

Mennonite Historian



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Photo: Courtesy of Rodney Sawatsky, Waterloo, Ont.

Peter K. Regier: Churchman-farmer (1851-1925)

Part I

"It was in the year 1893 that I and my family of the Rosenorter Mennonite Church in West Prussia began our journey westward to establish a new home. It was a difficult farewell, especially the parting from our aged parents, and the beloved congregation with whom we shared a final communion service as I broke bread for 500 fellow-members (*Geschwister*)."

"So wrote Peter K. Regier, an active Mennonite farmer and church leader, as he later recalled his resettlement in the Northwest Territories of Canada." Still in

his early forties, Regier would retain his memories of, and many contacts with, his West Prussian homeland throughout his remaining years.

Born on January 14, 1851, Peter spent his boyhood years with his parents, Peter and Maria Regier, at their home in Kalteherberge, West Prussia. After completing his elementary education at the age of 14 he had taken a year of high school training, and was baptized upon confession of his faith on June 23, 1867, by Aeltester Johann Wiebe of Freienhuben. Six years later, on December 16, he was united in matrimony with Anna Ens, the daughter of

Johann and Katherina Unger Ens of Beiershorst, West Prussia. Peter and Anna then purchased a farm at Rueckenau, Kreis Marienburg, and lived there till the time of their emigration in 1893.

The Regiers had eleven children of whom nine were born at their West Prussian home. In a church register of the Saskatchewan Mennonite congregation where the family later became members, these are listed as follows: Kaethe Anna, b. Dec. 11, 1874; Agatha Maria, b. July 22, 1876; Margareta Elise, b. November 3, 1877; Meta Helena (Nov. 25, 1878-June 2, 1883); Peter (Feb. 27, 1880-Mar. 2, 1884); Johannes, b. March 13, 1881; Cornelius Willie, b. August 12, 1882; Arthur Peter, b. July 14, 1885; Meta Clara, b. July 5, 1887; Peter (Aug. 2, 1892-Apr. 23, 1893); Greta Johanna (June 13, 1894-Apr. 1, 1913); and Wanda Frida, b. 1898. As the last surviving family member "Tante" Wanda, now Mrs. John Friesen, presently resides at Tiefengrund, Saskatchewan on the location of her parental home.

On September 7, 1879, Peter Regier was called to the ministry of the Rosenorter Mennonite Church in his locality. Aeltester Klaas Friesen ordained Regier on June 18, 1880. His sermon on that occasion came from the words of 2 Cor. 5:20, "So we are messengers in Christ's stead."

Regier wrote in his diary: "O holy God, you know my weaknesses, you see the innermost recesses of my sinful heart, look down upon me in your grace, and give me strength to put away sin, and follow you in holiness and righteousness . . . Help me and bless my labors in the work of your kingdom, and, O Jesus, if I should only win one soul, the effort will not have been in vain. O God, how joyful to be a helper redeeming one soul! Amen."

Eight years later, on Jan. 30, he along with David Penner, received an equal number of votes in the election of a new Aeltester of the church. The tie-breaking choice of the lot gave the task to Regier. His struggles over that event were intense. He wrote this time, "Thus I wrestled, prayed and struggled, but always the answer of the Lord came in these words, 'Go, where I will send you, and preach, what I will command.'"

He accepted the new responsibility on Feb 19, 1888, and was ordained on July 1 by his aging father, Peter Regier, then Aeltester of the Fuerstenwerder congregation. The younger Regier now prayed: "Give me the strength that I might show the true way to heaven to all the souls entrusted to me."

Though well-accepted in leadership, Regier increasingly sensed a point of tension on the issue of military service among the members of his and other Prussian Mennonite congregations. The traditional military exemption privileges granted to Mennonites in Prussia had already come under the critical eye of the populace, and particularly the royal government of the post-Napoleonic era. A special **Gnadenprivilegium** which had been granted to the Mennonites of the community at Netzebruch by Frederick II in 1765 was withdrawn in 1831, and the group chose to emigrate to Russia rather than pay the additional tax of 5% which was the only alternative offered.

In 1848 a prominent member of the Mennonite brotherhood challenged the concept of nonresistance as a meaningful approach to church-state relations at the time. Persons like Peter Froese, Aeltester of the Orlofffeld congregation, and Dr. Wilhelm Mannhardt, the well-known Prussian Mennonite historian, sought in vain to stem the growing tide of non-support for military exemption as a necessary tenet of the Christian faith. So the struggle continued.

