

# Mennonite Historian

## 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday Tribute for Otto Klassen – Mennonite Filmmaker

by Peter Letkemann (Winnipeg)

On 7 April 2007 the well known Mennonite filmmaker Otto Klassen of Winnipeg will celebrate his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. On Sunday, 15 April 2007, his most recent film “Remembering Russia, 1928-1938: Collectivization and Mass Arrest” will be premiered at the Springfield Heights Mennonite Church in North Kildonan.

I first got to know Otto Klassen as a master bricklayer and stone mason – my father was a building contractor in North Kildonan and Otto Klassen was his bricklayer of choice. I watched as Otto and his crew unloaded the bricks or limestone blocks, mixed the mortar, and began constructing the walls and chimney of the house. In retrospect, it seems to me that Otto was able to visualize the entire wall in his mind even before he laid the first brick – it was all done in his head, it just required careful and patient work to complete physically. These walls and chimneys are still standing all over North Kildonan, East Kildonan and other parts of the city, and if you look at them you will see that all the lines, both horizontal and vertical, are perfect – Otto is a perfectionist! One of the best examples of his work is the beautiful white limestone obelisk standing at the entrance of the Steinbach Museum – this monument to Mennonite Victims of Terror and Repression was designed and built by Otto Klassen.

I got to know Otto Klassen the film director in 1992, when I saw what is probably his masterpiece, “The Great Trek.” When I read the film credits, I was amazed, but not surprised, to see that Otto was not only the producer and director of the film; he also wrote the script, edited the film and even chose the music for the soundtrack.

As a filmmaker Otto exhibits the same dedication, hard work, skill, attention to detail, careful preparation, and long-range planning that he had displayed as a master mason.

He has the outline of the story and the entire film worked out in his head before he starts filming. Then he goes about the detailed work of researching and writing the script, compiling and “building” his visual resources, recording the soundtrack

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



Anna Thiessen and young girls outside the North End chapel (Winnipeg) NP045-01-20

## Pioneering an Urban Environment: The Beginning of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Winnipeg

By Abe Dueck

### Beginning of the 20th Century

The city of Winnipeg was a vibrant and growing city at the turn of the 20th century. The Canadian Pacific Railway had been completed in 1885, making Winnipeg a very significant transportation centre. The grandiose railway station on Higgins Ave. was completed in 1904 and immigrants from many European countries were arriving in the city and the population grew rapidly. Most of the population was centred on both sides of the railroad tracks, with the area north of the tracks known as the North End. Most of the area south of the tracks was considered the West End, whereas the area south of the Assiniboine River, where the wealthier class lived, was known as the South End. The area that is now Elmwood was incorporated into the city in 1906, with the present Talbot Ave. then called Central Ave. Winnipeg had

become the third largest city in Canada, with only Montreal and Toronto exceeding its population.

*Note: In 1871 the population of Winnipeg was about 250, making it the 62nd largest population centre in Canada. In 1901 the population had swollen to 42,000, making it the 6th largest city. By 1911 it had more than tripled in 10 years to 136,000 ranking 3rd, and in 1921 the population stood at 179,000. At that time Vancouver had a population of 117,000 and Calgary 63,000.*

Public transportation was still in its infancy. The Louise Bridge, which then was a railway bridge, was the first bridge across the Red River and was built in 1881. In 1903 the Winnipeg Electric Street Railway had its first run over the Louise Bridge. In 1908 the Redwood Bridge was built and the electric railway

(cont'd on p. 8)

and final editing – being sensitive to pacing and mood – making sure the story gets told and keeps moving.

Where did he learn to do this? Certainly not in school!

Otto, like many other men of his generation never completed more than 6 or 7 grades of formal schooling. But this does not mean that they were uneducated. By the time he was a teenager, in the Mennonite village of Schöneberg (Chortitza), Otto already spoke four languages – German, Low German, Russian and Ukrainian. Later he added Spanish and English to the mix. But like most young people of that generation, he learned most through keen observation, self study, experience and the application of common sense.

Otto was good in all subjects at school, but his favourites were math and history. The math stood him in good stead later in his business work; but history was his real passion. He did not only read about history, he personally experienced some of the most momentous historical events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – he lived through the terrible famine of 1932-33 in Ukraine, he experienced the horrors of war in Europe, and endured the hardships of pioneer work in Paraguay. Hundreds and thousands around him perished. He survived! And like so many others of

that era, whom I have met and interviewed, Otto felt that he had survived for a reason; it was his responsibility to tell the story of the Mennonite people – of the suffering and hardships they endured, of their cultural and economic achievements, and above all of their faith. Given his skills and talents, he felt that he could best do this through the medium of film.

As a boy Otto saw his first films in the village school or local church in southern Ukraine. By the mid-1930s all churches in the Soviet Union had been closed, of course, and converted into granaries, stables, dance clubs or movie theatres. The Soviet leadership, beginning with Lenin and Stalin, quickly recognized the propaganda value of the motion picture as a powerful new medium to reach people, many of whom could neither read nor write. The Soviet propaganda films of the 1930s showed, for example, smiling happy peasants – working and singing in the fields – happy to be part of the new collective farms. Of course the films were all lies, but the leaders knew that if you tell the story powerfully enough and repeat it often enough, people will believe; the same thing happened in Nazi Germany, and the same thing goes on today – a film can be used to tell a powerful truth or to cover up the truth.

Later, while serving in the German army, Otto observed German camera crews in action, filming documentaries for the weekly newsreels back home; he was intrigued! Much later, Otto met a member of one of these film crews working right here in Winnipeg at CBC-TV. This friend was able to offer Otto many suggestions and tips on the fine points of film tech-

nique when he started out on his own film career. When Otto came to Canada, he told me he loved watching the beautiful Walt Disney nature documentaries – soon, he started analyzing these films, with a stop watch in hand – paying careful attention to timing, pacing, photography techniques, etc. He traveled to studios in Disney World and Hollywood to watch film crews in action. He observed closely, and said to himself: I can do that!

And he did! Over the past 30 years, Otto has produced over 50 documentary films, telling the story of his people – the Mennonite people of Russia, Paraguay, Mexico and Manitoba – the story of ordinary people, living ordinary lives, experiencing extraordinary events, and achieving the extraordinary under the most adverse of conditions. He himself lived through many of these events himself, and was able to tell the story with a deep and honest conviction.

Otto's films are not made for commercial use on television or in theatres – they are intended to be shown in churches, schools, and community halls. His goal has never been to make money – in fact he has spent thousands of dollars, of his own money, to finance these films. Instead, his goal has been to tell the Mennonite story for succeeding generations – the generation of his own children and grand-children on their history. He has donated complimentary copies of his films to countless Mennonite schools and churches in Canada, South America and Europe, so that they in turn can educate their people, especially their young people, about their past.

*Peter Letkemann lives in Winnipeg.*

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**Otto Klassen making a film**

# Genealogy and Family History

By Alf Redekopp

## Recent Books

David Schroeder. *The Family Records of Heinrich and Maria (Kehler) Schroeder and The Ancestors of Heinrich and Maria (Kehler) Schroeder (1888-1974)* (Winnipeg, MB: Private publication, 2006)

These two compilations contain the family history for Heinrich Schroeder (1888-1974) and his wife Maria Kehler (1890-1978) who were born in Sommerfeld, Manitoba, lived in various places – Blumenthal and Austin in Manitoba and in Aldergrove and Clearbrook, BC and died in Altona, Manitoba. The compiler has also provided the Mennonite Heritage Centre with *A Tribute of Thanksgiving by Heinrich and Maria Schroeder* edited and translated from the diaries. Contact: D. Schroeder, 745 Coventry Road, Winnipeg, MB R3R 1B8.

