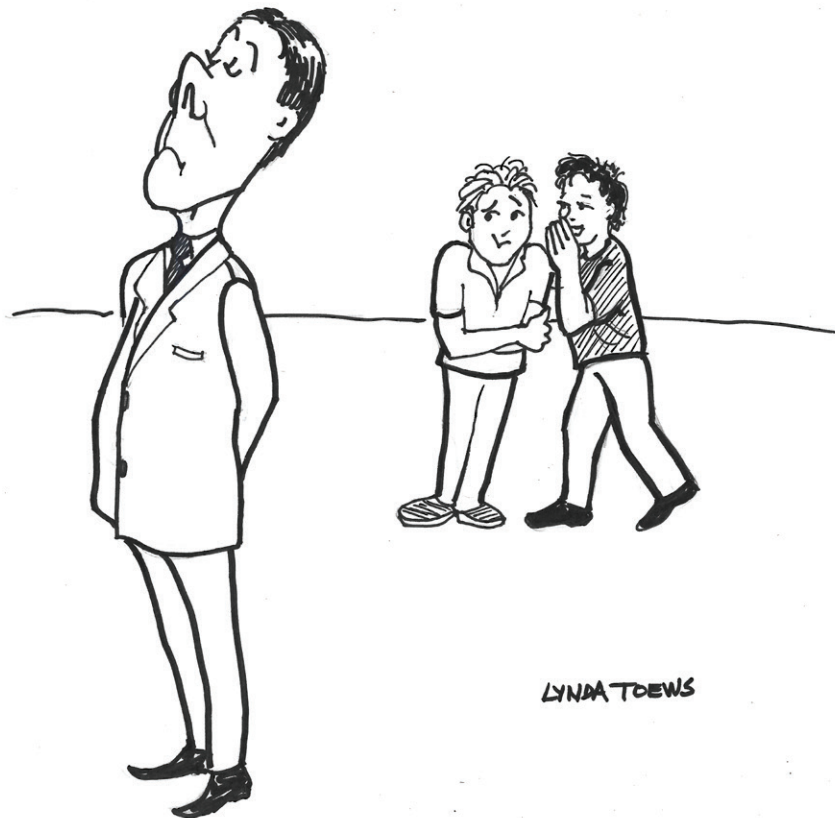


# Mennonite Historian

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



## *Dem reagen't enna Naes*

The English language equivalent of this Mennonite Low German (MLG) saying is *Him, it rains in his nose*.

To understand this saying takes a bit of explaining. Many English language expressions are abstract, while many MLG expressions are concrete, using images that can be seen or felt or heard.

The fellow pictured at the left in the cartoon is wearing a suit and tie and appears to be wrapped up in his own importance. He looks self-assured, a bit pompous, and proud of himself. Two younger teens are observing him with some disdain. One says to the other, *Dem reagen't enna Naes*. Translation: Him, it rains in his nose.

Explanation: When you walk in the rain, it is impossible for water to get into your nose. Water cannot flow up into your nose. But the expression suggests that if you are acting high and mighty, with your nose held high, rain could fall into your nose.

This expression shows that *Plautdietsche* expressions carry strong, concrete imagery.

*Text by Jake Buhler and illustration by Lynda Toews.*

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# The Precarious Life of Jacob Penner: Mennonite, Communist

by Dan Dyck, Winnipeg

In 2000, the city of Winnipeg honoured the late alderman, Jacob P. Penner, by naming a park after him. It very well may be the only park in Canada honouring a communist. Even more unusual, this communist was from a Kleine Gemeinde and Mennonite Brethren background. This immigrant to Canada from the Russian empire would become a prominent figure in Winnipeg's civic politics.

Penner was born in 1880 in the western borderlands of the Russian empire. His great-grandfather, Peter P. Penner (b. 1799), became a respected Kleine Gemeinde minister after converting to the faith in 1835. In 1867, Peter's son, also named Jacob, moved to Friedensfeld, near Nikopol, where he and his wife, Helena Dueck, established a large enterprise. During their time in Friedensfeld, the Penners would eventually join the Mennonite Brethren church. The farming and business undertakings eventually collapsed due to overextended credit in a time when the rural economy became jeopardized.

Jacob Penner, eldest in his family, was a small-framed, soft-spoken Russian

Mennonite. He arrived in Quebec City on August 4, 1904, and soon found himself in southern Manitoba, where other relatives had become established. Although Jacob would have preferred to stay in Russia, his parents, Peter and Margaretha Penner, convinced him to emigrate due to his risky political activities, especially after Jacob witnessed how striking workers were brutalized at the Briansk Metal Works in Ekaterinoslav.

As Jacob recalled, "When I was a boy in Russia, I came in contact with the Marxists and became immediately interested in their viewpoint—participated in underground, secret meetings in the forest on the outskirts of the city, protected by a sentry.... My parents, very religious, orthodox Mennonites, were greatly disturbed and alarmed that I would land in the clutches of the regime."

Already having trained as a teacher and studied surveying in Russia, Jacob attended the Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Gretna from September to November 1904 to re-certify as a teacher in Manitoba. Here his English learning accelerated. He taught school in nearby Altona from December 1904 to June 1905, but decided he was not well-suited to the profession. He moved to Winnipeg's North End, a neighbourhood of eastern European immigrants. Here his political views were more welcome than in rural southern Manitoba.

Though he rejected a religious path, he acknowledged that science and religion were both valid ways for humans to understand the world. He seemed to have had a passion for the ideals of the Social Gospel imprinted on his soul. He met his life partner, Rose Shapack (b. 1890), at a political event at the Winnipeg Radical



**Jacob P. Penner as a young man.** Photo credit for both images in this story: Ron and Wendy Dueck.

Club in 1908. Ever unconventional, the couple of Mennonite and Jewish heritage officially married some years after the birth of their last child in 1922. They wed on January 9, 1930, "for the sake of the children." The couple had seven children altogether. The most public was Roland, who became Attorney General of Manitoba in 1981.

Penner carried on his political activism, advocating for labour rights at a series of jobs in Winnipeg. In each case, his employment became compromised due to his political activities that included his support for the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919. At a secret meeting in Guelph, Ontario, in 1921, the Communist Party of Canada was founded. Penner was named Western Organizer. Fearing that Section 98 of the Criminal Code, which had been enacted to crush the Winnipeg General Strike, might be employed to indict the leadership of the new party, it operated under the name of the Workers' Party of Canada. However, in 1924, it openly became the Communist Party of Canada and affiliated with the international Communist movement.

At about this time, Penner decided to run for political office. He was roundly

(cont'd on p. 4)

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# Genealogy and Family History

## Too Good to be True: The Mennonitische Rundschau Online

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

The *Mennonitische Rundschau* (MR)<sup>1</sup> has been available online<sup>2</sup> for about two years. Suddenly having what might be considered as the most important Mennonite periodical ever published available online and searchable seemed like a miracle. However, a careful look shows that there are serious problems with searching the online collection of this Mennonite newspaper.

The root cause of most of these problems is with the Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software used by the website. The OCR takes the Gothic script text in the MR and transforms it into Latin script. In order to do this, it must recognize each letter. A look at the text produced by the OCR shows that pretty much every page has anywhere from about a few dozen to over a hundred incorrectly transcribed letters.

