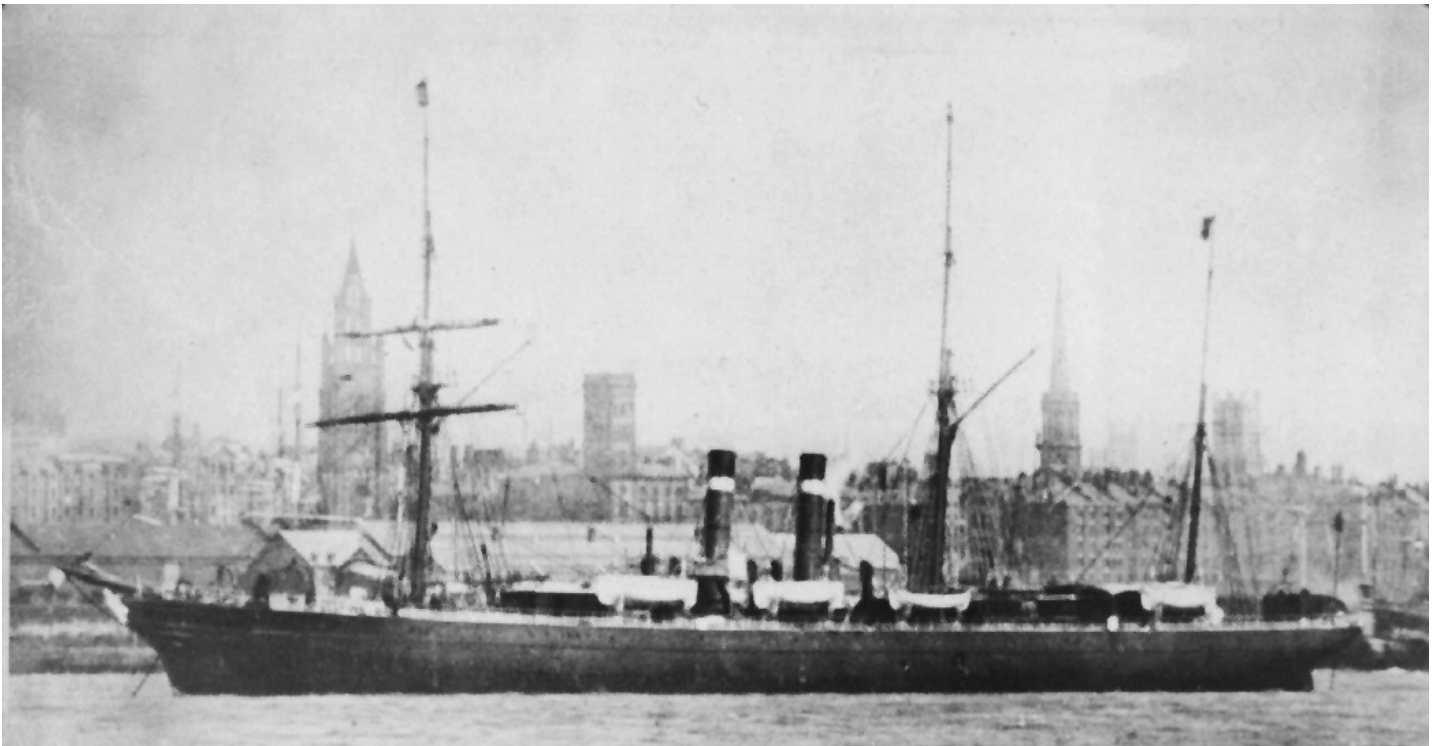


Mennonite Historian

A PUBLICATION OF THE MENNONITE HERITAGE ARCHIVES



The *S.S. Peruvian* was a steam-and wind-powered ship that made three trips to Canada in the 1870s with Mennonites from Europe on board. In 1874, before its first trip with Mennonites, it was rebuilt with new engines and lengthened to 373 feet. On July 13, 1875, it docked at Quebec City with the family of Gerhard Rempel on board. (p. 7). After 155 trans-Atlantic trips the ship was broken up in 1905 in Italy. Photo Credit: MHA, 050-12.0

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Klaas R. Reimer and the Search for Mennonite Blue Aprons

by Rachel Pannabecker

Following a trip in 1837 from Molotschna to Sarepta, a Moravian Brethren colony on the Volga River, Johann Cornies wrote to Franz Voth, then living in Einlage, Chortitza colony:

During my visit to Sarepta, several members of that community asked me to try to talk a Molochnaia master blue-dyer to accept an apprentice to learn practical dye work in blue. None of the dyers in Sarepta practice this art that is used by Mennonites to dye and print aprons and tablecloths.¹

Cornies used the German words *Blaufärben und Drucken* for the craft of making these blue textiles.² Designs were created by block printing a resist paste onto plain linen or cotton fabric that when dry was submersed in indigo dye. Resist-printed areas remained white, or, if the paste contained a mineral additive, a highlight color such as chrome orange, while the non-printed areas turned blue. A medium blue was achieved by a first round of printing and dyeing followed by a second application of resist paste and a dip in the dye vat so that the non-printed areas turned a deep blue.³ In German, this resist-dye process is called *Blaudruck*—literally blue-print—and the craftsman dyer *Blaufärber*. Traditionally a separate craftsman made the printing blocks: a) carving designs into hardwood (*Formschneiden*); or b) hammering

brass pins and strips into hardwood (*Formstechen*). Cornies' correspondence with Voth included the desire for the apprentice to learn *Formstechen*.⁴

Blue-print fabric was used in 19th century village dress across central Europe.⁵ Even though Cornies clearly considered them as Mennonite goods, these textiles, their blue-dyers and the process of blue-printing have been largely forgotten among Mennonites. Yet historical sources provide evidence of seven South Russian Mennonites beyond Franz Voth who were known as *Blaufärber* or as having a blue-dyeing and printing business (*Blaufärberei und druckerei*):

- Bestvater, Jakob (1856-1913, #963333), Ladekopp, Molotschna
- Fast, Kornelius Martin (1860-1920, #125859), Blumstein, Molotschna
- Janzen, Heinrich (dates unknown), Lichtfelde, Molotschna
- Martens, Jakob (dates unknown), Schönau, Molotschna
- Schellenberg, Abraham (1845-1920, #11552), Tiege, Molotschna
- Thiessen, Jakob (1832-1906, #87713),

Schönau, Molotschna

- Thiessen, Jakob J. (1857-1935, #133626), Schönau, Molotschna.⁶

While examples of blue-print aprons and tablecloths are preserved in Mennonite museums in Kansas and South Dakota, only a portion of their history has been uncovered. And much remains to be discovered in regards to blue textiles belonging to Russian Mennonites who settled in Canada.

Only one public collection in Canada is known to hold blue-print aprons connected to Anabaptist communities—two Hutterite aprons at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta.⁷ However, invaluable references to Mennonite aprons are found in the diary left by Klaas R. Reimer, a prosperous merchant and influential leader in Steinbach, Manitoba.⁸

Reimer wrote intermittently in his diary from 1885 to 1896. In the portions that have been translated and published, he mentioned “apron” or “aprons” in eight entries, six of which lack adjectives to describe the material, colors or patterns. However, a letter of February 10, 1890, contains the words *gedruckte Schürzen*, and *gedruckte Schürze* appears in a letter of February 15, 1896—translated as “printed aprons” and “stamped apron” respectively.⁹ The word *gedruckte* links these aprons to the blue-printing process, which is generalized to other aprons in the diary.

