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Mennonite Historian

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"Valley of Tears" describes the experience of the Johann Gerhard & Helena (Loewen) Funk Family, after this photograph was taken in 1911. Standing, L-R: Margareta, Helena, Anna, Katherina, Jacob, David, Isaak. Sitting: Maria, Susanna, Helena, Johann, Cornelius, Heinrich, Abram (Oldest son, Johann, is missing from the photo.) *Photo Credit: David Loewen.*

Contents

Valley of Tears

by David Loewen

The turmoil of revolution, civil war, collectivization, purges, exiles, and World War II created untold pain and disruption of Mennonite families.The story of the Funk family is one of many such stories. -ed.

Johann Gerhard Funk (1860–1932) was born in Schoendorf and his wife Helena Loewen (1863–1938) was born in Schoenhorst. The couple was among the founding settlers of the village of Katerinowka, a daughter colony of Chortitza when it was established in 1888. It consisted of 2500 acres and was intended to accommodate a modest community of 20 farms. With time, the village expanded as adjoining land was purchased from Russian neighbours. The Funk farm one saw as one entered Katerinowka was owned by the Funks. They farmed approximately 450 acres and operated a mill powered by an Otto-Deutz motor. Johann also established a brick factory beside a nearby pond. Johann built their three-story brick and wood house in 1900 to accommodate the growing family of ten children. The house was surrounded by a white picket fence and marked by an arched gateway, reflecting both his craftsmanship and prosperity.[1] A skilled artisan, Johann fashioned and fired the clay bricks himself, and completed all the woodwork for the spacious house, distinguished by six front-facing windows, and together with his brother Jacob, built all the furniture in his well-equipped workshop.

Beyond his talents as a farmer and craftsman, Johann was a man of intellect and faith. He maintained a small but carefully curated library of classic literature and theological works. Ordained as a preacher in his fifties, he recognized the need to improve his language skills and enrolled in evening classes. All his children received a solid education,[2] and Johann subscribed to several journals from America and Germany, including a German women's magazine that featured craft ideas and household innovations. He also appreciated music and encouraged the whole family to sing and play musical instruments. The Funk family orchestra and choir frequently sang and played at church services.

Helena's early life was marked by loss. Her father, Jacob Loewen, died when she was twelve and her mother passed away when she was eighteen. Despite limited formal education, Helena loved to read and was known for her quick wit and cheerful disposition. Her daughter Anna later described her as "a very cheerful and good-natured woman." Helena drew deep strength from her Christian faith and often quoted the verse, "He who abides in me bears much fruit, for without me you can do nothing." (John 15:5) She carried a small New Testament in her apron pocket and reportedly knew the Gospel of John by heart.

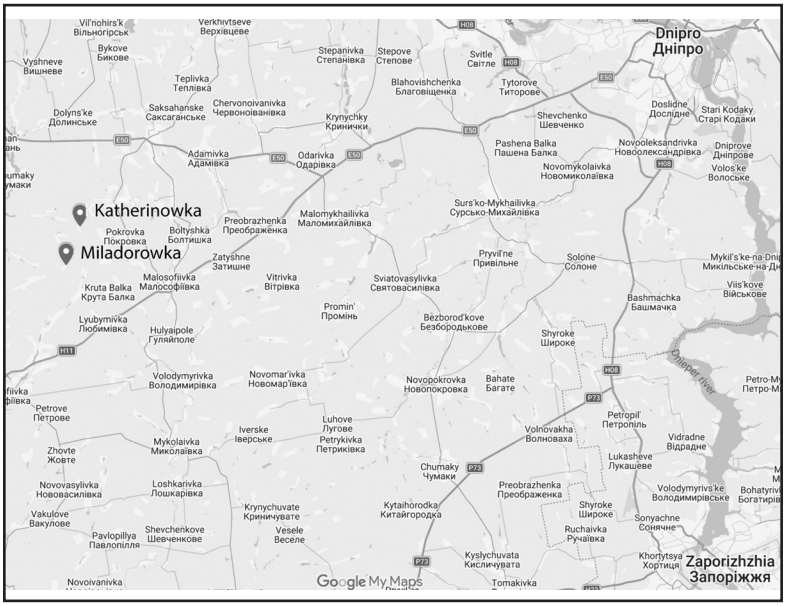
Shortly after marriage, Johann and Helena experienced "the new birth in Christ" at an evangelistic service, which led them to seek fellowship with Mennonite Brethren people. Consequently, the Funks were the only residents of Katerinowka who were members of the Mennonite Brethren Church in nearby Miloradowka. The rest of the villagers belonged to the main Mennonite Church. Devout in their beliefs, Johann and Helena raised their thirteen children[3] to be faithful followers of Christ. Over their doorway, Johann painted an inscription that proclaimed their faith:

Whoever passes through this door,
Shall hereby be reminded,
That our dear Savior Jesus Christ
Is the door to eternal life.

Though Mennonites were prohibited by law from proselytizing, they were permitted to testify about their faith when asked, and the Funks did so openly. Their home was filled with song, prayer, and Scripture reading. The memory of those joyful years sustained Helena during the harsh years of exile that lay ahead. Writing from banishment in 1930, she reminded her daughter Anna, then serving in the Belgian Congo: "Memory is the best thing life has to offer. In my loneliness, I vividly recall the beautiful songs you, as children, used to sing."[4]

The Revolution, Civil War, and raids by Nestor Machno's peasant army brought devastation to their village. Katerinowka was placed on Machno's "blacklist" of settlements marked for destruction, and though the Funks' home was repeatedly ransacked and looted, they survived through faith and providence. At one point, Johann called his daughters together and

(cont'd on p. 4)



Katerinowka was located approximately 90 km northwest of the Chortitza colony. It was 5 km from Milarodowka, which had a Mennonite Brethren congregation. *Map Source: Google Maps.*

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Genealogy and Family History

Scots and Mennonites in Prussia

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

The Scots have a long history in Poland, going back to the early Middle Ages when traders from the Kingdom of Scotland visited the Polish Baltic port cities of Danzig (now Gdansk, Poland), Elbing (now Elblag, Poland) and Koenigsberg (now Kaliningrad, Russia).[1] The Scots began having a significant presence in what was then known as "Prussia" in the early 1500s.[2] Unlike the Anabaptist Mennonites, most Scots were in Prussia for economic reasons. Some also came because they were Catholics living in a rather intolerant Calvinist-Presbyterian Scotland. Most were small-time merchants, tradesmen, and shopkeepers and as such would have had encounters with local Mennonites over the years. The Scots, while plying their trades in Danzig, mostly lived in the suburbs, such as [Alt] Schottland ([old] Scotland), which had been founded by Scots sometime around 1380. Like the Scots, Mennonite tradesmen were required to live outside the city walls. As a result, suburbs like Schottland developed a sizable Mennonite population. In 1597, Schottland consisted of 209 families, of which 96 were Catholic (mostly Polish, German, and Scots), 71 were Mennonites, 22 were Lutheran (mostly German), and 16 were Calvinists (mostly Scots).[3] In 1713, after the devastating plague of 1709, the population had dropped to 106 families.[4]

Another route by which Scots found their way to Poland was through the military. Every generation in Scotland produced a cohort of young landless men. Besides venturing into foreign trade, many became mercenary soldiers. One of the most famous was Patrick Gordon.[5] Gordon joined the Swedish army in 1655, at the start of the first Swedish invasion of Poland.[6] He switched sides several times during the course of this war. He briefly describes his encounter in 1656 with a Mennonite: "Wee marched through the Elbings werder and crossed the Nogat at Climings ferry [Clementz Fehre], and so onwards by soft marches to Siegenhagen, [Tiegenhagen] where we rested some dayes and had good quarters, I being lodged in ye house of a Manist or Anabaptist, a Hollander called Bartholomeus Peters, who every morning presented me with a reichs thaler to be peacable, and parting furnished me with good provisions."[7]

Part of a map drawn by Peter Schenk (1661-1711) in the 1690s showing Clementz Fehre where Patrick Gordon crossed the Nogat river in 1655. At the time many of the surrounding villages were heavily populated by Mennonites.

