

# Mennonite Historian

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

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Young girl hiding after a Makhnovist raid during the civil war period following the Russian Revolution (1917–1919). A scene from David Dueck's film *And When They Shall Ask* (1984). The reissued DVD (2010) is available from Mennonite Media Society or Mennonite Heritage Centre (see notice on p. 6). Photo: Courtesy of Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies (David Dueck Collection). See story on p. 2.



# Eichenfeld Massacre Revisited

by Sean Patterson

[This article is an excerpt of an article that was first published as "The Eichenfeld Massacre: Recontextualizing Mennonite and Makhnovist Narratives," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 32 (2014): 151–174 and appears here with permission. Sean Patterson's extensive research on the massacre is documented in *The Makhnos of Memory (M.A. thesis: University of Manitoba, 2013). Eds.]*

In 1924 Nestor Ivanovich Makhno was arrested in Danzig "on charges of robbery and murder committed against German colonists." After his transfer to a prison hospital, Makhno escaped in early 1925, never to face trial for his accused crimes. In the jury of history, however, Makhno's trial has proceeded apace, producing radically different verdicts depending on who is asked. For most Mennonites, Makhno is known as a notorious bandit whose name evokes memories of murder and terror. By contrast, amongst certain sections of the Ukrainian population Makhno is considered a folk hero, having tenaciously defended the peasantry against both the White and Red armies. In his native town of Guliai-Pole more than one statue has been erected in his honour and in 2013 the central Ukrainian bank issued a commemorative coin featuring Makhno. Furthermore, amongst Western anarchists Makhno is commonly vaunted as a heroic figure.

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For the most part these two narratives, the Mennonite and pro-Makhnovist, have remained segregated, each drawing upon a rich array of sources but each remaining largely unacquainted with the other. As a result few studies have attempted to integrate the primary sources of each narrative tradition into a unified account. This article hopes to contribute to the desegregation of Mennonite and Makhnovist narratives by employing sources from both traditions to tell the story of the Eichenfeld massacre. In this manner a more nuanced and multi-perspectival retelling of this tragedy is sought in which the roots of its evolution and the various factors that contributed to the escalation of violence in the area can be more clearly delineated. While not always in perfect agreement, this work builds upon the important research on Eichenfeld already conducted by Mennonite and Ukrainian scholars. In particular, the work of Marianne Janzen, John B. Toews, Natalia Venger, and Svetlana Bobyleva has been essential for this article.

On the night of Saturday, November 8 [N.S.], 1919 a squadron of Makhnovist cavalry surrounded the Mennonite village of Eichenfeld. The village was blocked off at either end and a massacre ensued. By the time the riders left, 75 Mennonites lay dead, numerous women raped, houses burned to the ground and cartloads of personal belongings stolen. Over ensuing days the death toll rose to 136 in the surrounding area. On Tuesday the survivors, who had fled for safety, returned to Eichenfeld to bury their loved ones en masse in a series of twelve unmarked graves.

Traditionally amongst Mennonites, blame for the atrocity at Eichenfeld has been attributed personally to Makhno. It is assumed that Makhno, as the chief commander of his army, was in full control of its actions and must have therefore ordered Eichenfeld's liquidation. On the other hand, within the entirety of Makhnovist literature Eichenfeld is not given a single mention. Indeed, none of the massacres of Mennonites are mentioned. It has thus been assumed by some of Makhno's sympathizers that he has been falsely accused of these actions.

This article challenges both narratives to varying extents. On the one hand, it will be shown through numerous corroborating Mennonite eyewitness reports that Makhnovists were

undoubtedly involved in the massacre. On the other hand, it will be argued that, given the available evidence, the massacre at Eichenfeld was more the result of local factors than a coordinated plan organized by Makhno. Through a close analysis of the primary sources it will be shown that a Makhnovist cavalry squadron perpetrated the massacre amidst a massive troop transfer between Alexandrovsk and Ekaterinoslav. This squadron combined with, and was perhaps enlisted by, the local Ukrainian peasantry who had become embittered against the colonies in the face of Mennonite collaboration with the Austro-German and White armies, and the establishment of an armed *Selbstschutz* [Mennonite self-defence militia]. Also explored are the internal conditions within the Makhnovist army in the weeks leading up to the massacre and the possible impact of Makhno's violent ideological rhetoric on the events in question. These factors when examined together contributed to the breakdown of neighbourly relations between Mennonites and Ukrainians and help to account for the escalation of violence that led to the massacre at Eichenfeld.

Any account of Eichenfeld unavoidably involves an examination of the activities of the local *Selbstschutz* [Mennonite self-defence unit]. As in the other colonies, in the summer of 1918 *Selbstschutz* units were armed and organized in the Jasykovo colony by officers of Austro-German occupation. Eichenfeld was a member village of Jasykovo. The embrace of the occupation and acceptance of armed self-defence units within the colonies was a direct response to the trauma endured by Mennonites since the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in November 1917. The colonies faced both "unofficial" robbery from local bandit groups, as well as "official" expropriations from the Soviet regime. While murder did not take on a mass character during this period, the mistreatment of the civilian Mennonite population was widespread.

Makhno's violent rhetoric targeting "kulaks" and other "enemies of the people" certainly encouraged the escalation of violence against the Mennonites and thus bears responsibility in this regard. However, as can be seen from the internal documents of the Makhnovists themselves, as well as Mennonite eyewitnesses, control over the insurgent army was increasingly

(cont'd on p. 4)

# Genealogy and Family History

## Johann Peter Klassen (1868–1947)

by Krysanne Klassen

Johann P. Klassen, my grandfather, was a prolific writer and gifted church leader. J.H. Janzen calls him “the most productive and most natural of [the Russo-Canadian Mennonite] poets.” Janzen adds, J.P. Klassen “writes mostly for existing melodies, so his poems at the moment they appear are already songs . . . An inexhaustible and unconquerable joy speaks out of all his poems . . . even though he has suffered much from an infirmity.”<sup>1</sup> He suffered from a severe case of eczema and found great relief when he retired to Vancouver in 1939. It turned out that the wheat pollens of the prairies aggravated his condition.

Since all of his books of poetry—the GAMEO entry lists ten—are in German, they are not very accessible to his descendants or others who might be interested in JP’s, albeit poetic, views of the dramatic events in the lives of Russian Mennonites. My sister, Erna Klassen Witherspoon, translated his published diary of the journey to Canada for inclusion in the Klassen family book published in 2007, *Two Journeys of Faith*. In that book, my mother, Katherine Schellenberg Klassen, translated her own diary of her family’s journey, a rather different experience.

I never met JP, as he was often called; he died three and a half years before I was born. His legacy, however, is one that I continue to explore.

JP was the third son, and the seventh child, of Peter Abram Klassen (1825–1905). After a period of teaching, JP followed his father into the leadership of the Kronsweide Mennonite Church (Kronsweide, Zaporizhia, Ukraine). His mother, Anganetha Schultz (1832–1920), was Peter’s second wife. JP was born on May 15, 1868.

After the village school in Kronsweide, JP finished his high-school formation at the Chortitza *Zentralschule*. Following graduation, he served as village schoolteacher for at least five years. I suspect he also worked at the family milling operation during these years. In 1907, he began to give leadership at the Kronsweide church.