Reimer mentioned aprons primarily as mail order merchandise for customers in the United States:

- Nebraska, Peter Isaaks, 2/20/1890: “17 aprons and shawls for \$27.00”
- Nebraska, Heinrich Ratzlaff, 2/20/1890: “6 aprons at 60 cents each”
- Minnesota, Johan Goertzen, 2/21/1890: “3 aprons at 55 cents equals \$1.65”
- Minnesota, Johan Goertzen, 4/5/1890: “1 dozen aprons and 1 dozen shawls.”¹⁰

On March 14, 1890, Reimer wrote that he sent Widow Doerksen in Kansas “wool and six shawls” and that he “dropped the price 10 cents for the defects in the aprons,” which he didn’t describe.¹¹ A close examination of an apron at Kauffman Museum donated by a family with roots in Hillsboro, Kansas, shows undyed spots where specks of paste had dripped and resisted the indigo dye—a mishap common

(cont’d on p. 4)

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Detail of apron/Schürze, dark blue, medium blue, white (KM 2025.1.1). Photo credit: Weldon Schloneger/Kauffman Museum.



Detail of apron/Schürze, dark blue, medium blue, white, chrome orange (KM 86.198.3). Photo credit: Weldon Schloneger/Kauffman Museum.

Genealogy and Family History

Letters from America 1875

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

The following letters were translated from a rather low-quality photocopy made by Goerge K. Epp¹ while visiting Germany. These photocopies are found in the Mennonite Heritage Archives.²

Although letters from Russia to the new settlers in Manitoba have been preserved,³ these may be the only existing letters written by an early West Reserve settler to Russia. The two authors were the daughters of Jacob Hoeppner (1822-1885; GM#183413)—Katharina, wife of Franz Klassen, and Anna, wife of Heinrich Harder.⁴ Both families arrived in Canada on July, 19, 1875, aboard the *S. S. Canadian*. By September, 1875, they were living together in the newly founded village of Blumenfeld in the West Reserve.

My comments and corrections are in square brackets. I have italicized all the surnames mentioned in these letters.

Dear parents, brothers, sister, and in-laws. Apart from, first of all, hearty greetings to all of you, regarding my promise, I can't help but report our hearts' joy; which we waited for longingly for a long time—news from our children from America—we happily received these two letters on October 16th with the following message [likely written by Jacob Hoeppner while he copied the letters]:

Blumenfeld, on September 1, 1875

Dear, very much loved parents, the hours and days are passing like in a fog, and there is almost no time to sit [and] write, while yours, the parents' [illegible word], and our children's hearts almost indescribably long for you, there is finally some time to tell you a little bit about our [illegible word] now[?], as well as something about the[?] city[?]. The peace-loving God may give that these lines find you in the best health, physically as well as spiritually; I wrote a letter from Hamburg, but I don't know if you received it; when we left Hamburg and went to the North Sea, we experienced something terrible, because we all were sick; however, we arrived well in Hull after traveling for 39 hours, stayed [over] night

and, in the morning, billowing steam, we left and arrived well in Liverpool; there, we berthed for three days, went unto the big ship, and went over the big and wild ocean; on the North Sea, it went badly, [and] here we imagined[?] it to be worse, but[?] there[?] was nothing terrible; when God lifts up the heart, it does not fear, and dreads neither death nor sea, but [one?] has to fully give oneself[?] into God's care, and then there is no fear to have; in the beginning, we received some bad food; recently though, we received quite good food; however, I advise you, take some bread with you, so that when you are in need, you have something to eat, because if it goes very well, there are [still] difficulties and deprivations of all kind that you can[?] not imagine beforehand; but those who emigrate for their freedom of conscience, do not find it difficult to carry the small cross. I don't want to describe the journey to you in all detail, as I have little paper, but I want to tell you that, in Hamburg, we almost gave our money away for free exchange, but got it [back] without any problems in Toronto; six days of travel from Quebec, we buried *Heinrich Harder's* [daughter] Katharina [GM#183629] in Duluth; by the way, all of us came here[?] pretty much without sickness; only now we realized[?], how far away we are from you; and the only comfort is that, in spring, all of you will come and follow us. Dear parents, when we could finally see each other, how would we press hands if you would be here, because we don't want to go there, we are doing very well and are not in distress; we have enough bread and meat, and when we'll have eaten all of it, we'll go to get more; there's enough food here for everybody[?], for the wealthy as well as for the poor; we get the wood from the forest for free; getting [...] load of wood takes 5 to 6 hours; but [we] only drive with oxen, which cost us [illegible word] dollars; 1 cow costs 40; we bought a [illegible word] for 21 dollars; however, we get food for free, and now I have ten dollars left, then my cash box will be empty, but we don't have any worries because of that, as the Lord will not leave those who put their hopes on him. Many greetings to all of you, and give our regards to all friends, and may you be under the grace of

the Very Highest, from your children Franz and Katharina *Klassen*!

We often heard that father was already on his way, that's why I didn't write something to him; we look forward to his arrival quite often already, which makes our hearts jump when we think of him being here soon; however, if it should not be the case that he is on his way, so please, appreciate my anticipation of being able to pick[?] him up here at the emigrant houses; so I tell you that the boy Jakob *Bartsch* broke his arm on the journey on the Red River [was he related to Jacob *Bartsch* 1848-1922; GM#182628?], while Franz *Peters* [daughter] Susana [GM#184391] fell into it and drowned helplessly and was not found again, so, when you will be travelling, be very careful indeed in all places, as one can almost not be careful enough to not get into anything, which one only learns to realize when one has experienced it, which often causes bitter pain such as it went with Franz Peters.

Attached/enclosed: we, Heinrich *Harders*, report to you, dear parents and siblings, that we, thank God many times, already completed the long and hard journey some time ago, but on the way, we buried our daughter Katharina, who died after 5 days of sickness. Apart[?] from that, however, we are now quite well. [We] live together with Franz *Klassens* [in] a Simlanka which we made[?] for the cattle. As we know, you are told a lot about here which is not actually true, namely that locusts ate everything here; we haven't seen any locusts, and here is so much grass that it also is impossible that they were here, because we mow grass to hay, everyone as much as they ever want, without any limits or rationing, because there is a lot of grass here. You are also being told that there is a famine here, but that is not [the case], because the government took care of us that we must not get into distress, only with the condition that we need to pick up the food one and a half day's journey away; the distance is not far, but it takes long with oxen; you also have heard that we need to go to work here; that is true, but we only go[?] to our own work, because we haven't yet completed the winter home for us which [illegible word] in our opinion, though, will not take very long anymore; we dig 3 to 4 feet into the ground and then

(cont'd on p. 5)

Blue Aprons

(cont'd from p. 2)



Close-up of blue-print apron/Schürze with printing defects (KM 2018.16.2).

Photo credit: Weldon Schloneger/Kauffman Museum.

in hand-printing by an inexperienced dyer—and likely the defect requiring a discount.

Reimer also referred to printed aprons as gifts. On February 21, 1890, Reimer sent Minnesotan Johan Goertzen three aprons, nine shawls, and seeds and encouraged further orders. He then noted that “In case they did not want these goods, they should give them to old Gerhard Willms as a present for the cousins.”¹²

On March 15, 1890, Reimer wrote that he sent Aunt Esau in Kansas “A letter to encourage her in bearing the cross that she has because of her husband. Out of sympathy I sent her material for a dress, for an apron and a shawl.”¹³

Almost six years later in a letter to Johan Goertzen on February 15, 1896, Reimer commented: “My wife also sent a stamped apron for sister-in-law Goertzen.”¹⁴ These three gifts demonstrate that Mennonites valued printed aprons and thereby provide insight into why Mennonites would purchase aprons that could easily be fashioned from any piece of cloth.