Another Scottish soldier with the same surname was John Gordon who, at the age of 15, moved to Poland and became a soldier in the Polish army at some point. He attained the rank of Colonel (Oberstleutnant). He had only one son, Joseph, born in 1732 (and died in 1780). John died in 1738. At some point Johann Gordon acquired the estate Sibsau.[8] Joseph's step-father transferred the lease of the Sibsau estate to him in 1745. It was a long-term, 40 years hereditary lease. On 11 September 1763, Joseph Gordon leased part of his Sibsau property (exact amount not given) to the Mennonite Franz Kliewer (GM#280087?) for the next 20 years for the sum of 600 Prussian Guilders.[9] On 1 May 1790, Joseph's son Franz Gordon leased the estate to 10 men, including Mennonites Salomon Kohnert (1767-1833; GM#419763), Abraham Schmidt (1721-1791; GM#806509) and Gerhard Dirks (1751-1797; GM#807014).[10]

Certainly, Mennonites and Scots had many interactions in Poland and West Prussia. These are not easy to document and the above are just two known examples. At present, no evidence exists of any intermarriage between members of these two groups during this period.

Endnotes:

1. Peter Paul Bajer, *Scots in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, 16th-18th Centuries: The Formation and Disappearance of an Ethnic Group*, The Northern World, v. 57. Leiden: Brill, 2012 and Thomas A. Fischer, *The Scots in Eastern And Western Prussia* (1903).

2. This region was also known as "Royal Prussia" and became the province of West Prussia in 1772 (Danzig in 1793) and is now mostly in the Polish province of Pomerania.

3. Link provided by Abraham Friedrichsen: https://gdansk.gedanopedia.pl/gdansk/?title=STARE_SZOTY .

4. For more on how this plague affected the Mennonites in the region see: https://www.plettfoundation.org/files/preservings/Preservings41.pdf .

5. Patrick Gordon: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patrick_Gordon . Also see: Dmitry Fedosov (ed.).

6. Second Northern War: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_War_of_1655%E2%80%931660 . At this time the world's entire Low-German Mennonite population found themselves in the middle of three wars between Sweden and Poland: 1600 – 1629, 1655 – 1660 and 1701 – 1706. These wars had devastating consequences for the Mennonite people, and will be written about in a future article.

7. *Diary of General Patrick Gordon of Auchleuchries 1635-1699,* Volume I: 1635-1659 [https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/monographs/h702q925m].

8. Sibsau: http://holland.org.pl/art.php?kat=obiekt&id=486 . Sibsau (originally called Bzowo) was the property of the Polish crown. It was given to the Teutonic knights in the early 1300s. After their defeat the village was once again the property of the King of Poland. See also: https://www.czasswiecia.pl/czas_swiecia/1,88351,23949654,gordonowie-ze-szkocji.html?disableRedirects=true, https://electricscotland.com/webclans/dtog/gordonsinpoland.pdf, and Hans Maercker, *Geschichte des Schwetzer Kreises*, Band II, p 311.

9. The details of the lease are found in Bydgoszcz Archives, Fond 1880, Sygnatura 939, p14.

10. Geheimes Staatsarchivs Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Berlin, Germany. Rep 77 XXXI No. 16, Vol.1. For more information on the GRanDMA database information see: https://mgi.mennonitegenealogy.com/grandma/whatsgrandma.php.

Valley of Tears

(cont'd from p. 2)

said, "Girls, I cannot protect you from these vile men. You must pray and take care of yourselves."[5] Anna later wrote: "We were tried beyond measure so that we began to despair of life and often believed that we would all die."[6]

By 1927, the family's once-considerable resources were nearly exhausted. Concerned for the future of his unmarried daughters, Anna and Helena, Johann sold his threshing equipment to finance their emigration to Canada. Between 1924 and 1927, five of the Funk children managed to emigrate to Canada: Jacob, Helena, Margareta, Anna, and Cornelius. Jacob and his wife Margaretha (Klassen) arrived in 1924, settling in Coaldale, Alberta, where they raised eight children. Jacob died there in 1973. Helena emigrated in 1927 and married Peter Nickel in 1948; they lived most of their married life in Chilliwack, British Columbia, where she died in 1961. Margareta and her husband Peter Unger emigrated in 1926, also settling in Chilliwack and raising eight children; she died in 1972. Anna emigrated in 1927 with her sister Helena. Anna married Heinrich Bartsch in 1928 and served for many years as a missionary in the Belgian Congo before settling in Chilliwack. She passed away in Abbotsford in 1989. Cornelius emigrated in 1927, first to Mexico and later to Canada, where he married twice and had six children. He retired in Penticton, British Columbia, and died in 1973.

When their passports arrived unexpectedly after ten months of waiting, Anna and Helena had only four days to prepare for departure. Anna recorded the painful farewell:

> Looking back, I can still see the train coming around the bend. My body trembles—can I bear it? I draw aside for a few minutes, alone, and an inaudible groan wells up within me! I have made a free decision to say goodbye, which I sense somehow will be forever! A final embrace—there are no words—we are speechless, father, mother, and the others who are with us. We board. We wave goodbye. Auf Wiedersehen! But this was never to be. We never saw each other again.[7]

Between 1923 and 1929, thousands of Mennonites fled the chaos of post-revolutionary Russia. Johann and Helena, together with their son Isaac and his family, were among those who gathered at the "Gates of Moscow"[8] in hopes of emigration. Their grandson Aron later recalled: "Almost all the Mennonites wanted to leave—our parents were among them—but it was no longer possible. Our grandparents (the Johann Funks) also wanted to go, but they wanted all the children to leave first and then they would follow. Those who didn't take the first chance had to stay behind, and most of them perished."[9]

Time was not on their side, and the delay would cost Johann his life. In 1929, Johann and Helena, along with Isaac and his family, reached Moscow. It is unclear whether they had already lost their property or left it behind voluntarily. Both Johann and Isaac were arrested; Isaac was exiled to the North. Johann, imprisoned for seventy days, was eventually released due to his failing health and returned with Helena to Katerinowka to live with their son David.