Some letters are frequently mis-recognized by the OCR. For example, “J” is often OCR-ed as “N”; hence, there are 833 instances of the name “Nacob”! There is also a problem with “S” and “H”; a search for Siebert yields mostly Hieberts. And lower-case letters “h” and “b” are often confused, as well as “s” and “j”—which means a search for *Rosenort* gives 547 results, while a search for *Rojenort* gives 253 results. In other words, if one searched the online MR for *Rosenort*, one should expect to see less than 70% of the actual Rosenorts.

Furthermore, the searching mechanism does not simply search for a string of characters. If that were the case, a search for *Johan* should also give all of the

Johanns. This does not happen. A total of 601 Johans are found. On the other hand, if one searches for *Johann*, one gets 4,558 hits. This will be true for all words that may be written with double or single letters, such as Hermann, Sudermann, Ladekopp, etc.

Care should be taken when searching for strings of words. A search for *Peter Loewen* will give you all Peters and all Loewens who are found in the same issue, even if the words Peter and Loewen appear on different pages of that issue. One must search for “*Peter Loewen*” in quotes. Such searches have revealed a serious problem, which I can’t explain. A search for *Loewen* does not give any Loewens before 1904. It seems highly unlikely that there were no Loewens mentioned before 1904. On the other hand, if one searches for “*Heinrich Loewen*” one gets three hits for 1902, two for 1901, two for 1898, and three for 1887. In fact, searching for nearly any traditional first name (Peter, Johan(n), Jacob, etc.) combined with Loewen in quotes gives hits before 1904! This is the situation for every combination of first name and surname I tried. I see this as a serious problem.

What can be done about these searching problems? Unfortunately, the user can do very little in directly addressing these problems. It is only through experience that the common mis-recognitions can be identified. It is up to the organization that offers the MR online to improve the quality of their images and the OCR of those images.

Fortunately, there are published indices for the MR covering the years 1880 to 1939, pointing readers to the newspaper issue where a particular name or subject is discussed. These are divided by decade and are also available online and can be (reliably) searched electronically.<sup>3</sup>

However, the indices are of uneven quality in terms of thoroughness and detail. That said, the indices compiled by Bert Friesen for decades 1900–1909 and 1910–1919 are superior. These indices have their advantages and disadvantages. Any serious researcher will make use of the online MR as well as the published indices.

Some hints for searching the MR online:

1. Make sure that you are searching *Text content*, not *Metadata*. For reasons I do not understand, the default search is set on *Metadata*.

2. Do not worry about umlauts. Just use the vowel without an umlaut. But note that you will also need to do an additional search for the word with the ae, oe, or ue variation. For example, a search for *Lowen* gives 3,052 hits for both Löwen and Lowen, but not Loewen. A separate search for *Loewen* gives 1,486 Loewens, but no Löwens or Lowens.

3. Do not worry about the double-s (ß). In these cases, search for the word using an “ss”; for example, a search for *Grossweide* also gives Großweide.

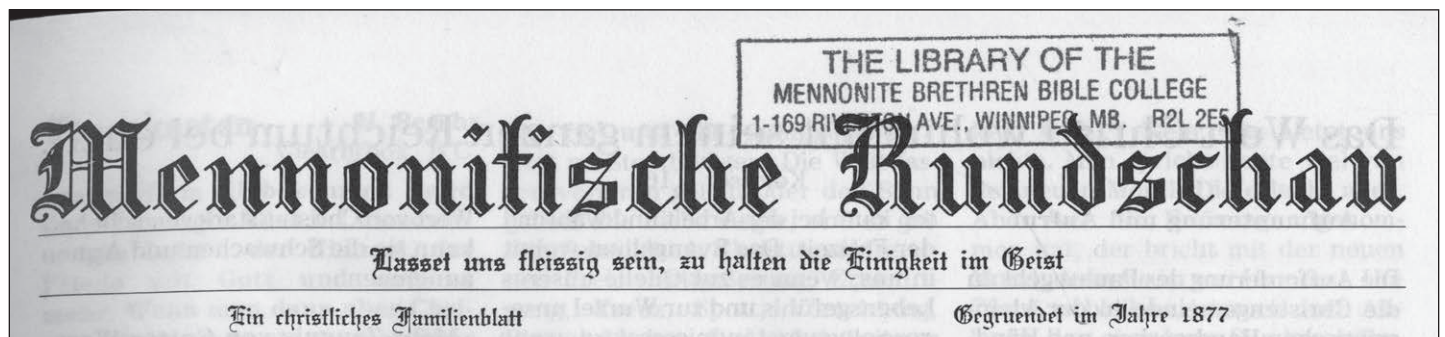
4. When searching for German words ending with double letters, one must search for both the single letter and double letter variations of the word. See Johan/Johann example above.

Of course, the longer the word or phrase you search for, the more likely you will miss important citations.

The online *Mennonitische Rundschau* is a fantastic resource, but as one can see from the few examples I’ve given above, there are serious problems in searching its contents.

## Endnotes

1. [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonitische\\_Rundschau\\_Die\\_\(Periodical\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonitische_Rundschau_Die_(Periodical)).
2. [https://archive.org/details/pub\\_die-mennonitische-rundschau](https://archive.org/details/pub_die-mennonitische-rundschau).
3. The six indices are viewable by clicking “more” and going to the bottom of the “description” at [https://archive.org/details/pub\\_die-mennonitische-rundschau](https://archive.org/details/pub_die-mennonitische-rundschau).



## Jacob Penner (1880–1965)

(cont'd from p. 2)

defeated in a 1921 run for federal office, and again in a 1927 run for provincial office, before eventually being elected as alderman for the North End ward on Winnipeg's city council in 1933. Before that he had failed runs for mayor in 1931 and 1932. As an alderman, his salary amounted to \$30/month, a significant step down from his job as bookkeeper at the Workers and Farmers Cooperative, which paid \$25/week. Since most elected city officials kept their businesses and employment, Penner's decision to quit his job and become a full-time politician angered his wife, Rose. He told her, "I was elected to serve the people and I can't do that part time!"

Penner soon became known as the man who could help constituents with whatever problems they had—whether it was a relief issue during the Great Depression, or assistance in helping local restaurateur C. Kelekis establish a mobile chip stand. Kelekis later became an immensely popular diner in the North End. Penner was the North End's man.

Though immensely popular among his constituents, Penner, who helped organize the Anti-fascist League of Manitoba, was hated by many of his fellow alderman for his communist ideology. When Mayor Ralph Webb was accused by Communists of showing tolerance to local brown shirts marching in support of Nazism, Webb provided a list of names of communist agitators to the federal government, hoping for their eviction from Canada. Webb said that if deportation were not possible, he would "throw them into the Red River, with Jacob Penner being the first to go," according to Penner's son, Norman.

The Second World War heightened suspicions of anyone who did not support the war or mainstream political parties. Penner, who had previously voiced his opposition to the First World War, fit both those criteria. In 1939, the federal government issued the Defence of Canada Regulations, which would eventually lead to Penner's arrest on June 11, 1940.

When the Soviets entered the war in the summer of 1941 on the side of the allied powers, attitudes changed. Winnipeg politicians across the spectrum advocated for his release. Early September 1942 found Penner on a train bound for home.

