

# Mennonite Historian

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



The *S.S. International* was a river boat that travelled up and down the Red River from Fargo, ND to Winnipeg, MB. In 1874, this photo was taken of the ship along with its first Mennonite passengers at The Forks, the historic meeting of the Assiniboine River and the Red River. Intrigued by these immigrants, a young land surveyor named John Dennis watched the Mennonites and continued to do so over the next decades. In 1922, Dennis became a key player in the 1920s wave of Mennonite immigrants. Based on what he knew of the 1870s immigrants, Dennis recommended to his employer, The Canadian Pacific Railway, that the 1920s immigrants be extended credit without collateral to pay for the transatlantic voyage and settlement on the prairies. Photo credit: City of Winnipeg Archives, A569 File 1-8. See article on p. 2.

## Contents

140th Anniversary of the Mennonite West Reserve . . . . .	2	Genealogy and Family History . . . . .	3	In Memoriam: Harry Loewen . . . . .	8
New Mennonite Prussia-to-Russia Immigration Lists . . . . .	3	Mennonite Heritage Centre Update . . . . .	6	People of the Plains . . . . .	9
		Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies Update . . . . .	7	Low German Club . . . . .	11
				Book Review . . . . .	12

# 140th Anniversary of the Mennonite West Reserve

by Conrad Stoesz

*(A version of the following presentation was made on September 13, 2015, by Conrad Stoesz at a ceremony commemorating the arrival of the first Mennonites to Manitoba at Fort Dufferin. Eds.)*

Today I want to tell you a story, a story about John and Jacob—John Dennis, a land surveyor, and Jacob Fehr, a Mennonite settler.

Jacob was 15 years old when his family decided to leave Russia and immigrate to Manitoba. The Russian government, at the time, was bothered by the way that Mennonite colonists had remained separate from the rest of Russian society, and so it enacted laws to encourage Mennonite integration. Russian had to be taught in the Mennonite schools and the complete exemption from military service that had been previously negotiated was no longer an option.

Jacob's family decided to leave their home in the oldest Russian Mennonite colony, the Chortitza Colony, and join the immigration movement to Manitoba, where land was available and freedom of

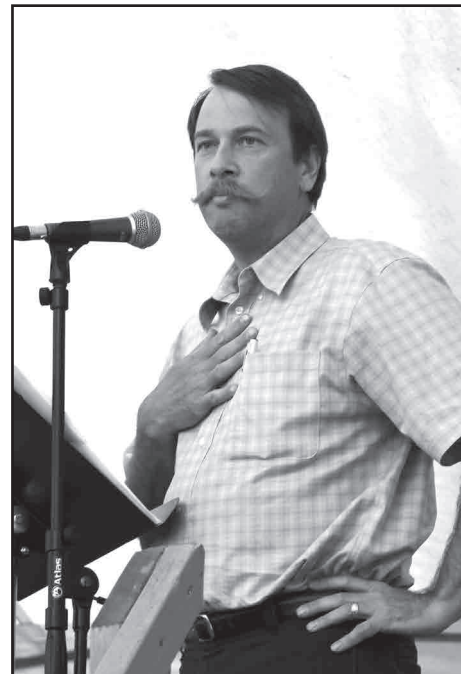
religion was promised. Specifically, they were promised control of their own schools and exemption from military service. In some cases, it was an entire community that decided to leave, such as the Bergthal Colony. The Bergthal Colony began to leave Russia in 1874.

At Fargo, North Dakota, a river boat brought the Mennonites down the Red River toward Winnipeg, Manitoba. It is there that John, the surveyor, first encountered Mennonites on the *S.S. International* docked at the Forks in Winnipeg, the intersection of the Red River and the Assiniboine River.<sup>1</sup> John Dennis was working at the time as a surveyor for the Canadian government and was intrigued by this group of pioneers. He likely thought that they dressed oddly, that they spoke a strange language, but he decided to watch this group and see how they fared.

In Russia, Jacob Fehr helped at the auction sale to liquidate the family's belongings that would not be needed on their journey. They left their comfortable life in Kronstal, complete with well-built homes and mature gardens, to start again in a new land. Jacob wrote: "I remember how I walked in the garden before evening, how I crisscrossed it in various directions. I remember how often I hoed it and cleaned it of weeds. I observed the fruit trees and how promising they looked and what a blessing they could bring forth, without our being able to enjoy it. The May cherries were almost ripe.... When I had observed all these things and reflected on them, I walked out of the garden and closed the gate. I remained standing at the gate and looked at the garden once more and said to myself, 'I will never again enjoy your fruit.' My eyes filled with tears. Thereupon I left the garden."<sup>2</sup>

Jacob's family travelled by rail a total of 22 days, and by ship 16 days. In total, they travelled 13,000 miles.<sup>3</sup> While on the ship, the seas were very rough and many people were sea sick. At one point, the storms were so bad that the captain called to Jacob and the passengers below, asking them to pray "that our Creator might have mercy upon us and help us."<sup>4</sup> Along the way a few of the old and the very young died and had to be buried at sea or in a strange land. Jacob's family arrived at Fort Dufferin on July 14, 1875. There they had to wait for their land to be surveyed.

Fort Dufferin was a new fort, located



Conrad Stoesz presenting at the 140th commemorative event (September 13, 2015) at Fort Dufferin. Photo credit: Rebecca Stoesz.

on the west bank of the Red River, three kilometres north of Emerson, Manitoba. It was established in 1872 and was used by the Canadian government for the Boundary Commission. The Commission's work was to survey western Canada in order to establish the boundary between Canada and the United States along the 49th parallel. The site consisted of a two-storey frame building that was the officers' quarters, three one-storey buildings that were the barracks that housed 300 men, a large stable, a store house, a cookhouse, a bakery, a workshop, and a smith-shop.

Around the fort there were also some saloons, brothels, and shacks. In 1874, the North West Mounted Police made Dufferin its provincial headquarters, as it tried to instill British law in western Canada. In 1875, the NWMP moved its headquarters to Winnipeg. From 1875 to 1879, the Canadian government used Dufferin as an immigration station where thousands of immigrants would come via river boat and head west across the prairie. The Mennonites would have been one of the largest groups to use Dufferin.<sup>5</sup>

We do not know if John, the surveyor, was involved in surveying the area west of Fort Dufferin, but as a surveyor he would have known about the flat, tall-grass plains that were once home to the prairie bison that the indigenous peoples used to hunt.