On February 23, 1930, Johann was arrested again and exiled to a forced-labour camp about fifty kilometers north of Vologda.[10] Helena voluntarily accompanied him into exile. They were lodged with others in a former nunnery, eight kilometers from the railway, completing the final stretch on foot through deep snow. Local villagers were forbidden from selling food to prisoners, forcing them to rely on a government store that charged double prices.[11] Johann died of starvation on February 16, 1932, at age seventy. His eldest son Johann arrived shortly before his death and remained with him to the end. Aron Funk later wrote: "Our grandparents were also exiled to the north. Grandfather died in banishment. Uncle Johann Funk went there while he was still alive, but already weak and ill, and stayed there until he died. After grandfather's death, grandmother was released, and Uncle Johann brought her back with him."[12]

Anna, then serving as a missionary in the Belgian Congo, received word from her mother in late 1932:

> She wrote that my father had died. I had last seen my parents in 1927 when, following their advice, my sister Lena and I left them to go to Canada. They had planned to join us, but things hadn't worked out that way. They, too, had reached the gates of Moscow, but instead of traveling to Canada, my father was sent to a prison camp in Siberia, and my mother joined him voluntarily. He was already seventy years old. There they endured three harsh years in a slave labor camp, suffering hunger and exhaustion. Finally, even my father's usually robust health gave way, and he succumbed. The news shattered me.[13]

After her release, Helena spent her remaining years alternating between the homes of her children. She passed away on December 23, 1938, at the home of her daughter Maria (Funk) Dyck in Miloradowka, aged seventy-five.[14] She never fully recovered from the three years of starvation and hardship in the Gulag.

Of the five sons who remained in Russia, Johann was drafted into the army on September 4, 1941,[15] and disappeared without a trace. He had five daughters from two marriages, three daughters, Lydia, Frieda, and Anna, survived into adulthood. Isaac and Abram were both arrested and exiled to the east. Isaac corresponded with his family for a short period of time but died alone in exile.[16] His widow and sons fled with the retreating German army in 1943. His older son, Isaac, was later drafted into the German army and captured as an American POW. He eventually emigrated

The Funk brothers: L-R: David, Aron, Johann, Gerhard, Abram.
Photo Credit: David Loewen, Personal Collection.

to Paraguay in 1950 and to Canada in 1957. His mother, Katerina, and brother were repatriated to Russia and, in 1989 moved to Germany, where they reunited with Isaac. Katerina, died the following year and his brother, Johann, in 2024.[17] Isaac died in British Columbia in 2008. Abram, a preacher, was arrested about 1936 and vanished in exile. Heinrich, who was unable to bear the constant oppression, took his own life in 1934,[18] leaving his wife Maria and two young children; Maria died in 1943.

Two daughters, Maria and Susanna, fled westward with the retreating German army in 1943. Susanna had been imprisoned earlier (1935–1939) for stealing bread for her children.[19] Her husband, Franz Funk, was conscripted into the German army, later reaching Germany and eventually emigrating to Canada, where he remarried and died in Abbotsford in 1987. Maria's husband fell victim to Stalin's terror of 1937–1938 and disappeared.[20] Both sisters were captured by Soviet forces in 1944 and repatriated to Siberia, where they died in 1947 under harsh conditions.

David & Elisabeth (Klassen) Funk, Karaganda, ca. 1954. *Photo Credit: David Loewen, Personal Collection.*

In 1934, Katharina and her husband, Jakob Unger, moved from Dnepropetrovsk (Dnipro) to Zentral, west of the Volga River.[21] Jakob was arrested in 1941 and died in captivity the following year. Katharina and her family were then relocated, with other ethnic Germans, to Kazakhstan, where she died, in Karaganda, in 1968.[22]

Of the sons who remained in Russia, Johann and Helena's second-oldest son, David, was the only one to outlive Stalin. In 1933, his property was confiscated under the dekulakization policy that had already claimed his father's estate. His son Aron recalled: "Everything was taken away from us, and we had to leave our house, which was demolished. When collectivization started, our father became an accountant in the Collective, and he always wanted to be very honest. But with this Soviet government that was no longer possible… that was the cause of his dekulakization."[23]

Driven from their home, David and Elisabeth Funk took shelter in a pig barn before relocating with their family of eight to the Caucasus, where they found a measure of peace in a village called Michaelsdorf.[24] This remained their home until 1941, when all ethnic Germans were rounded up and deported to eastern Kazakhstan. The Funk family was relocated among nomadic Cossacks near Buras. Soon after, their sons were conscripted into "work armies," scattering the family for thirteen years. The youngest children stayed with their parents, working on a collective farm. In August 1942, their son Aron was sent to a secret labor camp, later revealed as an atomic bomb testing site, where he remained for twelve years. Released in 1954, he reunited with his parents in Karaganda. David and Elisabeth, along with several of their sons, had resettled there in 1954, and the same year, all family members were able to enjoy a family reunion. David died suddenly of heart failure on December 22, 1955, Elisabeth followed on May 23, 1957, succumbing to chronic lung disease.[25]

In 1976, Aron and his family emigrated to Germany, at the invitation of his oldest daughter Maria. They first settled in Espelkamp and later in Frankenthal. Because of family dynamics, his daughter Katharina chose to remain in Russia, where she married, later divorced, and eventually emigrated to Germany with her two children—but only after her father's death.

In his last years, Aron Funk wrote his memoirs in which he recounted the Funks' 1933 journey from Ukraine to Kazakhstan, along with an account of his twelve fear-filled years of labour in a secret barbed wire enclosure in the Ural Mountains, related to the research and development of atomic weaponry. In 1990, Aron's wife, Katharina (Boschmann) Funk died of cancer, and two years later, on April 25, 1992, Aron passed away, of heart failure, in Frankenthal.

Endnotes:

1. A report from a visitor to Katerinowka in 1985 stated it was the only structure from that time still standing in the village. Anna Bartsch, *The Hidden Hand in the Story of my Life*, (Winnipeg, Kindred Press, 1987).
2. Bartsch, *Hidden Hand*. Several of the Funk children attended Bible School in Crimea.
3. Five children died in infancy.
4. Bartsch, *The Hidden Hand*. Anna and Heinrich Bartsch became missionaries to the Congo, and it was here that she received several letters from her parents, who were imprisoned in a Soviet labour camp.
5. Bartsch, *The Hidden Hand.*
6. Bartsch, *The Hidden Hand.*
7. Bartsch, *The Hidden Hand.*
8. In the fall of 1929, thousands of Mennonites from across the Soviet Union descended on Moscow in a desperate bid to obtain permission to emigrate. Two thirds failed, of which many were arrested and sent to forced labour camps in the northern and eastern hinterlands of the Soviet Union.
9. Aron Funk, "Memoirs.*"*
10. EWZ50 B089 1714. A compilation of Mennonites in the Einwanderer Zentralstelle records created by Nazi Germany can be found at https://mgr.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/EWZ_Mennonite_Extractions_Alphabetized.pdf.
11. Email from Elisabeth Funk Michler (granddaughter), 11/12/2023 (Johann, who had gone to stay with his parents shortly before his father died, relayed these details to his siblings in Canada, from whom Johann's daughter, Frieda, obtained them and relayed them to Elisabeth Funk Michler).
12. Aron Funk, "Memoirs."
13. Bartsch, *The Hidden Hand.*
14. Email from Elisabeth Funk Michler (granddaughter), 11/12/2023.
15. EWZ50 B090 0686.
16. Email from Elisabeth Funk Michler (granddaughter), 11/12/2023.
17. Aron Funk, "Memoirs."
18. Aron Funk, "Memoirs."
19. EWZ50 B089 1717.
20. EWZ50 B028 0674.
21. Susanne Isaac, *Das Dorf Zentral, Unser Plattdeutscher Heimatort im Gebiet Woronjesh/ Russland,*(By the author), Meckenheim, 1996), 156.
22. Email from Elisabeth Funk Michler (granddaughter), 15/12/2023.
23. Aron Fun, "Memoirs."
24. They had received money from relatives in Canada, which was sufficient to purchase the train tickets out of Ukraine. Within three days of the Funks arrival, they were joined by the David Fast family, also from Katerinowka.
25. Email from Elisabeth Funk Michler (granddaughter), 11/12/2023.