According to his son, Roland, 5,000 people greeted Penner at the train station, including every politician who had previously voted to take his council seat away, even including "the head of the Mennonite church."

Over time, Penner became widely known for his principled character and leadership. His motives for pursuing elected office declared no hint of personal advancement.

Citizen appeals for help to some aldermen went unheard, brushed off, or ignored. At a meeting of the Ukrainian Conservative Party, a man complained that his appeal at City Council for help with a problem yielded no results. The president told him, "Why don't you go see Jake Penner? Jake Penner will do anything you want if it is at all possible."

In Winnipeg, Penner persistently stood up for the poor, vulnerable, and marginalized, advocating for equal unemployment benefits for all. Social housing, the right to form labour unions, free education at all levels, and a minimum wage were just a few of the ideas Penner repeatedly fought for during his decades as a municipal politician. His views frequently garnered attention in the *Winnipeg Tribune* and the *Winnipeg Free Press*.

On the occasion of his retirement, Penner left city council with the following words, as reported in a December 28, 1961, issue of the *Winnipeg Free Press*: "He warned council that unless man practice peace on earth and goodwill toward men 'the most stirring message man has ever received, we will perish.'" Penner died after a brief illness on August 28, 1965, in Winnipeg. The epitaph on his headstone in Brookside Cemetery reads: "Beloved Champion of Justice, Peace, and Socialism 'For he had a Glowing Dream.'"

*Special thanks to Kathy Penner, Cathy Gulkin, Lori Penner, Wendy and Ron*



Jacob and Rose Shapack Penner

*Dueck, Conrad Stoesz, Mennonite Heritage Archives, Chris Kotecki, and Manitoba Provincial Archives for their assistance with this biography of Jake Penner. Any errors are my own.*

## A Death by Drowning

*Dora Dueck, Delta, B.C.*

After I submitted my 2001 master's thesis on discourse in the early Mennonite Brethren periodical, the *Zionsbote*, I forgot, as one eventually does, the details of what I encountered in many hours of perusing and analyzing content.<sup>1</sup> One entry, however, written by editor John F. Harms in the July 15, 1891, issue about the death of his son Peter, has stayed with me on account of its poignancy and the questions it provokes.

"Despite deepest melancholy that makes me almost incapable of writing," he begins, "I must try to share with dear readers a heavy blow that has fallen upon me and my family, namely that on the 12th of this month our oldest son Peter, at the age of [nearly 14] years, drowned while swimming."<sup>2</sup> Harms goes on to describe, in considerable detail and with the warm intimacy the newspaper fostered, the circumstances of that fateful day.<sup>3</sup>

Harms's wife, Margaretha, was in New York, on her way to Russia to visit her aging mother and siblings. The youngest three children as well as the 12-year-old daughter were staying with an Isaak family

in Lehigh, Kansas. Early on the Sunday in question, Harms and his two sons, Peter and Samuel, walked, with frequent rest stops, the six miles from Hillsboro to Lehigh. It was “a pleasure trip in every sense of the word,” and upon arrival, Peter’s “heart’s longing” to see his “darling” little brother Menno was satisfied.

That afternoon, Harms was given opportunity to lead Sunday school in the Lehigh church. He noticed his son was “inwardly stirred” with the lesson, but, he says, the boy’s careless attitude was too strong. Afterwards, Peter begged to go to another family’s place. Harms gave permission only if his son promised—which he did, in his “tempestuous manner”—to be back by five o’clock for their return walk to Hillsboro. “I had it on my tongue to call after him not to tire himself running,” Harms says, “but he was already around the corner.”

Peter then persuaded his friends to go along to a pond a mile out of Lehigh to swim. He kept urging that they hurry, for he had to be back by five “on the dot.” Thus, they arrived “rather warm.” Declaring he had come to learn to swim, Peter sprang into deep water and immediately went under. He rose twice but made no sound. A doctor later assessed that he may have had a heart attack for he had swallowed no water.

The burial took place the next day. (Margaretha returned when she received the news, but not in time for the funeral.) The sermons at the service gave his heart “footing,” Harms writes. For himself, he could understand God’s governing, for it was his “deepest plea that [God] work in me and take away all in me that does not glorify him, and this the loving master is also doing with this severe bereavement.” His anguish, which he poured on to the page of the *Zionsbote*, concerned his son.

*But I cannot find my way through for my dear child and it makes me nearly scream. Our son was admonished with tears to leave his frivolity, to be obedient and decide for Jesus. He was easily moved, but when it involved a serious commitment, he said repeatedly to me, especially the last week: “Papa, I can’t bring myself to live like this all the time.” God’s Spirit worked mightily in his heart the last week, as he also told me Saturday afternoon.... My son did not lack understanding of the plan of salvation, but it was a great struggle for him to turn from the pleasures of the*

*world and choose the narrow path. And in spite of my earnest pleas that he make a decision for Jesus’ side, he didn’t want to promise, usually saying, “If I [promise] I’ll have to do it.” Now all the work of God’s Spirit is cut off and how unspeakably it grieves me that my dear son passed away in his foolishness and impetuosity. May it be a warning especially to the youth.*

This *Zionsbote* text could be evaluated on several levels. In terms of the father-son relationship, it’s interesting to notice that in *Eine Lebensreise*, a short autobiography of his earlier years, Harms tells of various points at which he clashed with his own parents, from their not understanding his *Seelennot* (distress) and subsequent peace with God upon reading *Pilgrim’s Progress*; to their refusal to let him attend meetings of the relatively new Mennonite Brethren group in his village (this was in 1863); to being on the “other side” regarding the landless class issue of the time; to his father’s resistance to the further education he greatly desired. His father wanted to make a farmer of his son, which was never accomplished, even when Harms tried it himself in America. What a universal story this is, the difficulty parents and children have in comprehending one another!

John F. Harms was a key figure in North American MB history. He was editor of the *Zionsbote* from its founding in 1884 until 1906. Besides his leadership in Mennonite Brethren publishing, he was involved in nearly every aspect of Conference life, such as itinerant preaching, mission and relief efforts, and education, including the establishment of the Herbert (Sask.) Bible School. When Harms’s biographer, Orlando Harms, recounts Peter’s drowning, he notes, “So seriously did this incident



**John F. Harms in retirement years, Hillsboro, Kansas (c. 1940).**  
Photo credit: MAID CA CMBS NP149-01-3553.

affect Harms, according to some of his family, that he virtually disowned Peter.”<sup>4</sup> How much weight should this carry in our assessment of a “great man” in our history?

Perhaps the most salient observation this father’s anguish provokes, at least for me, is the impact of Mennonite Brethren’s emphasis on conversion—a key component of their formation as a new and separated church. Conversion accounts of “first generation” MBs such as editor Harms’s were frequently published in the *Zionsbote*. They were generally traumatic, emotional experiences, befitting situations of adult crisis, need, or even deliberate godlessness. In reading *Zionsbote* conversion stories of young people who grew up as second or third generation MBs, one senses an effort to match the familiar crisis narrative, but the strain to do so is evident.