Reimer’s diary does not divulge where he acquired printed aprons for his customers. However, the diary entry for February 10, 1890, noted that his letter to Mr. Neufeld in Plum Coulee concerned “the printed aprons (*Schuerzen*?), of which I do not need any this year.”¹⁵ Was Neufeld a *Blaudrucker* producing aprons in his Manitoba home? While the identity of this Mr. Neufeld is yet to be discovered, to date no historical record has been found of a Mennonite blue-printer named Neufeld.¹⁶

Or, did Neufeld import aprons from a Mennonite *Blaudrucker* in Russia? Reimer’s diary suggests such a possibility

in an October 31, 1885, letter to his maternal uncle Bernhard Rempel in Molotschna.¹⁷ Reimer encouraged Rempel to emigrate or at least come to Manitoba for a visit and recommended the following for financing the trip:

*And about travelling expenses, you can do it. I heard Martin Barkmans, Nebraska, are planning to travel to Russia in the next coming year. Their last trip had not cost them anything. He had so much income from trees and aprons (Schaltuecher) that it had paid for his trip.*¹⁸

An alternate source for printed aprons is suggested by Dr. P.S. Alexieva, a Russian who visited Mennonites in Gretna, Manitoba, in 1887:

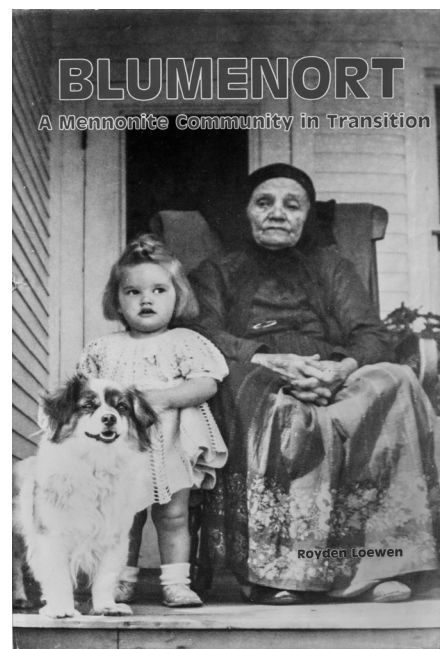
*Calico is worn much less in America than in Europe; here the patterns on the dresses of women and children were the same as those used in the calico-printing factories of Serpukhov or Ivanovo for the southern provinces. Mennonites are conservative regarding their appearance and do not change their tastes. In Winnipeg there are warehouses where goods are kept for them, which are printed in England in imitation of Russian models. The same is true of headscarves. Only here in all of America can you see the dyes, print motifs, and color schemes that the eye has become accustomed to in Russia.*¹⁹

By the 1880s, calico fabric was machine-roller printed, rather than hand-block printed, and did not include the multi-step process of *Blaudruck* resist-dyeing. Regardless, Alexieva’s report that Winnipeg merchants were aware of Mennonite preferences aligns with Reimer family history that tells how Klaas R. Reimer began his store business with dry goods consigned from Robert Jones Whitla, a Winnipeg merchant.²⁰

Reimer’s passing references to printed aprons are invaluable because they reveal how aprons functioned as merchandise and gift, and indicate the retention of a cultural tradition among Mennonite immigrants. To learn more about this history, Kauffman Museum in North Newton, Kansas, established the Indigo Textile Project to locate surviving examples and historical documents.

The assumption that more artifacts and information exist is supported by the cover of Royden Loewen’s book *Blumenort*.²¹ The black-and-white photo taken in 1947

shows Katharina Koop Klassen wearing an apron with a double floral border along the hem and a vertical pattern in the middle section—both characteristic of blue-print



Blumenort cover photo of apron-wearing Katharina Koop Klassen.

Permission courtesy of Royden Loewen. Photo credit: Weldon Schloneger/Kauffman Museum.

aprons in Mennonite museums. Whether Katharina brought this apron from her Russian home or whether it was purchased from Klaas R. Reimer, she chose to wear it for this photo taken 73 years after she arrived in Manitoba.²²

Kauffman Museum invites you to join the recovery of the history of Mennonite blue-print aprons by sharing information on:

- indigo aprons and tablecloths and their family histories
- blue-dyers/printers and printing block craftsmen
- printing blocks, resist-paste recipes, pattern books or descriptions of blue-dyeing and printing
- drawings or photographs of women wearing indigo aprons.

Contact Rachel Pannabecker at Kauffman Museum, Bethel College, 300 E. 27th Street, North Newton, KS, 67117, USA or rpann@bethelks.edu.

Rachel Pannabecker is the retired director of Kauffman Museum and the lead researcher for the Indigo Textile Project. She holds a Ph.D. in textiles and clothing with a minor in cultural anthropology from Ohio State University. Rachel thanks

Conrad Stoesz, Ernest Braun and James Urry for research assistance.

Endnotes

1. Harvey L. Dyck, Ingrid I. Epp, and John R. Staples (eds.), *Transformation on the Southern Ukrainian Steppe: Letters and Papers of Johann Cornies*, Volume II, 1836-1842 (University of Toronto Press, 2020), 71. Johann Johann Cornies (GRanDMA #44146) and Franz Heinrich Voth (#199382).
2. SAOR 89-1-432/55, Peter J. Braun Russian Mennonite Archive Collection, Mennonite Heritage Archives.
3. For color photographs of blue-printed aprons and a tablecloth, see Rachel Pannabecker, "Research Note: Seeking blue aprons and their Mennonite Blaufärber," *Mennonite Life* 78 (2024), <https://ml.bethelks.edu/2024/07/08/research-note-seeking-blue-aprons-and-their-mennonite-blaufarber/>.
4. SAOR 89-1-432/55.
5. In 2018 blue-printing was named to the UNESCO List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, based on an application submitted by Austria, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, and Slovakia. Blue-print fabrics can also be seen in some 19th century sarafan garments for Russian women.
6. For more details and sources, see Pannabecker. A note in GRanDMA describes Abraham Woelk (1840-1900, #63483) as "'Blaufarber' and owned a print shop," but a descendant suggests that Woelk was more likely a bookkeeper for foster father and blue-printer Jakob Thiessen.
7. Marijke Kerkhoven, "Striving for the Divine Ornament: Change and Adaptation of Hutterite Women's Dress in North America," *Material History Review* 43 (Spring 1996), 6-18. See Figures 1 and 2 for apron C-16907-d described on pages 7 and 13, and description of apron C-13712 on page 13.
8. CA MHC EMC-V-5907-5, Klaas R. Reimer Diary, Mennonite Heritage Archives. For English translations, see Delbert F. Plett, *Pioneers and Pilgrims: The Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde in Manitoba, Nebraska and Kansas, 1874 to 1882* (D.F.P. Publications, 1990), 115-126; and Royden Loewen, *From the Inside Out* (University of Manitoba Press, 1999), 134-148. Klaas R. Reimer (#3956).
9. Reimer Diary, 88, 112; Plett, 117, 126.
10. Plett, 117, 119. Peter Isaak (#49934), Heinrich Ratzlaff (#4345), Johann Goertzen (#276562).
11. Plett, 118. "Widow Doerksen" is presumed to be Maria Doerksen to whom Reimer wrote on January 24, 1891 (Plett, 121), which fits Maria P. Toews Duerksen (#5584), who settled in Hillsboro, Kansas, in 1875. Maria was the third wife of Cornelius W. Duerksen, and was widowed from 1888 to 1892 when she married Jakob J. Hildebrand. As a widow, Maria was unable to support her six children so Mennonite families took in three sons and a daughter until her remarriage enabled all to be reunited: Delbert F. Plett, *Johann Plett: A Mennonite Family Saga* (Crossway Publications, 2003), 227.
12. Plett, 117. Gerhard Willems (#5884) married Katharina Rempel (#5852), sister to Klaas' mother Elisabeth Rempel Reimer (#3955).
13. Plett, 118. The Reimer Diary, 94, shows the Kansas heading, which Plett did not include based on Peter U. Dueck's omission (CA MHC PP-Volume 6521-9, Klaas R. Reimer, Mennonite Heritage Archives). Loewen, 139, includes the word Kansas. Aunt Esau is presumed to be Anna Klassen Esau (#4389), the paternal aunt of Reimer's third wife Margaretha Klassen (#3959). In 1890, Anna could have been visiting her younger sister Maria Klassen Harms (#280303) who immigrated to Kansas with the Gnadenau community in 1874.
14. Plett, 126. A GRanDMA search yielded no "sister-in-law Goertzen" for Klaas or his wives

