

Mennonite Historian

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Abraham Cornelsen (1826-1884): A Biography

by Helmut T. Huebert

Abraham Abraham Cornelsen, who became an outstanding elder in the Mennonite Brethren Church, both in Russia and in the United States, was born 11 August 1826 in Grossweide, Molotschna Colony. His parents were Abraham Abraham Cornelsen and Maria Vogt. They had migrated from Schweingrube, Prussia, to the Molotschna Colony in 1819, likely being some of the first settlers as the village of Grossweide was being established. Father Abraham died in 1828, and his mother Maria may have married an Abraham Abraham Wall. In the 1835 Molotschna census son Abraham is listed as living in the Wall household.

Abraham certainly would have completed the Grossweide village school, and his teacher was likely Peter Isaak. He then seems to have gone on to attend secondary school, but any further religious knowledge, besides the catechism, was self-taught. He was well enough qualified to be a village teacher and later in the United States, he was considered to be well educated. The Rudnerweide Frisian Mennonite Church, with a sanctuary in Rudnerweide, was in the village next to Grossweide, so it is not surprising that Abraham was initially a member of this congregation.

Abraham married Aganetha Gaede of Liebenau, Molotschna, on 1 February 1849. The couple had 13 children and migrated to the USA in 1879.

1. Abraham Cornelsen (1849-1929) - born in Grossweide; married Sarah Regier (1870); 12 children; migrated to the USA (1880) settling in Hooker, Oklahoma, where he was the first minister of the M.B. Church.
2. Johann Cornelsen (1852-1915) probably born in Grossweide; married Anna Peters (1878); migrated to North America (1879);



Abraham Cornelsen (1826-1884) Photo: Courtesy of Center for MB Studies (Hillsboro, KS)

- 5 children, all born in North America; eventually settled in Main Centre, Saskatchewan.
3. Gerhard Cornelsen (1853-1931) - born in Elisabethtal; married Maria Duerksen (1881); lived in Marion County, Kansas, 12 children; moved to Fairview Oklahoma by 1898.
4. Heinrich Cornelsen (1854-1922) - likely born in Elisabethtal; married Regina Willms (1881); lived in Fairview, Oklahoma; 12 children.
6. Peter Cornelsen (1856-1930) - born in Elisabethtal; married Maria Patzkowski (1880); lived in Marion, Kansas, then in Oklahoma by 1898; 11 children.
7. Cornelius Cornelsen (1857-1857) - born and died in Elisabethtal on the same day.
8. Jacob Cornelsen (1859-1943) - born in

(cont'd on p. 4)

Mementoes of a faraway world

by Dora Dueck

The spine of the tall brown book is completely broken, its leaf-patterned pages have come loose and their edges are warped and ragged, but it must have been a handsome thing once, this album. It must have been a treasure.

It was carried along to Canada among the scanty possessions of my grandparents when they emigrated from Russia in 1925. The 90-some postcards inside it reveal places Grandfather saw while transporting wounded soldiers on trains during his medical corps service during World War I. They are mostly of the Caucasus region, where he spent much of his time during 1914-1918.

Postcards were introduced in Europe and North America in the last third of the nineteenth century as a cheap, short form of communication. Their rise was linked to the growth of a travel industry and passenger rail service, as well as photography and publishing technologies that allowed mass production of images. The years 1898 to 1918 have been called the "golden age" of postcards, and collecting became a mania in many places.

I do not know if the collecting craze hit the Mennonite colonies of Russia or whether my grandfather was simply motivated by his interest in new places. He corresponded with his fiancée, Helene Derksen, throughout his years of service and probably wanted mementoes to show her as well.

Heinrich witnessed many unpleasant scenes in his work, scenes he might evoke only with brief descriptions such as "load, unload, disinfect, then load again" or "heavily wounded men...four men with amputated legs...one who was shot through the body." Once he alluded to the dangers of the war with, "Remember that you are the bride of a soldier who could be torn away from you at any moment."

He also witnessed scenes of great beauty and fascination. "Never did I dream that I would travel as much as I have done by now," he said in one letter. Leaving Tiflis for Batum one day he wrote, "This outlook alone was already a joy for me, because no matter how often we have come here and left again, I never tire of seeing the area." He sometimes described excursions he and friends took on occasional free days.

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Mementoes

(cont'd from p. 1)

Cities, mountains, exotics

Heinrich bought postcards of Tiflis (Tbilisi, now the capital of Georgia) where he was often stationed; the oil city Baku on the Caspian Sea; Batum on the Black Sea which he raved about in letters describing its “tea plantations, lovely villas...cedars, bananas, palms, magnolias, and many other lovely trees and shrubs”; and scenes along the Georgian Military Road, which cuts through the peaks and gorges of the Northern Caucasus Mountains from Vladikavkaz to Tbilisi. This area includes the legendary snow-covered Mount Kazbek, where Prometheus is said to have been chained for stealing the secret of fire and some Christians claim Jesus’ manger is buried. He also collected postcards referred to in the European postcard trade as “types”—depictions of “exotic” local inhabitants shown in native dress.

About half the postcards Heinrich collected are in colour. The colour images are tinted photos (for a charming though somewhat surreal effect) or seem to be paintings. There are also 15 cards depicting aspects of Russian military life, not of actual warfare but staged photos—such as officers scouting or soldiers with horses at rest in camp. There’s a pastoral

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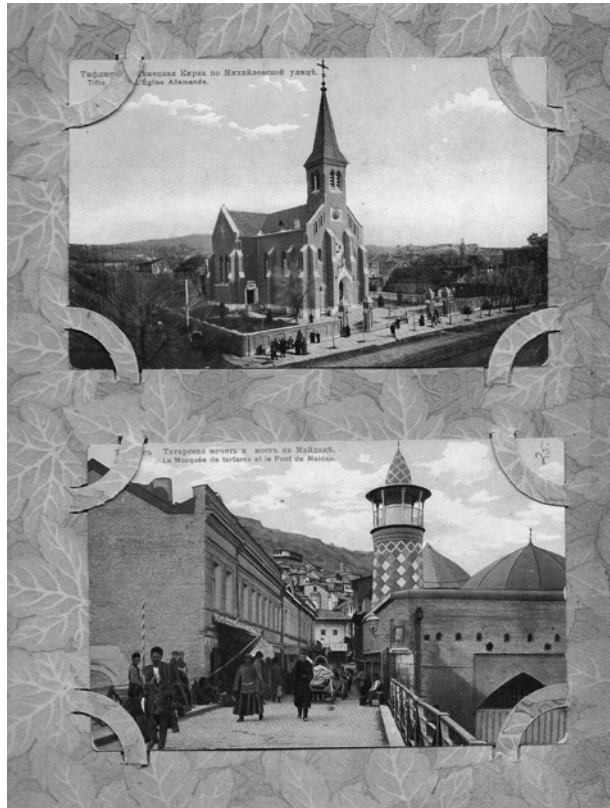
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Two postcards from Tiflis (Tbilisi, now the capital of Georgia). Top: the German church -- the St. Peter and Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church, built by the German residents in Tbilisi, consecrated in 1897, taken down in the 1940s. Bottom: the Tartars' Mosque and Maidan ("old city") Bridge in Tbilisi.

optimism in these scenes that seems both naïve and primitive; one can't help thinking it's not surprising Russia fared disastrously in the Great War.