The history of conversion as concept and experience among Mennonites is beyond the scope of this article, but Harms’s deep sorrow illustrates that expectations of what conversion entails

(cont’d on p. 8)

# Mennonite Heritage Archives

## News from MHA

by Conrad Stoesz

In 2023, Canadian Mennonites commemorated the 100th Anniversary of the *Russlaender* arrival in Canada. Between 1923 and 1930, 21,000 Mennonites left the Soviet Union to start over in Canada. The newcomers faced hardships, including the repayment of travel debt, compounded by the economic and agricultural depression of the 1930s, and the adjustments to a new life.

To remember the people involved and the challenges these newcomers faced, the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada (MHSC) undertook an ambitious task of planning a train tour from Montreal to Vancouver, *Memories of Migration: Russlaender 100*.

The train tour retraced the route that many of the *Russlaender* would have taken. Along the way, tour participants and locals took part in dramas, lectures, local tours, concerts, and speeches. Newspaper articles, blog posts, radio stories, and social media posts were created that reached tens

of thousands of people—maybe more. Four concerts in Kitchener, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, and Abbotsford raised over \$103,000 for MCC projects. To review the events from the past summer, see <https://mhsc.ca/events/russlaender-100/>.

In 2024, Mennonites will mark the 150th anniversary of the establishment of communities on the Canadian prairies. This resettlement movement became known as the first wave of Mennonite migration to Canada from today's Ukraine. It began in the summer of 1874, when immigrants crossed the Atlantic, travelled across North America, and found themselves on the banks of the Red River in the new province of Manitoba. After a few very difficult years, many families flourished.

To commemorate the 1874 migration, we carefully selected 13 archival images from our vault and reproduced them in a 150th anniversary commemorative calendar (see calendar cover below).

There are limited quantities—you can purchase them from the Mennonite Heritage Archives by emailing [info@mharchives.ca](mailto:info@mharchives.ca) or calling us at 204-560-1998.

The cost is \$20 plus applicable taxes and shipping, with all funds raised going to supporting the work of the Mennonite Heritage Archives.

## Voices from EMC & EMMC



In preparation for the 1984 Christmas special on the Keeseekoose and Cote First Nation Reserves in Saskatchewan, two days were spent shooting scenes with the local cast. Frank Braun and Brenda Cosens photographed these three kings on November 23, at the Keshane Farm, though it was almost dark by the time the “kings” made it to the photo shoot because they had to finish their school day first. Besides the horses for the kings, there were ponies for the manger scene and one for “Mary” to ride on. Indoor scenes were shot the following day at the home of Jack and Brenda Cosens, who operated a local drop-in. The slides, with narration, were shown at Christmas. Unfortunately, the names of the cast were not included in this account. Text and photo credit: Erica Fehr.



Since 1989, Treasured Foundation (TF) has had significant impact on EMMC youth. The 3-day event that takes place every three years consists of worship, building friendships between individuals across the conference, service opportunities, and developing leadership qualities. Over the years, many youth have shared that TF was the place where they made a deeper commitment to their faith. TF will be taking place December 28–31, 2023, in Steinbach, Manitoba. Text and photo credit: Lill Goertzen).



After the success of last year's calendar commemorating the 100th anniversary of the *Russlaender* Mennonites arriving in Canada, the Mennonite Heritage Archives has made a new calendar for another significant event in Canadian Mennonite history, the arrival of the first Mennonites in Manitoba in 1874. Photo credit: Mennonite Heritage Archives.

## Isaac Warkentin and a Spy Connection

by Jon Isaak

This fall Winnie Warkentin and her grandniece, Jacy Young, made an appointment with me at the CMBS archives. They were coming to review the personal papers collection of Winnie's father, Isaac J. Warkentin (1885–1971), and make another contribution to the fonds. They arrived at the appointed time, and we sat together while they showed me six photo albums of images that Isaac had taken during his university studies in Winnipeg and then in Germany. By the end of the meeting, they agreed to donate the albums to CMBS for preservation.

I have now processed this accession and updated the online finding aid that lists the materials in the Isaac Warkentin fonds. From the CMBS website, viewers can see the extent of the remarkable collection. As an early adopter of photography, Isaac's photos offer a rare window into the life of a Mennonite university student prior to and during the First World War. Of special note is his experience as a civilian prisoner of war, something which is described more fully in the biographical sketch that is part of the online finding aid. See excerpt that follows.

*Isaac J. Warkentin was born on November 27, 1885, to Johann Warkentin (Sept. 17, 1859–May 18, 1948) and Sara Loewen (Aug. 19, 1860–June 27, 1930) in Hoffnungsfeld, West Reserve, Manitoba. Isaac went to school in Winkler and Gretna and then attended Wesley College in 1908–1912 to study education. In 1913, Isaac went to Leipzig, Germany, in order to study Pedagogy.*

*On July 28, 1914, the First World War broke out. Isaac was still in Germany at this time and the war prevented him from returning home to Canada. On September 15, 1914, Isaac was arrested and placed in a Leipzig prison due to his enemy citizenship. After spending ten days in solitary confinement and sixteen days in communal prison, Isaac was released. After his release, Isaac was prohibited from leaving Leipzig without consent and had to report to the police station twice a week. Given his status as a citizen of an enemy country, he was also no longer allowed to attend classes at the university.*

*Luckily, Isaac had close friends in the German Christian Student Union. These friends provided him with a place to live until December 6, 1914, when Leipzig ordered the expulsion of all inhabitants with enemy citizenship. Having been expelled from Leipzig, Isaac went to live*



*with another friend, Pastor Bohne, in Etzdorf, Germany. He stayed in Etzdorf for several months until March 1915, when he was imprisoned in the Ruhleben Civilian Internment Camp ten miles from Berlin. Isaac remained in prison until the end of the war, only returning to Canada shortly before Christmas 1918.*

*Isaac lived the rest of his life in Manitoba. He married Maria Warkentin (March 24, 1899 – Nov. 3, 1970) on August 3, 1924, and spent 40 years teaching in various Manitoba high schools before he retired in June 1955. Even in his retirement, Isaac continued to teach Grade 12 chemistry and mathematics. Isaac and Maria raised four children: Helen, Johann Heinrich Cornelius, Bernhard Alfred Waldemar, and Frances Winnifred Agnes. He died on October 6, 1971.*

To view a sampling of the photos in Isaac's albums, one of which is at the left, see the Mennonite Archival Information Database (MAID), <http://archives.mhsc.ca/index.php/isaac-j-warkentin-photograph-collection>.

This photo achieved some notoriety recently as it is part of a publication by Jason Bell, *Cracking the Nazi Code: The Untold Story of Canada's Greatest Spy* (HarperCollins, 2023). In the book, Jason Bell narrates the story of Canadian Winthrop Bell (no relation) as an allied spy who had long been following the political scene in Germany, alerting the British of his intel—although a powerful fascist politician quietly worked to suppress his alerts. As it turns out, Winthrop was one of the first to “crack the code,” as it were, as to Adolf Hitler's ultimate aims, long before they became clear to the world. Already, during the First World War, he had spent time in the same civilian internment camp with Isaac Warkentin! This is the photo that appears in the book and also in the photo albums that Winnie and Jacy donated to the archives.

To read the full description of the Isaac J. Warkentin fonds, see [https://cmbs.mennonitebrethren.ca/personal\\_papers/warkentin-isaac-1885-1971/](https://cmbs.mennonitebrethren.ca/personal_papers/warkentin-isaac-1885-1971/).

