

Mennonite Historian

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



THE FALK SISTERS
“SING UNTO THE LORD”

F.S.-100

“SING UNTO THE LORD, for he hath done excellent things; this is known in all the earth.”
ISAIAH 12:5

The Falk Sisters sang together as a quartet until 1958 when the oldest, Martha (Mrs. Pete Voth), was married. At this time they formed a trio: Elizabeth (soprano), Mary (mezzo soprano), and Magdalene (contralto). On this recording they are accompanied by Mrs. Voth on the piano, although they usually sing acapella when singing in services. They frequently sing in the churches of the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Church as well as in neighbouring churches, hospitals, and homes for the aged. They are also heard on the radio broadcast of the E.M.M. Church. They are the daughters of Rev. and Mrs. William H. Falk, of Plum Coulee, Manitoba.

It is their desire that through this recording some of the Lord's excellent goodness may be conveyed to their listeners.

SIDE ONE

- NOTHING SATISFIES BUT JESUS
- POOR WAYFARING STRANGER
- YES, HE DID
- THE UPPER WINDOW
- HE DIED OF A BROKEN HEART
- FILL ALL MY VISION
- HIS PLAN

SIDE TWO

- ERBEN DES REICHS
- JESUS, MEIN HERR
- WIE SOLLT' ICH IHN NICHT LIEBEN
- O HAUPT VOLL BLUT UND WUNDEN
- ICH BETE AN DIE MACHT DER LIEBE
- WO KEINE WOLKE MEHR SICH TUERMT
- FAHRE HIN, DU BOESE WELT UND SUENDE

The Falk sisters, Mary, Elizabeth, Magdalene, and sometimes Martha, were well known in southern Manitoba, singing in various Mennonite and other church settings in the 1950s and '60s. One of the sisters, Mary Neufeld, reminisces in the lead article on the background, formation, and ministry of *The Falk Sisters*. Mary's story starts on page 2. Photo credit: Conrad Stoesz.

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The Falk Sisters Album

by Mary Neufeld, Winnipeg

It was many years ago when *The Falk Sisters* became an item of some prominence in southern Manitoba, culminating in a record of our singing. I recently received an invitation from Conrad Stoesz to write a personal reflection on how this album came about. I was pleasantly surprised to hear that he found the record for sale on eBay for \$15! With this glimpse from the past, I did not hesitate to accept.

My younger sisters, Elizabeth and Magdalene, and I (Mary) were preschoolers when we sang together (in unison) at our Roseville School Christmas Eve concert—you could say that was our first public performance. It was tradition that preschoolers would recite a verse and receive a goody bag. Our mother taught us *Der Große Arzt* (The Great Physician) while decorating cookies—although not a Christmas song, it did invoke a healing touch from the Christ child, as memories of birth and death on Christmas Eve lingered in our family's distant past. Thinking back and imagining three little girls dressed like triplets, singing on a stage (our parents bursting with pride), I am not surprised that there was much applause.

While we were in elementary school, Mother bought both Elizabeth and me

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a guitar; and Magdalene acquired a mandolin. I learned to play traditional guitar chords, according to the directions that came with my guitar. To differentiate, Uncle Henry (the piano tuner) adapted Elizabeth's instrument, showing her how to "wail" Hawaiian style while playing *Thirty Pieces of Silver*. He taught Magdalene to play the mandolin, and we started playing together, becoming a string trio. The Rosenfeld Rudnerweider Church heard about our musical endeavours and invited us to perform at a *Jugendverein*, after which we began to receive other invitations. Singing as we played, we soon realized that we enjoyed harmonizing our voices more than playing with strings, so we left our instruments at home.

Mother had taught our older sister, Martha, to play the auto harp when she was five, and Father had taught her to play the pump organ. In time Martha had become skilled at playing the piano and singing, and now she invited us to join her. Singing lead soprano, she assigned me to sing alto, Elizabeth tenor, and Magdalene bass. We sang as a quartet in various places, including another school Christmas concert. Magdalene says, "Singing the bass line was boring and a bit of a stretch since I am really a mezzo soprano, but I do remember that evening (at school) because the carol we sang had an interesting bass line."

I was sixteen when the Altona radio station, CFAM, first aired in March 1957. The following Friday at 9:30 pm, the *Rudnerweider Mennoniten Gemeinde* (EMMC in 1960) launched their weekly half-hour German radio program, *Die Evangelische Botschaft*—The Gospel Message. Edwin Klippenstein, technician and host, asked our father as retired bishop to be the first speaker and the Falk sisters to sing. Father often included a poem in his messages, and it seemed appropriate in this context for Mother to read the poem. We became regular participants in those early years with Edwin Klippenstein coming to our home to record the half-hour program, often with no breaks in between—Martha at the piano and the three of us beside her. In time Edwin Klippenstein accumulated a collection of our songs for playing on the radio, even after we were no longer available as *The Falk Sisters*.

Later in 1957, the Brunk Revival Campaign came to southern Manitoba—tent meetings lasting from June to

September. At the invitation of our father, the team came to our home for dinner. Sitting around the dinner table enjoying Mother's delicious roast beef, the conversation veered to the bishop's daughters and their role as *The Falk Sisters*. With the piano sitting next to the table in the dining room—we were fully persuaded and chose to sing *The Ninety and Nine* in four-part harmony, prompting an urgent invitation from the evangelist to sing this same song at a meeting under the large tent. We found another pianist, freeing Martha to join us at the podium.

Martha was married in 1958, and now we sang as a trio for the radio program, in our conference churches, and beyond—often invited to be a part of Father's weekly, prescribed itinerary or his preaching ministry at special events. For another memorable tenting experience, we were given the opportunity to sing at the annual Rudnerweider *Missionsfest/Erntedankfest* in Bergfeld, Manitoba. Conference people from Saskatchewan and Manitoba gathered in a large, flapping tent next to a country church with ample space in the tree-lined yard for both the tent and parking. The cemetery in a quiet corner of the yard was where children played over the lunch hour—sometimes even during the service.

Becoming known more formally as *The Falk Sisters*, we sang in churches of other denominations also. We sang at funerals, weddings, in the hospital, care homes, in the Women's Jail, as well as a live radio broadcast in Portage la Prairie. We sang at Saturday night street meetings in Altona. Once Edwin Klippenstein took us to Dominion City to sing in a private home where he was attempting to evangelize. Most of these venues required that we sing a cappella. Martha was busy, raising twins now—but where a piano was available, on occasion she would accompany us, or we might find a substitute pianist. As our audience expanded, we incorporated many English songs into our repertoire. When singing from a four-part German or English hymnal, I converted and rearranged the notes in order to harmonize in three parts. And we acquired songbooks for mixed trio, which did not need adapting.

Our motivation had never been to become a professional singing group. And as individuals, we began to expand our horizons. Our singing career—if it could be called that—was coming to an end.

