

# Mennonite Historian

## Brief History of Mennonite Child Dedication Services

by Elsie Rempel

In my advocacy work for children in the life of the church, I have done some historical research and been alternatively surprised and pleased by attitudes and actions of our Anabaptist and Mennonite ancestors towards children. What pleased me was the prevalence of child dedication services in our history, for this is something many of us have considered to be a relatively new congregational practice.

The 1953 article in the *Mennonite Encyclopedia* (ME) begins with the statement that "The consecration of children is an old, though not universally observed custom among the Mennonites, which is based on Matthew 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; and Luke 18:15-17." The 1989 ME article adds that this ceremony has been considered optional by Mennonites because there is no Biblical command to do so. Old Order Mennonites, Sommerfelder, and Old Colony Mennonites have not practiced it, but in the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference, the Brethren in Christ, Mennonite Brethren, Mennonite Church (MC) and General Conference Mennonite Church, (now Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA) it has become common practice since the 1950s. In some situations this ceremony has been discouraged because it "smacks of infant baptism" but there have also been repeated rebuttals of this that argue for the blessing of children as being in faithful continuity with Jesus' practice of blessing children.

But what are the Anabaptist roots of this ceremony of dedication?

Balthasar Hubmaier and Pilgram Marpeck both refer to and recommend this practice. In 1525 Balthasar Hubmaier wrote "Instead of baptism, I have the congregation assemble, introduce the child, and in German explain Matthew 19:13-15. Then the child is named; the entire church prays with bent knees for it and commends it to Christ, [so] that He may be gracious to it and intercede for it." (ME, 1989, quoting Hubmaier letter)

Pilgrim Marpeck writes that in dedicating children to God, parents and the church together affirm the belief that children are in the kingdom of Christ through promise, and they commit themselves to the loving care of bringing

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



Pioneering Mennonite workers in Quebec receiving plaques at the November celebration (l-r) front row: Tilman Martin, Harold Reesor, Ellen and Mel Schmidt, Leeta Horst, Luke Martin; back row: Nicole Ouimet, Mary-Lou Docherty and André Ouimet (pastor of Joliette and Rawdon). Photo courtesy of Richard Lougheed.

## Mennonite Church Work in Quebec 1956-2007

by Richard Lougheed

The 51<sup>st</sup> anniversary of Mennonite work in Quebec was celebrated November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2007 in Montreal. (We missed the 50<sup>th</sup>!) The following is a brief review of the history of Mennonite activity in Quebec, followed by some analysis.

### Historical Survey

The two first Mennonite missionaries in Quebec came from Swiss Old Order backgrounds. During the 1950s they had witnessed a time of religious renewal in Ontario. Through revival meetings they both experienced personal conversions which led them to the Mennonite Church (MC) and eventually into mission work. Tilman Martin in the St. Jacob's area and Harold Reesor in the Markham area both sought additional Bible training and gradually felt called by God to missions. As young married couples in the Mennonite Church, they had the freedom to explore various possibilities which would

not have been possible in their earlier Old Order communities. It was while attending the Mennonite Bible Institute, that call came from a Plymouth Brethren doctor and also other denominations in Quebec for Mennonites to explore ministry there. Tilman was part of one student team in 1954 sent to explore options. He was impressed with the needs. By 1955 both the Martins and the Reesors were looking at Quebec and offered themselves as candidates to the Mission Board for this new field. Classified as a foreign mission field as opposed to rural home missions growing out of Ontario, the Quebec work came under the Elkhart Mission Board of the Mennonite Church. Their call was confirmed and most of the supervision was assigned to the Ontario Conference.

The Quebec work was geographically

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## Child Dedication

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up children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, so that when they reach the age of full accountability, they will through faith in Christ be baptized for the forgiveness and remission of sins. (ME, 1989 quoting Marpeck, 112, 147).

References to this practice continue in handbooks and manuals for ministers. The *Christliches Handbüchlein* (1661), written in German at Berlin and then translated into Dutch, contains the injunction for parents to bring infants to church; where the preacher, after a suitable commentary on Christ's love for children and the importance for all believers to foster a childlike faith, takes "the child into his hands, commends it to the Lord in prayer, and having returned it to the parents, lays his hands on it with a blessing." (ME, "Child dedication", 1953)

Just over a century later Jeme Deknatel, a Dutch Mennonite preacher, pled for child dedication services in a book on Menno and children as follows, "My brethren, since we do not baptize our infants, because Jesus did not do it or command it, and because they do not have the necessary qualifications, would it not be good to bless them by the laying on of hands, as Jesus taught us by His example?"

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For we do nothing for our infants. If we truly believe these words of Jesus, would it not be good to do as Jesus did? Or if we do not do this would it not be right, when the mother comes back to church with her newborn child, to present the child with her to the Lord and bless them with believing prayer by the preacher and the church?" (ME, 1953, quoting *Menno Simons in 't Kleine* (1753, 196),

At about the same time Pieter Beets, a Mennonite preacher of Hamburg-Altona (d. 1776), performed a child dedication in the home of the van der Smissen family. In his address at that event he warmly advocated the consecration of the child in church, as well as in the home, with thanks to God for the mother's recovery. According to *Mennonitische Blätter* (1900, 51, 58, 75), home consecrations of infants by the preacher were practiced in the Hamburg-Altona church; in Switzerland and in the Palatinate. About fifty years later a preachers' conference of the Palatinate and Hesse churches decided that children should be consecrated the first time the mother comes back to church.

Mennonite minister's manuals from the Palatine (1852), Berne (1893), Berdjansk (1911), and Baden (1921), include instructions for infant consecration and the blessing of the mother in a church ceremony. The 1893 *Ministers' Manual of the General Conference of Mennonites in North America* (Berne) dedicates four of its 123 pages to address this practice, beginning with the statement, "The customary practice of child dedication, which our forefathers have practiced for centuries, is still being practiced in several of our congregations. While this practice shall not be considered compulsory, it is to be recommended to parents." The writer continues, "Questions have been raised by some of our brothers, whether this practice could lead to the practice of child baptism or to a meaningless ritual...However, this cannot happen if we simply rely on the Word of God and follow the example of our Lord and his apostles." Two reasons are then given to support this practice:

1. "When our Lord gifts parents with a child they should not neglect to entrust the child to the grace filled guidance of the Holy Spirit."
2. "It is the Lord's will, as demonstrated by his insistence on blessing the children in the Gospels, that parents are to bring their children to Jesus for blessing."

A prayer of dedication for a formal service, as well as a more informal prayer for before the sermon or after the service, are included in this manual, indicating the different levels of formality with which this ceremony was conducted.

The Mennonite church and settlement established in 1835 at Gnadenfeld, Ukraine, included a number of Prussian families of Lutheran and Moravian background. For the thirty years preceding emigration from Prussia it had enjoyed very close relationship with the Moravian Church. The Gnadenfeld congregation was strongly influenced by the pious, intelligent and eloquent Elder Wilhelm Lange (1812-1841) who had Lutheran roots. Because of these influences, the Gnadenfeld Mennonites were sometimes referred to as the Lutheran or Moravian Mennonites, so their preference for and promotion of child dedication may have been linked to its similarities to child baptism. (Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia*, 1980, 97-100) This church consecrated their children in a ceremony before the assembled congregation (Friesen, *Brüderschaft*, p. 83 and 331).

