

Mennonite Historian

A PUBLICATION OF THE MENNONITE HERITAGE CENTRE and THE CENTRE FOR MB STUDIES IN CANADA



Death of young children was very common in the home a century ago. How did people think and talk about death? How do we talk about death today? Photo: P.G. Hamm Collection Glass Negative 46.4, MHC Archives.

Mennonite Church diversity: Rosenorters, Bergthalers, Hutterites and Others

by Alf Redekopp

Today Mennonite Church Canada has a full-time director of Multi-cultural ministries and every Sunday about 2,000 out of 35,000 church members gather to worship in 12 languages other than English or German. Diversity of various kinds has been a gift to the church for many years. It has also been a challenge as people have worked to faithfully heed Christ's call for unity among his followers. This article will examine some examples mainly from the Russia Mennonite tradition, of diversity that confronted the Mennonite faith community in Canada and which led to an extension of the fellowship and an embracing of greater diversity. It con-

tinues a series in the *Mennonite Historian* that tells the story of "extending the fellowship".

With the completion of Canada's first transcontinental railway in 1885 the large area known as the Northwest Territories was ready for settlers from the east. By 1890 small groups of Mennonites were joining the movement of other Canadians into the area that would become the provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta in 1905. Immigration from Russia and other parts of Europe also again became strong during the 1890s with the prospect of homesteading in the Northwest. These Russian Mennonite immigrants came from a variety of colonies in Russia,

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Talking About Death

by Dora Dueck

When Maria Epp died in Ekaterinoslav, Russia in July 1903 at age 52, her husband Dietrich sent a report of it to the *Zionsbote*, the Mennonite Brethren periodical of the time. His report was much more than an obituary, however.

Dietrich described Maria's condition leading up to an operation, its subsequent apparent success and then downturn, and many of their exchanges when she realized she was dying. He described how he read her John 17 at her request and their conversation about what would happen to her body. He told of various people and events she had recalled and mentioned, and her concern whether there was anything she still needed to make right in her life. He told of the prayer she spoke and her words to the Russian nurse attending her.

Maria thought it was getting dusty in the room, but he told her that it seemed that way because she was "beginning to go home." To this she responded joyfully, "I'm going home." He told of other things she said, and added that there had been much more than what he had set down. She died peacefully, without struggle, he went on, her last audible words being, "There on the cross is the one I love." Dietrich concluded his lengthy report with a description of the funeral. Such stories of the act of dying and the accompanying rituals of grief occurred frequently in the small magazine a century ago. In fact, death was a strong presence in the paper, not only through narration, but through comment and description. (My research has been primarily in the *Zionsbote*, so I have restricted my analysis to the Mennonite Brethren (MB) context.)

Death might be called a "street preacher" [*Strassenprediger*] who appeared at any time, turning in at this house or that, often unexpectedly, with sobering reminders of life's brevity. Death was "a going over, there to look upon that which was believed here" or "being transposed from the struggling into the triumphant church." Over and over it provided opportunities to instruct and to warn of the need to be converted, to have one's affairs "in order," to remember that "our Home is not here."

A "good" death at that time, at least as it was talked about in the periodical, was first and foremost one in which the person was spiritually ready to die, with a clear

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Talking about Death

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conversion as it was recognized and understood by its readers. The opportunity for the dying person to order her affairs and speak to loved ones, as well as for survivors to minister with scripture and song, was also valued. Acts of dying that included some kind of vision of the approaching heavenly world (perhaps of seeing angels or Jesus) would be shared in print for the comfort and affirmation they offered the family and wider community. Other stories in the *Zionsbote*, such as conversion experiences, sometimes included dreams of heaven or hell, or near-death kind of experiences.

Reading it today, this earlier discourse around death feels unfamiliar and at times uncomfortable. The death stories, though often tender, seem just as often sentimentalized and drawn out for maximum emotional effect. Sometimes the commentary on deaths, in cases where the deceased person was not a Christian by the MB definition of conversion, or in the case of a suicide or death-bed conversion, could be quite harsh. One particularly poignant example is the anguish editor John F. Harms poured into

print after the death of his young son by drowning; the child had not yet made a definitive conversion decision (15 July 1891).

The presence and use of death in the print conversation of Mennonite Brethren (MB) in their earlier history can probably be explained in several ways. For one thing, the MB community, though scattered, was relatively small and people wrote quite personally, expecting that their news would be of significance and interest to the rest of the readers.

Furthermore, talking about death was not considered in bad taste in the late Victorian period. That culture gave a great deal of attention to death in literature and had developed elaborate rituals of funerals and mourning. The commentary about death, however, also clearly grew out of very strong beliefs about the finality of death and the judgment and destinies that lay beyond it.