The postcards Heinrich collected during his service were not written on or mailed. There *are* a few postcards with messages in the album but these are of other places, including Mennonite buildings like the orphanage at Grossweide and schools in Ohrloff. In one letter he asked Helene, “How would you like it if at times I mailed postcards to you, which would not be sealed as letters are, and how would you like me then to address you?” Postcard correspondents were always aware that the words they used were vulnerable to the scrutiny of others. During the postcard era, people also warned of the decline of letter writing, much like today's laments over email communication.

Far away places

Once in Canada, in a small house on a farm near Winkler, Manitoba, the album sometimes came down from its place on a high shelf. “We children loved to look at the postcards,” one of my aunts recalls. She points at those that particularly

impressed her as a child: the Tbilisian porter carrying on his back a box much larger than he was; a fancily dressed little girl and her mother in a tropical garden in Batum; Mt. Ararat in Turkey.

In a time when books were scarce and access to images of other places rare, the postcards carried the Harder children to far away times and places. The cards linked to the past, but also, by arousing their interest and imaginations, pulled them into the future. My aunts recall that their father did not talk much about the cards or the period they represented; engrossed in making a living as an immigrant farmer and active in church work, the album must have seemed to belong to his vanished youth.

Many decades later, the postcards have provoked me to happy days of sleuthing – of postcards in general and these postcards in particular. Location names have changed in most cases and

many of the inscriptions are in Russian, but with the wonderful help of the Internet, a map of the region, and my grandfather's correspondence, I have gained a small sense of what the cards represent. I still have many questions of course; perhaps others with postcard collections can help.

Any artifact contains many layers of meaning. This album of postcards illuminates the horizon-altering encounters of a young Mennonite man during World War I, the stirrings of the minds of immigrant children in the 1930s and 40s, and now, some ninety years since they were purchased, a journey of sorts for me through what is now Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Kazakhstan. I began with simple curiosity but was unexpectedly moved by how my exploration connected me with my grandfather. My recollections of him as an elderly widower with an aura of sadness about him fell away. I met a young man in his twenties, in the stage my children are now, open to beauty, keen for new vistas, astonished at all there was to see in the world.

Dora Dueck is a writer and editor living in Winnipeg.

Genealogy and Family History

By Alf Redekopp

Recent Books

Elmer W. Neufeld. *Toews Family History: The Story Through the Generations* (Saskatoon, SK: Elmer W. Neufeld, 2008) 263 pp.

This family history focuses around the story of Heinrich I. Toews (1855-1918) and his wife Katharina Klassen (1857-1922) and their children and grandchildren, with one chapter devoted to families descending from each of their children. This family lived in Alexanderwohl, Moloschna, South Russia till the 1920s when all but one of the families emigrated to Canada. In addition to the families' stories, this book includes a collection of family documents, maps, photographs and recently updated genealogical data. Contact: Elmer W. & Erna Neufeld, 512-351 Saguenay Dr., Saskatoon, SK S7K 5T4.

Lawrence Klippenstein. *Peter H. and Maria Dyck Klippenstein: A Brief Sketch of their Life and Work* (Steinbach, MB: The Cousins, 2008) 33 pp.

This booklet is written from the viewpoint of the grandchildren of Peter H. Klippenstein (1878-1960) and Maria Dyck (1879-1943), who are also the publishers. The ancestral roots are traced back from Manitoba to Russia to Prussia to Behrend Klippenstein (1781-1841). The more immediate family history begins in the Bergthal Colony in south Russia, followed by the migration to Canada in 1875, where they first settled in

the Manitoba Mennonite East Reserve before relocating to the West Reserve. Peter H. & Maria Dyck Klippenstein established their home in Altberghal, just west of present-day Altona, Manitoba. Although the book does not include current genealogical data, it would be of interest to any descendants of this family. Contact: Lawrence Klippenstein, 102 - 388 1st Street, Steinbach, MB R5G 0C7 (204)346-1808.

Les Plett. *Family Register of the Descendants of Our Grandparents Peter L. and Agatha (Koop) and Susana (Friesen) Plett #13* (Calgary, AB: Leslie Plett, 2006) 322 pp.

This book traces the ancestors and descendants of Peter L. Plett (1858-1944) who first married Agatha Koop (1859-1883) and then Susana R. Friesen (1864-1936). Born in Kleefeld, Molotschna, Plett moved to Canada in 1875, farmed at Blumenhof, Manitoba, until the family moved to farm near Satanta, Kansas in 1917. He moved back to Prairie Rose, Manitoba in 1939 and died in Steinbach in 1944. Contact: Les Plett, 923 Midridge Dr. SE, Calgary, AB T2X 1H5.

Queries

Braun - Looking for the ancestors and descendants, and date of death for Peter Jacob Braun, born April 03, 1897 in Canada. He had a sister, Helena Braun Siemens, born April 15, 1899, and a brother Herman Braun, born January 10, 1895. Contact: Laura Siemens Taylor, 3887 Quail Canyon Court, San Jose, CA 95148-2412 dennis.taylor@thermofisher.com



Guenther - A family photo (pre-1917) in my possession is stamped on the back with the name, David Guenther. The photo would have been taken in Orenburg. Is David Guenther the photographer? Is he familiar to anyone? Does anyone else have photos from the Orenburg area produced by the same person? Contact: David Loewen, 32187 Golden Ave., Abbotsford, BC V2T 5C5 E-mail: davengrace@shaw.ca. You are invited to view Dave's historic photo album at: <http://picasaweb.google.com/DLoewen33/Eitzen>.

Essay Contest Winners



The Genealogy Committee of the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society is pleased to announce the winners of this year's Henry E. Plett Memorial Award for writing a family history. First prize was awarded to Kathryn Boschmann (right), a student at Mennonite Collegiate Institute, Gretna, for her paper entitled, "Survival in the 20th Century: The story of my Oma and her family" which is the family of Adina Schroeder (1922-) born in the Ukraine and who came to Canada after the Second World War. Second prize was awarded to Brett Smith (left), a student at W.C. Miller Collegiate, Altona, for her paper entitled "Grandma Smith" which told the family story of Thelma (Gustafson) Smith (1906-1996), longtime resident of Gretna, Manitoba.

This annual essay contest, open to any Manitoba high school student, aims to promote and encourage research and writing in family history. Competition details can be found on the web at: www.mmhs.org/plett.htm.

Send inquiries to Alf Redekopp, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, MB R3P 0M4 or e-mail: aredekopp@mennonitechurch.ca



In front of the steam mill at Grigorevka, Naumenko, S. Russia. Who are these men besides Front row 2nd from left, Peter Harder (1877-1946), miller; and 2nd row, 4th from left, Jakob Harder (1880-1917) Assistant miller? (See previous issue for full photo.)

Cornelsen biography

(cont'd from p. 1)

- Elisabethtal; married Aganetha Nikkel (1883); lived in Hillsboro, Kansas; likely 6 children, of which 2 died in infancy.
9. Isaak Cornelsen (1861-1944) - married Katharina Nikkel (1890), then Aganetha Nikkel (1895), then Anna Boese (1912); lived in Kansas and Oklahoma; 11 children; died in Cordell, Oklahoma.
 10. Franz Cornelsen (1863-1863) - died the same day.
 11. Aganetha Cornelsen (1866) - died in infancy.
 12. Franz Cornelsen (1867-1951) - born in Gillantschik, Russia; married Anna Ewert; lived in Marion, Kansas, then after 1906 in Main Centre, Saskatchewan; 15 children; died in Herbert, Saskatchewan.
 13. Cornelius Cornelsen (1870-1954) - born in Gillantschak, Russia; died in Enid, Oklahoma.
 14. David Cornelsen (1871-1955) - born in the Don River region, Russia; married Aganetha Nikkel (1902); lived in Marion, then Hillsboro, Kansas; 8 children; died in Fairview, Oklahoma.