A special Royal Cabinet Order of March 3, 1868, stated that "such members of old Mennonite families as did not voluntarily express their readiness to do military duty under arms, would be allowed to fulfill their obligation to serve by acting as attendants in military hospitals, or as clerks, etc. in the office of the district commander of the Landwehr, or as stewards, artisans, or drivers."

In the ensuing debate over how this order might be applied in the Mennonite community, sharp divisions arose regarding what was acceptable and what not. Some wished simply to leave the decision entirely up to individuals, others advised acceptance of the Order, yet disciplining those who accepted regular military service, and a third position advocated no compromise with the state at all. It urged emigration instead.

As it happened, not many chose the latter option. At Heubuden a substantial minority (including all members of the **Lehrdienst** except one minister and one deacon) did follow Elder Gerhard Penner, an opponent to the Cabinet order, in a move to the US in the

late 1870s. Fuerstenwerder, the congregation to which Aeltester Johann Wiebe, another opponent to all forms of army service, belonged, almost unanimously accepted the Cabinet Order. Wiebe gave up his office and soon afterwards emigrated to Russia.

The Rosenort Mennonite Church at a brotherhood meeting held on April 26, 1874, accepted the 1868 Cabinet Order with strong approval, and simultaneously also agreed that persons entering full military service should henceforth not be excluded from the ordinances (**Segnungen und Handlungen**) of the congregation. Aeltester Nikolai Friesen of Rueckenau took over responsibilities for Aeltester Penner at the Heubuden congregation in its period of crisis on the issue.

Regier's sympathies lay definitely on the side of the traditional supporters of non-resistance, although the **Chronik** noting his departure, mentions only "wirtschaftliche Schwierigkeiten" (farming difficulties) as motivation for his leaving. He took his leave

from the congregation at a communion service held on May 28, 1893.

Twice more he would return to visit his first pastoral charge, but the next thirty years or more would be spent in Saskatchewan, Canada, his new home. *Lawrence Klippenstein*

Sources: Peter Regier, "Kurze Geschichte unserer Rosenorter-Mennoniten Gemeinde bei Rosthern, Sask." *Der Mitarbeiter* I (October, 1906), p. 7; J. G. Rempel, *Die Rosenorter Gemeinde in Saskatchewan in Wort und Bild*. Rosthern, 1950, p. 13; Ernst Regehr, ed. *Geschichte und Predigertabelle der Mennonitengemeinde Rosenort*. (n.p., ca. 1935), p. 10; Peter Regier, *Rosenorter Mennoniten Gemeinde Church Register No. 1*, Tiefengrund, Saskatchewan, p. 41, "Familienverzeichnis"; Peter Brock, *Pacifism in Europe to 1914*. Princeton, 1972, pp. 407ff. CMC Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

Program Developments

The recently restructured history-archives program of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada is now entering its third year of development. It may be helpful to note some particular aspects of work done to date during 1976.

- A second and third microfilming project were completed in late August. They covered village documents from the village of Reinland west of Gretna, Manitoba, secured from Mennonite sources in Mexico, as well as a portion of the Peter Elias memoirs, dealing with Old Colony Mennonite history in Western Canada.

- A further microfilming project will cover materials from the J. J. Thiessen files of Saskatoon, Sask. Recently Kaethe Hooe, formerly secretary for Rev. Thiessen, spent a week in the archives preparing the files for duplication.

- Marg Franz, librarian at CMBC, was available in June to card catalogue the record collections of the various Conference boards, as well as some of the individual collections of persons like Bernhard Schellenberg, Benjamin Ewert, D. W. Friesen, G. G. Epp, H. M. Epp, H. Wall, Johann P. Claszen, and others.

The archives of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. From left: Lawrence Klippenstein, historian-archivist; John Friesen, chairman of the History-Archives Committee; and Carol Wiebe, Conference secretary-receptionist and assistant to the archivist. Photo: Courtesy of Rudy Regehr.



PROGRAM (con't.)