We do not talk about death in the same way. Conference publications like the *MB Herald* now serve a large constituency and current cultural conventions do not lend themselves to the sharing of such intimate stories. (I have noticed, however, a slight shift that may be significant; very recently, for example, the *MB Herald* carried the story of a pastor who blogged his “dying”; this may be a new kind of death story).

Currently, obituaries in the *MB Herald* are relatively short, and focus on the life of the person and the “example” they have been. Although grieving family members sometimes protest, the magazine will not use euphemisms for the act of dying, for stylistic reasons (plain language) but perhaps also because of a reluctance to state someone has “passed to Glory.” This may reflect a shift in MB thinking about the afterlife, or perhaps about the markers of conversion. Funerals today tend to be expensive and often elaborate, but our culture has been described as “death denying.” Although movies and television give us any number of acted deaths, curiosity about dying carries the opprobrium of voyeurism. A “good” death today is often defined in terms of the dying person’s experience of it (that they have gone through the “stages” to acceptance, that they are not alone) rather than the life after death which awaits believers no matter how their death occurs.

The point of becoming aware of our past customs around death, and making



Andreas Wallman left the Hutterite group of Russia and joined the Mennonites of Chortitza. Here he married Katharina Lepp. This industrialist family had a factory in Chortitza and Alexandrowsk. This advertisement gives evidence of the machinery that they manufactured and sold. Photo: *Mennonitisches Jahrbuch*. 1913.

the inevitable comparisons with present practice, is not to hold up the past as an exemplar to which we must return. Neither is it to assume that we are doing things well now. Rather, it gives us the opportunity to evaluate our public discourse around death.

Should we talk about death more? Should we tell each other the acts-of-dying stories we witness? What is our definition of a “good” death? Is death instructive? How should we use it? How do we respond both with and against our culture in the matter of death? How do our Christian beliefs affect our practices around death?

These are some of the questions and opportunities raised by this brief look back in our history.

Dora Dueck is associate editor of the MB Herald and author of two books and many articles. Her MA (history) thesis analyzed communication in the Zionsbote in its first decades.

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Genealogy and Family History

By Alf Redekopp

Queries

Ewert – I am looking for any information on the family of Johann Ewert, b. about 1815, and married to Susanna Sawatzky, b. 28 Nov 1815 who lived in Rosenthal, Chortitza. Two known children include: Johann, b. 25 Jul 1836, who married Helena Sawatzky, and Susanna, b. 27 Sep 1842, who married Aron Enns. Johann Ewert contracted rabies from a rabid wolf attack while working as a night watchman and died on 2 March 1861. Contact: Kathy Penner, 550 Highland Avenue, Brandon, MB, R7C 1A9 or email kathypenner@hotmail.com.



Isaak – On the back of this photo is the following inscription “*Zur freundlichen Erinnerung an die gemeinsam verlebte Stunden in Asuncion, Paraguay, nach einem langen Wiedersehen, Abraham u Aganetha Isaak*”. Who are these people? If I'm right Abraham Isaak was the brother of my great grandmother Anna Isaak (d. 1894) who married Jacob J. Tessmann (1845-1917). She was the daughter of Abraham W. Isaak & Sara Voth. Contact: Edith Van Dongen, email: vandee@sympatico.ca.

Boschmann – I am looking for information on the ancestors of David Boschmann (ca. 1877-1922) and his wife Margareta Sommer (1875-1939). Margareta was from Hochfeld, Yazykova Colony, South Russia and came to Canada, where she died in Namaka, Alberta. Their children included Peter (1898), Cornelius (1900), Dietrich (1905), Liese (1908), Margareta (1910), Heinrich (1912), Tina, Elizabeth and Katharina (1921). Contact: Sherry Blake, Box 21, Bay Tree, AB T0H 0A0, phone 780-353-2822 or email: sherbear58@hotmail.com.

Toews – I am looking for information on the ancestors and descendants of Jacob J. Toews (1875-) of Frabrikerwiese, Molotschna and his wife Katharina Loewen (1883-1919) of Ohrloff, Molotschna. Jacob J. Toews' parents were Johann J. Toews and Katharina Braun. Contact: Sherry Blake, Box 21, Bay Tree, AB T0H 0A0, phone 780-353-2822 or email: sherbear58@hotmail.com.

