaders such as Dikman confirmed for participants that the persecution of religious communities lasted into the 1980, with many leaders being arrested numerous times throughout their lives. In spite of this persecution, Mennonite religious and cultural life survives in Siberia. In villages such as Apollonovka, children still speak *Plattdeutsch* to their playmates. Participants also witnessed the wonderful musicality in Mennonite religious services. While not all Mennonites experienced and responded to the Soviet regime in the same way, the interest of scholars from the former Soviet Union in Mennonites as a ethno-confessional community confirms the historical significance of this story to a wider audience. It also confirms the importance of building bridges between scholars from different countries and extending these bridges to the communities which these scholars try to understand and describe.

Aileen Friesen is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Alberta specializing in Russian History.

Genealogy and Family History

By Alf Redekopp

Recent Books

Marlene Kran, *Wiedemann* Winnipeg, MB: Private Publication, 2009)

This genealogy and family history book traces the story of the descendants of August Friedrich Wiedemann (1853-1915) and his wife Justina Krause (1858-1913) who were of Evangelical Lutheran and German/Prussian descent who lived in South Russia. Two of their sons, Paul (1884) and Wilhelm (1886) trained as machinists supporting the production and maintenance of agricultural equipment. They were not farmers but employed at the J.B. Niebuhr factory in New York, Russia. Wilhelm Wiedemann married a Maria Janzen of Romanowka in 1909. One of the younger sons, Karl Wiedemann (1895) married a Canadian Mennonite Agatha Peters of Plum Coulee in 1925. The compiler has included colour copies of many documents, certificates, photographs and maps, as well as images from her trips to visit ancestral places in Ukraine and other parts of Europe. This compilation gives a unique perspective of life in Russia from a family that lived with and worked for Mennonites. Contact: Marlene Kran, 603-29 Roslyn Road, Winnipeg, MB R2L 0G1.

Reg Reimer, writer and editor, *"Dead They Are, But Living Still:" One family's journey to Wiesenfeld, Ukraine* (mypublisher.com, first published 2007 with addendum in 2009) no pagination.

This hardcover coffee-table style book, produced using an on-line publishing service is a very attractive presentation of one family's journey to the village of their ancestor Jacob D. Reimer (1818-1891) (JDR), where a memorial stone had been discovered in 2006. (See related story on page 4.) JDR was married to Wilhelmine Strauss (1818-1889) and was the founder of the village of Wiesenfeld (now extinct), but located and well-documented with GPS coordinates for future travelers to Ukraine to visit. Contact: Reg Reimer, 7-35537 Eagle Mtn. Drive, Abbotsford, BC V3G 2Z4.

Untypical Large Mennonite Family

*From the collections of Peter Goertzen
Submitted by Jim Driedger*

After several years of genealogical research among my Mennonite ancestors I have become quite accustomed to large families, very early remarriages of widows and widowers and the repetition of given names. However when a friend recently asked me to check on a family for him I came across a most exceptional example of these characteristics.

It started with a Gerhard Niebuhr, born in 1818, who married one Margaretha Braun in 1838. The couple had eight children after which Jacob passed away and his widow married one Daniel Teichroeb. Four children later Margaretha died and her widower married a younger woman, Elisabeth Nickel, who bore him an additional ten children. Shortly after, Daniel passed away and Elisabeth decided to marry a widower, Jacob Fehr.

In order to completely understand Jacob Fehr's marital status I had to go back to one Anna Thiessen, born 1831, who married a Peter Peters. This couple had nine children when Peter passed on and Anna married the said Jacob Fehr. Jacob brought along nine children from his first marriage. Now Anna and Jacob had two children and when Anna died, Jacob married Aganetha Giesbrecht and she bore him four children. It was after Aganetha died that Jacob married the widow Elisabeth, mentioned above, in early spring of 1895.

This last union made the couple parents, in a sense, to all of the following: eight Niebuhr-Braun children; four Teichroeb-Braun children; ten Teichroeb-Nickel children; nine Peters-Thiessen children; nine Fehr(?) children; two Fehr-Thiessen children and four Fehr-Giesbrecht children. A grand total of 46 offspring!

I also noted that the oldest 'parent' was born in 1817 while the youngest didn't arrive until 1851. Of the eight marriages that took place among the various fathers and mothers, the first occurred in 1838 and the last in 1895 - almost 60 years later. The difference in age between the

oldest and the youngest child was 55 years -- Peter Niebuhr (1839) to Maria Teichroeb (1894). Three 'siblings' were born in 1859 and there was only one set of twins born in 1863.

The names of the children proved no less interesting. There was one Gerhard, David, Julius, Cornelius, Herman and Daniel. There were two each of; Katharina, Agatha, Elisabeth, Sara, Helena, Isaak and Aron. The family had three Johanns, Marias and Aganethas as well as four Peters, Jacobs and Annas. The most popular name, however, was Margaretha; of which there were five!

As I filed the last of the information for my friend I found myself wondering how this family would have reacted to such modern terms as 'planned parenthood', 'birth control', 'generation gap' or 'single parent family'?

Jim Driedger is in the possession of the files of the late Peter Goertzen (1941-2007), genealogist/ museum administrator.

Send inquiries to Alf Redekopp, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, MB R3P 0M4 or e-mail: aredekopp@mennonitechurch.ca

Book Notes

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Germany. Included is a eulogy of C.F. Klassen, a Canadian Mennonite who spent many years in Europe facilitating this emigration. Then life in Canada is celebrated, including the tensions of learning a new language and adapting to a new culture. The hymns, *Kernlieder* of the Russian Mennonites, are sung by the assembled congregation.

An exhibition this summer and fall at the Neuberghal Mennonite Street Village, Manitoba, *Himmelbleiw* has produced a catalogue of the exhibition featuring furniture used in homes. Following a helpful historical introduction this 36-page catalogue features pictures and notes about the various home furnishings.

A revised edition of *Through Fire and Water, An overview of Anabaptist and Mennonite History* by Harry Loewen and Steven Nolt appeared this year, 14 years after the initial edition. This 336-page book was originally produced for Mennonite High School use, and continues to fill that need. But it has found a much wider audience. The update, by Nolt, increases the attention paid to this story as a world-wide movement. Using story and facts, this book will continue to be a wonderful introduction of Mennonite history for those who have not studied it before.

Reimer Grave Marker Unveiled at Mennonite Heritage Village

by Susan and Gilbert G. Brandt

The Jakob D. Reimer grave marker, brought to Canada from Ukraine by Reimer family members, was unveiled in a permanent location in the Mennonite Heritage Village. Some seventy descendants and numerous friends attended a ceremony Sunday afternoon, July 25, 2010.

Visitors from different provinces (BC, AB, MB and ON) crowded into the Old Colony Mennonite Church on the Museum site to participate in the service. Harold Wiens, great-great-grandson of J.D. Reimer and a music professor from Alberta, led the group in a number of traditional hymns throughout the service. The songs, some favourites of Reimer, reflected the singing tradition of the Mennonite Brethren.