A currently common blessing for child dedications in Mennonite Church Canada and USA congregations is as follows: "You have offered your child to the strong and tender providence of God. We rejoice with you and give thanks for the gift of your child. We promise, with humility and seriousness, to share in your child's nurture and well being. We will support, by our example and words, your efforts to provide a loving and caring home, where trust in God grows and Christ's way is chosen. Our prayers will be with you and for you. May our shared life and witness help make your task both joyful and fruitful." *Hymnal: Worship Book*, (Elgin, IL and Newton, KS: Brethren Press and Faith and Life Press, 1995)

Today, the practice of dedicating children has become part of a wider focus of integrating children into the whole worship life of the church. The 1989 ME article on the dedication of infants already makes this link when it refers to an increasing "pressure to allow children to partake of the elements of the Lord's Supper before they are baptized (Lois Thieszen Preheim, *The Mennonite*, December 1, 8, 15, 1981)" and attributes this influence to those who are not trained in Anabaptist theology. The connection between child dedication and the

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# Genealogy and Family History

By Alf Redekopp

## Recent Books

Alvina Helen (Loewen) Thiessen. *Margaretha Penner Loewen* (no publication data, 2008?) 110 pp.

This book contains the family history of Margaretha (Penner) Loewen who was born 29 September 1909 in Schoenhorst, Southern Russia to Aron H. Penner (1875-1937) and Margaretha Klassen (1876-1975) who came to Canada in 1926 with her parents and settled in Winkler, Manitoba where she married Henry B. Loewen (1909-1990) on 17 May 1931. The book includes genealogical data, sections on the life of her mother and father and a section on her life in Russia and Canada. Many photographs and other documents have been reproduced in the appendices. Contact: Alvina H. Thiessen, 92 Brentcliffe Dr., Winnipeg, MB R3P 2B5 or 204-489-4397.

A.J. Thiessen. *"Grace": My Background and Life's Experiences* (Winnipeg, MB: A.J. Thiessen, 1982) 102 pp.

This book is the autobiography of Abram J. Thiessen was born 12 December 1910 in Rosenfeld, Manitoba and died in March 2002, written and published in 1982 but not distributed until after his death. It includes sections on his roots, his early years, his business endeavours, personal and home life, and miscellaneous items. A.J. Thiessen resigned in 1977 as president of Grey Goose Bus Lines. Contact: Bernard M. and Alvina H. Thiessen, 92 Brentcliffe Dr., Winnipeg, MB R3P 2B5 or phone 204-489-4397.

## Queries

**Rempel** - I am looking for descendants of Diedrich Rempel (1855-1925?) and Aganetha Scellenberg (1859-1943). They had the following children: Diedrich (1879-1962), Agnes (1881-1959), Annie (1883-1956), Susan (1885-1964), John (1886-1974), Margaretha (1889-1964), Katharina (1891-1964), Bernard (1893-1921), Helena (1895-1994), Sophia (1897-1972) and Gerhard (1902-1935). This couple settled first in Einlage,

Manitoba in 1875 and then moved to Drake, Saskatchewan about 1896. Diedrich was the son of Diedrich and Anna (Friesen) Rempel and Aganetha was the daughter of Johan and Susanna (Toews) Schellenberg. I am also looking for the burial site for Diedrich Rempel (1855-1925) in Manitoba, perhaps Winkler area, but I could not find it in the large Winkler cemetery. Contact: Gloria Muir, Box 253, Embro, Ont. N0J 1J0 or GMuir@fanshawec.ca.

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

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## New Mennonite Family History Centre in Steinbach

by Bob Strong, MHV Executive Director

After a six-month gestation period, Mennonite Heritage Village (MHV) announced the establishment of its new Mennonite Family History Centre, in which visitors and area residents can receive training and assistance in researching their ancestry.

Subsidized by Wes Penner and Powerland Computers, and with financial assistance from the MHV Auxiliary, the Family History Centre offers 10 Internet-connected computers, pre-loaded with the Grandma 5 database, Brother's Keeper and Personal Ancestral File. Participants will learn how to use computers, software and the internet to research and document their family history. Volunteer assistance and a research library will be made

available. Researchers will also be invited to contribute their family information, or to enter information from other sources, into the local database.

At present, the Centre is a working exhibit on the subject of Genealogy in the Temporary Gallery. It is expected that it will become a popular feature of their ongoing program.

Besides complementing MHV's commitment to Mennonite Heritage, this project is expected to be a modest revenue generator. It will also give people a reason to return to or visit the Village, particularly out of season. It is hoped that - in co-operation with other agencies engaged in similar activity - this project will contribute towards the compilation of as comprehensive a database of Mennonite ancestry as possible.

Another possible application that is being explored is use of the classroom and materials by students from local school divisions for a genealogical component in their curriculum.

The computerized classroom opens up other intriguing possibilities. Plans include development of an interactive local website on which visitors can explore topics of particular interest to them. If a patron wants to know about Catherine's Manifesto, the Machno bandits, or other intriguing subjects, they can be linked to existing websites on the Internet, or to materials made available on the Local Area Network.

Response from the community has been very positive, the consensus being that this initiative is both appropriate and timely. Next time you're in the area, stop by and ask to see or use this new resource. Or check it out at the Local History/Family Roots Day in Steinbach on April 5, 2008.

In November, Shaw Cable aired a mini-documentary about the Genealogy project on its Public Access Channel.



Lawrence Klippenstein and others at the MHV Family History Centre in Steinbach.

## Quebec Mennonite work

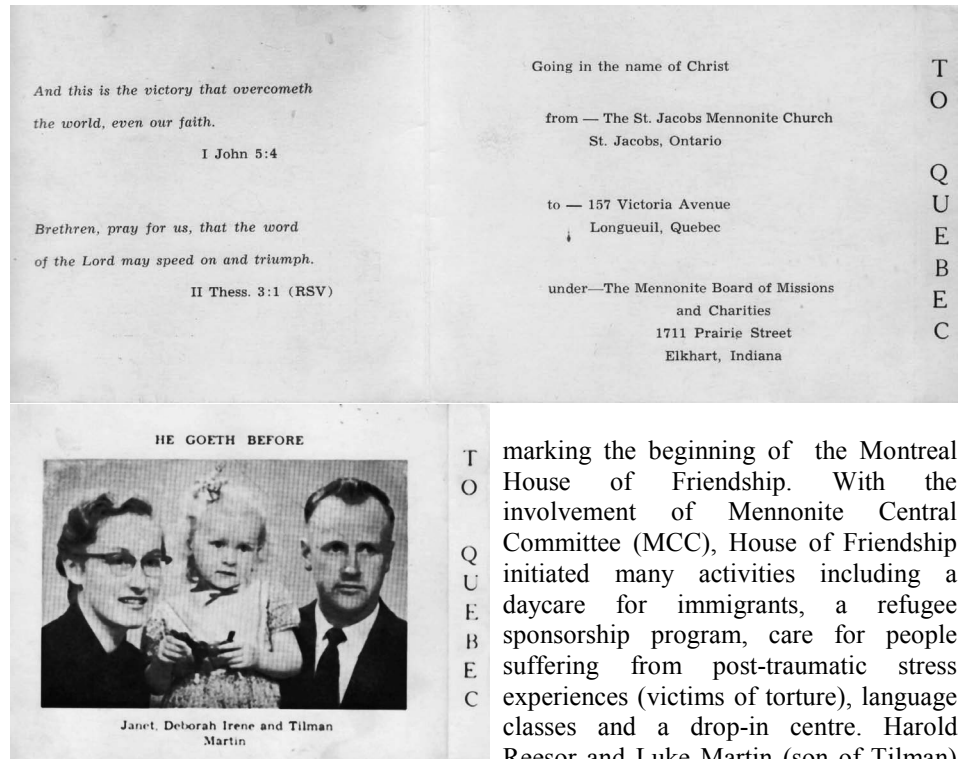
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close to Ontario, but in many ways a very foreign situation. Since this mission was aiming to be a French work, the first obstacle was the language. Only Janet Martin, originally from a secular background in England, had studied French before the couples were assigned. So, it was decided to spend the first year at the Institut biblique de Montréal to learn French. The two families arrived in August 1956. This college was most welcoming but was designed to teach Bible rather than French. So progress was slow. However important relationships for the future were made with fellow students Melvin Schmidt and Ellen Anderson. The big city offered opportunities to explore various French congregations and also to attend some evening services in English. This time deepened the bond between them.