Con Hildebrandt. *Hildebrandt 1726-2006: A Genealogical History of the Descendants of Heinrich and Maria (Guenther) Hildebrandt 1866-2006* (No Publication place given, 2006) 365 pp.

This book focuses on the family history of Heinrich Hildebrandt (1866-1945) and his wife Maria Guenther (1870-1949). The Hildebrandt family have Old Colony Mennonite roots and migrated from Manitoba to Saskatchewan where they lived about half way between Hepburn and Hague. Contact: W. Hildebrandt, 2143 Mayflower Blvd., Oakville, ON L6H 4E6 or whildebrandt@sympatico.ca

*The Klippenstein Sisters* (No publication place given, 2003) 200 pp.

This compilation comes in a 3-ringed binder prepared for a family reunion which was held August 9 and 10, 2003. The purpose of the reunion was to maintain family ties with the families of three Klippenstein sisters who came to Canada – Sara (Klippenstein) Isaak (1905-1951) in 1930, Katharina (Klippenstein) Letkemann (1907-1982) in 1948 and Anna (Klippenstein) Loewen (1911-) who also came during the 1920s migration from Russia. Contact: Gwen Rempel, 2910-51<sup>st</sup> B Ave., Lloydminster, AB T9V 1M2.

Les Plett. *Family Register of the Descendants of Our Grandparents Peter L. and Agatha (Koop) Susanna (Friesen) Plett #13* (Calgary, AB: Private Publication, 2006) 322 pp.

This book traces the family history of the descendants of Peter L. Plett (1859-1944) who first married Aganetha B. Koop (1859-1883) and then Susanna R. Friesen (1864-1936), who came to Canada from Russia in 1875, settling in Blumenhof, Manitoba with the Mennonite Kleingemeinde. The book includes genealogical data, photographs, biographical sketches and a comprehensive index. Contact: Les Plett, 923 Midridge Dr. SE, Calgary, AB T2X 1H5

*A Day of Pilgrimage June 11, 2005: A Document commemorating the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Arrival of the David and Agatha Fast Family in Canada 1930-2005* (Winnipeg, MB: Private Publication, 2005) 93 pp. and 44 pp.

The first part of this compilation consists of the “Day of Pilgrimage” which includes the genealogical data for the family of David Fast (1899-1979) and his wife Agatha Schroeder (1903-1996), as well as chronological survey of their life starting in the Memrick Colony of Russia to settlement and subsequent stages of their life in Manitoba. The second part of this compilation, entitled “Appendix” includes interviews, copies of documents, maps, charts and other items of interest. The third part which is included only in the limited family edition consists of the “Elkhorn Tapes” – a series of 4 sessions where the children share memories. Contact: P. Fast, 529-445 Stafford St., Winnipeg, MB R3M 3V9

## Queries

**Schroeder** - Looking for the family of Cornelius Schroeder, born July 22, 1899 married Helena Bergen 5th July 1925. Children from this union were: Kenneth, Terence and Winnifred Constance. These three children are all first cousins of my husband Dennis Schroeder. I am doing genealogy on the family and would appreciate contact. Contact: Esther Schroeder. Unit 7A, 46354 Brooks Ave. Chilliwack B.C. V29 7S9.

**Wiebe** - Searching for ancestors and siblings of Gerhard Wiebe (1858-1921) b. Halbstadt, Molotschna, migrated to Munich, ND in 1907 with wife and 4 children, and d. in Walla Walla, WA. His wife's name was Elisabeth Richert. Contact: Richard Vorwerk at richardvorwerk@hotmail.com, 512-750-5562, or 1808 W. Lake Dr, Taylor, TX 76574.

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## A Genealogical DNA Project for Low-German Mennonites

by Glenn Penner

In the Dec. 2004 issue of the *Mennonite Historian* I announced the start of a genealogical DNA project for Mennonites. At that time there was a significant cost associated with the testing and the project covered all Mennonite/Anabaptist groups. Since that time a new project has been started which specializes in the use of DNA analysis to help genealogical research among Mennonites of Low-German background. The good news is that **participation is now free**. So far nearly 500 people of Low-German Mennonite background from Canada, the United States, Paraguay, Mexico and Germany have participated. For more information on this project and what kind of information it can provide visit the Low-German Mennonite DNA Project website at [www.mennonitedna.com](http://www.mennonitedna.com). You can also find the Y-DNA results for the first 91 men on this website. Y-DNA is the DNA that is passed on from father to son and is particularly useful for genealogical research since Mennonite family names have also been passed down from father to son for at least the last 400 years. Also note that mtDNA is also tested for both men and women. This is the DNA that is passed from mother to child and follows the maternal ancestry of the person who is tested. Those who are interested in participating in this project are encouraged to contact me at [gpenner@uoguelph.ca](mailto:gpenner@uoguelph.ca) or 519-824-4120 ext. 52602.

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

## Encyclopedia on Mennonites in Paraguay

The society for the history and culture of the Mennonites in Paraguay [Ver-ein fuer Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay] agreed a number of years ago to publish a reference work on Mennonites in Paraguay. The people appointed to this task were: Gundolf Niebuhr, Filadelfia, Hans Theodor Regier, Friesland, Uwe Friesen, Menno, Jakob Warkentin, Neuland and Gerhard Ratzlaff, Asuncion. Beate Penner from Friesland has also become a part of this group. The goal is to publish this work, first in German, then, when it is possible, in Spanish and finally also in English. The content need not be the same in each of the languages. The working committee for this Mennonite Encyclopedia met on 10 July 2006 in order to consider the task and make plans for the future. It hopes to have the German edition complete by 2008 at the latest.

The goal is to inform the reader on topics on Mennonites in Paraguay, their history, institutions, organizations and leading persons. The committee has put together a list of 700 subjects that should be covered, which will be expanded and edited as needed. Some topics will take a whole page, for example on the colonies, and some only a few sentences. In general it will inform readers quickly and easily about what Mennonites have done in the past and what they are still doing today. Wherever possible, each topic will also include a bibliography for further reading. Such an encyclopedia would be particularly useful in the school libraries, for students and researchers, as a basic and valuable source of information.

In the German edition, we naturally think of including articles on our Mennonite churches and colonies in Paraguay, in order to inform ourselves about our history and identity. The Spanish edition will primarily serve the Spanish population with accurate information. It would be good if there were the financial means to provide each school in Paraguay with a copy. The English edition would have international significance. Mennonite researchers, reporters, journalists and other foreigners would value such a work and the information would benefit the Mennonites in Paraguay as well. All Paraguayan embassies and consulates worldwide could and should be given such a book, as a source of information of their

Paraguayan personnel, as well as for persons interested in informing themselves on Mennonites in Paraguay.

The publication of an encyclopedia on Mennonites in Paraguay requires good organization, many willing writers and good financial support. The Historical Society would value the active participation and support of the churches, the colonies and individual persons. It will be a work by the Mennonites, for the Mennonites and beyond that, for all of Paraguay.

*Based on excerpts from an article entitled: "Mennonitishces Lexikon – Paraguay" by Gerhard Ratzlaff published in Neuland Informiert und Diskutiert, July 2006, pp.16-17, translated by Linda Huebert Hecht.*

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### Janzen diary

*(cont'd from p. 6)*

period, the terror brought on by the war, the roving bands and the shortages. To that was added the famine and the typhus epidemic. Finally relief supplies began to trickle in from the Dutch Mennonites and from American Mennonites including seed grain and some tractors. Orie Miller and Hiebert and others from America came on the scene, as well as the effective coordinating efforts of B.B. Janz in the distribution.

