

Mennonite Historian

A Mennonite Newspaper One Hundred Years ago - 1911

by Bert Friesen

*What dominated communication between Mennonite communities in Europe and North America? What did the different Anabaptist groups hear and know about each other? Indexer Bert Friesen has recently been reading the 1911 issues of the **Mennonitische Rundschau**. – ed.*

The year 1911 was the first complete year of the editorship of Claas B. Wiens, 1869-1962. The content did not change much from the previous year in terms of the sources of information and the intent of providing a means of communication between the various Russian Mennonites. The Hutterite Prairieleut, who had begun to join the KMB Church, also contributed to the content.

There are a number of subject areas which became dominant in 1911. These are as follows:

1. Founding of new agricultural colonies of Mennonites in California.

The first attempt had begun the previous year under the leadership of Julius Siemens, 1863-1953. Both were in the San Francisco area. The first in Los Molinos attracted colonists from the Mid-west states. It failed because of the continuing problem of malaria outbreaks due to the swampy conditions in the area. Fortunately, much of the investment was recovered by the sale of the land to other non-Mennonite colonists. The second attempt was slightly further south, in the Merced/Atwater area. Many of the Los Molinos colonists moved here as well as some from the southern part of the San Joaquin valley. They also attracted more colonies from the Mid-west states and even from the Prairie provinces in Canada. This colony took root, congregations were established, and agriculture thrived. It lasted for at least three generations in the 20th century.

2. Founding of a new agricultural colony in Georgia for Russian Mennonites.

This attempt was to try to give the Mennonites of the Terek Colony in Russia a new lease on life. They had suffered severe economic hardships in the Terek Colony. Agricultural pursuits had failed more years than not. The American Mennonites thought that a similar climate and growing conditions existed in Georgia where they had been doing mission work among the African-Americans. The intent was to make immigrants cotton farmers.

(cont'd on p. 6)

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



Indexer Bert Friesen. For the past two years the Centre for MB Studies has provided the original newspapers and the Mennonite Heritage Centre the office space and computer support, in a cooperative project to compile an index for the *Mennonitische Rundschau*, thanks to the D.F. Plett Research Foundation. Photo credit: Alf Redekopp

Winnipeg Mennonite Archival Centres mark Twenty Five Years of Cooperation in publishing and other ventures

By Alf Redekopp

With this issue of *Mennonite Historian*, we mark 25 years of a joint publishing venture – 100 issues of this quarterly newsletter have been produced cooperatively by the Mennonite Heritage Centre and Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies. What preceded the decision to begin this venture with the March 1987 issue (Vol. 13 No. 1)? What was anticipated by this cooperation? What has happened by it? What has not happened? What is the vision today?

A decade before this joint venture, there was a new surge and interest in history and archives in both the Conference of Mennonites in Canada (CMC) (now a part of Mennonite Church Canada) and in the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches. The marking of the 100th anniversary of the arrival of Russian

Mennonites to Canada in 1974, certainly was one influence. Although the CMC had promoted historical concerns since the 1930s, it was in the early 1970s that Henry H. Epp spent much time promoting the idea of archives and developing indexes and filing systems. On September 1, 1974 the Committee appointed Lawrence Klippenstein as historian-archivist. The History-Archives Committee of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada published the first issue of *Mennonite Historian* in September 1975 (Vol. 1 No. 1). Three years later a new building was constructed and named Mennonite Heritage Centre.

The Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches also had its experiences of renewed historical interest

(cont'd on p. 2)

Twenty-Five Years

(cont'd from p. 1)

in the 1970s. Two of their former Bible College presidents had published histories of the Mennonite Brethren Church – Dr. A.H. Unruh in 1954 in German and Dr. John A. Toews in 1975 in English. Together with their American counterparts they had established the Historical Commission in 1974. The establishment of centres for the study of Mennonite Brethren life and history were established at each of their colleges in North America – Hillsboro, Winnipeg and Fresno – in 1975. The Canadian Conference formally established an archives in 1969 and named college librarian Herb Giesbrecht as archivist. A decade later, the Centre for MB Studies (synonymous with the archives) moved to a new facility as part of an expansion of MB Bible College (later renamed Concord College). Ken Reddig became the first full-time archivist and published the *MB Historical Society Newsletter* from 1979-1986.