At the age of 23, JP married Katharina Wieler (1870–1909). They had eight children together before she and one of her five sons died of typhus in 1909. His second marriage was to Katharina Dyck (1881–1954) in 1911; they had two more sons.

By all accounts, JP was a beloved church leader in Chortitza. He helped his flock face many great challenges: World War I, German occupation, Russian revolution, civil war, anarchy, and a typhus epidemic. He would not have left Russia with the other 1920s emigrants, if his older children had not refused to go to Canada without him.

When he came to Canada, JP’s talents were in high demand again, first by providing roving leadership for several country community churches and then in the establishment of the First Mennonite Church in Winnipeg. He served as leading minister from its inception in 1926 until his retirement in 1939.

In Canada, JP ministered to many who struggled with the same issues he faced: language barriers, prejudice against German speakers, and economic challenges. The financial pressures were great: the repayment of travel loans from the emigration and the struggle to secure a financial footing for a family whose education and training had been disrupted by the decade of upheaval in Russia. Then, too, there was the loss of family and friends—alive or dead—in Russia, the beloved homeland, no matter how difficult it had been in the end.

JP had a wonderful sense of humour. When his wife reproved their sons for laughing and telling funny stories at his funeral, they shot back: “If he were here, he would be laughing louder still.”

His positive outlook, faith, and humour helped JP manage many issues during his pastoral duties, but one issue caught him by surprise: the conflict and misunderstanding that some of his views generated in the growing tension between rural and urban Mennonite churches. JP’s confidence in a merciful God who would consider the actions of good people even without Mennonite baptism at the final judgment was popular with his congregation, but not so with the national conference leadership. T.D. Regehr reports that “dancing, social drinking, card playing, movie attendance, theatrical

productions, and many other similar activities were allegedly tolerated in his church, and young men who had enlisted for military service were welcomed without a demand that they apologize for the error of their ways.”<sup>2</sup> The conflict with national church leadership shook JP badly and there is a strain of bitterness in his later writings, strain that had not been there before.

I don’t know when JP started writing; surely he wrote sermons from the age of 35 or so when he began to preach at Kronsweide. We know he had a diary at least from 1923. His poetry was published in the 1920s. What I don’t have are his papers.

I’m not sure what papers came with him from Russia or went with him to Vancouver when he retired, and what might have returned to Winnipeg with his widow in 1947. He had four surviving children living in Winnipeg at the time: Helen, Corny, Vic, and Eddie. His widow died in 1954. All the children have died as well. The last survivor from that generation, Vic’s widow, Helen (Dyck) Klassen, has no knowledge of any additional papers or writing from JP.

I am particularly interested in JP’s diary of the trip from Russia. He published a version in German, but it was clearly edited for public consumption. I also hope to publish translations of his poetry some day and it would be great to know if there were earlier drafts or notes.

If you have information regarding JP’s papers or writings, contact: Krysanne Klassen, 571 Logan Ave., Toronto ON M4K 3B6 (647-381-7129), k\_klassen@live.com. If you are interested in a copy of the book *Two Journeys of Faith*, contact hemoore@bell.net.

### Endnotes

1. See Harold S. Bender and Richard D. Thiessen, “Klassen, Johann Peter (1868–1947),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, GAMEO, February 2007.

2. See a discussion of the rural-urban conflict at First Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, in T.D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939–1970: A People Transformed*, volume 3 of *Mennonites in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 1996), 177–179.

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**Recent Books:** If you have recently published a genealogy or family history book, please send us a complimentary copy and it will get noted



## Eichenfeld Massacre

(cont'd from p. 2)

precarious. Excessive drinking, looting, the abuse of civilian populations, and anti-Semitic pogroms were all poisonous presences within the army by the fall of 1919, despite repeated attempts by Makhno and high-level commanders to impose discipline. The problem of discipline was further compounded by the sudden injection of disparate elements into the army. Red partisans, nationalists, Grigorievites and a host of local groups temporarily allied themselves with the Makhnovists. Each group had its own competing agenda and was spread out over a large territory, making communications very difficult. This situation taken into perspective suggests that many units in the fall of 1919 were functioning semi-independently. Thus, while they fell under the overall rubric of Makhno's army, they did not always strictly adhere to the orders of the Makhnovist high command.

On the morning of November 8th a large number of Makhnovist troops passed through the villages of Jasykovo en route to Ekaterinoslav. David Quiring recalls "thousands of men" marching through the village between 9am and 4pm.<sup>1</sup> Around 10am the Makhnovists' first action was to kill a man they may have believed to be Heinrich H. Heinrichs [leader of the Eichenfeld *Selbstschutz*]. They in fact murdered Heinrichs' father, who bore the same name as his son. It appears that the killers of Heinrichs moved on from the village and were separate from the group that perpetrated the massacre later that evening.

A steady stream of Makhnovists moved through the village over the course of the day, making demands for food and stealing anything they saw fit. At dusk, as the column of men began to thin, a cavalry squadron entered Eichenfeld at full gallop. Elizabeth Warkentin recalls that "a guard was set at either end of the village so that no one could escape."<sup>2</sup> In the massacre that followed, all landowners and their sons over the age of sixteen were systematically executed. When the killing was finished, seventy men and five women lay dead. Over the next ten days the death toll rose to 136 in the whole of the Jasykovo settlement.

In the aftermath of the killing, peasants from the surrounding area descended upon Eichenfeld, taking anything of value. As for the survivors, after three

days the dead were gathered from streets and buried in a series of twelve mass graves. Eichenfeld had ceased to exist.

The perpetrators appear to have targeted the male population. Eichenfelder H.W. Klassen recalls: "Grandmother lived at the end of the village not in the farmer's row."<sup>3</sup> [She was an *Anwohner*, landless]. Because of this, my brother and father stayed alive." That the *Anwohner* were spared on ideological grounds is further confirmed by David Quiring's account. Quiring's memoirs are unique in being the most detailed eyewitness account of the massacre. Quiring also came face to face with the commander in charge of the massacre numerous times throughout the evening. At the height of the massacre Quiring was assigned the chilling task of informing each household that they were to bake bread for the Makhnovists.

The above accounts strongly suggest that the massacre was motivated by class antagonisms. From the surviving evidence it appears that the attackers were following orders to execute all landowning males but to leave the landless unmolested. At least two Eichenfelders survived the massacre by taking refuge in the homes of *Anwohner*. In a similar manner to H.W. Klassen's account, Katherina Harder, with her mother and sister, "fled to the end of the village to the Schmidts."<sup>4</sup> They were not landowners and therefore were not being attacked by the Makhnovite bandits." Another survivor, Abram Dombrowsky, managed to save his life as a teenager by telling his captives, untruthfully, that he was a worker. Tragically the male members of his family were murdered within earshot.

While class primarily motivated the massacre, an element of anti-Germanism also manifested itself during the tragedy. For example, Quiring recalls one individual who "frequently came into the room cursing and mocking. He said that all the Germans should be killed." In Franzfeld [within Jasykovo], Gerhard Redekopp was likewise confronted by a Makhnovist who declared it was his duty to "kill all Germans."<sup>5</sup> Redekopp and four others were subsequently killed. It is possible that those rank-and-file Makhnovists who harboured anti-German feelings used the event to vent their ethnic hatreds to one extent or another. Certainly some Mennonites came to the conclusion that "the Germans were murdered because they were Germans."