French Foreign Legion - Many young men in the Ukraine of Russia joined the "Selbstschutz" to defend their villages. Later they joined the White Army to drive away the Red Army. When the White army was defeated, it retreated to the Black Sea, and many a young man found his way to Constantinople. Here many came down with typhus. Some were taken to a French hospital where food and nursing were very poor. Agents of the French Foreign Legion made contact with these young men who promised them a decent hospital with proper treatment if they signed a contract with the French Foreign Legion. They were also promised that they could stay in the Legion as long as they wanted, but they found out later that it was not true - they were in there for the 5-year duration. One young Mennonite man who signed the contract was Julius Cornelius Heinrichs of Nicolaipol. I would like to know if any other Mennonite men also joined this French Foreign Legion. Contact: Marianne Janzen of 205-333 Edison Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba R2G 0L9 943-8270 or e-mail bengell@shaw.ca.

Recent Books

Nicholas Dick, Alyce Hiebert and Peggy Unruh Regehr. *The Unruh Ten Family Book* (Toronto, ON: Private publication, 2004) 153 pp.

This compilation contains stories and genealogy about the children of Heinrich B. Unruh (1847-1883), itinerant preacher and *Aeltester* of the Karassan Church in Crimea. On his death at age 36 his surviving spouse, Maria (Kunkel), unable to cope, gave up the children to relatives. Best known to the older generation of Mennonites were mission-

aries Heinrich (1868-1912) and Cornelius (1873-1941), theologians Abraham (1878-1961) and Benjamin (1881-1959). Lesser known were Gerhard (1870-1934) and the female siblings Maria (1872-1942), Katharina (1875-1938) Elizabeth (1876-1972) and Anna (1880-1915).

The stories are about the first three generations (the ten siblings, their children and grandchildren) whereas the genealogy section includes all descendants to the present.

The books are out of print except for a few copies for direct descendants and libraries. However a CD version is available, containing up-to-date data.

Inquiries and requests should be directed to Nicholas Dick, 511-1093 Kingston Rd., Toronto, ON, M1N 4E2; phone 416-699-8351 or email nwhad@rogers.com.

Adina Reger† (1950-2005)

Mennonite genealogist and family historian Adina Reger died on Nov. 5, 2005 in Germany. Adina was born in Kasachstan, emigrated to Germany with her family in 1987, developed a deep interest in Mennonite history and published a number of books including *Nur aus Gnaden (Die Lebensgeschichte meines Grossvaters Nikolaj Reimer)* (1994), 152 pages, *Familienstammbuch und Geschichte der Familie Reimer 1740-1995* (1998), 717 pages, and, *Diese Steine: Die Russlandmennoniten* together with Delbert Plett (2001), 692 pages.

Clarence Hiebert† (1927-2005)

Professor, teacher, pastor and historian Clarence Hiebert died November 14, 2005 in Hillsboro, Kansas.

Historians and genealogists will know Clarence best for his history of the Holdeman people, published in 1972. In 1974 he compiled and published a book containing ship lists and other related materials on

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MHC News

The Mennonite Heritage Centre has had the good fortune of two university students helping at the office this fall and winter months. Both students attend the Canadian Mennonite University (CMU).



Tare Muvingi comes from Zimbabwe and is a 2nd year CMU student. She is a very responsible worker and has already assisted with sorting and filing congregational records, and other office related tasks. She works 2 hours a week at the Centre.

Darren Pries is a 4th year student who is spending 6 hours a week at the Centre as his placement to fulfil the *Practicum* course require-



ment. Darren has responded to research inquiries, created a digital copy of the Peter Bergen Letter Collection using a digital camera, and helped install some new and higher shelves for the bound periodical collection in our research room.

The **D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation Inc.** of Steinbach awarded a grant in the amount of \$6,350 to the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada based on a joint application from Sam Steiner, Managing Editor of the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online and Alf Redekopp of the MHC to turn biographies published in *Preservings* into entries for GAMEO.

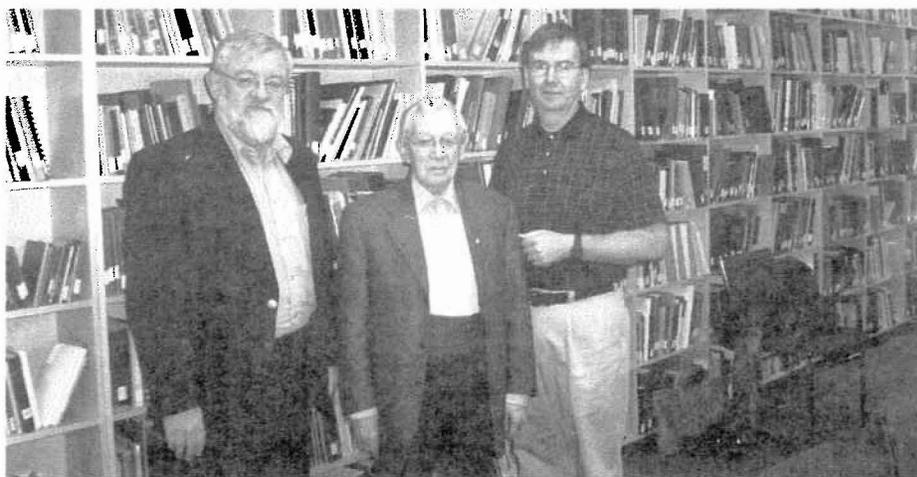
The MHC anticipates hiring a contract worker for this project and providing the computer and workspace for the project.