Browsing through the four issues immediately preceding the first joint issue, there is evidence of significant cooperation and collaboration by simply noting how much Mennonite Brethren content the *Mennonite Historian* included. The lead article in March 1986 was by Ken Reddig and featured Katie Peters and her genealogical collection donated to CMBS. In the June issue Reddig was the writer of the book reviews and there is a notice of a “New Audio-Visual for Mennonite Archives” which was commissioned by the “three major Mennonite archives in Canada...” (Mennonite Archives of Ontario, CMBS and MHC). In the September issue a short report announced that a “new version might appear as early as March, 1987.” The directing committees of both Centres “have been discussing the merging of their respective newsletters.” This issue also included another review by MB archivist Ken Reddig. In the December issue, the agreement to merge the newsletters was restated with additional details of what was anticipated. “We [CMC History-Archives Committee] began the *Historian* – and the Centre for MB Studies started their newsletter – with the hope of sharing helpful information about the two fledgling archives programs. The two publications aimed as

well to stimulate research on Mennonite themes and to publish notes and articles of historical interest to the constituency served by the Centres.

“If all goes well, these objectives will continue as the heartbeat of the joint publication. Perhaps it will also be a small gesture of working together which can point the way to more ventures of a similar kind...”

In the first joint issue, John Friesen, member of the joint editorial committee, wrote that the “newly-formed editorial board is convinced that interpretations of the Mennonite experience should include the interests and concerns of the larger Mennonite community... [They] hope to meet the needs of people who are interested in Mennonite history, genealogy and related areas...to carry popular articles, genealogical information, reviews of recent books about the Mennonite experience and other information of general interest... A designated portion of the paper will... be utilized to serve the denominational needs of the two centres.” On this latter point, the editors reserved the pages in the center of the newsletter for this purpose – MHC on the left and CMBS on the right – a pattern that has carried on to this day. A year after the joint newsletter began, a regular page devoted to Genealogy and Family History, was begun (March 1988). Book notes and book reviews were almost always featured on the last two pages. These features have continued to this day.

What additional “small gestures of working together” followed in the subsequent years? Here are a few that are worth noting. For seventeen (17) years, the Centres have shared a staff person, although it was not a joint appointment per se. From 1994-1999, Alf Redekopp worked half-time at the CMBS and half-time at MHC. After Alf Redekopp became director of MHC, Conrad Stoesz was hired by both Centres on a half-time basis each. The arrangement has been characterized by a good “give and take” relationship, allowing flexibility in schedules and meeting specific needs of one or the other. The Centres both participated in a collaborative microfilming project of records in Odessa and St. Petersburg. The Centres have jointly developed a software application for describing their photographs. The Centres have sponsored lectures together. Both Centres have given the Manitoba

Mennonite Historical Society administrative support. In 2009 the Centres initiated a joint fundraising project called “Text to Terabyte,” a venture made possible through the generosity of Winnipeg filmmaker Otto Klassen. The Centres have the copying and distribution rights of the Klassen documentary films on Mennonite history. This has led to sponsoring several joint film nights. The funds are being shared as each Centre independently faces the challenges of supporting archives in the 21st century when more and more information is being managed digitally.

What else has changed and what has not happened? CMBS physically moved to a location much closer to the MHC -- only 5 kilometres away. The Centres have not merged into one institution. CMBS is no longer on the campus of a Mennonite Brethren college/university. The MHC remained on a college/university campus. Both Centres remained administratively under their respective national church denominational structure.

I began working at the Centre for MB Studies on August 1, 1987, just after the joint newsletter had begun. I suspect that I hardly knew about the “little gesture” of this joint publication, at the time, but now, reflecting back, I am grateful for 24 ½ years that I have been part of it.

Alf Redekopp, MHC Director since 2000

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Genealogy and Family History

By Alf Redekopp



Can anyone help identify this photo?

The stamp on the back says Dallas, Oregon.

We speculate that it is a Duerksen family, because of the strong resemblance to our Abraham Johann Duerksen, born 01 Jul 1871 in Lichtfelde, Molotschna; died 24 Oct 1963 in Abbotsford, BC.

In 1899 (8 Mar), Abram married Elisabeth Janzen (1877-1960), the daughter of Johann Kornelius & Margaretha (Dyck) Janzen in Lichtfelde, Molotschna. The family came to Canada in 1929 (11 Mar), to Linden, AB, and in 1937 moved to Langley, BC (Abbotsford). They had 6 surviving children: Abe (1899-1997), Elizabeth (1909-1999) Enns (John); Margaret (1912-2004) Giesbrecht (Peter); Justina (1914-2008) Friesen (Menno); Kay (1915-2007) Reimer (Art) and Jakob (1917-2010) Duerksen.