*(cont'd on p. 4)*

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# Genealogy and Family History

## New Mennonite Prussia-to-Russia Immigration Lists

by Glenn H. Penner, chemistry professor at the University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario (gpenner@uoguelph.ca)

Those genealogical researchers who have successfully traced their Mennonite ancestry through Russia are often met with another roadblock—finding their ancestors in whatever immigration lists are available in order to ultimately find their ancestors' place of origin in Prussia.

When I attempted to do this nearly 40 years ago, the one-and-only source was the huge immigration list at the back of Benjamin H. Unruh's 1955 book.<sup>1</sup> It took until 2000 before a second immigration resource was published, Peter Rempel's book.<sup>2</sup> Since then several lists have appeared on the <http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com> web page.

This short article is an overview of the available lists, including those not yet extracted from microfilms and archival holdings.

Mennonite immigration from Prussia to Russia took place from 1788 until the 1870s. From the 1870s onward, Prussian Mennonites preferred to immigrate directly to North America. A description of the periods or "waves" of immigration from Prussia into Russia are well-covered in chapter 6 of Henry Schapansky's latest book.<sup>3</sup>

There were essentially four early waves of immigration: (1) 1788–1789 and (2) 1795–1798 to the Chortitza colony, and (3) 1803–1806 and (4) 1816–1820, mostly to the Molotschna colony. There were also coherent groups coming in 1834, 1836–1838, 1854, and 1859. In addition, during this time period, and on to the 1870s, there was slow but continuous immigration. The exception was the period 1806–1816, due primarily to the Napoleonic wars in Europe.

Unfortunately, there is only one official government list for the early Chortitza immigrations: namely, the list of those who passed through Königsberg on the way to Russia in 1788. The list given on pages 287 to 304 of B.H. Unruh's book is gleaned from this and numerous other sources. The



Glenn Penner standing at the entrance to the archives in Toruń, Poland.

most significant of these is the 1808 set of census listings for Einlage, Rosenthal, Neuendorf, and Burwalde, which include the village of origin and immigration year for each head of household.

The immigrants from the 1803–1806 period are much better documented. This is due in large part to the 1808 census, which is complete for the entire Molotschna colony and includes each colonist's immigration year and village of origin. For the years 1803 to 1805, the Prussian government required families to apply for permission to emigrate. They were then interviewed and their assets were evaluated. They were then required to pay a 10% exit tax.

Those who have looked at the immigration lists on pages 336 to 355 of B.H. Unruh may have noticed the term *Vernehmung*, which refers to the application/interview process. The *Vernehmung* records of the Prussian government still exist, and are found in the Berlin archives. One set is available on microfilm;<sup>4</sup> and I was recently able to obtain copies of the other half of these records.<sup>5</sup>

A close examination of these records shows that a good deal of important information from the Prussian records did not make it into Unruh's book. A good example is the record for my own great-, great-, great-, great-grandfather, Johann Dyck (GRANDMA # 44744).<sup>6</sup>

The Prussian record reads: "*Johann Dyck von Tiegenhagen welcher sich als Tagloehner, theils bey den Feldarbeit, theils bey den Schiffarth, indem er als Martose zu weilen auf der Jacht gefahren, ernähet hat, und kein Vermögen besitzt er ist gesamen mitzunehmen siene Ehefrau Agatha geb. Schulzin und sein 4 unmundige Kinder Johann, Harm, Jacob, und Heinrich.*"<sup>7</sup>

This Johann Dyck is not found in Unruh's or Rempel's lists. He is, however, found in the 1808 census, which confirms that he did emigrate from Tiegenhagen in 1803. These Berlin files are a fantastic source of new information in original form and need to be made accessible to researchers!

A very important source of immigration lists for 1803–1828 is the book by Peter Rempel.<sup>2</sup> This book complements the Unruh book and the lists found in the Berlin archives in that it consists mostly of Russian sources—those who actually arrived as opposed to those who applied to leave. It is very important to note here that the majority of the material found in Rempel has not yet been integrated into the GRANDMA database, even though the book has now been around for 15 years! The lists found in Unruh are taken from various sources and have been integrated into GRANDMA.

The web site <http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com> includes many other lists obtained from various sources. Six examples are: (1) 1820–1841 lists of the heads of families who left Prussia; (2) 1843 list of recent immigrants settling in Neuhalbstadt, Molotschna; (3) 1839 list with names and ages and Russian village; (4) 1848–1850 list with names and ages and Russian village; (5) 1849 list with names and ages and Russian village; and (6) 1851–1852 list with names and ages and Russian village.

The following four files found in the Odessa archives<sup>7</sup> have not yet been posted: (1) 1819 list of the heads of 240 families who arrived in Russia (Fond 6 Inventory 1 File 1528); (2) 1836 list includes family members, ages and origin in Prussia (Fond 6 Inventory 1 File 23834); (3) 1847 list includes family members, ages and origin in Prussia (Fond 6 Inventory 1 File 9471); and (4) 1849 list includes family members, ages and origin in Prussia (Fond 6 Inventory 1 File 12750).

The 1835 Molotschna colony census

(cont'd on p. 9)

## 140th Anniversary

(cont'd from p. 2)

Now this area was shunned by pioneer settlers. Out on the open prairie, trees and shrubs only grew along the banks of the creeks and coulees. For the most part, the wind had free reign on the open prairie and offered settlers little in the way of protection.

Imagine what Jacob Fehr would have seen as he looked out from Fort Dufferin onto a grassy “nothingness.” Other Europeans typically moved through the open plains and headed to areas that had easy access to water and trees.<sup>6</sup> Settlers usually did not want to put down permanent roots in this area; some of the Mennonites also wondered if their decision to settle this prairie had been a good one.<sup>7</sup>

The three basic human needs are food, water, and shelter. On the open prairie, food was not abundant until crops and gardens could be planted. What about water? Where would they get water? There were a few little streams. They would have to trust that a shallow well would be sufficient. And then there was shelter. Winter was coming. There were few trees for building houses, few trees for fuel; even trees for fence posts were hard to find. There were plans to access lumber from wood lots to the west and into North Dakota, but that would take a lot of effort and require hauling the wood back to their villages.<sup>8</sup>

Other river ships dropped off more immigrants. Some were familiar to Jacob, most were not. The fort quickly became crowded with hundreds of people. The immigrants stayed in the three barracks that were designed for 300 men, but now housed close to a thousand people. Here they waited.

