

# Mennonite Historian

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



The Crusaders quartet singing on the Lighthouse of Hope broadcast from Vancouver (CJOR) around 1962: (l-r) Henry Block, Rudy Martens, Norm Sawatzky, and Jim Poetker (MAID CMBS NP149-1-3568). The radio broadcast was sponsored by the Fraserview and Killarney Park Mennonite Brethren Churches. There were many such radio broadcasts initiated by Mennonites across Canada starting in the 1940s. In addition to a gospel message, music was a significant component of these broadcasts. See story starting on page 2.

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## The Early Years of Mennonite Radio in Manitoba

by David Balzer, Canadian Mennonite University

On February 11, 1923, the Sunday service of Carmichael Presbyterian Church hit the airwaves in Regina, Saskatchewan, over local radio station CKCK.<sup>1</sup> This first documented Sunday radio service in Canada heralded a remarkable era of religious radio broadcasting from the 1920s into the 1960s. Into the myriad religious programs filling the airwaves in those decades would come the Mennonite voice, not to be left silent in the din of proclamations and music. The earliest known Mennonite radio broadcasts in Canada aired in 1940.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, I explore the timbre—the character and tone—of an emerging Mennonite voice through two English-language radio programs that originated in Manitoba: *The Gospel Light Hour*, sponsored by the Mennonite Brethren (MB) community, and *The Abundant Life*, produced by the Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba (CMM).<sup>3</sup> My analysis focuses on the early years of these programs and the leadership of their respective producers, John M. Schmidt and Frank H. Epp. From the 1940s to the 1960s, many local Mennonite-connected radio projects



Radio preacher John M. Schmidt recording *The Gospel Light Hour* program in 1960 for broadcast on CFAM Altona and other stations. Photo credit: MAID MAO XV-19.3-1992-14-1471.

were developed across Canada. But the two Manitoba programs were uniquely endorsed on several denominational levels and distributed nationally, signaling their particular significance in the Mennonite radio landscape in Canada. In exploring the underlying dispositions guiding the producers' decisions, I argue that the two programs shared a rhetoric of conversion but diverged in their emphasis on social transformation.

### *Beginnings of Two National Radio Programs*

On February 23, 1947, two Mennonite Brethren Bible College students, Henry Brucks and Henry Poetker, along with musicians, introduced a half-hour program called *The Light and Life Hour* on Winnipeg radio station CKRC.<sup>4</sup> The program was soon renamed *The Gospel Light Hour* and, in 1954, officially became part of the work of the Manitoba MB Conference. John M. Schmidt was the producer from 1950 to 1963. The program aired continuously from 1947 to 1976, eventually expanding to stations across Manitoba into western Canada and globally through shortwave on HCJB based in Quito, Ecuador.<sup>5</sup>

Ten years after the Mennonite Brethren launched a radio ministry, the Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba entered the field. On January 2, 1957, the CMM Executive and Radio committees met to

deliberate extending a half-time position to Frank H. Epp to be director of their radio interests.<sup>6</sup> Two weeks later Epp accepted—and inaugurated an unprecedented era of radio production in this segment of the Mennonite community.<sup>7</sup> Within his first year he developed several programs, one of which was the half-hour *Abundant Life*. While initially offered a one-year appointment, he would stay on as director until 1959 and as primary speaker through 1963.<sup>8</sup> The program began airing on CFAM Altona, Manitoba, in March 1957. By 1961, *Abundant Life* was airing in all four western provinces.<sup>9</sup> In January 1962, the Canadian Board of Missions of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada approved a motion that *Abundant Life* become a national weekly radio outreach.<sup>10</sup> Thus *Gospel Light Hour* and *Abundant Life*, both originating in Winnipeg, achieved national presence and affirmation within their first decade of operation.<sup>11</sup>

### *Rhetoric of Conversion*

In conducting a textual analysis of more than 240 radio broadcast scripts of *Gospel Light Hour* and *Abundant Life*, I concluded that the dominant rhetoric of both programs from 1950 to 1963, while Schmidt and Epp were producers, was one of conversion. In an analysis of the relationship between

(cont'd on p. 4)

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# Genealogy and Family History

## Mennonite Genealogy and Adoptions in Russia and Prussia

by Glenn H. Penner <gpenner@uoguelph.ca>

This article is concerned with adoptions among the early Low-German Mennonites in Russia before the big emigration to North America in the 1870s and in Prussia during the period before the last big emigration to Russia around 1820.

The idea of adoption in those days was very different than it is now. Adoption, in the modern sense of the word, simply did not happen. According to the old Flemish inheritance rules followed by the Low-German Mennonites during this time period, all children were assigned two *Vormünder* (sing. *Vormund*) or guardians early on in their lives. These men were usually related to the child in some way (most often an uncle) or trusted neighbour.

One of the duties of a *Vormund* was to ensure that when a child reached the age of majority, they would receive any inheritance due to them. Another duty was to take responsibility when a child under their guardianship was orphaned. This meant finding foster parents. In such cases, the child was usually referred to as a *Pflegekind*. The foster parents (*Pflegeeltern*) would be known as *Pflegevater* and *Pflegemutter*. The proceeds of the sale of the deceased parents' property were entrusted with the *Waisenamt* (the institution in charge of orphan affairs). The *Waisenamt* existed in Russia from the early days of settlement, but there is no evidence that such an institution existed among the earlier Prussian Mennonites.

It was rather rare for both parents to die while their children were young. On the other hand, it was not uncommon for one parent to die. When a widow and widower married, the resulting family could be quite large. In such cases, it was common for "excess" children to be "farmed out." In some cases, this also happened to children in rather large, poor families. In either case, the children were usually sent to live with various relatives or taken in by childless couples. These children were *not* adoptees. One or both parents were still alive but were economically unable to

support or physically unable to care for all their children (and stepchildren).

The most important point of this article is that children who were taken in did *not* change their surnames. Birth names were kept. I have yet to see a documented example of a child who took on their foster parents' surname and would be interested to know if anyone can find such an example.

During this time, Mennonites strictly followed the Flemish inheritance tradition whereby inheritance was through blood (biological) relationship only. In the hundreds of Prussian and Russian Mennonite inheritance documents I have viewed, I have not seen a single example of a person receiving inheritance other than from blood relations.

In the past, one potential example has been used to counter the argument that Mennonites followed a biological inheritance tradition. Prussian Mennonite genealogist Anna Andres interpreted the inheritance records of Cornelius Andres and Anna Stoesz as saying that the couple was childless, that they adopted the children Cornelius and Anna (yes, the same first names!), and that these children were Cornelius Andres's heirs upon his death in the early 1760s.<sup>1</sup> It has been assumed by some that these children changed their names to Andres upon being taken in by Cornelius Andres. If that were the case, the Y-DNA of all male direct-line descendants of Cornelius should not match those of the descendants of Cornelius Andres's brothers. This is not the case. The Y-DNA of the male Andres descendants of 'adoptive' son Cornelius *do* match those of the male Andres descendants of Martin Andres, the brother to Cornelius Andres. This means that Cornelius and Anna were the children of Cornelius Andres and Anna Stoesz or of a male Andres relative of Cornelius Andres. If Cornelius Andres was indeed childless, the inheritance rules clearly state that his surviving siblings and surviving children of deceased siblings would have been his heirs. The fact that the children, Cornelius and Anna, were the only heirs mentioned implies that they were his legitimate biological children. In addition, if the children were indeed orphans, they would have received as inheritance the proceeds of the sale of

their biological parents' property, not from Cornelius and Anna (Stoesz) Andres.