Abram was the son of Johann & Katharina (Wiens) Duerksen, and his family owned a grist mill in the Molotschna. He had 2 brothers, and some younger sisters, though we don't know their names. His younger brother, Jakob Joh. Duerksen (1873-1914), married Elisabeth's sister, Justina Janzen (1875-1943), who later married a widower, Peter Jakob Dueck (1871-1937) in Gnadenfeld, Kalantarowka, Kaukasus.

We believe this might be the family of Abram's oldest brother, Johann Joh. Duerksen (b. 1869-70), who we believe might have immigrated to America sometime after 1911. Maybe even with the parents and sisters. For a few years, the family lived in the Terek Colony (1903-1911), where they were millers by trade. But because of the problems there, they all eventually had to return to the Molotschna (by 1911), and moved on from there to other settlements farther away.

Abram settled in Blumenfeld, Ekaterinoslav and Jakob moved to Hoffnungsfeld, Kalantarowka (Kaukasus). And from there we're not really sure what happened to this brother, and the rest of the family.

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Herman Thiessen (1919-2011)

Hermann Thiessen of Burgdorf, Germany, who was born in Störbuderkampe, Danzig, West Prussia, on 29 May 1919, died in Burgdorf, Germany, on 19 October 2011, at the age of 92. His genealogical collection was deposited at Bethel College (Newton, KS) by Hermann Schirmacher. Thanks to Schirmacher and Tim Janzen, microfilm copies can be viewed at most North American Mennonite archives since 2003. (mennonitechurch.ca/programs/archives/holdings)

Genealogy Books Received

The Mennonite Heritage Centre recently received four genealogy/family history books which were produced some years ago, but seem only to have circulated with the specific family. We are grateful for the following items and encourage people who produced family books to consider depositing a copy with us or a Mennonite archives in their area.

The Peters Family (50 pages) compiled by Martha Dyck and printed in May 1998, traces the descendants of Johann H. Peters (1864) and his wife Maria Wiebe (1869) who came to Canada from the Bergthal Colony in 1875 and homesteaded near Altona, Manitoba.

The Klassen's 1744-1995 (84 pages), was the result of a project begun by Peter and Maria Klassen and brought to completion by Olga Krahn and Lydia Neudorf. It traces the descendants of Johann Klassen (1839-1887) and Maria Blatz (1843-1886) who came to Canada from the Bergthal Colony in 1875 and eventually settled in the village of Altbergthal near Altona, Manitoba.

Karl and Anna Hildebrand: Family Tree Genealogy 1859-1997 (286 pages) by Dave Sawatzky and Katherine Schroeder was published in 1998. This family also has roots in the Bergthal Colony of Russia and came to Manitoba in 1874.

The Abraham Froese Family book of History 1872-1999 (147 pages) compiled by Katherine Hildebrandt was published in 1999. It traces the descendants of Abraham Froese (1872-1957) who was born in the Bergthal colony just a few years before the family migrated to Canada. Froese and his first wife migrated to Mexico with Sommerfeld Mennonites in 1922. After his first wife Helena Dueck died in 1937, he moved back to Canada where he died in Altona in 1957.



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Sharing the Stories

Part of my role as an archivist at the Mennonite Heritage Centre is to "...share stories of the Mennonite people that will strengthen the Church as a community." In the past three months, as I shared some stories, I received as much as I gave. I learned lessons, built self confidence, renewed friendships, and was encouraged by the people in our church community.

On September 11th in Winkler close to 200 people gathered to dedicate the Wall of Remembrance to commemorate the example of 3,021 men who chose to be conscientious objectors to the war and performed alternative service. I told the story of the migration of the Mennonite people and that in part, why we were gathered in Winkler was because of the history of the Mennonite people and the strong belief in faithfully rejecting war. During my short speech a fly persistently pestered me – I was distracted. It buzzed around my head and in my face like it was on a mission to take me out. I learned that even small things can make a big difference.

