

# Mennonite Historian



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*The Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization played a crucial role in helping groups like the Nordheimer Mennonite communities to settle in Western Canada. The exact date of this photo is not known, but many will recognize familiar faces. The picture comes from the files of the late Rev. J.J. Thiessen, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. (MHC Archives)*

## The Nordheimer Mennonite Church Archives

This article demonstrates the manner in which several CMC congregations have attempted to undertake the preservation of their church records. George Zacharias, the congregational historian of the Nordheimer Mennonite Church of Saskatchewan has been a strong promoter of this program, and we include here his (slightly edited) version of how they tackled this venture. It may give some useful ideas to other congregations who are trying to take on this task responsibly in their own meetings.

\* \* \*

*At the annual local congregational meetings in 1976 the following persons were elected as historians in each group: Hanley, Mrs. Margaret Peters; Pleasant Point, Rudolf Daniels; and Dundurn, George*

*Zacharias and Harry Friesen. These people were asked to record all events of the combined church, the Nordheimer Mennonite Church of Saskatchewan.*

*On September 2, 1976, a number of persons gathered at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Epp of Hanley. It was suggested at this meeting that all material such as church record books, or any records pertaining to the church should be gathered and later shown to a representative from a proper institution such as that at Rosthern, Saskatchewan, in order to assess the value of the collection, and also to discuss the matter of duplication, in case the originals were ever damaged by fire, etc.*

*It was further agreed that all these records should be stored in one place, preferably in a fire-proof location. The*

*Dundurn church house was suggested because of its central location. Up to now the records had been stored in the homes of the congregational secretaries. It was felt that this was not a proper place for these records.*

*After viewing the materials after the meeting, George Zacharias was asked to take them to his home and to hold them until a permanent storage place was ready, or a safe could be purchased. In the meantime he undertook to index the whole collection.*

*On April 15, 1977, Harry Friesen purchased a safe at a sale in Hanley, and placed it in the basement of the Dundurn church.*

*The importance of these records can be appreciated, as they represent the work and planning of the congregational members, since the establishment of our Nordheimer church in 1925. At that time the church included the group at Hanley, Dundurn and Pleasant Point, as well as smaller groups at Mildren, Harris, Hague, and others scattered throughout the province.*

*The concern of the founding fathers was to build a solid foundation for the congregation, so that they and their children would find fulfillment in their spiritual needs, and so serve to the glory of our Lord. This challenge has been taken up by the members that followed. They have done their utmost to maintain and further the growth of the church, as the founding fathers set out to do.*

*May these records henceforth serve as a reminder, in the work of the congregation throughout the years, that they may guide and strengthen us, in upholding our faith and traditions in the future. May the Lord be with us all. George Zacharias.*

\* \* \*

About six months ago these records were sent to the Mennonite Heritage Centre for microfilming. A copy of this microfilm has been retained in the Centre, and another sent to the congregation, together with the originals which remain with the congregation for the present. The total material, comprising about 3000 pages, is now preserved in slightly more than one roll of film. This may be something other congregations will want to consider as well.

## The "Kirchliche" Mennonites in the USSR

By Lawrence Klippenstein  
Part II

The "kirchliche" Mennonite believers' group at Novosibirsk in Siberia found relatively solid footing in 1967 when the authorities accepted a proposed membership list and registered the congregation. In 1969 Aeltester Jakob Thiessen came from Karaganda<sup>1</sup> to ordain Bernhard Sawatzky as leader of the congregation, and a building could be dedicated for worship services the following year. About 200 persons were in attendance at the time, and this number seems to have remained even though about a third of the members have left as emigrants to West Germany during the past decade. According to Sawatzky, who subsequently received ordination also as Aeltester, the membership of the congregation at present is around 140. Attempts are being made to procure a larger building and the group is hopeful that this effort can succeed.<sup>2</sup>