Since no clear direction was given by the Mission Board, these early mission workers were encouraged by other denominations to work in areas with no French Protestant church. The Martins found a poor under-churched neighbourhood on the north side of the island of Montreal. In 1957 Tilman began going door to door. He also spent hundreds of hours following up persons who had requested Bibles and Christian literature by mail. Many Mennonite congregations assisted in these mailings to every home in Quebec. Tilman found only one person of the thousands of contacts he made in following up requests for literature who actually joined a congregation. However, the effort facilitated a time of cooperating with other Christian workers and it also permitted these new workers to gradually learn the context for their work.

In 1958 the Reesors decided to work in Joliette and moved into an apartment with their growing family. Harold Reesor also followed up mail contacts in the Joliette area. Like immigrants to a new country, the four Martin and six Reesor children became an important part of how their parents could integrate into the Quebec society.

Communication with the English families of Montréal-Nord was easier than working in French. This led to a system of both French and English language worship. The congregation also developed much quicker than in Joliette which had



Prayer Card for Martin family, 1956.

the strong Catholic social control of a French community. One great encouragement in Joliette came from the support of Mel & Ellen Schmidt from Rawdon since 1958 and with the arrival of the Mel and Leeta Horst family from St. Jacobs in 1961. They came as part of a "colonization" project, that had been proposed in a booklet by John H. Yoder. Nevertheless, the draining situations in Montréal-Nord and slow growth in Joliette took their toll on the missionaries. The Reesors decided in 1963 after some retreat time to turn to farming nearby while the Martins moved into camp work and eventually in 1975 to prison chaplaincy. The two pioneer mission couples were replaced by non-Mennonites in these locations. The Montreal Nord congregation moved downtown and emphasized social services, disappearing completely after several years. On the other hand, Clyde and Elisabeth Shannon, who had come from the Congo to work with the Mennonite Brethren in Ste-Thérèse, served in Joliette from 1963 till 1978. Gradually the numbers increased. The arrival of David Shantz during the 1970s gave another lift to work in Joliette and eventually led to the daughter church in Rawdon.

Although the first French Mennonite mission church in Montreal-Nord closed, another venture began in 1973 with the purchase of a property on Duluth Street –

marking the beginning of the Montreal House of Friendship. With the involvement of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), House of Friendship initiated many activities including a daycare for immigrants, a refugee sponsorship program, care for people suffering from post-traumatic stress experiences (victims of torture), language classes and a drop-in centre. Harold Reesor and Luke Martin (son of Tilman) were among the directors. Despite attempts to broaden its appeal, the House of Friendship continued to find leadership primarily from the English congregation.

Although establishing an English Mennonite congregation in Quebec was not part of the initial vision of the Mission board, there was at least one other factor which contributed to its development, namely the groups of Mennonite students in Montreal from other parts of the country who as early as 1956 would get together. So in 1970 Dr. Joe and Rachel Martin restarted English meetings which eventually led to the founding of the Mennonite Fellowship of Montreal in 1978. The Reesors were among the founding members. This congregation has continued to function with strong pastoral leadership, including female leadership.



First Mennonite workers in Quebec studying French, 1956 (l-r): Tilman Martin, Mel Schmidt, Mary (Poole) Clayton, Pauline Reesor and Harold Reesor. Photo courtesy of Richard Loughheed.

Besides the development of Joliette, Rawdon and Mennonite Fellowship of Montreal, there have been church plants in Rouyn-Noranda in the 1980s and an urban Communauté de Réconciliation in Montreal in the 1990s. The Rouyn-Noranda developed rapidly with Robert and Lois Witmer but gradually declined as people moved away. It closed in 2001. The visionary multicultural Communauté de Réconciliation, led by a part-time Daniel Genest never took root, despite assistance from the General Conference Mennonite "City on the Hill" program. There was also a Spanish Mennonite congregation which developed in the 1970s but closed during the 1990s. Another Spanish venture recently began in Sherbrooke. From the early days there has been cooperation with the Mennonite Brethren cousins. The initiative for cooperation has usually come from the earlier but smaller Mennonite side.

### Analysis

Four low-key humble couples with no knowledge of French or Catholicism arrived in Quebec in the late 1950s and early 1960s to plant French Mennonite congregations. Fifty one years later Quebec French society has changed tremendously and swung from fervent Catholicism to militant secularism. While other evangelical denominations experienced tremendous growth in the 1970s followed by decline in the 1990s, Mennonites plugged along slowly and quietly. There was considerable cultural adaptation, a lack of growth at times, a focus on the marginalized, and there was a burn out of the original workers. David Shantz was the only second generation Mennonite to come along, with Robert Witmer (after many years in France) coming much later. Ontario Mennonites provided considerable money and work parties to aid the work but nothing worked quite like in the rest of North America. The English congregation with far less investment did better for stability and numbers because it had a solid core of people with Mennonite backgrounds and its music and social justice concerns drew many students in. All French Mennonites were ex-Catholics and seen by most as breaking from their prior social identity. Those who did convert were usually more evangelical in their identity and often moved on to identify with other denominations than Mennonites.

Looking back the results in terms of congregations and members seem meagre in the French work. However Mennonites

did pioneer in the role of women in leadership and contacts between evangelicals and Catholics. They have had a major impact on prison and refugee ministries. Through MCC and House of Friendship they have acquired a positive reputation in Quebec. The low-key evangelism impresses in the long-term and the lack of empire-building is noted and respected. Is that enough? In an age where the media portrays religion as out for money and power, the Mennonite approach in Quebec stands out --willing to work with anyone, humble in their accomplishments, not aggressive but clear in evangelism, not pushing their denomination, working with refugees, prisoners and the poor, concentrating on practical aid more than politics -- all this clashes with traditional North-American evangelism which appears not to communicate in Quebec. There are signs that humble integrity, concern for people without vested interests and the good news of Jesus Christ can be heard in Quebec.

This study was based on eight interviews with pioneers of the first 10 years of Mennonite work. These interviews are available in DVD form. Hopefully this article will be extended to a book-long comparative study of the Mennonite, Mennonite Brethren, Brethren in Christ and Church of God (Mennonite) French work in Quebec.

*Richard Loughheed has taught Church history and Old Testament at the Faculté de Théologie Évangélique in Montreal for 13 years and is chair of the Mennonites (MCEC) in Quebec.*

## Child Dedication

(cont'd from p. 2)

appropriate place for children at the Lord's Table is worthy of close examination and consideration. Baptism, communion and membership form a cord of closely related core beliefs. Our long history of dedicating infant children in a meaningful ritual of inclusion and blessing does not appear to have undermined our practice of believer's baptism. Perhaps our historical experience in this area can inform and guide congregations currently considering the place of children at the Lord's Table.