Mennonite Heritage Archives

MHA Update

The Mennonite Heritage Archives (MHA) provides numerous ways to explore and learn from history. The MHA is a co-sponsor of the Friesen lectures hosted by Canadian Mennonite University. This January the speaker was Dr. Mark Jantzen of Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas. His main title was "The Shifting National Identities of Mennonites in Polish/ German Lands." Lecture one was entitled "Changing Old Martyrs for New in the 19th-Century Prussia," and lecture two "So Maybe We are all Polish?" His two lectures were well attended and can be found on he CMU website.

Bert Friesen, this year's recipient of the Award of Excellence with MHSC President Conrad Stoesz. *Photo Credit: Conrad Stoesz.*

The day after the lectures, the MHA hosted the annual Mennonite Historical Society of Canada meetings. Representatives of Mennonite historical societies, institutes, denominations, museums, and archives from BC to Quebec came for the two-day event. In President Conrad Stoesz's remarks, participants were reminded of the challenge outlined by Pope Leo at the 500th anniversary of Anabaptism in Zurich on May 29, 2025. Pope Leo called for "for honesty and kindness in reflecting on our common history, which includes painful wounds and narratives that affect relationships today." This short but pithy directive is applicable to the MHSC as we write the history of Mennonites in Canada, to the provincial societies who are planning events, and to the institutes, museums, and archives as we teach, interpret, and collect the stories from our Mennonite communities."

The Society annually presents the Award of Excellence to a person who has made significant contributions to the advancement of Canadian Mennonite history by way of research, writing, organization or the dissemination of Mennonite historical knowledge. This year's recipient was Bert Friesen of Winnipeg for his work as a genealogist, author, editor, and contributor to provincial and national Mennonite historical societies.

"Tales from the Mennonite Heritage Archives" continues to be aired on three Golden West radio stations in Manitoba and on several podcast platforms. Hosted by Dan Dyck, these weekly 15-minute stories explore people, places, and events from Mennonite history. Themes recently explored include midwifery in Paraguay, perilous travel to Manitoba in 1876, and conversations with Maria Lotsmanova and Dr. Aileen Friesen. Upcoming episodes include a conversation with Elmer Hildebrand of Golden West Radio, tragedy at Vanderhoof, BC, and the move of Mennonites to Burns Lake, BC.

MHA benefits from community support in the form of volunteering. Recently, Alice Britton began her volunteer time with us. Alice is in the archival studies program at the University of Maniotba and is honing her archival skills with us.

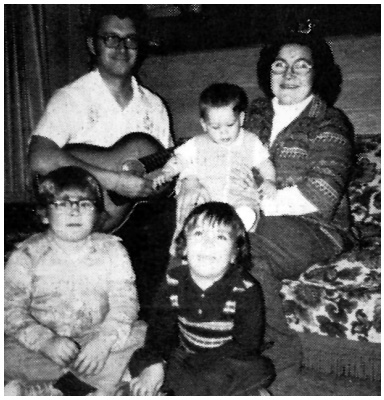
The Mennonite Heritage Archives provides access to historically significant records including through digitization. On our digital collection site, we have now finished uploading *The Canadian Mennonite* 1953-1971. Currently we are working on the last half of *Der Bote* and started uploading the Evangelical Mennonite Conference yearbooks. To access these text searchable collections, sign up for a free account at https://collections.mharchives.ca/

The MHA hosts a variety of researchers every week. In February we hosted a group of homeschool teenagers who wanted to explore what an archive is and what the Mennonite Heritage Archives holds.

Through all these initiatives we endeavour to preserve, present, and promote Mennonite history.

Voices from EMC, MB, and EMMC Pasts

EMC



Pictured are Wilbert and Hilda Friesen with their sons, Dale, Patrick, and Maurice. They were missionaries in Nicaragua for many years, and this image was taken during their time at home on furlough in the fall of 1976. Nicaragua at the time started to become dangerous, but Hilda reported, "You might ask, 'Has it been worth the hardship of moving, the leaving of friends, the sweat and the tears?' We take one look at the transformed drunk, one look at the growing church where before there was none, and we ask ourselves again, has it been worth it? Yes, oh yes, it has been worth every last bit of it!" She continued, "How good it is to know that the Spirit of God is not limited to any one place…" The Friesens returned to Nicaragua the following summer but were evacuated due to the revolution a few years later. Today, their youngest son Maurice, joyfully serves and works at the Evangelical Mennonite Conference head office as the Director of Next Generation.

Quoted material is from *The Messenger*, Vol. 14(24) (Nov 26, 1976).

Mennonite Brethren

Mennonite denominations and groups affiliated with Mennonites throughout

Photo Credit: CMBS NP046-01-4

Canada have been instrumental in the development of Christian camps. Attending summer camp for a week has been a tradition in many Mennonite families. Camps like Camp Arnes (formerly Lake Winnipeg Mission Camp) provide opportunities both to grow in one's Christian faith and to serve others, and often served as excellent training opportunities for future church leaders. Camp settings also provide outdoor education experiences and recreational activities that appeal to youth from both Christian and non-Christian families and provide year-round retreat opportunities for churches.

EMMC

Gerhard Froese was one of the four founding ministers of the Rudnerweider Gemeinde, which later became the EMMC.

Gerhard J. Froese was born in 1901 in Schoenfeld, Manitoba, not far from Winkler. He attended the village school, where the Bible was the text and manual for education. He was elected to the ministry and was ordained November 15, 1931.

The revival of 1934 in the Reinfeld area had a profound impact on Froese, leading to a deep personal renewal. His perspective on Scripture and his ministry shifted significantly. He began studying God's Word with great diligence so he could better serve the congregations in his care. His desire was to remain faithful to Scripture and to serve wholeheartedly, eagerly sharing God's message of salvation with the surrounding communities.

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

Bishop Johann Wiebe: The Fractured Founding of an Old Colony Legacy

by Arnold Neufeld-Fast

For the descendants of the Reinländer Mennoniten Gemeinde in Manitoba, Bishop Johann Wiebe is a foundational figure. The standard narrative is well-known: in 1875-76, he led his flock from Russia to Canada to preserve their faith against a compromising state, founding the staunchly traditional Old Colony Church. This story, however, contains a myth that has persisted for generations: the idea that virtually the entire Fürstenland settlement followed him.

The truth is far more revealing. Johann Wiebe was not merely a conservative leader shepherding a unified community; he was a polarizing reformer whose vision deeply fractured his congregation. While 214 families did answer his call to emigrate, at least 140 other families—a significant 40 percent of the settlement—chose to stay behind. This division points to a history that is not one of simple consensus, but of fierce internal struggle. By examining the conflicts within Fürstenland, we see Johann Wiebe not as a passive custodian of tradition, but as a complex, ambitious, and flawed man who crafted a powerful vision for renewal in the face of competing alternatives.