Five days later I attended the Saskatchewan Mennonite Youth Organization's (SMYO) junior high youth retreat at the same location as the first SMYO retreat 70 years earlier -- the Rosthern Youth Farm. I gave four talks on the story that shapes us. I drew on stories from the biblical text that showed the importance of history and remembering. I explained that stories from our own faith community have enormous power in shaping our reality and current actions. The writer of Hebrews used the image of a cloud of witnesses. With the simple utterance of names such as Abraham, Sarah, David, and Samson, listeners were reminded of faithful action, encouraging them as they faced troubled times. In the book of Joshua, God instructed the placement of a monument of stones to act as a reminder and discussion starter. We too constructed a pile of rocks to remember God's faithfulness through the lives of the men and women who began the Rosthern Youth Farm. The stones were piled to act

Page 4 December 2011 Mennonite Historian

Along the Road to Freedom Project

Ray Dirks is creating a series of paintings telling the stories of Mennonite woman who played such a big part in bringing their families out of Ukraine during WW 2 to Canada, some via Paraguay. Ray Dirks and the project advisory committee hope the images will help keep the stories alive and will be a tribute to their mothers and the other woman.

As the families of these woman are aging there is a need to preserve these stories. Dirks and the committee also hope that it will encourage viewers to find out more by reading existing books, visit archives and view films and thus would result in an appreciation of an important part of Mennonite history and create a sense of appreciation.

An exhibit will open at the MHC Gallery in October 2012.

The series will include stories of faith, love, strength and forgiveness – lack of revenge; and hopefully spark interest to dig deeper into the viewer's own history and faith stories.

as a reminder. Peter spoke about believers as living stones and I encouraged the youth to continue living lives that will remind others of God's love and faithfulness. I was impressed by the leadership of the organizing committee who actively planned and guided the activities of the retreat. I gradually gained more confidence and needed to rely less on my written text. I could "embrace my inner story teller" as one participant put it.

I was back in Saskatchewan speaking at the Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan event "Remember our Peace Makers" on November 11th and a genealogy workshop on the 12th.

How we remember our peace makers shapes our reality today and it provides direction for the future. Without stories that shape our values, we will be shaped by the dominant stories of our surrounding society, which may not be the same values as our Christ-centred congregations promote.

For the following day I talked about sources for genealogical research at the two archival centres in Winnipeg and encouraged people to not only find names and dates but to also discover the stories behind the vital statistics.

The stories may be humorous or they



One of the painting in the Along the Road to Freedom Project. Drawing on a collection of family photographs from the early 1930s to images in her old age in her beloved backyard flower garden in Winnipeg, Ray Dirks has created this painting telling the story of Mrs. Reimer who came to Canada via Paraguay with her three sons.

A \$2000 tax deductible donation will sponsor a framed painting. Tax deductible donations of any amount greater will help cover overall project expenses. Buying a quilt raffle ticket from a committee member will also support the project. Contact committee member Wanda Andres at wanda.andres@gmail.com about the raffle or call Connie Wiebe at 204-888-6781 to make a designated donation.

may be tragic. They will be guiding stories; there may be stories that you will not know what to do with. Some stories will be simply good stories and others will have profound power.

On this trip I was pleased to reconnect with old friends and make new ones. I was pleased by the large attendance for the November 11th service that featured the Mennonite and Doukhobor story. I was encouraged to see the group of committed volunteers at the MHSS and their strong community support.

Ten days later I was the guest speaker at CMU, in the class "History and Methods of Non Violence." I told the story of Canada's conscientious objectors in the Second World War, arguing that their view of success was not political change, but rather, faithfulness to God's call to live as peaceful people. I was impressed with the sharp students who are devoting themselves to a Christian education.

At all of these events I represented both the Mennonite Brethren and Mennonite Church Canada archives -- a unique privilege. My experience confirmed for me that our lives are truly enriched as we gather, preserve and share the stories of the Mennonite people – tasks that our archival centres continue to promote.

Conrad Stoesz



CENTRE FOR
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Volunteers recognized at appreciation dinner (L to R): John Martens, Clara Toews, Lois Wedel, Kathie Ewert, Susan Huebert, and Ed Lenzmann. Not pictured: Bill and Augusta Schroeder. Photo credit: Karen Hume

CMBS Update

Looking back over the last quarter at the Centre for MB Studies, there are four items of note: an update on a book-editing project, the addition of a new part-time staff member, the acquisition of several new books, and the annual volunteer appreciation dinner.