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**This is a photo from the Ruhleben Internment Camp near Berlin, Germany, where Isaac was imprisoned from 1915 to 1918. Isaac (middle) stands with other Canadian prisoners, Winthrop Bell (left) and A.G. Lochhead (right). Photo credit: MAID CA CMBS NP205-01-17.**

John F. Harms

(cont'd from p. 5)

had not yet transitioned to fit new family environments.<sup>5</sup> By his own belief system, the father felt compelled to pressure his son and, when death intervened, also felt compelled, it seems, to consider him lost.

*Dora Dueck is a writer, editor, reader, and historian. Her most recent book publication is Return Stroke: Essays & Memoir (CMU Press, 2022).*

## Endnotes

1. Dora Dueck, "Print, Text, Community: A Study of Communication in the *Zionsbote*, a Mennonite Weekly, Between 1884 and 1906" (Master of Arts thesis, Universities of Winnipeg and Manitoba, joint program, 2001).

2. Translations from German are mine.

3. If, as archivist Conrad Stoesz has suggested, the broadly Mennonite *Mennonitische Rundschau* was like the Facebook of its time, the *Zionsbote* was like a closed group within Facebook, with personal stories of conversion, death, illness, and so on, all of which assumed mutual belonging and shared theological understandings.

4. Orlando Harms, *Pioneer Publisher: The Life and Times of J.F. Harms* (Kindred Press, 1984). Orlando was a distant relative.

5. See, for example, Gerald Ediger, "Conversion in Anabaptist and Mennonite History," *Direction* 9, no. 4 (October 1980): 16–23.

## Greek Bread, Cheese, and Watermelon

by Henry R. Fast, Winnipeg

*Editors' note: This story is based on the author's recollections of his participation at the MVS Work Camp, Ioannina, Greece, July 28–August 24, 1963. In 2019, the author published a collection of such stories from his life, What These Stones Mean: A Memoir, available through the Common Word bookstore (<https://www.commonword.ca/ResourceView/82/20618>).*

Their bodies are wet with perspiration. They swing their picks and shovels in an effort to remove rocks and soil on the mountain side in the 30-degree plus sweltering heat of the Greek sun. A loosely strung cord marks the route they are to follow, creating a trench that measures a couple of feet deep and a kilometer in length, up a steep incline from the village to the water spring. When completed, a water pipe will be buried in the trench, deep enough to protect the pipe from freezing in winter.

Romanon village lacks a nearby source of water, so 13 young people have volunteered to participate in a month-long



Henry R. Fast (left) with others at the Mennonite Voluntary Service Work Camp, Ioannina, Greece, July 28–August 24, 1963. Photo credit: Henry R. Fast.

Mennonite Voluntary Service (MVS) work camp in the summer of 1963. The work camp took place during the last month of my two-year MCC PAX assignment.

Most of the five men and eight women on the work camp are European: four Dutch, three German, one Swede, one Dane, and one Greek. Two others are from the USA, and I'm the lone Canadian, appointed to be team leader with the assistance of Marion from the Netherlands. Not everyone arrived for the first day and some could not stay for the entire four weeks.

Preparations for this camp started months earlier with the selection of a suitable work project. The people of Romanon had long been begging local government officials to connect them to a spring in the mountain ridge behind their village. The women especially were keen for this to happen, since it would relieve them of the heavy burden of having to hike up the rough goat path practically every day and lug jugs of water back down for their families.

I accompanied the municipal engineer to the site to lay out exactly where the trench was to be dug. Interestingly, his surname was Karpouzi, the Greek word for "watermelon." Furthermore, Mr. Karpouzi did not have the typical black hair and dark complexion of most of his countrymen; he was bald with a rather reddish complexion, just like a watermelon. Maybe that's why I've not forgotten his name.

The workday began early. At 5:45, someone rang the cow bell to announce

that breakfast was being served in half an hour. Each day, two of the girls were assigned kitchen duty, which also meant they felt lucky that they didn't have to go to the work site. Breakfast usually consisted of pancakes, German, Dutch, or Swedish.

About 7:00 o'clock, we began the arduous 45-minute trek up the mountain carrying our picks, shovels, and water. By break time at 9:00, the sun was beating down on us. Instead of walking all the way back down to the village, the kitchen crew brought us our lunch at 11:00—Greek bread, yellow cheddar cheese, jam, and a big *karpouzi* to sustain us until supper.

When the heat of the sun was at its highest, we had a siesta until 3:00 p.m. Each camper found a patch of shade and a flat piece of earth or rock on which to lie down. Napping was disturbed by flies buzzing around our faces. After another three hours of back-breaking work and drinking many litres of water, it was time to head back down for supper. Blisters appeared on our hands and our muscles ached.

All that physical labour gave rise to healthy appetites, and we were constantly running out of supplies. I found myself driving the two-and-a-half hours into Ioannina at least once a week to buy food. We soon lost track of how many watermelons we consumed.

Evenings were spent discussing a variety of topics (if we were not too tired) like Greek holidays, culture, religious festivals, and so on, and playing games like volleyball. One evening, we invited the

villagers for a time of socializing. About 20 showed up. With the help of Apostolos, our Greek volunteer translator, we shared our ideas of why we had come, and they told us more about conditions in the village. The program ended with a glass of ice tea (without ice) and the singing of some Greek songs.

Evenings were also the time to write letters to friends back home. One person was asked to write a few brief comments about the day to be printed in our newsletter at the end of the camp.

Accommodations were basic—no running water (of course) or electricity. The girls occupied a two-storey house that also had kitchen and dining facilities, while the guys slept in the school nearby.

On weekends, we took a break from the mountain. Early one Saturday, we set off for Dodoni, the site of an ancient amphitheater built on the side of a hill. We drove 2.5 hours with five of us in the jeep and another five in the open trailer hitched behind the Jeep. Then we walked another 3.5 hours to Dodoni. All were in good spirits and no one complained about the walk. That night we slept in our sleeping bags under the stars before retracing our steps the next day.

The following weekend, we traveled to the beach at Preveza, a longer trip than to Dodoni. We spent our time sunbathing, swimming, and just relaxing—wonderful! At the end of the day, Irmgard (a German) wrote: *Tired, but happy and satisfied. Everybody looked for a suitable place to crawl into their sleeping bag. Instead of counting sheep, we counted falling stars—there were millions of small and big twinkling stars above us—and listened to the waves until we were sound asleep.*

From the beginning, a few villagers worked alongside with us. When we returned from Preveza, we learned that some 45 men and women had been working all weekend while we were away—and that they had reached as far as the spring!

It was now in the last week of our work camp and things began winding down.

On Wednesday, five campers departed with tearful goodbyes. Some of the guys seemingly couldn't tear themselves away from the digging, wanting to dislodge just one more rock. And the bread, cheese, jam, and watermelon at lunch never tasted as good.

At the close of the day, we shook hands with each one of the 45 villagers before proceeding down the path. It had become a

real international team effort. As we walked down along the by-now-familiar goat path, we beheld the broad valley below for the last time, and it never looked as impressive as on that last evening.

