

# Mennonite Historian

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



For long-time Native Ministries worker Henry Neufeld, summer travel in northern Manitoba in the 1960s was by boat and winter travel was by snowmobile. Henry (pictured above) sits on a snowmobile made by Ingham Brothers of Lanigan, Saskatchewan, one of the first in the north. According to Henry: “It was kind of a homemade affair in two parts. The front part made up the seat and the steering, while the back was a metal cleat track on the bottom side of a frame and the motor on the top side. These two were connected by hinges on the runners. I christened it with the name ‘Sputnik,’ as that was a great name of the time. I never got ‘Sputnik’ into orbit as the Russians did, but it often got me into orbit until I got many of the mechanical bugs out of it.” See story on page 2. Photo credit for all four images in the story: Henry Neufeld.

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## “Never a Teacher”: Henry Neufeld and His “Indian Day School” Experience

by Henry Neufeld, Winnipeg

“Never a teacher”; this is a statement I claimed for myself ever since I was in public school, growing up in the Leamington district of southern Ontario. What was behind such a categorical statement, I don’t know, but it stayed in the back of my mind for years.

When I finished high school in Ontario, I learned of an opening to attend Canadian Mennonite Bible College (CMBC) in Winnipeg and so I enrolled. These were three very significant years for me, marked by study and intimate associations with students from across Canada. The never-a-teacher assertion still played a prominent role in my mind through college, even though I openly claimed I was ready to do whatever the Lord wanted me to do.

During my three years at CMBC (1949–1952), I became very interested in a female student who was preparing to take teacher training and go teach in northern Manitoba. Her brother was already teaching up north and came home with some very exciting stories of adventure. When our relationship

developed to the point where we were not willing to go our separate ways, I relented and finally said: “Why not a teacher?”

At one point, I had even checked with one of my CMBC teachers, asking him what he thought of my idea to become a permit teacher. His comment was: “That is not a position I would advise for you.” I listened to his comments, but love drove me to marry Elna Friesen of Homewood, Manitoba, anyway and go ahead with our teaching plans.

Even before graduation in June 1952, Elna and I signed a contract to teach in a two-room school at Moose Lake, Manitoba, some 128 kilometers east of The Pas. Because she was a certified teacher, I was granted a teaching permit. I chose the lower three grades, because I saw there were a large number of teenage girls in the upper grades. I did not know how to handle them. Elna taught the upper grades in the second room.

The Moose Lake school was part of a provincial school division, so all the needed teaching supplies were provided. However, electricity had not yet been connected to the community, so there were no electronic devices. We each had 40 names on our class registers, but all the students were not always present. In fact, we were happy when some families would go out trapping with their children, because we did not have enough desks to seat them all at the same time.

For curriculum, we followed the direction of the School Inspector in all areas except language. He wanted us to force the children to speak only English, but we respected to local Cree language. While we encouraged the students to become as fluent as possible in English, we did not discourage the students from also speaking Cree. The Inspector was not happy with us.

Life with the school children and in the community was outstanding; we enjoyed every bit of it. However, there were times when we had to take our family pictures off the shelf, as it sometimes became too difficult to look at them during times of real loneliness. During our second year at Moose Lake, Elna became pregnant. The prospect of having to board a strange teacher the following year in our small residence

while Elna stayed home with our soon-to-be-born child concerned us.

Consequently, we looked for another teaching position, but this time in a one-room, one-teacher school. We found a new teaching assignment for me at Little Grand Rapids, a community located 281 air kilometers north east of Winnipeg and 16 kilometers west of the Manitoba-Ontario boarder.

The treaty in that area between the federal government and the indigenous peoples had been signed in 1876 and included provisions for schools in each community that wanted one. Apparently, the first school at Little Grand Rapids was established in 1906. When we arrived there in the fall of 1954, the day school was run by the United Church. Due to the arrangement with the United Church, I would not only teach in the school, but would also conduct Sunday and midweek church services. We were very happy with that arrangement.