*Elsie Rempel is Director, Christian Education and Nurture with Mennonite Church Canada in Winnipeg, Manitoba..*

## Dietrich H. Epp

(cont'd from p. 6)

M. Frawley, owner of the Rosthern Valley News Printing Service to print the paper for Enn. Bv Januarv 14. 1924 Enn and his

wife produced the first edition of the *Mennonitischen Immigrantenbote*. Dietrich, his wife and friend Agatha Lehn folded the papers, pasted on addresses and one cent stamps. Epp saw this venture as a step of faith for a cause close to his heart.

In Epp's first editorial he outlines the vision for the paper. He invites readers to share their experiences, hopes and joys via the paper. The paper was to be an advisor in all of life's emergencies. Epp reaches out to the more established Mennonite community in western Canada. "And to you dear brothers in Canada, the *Mennonitische Immigranten Bote* will be hoping to find a place at your family table. For your Christian charity in helping us come here and offering us such kind hospitality, we are grateful. Also, with you we want to form a common bond of friendship."

David Toews also wrote a preface in the first issue. "Therefore, go forth little *Bote* and fulfill your obligations. Spread rays of sunshine on those who often travel in the dark valleys of gloom. Bring news that they read eagerly and serve as a uniting force for all those who are scattered in various communities."

Epp continued his strong presence in the Mennonite community. In addition to his work with *Der Bote*, he published and edited the *Saskatchewan Valley News* and books of interest to the Canadian Mennonite constituency. He was chairman of the Central Mennonite Immigration Committee 1923-1934, director of Rosthern Junior College and member of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization.

In 1944 the Echo-Verlag historical society was founded in Winnipeg by former students of Epp's old school, the Chortitza *Zentralschule*, in commemoration of the school's centenary. Epp was chosen as chairman of the society which produced over 10 volumes of historical books focused on the history of Mennonites in Russia. Epp was editor of *Der Bote* until shortly before his death in 1955. His step of faith in 1923 was richly rewarded. By 1955 the paper had become a staple in many homes. In 1947 it became an official organ of the General Conference Mennonite Church. These factors ensured *Der Bote's* long life, beyond what Epp could have imagined.

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## ***Der Bote* Stops to Publish**

This month, March 2008, *Der Bote* will publish its last issue in its 84 years of existence. Founded in 1924 as *Der Mennonitische Immigrantenbote* in Rosthern, Saskatchewan, known as *Der Bote* by 1925, it later merged with the U.S. based *Christlicher Bundesbote* in 1947 and became the weekly paper for the former General Conference Mennonite Church. Since the transformation into Mennonite Church Canada in 2000, *Der Bote* has been a resource ministry of Mennonite Church Canada. Over the years the bi-weekly paper has provided important news, information and spiritual nurture to readers in Canada, as well as the United States, Mexico, South America and Europe.

The Heritage Centre has seen the value of this publication as a resource for remembering the story of our church community. For a number of years we have facilitated the *Bote* indexing project, so that the resource can truly be useful. The indexes allow readers to find articles much quicker than would be possible otherwise. For example, the index helps readers find reports from specific congregations or communities, reports of events, obituaries, book reviews and articles by specific writers. The final volume of *Der Bote* indexing project should be published later this year. It will be Volume No. 6 and cover 2000-2008.

The Centre has recently facilitated the microfilming of the final years, 1981-2008, so that other libraries who cannot acquire a complete hard copy can have access to it.

In its final issues *Der Bote* has been featuring articles that highlight the impact of the ministry of this publication and articles on its history. The article about the first editor featured on this page, was originally written for *Der Bote* and adapted here for the *Mennonite Historian*.

The *Bote* has been an important publication. It has helped build a community of people. It has served this community well.

AR



Dave Bergen making a presentation to Ingrid Janzen Lamp, last editor of *Der Bote* at a recognition event for *Der Bote* staff. Photo credit: Dan Dyck.

## **Dietrich H. Epp: First *Bote* Editor**



Dietrich H. Epp was born on March 17, 1875 to Heinrich Epp (1827-1896) and Elizabeth Perch (1830-1904) in the village of Chortitza, Chortitza Colony, South Russia. He was the second of three children. Heinrich's first wife was Anna Siemens and they had six children.

Dietrich (D.H.) attended elementary school and then the *Zentralschule* where his father had taught. He went on to Normal School in Chortitza in 1881-1892 and the Teacher's Institute of St. Petersburg (1892-1895). After his return in 1895 he was baptized in Neu York, Ignatyev Colony by his father, Aeltester Heinrich Epp.

In 1895 Epp began teaching at the *Chortitza Zentralschule* and Normal School. Epp soon established himself as

as an excellent teacher who was well liked by students. He carried on in this capacity until his emigration in 1923. Epp was heavily involved in public life in Chortitza, serving with various organizations. Seeing the need for a library, Epp organized the Chortitza Public Library and served as director from 1902-1914. He was secretary of the Chortitza Life Insurance company (*Sterbekasse*) from 1901-1909 and secretary of the *Chortitza Mädchenschule* from 1906-1923.

On June 27, 1898 he married Maria Thiessen (1879-1906). Three years after Maria's death he married Maria's sister Malvina Thiessen (1880-1942). D.H. and Malvina adopted John Hesse (1905-1960) who became Epp's heir.

With the upheaval after the war and the revolution, the Epp family was one of the earliest families to immigrate to Canada in the 1923-1930 migration wave that saw some 20,000 Mennonites begin life anew in Canada. The Epps arrived in Rosthern, Saskatchewan in late July 1923. Their first residence was with the Heinrich Wieler family in Eigenheim, Saskatchewan. After 3 months Epp began to see the need for a tool to link Mennonite immigrants like him together, a tool like a newspaper. He found support from church leaders such as Bishop David Toews, business leaders Abraham A. Friesen and political leaders like Member of Parliament Gerhard Ens. A.A. Friesen helped Epp make arrangements with

(con'd on p. 5)



## Centre achieves Re-accreditation

We have received word that the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies has been approved for re-accreditation by the Association for Manitoba Archives (AMA). An accreditation process is initiated by the provincial association every five years in order to ensure that archives within the province are meeting industry standards. By meeting the accreditation standards, the Centre is again eligible to apply for federal funds and is a member in good standing with the AMA.

*Ken Reddig*

## Launch of Russian Mennonites in the Cities Volume II

Dr. Helmut T. Huebert will launch his most recent book at 7:30 p.m. May 28, 2008 at the Centre for MB Studies, Winnipeg. All are welcome to attend.

Huebert notes that it is evident that not all the Mennonites in Russia during the Imperial time lived in the villages. A considerable number lived and worked in the cities as well. *Mennonites in the Cities of Imperial Russia, Volume I* began the series which this new and final volume will complete. Cities discussed in Volume II are: Alexandrovsk/ Zaporozhye, Ekaterinoslav/ Dnepropetrovsk, Kharkov, Moscow, Nikopol, Odessa, Omsk, St Petersburg and Tokmak. Each chapter has a brief history of the city, maps of the city and region, a complete list of all Mennonites that lived there, a study of the Mennonite institutions, businesses and events.

The book is replete with as many illustrations as could be found, topped off by an index. Biographies of prominent people are included, both because they were important, but also because they should not be forgotten. It is an interesting study of a journey many of our forefathers traveled.