The beginning of another congregation, the Romanovka Mennonite Church, belongs very much to a family experience in the difficult years of the forties and fifties, and then the "thaw" that followed. Jacob and Elizabeth Wieler Friesen had grown up in Schoenhorst, Molotschna Colony, and were married in 1924.<sup>3</sup> They endured the distresses of the early Stalin period, and were among those who during the war trekked to the west, only to be forcibly returned to Eastern Siberia. The next decade of hard labor and confinement was at times unspeakably harsh, but then came better times and things changed. German-speaking people were relieved of travel restrictions, and the family with several children now moved to Kirgizia to settle at Romanovka in the vicinity of the city of Frunze.<sup>4</sup>

At Romanovka Friesen, and others began at once to found a Mennonite congregation. Many Mennonites had earlier met with the Baptists, and often there were fellowship gatherings in homes for such events as birthdays, weddings, funerals, etc. Attempts were now made to register the group, but with little progress. Pressures seemed to increase, so that for a time even house meetings could not be held. After several years however further persistent efforts to register did gain a positive response.<sup>5</sup>

The Mennonite congregation found much encouragement in the willingness of the Baptists to share the use of their worship building, and revival came to this community as it did to many others. Daniel Bergen accepted ordination as leader, with Jacob Friesen and Jakob Derksen ordained to help. Several younger men took on the task of evangelistic work. Baptism and communion services followed. As well several of the neighboring "kirchliche" congregations were



*This group of Mennonite Brethren and "kirchliche" Mennonites worshipped together in 1959 at Sowyetabad in Tadzhikistan, USSR.*  
Photo: Courtesy of Jakob Friesen.

becoming registered now. Exchanges of ministers and common services of baptism and choir festivals began and continued as a result. "The greatest blessing of all," writes someone who was close to these groups, "lies in the influence of the congregation upon the young people in helping them to withstand the worldly evils of alcoholism, immorality and atheism. God is building and blessing His people!"<sup>6</sup>

From the Dzhambul Mennonite congregation in southern Kazakhstan someone recently shared information about its practices and procedure, possibly typical of "kirchliche" groups elsewhere in the country.<sup>7</sup> Ministers and deacons are chosen from the male members of a congregation, anyone being eligible, with an exemplary life style the primary qualification. These elected men gather every Friday to decide who will preach on the weekend, and what work would need to be done the following week. On communion day all the sick and elderly are visited and given the Lord's Supper, with an Aeltester leading the celebration.

Those seeking baptism usually given at Pentecost, this writer recalls, were encouraged to take catechism classes led by several ministers of the church. Questions and answers were used, and key verses of Scriptures were memorized by the class. The Aeltester would perform the baptisms, though regular ministers would do so also in case of illness. Baptism was by pouring, but other forms were not denied or depreciated. A service of communion took place four times a year: at Advent, during Lent, at Pentecost and on Thanksgiving Day. Any baptized believer could participate, and no

Christian denomination was excluded.

Collections of money went to support aging ministers without a pension, giving aid to elderly widows, helping sick and needy families, paying for funerals, and supporting special projects. Regular collections occurred only during major Christian celebration, but special needs were presented for extra offerings. When building the church house, enough money was donated on the first collection to cover costs of materials. Members worked voluntarily after hours to complete the construction.

The church at Dzhambul, we are informed, has had good relationships with other Christian communities. Especially close have been the ties with the Mennonite Brethren, and the local registered Baptist Church. Direct contacts were maintained through song festivals, union services at Thanksgiving, exchanging pulpit services, and personal visitation. At a *Saengerfest* of July 27, 1977, for instance, the "kirchliche" congregation, two Mennonite Brethren churches, and a Baptist congregation participated. Four choirs sang six songs each, and four altogether. Two persons from every choir recited poems; sermons and prayers were included as well.