Paradoxically, some survivors report

"Germans" amongst the Makhnovists. Quiring writes of an encounter with a Makhnovist who "suddenly began to speak High German. I realized he was a [German] Catholic." Another survivor, Katharina Penner, remembers recognizing to her horror a Mennonite by the name of Schmidt consorting with the "apparent leader of the band."<sup>6</sup> Schmidt proceeded to assault Penner. Years later Penner encountered Schmidt again as a Soviet official. She writes, "How could such a scum of humanity, one who massacre his own people, be accepted in a leading role in the governmental department?"

Whoever participated in the massacre, be it Ukrainians, Makhnovists, Germans or Mennonites, it is safe to assume that the vengeful nature of the massacre allowed individuals to indulge in a host of "reasons" they felt may have justified their actions. Thus, while at the command level the action was justified as a punishment for the *Selbstschutz* and rural bourgeoisie, at the individual level it offered an occasion to pursue petty personal vendettas or afforded an opportunity to "kill the Germans."

Reflecting on the massacre, Gerhard Schroeder writes, "Eichenfeld was a very prosperous Mennonite colony, thus constituting a highly desirable prize for looting by Makhno's men and then to be turned over for wholesale plunder to some of the neighbouring peasant villages."<sup>7</sup> In many Mennonite histories Makhno is held personally accountable for the massacre. Yet when the primary sources are carefully examined, there is strong evidence that the neighbouring Ukrainian peasantry played an important role in the tragedy as well.

First, there is the widely attested fact that immediately following the massacre, residents of the surrounding Ukrainian villages, in particular Fedorovka, looted Eichenfeld. This information is contained in virtually all eyewitness accounts including the Ukrainian oral histories collected by Svetlana Bobyleva. Second, we have eyewitness testimony that the Jasykovo colony was being harassed by local bandits prior to the arrival of the Makhnovists, and that they even threatened to burn down Eichenfeld on one occasion.

David G. Rempel, who lived in Nieder Chortitza and was the nephew of H.H. Heinrichs, felt that despite "the virtually unanimous verdict among Mennonites that the nightmarish experiences of

Eichenfeld and the surrounding communities were part and parcel of the Makhnovshchina ... it is safe to assume that many of the worst excesses in Eichenfeld, [etc.] were carried out by peasants of neighbouring villages.”<sup>8</sup>

Rempel attributes the peasantry’s underlying motivation to “loot and land hunger.” Situated in a highly fertile area, Jasykovo quickly became very prosperous, arousing, according to Rempel, “envy and resentment among many of the neighbouring peasantry who no longer were able to rent smaller or larger pieces of land from their former gentry landlords.” Unwittingly, the daughter colony of Jasykovo placed itself in the direct line of fire in the years leading up to the revolution. This is an important observation on Rempel’s part, which points to the heart of the breakdown of Ukrainian-Mennonite relations. Further research specific to the exact conditions of the peasantry surrounding Eichenfeld is necessary but if Federovka followed the patterns of the rest of the country then land hunger and poverty would have been widespread. The oral histories collected from the area describe the “Germans” as substantially more affluent than the Ukrainian villages.<sup>9</sup> One interviewee recalls that the “Germans had everything of the best quality ... With us everything was run down, dishevelled, dirty. With them everything was cultured.” The interviewees also point out that Mennonite land was superior to Ukrainian land. An interviewee states that “Catherine the Great gave all the good land to the Germans,” while another comments: “Here in the village of Fedorovka the soil was sandy, so the Germans didn’t take it.” With the breakdown of social order during the civil

war, these clear material discrepancies would have made the colonies an obvious target and an object of envy amongst the poorer sections of the peasantry.

Compounding any bitterness that may have evolved from socio-economic inequalities, there is evidence suggesting that colonists from Jasykovo actively participated in the punitive expeditions of the German occupation in 1918. The reasons ostensibly given for these raids were to retrieve stolen property and land, but they often took on an excessively violent dimension that only contributed to the deteriorating relations between the colonists and peasantry.

The goal of this article is not to stand in judgment of the victims but to better understand the dynamics that led to the Eichenfeld massacre. Blame for what occurred at Eichenfeld ultimately rests with the perpetrators who carried out the murders. However, actions on both sides of the Ukrainian-Mennonite divide contributed to the escalation of violence. The initial attacks by local bandit groups; the embrace of the Austro-German occupation and then the White army by the Mennonites; the establishment of the *Selbstschutz* and the Eichenfeld unit’s attack on the local soviet; the robbery, harassment, hostage-taking and abuse of civilian Mennonites by the Reds and Makhnovists; the violent rhetoric of Makhno; the land hunger and gross social inequalities facing Ukraine at the time all helped to pave the way to the tragedy at Eichenfeld.

The majority of victims likely had nothing to do with the *Selbstschutz* or the punitive expeditions, and for the murdered it does not matter whether their killers were Makhnovists or neighbours. But for the historian, understanding how situations evolve and why massacres

unfold is a grim but necessary task, if only to point to warning signs for future generations. The bitterness engendered through social inequalities, and the failure of broader society to adequately address these inequalities, is always in danger of rapidly evolving into a situation where acts of revenge once considered inhuman become routine and interpreted as necessary.

In the end, the concept of putting Makhno on trial is sorely inadequate. The broad and complex factors that contributed to the Eichenfeld tragedy extend far beyond the culpability of one man. As such, a simple verdict of guilty or not guilty does injustice to the event if it does not thoroughly address the many social factors that paved the path to Eichenfeld.

Perhaps what is needed is a movement away from the overemphasis on Makhno and towards the broader social and economic factors at play. Such a movement acknowledges how Makhno contributed to the degeneration of events but does not find him singularly guilty. In this context Makhno is a small part of a larger whole involving the broader collective choices of Mennonites and Ukrainians alike, which led to Eichenfeld and similar tragedies. In this way we may begin to move towards a greater understanding of how it was that pacifists took up arms and revolutionaries perpetrated massacres in the name of freedom and equality.

## Endnotes

1. David A. Quiring, “The Days of Terror in the Village of Eichenfeld,” in *Mennonites in Ukraine Amidst Civil War and Anarchy*, ed. John B. Toews (Fresno: Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 2013), 143.

2. “Recollections, interviewed and transcribed” by Marianne Janzen. See also Marianne Janzen, “The Eichenfeld Massacre – October 26, 1919,” *Preservings* 18 (2001): 25–31.

3. “Remembrances of Eichenfeld-Dubovka, Jasykovo, 1919,” translated by Marianne Janzen.

4. Harvey L. Dyck et al., eds., *Nestor Makhno and the Eichenfeld Massacre* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2004), 70.

5. Isaac Epp, “A Time of Darkness,” in *Nestor Makhno and the Eichenfeld Massacre*, 47.

6. Heinrich Friesen, “Bartholomew Night in Eichenfeld,” trans. Arthur Toews, 13.

7. Gerhard Schroeder, *Miracles of Grace and Judgment* (Lodi: Gerhard P. Schroeder, 1974), 116.

8. David G. Rempel, “I too was there and mead I drank ...,” *Preservings* 21 (2002): 27.

9. Dyck et al., *Nestor Makhno and the Eichenfeld Massacre*, 82–83.



Young girl remains alone after Makhnovist raid. A scene from David Dueck’s film *And When They Shall Ask*. Photo: Courtesy of Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies (David Dueck Collection).