There are also stories of non-Mennonite children being taken in by Mennonites, with the child taking the surname of the family. These are, in general, family legends which are either unverifiable or easily disproved. Unfortunately, some descendants cling to these old wives' tales as if they were fact, even when there is no supporting evidence whatsoever, or there is solid contrary evidence. DNA testing of descendants could help clarify these situations.

During the entire time period of interest here, I know of only one verifiable case of a non-Mennonite being adopted by Mennonites: namely, Johann Peters (1863–1946; Grandma database #177802).<sup>2</sup> Johann was abandoned as a newborn by his mother, who was likely a local Ukrainian, and taken in by a Mennonite family in the Bergthal Colony in Russia. DNA evidence strongly supports this adoption. I would be interested in knowing about other examples from the time period of interest here.

The topic of adoption in Mennonite genealogy has come to the forefront as a result of the popularity of genealogical DNA testing, especially in situations where Y-DNA tests show that a male does not match the other males of the same surname. Adoption is often used to explain away such a mismatch. However, as mentioned above, name changes did not accompany adoption in traditional Mennonite society, at least as far back as we have written records. In such cases, the mismatch is more likely due to the illegitimate birth of a paternal ancestor (this will be the topic of a future article).<sup>3</sup>

*Genealogist Glenn Penner has an office at MHA on the CMU campus. If you have a Mennonite genealogical question, he is open to corresponding with you. He can be reached by email at the address above.*

## Endnotes

1. Correspondence in the possession of the author. Unfortunately, these inheritance records did not survive WW2.

2. More information on the GRANDMA database can be found at <https://www.grandmaonline.org/gmolstore/pc/Overview-d1.htm>.

3. For more on the Mennonite DNA project, see my articles in the following issues of the *Mennonite Historian*: September 2018 <http://www.mennonitehistorian.ca/44.3.MHSep18.pdf>; December 2018 <http://www.mennonitehistorian.ca/44.4.MHDec18.pdf>; and June 2019 <http://www.mennonitehistorian.ca/45.2.MHJun19.pdf>; as well as [www.mennonitedna.com](http://www.mennonitedna.com).

## Early Mennonite Radio

(cont'd from p. 2)

Christianity and mass media in America, Quentin Schultze argues that “Protestants created a powerful rhetoric of conversion that shapes practically every excursion into religious broadcasting. Protestants have long imagined mass-media technologies as powerful tools for transforming culture, building churches, and teaching society moral lessons.... This rhetoric was an ode to persuasion or, to put it more religiously, an aria to the power of symbols to foster social progress as well as to save souls.”<sup>12</sup> Evidence for this rhetoric of conversion is found both in the two Mennonite producers’ personal faith experiences and in each program’s mandate and content.

Born in Russia in 1918, John M. Schmidt emigrated to Canada with his parents and grew up on the family farm in Coaldale, Alberta.<sup>13</sup> His memoir recounts how one Sunday evening at age 17 he went to the schoolhouse for Bible study because his father invited him to drive their new Studebaker car, a rare occurrence.<sup>14</sup> Schmidt recounts how he lingered after the Bible study and engaged in conversation. “I received a deep consciousness of forgiveness,” reports Schmidt, “[and] this blessed assurance of salvation has stayed with me all my life.”<sup>15</sup>

Frank H. Epp, born in Manitoba in 1929, recounts two conversion experiences, the most poignant of which occurred after the family moved to British Columbia when Epp was baptized and subsequently became a church member in 1947. “It was at this time that I was deeply convicted of sin, and it was only after a new, genuine conversion experience and a return to faith in Christ that I began to gain victory over my old nature.”<sup>16</sup> Epp offers a systematic articulation of his convictions in “A Personal Credo” submitted to Bethel College in 1956.<sup>17</sup> He comes to this conclusion: “Having realized the plight and hopeless condition of individual man without God in my own life and having witnessed to it in numerous other lives, I regard it as my mission in life to be dedicated to the proclamation of the message of salvation, as the message of hope and purpose for individual men everywhere.”<sup>18</sup> I suggest that Schmidt and Epp both lived with a clear awareness of their own conversion experience and named that experience as central to



Radio preacher Frank H. Epp on *The Abundant Life* program in the early 1960s, CFAM Altona. Photo credit: MAID MAO XV-19.3-1992-14-2905.

their life’s vocation as they engaged in broadcasting.

Alongside this personal sensibility around conversion, a rhetoric of conversion is evident in each program’s founding mandate. Executive committee minutes from *Gospel Light Hour*’s first year of operation state that the broadcast’s aim was “to reach the many people—saved and unsaved, shut-ins, and those in isolated districts, with the clear Gospel concerning Jesus Christ and the way of salvation.”<sup>19</sup> In a listener’s letter of May 8, 1947, just months after the program began, co-founder Henry Poetker wrote that “it is our prayer that God will bless the broadcast as you listen to it and above all that sinners might find their Saviour.”<sup>20</sup> A 1962 report, written while Schmidt was producer, stated that since its inception “this program has been frankly evangelistic in tone; its primary aim being to reach the unsaved, who are unlikely, unwilling, or unable to hear the Gospel of salvation in regular church services.”<sup>21</sup> The vision of *Gospel Light Hour* was unwavering.

A rhetoric of conversion pervaded the founding mandate of the CMM’s radio interests. As early as 1949, the missions committee of the conference had begun exploring possibilities for radio broadcasting in Manitoba.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps the clearest articulation of *Abundant Life*’s mandate came from Frank Epp at a 1957 meeting of CMM’s newly established Radio Committee. He had just accepted the

role of Radio Director for the conference. In an addendum to the agenda, he outlines a lengthy series of organizational and philosophical concerns about the radio project. This is how he saw its primary goal: “The message of our radio work should be evangelical, purely biblical, simple and clear; and in no circumstance should there be a compromise with a cheap Christendom. The foundation of our faith, including nonresistance and our commitment to discipleship and nonconformity to this world should come to full realization. The Gospel should also have something to say to the problems of our time.”<sup>23</sup> In a program review survey sent to ministers and church workers in October 1959, an item in the survey asks, “Are non-believers made aware of their situation? Are they shown the way of salvation, does it truly share the Way, the Truth, and the Life?”<sup>24</sup>

Informed by their founding mandates, the contents of both programs reverberated with an evangelistic vision. The lyrics of the opening theme music of *The Gospel Light Hour*, a hymn written by Maud Frazer Jackson, point to the broadcast’s overriding content: “’Tis a true and faithful saying, / Jesus died for sinful men; / though we’ve told the story often, / we must tell it o’er again. / Oh, glad and glorious Gospel! / With joy we now proclaim / a full and free Salvation, / through faith in Jesus’ name!”<sup>25</sup>

A radio message that first aired on

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## German Mennonites and Their Canadian Connections After the Second World War

by Bernhard Thiessen, Berlin, Germany

It took only 12 years for Nazi ideology and its supporters to destroy large parts of Europe and other parts of the world. Millions of people died in a terrible war and millions more were killed in concentration camps, because they did not fit the Nazi's racist ideology. While Canadian and German soldiers had been enemies during the war, Canadian and German Mennonites were still part of the same "family of faith." And so, just a few weeks after the Second World War ended, the first Mennonites from North America came to a destroyed Europe to help struggling German Mennonite communities rebuild and feed the starving people.

Postwar Germany had been divided into four zones, each under foreign control: British, French, American, and Russian. The capital city, Berlin, was also divided into four sectors, controlled by the same foreign governments. About 1,800 to 2,000 Mennonites,<sup>1</sup> mostly from East and West Prussia and a few from Russia,<sup>2</sup> came to the Soviet-controlled zone of Germany as refugees between January and May 1945. By the 1950s, many of them had fled from East to West Germany and some immigrated to North America, including Canada.