A Crucible of Competing Visions

To understand the schism, one must understand the unique nature of Fürstenland. It was a *Pachtkolonie*—a leasehold settlement—not a formal colony, which attracted landless and ambitious families from Chortitza. This environment fostered a surprising diversity. Far from being a monolithic bloc of traditionalists, Fürstenland was a microcosm of the wider Mennonite world, containing Pietists, educational reformers, skilled tradesmen, and historically Frisian Mennonites who chafed under the Flemish church's rigid discipline.

Into this ferment, three distinct visions for Mennonite renewal emerged from the Chortitza Church, championed by three contemporaries ordained within a few years of each other. The Mennonite Brethren, led by Abraham Unger, offered renewal through emotional conversion and separation. The progressive educator Heinrich Epp championed renewal through cultural engagement, elevated worship, and modern education. Johann Wiebe, ordained as Fürstenland's bishop in 1870, proposed a third path: a conservative reformation. He sought to purify the church from within by enforcing a strict, separatist discipline based on his interpretation of Menno Simons, creating a visible *Gemeinde* set apart from the world.

Thus, all three men—pew-mates from the same congregation—put forward competing claims to the true Mennonite tradition. Fürstenland was a battleground where these models clashed.

The Pillars of Wiebe's Reformation

Wiebe's program was a purposeful and systematic. Its first pillar was a radical separation of church and state. He rejected state-prescribed education, which he believed trained "citizens under the flag" rather than disciples of Christ. He also opposed Mennonites holding any public office that could require them to punish fellow believers, a conviction amplified by a childhood trauma. In 1847, the powerful reformer Johann Cornies publicly humiliated and removed Wiebe's father from his position as village mayor. This event left an indelible mark, teaching Wiebe that worldly office inherently corrupted Christian community.

The second pillar was rigorous church discipline. For Wiebe, a pure church required strictly policed boundaries. He wielded the ban frequently, seeing it as an essential tool to prompt repentance and maintain holiness, lamenting that it had fallen into disuse in the broader church.

The third pillar was visible separation from worldly compromise. This meant modest clothing, unadorned homes, and a rejection of technologies or cultural expressions that encouraged pride. These priorities were held together by a fourth element: a strong bishop model. This centralized authority allowed Wiebe to enforce his vision, though it also left him exposed to criticism when congregational checks on his power eroded.

The Battlegrounds: Schools, Singing, and Service

Wiebe's vision was tested daily in the life of the community, and nowhere more fiercely than in debates over education and worship. The state's push for a modernized curriculum, including Russian-language instruction, was seen by Wiebe as a direct

(cont'd on p. 10)

Accessibility and the Jacob Klaassen Diaries

By Carole Jantzen

Rev. Jacob Klaassen 1867-1948 At Rest
Photo Credit: Carole Jantzen

Prologue

Here lies my great-grandfather, Jacob Klaassen (1867-1948); born the year that Canada became a nation and died as the Cold War was beginning; father, farmer, pastor, and immigrant. This photo was taken not long ago in the Eigenheim cemetery near Rosthern, Saskatchewan. I grew up in this area, on a farm kitty-corner from the farm that Jacob bought when he moved to Canada from the United States in 1918. Jacob was a widower by then and his five sons were at or nearing draft age, so the move was deemed a necessity.

They joined the church at Eigenheim when they arrived and Jacob joined the ministerial team. In the early days it was part of the larger Rosenort Mennonite Church.

I never got to meet my great-grandfather Jacob, not in his time at least. I only began to get to know him in 2016 when I started editing a new edition of his diary.

Jacob's Diary

Great-grandfather Jacob Klaassen kept a diary from June 1, 1919 to May 26, 1947, almost 28 years. He wrote using German Gothic cursive in an exquisite hand, tightly filling the pages of eight small notebooks. He carefully recorded the weather; family, farming, and church activities; and world events if they affected his community. He rarely missed a day unless he was away; such as in July of 1921 when he went to the Mennonite Conference in Herbert, Saskatchewan, or July of the following year when he went to the conference in Manitoba.

Jacob started his diary not long after arriving in Saskatchewan from the United States. He continued writing as his sons married and all but one moved away, each to his own farm in the area. After Jacob retired from farming in 1928, he continued to live on the farm he had bought, together with son Henry and his new family. Jacob's sons took over the farm work. Jacob had his own space in the family home and continued documenting life as he kept the garden, pitched in with household tasks, and continued his ministerial work with the church.

The garden was his pride and joy. From 1908 to 1942 an Experimental Farm was located six miles away at Rosthern. Jacob consulted with experts from the experimental farm and purchased their breeding animals for his farm. He continued in the same vein as a gardener, experimenting with different varieties of plants and fruit trees..

In his diary, Jacob was a documenter of sorts sharing only the occasional opinion or emotion. He missed his wife who died in 1908, and ruminated over his life experiences. He was born in the Ukraine (South Russia at the time), as a boy travelled through Uzbekistan where he lost both his father and a sister, and moved to the United States at the age of 17 with his mother and other sister. He lived there for 34 years, learned to be a farmer, married, became a father, was ordained, built his life. Starting over again in Saskatchewan was difficult. He missed his old life.

Jacob retired from the ministry in January of 1944. No longer a farmer or church leader, Jacob had more time on his hands and he frequently noted being frustrated with his lack of daily accomplishments. He did not take a shine to sitting around and relaxing, especially in his later years. Despite his frustrations he continued with his diary. He visited his children. Two lived within a short walking distance, each on a different corner of the same intersection as Jacob's farm. It was also easy to visit a good friend from Jacob's Oklahoma days who lived on the fourth corner, the farm where I grew up. Jacob kept documenting life in his diary through the end of May, 1947. He died the following year in October.

A Note on Diaries

Diaries are a way of documenting one's life, of preserving memories. And, at least in our family in those days, diaries were also often left as a record for future generations. Jacob's father Martin Klaassen, who passed away in 1881 when Jacob was just 14 years old, kept a diary. That diary was carefully preserved by the family. On November 20, 1919, six months after starting his own diary, Jacob writes that he, "began to copy my father's diary," a task that took him almost a year and a half to complete. His brother Michael was the keeper of the original. Did Jacob expect others to read his own diary in the future? I expect the answer is yes.

Perhaps that explains why his diary is not so much a personal journal of introspection or emotion, but rather a documentation of daily life. It was intended as a record. A record for himself and for posterity. Most entries are only a few short sentences in length. He diligently noted each day's temperature, what was planted and when, grain prices, the scripture theme for the Sunday sermon, who came to visit or went to which meeting. All of it was information that one would expect he might want to refer to later. I imagine him flipping through his diary notebooks for answers to questions such as when did we start harvesting that year? What was the yield? When was the first frost? Who preached last year on Pentecost Sunday and what scripture did they use? Jacob kept notes elsewhere of his own sermons, but it is in his diary that he records scripture texts used by others when they spoke in church. What scripture did Brother John Dueck speak on for the communion sermon on the 27th of May, 1934? That would be John 6:53-56.

My Motivation

Nearly five decades after Jacob died, in 1997, his grandson, my uncle Henry Klaassen, translated the contents of those eight little diary notebooks into English and I received a copy. Translating can be a finicky task and in 2010 Uncle Henry issued a revised edition. My encounter with the diary began in earnest in 2016. I wasn't looking at creating a new edition. All I wanted was to find some specific information and that quickly became a challenge. The translation of those little notebooks had resulted in a 752-page typewritten volume. Unlike my great-grandfather Jacob, I didn't know what happened in which year or nor did I have any relative timeframe to help me narrow my search, so I asked Uncle Henry for a copy of the digital files. Those files made a big difference. Now I could search by keyword. One problem was solved, but only for me. I made a note to myself: an ebook version could be useful.