Katharina Willms, Helena Warkentin, and Margaretha Klassen. Loewen, 148, inserts [Johann] before Goertzen leading to the presumption that he is the same Goertzen with whom Reimer corresponded in 1890. Minnesotan Johann Goertzen (#276562) never married, but in 1896 had sisters-in-law through three brothers and two half-brothers who lived in and around Mountain Lake.

15. Plett, 117.
16. Multiple men named Neufeld resided in Plum Coulee in 1890.
17. Bernhard (#5851) was a brother to Klaas' mother Elizabeth Rempel Reimer (#3955).
18. Plett, 116. Plett's (*Schaltuecher*) is based on translator Peter U. Dueck's (*Scheltiecher*), likely inserted in parentheses because the Low German term contrasted with other entries where Reimer used *Schürzen*. Reimer's paternal aunt Margaretha Reimer Barkman (#3948) immigrated to Jansen, Nebraska, with her husband Martin (#3982). In 1883 Barkman reported that his orchard contained 180 apple, 190 peach, 35 apricot, 8 plum, 35 cherry, 4 pear, and 40 mulberry trees: Henry Fast, "The Kleine Gemeinde in the United States of America" in *Profile of the Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde 1874* (DFP Publications, 1987), 113. Nebraskan Abraham Thiessen imported Russian mulberry Morus Alba seed: see Abraham Thiessen, *The Mulberry Trees and Silk Culture* (State Journal Co., 1884), 4.
19. P.S. Alexieva, ПО АМЕРИКЪ. ПОБЪЗДКА ВЪ КАНАДУ И СОЕДИНЕННЫЕ ШТАТЫ [*Across America: A Journey to Canada and the United States*] (Moscow, A. Lang, 1888), 298-9. AI translation with amendments by Rachel Pannabecker.
20. E.K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia: The Mennonites in Manitoba* (D.W. Friesen & Sons Ltd., 1955), 153.
21. Royden Loewen, *Blumenort: A Mennonite Community in Transition, 1874-1882* (Blumenort Mennonite Historical Society, 1983).
22. Seventeen-year-old Katharina Koop (#6633) immigrated with her parents and seven siblings as one of 65 Kleine Gemeinde families that arrived at the confluence of the Red and Rat River on August 1, 1874. On December 26 of that year Katharina married Peter B. Klassen (#6720), whose family had sailed on the same immigrant ship, S.S. Austrian. See Delbert F. Plett, "Katharina Barkman Koop 1832-1923," *Preservings* 10.2 (June 1997), 31-32.

1875 Letters

(cont'd from p. 3.)

we build everything else above the ground, because the water is only 8 to 10 feet below the ground here. The steppe is straight and even; there are several villages around, and in general, 20 villages have been adopted by our community, and maybe about two times 20 stayed empty, so accelerate your steps to emigration, because there is a flow from all places on earth to America; we haven't taken any land for you, because [one] needs [to pay] a registration fee of 10 dollars; however, we live on the outskirts of the colony and there are still vast lands next to us, so come here [sooner?] so that you can be our neighbors

when you are among the first to arrive in spring; we have very nice land; water is part of our plan as well, ducks and prairie chickens are very common here, same for deer, coyotes, and badgers, also squirrels and bats; only the rifles are very costly; those can be brought with you very well from there, though; for the journey, prepare boxes and not bags, because in the bags, everything fragile will break, and it won't be asked how big the box is; it will only be weighed; but keep everything with you in the baggage car and don't send it ahead as it happened last year, because the things sent ahead, the boxes and car boxes, are not here yet; there hasn't even been a message about them. I need to let you know about the journey that you should not travel with too many at once, because the less, the more space there is; many also brought along the small silver coins and spend one kopeck for one cent here; don't know if it will stay like that, though; we only got 66 ¾ cents for a ruble when exchanging money, but the paper is not useful here, but what they are selling to you there in Hamburg won't help you except for the mattresses; we received a letter from Jakob Elias; [GM#182180] they live a 4 day's journey driving with oxen away from us, but we haven't seen them, but heard that they are always a little sick which you can tell to Jakob Friesen as well as to father if he's still there; we have had three burials in our village; the Aeltester Johann Wiebe was here[?] as well; he seems also quite happy to me.

Heartfelt greetings to all of you, and give our regards to all friends, from your children who love you faithfully,

Heinrich and Anna Harder,
In our village, there are 24 farms.
Blumenfeld, on September 1, 1875.

Endnotes

1. See [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Epp,_George_K._\(1924-1997\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Epp,_George_K._(1924-1997)). Unfortunately, the owner of the original has not cooperated with any further attempts to photograph these letters.
2. MHA Volume 4047 file 1 (last 6 pages).
3. Edward Falk: a) The Dr. Abraham B. Hiebert letters, 1877-1924. Winkler, MB (2002). b) The "Hoepfner" letters, Folio 2, 1876-1891. Winkler, MB (2004).
4. For more information on the GRanDMA database information see: <https://mgi.mennonitegenealogy.com/grandma/whatsgrandma.php>.

MHA Update

by Conrad Stoesz

There are a number of activities to highlight at the Mennonite Heritage Archives. To mark the 500th anniversary of Anabaptism the Mennonite Heritage Archives has worked with designer Aniko Szabo to produce custom commemorative metal bookmarks featuring Menno Simons. Proceeds go to support the archives. Get yours by contacting us at info@mharchives.ca or online at www.commonword.ca

The weekly newspaper *Der Bote* was an integral publication for the Mennonites who arrived in Canada in the 1920s. From

Mennonite newspaper, and I do not read or understand German. However, with the help of AI, I can occasionally look up the translation of various articles. For instance, I learned a new phrase that appears on the frontpage of every copy: *Licht von Oben*, which means 'light from above'. Ironically, my workstation has a light shining from above that constantly reminds me of this phrase."

In April, our archivist, Conrad Stoesz was invited to speak at the Winkler Heritage Society Annual General meeting where he featured the early years of Mennonite settlement in the Winkler (West Reserve) area. In May, he spoke to an enthusiastic



Archivist Conrad Stoesz speaking to a group of newcomers in Altona. Photo Credit: MHA.