Gert Martens, another descendant of Reimer, recounted how the grave stone was found. The family, in 2006, in a second attempt to find the grave marker, spent time questioning individuals in the area. Finally someone mentioned that a neighbour had a tombstone in his field. It proved to be that of Gert's great-great grandparents, Jakob and Wilhelmina Reimer. The neighbour had moved it from Wiesenfeld when that village was leveled to become a wheat field. The forgotten cemetery and abandoned village of Wiesenfeld, founded by Jakob Reimer, was deserted as all fled in 1919 after the revolution. The stone was moved to Molochansk where it remained for one winter. Then, with the help of numerous people especially that of Olga Shmakina, Ukrainian tour guide, the grave marker was allowed to be shipped out of Ukraine to Canada.

Ken Reddig, former Mennonite Brethren Archivist, provided some historical reflections on the significance of Jakob D. Reimer. Reimer was born in Kronsart. He had a passion for education and established schools for the needy. He was influenced in his faith by the preaching of pietist Eduard Wuest, and met with other believers of similar persuasion. He invited Elder Lenzmann of the Mennonite Church to serve communion to this group of believers, but Lenzmann declined.

When this group of believers signed the



Unveiling of the Reimer Grave Marker brought to Steinbach, Mantioba from Ukraine by Reimer family members. Photo credit: Cliff Derksen

letter of secession January 6, 1860, to separate from the Mennonite Church, Reimer was not one of the signators. However, two months later, he sent a letter to the leadership of the Mennonite Church to explain the rationale behind their actions. He was later elected as an assistant elder to Elder Huebert. Meetings of this group of believers were often held in Reimer's house or machine shed.

Several influences affected the new group, including "leapers and jumpers" (*Froehliche Richtung*) who dominated the fledgling church. Because Reimer refused to participate, he and his family were excommunicated in 1864. They were later restored to fellowship but Reimer never regained his previous influence.

Abe Dueck, Executive Director of the M.B. Historical Commission, added that monuments such as the Reimer grave marker help us remember and remind us to be faithful. Dueck also noted that the Mennonite Brethren were celebrating 150 years during 2010.

Edgar Reimer, great-grandson of Jakob D. Reimer, provided excellent historical background concerning the Mennonites and their Russian experience. The Mennonites were not unaware of world events, such as the Crimean War and the border wars against the crumbling Turkish Empire. Nor were they unaffected by religious streams such as the Claas Epp "Bridal Congregation" or the charismatic Kuban Colony or the Klaas Reimer preparations to move the "*Kleine Gemeinde*" (EMC) to Canada. Edgar Reimer noted that Jakob D. Reimer, although strongly desiring to move to North America, had opted to remain in Ukraine and founded Wiesenfeld, which remained a village for some forty years.

Helga Enns, a great-great-granddaughter living in BC, spoke about the "Women of the Reimer Family." Wilhelmine (Strauss) Reimer, baptized as an infant in the Lutheran Church, came to Russia as a teen. She was baptized and became a member of the Mennonite Church as a young adult. Later, she was baptized as a mature adult and joined the Mennonite Brethren Church. At age 21 she married Jakob D. Reimer and stood beside him as a strong and resilient partner.

Helga Enns also talked briefly about Wilhelmine's sister Julianna Strauss who assisted in meeting the needs of the poor among them. Julianna worked as the housekeeper for a British industrialist for 20 years, but then became too ill to work and lived with the Reimers.

Reg Reimer, former missionary to Vietnam and now living in Abbotsford, BC, wrote some reflections about the Jakob D. Reimer family. Reg had taken his family to Ukraine where they visited the grave site and became involved in moving the grave marker to the Mennonite Centre in Molochansk.

Barry Dyck, Executive Director of the Mennonite Heritage Village, led the congregation outdoors to the grave marker. After the family members who had been in Ukraine when the marker was discovered unveiled the marker, Abe Dueck led in a dedicatory prayer. Barry Dyck then invited all guests to the Livery Barn Restaurant for dessert and visiting.

Susan and Gilbert G. Brandt live in Winnipeg and have been active supporters of Mennonite historical activities.

Renewing Identity and Mission Consultation Report

By Karla Braun, Associate Editor, **MB Herald**, with files from Barrie McMaster and Connie Faber

"After 150 years, you'd think we'd know who we are," one participant noted at the Renewing Identity and Mission (RIM) consultation. Held July 12-14 on the campus of Trinity Western University in Langley, B.C., RIM was sponsored by the M.B. Historical Commission and part of Celebration 2010, an event marking the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Mennonite Brethren church. Pastors, historians, and seminarians presented 30 papers in 15 workshops, examining facets of MB history, theology, and practice. Scholars and laypersons – young or old, well-versed in the subjects or encountering ideas and histories for the first time – responded in roundtable discussions and Q & A sessions.

Diverse influences on the movement have always raised questions about what it means to be MB. But they have also formed the denomination into an entrepreneurial community of believers with a strong commitment to evangelism, biblicism, and a personally experienced faith. These themes were repeated, but assessment of how well we actually live out the values professed was largely absent. "I heard you say you are people of the Book, but I noticed very few of you carrying the Book," Danisa Ndlovu, president of Mennonite World Conference, remarked at the binational session.

The mostly Canadian presenters spoke on the history and successes of the MB church in the past 150 years, and plenaries given by international brothers highlighted the global nature of the MB family, but American perspectives were under represented. (Only 6 presenters out of 30 were American, not including the BFL Q&A which had equal Canadian and U.S. representation.)

Plenary Sessions

Alfred Neufeld's plenary address Monday night set the tone. "Denominations are not abominations," Neufeld declared, urging his listeners to consider denominations a gift, a reflection of the diversity and beauty of creation. Not merely "cheap relativism about revealed truth," denominations are a picture of how with "humbleness and even gratitude for the historic perspectives and special gifts, every church is able to contribute to the wider body of Christ."

Neufeld, a theologian and leader in the Paraguayan MB conference and Mennonite World Conference, surveyed 16 commentators' assessments of the birth and development of the denomination. Not to "lead us to a proud hagiography,"

he said, but to "the consciousness that God has entrusted to us some precious jewels, some considerable talents, so that we might multiply them and do things better in the future."

Renewal is a feature of the establishment of the MB church, said Neufeld, but he encouraged the church to recover its "apostolic and prophetic origins" in living out its mission today. Invoking MB anthropologist Paul Hiebert's concept of critical contextualization, Neufeld urged that, as in the 1860s, the MB church should be critical not only of the broader cultural context, but also of its own current practice, in order to be a true community of covenanted disciples expanding the Kingdom of God.

Audience response zeroed in on ambivalence about identity, particularly at the local church level, where some worshippers at "community churches" are unaware their ecclesiastical home is MB nor what that "MB" means. In his official response to Neufeld's paper, CMU president Gerald Gerbrandt affirmed Mennonite Brethren's "intuitive" passion for evangelism and mission but challenged the denomination to measure the lines we draw against the New Testament body of Christ.