The establishment of the Soviet system of village and regional control continued to erode the independence of the farmers through taxation and exorbitantly high levies on literally everything, together with rampant corruption, impoverished the farmers prior to the establishment of the collective system.

Emigration to Canada and Mexico eventually became possible and the Janzen family emigrated to Mexico in mid-1923. Pioneering as farmers was very difficult and sustained only by MCC relief supplies from the USA. The diary ends in the midst of that struggle and other records indicate their travel to Canada in the spring of 1926 and their settling at Springridge.

Janzen was a devout Christian and faithful and active member of the *kirchliche* congregation in Rudnerweide. He was keenly interested in newer trends such as the establishment of Sunday School, youth programs, choirs and Bible conferences. As times became more difficult and serious due to changes brought on by the revolution and the new system, the famine and the typhus



**Diary showing water-damaged pages and Gothic hand-writing from edge to edge. Ed and Elisabeth Enns worked with photocopies from this ledger.**

epidemic, he became greatly interested in eschatological topics and was deeply taken in by visiting speakers such as the Mennonite Brethren minister Jakob Reimer and Enns and others of the *Zeltmission* (Tent mission). Their strong emphasis on the end-times and on "clear conversions" brought on a revival of considerable proportions in theirs and surrounding villages, and with it the categorizing even of church members into "saved" and "unsaved". Janzen appreciated this kind of evangelistic thrust, but was very distressed and disgusted when some from his church were re-baptized by immersion in local ponds by Mennonite Brethren ministers.

Janzen remained single all his life, but in the diary he admits that he very much wanted to get married. He describes how one or more times he identifies a certain young woman as the one and makes some approaches, but is turned down each time and goes into depression and questioning as to why his prayers in this regard are never answered.

Since it is a diary and he no doubt wrote it primarily for himself, the reader 90 years later often wishes for more context when he alludes to certain problems, or militia groupings during the fighting, or the various foreign elements involved (i.e., Bulgarians. Germans. British fleet, etc.). To the reader today he also seems tedious by recording the temperature three times a day, plus the wind direction, or the number of *desjatins* plowed each day, the amount of grain threshed daily over three weeks and the price of every item he buys or sells. That to him was diary!

On the other hand, in translating him, in seeking to understand him in his time and circumstances, one learns to appreciate his courage and Christian stance and service to his family and the community - - and he becomes a friend.

*Edward and Elisabeth Enns have translated the Jakob Janzen diary for the years 1916-1925 as volunteers of the Mennonite Heritage Centre.*

## Another view of 'MB/GC' Beginnings...

by Ed Lenzmann

In "MB/GC Beginnings in Western Canada: Convenience Unites What the 'Spirit' Divides" (*Mennonite Historian*, Vol. XXXII No. 3, Sept. 2006) Donovan Giesbrecht notes that in many cases Mennonite families immigrating to Canada from the Soviet Union in the 1920s settled in small and isolated clusters, especially on the prairies. At the start these families worshiped together. But when it came to organizing formally they continued the practice of having two churches, namely the Mennonite Brethren and the *kirchlich* (increasingly referred to as the General Conference or GC). Giesbrecht asks why the practice of having two churches continued in Canada, even when the numbers were small. Upon discussing this question with him and he suggested that I share my views in a subsequent issue of the *Mennonite Historian*.

It was the Mennonite Brethren who insisted on two churches; in so doing they maintained in essence – whether consciously or not – the Anabaptist understanding of a true believers' church. Almost all of these Mennonite Brethren, or at least their parents, had earlier been *kirchlich*, to use their term. But then they had crossed over and been re-baptized by immersion because, in their view, *Bekehrung*, a personal experience of the new birth at a specific time and place, had not been seen as requisite for baptism and church membership in the existing church. Rather, all who had been born and raised in Mennonite homes were, at a more or less set age, instructed over a period of weeks or months in the Mennonite catechism and then baptized and received into the church, usually on Pentecost Sunday. In essence, this constituted a universal rite of passage into adulthood. The result was a mixed church lacking in discipline. Mennonite Brethren leader B.B. Janz noted that he had joined the Mennonite Brethren because in the existing church "...one already knew that the child in the crib would join the church between the ages of seventeen to twenty-one. That is *Volkskirche*."<sup>1</sup> Apparently the situation had developed because in Russia one could not partake of the Mennonite 'privileges' – one could not marry, one could not own land, one could not gain exemption from the military – unless one were a member of the church.

With the emergence of the Mennonite Brethren in 1860, the leaders of the existing church were forced to reconsider their understanding of the church. Elder August Lenzmann of Gnadenfeld conceded that, given the existing situation, some unbelievers might find their way into the church. Given his Lutheran/Moravian heritage with its universal infant baptism and confirmation, he could live with the situation provided that church members were not living "... in open and apparent sin." Based on the Parable of the Tares (Matthew 13) he and Elder Heinrich Dirks, his successor, argued that the church would always be an undisciplined body made up of believers and unbelievers. In the view of Elder David H. Epp a particle of faith – which presumably could be built upon – should constitute a sufficient reason for baptism and church membership.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Bernhard Harder who had himself experienced a conversion did not encourage re-baptism and joining the Mennonite Brethren. Rather, he promoted reform of the old church and engaged in aggressive evangelism within his church. His efforts, however, brought a significant increase to the ranks of the Mennonite Brethren.<sup>3</sup> Taken together, these views might be seen as the response to the Mennonite Brethren view that the old church reconsider the nature of the church.

Aside from military exemption during war there were no 'Mennonite privileges' associated with church membership in Canada. But all those who had been catechized and baptized in Russia remained in the church and all of the young people continued to be baptized.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, this was not acceptable to the Mennonite Brethren. They worshiped initially with the other side much as Mennonites today might 'worship' with churches that reject nonresistance or practice infant baptism – as in the recent Franklin Graham Festival in Winnipeg – without being prepared to form one church with them. Martin Hamm, writing about the 1920s settlers in the LaGlacé, Alberta area, shows how a set conversion was central to the Mennonite Brethren. The settlers at first met in various homes. After awhile the Mennonite Brethren decided to organize. "We agreed", he writes, "that each one would relate the story of his conversion. That way we would get to know each other better. It took several Sundays until we were finished. How this bound us together! There were also some who now

stayed away. Too bad for them. This was how we actually organized as a church."<sup>5</sup>

Throughout their history the Mennonite Brethren have agonized over those among their friends and loved ones in the other church who have not experienced what is now sometimes called "a Mennonite Brethren conversion". My own father had a favorite aunt who was not open to "getting saved" in the Mennonite Brethren sense. But late in life she shared that at the time of her baptism she had made "a covenant with God" (einen Bund mit Gott). Was this another way of becoming a Christian? He desperately hoped so. Others, however, had little to say about the need to become right with God.

People from the other church have responded with concerns of their own about the Mennonite Brethren. Why are they so ready and eager to baptize their young teens and even pre-teens? Is this not an adult decision? How different is the pressure coming from peers and from adults (including pastors) in Mennonite Brethren churches to be baptized, from simply baptizing everyone at a set age in the other church? How different is a once saved but later wayward teen age member of the Mennonite Brethren church from an adult church member in the other church who has never been saved and cares little about the Christian life? How often has the pressure to be saved and baptized led to young people being saved over and over again? (When asked about this, A.H. Unruh, Mennonite Brethren leader of an earlier time, deflected the question by suggesting it was better to be saved many times than not at all.)