At the Little Grand Rapids school there were fewer students and only five grades, if I remember correctly. Back at Moose Lake, we had learned to enjoy the Cree language; but here the language was Ojibwe. At first, this gave us some concern; but we soon settled into learning Ojibwe words besides

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This is a photo of Elna and Henry Neufeld standing in front of the Moose Lake school in 1952.

(cont'd on p. 4)

# Genealogy and Family History

## Common Misconceptions and Errors in Mennonite Genealogy: Part Two

by Glenn H. Penner <gpenner@uoguelph.ca>

Over the past 40 years, I have come across several misconceptions and errors commonly found in Mennonite genealogical research. Many of these are due to misinformation passed down over the years and now taken as fact. Many are due to speculation by genealogists without documented, or in some cases logical, bases. (For the first six misconceptions, see Part One in the December 2017 issue of the *Mennonite Historian*.)

7. *The word von in a surname means descent from nobility.* This misconception is based on the old German practice of using “von” to designate nobility. It does not apply to Mennonite surnames. The number of traditional Mennonite surnames, excluding exceptionally rare names, that have at one time used “von” is small: von Riesen, von Bergen, von Dyck, von Kampen, and von Niessen. These are cases where the Dutch word “van” has at some point been Germanized to von. Van simply means “from” in Dutch. Van Riesen and van Niessen are based on specific locations, while Dyck means dike. Bergen means mountain or hill and Kampen refers to small settlements along rivers, which were often called *Kampen*.

A look at the 1776 census of Mennonites in West Prussia<sup>1</sup> shows four von Bergens, five van Bergens and six Bergens; three von Dycks (all from the same family in Danzig), and 112 Dycks; eight von Riesens, five van Riesens, two Riesens, and 52 Friesens; one von Niessen and five Niessens; and one van Kampen. By the 1800s, most of these families dropped the van or von.

In the past century, a few individuals or families have started using the prefix von. In some cases, these people are trying to reclaim some old nonexistent noble ancestry by doing so. There are families of German ancestry who have familiar surnames with a von prefix, such as von Thiessen and von Unruh, but these families

were never Mennonite and there is no evidence that they are in any way related to the Mennonite families with a similar name (see point 10).

8. *Traditionally, Mennonites always lived in their own villages.* This misconception applies to Mennonites who lived in Prussia and is based on the fact that nearly all the Mennonites who lived in imperial Russia lived in their own villages, which were usually within Mennonite administered colonies. This situation continued in Canada for a few generations and continues to be the case in many Mexican and South American Mennonite communities. This, however, was not the case during the 400 years that Mennonites lived in what was known as Prussia.

After the first partition of Poland in 1772, nearly all of these Mennonites lived in the province of West Prussia. Most of the hundreds of villages in West Prussia had no Mennonites. However, the 200 villages with Mennonites can be broadly divided in two groups: those with a few Mennonite families and those (a few dozen) that were predominantly Mennonite.<sup>2</sup>

During the period for which we have reasonably complete records, it was rare for a West Prussian village to be over 90% Mennonite (unlike many of the Mennonite villages in imperial Russia and early Canada). The 1772 census of West Prussia provides a snapshot of the situation when the Prussians took over.<sup>3</sup> After three big waves of emigration to Russia, the Mennonite populations in these villages were much lower, as shown by a census of 1820.<sup>4</sup> For example, the “Mennonite” village of Heubuden went from having 85% of its households identified as Mennonite in 1772 to 66% in 1820.

9. *Historical documents like church registers and census lists tell us the spellings of surnames.* This misconception frequently leads to arguments and confusion. The arguments are the result of a person seeing their ancestor in a church register or census and then adamantly claiming the recorded name as the true spelling of the surname. The confusion comes when someone finds the same ancestor in another list with a different spelling of the surname. The bottom line is that one needs to look for original

signatures in order to determine how an ancestor spelled their name. This will be the topic of a future article.

10. *A Major Misconception regarding “Mennonite” Surnames.* One of the most frustrating aspects of interacting with Mennonite genealogists is the propensity of some to equate a traditional Mennonite surname with the same, or similar, surname found in non-Mennonite records or found among people who have no Mennonite background whatsoever.