Mission was on the tongue of each international presenter at Tuesday night's plenary. John Sankara Rao of India and Nzuzi Mukawa of DR Congo spoke with gratitude about the first missionaries who risked safety and comfort to spread the gospel in foreign lands, "so that today, we might have Jesus," said Mukawa. Today, Indian and Congolese MBs risk their health and security to bring news of the gospel to their neighbours.

César García of Colombia added an account of suffering in his own homeland, but spoke of opportunity for further mission through "traditional" methods (the Colombian church has sent missionaries to Peru, Panama, Mexico), and a method dating beyond 1860 to the New Testament church – migration. The MB church in Germany (comprised largely of immigrants from the former Soviet Union) has seen this phenomenon as well, said Johann Matthies, mission development team leader for MBMSI in Europe. These *Umsiedler* struggle to connect with a culture that sees the church as a bridge to nowhere.

Participants affirmed the vision of holistic mission presented by international guests, and named challenges like helping without being paternalistic, a healthy

distribution of finances, fear and uncertainty about engaging a culture that doesn't believe in truth, and awareness of need in our own backyard. "The glut of information is paralyzing," said Randy Klassen of West Portal Church, Saskatoon, but "profound humility" is our starting point.

Workshops

RIM workshop presenters faced the same challenge as the plenary speakers – addressing an audience that runs the gamut from professional church historians and theologians to interested church members with limited knowledge of MB history and theology. The papers were academic and favoured the former group, but the lively discussions which followed each presentation made room for all. With two presenters per 90 minute session, each was allotted about 25 minutes after introductions; half an hour was given to questions from the floor. Three sessions in each timeslot were organized loosely around themes: MB identity, MB theology, and MB mission. Some of the workshop pairings were only tangentially related to each other, so facilitators either dealt with the papers separately or moderated Q&A periods that ping-ponged from one topic to the other.

Identity

The majority of the 10 workshop papers presented in Track 1 explored questions of identity in the context of Mennonite Brethren history. Presenters were primarily educators from a variety of disciplines, although historians dominated the line-up. They frequently spoke of the inherent difficulty in labelling MB identity and theology.

"There is virtual consensus that multiple influences impacted early Mennonite Brethren and that this convergence of influences was controversial at the time and still is today among MB historians," said Bruce Guenther. "Few debates have been more vigorously debated than how best to categorize this new movement. Despite the fact that the movement claimed to associate with Anabaptists, in many ways they intentionally borrowed from others." Guenther called this amalgamation a "new way of doing Mennonite."

Baptists influenced the early MB's understanding of conversion, said Andrew Dyck, in his paper on conversion and spirituality. The influence of Pietists can be seen in the songs favored by Mennonite Brethren, said Larry Warkentin. Gay

(cont'd on p. 9)



**Mennonite
Heritage
Centre**

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MHC Staffing Changes

After eighteen years at the reception desk of the Heritage Centre, administrative assistant Connie Wiebe will be moving up to the position of Church Engagement Executive Assistant, Mennonite Church Canada. Connie has provided faithful, friendly, stable and dependable support to the MHC Archives and Gallery longer than any other current staff at the Centre. She began on 1 August 1992 and will be transferring to the newly created Church Engagement Council on 1 October 2010. We thank her and wish her all the best in her new position.

Archivist Conrad Stoesz, who has served in the current position since the year 2000, will continue to work part-time and will start a graduate studies program in history offered by the Universities of Winnipeg and Manitoba.

Artist Ray Dirks, MHC Gallery curator since 1998, has just completed his 12 year on our staff.

It continues to be an honour and pleasure to work with such a fine team. I cannot imagine a finer place than the Centre, where I would rather have worked for the past 16 years.

Director, Alf Redekopp

Upcoming Events

There are a number of events and exhibits which anyone visiting Manitoba this Fall should consider. *Himmelbleiw* is an exhibition featuring Manitoba Mennonite Heritage Furniture and Floor Patterns, in Neuberghthal, south west of Lettelier, on until **October 11th**. At the Mennonite Heritage Village in Steinbach, visitors should not miss seeing, in the temporary gallery, the exhibition entitled, *Singing in Time: Mennonites and Music* which is on until **October 30th**.

There will also be special book releases, conferences and other presentations. Sociologist Leo Driedger's 19th book, titled *At the Forks: Mennonites in Winnipeg* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2010) is scheduled to be out in September. You'll want to get a copy for



Connie Wiebe, Heritage Centre Administrative Assistant since 1992 will be serving Mennonite Church Canada as Executive Assistant, Church Engagement as of October 1. We wish her all the best. Photo credit: Dan Dyck

yourself and perhaps as a gift for someone for Christmas. Then on Friday October 1, we will be hosting an **Otto Klassen Film Night** starting at 7 p.m. in the Canadian Mennonite University chapel, featuring the premiere showing of *The Burden of the Soviet Star* and other documentaries such as *The Pioneers of the Chaco* and *Remembering our Mennonite Heritage*. These new titles will be added to the list of Otto Klassen films available through the Text to Terabyte Project of the Mennonite Heritage Centre and the Centre for MB Studies.

An academic conference entitled *Mennonites, Melancholy and Mental Health* will convene at the University of Winnipeg **October 14-16**, hosted by the Chair of Mennonites Studies.

And finally, another must-see exhibit, brought together by the Mennonite Committee on Human Rights, entitled *Just Food*, featuring 19 artists from Canada and around the world, on the right to food, will open on Saturday, **Nov. 20** at our MHC Gallery. This exhibit is scheduled to run until mid-January 2011, and then tour in other parts of Canada.

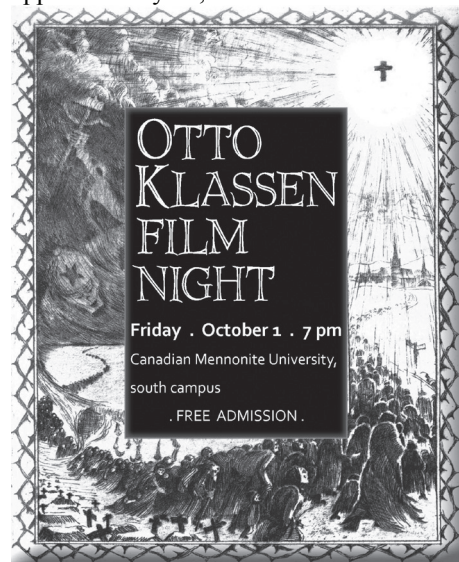
A.R.

Projects

Mennonitische Rundschau Index. The Centre for MB Studies and the Mennonite Heritage Centre applied for funds from the D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation to index the 1910-1919 issues of this newspaper. The Foundation awarded \$6000 to begin the project, and the Centres have agreed to have Bert Friesen do the work. CMBS holds the original newspapers and will be administering the funds. MHC has agreed to provide work space, software and technical support for the project. It is anticipated that the indexing of the 1910 issue will be completed in this first phase.