When the Berlin Wall was constructed in August 1961, there were about 350 Mennonites that remained in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Conditions changed drastically once again. Now border crossings were prohibited and cross-border contacts were severely restricted. Nevertheless, a Mennonite congregation in the GDR was organized and attempted to live as a church in a socialist country. Mennonite groups and individuals from western Europe and North America visited their spiritual brothers and sisters in East Germany repeatedly, trying to sustain a Mennonite presence in this communist and anti-religious environment. This era ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall (November 1989), when the Mennonite congregation in the GDR rejoined the Berlin Mennonite Church.

The story of the Mennonites in the GDR can be divided into four periods and, in each period, Canadian Mennonites had significant involvement.

1945–1953

The refugees who arrived in the Soviet-controlled zone of Germany and who had been farmers were settled as so-called "new farmers" (*Neubauern*) and the others were called "new citizens" (*Neubürger*). All refugees were called "resettlers" (*Umsiedler*), as the government did not use the word "refugee."

Spiritual and practical help for the people in the Soviet zone came from West Berlin. The elder of the Mennonite congregation, Erich Schultz, and his wife, Johanna, together with the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) from North America and other western relief organizations did much for the refugees.<sup>3</sup> At least 14 worshiping communities were served by Elder Bruno Goetzke and his wife, Charlotte.<sup>4</sup> They came from East Prussia and moved to the GDR, in the town of Zorbigo, near the city Halle, in the county of Sachsen Anhalt. MCC supported the couple, making it possible for Bruno Goetzke to travel with his bicycle and the train through most of the GDR, from Rostock/Baltic Sea to the Harz Mountains.

The Russians tried to make West Berlin part of the GDR, so they set up a blockade around West Berlin from June 24, 1948, until May 12, 1949. The Allied forces used airplanes to fly over the blockade and bring relief supplies into West Berlin, enabling the people to survive.

All Mennonite relief organizations from western countries—Netherlands, Switzerland, France, West Germany, West Berlin—worked together. Ten percent of the help was for the Mennonite communities and the remaining 90 percent was given to other needy people, especially the elderly and children.<sup>5</sup>

Twice a year there were large meetings in West Berlin. Nearly 200 families came and got Christmas parcels and then Easter packages. The other Mennonite families in the GDR got their support by mail or others took two or three CARE<sup>6</sup> or CRALOG<sup>7</sup> packages for the

families staying with them. Sometimes they got into trouble with the police. For example, Hermann Dueck was captured by train police in summer 1950 and was taken to the police station because he had three packages and Mennonite literature in his luggage. Later, he fled with his whole family to the West and immigrated to Canada (Winnipeg).<sup>8</sup>

Another flight was very important for the Mennonite story in the GDR. It was in July 1951 when the Hein and Dau families, together with 19 persons, took their horse carts and left the GDR, crossing the so-called "green belt" separating East and West Germany. When this information came to the Minister of Internal Affairs,<sup>9</sup> he wanted to forbid the formation of Mennonite churches in the GDR,<sup>10</sup> because, for him, Mennonites left the country illegally, took with them expensive horses, and had connections to "Anglo-American imperialistic"<sup>11</sup> enemies.

A few weeks after the Dau and Hein families escaped, the police came to the house of Marie and Otto Bartel, who were in the same congregation in Mulmke in the Harz Mountains. The *Volkspolizei* came while the Bartels had been in the church service and looked through the Bartel letters and private papers. They discovered that the Bartels had good contacts in the West.<sup>12</sup> Otto Bartel was an elder and preacher, responsible for the bank account of the Mennonite group in the Harz area. The State confiscated the church's bank account. The Bartels got the impression that there was no longer a future for them



Canadian MCC worker Helena Klassen (left) hands relief bundle to a young boy in Berlin, 1956. Photo credit: MAID MAO XV-19.3-1994-14-2220.

(cont'd on p. 10)

# Mennonite Heritage Archives

## History Is Still Speaking (But Are We Listening?)

by Dan Dyck, Winnipeg

Conrad Stoesz, archivist and co-editor of the *Mennonite Historian*, has launched an audio series called “Still Speaking” for radio and online streaming. In just five minutes, Stoesz dramatically retells stories from our Mennonite past that inform our present—and ideally—our future.

The premise is that archivists are much more than collectors of documents. They are the Sherlock Holmeses of human history. They are the investigators, decipherers, interrogators, and interpreters of our past.

As a self-directed student of Mennonite history, I have been relentlessly reading about my Mennonite church’s past these last two years. I have learned about Mennonite sympathy and complicity in the communist Soviet regime and the German Nazi party. Moreover, there is strong evidence that we had a history of nationalist fervor and loyalty when push came to shove. There were a variety of complex reasons for this. The more I read, the more parallels I see to current events.

These same exclusionary attitudes about early Anabaptists and their beliefs and customs caused our spiritual ancestors to flee from persecution for their beliefs, customs, and traditions. Many were charred to death at flaming stakes, drowned in rivers. Anneken van den Hove was buried alive for not recanting her Anabaptist beliefs. For hundreds of years, they sought to live in communities isolated from the outside world. Isolation was useful for survival in that time and context. Over time, many Mennonites came to increasingly value and prefer such isolation, even when it was not required for survival.

For example, Mennonites have sought to preserve their preferred way of life in Canada, Mexico, Paraguay, Bolivia, and elsewhere. They lived relatively peaceably until local populations grew and Mennonites rubbed shoulders with indigenous peoples in their new homelands. Stories now being uncovered point to isolation, wealth, and

entitlement as causes of internal and external conflict. Complacent economic, cultural, linguistic, and religious interactions are breeding grounds for conflict. We feel threatened by those who are different from us.

Our history continues to speak to present and future generations. Are we listening? Who will interpret the history we are creating today, and will we learn from it? I am grateful for the work of dedicated archivists. For those of us who care to listen, they are providing a broad and deep education now and for future generations.

### *Still Speaking—How and Why*

With the support of Golden West Radio and Canadian Mennonite University, the Mennonite Heritage Archives has ventured into an audio series called “Still Speaking.” For over twenty years, archivist Conrad Stoesz has been collecting stories from his work. “Still Speaking” allows him to not only tell a good story but tell the audience why archives matter. With support from David Balzer and Darryl Neustaedter Barg of Canadian Mennonite University’s Communication and Media faculty, and MHA staff person Selenna Wolfe, Stoesz has crafted, edited, and recorded twelve stories. They are featured on Golden West



**Conrad Stoesz recording an episode of “Still Speaking” for broadcast.** Photo credit: Conrad Stoesz.

Radio 950, 1250, and 1220AM radio at 9:20 am Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. You can also listen on the MHA website <https://www.mharchives.ca/features/still-speaking/>.

With each story, Stoesz talks about items in the archives, drawing the listener to the MHA website to see pictures of the materials. “Still Speaking” tells stories about people, places, and events preserved in documents and artifacts in the archives. The aim is to learn about the past and the role of archives in society. Together, we can listen to the people of the past “still speaking.”



**Anneken van den Hove buried alive.** Photo credit: MAID MHC 706-46.

## 1950s Mennonite Newspaper Now Viewable Online

by Jon Isaak

Pictured below is a scan from the first page of the first issue of the *Mennonite Observer*, published on September 21, 1955. Modeled after *Die Mennonitische Rundschau*, the weekly Mennonite newspaper ran from 1955 to 1961.