The English translation of the last section of P.M. Friesen's Mennonite History book is now in the process of being published. 1978 marked the publication of the English translation of the first and larger portion of Friesen's work, *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruederschaft in Russland (1789–1910) im Rahmen der mennonitischen Gesamtgeschichte* (Halbstadt: Raduga, 1911). While the first portion of Friesen's book deals with Mennonites in Russia, the last 150 pages, the section dealing with North America, has not been translated and published. In this final section, Friesen quotes excerpts from letters and documents that he received in Russia from his many correspondents in America. While he never traveled to America (he died in 1914), his interaction with his American correspondents provides a unique window into how the Russian Mennonites viewed the fledgling Russian-American Mennonite faith communities, schools (e.g., Bethel College, Tabor College), mission efforts in India, etc. Both the CMBS in Hillsboro and the CMBS in Winnipeg are collaborating in order to bring this last

section of Friesen's Mennonite history into print for an English-speaking readership. Translator, Jake Balzer of Calgary and editor, Elfrieda Schroeder of Winnipeg, have completed their work and the project is now at the stage of making the translation ready for printing. We anticipate a 2012 publication.

In October, CMBS hired Yvonne Snider-Nighswander to work as part-time archival assistant. Yvonne comes to the Centre with experience working on several archival projects at the City of Winnipeg Archives, Mennonite Heritage Centre, and Hudson's Bay Company Archives. Readers of the *Mennonite Historian* may remember her work on the Heidi Koop fonds (see Dec. 2010 issue, p. 4). Yvonne also has global archival experience. While working with Mennonite Church Canada Witness (2006–2009), she was involved at the Evangelical Seminary of Southern Africa in Pieteraritzburg, South Africa, helping the school start an archive with collection procedures, finding indexes, and computer tracking systems. Her friendly, warm, and efficient disposition is a great asset to CMBS. The backlog of donations and accessions that needed description and documentation is already getting smaller, thanks to her quick work!

Five recently published books were added to the J.A. Toews library at CMBS (see Book Notes this issue, p. 7).

On November 15, 2011, CMBS paused to give recognition to the volunteers who regularly come to help at the archives. Eight volunteers were recognized: Kathie Ewert, Susan Huebert, Ed Lenzmann, John Martens, Bill and Augusta Schroeder, Clara Toews, and Lois Wedel. Archivist, Conrad Stoesz, estimates that these volunteers contribute about 1,200 hours during the year, doing things like filing, collating, indexing, tabulating, editing, writing, stuffing envelopes, and more. It is clear that the work of CMBS is greatly aided by these gifted and regular volunteers. A tasty meal of *verenki* and farmer sausage, a short program of stories, a game of Mennonite history trivia, and the presentation of recognition gifts, all made for a memorable evening. Of special note, Executive Director, Willy Reimer, came to offer words of greeting and encouragement from the Canadian Conference of MB Churches.

Jon Isaak



Historian, minister, teacher, and author, Peter M. Friesen (b. 1849), at his writing desk. The original German edition of his *Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia* was published in 1911.



Yvonne Snider-Nighswander, new Archival Assistant.

Hundred Years Ago

(cont'd from p. 1)

The first group came in 1911 and began producing cotton. However, they felt isolated, and so pursued contacts with their kin in the Mid-west states, and moved there. My hunch is that the group did not reach the size that they felt like a viable community. Mennonites are more community oriented than individualistic, especially in 1911, after the traumas of their experience in the Terek Colony. They sought the routine and support base of a community of co-religionists rather than success as individual cotton producers. So as soon as the first group started to move on, it was more difficult to attract others. Also, it was difficult for the American sponsors to raise sufficient funds and overcome all the logistics of bringing new immigrants to the USA.

3. Economic hardships in Russia

There were continuing reports of economic hardships in the colonies of Russia. They ranged from Orenburg and Terek to the eastern Siberian colonies around Omsk. There were reports of difficulties such as crop failures, disease, loss of livestock, and lack of support from the mother colonies. There were pleas for assistance from individual families and from colony leaders. Responses came for family units and for the colonies generally. The MR became a collecting agency for these relief funds and a forwarding agency. This effort became a paradigm for the coming decade when the Mennonite Central Committee came into being.

4. Missions

There was a regular Missions page. Here reports were carried about the mission work in China, India, and Turkey, mostly. There were also reports of missionaries, predominantly Nellie and Heinrich Bartel, 1873-1965, in reporting to the Mennonite churches in North America. The mission reports contained detailed accounts of accomplishments and problems. There were also detailed financial reports of monies collected for various missions' projects. Concerning China, there were also reports of the affects of the revolution, 1911-1912, which resulted in the overthrow of the last Chinese dynasty, the Qing dynasty, 1644-1912, had on their mission efforts.