Jacob noticed that some of the children who were sick on the ships were dying at the fort. His records show that there was a death each day for the six weeks that they waited at Dufferin. Jacob called Dufferin a “place of mourning,” since it reminded him of the wandering Israelites in the Old Testament.<sup>9</sup>

There was much to mourn. They mourned for their friends who stayed in Russia; they mourned for the comfortable homes they left behind; they mourned for their children who died of disease. Somewhere near the fort are buried

the bodies of the deceased children. Researchers continue to look for the spot where they are buried, but so far have not located it.

As they waited for the surveying to be completed, the families were assigned to specific villages. But more importantly, a significant decision was made. *Aeltester* Johann Wiebe from the Fuerstenland Colony in Russia called a meeting and suggested that they form one church body. The heads of each household voted and agreed to appoint Johann Wiebe as *Aeltester* and to appoint Isaak Mueller from Chortitza Colony as leader of the civic authority known as the *Gebietsamt*.<sup>10</sup>

This decision to form one body, one *Gemeinde*, made up of people living in villages and not on individual homesteads, allowed the Mennonites to live successfully on the open prairie. Most other pioneers lived on their homestead or parcel of land, often many miles from their neighbours. The Mennonite settlers in Canada, however, were allowed to live in villages and farm their land together. Historian E.K. Francis states: “Thus, the West Reserve ... was really the first permanent agricultural settlement ever established on the open prairie of western Canada without direct access to a major body or current of water.”<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the Mennonite settlers received approval to move out of Dufferin by ox

cart and onto the open prairie. Jacob’s family found their village location, which was called Reinland, and began to establish their new home. They built a sod house into the ground, cut hay for the animals, and hauled wood in preparation for the winter. That first winter was very hard. The whole family crammed into the small sod hut, and when the weather was very cold, their animals joined them.

In the spring of 1876, they broke more ground, planted crops, and gathered more fuel. That summer, 147 more Mennonite families arrived at Dufferin and joined the villages.<sup>12</sup> Because they had agreed to live as one community, Isaak Mueller sent out notices about fire insurance, ploughing fire guards, and asking for a family census. He also kept track of the debts owed by each family.<sup>13</sup>

In February 1876, Isaak Mueller notified each family and instructed them to bring wood and manpower to Reinland in order to build a church. So, in the spring of 1876, the church at Reinland was built, which still stands today.<sup>14</sup> Schools were also established.<sup>15</sup> But there was also concern. Food was becoming scarce and funds had been depleted.

The West Reserve Mennonites benefitted from the work done by the East Reserve leaders to secure a \$100,000 loan from the Canadian government to help the Mennonites get established. Isaak Mueller’s office administered the funds and their repayment for the West Reserve.<sup>16</sup> These loans assured survival for the new pioneers. Surveyor John Dennis, who had seen the Mennonites in Winnipeg the year before, heard about this loan and no doubt wondered if the immigrants would survive on the prairie.<sup>17</sup>

In 1878, Isaak Mueller also directed families to contribute a wooden post 10 feet long and six inches in diameter. The most common path going from Dufferin toward the west, was to be marked by these posts every 250 feet. Remember, there were no street lights, no paved roads, no powerful headlight or flashlights. On the open prairie, a snowstorm or even blowing snow could be dangerous for travellers. These posts were to guide people along the path. It connected people to the economic centres at Emerson and Dufferin in the east and Mountain City in the west.<sup>18</sup>

The *Waisenamt* was another Mennonite community institution that had its origins in Prussia and was established to help



**Commemorative cairn at Fort Dufferin marking 140 years since the Mennonite settlers arrived on the Canadian prairies.**  
Photo credit: Conrad Stoesz.



Benjamin B. Janz (1877–1964) thanking Col. John S. Dennis (1856–1938, centre left) for CPR financial aid given to Mennonite immigrants. The event was at the Coaldale Mennonite Brethren Church, Coaldale, Alberta, on September 19, 1937. Photo credit: CMBS photo NP52-01-10.

families when a parent died. Assets were divided equally between the surviving spouse and all the children regardless of gender. A guardian was appointed for minor children and their shares were held in trust until they became adults. When I go through the *Waisenamt* materials in my job as archivist at the Mennonite Heritage Centre, I am amazed at the detailed records they kept and the provisions that were made so that orphaned children were looked after. The *Waisenamt* was a unique Mennonite institution that provided stability for people when life was uncertain.<sup>19</sup>

With the financial support, the support from each other, and the overarching organizational structures, such as the church, *Waisenamt*, and *Gebietsamt*, the Mennonite settlers soon thrived. New houses were built, crops flourished, and new machinery was purchased. By 1892, all debts were paid. The Canadian government was very pleased with the speedy repayment. The Minister of the Interior wrote in glowing terms: “The history of any country does not afford, I undertake to say, a case in which an obligation to the government on the part of any society, company, or individual, has been fulfilled with greater faithfulness than this.”<sup>20</sup> Surveyor John Dennis took note and his respect for the Mennonites grew.<sup>21</sup>

Why did the Mennonites succeed when other settlers dared not to pioneer on the

open prairie? It was their community-mindedness that was the key to their success. Because they lived together, they could help each other farm. Because they valued community, they could build church meetinghouses and schools. When women needed a midwife, there was one in the neighbouring village or even next door.<sup>22</sup> Community institutions like church, *Gebietsamt*, and *Waisenamt*, were institutions that would not have functioned without community endorsement. Community, togetherness, and *Gemeinde*—these were the keys to living on the open prairie where no one else wanted to settle.

Now we need to bring our friend surveyor John back into the story. If we fast-forward to 1922, the Russian Revolution and civil war have taken their toll on the German colonists in Russia, including the Mennonites. The suffering is great. Once again, many Mennonites are trying to emigrate from Russia in search of freedom and opportunity.