Heidi Koop fonds. The Heritage Centre has received final approval from the Librarian and Archivist of Canada for a project to arrange and describe the Heidi Koop archival materials which the Centre acquired in 2002 upon her death. Koop was a Bible school teacher, author, artist and health care advocate. The Centre is grateful to the Canadian Council of Archives for delivering this National Archival Development Program (NADP) for the Federal Government. The grant for \$3,267 will be used to hire a project worker for several weeks to process the collection.

Mennonite Genealogy Card Scanning. Thanks to Caroline (Kroeker) Brandt, granddaughter of Abram A. Vogt, the founder of MGI, 800 more cards were scanned this summer, while on her vacation from Germany. Over 170,000 cards are now scanned, leaving approximately 20,000 still to do. *A.R.*

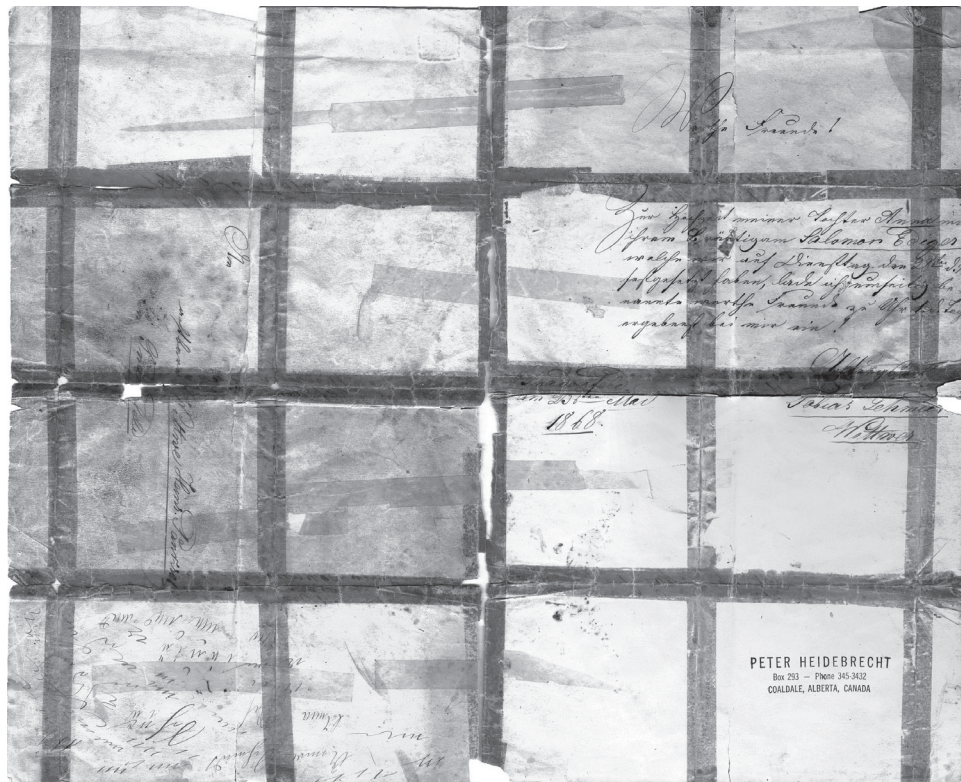


Contact Alf Redekopp, 204-888-6781 ext 193 or aredekopp@mennonitechurch.ca for details.



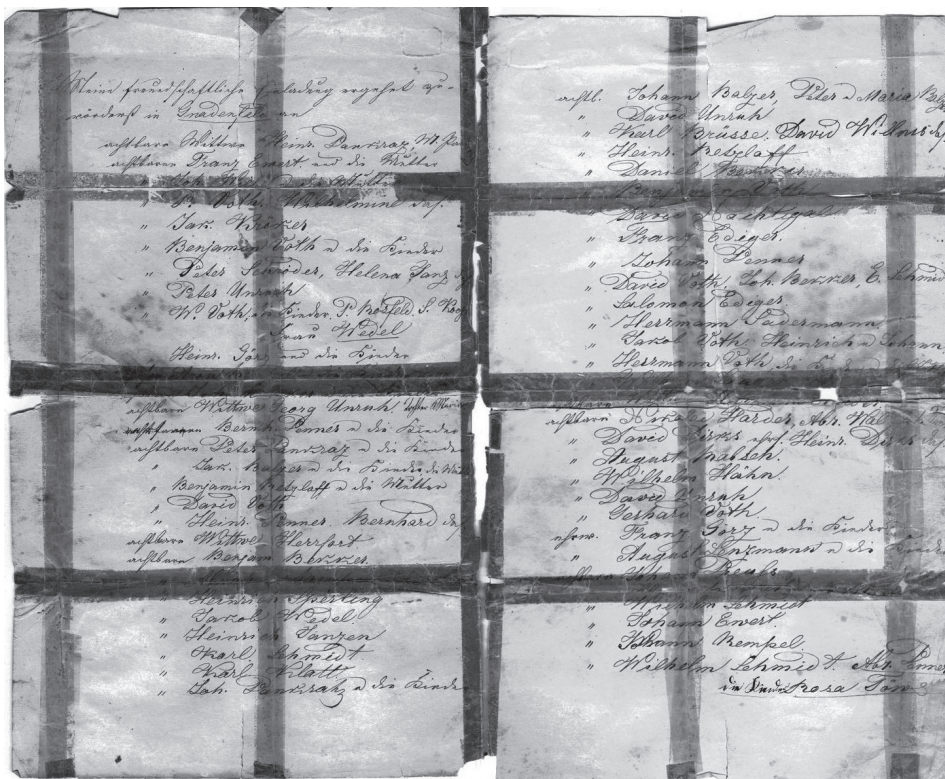
CENTRE FOR
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A wedding invitation from 1868 in Russia

Solomon and Anna (Schmidt) Ediger.



Doug Heidebrecht recently donated to the Centre a rare 1868 wedding invitation from Gnadenfeld, a village in the Molotschna Colony in South Russia. Widower Tobias Schmidt sent the invitation for his daughter Anna's May 28 wedding to Solomon Ediger. The invitation contains a list of almost 70 names and was passed around the village from home to home two days prior to the wedding. Anna and Solomon Ediger are Heidebrecht's great-great-grandparents.