The story of the Mennonite "kirchliche" congregations in the Soviet Union is one of sufferings, renewal, new beginnings, defeats and victories - like that of other Christian communities in the land. Brother Sawatzky<sup>8</sup> and others look forward with confidence in the keeping power of God. They see great things happening in the days ahead, not without problems, but still giving witness to

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God who does not fail, and whose people will most certainly prevail.

#### Notes

1. At Karaganda the Mennonites had begun to meet for worship in homes around 1960. Many members had come from the old area of the Trakt. Thiessen became the leader in 1965, and the group was registered ten years later. It has a membership of about 500. Sawatsky, "Mennonite Congregations in the Soviet Union Today," p. 22.

2. The present building is rented, and was earlier a private dwelling. Persons of the MCC sponsored student tour of May, 1979, visited the group, and found the premises overflowing.

3. Cf. the obituary of "Jakob and Elizabet Friesen (geb. Wieler) Tokmak, Kirgizien, UdSSR, Frueher Schoenhorst, Ukraine," *Der Bote*, January 30, 1980, p. 6. Both parents passed away in August last year.

4. Kirgizia lies west and south of Siberia with Eastern Kazakhstan in between. Frunze is in an area where several Mennonite congregations exist today.

5. Cf. Jakob Friesen, "Ein Wort der Dankbaren Erinnerung Gewidmet meinen Eltern, Jakob und Elizabet Friesen (Frueher Schoenhorst, Zaporoshje," *Der Bote*, January 30, 1980, p. 7.

6. Private correspondence with Jakob Friesen, a son of Jakob and Elizabet, dated February, 1980.

7. Cf. Peter Neufeld, "Historical Sketch of Die Mennonitengemeinde (Kirchliche) zu Dzhambul," unpublished paper, CMBC, April, 1979. pp. 10ff.

8. Cf. Bernhard Sawatzky "Ein Neujahrsgruss an die Geschwister" in *Der Bote*, Jan. 30, 1980, p. 5.

## Corrections

\* The reference to *Christliches Jahrbuch* in the acquisitions list of *Mennonite Historian*, December, 1979 should have been instead to *Christlicher Familienkalendar*, also edited by A. Kroeker at Halbstadt in south Russia.

\* In the above list Dr. Albert Wardin should have received credit for helping MHC to secure copies of *Friedenstimme* microfilm from the Southern Baptist Historical Commission at Nashville, Tenn., USA.

\* The *Mennonite Historian*, June, 1979, article on Abraham R. Friesen (p. 1) should have stated, "Although Kornelius Friesen moved to Borosenko his son Abraham R. Friesen, remained in Lichtenau where he was a teacher."

\* Dr. Walter Klaassen, of Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario should have been listed as co-editor of *The Believers' Church in Canada*, (cf. "Other New Books", *Mennonite Historian*, December, 1979, p. 4.). The book was published jointly by MCC (Canada) and the Baptist Federation of Canada at Winnipeg, Manitoba and Brantford, Ontario respectively.

## Book Award

On January 12 the Manitoba Historical Society awarded the Margaret McWilliams medal to the editors of the book *Mennonite Memories. Settling in Western Canada*. The occasion was the John A Macdonald anniversary banquet held at the Fort Garry Hotel in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

*Mennonite Memories* first appeared in 1974 under the title *Manitoba Mennonite Memories* for which material had been collected and edited by Julius G. Toews of Steinbach, Manitoba. After selling out, the book appeared in a revised edition with its present title in 1977, under the editorship of Toews and Lawrence Klippenstein.

The hardcover volume is an anthology of essays, with some documents and many photos and maps to illustrate the general theme. It is still available at most Mennonite book stores, or the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg.

## The Rumbling Rambler

For teachers of a generation ago, in southern Manitoba and elsewhere, the *Rumbling Rambler* will have been a welcome and well-known publication. To anyone else, less known. We learned about it only a month ago, and are curious to know more.

The extant numbers brought to the archives are the first monthly issues beginning with October, 1939, and running into the following year. By all appearances this was a newsletter published by the teachers (mostly Mennonite) of the Rhineland Stanley Teachers' Association, a local branch of the provincial Federation.