My first experience of this was in the sixth grade when we were told about one of the first French families to settle in Quebec in the 1600s—the Huberts. The girl who lived two doors down from our family was convinced that, as a Hiebert (Huebert), she was descended from these people. It is quite understandable that a naïve 12-year-old might have such a misconception. However, I’ve heard and read even more absurd connections made by grown, supposedly educated, adults!

One driving force behind Mennonite genealogists’ attempts to connect a non-Mennonite with a “Mennonite” surname is the need to be related in some way to a historical figure or “famous” person;<sup>5</sup> and there is certainly no shortage of such persons with Mennonite sounding surnames. Another is the need some have to trace one’s family history as far back as possible, irrespective of the unrealistic connections that have to be made in the process.

None of the traditional “Mennonite” surnames are uniquely Mennonite. Take the Penner surname for example. The majority of Penners in North America are likely of Mennonite descent, but by no means all. There are three small but significant other groups of Penners: 1) Jewish, 2) German, and 3) English. There is no evidence that these three Penner groups are in any way related to the Mennonite Penners.

I think that the bottom line here is that if Mennonite genealogists want any kind of credibility, we need to steer away from making these speculative, unprovable, connections to people who were never Mennonites and never had any Mennonite ancestors, based simply on the observation that they happen to have the same surname.

I would be interested in hearing from those who have encountered similar misconceptions regarding Mennonite genealogy or history.

(cont’d on p. 9)



**This is a photo of the students in Henry's first classroom in Pauingassi in 1956.**

teaching in English. The cultural assimilation here was considerably less, as Little Grand Rapids was more isolated than Moose Lake.

As it had been in my past two years of teaching, I again got my knuckles wrapped for using a bilingual approach. Being a school under the federal government's Department of Indian Affairs, all the supplies—like text books and notebooks—were supplied. Here too, there was no hydro electricity in Little Grand Rapids, so there was nothing by the way of electronic equipment. Life at the school and in community was very enjoyable for us; we felt fully accepted by the community people.

Even before we went to Little Grand Rapids, we had heard of an outlying community just 16 kilometers north of Little Grand Rapids, called Pauingassi, that had never had a school for classroom-type education. Though they had asked for a school long before we came into the area, one had not been built. Their children did not attend school at Little Grand due to the long distance and to the two sets of rapids between the two settlements.

Besides teaching and ministering, I was also asked to tag furs for the Hudson's Bay Company. Ontario trappers could not sell their furs unless they were tagged. One winter day, Waanacens from Pauingassi came to get his furs tagged. He, and the other elders, had been observing how we operated the school and that we were beginning to learn the Ojibwe language. Though they had tried in

the past to request a school, there had been no response from Indian Affairs. Because of what we were doing in the Little Grand Rapids community, they felt that we might be able to do something for them.

Thus, Waanacens came up with the following request: "Our way of life in the past has been very adequate for us; we did not need English nor the outside world. However, this world is now crowding in on us and for tomorrow our children will need the English language. Come and set up your tent with us, teach our children English, and have services with us." With this three-point invitation and a distinct nudging from the Lord, it was impossible to refuse. As a result, I resigned my position in the spring of 1955 and set wheels into motion to move our family to Pauingassi in the fall.

Because the 129 inhabitants of Pauingassi were registered under treaty, I decided to contact Indian Affairs and request assistance. They knew me from teaching at Little Grand Rapids, so I did not go there as a stranger—but the reception was not favourable. In the first place, the Inspector was not pleased with me because I had resigned at Little Grand Rapids school. Further, they were very adamant that they had a 10-year policy in place and told us "to keep our fingers out of there." When they realized that I was beginning to learn Ojibwe, they very clearly said: "You are crazy to learn Ojibwe, no Indian will every respect you if you learn their language."

I left the India Affairs office without

a penny of assistance, but not the least bit discouraged. Our invitation had come from two different sources, which was all we needed. We moved into Pauingassi in October 1955. The southern Manitoba churches connected with Mennonite Pioneer Mission (as it was called at the time) gave us monthly support as well as a saw mill to construct the necessary buildings. Together with the help of local men, the building project proceeded.