A significant number of entries would be added to GAMEO from the Mennonite community (and descendants) that emigrated from Russia to North America in the 1870s, particularly from the more conservative groups.

A.R.

MHC Selected Accessions

- Four original maps related to the Russian Mennonite country estate Neoteric of David Gerhard Enns in the Melitopol region, Tauria. (Donated by Elfriede Schroeder.)
- I.P. Klassen papers. -- 1930-1982. -- 1 folder. (Received from Lawrence Klippenstein)
- Sterling Mennonite Fellowship (Winnipeg) Ladies Mission Band records.
- Gerhard Lohrenz slide collection. -- 1970s. -- ca. 980 slides. These slides were taken and collection by G. Lohrenz in the course of his numerous trips often as a tour guide. (Donated by daughter Sophie Hynd.)
- Katharina (Wiens) Bahnmann Dyck Regier (1859-1936) papers. -- 17 original items. (Donated by Kathy Kajinami and delivered by David P. Sudermann)
- Photocopy of Berdyansk map dated 1862 copied while visiting the Ukraine in 2004. [in Russian] (Courtesy of David P. Sudermann)
- Der Bote* Editorial Office files
- Walnut Receiving House records
- Manuscript entitled "Leonard Sudermann and the Emigration from South Russia (Ukraine) to North America Selected Documents 1870-1874" by Lawrence Klippenstein, Clara K. Dyck and Sonya Hauri-Thiessen (2005), 188 pp.
- Index for the earliest church family registers of the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference (EMMC) known as the "Rudnerweide Gemeinde Registers 1936-1959" compiled by Martha Martens.
- Mennonite Historical Society of Canada treasurer files (1990-2003).
- Conference of Mennonites in Canada (now MC Canada) Communications department files (1994-1998).
- Memoirs of Agnes Friesen (nee Dueck) re. life in the former Soviet Union (1990).
- Translation of Jacob P. Janzen diary September 18, 1916 - January 8, 1918 by Edward Enns.
- Judge Horace Harvey note books and lists of COs in various locations in Alberta (1940-1941), 104 pp.
- Manigotagan Community Chapel records (1969-2001).
- Orie O. Miller diary (1920-1921) typed from a copy of the original by Nelly Rempel, 67 pp. (Original at Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen.)
- Genealogy of John Frank Kroeker (1871-1933) and Susanna Schowalter (1874-1939) compiled by Helen Kornelsen, 14 pp.
- German Foreign Ministry. Schubert File re. Mennonite emigration. 1929 : digital images taken by Erwin Warkentin at the Public Records Office, London (GFM 33-1981).



MHSC 2005 Award of Excellence was received by Ted E. Friesen (centre), long-time representative for Mennonite Church Canada on the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada board. The Society began in 1966 when two provincially based Mennonite historical societies (Ontario and Manitoba) together with MCC Canada organized for the purpose of writing the history of Mennonites in Canada. Ken Reddig (left) current president of the Society presented the award. Don Peters (right) represented Mennonite Central Committee Canada at the annual meeting held Dec. 2, 2005. MCC Canada archival records are deposited at MHC Archives. Photo by Bert Friesen.

Recent Accessions

Two significant accessions among others this fall were:

Papers of Leonard Siemens, including his work at the University of Manitoba Department of Agriculture, work with the MB Conference and church committees and his work in many overseas development projects including MCC.

Sermon notes of Rev. Henry H. Voth (1919-1981), long-time pastor and teacher with many involvements with conference boards and committees.

New Staff at CMBS



David Perlmutter

The Centre welcomes David Perlmutter to its staff for the winter and summer months. David is a history student who comes to the Centre with previous experience with the Archives of Manitoba. A portion of his salary is granted by the Federal Government Youth Employment Services program.

Already David has compiled the remaining motions, recommendations and resolutions of the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches and is working on the past number of years for the Manitoba Conference.

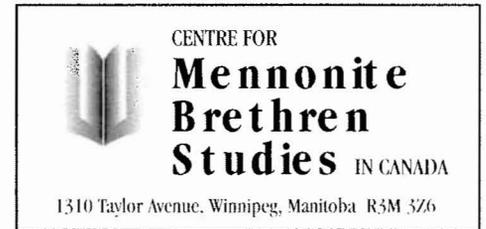
His main task will be to convert the 4,000 volume John A. Toews Historical Library from the current Dewey classification scheme to that of the Library of Congress. This large project will be conducted with the assistance of the University of Winnipeg Library system.