The October, 1939 issue came as a new start after publication had lapsed for more than a year. As editor, Hermann Schellenberg, of Altona, sought to solicit articles, and to collect the 50¢-a-year subscription fees, which seemed somewhat difficult to come by. A "List of Subscribers to the Rumbling Rambler", not dated, includes 62 names, such as Mary Loewen, Lowe Farm; Henry H. Goertzen, Winkler; Peter Dyck, Winkler; Victor Peters, Landmark; D. G. Reimer, Altona; and John K. Friesen, Virden, Manitoba.

Contributions included write-ups from the Normal School, feature articles, and news for teachers. A call to a sturdy support of democracy at the outbreak of the war, commended those who were entering non-combatant services.

One interesting item notes the organization meeting of a "Youth Movement" at Altona on November 1956, 1939. Elected as officers were H.W. Reimer, Lowe Farm, president; D.G. Reimer, Altona, vice-president, and William Friesen, Haskett, Manitoba as secretary in chief. Hermann Schellenberg of Altona came in as "stooge", (officially assistant secretary and treasurer) of the group.

An earlier meeting had recommended efforts to provide a systematic study of the Mennonite faith for the young people of this area. There is a mysterious reference to "strenuous opposition in certain quarters" but the editor felt confident that "if reasonable care and tact are used in its administration, the most exacting skeptics will soon be convinced of its usefulness". The movement might be worth further study and research by historians today.

Issues of this periodical have been provided for the Mennonite Heritage Centre archives by Mr. William Friesen, a former active member of the Youth Movement, now resident in Winnipeg. Can anyone supplement our file? Available now are October - December, 1939, and March - May, 1940.

## Heritage Centre News

Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries donated nearly a hundred bound volumes of back number periodicals to the MHC archives. Titles include *The Mennonite*, *Congo Missionary Messenger*, *Missions Today*, *Christlicher Bundesbote*, *Gospel Herald* and *Missionary News and Notes*.

Recent visiting groups at the Mennonite Heritage Centre included the board of Mennonite Historical Society of Canada, the local chapter of the Manitoba Genealogical Society, a women's group from First Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, and members from the ministers' and layman's courses at CMBC.

Dr. Wes Berg's recently completed Ph.D. dissertation (1979) on choral music among Canadian Mennonites extensively utilized materials from the MHC archives. Dr. Berg, formerly from Manitoba, teaches music at the University of Alberta in Edmonton.

*Mennonite Historian*, the newsletter of MHC, has exchange or paid subscriptions with about two hundred individuals and fifty institutions in Canada and the USA. Bulk mailings go to the congregations of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada and the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference.

Four reels of microfilm copies of correspondence from Dutch Mennonites in Amsterdam to fellow-believers in West Prussia have been added to the archives collection. The letters span the period of the 16th - 18th centuries.

Esther Epp of the University of Manitoba and Louella Friesen of the University of Winnipeg have been researching MHC archives files on topics in Canadian Mennonite history (The origins of MCC Canada, and the story of several southern Manitoba villages respectively).

Two early Manitoba Mennonite periodical collections, *Der Mitarbeiter* (1906-1934) and *Das Bergthaler Gemeindeblatt* (1936-1972) have now been completed and bound.



## Growing Up Mennonite

We think there is something very positive and/or humorous about "growing up Mennonite". We have all heard the old adage that "everyone has a story". This is your chance. We want to encourage you to write a short story, paragraph, or even sentence about "growing up Mennonite".

Your response, along with many others, will hopefully be compiled into a book or booklet. We are sure that other Mennonites will be able to relate to your "story". No story is too short or insignificant. We are looking forward to your response and support.

The following is a list of topics that you might consider. Please do not limit yourself to these suggestions.