Canadian Council of Archives, we have hired Baden Gaeke-Franz to process the Winnipeg Mennonite Children's Choir materials deposited by Helen Litz and her children. The choir began in 1957 and performed into the 2010s. The choir won numerous awards and traveled internationally.

MHA's new story-telling project continues to garner interest with audiences. "Tales from the Mennonite Heritage Archives" was launched in November 2024 with the team of Dan Dyck, Caley Dyck, Graeme Unrau and Conrad Stoesz with support by Golden West Radio. The weekly program airs on AM stations 950, 1220, and 1290 Sundays at 9:15 Central Time and can also be found on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, YouTube, and on the archives' website www.mharchives.ca/tales-from-the-archives/.

Recent episodes include the Trek to Central Asia, Romancing Fasma, Circle Games, and Helena F. Reimer: Nurse, Administrator, Adventurer.



Imano Nademo at her workstation where she scans and digitizes the 1924-1929 issues of *Der Bote*. Photo Credit: MHA.

1924-2008 it supplied the community with hope, courage, news, and community. It has become a valuable tool for people researching their families and a host of other topics. The Mennonite Heritage Archives has invested in the creation of an online platform to host large amounts of digitized content. Now thanks to funding from Mennonite Genealogy Inc. we will be posting the paper 1924-1949 at <https://collections.mharchives.ca/> and it will be accessible with a free account. Imani Ndemo says "Digitizing *Der Bote* has been both easy and challenging, mainly because it is a German-language

group of newcomers at the Regional Connections Immigrant Services office in Altona about Mennonite history and the Altona area. Students came from Bolivia, Mexico, Ecuador, Russia, Ukraine, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela, Columbia, Philippines, and Eritrea. Later that month he spoke at an event hosted by the Alberta Mennonite Historical Society, taking the audience on a photographic tour of Anabaptist sites in Switzerland, Germany, and Holland.

Thanks to funding from the Young Canada Works program through the



Helena F. Reimer, subject of a recent Tales from the Mennonite Heritage Archives episode. Photo Credit: MHA 666-98.0.

Voices from EMC, EMMC and MB Pasts

EMC

Inspired by a missionary, Mary Brandt's story of faith, a "young people's" group from the Steinbach EMC agreed to trust the Lord for the money required to buy a stove for the children's home in Bad Gandersheim, Germany. Recognizing they also needed to make an effort, they



Steinbach EMC youth ready to distribute their baking in the community. Photo Credit: EMC Archives D1960-EMC-F432-P-00297.

decided to bake cakes and cookies and bring them to the homes of their church family and ask for a donation. The youth group prayed specifically for \$200. By noon, all the baking had been distributed, so they baked and distributed another round, reaching their goal that evening. The money was presented to Mary Brandt on Sunday during a "faspa" get-together at the home of Pastor Arnold Fast.

As reported by Helen Braun in the "Truth for Youth" column of *The Messenger* vol. 5(6) April 14, 1967.

Mennonite Brethren

In the 1940s, children were transported to Daily Vacation Bible School in Towers, Alberta by horse and wagon. The teachers were H. Peters and H. Walde. These summer Bible schools for children were carried out by churches in often remote areas to introduce them to stories from Scripture and to the Christian faith. In some cases, these schools led to services for the parents of the children, and the establishment of a mission church. A number of churches in Canada can trace their origins back to these very modest Daily Vacation Bible Schools.



Children posing in front of the wagon that would take them to DVBS in Towers, Alberta in the 1940s. Photo Credit: Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, NP 044-11-11

EMMC.

The Gospel Message Low German radio ministry was born in response to spiritual hunger and public requests by the larger Mennonite constituency. Radio work that had begun in 1961 in Saskatchewan amalgamated with the program produced in Manitoba. The result was *Die Evangelische Botschaft*, with John D. Friesen as host and speaker on a regular basis. This provided continuity for the audience. Friesen was well-known and appreciated by many because of his evangelistic work, and so his programs were a natural follow-up to his public meetings. Friesen's voice on the radio was that of a friend whom many had met personally.



John D. Friesen speaking at Nutana Park Mennonite Church, Saskatoon, Sk. Photo Credit: MHSS 891-6

Jack Heppner, *Search for Renewal: The Story of the Rudnerweider/EMMC 1937-1987*, p. 236.

Interview of Gerhard Rempel by Victor Peters ca August 1958¹

Gerhard Rempel came to Canada in 1875. Born in the Old Colony in Russia in 1864, he was 11 years old when he together with his parents emigrated to Canada. They stayed in Ontario for almost a year before going to Manitoba where Rempel later farmed at Waldheim, and was village mayor for some time. He was married to Helen Wall and when he died at the age of 97 he was survived by his eight children, all of them making their home in Manitoba. The following interview, taken on tape, was made three years before Rempel's death in 1961.

Now I want to introduce you to Mr. George Rempel. He now lives in Winkler and next month he turns 94 years old. He is the oldest of our people who came here in the 1870s years and not only has he experienced much, but he also has a very good memory. Before I turned on the tape-recorder, he told me about the old Hoepfner Bible. It is from 1640² and is now in Morden. [Rempel's grandmother, Maria Hoepfner, was the sister to the Deputy Hoepfner who in 1787 went from Prussia to Russia. vP]

Peters: Good evening. Today I want to interview one of our oldest pioneers who is Mr. Gerhard Rempel of Myrtle, now living in Winkler. Mr. Rempel was born in 1864 and I assume he is the oldest of our early settlers still living. He has quite a remarkable memory. I am sorry that I don't have time to put everything he knows on tape.

He also speaks of the old Hoepfner Bible of 1642 which can be found in Morden. Mr Rempel himself also is a descendant of Deputy Hoepfner from the Kaump, Russia, and now I want to begin with the interview with Gerhard Rempel.

Peters: Mr. Rempel, I want first of all to ask you, how old are you?

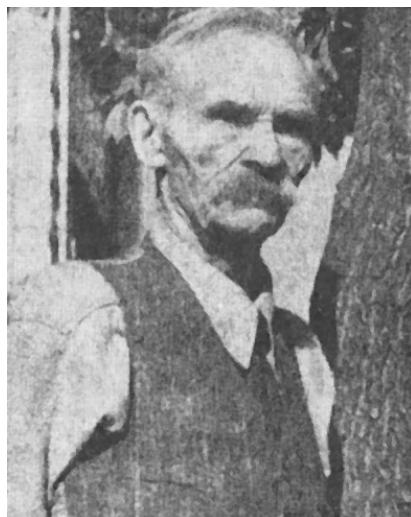
Rempel: I am almost 94 years old.

Peters: And where were you born?

Rempel: I was born near Trepolstje-Tripolski in the village of Hoffnungsfeld.³

cont'd p 8

(cont'd from p7)



Gerhard Rempel (GM#183449). Photo Credit: Winkler Heritage Society.

Peters: Just where is that? Could you describe that a bit more exactly?

Rempel: That nobleman's estate was about 10 Verst [11 km] from Neuendorf [Chortitza Colony]. It has the name Tripolski; that was the nobleman, and his own shepherds let the dogs tear the nobleman to pieces, in 1853 when serfdom was abolished.

Peters: Ahh, it was ... and things probably got pretty wild, presumably.

Rempel: Oh yes.

Peters: That is quite an interesting story. And how old were you as you...

Rempel: then my parents moved away from there to Fürstenland, to the village of Alexanderthal. At that time I would have been about two years old.

Peters: And how old were you.... And did your parents have a farm or homestead there?