(cont'd on p. 8)

Genealogy and Family History

The 1920s Mennonite Immigration to Canada: Pre-emigration Genealogical Sources, Part 1a

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

Next year marks the centennial of the beginning of one of the largest migrations in Mennonite history. Between 1923 and 1930, over 21,000 Low-German Mennonites from Russia immigrated to Canada.¹ At the end of the decade, and into the early 1930s, another 3,000 immigrated to South America.² Here in Canada, there will be events to commemorate the Canadian immigration—the highlight of which will be a cross-country train tour.³

In this and the next three issues of the *Mennonite Historian*, I will attempt to give an overview of the many genealogical resources available to those who are interested finding information on their ancestors who gave up everything in order to escape the Soviet Union and come to Canada. To my knowledge, everyone who participated in this immigration is in the GRANDMA database (henceforth referred to as GM).⁴ My goal is to point out sources that are often not cited in GM. The idea is that someone should be able to use the resources mentioned in these articles to chronicle the lives of their ancestors from their homes in Russia to their new homes in Canada.

I plan to tackle this overview of genealogical resources in four parts: 1) Pre-emigration: Background and Russian sources 1900–1930, 2) Emigration: Russian emigration applications, 3) Immigration: Ship lists and other immigration lists, and 4) Post Immigration: Canadian church records, census records, and Canadian Board of Colonization files.

Two important online genealogical sources, which I will frequently cite, are mennonitegenealogy.com⁵ and [Mennonitische Geschichte und Ahnenforschung](http://www.mennonitische-geschichte-und-ahnenforschung.de).⁶ The latter was started by the late Willi Vogt and is often called the Willi Vogt website. The mennonitegenealogy.com website is the central repository for transcriptions and translations of many accessible documents of interest.

By 1923, there were 80,000 to 120,000 Mennonites living in the Soviet Union. The majority of these people were no longer living in the original mother colonies. For example, about 10,000 Mennonites were living in Siberia. The Russian Mennonites were members of many hundreds of congregations and were spread over dozens of administrative districts within Russia. Those families who immigrated in the 1920s were likely started sometime between about 1900 and 1930, so I will restrict my survey to that time period.

There are three main types of genealogical sources available for the pre-emigration phase: Church registers, civil records, and census or village lists. Unfortunately, most of these have not survived or remain to be found in Russian and Ukrainian archives.

Church Records

Only six Mennonite congregational registers (out of hundreds) from the 1900–1930 period have survived. The family register book of the Schoenhorst village congregation in the Chortitza colony is in Canada. Its current location is unknown. An index is available online.⁷ Family register books for parts of the Chortitza colony were found by Paul Toews of the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies (Fresno, California) in the Zaporozhye archives. These registers, which were started in the 1890s, were translated from Russian and were once available for purchase by the California Mennonite Historical Society. Arrangements have been made to post these on the mennonitegenealogy.com website. I recently discovered the birth register of the Memrik colony (1902–1923) in the Donetsk archives.⁸ The original baptismal register of the Fuerstenland colony, which covers the years 1885–1932, has gone missing. Fortunately, a photocopy was made by the Mennonite Heritage Archives (MHA) in Winnipeg before that happened.⁹ The Felsenbach family register for the Borzenko colony is available.¹⁰ Various church registers from the Orenburg colony have survived. Scans have been made and are available.¹¹ In 1996, the Mormon Church microfilmed the Mennonite family register of the Busau church in Crimea, which is in the Simferopol archives.¹²

Scans of the above-mentioned registers

are available from the MHA and the data from all the registers has been integrated into the GM database. For more on the fate of the Chortitza colony church registers and an accounting of all Russian Mennonites church registers currently available, see my earlier articles in the *Mennonite Historian*.^{13 14}

Aside from these records, there are a few dozen pages of hand-copied excerpts from various church registers that were taken to Canada after the Second World War. Some diaries and journals kept by Mennonite church leaders include the marriages and funerals they performed: the marriages performed between 1917 and 1922 by Mennonite Brethren minister Johann Ens in Fuerstenland¹⁵ and the marriages and funerals performed by Rev. Abram Krueger of the Baratov settlement.¹⁶ There is also a 1926 membership list for the Chortitza/Rosenthal branch of the Chortitza colony congregation.¹⁷

Glenn's overview of genealogical resources continues in the June edition of MH. He also notes that he has found dozens of immigration lists from the 1920s. Some simply need to be transcribed, while others need to be translated from German or Russian. This is a huge task and volunteers are needed. The transcriptions and translations will be posted online.

Endnotes

1. See for example Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus: The Rescue and Resettlement of the Russian Mennonites since the Communist Revolution* (Altona: Friesen & Sons, 1962).

2. South America - GAMEO, https://gameo.org/index.php?title=South_America

3. <https://mhsc.ca/events/russlaender-100/>

4. <https://grandmaonline.org/gmol-7/gwHelp/userGuide.asp>

5. <https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/>

6. Vogt - Mennonitische Familienforschung (chortitza.org)

7. <https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/schoen2.htm>

8. https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/Memrik_Birth_Registers.pdf

9. https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/Fuerstenland_Baptism_Register.htm

10. <https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/felsen.htm>

11. <https://chort.square7.ch/Dat/GERO1.htm>

12. <https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/busau.htm>

13. https://www.mennonitehistorian.ca/31.1.MH_Mar05.pdf

14. https://www.mennonitehistorian.ca/45.1.MH_Mar19.pdf

15. https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/Fuerstenland_MB_Marriages_1917-22.pdf

16. https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/Abram_Kroeger_Register.html

17. https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/Chortitza_and_Rosenthal_List_1926.pdf

Searching the KGB Files of My Grandfather, Nikolai D. Sudermann (1898–1938): Part 2 of 2

by Werner Toews, Winnipeg¹

In the December issue, Werner described his search for information on his grandfather who was arrested in November 1937. In this second and concluding part, Werner gives more analysis of the court transcripts he secured from the State Archives of Zaporozhye in Ukraine and explains what likely happened during N.D. Sudermann's last days.

According to the court transcripts, my grandfather, N.D. Sudermann, was interrogated by NKVD officers.

Interrogation, November 21–22, 1937

The first question put to him was the following:

Q. The interrogation shows evidence of your participation in underground, counterrevolutionary activity. Are you prepared to give truthful testimony to the accusation?

A. I confess that I am guilty. Before the arrest, I was a member in a German fascist organization with the assignment of promoting counterrevolutionary activity against Soviet Authorities.

I have been a police officer for 25 years in Canada and have been involved with the arrest of many people. There were few occasions in my experience where people confessed to their involvement in a crime after being asked the first question.

Canadian law requires a police officer to inform the accused of his or her rights prior to a charge and to caution them about making a statement. Most important is the right to speak to legal counsel before being formally questioned. It is obvious that there were no provisions in the Soviet justice system in 1937–1938 for the accused to speak to or be represented by legal counsel prior to answering any questions by the police.

What caught my attention in the first question of the court transcript was the statement: “The interrogation shows evidence.” However, there is no reference to what interrogation Sergeant Gendelman is referring; although, it appears that other accused persons may have mentioned that my grandfather was part of their “counterrevolutionary organization.”

Now the second question:

Q. When, and by whom, were you recruited into the fascist organization?

A. I was recruited to the fascist organization in the month of January 1937 by a German named Unruh, Korney Kornejevich. He worked with me in the collective farm Kosior in the Colony Chortitza.

A search for Kornelius Kornelius Unruh revealed that he was arrested on September 5, 1937, and was charged with being a “German intelligence agent.” He was a lawyer and living in the village of Chortitza. Unruh was executed on November 2, 1937, and rehabilitated in 1989.²

We can assume that Unruh was working at the Kosior collective farm with my grandfather, as there may not have been enough work for a lawyer in the village of Chortitza. We can also assume that my grandfather’s name would be found in the interrogation notes of Unruh.