After we had completed the buildings for the school, our team offered to help the townsfolk improve their own dwellings. We noticed that their homes were situated in family clusters all around Fishing Lake. So, we requested that when they built a new house, they build it on the same shoreline as the school to facilitate the children getting to and from school without having to cross the water. This developed very favourably.

Because I had agreed to make all the desks and benches from the lumber we sawed at the mill, I had set aside the fall weeks for the project. I was aiming to start school right after Christmas. Many of the townsfolk had already moved out to the trapline for the winter trapping season. However, the children that were around in town kept bugging me that they wanted to start school as soon as possible. As a result, I pushed myself and completed enough of the needed furniture to start two weeks before Christmas.

Since the community had never had a school, they were not used to sitting in classroom from 9:00 AM to 4:00 PM. To accommodate this condition, I conducted school during the afternoons only. This gave the children and their families a chance to get used to the rhythm of school life and it gave me some breathing space to get many other projects done.

Not having experienced school life before, all students, regardless of age (ages 7 to 16), started at the same place and I let each advance through grade levels at their own pace. Mennonite Pioneer Mission gave us the basic educational supplies and we immediately started with a bilingual approach that we had used in Moose Lake and Little Grand Rapids. For example, in a reading lesson, if I knew the equivalent word in Ojibwe, I would



In 1961, after much deliberation and prayer, the Mennonite Pioneer Mission secured a “bush plane” for the native ministries in northern Manitoba. Henry (pictured above) stands next to the CF-KOV airplane in 1962, a Piper J-3 (two-seater), painted bright red and white. Having already completed flying lessons in 1960, Henry was soon flying and taking care of ministry assignments in a fraction of the time. According to Henry: “We not only found the plane to be a great blessing, but also found it completely revolutionized our thinking in what used to be isolated Pauingassi. Travelling time on a trip to Little Grand Rapids for Sunday services, getting the mail, or visiting, was cut down from 2 ½ hours to 25 minutes. Though I did not have the authority to do charter work, I very often took someone with me, or brought back a load of groceries for the local people. Several times when sick cases came up, I was able to fly the patient to the Nursing Station at Little Grand Rapids or get the needed medicines. Visiting families out on their traplines was something that we had often dreamt of, and now it was a great joy to do just that.”

give them both words. Math was by far the easiest subject to teach bilingually because they were always dealing with the number of rabbits or squirrels that they snared.

When the families returned from their trapping areas in the spring that meant starting over with the new students, while the others moved ahead to another grade.

After Indian Affairs observed for a couple of years what we were doing, they decided to come on board and assist us. With their help, we were able to change to full days of school, which by this time made sense. They also paid the Mennonite Pioneer Mission office \$12.00 a month for every child in attendance as well as covered the rent for the building and all the supplies that were needed in school.

Because of the heavy workload in teaching, community involvement, medical dispensing, and church work, etc., I discontinued my teaching responsibilities in 1960, in order to focus on other aspects of the mission. A teacher was then appointed to carry on the classroom work, while she boarded in our home. By 1963, we were able to

build a teachers’ residence and Indian Affairs paid the first salary directly to the teacher.

And so, my never-a-teacher statement was proven wrong, at least in part, as I did serve seven years as a classroom teacher. It was a good experience and taught me valuable lessons along the way.

*Henry (b. 1929) and Elna (Friesen) Neufeld (1930–2011) served with Mennonite Pioneer Mission (later called Native Ministries) in northern Manitoba at Pauingassi from 1955 to 1970. Henry then became an itinerant minister to Pauingassi, Little Grand Rapids, Bloodvein, Hollow Water, Manigotagan, and Cross Lake until 2013 when the Native Ministries department of Mennonite Church Canada was discontinued. He still goes to Pauingassi to visit and encourage friends once or twice a year; but now travels with his son. He also serves as chaplain at Winnipeg’s South East Care Home (Indigenous) and leads a monthly woodworking class at the Indian Metis Friendship Center.*