Centre Hosts Events

During the month of November the Centre hosted a number of meetings. An information meeting with Kim Jasper of the Friends of the Canadian Museum of Human Rights Inc. was held in the Centre. Hosted by the Centre and the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, Kim presented the vision and current status of this new international museum. She noted that the Canadian Museum for Human Rights will be an educational centre dedicated to promoting understanding and respect for diversity so that together we can all find the courage to stand up for one another and be vigilant in the protection of each other's rights. How the broader Mennonite community will participate with the museum is being explored.

November 22 the centre hosted a supper for some very special people. Invited were the volunteers and the last Historical Committee responsible for the operation of the Centre. The evening began with hot apple cider and then Helen Schellenberg treated the group of 27 to a Russian-Mennonite supper of verneki, farmers sausage and the trimmings. Cam Rowland, currently director of Communications and Church Health, made some opening remarks. Ken Conrad and Cam cited the projects with which the 13 volunteers had worked. The participants on the last Board were thanked and commended for their years of service. It was a lovely evening and a pleasure to thank everyone involved with the Centre.

December 1-3 a series of meetings revolving around the Mennonite Histor-



ical Society of Canada (MHSC) were held at the Centre. First, were the historic meetings of the Canadian Mennonite Encyclopedia Online. This project of the MHSC began in 1996 and currently has achieved considerable success. The website receives over 27,000 hits each day with some 8,000 pages read. The name of the site and project has now been changed to the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online (GAMEO). Formally participating in the website were people from the United States. Expressions of interest in participating in the project have been received from several other countries as well.

Following the Encyclopedia meetings were the meetings of the annual meeting of the MHSC. Among its business was further GAMEO participation. The Society specially recognized the participation of Mr. Ted E. Friesen of Altona, Manitoba by presenting him with an award of excellence. Ted was a founding member of the society and was a major support and encouragement of the society in its early years. He also helped support the research and writing of the Mennonites in Canada series authored by Frank Epp and Ted Regehr.

KR



GAMEO Editorial Committee (l-r): Abe Dueck, John Thiesen, Kevin Enns-Rempel, Peggy Goertzen, Rich Preheim, Sam Steiner, David Rempel Smucker, Bert Friesen, David Giesbrecht, Beth Graybill, Peter Penner, Richard Thiessen, Alf Redekopp, Victor Wiebe and John Sharp. Taken at the first annual meeting at CMBS on Dec. 2, 2005.

Church diversity

(cont'd from p. 1)

directly from Prussia, or they came after a short period in Manitoba or the United States.

Peter Regier of West Prussia was one of these immigrants that arrived to homestead at Tiefengrund in 1894. As an ordained minister and bishop of the Rosenorter Church in Prussia, he was immediately invited to serve the scattered Mennonite settlers in the Rosthern area. Already that same year he gathered the surrounding settlers together and invited them to form a church (*Gemeinde*). They agreed and subsequently the Rosenorter Mennonite Church of Saskatchewan was established with Bishop Peter Regier as their leader.

The members of this newly founded church were a diverse group. Ens writes:

"The members came from widely scattered colonies in Russia and had lived there for varying lengths of time. Some had no experience of Russia at all. Some were educated in the United States, others in Prussia. Their understanding of and commitment to living the Christian faith varied significantly. And their having moved to a frontier area of a very young country reflected a tendency to rugged individualism..."¹

Minister J.G. Rempel, described the founding members as a group thrown together with no prior intent on forming a congregation.

In July 1902, Bishop Peter Regier invited the ministerial of the Rosenorter Church to his home to meet two visiting Mennonite church leaders from Manitoba – minister Johann M. Friesen of Altona and minister Benjamin Ewert of Gretna. These visitors were from the Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Manitoba, a church whose name traced back to the group of immigrants that had come from the Bergthal Colony in Russia between 1874 and 1876. Their membership was also quite diverse. Only a minority of their group at that time traced their origins back to the Bergthal Colony in Russia from which they took their name and identity. A division in the group a decade earlier had seen the majority of the families from the Bergthal colony follow the leadership of Abraham Doerksen of the village of Sommerfeld, founding the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church of Manitoba. The smaller group which retained the name Bergthaler had accepted into its fellowship many members who had never lived in the Bergthal Colony but were either from the Molotschna Colony, the

Chortitza Colony, or one of its younger daughter colonies in Russia. These "newer" members in the Bergthaler church have often been characterized as those seeking and advocating better teacher training. At least some of them also promoted a greater emphasis on experiential faith. So the Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Manitoba was also a rather diverse group.