The 12-page *Mennonite Observer* was published by The Christian Press in Winnipeg, Manitoba. As the language transition from German to English among Mennonites in Canada was intensifying, the English-language *Mennonite Observer* took the place of the Mennonite Brethren German-language *Konferenz-Jugendblatt*. Les Stobbe was the first editor of the *Mennonite Observer*, followed by Gerhard D. Huebert.

According to the masthead, the newspaper aimed “to have Christ at the helm, the salvation of man as its goal, and the essential unity of all true Mennonites as its guiding principle.” It was a newspaper

with reports from Mennonite high schools and colleges in North America and beyond, missionary updates, congregational news, obituaries, and Bible-based devotional writings. The newspaper was designed to relate to people from a broad range of Mennonite conferences, even though its owners/editors were from the Mennonite Brethren Church.

The publication ceased in December 1961 and the *Mennonite Brethren Herald* took its place with a new mandate, starting in January 1962. The *MB Herald* became the official communication organ of the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, a publication which ran for 58 years; the final edition was printed in January 2020 (see news release at <https://mbherald.com/mbh-end/>).

Thanks to the efforts of Susan Huebert (many hours of scanning!), all the issues of the *Mennonite Observer* are now viewable online. With the author index created by David Perlmutter, the church, mission, school, and community news from this era are now more easily accessible to

## Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies



researchers. For a description of the newspaper and links to each of the 351 issues, go to <http://cmbs.mennonitebrethren.ca/publications/mennonite-observer-2/>.

### Out of Print *MB Herald* at Your Fingertips

The *MB Herald's* entire collection of magazines (January 1962–January 2020) is digitized on a fully searchable compact USB drive. Order your flash drive with all 58 years for \$30 (including tax and shipping) or send your previously purchased *MB Herald* drive for an update to the last issue at no charge. For more information, contact Jon Isaak ([jon.isaak@mbchurches.ca](mailto:jon.isaak@mbchurches.ca)).

# Mennonite Observer

(Mennonitische Rundschau)

September 21, 1955

The Christian Press, Ltd., Winnipeg, Manitoba

Vol. I, № 1

## Japanese Teacher Arrives

“I think I’m dreaming,” were some of Takashi Niwa’s first words after he stepped off the train in Winnipeg on Sept. 10 to complete the last leg of his 10,000 mile journey. Shivering in the 35 degree morning air, he didn’t look fatigued, even though he left Yokohama, Japan, 32 days ago. He declared that he had come to Canada to study Christian education, and for three years he will attend the Mennonite Brethren Bible College.

Takashi Niwa, 25, comes from Kanazawa, Japan, and is one of the two Christians in his family. He is a graduate of the local University, where he majored in English. Since then he has taught English for two years in the Hoku-riku Mission School, a Presbyterian high school in Kanazawa.

Strange as it may seem to us, yet Takashi Niwa did not hear the Gospel until he was in high school. Because missionaries were giving classes in English, and he was tremendously interested in English, Takashi Niwa attended these clas-

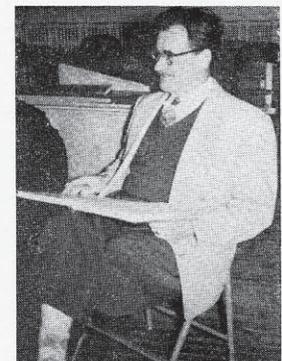
all around him. Through missionaries he heard about the Bible Institutes and Bible Colleges in the U.S.A. and Canada. Contact with a Mennonite missionary led him to write to Dr. H. H. Janzen at the M.B. Bible College in Winnipeg, Man.

Because his salary as a teacher in the high school was about one-quarter of that received by the average labourer here, study in Canada seemed chimeric. But God, through missionary-minded brethren and sisters in Canada and

“For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” 1 Cor. 2:2.

★

YOUR CHRISTIAN  
FAMILY WEEKLY



## Horches Leave for California

Mr. and Mrs. Ben Horch, well-known across Canada for their work in the field of music, left Winnipeg, Man., on Friday, Sept. 16, for Reedley, California. There

proteges, played two pieces on the cello.

Sunday morning, Sept. 11, the Elmwood M.B. church bid farewell to Mr. and Mrs. Horch. Jacob

## Early Mennonite Radio

(cont'd from p. 4)

March 22, 1953, and again on December 30, 1962, epitomizes the preaching of John Schmidt during his 13-year leadership. In an exposition of 2 Kings 17:32–34, Schmidt opens this way: “The devil is a great clown; he can imitate most everything and everyone! For Christ, he sets up an anti-Christ. If there is a true church, he sets up a world church to copy it. For a gospel, he produces false cults by the dozen. He substitutes mental assent for heart faith. He mimics ‘assurance’ with presumption, and imitates repentance, with a little emotional remorse.... Listen dear friend, God doesn’t care how religious you might be outwardly, for unless you have sincerely repented and forsaken your sins, you are not one of his. Except ye repent, you shall likewise perish.”<sup>26</sup> After illustrating the deception of the times through indulging in alcohol, selling the body, and following material wealth, he closes with, “Open your heart even now and Christ will come in, let Jesus come into your heart.”<sup>27</sup>

*The Abundant Life* similarly employed a rhetoric of conversion that drove its content. A common program opening was, “*The Abundant Life* is a broadcast of Christian inspiration and challenge designed to bring Christian healing and salvation to the minds and souls of men and women everywhere.”<sup>28</sup> An analysis of scripts from 1957 to 1963 reveals an explicit, ongoing invitation for listeners to give allegiance to Jesus Christ and to find salvation. A direct invitation to turn to God through Christ was particularly characteristic of Epp’s earlier years of leadership. Out of 60 radio talks from September 1958 to December 1959, at least 26 extend a direct appeal of this nature: “My friend, if you today are experiencing the anguish of heart and soul, the remorse of a life that is bankrupt, this is the good news we have for you: God paid your debt; he pardons your guilt; he gives you a new start; he makes you a new creature.”<sup>29</sup> In a compelling exposé of political dynamics of the day in November 1962, Epp reasserts his conviction: “The first ingredient of our prescription for peace is the salvation of the individual ... There will be no peace among men until there is peace within man. There will not be peace within man until man is at peace with God. Man must be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ

and then be reconciled to his brethren through Jesus Christ. Man must experience the love of God before this love of God can be exemplified in human relationships.”<sup>30</sup>

### *Emphasis on Social Transformation*

While *The Gospel Light Hour* and *The Abundant Life* shared a rhetoric of conversion, they differed in their emphasis on social transformation. Radio scripts spanning 1950 to 1963 reveal distinct stylistic differences between the two producers. Schmidt took a consistently expositional and doctrinal approach in crafting his program. Epp’s scripts for *Abundant Life* were topically constructed, opening with cultural allusions, newspaper clippings, quotes from US presidents, and references to poets, philosophers, and theologians, and then moving into Scripture.<sup>31</sup>

While a comparison of Epp’s and Schmidt’s scripts demonstrates distinct production approaches, the differences are more than simply a matter of form. A close reading of two programs aired in 1962 bears out this judgment. In March, Epp delivered a series of four radio talks on *Abundant Life* entitled “Revolutionary Christianity.” Just a few weeks earlier, Schmidt had delivered a sermon at the South End MB Church in Winnipeg during a special 15th-anniversary broadcast of *Gospel Light Hour* on February 18.<sup>32</sup> Epp had been on the air since 1957, Schmidt since 1950. Their addresses in 1962 came at a time when both had honed their convictions and delivery. The two messages offer distinct insights into the place of social transformation in their theological understandings. Schmidt’s focus was almost exclusively on peace with God through Christ, while Epp retained this fundamental salvific center but cast a vision for transformation of the social order. Both men prayed the Lord’s Prayer with an unyielding desire to see “Thy Kingdom come,” but what they meant by “on earth, as it is in heaven” was markedly different.