5. Swiss Mennonite contributors

There still were occasional entries from the Swiss Mennonites of the older generation who still were comfortable in reading and writing in the German language. These were the Mennonites who came from western Europe beginning in the 17th and 18th centuries and settled first in eastern United States, which it later became. Most of these Mennonites had made the transition to the English language by the end of the 19th century. They added a flavour and content which would have seemed different to the majority of Russian Mennonite readers.

6. Anabaptist 16th century history

A major feature of MR was to carry lengthy works of fiction. Each week a page was dedicated to this feature. In 1911 another feature was added. In each issue, for about half of the year, John Horsch, 1867-1941, contributed the history of the Anabaptists in the 16th century. The editor informed his readers that since Horsch was referring to many sources which could not be easily accessed, and the content was not widely known, it would be published in MR to make it available to as wide a readership as possible. It would inform the readers of their history, which likely many of them were unaware.

These were some of the main subject areas of the MR in 1911.

There were about the same number of references to deaths, about 750, fewer birth notices, about 50, slightly more local reports, about 1900, along with many world news items, wedding reports, and community news from the locales of interest to the readers.

The editing may have been a little weak in 1911, but MR continued to be an effective tool for communication for Russian Mennonites.

Indexer Bert Friesen lives in Winnipeg.

Historic document received

by Abe Dueck

The Mennonite Heritage Centre recently received an original copy of an important document relating to a series of significant negotiations of the Mennonite churches with the Russian/Ukrainian governments from about 1910 to 1918. The document is entitled, "*Project zu einer Gemeindeverfassung fuer die Evangelischen Mennonitengemeinden in der Ukraina*", dated 11 November, 1918.

The developments that led to the creation of this document are detailed in my article entitled, "Mennonites, the Russian State and the Crisis of Brethren and Old Church Relations in Russia, 1910-1918" (*Mennonite Quarterly Review* LXIX, 4 [Oct. 1995]: 453-485). The problem that confronted the Mennonites in a new way during that era was the potential loss of the special privileges which they had enjoyed for more than a century. The Russian government, in concert with the Orthodox Church, was increasingly concerned about the emergence and growth of various sects and the potential threat that this posed for the unity of the state. Mennonite Brethren in particular were also under increasing suspicion, partly because of their evangelistic activity among Russian peasants and other orthodox believers. Mennonite Brethren had also created a very divisive situation in the Mennonite community. The so-called *Kirchliche*, the main Mennonite body, often regarded Mennonite Brethren as Baptists.

The Russian government tried to deal with the religious situation and one of the rumors was that Mennonites would all be subsumed under the classification of a "sect" rather than as "Christians of the Protestant Confession" like Lutherans and other Protestant bodies. The Mennonites therefore tried to counter this by seeking to place the entire Mennonite community under a constitution which would be recognized by the government as distinct from a sect and with continuing special privileges.

The process of the negotiations was long and complex, as is outlined in my article. However, the article concluded with references to the Landeskron conference (Dec. 3-4, 1918) where the significantly revised "Project" was discussed and referred to three individuals for translation and submission to the authorities in Kiev. The document that was discussed and revised at that conference was not available at the time that my article was submitted, but a copy surfaced later and an original copy is now at the MHC.

The November 1918 document is radically changed from the earlier versions. It is also important to note that the latest revisions were prepared for the Ukrainian government, which experienced a short period of independence before it became a Soviet Republic.

New Otto Klassen documentary premieres

by Jon Isaak

On Sunday, October 16, 2011, the *Mennonite Heritage Centre* and the *Centre for MB Studies* sponsored a second Otto Klassen documentary film presentation. The first such event was held on October 1, 2010, where Klassen's documentary, *Burden of the Soviet Star*, was shown along with several others (see *MH*, Vol. 36, No. 4). This year's showing featured the premiere showing of Klassen *Escape via Moscow 1929* (35 min) and *The Women's Burden under Stalin* (10 min), both of which are now available combined on one DVD.

Some 180 people turned up for the event hosted by the River East MB Church (755 McLeod Ave., Winnipeg). The large sanctuary and good video and sound capabilities made for an ideal setting. Dr. Peter Letkemann situated both documentaries by briefly reviewing the social and political context within which these events in the new Soviet Republic transpired. Between the two video presentations, the viewers paused to sing *Wehrlos und Verlassen*, a moving hymn easily remembered by most of those gathered. Many had a personal connection to the stories that unfolded via film—parents, siblings, friends, loved ones—some survived, many perished, all deeply shaped by the struggle.