- The History-Archives Committee agreed to initiate two educational projects commemorating the 75th anniversary of the Conference. One relates to publication of heritage materials for youth, and the other involves a multi-media historical presentation on the founding of Mennonite communities in Saskatchewan.
- The Committee also sponsored a second Manitoba Mennonite Studies seminar at CMBC on March 27, 1976. About 35 persons attended. Presentations on writing local history were given by Dr. Ed Rea and Dr. Gerry Friesen of the University of Manitoba. Peter D. Zacharias of Grunthal, Man. gave a progress report on writing *Reinland: An Experience in Community*.
- Researchers who received assistance in the archives during July and August included Professor Marilyn Barber of Carleton University, Ottawa, working on immigrant domestics (in our case, the *Maedchenheime*); Glenn Penner, Plum Coulee, Man., on doing a family history; Mr. and Mrs. Peter A. Neufeld, of Didsbury, Alta., family history; Adolf Ens, CMBC, dissertation on Canadian Mennonites and state-church relations; James Davis, Sacramento, California, organization of Mennonite church groups in Canada (by letter); Olga Rempel, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, writing a biographical study of her father, Rev. A. Toews, of Rosenthal in the Old Colony, Russia; and Professor Earl Waugh, University of Alberta, researching documentation for a film on the Mennonites of Coaldale, Alberta.

For further information on the archives, or any research project, write to The Historian-Archivist, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, Manitoba R3P 0M4.

New Acquisitions

January - August, 1976

I. Published Materials

- Schule und Gemeinschaft.** Erinnerungen des Dorfschullehrers David Harder von Mexico. Paperback, mimeographed, 84 pp. Courtesy of Jacob Rempel, Gretna, Manitoba.
- Wes Brown, ed. **The Beacon**, periodical for WW II COs. Campbell River, B.C. 1943. Feb. (Vol. 2, No. 2), and Mar. (V. 2, No. 3) issues. Courtesy of C. B. Dueck, Rosenort, Manitoba.
- Ben B. Dueck. **De Trachtmoaka**. Steinbach, 1974. A Low German Mennonite drama photoduplicated. Paperback, 31 pp. Courtesy of author.
- Etta S. Schmidt, comp. **Genealogy of John Albert Bartel (1857-1940)**, 1976, Paperback. Courtesy of Dr. David Schroeder.
- Bill Schroeder. **Kornelius Buhr. 1826-1885?** (1976). Mimeographed. 15 pp.

Official debates of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada, 1882. Fourth Session, fourth Parliament. Ottawa, 1882. 1576 pp. plus index.

Debates of the Senate of Canada, 1883. First Session, fifth Parliament, Ottawa, 1883.

Journals and Sessional Papers. Legislative Assembly of Manitoba. For the years 1900, 1904, 1905, 1912, 1913 — a volume for each. Cloth. 600-800 pp. each.

H. J. Willms. **Die Sued-Abbotsford Ansiedlung**. Abbotsford, B.C. 1955(?). 56 pp. Paperback.

P. G. Martens, ed. **The Martens Family 1843-1975**. Clearbrook, B.C. 1976. 98 pp. Paperback. Illustrated.

Theilungs Verordnung der an der Molotschna im Taurischen Gouvernement angesiedelten Mennoniten (1894). 40 pp. Paperback. Duplicate (3 copies).

II. Manuscripts, tapes, photos, etc.

Bill Schroeder. "Index Bergthal Church Register." (1976). 11 pp. Duplicate.

Botschafter der Wahrheit (Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, periodical) 1913-1918, scattered. Courtesy of L. Wohlgemuth. On loan.

Diedrich H. Epp papers — minutes from Chortitza church meetings, 1925, and other materials related to work of Minister A. Toews. 8 pp. Handwritten, minutes — typed. Courtesy of Olga Rempel.

Microfilm copy of passenger lists re: 1924-1930 Mennonite migration from Russia to Canada. Six reels. Courtesy of MCC (Canada). Permanent Loan.

Rev. J. J. Klassen material. Files re Rosthern Bible School, program committee, etc. Correspondence, etc. Courtesy of H. T. Klassen.

Kirchenbuch der Dorfgemeinde Schoenhorst, USSR 1870. Microfiche copy provided courtesy of Sherbrooke Mennonite Church, Vancouver, B.C. Ca. 280 pp.

Microfilm copy of Mennonite Trust Co. (earlier Waisenamt) of Waldheim, Sask. 1917-1975 minutes, some reports, etc. Done by Ken Funk, CMBC student. German and English.

Last address of A. A. Friesen, Rabbit Lake, Sask. German copy from Hoffnungsfelder Mennonite Church book. Also in hand written printed transcript and typed English translation.