(Family records are not all consistent. A daughter Regina is on the ship passenger list, but is not included in the family's own records)

According to the birth records of the children, Abraham and Aganetha lived in Grossweide from the time of their marriage in 1849 until 1852, at which time Abraham likely started teaching in Elisabethtal. In 1857 he is listed as the teacher in that village with a total of 65 students. He continued in that position into 1860, when he was fired and expelled from the teacherage, the village, and the Molotschna Colony for his involvement with the new Mennonite Brethren movement. He was not even given a pass to allow his family to move elsewhere. In the 1861-62 school year the Elisabethtal teacher was Kornelius Friesen, so Abraham was certainly gone by then. By 1867 the Cornelsens lived in Gallantschik, staying there until 1870. From 1871, probably until 1879, they lived in the Don River region.

Eduard Wuest, pastor of the Neuhoffnung separatist Lutheran Church, had interested many, including Mennonites, by his fiery and lively sermons. He spoke at Missionfests on a number of occasions, especially in the Gnadenfeld Mennonite Church; he inspired many serious Christians to a deeper spiritual life. A group of Gnadenfeld members asked their elder, August Lenzmann to administer communion, "as our fellowship based itself more and more upon the Word of God." The request was denied. Some

believers met in late November, 1859, in Elisabethtal, in the home of Kornelius Wiens, and participated in communion, with teacher Abraham Cornelsen in charge.

When news of the event spread, the six Flemish church members who participated were put under the ban and the Gnadenfeld members were reprovved. At the Gnadenfeld membership meetings of December 19 and 27 the whole new movement was attacked. On December 27 Jakob Reimer, Johann Claassen and ten others left the meeting following some jeering by the membership, and after Elder Lenzmann reluctantly had given his consent. As a result of this episode Johann Claassen called a meeting of the fellowship for Epiphany, 6 January 1860.

On January 6 a letter of secession previously prepared by Abraham Cornelsen was carefully studied, and accepted as the basis for further action. The afternoon and evening were spent in prayer. Then the document was presented for voluntary signatures. Eighteen heads of families signed, including Abraham Cornelsen; nine others added their signatures on 18 January. The documents were then submitted to the Council of Elders of the Molotschna Colony.

The letter began with, "We, the undersigned, have by the grace of God, recognized the decadent condition of the Mennonite Brotherhood and can, for God's and conscience's sake no longer continue therein; for we fear the inevitable judgment of God, since the openly godless living and their wickedness cries to God in heaven."

Together with Johann Claassen and Isaak Koop, Abraham Cornelsen sent an additional letter of clarification to the Molotschna authorities, dated 23 January 1860.

Probably early in February, thirty-two of the leading Brethren were summoned to the Halbstadt District Office to answer charges of having baptized two people in a river. They were ordered to come to an upstairs room where five elders and five ministers were to hold "court." It should be noted that none of the elders or ministers of the Ohrloff Church were present. Efforts were made to persuade the thirty-two to return to the Mennonite Church; since these efforts failed they were given one month to think it over. Heinrich Huebert stated the position of the dissenters, concluding his remarks with, "because we fear God, we would rather fall into the hands of men than into

the judgment of God." Nikolai Schmidt, a minister of the Gnadenfeld Church, was present at the meeting. He had earlier advised Abraham Cornelsen and Johann Claassen "to separate from the church if it were a matter of conscience with them not to take communion together with unrepentant drunkards and blasphemers." Now Schmidt backed away from this stance. He claimed that he had not meant that they should actually leave the church. One of the Brothers responded, "How can you freely misinterpret the scripture contrary to your convictions, merely to please men?" After this Schmidt did not accept service in the jury of elders. When Heinrich Huebert was jailed, Schmidt bailed him out and gave the surety that he would bring him back if needed for further investigation.

David Friesen, the *Oberschulze* of the Molotschna Colony, a very dictatorial and reactionary official, ordered the three designated delegates of the Mennonite Brethren, Johann Claassen, Abraham Cornelsen and Isaak Koop, to appear before Colonial Inspector Andrea, a member of the *Fuersorgekomitee*. Andrea expressed sympathy toward the Brethren and assured them that religious freedom existed for all organized churches in Russia. A new group, however, would need to secure permission from the government before it could organize. He expressed willingness to assist them in obtaining the necessary documents on the condition that they would refrain from further steps until they had received express permission from the government. The three signed a prepared statement to that effect on 10 February 1860. When he got home Claassen realized that they had been duped. The government, with the lobbying of the Molotschna authorities, would never give this consent.

When the Brethren had not returned to their churches within a month, the colony administrators put a number of them under the ban. For some families this meant economic ruin and hardship. Abraham Cornelsen, school teacher in Elisabethtal, was dismissed from his position and together with his family was driven from the teacherage and from the village and colony. They took temporary refuge in an abandoned Nogai sod hut. When he and his family became ill they settled in a neighbouring Nogai village. A prominent member of the Gnadenfeld Church, Abraham Braun of Grossweide, intervened, and the family was allowed to return to the colony. Other teachers who

also lost their positions when they joined the Mennonite Brethren Church were Gerhard Wieler and Daniel Fast.

Since the three delegates had signed the promise not to participate in further organization of the new church, these men were not considered to be candidates for election of leaders which occurred on 30 May 1860. This probably adversely affected the Mennonite Brethren Church in its first years. Cornelsen had a personality in which "keen discernment, moral courage and a cool, even temperament were happily blended." He would have been an ideal elder to guide the group through the first stormy period. With Cornelsen excluded from active participation, and Claassen negotiating in St. Petersburg for extended periods of time, the movement lacked strong, positive leadership. The elected leader, Heinrich Huebert, was a good theologian, but lacked the forceful personality needed for that difficult period.

Abraham officially joined the church when he was baptized 25 April 1860, wife Aganetha followed on 15 May 1860.

In November 1861 Abraham, together with others, had written a letter to Johann Claassen when he was still negotiating in St. Petersburg, stating his distress at how the *Froehliche Richtung* was expressing itself in the Molotschna. The leaders of the *Froehliche Richtung*, on the other hand, labeled some of the more stable and thoughtful leaders as being "shipwrecked in their faith." Included were Jacob Reimer, Abraham Cornelsen and others.

The story from here on is a little sketchy. Some time after his expulsion from the Molotschna Abraham obtained employment in a flour mill owned by a nobleman. Unfortunately he injured his right hand so severely that he was hospitalized, and was not able to continue this work at the mill. The eldest sons, Abraham and Johann did continue in this employment. Also in this period Abraham contracted typhus, which in time the whole family suffered from. Another version of this time mentions the help offered to the family by Abraham Braun, from the village of Grossweide, at whose mill Abraham Cornelsen worked.