Letkemann spoke about the significance of print journalism and the rapid dissemination of reports, detailing the large numbers of farmers (some 13,000) who gathered in Moscow in 1929, all trying to flee the forced farm collectivization. Foreign correspondents in Moscow at the time brought the news, embarrassing as it was to the young Soviet socialist empire, to the world.

Reports of Soviet citizens wanting to emigrate, was not welcomed by the Soviet authorities; they wanted rather to celebrate the gains of the recent socialist Revolution: namely, the destruction of the wealthy landowner class and the empowerment of the ordinary people. The collectivization of farms was a key part of the soviet strategy getting rid of the "kulaks," i.e., the wealthy farmers on large estates and also the successful peasant farmers on small properties. Letkemann narrated the political "damage control" orchestrated by the Soviets—the

border was closed, travel documents denied, and the remaining 8,000 were turned back and forced into exile in labour camps deep into the north and east.

The 5,000 who did manage to get travel documents were only able to do so because the German President Paul von Hindenburg agreed to do something that no other country was willing to do initially, take Soviet refugees. Because these Soviet farmers had maintained German language and culture while establishing their successful Mennonite farming operations in the south of Russia, the German government decided to house and care for the refugees in Germany, while they negotiated eventual resettlement in Paraguay, Brazil, and elsewhere.

In the Soviet effort to make a classless society, kulak families were severely impacted, as their men were arrested, interrogated, killed or exiled to labour camps. Many families were left without husbands, fathers, and sons. In the vacuum, women were forced to band together to raise families, work the collective farms, lead the worship services, and wait for news—had anyone seen their husband? Was he still alive? The burden of it all was very heavy: a burden the women had no choice but to carry.

Klassen uses a series of photos and film footage from the German Bundesarchiv to accompany the film text written by Klassen himself and narrated by his daughter, Charlotte DeFehr. As Letkemann noted, what would take him several hours to unpack in a scholarly lecture, a Klassen documentary is able to do in 30 or 45 minutes. Very few of Klassen's documentaries run for longer

than 45 minutes! Part of the genius of Klassen's recipe for success is the remarkable way that he is able to weave together audio text and images. With great economy of words and stunning imagery, Klassen is able to tell the story of Mennonite life in a genuine and credible way. The haunting images of people trying to hold together family, faith, and farm under the incredible strains of an economic experiment called Soviet socialism is unforgettable.

During the last 30 years, Klassen has produced over 50 documentary films, telling the story of the Mennonite people of Russia, Paraguay, Mexico, and Manitoba. Each film documents the story of ordinary people, living ordinary lives, achieving the extraordinary, under the most adverse of conditions. At a special tribute to Klassen on his 80th birthday, Peter Letkemann wrote: "Otto's films are not made for commercial use on television or in theatres—they are intended to be shown in churches, schools, and community halls. His goal has never been to make money—in fact, he has spent thousands of dollars, of his own money, to finance these films. Instead, his goal has been to tell the Mennonite story for succeeding generations" (*MH*, Vol. 33, no. 1).

This latest title adds to the growing list of titles (now 13!) available through the *Text to Terabyte* project, a joint venture of the *Mennonite Heritage Centre* and the *Centre for MB Studies*. The project is designed to raise funds for the archival programs at both Centres. For a minimum donation of \$30, a donor may obtain one of the 13 DVDs. For more information contact either Centre.

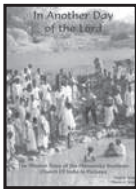


This photo comes from the collection of Maria Dyck who trained as a nurse in Russia. It is believed that this photo is a group of nurses in training. Maria immigrated to Canada in Nov 1925 and in Dec 1925 married Jacob A. Peters. Can you help identify the people in the photo? Contact: Conrad Stoesz (cstoesz@mbconf.ca)

Book Notes

By Jon Isaak

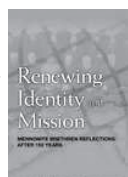
Paul D. Wiebe and David A. Wiebe, in their book, *In Another Day of the Lord: the Mission Days of the Mennonite Brethren Church of India in Pictures* (Winnipeg: Kindred, 2010), compile and annotate a photo book documenting the missionary work in India between 1899 and the mid-1970s. Paul D. Wiebe, in *Heirs and Joint Heirs: Mission to Church among the Mennonite Brethren of Andhra Pradesh* (Winnipeg: Kindred, 2010), writes as a sociologist assessing the challenges and opportunities of the MB church in India.