*Mennonite food and cooking*  
*"The Farm"*

*Bible School*

*The minister comes to visit*

*The predominately*

*Mennonite community*

*German School*

*Mennonite taboos*

*The German Language*

*Learning to work*

*Frugality*

*Non-resistance*

*Childhood experience*

We would like to have the following information: a) name (optional) b) your province/state c) your Mennonite affiliation. Please send all correspondence to: Menno Claus, P.O. Box 321, Vineland, Ontario (Canada) L0R 2C0. We reserve the right to edit and change names to protect your identity.

## Book Notes

\*Copies of Frank H. Epp's manual for writing congregational histories, **Stories with Meaning**, are available at the Mennonite Heritage Centre, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, Manitoba. Please send \$2.00 plus \$.50 for postage.

\*The December, 1979 issue of **Mennonite Life** includes articles on the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, the MB Archives in Winnipeg, and the Hildebrand family of Rosenthal (formerly), Manitoba. For a copy, or regular subscription to **Mennonite Life**, write to Dr. James Juhnke, editor, Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, Kansas, 67117.

\*Back copies of **Mennonite Reporter** and **Canadian Mennonite** are available for most years (1953-1979) at the Mennonite Heritage Centre. Some years are already bound. Write if interested.

This page was provided by the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada.

## Mennonite Historical Society of Canada Minutes

The annual meeting of the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada took place at the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg on Saturday, February 9, 1980. Representatives from the provincial Mennonite Societies, as well as observers from two Canadian Conferences (MB and CMC) were present at the meeting.

Reports from the provincial historical societies mentioned ongoing activities. B.C. MHS, with a membership of about 100, is incorporating and planning a Mennonite museum. The Golden Age Society has a very active program in progress. Alberta - Saskatchewan is laying plans to establish a Saskatchewan Valley Historical Museum at Rosthern. A report on the recent Saskatchewan heritage sources survey was available to persons at the meeting. Manitoba is in the process of reorganizing its society, an event scheduled for Saturday, March 1. In Ontario the focus has been on writing congregational histories. Jan Gleysteen was a guest in the most recent annual meeting of the group.

In other business the Canadian society heard a progress report on the second volume of **Mennonites in Canada**. A manuscript is expected to be ready for publication by the end of 1980. F.H. Epp's congregational history writing manual, **Stories with Meaning**, was published last fall and the December issue of **Mennonite Life** (Canadian content) will be appearing shortly.

Final revisions on the by-laws were passed so incorporation of MHSC can be completed. An archives consultation meeting is being planned, and provision was made to have the Anna Baerg diary prepared in manuscript for publication in an English translation. It is hoped that support can be given also to completing the index to **Canadian Mennonite** (1953-1971), begun some years ago. A budget for \$26,450 was accepted.

The executive for the coming year includes: Ted Regehr, as president; George Groening, vice-president; Sam Steiner, treasurer; Ted Friesen, secretary; and Herbert Giesbrecht, member at large.

*The David P. Reimer papers, recently microfilmed at the Mennonite Heritage Centre, have provided some new documentation for the scope of the Canadian Mennonite alternate service program, and other Mennonite peace activities in Canada. One folder has materials on the visit of a peace delegation to Ottawa in February, 1951, and minutes of local meetings leading up to that action. Below are seen the persons involved in the Ottawa visit. Back (left to right): C. J. Rempel, Saskatchewan; Elven Shantz, Ontario; David P. Reimer, Manitoba; David Schulz, Manitoba; and front (left to right): J. B. Martin, Ontario; E. J. Swalm, Ontario; B. B. Janz, Alberta; Fred Haslam, Ontario; and John G. Rempel, Saskatchewan. They represented the Canadian Historic Peace Churches, including here the Mennonite Brethren, the Kleine Gemeinde (now EMC), Conference of Mennonites in Canada, the Brethren in Christ, the Society of Friends (Quakers), the (Old) Mennonite Conference and several other smaller Mennonite groups of Ontario and Western Canada.*