The Cornelsens moved into a Tatar village near Berdyansk in the 1860s; from here they were ousted by a group called Bulgars, incoming Bulgarian settlers taking over the Tatar lands when that group moved to Turkey after the Crimean War. It seems that the Cornelsens then moved, together with other Germans and

a number of Mennonites, to a German settlement in the Don region north of Mariupol and Taganrog. Here it is likely that Abraham did some "missionary" work among the Lutherans; there was a revival in 1872, and a number joined the Mennonite Brethren Church. Abraham was elected minister of this group. This caused a considerable stir among the Lutherans, to the extent that Cornelsen was actually imprisoned and not allowed to hold any more church meetings. In time the situation was defused, partly because some of the recent converts, such as the Heins and Justs, moved to the Molotschna. Dedication of children appealed to Cornelsen as a solemn festive act, so the practice was implemented. This tended to appeal to the Lutheran element, since they now found infant baptism to be unbiblical but welcomed a modified substitute. Some of the converted Lutherans wished to migrate to America; Abraham wrote letters confirming that they were indeed now Mennonites, and therefore entitled to go under that designation. As a result of this documentation, the Johann Hein family, for example, could migrate to the USA, arriving in New York City 17 July 1878.

In 1879 the Cornelsen family, including their married children, migrated to the United States. The ship passenger list includes: Abraham Cornelsen (farmer, age 53), wife Aganetha (51), children: Gerhard (27), Heinrich (25), Peter (23), Jacob (20), Regina (18), Isaac (17), Franz (11), Cornelius (9), and David (7). They sailed from Antwerp on the *S.S. Switzerland* of the Red Star Line, arriving in Philadelphia 24 June 1879. Son Johann with his wife Anna were on the same ship.



Aganetha (Gaede) Cornelsen (1828-1909)

A news item in the *Nebraska Ansiedler* mentions that there were 726 Mennonites onboard. They landed on June 24, then the following morning were whisked away on a special train via the Pennsylvania Line. Together with a number of other families from the Don River area, the Abraham Cornelsen family settled in a community south-east of Hillsboro, Marion County, Kansas. From the listing of occupation on the ship list one could gather that in the time shortly before the migration Abraham had tried to sustain a livelihood by being a farmer; this orientation was continued in the new home. The Cornelsens bought 160 acres of land about 4 miles from Hillsboro, right across the road from where Johann Hein had purchased 80 acres. Price for the land was \$1,600.

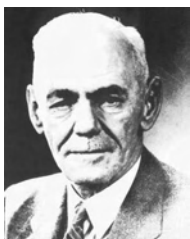
Two Mennonite Brethren families first settled in the area in 1875, then Peter Eckert, a Mennonite Brethren minister from the Volga region of Russia arrived with a few families. The following year 75 more families arrived, most from the Volga but also some from the Kuban and Chortitza. The Ebenfeld Mennonite Brethren Church was founded in 1879, with Peter Eckert as the presiding minister. This is the area where Abraham Cornelsen and his Don group settled so they joined the church. Eckert found the factions and the variety of peculiar views and practices too difficult to deal with, so Abraham was chosen to be his helper. He was considered to be a "very capable and educated school teacher and preacher...and became a valuable assistant to Elder Eckert." Abraham was invited by the church to serve in the ministry, and in 1882 was chosen by the church and installed by Elder Abraham Schellenberg as elder and leader of the Ebenfeld Mennonite Brethren Church. In 1883 several families from the Don River Settlement came to Ebenfeld, along with Johann Foth. He had succeeded Abraham as elder when the Cornelsens left the Don Settlement in 1879. Despite the considerable differences, the congregation continued to grow; in 1883 building a spacious new sanctuary on a corner of the Cornelsen farm. The following year a wing was added, which housed a nursery, a dining hall, Sunday School classrooms and a kitchen in the basement.

Starting in 1883 Abraham had a series of strokes, and after about one year of decreasing health he died on 24 September 1884. Notice of death mentioned

(cont'd on p. 8)



Siemens Family Collection



The J.J. Siemens Family Collection has recently been catalogued and described at the Mennonite Heritage Centre. It is an important collection in shedding light and understanding on a period of Manitoba history particularly in the development of the cooperative movement. There are some speeches and correspondence related to the Rhineland Agricultural Society, Consumer's Cooperative, Co-op Vegetables Oils Ltd., and cooperatives generally as well as newspaper clippings. The collection includes a fair amount of correspondence received by J.J. Siemens and his wife Maria from their children, especially Viola Siemens and her brother John, while they were away at college in the U.S.A. Much of these material were recently donated to the Heritage Centre from the estate of Rodney Sawatzky. There is also one small file consisting of correspondence and research notes regarding the writing of a Siemens biography which Sawatzky had explored during the late 1970s. These material give a glimpse into the life of an important individual in western Canada and the Mennonite community. The documents show some of J.J. Siemens' activities with co-operatives and agriculture and they also give a glimpse into the Siemens family life. Who are these people?

Jacob Johann Siemens (J.J. Siemens) was born on May 23, 1896 to Johann P. Siemens (1864-1958) and Anna Hiebert (1867-1952) in the Schoenthal district near Altona, Manitoba as the 5th of 11 children. Jacob Siemens received his early education in Altona, followed by teachers' training in Winnipeg. He taught in the Halbstadt and Lowe Farm communities of Manitoba. He left teaching and returned to the family farm in 1929 when his parents retired. He was married in 1921 to Maria Heinrichs (1901-1969) and together they had five children: Viola, John, Irene, Raymond,

and Edith. The family was part of the Bergthaler Mennonite Church in Altona.

Historian Rodney Sawatzky claimed that Siemens is a "... most under-rated figure in 20th century western Canadian History."

With the onset of the Great Economic Depression in the 1930s Siemens was a founder of the Rhineland Agricultural Society in 1931. The Society helped farmers in southern Manitoba in their effort to control crop and livestock diseases and helped them obtain seeds for new and better crop varieties through various educational opportunities. He believed in the youth of the community and provided avenues where they could get involved. Siemens served in various capacities for 20 years with this organization including as president and lecturer.

Through the agricultural society Siemens was a principle mover in the cooperative movement in western Canada. The cooperatives were a vehicle for mutual aid and Christian love in practice. He played a leading role in the development of Rhineland Consumer's Cooperative Ltd, Federation of Southern Manitoba cooperatives, Manitoba Coop Wholesale Ltd, Manitoba Cooperative Ltd., and the Manitoba Beet Growers Association. He was director of the Co-operative Union of Canada and an active member of Manitoba Federation of Agriculture and Co-operation.

Siemens was a strong proponent of education. He believed it was through education that attitudes of people could be changed and a more enlightened outlook would bring more efficient farming methods, ensure the development of the cooperatives, and help sustain the rural communities. In 1937 Siemens founded the Rhineland Agricultural Institute (part of the Rhineland Agricultural Society) for training youth through short agricultural and home economic courses. It also had courses on Mennonite History and Christian ethics. While this institution ended in 1942, Siemens' drive and dream continued and he helped found the Western Co-operative College in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

One of Siemens' greatest achievements was the establishment of the sunflower industry in Southern Manitoba and the diversification of Manitoba farms. During WWII there was a critical shortage of vegetable oil. Siemens lobbied for a sunflower oil extraction plant in Altona which was established as Co-op

Vegetable Oils Ltd in 1946. He was president from its founding until 1952 and on the board until 1958. In the mid 1950s Canola was introduced as well.

Siemens had a difficult relationship with his church. It has been said that "the Bergthaler Mennonite leadership rejected his vision as too socialistic and insufficiently orthodox. The resulting pro- and anti-cooperative division in much of the area between Altona and Winkler influenced both church and community very negatively." Siemens eventually left the community and moved to Winnipeg. Siemens died July 12, 1963. His funeral was in a Unitarian Church. In 1979 Siemens was inducted into the Manitoba Agriculture Hall of Fame.