For my last entry in the camp diary, I wrote: *MVS work camp Romanon is a thing of the past and has slipped from the present into the pages of history. And I am confident that when the campers glance back at those pages, they will have pleasant memories of those four weeks and will say, "This was good."*

After a good lunch and a little siesta, we packed all our belongings, cleaned the house, loaded the jeep and trailer, said our last goodbyes to the villagers and started back to Ioannina. My bed felt very good that night.

P.S. In 2020, I learned that the spring no longer had enough water year-round, so a second pipe has been installed from another source to service the village.

*Henry Fast earned a master's degree in agricultural economics from the University of Manitoba in 1969 and worked as a research economist with Agriculture Canada in Regina. After two overseas postings (Greece and India) with Mennonite Central Committee, he was employed by Mennonite Economic Development Associates as program manager and consultant, followed by a stint with the Canadian International Development Agency. Henry is now retired and lives in Winnipeg.*

## **Zacharias Hiebert (1729–1811)**

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

**B**ased on his age at death, Zacharias Hiebert was born around 1729.<sup>1</sup> He was probably born in the part of northern Poland that became the province of West Prussia in 1772 and is now part of Poland. Interestingly, there was another Zacharias Hiebert living in this region at about this time. This Zacharias Hiebert was a Mennonite living in Tiegenhagen, who died in 1764 at the age of 65 (b. ca 1699). The relationship between these two Zacharias Hieberts is unknown. Some genealogists claim that they are father and son, but that is purely speculative.

At some point between about 1750 and 1760, Zacharias Hiebert married Barbara Epp, who was nine years older. He was likely the Zacharias Hiebert whose son Claas died in 1767 at the age of four

years.<sup>2</sup> His marriage to Barbara Epp does not appear to have resulted in any known surviving children. I have been unable to find Zacharias Hiebert in the 1772 census of West Prussia<sup>3</sup> or the 1776 census of Mennonites in West Prussia.<sup>4</sup> He is also not included in the 1789 census of Mennonite landowners in West Prussia<sup>5</sup> even though he was known to have been a landowner. For reasons described below, he would have left the Mennonite church and may not have been classified as a Mennonite in the 1776 or 1789 censuses.

It was only a few years before the 1789 land census that Zacharias Hiebert's life took a very unusual turn. In 1787, he fathered an illegitimate son, Cornelius, with a 19-year-old Lutheran woman named Christina Klein.<sup>6</sup> He was about 58 years old and still married to 67-year-old Barbara Epp at the time. Zacharias Hiebert and Christina Klein went on to have at least 13 more children together—all out of wedlock! The last child was born when Zacharias Hiebert was about 78 years old. His estranged wife, Barbara Epp, died on October 3, 1807, at the age of 87½ years.<sup>7</sup>

On November 23 of the next year, Zacharias Hiebert and Christina Klein finally married. He was 79 and she was 40 at the time.<sup>8</sup> Their marriage was conducted by the Lutheran church at Gross Mausdorf. Zacharias Hiebert died on April 17, 1811, in Halbstadt, Prussia, at the age of 82.<sup>9</sup> After his death, Christina Klein married the Lutheran Jacob Ballmann.<sup>10</sup> She died on December 24, 1833, in Wiedau, Prussia, at the age of 65 years, 9 months, and 24 days.<sup>11</sup>

Under normal circumstances, and under the conditions at that time, Zacharias Hiebert's sons would have been raised as Lutherans and the extraordinary story of this family would have ended as far as Mennonite connections are concerned. However, somehow their son Claas made his way to the Molotschna Mennonite colony in what was then South Russia, which is now part of Ukraine. He is not found in any known immigration records. However, we do know that he arrived after the 1816 census and before his marriage, which would have happened around 1826.

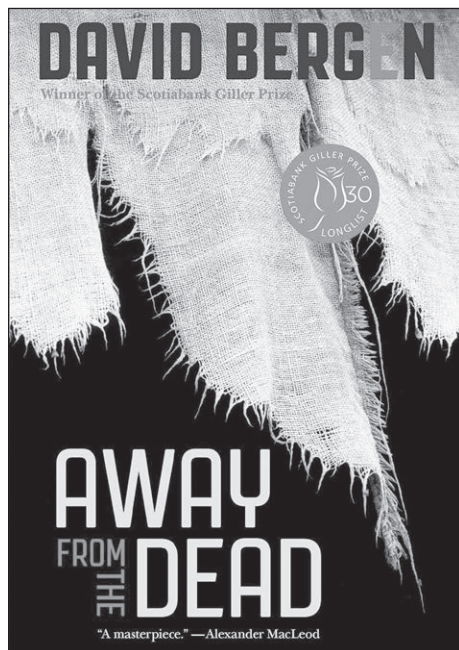
It is most likely that Claas Hiebert came to South Russia during the large migration wave of 1817–1820. This migration is poorly documented and has received much less attention than the previous 1789–1797 and 1803–1805 migration periods. We also

know that he was registered with the family of Heinrich Unruh of Alexanderwohl after he arrived in the Molotschna colony.<sup>12</sup> In 1833, he and his family moved to Lichtfelde, where he owned property #19 until at least 1862.<sup>13</sup> Claas Hiebert died at sea on July 18, 1876, at the age of 74, while immigrating to the United States on board the *S.S. Vaterland* with his children and grandchildren.

All genealogical information cited for this family has been added to the GRANDMA database. See <https://www.grandmaonline.org/gmol-7/login.asp>.

## Endnotes

1. This year is based on his age at the time of his death. See note 9.
2. Fuerstenau, Prussia. Lutheran death and burial register.
3. The 1772 census of West Prussia. See the sources in [https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/1772/West\\_Prussia\\_Census\\_1772.pdf](https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/1772/West_Prussia_Census_1772.pdf).
4. The 1776 census of Mennonites in West Prussia. See [https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/1776\\_West\\_Prussia\\_Census.pdf](https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/1776_West_Prussia_Census.pdf).
5. The 1789 census of Mennonite Landowners in West Prussia. See [https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/1789\\_Land\\_Census\\_West\\_Prussian\\_Mennonites.htm](https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/1789_Land_Census_West_Prussian_Mennonites.htm).
6. Gross Mausdorf, Prussia. Evangelical Lutheran Church records.
7. Fuerstenau, Prussia. Evangelical Lutheran death and burial register.
8. Gross Mausdorf, Prussia. Evangelical Lutheran Church records.
9. Schadwalde, Prussia. Evangelical Lutheran Church records.
10. Schadwalde, Prussia. Evangelical Lutheran Church records.
11. Gross Mausdorf, Prussia. Evangelical Lutheran Church records.
12. The 1835 Molotschna colony census. Scans of originals in the possession of the author.
13. Molotschna Colony Voters Lists, 1835-62. See [https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/Molotschna\\_1835\\_to\\_1862\\_Voters.pdf](https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/Molotschna_1835_to_1862_Voters.pdf).



## Book Reviews

David Bergen, *Away from the Dead* (Goose Lane Editions, 2023), 224 pp.

Reviewed by Dan Dyck, Winnipeg

In his latest novel, David Bergen takes his readers on a sweeping emotional journey through the turmoil and chaos of a complex civil war in Russia. The novel draws from actual diaries and stories of people who endured roving bands of marauders and murderers during the 1917–1922 conflict.