At *The Gospel Light Hour*’s anniversary event, which also aired as a special broadcast, Schmidt offered a seven-minute sermon and closed with these words: “Let us point men and women, boys and girls to the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.... May we so act and so live today that the words of the King, will be our blessing now and forever more, for in as much as ye have done it unto one of

these the least of my brethren, ye have done it unto me. Lord direct, empower and bless our lives to thy glory and to that end we pray, Amen.”<sup>33</sup> The Scripture referenced was Matthew 25:40, where Jesus describes how those who offer the stranger food and drink will find favour with God. Schmidt’s singular theme that day was motivating and inspiring the audience to proclaim verbally the Good News of Jesus Christ for the salvation of souls. By implication, the action to be taken on behalf of “the least of these” was to share with them this message of salvation.

A few weeks later, just across town, Epp put forth his “Revolutionary Christianity,” describing it “as a force of rebirth and renewal [that] was meant to be the dynamic of history. The Christian faith was to be the harbinger of change and progress, constantly exchanging the old decadent order for the new emerging one.”<sup>34</sup> Epp’s conception of Christianity began with the person of Christ, who came “proclaiming a revolutionary message, ‘I am the way; I am the truth and I am life; no one comes to the Father except by me’ (John 14:6).”<sup>35</sup> Epp describes conversion as “the rebirth of personality” at the heart of this Christianity, chiding superficial revivalism and evangelism that offer mere emotional crisis and verbal assent as “synthetic manifestations.”<sup>36</sup> Further, when “Christ captures a man’s life, enters it within, and there effects new attitudes, new ideas, new motives, which emanate in new actions, we have a most revolutionary experience.”<sup>37</sup> Menno Simons and Walter Rauschenbush, the US social gospel advocate, are cited as examples of leaders who coupled soul-saving with social action, where the evangelist becomes the prophet embodying “the dual thrust of the Christian faith: bringing man to heaven and bringing heaven to man.”<sup>38</sup> Epp saw as inseparable the individual dimension of salvation and the social dimension of concern and love for neighbour; the Christian church would “champion the cause of social and economic righteousness.”<sup>39</sup> While both broadcasters shared a strong conviction of the need for personal salvation, Epp conceptualized salvation to include transforming the social order in more emphatic terms.

### *Conclusion*

John M. Schmidt and Frank H. Epp, both strong adherents of their respective

Mennonite communities, stood behind microphones only a few blocks apart and enacted an emerging public Mennonite voice in southern Manitoba. The timbre of those early years of *The Gospel Light Hour* and *The Abundant Life* was marked by a rhetoric of personal conversion that espoused salvation and peace with God through Jesus Christ. The two programs diverged, however, in their emphasis on transformation of the social order. Both Schmidt and Epp ended their respective leadership roles with *Gospel Light Hour* and *Abundant Life* in 1963, leaving behind significant communication legacies of zeal, conviction, and creativity. Their weekly programs broadcast a compelling Mennonite voice that found its way into thousands of homes in Manitoba and across Canada.<sup>40</sup>

The research I have presented in this article signals at least two trajectories for further investigation. First, given the scope of these two programs in their respective communities, there would be merit in seeing how the communication dispositions I have identified played out over the next decades of radio production in the Mennonite community. To what extent did these approaches and understandings knowingly or unknowingly mark the pattern of future media production? Second, while acknowledging the contested nature of Bender's "Anabaptist Vision," it would be heuristically valuable to probe these radio programs in relation to Bender's conviction that personal conversion and social action are two primary characteristics of Anabaptist thinking and belief.<sup>41</sup>

*Eds. This is an abridged version of David's original essay, first published as "Exploring the Timbre of Mennonite Radio in Manitoba: A Case Study of The Gospel Light Hour and The Abundant Life," Conrad Grebel Review 36, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 133–153, and appears here with permission.*

## Endnotes

1. Mark G. McGowan, "Air Wars: Radio Regulation, Sectarianism and Religious Broadcasting in Canada, 1922–1938," *Historical Papers: Canadian Society of Church History* (2008): 8.  
 2. Ted D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939–1970: A People Transformed*, vol. 3 (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1996), 352–353.  
 3. I use the denominational title current during the era I am investigating. CMM was largely, though not entirely, made up of General Conference Mennonite Church congregations; see Gerhard Ens and Sam Steiner, "Mennonite Church Manitoba," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* [hereafter *GAMEO*], 2010.

4. William Neufeld, *From Faith to Faith: The History of the Manitoba Mennonite Brethren Church* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1989), 144–145; "The Gospel Light Hour History," n.d., Vol. 276, File 1 BC260.1, History of MB Communications, Square One World Media (formerly Family Life Network, Mennonite Brethren Communications, and Gospel Light Hour) Series, Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies [hereafter CMBS], Winnipeg. For a detailed history of beginnings, see John M. Schmidt, *The Lord's Donkey: The Autobiography of John M. Schmidt* (Winnipeg: Windflower Communications, 2001).

5. The program began airing on CFAM in 1957; see Neufeld, *From Faith to Faith*, 145; see also Harold S. Bender and Diane Zimmerman Umble, "Broadcasting, Radio and Television," *GAMEO*, February 2012.

6. "Joint meeting of the Conference Executive and the Radio Committee, January 2, 1957, CMBC, Tuxedo," Vol. 1596, File 1 Radio committee minutes, correspondence – 1957–1960, Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba-Mennonite Radio Mission/Faith and Life Communications Series [hereafter CMM-MRM/FLC Series], Mennonite Heritage Archives [hereafter MHA], Winnipeg.

7. Letter from Frank H. Epp in German to Rev. David Schulz, Vorsitzender, Manitobaer Mennoniten Konferenz, January 19, 1957, Vol. 1596, File 1 Radio committee minutes, correspondence – 1957–1960, CMM-MRM/FLC Series, MHA, Winnipeg. This Mennonite conference was reorganized and constituted on October 28, 1947. For details and the groups that joined, see Anna Epp Ens, *In Search of Unity: Story of the Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1996), 92.

8. Adolf Ens, "Epp, Frank H. (1929–1986)," *GAMEO*, 1990.

9. Epp Ens, *In Search of Unity*, 142–143, charts all the Mennonite Radio Mission programs aired from 1957–1995.

10. "Canadian Mennonite Radio Committee, Minutes, January 25, 1963," File 2 Radio Committee – 1960–1966, Series 5: Board of Missions, Conference of Mennonites in Canada fonds, Mennonite Archives of Ontario [hereafter MAO], Waterloo; see also Bender and Zimmerman Umble, "Broadcasting, Radio and Television."

11. Leo Driedger, "Post-War Canadian Mennonites: From Rural to Urban Dominance," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 6, no. 6 (1988): 70–88, offers a compelling sociological analysis of Winnipeg as a center of influence. By 1961, Winnipeg was the biggest center of Mennonites in Canada and became home to the national conference offices of the two largest Mennonite groups in Canada in 1960 (Mennonite Brethren) and 1961 (Conference of Mennonites).

12. Quentin J. Schultze, *Christianity and the Mass Media in America: Toward a Democratic Accommodation* (East Lansing: Michigan State Univ. Press, 2003), 11–12, 14.

13. "Rev. John M. Schmidt," Rev. John M. Schmidt Obituary, *Winnipeg Free Press*, July 12, 2008.