While I am not suggesting that the concerns of each side cancel out the concerns of the other, I am suggesting that each side can learn from the other.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in John B. Toews, *With Courage to Spare*. (Winnipeg: The Board of Christian Literature of the General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches of North America, 1978) p. 83.

<sup>2</sup>For a fuller explanation and assessment of their views on the subject see Abraham Friesen, *In Defense of Privilege* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2006) Chapter 7.

<sup>3</sup>Helmut T. Huebert, *Events and People* (Winnipeg: Springfield Publishers, 1999) p. 51-52.

<sup>4</sup>Indeed, one young man told me not long ago that in the General Conference congregation of his youth all of the young people were baptized in grade 12, while, as he came to realize, in the neighbouring M.B. congregation people were baptized "whenever".

<sup>5</sup>Martin Hamm, *Aus der alten in die neue Heimat* (Winnipeg: Christian Press) p. 81.



## Mennonite Heritage Centre

600 Shaftesbury Blvd Winnipeg MB Canada R3P 0M4

### MHC Projects

#### National Catalogue Cooperative Program

The Heritage Centre has hired **Joanne Moyer** for a 9-week project which consists of re-describing and updating the descriptions of 24 small collections which are significant for studying Canadian Mennonites. The funding for the project came through a cooperative grant proposal that the Association for Manitoba Archives submitted to the National Archival Development Program.

The collection descriptions are being entered into a national catalogue of archival holdings which is accessible at [www.archivescanada.ca](http://www.archivescanada.ca), which includes descriptions of archival holdings from across Canada. The full inventory listing will also be on our Centre's website at: [www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/172](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/172).

Among the collections which are already completed are the papers of Anna Baerg (1897-1972), Esther (Klaassen) Bergen (1921-2005), Jacob Gerbrandt (1888-1963), Jacob J. Hildebrandt (1880-1976), C.C. Neufeld (1906-1977), I.G. Neufeld (1910-1991) and many more.



Joanne Moyer, archival assistant, displaying one of the most unusual and surprising discoveries in one of the MHC small collections – 4.9 million Deutsch Mark!!! Tucked away in the collection of C.C. Neufeld was an envelope with 49 banknotes each with a value of 100,000 DM. These Weimar Republic German Reichsbanknotes dated 1 February 1923 were issued during a period of hyperinflation. Photo credit: Conrad Stoesz

#### Mennonite Genealogy Inc. (MGI)

The MGI collection is by far the largest collection acquired by the Mennonite Heritage Centre in recent years. MGI was the only organization in Canada (and possibly anywhere in the world) that worked exclusively at helping individuals research Mennonite genealogy and family history. The collection is likely the largest Mennonite genealogical collection anywhere in the world. The collection includes a 200,000 card index file, over 300 Mennonite-related periodicals, 37 maps, ca. 1500 photographs, ca. 1500 family registers and 21 filing cabinet drawers of family, community, and church-related historical materials. The collection contains genealogical information for Canadian Mennonites of Dutch, North German, Prussian and Russian ancestry. They are important to people of this ancestry who currently live in North or South America as well as Europe.

Some parts of the collection will be integrated with existing collections at the Heritage Centre (i.e. books, periodicals and maps) and duplicates shared with other Mennonite archival centres. Plans are also being made to scan the card index file for ease of access by computer and also to share with other Centres.

The Centre is very grateful to MGI Board of Directors who saw the importance of donating the collection to our Centre where it will continue to be used as it was intended. *A.R.*

#### Jakob Janzen Diary (1916-1925)

by Edward Enns

Jakob Janzen (1889-1963), originally of Rudnerweide in the Molotschna Colony, emigrating to Mexico in 1924 and then to Springridge, Alberta in 1926, was very keen on keeping a diary of events around him, as well as of daily personal experiences and thinking. In this diary from 1916 to 1925 he misses only two days in the first four years.

He possibly wrote six diaries of varying lengths between 1911 and 1946, this one being the most extensive, covering his time in an alternative service forestry camp followed by his taking over the family farm, including the experiences during the revolution and the famine and epidemic and finally their emigration to Mexico in 1924.

The diary is contained in a hard-cover ledger-sized book of just under 500 pages. He wrote in Gothic German in small script crowded from edge to edge and top to bottom, always compressing the last few lines into minute and frequently illegible words. Water damage has wiped out the lower corners of many pages. He used a considerable number of Russian words and expressions and practically ignored punctuation except for commas.

In 1916 and most of 1917 he served in a forestry camp near Kasan, northeast of Moscow. He served primarily as a cook which included much time spent in finding and buying supplies in surrounding towns. He was also the camp handyman who repaired shoes, cut hair, soldered, sharpened saws, did carpentry work, repaired watches and did accounts. Prior to this he had done a term of alternative service at the Bethania Mental Institute (recorded in a pre-1916 diary).

Janzen was a committed pacifist, a stance that was sorely tested during the time of the revolution and the marauding bandits. When the *Selbstschutz* (self-defense unit) was organized in the Mennonite villages, Janzen and his brothers and the majority of Rudnerweide men refused to join and ironically suffered harassment from their fellow Mennonites who did join, as well as from some clergy, but they stood their ground. However, during the fighting in their area between the opposing forces, they did transport prisoners and wounded soldiers away from and towards the battle lines.

Janzen describes their community and farming difficulties during the civil war

(cont'd on p. 5)



## Farewell to a Faithful Servant

What do you say when a faithful companion of almost 130 years dies? Do you grieve or do you celebrate its long life? Do you protest its death or do you look forward to how it can continue to serve.

With such mixed emotions a group of some 50 people gathered in the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies on January 30 to say goodbye, and yet celebrate, the closing of the *Mennonitische Rundschau*.

The reasons for its closure were due to declining subscriptions—as was noted in our December 2006 issue, page 7.

There were some wonderful testimonials at the event noting the *Rundschau*'s heart-felt ministry to immigrant Mennonites from Russia, and then more recently German-speaking Mennonite Brethren mostly in Canada. Together with cake and coffee we said goodbye and yet were amazed at the more than 80,000 pages of ministry the *Mennonitische Rundschau* represents.

However, there still is life beyond the grave. Given its incredible documentation of the thousands of people the paper witnessed to, the Centre is committing itself to moving forward the indexing project it began earlier. Ed Lenzmann, a volunteer from Winnipeg, together with a number of other individuals, will work at indexing its contents so that scholars, genealogists and church historians will have better access to its contents. The completed indices will be made available freely on the Centre website.

KR

## Documenting Institutional Change

Church institutions and agencies constantly change—but often we fail to properly document these changes—no matter how important they may be. However sometimes people think of documenting important changes and that makes historians and archivists very happy.

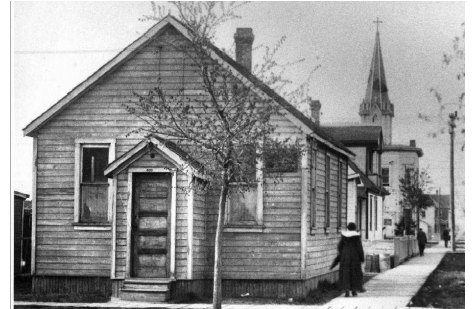
A good example is the change from Concord College and Canadian Mennonite Bible College to the present-day Canadian Mennonite University. In between was the transition college called Mennonite College Federation which also included Menno Simons College. The records of Mennonite College Federation and Concord College it appears, at this writing, will receive a federal government grant to hire a student to properly archive and write a detailed finding aid to their contents.