*Aeltester* David Toews from Saskatchewan agrees to lead the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization in their attempt to bring 20,000 Mennonites to Canada from Russia. The Canadian Pacific Railway has ships; it has rail lines through Canada; and it has land to sell to farmers. So, the only thing needed is the financial resources to bring the Mennonites to Canada. Where will the money come

from?

Surveyor John Dennis is now Colonel John Stoughton Dennis, commissioner of the CPR. He remembers his first encounter with Mennonites 47 years earlier. He knows the Mennonites to be honest and hard working. As it turns out, it was his voice at the negotiating table that convinced the CPR to lend the money to *Aeltester* Toews on the collateral of Toews’ good name only!<sup>23</sup> By 1930, the CPR had extended over 1.7 million dollars in loans to the 20,000 Mennonites that immigrated to Canada in the 1920s.<sup>24</sup>

From this story of John and Jacob, it is clear to see that Fort Dufferin is an important place for Mennonites, worth commemorating. In spite of the crowded facilities in 1875, key decisions were made at Dufferin that promoted working together as one church body. By their faith in God, community-mindedness, and hard work, Jacob Fehr’s people were able to flourish on the windswept prairie. And as they built their communities and repaid their debts, people like John Dennis were watching and taking note. Future waves of Mennonite immigration to Canada would benefit from such a testimony.

## Endnotes

1. “A Gala Day at Coaldale” is a translation of an article that appeared in various Mennonite newspapers in Canada and the United States during the week of

(cont’d on p. 8)

## MHC Update

by Korey Dyck

Writing the Mennonite Heritage Centre column is like coming up for a breath of fresh air. Sometimes it feels like we, as archives staff, are so focused on doing the work that we forget to tell people what we are doing!

The archives stewards the rich faith history of the Mennonite people as told through letters, photos, film, and music. We act as caretakers of these materials. So, what kinds of collections have been donated to the MHC archives recently? Here's a sampling:

1. Dr. David "Doc" Schroeder, former professor at Canadian Mennonite Bible College (CMBC). Adding to his personal and professional papers already on deposit at MHC, we received a large audiocassette collection of sermons and presentations. Once digitized and hopefully made available on the MHC webpage, it will be wonderful to keep hearing his voice and learning from Doc.

2. Mr. Otto Klassen, documentary filmmaker. An avid Mennonite storyteller using film, Mr. Klassen's films and photos are slowly making their way to the archives. Peter Letkemann is helping to organize the material before the majority of Mr. Klassen's ministry through film is transferred to the archives. We expect to receive 5–7 kilometres of film material in the coming months!

3. Mr. Arthur Kroeger, author and clock expert. Mr. Kroeger's materials arrived this week, including the donation of a Kroeger clock. A draftsman by trade, Mr. Kroeger's materials include research for his *Kroeger Clocks* book and Hoepfner and Bartsch booklet, a database of clock owners, and a series of historical maps. I was honoured to get to know Mr. Kroeger over the last 2 years and hear his stories first hand.

4. Dr. Al Reimer, professor and author. An initial four boxes of material arrived this week of personal papers and research

notes. We look forward to describing what the former *Mennonite Mirror* editor and publisher created and collected over the years.

5. Hope Mennonite Church. We celebrated (as much as archivists do) the first deposit of materials from Hope Mennonite Church in Winnipeg. Congregational records document the life, decisions, and mission of a local church in ministry. It is good to receive the record of how this church has served God within its neighbourhood.

6. Mennonite Literary Society (MLS)/*Rhubarb* magazine. We received files, papers, and correspondence covering a span of 15 years of this literary magazine that continues to publish. The deposit includes a box of 3.5 inch memory discs from the early 1990s.

7. Evangelical Mennonite Conference (EMC). In September, the archives received 383 volumes (boxes) of conference, individual, familial, and church material. We also received complete periodical runs of the *EMC Messenger*, the *EMC Yearbook*, and the *Familien Freund*.

### Other news of note

1. Building Renovation Project. MHC staff has been busy costing a necessary building project for the ongoing safe keeping of items. Specifically, we hope to finalize costs for upgrading our current vault, the creation of a second vault, and the installation of an elevator to the Heritage Centre building. Once costs are known, we will be inviting financial contributions from our friends and supporters to secure and protect the unique historical treasures available at the Centre.

2. Digitization Project. Developing at the same time is our movement toward making more resources available online. While our collection is vast and varied in scope, few resources are available digitally. We anticipate finalizing costs of this project shortly so that we can purchase specialized computer equipment and put out a call for volunteers to help make this project a reality. We have already seen the keen interest in the MAID (Mennonite Archival Image Database) photo website when it launched in spring 2015, and are encouraged to make more items available online. MAID can be viewed at <http://archives.mhsc.ca>.

3. MAID website. The seven Canadian

Mennonite historical societies and archival partners are pleased with the encouraging responses to upload and make available photos held at the seven institutions. Already we are finding different uses of the website than were first envisioned. For example, when a person dies or is in the news, an increase in photo searches traffic is noted. In January, the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada (MHSC) is looking forward to voting on our first U.S. Mennonite institution joining MAID. The staff at MHC would be very pleased if MAID would grow from a Canadian to an international project!

### *Mennonite Historian* by email?

And finally, in an effort to be both fiscally prudent and environmentally responsible, the MHC is asking for expressions of interest in receiving the *Mennonite Historian* magazine by email. Please let us know if you would prefer to transfer your paper subscription to an electronic subscription. By choosing to go digital, the magazine would arrive earlier, reduce both print and mailing costs, and subscribers would have the ability to increase the font size to larger print. If you wish to start receiving the *Mennonite Historian* by email, please let me know ([kdyck@mennonitechurch.ca](mailto:kdyck@mennonitechurch.ca)).



**Arthur Kroeger (1922–2015) passed away on November 13, 2015. This photo was taken one year earlier, during the 225th Celebration of the Emigration of Prussian Mennonites to New Russia, 1788–1789, held on November 15, 2014, at the Mennonite Heritage Centre. Kroeger is noted for his book, *Kroeger Clocks* (2012), that tells his story of researching and repairing clocks made by his family beginning in the 18th century. Photo credit: Gladys Terichow.**

## CMBS Update

by Jon Isaak

During this quarter, CMBS staff were involved in writing and presenting several talks in the community. Conrad Stoesz presented a paper at the “Mennonites, Medicine, and the Body” conference (October 23–24, 2015) hosted by the Chair in Mennonite Studies, University of Winnipeg.