14. John M. Schmidt, "My Personal Conversion – J.M. Schmidt," n.d., Vol. 1330, File 7 Memoir Pages, John M. Schmidt fonds, CMBS, Winnipeg. A more detailed account is Schmidt, *The Lord's Donkey*, 20–22.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. Frank H. Epp, "My Mission in Life in the Light of My Christian Faith: A Personal Credo presented to the Dept. of Bible, Bethel College February 1956," Hist Mss 1.26.3, PF CC – Basic Christian Convictions (Credo), 1956, Frank H. Epp fonds, MAO, Waterloo.

18. *Ibid.*, 9.

19. "Gospel Light Hour Executive – Minutes: 1947–1948," n.d., Vol. 276, File 2 BC260.2.1, Square One World Media Series, CMBS, Winnipeg. Co-founder Henry Brucks reiterated this aim in his historical account during the 15th-anniversary broadcast on February 18, 1962, in Winnipeg.

20. Letter dated May 8, 1947, from Henry Poetker to a listener, Vol. 277, File 11 BC260.2.2 Director's Correspondence and Reports, 1947–1956, Square One World Media Series, CMBS, Winnipeg.

21. "Ministry Report 1962," Vol. 276, File 1 BC260.1 The Gospel Light Hour History 1961, Square One World Media Series, CMBS, Winnipeg.

22. Epp Ens, *In Search of Unity*, 101.

23. Frank H. Epp, "Einige Gedanken über Unsere Radio Arbeit, February 11, 1957," Vol. 1596, File 1 Radio committee minutes, correspondence – 1957–1960, Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba Executive Committee Series, MHA, Winnipeg; translated by the author.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Gospel Light Hour 15th Anniversary Broadcast, 1962, CD, Square One World Media Archives, Winnipeg.

26. John M. Schmidt, "Promiscuous Religion," March 22, 1953, Vol. 1248, File 32 Salvation. – ca. 1950–1963, John M. Schmidt fonds, CMBS, Winnipeg.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Frank H. Epp, "Healing for the Brokenhearted, December 1961," Hist Mss 1.26, PF MRM Script, 1960s, Frank H. Epp fonds, MAO, Waterloo.

29. Frank H. Epp, "Your Sins Are Forgiven, February 1959," in *The Dynamics of a Strong Life: And 214 Other Radio Talks Given on The Abundant Life 1958–1963* (Ontario: Frank H. Epp, 1975), radio talk 20. Content analysis of radio talks included a topical assessment of titles and a close reading of the closing of 120 scripts. Closings were investigated to identify direct calls to action, including emphases such as "make Him Saviour," "repent/yield/turn to Him," "disobedience/sin," "judgment," "commit lives to Him," "decide/choose Jesus Christ," and "Christ/God is calling."

30. Frank H. Epp, "A Prescription for Peace, November 1962," in *The Dynamics of a Strong Life*, radio talk 182.

31. Numerous program outlines are available in Vol. 625, File 1 Abundant Life Formats Frank Epp. – January 1960–July 1965, CMM-MRM/FLC Series, MHA, Winnipeg.

32. Frank H. Epp, "Revolutionary Christianity, March 1962, Sermon Pamphlet," CMM-MRM/FLC, Vol. 753, Abundant Life Sermons, File 5 1962-March, MHA, Winnipeg; Gospel Light Hour 15th Anniversary Broadcast, 1962, CD, Square One World Media Archives, Winnipeg; "Gospel Light Hour Fifteenth Anniversary," *MB Herald*, February 1962, copy received from John C. Klassen, Winnipeg, via e-mail communication.

33. Transcription of Gospel Light Hour 15th Anniversary Broadcast, 1962.

34. Epp, "Revolutionary Christianity," March 1962, MHA, Winnipeg.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*

40. I am very grateful for research assistance provided by Conrad Stoesz, Archivist at the Mennonite Heritage Archives; Jon Isaak, Director at the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies; and Lauren Harder-Gissing, Archivist, Mennonite Archives of Ontario. Their efforts were invaluable in facilitating the investigation of primary sources.

41. Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 18, no. 2 (April 1944): 67–88. For an important assessment of the historiography around Bender's work, see Bruce L. Guenther, "Rediscovering the Value of History and Tradition," in *Out of the Strange Silence: The Challenge of Being Christian in the 21st Century*, ed. Brad Thiessen, Bruce L. Guenther, and Doug Heidebrecht (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2005), 192–195.

## German and Canadian Mennonites (cont'd from page 5)

and their children in the GDR. So, they also fled over the border to West Germany and then immigrated to Canada.

Many of the Prussian Mennonite refugees left the GDR in these years and some of them found a new home in Canada.

### 1953–August 13, 1961

While congregational life was coming to an end in the GDR (from January 1953 to 1961), MCC rented the Menno-Heim in Berlin-Lichterfelde (Summer 1952), which was in the West part of the city. At that time, it was still possible for Mennonites from the East part of Berlin and even from the GDR to visit the Menno-Heim in West Berlin. Volunteers regularly came to help the needy people in Berlin. Canadian Mennonites—including young people and families—came and organized youth work or relief programs in Berlin.

For example, the Canadian family Helen and David Neufeld, with little Harold, became house parents and lived in the Menno-Heim in 1954/55.<sup>13</sup> They were responsible for the refugees who came and passed through the area. And they also worked together with the volunteers. There was another house in West Berlin rented by MCC on Hammersteinstraße, where, in the 1950s, the Canadian Arthur Driedger worked as a volunteer and where he met another Canadian, Kathleen Janzen, whom he later married.<sup>14</sup> They managed the house that was dedicated to care for women who came as refugees from the East and had children. MCC wanted to provide housing for these single mothers, so they would not have to live in the big refugee camps. The work in a foreign country—helping to settle refugees—remained an important characteristic of their lives. The Driedgers still live in Winnipeg.

### August 13, 1961–1979

The building of the Wall changed everything. Now it was no longer possible for people from the East to visit the West. The Mennonites in East Berlin and the GDR were now on their own. Elder Erich Schultz of the Mennonite congregation in West Berlin called Walter Jantzen in the East and told him: “Walter, you are the only member of the board of our congregation who lives in the East; now you are responsible for the Mennonites in the GDR. We’ll try to help, but we can’t do too

much at the moment!”<sup>15</sup>

In this way, Walter Jantzen and his wife, Berta, became the lay leaders of the Mennonite congregation in the East. With the help of a Lutheran Pastor, Johannes Mickley, Walter Jantzen successfully obtained registration for that Mennonite congregation as an independent Free-Church called: “Mennonitengemeinde in der Deutsche Demokratische Republik.”

Walter Jantzen was the lay-preacher and representative of the Mennonite Church in GDR. He drove all over the GDR to visit church members and lead worship services. He also represented Mennonites at ecumenical church meetings.

Beginning in the 1960s, but then permanently from 1966 to 1975, Walter Jantzen and the Mennonite congregation in the GDR got support from Canadians John R. and Marian Friesen, who lived at the Menno-Heim in West Berlin. The Friesens were very important for the East-West connection and dialogue. John Friesen served as a pastor and Marian Friesen managed the Menno-Heim, taking care of the guesthouse. One third of John’s work was dedicated to supporting the Mennonites in the GDR. Occasionally, Mennonites came from Canada to visit the GDR— young people working in West Berlin as volunteers coming for daytrips in the East or church choirs coming with a bus to sing in the GDR churches. A look in the Jantzen guestbook<sup>16</sup> shows how international their visitors were. No wonder the GDR security police (Stasi) occupied an apartment in a building directly opposite the Jantzen’s house, keeping a close eye on all this coming and going.<sup>17</sup>

Students also came to visit the GDR. The Canadian John B. Toews made a trip supported by MCC to the GDR and the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (CSSR) in 1966 and wrote an important report.<sup>18</sup> He recommended that Mennonites should no longer make big-group trips to the GDR. He felt it would be better to go in small groups or alone when visiting the GDR—there was a much better chance



**Canadian MCC worker Kathleen Janzen teaches refugee children in a Sunday School class in Berlin, 1958.** Photo credit: MAID MAO XV-19.3-1994-14-2207.

of meeting regular people and finding out what is really going on in the lives of the ordinary citizens. Toews recognized that the large, official student trips were only shown “politically correct” situations.