## KGB Archives Opened in Ukraine

by Peter Leikemann <lbpeter@shaw.ca>

Mennonite communities in Winnipeg and southern Manitoba were abuzz in late February 2018, thanks to media reports about the opening of the former KGB Archives in Ukraine and what this might mean for a deeper understanding of the fate of thousands of Mennonite victims of the Stalinist terror and repression of the 1920s and 1930s in the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> Prior to this, only a handful of Mennonite scholars were aware of the declassification of archival records in Ukraine that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Since the mid-1990s, when I took over a project begun many years earlier by Dr. George K. Epp, I have been collecting the names and information on the fate of Mennonite men and women arrested and exiled or executed during the 1920s and 1930s in the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> The list of victims now stands at well over 23,000 names. The process has been helped immensely through the work of scholars affiliated with the human rights organization MEMORIAL, founded in 1989 in Moscow.<sup>3</sup> Through access to state archives across the Russian Federation, they have been able to publish over 100 volumes of *Kniga Pamyati* (“Books of Memory”). All of the victims listed in these books can also be found in an alphabetical online database of over 2.6 million persons who were unjustly arrested, exiled or executed, and later rehabilitated.<sup>4</sup>

In the newly independent Ukrainian Republic of the 1990s, scholars gained access to archives and began researching victims of Stalinist terror and repression, publishing a series of books entitled *Poverneni Imena* (“Restored Names”). Later, beginning about 2004, Ukrainian scholars began producing a new series of volumes entitled *Reabilitovani Istorieyu* (“Rehabilitated by History”), all of which (114 volumes to date) can be found online. Most of the names of Mennonite men (and women) arrested and sentenced in Ukraine can be found in the volumes for the regions of Zaporizhzhia (6 volumes, 2004–2013), Dnepropetrovsk (2 vols., 2008–2009), Mikolaiv (6 vols., 2005–2013), Donetsk (9 vols., 2004–2012), and Kherson (1 vol., 2005).<sup>5</sup>

(cont’d on p. 8)

## Keep on Moving!

by Conrad Stoesz

This spring has been full of activities at the Mennonite Heritage Archives. As a sign of our success, our upper vault is nearing capacity in its current formation. We are pleased that Canadian Mennonite University (CMU) has provided us with a second vault, roughly 1,700 square feet of space. And thanks to a grant from Winnipeg Foundation, the first set of mobile shelving was installed in March, with room to expand. This set of shelving will accommodate just under 500 large boxes. We have also received a new photocopier that greatly enhances our capacity to photocopy, print, and scan. Thank you, CMU!

On May 2, we officially welcomed three new people to the team (see photo below). Selenna Hildebrand Wolfe is taking over the administrative assistant position while Connie Wiebe is on leave. Krista Zerbin is doing her CMU practicum at the archives and gallery and has been a welcomed resource for us. We were successful in obtaining a grant for a summer project this year and we hired Jordon Zimmerly.

As part of Jordon's CMU practicum in early 2016, Jordon combed through the Mennonite Pioneer Mission / Native Ministries files looking for references to day



**Professor Irma Fast Dueck (front, left) visits MHA with class to see 16th-century music book.**

schools. The Mennonite Pioneer Mission (MPM) was invited by the communities of Pauingassi (1955) and Bloodvein (1963) in Northern Manitoba to establish schools in their communities (see lead article, starting on page 2). Initially the mission workers doubled as teachers, but soon the workload proved too much; and so, in 1958, MPM began an association with the federal Department of Indian Affairs to financially support the schools. In 1960, Edna Dalke was hired as the first full-time teacher. In 1970, the on-reserve schools in Bloodvein, operated by the Catholics and Mennonites, amalgamated.

Jordon is now scanning these documents as a response to Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which looked into the residential school experience. The Commission created a document

with 94 "calls to action," some of which pertain to archives. Recommendation 77 calls upon community archives to work collaboratively with the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (a national, digital archive based in Winnipeg that houses records related to residential schools) to "identify and collect copies of all records relevant to the history and legacy of the residential school system, and to provide these to the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR)." While we do not hold residential school materials, the NCTR has expressed interest in day school materials. The MHA is partnering with Mennonite Church Canada's Indigenous and Settler Relations office for this project. The project will also provide copies of the scanned documents to the communities of Pauingassi and Bloodvein where the day schools were located.