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## Celebrating 225th anniversary of Mennonite migration to New Russia

by Gladys Terichow

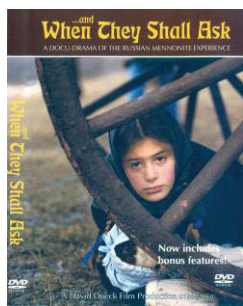
A seminar in Winnipeg and celebrations in Steinbach marked the 225th anniversary of the first migration of Mennonites from Prussia to New Russia, now East Ukraine, 1788–1789.

Guest speakers at the events held Nov. 15 and 16 shared historical research on the political, religious and economic forces that led to the migration of Dutch, Flemish, and German Mennonites to New Russia.

“Today we have the image of Mennonites as people who migrate from country to country; that was not the image in 1789,” explained John J. Friesen of Winnipeg, one of six presenters at the seminar held at Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives (MHCA).

Mennonites, he said, settled along the Vistula and Nogat River valleys in the 16th century and lived under Polish rule for about 10 generations.

Friesen said among the many reasons for emigration to New Russia was the partitioning of Poland in 1772, placing the majority of Mennonites under Prussian jurisdiction.



A film that demonstrates a faith that endures, David Dueck’s docu-drama, *And When They Shall Ask* is available from the Mennonite Heritage Centre. Telling the Russian Mennonite story, the 88 minute film with 45 minutes of additional bonus features is priced at \$25. A great way to learn again about God’s faithfulness.

A formal invitation to settle in New Russia coincided with changes in laws about military recruitment and restrictions on the purchase of land. Those changes created interest in migrating to New Russia where land was said to be more readily available. Most of the 228 families in the 1788–1789 migration were landless.

Keynote speaker, Mark Jantzen from Bethel College, Kansas, said Mennonites living in Prussia were part of the larger community. Each religious group in the community were given different sets of rights, freedoms, and restrictions. For example, Mennonites were granted



**The 225th anniversary celebration for the first migration of Mennonites from Prussia to New Russia, now East Ukraine. Henry Epp (L) provided the Archives with historical documentation from and scouting efforts preceding the migration. Lawrence Klippenstein (C) read from those documents. Corey Dyck (R) is Director. Photo: Courtesy of Gladys Terichow.**

military exemption but were required to pay fees for this exemption. They also needed special permits to buy land.

In Russia, the separately administered colony system was imposed on Mennonites and other religious groups migrating to Russia at that time.

The first wave of migration started with Mennonites in Prussia selecting two men, Jacob Hoepfner and Johann Bartsch, to investigate settlement possibilities in New Russia.

People at the seminar heard about the challenges Hoepfner and Bartsch faced during their land scouting travels through letters written by Bartsch to his wife, Susanna, and to a church leader, David Epp.

The letters, read by Winnipeg historians Lawrence Klippenstein and Edwin Hoepfner, are part of a 109-page collection of documents that were passed down through the generations to Henry

Epp of Calgary, a descendant of David Epp’s family. “I believe I hold an important piece of Mennonite heritage in my hands and I like to share it with people,” said Epp. “I feel this information belongs to the people.”

Klippenstein has been following the collection as it passed from one family member to the next for over 30 years.

The collection, now being translated from Gothic German script at MHCA, contains items thought to be long lost and destroyed. They are not original documents but legible, handwritten copies of the originals that are believed to be part of the collection known as the Hildebrand

Nachlass (Hildebrand papers). “This is an amazing find,” said Corey Dyck, MHCA director. “Having access to these letters fills an historical gap when researching Mennonite History.” Bartsch, Hoepfner, and their Russian emigration agent, Georg Trapp, departed from Prussia October 30, 1786. Bartsch wrote his first letter to Susanna, Nov. 11, 1786 from Riga. In this letter he says he expects to be home by late spring.

His second letter was written from Dubrovno, Dec. 1, 1786. He wrote the third letter from St. Petersburg, Aug. 28, 1787, as they were preparing for their trip home. His final letter was again written from Riga, Oct. 18, 1787.

“It had been a daring but very important venture, taken at considerable risk, but certainly contributing much to make the larger group’s move a more informed and better organized undertaking,” said Klippenstein.



## Katie Funk Wiebe 2015 RESEARCH GRANT



The Historical Commission of the U.S. and Canadian Mennonite Brethren Churches announces an "Open Research Grant" of \$2,000 to promote research and publication on the history and contributions of Mennonite Brethren women around the world. The Grant is made possible by generous support from the Katie Funk Wiebe Fund. Projects may include, but are not limited to, books, articles, lecture series, symposia, and multi-media presentations.

To apply, send the following materials by April 6, 2015, to Jon Isaak (jon.isaak@mbchurches.ca), Executive Secretary, Historical Commission, 1310 Taylor Ave., Winnipeg, Manitoba R3M 3Z6: a 500 word summary of the project, stating its significance to the field of Mennonite Brethren women's studies, a budget of anticipated expenses (e.g., transcription, copy editing, research assistance, travel, income supplement, etc.), a vitae, and one letter of recommendation.

Recipients of the award will be announced June 10, 2015, following the annual meeting of the Historical Commission. Disbursements will be made June 15, 2015. The Selection Committee may choose not to award the grant, if none of the applications is deemed acceptable.



**Mennonite Brethren  
HISTORICAL  
COMMISSION**

Application deadline:  
**APRIL 6, 2015**

SEE: [www.mbhistory.org](http://www.mbhistory.org)



## CMBS update

During this quarter, CMBS staff were involved in writing and presenting several papers and talks in the community. Conrad Stoesz and Jon Isaak presented papers at the Ex-Mennonite, Near Mennonite Conference (October 3–4, 2014), hosted by the Chair in Mennonite Studies, University of Winnipeg.

There were 22 papers presented considering the process by which some Mennonites have given up or retained Mennonite identity in addition to newly assumed identities, either as individuals or church groups. Conrad's paper narrated the interesting and sobering story of the reception of some WWII veterans who still wanted to go to church, even though they no longer felt welcome at their family's Mennonite church. The paper's title was: "Altona United (Mennonite?) Church." Jon's paper explored the trend of Mennonite Brethren churches to drop "Mennonite" from their names, usually because it was perceived as a liability to church growth and evangelism. The paper's title was: "From Mennonite Brethren to Community Church to Life Centre and Gathering Place."

Conrad also presented: "Mennonites in Winnipeg: from Mission, to Refuge, to Home" at the Winnipeg Public Library: Henderson location on October 29, and "Conscientious Objectors: Part of Canada's Identity" at South Winnipeg Sings for Peace on November 2.