## The First Soviet Combine

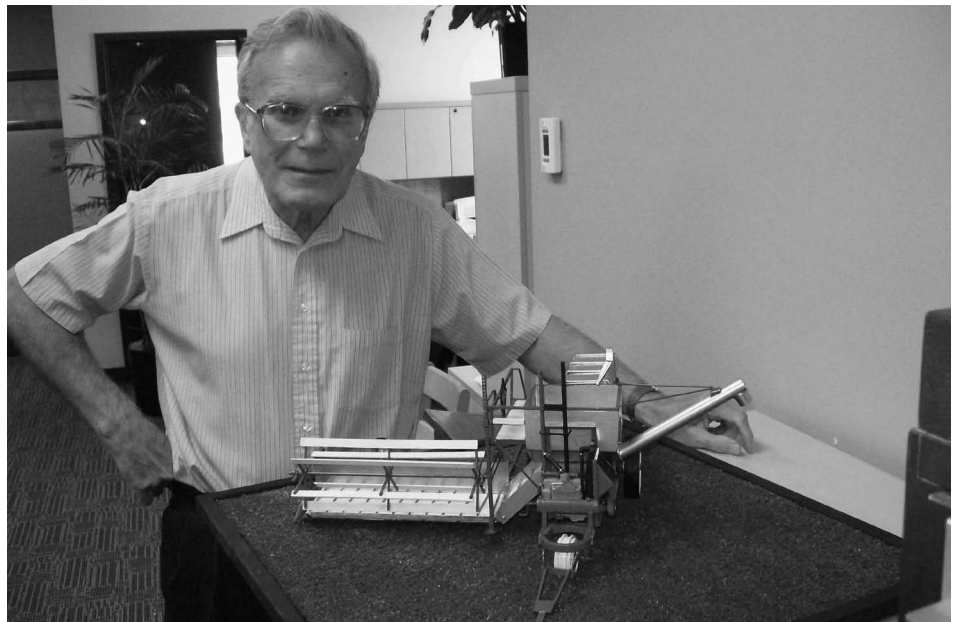
*by Helmut T. Huebert*

Mennonites in Russia were excellent farmers, but they also branched off into business and manufacturing. Three large firms in Alexandrovsk/Zaporozhye produced agricultural machinery. When the Bolsheviks took over, these three companies were amalgamated to form the "Kommunar Factory." Many of the

engineers, particularly those from the Koop factory, were retained. Peter Dyck was the chief engineer, with helpers Gerhard Hamm, Kornelius Pauls and others. Dyck and Hamm were even sent abroad to Europe and America to get new ideas. In 1929 they developed the first combine ever designed and produced in the Soviet Union. In recognition of this accomplishment the engineers and factory received the Order of Lenin in 1931. Peter Dyck reported that by 1934 the factory had produced 18,507 units, sometimes 60 in one day.

In 1937 eleven of the engineers, including Dyck and Hamm, first had to hand back their medals, then were declared enemies of the people, and were executed.

A model of this first combine has been constructed, and is now on display at a museum in Zaporozhye. This has been photographed. One oblique picture of the actual combine has been published. It has also been discovered that there is actual filmed footage of the combine in action. Using this slim evidence we have studied the combine. Martin Schlichting has kindly helped identify some of the parts of the machine. Abe Friesen, whose hobby is building model agricultural machinery, has used his expertise to build a model of the model. He is convinced that there is some evidence of the Holt company designs, which subsequently became John Deere. Therefore we have chosen green as the color of the trimming. With all this interest in design and models one cannot forget the original designers, and the price they paid for living in the Soviet Union.



Dr. Helmut T. Huebert and a model of the first Soviet combine. Photo credit: Conrad Stoesz..



## Canadian Mennonite University Documents Processed

Thanks to you, the Canadian taxpayer, there is a new level of access available to the Concord College materials and the founding of Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg. The Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies was successful in receiving a grant from Library and Archives Canada, through the Canadian Council of Archives, for the processing of this important collection of documents. Canadian Mennonite University (CMU) student, Janelle Hume, was hired to sort through the backlog of materials donated between 1999 and 2007. In total there are over 4 metres of paper records as well as videos and photographs. The full finding aid will soon be available on line.

Concord College was established in 1992, developed out of the former Mennonite Brethren Bible College (MBBC est. 1944). The birth of Concord College included a change of governance, vision and programming. Prior to 1992, MBBC was owned by the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches. Their primary vision for the

*(cont'd on p. 11)*



Elizabeth (Unger) Buhler, age 109. Photo credit: Jake Harms.

## Oldest Mennonite Alive in Canada Today!!

Elizabeth Unger Buhler of Winkler turned 109 on February 8, 2008. According to the *Winnipeg Free Press* she is thought to be the oldest Manitoban alive today. Is she perhaps the oldest Mennonite in Canada? We don't really know. However, aside from her longevity, she has a very remarkable story.

In 1917 during the Russian Revolution both the Whites and Reds were fighting near her village of Grigorievka in Ukraine. One day a group of bandits (anarchists) showed up at their farm. The leader and his men stormed into the house demanding food for themselves and their horses. Some were a bit drunk. They

threatened to kill anyone who did not obey their orders. They also wanted clothing, money and whatever articles of value they saw.

In the midst of the confusion in the house, Elizabeth, about 18 at the time, grabbed her guitar, sat on a chair and began to play and sing both Russian folk songs and hymns.

The leader was astounded. The bandits stopped and listened to her sing. Suddenly the leader shouted to his men. "Stop! We shouldn't take anything from these people. Let's leave everything here and go. Get on your horses. Don't hurt anyone."

Peacefully, with her singing and courageous stance, she defused a volatile situation.

On Saturday afternoon, February 9, a group of people gathered at the Salem Home in Winkler to celebrate her birthday. KR

## Gerhard Ens receives Award of Excellence

Gerhard Ens spent most of his life in public service within the Canadian and Manitoba Mennonite communities. Ens was honored in late January at the annual meeting of the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada (MHSC). He received the *Award of Excellence* for his life-long advancement of Mennonite History as a minister, teacher, editor, historical society/museum promoter, German and Low German broadcaster.

Ens began his career as a teacher in the village of Gnadenenthal, Manitoba where he taught 60 children in 8 grades in a one-room school. During the Second World

War as a committed conscientious objector he opted for alternative service. He worked as an orderly in a mental hospital. He returned to teaching at the Mennonite Collegiate Institute, in Gretna, Manitoba, where he served for 31 years. For ten of those years he served as principal.

Ens was a founding member of the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society in 1958 and sat on the board of the Mennonite Heritage Village Museum from 1958-2004. In 1972 he was asked to produce a Low German radio broadcast to promote the centennial of Manitoba Mennonite settlement in Manitoba. Very quickly this 15-minute program was lengthened to 30 minutes. Ens continued broadcasting for 34 years. He was never paid for his broadcasts. In total he aired over 1400 programs on three radio stations.

In 1977 he moved to Winnipeg and began editing *Der Bote*, a Canadian based, German language paper. Having been ordained in 1957, he was asked to become a lay minister at the Sargent Avenue Mennonite Church. He preached and taught the German Bible Study there for 30 years.

Upon acceptance of the award Ens said this award was special for him. Commenting on his Low German broadcasting Ens said; "Mennonites of the Low German persuasion have no homeland in Europe they call their home. Low German has become a home where people can move in and out of and express themselves".

The Mennonite Historical Society of Canada and its committees held 4 days of meetings at the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg where representatives informed each other of their projects and continued their joint work with the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online ([www.gameo.org](http://www.gameo.org)). The aim of this ambitious venture is to provide reliable information on Anabaptist-related (Amish, Mennonite, Hutterite, Brethren in Christ) topics, including history, theology, biography, institutions and local congregations. Secular topics from an Anabaptist perspective and full-text source documents are also included. Since its inception in 1996 it has gained the support of organizations like MCC and Mennonite World Conference.

Conrad Stoesz  
Centre for MB Studies  
and Mennonite Heritage Centre



MHSC Secretary, Lucille Marr, congratulates Gerhard Ens. Photo credit: Alf Redekopp.