The book opens with an epigraph from Viktor Shklovsky's *The Writing Desk*: "All this happened without me and I am writing about it from other people's words."

Bergen's characters come to life. His lucid writing makes their troubling circumstances palpable. Though the story is fiction, every word feels true. The reader need not know all the political nuances or historical facts to appreciate the hard decisions his characters face.

The Martens family and its large estate are the connecting tissue of a story that asks what it means to be family. It interrogates the love, hate, and loyalty of a rich family who loses its power and influence. Impoverished peasants and servants get caught in the middle. Each, in their own way, is desperate to turn away from inevitable tragedy.

Young Julius Lehn is a tutor to university student Katka Martens. Katka has left the simple life of her Mennonite colony in Chortitza and is eager to explore university and the city of Ekaterinoslav. Through Katka, the Jewish Lehn finds his life woven into the fabric of the Martens family.

War leads to Lehn's conscription and then desertion from the army. Needing a place to hide, he returns to the now pillaged Martens' estate. Patriarch Heinrich Martens flees with some of his family. Ultimately, Sablin, a trusted Ukrainian servant, is left to take all the risks of defending what remains of the estate.

Bergen wisely avoids the nitty-gritty of the multi-layered conflict between monarchists, bolsheviks, and anarchists. Each of these competing groups promises a fierce and unforgiving brand of freedom and justice. Mennonites and Ukrainians endure countless raiders who demand meals and plunder homes and farms. Intruders rape women and mindlessly murder anyone who refuses to cooperate.

Bergen's prose is intense, the pace compelling. I found the book hard to read,

and hard to put down. Relationship tensions among the characters were utterly believable and relatable. Gripping situations gathered momentum and had me steadily turning pages to find out what was coming next.

There is a saying that history doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes. Bergen's story vividly describes conditions that lead to a failed state. One does not have to dig deep in today's news to see parallels, such as the heinous acts of the Wagner Group mercenaries in Russia's war with Ukraine.

Longlisted for the Giller Prize, *Away from the Dead* is a must-read for anyone keen on Mennonite history. Readers with distant ancestors who endured these tumultuous times will find an evocative story with a deep sense of connection to the past.

Dan Dyck is a volunteer writer at the Mennonite Heritage Archives.



Eduard Friesen, *Die Gemeinde in Menno: Zwischen Bewahrung und Erneuerung 1927–1978* (Geschichtskomitee der Kolonie Menno, 2023), 367 pp.

Reviewed by Titus Guenther, Windsor, Ontario

The core of this book deals with the internal updating of the Menno Colony's own school system and church life in the Paraguayan Chaco between 1927–1978. Friesen describes the change from its *Ältester*-centered beginnings to its "collegial" leadership reorganization with a dozen plus district congregations. To make this possible, a far-reaching overhaul or "renewal" (*Erneuerung*) of both its school and church practises was necessary.

In preparation for the well-documented description of this "cultural, intellectual-

spiritual reform” in the Menno community, the author first places his study in an extensive historical context, including the foundational 1527 Schleithem Articles (20–30), diverse Anabaptist groups coalescing around Menno Simons, their successive migrations to, and sojourns in, Prussia, Russia, Canada, and finally the Paraguayan Chaco (17–136). We learn how the governmental restrictions placed on peace churches precipitated the repeated need to migrate in search of countries that would grant their requisite military exemption and control of local schools.

The protagonists in the lived drama described in this book descended from the Bergthal Colony (in present-day Ukraine) that had emigrated to Canada in its entirety in the 1870s (74), escaping the “russification” in progress in Russia at that time. In Canada, they sought to perpetuate their conservative schooling with untrained teachers and a “medieval” curriculum with four levels: the Primer, Catechism, New Testament, and Bible (both Testaments). They took this system with them to Paraguay as well. However, their “visionary” church leaders resolved to “contemporize” their education system. They were determined to avoid division over the issue, even if it meant taking two more decades to lay the groundwork towards better school reform (138ff.).

Younger persons—sons of *Ältester* Martin C. Friesen and others—equipped themselves through self-training in grammar and other school subjects (254). And when unanimous support from the “ministerial” (*Lehrdienst*) could not be obtained during ministers’ meetings, a Young Men’s School (*Knabenschule*) with private supporters was opened in Ebenfeld with Martin W. Friesen (deacon since 1947) as teacher. As well, Andreas Sawatzky was sent to the national university in Asunción for study in the 1950s. Further assistance was procured by hiring qualified teachers from neighbouring colonies to help design and implement the high school curriculum. The promoters of educational reform had to contend regularly with vocal opposition, though seldom was this opposition “life-threatening,” notes the author.

The author explains repeatedly that, for the Bergthalers, school and church were inextricably intertwined: “What the school is (today), will become the church” (137). Hence, schools were always under the close supervision of the “ministerial”

(*Lehrdienst*). In attempting to start a high school in Menno, *Ältester* Friesen couldn’t obtain unanimous support on secondary education from the ministerial but managed to pull together a team of supporting ministers. Coincidentally, in 1951, Jacob Reimer was chosen as *Oberschulze*; he lent unwavering support to organizing a private *Vereinsschule* in the mid-1950s, an initiative put forward by those who desired high school education for their children (male and female, equally) and other interested persons. This step made the multi-faceted “renewal” process all but irreversible. It also marked the introduction of choral singing, including in worship services (with a *Sängerfest* held in 1960).

The *Vereinsschule* soon became a *Zentralschule* that enjoyed increasing circles of support throughout much of the colony. Special courses for elementary teachers were offered in the summers. Help for sermon preparation was offered during monthly ministers’ conferences (with trial sermons and mutual critique). Formal missionary activities among the *Enlhet* (Indigenous peoples) and Latin Paraguayans were also undertaken in the 1950s. A.G. Neufeld was invited from Canada for evangelistic services that found wide acceptance.

Remarkably, all of this “reform” activity was carried out without causing a church split. On the contrary, by the late 1950s, the three church groups—Chortizer, Sommerfelder, and (Alt)Bergthaler (from the division of the Russland-Bergthaler during their 50-year sojourn in Manitoba and Saskatchewan)—merged into **one** *Mennogemeinde*.

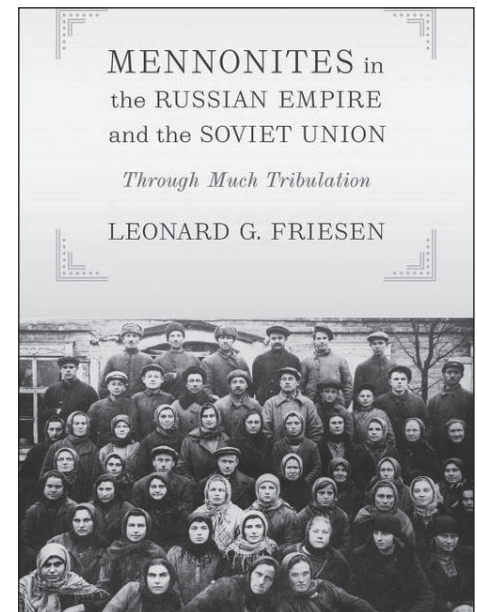
Readers are indebted to Eduard Friesen for his historical account of the remarkable first 51 years of *Die Gemeinde in Menno*. Gerald Gerbrandt, former president of Canadian Mennonite University, once asked: “How much do we have to change in order to stay the same?” I feel that question runs through much of Eduard’s book. That said, I found myself wishing the author had used inclusive language. E.g., “faith of our fathers” might be better described as “faith of our forebears.”