On November 20, 2014, CMBS held its annual Volunteer Appreciation dinner to recognize the contributions of Abe J. Dueck, Ed Lenzmann, Clara Toews, Kathie Ewert, Lois Wedel, Bert Friesen, Augusta Schroeder, Lillian Martens, and Susan Huebert. Helen Schellenberg, who turns 90 next month, again catered the celebration with home-made ethnic Mennonite foods. Lorlie Barkman was the invited guest speaker who shared the genesis, design, and impact of the children's television program called *Third Story* that ran from 1975 to 1990. The dinner group viewed a 15-minute clip from a 1980 episode. Most of the 91 episodes have been digitized and are now part of the CMBS collection.

## SUMMER 2015 ARCHIVAL INTERNSHIP



The Historical Commission of the U.S. and Canadian Mennonite Brethren Churches announces one "Summer 2015 Archival Internship," designed to give a college/seminary student practical archival experience at each of the four Mennonite Brethren archival institutions in North America. Spanning five weeks during May and June (exact dates to be determined), the intern will spend a week at each of the MB archives (Winnipeg, Hillsboro, Fresno, and Abbotsford). Each archival site will host the intern, providing orientation to the context and collection, and involve the intern in its ongoing projects. In addition to experiencing a functioning archive, the intern will gather stories, images, and video during the four weeks related to a particular theme in Mennonite Brethren church history, spending the fifth week producing a report that is compelling and image-rich—one that promotes the mission of church archives. Airline travel and accommodations will be provided by the Historical Commission. The internship comes with a stipend of \$2,000.

To apply, send the following materials by February 2, 2015, to Jon Isaak (jon.isaak@mbchurches.ca), Executive Secretary, Historical Commission, 1310 Taylor Ave., Winnipeg, Manitoba R3M 3Z6: a statement indicating why/how the internship would be helpful to you, a statement outlining your research interests in Mennonite Brethren church history, a vitae, and one letter of recommendation. The internship award will be announced March 2, 2015, allowing scheduling to be made in consultation with the intern. The Selection Committee may choose not to award the internship, if none of the applications is deemed acceptable.



**Mennonite Brethren  
HISTORICAL  
COMMISSION**

Application deadline:  
**FEBRUARY 2, 2015**

SEE: [www.mbhistory.org](http://www.mbhistory.org)



## Readers Write

“Ann Klassen and Her Moro Spear” (Sept 2014). The article on Ann Klassen was well done, but understated her role in bringing Indian women into the development picture. Male-dominated Mennonite mission programs usually related to male Indian leadership, and the women were left sitting in the dust, literally. It was Ann, more than anyone else, who recognized that if the Indians were to advance, attention needed to go beyond men and reach the entire family. And she did this before feminism became the movement that it is today. It just made sense to her. When I am in Yalva Sanga, I always try to visit her grave and pay my respects.

*Edgar Stoesz, Akron, PA*

“Mennonites in British Columbia: The Early Years, 1910-1938” (June 2014). In August we were at the Bloomfield-Rosewell cemetery, visiting the grave of my grandfather, Peter Dyck. He died in 1918 at the age of 30. He and his wife and their 2 young sons (one of whom was my father) had travelled to Vanderhoof, B.C., for a family wedding. On the train, my grandfather and his brother (the groom) contracted the Spanish Flu from soldiers returning from WWI. Upon their arrival in B.C., it was just a couple of days until they (and the bride's brother) died, within days of each other. Some years later, the caskets were exhumed and shipped to Manitoba for burial in Bloomfield-Rosewell.

*Howard Dyck, Waterloo, ON*

## Gilroy: Reconstructing a Community

*by Kate Woltmann*

A couple of months ago, I was given the task of reconstructing the history of the Gilroy Mennonite Brethren church. Our archives knew of the church's existence and had several items pertaining to the church, but it had not yet been described in our finding aid.

I began my task by looking for some general information about Gilroy on the Internet. After typing “Gilroy” into my search bar, I realized there was very little information available online about the community or its MB Church. I was completely baffled by this turn of events. In an age of instant information, how could one community's history be so difficult to find? Putting aside my botched Internet search, I decided I would reconstruct my own history of the Gilroy MB Church using only primary resources from the archives, such as church minutes and church correspondence published in *Der Bote*, *Zionsbote*, and *Die Mennonitische Rundschau*.

The primary sources provided small tidbits of information, all of which came together to form the history of a once-thriving town. In the early 1920s, a group of Russian Mennonite immigrants settled in Gilroy and the MB church was founded soon after that. The church grew quickly, so that by 1926 there were a total of 17 families.<sup>1</sup> An early article by one of the lay pastors, Jakob P. Bergen, describes Gilroy as a small town located by the

Canadian Pacific Railway line and claims that people are often surprised to hear that there are Mennonites here. In a rather humorous narrative, he states that Gilroy could easily be compared to Nazareth<sup>2</sup> where Jesus grew up, and about which Nathanael said: “What good can come from Nazareth?” (John 1:46).

Despite the negative publicity, the Gilroy MB Church enjoyed many visits from travelling preachers and the church thrived. Early church leaders and lay pastors included Peter P. Braun, Jacob I. Bergen and Franz F. Wiens. In later years, D.H. Loewen and Jacob P. Dyck would fulfill church leadership roles.<sup>3</sup>

When talking about Mennonite immigrants in Saskatchewan, it's important to distinguish between the two waves of Saskatchewan immigration. The first came in the early 20th century and was comprised of Mennonite settlers from the United States, Russia, and other parts of Canada. The second wave of immigrants came in the 1920s, when many Mennonites fled Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution in search of peace, religious freedom, and the right to own property.<sup>4</sup>

The letters from the Gilroy MB Church provided some interesting insight into the cultural aspects of this second wave of immigrants, the Russian Mennonites. In 1929, at the peak of immigration, several letters go into great detail regarding the debate on the use of High German and Low German within the church community. According to one newspaper correspondent, many of the Sunday school students, not previously educated in Russia, were falling behind in their lessons. Teachers soon realized that this was because their language of conversation was Low German and they could not understand the High German used in church. After a church meeting, the church families decided that it was important for them to speak High German at home. The correspondent was pleased to report that after several months of this, the understanding of the Sunday school students had increased.<sup>5</sup>

A similar letter was published later that year, in which the correspondent expounds upon the community's joy at finding a German school teacher. Lessons were provided in a range of subjects, including religion, reading, writing, and arithmetic. The correspondent also explains the different schedules of the German and English schools, portraying a

*(cont'd on p. 12)*



**Bloomfield-Rosewell Cemetery, near Roland, Manitoba.** Photo: Courtesy of Howard Dyck.



# Mennonitische Rundschau

Lasset uns fleissig sein, zu halten die Einigkeit im Geist

Ein christliches Familienblatt

Gegründet im Jahre 1877

## Mennonitische Rundschau 1913–1914

by Bert Friesen

[Bert's project involves indexing the Mennonitische Rundschau. His report summarizes some of the highlights from the years 1913–1914. The project is made possible by a grant from the D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation. Eds.]

Clas B. Wiens (1869–1962), who had immigrated to the United States in 1906, continued to edit the *Mennonitische Rundschau* (MR) with limited staff and resources during 1913 and 1914. He used the same format for his weekly publication. The sections were: devotional, local reports from United States, Canada, and then the rest of the world. Then there was the editorial page with various short pieces. This was followed by the *Aus Mennonitischen Kreisen* which was a catch-all section of short notes from readers. Then came the short sections about editing corrections. He began a more regular section of obituaries submitted by families. Missions section was usually about China or India. Then the local reports continued. Then came news reports which were gleaned and reprinted from many different sources. This section became larger with the beginning of World War I. Then there was a novel that was serialized and printed over a period of months, usually at least six. The final section had more news items. Throughout the news sections there was advertising, mostly for medical remedies for ailments, and for the sale of land.