Theodore Dyck, CMBS Project worker

The Centre for MB Studies was fortunate to receive money from the National Archival Development Programme (NADP), as administered by Library and Archives Canada and delivered by the Canadian Council of Archives (CCA) and its provincial counterpart, the Association for Manitoba Archives. The funds were used to process records of Bethany College (Hepburn, SK) and some of its supporting organizations such as the Saskatchewan conference, and several congregations. Also included were records from early MB Bible schools in Herbert and Coaldale. Theodore Dyck of Abbotsford BC was hired this summer to assist in the project. The final product will be a finding aid posted on www.archivescanada.ca, and on our web site, www.mbconf.ca/cmbs. — C. Stoesz

Siberian Mennonites

(cont'd from p. 1)

the beginning of active mission among non-Germans; today the lay preachers preach primarily in Russian. The Brotherhood had no church buildings of its own prior to Gorbachev – today it enjoys 17 new chapels and 36 more redone from former private quarters. A “prayer chapel” with more than 200 seats meeting the expectations even of an upscale West German audience is nearing completion in the village of Putschkovo. The informer reports that relatives and friends in Germany supplied the required funds. The leader for most of these congregations is 1929-born Nikolai Dikman (or Dieckmann) from Marionovka, who was forced to spend the years 1951-1956 in the mining GULag of Vorkuta.

A congregation of *kirchliche* Mennonites located in Solntsevkia just north of Isilkul boasted 130 baptised members and 160 children in 2008. That makes it the largest Mennonite congregation in the region of the former USSR. Other small congregations of *kirchliche* Mennonites are located in Nieu-dachino to the east of Omsk and in Novosibirsk. None of these belong to the Omsk Brotherhood. In Solntsevkia, church elder Philipp Friesen, a retired shepherd and farmer, remains the stalwart force behind the movement for staying home. But his congregation has nevertheless not been totally immune to western influences. For more than 70 years it has propagated the teaching of universal salvation. Contacts to the Swabian conference centre “Langensteinbacher Höhe,” which is famous for espousing this theology, exist. That teaching has heightened tensions. One hears that an inter-Mennonite wedding in Solntsevkia is unthinkable.

Further congregations of Mennonite origin are located around Slavgorod (Altai region southeast of Omsk) as well as in Shutshinsk near Karaganda (Kazakhstan). The same is true for four or five mission stations in the region of Orenburg (Urals) supported by emigrated *kirchliche* Mennonites in Bielefeld (Germany). Yet it would now be difficult to describe these congregations as German or Mennonite. Alexander Weiss (born 1964), pastor of the still-unregistered “International Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists” (ICCECB) in Slavgorod, does not hesitate to affirm his Mennonite roots. He explains: “When we were allowed to restart church life in the 1950s, there were

only grandmothers still around who knew anything about our Mennonite past, but they were afraid to talk.” Only in the 1950s was the old Mennonite identity able to resurface.

But generally speaking, the borders between Mennonite Brethren and Baptists have become blurred. From the Baptist influence, the Mennonite Brethren receive the practise of baptism by immersion. It is claimed that the pietistic teachings of Johann Gerhard Oncken (1800-1884), founder of the German Baptist movement and missionary to Russia, contributed -- along with the struggle for farmland -- to the Mennonite split of 1860. The process of assimilation was expedited by the fact that roughly half of the USSR's Mennonite congregations joined the “All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists” after 1966 in order to become officially registered.

Even the surnames of the present presidents of the Baptist Unions of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan reveal their Mennonite roots: Franz Tissen (or Thiessen) and Genrikh (or Heinrich) Foth respectively. The German-Russian Canadian Viktor Hamm, a Billy Graham Evangelistic Association-sponsored evangelist highly-popular in Eastern Europe, is a member of the Mennonite Brethren. Even the martyred father of Georgi Vins (or Wiens) (1928-1998), who was himself General-Secretary of the USSR's unregistered Baptists until deported in 1979, was a Mennonite Brethren missionary from Canada.

Working from Germany, mission societies with Mennonite roots such as Bibel-Mission, Friedensstimme, Hoffnungsstrahl and the Janz Team continue to influence events in Russia. One of the two founders of the mission Light in the East, Jakob Kroeker (1872-1948), was a Ukrainian Mennonite. Around 10% of the 2.2 million Russian-Germans now living in Germany are of Mennonite descent. (At the outset of WW I, the number of baptised Mennonites in Russia had peaked at 120,000.)

Even today, the small flock of Mennonites to the west of Omsk reflects the pacifism, pietism, Arminianism and separatism prevalent within the historic Russian Baptist movement. One could consequently claim that these Mennonites remain closer to the theological heritage of Russian Baptists than those new, heavily-Calvinistic groups from North America which have been active in Russian Baptist circles since 1990.

Yet despite this theological proximity, one cannot maintain that current relations between Mennonites and Baptists in the villages of Siberia are harmonious. Insiders attribute this to an unwanted, forced competition. Nearly all Mennonite and Baptist congregations to the west of Omsk (also Slavgorod) are unregistered, non-legal entities. This means that church buildings remain officially the property of private individuals. If the owner of a church property decides to transfer his allegiance to another denomination, only his conscience can keep him from taking the church property with him. So in certain instances, Mennonites could accuse unregistered Baptists not only of sheep-stealing (proselytism), but also of property theft.

North American Mennonites – and a Closing Commentary

The North American relief agency Mennonite Central Committee was active in the Soviet Union as early as 1920. After 1955 MCC belonged to delegations which frequently visited congregations throughout the USSR. During the Cold War, it was involved along with the Quakers and some Brethren denominations (Church of the Brethren for ex.) in attempts to foster understanding between the rival world blocs.

After 1990 MCC belonged to the large cloud of Western missions and agencies setting up shop in Moscow. There it rented space at the historic Central Baptist Church not far from the Kremlin. Yet the competition between missions and soaring living costs forced this organisation to reconsider. In 1998, MCC transferred its office for the former Soviet Union to Zaporozhe (Ukraine). For Mennonites that location was in a territory of major historical significance – but it was also remote. Thanks to the offspring of Ukrainian Mennonites from Canada, roughly five small church plants have occurred in this vicinity. Yet number-wise they cannot compete with the 2,000 Mennonites (including children) of western Siberia.

Canadians with Ukrainian roots have – largely without the aid of their mission societies – organised church and humanitarian efforts around Zaporozhe. It can no longer be considered impossible that a similar interest group might be formed for western Siberia. That would have the support of some, for the 220-year history of Mennonites on Russian soil makes them – after the Lutherans – the second-most traditional of all of Russia's

Protestant denominations. Not all regard the time as too late to reconnect to that heritage. Somewhat within this context, Canadian Mennonites sponsored an initial history symposium in Omsk June 2-4, 2010. [Separate report on p. 1 – ed.].

Walter Willms, a large-scale Mennonite farmer from British Columbia, has begun to invest in the village of Apollonovka to the west of Omsk. A large farm and grain mill are active; a bakery is nearing completion. As in the wilderness of Paraguay, a “Mennonite” road grader is bringing the public roads of the area up to par. That machine is a donation from British Columbia, shipped over by container.