Important transitions such as this can very easily be lost in the “mists of time.” Then many years later someone is looking for important information, or perhaps writing the story of the agency or institution, and the search begins for the transition records.

Al Doerksen was the chair of the Mennonite College Federation and it was his clear vision and intent that these records be carefully kept and then transferred to the Centre so that the important story they tell be made available to future researchers. We thank Al for his diligence and foresight.

KR

CENTRE FOR  
**Mennonite  
Brethren  
Studies** IN CANADA  
1310 Taylor Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3M 3Z6



**North End Chapels at Burrows and Andrew**  
(See Abe Dueck's article this issue) Photo credit: CMBS NP20-1-4 and NP18-1-7.

## Come Celebrate: The First Mennonite Brethren “City Church” in Canada

Everyone is welcome June 1 - 3, 2007 as the Mennonite Brethren Churches of Manitoba celebrate the centennial of the first Mennonite Brethren city church, and as far as we know the first Mennonite city church, in Canada. Events include:

A Friday evening gathering with stories and singing in the old North End Mennonite Brethren Church (now Heritage Baptist), 621 College Ave., Winnipeg beginning at 7:30 PM, June 1, 2007.

A bus tour of historic Mennonite Brethren sites in Winnipeg beginning at 1:00 PM Saturday, June 2, 2007. Departure from the Elmwood Mennonite Brethren Church parking lot. (2 ½ hours)

Banquet, celebration and inspiration of Mennonite Brethren Church planting in Manitoba at the North Kildonan Mennonite Brethren Church, 6:30 PM Saturday, June 2, 2007.

A Sunday afternoon public service of music and stories at the Elmwood MB Church, 3:00 PM, June 3, 2007.

Contact Dan Block at the Manitoba Mennonite Brethren Conference offices at (204) 654-5777 or Ken Reddig (204) 669-6575 for further details.



**Event celebrating the ministry of the *Mennonitische Rundschau* held at the Centre on January 30, 2007.** Photo credit: Lorie Mayer.

## Winnipeg Mennonite Brethren

(cont'd from p. 1)

cars soon made their way across the bridge, connecting via Kelvin St. (later Henderson Hwy.) and Midwinter Ave. with the Louise Bridge. By 1914 the population of East Kildonan, not yet a part of Winnipeg, was over 3,000 and the railcars traveled all the way to Foxgrove.

In 1919 the Greater Winnipeg Aqueduct to Shoal Lake was completed. That was also the year of the Winnipeg General Strike.

These were some of the circumstances that formed the context for the arrival of the first Mennonite Brethren into Winnipeg. They were also the first Mennonites in Winnipeg and the first Mennonites in Canada to establish themselves in a major urban environment. Winnipeg eventually became the city with the largest Mennonite population of any major urban centre in the world. The three founding Mennonite Brethren churches in Winnipeg were the North End (Elmwood), which was the "mother" church, South End (Portage Avenue), and North Kildonan churches. In the early years a number of nearby rural churches (e.g., Domain) also functioned as affiliates of the North End church.

Mennonites came to rural Manitoba long before the turn of the century. The first group of Mennonites arrived in Manitoba beginning in 1873 and soon established what became known as the East Reserve (east of the Red River, including the Steinbach area) and the West Reserve (west of the Red River in areas around Winkler and Altona). They came from Russia via the United States. The last leg of their journey was onboard a steamer on the Red River, which first docked in Winnipeg for supplies before establishing themselves in rural Manitoba.

The first Mennonite Brethren church in Manitoba was established in 1888 in Burwalde near Winkler. It resulted from evangelistic efforts of Heinrich Voth, who came to Manitoba as a result of a decision by the U.S. Conference in 1883. The Winkler Mennonite Brethren Church, therefore, became the mother church of the Mennonite Brethren in Manitoba as well as Canada. It was also the church that nurtured the early development of the first truly urban Mennonite church in Canada.

### 1. Elmwood/Louise Bridge (1906-1909) (Peter Ewerts)

The first meeting place for Mennonite

Brethren in Winnipeg was at 584 Talbot Ave. (then Central Ave.), beginning at least as early as Easter, 1906. The first known Mennonite family to move to Winnipeg was the Bernhard Tilitzky family, coming sometime in 1905 and living at 713 McCallum Ave. They moved to Winnipeg from Winkler where they had lived for about a year after arriving from Rosenthal, Russia (Chortitza colony) in 1904. About the same time several others arrived, including the Peter Ewert family, also originally from Rosenthal and living at 580-584 Talbot (now the site of the Serbian Orthodox Church), the Frank Ewerts (563 Chalmers), and the David Penners (720 Talbot). The Peter Ewerts operated a small sausage factory adjacent to their home.

The Peter Ewert home was quite large and had a room that could accommodate at least 40 people and was used as an assembly room for some time, at least until 1909. The first report of a group meeting for a service was from "Louise Bridge" and was published in the *Zionsbote* on 2 May 1906. Bernhard Tilitzky reported that a group was gathering every Sunday at 2:00 p.m. in the home of Peter Ewerts for Sunday School with some 40 children in attendance. The report also stated that H.S. Voth and P. H. Neufeld from Winkler had ministered to them during Easter week.

The next information comes from the diary of H.S. Voth, who reported that on 22 December 1906, he boarded a street car and made his way to the Ewerts. Finding no one home, he went to the Tilitzky home for lunch and stayed there the following night. The next day, which was Sunday, he went to the Peter Ewerts for a service, then stayed for lunch and for the Sunday School in the afternoon. Another service was held in the evening with good attendance.

More than a year later, on 29 April 1908, a report written by Anna Tilitzky, also posted from Louise Bridge, appeared. It again referred to Easter services with visiting ministers Jakob Ewert and Peter Neufeld from Winkler. A service was held at the Tilitzky residence on Good Friday. Services were also held on Easter Sunday and from Tuesday to Thursday in the evenings and a small prayer meeting on Friday. The following Sunday Jakob Ewert ministered to the group. The report concluded by stating that they were a small group which met every Sunday morning and evening.

Later that year (12 August 1908) Anna

Tilitzky reported on a visit by Brother and Sister Franz Wiens as well as J. Ewert. Frank and Agnes Wiens presumably were the couple who later served as missionaries in China from 1911 to 1940. A regular morning service was held and the evening service was held in "a small chapel", possibly a mission chapel of the German Baptist Church. On Tuesday evening Wiens spoke in the German Baptist Church.

A report on 20 January 1909, by Jakob Ewert gives information about his visit to Winnipeg in December, during a time when H. S. Voth and Peter Neufeld were ministering to the group. A small chapel had been rented which continued to be used. On 13 December a service was held in the home of the Tilitzkys and Peter Penner from Herbert also preached.

In October, 1909 Anna Tilitzky informed readers about a Thanksgiving service in the home of Peter Ewert. Johann Warkentin and a Brother Karlenzig preached at the service. One sermon was in Russian.

It is clear, therefore, that the Louise Bridge/Elmwood area was an important centre for the early Mennonite Brethren in Winnipeg. After 1909, however, the centre of activity shifted to another area of the city, the North End, which since 1908 was linked with the Elmwood area by the Redwood Bridge.