## Ten Thousand Mennonite Articles on the Web

Ten thousand Mennonite-related articles are now available on the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online website ([www.gameo.org](http://www.gameo.org)). If you are interested in finding information on Mennonites, peace, Amish in Lancaster County or Mennonites from Russia, this is the quickest, easiest and most reliable resource to use.

This milestone was recently achieved according to volunteer website editors Sam Steiner of Waterloo, and Richard Thiessen of Abbotsford. They note that GAMEO began almost 10 years ago when the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada combined a congregational database created by Frank H. Epp together with all the Canadian-related articles in the *Mennonite Encyclopedia*. Initially the site was known as the Canadian Mennonite Encyclopedia Online.

Shortly thereafter Herald Press of Scottdale gave the group permission to add the non-Canadian articles. The editorial group also expanded in 2006, adding representatives from Mennonite Church USA Historical Committee and from the bi-national Historical Commission of the Mennonite Brethren church. The website changed its name in order to become more globally inclusive.

Each day approximately 15 articles are added to the website. This is possible because of volunteers from the US and Canada who assist in editing each article. It is projected that all of the articles that were in the published *Mennonite Encyclopedia* will be available online by the end of 2008. New articles will be sought and added. "As long as there are active Mennonites in the world there will always be something new to add," Steiner says.

GAMEO will soon become a truly international resource as it plans to include articles in other languages starting with French this year. This is only the beginning since the goal of the website is to become an all-inclusive, multi-national and multi-lingual resource for Mennonites and people interested in finding accurate information on Mennonites around the world.

In 2007 Mennonite World Conference and Mennonite Central Committee became partners of the GAMEO project. Currently there are some 1400 visitors to the site each day.

Ken Reddig

## The Majak Bible School of Davlekanovo

By Helmut T. Huebert

The Majak (Lighthouse) Bible School was initiated on the basis of a government decree of 27 July 1923, which allowed such a school to be started in the region. The founder was Karl Hermann Friedrichsen, former teacher at the Davlekanovo *Zentralschule*. Friedrichsen was no longer allowed to teach in the *Zentralschule* because he was a minister.

Karl Friedrichsen, the last of four children, was born 6 January 1879 in Saribasch, Crimea. He married Maria Fast on 25 May 1899; the couple had eight children, the first three dying at an early age. It is not certain where Karl obtained his theological training, but in 1911 he was ordained as a minister of the Busau Mennonite Church in the Crimea. In 1914 they moved to Davlekanovo, where their last child, Otto was born 16 October 1916. Karl was obviously a very well educated, but strict teacher at the *Zentralschule*, as instructor in German and Religion. He was a dedicated Christian, and thorough in his teaching methods. Many a good poem and hymn was memorized, presumably as punishment for student misbehavior. While he was a member of the Mennonite Church, he preached alternately in the Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren churches.

The purpose of the Bible School was to train evangelists and church workers. Students were required to be believers, at least 18 years of age, and interested in working in the "vineyard of the Lord." They were required to have the following documents: Autobiography, Birth Certificate and Baptismal Certificate, Academic Documents and a doctor's certificate, since people with contagious diseases could not be accepted as students.

The school had a three-year program. Subjects studied were: Salvation Story in the Old and New Testaments, Principles of Faith, Bible Psychology and Geography, Church History with special emphasis on Mennonite and Missions history, Practice Preaching, Church Structure and Church Music. In the first year it was felt that it might be necessary to amplify the program with language study required to understand the subject matter, although language of instruction was principally German. The school had

the right to have special prayer or preaching services on Sundays or holidays.

The initial plans were for three instructors; they needed to be firm believers, oriented according to the principles of the Alliance Church (*Allianzgesinnung*), with appropriate theological training or equivalent long history of experience. Unfortunately additional instructors could not be found, so Friedrichsen remained the only staff member. To accommodate this limitation only one "year" was taught at a time. The first year program was offered in the autumn of 1923, the second year in 1924, the third year in 1925.

The school year was 15 September to 15 December, then 10 January to 1 May. Those who could, were encouraged to go home for the Christmas break. Those who could not were given opportunity to work in the local churches. As of March 1926 a total of 13 men had been students at the school: 9 Mennonite Brethren, 2 "Free Church" (Alliance?), 1 Mennonite Church and 1 Baptist. Six came from Siberia, 5 from Turkestan, 1 from Ufa and 1 from Alt Samara. The government had given permission for the Bible School to use either of the two Mennonite churches in Davlekanovo, although the school felt that its own facility would be preferable.

Since 20 August 1925 a committee was formed to assist the school principal. It consisted of the two elders of the local churches, David Isaak (Mennonite Church), Franz Martens (Mennonite Brethren) and ministers Jakob Sudermann and Peter Fast. The committee had been appointed by Friedrichsen. Should there be additional instructors, they would automatically be on the committee.

Budget of the school was met by tuition fees, and voluntary donations by churches and individuals, as well as by sale of Bibles and photographs. Excess in the budget would be used to establish and maintain a library, to help students in financial need, and to establish a slight reserve. The financial statement 1 January 1925 to 1 January 1926 was published in the March 1936 edition of "*Unser Blatt*."

(cont'd p. 10)

### Just Published!!

(in German)

### *Einlage Kitschkas 1789-1943*

by Heinrich Bergen

(Regina, SK: Private publication, 2008) 427pp.

Order from Mennonite Heritage Centre

**\$30.00** (plus GST and postage and handling)

## Bible School in Davlekanovo

(cont'd from p. 9)

### Income (rubles)

From Churches and Mission Societies.....	477.03
Tuition fees.....	198.00
Liquidation of an Emigration Fund .....	106.50
Accommodation Rent from Students.....	42.00
Gifts from Individuals.....	221.39
Sale of Bibles, Testaments and Photographs .....	76.00
Total.....	1,149.80

### Expenses

Salary of Teacher Friedrichsen. ....	560.00
Rent.....	65.00
Fuel (8 loads of wood).....	40.25
Library.....	18.75
Other Misc. ....	55.11
Total.....	739.11
In the Treasury 1 January 1926.....	410.69
Total.....	1,149.80

At the end of the school year for 1926 closing exercises were held in the Davlekanovo Mennonite Brethren Church on 25 April 1926. The weather was not favourable, so the attendance was low. However, those who came in spite of the "terrible mud" paid full attention during the two and one half hour service (although looking at the agenda it would seem to have lasted more like four or five hours). There were several congregational songs, seven songs by a male choir (presumably the students), and talks on various aspects of The Life of Christ, Bible Exposition, The New Prophecy, Ethics, Biblical Psychology and Mennonite History. Each of the students made presentations on the various topics. An example would be "The Life of Christ" with student topics being "Sources regarding the Life of Christ" (Johann Wessel), "The Gospel According to John" (Gerhard Giesbrecht), "Christ, the God-Man" (H. Herde-Mertens), "The Sermon on the Mount" (Franz Giesbrecht) and "The Suffering of the Lord from Gethsemane to Golgatha" (P Baerg).

In reviewing the past it was specifically mentioned that the school was thankful that it had been able to complete the third year, while Bible Schools in Tschongrav and Orenburg had been forced to close. It was said (likely by Friederichsen) "It is not something we have earned, but rather a special grace of God!" Classes for the 1925-1926 school year were held in the Davlekanovo Mennonite Brethren Church. Three of the previous year's students had not appeared for the third year: Sudermann immigrated to Mexico, Thielmann was ill, but no reason was known for the absence of Heinrichs. In

addition to the four remaining students, H. Herde-Mertens, P. Baerg, Franz Giesbrecht and Johann Wessel, Gerhard Giesbrecht had come from Markovka of Slavgorod. With these five students the academic year had proceeded without hindrance. A special "Predigerwoche" (a week of special sermons), held 8-11 February 1926 had been a time of particular blessing. Three students completed the three-year course, and were to receive certification - H Herde-Mertens, P Baerg and Franz Giesbrecht. The Bible verse given the graduates was 2 Chronicles 32:7 "Be strong and of good courage. Do not be afraid or dismayed..." All students had declared themselves willing to work in the Kingdom of God, wherever the Lord led, either at home, in the churches or in foreign countries.