Note: This is a partial listing. A complete list is available upon request.

My Father

This is a short write-up on the writing of a book about my father, Rev. Abram Toews. I did a lot of travelling, and contacted about thirty people personally in order to get more information about my father's character and work as a minister, etc.

A very good source of information was the new index to *Der Bote* at the Conference archives. I also placed an ad in *Der Bote* asking if there were still people who could remember my father, or if they had received letters from him after emigrating to Canada and the USA. I am amazed at what I have received so far — about 20 letters, all written by my father.

The oldest letter is dated 1922. I also have one with the original letterhead of the A.M.R. (American Mennonite Relief) from Zaporoshje, then called Alexandrowsk. I also received an information sheet from Dr. D. G. Rempel of California which includes the picture of Train No. 194 on which my father worked for two years. His *Sanitaeter* friends are on the picture with him.

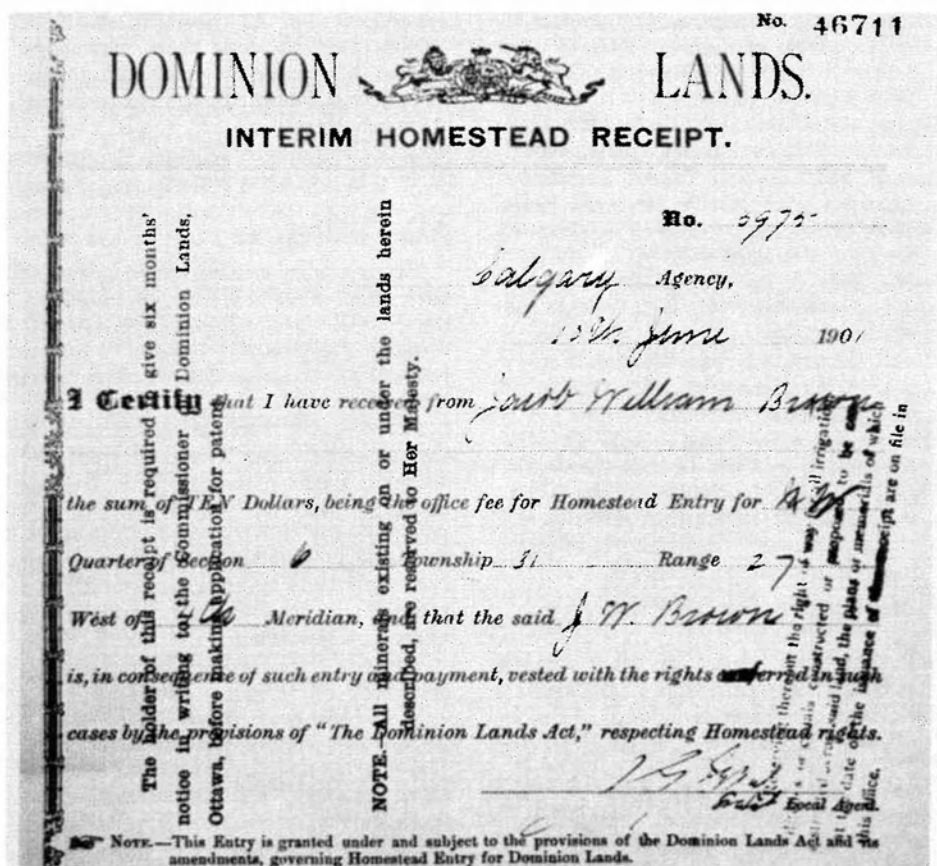
I would like to write the book in such a way that it would speak to the younger generation also. But if I look back into the history of our Mennonite people, and also through the Bible I realize it is almost an impossible task. It is so difficult to convey a personal experience meaningfully so that others understand it. For me it is a revelation of faith and our tradition that we can learn from each other, always keeping in mind that we are on different levels of perception.

I am looking forward to seeing the book become a reality. It is very interesting for me to work on it, but sometimes I come to a dead-end road. I need more prayer and inspiration to accomplish what I would like to do. *Olga Rempel*

Note: Olga's present address is 342 William St., Box 579, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont.

Der Mitarbeiter was the first Conference paper, begun in 1906. Back numbers are needed at the archives. Do you have some to donate, or know someone else who does?





Book Review

Our Congregational Historians

News and Notes