Rempel: No, they lived there until I was in my fifth year, and then they moved to Sergeyewka [Fürstenland]. That village was being founded at the time, and there I had my schooling and it was in my eleventh year when we moved to America.

Peters: And can you still remember the trip?

Rempel: Oh yes.

Peters: Would you be able to tell us something about the trip?

Rempel: Oh yes. We drove from home to Great Lepeticha - [interrupts himself]

to give more specific details]—first to Little Lepetich the town next to our village, that was about 2 Verst [2 km] away and from there we drove to Great Lepeticha. There came ...[interrupts himself] We lived on the Konstje. The Konstje River went out of the Dnieper River and ran approximately from Kamenka to Greater Lepeticha, making something of a...

Peters [interrupts]: A bow/bend there,

Rempel: A bow/bend and on that island/delta is where we as well as many others lived. There was the village of Michaelsburg and Georgs—no [corrects himself] and Sergeyevka—these were the villages that lay on the river. And there was the Konstje/Konska [River] and I think somebody had a horse-breeding operation there and that is why the river was named that.

Peters: Oh yes. Yes, yes, that sounds ...

Rempel: A large horse-breeding farm that the count -garbled - [interrupted by Peters]

Peters: In Russian horses were called "Konstje/Konska"...

Rempel: Yes, the count [garbled] had a horse-breeding farm there.

Peters: And was your father the foreman there or an employee?

Rempel: No, no, my father was not a [interrupts himself], my father was [indistinguishable] an educated man, in no such matters.

Peters: And from there you moved away.

Rempel: Then we moved away from Taljew [abbrev for of Sergeyevka?] that was in my eleventh year. We went from there to Great Lepeticha where we boarded the ship and went up to [two place names not distinguishable] and then to Kherson and then we went across the Black Sea to Odessa, and from there we boarded the first train I ever saw and traveled on it to Austria.

Peters: Did almost all of the emigrants that came here in the 1870s depart from Odessa and by train via Austria or...?

Rempel: Yes, most traveled that way. ... they probably will not have taken the water route and we will have travelled differently than the others. We went over—I don't know where they would have gone, ... They went directly from Alexander by train. They didn't come ... [garbled]—but they also came to Odessa. I don't know

what kind of city it was... were met—[garbled] we came from Austria and went to Germany, to Hamburg. There I think we laid up for three days on the North Sea.

Peters: ...,and then tell us, and then you went on the big ship when you left there?

Rempel: No, we traveled on the same ship over to Hull and from Hull we went to Liverpool through many tunnels, that it got—smoky in the cars—[garbled] - And then from Liverpool we of course first traveled on a small boat since the big ship stood a ways off, and they took us there. And from there we travelled ... I don't know on the second day that we sailed we struck an iceberg, no, a rock. No we drove up onto a rock and they thought the ship would sink. We were traveling in a fog, not far from ..

Peters: from Ireland.

Rempel: Ireland. And then we could hear the ringing of the bell from the lighthouse. But our ship stood fast on the rock.

Peters: Where was that?

Rempel: It was not far out from Ireland. Then they rang a bell from the tower. At the end, the ship had not been driving; it just drifted onto it. [?] Then they looked to see whether the ship has sprung a leak. I saw that lots of people were crying; I didn't quite know why, for I had grown up near water where we had big stones, and now here were stones everywhere too; I thought one could step around on them the way we had done it on the Dnieper. But of course it was different here. Now all the people that were there had to go to one end of the ship first and the ship tipped over completely. And then back, and the third time we did that the ship jerked/shuddered off the rock and deep[?] again.⁴

Peters: Then that could not have been all that big of a ship?

Rempel: Oh, yes, that was a big ship. It was called *Peruvian* ⁵

Peters: It was called the *Peruvian*.

Rempel: The ship *Peruvian*.

Peters: Was it of the Cunard Line or from which line was it?

Rempel: It was an English ship

Peters: And that was the only accident

that you had while on the ship?

Rempel: No. Once during the night there was a big storm and they had to take down the sails, and in the process I believe either three or five men had fallen off. One had fallen into the ... apparatus and was killed immediately, and one went overboard whom they did not see any more. The rest were then rescued.

Peters: So that was a sailing ship.

Rempel: Yes. Sail and steam. They used both. It was already a steamship. The *Peruvian* was already a steamship.

Peters: Were there also some of our people who died during the voyage, on the water?

Rempel: There was a Thiessen, whose daughter died and they lowered her into the water rolled up in canvas, together with a weight. She was lowered overboard on a kind of plank and then down – [garbled]. The Thiessens came from Rosenort. Diedrich Thiessens.⁶ But where they went to, maybe Mexico or the west, I don't know.

Peters: And where did you land? Do you remember where you landed?

Rempel: We landed at Quebec, they said, but it was on the other side, at Montreal that we landed; I think that is further west. At Quebec we would have needed to cross the river again.

Peters: And then you traveled up to Ontario at that point.

Rempel: We then went to Ontario and stayed in Berlin (Kitchener). From there we were parceled out. We were after all poor people, and they came and fetched us. For the first while we were at a family two miles from Heidelberg.⁷

Peters: And how was it for you in Ontario? These were the Old Mennonites, right?

Rempel: Those were newer Mennonites. We didn't fare well here. He used us the entire summer and didn't pay. And the Old Mennonites said they couldn't do anything with him. As they were then, and yet - [garbled].

Peters: And then how did you get here?

Rempel: In May we left there and I think we went to a harbour, Fisher's Landing, and from there boarded a



A Perspective Map of Duluth, Minnesota ca 1880s, an important stopping point for Mennonites, including Gerhard Rempel's family. They were stuck in the ice in the spring of 1876, a regular occurrence in spring on Lake Superior. Image Credit: Library of Congress, American Publishing Co. Perspective map of the city of Duluth, Minn. [Milwaukee, Wis.: American Pub. Co., ?, 1893] Map. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2010593252/>.

ship and in five days we were to be over the North Sea, over Lake Superior. But we ended up being there for 17.5 days.⁸

Peters: 17 and a half days on Lake Superior?

Peters: Was there a storm, or...?

Rempel: No, the way it was is that we had sailed into an ice-field. When ... broke up that ice and drove it into Lake Superior, and it was And there was 15 feet of ice all around the ship. There we lay for 12.5 days without the ship moving.

Peters: But it was not dangerous?

Rempel: It didn't move at all but we had no food. It was very dangerous. We were facing death. And then I believe 22⁹ men set out; either they would reach land or they would drown or die. ...[garbled] ... The ice had edges as sharp as knives. They cut up their footwear, their feet and their hands so that most of them soon had to come back. By noon a dozen came back and in the evening the rest came back. They cut up their footwear, their feet and their hands that most of them soon had to come back. They were French. One had cut himself so badly that they believed he would never be able to walk again. But a couple made it over and built fires. They had arranged that with our captain that if they should make it over they would build three fires. The next day three ships came from Duluth. They came via a great detour and brought us coal and food, and they heated up our ship too. The ships then tried to yank our ship back,

but that didn't work, and then they dynamited it through, through the ice field. That same day we got to Duluth.

Peters: Our time is up. Mr. Rempel has also told much, also of the war years but for that we don't have time now. For today until next Wednesday, Good night.

Endnotes

1. Mennonite Heritage Archives reel to reel recording #224. See dg001 for digital version. Translated from Low German by Ernest Braun, 2024.