The next six questions that were asked of my grandfather queried who recruited him into the fascist organization and whether he was involved in any kind of counterrevolutionary activities. His answers revealed that it was Unruh who recruited him and that he willingly joined the group.

My grandfather also admitted to causing damage at the collective farm by scattering grain in the fields, breaking the bones of a horse, and damaging some farm wagons.

Based on the stories of my grandmother and mother about my grandfather’s personality, I strongly doubt any of this happened. He was not the kind of person who would destroy property and would never have harmed an animal. He would also not have been engaged in this type of activity that would have jeopardized his ability to provide food for his family.

The following day, Sergeant Gendelman presented the formal indictment document to my grandfather. The text from the document stated the following:

Having examined the investigative materials related to the charges against Sudermann, Nikolai Davidovich, German, charged with crimes provided for under Articles 54-7, 54-10, part 2 and 54-11 of the Criminal Code of the Ukr. SSR, it is found that the investigative actions have established that citizen Sudermann, N.D. was a member of a German fascist organization and promoted fascist propaganda among kolkhoz farmers.

His signature is at the bottom of this

document, indicating that he had read the document. The document also contained the signatures of Colonel Igor Boris Shumsky and Lieutenant Joseph Taksar (see Appendix for more details on the NKVD officers cited in this article).

The last page of the interrogation notes indicated that my grandfather was interrogated again the next day, November 22. This follow-up interrogation was most likely conducted in conjunction with him being compelled to sign the indictment document. There was only one question that he was asked: “Do you confess to being guilty of committing crimes according to these articles of the Criminal Code?”

The transcript shows that he responded in the affirmative, saying that he was guilty of all the crimes that he was charged with and that he had provided the details of all his crimes in the previous interrogation.

I suspect that my grandfather’s confession was probably prewritten, and all he did was sign the documents put in front of him after being threatened and tortured. He, along with the other accused caught in the Great Terror trap, had no choice but to sign these fraudulent documents and face the consequences.

In the chapter, “An Excursion to Zaporozhye,” NKVD officer Frishko testified that “interrogators invented in advance of interrogations, charts of counterrevolutionary organizations, and interrogation protocols. Thick rubber truncheons were used to elicit false confessions as well as assignments to cell number 8, which generally took no more than a few days to persuade prisoners to confess.”³

During the same investigation, NKVD operatives in Zaporozhye testified to “the existence of detailed charts and diagrams that displayed the geographical hierarchies among and/or interconnectedness of counterrevolutionary formations in the city and nearby countryside.”⁴

One officer testified that he was aware of these diagrams and that they belonged to either Gendelman or Linetsky. Gendelman later denied “any knowledge of such diagrams.”⁵

The next document is a typed summary of the judicial review of my grandfather’s case (#File No. F-51395). The investigative materials or evidence to support the charges against him would have been sent to a three-person panel (troika), who would have conducted a hearing to decide his fate.



The extended Sudermann family, ca. 1948, prior or during immigration to Canada. Having left Ukraine, they arrived in the city of Konitz (West Prussia, Germany) on October 11, 1943. Back row (l-r): Luise Sudermann, Anna Sudermann, Heinrich Sudermann, and Elizabeth (Epp) Sudermann (mother of Heinrich, Helena, and Margarete). Front row: Margarete Sudermann (my mother, with braids), Katherina Sudermann (sitting), and Helena Sudermann. Photo credit: Werner Toews.

I soon discovered in my research that there was no formal court hearing for the people charged with counterrevolutionary crimes during the Great Terror. In 1937–1938, these cases were reviewed by a troika, an extra-judicial body, who were named in NKVD order #00447 of July 31, 1937.⁶

The people appointed to the troika in the Dnepropetrovsk region were Senior Major of State Security E.F. Krivets, head of the NKVD, Nathan V. Margolin, the 1st Secretary of the Dnepropetrovsk Regional Committee of the Communist Party, and Makar S. Tsvik, regional prosecutor of the Dnepropetrovsk region.⁷

The review was conducted on December 22, 1937, but by this time Margolin and Tsvik were gone. Both had been arrested and were later executed in 1938. There were only two names on my grandfather's document, E.F. Krivets and acting prosecutor Prokopenko. Krivets was later arrested in 1938 and executed in January 1939. The fate of Prokopenko is not known.

The judicial review contained a summary of the alleged crimes committed by my grandfather and stated that he had been recruited into a counterrevolutionary organization by German intelligence agent Cornelius Unruh (shot). Also included in

the summary were three other names. The first one was Ivan (Johann) Regier, but this was an error as his name was Jacob Regier. He was the husband of my grandfather's niece, Olga (Toews) Regier Rempel.⁸

Jacob Regier worked at the same collective farm (Kosior) as my grandfather and had been arrested on December 28. He was charged with the same crimes as my grandfather and was executed on February 2, 1938.

The other two names were Franz Sawatzky and Peter Willms. They were identified as witnesses to the activities of my grandfather, who was “exposed through the personal testimony of witnesses SAWATZKY, Franz and WILLMS, Peter.”

Franz Sawatzky had worked at the Kosior farm and had also been arrested on November 4, 1937. He along with my grandfather were sentenced and executed on the same day.

Peter Willms was also arrested on November 4 and was executed on December 27, 1937. Willms worked at a different Collective farm. At this point, I am not sure of his connection to my grandfather's case.

Dietrich Pauls, whose name appears on the cover page of my grandfather's case file but was not named in any of my

grandfather's documents, also worked at the Kosier farm. He was also arrested, sentenced, and executed on the same date as my grandfather and Franz Sawatzky.

A short arrest summary and biographical outline of all five men can be found on the Willi Vogt website in the Exiled Mennonites in the Zaporozhye Region section.⁹

There were only two sentencing options according to NKVD order #00447 for the people classified as counterrevolutionaries. The first category was death, and the second category was a prison term in the Gulag system of camps.¹⁰

At the bottom of the judicial review, in large capital letters, was the word “CONFESSED” and the names of Krivets and Prokopenko with two illegible signatures.

Following the judicial review, a document with the sentence would be sent to the NKVD regional office where the accused was imprisoned as per the direction in order #00447 part VI.

“The basis for enforcing the sentence was a certified extract from the minutes of the meeting of the troika with a statement of the verdict in relation to each convicted person, and a special order signed by the chairman of

(cont'd on p. 8)



Upcoming Anniversaries

by Conrad Stoesz

We are entering a window of time where there will be several significant anniversaries.

2022 marks 100 years since the emigration of Mennonites from Canada to Mexico.

2023 is 100 years since the second wave of Mennonite migration from Russia.

2024 is 150 years of Mennonites in Manitoba.

2025 is the 500th anniversary of Anabaptism.

2026 will be 240 years of Mennonites in Ontario.