CDS and AR

MGI Project Phase 2

Thanks to Library and Archives Canada and the Canadian Council of Archives the Mennonite Heritage Centre received funds to hire a project worker for phase 2 of the Mennonite Genealogy Inc. (MGI) card scanning project. The funds were approved under the National Archival Development Program (NADP), a program designed to "assist Canadian archival organizations to increase their capacity to preserve and make accessible archival materials about Canada and Canadians."

The aim of this MGI project is to scan the 200,000 genealogical index cards containing genealogical information for people who are commonly referred to as having "Russian Mennonite" origins, a group with connections to Holland, North Germany, Poland, Prussia and Russia.

The Centre was pleased to hire Candice Redekopp in August of this year to begin work on this phase which will eventually see another 75,000 cards scanned on both sides, creating 150,000 images accessible to Mennonite archives, genealogists and family historians.

AR



Candice Redekopp scanning MGI cards.

Centre for Anabaptist Studies Started in Montreal

On September 6, 2007 the Centre d'études anabaptistes de Montréal (Montreal Centre for Anabaptist Studies) was launched in Montreal. For the occasion, the co-directors of the Centre, Marc D. Paré, Professor at the Mennonite Brethren École de théologie évangélique de Montréal (ETEM) and Steve Robitaille, adjunct faculty at ETEM, presented the mission of the Centre. This mission involves publishing Anabaptist resources in theology and Biblical studies, organizing symposiums and conferences (both academic and for a wider audience) on Anabaptist and peace issues, gathering a specialized collection of books in Anabaptist and peace studies and creating a website.

Neal Blough, the director of the Mennonite Centre of Paris (www.centre-mennonite.fr) and an accomplished scholar, was the guest speaker at the launch. He presented a conference on the importance of developing a francophone and urban Anabaptist theology in dialogue with other Christian traditions. The event took place in the new facilities of ETEM, on the campus of the University of Montreal, and drew forty people from different corners of the evangelical and Mennonite communities of Montreal.

The Centre is a creation of the Mennonite Central Committee of Quebec and of ETEM. Its offices are located at ETEM.

Marc D. Paré



Steve Robitaille (left) and Marc D. Paré (right)

Recent Acquisitions

The Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies recently received several donations of biographical and genealogical interest.

Herta J. Voth donated the autobiography of Annie E. (Dyck) Buhler ("My Story") to the Centre. Buhler spent more than 30 years as a Mennonite Brethren missionary, primarily in Columbia, and her story provides a first-hand account of pioneer mission work.

Robert L. Klassen, donated his biographical account of K.K. Isaak, entitled, "The Mennonites and Kornelius Kornelius Isaak's (1866-1935) Sojourn Among Them in Russia and America." K.K. Isaak, an early Mennonite Brethren minister, left Russia with his family for the United States in 1913, during a time when few Mennonites considered emigrating.

Noted author, Katie Funk Wiebe, donated three unpublished volumes. The first, "Born Out of Season" is a biography about her husband, Walter Wiebe (1918-1962). This story follows Walter's life across five provinces, culminating in his untimely death seven weeks after moving to Hillsboro, Kansas to join the M.B. Publishing House staff. The second volume, "Into the Twilight Zone: Family Stories my Father and Others Told Me Too Good to Throw Out," portrays Mennonite encounters with the occult, experiences in Russia, and life in Blaine Lake, Saskatchewan. The third volume, "Growing Up in Blaine Lake," is a collection of stories by Katie and her siblings (edited by Jack Funk), which highlights their experiences in a small Saskatchewan town.

DH



Meribeth Plenert

Summer Student Processes Collection

The Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies recently acquired the music files and papers of the late Benjamin Horch. These came to our Centre via his biographer Dr. Peter Letkemann of Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Thanks to Library and Archives Canada and the Canadian Council of Archives we have received funds to hire Meribeth Plenert to process the collection. The collection consists of over 1500 photographs and 24 boxes of correspondence, musical scores, concert programs and cards preserved by his spouse Esther Horch.

Ben had a long musical career in the Canadian Mennonite and larger Canadian musical community. He was instrumental in the organization of the Mennonite Community Orchestra (Winnipeg) and dozens of choirs. He was a frequent conductor and workshop presenter. His career included teaching at Mennonite Brethren Bible College, Winkler Bible Institute, radio broadcasting in Los Angeles and Altona, Manitoba as well as a long stint with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. His knowledge, charisma and warm spirit made him one of the most influential Mennonite musicians of his time.

Meribeth is a native of Dawson Creek, British Columbia. She is a recent graduate of the Canadian Mennonite University with a degree in history. She is considering archival studies at some point in her future.

CDS

Plan to attend

**Mennonites and Money:
Wealth and Poverty in the Past and Present
October 9-10, 2008**

Eckardt Gramatte Hall, University of Winnipeg
Admission Free

This conference will explore Mennonites' relationship to wealth and poverty. Dr. James Urry, University of Wellington, New Zealand, will provide the plenary address. Twenty presenters will explore the following themes: entrepreneurship, wealth, loss and poverty, charity, critique of capitalism, and democratizing capitalism.

A detailed program is available on the web at: <http://mennonitestudies.uwinnipeg.ca/events/money.php> or contact: Royden Loewen at: r.loewen@uwinnipeg.ca

Book Reviews

(cont'd from p. 12)

example, in the opening sentence of letter F.1 (Siemens, p. 43) we see the nonsensical words "Lercon u Krubou-Rox." In the original one can obviously read that these words refer to the Ukrainian cities of Kherson (the former capital of Ukraine) and Krivoi Rog (an important mining town located not too far from the Sagradovka Settlement). Further in the same letter we read the word (incorrectly) transliterated as "Bouorga" – this in fact is a reference to the northern Russian city of Vologda – a destination for many exiles in the 1930s. The same Russian word is incorrectly transliterated several more times in the book.

While the Bargins made occasional attempts to transliterate Russian or obscure German words, in most cases they merely inserted an ellipsis (...) into the text, leaving the reader to wonder what had been left out. Siemens, it appears, made no attempt to correct any of the incorrect transliterations or to unravel the meaning of the hundreds of ellipses found throughout the text. While the ellipses do not take away from the general meaning of the letters – i.e. the story still comes through – they do detract from an understanding of important physical, emotional or geographical "details."

For example, on p. 79 and in many other locations, we read the so-called place name "Aynebka" – in fact, this Russian word should be translated as the village name "Lunovka." On p. 85 we read the word "Pejok" and Siemens' editorial explanation "*possibly points for work*" – when in fact the word should

read "Pajok," which refers to "rations" not points.

In letter F.117 (Siemens, 303 ff.) from 10 May 1934 we read Maria Regehr's description of her work on the Collective Farm: "My work is carrying manure and dirt in the [...] with the Nasilka [*meaning unknown*]." The word missing in the ellipsis is "Parniki," which refers to a "seed-bed under glass" or in other words a green house. Maria carries manure and dirt into the green house with a "nosilki" – a Ukrainian word referring to either a hand-barrow (not a wheel-barrow) or a litter, carried by two persons.

Later in the same letter Maria writes that "we are free already – as of the 17th Crezd" – to which Siemens adds the explanatory note "*a reference to date on the Julian calendar, still in use in the USSR at this time.*" In fact, the word "Crezd" is again a Ukrainian term (many Mennonites in Zagradovka and other settlements in Ukraine understood and spoke Russian and Ukrainian interchangeably) – an abbreviation for the month March – *berezen*. This indicates that as of 17 March 1934 exiles in this region were free to move from one location to another in looking for work (obviously not free, however, to return to their original homes).