### 2. The North End

The shift of the centre of Mennonite Brethren activity to the North End is not well documented, but seems to have begun around 1910. The first official minutes of the North End Mennonite Brethren Church are dated 20 May 1909 and took place in the home of John Trottno. Thereafter regular sets of minutes were kept in the Gothic script. Although the homes where congregational meetings took place and where services were held are often identified the exact locations of many are hard to determine.

One of the interesting developments in the years from 1910 is that the names that appear in the minutes and other records are often not the usual Mennonite names. Some of the names that appear in the various minutes of 1909 and 1910 are Trottno, Hunza, Reich, Schott, Horch, Huget, Mandau, Reich, Murtin, Pauli, Schlimming, Munsil (or Mumsel). The other names are mostly those involved in the earlier records— Jakob Ewert, Peter Neufeld, Peter Ewert, B. Tilitzky, Frank Ewert, Johan Warkentin (as moderator). Evidently a significant shift had taken



place and new individuals were taking important leadership roles.

In terms of places of worship, the record is somewhat confusing. According to the minutes of 21 December 1909, two individuals, W.A. Huget and J. Trottno, were asked to find a suitable place for worship in the area of Selkirk and Burrows. The minutes of 10 February 1910 indicate that the group approved the purchase of a house for \$1,500, offered by John Trottno. The exact location is not known, but it was in the vicinity of Burrows and Selkirk and probably was at the corner of Burrows and Andrews. A building committee was also formed, but it is not clear whether anything concrete followed. In January the group offered to pay Peter Ewert for the previous use of his house. At some point Johann Warkentin of Winkler purchased the empty lot at the corner of Burrows and Andrews and also purchased a small chapel which was moved to the site from St. Vital in 1911 (Neufeld, p. 37), although Anna Thiessen states that it began to be used in 1913 (p.15).

In 1913 an important decision was made to strengthen the work in Winnipeg. William Bestvater from Mountain Lake, Minnesota, was appointed as city missionary by the Northern District Conference (Canadian Conference). The Bestvaters arrived in October when there were 22 members in the group. According to Anna Thiessen there was only one "Mennonite" in the group. What had happened to the others? Had they moved or had they gone elsewhere? Why?

Whatever the circumstances, the group grew rapidly after the arrival of Bestvater so that within a year they needed more space. It also becomes clear that there was increasing interaction with the First German Baptist Church, which became McDermot Ave. Baptist Church (located at McDermot and Tecumseh, earlier Monkman). The building, which is still in use today, was dedicated in 1908. This church, however, also had a number of other mission stations, including a North End Chapel and an Elmwood Chapel (anniversary book). The North End Chapel was located at Manitoba and McKenzie. The Baptist church agreed to rent the chapel to the Mennonite Brethren group and they used it from 1914 until September 1917.

In 1916 the Conference decided to build its own mission hall in Winnipeg. Work was soon begun at the previous site on Burrows and Andrews and on September

23, 1917, the new hall was dedicated, although only the first floor (basement) was completed and the remainder was never built. This building is still in existence and is used as a meat shop.

In the meantime another significant step was taken when Anna Thiessen was invited by Bestvater to help with the missionary work in the city, since the ministry had grown and the needs were great. In December 1915, she arrived in Winnipeg and soon she was busy with Sunday School work, house and hospital visitation, sewing classes, tract distribution, etc. Music also became a strong component of worship and ministry, particularly as the Horch family joined the North End group.

In 1921 the Bestvaters left to go to Herbert and teach in the Bible school there and the Erdman Nikkels replaced them for a short while. Four years later, in 1925, the C.N. Hieberts were invited to assume the task as city missionaries (parents of Esther Horch).

The mid-1920s brought a major challenge to the Winnipeg church as the Mennonite refugees from Russia began arriving in Canada. Many of them stopped in Winnipeg for a time or made Winnipeg their permanent home. This resulted in a very rapid growth of the church. By 1929 the group was in dire need of a larger place of worship and a new church was built at 621 College Ave. This location was the home of the mother Mennonite Brethren Church of Winnipeg for the next 25 years. In 1954 the church finally returned to the area where it was birthed—the Elmwood area, in the heart of the quadrant of the city in which most of the Mennonites had settled in the meantime. It was also only a few blocks from the headquarters of Mennonite Brethren institutional and conference life for both Manitoba and Canada. The Mennonite Brethren Bible College was founded in 1944 and was located at 77 Kelvin St. Next door was the Mennonite Brethren Collegiate Institute, founded in 1947. Other agencies such as Christian Press and Gospel Light also established their homes in the area.

But the mid-1920s also brought another significant development. In 1925 the Mission to Young Girls (Mary Martha Home) began at 608 Mountain Ave. This was essentially the work of Anna Thiessen, the matron of the home. The home became a residence and meeting place for many young girls who came to the city to find work, mostly as domestics. This home

was one of several established in major cities in Canada. It grew from very small beginnings and gradually expanded and moved to new addresses on Boyd and Mountain Avenues. (413 Boyd -1928; 398 Mountain-1929; 437 Mountain-1931). The ministry of this home met an important need and shaped the lives of many women until it finally closed in 1959.

## 2. South End

A number of Mennonite Brethren and other Mennonites began settling south of the CPR tracks, particularly some of those who came in the 1920s. These found it more difficult to make their way to the North End since they were often without automobiles and public transportation was limited. This prompted them to schedule separate services in various homes from time to time. But as the group grew in number the need for a regular place of worship grew. The first regular meeting place of the South End group, beginning in 1928, was a rented United Church (previously the Pt. Douglas Presbyterian) at 95 MacDonald, not far from the CPR station. This building was erected in 1906. (See *Mennonitsche Rundschau*, 12 Nov 1930 and report of Peter Kornelsen in Anna Thiessen scrapbook).

Although the reasons are not stated, the group moved to another site late in 1930. The church met at 41 Maple St., only about a block from the previous address, until 1932 or early 1933. The church which they rented was called the All People's Mission (1904). Later it became a Baptist Mission Church. When the lease terminated in 1933, the church apparently met at a number of locations, including a second floor location on Princess St., a Kindergarten room at 294 Ellen (now Chief Cornerstone House), and possibly Logan and Ellen (268 Ellen).

After a lengthy search, the church was finally able to purchase its own property at 344 Ross Ave., in June, 1933, where it remained until 1940. Several years later, in 1936, the South End Mennonite Brethren Church became an independent



Maple Street mission later South End MB now Pilgrim Baptist Church.

church and was no longer an affiliate of the North End Church. In 1940 the church had again outgrown its facility and moved to William and Juno, the site of a former Methodist and United Church. After two decades at this site, a more drastic step was taken with a move to 1420 Portage Ave. in 1961. The church soon became named the Portage Avenue Mennonite Brethren Church. Those who decided to remain at William and Juno became the Central Mennonite Brethren Church.

### 3. North Kildonan

The North Kildonan Mennonite Brethren Church had its beginnings at about the same time and for similar reasons as the South End group. Some new immigrants had begun settling on small acreages in the area much of which was still heavily wooded. In 1928 they began to meet in private homes because the distance to the North End congregation was too great. They first met in the home of J. J. Klassen on Edison Ave., under the leadership of Gerhard Klassen.

The group quickly increased in size and in 1929 they erected their first church building on Edison Ave. Rapid growth continued for the next several decades so that a series of additions followed until a large new church was erected at 217 Kingsford in 1957.

For a number of years the North Kildonan church together with the South End church functioned as affiliates of the North End church with a common governance structure. Other small nearby rural groups, such as the one at Springstein, also related to the North End Church. The North Kildonan Church became independent in 1938, two years after the South End Church had taken that step.