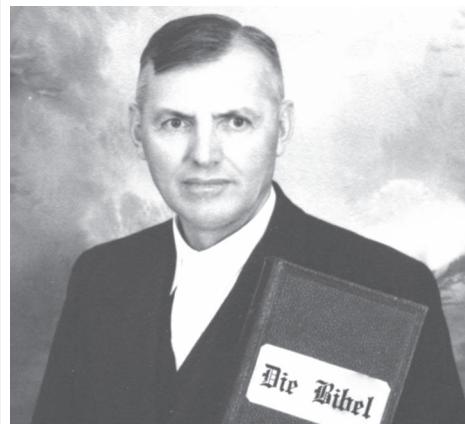
These are all significant events that have shaped us and our country. Commemoration is more than planning a project or event, it is a platform for engagement that can have far reaching effects. Commemoration can make the past meaningful to people so that the unexperienced past becomes part of them and builds support for larger projects. In fact, many historical societies, museums, and archives are direct beneficiaries, as many were born out of commemorative endeavours.

For example, on the heels of Canada's recognition of multiculturalism in the 1970s and Manitoba's own 100th anniversary, the Mennonite Centennial Committee was a catalyst encouraging congregations, towns, and families to mark the 100th anniversary of Mennonites in Manitoba from 1972–1976. As a result, the community supported the Mennonite Heritage Archives by hiring an archivist, constructing a purpose-built archival facility, and establishing an endowment. The numerous commemorative events stretched beyond the province and resulted in support for Mennonite historical societies across the country, culminating in a more robust Mennonite Historical Society of Canada with membership from BC to Ontario.

A *Mennonite Reporter* article from July 8, 1974, stated that "Mennonite historical interest is bursting out all over. One of the by-products of centennial and other anniversaries is a passion concerning the past, noticeable among the younger as well as the older generation."

The work historical organizations do to engage the public is important not only for the public but also for our organizations. There is an opportunity in these next few years to commemorate significant anniversaries to engage our constituencies. Our public programming can be a platform for engagement to make the unexperienced become a part of our constituency's identity and also grow the support of our historical endeavours.

Voices from EMMC & EMC



Wilhelm H. Falk (1892–1976) was born in Schoenthal, northwest of Altona, Manitoba. Falk was the first Bishop of the newly formed *Rudnerweider Gemeinde* that was organized in 1937, which later became the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference (EMMC). He dedicated himself to study of the Bible, which gave him the strength and vision for the challenges of this new leadership ministry. During his ministry, he baptized nearly 1,000 persons, served at 50 funerals, married 112 couples, dedicated 14 church buildings, and ordained 48 ministers, two bishops, and five deacons. Source: Jack Heppner, *Search for Renewal: The Story of the Rudnerweider/EMMC*, page 42. Text and photo credit: Lil Goertzen.



On January 1, 1963, a ministry in the Point Douglas area of Winnipeg officially leased its first permanent meeting space at 139 Euclid Ave. (Pictured above.) They took the name Euclid Gospel Mission and reached out to the area's children and families. In 1968, they had a regular attendance averaging 20. Steinbach Bible College students helped lead Sunday School and Vacation Bible School there in the 1970s, but after this, EMC records are silent. Today, this building is bricked over and sits across the street from a new church plant, part of another denomination with the same vision of reaching the families of Point Douglas. Text and photo credit: Ruth Block.

Departing Canada, Encountering Latin America

REFLECTIONS ON THE CENTENARY OF MENNONITE EMIGRATION FROM CANADA TO MEXICO AND PARAGUAY

October 21-22, 2022



This is a poster advertising one such upcoming anniversary. It is called *Departing Canada, Encountering Latin America: Reflections on the Centenary of Mennonite Emigration from Canada to Mexico and Paraguay*. The conference takes place at the University of Winnipeg on October 21–22, 2022. For more details, see <https://mennonitestudies.uwinnipeg.ca/events/>.

The Journey of the Jakob Hoeppner Wallet

by Werner Toews, Winnipeg

“What’s in your wallet?” was a recent Capital One advertising slogan that came to mind when I discovered that a Jakob Hoeppner, who now lives in Germany, disclosed that he had in his possession his ancestor’s leather wallet. The disclosure was made during a discussion on the Mennonite Genealogy and History group Facebook page in November 2019.



A wallet thought to have belonged to delegate Jakob Hoeppner (1748–1826) was recently donated to the Mennonite Heritage Village Museum, Steinbach. Photo credit: Werner Toews.

Coincidentally, the discussion on that day was regarding a group member’s visit to the Jakob Hoeppner (1748–1826) monument and gravestone located at the Mennonite Heritage Village (MHV) in Steinbach, Manitoba. The Hoeppner monument and gravestone had been originally located on Chortitza Island in Zaporozhye, Ukraine, and was later brought to Canada.

During that discussion, Jakob Hoeppner revealed that the wallet, belonging to his ancestor of the same name, was engraved with his ancestor’s name and the year 1790.

What made this revelation even more remarkable is that Jakob’s ancestor, Jakob Hoeppner (1748–1826), was one of the two delegates selected to travel to South Russia on behalf of the Prussian Mennonite community to survey the land and to investigate the offer for colonization by Empress Catherine II of Russia.

Hoeppner, along with the second delegate, Johann Bartsch (1757–1821), travelled from Prussia to South Russia in 1786 to survey the land and to negotiate the rights and privileges that would be required by the Mennonites to consider immigration to Russia. After selecting the land, they met with Catherine II who accepted their terms for immigration.

Hoeppner and Bartsch returned to Prussia in 1787 and informed the community of the land they had selected and the terms of immigration that were approved by the Empress Catherine. Their report was met with much enthusiasm and started the first wave of immigration to new Russia.

Between 1788 and 1789, over 200 families left Prussia for the long trek to the new land. The first Mennonite families eventually landed in the settlement area of Chortitza in July 1789.

In 1889, the Chortitza Mennonites celebrated the 100th anniversary of the first Mennonite settlement in Ukraine. To honour the contribution of the two delegates, Hoeppner and Bartsch, the organizers of the celebration collected funds from the Chortitza and Molotchna colonies to erect two monuments that would recognize the delegates and their legacy. In the year 1890, the Hoeppner monument was placed at his gravesite, and the Bartsch monument was placed at his gravesite in the Rosental cemetery.

These two monuments were later brought to Canada, the Bartsch monument in 1968 and the Hoeppner monument in 1973. Both are on display at MHV. The two Hoeppner gravestones were also brought to Canada and are displayed at the museum beside the Hoeppner monument.

During discussions with Jakob Hoeppner, who now lives near Frankfurt, Germany, he revealed that it had always been his intention to donate the wallet to MHV. The museum, coincidentally, is also in possession of a few other Hoeppner artifacts, including a Bible that was printed



in 1641. Adding the wallet to this existing collection was Jakob’s motivation to donate the wallet to the museum.

Jakob writes: *The wallet has been in the family for almost 230 years. The wallet was passed on from one Jakob to another Jakob of the next generation, from the forefather to the son, and so on. First, in Ukraine, island Chortitza, then Zaporozhye, then North Caucasus, then Kazakhstan, then North Ural (Gulag), then Siberia, then Germany, and finally, Canada.*

After notifying MHV’s Senior Curator, Andrea Klassen, of the intended donation, tentative plans were made to have the wallet transported to Steinbach. Those plans were then disrupted by the Corona Virus Pandemic, which created travel restrictions and quarantine measures in both Europe and North America.

Two years later, in November 2021, the transportation of the wallet to Canada was made possible by Jon Isaak, director of the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies (CMBS) in Winnipeg. Jon and Mary Anne, who were visiting their daughter and son-in-law in Frankfurt, transported the wallet on its final journey from Germany to Canada. The wallet was officially turned over to Andrea Klassen by Jon Isaak on November 19 at CMBS.