The agenda for Bishop Peter Regier and those at the July 1902 meeting was focused on how to minister more effectively to the scattered and ever expanding Mennonite communities. They agreed that closer fraternal relations between the ministerial and pulpit exchanges between the Bergthaler and Rosenorter churches would help. Their agreement to meet again in one year in Manitoba in 1903 marks an early coming together of diversity. The meeting marks the establishing of an area conference.

One of the people present at the 1902 Tiefengrund meeting was James E. Sprunger, General Conference Home Missions worker from Berne, Indiana who was "sent" to minister to scattered groups of Mennonites in the United States and Canada. The General Conference Mennonite Church was founded in 1860 from the coming together of "New" Mennonites from Pennsylvania. This group represented another element of diversity. All of the Mennonite groups mentioned shared the common heritage which grew out of the radical wing of the 16th century Reformation in Europe. The Swiss and South German founders of the General Conference traced their origins to the first Anabaptist baptism in 1525 in Zurich. The Bergthaler and Rosenorter shared the basic convictions of the Swiss-South German Mennonite groups, but ethnically they descended largely from Dutch and North German Anabaptists among whom Menno Simons was one of the most significant leaders.

How did these diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds affect their coming together? The committee that drafted the first constitutional framework for establishing what eventually became the Conference of Mennonites in Canada did their work well. The document was accepted at the 1904 session in Eigenheim, seemingly without changes. Ens writes:

"...it had been prepared by a broadly representative committee. Bishop Peter Regier represented the Prussians. H.H. Ewert shared that background but was raised and educated in the United States in

the context of the General Conference. Gerhard Epp and Franz Sawatzky represented the Chortitza Mennonites in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and Johann M. Friesen those who came from the Bergthal Colony..."³

Throughout the 1890s and into the first two decades of the 20th century the Canadian government vigorously promoted the settling of the west. Gerhard Ens of Rosthern became one of the government's appointees for recruiting settlers. As a result of his work and other agents, by 1914 many new communities of Mennonites were founded in Saskatchewan and Alberta. As churches organized in these communities, and at least some became a part of the Conference, they added yet another element of ethnic diversity.

The North Star congregation at Drake, Saskatchewan applied for membership into the Conference in 1907. Their leader Johann Gerbrandt, as well as a number of the Drake settlers came from the Wymischle congregation in Poland. Some of the early settlers in the Drake area that originated in Poland include names such as Bartel, Kliever, Schroeder, Ewert, Ediger and Schmidt.⁴

In 1914 the Bethesda church at Langham, Saskatchewan joined the Conference. The Langham congregation included a significant number of members of Hutterite background. These included some typical surnames like Waldner, Wurtz and Hofer. Their background also formed a distinct ethnic group.

Like the Mennonites, the Hutterites had also found a period of reprieve from persecution in South Russia. However, their experiences before Russia and even in Russia were quite different from the Mennonites. Initially things went well for them in Russia where they had moved in 1771 and found toleration for their faith for the first time in several hundred years. However after 1796, with the death of Count Rumiantsev, there were attempts by his successors to make serfs or slaves out of the Hutterites. Appealing to the government they got assurance that they would have the same legal status as the Mennonite colonists, but it was also advised that they relocate to Radichev, which happened in 1802. Plagued by various problems, including religious differences and economic poverty, in 1842 the entire community of 69 families moved south over 640 kilometres to a location on the Molotschna River near the Molotschna Mennonite Colony. Here they established the settlement known as

Huttertal. They were required to model their settlement after the neighbouring Mennonite villages.

Although the Hutterites lived close to the Mennonites in Molotschna, they continued to elect their own preachers and have their own worship services. The old sermons of their forefathers continued to be read in the services. When parts were read about having goods in common based on Acts 2, many people got guilty consciences. Inspired by these sermons and additional visions, eventually in 1859, after having abandoned the community of goods for 40 years, a renewal of communal living started. One of the renewal groups lived at one end of the village, and another group which re-instated the community of goods a year later, lived at the other end. In the middle of the village lived the families who did not accept community of goods as a necessary expression of faithfulness to God.⁵