Some of highlights from these years include: (1) Minutes and proceedings. Various Mennonite conferences and societies used the MR to publish the discussion and decisions of their conventions. This made the dissemination of the history and plans for these organizations much more widely known than just for the attendees. The *Allgemeine Bundeskonferenz der Menno-*

*nitengemeinden in Russland* held its convention in Rudnerweide, Molotschna. The *Mennonitischen Allgemeinen Konferenz* met in Kalona, Iowa on October 29–30, 1913, for its 16th convention. The Mennonite Aid Plan met in Freeman, South Dakota, for its convention on November, 7–8, 1913.

(2) Land offers. Mennonites continued to seek opportunities for agricultural settlements in North America. The Homestead Act of 1909 in the United States greatly affected Montana. The free land was doubled from 160 acres to 320 acres. This attracted Mennonites from the Prairies in Canada and from other parts of the United States. These pioneers reported on their experiences in the MR. In California, there were opportunities presented by land agents such as Julius Siemens (1863–1953). He was promoting land in various parts of California, specifically: land in the San Joaquin valley, north of Fresno.

(3) Mission reports. Various missionaries reported on their work in India and China, but other areas also had reports. Many individuals made major contributions. One such individual was D.F. Berghold (1876–1948), who was a missionary to India for over 40 years. He was in California reporting on his work. There were detailed reports of the evangelistic work, medical work, educational and vocational work, and statistical and financial summaries. Another missionary was H.C. Bartel (1873–1965), working in China. His oldest son, Loyal, actually stayed in China during the war and revolution, and died there in 1971. His wife, Nellie (1876–1946), and children left China in 1948, but he remained, never to be seen by his family again. A.F. Wiens (1868–1937) sent regular reports from the city mission in Chicago, a mission begun in the 1890s.

(4) Emigration accounts. Journeys made by Mennonites to visit their co-religionists, and to emigrate, was a feature in the MR. One such journey was made

by Elisabeth and Johann Giesbrecht (1859–1936). They settled first in Saskatchewan. The report continues for a number of issues. Another such journey, begun in 1912 and reported then as well as in 1913, was by the family of Kornelius Wittenberg from the Terek Colony to California. It is documented in some detail, with separations, and many meetings along the way.

(5) Reports on robbery and violence in Russia. One incident report in the MR was of the robbery of Herman J. Neufeld (1843–1919). He was a big estate owner, who according to Helmut Huebert's book on estate owners, was a multi-millionaire in ruble terms at about this time.

(6) Church news. There were many reports of church work being done by various church leaders. These had influence and work far beyond their local communities. One such was William J. Bestvater (1879–1969), who did church work in Canada and United States. A report was submitted by Peter Buschman from Lewiston, Michigan. Another report was about a Missions and Thanksgiving service in Lehigh, Kansas, by J. G. Barkman. He reported on the contribution of Johann Esau (1863–1934), who preached the sermon there. Such reports were common in informing the readers about church events in the many Mennonite communities scattered throughout the land.

(7) Travel reports. During this era travel to Russia was not that common. Some Mennonites had been in North America for a generation. So the means to travel had become possible. Two such journeys were given prominence in the MR. They were by John P. Dyck (1891–1968), who had come with his parents as a child, and John Balzer (1852–1930). They described their journeys in some detail. John Balzer traveled overland by rail from Western Europe to New Russia.

(8) Holy Land tours. Another unusual report for the MR was a journey Isaak P.

(cont'd on p. 12)

## Were Upper Canadian Mennonites Loyalists?

by Sam Steiner

Eleven-year-old Staats Overholt had a difficult start in life. His father, Mark, died in 1754, leaving his widow, Elizabeth, and three young children in difficult financial circumstances. Likely the Overholt family struggled financially for years, surviving by living with relatives. But Staats persevered and eventually married Susannah Hunsberger, with whom he had six children. Staats and Susannah lived in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, along with many fellow Mennonites. When the Revolutionary War came, Staats and most of his fellow Mennonites chose to pay hefty fines in order to avoid mustering with local militia units. Three years after the war ended, when his oldest son was approaching the age for militia service, Staats and Susannah moved to Canada in 1786 along with several other families from Bucks County. Were Staats Overholt and his fellow 1786 immigrants British Loyalists?<sup>1</sup>

The Niagara Peninsula had been part of Quebec under the French sphere of influence until it was taken by the British in 1759 during the French and Indian War. When the Revolutionary War began, Fort Niagara became a gathering point for Loyalists and became a launching point for British military activity. The territory on the west (Canadian) side of the river was then minimally inhabited. In 1781 the Ojibwa (Mississauga) Nation surrendered some land west of the river to the British for three hundred suits of clothes; this land began to be informally settled by individual Loyalists who had been displaced by the fighting. In May 1784 the British obtained additional Ojibwa land.<sup>2</sup>

Abraham Beam of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, was one Mennonite who had clear Loyalist leanings. He had been accused of assisting the British during the Revolutionary War, by providing the British forces with cattle and harboring deserters from the Continental army. He was arrested in January 1781 and incarcerated in the Lancaster jail. He denied most of the charges while admitting to knowing some of the persons he was charged with assisting. On May 16, 1781, he was found guilty of encouraging the deserters, and was sentenced to a fine of £750. Unable to pay

his fine, he borrowed the necessary funds from his neighbor, Jacob Morgenstern (Morningstar). He was left with only half the property he had owned previously. Abraham Beam came to the Niagara Peninsula in 1788. Beam's land petition six years later said "everything he possessed was sacrificed to the fury of an unnatural rebellion, except his life and his integrity. Six Years since he roamed with his family into the Province, and now enjoys the happiness of that Government which was always dear to him and for which he has severely suffered." He was unable to repay his debt to Morgenstern in his lifetime; Beam's will at his death in 1799 stipulated that two lots he owned be transferred to Morgenstern.<sup>3</sup>

Were the Mennonites who arrived on the Niagara Peninsula before 1790 Loyalists? Without question at least a few of these families had Loyalist impulses. However, many claims of loyalism came in petitions for land grants and were submitted without evidence of property losses or imprisonment in Pennsylvania. This suggests many claims were self-serving efforts to strengthen their petitions for free or cheap land that was available to Loyalists and in lesser amounts to settlers. The Pennsylvania Test Act, which deprived Mennonites and Tunkers of their civil vote and limited their property rights if they did not renounce the British Crown, was not repealed until 1789. The Test Act influenced some Mennonites to leave Pennsylvania in the 1780s. A writer in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* in February 1789 said that thirty Mennonite families from Lancaster County were planning to leave for Canada, with other families looking to Virginia, which had already repealed its Test Act. It can thus be argued that the only Mennonite immigrants to Canada who could be called Loyalist were those who came prior to the repeal of the Test Act in Pennsylvania and who settled somewhere on the Niagara Peninsula. Those who came later clearly sought an economic promised land, not one of increased political or religious freedom.<sup>4</sup>

### Endnotes

1. "Exercise fines for the fall 1780," in "State of the Accounts of Hon. George Wall, Esquire, Sub-Lieutenant of Bucks County. 1780-1783," in *Pennsylvania Archives*, ed. William Henry Egle, Vol. Series 3, vol. 6 (Harrisburg, PA: William Stanley Ray, 1896), 79; Eugene Singer, "A Hunsberger Family," <http://home.earthlink.net/~geneals/overholt.htm>. Staats Overholt (1743-1820) received his given name from his mother's maiden name. In fall 1780, Overholt paid a fine of one

hundred pounds, a significant sum; his younger brother Martin paid even more, as did Tilman Kulp and several Fretz men who also came to Canada.