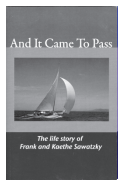
Heinz Dieter Giesbrecht, in *Mennonitische Diakonie am Beispiel Paraguays: Eine diakonie-theologische Untersuchung* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2011), explores several diaconal ministries associated with Paraguayan Mennonite churches, noting their evolution from church-based charities to increasing integration into Paraguayan society.



Abe J. Dueck, Bruce L. Guenther, and Doug Heidebrecht, eds., in *Renewing Identity and Mission: Mennonite Brethren Reflections after 150 Years* (Winnipeg: Kindred, 2011), make available seventeen of the thirty presentations made during the consultation (July 12–14, 2010 at Trinity Western University, Langley, BC), marking the 150th anniversary of the MB church.



Frank Sawatzky, in *And It Came To Pass: the life story of Frank and Kaethe Sawatzky* (Winnipeg, 2011), tells his story of flight from Russia, life in a German refugee camp, and immigration to Canada. Frank's book is a good example of the growing number of self-published "life stories" written primarily for the author's children and grandchildren. These books are highly-valued additions to the CMBS collection, because they document the lives of Mennonites in Canada. A workshop on how to write such "life stories" is planned for spring 2012 (see notice on p. 8 in this edition of MH and consider attending).



Is this the year to write your family story?
Be sure to register early for a new course entitled,
Creating Living Legacies.
The "who, what, why, when, where, and how" of writing life stories with meaning, using Transformative Writing.

Facilitated by Joanne Klassen and Eleanor Chornoboy,
of Heartspace Writing School (www.write-away.net).

March 12 & 19, 2012 (7:00 – 9:30 p.m.)

1310 Taylor Ave. (March 12)

600 Shaftesbury Blvd. (March 19)

Cost: \$50 (includes both evenings and all materials).

Limited to 15 participants.

Sponsored jointly by the **Mennonite Heritage Centre** and the **Centre for MB Studies.**

To register, call one of the Centres at either 888-6781 or 669-6575.

Payment can be made by cheque or credit card.

Registration deadline: February 15, 2012.

More Book Notes

by Alf Redekopp and H.Peters-Fransen

Arlette Kouwenhoven's *De-Fehrs: Kroniek van een Nederlandse Mennonieten-familie* (Amsterdam/Antwerpen: Uitgeverij Atlas, 2011) written in Dutch by one who has studied Anthropology and written about the Madagascar and the German Dutch Physician Philipp Franz von Siebold, traces the Fehr / DeFehr family from its origins in the Netherlands, to Prussia, to Ukraine, to Canada, to Mexico. Their history leads the reader on a journey starting in the 16th century. The journey goes from Amsterdam merchants, to heretics and martyrs, to farmers, pioneers and authoritarian leaders and to drug merchants and alcohol addicts, but mostly on a continuous journey toward freedom. The book is expected to be published in English sometime in 2012.



Gerhard Ens' *Dee easchte Wienachten enn Kanada: enn aundre Jeschijchten* [The First Christmas in Canada and other stories] (Edmonton : RTP Archive Press, 2011) edited by Gerhard J. Ens & Erica Ens contains Low German stories originally written for and broadcast over Radio CFAM in Manitoba in a series of weekly programs produced between 1972 and 2003. The author, teacher, editor and broadcaster, Gerhard Ens (1922–2011) migrated to Canada from the Soviet Union in 1923.



Mennonites in The Netherlands and Russia

by Esther Bean (Guy Mills, PA: Faith Builders Resource Group, 2011) is a literature-based history curriculum for grades 1-4, designed for the Christian school or home school market. This book follows the Mennonites in their journey from the Netherlands to Prussia, Ukraine, and eventually North and South America.



Dennis Stoesz' *A History of the Chortitzer Mennonite Church of Manitoba 1874-1914* (Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2011) is his 1987 M.A. thesis. He chronicles the larger founding group of the East Reserve in Manitoba, the bulk of the Russian Bergthaler colony, in the move from an ethnic identity to a religious identity. As some of their numbers moved to the West Reserve, this group's distinctiveness became identified by the village name of their Bishop Gerhard Wiebe of Chortitz.

Their theological boundaries became more definitive as, for example, they identified with the more conservative Sommerfelder of the West Reserve, while rejecting the more evangelical/liberal direction of the Bergthaler of the West Reserve. The group resisted a move toward public schools. Their sense of mutual aid, first expressed through their organization called the *Waisenamt*, did expand beyond their own boundaries to the needy in other groups. They did come to accept municipal government, and accepted some limited aspect of evangelical preaching, so there were groups more conservative than they were.