Now, diaries are personal. When one keeps a diary one is writing about a world with which one are intimately familiar. It is your own life. You know who is who

and what is where. You know all the back stories and all the little details of your day-to-day. Not all needs to be written down, just the key bits, and that's what Jacob did. How should he have known that the reader, his own flesh and blood in the future, would not be familiar with the Bennett wagon or the Democrat, know where the Danzig school was, or understand why they needed to go all the way to the Jantzen farm to get ice; or how the Jantzen's even managed to have ice in July?

When I read his diary, I had those questions, and many more. I grew up in the same community that Jacob lived in during the diary years, on that very Jantzen farm. While the farm that Jacob bought is no longer in the family, I often spent time there as a child. I knew the community well, as it was when I lived there. I had some context. I recognized names and places but there were still many gaps in my knowledge that made parts of the diary hard to follow or fully understand. What exactly was he referring to? Why did he do or say this or that? Life is so very different now, one hundred years later. My unanswered questions piled up quickly.

If I, a family member and a local from the area, had all these questions, how many more questions might others without that context have? What if my questions could be answered and those answers made available for other readers? The idea for a new edition started to take form. I discussed my ideas with Uncle Henry Klaassen. His one request was that I make the new edition accessible to the younger generation. That request fit perfectly with what I had in mind and became the focus of the third edition.

The Third Edition Project

It took five years to produce the third edition and, while I started this project on my own, I hardly completed it that way. Many family members played some part along the way. Most significantly, my mother, Irene Jantzen nee Klaassen and my sister, Marjorie Jantzen. My mother spent endless hours helping me to decipher Jacob's handwriting when we needed to check the original, digging through old photos and publications, sharing her memories, and providing immeasurable insights. Marjorie took charge of obtaining digital access to the originals so that we could accomplish this huge task remotely during COVID. She also managed all things copyright, helped dig through volumes of historical information, and, together with my brother, Fred, even drove around the prairies searching for long lost locations. Finding the GPS coordinates for the old Danzig school was a particular challenge. This became a family affair.

When we published the third edition of my great-grandfather Jacob Klaassen's diary, we produced two different versions, a print version that came as a two-volume set, and a digital version. We produced the digital version as an electronic book for Kindle – well worth the effort for the extra features that it enabled us to provide to make the diary accessible.

Jacob Klassen ca 1940. *Photo Credit: Carole Jantzen*

We found more than one way to make a historical document accessible.

Physical accessibility

To meet the diverse needs and preferences of our intended audience, (primarily family members) we chose to produce both print and digital editions of the diary. While some readers prefer the convenience of digital books, others are more comfortable with, or simply enjoy the experience of reading in print. Creating an accessible print version meant thinking beyond the content. We had to consider layout, font style and size, line length, and white space for example, each factor affecting readability. None of us are professional publishers, but we learned a great deal along the way. Every design decision prompted another question: How will this feel to the reader? To make the book more comfortable to handle, we ultimately decided to split it into two volumes.

As for the digital edition, we knew some readers would benefit from the portability and flexibility it offers. We chose the Kindle format, which allows for:

- Lightweight, portable access,
- Full-text search,
- Resizable and reflowable text that adapts to any screen size,
- Customization—readers can choose their font, highlight text, add bookmarks, and make personal notes, and
- Ease of use —pages can be turned with a simple tap or swipe, and no book needs to be held open

Intellectual Accessibility

Jacob did not write for the modern frame of reference; he wrote for his own time. In this aspect, improving accessibility meant adding context, clarifying references, and connecting the past to the future reader's understanding to bridge the frame-of-reference gap. Simply put, it was time to answer all the questions.

This was the most challenging, time consuming, and the most interesting part of the project. We worked through the entire diary, line by line. What additional information would help bridge the gap for readers? We added explanatory notes, cross-references, land locations, photos, illustrations, and references. We answered question after question producing 407 footnotes and four new appendices.

Many things begged for explanation. Sometimes the explanations were elsewhere in the diary. Here we added cross-references. For example, on May 11, 1920, Jacob writes that he had not enjoyed the conference at all because Jacob's election (not his own) was discussed. That's all he says so readers are missing a key part of the story. We added a cross-reference that takes readers to the date of the election where they can read irregularities made the election results null and void. In the digital version the cross-reference is hyperlinked for easy access. Just tap on the link and the text takes you there.

Often the explanations could only come from having additional knowledge of the time, place, or event. On April 12, 1937, for example, Jacob wrote, "The harbingers of spring, crows, cars, and gophers, can be seen and heard." That line only makes sense when one understands that the roads at that time were not passable for cars during the winter. .

Then there were the comments Jacob made that simply had us curious. Surely there had to be more to the story. And sometimes there was. On two occasions, Jacob referred to local events that we

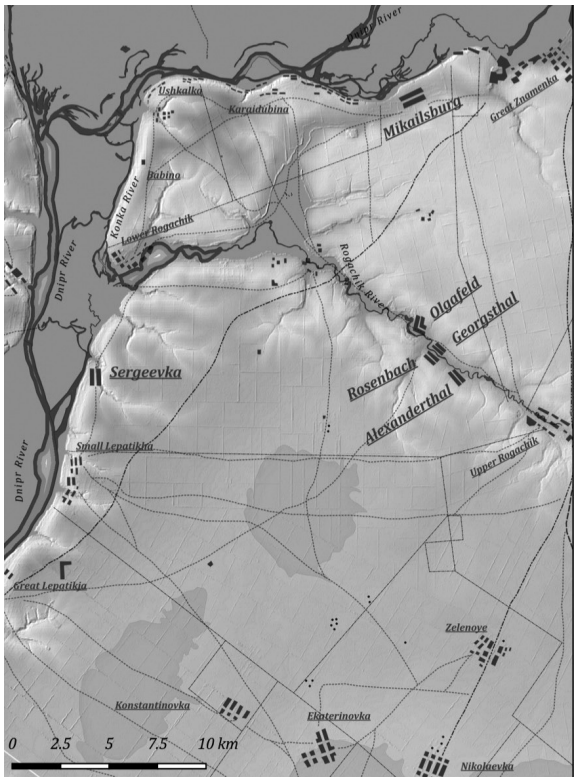
(cont'd on p. 11)

Bishop Johann Wiebe: Old Colony Legacy

(cont'd from p. 7)

assault on the church's autonomy. He championed a return to the "old way," where schools formed disciples, not citizens.

The conflict turned visceral over the issue of music. The introduction of part-singing and cipher notation, championed by progressives as a more reverent form of worship, was anathema to traditionalists. One member, Peter A. Elias, recalled the crisis erupting after a service when ministers announced the change without a congregational vote. The old *Vorsänger* defiantly led a hymn in the traditional style before the "cipher singers took over with their singing style. That produced singing which brought sadness to the listener who still had some Christian feelings left." While the young Bishop Wiebe initially allowed this division to simmer, his position would eventually harden into absolute conviction—a non-negotiable practice of spiritual formation and bulwark against a dissolving world.