At the Mennonite General Conference held in Moscow in June of 1926 Karl Friedrichsen presented the history and function of the Bible School. He pointed out that the school, since it was not sponsored by a church or an organization of churches, but was rather the project of an individual, could function under local bylaw R i Ts1920, No 3 str. 69. (Р. и Ц. 1920, No. 3 стр. 69.)

The search for additional faculty had not been successful, but even so the start of the next academic year was announced for 15 September 1926, with the opening program to be held on 19 September. Obviously government regulations caught up with the school, and the new year never materialized. And so the last Mennonite Bible School in Russia was forced to close.

Personal tragedy struck Karl Friedrichsen. His wife Maria died, likely in mid 1926, of longstanding cancer. It was remarked that Karl suffered in the following years, under difficult circumstances. Later he moved "back south," likely to the southern Ukraine or Crimea, where he was faithfully cared for by his daughter Marianne until "the end." Marianne herself eventually died in exile.

### Sources

*Unser Blatt*, March 1926, pp 135-138; June 1926, pp 203, 220-222; August 1926, pp 280-284; October 1926, p 25; December 1926, p 88.

Hein, Gerhard, *Ufa*, Published with a committee consisting of Dr N J Neufeld. Mrs H F Klassen and Dr Peter Mierau, 1975, pp 31, 42, 46, 47.

*Helmut T. Huebert is a practicing orthopaedic surgeon in Winnipeg with a longstanding interest in Mennonite history.*

## Book Notes

by Adolf Ens

The migration diary of Rev. J.P. Klassen, founding bishop of the *Schoenwieser Gemeinde* (now First Mennonite Church in Winnipeg) was first published in German in the 1920s. Klassen came to Canada in 1923. Three of his granddaughters have now combined to translate, edit, and publish his journey diary in English, alongside that of their mother, Katherine Schellenberg, who began the trek as an 18-year-old in 1922. The combination of these two quite different perspectives on leaving their homes in Ukraine and the nature of their diaries makes for interesting reading. Katherine Schellenberg Klassen and Johann Peter Klassen, *Two Journeys of Faith*, edited by Erna L. (Klassen) Witherspoon, Krysanne C. Klassen and Helen E. Klassen Moore (Windsor, ON: Cranberry Tree Press, 2007). Pb, 97 pages, \$9.95.

*Glenlea Mennonite Church Since 1923: Stories from the Congregation* (Glenlea Mennonite Church History Book Committee, 2007), 8½ x 11, 332 pages. A book committee of ten had another six as "Assistants to the Committee" to put together this wide-ranging collection of stories, diaries, photographs, maps into a coherent whole. The 21 chapters include not only the categories usually found in congregational histories (leaders, church buildings, programs, committees, etc.) but provide a more comprehensive picture of the church community by adding substantial sections on agricultural traditions, social activities (including sports) and a chapter on "Church in the Community." The variety of "voices" in the stories makes for interesting reading. The careful selection and arranging of the material gives coherence to the story. The meticulous footnoting of sources provides clues to further research.

COs during World War II and their descendants, particularly those with connections to camps in Riding Mountain National Park in Manitoba will be interested in Edward S. Stozek's *The Sawmill Boys, P.O.W.'s and Conscientious Objectors: Stories from the Parkland* (Dauphin: by the author, 2007). Pb. 8½ x 11, 108 pages. Chapter 3, the last 20-odd pages of the book, dealing with the Mennonite connection, contains photos and stories from outside of the CO

community. But readers will also be interested in the other two chapters, learning about (or rediscovering) some of the injustices that nations commit against their own citizens in the hysteria of war.

Martin Klaassen (b. Prussia 1820; d. Central Asia 1881) is known to many for his participation on the "Trek" to Central Asia during the time of the visionary Klaas Epp. His son Michael came to Manitoba via Oklahoma bringing with him Martin's journal (1852-1881) and other writings. Michael's daughter, Esther Bergen, translated the journal and some other writings of her grandfather. Now one of Martin's great-grandsons has used these writings to produce in "story form" a book which he titles *Martin's Walk: An Autobiography of Martin Klaassen as Told by His Great-Grandson Karl H. Klaassen* (Spring, Texas: by the author, n.d. [2007]), Coil-bound pb. 253 pages. The journal-based story is preceded by 15 pages of family background and followed by 30 pages of appendix material. Martin Klaassen's introspective reflections on Mennonite faith and life shed light on that episode of our history in Russia.

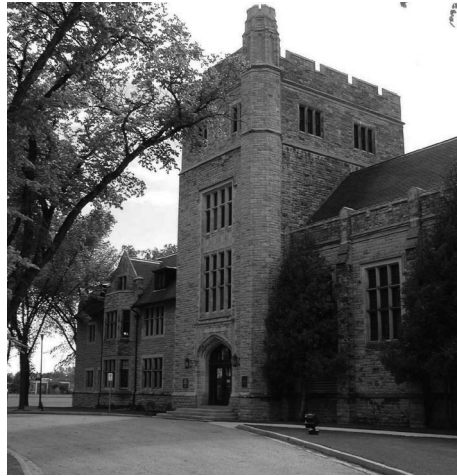
The results of Elsie Rempel's study of children and communion in Mennonite church contexts are now available. "Mennonites, Children and Communion" is the title of her M.A. thesis (Faculty of Theology, University of Winnipeg, 2007) but the study goes beyond that narrow theme. Rempel proposes a believers church "theology of childhood" as well as a communion theology "for the whole Christian faith journey," including "faith novices." In addition to researching Mennonite practice in several conferences, she also brings insights from Lutheran and United Church denominational experience. As academic submissions of this type go, Rempel's thesis (137 pages) is quite readable, reflecting her strong practical theology bias.

## CMU Documents Processed

(cont'd from p. 7)

school was to provide higher-education and practical training for church workers and missionaries from a Mennonite Brethren/Anabaptist Christian perspective.

Support for the school, in some of the provincial conferences, began to wane and by 1992 MBBC could no longer remain a national school due to this loss of broad provincial support. On June 30, 1992, a new board was elected by the Mennonite Brethren provincial confer-



Canadian Mennonite University main building on north campus, 500 Shaftesbury Blvd. Photo: CMU Communications Dept.

ences of Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. It was the Manitoba provincial conference that showed the most interest in the school, taking on financial liability and later full ownership of the school. Some individual supporters from the other provincial conferences remained, but this support did not cover the deficit following the withdrawal of funding from the Canadian Conference.

What proved to be a beneficial transition in terms of enrollment and accreditation did have challenges. As soon as Concord College began to establish its identity, discussion began on a union between all Mennonite colleges in Winnipeg. There was a growing feeling within some Mennonite groups that Concord College, Canadian Mennonite Bible College (CMBC) and Menno Simons College could work together and build on each other's strengths.