2. See Wilbur Henry Siebert, *The Loyalists and Six Nation Indians in the Niagara Peninsula*, ed. Royal Society of Canada (Ottawa: Royal Society of Canada, 1915), <http://www.ourroots.ca>.

3. R. Robert Mutrie, "Abraham Beam: From Pennsylvania to Canada," *Beam Branches*, [http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~boehm/data/biographies/1719\\_Beam\\_Abraham\\_bio.pdf](http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~boehm/data/biographies/1719_Beam_Abraham_bio.pdf). See also MacMaster, Horst, and Ulle, *Conscience in Crisis: Mennonites and Other Peace Churches in America, 1739-1789: Interpretation and Documents* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1979), 482-490; R. Robert Mutrie, "Niagara Settlers: Land Petitions of The Niagara Settlers 'Barnum to Beamer,'" <https://sites.google.com/site/niagarasettlers/petitions-barnum-to-beamer>.

4. Mennonites, who with rare exception did not actively fight for the British (or the American Patriots), did not qualify as Loyalists under the terms of the proclamation by Lord Dorchester in 1789: "Those Loyalists who have adhered to the Unity of the Empire, and joined the Royal Standard before the Treaty of Separation in the year 1783, and all their Children and their Descendants by either sex, are to be distinguished by the following Capitals, affixed to their names: U.E. alluding to their great principle The Unity of the Empire." See the text at "Lord Dorchester's Proclamation," United Empire Loyalists' Association of Canada, <http://www.uelac.org/PDF/ldp.pdf>. Tacit inclination to British rule, or even service for the British under duress (e.g., providing horses and wagons), was not enough to demonstrate loyalism. Many Mennonite-background family historians have sought to overlay a Loyalist impulse on later Mennonite immigrants. For the reference to thirty Mennonite families, see Richard K. MacMaster, et al., *Conscience in Crisis*, 449.

Sam Steiner retired as librarian and archivist after 34 years at Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, Ontario. His life as a 1968 draft dodger resisting the Vietnam war is the subject of a recent play called "Gadfly: Sam Steiner Dodges the Draft," written and produced by Theatre of the Beat.



The 32 cent "Loyalist" stamp was designed by Toronto illustrator Will Davies. In the background is the grand union flag, the British flag used from 1606 to 1801. Canada Post press release, 1984.



## Book Review

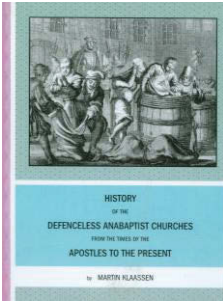
Martin Klaassen, *History of the Defenceless Anabaptist Churches from the Times of the Apostles to the Present*, trans. Walter Klaassen (Saskatchewan Mennonite Historical Society, 2013), 233 pp.

Reviewed by Elfrieda Neufeld Schroeder

When the Centre for M.B. Studies asked me to review the translation of Martin Klaassen's book, they also lent me the original copy, published in 1873. It is a rare book, with only twelve copies still in existence (p. 10). I felt privileged to hold it in my hands and grateful that Martin's great-grandson, Walter Klaassen, had taken the time to translate it.

Walter Klaassen tells us in his introduction that this was not a casual scholar's book, but rather "the response to a crisis in the life of the Mennonite churches in Prussia and Russia" (p.6). The churches in Prussia had all but given up on the principle of non-resistance and those who had migrated to Russia constantly faced challenges by their government to take up arms. The purpose of Klaassen's book is to remind Mennonites of their unique understanding of the Christian faith, characterized by believers' baptism and the refusal to bear arms, that could be traced all the way back to apostolic times.

Klaassen divides his book into four sections in which he outlines the history of the church up until his time. Part One begins with the New Testament churches and ends with Constantine the Great (325). In this section, the author emphasizes the persecution of the early church and its powerful witness in the face of martyrdom and persecution. Part Two deals with the history of the victory of Christianity over paganism and the gradual decline of Christianity until the time of Peter Waldo (1170). Part Three focuses on the Anabaptists and their struggles and ends with Menno Simons (1536). Part Four treats the work of Menno Simons and takes readers to the migration of Mennonites from Prussia to Russia.



The translated book has an attractive format. The front cover depicts a sketch by Jan Luyken from the *Martyr's Mirror* and a portrait of Menno Simons by the same artist is found on the back cover. On the first page is an 1870 photo of the Martin and Marie (Hamm) Klaassen family, and the second page portrays Martin Klaassen in a scholarly pose. Another photo shows the church in the village of Koepental where Klassen lived and the school in which he taught. Martin and Marie Klaassen's wedding photo appears at the end of the book. A map of the Trakt Colony (taken from the *Mennonite Historical Atlas* by William Schroeder and Helmut T. Huebert) and of the villages surrounding Koepental helps readers to orient themselves geographically.

It is fascinating to read the two-page biography of Martin Klaassen (pp. 8–9). He was born in Prussia in 1820. His family did not join the migration to Russia, but he visited the Molotschna Colony on his own and stayed there for two years. After returning to Prussia, he decided that God had called him to go back to Russia. He became a much loved and appreciated teacher there. Like the martyrs of whom he writes with such passion and conviction, he too gave up his life for a vision in which he believed with his whole heart but which did not come to pass.

Translating a book like this is a formidable undertaking. Not only does the translator need a good working knowledge of the German language but also a reading knowledge of the Gothic script (*Frakturschrift*) in which the book is printed. At times, the author's German is quite archaic (especially in the first section) and the sentences are extremely long. Sentence structure of course is different in German than it is in English. A translator must be constantly aware of this, otherwise the translation becomes stilted rather than idiomatic. I did discover a number of awkward sentence structures as I read the translation and compared it to the original.

Walter Klaassen's footnotes are excellent and show that he has done considerable research. Several times he corrects his great-grandfather's tendency to exaggerate. For example, Martin Klaassen writes, "pagan kings ... shed the blood of thousands, indeed, hundreds of thousands, between 64 and 303 A.D." Walter Klaassen corrects this with a

footnote saying that this is a "highly exaggerated" claim (p. 55, footnote 21).