### 4. Rundschau Publishing House (Christian Press)

When the *Mennonitische Rundschau* first was transferred to Winnipeg from Scottsdale, PA, it was located at 672 Arlington, where it remained until it moved to 157 Kelvin St. in January, 1951.

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Gert Martens of Winnipeg beside his great-great-grandparents' tombstone.

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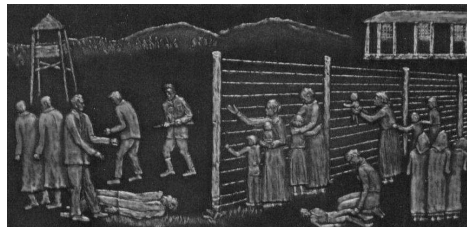
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*Zionsbote*

*Abe Dueck is the former director of the Centre for MB Studies in Winnipeg.*

## Remembering Russia

### 1928—1938 Collectivization and Mass Arrest



#### A Film by Otto Klassen

Premiere Showing  
Sunday, 15 April 2007 7:00 p.m.

Springfield Heights Mennonite Church  
570 Sharron Bay  
Winnipeg, Manitoba

## Tombstone of Mennonite Brethren founder located.

by Katherine Martens

On 10 October 2006, at 9:09 a.m. Helen and Ed Wiens, and Gert and Katherine Martens, all passengers on the Mennonite Heritage Cruise left Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine to look for Wiesenfeld. It was the village which Gert's great great grandparents, Jakob and Wilhelmine Reimer founded.

Together with Viktor our translator and driver we drove north but eventually turned east in the direction of Donetsk and then south on the road to Limanskoe. We saw the valley Wiesenfelder had written about, that lay west of the former village. We then headed for the village of Oktyabrskoe.

When we saw three men working in their front yard, our driver stopped the van and asked them if they knew of a former Mennonite village nearby. One man said he knew that his neighbour a few doors over had a Mennonite tombstone from earlier times and he could take us there. He walked us over to the fence beside the gate and pulled a plank away from a pillar that stood beside the gate. We crowded around it and began to read the inscription on the side of the stone facing us as follows:

Durch Kreuz zur Krone  
[Kreuz was in the shape of a cross]  
Hier ruhen unsere Eltern  
Jakob und Wilhelmine  
Reimer  
geborne Strauß

geb. 29. Januar 1818 - 22. April 1818  
gest. am 13 Nov. 1891 - gest. am 11. Nov. 1889  
Funfzig Jahre gemeinsam tragen  
Durch manch Leiden Christi Tod  
Macht das nun, wir Kinder sagen:  
"Tod sind sie und leben doch!"

While I was reading the inscription I clapped my hands with joy and a wave of emotion swept over me. The persons whose tombstone we had been led to so miraculously were Gert's paternal great-great-grandparents. Jakob and Wilhelmine Reimer who founded the village of Wiesenfeld in 1880.

Viktor asked the farmer if he could show us the place where he had found the tombstone. He drove with us and pointed to a place in an open field of winter wheat. With our map we could then tell where the village street had been. It was now a trail about a kilometre or more running south to north. Our Ukrainian guide pointed to depressions in the ground

(cont'd on p. 11)

## Book Notes

by Adolf Ens

The following East European items will be of interest to many readers.

Adalbert Goertz, "Zur Einrichtung der Grund- und Hypothekenakten – 1783 – Klein Lublin, Amt Graudenz," is a 14-page reprint from *Altpreußische Geschlechterkunde*. It illustrates the rich source of family information that can be found in West Prussian mortgage and inheritance "contracts." Readers who find ordinary German texts difficult to navigate (let alone old German technical legal ones) but are interested in such sources should check Goertz's articles (similar to the one above, but in English) in *Menno-nite Family History* back to the year 2000.

The East German Genealogical Society and the Federation of East European Family History Societies held their annual Conference in Winnipeg in Summer 2006. The 129-page *Conference Syllabus* contains a wide variety of useful information for family and group studies of people from Hungary, Prussia, Poland and Russia. Included are two papers on the Hutterites by retired CMU professor, John J. Friesen.

Sergej Terojochin, *Deutsche Architektur an der Wolga* (Berlin: Westkreuz-Verlag GmbH, 1993), 88 pages, is an illustrative survey of architecture in the German colonies of the Volga River region in Russia. The book is translated (into German) from Russian. While it deals largely with German Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed colonies, there are some references to the Am Trakt Mennonite settlement.

Three sets of memoirs, recently published in limited editions, provide a spectrum of Mennonite experience in Russia, the USSR and Canada. Gerhard P. Froese (1867–1955) grew up near Alexandrovsk not far from the Dnieper River. With a strong interest in milling and farming, Froese was in the agribusiness in Barwenkovo and after World War I in the Crimea. The family was among the last to receive entry permits into Canada in 1929, living first in Winkler and then in Winnipeg. Froese's *Memoirs* were transcribed and translated by granddaughters Edith E. (Wiens) Schmidt and Bertha Toews and published in 2000. (8½ x 11, coil-bound, 323 pages.) A companion piece is Froese's 39-page diary covering his alternative service 1889-1890, with an 8-

page supplement, published by Bertha Toews in 2004.

*My Life Story in Brief* by Jakob A. Loewen, written at Kaluga, Russia, in 1996 is available in coil-bound format (8½ x 11, 61 pages) and in English translation by Gerhard I. Peters (58 pages). Loewen (1903-2001) voluntarily remained in the USSR when his parents and family emigrated to Canada in the 1920s. Making his way in scientific and academic circles as a "German" geologist was never easy, and especially difficult during World War II. "I paid a lot of attention to the police," he writes. Yet, looking back on his life, he says "I must admit that it was good." He and his wife of 62 years "had a good (ignoring the bad) and happy life." Loewen's story provides a perspective on life in the USSR seldom portrayed by Mennonite memoirists.

John Jacob Bergen, *A Slice out of My Life* (Edmonton: by the Author, 2006) had his first birthday at the Lechfeld barracks in Bavaria, Germany, where his family stopped over on their way to Canada in 1923 from Neuendorf, Chortitza, South Russia. An educator and academic, Bergen taught in various schools in Manitoba before joining the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. This 284-page memoir is of interest to the larger public because of Bergen's deep commitment and service to the Mennonite church and the larger Canadian society. Some of the extensive appendix material has been published earlier elsewhere.

Readers who are acquainted with Norman Unrau's *Those Were the Days* (2002) may be interested in his new *Paraguay Connection* (NP: by the author, 2007), pb, 124 pp. Unrau joined the Canadian army in 1948 after he had contemplated joining the Manitoba Mennonites who were leaving for Paraguay to find a new home there. Now in retirement and having never visited his friends and relatives in Sommerfeld and Bergthal colonies in Paraguay, he has started to piece together their story, both those who remained there and those who returned. Both the text and the numerous photos used are of uneven quality, but the reader gets a glimpse into the pioneer hardships and more recent successes of this segment of "Canadian" Mennonites in Latin America.

*Auf der Suche nach Heimat: Lebensläufe von Spätaussiedlern und Integrationsprojekt in Niedergörsdorf und Wittstock* (Niedergörsdorf, Germany:

Diakonisches Werk Teltow-Fläming e.V., 2005) is a modest 105-page two-in-one booklet gathering memories of the experiences of German settlers in the USSR, especially during World War II, and describing the slow integration into German society of those who have returned to the land of their ancestors. While dealing primarily with the Volga German settlement, there are many parallels with the experiences of Mennonite *Aussiedler* in Germany, and more recently in a number of communities (like Winkler and Steinbach) in Canada.