On November 19, 2021, (l-r) Werner Toews, Andrea Klassen, Jon Isaak, and Conrad Stoesz met at CMBS to deliver the 1790 Hoeppner wallet to Andrea Klassen of MHV for preservation. Photo credit: Karen Hume.

The addition of the wallet to MHV's artefact collection ensures that it is preserved and protected for future generations. The museum's plans for the wallet may include special conservation measures in the future in order to stabilize and restore the leather. It plans to place the wallet on display in 2022, to allow visitors to see this unique artefact in person.

Note: Papers related to the Jakob Hoeppner family are preserved at both CMBS (see https://cmbs.mennonitebrethren.ca/personal_papers/enns-gerhard-g-1896-1957/) and MHA. Glenn Penner and a team of translators are compiling early Chortitza Colony documents, including Hoeppner's letters.

The Falk Sisters Album

(cont'd from p. 2)

I was teaching in Plum Coulee, Elizabeth was at Bible school in Winkler, and Magdalene was preparing to attend University of Manitoba. In the summer of 1963, while numerous recordings of our singing were still being aired, I began to think that we should have a more permanent record of our singing, as had already been requested by many of our fans. I had been earning money for a year and proposed to my sisters that we have an album made. They were in full agreement, and I hired Redekop Electric in Winnipeg.

We agreed on a date and time, and so David Redekop came to Plum Coulee to set up his equipment in our parents' living room. Elizabeth remembers a very hot day. Magdalene says she remembers the long cord snaking across the room. I remember the three of us standing next to the piano in front of the microphone, facing Redekop and the picture window with a view of the street. Martha was seated at the piano. I can see my parents in the room as usual, listening in their familiar easy chairs, but they may in fact have been in the next room.

We had decided on the songs we liked best as a part of our repertoire—both English and German—separated by opposite sides of the record. Since we had often performed these numbers, they would not require much rehearsal ahead of time. On the day of the recording, with Martha accompanying, we briefly sang all the songs, not wanting to exhaust our voices. We planned to record each song in one take, unless there was a definite reason to redo—we mostly accomplished this.

We agreed that Elizabeth would write the blurb for the back of the album. She chose Isaiah 12:5 as an introduction and *Sing unto the Lord* from that verse became the album title. Elizabeth designed the album cover, and Winkler photographer, George Sawatsky, took our photo for the record jacket.

Once the 100 finished albums arrived, I took on the job of marketing, with Redekop Electric selling some from their shop on Portage Ave. in Winnipeg. I no longer remember the price I designated for the albums. It must have been somewhere between \$2 and \$4. [That is what Google says an LP sold for in the 1960s.] As you might imagine, many of the first sales were to family members. I arranged with some local merchants to sell them on consignment. Realizing that I would not readily be selling all the albums on my own, I offered to donate some to Edwin Klippenstein with the suggestion that he use them as an incentive to donate to *The Gospel Message* program. For a given sum of money, donors would receive an album by mail.

The albums were well received by listeners beyond the Rudnerweider circles. CFAM began playing songs from *The Falk Sisters* album, weekday afternoons on their hour of hymns. Decades later when CFAM was clearing out their record collection, Elizabeth discovered one for sale at the Altona MCC store. She was amused when she read the handwritten instructions on the cover: *Use very occasionally. These all sound the same.* All these years later, all three of us find this quite hilarious, because of course it is true! What is also true is that the singing itself was of good quality.

When my family and I gave up our turntable, I had the songs from the LP transferred to a CD; however, it had been decades since I listened to it. As a prelude to writing this article, I played the CD again and was pleasantly surprised. In fact—dare I say it—I heard a beautiful blend of voices—the sweet harmony of three young treble voices. It may have been nostalgia alone, but I was quite moved. We had always been told how well we blended, and now I noticed that we were very much attuned to each other and in sync every step of the way. All these years later, I was impressed and reminded that as teenagers we entered a Rudnerweider Youth Singing Contest. We competed with several other

singing groups and a well-established church choir—and we won! At the time I did not think it was particularly significant. But from this distance, it seems maybe it was deserved after all!

Over the years—and to this day—listeners comment on how much they or someone from the older generation enjoyed the record. I am reminded of the letter from a friend, written after her mother's death, where she expressed how much her mother had enjoyed our singing on this record.

I must admit that Conrad's discovery of the album for sale on eBay came as a pleasant surprise. I was curious, so I checked several times on the status of the sale. Sure enough, the first time it was listed for sale at \$15, the next time the \$15 was crossed out and "Best Offer Accepted" appeared, then "Sold" appeared on the photo! For me, this raises the question: Who bought this 58-year-old album? Perhaps it was someone who knew and appreciated *The Falk Sisters*, an older person who wished to replace a worn-out album, a younger person who had often heard their parents/grandparents refer to *The Falk Sisters* trio and wanted to hear it for themselves, maybe a record collector, wanting to add a rare album to their collection—or simply a curious person—like me. I find this renewed attention to our record fascinating, but I must concede that the identity of the buyer will forever remain a mystery to me. However, reflecting on the unexpected appearance of a single album is gratifying in a way that vindicates our youthful endeavour.

Note: The Falk Sisters album can be heard at <https://www.mharchives.ca/features/mennonite-historian/#falk-sisters-album>.

Searching the KGB Files

(cont'd from p. 5)

the troika, which was then handed over to the person executing the sentence."¹¹

There was no such summary document in the copies that I received from the Zaporozhye archives. There was, however, a copy of a certificate that was completed in all such execution cases of the first category. That certificate stated:

Sudermann, Nikolai Davidovich, [born] 1898, was detained by order of the UGB / Administration for State Security of the NKVD Administrative Division of Dnepropetrovsk Oblast and, by the decision of the People's Commissar for Internal

Affairs and the Prosecutor of the USSR on 22 Dec 1937 / Protokol No. 98 /, was convicted under the FIRST CATEGORY [death sentence].

The sentence was carried out on 9 / I 1938 [January 9, 1938].

Head of the 8th department of the UGB of the UNKVD - Administrative Division of Dnepropetrovsk Oblast. [signed] SINYAKOV

While the date of his execution is given, the place of execution and burial was not recorded in this document. As with many accused, the places of burial were kept secret as well as the names of those who performed the executions.

Family Struggles, November–December 1937
When my grandfather was arrested and taken to prison, my grandmother, along with hundreds of other women, would make a weekly journey to the prison to bring food packages to their husbands.

Below is an account of that journey, from the memoirs of Anna Sudermann.¹²

For Liese now began a difficult time of trips to Zaporozhye with food parcels. This was connected with a lot of trouble—long waiting in lineups, cold feet, patience, and perseverance. Liese travelled to Zaporozhye almost every week. Once I was able to take some time off from work and make the trip myself. At this time of the year, we did not want to expose Tinchen (sister Katherina Sudermann) to such a trip because of her hearing problem.

We had to leave on the evening train to get a good place in the line. This would at least give us a better chance to deliver our items the next day. I arrived at the Zaporozhye station about six o'clock in the evening. I went straight to the prison but was not the first one in line by a long way.