These ideas remained quiet for the most part until 1995 when Art DeFehr presented a study paper called "A Mennonite University". DeFehr was a visionary and strong supporter of what would become the Mennonite College Federation. Although many were hesitant about the success of a unified Mennonite college, there was an underlying drive to see this through. Provincial government support as well as the availability of property helped build the dream. After a long process of discussions and planning by the Mennonite College Federation Committee and others, a unified establishment was born and resulted in a merger between Concord, Canadian Mennonite Bible College and Menno Simons College to form the present day Canadian Mennonite University.

Conrad Stoesz and Janelle Hume

## Global Mennonite History

Reviewed by Lawrence Klippenstein

Alle G.Hoekema and Hanspeter Jeker, eds. *Testing faith and tradition: Global Mennonite History Series: Europe* (Inter-course, PA and Kitchener, ON: Good Books with Pandora Press, 2006) 324 pp.

In the second volume of the Global Mennonite History series, we are given surveys of five European countries where Mennonites have developed to significant populations (or decreased in significant numbers) over the years. These countries include The Netherlands, France, Germany, Russia and Switzerland. Each brief history has been written by a competent authority on the area.

Some important issues have been highlighted for each national Mennonite community, and a good foundation laid for further study. Brief bibliographies are added to give easy access to related literature. Photographs, maps and an index are useful additions.

One spots some problems in the section on Russian Mennonites. A rather obvious error has slipped in early (p.182) with the naming of the initial Prussian Mennonite delegates sent in 1786-87 to explore settlement possibilities in New Russia. These were Jacob (not Johann) Hoepfner and Johann (not Bernhard) Bartsch. The settlement information regarding early families arriving in Chortitza and Molotschna is also somewhat confusing (the eighteen villages mentioned would have been in Chortitza, not Molotschna as implied here).

This section is a good updating regarding the departure of the so-called *Umsiedler* who left the Soviet Union to resettle in Germany. It might have been more appropriate to include the information about their new life and church work in Germany in the chapter about Mennonites in that country rather than Russia. The final paragraphs on the future of Mennonites in Russia, in turn, could have included something on new congregations in former Mennonite settlement areas of Ukraine (Molochansk, Zaporozhe, etc).

Quite enlightening introductory and closing chapters meaningfully augment the sectional summaries. This history of Mennonites in Europe updates the larger European story that others like John Horsch have written. The need for further work on the story of this area is also apparent.

## Book Review

### **“An Oracle, a Prophet, a Wegweiser”: A Review of Peter Letkemann’s *The Ben Horch Story***

by Howard Dyck

Letkemann, Peter. *The Ben Horch Story* (Winnipeg, MB: Old Oak Publishing, 2007) 490 pp.

When Ben Horch, the legendary musical pioneer in the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Church, died on July 2, 1992, I hoped that someone would write his biography, thereby recalling not only the remarkable work of one outstanding individual, but also documenting a critical phase in the history of the Mennonite Brethren in Canada. It has taken 15 years, but thanks to Winnipeg historian, musicologist and organist Peter Letkemann, we now have such a volume, an expansive (490 pages) biography, *The Ben Horch Story*.

Let me say from the outset that, while this biography is flawed, both stylistically and by its frequent redundancies, I was nonetheless fascinated by it from beginning to end. Growing up on a farm near the southern Manitoba town of Winkler, I experienced firsthand the electrifying personality of Ben Horch. I’ll never forget hearing Handel’s *Messiah* for the first time under his direction. His flamboyant conducting style sent me into paroxysms of musical ecstasy. For me and for anyone interested in the history of music making in the MB church in Canada during the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this biography is a real “page turner”.

Ben Horch was born into a German Lutheran family in the tiny village of Freidorf, about 80 kilometers northwest of Odessa, Ukraine. His people had left Germany for some of the same reasons that the Mennonites headed east – the promise of more land, economic and religious freedom, exemption from military service. As land became scarce and the political situation became increasingly threatening, the German *Kolonisten* and many Mennonites migrated to North and South America. So it was that the Horch family, with two-year old Ben in tow, arrived in Winnipeg

in December 1909. The family gradually found its way into the MB community, and this became Ben’s spiritual home for decades.

In five major sections, Letkemann chronicles in exhaustive detail every stage of Horch’s musical apprenticeship and subsequent career. In telling Ben’s story, he also gives us an invaluable overview of the development of music in the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Conference. Therein lies one of the weaknesses of the book. Numerous details are cited and indeed repeated, sometimes to the point of annoyance. In documenting Ben’s life, or the history of the MB church in Winnipeg, or the Winkler Bible School, or the Mennonite Brethren Bible College, Letkemann, approaching the same subject matter from a slightly different vantage point, frequently repeats the same minutiae. I couldn’t help but wonder whether more of the details might not have been included in the footnotes, making for an easier “read”. Indeed, a rigorous editor (more than just “spell check”) would have pointed out that the past tense of “lead” is “led”, and not “lead”.

That said, Letkemann does a thorough job of defining the seminal influences in Ben’s life – his musical family and the musical heritage of the German Lutheran church, the Anglo-Saxon musical environment in Winnipeg, numerous friends and mentors who advised and cajoled Ben at critical junctures, and, not least, his wife Esther, a strong and gifted woman who helped Ben in practical ways and also saw him through some dark times. The picture that emerges is of a determined visionary, an impatient man considerably ahead of his time, and, to be sure, a man of wit and humour. I laughed out loud when I read how, in the 1930s, Ben’s North End MB Church Orchestra played unfamiliar classical selections and met with some bemused responses. On one occasion, when asked for the title of a particular piece, Ben set a skeptic at ease by replying, “It is called *He is Coming Soon*”.

What is surprising and indeed inspiring is to discover what odds Horch had to fight in order to advance the cause of music. The usual reactionary biases against artistic expression were prevalent among MB church leaders, particularly in the fledgling years of the MB Bible College. Letkemann paints the portrait of a man unconcerned about his own financial well-being, pressing on to

achieve what he believed was right, and never embittered by the many setbacks he had to endure. Even late in his life, when he and Esther left the MB church and joined First Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, he was generous in his assessment of the MBs. Whether he was conducting *Saengerkurse* across the prairie provinces, or championing his beloved *Kernlieder* (“core” songs which he believed formed the basis of MB hymnody), developing a music curriculum for the Winkler Bible School or the MB Bible College, initiating a classical music format for radio station CFAM in Altona, Manitoba, or producing music programmes for the CBC, Ben was nothing if not courageous and creative.

What he lacked in formal technical training, he more than made up for in dedication, charisma and sheer tenacity. Considering that he spent several years in the 1930s studying in California, one can’t help but wonder what might have resulted had he crossed paths with the likes of Arnold Schoenberg and Igor Stravinsky and numerous other elite musical émigrés who left Europe and settled close to Hollywood during those tumultuous years leading up to WW II. Unfortunately, Ben’s destination was BIOLA (Bible Institute of Los Angeles), a school with a decidedly undistinguished music curriculum.

His wife Esther, herself a person of considerable perspicacity, reflected on her late husband’s legacy, referring to him as a latter-day Moses, who “saw the burning bush, took off his shoes, but did not enter the Promised Land” of artistic achievement. That would be left to another generation of Mennonite musicians, many of whom would find their artistic and, indeed, their spiritual fulfillment beyond the church.

Peter Letkemann’s “The Ben Horch Story” is a valuable contribution to MB history, and offers a comprehensive portrayal of a man whose pioneering musical vision helped shape the artistic sensibilities of an entire people. He was indeed a *Wegweiser*, one who pointed the way.

*Howard Dyck is the Conductor and Artistic Director of the Grand Philharmonic Choir (Kitchener-Waterloo), the Bach Elgar Choir (Hamilton) and Consort Caritatis. He is the Programme Host of ‘Choral Concert’ on CBC Radio Two.*