The Fuerstenland Colony. *Map created by Brent Wiebe.*

The final, breaking point was the Tsar's 1874 decree of universal military service. While the government eventually offered a compromise—non-combatant service in forestry units under civilian control—for Wiebe, any compromise with the military apparatus was a fundamental betrayal. His decision was sealed by a profound crisis of conscience. In dramatic language, he recounted intense spiritual struggles, perceiving battles with demonic forces. He came to see the mother church's acceptance of state service as a sign of its final apostasy.

The Farewell Sermon: A Leader Divided

The deep divisions within Fürstenland are laid bare in Johann Wiebe's 1875 "Farewell Sermon," delivered just days before departure. It is the plea of an embattled, not a triumphant, leader.

He confessed the pain of "leaving my beloved congregation" and admitted, "We are not like-minded on all issues." He admonished those staying behind, warning that their souls were "in jeopardy" and that they had been "misled by the evil one." He framed the emigration as God's purging process, contrasting those departing to "become closer to Jesus" with those swayed by "hypocrites and liars" toward "false spirits."

Though conceding that "not all present still love" him, Wiebe maintained his "conscience is clear." His tone, however, was more accusatory than pastoral. He missed the opportunity to acknowledge his own role in the divisions or to seek forgiveness. He interpreted the refusal of many to follow him not as a different faithful choice, but as a rejection of Christian sacrifice. His rhetoric branded opponents as "enemies" and framed the conflict in apocalyptic terms, making genuine reconciliation impossible.

His parting words from Canada later that year offered no comfort, only a stark ultimatum. He expressed "pain" for those who stayed, insisting that anyone loving God "above all else" would emigrate. His message remained uncompromising: the choice to stay was part of "Satan's schemes."

A Complex Legacy

Johann Wiebe's legacy is profound. He successfully established one of the most resilient and enduring conservative Mennonite traditions. His vision of a church separated from the world, governed by strict discipline, has guided the Old Colony for generations.

Yet, the full story of Fürstenland reveals the cost of that achievement. He was a visionary, but a divisive one. His leadership style was polarizing; his capacity for reconciliation, limited. He crafted a powerful renewal project, but it was a selective vision, premised on a tradition that never was, and realized only by splitting a community.

The familiar story of a unified exodus is a myth. The reality is that Johann Wiebe was a complex, real person—a reformer with feet of clay, who fought battles with ministerial mentors and with his own congregation. He inspired fervent loyalty and provoked deep resistance. By understanding these struggles—the competing visions, the personal trauma, and the painful farewell—we gain a richer, more human understanding of the man behind the legacy and the true, fractured origins of the Old Colony church in Canada. This deeper history, filled with conflict and conviction, is the compelling prelude to the larger story of Fürstenland, a settlement whose influence on the Mennonite world did not end in 1875, but was only just beginning.

Fürstenland: A History of Mennonites in Russia and Ukraine, 1864 to 1944 follows this community for eight dramatic decades through revolution, famine, and totalitarian regimes. A key claim of the book is that by focusing intently on this one transient community as a microcosm, we gain a clearer, more intimate understanding of the larger Mennonite experience in Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. Moving beyond the leaders, the study uncovers the lives of ordinary families—their resilience in Stalinist terror, the life-saving alliances with Ukrainian neighbours, and the indispensable role of women as architects of survival. It is a history from the ground up, revealing how a "sojourner theology"—forged on rented land—shaped their response to catastrophe.

Based on Chapter 4 of the forthcoming book: *Fürstenland: A History of Mennonites in Russia and Ukraine, 1864 to 1944*, by Arnold Neufeldt-Fast, with a foreword by James Urry, published by the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society.

Jacob Klassen Diaries

(cont'd from p. 9)

found documented in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police archive. One of those was on October 20, 1936. For the reader's benefit we added a reference to the specific archive document. For those reading the digital edition, we also inserted hyperlinks directly to the document in the public archive.

I mentioned land locations earlier. In Jacob's time, the province of Saskatchewan was covered by a network of closely spaced country schools. With the advent of school buses, children no longer needed to walk to school and many of those country schools closed in favor of town schools. Today you would be hard pressed to find any evidence of most of them. Hence, we added notes with GPS coordinates and legal land locations for the schools that Jacob mentions, and for other places that have also faded away. In the digital edition those notes link directly to maps with the GPS coordinates pinpointed so the reader can easily see the location for themselves.

All the work we did was to make Jacob's world more accessible, to help readers not only better understand but also experience the life Jacob described in his journal entries.

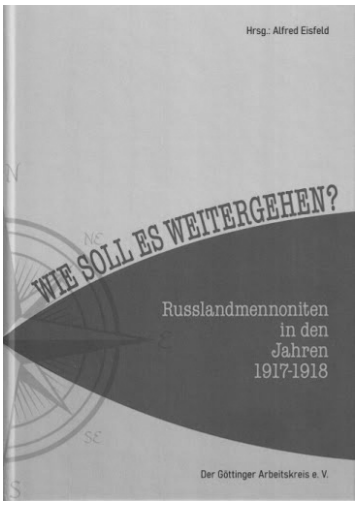
Wrap up

Now, when I see my great-randfather Jacob's gravestone, when I look through his diary, his memoir from the Trek in east Asia, and his autobiography, I am beginning to have a better understanding of who he was. Quite frankly, some of that new understanding applies to our entire family as, unbeknownst to Jacob, he influenced us all.

Whether this edition of the diary is read now, while some of the older generation is still available to answer questions and provide extra context, or later, when the text must speak for itself, my hope is that it will serve as a meaningful and approachable window into the life and times of my great-grandfather for the entire family and anyone else who wants to get to know him. If you are interested in experiencing the third edition of the Jacob Klaassen Diary for yourself, here's how.

The Mennonite Heritage Archives has the print edition and the electronic edition is available for purchase by contacting Majorie Jantzen at jacobklaassenfaily@gmail.com

Book Reviews



Alfred Eisfeld (Hrsg.). *Wie soll es weitergehen? Russlandmennoniten in den Jahren 1917-1918.* Abhandlungen des Gottinger Arbeitskreises. Bd. 16. Göttingen: Göttinger Arbeitskreis e.V., 2025. 460 pp. (152 Dokuments). ISBN 978-3-9818664-3-8.

By Johannes Dyck

Dr. Alfred Eisfeld is a recognized expert in the field of Russian-German history from the Imperial Russia and Soviet periods. He sets out the aim of this collection of documents in the first sentence of his introduction:"The idea of the Mennonites of Russia as a community isolated from the world, concerned only with practicing their religion and earning a living and avoiding any public or political activity, is as inaccurate as it is misleading." (p.11) This argument is supported by a large number of documents, a significant portion of which are being published for the first time. Many documents come from Ukrainian state archives. The time frame of the collection is limited to the highly turbulent period of political upheaval from 1917 to 1918.

The core of the document collection can be found in the minutes of the major conferences, lasting several days, at which the future direction was debated. Two of the four conferences of a confessional nature were based on a tradition that had existed since 1883: the General Conference of Mennonite Congregations in Russia from June 6 to 8, 1917, in Neuhalbstadt (Doc. 44) and the General Mennonite Federation Conference from June 30 to July 2, 1918, in Lichtenau (Doc.127).