## Tombstone

(cont'd from p. 10)

where there had been basements or more likely wells and/or root cellars. He found remnants of red bricks which he gave us.

Through Viktor, the farmer explained that he had moved the tombstone to his yard in the village because the plow would eventually have damaged the stone where it stood in what is now an open field. Gert used a Global Positioning to get the following coordinates: the field where the tombstone was before it was moved is at N48° 30.930'; E 35° 36.691'; the northern edge of trees lining the former village is at N 48° 31.382'; E 35° 36.473'. Directions to the site of the former village of Wiesenfeld from Oktyabrsk are: 2 km north, then 1.5 km east and 0.5 km south.

It should be noted that Jakob Reimer (1817-1891) was one of the founders of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia. Inspired by the revival preaching of Eduard Wüst he joined the revival movement in the late 1840s and promoted it on his travels in the Mennonite churches with Johannes Claassen and Wilhelm Bartel. Gradually his group left the large church and founded the Mennonite Brethren. On 21 May 1861 he was baptized by immersion by Heinrich Hübert. He was one of the signatories of the petition to the government for permission to settle in the Kuban, which was granted on 4 March 1864 (See "Reimer, Jakob" in *Mennonite Encyclopedia*. IV: 277-278.)

Jakob Reimer made important contributions to the development of the Mennonite Brethren Church. He opposed the emotional excesses of the early period with determination and was excommunicated for that reason by his opponents. In the next year he was restored to membership and the differences reconciled.

*Katherine and Gert Martens live in Winnipeg, Manitoba.*

## Book Reviews

By Lawrence Klippenstein

Irmgard Epp, ed. *Constantinoplens: Escape from Bolshevism* (Victoria: Trafford Publishing, 2006), pb., 370 pp.

The story of how the Civil War in the Soviet Union ended, with the flight of the last several hundred thousands from the Crimean peninsula to Constantinople, is known to many. But first hand accounts of the fortunate individuals who managed to save their lives that way, are less readily available. This volume contains several dozen tellings about the experience which reflect with deep pathos the often desperate actions of, and personal feelings about, that traumatic escape.

The first two accounts (Gerhard Wiens and John P. Unruh) include useful background material to create a context for the story of Mennonite soldiers who fought in the White Army under General Wrangel, and how some of them managed to emigrate from the Soviet Union via Sevastopol and Constantinople. Experiences in army service are dealt with in extensive accounts by Peter Gerz, John J. Dyck, and Peter D. Froese. While these do not provide a systematic account of what happened during the final year and months of White Army resistance to the Reds, they do give significant windows for understanding what Mennonite soldiers had to contend with in military service during that period.

The episode of the so-called *Selbstschutz* (Self-defense militia) is not central to these reports. However, it is clearly the most immediate background for Mennonite involvement in the White Army. It was the termination of the *Selbstschutz* which led to a harsh Red Army prosecution of all Mennonites who had been part of the *Selbstschutz*, even though that body intended itself to be an opposing force only to the Makhno forces, not the Red Army itself. This prosecution led to the flight of hundreds southward from the into the Crimean peninsula as the Civil War came to an end.

Part Three entitled "The Hollanders' Desperate Flight", begins with an account of a reunion of "Constantinoplens", in Yarrow, BC in June 1952. It was here that an attempt to collect written stories about that fateful experience was started in earnest. Then follow a dozen more stories, in the course of which one learns also about the refugee situation in

Constantinople. Here Mennonite Central Committee set up a refugee centre which could serve the escapees for several years, and become a point of gathering to make plans for moving on to permanent new homes, some in Europe, but mostly in North America. The oft-told story of the "62", a group of young Mennonite soldiers of the White Army who made it together to the US, belongs to this section.

The final part of the book brings in accounts of a number of people (not all former White Army soldiers) who did not leave via the Crimea, but went first to Batum and then on to Constantinople as they left the Soviet Union. The harrowing experiences of delay at Ellice Island in the US form a distinctive part of this experience.

It is interesting to note that the several dozen accounts here do not include much reflection on the problem for Mennonites of pacifist background, of going into active military service. It seems fairly clear that the self-defense initiative during Makhno times, once tacitly or even openly sanctioned by leading Mennonite ministers and teachers, seemed to leave the door wide open to take up arms and not question it too severely as a compromise of the Christian faith.

The material is now at hand to write a more comprehensive history of this part of the Mennonite story, here still much in fragments large and small, but waiting, along with other data (e.g. the story of the refugee home at Constantinople, which is available elsewhere), for an integrated account which will surely come some day. The editor is to be commended for managing an impressive collection of data. Trafford Publishers have done a very creditable job in getting the book out. The inclusion of maps (a useful one right on the cover), photographs and a very readable type font, is also a plus for the project.

Heinrich Bergen, compiler and editor. *Verbannung: Unschuldig nach Sibirien ins Verderben 1935-1955* (Regina, SK: By the editor, 2006), pb., 204 pp.

The Mennonite literature dealing with exile in the former Soviet Union has gained the stature of special genre in the sharing of Russian and Soviet experiences. This volume will likely not be the last to appear in this category. The full story will probably never be told. It is good that the stories Heinrich Bergen has included here are now part of the larger account as well.

His volume includes three memoirs: Isaak and Olga Reimer's "Unter dem Schutz des Höchsten: Elf Jahre in der Verbannung - 1945 - 1955", "Erinnerungen aus schweren Zeiten", by Jakob Bergen (1895-1974). and a section called "'Genommen' - Eine Schwere Nacht". A short piece titled "Andenken" is next, and a brief "Epilogue" concludes the book. We have before us a needed tribute to some more families who endured the tortures and trials of this experience.

The stories of the Reimers take the reader to the city of Vorkuta in the Far North where Isaak (d. 1987) spent time in the Gulag, and Irkutsk in central Siberia, where Olga (d.1983), Isaak's wife had to endure her term of exile. Both ultimately were reunited in Tadzhikistan, Central Asia, and made their way to Canada in 1966. In Saskatoon is where this reviewer learned to know them, and from where the Reimer papers were procured through the contacts of the late Dr. George K. Epp, to be deposited in the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg. The total Reimer collection at the Centre goes far beyond the portion included here.

Reimer's memoir constitutes the main section of the volume. Then follows the Bergen piece, subtitled "1917 Krons-garten - GULag - Karaganda 1955" in sixteen short sub-sections, with some photos. Regina, 1964, is cited as the place and time of writing. Bergen came to Canada a year before.

Johann Rempel's "Genommen" is the third feature of the volume. Rempel's dates are 1887 - 1963. His home originally was Einlage in the Chortitza settlement. This is a 3-page item taken from *Der Mennonit* where it was first published in November 1955.

Heinrich, the editor, is concerned that these stories not be forgotten, and proposes here, as he has in several other instances (*Der Bote*, Sept. 17 and 24, 1997), and *Chortitza Colony Atlas* (2004), that a special memorial be erected in the memorial year 2007 (90 years since the Bolshevik Revolution). Zaporozhe would be a fine site to consider.

This review does not begin to note details in this publication. The stories need to be read meditatively and with thanks to God for those who endured and could share about God's grace taking them through these ordeals.

Both of these books may be order from the Mennonite Heritage Centre. Contact: [archives@mennonitechurch.ca](mailto:archives@mennonitechurch.ca).