The hours crept by very slowly. You could warm up a little bit in a shed. One did not dare to stay away too long so as not to lose one's place in the line. It started to become light at seven o'clock, and we could see that the line had grown considerably longer overnight with hundreds in the queue. The people at the end of the line would not have had any opportunity to deliver their items.

Two more hours of waiting. The closer the time came, the more intense was the attention towards the window in the wall of the prison. It was through this window that the items were handed over to the prison guards. Our thoughts then turned

to the question, when will it finally open? And when the time finally came, there was still more waiting. Only about 10 women at a time could hand in their bags. Then the window was closed again, and it took another quarter of an hour or longer until the next 10 women were served. Finally, when the things were taken, there was another waiting period, until the empty bag with the note and the receipt certificate was returned.

Hours passed again until this happened. Now you were no longer tied to the lineup, but you did not dare to go too far from the prison, so as not to miss the crucial moment. When the empty bags were returned, there was often great disappointment when a bag was returned full. There was no explanation given, which heightened the worry; what was the reason?

There were several times when we could not leave anything for Heinrich, because he could not be found. Later we learned that his name had been misspelled. Since the list of items on the note where the recipient signed could be used to include a short greeting, we found out that Heinrich and Kolja were together, because Kolja had written “zelujem” (we kiss). These few words on the notes were most precious to receive—compensation for the long hours of waiting, the last sign of life from our loved ones.

At the end of December, Heinrich and Kolja disappeared from the prison with many other inmates. They were transported away without interrogation; whereto? No one told us, but we have now known for awhile that all the ones banished to the polar areas of Russia and Siberia have perished in the total isolation camps.

I now know the truth behind the disappearance of my grandfather and his two brothers. It would have been cold comfort for my grandmother and my grandfather's sisters if they had still been with us to learn the truth from these records. My mother commented on learning the news in 2003 that “at least they didn't suffer in a Siberian camp.”

The last injustice perpetrated on my grandfather's family was the confiscation of my grandfather's personal property by the NKVD in the spring of 1938. The authorities made a list of furniture, carpentry tools, horse harnesses, and clothing belonging to all three brothers. After the family appealed to the local NKVD office, some of the possessions

were taken off the list. Some time later, the remaining articles were taken and sold in the village square.¹³ I was later advised by a Russian researcher that the seizure and sale of property from the accused was considered a theft and had nothing to do with the charges against those people arrested in 1937–1938.

As described in *Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial*, some of the NKVD officers in Zaporozhye were charged with property theft. During the investigation of the officers in Zaporozhye, the prison commander, G.Y. Dorov, claimed that the former acting head of the NKVD in Zaporozhye (June 1937–April 1938), Semyon Yankovich, ordered him to remove clothing and suits from the prisoners that has been executed. That clothing was kept in the prison storeroom. Dorov also claimed that Yankovich would “from time to time distribute the clothes to him and other squad members.” Another employee of the NKVD who oversaw the garage and took part in executions testified that Dorov sold the pillaged goods at markets in nearby towns and at the barracks in Zaporozhye.¹⁴

After the investigations and trials of the Zaporozhye officers were complete, Dorov received five years in the Gulag. Yankovich was arrested in 1938 and executed on October 2, 1938.¹⁵

Review of the case

The last three documents in the package of KGB documents I received in 2018 contain details of a 1941 review of the case against my grandfather, Franz Sawatzky, and Dietrich Pauls. There is also a separate 1989 review of my grandfather's case.

The 1941 review was requested by a relative of Sawatzky. There is a curious statement in this document that stated: “The case will be examined on the complaint of a relative of the convicted Sawatzky, but nothing substantial will come of this complaint.” This seems like a review with an outcome that was predetermined.

A further statement in the 1941 document revealed the decision of this review. “Summing up the foregoing, I find no grounds for bringing a protest to the court judgment, and therefore, in the case of Sawatzky, reject as unjustified any refusal to suspend the proceeding of the case.” In other words, the earlier convictions of all three men remained and were not overturned. Many years later, the cases of the people that were repressed in the USSR were

reviewed, and, as a result of that review, my grandfather, Franz Sawatzky, and Dietrich Pauls were exonerated.

Exoneration

The last but most important document to me was the 1989 review of my grandfather's file. The review was conducted by the state prosecutor's office of the Zaporozhye oblast. The prosecutor reviewed the case and found that my grandfather's case fit the criteria described under the Decree (#1) of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on January 16, 1989. The decree stated that cases like my grandfather's qualified for "additional measures to restore justice for victims of repression during the period of the 1930s–1940s and beginning of the 1950s."

These measures are described by the Memorial Society of Russia as the following: "the return of lost rights and benefits, the elimination of legal restrictions related to unlawful criminal prosecution, imprisonment, unjustified conviction of innocent persons, the unlawful use of compulsory medical measures, and the restoration of legal capacity for the future."¹⁶

The 1989 review was approved by three people: the prosecutor, the assistant prosecutor, and the Chief of the Ukrainian KGB Division of the Ukrainian SSR for the Zaporozhye Oblast. The sad irony is that, in 1937–1938, troikas were created by the Soviet government to send people to their death and then, 51 years later, another troika exonerated my grandfather.

Aftermath

The exact figure on how many people were arrested, convicted, and executed during the Great Terror will never be known. Many historians have written extensively on this subject citing different sources for their estimates on the number of victims. Nicolas Werth estimates that over one and a half million people were arrested and, of those, 800,000 were executed. The remaining number were sentenced to 10 years of forced labour in a Gulag camp.¹⁷

For many years now, Dr. Peter Letkemann has been collecting the names of Mennonites that were arrested during the terror years. His research revealed that 8,000 to 10,000 Mennonites from a population of 90,000 to 100,000 or about 8% to 10% of the Mennonite population in the USSR were arrested during 1937–1938.¹⁸ With the opening of the KGB archives in Ukraine, many more will be added to the list in his

ongoing research of Mennonite victims during the Soviet period.

In 2019, the University of Winnipeg's Center for Transnational Mennonite Studies (CTMS), under the direction of codirector Dr. Aileen Friesen, partnered with archives in Ukraine to provide families with information on their lost relatives during the terror years. Families interested in requesting a search of the KGB archives for a family member can contact the CTMS via email <ctms@uwinnipeg.ca>. Families are asked to provide as much information as possible to assist the archives staff with a search. CTMS can also provide family members with contact information of translators in Canada or Ukraine.

During the terror years, the execution sites and places of burial were kept secret by government order.¹⁹ To date, I have not located the burial site of my grandfather. I will continue to search for credible information on the burial sites of the people executed in Zaporozhye.

I will end this part of my journey into the past with a statement from my mother who, upon learning that her father had been exonerated in 1989, said, "What does that help now; they are all dead."