2. Rempel says it is 1642.

3. Tripolski was the name of the Nobleman who owned the land.

4. Many parts of Rempel's story match with Aeltester Johann Wiebe's travel account, including this incident. See Peter Zacharias, "Aeltester Johann Wiebe (1837-1905), Documents," in Delbert Plett, *Old Colony Mennonites* (Steinbach: Crossway Publications, 2001) 52.

5. Rempel calls the ship Victorian.

6. While there are accounts of children dying and buried at sea including that of Aeltester Johann Wiebe, we cannot verify who the girl or family is.

7. Some Mennonites stayed in Ontario with the Swiss Brethren over winter because they had received word about the bad grasshopper infestation on the prairies and so they could earn money to pay off debts.

8. For more about being stuck in the ice see Klass Peters, *The Bergthaler Mennonites*, (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1988), 23-27. See also "Stuck in the Ice on Lake Superior," in *Preservings* no. 34, 2014, p. 24-25, and Lawrence Klippenstein, "Old Letters Tell Our Story," in *Mennonite Historian* December 1978, p. 1-2;

cont'd on p. 10

(Cont'd from p. 9)

Isaac R. Horst "Colonization in the 1870's," in *Ontario Mennonite History*, October 1998, p 21. In Klass Peters' and the *Preservings* account it appears they stayed on the lake 14.5 days.

9. Other accounts say 18 people.

The Fernheim Archive: Preserving our History

by Caroline Klassen

The groundwork for the Fernheim Archive was laid by Peter P. Klassen, a teacher, historian, and author of numerous books about the Paraguayan Mennonites. In 1969 he began systematically organizing historical documents at the colony office. Ewald Reimer briefly continued this work in 1977. As the colony prepared for its 50th anniversary, which was celebrated in 1980, an official archive was established, with Ingrid Epp overseeing its development for the next 13 years. After that and until February 2023, theologian and historian Gundolf Niebuhr played a significant role, initiating scanning and digitization efforts in the archive.

The archive, as well as the museum, is administratively linked to the Department of Education and Culture within the Colony. The collection grew to meet various historical documentation needs

and includes minutes (protocols), correspondence, research studies, historical writings, as well as photographs, diaries, journals, audio and visual materials and other significant items. The archive's work focuses on two key areas: gathering materials and making these resources available and accessible to writers, teachers, students, researchers, journalists and others.

In recent years we have seen an increased interest in the archive's resources, we have supported multiple book projects, provided material for different projects, such as photobooks or film projects. We are pleased to continue to offer our historical resources and services to colony members and the wider community.

Many historical initiatives in the colony gain momentum around major anniversaries. This past year, we marked 90 years since the opening of the *Koloniehaus*, Filadelfia's original administration building. We organized a gathering with the present administrative members and enjoyed an open house afterwards. Our department also hosted an Archive Day, where visitors enjoyed a photo exhibit on the early pioneering days, explored old issues of the *Mennoblatt*, participated in genealogy sessions, and engaged in interactive games highlighting key colony events, people, and places.

With limited space becoming a challenge, we sought alternative storage



Caroline Klassen and Conrad Stoesz in front of the Fernheim Archive. Photo Credit: Conrad Stoesz.

solutions and in 2022 were able to expand the archive's facilities. Many materials are currently being reviewed, re-cataloged, and reorganized. In particular, our extensive collection of over 20,000 photos requires careful classification, digitization, and indexing. Additional file cabinets were acquired, and they fill up remarkably quickly.

Also in 2023, we established two new departments within our office: Audiovisual and Genealogy. The colony's rich collection of film and audio materials is now being systematically indexed by a competent colleague, making these resources more accessible. And more and more people are taking advantage of our help in researching their family trees.

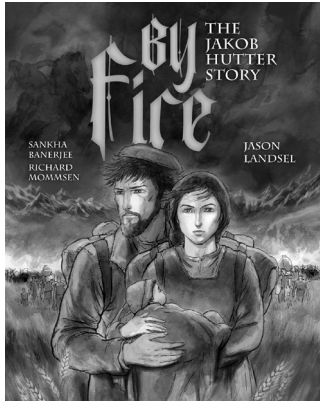
In September 2024, I had the privilege of visiting various Mennonite archives, museums, and historical societies in Manitoba and British Columbia. The opportunity to exchange experiences was invaluable, and I gained deeper insights into resources such as the MAID program and the Grandma Database, both of which I frequently use.

This visit not only enhanced my understanding of archival practices but also highlighted the vast network of shared heritage to which we belong. Learning from the dedicated archivists and volunteers in Manitoba and BC has strengthened my commitment to preserving Fernheim history and making it more accessible. I am deeply grateful to all those who generously shared their knowledge and inspired me to learn more about Mennonite history worldwide. Above all, my aim is to ensure that our collective stories endure, and to encourage those who wish to explore them.



The expanded Fernheim Archive. Photo Credit: Conrad Stoesz.

Book Reviews



Jason Landsell, Richard Mommson and Sankha Banerjee (illustrator), *By Fire: The Life of Jakob Hutter* (Plough Publishing House, 2025), 168 pp.

Reviewed by Jonathan Dyck, Winnipeg.

In the Christian imagination, fire, like water, is an ambiguous metaphor, vacillating between the spark of divine presence and the flames of eternal damnation. *By Fire: The Jakob Hutter Story* locates Hutterite origins in a historical moment when fire was an instrument of state execution. However, like its predecessor, *By Water*, the story of Jakob Hutter shows how such elements can exceed their destructive purpose through martyrdom. Although Hutter's leadership was cut short when he was burned at the stake, "an irrepressible movement," author Jason Landsell writes, "would carry on his flame."

This second instalment of Plough's "Heroes of the Radical Reformation" graphic novel series finds Landsell continuing his collaboration with artist Sankha Banerjee and scriptwriter Richard Mommson, who together present the story of Hutter's rise to prominence as an Anabaptist leader. In their telling, however, the collaborators shift some of their focus to Hutter's wife Katherina — an intriguing figure who, over the course of the book, switches between two romantic partners and, at one point, recants her anabaptism.

The story's narration comes through the voice of Peter, Jakob's friend, positioned as the skeptical everyman whose self-interest makes him reluctant join the Anabaptists. Eventually he will betray his friend — partly out of jealousy, partly out of protection — and thus condemn Katherina and her child to death.

By Fire begins in 1525 Tyrol, where unjust taxation and other forms of inequality have pushed common people to their breaking point. Through the trees, we see the peasants gather with spears, scythes and flags touting the boot and the rainbow — symbols of the popular revolts known as the German Peasants' War. Two men appear set apart, Peter, a struggling farmer, and his friend Jakob who has been swept up in the violent revolutionary fervour of the times.

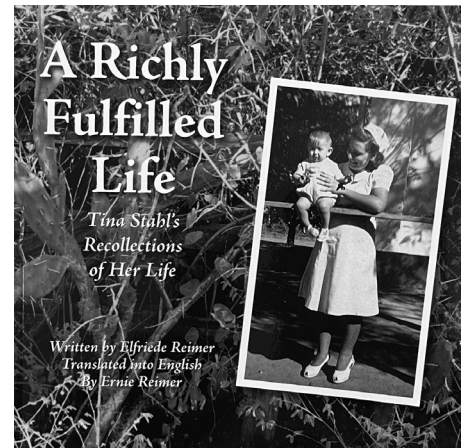
Initially, Jakob and Peter appear at the vanguard of the peasant insurgence, with Jakob outfitted like an Anabaptist Che Guevara; but when their siege on the bishop's palace in Brixen fails, the two characters flee and go into hiding. A chance encounter with a Swiss Anabaptist refugee leads Jakob and Peter to George Blaurock and marks the dissolution of their friendship. But as King Ferdinand tightens his control on the region, continued persecution pushes the Anabaptists farther and farther afield, until Jakob and Katherina are delivered into the hands of the state.