In the Translator's Postscript (p. 233), Walter Klaassen poses the question: "What might his [Martin Klaassen's] thoughts be if he knew what had happened after his death?" The same question occurred to me several times as I read this book. Klaassen expresses horror at the "anti-Christian teachings" of Rousseau and Voltaire. He remarks: "They came from the blackest abyss and ... disrobed the kings of the West of the absolute power conferred on them by God" (p. 209). My grandmother expressed those exact sentiments about the Russian Revolution of 1917. After reading this book, I began to understand her worldview and where it originated. She still venerated royalty and kept a scrapbook of the English monarchy. She was very uncomfortable in our Canadian society and could not accept the freedom her grandchildren relished. "No revolutionary movement has its origins in the spirit which is from God," writes Martin Klaassen. "It is the spirit of Antichrist" (p. 209). I wonder what he would have said about our democratic Canadian way of life in which the average Mennonite feels very comfortable.

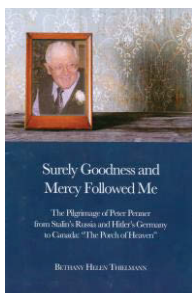
Reading a book like this helps our generation to a better understanding of its forebears and their worldview. It also allows us to compare our lives as Christians today with the lives of God's people of earlier times. Furthermore, this translation provides us with an opportunity to ask ourselves once again, have we kept alive the vision of those who were willing to die for their convictions? For this reason, we should be immensely grateful to Walter Klaassen for this monumental work.

*Elfrieda was born in Chortitza, Ukraine, just before the German invasion and consequent flight of her family to Poland and Germany. Her family spent five years in the Chaco, Paraguay, before immigrating to Canada in 1952. She and her husband lived many years in the (Belgian) Congo, returning to Canada in 1984. They moved from Ontario to Manitoba in 2008. Elfrieda received her PhD in German Language and Literature in 2001. She is a translator, freelance writer, and grandmother of eight. You can read more of her writing on her blog site: <http://ens-intransit.blogspot.com/>*

## Book Note

Bethany Helen Thielmann, *Surely Goodness and Mercy Followed Me* (2013), 99 pp.

Granddaughter-in-law, Beth, narrates the story of Grandpa Peter Penner (1929–2011) in this family book. Peter was born in Kontin-eusfeld, Ukraine, on a collective farm. He experienced the trauma of having his father “disappeared” in 1938 during Stalin’s Great Terror, designed to rid the new Soviet society of intellectuals, foreigners, and people of faith. During WWII, Peter was recruited by the German forces occupying Ukraine for the Hitler Youth program and was separated from his mother and siblings. With difficulty, he managed to secure a discharge and locate the rest of his family. Eventually, they immigrated to Canada and settled on a farm in Coaldale in 1948. The book is a tribute to Peter’s life as a school teacher, minister of the gospel, farmer, and loving family man. Copies may be purchased at [www.peterandmargaretpennerbooks.ca](http://www.peterandmargaretpennerbooks.ca).



Russian censorship did not allow news in or out. It seems evident that this exchange was vital to the well-being of co-religionists and kin across the Mennonite world. Each had their perspective on the events of the war. There were reports from missionaries about how the war was affecting them. There were also reports from church leaders calling for peace. The war had an immediate effect on many aspects of the Mennonite world. The MR reported on these effects in as timely a manner as possible.

The MR in 1914 fulfilled its mission to be a medium of contact for the scattered folk of the Mennonite settlements. It remains the primary source of information about this era in Mennonite history.

## Gilroy Community

(cont'd from p. 8)

clear segregation between the German-speaking immigrants and their English-speaking neighbours.<sup>6</sup> This segregation would dissolve as German Mennonite families moved and dispersed themselves in other provinces.

Trouble arose for the Gilroy MB Church in 1932, when they no longer had use of their building and the community was left without a place of worship. The community correspondence in the newspapers never says *why* this occurred, only that their church building had been “taken” from them. After holding a community meeting, two men were sent to each church family, specifically asking for funds. In the spirit of true survivors, each family scraped together enough money for the church to buy its own building and continue the church services.<sup>7</sup> The good feelings didn’t last, however, with crop failure occurring in June due to worms and bad weather.

It was the beginning of what would later be called the “Dirty Thirties” or “The Great Depression.” Among the contributing variables, the weather was one that did not spare anyone. Hot, dry summers and freezing winters created crop failures throughout the prairies.<sup>8</sup> Those who had immigrated earlier were better able to bear the brunt of the Depression, having had more time to settle. The Russian Mennonites, arriving in the 1920s, were not so lucky. Having escaped Russia with next to nothing and having had only a few years to nurture their farms, these immigrant farmers were forced to look for greener pastures.

The members of the Gilroy MB Church were no exception. After another crop

failure in 1933, a group of five men travelled to Mullinger and Glenbush in the North Saskatchewan district to look at possible resettlement. They returned with reports of several good options; however, the news produced both heartening and disheartening reactions. With mixed feelings, the church celebrated a farewell and said goodbye to seven families.<sup>9</sup> Between 1933 and 1934, another 22 families left the community. By 1940, few families remained in Gilroy, resulting in the ultimate disbanding of the Gilroy MB Church in 1945.

By the time I finished my reading, I found myself exclaiming to my co-workers: “They left! I can’t believe they all left!” True, many of my fellow workers did not know what I was going on about, but those that did simply nodded their heads and explained that this was the pattern for many Russian Mennonite churches founded in the 1920s. Both rapid growth and quick decline were apparently the norm for many of these small rural churches. And given that many of these churches were located in remote areas, it is not surprising that they were easily forgotten, as if they had never existed. However, these churches are an integral part of Mennonite story on the Canadian prairies. Sometimes, as was the case for the Gilroy Mennonite Brethren Church, it just takes a little bit of digging to uncover a once-vibrant community.

## Endnotes

1. Wilhelm & Anna Toews, “Korrespondenzen,” *Zionsbote* (December 1, 1926): 11.
2. Jakob P. Borgen, “Korrespondenzen,” *Zionsbote* (August 29, 1928): 3.
3. Information collected from the Saskatchewan Conference Northern District Yearbooks, 1927–1945.
4. Harold & Neoma Jantz, *Rooting the Faith: A Saskatchewan Mennonite Brethren Story of Losses and Gains* (Saskatoon: Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan, 2008), 10–12.
5. Jakob P. Borgen, “Korrespondenzen,” *Zionsbote* (May 1, 1929): 6.
6. J.P. Borgen, “Korrespondenzen,” *Zionsbote* (August 21, 1929): 8.
7. H. Krahn, “Korrespondenzen,” *Zionsbote* (January 6, 1932): 12.
8. Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 386–387.
9. Peter Braun, “Korrespondenzen,” *Zionsbote* (September 13, 1933): 7.

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## Mennonitische Rundschau

(cont'd from p. 9)

Friesen (1873–1952) made to the Middle East. He describes in detail the sights he saw in the various places he visited. He visited Gibraltar, Malta, Greece, Egypt, and Palestine, among other places.

(9) The Great War (1914–1918). In 1914, World War I became a major content item in the MR. There was editorial comment, local reports on their opinions and news, reprints of various news services from Europe and North America to inform readers of the events. Editorial comments were a regular feature after the war began. The North American Mennonites did not immediately see the seriousness of the events. Rather they interpreted them as fulfilment of Scripture. The Russian Mennonites were more concerned about the war because it had an immediate effect on them. All men up to age 45 were drafted. Most Mennonite men served in some form of alternative service.

The Russian censorship policy restricted access to war news. So not only was the postal service restricted, but also the