Appendix: NKVD officers named in article

Schultz, Hugo Johannovich. An operative of the 3rd department of the UGB of the Zaporozhye department of the NKVD; sergeant of the State Security of the NKVD of the Ukrainian SSR. There is no information about the date and place of birth. There is no death information.²⁰

Taksar, Iosif Ilyich. Head of the 3rd department of the UGB of the Zaporozhye department of the NKVD; lieutenant of state security. Dismissed (Nov. 1, 1939) according to Article 38 p "b" (in connection with the arrest) of the Regulations.^{21 22} Listed as no disposition after arrest.²³

Shumsky, Igor Borisovich. From August 1937 to March 1938, head of the Zaporozhye city department of the NKVD; colonel. Retired in June 1956. Died in Kiev in July 1974 after a "successful" career; received many medals.^{24 25}

Linetsky, Boris Lvovich. Born in 1906. Place of birth: Odessa. Executed on October 9, 1940.²⁶ From May 1938 until his arrest on March 18, 1939, he oversaw the national operations in Zaporozhye. His unit "was responsible for the largest number of arrests in Zaporozhye in the summer of 1938." He was eventually

arrested and accused of, among other things, beating a prisoner. He was also accused of falsifying cases and using torture to extract confessions from the accused.²⁷ After a trial, Linetsky was found guilty of all charges and executed on September 10, 1940.²⁸

Gendelman, Joseph Moiseevich. No information about the date and place of birth. No death information. He was a sergeant of state security, acting head of the 2nd department of the UNKVD department of the Zaporozhye region of the Ukrainian SSR. Dismissed (fired) on June 23, 1940.²⁹

Gontarenko, Vasily Afansyevich. In October 1937, he was an operative of the 5th department, UGB Zaporozhye GO UNKVD Dnipropetrovsk region; sergeant of state security (operative of the EKO UNKVD of the Zaporozhye region of the Ukrainian SSR. Dismissed (fired) on July 31, 1939.³⁰

Yankovich, Semyon Alexandrovich. Nationality: Jewish. He was born in 1903; place of birth: Odessa. Died on February 10, 1938, in Kiev (shot). Member of the CPSU (b) since 1928 and member of the Cheka-OGPU-NKVD since 1919. He was subjected to repression (Feb. 10, 1938) by the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR and sentenced to VMN (capital punishment).³¹ On the activities of Yankovich: "Most NKVD operatives looked at looting as compensation for difficult work. Pillaging was a testament to the poverty of the times, even among NKVD workers, who would wear or sell their victims' clothing without remorse."³²

Dorov-Piontashko, Grigory Yakovlevich. Born in 1898, Berdichev, Vinnytsia region B; commandant of the city department of the NKVD. Social origin: a worker (locksmith), Ukrainian, who served in the Red Army from 1918–1919, member of the NKVD since 1920. From 1930 to his arrest on April 8, 1939, Dorov was the commandant of the Zaporozhye jail. Known as "beater in chief"; he admitted to "telling his interrogators that if all else failed he was called in to beat confessions out of resistant prisoners. Dorov was also executioner in chief. A key accusation against him was looting at the execution site."³³ "Dorov was sentenced to five years and Klibanov to seven years in the Gulag. Linetsky was sentenced to death."³⁴

Krivets, Efim Fomich. Born in 1897, village Krivtsy, Vilenskaya province. In the family of a railway labourer, Belarusian. In KP since September 1917; Deputy of the

Supreme Soviet of the USSR of the 1st convocation; Head of the NKVD in the Dnepropetrovsk region; Chairmen of the troika 1937–1938. Arrested in 1939. Shot on January 25, 1940.³⁵

All the officers in this list, except for Dorov-Piontashko, can be found a list of approximately 40,000 secret police officers that were active during the Great Terror. This list can be found online through the Russian Memorial website.³⁶

For an interesting story on how these names were found by Andrei Zhukov, see *The Guardian*, February 6, 2017.³⁷

Werner Toews is a retired police officer and a former vice president of the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society. He is the author of Sketches from Siberia: The Life of Jacob Sudermann (Friesen, 2018) and received the Germans from Russia Heritage Society 2017 Joseph S. Height literary award for his article on the missing records of the first Mennonite settlement in Russia.

Endnotes

1. This article was first published in the *Heritage Review* 51/3 (September 2021): 27–42, a publication of the Germans from Russia Heritage Society (GRHS), and appears here with permission from both the article's author, Werner Toews, and GRHS.
 2. <https://chort.square7.ch/Pis/Sapor.pdf>, see page 290; the lists are in the Ukrainian language.
 3. <https://www.history.utoronto.ca/publications/stalinist-perpetrators-trial>, see page 119.
 4. Ibid., 130.
 5. Ibid., 130.
 6. <https://www.alexanderyakovlev.org/almanah/inside/almanah-doc/1007240>.
 7. https://nkvd.memo.ru/index.php/Документ_Составы_троек_в_1937–1938_годах.
 8. *Der Bote*, August 30, 2006, page 17.
 9. See <https://chort.square7.ch/> and list of exiled Mennonites at <https://chort.square7.ch/Pis/Sapor.pdf>.
 10. <http://istmat.info/node/31685>, see part 4 and part 6 of NKVD order #00447, July 30, 1937.
 11. <http://istmat.info/node/31685>.
 12. “Lebenserinnerungen,” 301–302.
 13. Ibid., 302–303.
 14. <https://www.history.utoronto.ca/publications/stalinist-perpetrators-trial>, see page 134.
 15. https://nkvd.memo.ru/index.php/Янкович,_Семен_Александрович.
 16. <http://old.memo.ru/s/12.html>.
 17. <https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/en/document/mass-crimes-under-stalin-1930-1953.html>.
 18. <https://jms.uwinnipeg.ca/index.php/jms/article/view/543>; there is also a 2016 unpublished

- update.

 19. <https://urokiistorii.ru/article/55889>.
 20. https://nkvd.memo.ru/index.php/Шульц,_Гуго_Иоганнович.
 21. https://nkvd.memo.ru/index.php/Обсуждение:_Таксар,_Иосиф_Ильич.
 22. https://nkvd.memo.ru/index.php/Таксар,_Иосиф_Ильич.
 23. <http://www.reabit.org.ua/files/store/Journ.2017.2.pdf>, see page 214.
 24. https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Шумский,_Игорь_Борисович#cite_note-alhamanax-2.

25. https://nkvd.memo.ru/index.php/Шумской,_Игорь_Борисович.
 26. https://nkvd.memo.ru/index.php/Линецкий,_Борис_Львович.
 27. <https://www.history.utoronto.ca/publications/stalinist-perpetrators-trial>, see pages 139–142.

28. Ibid., 142.

29. https://nkvd.memo.ru/index.php/Гендельман,_Иосиф_Моисеевич.

30. https://nkvd.memo.ru/index.php/Гонтаренко,_Василий_Афанасьевич.

31. https://nkvd.memo.ru/index.php/Янкович,_Семен_Александрович.

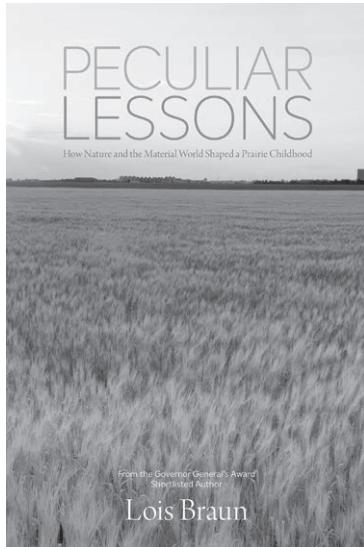
32. <https://www.history.utoronto.ca/publications/stalinist-perpetrators-trial>, see page 134.

33. Ibid., 133.

34. Ibid., 142.

35. <http://old.memo.ru/history/nkvd/kto/biogr/gb255.htm>

36. https://nkvd.memo.ru/index.php/НКВД:_



Lois Braun, *Peculiar Lessons: How Nature and the Material World Shaped a Prairie Childhood* (Winnipeg: Great Plains Publishing, 2020), 224 pp.