Could a revised model of the Mennonite and Protestant settling and colonisation of Russia in 1789, prove to be an alternative to the expensive and frequently ineffective “mission tourism” of today? Such “tourism” consists of whirlwind tours lasting somewhere between five days and five years. The invitation already exists: in a Moscow meeting with Neville Callam, General-Secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, in Moscow on 17 June 2008, Alexander Torshin, Vice-Chairman of the Council of the Russian Federation, called on western Protestants to replant the wide expanses of Russia. Perhaps such an endeavour would not be hampered by the fact that Harry Giesbrecht, a Mennonite construction contractor from Winnipeg, is said to be a long-time friend of Vladimir Putin. But one should guard against undue enthusiasm: An initial goal could be the resettling of 200 Protestants. That would be 0.1% of the persons with Mennonite roots who moved to Germany in recent decades.

After 125 years of relative prosperity, the Russian experiment suffered total shipwreck for settlers of German origin during and after WW I. Assuming that all involved parties have learned from their past transgressions, a future experiment could be of significantly longer duration. The first settlers have already returned.

William Yoder, Ph.D. of Moscow wrote this article as a part of a press service of the Russian Evangelical Alliance.

RIM Consultation

(cont'd from p. 5)

Lynn Voth's paper explored the implications of the willingness of early Mennonite Brethren to borrow theology, among other things, from various groups.

The significant influence of Pietism was noted in several sessions, including the opening paper by historian Abraham Friesen. The conversation following Friesen's paper was lively, as participants criticized Friesen for being “too hard” on the Pietists and for not providing his audience with a clear definition of Pietism. The difficulty of defining Pietism was acknowledged by more than one presenter, but unlike Friesen, some attempted to do so anyway.

The influence of evangelicalism, specifically the current trend among U.S. and Canadian MBs to describe themselves as both evangelical and Anabaptist, was also explored in this track. Guenther argued that MBs have always been both evangelical and Anabaptist. “This dual identity is a huge advantage to us,” he said, because it allows Mennonite Brethren to draw selectively and critically from both streams.

When asked why the evangelical and Anabaptist aspects of MB identity have interacted as “oil and water,” Guenther responded: “I don't think they are polar opposites. The reason the traditions came together is precisely because there is such compatibility between them that it works.”

Other papers presented in this track explored a specific aspect of Mennonite Brethren identity in North America.

Valerie Rempel explored how Mennonite Brethren have “officially” told their story and how the decisions made in the storytelling process have helped to form the denomination's identity. Harold Jantz used life stories of four Canadian leaders to point out strands of MB identity recognizable to this day.

Survey findings: Sam Reimer reviewed the Canadian Evangelical Churches Study, noting that the identity of Canadian MB churches tends to be strongly evangelical, less Anabaptist. Lynn Jost outlined trends in preaching and changes in MB identity revealed by a bulletin survey of six U.S. MB churches from 1955 to the present.

Myron Penner outlined the popular view of intellectual history and then countered that understanding with an explanation of how philosophers themselves understand the role of reason in demonstrating that



Alfred Neufeld, Paraguay

belief in God is intellectually viable. The session ended before Penner made the connection between MB theology and identity and philosophy but the question and answer time showed that his material engaged participants.

Theology

In Track 2, each session highlighted the importance of community hermeneutics – the discipline of working together at theology. Of course, conflict was an underlying theme in these workshops. Tim Geddert and Doug Heidebrecht's papers explicitly asked the questions the other workshops danced around: how do we figure out what the Bible says – together – and what is the role of the MB confession in that process?

The MB church has always valued biblicism, said Geddert, but he cautioned against inadequate understanding of cultural factors, both for our own reading, and in the original audience, and challenged us to bring a discerning mind to every promise and command recorded in the Bible. The Confession of Faith is both a descriptive and a normative document that points back to the Bible even as it attempts to lay out our understanding of it. “It's important not to lose our engagement with texts and the Confession,” said Heidebrecht. “The Bible is always right, but is our interpretation correct?” Geddert asked. Thus, “we must engage with people – it makes our theology better.”

Jericho Ridge Community Church navigated the waters of the contentious Women in Ministry Leadership issue by using a multilevel, inclusive discussion process to come to congregational resolution. In keeping with their view that the process is as important as the decision, pastors Brad Sumner and Keith Reed did not reveal their conclusion, but showed how the method of coming to consensus allowed all members to feel heard, to gain instruction on the issue, and learn how to disagree respectfully.

“Church life is more an emotional journey than a theological one,” said Dan Unrau in his paper on the role of family

systems in conflict within the church; “when we know our families, we know ourselves.” With a healthy understanding of ourselves and each other, we can “learn to walk toward conflict.”

According to J Janzen, Canadian MBs have lacked a robust peace witness. We have neither wholly rejected the use of force, nor fully engaged in social activism, nor managed interpersonal and congregational conflict well, he asserted, citing our emphasis on evangelism and personal peace with God as major factors. He challenged MBs to reach a more holistic understanding, erasing the line between good works and good news, relocating individuals within a community of faith and accountability, and above all – “be humble.”

In a report on his organization’s theological orientation, Don Peters explained that Mennonite Central Committee is working intentionally to be “on the same page” with ICOMB, recently adopting a statement of faith (“Shared Convictions” of the Mennonite World Conference) that jives with the ICOMB Confession.

Questions about jurisdiction dominated the BFL Q&A, along with topics that need discernment. At the end, USMB BFL chair Larry’s Nikkel’s question still hung in the air: “should the BFL be more prophetic in its leadership?”

Mission

Speakers and delegates affirmed that a heart for missions and a desire to reach unsaved people “is in the DNA of Mennonite Brethren.” Over our 150-year history, missionaries have thanked God for providing knowledge and guidance to carry out the task with amazing results. But there are always challenges. Track 3 provided an overview of 2010 mission realities – on what’s new, what’s still true, and what’s to do.

What’s new: The sweeping reach of media: Satellite TV, radio, and internet are producing fruit in previously unreachable parts of the globe. It’s probably “the most exciting single change” at work in missions today, said Randy Friesen.

The emerging generation: The digital world is “messing with our minds” and has “changed how we do life,” Jules Glanzer explained, making it all the more important to be present, face-to-face people, as Christians.

Holistic church planting: Meeting physical human needs while ministering spiritually is a major success story in this

period.

Partnership – *with* the local church to support media and material outreach, and *between* national conferences: ICOMB’s work to develop confessional unity among its 19 conference members, is building a “global sense of what it means to be MB,” said Abe Dueck.

Interculturalism: Canadian society is increasingly multicultural but the church is lagging behind. To truly make a place for others, churches must go beyond the peaceful coexistence of multiculturalism, learning “self-critique” and “empathy” for those who are different, said Ken Peters. Beware – the church will be changed in the process.

Still true: Suffering and persecution: The greatest growth in the church is under “authoritarian and oppressive regimes.” Those on the edges of society may have less to lose, and thus experience fewer impediments to accepting a life-changing gospel.

The gospel: Some people groups – Quebecers, post-secondary students – seem indifferent to religion, but Eric Wingender reminded us that the incarnation still resonates there. Faith communities who model the life of Jesus and invite others to join engage the irreligious.

A missionary impulse: Former MB mission fields (DR Congo, India) are larger in membership than Canada and the U.S., and are sending their own missionaries abroad. North American members comprise only one-sixth of the global population of Mennonite Brethren.