In August 1967, the new Mennonite pastor in the GDR, Peter Müller, the church leader Walter Jantzen, and Pastor John R. Friesen from West Berlin organized a small Mennonite World Conference meeting in East Berlin. Marian Friesen and Berta Jantzen served as hosts for the guests. Approximately 40 international guests and many members from the Mennonite congregation in the GDR took part in the meeting.<sup>19</sup>

This was the beginning of developing support for the people in North Vietnam. Mennonites collected money at the Mennonite World Conference in Amsterdam (1967) and MCC Canada sent this money to West Germany. John Friesen purchased material and he, along with Marian, transported the relief materials with their MCC Volkswagen van to the border of the GDR in Berlin. With the help of Christians who had good contacts in the GDR government, it was possible to bring this medical relief material through the GDR to North Vietnam. At the time, the US was still at war with North Vietnam (National Liberation Front of Vietnam).<sup>20</sup>

MCC did not only want to help with relief work, they also had the opinion that peacemaking meant building bridges across barriers between people. For this reason, they sent people to live in the communist countries, students and MCC

workers. Canadian John Rempel studied in 1971/72 in Berlin, living in the West and travelling to attend lectures and seminars at the Humboldt University in the East, over the border. He got in contact with Lutheran Pastor Bruno Schottstädt from the GDR and helped him organize a lecture tour through Canada and the US in the 1970s.<sup>21</sup>

#### 1980–1989/90

In the last decade of the existence of the GDR, Evangelical Lutheran theologian Knuth Hansen became pastor of the Mennonite congregation in the GDR. He said in the worship service where he became a member of the Mennonite congregation (May 10, 1981): “I have very good contacts with the ‘State Secretary of Church Affairs.’”<sup>22</sup> Today, we still do not know exactly what he meant by that. However, he was able to secure authorization for travel to West Berlin and also to other countries: Canada, Netherlands, France, Russia, and elsewhere.

Hansen even got permission to travel to the Meeting of the World Council of Churches (WCC) 1983 in Vancouver, British Columbia. And in 1984, a delegation of Mennonites from the GDR took part in the Mennonite World Conference in Strasbourg. Some of them used the opportunity to also travel to the Netherlands and to West Germany. They all returned to the GDR and had to report to the State Secretary of Church Affairs; but they did not get into any trouble.<sup>23</sup>

In this period, there was more Canadian support. Norma and John Thiessen came to serve as hosts at the Menno-Heim. They lived from September to December 1986 in a little town near Berlin in the GDR. The house was very simple, but they liked it there. They worked together with the Lutheran pastor Bruno Schottstädt in Berlin-Marzahn and with pastor Knuth Hansen from the Mennonite congregation. They also participated in a peace event in November 1986. It was a *Schwerter zu Pflugscharen* (swords into ploughshares) event where Christians protested the slogan being promoted by the GDR: “peace must be armed.” The security police monitored these churches and harassed the protesters. At the end of December 1986, Thiessens were denied a visa to stay longer in the GDR. They had to leave and go back to Menno-Heim in West Berlin.<sup>24</sup>

When the Wall was taken down in 1989, the Mennonite congregation in

the GDR continued a few more months. Eventually, the members again became part of the Berlin Mennonite Church. In December 1997, the last worship service took place in the Jantzen house in Berlin-Mitte, Schwedter Str. 262.

#### Summary

For German Mennonites, it was very important to have brothers and sisters from North America—many of them from Canada—come to support the starving and hungry people of Germany, to bring *Lebensmittel* (food), and to help them move on after the destruction of the Nazi-regime and the terrible war. This was not only concrete support, but also a sign that German Mennonites had not been forgotten.

Furthermore, this period was key for German Mennonites to rediscover their peace witness and Anabaptist theological centre. For me personally, it was important to know that Mennonites (MCC and other relief workers) advocated for peace, justice, and development in Germany, postwar Europe, and other parts of the world. This is what makes Mennonites part of an important global movement and helps overcome the isolation of nationalism.

My research on the Mennonites in the GDR, a regime that was a dictatorship with permanent security control (Stasi), also raises the question of ethical limits: With whom will Mennonites (MCC and Mennonite congregations) work together and, at what time, for which reason, and in which situation should Mennonites say, “No!”? Are there criteria for such “collaboration with the state,” or is “the love of enemies” in the Jesus manner without limits?

*Bernhard Thiessen is a theologian and the former pastor of the Mennonite congregations in Hamburg and Berlin. This article is based on the lecture he gave on July 24, 2019, at the Mennonite Heritage Archives, Winnipeg, after doing research in the Mennonite Central Committee archives in Akron and the Mennonite Heritage Archives in Winnipeg. He is currently preparing an exhibition about the Mennonites in the GDR, which will be shown in Germany in May 2020 at the Mennonite Gemeindegtag. He plans to return to Canada on October 22–24, 2020, to show part of his exhibition and also give a lecture at the University of Winnipeg. For*

*further information, see [www.mennoniten-ddr.de](http://www.mennoniten-ddr.de).*

#### Endnotes

1. It is not possible to give an exact number. There were approximately 13,000 Mennonites in West and East Prussia until 1945. They all had to flee. Erich Schultz in Berlin (West) created a list of the Mennonites that came to the Soviet zone. See Imanuel Baumann, “Als der Entwurf zum Verbot der Mennoniten bereits aufgesetzt war. Bemerkungen zu einem Fund staatlicher Dokumente aus den Jahren 1951 und 1952,” *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* (MGBI 2016): 61–79 [page 61, footnote 3].

2. The situation for Mennonites from Russia was different. Many of them came with the Wehrmacht during the German army’s retreat. MCC helped 1,200 of them flee to the West (see “Berlin Exodus” <https://www.commonword.ca/ResourceView/18/4785>). However, many of them would be sent back to the Soviet Union. Only a few stayed in the GDR.

3. See the article by Wolfgang Schultz and Bernhard Thiessen, “Berlin,” *Mennonitisches Lexikon V* [hereafter *MennLex V*] (<http://www.mennlex.de/doku.php?id=loc:berlin>).

4. Imanuel Baumann, “Götzke, Bruno Albert,” *MennLex V* ([http://www.mennlex.de/doku.php?id=art:goetzke\\_bruno\\_albert](http://www.mennlex.de/doku.php?id=art:goetzke_bruno_albert)).

5. See James C. Enns, *Saving Germany: North American Protestants and Christian Mission to West Germany 1945–1974* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017), 68.

6. CARE = Co-operative for American Remittances to Europe, Inc. See John D. Unruh, *In the Name of Christ: A History of the Mennonite Central Committee and Its Service, 1920–1951* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1952), 169.