Between 1874 and 1879 almost all Hutterites emigrated to America. Of the 1265 people only 400 settled in colonies, the majority settled on the prairies like the Mennonites.⁶ These people were often referred to by their colony Hutterite relatives as the *Prairieleit* (prairie people) because they did not live having “all things in common”. During the first two decades in America the *Prairieleit* gradually distanced themselves from their communal relatives and established independent Hutterite churches in South Dakota in order to maintain their own understanding of the Christian faith. They continued to think of themselves as Hutterites even as they rapidly assimilated with the general population. In the late 1880s *Prairieleit* Hutterites in South Dakota began marrying Mennonites and joining their churches. Some were drawn to the Mennonite churches, especially through the work of Mennonite missionaries from Kansas of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren church. Around the turn of the century, when homesteads were no longer readily available in South Dakota, some *Prarieleit* immigrated to Canada and settled in the Langham area of Saskatchewan. The Waldner, Wurtz and Hofer families in the Bethesda Church which was part of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada until it closed in 1948 had this ethnic and cultural background. Ens writes that “about one-third of active members participating in one of the last Bethesda *Bruderschaft* meetings in about 1948 had typical

Hutterite names...”⁷

Perhaps it was quite natural to extend the fellowship within the Mennonite Church to others who spoke the German language -- Rosenorter, Bergthalers, Germans from Poland, or Hutterites, but I suspect that language alone did not keep the church from growing in diversity. Diversity was a gift and it was also an expression and partial fulfillment of the prayer for unity expressed by the Lord Jesus who they chose to follow.

Endnotes

1. Adolf Ens, *Becoming a National Church: A History of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada* (Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2004) 8.
2. J.G. Rempel, *Die Rosenorter Gemeinde in Saskatchewan in Wort und Bild* (Rosthern: Rosenorter Gemeinde, 1950) 25.
3. Ens, *Becoming a National Church*, 20.
4. *Drake: Past and Present Making Memories* (Drake: Drake History Book Committee, 1987) 121f.
5. John Hofer, *History of the Hutterites* (Elie, Manitoba: The Hutterian Educational Committee, James Valley Colony, 1982) 57.
6. *Ibid.*, 60.
7. Adolf Ens, *Becoming a National Church*, 229.

Additional Sources

Edna Wurtz and Catherine Masuk, *Rooted and Grounded in Love: The History and Family Records of the Langham Prairie People* (Saskatoon: Wurtz and Masuk, 2000)

Samuel Hofer, *The Hutterites* (Saskatoon: Hofer Publishers, 1998)

Conference reports

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liked the provision, but were afraid of the liability. What would they do in the worst-case scenario?

The 1979 agreement made this more acceptable. With the new agreement it was MCCC who accepted the liability. As a result local groups, congregations, if they obtained a letter of authorization from MCCC did not have to worry about being liable if problems developed beyond their capability. (Interestingly MCCC never ever had to pick up the expenses for any church or group.) This letter also became the only screening process that groups or congregations required for immigration officials. If they had a letter from MCCC they were instantly deemed trustworthy and considered to have sufficient resources to engage in the sponsorship.

The conference was hosted by the Chair

in Mennonite Studies and the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada. Stories of both sponsors and former refugees were shared. The event was fantastic. We heard from sponsored people who now have become part of the Canadian fabric of society. We heard the stories of new churches and their leaders that sprang from their sponsorship relationships. We heard from people who by now have inter-married with Canadian Mennonites. We heard of relationships that worked well and those that did not work out well—sometimes because hosts tended to try too hard and also from newcomers who just had too much to absorb in coming to a new land and beginning a new life. If ever there was a short course on church planting and church growth among newcomers to Canada, this was it.

The conference was also reminded in a poignant speech by Dr. Lloyd Axworthy, former Foreign Minister of Canada, who happened to be Minister of Employment and Immigration during the first years of the sponsorship program, how we no longer can rest on the good things we did in the past. We must now focus on the present and the future where over 170 million people are on the move around the world and over 50 million placed in refugee camps. This is among one of the root causes for terrorism and global instability. Dr. Axworthy challenged us to consider what the contribution of the church and its agencies is in this current crisis.

A concluding impression of the conference was that as Mennonites we stepped forward to do our small part in a terrible global situation over 25 years ago and it strengthened and expanded our churches. What role does the church and its agencies have in today's global crisis? How will it change us?

Clarence Hiebert

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materials on Mennonite immigration from Russia in North America entitled *Brothers in deed to Brothers in Need*. This for many years was an indispensable genealogical aid for Mennonites of 1870 Russian descent. For over thirty years Clarence invested his time and energy in Tabor College (Hillsboro, Kansas) where he served as professor of Biblical and Religious Studies.

Clarence was the son of C.N. and Tina Hiebert, early city missionaries for the Mennonite Brethren Conference in Winnipeg.

Conference Reports

By Ken Reddig

John and Margaret Friesen Lectures at the Canadian Mennonite University, November 9 & 10, 2005 entitled "Recovering A Heritage: the Mennonite Experience in Poland and Prussia" presented by Dr. Peter Klassen, Fresno, California.