The effort to unravel these ellipses and Russian terms is not as daunting a task as one might assume, and I am surprised that Siemens' doctoral advisors did not insist on this, in order to make the content of these valuable letters that much more accurate. I am also surprised that Siemens, the English professor, made no attempt to improve the English translation of Peter and Anne Bargin.

What she did do was add a short and most inadequate introduction containing a number of historical errors. She also provided a "Glossary" of several Russian and German terms – again, with numerous errors.

For example, the second entry in the Glossary presents the words "Cydomains, Cyodmmn, etc." – these are senseless transliterations of the Russian word "Subbotnik" (and various derivations thereof); her explanation of the term is also inadequate.

A second factual error in the Glossary is her explanation of the term "Trudodnie" (which should read "Trudodjen" – literally "work-day," a unit of measurement for work on the collective farms) – Siemens writes that "points earned for work" could be redeemed for

supplies at the *Torgsin* store. In fact, *Torgsin* stores were set up to deal only in hard currency, such as US dollars, or gold.

The one significant addition to the book, as opposed to the original Bargin publication, is the last chapter which brings the story of daughter Lena Regehr Dirksen – who survived the years in exile and came to Germany in 1989 – up to date. Lena also provides some moving eye-witness commentary on the accompanying DVD.

Siemens' book is subtitled as "Volume One" – presumably she intends to publish the remaining 332 letters of the Bargin collection in subsequent volumes. This would be a valuable contribution to our knowledge of Mennonite life in the Soviet Union during the 1930s – I only hope she will make the necessary effort to contact expert linguists and historians in order to improve the accuracy of the final product.

Cornelsen biography

(cont'd from p. 5)

that he was survived by his widow, ten children and eleven grandchildren. The funeral address was delivered by Johann Foth. His grave, marked by a small obelisk, was said to be the first in the Ebenfeld cemetery. Aganetha died 14 August 1909 in Fairview, Oklahoma, where she was visiting her sons.

Abraham Abraham Cornelsen at the very beginning was one of the bright lights of the emerging Mennonite Brethren Church, but then through a tactical error was derailed from leadership. Thereafter he experienced the persecution by the entrenched Mennonite Church, through which both he and his family suffered, and also the vengeance of the *Foehliche Richtung*, this time from those who were supposed to be his brothers. It is difficult to be certain of all of his activities from the early 1860s until the early 1870s, when he again emerged as a leader in the Don River Settlement. This function transferred easily to the United States, where he had a brief, but well received position of leadership in the Ebenfeld Mennonite Brethren Church.

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Helmut Huebert is an orthopedic surgeon living in Winnipeg.

The John and Margaret Friesen Lectures in Anabaptist/Mennonite Studies presents

Church and ethnicity: The Mennonite experience in Paraguay

Featuring **Alfred Neufeldt**, Dean of the School of Theology of the Protestant University of Paraguay

November 4-5, 2008
Canadian Mennonite University
Laudamus Auditorium
Free admission

"Mennonites and Nazis? The quest of Mennonite identity in Paraguay during the 1940s" – Nov. 4, 7:30 p.m.

"Mennonite identity and church among the Enhlit and Nivaclé tribes" – Nov. 5, 10:30 a.m.

"A Mennonite church with Paraguayan identity: The Spanish-Guaraní legacy and Anabaptist theology" – Nov. 5, 7:30 p.m.

You are invited to the introduction of the **book**

Remember Us: Letters from Stalin's Gulag (1930-37)

and the accompanying documentary **film** entitled

Through the Red Gate

(www.gulagletters.com)

by Ruth Derksen Siemens

Sunday, November 9, 2008 7:00 p.m.
Springfield Heights Mennonite Church, 570 Sharron Bay, Winnipeg, MB
Free Admission
Sponsored by the Mennonite Heritage Centre

Book Notes

(cont'd from p. 11)

Memories of Matsqui Mennonite Brethren Church 1945-1975, compiled and published by Elizabeth Suderman Klassen (2007, 122 pages, 8 1/2 x 11, coil bound) consists of a series of family histories or biographical sketches of the people who worshiped in this BC congregation during the thirty years of its existence. A very brief historical framework of the church and community provides the context for these stories. Photographs supplement the text and some statistical data in an appendix provide a good overview of this significant community whose membership did not exceed 218.

Both autobiographies noted below are about the growing up years of 1930s Manitoba boys in a Mennonite community. John E. Hildebrand, *Rappelling the Mennonite Mountain: Good Kid in Bad Overalls* (Belleville, ON: Epic Press, 2005) ends his 246-page story at the point where he is about 10 or 12 years of age, with the promise of "more books to come." Much of the account deals with rural farm life during the late thirties and early forties, but the chapters on the Sommerfelder church and the local public school reflect some of the controversies, especially with an MB teacher. Cornelius Friesen, *Attention Deficit Disorder to the Call of God: An Autobiography of a Mennonite Boy Growing into Manhood* (Victoria, BC: Trafford Publishing, 2006), covers Friesen's life until shortly after his conversion and marriage, when he is well into his twenties. Unlike Hildebrand, who leaves the reader guessing about who his family was and in which community he grew up (somewhere southwest of Winkler, MB), Friesen provides details of family antecedents and communities (in the Plum Coulee to Rosenfeld area). The

former tries to write from the perspective of a pre-teen boy and focuses on his experiences; the latter writes mostly of a post-teen young man and is generous in describing his friends, almost to the point of name-dropping. Both are unabashedly Christian, even when describing their pre-conversion lives.

"Spanish Lookout History in Action," a video documentary of life in Spanish Lookout, Belize, from 1958 to 2008, has just been produced by Shamax Productions of Belize (DVD, \$25). This Mennonite community was founded by Mennonites from Mexico and is grateful for God's grace which has sustained them from difficult pioneer times to the relative prosperity of today.

Pacific Journal, now in its third year, is an annual scholarly publication of Fresno Pacific College, USA. The current issue, on the theme of "Encountering the Environment: Humanity and Nature," is available in print edition for \$15 or may be electronically downloaded for \$5 at fresno.edu/pacificjournal.

Mennonite Heritage Village Upcoming events in Steinbach

8 November: Craft Sale.

Call 1-204-326-9661 to reserve a table

23 November: Grey Cup Celebration

Dinner, beginning at 12 noon. Payment at the door.

5-6 December. Touch of Christmas.

For further info on all events email info@mhv.ca

For more info on MHV recent past events see upcoming issue of *Heritage Posting* published by the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society and available at MHC.

Edible History Workshop

Delicious smells of curry emanated from Conrad Grebel University College's Great Hall on the morning of August 7. The event was part of a two-day workshop, hosted and organized by Dr. Marlene Epp, called "Edible Histories, Cultural Politics: Towards a Canadian Food History." The role of food in Mennonite history was discussed during the workshop, and Grebel's kitchen provided opportunity for participants to sample traditional recipes, such as shoofly pie, *Zwieback* and *Rollkuchen*.

Many of the papers presented by the 30 invited participants will be part of a book by the same name as the workshop, co-edited by Epp and her colleagues Franca Iacovetta (U. of Toronto), and Valerie Korinek (U. of Sask.).

Several lectures were open to the public, including the one in which Daniel E. Bender, Canada Research Chair in Urban History, University of Toronto, punctuated his lecture with a demonstration of the earliest published recipe of a curry dish, from a mid-18th century British cookbook. Bender, who teaches global food history at the University of Toronto, commented that students today are more motivated and politicized about food than they were even five years ago and talked about how food symbolizes identity for people and the ways in which "power becomes visible at the table."