7. CRALOG = Council of Relief Agencies Licensed for Operation in Germany. Ibid. 144.

8. Elisabeth (Dueck) Janzen, *From Luxury to Loss to Liberty* (Winnipeg: McNally Robinson, 2016), 103ff.

9. Letter from Chefinspektor der Volkspolizei Lust to Staatssekretär Warnke Ministerium des Innern, August 23, 1951, Bundesarchiv, Berlin, Germany: BArch Do 4 / 723.

10. Letter from Minister Dr. Steinhoff to Zentralkomitee der SED Genosse Plenikowski, February 27, 1952, Bundesarchiv, Berlin, Germany: BArch Dy 30 / 95 105.

11. Draft of letter response from Dr. Steinhoff to Chef der HV Deutsche Volkspolizei, no date, Bundesarchiv, Berlin, Germany: BArch Do 4 / 723.

12. Letter from Otto and Marie Bartel (Mulmke) to Erich Schultz (Berlin), September 5, 1951, Mennonitische Forschungsstelle Weierhof, BMG, Box 9.

13. See David and Helen Neufeld collection at the Mennonite Heritage Archives, Winnipeg.

14. Arthur Driedger, *My Life Story, 1933–2017* (Winnipeg, 2017), 63.

15. Wolfgang Schultz and Jochen Jantzen, “Jantzen, Walter,” *MennLex V* ([http://www.mennlex.de/doku.php?id=art:jantzen\\_walter](http://www.mennlex.de/doku.php?id=art:jantzen_walter)).

16. “Gästebuch der Familie Jantzen,” notes from 1965 until 2005, in author’s possession.

17. Interview with the daughter-in-law, Gudrun Jantzen, at Menno-Heim, October 27, 2019.

18. John B. Toews, Report on the MCC-Sponsored Study Tour of the DDR (June 21–July 4, 1966) and the CSSR (July 5–8, 1966) IX-6-3 East-West Student Encounter 1966, MCC archives, Akron.

19. John R. Friesen, “Blick über die Mauer,” *Junge Gemeinde* 11/1967, *Jugendblatt der Mennonitengemeinden*, edited by Jugendkommission der Konferenz der Süddeutschen Mennoniten, vol. 20, page 176.

20. On the work of MCC in Vietnam, see Robert

S. Kreider and Rachel Waltner Goossen, *Hungry, Thirsty, a Stranger: The MCC Experience* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1988), 139–163; for the “selective aid” in South Vietnam, see page 147.

21. Interview with John Rempel in Berlin, June 3, 2019.

22. Handwritten notice from Walter Jantzen in his May 10, 1981 sermon manuscript, Jantzen Sermon Collection, in author’s possession.

23. Interview with some of the participants of the journey, Menno-Heim, October 27, 2019.

24. See the folder with the report for MCC in “Thiessen, John & Norma Reports (Berlin) 1983–1987,” pages 1–116, MCC archives, Akron.

## Book Review



Hermann Heidebrecht, *Unmögliches wagen! Heinrich Dirks (1842–1915) Missionar auf Sumatra* (Bielefeld, Germany: Christlicher Missions-Verlag, 2019), 298 p.

Reviewed by Anna Epp Ens, Winnipeg

This German book—with the title translated as *Daring the Impossible!* *Heinrich Dirks (1842–1915), Missionary on Sumatra*—is fascinating and thought provoking. In the 1960s, Adolf, our children, and I spent four exciting years with MCC in Pati, Java, Indonesia. Though aware of the Mennonite mission on Sumatra, I did not know very much about it. This book fills some of that gap in my knowledge.

When author Hermann Heidebrecht speaks of the impossible, I assume he means the humanly impossible. He elaborates on the missionary task in two sections: the impossible call and the impossible commission. Besides the portrayal of Heinrich Dirks as the exemplary missionary with a Batak Mennonite church emerging at Pakantan in the Mandailing region on Sumatra, the book also introduces the reader to the growing 19th-century overseas missionary movement, to the breadth of missionary preparation,

to the interdependence of European (and international) mission societies, to a biblical justification of colonialism and racism, to the collaboration of missionary and colonial interests, and generally places the story into its context of relevant world events. It is a remarkable story.

Heinrich Dirks, born in Gnadenfeld, Molotschna, Russia, grew up in turbulent times: losing his father at age 13, affected by divisions in the church, and witnessing war and its carnage. For the author the troubles in the church seemed most disconcerting. It seems impossible that anyone could hear a call to mission in, or want to belong to, a “dead” or “corrupt” church. This is what dissatisfied members were calling Gnadenfeld’s church. Lutheran pietist preacher Edward Wuest was preaching repentance and renewal. When some members did not see the changes called for, they left the church and formed the new Mennonite Brethren Church in 1860. Mission work is the spiritual thermometer of a church, the author quotes at one point. Gnadenfeld had been financially supporting the work of the Netherlands Mennonite Mission Society (Doopsgezinde Zending, DZ) for a number of years already and was now assisting Heinrich in his preparation for probable overseas mission. How could the church be dead and simultaneously vibrant in mission work? The book proves that it was amazing that Heinrich could find his way through the congregational brokenness to a decided calling and a trust in the church’s support.

The impossibilities of the commission begin with the description of the enroute premature birth of Heinrich and Aganetha’s twin girls, one of them living but a day and being buried at sea. The help and hospitality of the Rheinisch Missionary Society missionaries in language training and tropical climate acculturation helped ease the heartache and transition. Already in Amsterdam at the DZ, the suggestion had been that the Dirkses should locate to a place where no other Christians were yet found, probably among the still ancestor-worshipping, cannibalism-practising Batak tribe. Because the Rheinisch missionaries had staked out the northern part of Batakland and Islam was taking over much of the southern territory, finding the exact place for the mission site on Sumatra was challenging. Gaining acceptance among the people, the ongoing lack of like-

minded and sympathetic co-workers, a repeated shortage of funds, as well as the difficulties of long-distance expectations and administration were sometimes overwhelming. Furthermore, the threat of earthquakes, tsunamis, tropical illnesses, and jungle life were constant. For example, Dirks, in a report to Amsterdam, tells of killing five sizable, dangerous snakes in the room where he was working, with two still having escaped, while the children were sleeping behind a closed door.

Despite the challenges, confident that God was with them, in 1871, Heinrich baptized the first three Batak persons and, in the years following, another 125, who through teaching, preaching, and healing ministries had been drawn to the gospel. New Christians were being trained to be teachers, evangelists, and leaders; a church building was erected, several preaching stations established, and a coffee plantation cultivated. With God all things were becoming possible.

After eleven years on Sumatra, Heinrich and family returned to Gnadenfeld for a much-needed rest. Heinrich’s heart was still with the Batak; but after repeated pleas, he agreed to the leadership as *Ältester* of the Gnadenfeld congregation. His ministry leadership, both informative and interesting, is discussed in the last part of the book. The assignment soon included being missionary itinerant preacher and recruiter—in all of Russia, Europe, as well as North America—mission conference organizer, author, publisher of the *Mennonitisches Jahrbuch*, and promoter of Mennonite understanding and unity.

Heidebrecht uses his sources well, adding historical details and small but useful maps and photos. Footnotes and an index are unfortunately missing. This notable book is currently being translated into English by Heinrich’s great-granddaughter, Irene Hedlin, from Winnipeg—mainly for relatives, she says.

The author suggests that Heinrich and Aganetha are rightly regarded as pioneers of world mission among the German Mennonites in Russia. The hands of missionary ordination were laid on them both. Over and over the author hints at the compatibility of Heinrich and Aganetha in their mission tasks. It would have been great if the title could have reflected that and read: *Daring the Impossible! Heinrich (1842–1915) and Aganetha (1844–1911) Dirks, Missionaries on Sumatra*.