Political developments brought the Mennonite principle of non-resistance into focus at the conferences. The discussions at the Federal Conference revealed the advanced secularization of Russian Mennonitism[1] and brought forth a remarkable range of opinions. The twenty-two contributions to the discussion were followed by a resolution that, in Eisfeld's view, was "open to interpretation" and "from which everyone could derive a legitimation of their own opinion." (p.26)

The two remaining major multi-day consultations fall into the political category: the General Mennonite Congress August 14-18, 1917, in Ohrloff (Doc. 88) and the General Mennonite Congress September 18-21, 1918, in the same location (Doc. 139). In addition to individual representatives of the religious community, Mennonite political self-organization attracted mainly teachers (Doc. 58, 68, 86), farmers, and businesspeople (Doc. 139). Reporting by theologically influenced Mennonite periodicals became an integral part of the political process as an authoritative opinion-forming authority (p.26), which Eisfeld used intensively. Mennonites mobilized in the medical service also took part in the political processes (Doc. 13). At the end of April 1917, a leaflet appeared with a call and recommendations for self-organization (Doc. 12). Eisfeld identified the Molochna Mennonite Association in Neu-Halbstadt (p.18), chaired by businessman and mill owner Johann A. Willms, as the most important center of the political movement in Ukraine. In Siberia, Slavgorod was considered the center of German and Mennonite political activities (Doc. 14). The Mennonites co-operated with initiatives by other Germans, for example in Moscow (Doc. 11, national level) and Feodosia (Doc. 18, Evangelical Lutheran colonists). The major goal of German representation in Russia's Constituent Assembly was not achieved because of the October Revolution of 1917.

Many of the documents selected by Eisfeld on the political activities of the Mennonites in 1918 come from periodicals—the *Friedensstimme* (Voice of Peace) , and the weekly *Volksfreun*d (People's Friend). Both were edited by the theologian Abraham Kröker. The community now had to adapt to the realities of independent Ukraine

(Docs. 106, 107). The Mennonites soon realized that the Ukrainian state lacked the substance to protect its citizens from banditry effectively (Docs. 109, 111). The invasion of German troops promised order (Docs. 113, 123, 125), but its political consequences soon became apparent—prompting the population to take measures to protect themselves (Doc. 127). The Ukrainian state also planned to introduce compulsory military service for German colonists (Doc. 124). Thus, defenselessness once again became a topical issue with political undertones. Suddenly, questions of repatriation to Germany (Doc. 129) and emigration overseas (Doc. 133) became relevant. The course of events was unexpectedly dominated by the activities of Makhno's gangs (Docs. 144-145, 147-149).

Eisfeld refrains from offering his own final judgment and leaves the interpretation of these two extremely turbulent years to a contemporary witness: "Abraham Kroeker's review of the changes in the Russian Mennonite community" (Doc. 151) and "On defenselessness and the permissibility of self-defense" (Doc. 152),

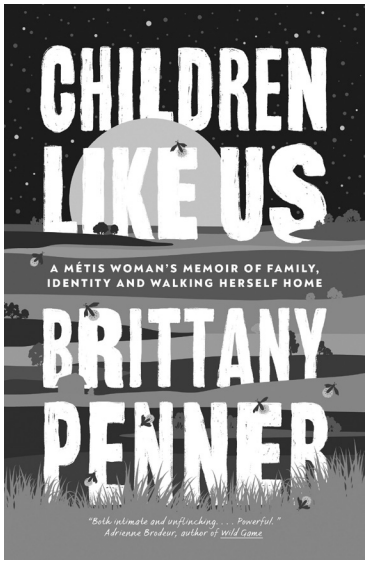
The significance of the document collection is highlighted by the extremely readable introduction. It reflects the current state of research, but could be further enhanced by taking into account the research of Ukrainian scholar Olena Khodchenko, for example.[2] Rare typographical errors such as "1. Unger" for "L. Unger" (p. 21) have no effect on the excellent quality of the document volume. This is also ensured by the extensive indexes compiled by Dr. Peter Letkemann, Winnipeg, Canada. The contribution of Dr. Gerhard Hildebrandt, Göttingen, as a consultant also adds to the significance of the work.

The long-awaited collection of documents is particularly relevant for libraries, archives, and researchers focusing on the history of Russian Germans and Mennonites in particular, as well as the history of the Soviet Union and religious minorities in general.

1. See I. Dik (= Johannes Dyck). "O sekuljarizacii i transformacii identicnosti rossijskich mennonitov" in Pytannja nimec'koi istorii' ["On the Secularization and Transformation of the Identity of Russian Mennonites" in *Questions of German History*] 44 (2017), Dnipro: RWW DNU, 2017, 50-54.

2. O. Khodchenko. "Izmenenie mirovozzrenija rossijskich mennonitov i razrusenie ich soobscestva" in Sucasni doslidzennja z nimec'koi istorii [The Change in the Worldview of Russian Mennonites and the Destruction of Their Community" in *Modern Studies in German History*, 47 (2020), Dnipro: LIRA, 2020, 72-80.

Johannes Dyck is a Research Assistant at the Museum of Russian-German Cultural History in Detmold, Germany..



Children Like Us: A Métis Woman's Memoir of Family, Identity and Walking Herself Home, Brittany Penner, 2025, Doubleday, 371 pages.

by Dora Dueck

At one point in her memoir, *Children Like Us*, Brittany Penner muses how much less painful it would be "if our histories were erased right as we entered the world." Impossible, of course, which for her means a beginning already crowded with story: a pregnant Métis teenager who will give her up, an infertile Mennonite couple who will adopt her, and further back, the dynamics of colonization. It means a long search for identity—for "home."

Penner takes us through her Manitoba childhood and early adulthood in a series of scenes, often using photos or home videos. She writes beautifully. Her use of present tense gives immediacy to her experiences. Her adoptive parents fostered children as well—21 by the time she was seven, all of them Native. (Penner uses the terminology current at the time.) These foster siblings would leave again and she became "obsessed" with when she too might be taken away.

She tells of adventures with these siblings and her cousins, of Mennonite celebrations and food and customs and religion, of her hatred of church basements because of what happened to her there, of good relationships and conflicted ones within the family, of the pressure to be grateful and "a good girl" because she was adopted. She comes to know and embody Mennonites' "belief in self-reliance."

As a youth, Penner worked at a Mennonite-run camp for Indigenous kids. "These Mennonites speak of the Native kids at camp with affection," she writes, "but also with an undeniable otherness." She wonders, "What is it to be Native—or part-Native?" She's "terrified" she'll never be enough of "this part of me."

Adolescence was tough, but Penner excelled as a student. Encounters in the medical system after a car accident aroused her desire to become a doctor. She pursued this and is clearly a compassionate physician, alert to and affected by racism she observed in her hospital rotations. She re-connected with her birth mother and family. She learned of the Sixties Scoop. She married.

Through it all, she was "in constant search of a story, of a narrative that feels whole and truthful and helps me understand my family and my place in it." Although she used to hold much of herself inside, a "persistent" desire to write has led to sharing "these parts of who I am," even though she knows her honesty may be risky. For this reader, the parts of her, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, have come together here to achieve something larger, a narrative that indeed feels "whole and truthful."

One step non-Indigenous people can take toward reconciliation with Indigenous people is to listen to and read their stories. This one, which is a Mennonite story as well, is heart-stirring. I recommend it.

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 Tsawassen, B.C.

Tales from the Mennonite Heritage Archives

What do a war veteran, midwife, and a historian all have in common? They have been featured on "Tales from the Mennonite Heritage Archives." Catch the podcast on Apple Podcasts, Spotify or your favourite platform. A new episode comes out each week.