Donna Gabaccia, Director and Professor, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota, addressed the theme, "Cookbooks in the Archive" through her research into the earliest cookbooks of Charleston, South Carolina. Jeffery Pilcher, Professor of History, University of Minnesota, and author of *Food in World History* spoke on "The Future of Food Studies," focusing on the evolution of Mexican foodways in different national contexts.

Insisting that food offers a means of examining global history in a way "that's small enough to hold in your hand and to pop in your mouth," rather than a variation on a Food Network show, workshop participants emphasized food as a lens for considering history in an integrative, tangible, accessible, way.

Other workshop participants presented research on varied topics including: colossal Ukrainian food sculptures on the prairies; the global food movement of



Daniel Bender of the University of Toronto, preparing an 18th century curry recipe while lecturing at Conrad Grebel University College. Photo credit: Susan Fish.

the colonial era (an interesting counterpoint to today's local food movement); cookbooks and ethnic identity; encounters over food ways between Aboriginal people and European newcomers and between immigrants and the state; the politics of changing nutritional standards; the intersection between religious practice and eating rituals; and the health food movement of the 1960s and 70s.

Workshop organizer Marlene Epp said, "Food issues have recently become of great interest to researchers, to the media, and to the general public. The *Edible Histories* project is a fascinating historical complement to a contemporary issue by demonstrating how significant food has been in shaping Canadian politics, culture and everyday social interaction."

The workshop was also supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and by University of Waterloo's Canada Research Chair (Tier 1) in Gender and the History of Medicine, Dr. Wendy Mitchinson. *Grebel Press Release*

An 1880s Theological Quest: Mennonite Trek to Central Asia along the Silk Road

Join Mennonite historian, professor and story teller **John Sharp** reflect on the 1880-81 migration from Ukraine to Khiva along the Silk Road. John retraced this trek last year with primary sources to study the motivation, results, and legacy of these Mennonite wagon trains.

Hear his reflections, stories from journals, and pictures from the trip.

Sept. 23, 7:30 pm. CMU Chapel

Sept. 24, 7:30 pm. Mennonite Heritage Village

For more information and questions please call 204-487-3300 or 1-800-565-0941

Memories of Hebron Mennonite Church at Bluebird, Saskatchewan 1937

by *Katherine (Ens) Bartsch*

Some things we value only in our backward glance, after it is no more. The Hebron Mennonite Church was a small church with home-built pews. Heat came from a heater built with two large drums placed one on top of the other. The pulpit stood on a platform in the front of the church. Travel to attend services was with horses until motorized vehicles began to appear around 1949.

A curtain drawn across the front platform provided space for 7-10 Sunday School children. The *Biblische Geschichte* served as the lesson book for biblical instruction and also gave some practice in reading German. Instruction was in Low German. Teachers were Mrs. John Braun, Mrs. Frank Wiebe, and much later Katherine Ens. In summer we were privileged to have Daily Vacation Bible School. *Kinderfest* was the best! The children got to eat first. Those *Zweibach* and *Sucka Shtacka* were such treats. Christmas and Easter programs were always a highlight. Mr. C. Wiebe always made sure that there was a real Christmas tree with candles. Every child memorized a *Gedicht*, sang songs and then was amply rewarded with a brown paper bag of Christmas goodies.

The adults studied the *Lektion* Series, mostly taught by Mr. William Ens, who



Bluebird Mennonite Church, Mayfair, SK

was also deacon of the church. The adults also contributed with four-part *Zions Lieder* songs. They really enjoyed singing and were good at it. The congregation sang the beloved *Evangeliums Lieder*.

During the years that I remember, Rev. Frank Ens was the minister, however, there was an exchange system where Rev. Frank Ens and Rev. Abram Funk would alternate between Northvale, Sand Beach and Bluebird; an 8-10 mile drive each Sunday morning. In 1945, Frank Ens attended Rosthern Bible School for a short period to improve his ability to minister to the church. Rev. C.K. Ens, who organized the Hebron Mennonite Church and ministered at Sand Beach for a number of years, retired when he became blind and moved to Laird, SK in 1939. Rev. Abram Funk later moved to Manitoba in the early 1950s.

In 1949, ten young people were baptized in the Bluebird church with Rev. G.G. Epp officiating and local ministers participating. It appears, however, that the young people did not find enough incentive for them to stay in the community. Some married, became active in other churches, went out as missionaries, or pursued various vocations. Parents eventually followed their children and so the community passed on to non-Mennonite hands. Rev. Frank Ens moved to Austin, in 1961. Jacob Reimer took over, but shortly after that the church property was sold and became a private dwelling. There are some 15-20 grave sites in the cemetery, some from the time the church was established. The cemetery is securely fenced but has been sadly neglected.

This has been a span of history where there was physical and spiritual growth. Joyful, uplifting times as well as struggles, indifference, discouragement and sorrow, and eventually relinquishment. But the church is not gone! It has been transplanted to other areas of the land and still goes marching on.

Kay Bartsch of Austin, Manitoba is the daughter of Rev. Frank Ens.



Letter to Editors re. Clockmaker Janzen

In the informative article in the *Historian* of June, 2008, James O. Harms mentions a clockmaker Janzen of West Prussia. The later well-known industrialist Peter Lepp (29.12.1817-30.8.1871) of the Old Colony, is stated to have left Chortitza in 1833 to become an apprentice to this unknown clockmaker Janzen. Harms states that "I assume that Janzen was a respected clockmaker [in West Prussia], since there is no reason to make such a journey to study with one who was not."

Be that as it may, I would suggest there may have been perhaps another more relevant reason why Peter Lepp went to the Old Country to study with Janzen. The clockmaker Janzen in question appears to have been Abraham Janzen (b. 30.6.1797) m. Helena Lepp (b. 11.8.1798). This Janzen moved to Russia after 1836 (see B.H. Unruh, p.377), so Peter Lepp's apprenticeship with Janzen was likely not too long. Perhaps too, Lepp may have had a role in Janzen's decision to move to Russia.

Abraham Janzen was a son of Johann Janzen (1.3.1766-25.1.1847) m. 14.10.1788 Maria Siemens (20.10.1768-22.4.1840) of Schottland, Danzig Gemeinde, and a grandson of Johann Janzen (10.1725-4.5.1782) of Neukirch [listed at Neukirch in 1776], a shopkeeper. Abraham appears to have been baptized in the Ellerwald Gemeinde in 1816.

Helena Lepp was a half-sister of the above Peter Lepp, and a daughter of Peter Lepp (29.7.1778-29.3.1830) m. Margaretha Wiebe (19.11.1775-3.12.1809) of Quadendorf.

So among the reasons why Peter Lepp went to West Prussia to study with Janzen was his close family ties with Janzen, and perhaps owing to correspondence with West Prussian relatives. It seems unlikely that Lepp would have undertaken the journey, had there not been some sort of prior agreement between the two men.

Exactly where Abraham Janzen settled in the Molotschna is not clear. He may have lived in Tiege. Among his children can be mentioned Bernard Janzen (30.5.1831-26.6.1902), who signed the Mennonite Brethren petition of 1862, and later moved (1874) to the USA. (Schapansky (2006), p. 248).