What’s to do: Understand and engage young people. The 18–30 age bracket is the first group in our culture to take its own importance for granted, Gil Dueck explained, yet, many are still searching for identity in a pluralistic world. They associate adulthood with stagnation, feel chronically in transition – and are under-represented in churches. Rebecca Stanley reported that University of B.C. has 47,000 students but only 500 of them are involved with any Christian club on campus.

North Americans may have a sense that western missionaries are no longer needed, but Randy Friesen noted that in such a rapidly changing field, western mission workers still have an essential role to play.

Using the NASA space program as a model, Terry Wiseman explained how the expensive, outmoded models of the past need to give way for innovation and

return to the basics. “Embrace the unfamiliar” and “give yourself away” he urges church planters.

Kicking off the closing session of the consultation, BFL chairs Lorraine Dick of Canada and Larry Nikkel of the U.S. responded on behalf of the listening committee. “I pray these discussions will result in work” – both for the BFL, and local churches, said Dick. “To only think about a subject is not enough.... How will I allow God to transform mission in my life so that I will continue to serve faithfully where God has placed me?” Identifying change as a thread through the fabric of our history, USMB BFL chair Larry Nikkel said “we should work creatively in managing change instead of resisting.” We must continue to ask “who are we?” but “continue to be dedicated to walking in [Jesus’] way as we best understand it.”

As befits a consultation, participants had the last word at RIM, discussing around tables then presenting their findings to the larger group. They still had questions about boundary making with the Confession of Faith, how to do mission, and how to value and engage the voices of young people in the church, and felt they had only scratched the surface of all there was to learn and discuss on the many topics presented. But there was also plenty to affirm, and excitement for what had been learned over the three days.

There were some cautions, too. “MBs must guard against spiritual arrogance and exclusivity,” said David Gibson from Sardis Community Church, Chilliwack, B.C. “We need enough face time together to understand what we mean by words we use,” urged Edith Dyck from Crossroads, Winnipeg. Several others wondered, “Where was the time spent praying together?”

“The local church is like a nuclear family,” said Tor Norris of Country Bible Church, Orland, Cal., summing up his experience with an analogy and a prayer for the MB church of the future. It needs to hear stories about the past, but realize it’s not the same as in the past. Family changes as children grow up and bring home spouses. “Each new culture enriches us, makes us more complete. We’re going to be losing our current identity as we give it away. In return, we’ll take on more and more the identity of Jesus Christ.

Book Reviews

(cont'd from p. 12)

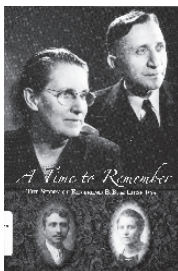
to do farming family, emerge in the Molotschna Colony villages of Ladekopp and Petershagen, and the strongly business inclined Neufeld lineage in the Molotschna administrative centre of Halbstadt. In fact, so entrepreneurial and prosperous were Susanne's maternal Neufeld ancestors that her great great grandfather Johann Herman Neufeld (1801-1865) was recognized by the Czar for his progressive business leadership with a gold pocket watch with his name engraved on it and her great uncle, Herman Neufeld (1850-1913), was awarded a gold medal by the Czar for outstanding business achievements.

Whether the author's main intention is realized, namely, to explain and preserve the memories of her past so that her children, grandchildren and the descendants of her siblings may learn about their heritage, is for the family to say. Her hope for the broader audience—that the story “of a little Mennonite girl and her family [may] interest and inspire you” (x)—has certainly been realized for me.

Dora Dueck *A Time to Remember: The Story of Reverend B.B. Fast & Liese Fast* (Winnipeg: The Estate of B.B. Fast, 2009?)

Reviewed by Marlene Epp, Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo

Mennonites (and Mothers) have a long tradition of ‘great men’ (auto) biographies and this recent history of teacher, businessman, and Mennonite Brethren church minister, Bernard B. Fast, is a new addition to that genre of history. As was common for an earlier generation of male leaders, Bernard is identified by his initials – B.B. – perhaps as a means of differentiating between common first names. But like other well-written and thoughtful biographies published in the last two decades, *A Time to Remember* makes an admirable effort to make this also the life story of Liese (DeFehr) Fast, B.B.'s wife, and about their historical sojourn together and as a family. So this book also fits the genre of family history and, because of all it illuminates about the history of the Mennonite Brethren (MB), also makes a contribution to denominational history.



The book is divided into three parts according to the geographic locations of the Fast family – Russia, Springstein (Manitoba), and Winnipeg. The eleven chapters spanning the sections are organized mainly chronologically, with a thematic focus in each such as childhood, teaching, ministry, business, and family.

Part one of the story follows B.B.'s birth in the late nineteenth century in Molotschna, South Russia, his youth and early adulthood in the settlements of Terek and Kuban, his service in forestry camp, and his experience of the tumultuous years of the First World War, Revolution, and Civil War. A life-changing event during these years was the murder of B.B.'s father, along with a brother-in-law and a neighbor in 1917; his mother died of typhus only two years later. B.B.'s marriage to Liese DeFehr in 1923 came closely on the heels of his conversion and membership in the MB church. The book intriguingly connects the “two major commitments,” suggesting that the desire for Liese's hand in marriage helped propel Fast towards his spiritual choice, given her own strong faith commitment. His marriage to Liese also drew B.B. into a new family, one that would shape his own career choices and included him in an MB dynasty that influenced many institutional, social, and economic developments for Canadian Mennonites at mid-twentieth century.

In 1925 the DeFehr and Fast families, led by patriarch C.A., immigrated to Canada, where B.B. sought to pursue his chosen vocation as a teacher. The second part of the book then, is about the Fast family's years in Springstein, Manitoba, where B.B. and Liese and their children (five in total) shaped their daily lives around the routines of the schoolhouse next door. There is much in this section that depicts the nature of schooling and education in Depression-era rural Canada – curriculum, games, discipline, special events, weather – and the narrative is enhanced by nostalgic memories of B.B.'s former students. The section also introduces B.B.'s early years as a minister in the MB church and the growing tensions between MB community members and those who belonged to the General Conference Mennonites. The analysis of B.B.'s sudden resignation in 1938 suggests that MB-GC friction precipitated his departure from the school, but the reader is only given a brief glimpse into what must have been a momentous transition in the lives of B.B. and Liese.

The “Winnipeg Years” are the focus of part three. Here we learn about B.B. the businessman, as the son-in-law who played a central role in the early years of the C.A. DeFehr & Sons company, a sales enterprise that would develop into a major Canadian corporation. The small but engaging anecdotes about the business, such as what B.B. wore to work every day, are strengths of this section. One narrative weakness is the frequent mention of B.B.'s “early death” well before the chronology of his passing is actually reached. B.B.'s personality as “non-confrontational” and his ability to find the “middle path” in an issue is highlighted especially in his ongoing church work as leading minister for many years of the North End MB Church. The second last chapter of the book on family life – preceding the conclusion on B.B.'s death and legacy – is fitting but also ironic given that B.B. seemed to have little time for family in the midst of his consuming involvement in church and business.