There were 26 papers presented, considering the rise and practice of modern medicine and medical research among Mennonites. Conrad’s paper, entitled “For Women Whose Monthly Period Has Not Occurred: Revisiting Mennonite Midwives of Manitoba,” explored the significance of peculiar recipes found in diaries of 19th-century Mennonite midwives. Before modern medicine, it seems the understanding was that a fetus was not a life until the mother could feel the fetus move, usually after the first trimester. Recipes in these diaries with veiled titles appear designed to stop the fetus from growing into a life by causing a miscarriage.

In October, Jon Isaak drove an empty cargo van to Hepburn, Saskatchewan, to pick up 50 banker boxes of files from the recently-closed Bethany College and haul them back to Winnipeg. The boxes contain faculty files, office files, student newspaper and yearbook files, photos, sound recordings, etc. and will eventually be processed, described, and preserved in the archives.

October also saw a staff transition. Kate (Woltmann) Regier concluded her part-time work in the archives to take a full-time job in the Communications department of the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches.

Kate began her work in the archives in summer 2013 and quickly established herself as a gifted archival assistant with an eye for detail and organization. She completed an intensive course on processing archival materials at the Archives Society of Alberta (Calgary) in spring 2014 and busied herself with processing the backlog of archival donations from churches, individuals, and conference agencies, in order to get their file descriptions on the CMBS website. While her cheery disposition will be missed at CMBS, she’ll still be able to pop in for a visit, as her new office is in the



**Kate Regier, CMBS Archival Assistant (2013–2015).** Photo credit: Dustin Wiebe.

same 1310 Taylor Ave. building, only on the second floor, instead of the main floor where the archives are located.

Phil Enns has been hired on a one-year contract to continue the work two days a week, processing the backlog of donated files.

On November 19, 2015, 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. Over the year, these volunteers



contributed some 1,200 hours of donated time doing things like scanning documents and photos, migrating files to the new website, and filing, sorting, editing, and translating.

Helen Schellenberg, who turns 91 next month, prepared the celebration meal with homemade ethnic Russian Mennonite foods like *Wreninkje*, *Holloptsee*, and farmer sausage.

After the dinner, John C. Klassen shared the genesis, impact, and reception of his Low German Hymn project. Besides publishing several volumes of Low German hymns, he has translated many favorite hymns into Low German and created sound tracks for them, singing all four parts of the music—melody, alto, tenor, and bass! His Low German arrangements of these hymns are being used in South America and on Low German radio broadcasts here in Canada. For a selection of these hymns, see <http://www.plautleet.ca>.

## SUMMER 2016 ARCHIVAL INTERNSHIP



The Historical Commission of the U.S. and Canadian Mennonite Brethren Churches announces one “Summer 2016 Archival Internship,” designed to give a college or 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. Preference will be given to students affiliated with an MB church in the U.S. or Canada.

To apply, send the following materials by February 1, 2016, to Jon Isaak ([jon.isaak@mbchurches.ca](mailto: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 7, 2016, 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 1, 2016**

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

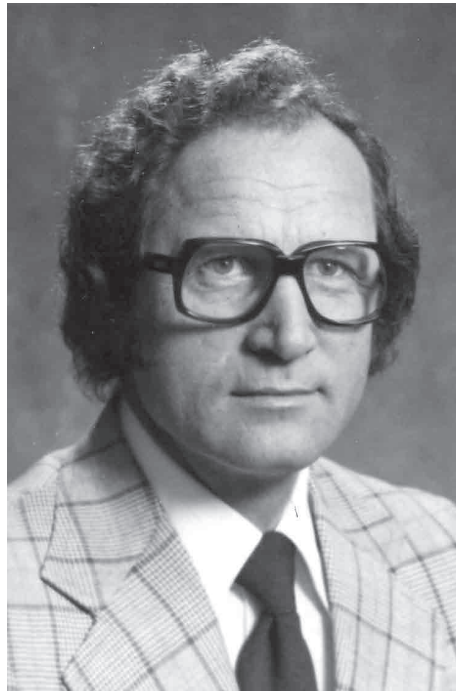
## In Memoriam: Harry Loewen (1930–2015)

On the afternoon of September 16, 2015, Dr. Harry Loewen died in Kelowna, after a long and courageous struggle with cancer.

Born December 8, 1930, to Nikolai Loewen (1910–1942) and Anna Wiebe (1910–1988) in the Russian-Mennonite settlement of Friedensfeld, Southern Ukraine, Soviet Union, six-year-old Loewen witnessed the arrest and later learned of the execution of his father and grandfather by the state police, a fate that befell many other Mennonite families during this period. In a number of moving reflections on the historical significance of the Mennonite experience in the Stalinist period, Loewen depicted the anguish of the young boy at his father's violent end in his collection of stories *No Permanent City*, a book which was also translated into German.

With his grandmother, mother, brother, and sister, he made the long trek through war-torn Europe to Germany from which the family then migrated in 1948 to Canada as refugees in the wake of the Second World War, settling in Southern Alberta. In Coaldale, Alberta, he and his brother John built a house for the family, digging its foundation with shovels. In Coaldale, he married Gertrude Penner on May 17, 1953, his beloved wife and partner for over six decades.

A prodigious scholar and respected teacher, Loewen earned degrees from the Mennonite Brethren Bible College, University of Western Ontario (Waterloo College), University of Manitoba, and earned his PhD with a dissertation on Goethe and Protestantism from the University of Waterloo. After college and high school teaching in Winnipeg, Loewen joined the German department at Wilfrid Laurier University (1968–1978) and served as its chair before accepting a position as inaugural holder of the Chair in Mennonite Studies and Professor of History at the University of Winnipeg (1978–1995). During his tenure at the University of Winnipeg, Loewen founded the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, organized annual symposia in the field, and lectured on Mennonite history and literature at universities in North America, Europe, and at a pedagogical institute in



**Harry Loewen in 1978 when he returned to Winnipeg to become the first Chair in Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg.**

Paraguay. He was also guest professor at the University of Mannheim in Germany.