This reviewer couldn’t help wondering why the author set the cut-off date at 1978? I would love to see the author wrestling with developments on various levels of colony and church life, including missionary engagements from 1979 to the present. E.g., might mission perhaps

be done in dialogue with the recipients? Published materials of *Enlhet* accounts of how they experienced the newcomers in their historic homeland are now available. Perhaps we may have to wait for a sequel from the author on the next 50-year history of Menno colony.

As one who grew up in the Chaco and has lived much of the story told in Eduard’s account, I found it a helpful “refresher” and recommend his book to anyone with facility in German and an interest in the historic undertaking of this group of 1,743 Mennonites (125) in Paraguay. After subtracting the 171 persons who died *en route* (many of typhoid fever in *Puerto Casado*) and another 323 persons who returned to Canada shortly after reaching their destination, only 71.6% or 1,249 persons persevered in the Chaco to found Colony Menno (130) and construct the communal life narrated in this book.

*Dr. Titus Guenther, Associate Professor Emeritus, Theology and Missions, Canadian Mennonite University, is a member of Windsor Mennonite Fellowship in Windsor, Ontario.*



Leonard G. Friesen, *Mennonites in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union: Through Much Tribulation* (University of Toronto Press, 2022), 401 pp.

*Reviewed by Karl Koop, Winnipeg*

Leonard G. Friesen, professor of history at Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, has written a comprehensive study of Mennonites living in the Tsarist and Soviet periods. His work is a major contribution to understanding the Russian

Mennonite story with all its triumphs and tribulations. It will likely be a standard reference for years to come. It may also spark debate about the nature of Mennonite relations with other groups in the Russian Empire and inspire lively exchange about the future of Mennonite faith identity.

The book does not start with Mennonites in the Empire but goes all the way back to the story of Anabaptist beginnings. The first three chapters include the emergence of Swiss Anabaptism, the development of the Melchiorite movement in the Low Countries, and the materialisation of the “Mennonite” Anabaptists under the leadership of Menno Simons. The author then traces the Mennonite migrations to Poland, highlighting the ways in which Mennonites became successful economic and political actors at a time when they were challenged by various pressures of acculturation.

Chapters four through nine focus on the experiences of Mennonites in the Russian Empire, the period from 1789 to 1917. This section describes the push and pull factors that led Mennonites to relocate to the new territories of southern Russia. It outlines the difficult challenges of the first years in the colonies of Chortitza and Molotschna, the transformation of Russian Mennonitism through the entrepreneurial efforts of Johann Cornies, and the period of crisis in the years 1860 to 1874 that led one third of the Empire’s Mennonites to migrate to North America. In addition, this part of the work also examines Mennonite experiences in the decades leading to revolution and turmoil. At the end of the 19th century, Mennonites found themselves in a period of flourishing and glory days. But these days were short-lived as the first decade of the 20th century brought political and social instability. Then came the First World War, forcing Mennonites to consider how they might survive as a religious minority and how they might conceive of their future, given the end of Tsarist Russia.

In the final five chapters, the book presents the story of Mennonites in the Soviet Era, the period from 1917 to 1989. It gives a detailed account of the trials facing Mennonites following the Bolshevik revolution. Beginning in 1923, some 20,000 Mennonites fled to Canada, while those remaining sought to adjust to a new Soviet regime. Friesen narrates the unfathomable degree of suffering under the reign of Stalin, the period of the Great

Terror in the 1930s, the experience in the colonies under Nazi occupation, and the chaos at the conclusion of the Second World War. The final chapters follow the story of Soviet Mennonites as they experienced persecution and exile, but eventually also a time of renewal and shifting identities with the fall of the Soviet Union and the exodus of some 100,000 Mennonites to Germany and other parts of the world.

At one level, Friesen’s history seeks to tell a story “the way it essentially was”—as von Ranke once put it, but it is evident that he also has an agenda. As the subtitle of the book suggests, Mennonites experienced much tribulation. Friesen wants to make clear that “no period in the almost five hundred years of Anabaptist and Mennonite history was more wracked with tribulation than the one experienced by Soviet Mennonites from 1917 to 1991” (274). But more than underlining this neglected past in the scholarship, Friesen wants to engage in questions about modernity and religion.

Modernity is commonly linked to the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods and associated with developments in science, technology, capitalism, globalization, colonization, and so on. However, what concerns Friesen about modernity is “the emergence of the secular over the religious,” “a world of instrumentality” that gives little attention to “a life of thought-filled contemplation” (6). Friesen contends that, unfortunately, “we have not found an adequate substitution for religious belief in the public square or as a means of determining absolute Truth, and this has left us entirely self-referential, adrift in a subjective sea” (281). To borrow the language of Brad Gregory, Friesen believes that modernity has left us with little guidance as we confront “Life Questions” (281–282).

Friesen is not optimistic that any new impetus can come from North American churches since they have sold out to personal or individualistic belief and besides their memberships are in decline. He suggests that the answer may lie in the former Soviet Union since 1991, the period “that hearkens back to Menno’s original vision” (282). Friesen contends that we need to return to Zaporozhe, to the revivalism that has been exhibited there, where denominationalism and ethnicity have been put aside. Here may be the future of Mennonitism—where religious expression is genuine, where secularization is successfully held at bay,

where evangelists urge new converts to join communities of faith and love unbelievers, “even amid a persecution that is sure to come.” In this context of evangelical ecumenism, Friesen asserts, “distinctions among Christians matter far less than that which places a unified Christianity against the devastation of our present secularized age” (287).

Not everyone will feel at ease with this provocative conclusion, or with the author’s treatment of other topics in earlier chapters. Some may suggest that Friesen could have said more about the ambiguous relationship between Mennonites and the nomadic Nogai Tatars. More details could have been provided regarding the complex relationship with the Ukrainian peasants prior and during the Revolution. More space could have been given to the way in which some Mennonites collaborated with Nazis during the occupation of Ukraine. In my view, these complicated sides of history do call for a more extensive explanation, especially at a time when North American Mennonites are embarking on their own journey of reckoning—a coming to terms with the past regarding their relationship to the Jewish community, Indigenous peoples, and other marginalized groups.

Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the author has made a significant contribution to our understanding of the Russian Mennonite story. Drawing on archival and oral histories, Friesen has written an accessible account while significantly engaging with the latest research and scholarly opinion. His narrative addresses much political, social, and economic detail, while humanizing much of the story, not infrequently following the experiences of individuals and families as they encountered various travails.

Leonard Friesen has written an exceptional book on Mennonites of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union that is destined to generate further conversations among academic and non-academic readers alike.

*Dr. Karl Koop teaches in the areas of history and theology at Canadian Mennonite University. He is a child of 1920s Russian Mennonite immigrants to Canada. From 1993 to 1997, he and his family spent four years under the auspices of Mennonite Central Committee in Brandenburg and Berlin, relating to recent immigrants of the former Soviet Union, the Aussiedler.*