The project was initiated by the children of B.B. and Liese and thus serves as a tribute to their parents and to present and preserve the Fast's life story to subsequent generations. The narrative is supplemented by a collection of wonderful photographs and text inserts such as Liese's *Bubbat* recipe. The book's broader appeal, beyond family, depends on the interest of individuals who were students or parishioners of Fast, or who want to understand the history of the Mennonite Brethren church and its institutions in Russia and Manitoba.

Book Notes

By Harold Peters-Fransen

The Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia, in October 2008 and January 2009 held a commemorative event, which resulted in the production of a CD entitled, *A Festival of Thanksgiving, 60 years of Peace and Plenty*. The event was held to remember the coming of refugees from the Soviet Union ultimately to Canada after the Second World War. With narration, hymns, and poetry, the story is told starting with the departure of those from the Soviet Union in the 1920s, and the various trials of those who stayed. Events remembered included famine, the great terror, the German occupation, and the trek to

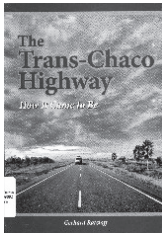
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Book Reviews

Gerhard Ratzlaff, *The Trans-Chaco Highway: How It Came to Be* / translated by Richard Ratzlaff (Asunción, Paraguay, 2009) 185 pp.

Reviewed by Elfrieda Neufeld Schroeder

Ratzlaff's book is an English translation of *Die Ruta Transchaco - wie sie entstand* (1998), prepared especially for the Mennonite World Assembly in Paraguay in July 2009.



In his foreword, Edgar Stoesz, long-time MCC director for Latin America, writes: "It was an 'unlikely coalition' between the Paraguayan and US governments, the Mennonite Central Committee, and the Mennonites and cattle ranchers of the Chaco that brought the unique, exceptional project [for a Trans-Chaco Highway] to completion." For the colonies, this highway became the means of escaping a hopeless situation: the inability of transporting their goods to market.

Ratzlaff vividly describes the "unlikely coalition" and how it came about. He credits Dr. John Schmidt, an American physician who served for many years among the Mennonites in the Chaco, for first voicing his concerns about improving two of the biggest problems in the Chaco – communication and export markets — by constructing a good road to the ports along the Paraguay River. People like Harry Harder, Vern Buller, and other Mennonite leaders took up the cause. They demonstrated that roads in the Chaco could be built quickly and economically; they aroused national and international interest in the Trans-Chaco Highway project (and in the development of the Chaco in general).

As stated in his conclusion, Ratzlaff's purpose in writing this book is three-fold: to provide information about one part of our history, to cause reflection about our principles of faith, and to motivate our fellow believers and other citizens of this country to service.

It was quite difficult for the author to find the necessary information he needed in order to write this book, especially where it concerns the Mennonite involvement. It is to his credit as a tenacious researcher that this material about an incredible achievement is now available to ordinary readers. He also brings considerable writing skills to this

project, providing colourful descriptions about the characters who participated in this immense work and humorous anecdotes about their experiences. It seems to this reviewer that his description of the book as "a patchwork, pieced together from many different sources" reflects how the Trans-Chaco Highway itself came into being. He claims that the book lacks a proper conclusion, but his conclusion and evaluation in the last two chapters is very helpful.

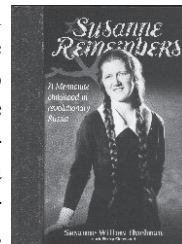
Ratzlaff laments that no one set up a monument to the achievements of those workers who carried on "in the name of Christ" to help their fellow believers. He himself has done so by writing this book. It is not just a book for people who have a special interest in Paraguay because they have lived or worked there. It is a fascinating account of people of different cultures working together to achieve something of lasting value.

Thielman, Susanne Willms with Philip Sherwood, editor; Selma Willms Turner, illustrator; Bill Glasgow, designer. *Susanne Remembers: A Mennonite childhood in revolutionary Russia* (Abbotsford, BC: Judson Lake House, 2009), 166 pp.

Reviewed by Anna Epp Ens

Besides the beautiful cover, the name Willms attracted me to this book. It is the name of my paternal great-grandmother, Justina Willms, and of my uncle, Abram J. Willms, married to my father's sister Susanna, from Coaldale, Alberta. A quick scanning of the book confirmed for me that Susanne's father was Abram J.'s older brother who lived at Abbotsford BC, ca 15 kilometres from my Epp family at Mt. Lehman BC. My curiosity to learn more about this H.J. Willms family I knew about but never got to know personally, piqued my interest. Perhaps there would be more information also relevant to my great-grandmother.

Susanne, the 4th of seven, was born in 1914 in Tiege, Molotschna. In Canada she first worked as a domestic, then turned to nursing. She married college professor George G. Thielman. Together they raised two sons and lived in Greensboro North Carolina, Atlanta Georgia, and retired to Seattle, Washington. Since George's death, Susanne, now 95, has lived with or



near son Gerry and family, presently at Fredericksburg, Virginia.

Several things make this memoir unusual: as far as I know it is the only one of the WWI era written by a woman, reflecting on her childhood and adolescent years. What characterizes the memoir further are the intelligent, eloquent, vivid word pictures describing the growing up amidst war, revolution, hunger, disease, persecution and displacement. The memoir speaks of the resilience and faith of youth that rises above bitterness, discontentment or despair to acceptance and making the best of things. Through all the hardships and dangers including the late 1929 uncertain, urgent flight via Moscow to Canada, Susanne maintains her cheerful, positive view of life.

While Susanne's first 15 years were marked by hardship and privation she claims: "we were a happy lot of youngsters." (71) Her recollections are graphic, detailed, insightful and often humorous whether she talks about her doll or about her ingenious mother, Christmas or *Papa* telling stories. "It was a slower era than today, when fewer projects were planned and achieved. But if we had hurried, I might not have the fond memories that I do." (87) And Communism? She knows about that too, because, among other things, she was a pioneer, though "not very cooperative with communist indoctrination." (95)

Prepared in stages, the memoir, revised from assignments first penned in a writing class (vi), are unquestionably complemented by the collaborative efforts of the editor, designer, illustrator, and others. Significant historical context is excerpted from Susanne's father's diary and provides a male perspective on the times. Similarly, selections from her sister Margarete's diary add noteworthy detail for the 1927-1928 years. Striking sepia-toned photographs, delightful water colour sketches and side bars highlight persons, institutions, objects, and special sentiments that Susanne recalls. The cover design and layout of the book are pleasing. Typos, historical inaccuracies, or the lack of an index, go pale in the overall product.

The earliest dates cited in the genealogical information are those of her great great great great grandfather Peter Neufeld (1697-1769). Though incomplete, the data in the book spans seven generations of both her Willms and Neufeld families. The Willms, a largely well

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