Loewen published 16 books and numerous research articles. He was a scholar at home in a number of disciplines, including the German classical tradition, the Enlightenment, Russian literature and history, Reformation history, modern German literature (Nietzsche and Kafka), and contemporary Mennonite writers. Loewen was honoured by his colleagues at the University of Winnipeg with the title of Professor Emeritus for his lasting academic contributions and service in furtherance of collegial governance and received recognition from various historical societies for his work in Mennonite history, including the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada's Award of Excellence in 2014.

Loewen's life and work were inspired by a religious humanism which was critical of the fundamentalisms of our time while affirming that the Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage contained resources to guide subsequent generations. During the course of his illness, he completed a study of Martin Luther and his opponents, a book which was launched in Kelowna shortly before his passing. In the final paragraph of that book, Loewen discussed contributions to the shaping of the modern world that owe much to the radical Anabaptist

movement, including the separation of church and state, the democratic principle of free speech, and the "importance of the 16th-century 'revolution of the common man' that left its lasting mark on the labour movements with their drive for justice, equality, and positive legislations throughout the western world."

Harry Loewen lived a life of service animated by a deep love for a suffering humanity, a theme throughout his work. He never lashed out at those who wronged him, consistently seeking justice through peacemaking. With an indomitable spirit, Gertrude and he rebuilt their house (and his cherished library), destroyed by the Okanagan Mountain Forest Fire of 2003. A truly remarkable man who embodied the faith and ideals that guided his life, he will be missed by his family and his many friends and colleagues.

*Based on an obituary that appeared in the Winnipeg Free Press, October 3, 2015.*

### 140th Anniversary

(cont'd from p. 5)

September 26, 1937, recounting a commemorative event in Coaldale, Alberta, in 1937 when Canadian Pacific Railway officials were thanked for their role in Mennonite immigration. John Dennis' encounter with Mennonites in the 1870s is noted (C.F. Klassen photo Collection NP052-01 at the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Winnipeg). See also Victor G. Wiebe, "John Stoughton Dennis (1856–1938)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (GAMEO). See also photos on cover and p.5.

2. Peter Zacharias, *Reinland: An Experience in Community* (Altona: Reinland Centennial Committee, 1976), 34. See also the Jacob Fehr fonds at the Mennonite Heritage Centre, volume 4891.

3. Peter Elias, "The Emigration from Russia to Manitoba," in *Church, Family and Village: Essays on Mennonite Life on the West Reserve*, eds. Adolf Ens, Jacob E. Peters, and Otto Hamm (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2001), 48.

4. Zacharias, *Reinland: An Experience in Community*, 39.

5. Historical Branch, Province of Manitoba, "Dufferin: Then and Now," *Manitoba History* 23 (Spring 1992).

6. Zacharias, *Reinland: An Experience in Community*, 42.

7. Zacharias, *Reinland: An Experience in Community*, 43.

8. John J. Friesen, "Mennonites and Their Neighbours on the West Reserve, 1874–1920," *Preservings* 30 (2010): 54.

9. Zacharias, *Reinland: An Experience in Community*, 39–40.

10. Peter Zacharias, "Aeltester Johann Wiebe (1837–1905)," in *Church, Family and Village*, 62. See also Adolf Ens and John Dyck, "Obervorsteher Isaak Mueller (1824–1912)," in *Church, Family and Village*, 70.

11. Zacharias, *Reinland: An Experience in Community*, 44.

12. Zacharias, *Reinland: An Experience in*

Community, 55.

13. Ens and Dyck, "Obervorsteher Isaak Mueller," in *Church, Family and Village*, 71.

14. Ens and Dyck, "Obervorsteher Isaak Mueller," in *Church, Family and Village*, 74.

15. Ens and Dyck, "Obervorsteher Isaak Mueller," in *Church, Family and Village*, 74–75. See also Zacharias, *Reinland: An Experience in Community*, 53.

16. Ens and Dyck, "Obervorsteher Isaak Mueller," in *Church, Family and Village*, 73–74. See also Zacharias, *Reinland: An Experience in Community*, 63–66.

17. "A Gala Day."

18. Conrad Stoesz, "The Post Road," in *Church, Family and Village*, 81–83.

19. Jake Peters, *The Waisenant: A History of Mennonite Inheritance Custom* (Steinbach: Mennonite Village Museum, 1985), 4–5.

20. Zacharias, *Reinland: An Experience in Community*, 66.

21. "A Gala Day."

22. Conrad Stoesz, "Midwives in the Mennonite West Reserve of Manitoba, 1881–1900," *Manitoba History* 75 (Summer 2014): 13–24.

23. "A Gala Day."

24. Victor G. Wiebe, "John Stoughton Dennis (1856–1938)," GAMEO.

## Mennonite Immigration Lists

(cont'd from p. 3)

also includes the immigration year for each family. This census also has lists of those who arrived from abroad and settled in each village between the 1835 census and the 1850 census. I have extracted and posted these.<sup>8</sup>

An essentially untapped source is Prussian church registers. Some of

these indicate when a family left the congregation for Russia. I have posted a list extracted from the Orlofffelder records.<sup>9</sup> Other congregations with such information include Rosenort (after 1857), Ladekopp (after 1832), and Elbing-Ellerwald (after 1809).

## Endnotes

1. Benjamin H. Unruh, *Die niederländisch-niederdeutschen Hintergründe der Mennonitischen Ostwanderung im 16. 18. und 19. Jahrhundert* (Karlsruhe, 1955).

2. Peter Rempel, *Mennonite Migrations to Russia, 1788–1828* (Winnipeg, 2000).

3. Henry Schapansky, *Mennonite Migrations* (Rosenort, 2006).

4. Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany. II. Hauptabteilung: General-Directorium, Abt. 9 Westpreussen und Netzedistrikt, Materien. Tit. 109, No. 1 Acta das Mennonisten, vol. 5, 1803–1805, found on microfilm LDS #1056558. One of the lists can be found at [http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/1803\\_Emigrant\\_List.pdf](http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/1803_Emigrant_List.pdf).

5. Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany. II. Hauptabteilung: General-Directorium, Abt. 7B, file 4176. For Johann Dyck, see 28 March 1803.

6. The GRANDMA database (Genealogical Registry and Database of Mennonite Ancestry), California Mennonite Historical Society (CMHS) <http://www.grandmaonline.org>.