Henry Schapansky, New Westminster, BC

Book Notes

By Adolf Ens

Helmut T. Huebert has become widely known to researchers of Mennonite history for his atlases. With the recent publication of the second volume of *Mennonites in the Cities of Imperial Russia* (Winnipeg: Springfield Publishers, 2008) he has established himself as one of the foremost scholars of urban Mennonites in Russia. The 430 pages of this 8 1/2 x 11 volume add information about 1,643 persons to the 2,070 described in volume 1. The nine cities whose Mennonite families, enterprises and institutions are described are Alexandrovsk, Ekaterinoslav, Kharkov, Moscow, Nikopol, Odessa, Omsk, St. Petersburg and Tokmok. A name index makes it easy for researchers to locate their subjects.

Peter J. Klassen's out of print *A Homeland for Strangers: An Introduction to Mennonites in Poland and Prussia*, first published in 1989 by the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Fresno, CA, is now again available through Pandora Press, Kitchener, ON.

After a break of 22 years, Mennonite Heritage Village, Steinbach, MB, has finally resumed its historical series of booklets. Tracy Ruta Fuchs, *Beauty and Sustenance: A History of Mennonite Gardens and Orchards in Russia and Manitoba* (MHV, 2007, 34 pages) is a very interesting survey, not only of the gardens and orchards, but also of traditional methods of preserving fruits and vegetables, selecting and saving seeds, medicinal plants, division of labour, and other aspects of economic, social and esthetic history of Mennonites.

Harold and Neoma Jantz, *Rooting the Faith: A Saskatchewan Mennonite Brethren Story of Losses and Gains* (Saskatoon: Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan, 2008, 104 pages) is an excellent overview of the history of one Mennonite denomination in Saskatchewan. The clear and readable style of journalist Jantz is complemented by judiciously chosen statistical tables, a good selection of photographs and a very useful map. The Historical Society deserves our gratitude for encouraging projects of this kind. Perhaps the other Mennonite branches will follow with similar histories of their group!

(cont'd on p. 9)

Book Review

Heinrich Bergen, *Einlage/Kitschkas 1789-1943* (Regina, SK: The Author, 2008) 430 pp.

Reviewed by Lawrence Klippenstein

This compilation of materials is a “first” to give major attention to the story of the village of Einlage/Kitchkas in the Chortitza (Old) Colony of south Russia (later Ukraine). The author calls it “*ein historischer Bericht, sowie Beschreibungen des taeglichen Lebens des Dorfes*” (A historical report with descriptions of daily life in the village). A series of very useful maps forms part of the introductory material for the volume. An extensive collection of handwritten manuscripts located by George K. Epp and donated to the Mennonite Heritage Centre several decades ago by Isaak J. Reimer of Saskatoon, is the major source for this information.

The village of Einlage was established in 1789 as the title indicates, among the first ones to be inhabited by the 1788-89 emigres from Danzig and West Prussia. It lay offshore from the Dnieper River to the west, and in the immediate vicinity (northeast) of the village of Chortitza. Both would later become part of the present-day city of Zaporozhe. The village began with 41 residents, and would grow ultimately to hold 40 farmyards of which 32 were *Vollwirtschaften* (full farms) -- well over 200 residents (as long as it remained a separate community).

This collection of material is characterized by an encyclopedic abundance of detail on virtually every imaginable theme of life and work which one could imagine. A table of contents provides easy access to which topics are in fact treated in the volume. Names of people are prominent among the details, whether early residents, administrators over the years, church leaders, those arrested, those who died in the 1917-1920 period particularly, those who emigrated later on, etc.

Maps and charts also abound – hand drawn, mainly, but giving basic data crucial to the story. One also gets a helpful sketch of what was involved in the relocation of the village when the *Dneprostoi* (hydroelectric dam) was constructed after the civil war ended. The material found to be available for the story of Einlage appears indeed to have

been so plentiful that it became a real challenge to find ways in which to organize the data, in order to make it all available to readers easily.

A bibliographical list points to further information, including photos which are not really part of this documentation, though they do abound in other sources, it would seem. What this volume will give to future researchers is “mini sketches” of how the larger movements of history affected one village – whether it is the *podwods* (army supply wagons) of the Crimean War, industrialization, alternative service for Mennonites during tsarist times, or economic development, and the fate of hundreds who perished in the fires of the Russian Revolution, disease and famine, civil war and Stalinist repression.

One could wish that collections of similar data be gathered for other Mennonite communities which have not yet been studied seriously.

Ruth Derksen Siemens, *Remember Us, Letters from Stalin's Gulag (1930-37) Volume One: The Regehr Family*. (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2007), 407 pp.

Reviewed by Peter Letkemann

The book *Remember Us* tells the moving and tragic story of the Jakob Regehr Family from Altonau, village #9 in the Zagradovka Settlement. On 30 October 1930 the parents, Jakob and Maria (nee Goossen) Regehr, were disenfranchised and together with their 6 children (Liese, Peter, Maria, Tina, Lena and Jakob) were evicted from their home. Nine months later, on 6 June 1931, they and dozens of other ‘kulak’ Mennonite families from Zagradovka were exiled to the northern Ural Region between the cities of Kizel and Perm. Father Jakob starved to death and died in October 1933; his widow Maria survived the years in exile and died in Tokmak (Kirghizia) in November 1976. The oldest son Peter made several escape attempts from their place of exile, was rearrested each time and finally sentenced to prison, where he died in 1938. Two other children, Liese and Jakob, also died in Soviet Russia; two daughters, Maria and Lena both survived the years of exile and finally emigrated to Germany in 1989; a third daughter, Tina, remained in the Soviet Union.

The story of this family is recounted through a series of 131 letters written from their places of exile to family

members in Zagradovka or Canada during the years 1930 to 1937. The Regehr letters are part of a larger collection of 463 letters written during the years 1930-1938 by members of the extended Bergen – Regehr families and by friends and neighbours in the Zagradovka villages.

All of the letters eventually ended up in the possession of Peter Bergen, a nephew of Jakob Regehr (Peter's mother Liese was the younger sister to Jakob Regehr), in August 1989. [The story of how these letters were rediscovered and translated is told in an accompanying DVD production entitled *Through the Red Gate*]

Over the next three years Peter Bergen and his wife Anne spent hours transliterating and translating into English the 463 letters dating from the years 1930 to 1938. The product of their remarkable efforts was a 550 page book entitled *From Russia with Tears – Letters from Home and Exile (1930-1938)*, published in 1991 in a small edition of 100 copies for members of the extended Bergen family. The original letters were then donated to the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg in June 1992 (a fact that Siemens neglects to mention in her book).

In the original letters, mother Maria (Goossen) Regehr repeatedly pleads with her readers in Zagradovka and Canada, “Do not forget us.” In response to this plea, Peter and Anne Bergen made it their modest goal to preserve and pass on this moving story to succeeding generations of the extended Bergen family in Canada.

Several years later, Ruth Derksen Siemens, a professor in the English Department at UBC in Vancouver, discovered Peter Bergen's publication and made these 463 letters the basis of a Ph.D. dissertation in the Philosophy of Language at the University of Sheffield in England.

Through the publication of the 131 Regehr Family letters and the production of a beautiful accompanying DVD video [<http://www.gulagletters.com/>], Siemens has made it her aim to make this story available to a much wider audience. While the aim is to be commended, it is unfortunate that the book leaves much to be desired in terms of linguistic and historical accuracy.

Peter and Anne Bergen were neither historians nor linguists and were unable to decipher the many Russian terms and phrases included in the original letters. In some cases they tried to reproduce the Russian word as they “read” it – for

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