Reviewed by Maria H. Klassen, St. Catharines

In the preface, Lois Braun writes, "I came to realize the extent to which the physical elements of my surroundings shaped my childhood and my world view, how the things in our surroundings inspire activity, investigation, and discovery." This book is not a novel but a collection of detailed childhood memories. In each stand-alone chapter or section, a specific material is covered using geographic, historical, and scientific explanations. With each element, Lois Braun profiles a contemporary local artist or advocate, including black and white photos of artistic examples spread throughout the book.

The first element is rock—how she would find stones and rocks, split them open with a sledgehammer, and discover

the multi-coloured crystals inside. She includes geological history and explains limestone, fossils, and petrified forests. Todd Braun briefly tells the story of his journey into rock sculpting.

In the next section, Braun explains the science of light, including mirages, looming, the colours and odours of light, northern lights, fog, and smog. Photographer Terry Klippenstein comments about light, "The more unusual the weather, the more engaging the image." Most of Terry's photos are presented in black and white. Painter Steve Penner spent an entire summer taking pictures of the prairie skies and witnessed the colours and constantly changing skies, putting these images on canvass.

Water—on our skin, on the windowpane, in a puddle; mud and morass in furrows, drainage ditches and ponds. Braun talks about the fun of wearing rubber boots, building rafts, and exploring creeks. She writes about the history of the Red River, steamships and paddlewheeled boats. Sherry Dangerfield has a master's degree in Natural Resource Management and says, "We have to stop trying to control nature and find ways to work with it." She works with conservation and watersheds.

Growing up on a farm and living most of her adult life on a farm, Braun has experienced the benefits of plants, shrubs, bushes, and trees. They are used for shade, as boundaries, for food, to harbour birds and insects, as wood products, and to cleanse the air and protect the world's ecosystems. Laura Reeves is a botanist working with wild plants, teaching their usefulness through specialized classes.

Braun writes about the many species of insects, birds, and animals she saw, heard, and interacted with on the farm. She briefly touches on the transition from raising to not raising farm animals. Allen Schritt makes presentations of his photography to many groups and organizations, delivering his message of conservation and wildlife advocacy.

Many of Braun's most important objects in her young world were made of paper—books, catalogues, paper dolls, colouring books, maps, and paper for writing and drawing. Norman Schmidt works in the art and profession of graphic design and printmaking; kites and airplane designs emerge from his work with paper.

Different textures are found in the home, including ceramics, quilts, carpets

and rugs, gauzy curtains and velvet drapes, wool scarves, knots in raw wood, and ivory piano keys. Braun goes into detail about new dresses and outfits, and other sewing and embroidery projects that are not as common today. Sharon Schmidt spends every day working on some sewing project, working on several different quilt projects at the same time. She has spent much of her retirement honing her fibre art skills.

Metal elements are found in coins, toys, pots and pans, shovels, bikes, musical instruments, appliances, furnaces, garden and farm implements. One of Braun's favourite metal objects was her transistor radio. Scrap metal is the base for many of Ken Loewen's works of art.

The grid system is found in maps and diagrams, in gardens and on farms, and in the layout of the roads on the prairies of the Canadian West. Artist Margruite Krahn has researched and written about floor art found in many Mennonite homes in years gone by.

The concluding chapter is about synthetics and plastics: how they were developed and how they are being used. Bakelite is described in detail. In Braun's childhood, most of her clothing was made of natural fibres, today not so much. She concludes her book with interviews of people from the older generation and their attitudes toward synthetics.

This is a well-researched book, with explanations as to how objects are created and how they function. Braun uses ancient geological history and scientific explanations. Each section includes childhood memories of what was important to her as a child. These include toys, routines, family trips, and Saturday evening rituals. We get an insight into her family dynamics. Her creativity, investigation, and discovery of so many objects in her young life is amazing. The fact that her father loved science (explaining the interplay of photons and water molecules) and taking his family on trips, clearly influenced his children.

This book also includes the realities of life. Some examples include flooding, lack of sustainable land development, and the offences committed by sewage systems. Our lack of awareness of ecosystems hinders us from understanding food chains, nutrient cycles, energy flows, and their interdependence. Making paper is very damaging to the earth.

I would recommend this book to

anyone who is interested in the past—what we were using in the 1950s and 1960s, and how we have evolved to our present-day product usage. One section can be read at a time, to better absorb and understand each element or material. It does seem very detailed at times, but there is nothing I would leave out. The individual artist and advocate stories for each chapter are interesting and add appreciation for the current use of the material world.



Bernhard Thiessen, *Mennoniten in der Deutsche Demokratische Republik: Leben in Grenzen, 1945–1990* (Mennonitischen Geschichtsverein, Bolanden-Weierhof, 2020), 212 pp.

Reviewed by John Thiessen, Altona

In reading this overview of the Mennonite experience in the Soviet-controlled German Democratic Republic (GDR), known to many as East Germany, it immediately became clear that it would be difficult to provide an objective review of this project. Having worked four years in the GDR with MCC in the 1980s, I came to know many of the people whose personal recollections are presented here. Hence, I read this book eagerly and with affection for the people who shared their stories and with gratitude for Bernhard Thiessen's efforts to write their history.

Note that most of the book is in the German language, which unfortunately will limit the readership. Also note that there is overlap in the different biographies and articles, which could be helpful for those who have little familiarity with this history.

The book is divided into four historical periods, each section helpfully providing an overview followed by personal stories and reflections from those who lived that

period. There is an appendix of important dates in the back. The historical documents, letters, personal accounts, and reflections bring the focus down to the level of the individual and the Mennonite community. The impact of policies and actions of the GDR regime can be experienced through the eyes of those affected.

A few topics are worth highlighting. First, the book relates the commitment of Mennonite leaders in West Berlin and the GDR to do what was necessary to reach out to Mennonites scattered across the GDR, many of them refugees from East Prussia after the war. The readiness of these people to be there for others demonstrates the strong sense of community, no matter the distances and difficulties in remaining connected. The Menno-Heim in West Berlin had an important role in helping the scattered Mennonites feel connected to the larger Mennonite world.

Second, as we read through the book, it becomes evident that the state officials had a limited understanding of who the Mennonites were, what their beliefs were, and how they differed from the *Evangelische Kirche*. So, even though the Mennonite Church in the GDR never had more than a few hundred members, the international Mennonite contacts aroused suspicion. Informants within the Mennonite ranks were a reality, and the presence of the police state was never forgotten.

Third, Thiessen raises the question of accommodation to a police state—is collaboration an easy compromise or a way of being a Christian with integrity in a socialist society? Our contacts in the GDR, whether Mennonite or other, led us to focus on supporting those individuals who saw themselves as servants to everyone they encountered in their lives. We found leaders and laypeople in the Mennonite, *Evangelische*, and Catholic churches whose focus was on being the hands and feet of Christ in their everyday lives, including their workplaces where most were not associated with any church. They saw more value in this witness than in being openly critical of their state. Of course, one could be both, but here personalities and individual circumstances shaped their paths.

The book provides an important window into the lives of a community of Christians who regularly had to critically assess their responses to a social and political reality significantly different from ours.