7. Microfilms and scans of the Odessa archival material can be found at the MHC and CMBS in Winnipeg and most other Mennonite archives in North America.

8. <http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/Molotschna1836-1849ImmigrantsFrom1835Census.html>.

9. <http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/OrlofffelderImmigration.html>.

## People of the Plains

by Bill Schroeder

On a recent visit to the Netherlands we rented a car and drove to the province of Friesland, land of my ancestors. Specific Dutch locations linked to family ancestry have long been lost in the mists of time, notwithstanding my father's considerable research (William Schroeder [1927–2012]).<sup>1</sup> After five centuries, three intervening countries, and several refugee crises, it is understandable that maintaining precise documentation was not uppermost in family thoughts as they prepared, yet again, to flee to safer havens.

As we drove along the rural lanes, I secretly hoped we might stumble upon a site where I would feel some sort of ancient Schroeder vibe, but maybe that is a bit too "New Agey" to be part of the Mennonite DNA. Somewhere near Schraard, I did find a farmer's field where I realized I could, with reasonable confidence, claim that my ancestors might well have lived within a 20-kilometre radius of where I stood. In fact, given the flatness of the area, I could see virtually the entire 20-kilometre radius from my vantage point.

Substitute windmills for grain elevators, a fading old-world architectural icon for its similarly dwindling new-world counterpart, and the terrain reminded



This is a painting by Michael Klaassen (1860–1934) of the area around Tiegenhagen, Prussia, illustrating the flat landscape typical of Mennonite villages with canals, farms, and windmills. Photo credit: MHC photo 662-01.

me very much of my childhood home in southern Manitoba.

What is it with Mennonites and flat surroundings? I grew up by the Morris River, a minor tributary of the Red River. If you have ever heard of it, that could be because of the periodic news reports of spring flooding. In 1966 when I was ten, for example, the Morris burst its modest banks and merged with the flooding Red to create a lake that was, to use a phrase in its literal sense for a change, ten miles wide and one foot deep.

A few years later, now living in Winkler and a bit further south, we once convinced a visiting college student that the Pembina Hills, visible 15 kilometres away, were actually the Rocky Mountains rising out of uninterrupted prairie 1,000 kilometres to the west. I am not sure if he ever learned the truth, but I don't think he was a geography major.

Both my grandfathers emigrated from Russia in the 1920s and surviving black and white photographs of Mennonite areas of Ukraine reveal a similarly flat topography. Judging from the pictures, Chortitza, Ukraine, looks remarkably similar to Chortitz, Manitoba, or, I suspect, Chortitz, Paraguay, and any other identically named village scattered in Mennonite areas around the globe.

Photography did not exist during our Prussian sojourn a few centuries earlier, and Mennonites are not renowned for their landscape painting (Rembrandt stayed in Holland, after all), but the Vistula delta where Mennonites lived for several generations is another level, breadbasket-to-the-nation type of region.

Paraguay, Kansas, northern Mexico, southern Ontario, Saskatchewan—a similar topographic image springs to mind when one hears the place names of these centres of Mennonite settlement, although Abbotsford and the British Columbia lower mainland may be the exception that proves the rule.

Perhaps our propensity for the plains is an extension of our dour worldview. Elders scouting new locations as potential sites for resettlement might have worried that scenic vistas of hills and valleys would distract us from the serious business of farming. If our sons and daughters are tempted by visual splendour, they might also covet fancy jewellery and flashy cars.

I am being facetious, of course; as an agricultural people, finding flat fertile

land to farm makes perfect sense. Every available acre can be planted. The land can be neatly subdivided into tidy rectangles that lend themselves to efficient cultivation. Less preparatory work is necessary, such as moving rocks aside like the settlers in other parts of Canada needed to do.

The 16th-century Frisian farmers had a good thing going. Though forced to migrate, seeking subsequent Babylons

with similar surroundings was eminently sensible.

## Endnotes

1. See William Schroeder, "In Search of Wilhelm Schroeder I," *Mennonite Historian* 19/2 (June 1993): 1, 6–7; "My Inter-Mennonite Christian Heritage," *Mennonite Historian* 30/2 (June 2004): 1–2, 7; and *A Genealogical History of Wilhelm Schroeder (1761–1827) and Helena Reimer (1788–1829) and their descendants* (Winnipeg, 2005).



**Bill Schroeder in 2015, standing in front of a cornfield near Schraard, Friesland, Netherlands. Born in Paraguay, raised in Manitoba, of Russian-Mennonite heritage, Bill currently teaches in scenic Barry's Bay, Ontario, among the hills and forests of the Madawaska Valley. With no Mennonite presence in the area, he is a member of the local Anglican congregation.**



**This photograph shows Arthur W. Slagel (1891–1943), standing second from right, in a rye field in Chortitza, Ukraine, with the representatives of the Agricultural Committee of the American Mennonite Relief (1922–1923). The group delivered food aid to the Mennonite villagers suffering famine in Ukraine at that time. Photo credit: MHC 665-96.0.**

## Low German Club

by Shane Friesen

It seems to me that after several generations in Canada, many Mennonites have stopped using Low German at home with their children. Today, many young and middle-aged Mennonites cannot use this language anymore. For me, this is an unfortunate situation.

I am 39 years old and consider myself lucky. Why? Because I grew up on a farm where my siblings, parents, cousins, uncles, aunts, and grandparents worked closely together. In this setting, Low German was often used for communication, and thus many of my childhood memories include Low German expressions that link me to my Mennonite cultural and religious heritage, as well as to my parents, uncles, aunts, and grandparents.

As a parent now, I wanted to share with my children the connection I felt to my heritage through knowledge of the Low German language. There was just one problem. When I was young, it was not considered essential for my generation to learn Low German, and so we were often not encouraged to speak Low German. Many of my generation were only able to pick up parts of the language by listening to our elders conversing in Low German around us. Now, we are parents and, while many of us understand some Low German, we are often not confident enough to try and use the language, let alone to teach the language to our own children. We may still have our elders to ask for help, but in a few years, we will not.

So, I decided to improve my own understanding of the Low German language. I started in December 2013 by studying Low German dictionaries, reading Low German books, and of course, asking my parents and other native speakers to explain certain aspects of the language.