Were you to ask the average person of Russian-Mennonite heritage if they knew that most likely their family had resided in Poland for over 200 years—very few would be aware of that fact. For most that bit of information would be totally new, if not almost preposterous.

The lectures by Dr. Peter Klassen at the Canadian Mennonite University during this fall's John and Margaret Friesen Lectures (November 9-10) provided new and fascinating information on the sojourn of many Mennonites who had resided in Poland some 200 or more years ago.

Dr. Klassen's first lecture was a series of beautiful power-point slides that documented the remaining built heritage of Anabaptist Mennonites who emigrated from the Netherlands to Poland as early as the 1530s. It is amazing that many churches, farmsteads and graveyards are still recognizable and intact. Dr. Klassen reported on personal contact with Polish people, civic and federal government officials who are interested in learning about, and helping preserve, the story of the Mennonites who long ago resided in the city of Gdansk (Danzig) as well as the flood plain of the Vistula and Nogat rivers.

The next two presentations of Dr. Klassen were lectures that explored the life and impact of the Mennonites in this region. In broad strokes Dr. Klassen noted how some Mennonites fled from the persecution they were facing in the Netherlands and were attracted to regions under the Polish crown due to the significant religious toleration they were extended. At the same time these Mennonites were welcomed and invited to the region for their farming and engineering skills. Among those skills was the ability to build windmills and develop excellent drainage systems in these lowlands, the remains of which are utilized even today. The marshy lowlands that had been considered unworkable and unprofitable, were turned into a literal

garden of crops that brought wealth and food security to the region.

Though the Mennonites arriving from the Netherlands were initially tolerated by most authorities, they did indeed face discrimination. In Danzig, for example, the populace had embraced the reforms of Luther. These churches considered the Mennonites coming from the Netherlands as "heretics" and as a result Mennonites faced opposition from numerous churches. Even in the area of the trades, opposition was encountered. While permitted to employ their skills as merchants and craftsmen, such as making lace and braids, the local trade guilds voiced opposition and forced the Danzig city council to take restrictive action against the Mennonite craftsmen and merchants.

Trade was vital to the economy of the region. In particular trade between Danzig and Amsterdam flourished. Some Mennonites increasingly became involved in shipping. One Mennonite is known to have owned over 40 ships that regularly moved trade goods between northern Baltic seaports.

The first partition of Poland (1772) began to negatively affect the toleration that the Mennonites had enjoyed. But the biggest challenge for the community came between the Napoleonic wars and World War I. Initially the Mennonites came to Poland with the promise of religious freedom and practice that included exemption from military service. Shortly after Prussia had seized portions of Poland, the Mennonites in those areas were permitted to continue to exercise their exemption from military service only upon payment of money. Additionally they were restricted from acquiring additional lands. As the restrictions increased, the option of moving to South Russia, upon the invitation of Catherine II, became more attractive.

The pressure remained on those who stayed to conform to military service. Eventually broad exemption was totally abolished and it was up to individuals to make their own choices. Even the churches relented and gave members the option of whether or not to participate in military service. Over the years regular military service became common among Mennonites.

These well-attended lectures of Dr. Klassen were much appreciated. They helped open up the four-century story of Mennonites in Poland. While Dr. Klassen has written a book and numerous articles

on the story of the Polish/Prussian Mennonites, it is still a story that is unfamiliar to most people of Russian-Mennonite extraction. Hopefully these good lectures, and the future publications of Dr. Klassen, will encourage more Russian-Mennonites to explore and include their Polish background into their self-understanding.

Mennonite Hosts & Refugee New-comers: 1979-Present, September 30-October 1, 2005 at University of Winnipeg.

Ever wonder where some of those Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian and Thai churches came from? Not all, but some stemmed from an agreement between Mennonite Central Committee Canada and the Federal Government over 25 years ago.

A conference held at the end of September entitled "Mennonite Hosts and Refugee Newcomers: 1979-Present" celebrated and explored what happened and what the results of those newcomers was on Mennonite churches in Canada since 1979.

Canadian Mennonites and other churches began to have a broader refugee concern after 1979. Prior to that time, a lot of our refugee activity had centred on Mennonite refugees largely from Germany and the former Soviet Union. What spurred this change was an agreement between Mennonite Central Committee Canada (MCCC) and the Canadian Government known as the Master Agreement for private refugee sponsorship. MCCC was the first church agency to sign this agreement—with numerous other agencies and church denominations following closely thereafter.

Signed by MCCC on March 5, 1979, the agreement made some changes in the new immigration law of April 1978. The changes were made in order to accommodate the thousands of refugees leaving southeast Asia following the war in Vietnam. That new law had a provision whereby any five individuals could sponsor a refugee, provided that they accepted full responsibility and liability for the refugee and his/her accompanying dependents for one year. Interested people

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