At times, *By Fire's* multi-layered composition makes for disjointed reading experience, with speech bubbles in awkward positions and abrupt shifts in time and perspective without accompanying explanation. Historical fiction is a challenging genre, particularly in graphic format where visual accuracy requires extra attention and complex events require condensing. Too much exposition can hamper narrative momentum and flatten characters — indeed, some of the strongest section of the book are its wordless sequences, where Banerjee's illustrations are given room to breathe.

While the story follows a hagiographic arc of conversion, persecution, and martyrdom, there are some welcome and unexpected touches, such as a full spread of illustrated plants from medieval herbals, leading into a scene where Anabaptist women discuss their use of Lady's Mantel. Likewise, a brief epilogue set in the present day shows a woman walking through Innsbruck, Austria with flowers to lay at a neglected memorial plaque that marks Hutter's site of execution. Landsell and Banerjee are featured in cameo nearby, standing watch as the woman — presumably Landsell's wife, who is of Hutterite background — pays homage to her spiritual forebears. Such moments hearken

back to Katherina, who along with Jakob, left an indelible mark on the anabaptism that would continue in his name.

Jonathan Dyck is an illustrator, designer, and cartoonist from Winnipeg. He is the author of the award winning graphic novel Shelterbelt.



Elfriede Reimer, Ernie Reimer, trans., *A Richly Fulfilled Life: Tina Stahl's Recollections of Her Life*, (Fort St. John, B.C., Ernie Reimer, 2019), 108 pp.

Reviewed by Madison Kehler, Winnipeg.

A Richly Fulfilled Life, by Elfriede Reimer, is a beautifully described story of a Mennonite woman by the name of Tina Stahl, who lived in Paraguay with her family and worked there as a nurse. The story begins with the Stahl family's migration from the Soviet Union to Chaco, Paraguay in 1929. It was incredible to read how God worked in this journey to enable everyone to safely arrive at their destination together. Not every family got this opportunity. Tina's childhood, as with the rest of the story, was vividly described in detail, so much so that I felt I was present with her. I could hear the dogs barking in Tina's village in the Soviet Union and hear people's voices as they spoke. I could see the Christmas tree in Germany, the cactus trees and berries in the Chaco bush, and the children playing pick-up sticks. The photographs and quotations from Tina's family were helpful in creating this picture.

Tina went on to become a nurse, training at a hospital in Philadelphia. She describes her work and the patients she treated. It was clear that she deeply cared

about her patients and wanted to help them however she could. What was also clear was that Tina was destined for the position. Whenever she left, God brought her back into the role. Tina not only cared for her patients, she also cared for her family members, helping them with anything they needed. For example, after Tina's brother's wife died, Tina stepped in to help raise his children for several months. It was not the most enjoyable task for Tina but she did it out of love for her family. Four of those children, through their own quotes, expressed their appreciation for their Tante caring for them.

I appreciated that Tina was depicted as a human being with flaws and insecurities. Most of the story is told from Tina's perspective and being the humble person she was, she shared several of the negatives in her life, along with the positives. She talked about her diligence in nursing and persistent willingness to help her family, as well as her insecurities regarding her curved back. It made her feel more real and more relatable to me as a reader.

Since I live in Canada, most of the stories I hear about Mennonite immigration are about them settling here. I have not read about many experiences of Mennonites settling in other countries so I was glad to have done so in this book. There are similarities, such as church life and the Mennonite school system, and differences, such as a poorer healthcare system and more interactions with the Indigenous peoples, valuable and harmful ones. It made me want to learn more about these Mennonite communities outside of Canada and the United States.

Tina's story stood out to me because of the fact that Mennonite culture has traditionally promoted the idea of women getting married and having children. This can lead to unmarried Mennonite women feeling lost and unvalued. Tina did not get married or have children but God used her to have a positive impact on many lives and she was able to lead a richly fulfilled life herself. I found this to be incredibly encouraging and I would love to read more stories like this.

Madison Klassen is an author and an avid reader of Mennonite history. She is currently working on a book about her grandmother's experience as a maid in Winnipeg in the 1920s after arriving from Russia. She lives in Winnipeg.



Ralph Friesen, *Prosperity Ever Depression Never: Steinbach in the 1930s* (Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2024). 228 pp.

Reviewed by Dora Dueck, Tsawwassen

Put any small ordinary thing under a good microscope and suddenly the astonishing beauty, dynamism, patterns, and complication contained in that small ordinary thing will be revealed.

This is what Ralph Friesen accomplishes in *Prosperity Ever Depression Never: Steinbach in the 1930s*. He focuses attention on a single decade, the 1930s, the time of the Great Depression, and how that era played out in a tiny “particle of Canada,” the then-village of Steinbach in southeastern Manitoba, and the resulting close view teems with life.

What Friesen, a former resident, finds is that while Steinbach was definitely affected by the Depression, it actually experienced steady growth throughout the decade. One reason was that the surrounding farmers, in a rather unremarkable location land-wise, practiced mixed farming and were thus less affected by collapsing grain markets. Another reason was the “can-do” attitude of Steinbachers, every success emboldening the next, it seemed, even to the extent of exhibiting a “materialistic, crass boosterism.”

With some notable exceptions, Steinbach was mostly Mennonite, though divided into several Mennonite groups with their own church buildings. Everyone, of course, knew who belonged to which. Although internally competitive, the community did cooperate, however, for projects such as building a high school and a hospital.

Friesen begins his close-up of the decade and village with the creek that ran through Steinbach, a charming if rather modest waterway, one that would disappear in the name of progress but remain in nostalgic memory for those who grew up playing in and near it.

The second, and longest, chapter follows Main Street—“the backbone” of the community—from Lot 20 in the northwest to Lot 1 in the southeast, with descriptions of the businesses, residences, inhabitants on each lot. Changes are also noted, for Main Street was never static; even during the Depression there was, as Al Reimer put it, “always something vital and expectant” about it. This tour along Main Street is packed with facts and telling details, photos, quotes, and memories, and enough diverse personalities for any novelist's dream—details like a mural on a bedroom wall, a whole row of pretty red-haired daughters from a poorer family marrying prominent men, feuding heirs, and false teeth purchased in The Bargain Store, just to mention a few.

Subsequent chapters enlarge the sense of the 1930s in Steinbach as related to themes of power, the economy, religion, aviation (“flying fever”), education, arts and sports, and shifting identity. Language usage turned to English; British and Canadian nationalism gained influence.

If towns, like people, reveal their core character at a formative stage, Steinbach's was, as drawn by Friesen, pragmatic though “smouldering with competitive fire” and marked by “an almost reverential enthusiasm” for mobility in all the meanings of that word. He also brings women into the scene whenever he can and is alert to situations of trauma, difficulty, and prejudice within this religious, confident, and “thoroughly capitalist” community.

Prosperity Ever Depression Never is a well-written, well-produced book that will surely delight readers who have a connection to Steinbach, but also fascinate those (such as this reviewer) who have no such connection. It's a unique story: a small place that not only survived the Depression years, but prospered.

Dora Dueck is the author of two novels and a collection of short fiction, as well as stories and essays in a variety of journals. She lives in Tsawwassen, B.C.