Through this process, I began developing lessons on Low German that I could use to teach my children to learn the language in a conversational and fun way. These lessons are structured to allow children to learn Low German in a way similar to the way we learn English when very young. The lessons use lots of interaction: singing songs, memorizing verses, and playing games. Written assignments are also incorporated into the lessons to help reinforce what is learned, as



Shane Friesen (front right, with back to camera) leads a group of children during a lesson at the Low German Club in Altona, Manitoba. Shane uses songs, verse memorization, plays, and games to teach Low German. Photo credit: Kim Friesen.

well as to teach reading and writing in Low German.

After several lessons were prepared and tested at home, I decided to invite other young families in my congregation (Altona Berghaler Church) to meet together once a week for 1 hour and go through the lessons together. Initially, I asked the families to commit to four lessons to see if it was something worth pursuing on a greater scale. Thus, our Low German Club was formed in the spring of 2014. The interest was strong and the parents and children seemed to have a lot of fun in our Club. We

agreed to continue the Low German Club in the autumn and winter of 2014–2015.

Over this past winter, we studied 14 lessons and through them have learned 10 verses, six songs, two prayers, how to count, how to tell time, and more. Through the lessons we learned about 250 Low German words! At the beginning of this process, I wasn't sure how fast the children would be able to absorb a new language, but I have been incredibly surprised and pleased at how well they learn. In fact, with respect to my own children who are two, four, and six, I would say that after



Shane Friesen, Altona area farmer and Low German language promoter, poses with his wife, Kim Friesen, and their children for a family picture. Photo credit: TLP Photography, Altona.

these 18 lessons, they know far more Low German than I did at their ages!

It has been a real blessing and joy to be a part of their learning. One of my biggest surprises came just a few weeks ago, when my two-year-old daughter began singing a song at home, a song that I didn't think she knew! She is always at our classes, but usually doing her own thing. I didn't realize she was listening and learning the whole time.

In April 2015, we performed a recital at the Eastview Place nursing home in Altona. In front of about 30 residents, plus staff and visitors, we performed many of the things we learned over the year in Low German Club. What a wonderful experience that was for us! Numerous residents expressed their gratitude for the performance afterwards.

If enough children continue to be interested, Low German Club will continue next autumn. As their language skills improve, I hope to include longer poems, more songs, and even some plays. I feel strongly that there is a need to grow our use of Low German as a written language and will continue to stress reading and writing in our Club.

If any readers have Low German poems, songs, rhymes, expressions or plays, I would love to hear about them. You can send them to me directly. And if you would like to start a Low German Club, I am willing to help you get started. I can be reached by mail at P.O. Box 147, Rosenfeld, Manitoba R0G 1X0 or by email at [friesenshane@yahoo.ca](mailto:friesenshane@yahoo.ca).

*In April 2015, editor Kennert Giesbrecht of Die Mennonitische Post received a letter from Shane Friesen who lives near Altona, Manitoba, describing the Low German Club he started in his church. That letter was published as "Kinder lernen Plattdeutsch" in the May 1, 2015, issue of Die Mennonitische Post and is reproduced here in a shortened form with permission.*

## Book Review

Otto Klassen, *Erinnerungen Aus Meinem Leben* (Winnipeg: Old Oak Publishing, 2015), 292 pp.

*Reviewed by Peter Rempel*

In this memoir, Otto Klassen—widely-known as the maker of numerous films



depicting various episodes in the history of the Russian Mennonites—recounts the story of his life. Klassen retraces his life as a child in an oppressed Mennonite village in Soviet Ukraine, as a young survivor of war in the expanding and then collapsing German *Reich*, next as a pioneer with other refugees in a colony in Paraguay, and finally as an enterprising immigrant and filmmaker in Canada.

What stands out for this reviewer are the numerous ethical dilemmas Klassen, born as Abram in 1927, faced already in his childhood and youth. Klassen repeatedly credits his mother for praying for God to protect him through many perils and for instilling the religious and moral values that guided his decisions in excruciating circumstances. As a child he refused to report the praying and Bible-reading by his parents at home and declined to wear the red scarf of the communist children's club. He experienced or witnessed the eviction of his family from their home, the early death of his father, and the beatings of his grandfather by village officials.

As a youth, Klassen—together with his Mennonite community—welcomed Germany's invasion and occupation of Ukraine as liberation from Soviet Communism. He changed his name to Otto to ease acceptance into a school for training leaders for the *Reich*, but he rejected its depiction of Russians as retarded and concealed the Jewish origin of a neighbour. He also refrained from denouncing his family's former persecutors, saving

them from certain execution by German authorities.

Klassen's abilities and intelligence brought him to Berlin as a security guard for the ministry that supervised the occupied territories. The Allied victory and the cessation of warfare brought on another crucial dilemma for the teenage Otto: how to prevent his family from being repatriated to the Soviet Union with the prospects of severe maltreatment and suffering. For Klassen, this involved refuting false accusations but also fabricating false identities for himself and his family members so that they could move westward away from the reach of Soviet Communism. Klassen could justify the telling of untruths to Soviet, German, and American officials, if it served the goal of getting his family to freedom. Who would or could judge him for this?

The voyage to Paraguay, the settling of the Volendam Colony in the Chaco, and the establishment of his family involved another set of challenges: much hard physical work and the re-constitution of community and church life. Here, Klassen provides fascinating glimpses into the wildness of the Chaco and the work ethic of the Mennonite refugees. The family's re-settlement to Canada in 1955 and his family life, church involvements, and business endeavours thereafter are sketched adequately but not in as much detail—perhaps because the challenges, though significant, were not as acute or dramatic.

Otto Klassen concludes his memoir with an extensive recounting of the planning, execution, and outcomes of his various film projects. Those who—like Otto Klassen—dream of applying their technical and artistic talents to serve their community in pioneering ways and expend themselves to do so will gain insights and inspiration from his story. The tributes by his five children are a pleasant and fitting conclusion to this memoir of a man who has shared many experiences with his dispersed people and has also uniquely and self-sacrificially served them as a documentary filmmaker of their experiences.

NOTE: An English translation of an abbreviated version of Otto Klassen's memoirs was self-published in 2013 under the title *I Remember: The Story of Otto Klassen*.