On May 3, Conrad attended the annual Red River Heritage Fair in Winnipeg for students in grades 4 to 11 with his display on Canada's conscientious objectors. Conrad reports that he is starting to hear students say, "Oh, we took this in school," which is a very positive sign.

The new partnership with the Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies and CMU has brought more students into the archives. On May 7, CMU professor Irma Fast Dueck brought her Christian worship class to view and discuss our big 16th-century Catholic music book from Spain (see photo above). If you want to learn how the book got to our archive, see the article in the September 2003 issue of the *Mennonite Historian*.



**Three new MHA workers (L-R): Selenna Hildebrand Wolfe, Krista Zerbin, and Jordon Zimmerly.** Photo credit for both images: Conrad Stoesz.

## Translated letters from the *Mennonitische Rundschau*

by Jon Isaak

In 2012, when Harold Jantz first came to the archives to borrow the bound collection of all the 1929 issues of the weekly magazine *Mennonitische Rundschau* (or Mennonite Observer in English), I was quite nervous. Why? It is a fragile and very rare collection. But as I learned more of what he had in mind, it seemed like a good risk to take.

In fact, the Mennonite Brethren Historical Commission was so impressed with his translation project that it awarded him a project grant in 2015 (see news release at: [http://www.mbhhistory.org/news.en.html#dec\\_15\\_2015](http://www.mbhhistory.org/news.en.html#dec_15_2015)).

In this book, aptly called *Flight: Mennonites facing the Soviet empire in 1929/30, from the pages of the Mennonitische Rundschau* (Eden Echoes Publishing, 2018), Harold has rehabilitated voices of suffering and longing from the past. How so? Harold translated and summarized all the German letters published in the *Rundschau* during the years 1929/30.

These letters were submitted and published with the hope that loved ones in North America or in Russia might learn the news of those family members who had emigrated or who had been blocked from emigration by Soviet authorities. The newspaper functioned as a “message board” for Mennonites separated from their loved ones by geographical and political barriers.

Likely allowed through the post by sympathetic Soviet officials, these letters eventually arrived in North America and the recipients turned them over to the *Rundschau* editor, Herman Neufeld, who edited and published the letters out of his office in Winnipeg, Manitoba. While other newspapers carried news from Russia, the *Rundschau* carried the largest amount and was read by the largest number of people on both sides of the Atlantic.

Unfortunately, as often happens, a social group that manages to obtain liberation from oppression turns around and becomes a new oppressor. Such was the case following the Bolshevik revolution and civil war. And so it was that the Mennonite settler communities living in Russia got caught in this massive social

and economic reversal.

The Soviets were passionate in their quest to remake Russia and the Mennonites were simply on the wrong side of Stalin’s grand Five-Year Plan. They were offside for three reasons:

- They professed a Christian faith.
- They practiced private landownership, even though they shared much with one another in communal villages.
- The language of their literature, church life, and cultural preference had remained German in their farming settlements on the Russian steppes—and now they were associated with Russia’s enemy, Germany.

Many felt they now had little choice other than to emigrate from Russia. However, most did not succeed. Thousands of Mennonite settlers assembled in Moscow, beginning in the summer and through the fall of 1929, requesting permission from Soviet authorities to leave. Some 5,600 German settlers—3,885 of whom were Mennonites—managed to secure exit visas through Germany, but more than 8,000 were refused exit papers and were sent back in hastily assembled boxcar trains to their villages or into exile. Many thousands perished.

*Flight* makes a huge contribution for three reasons:



• Harold uses one the best first-hand public sources for this period of terror and loss, the *Mennonitische Rundschau* newspaper.

• Harold puts into English these accounts, which would otherwise be inaccessible, as most North Americans no longer can read German very well.

• Harold has created an extensive Index of names, subjects, and places, so as to make this massive 735-page book usable.

Clearly a labour of love—readers with family ties to this era will be especially appreciative of this book, as will anyone with interests in human rights, political science, sociology, church history, and Russian history.

*Flight* sells for \$60 and is available through the CommonWord resource center on the campus of Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg. More information at: <https://www.commonword.ca/ResourceView/2/19795?readmore=1>



Harold Jantz (standing with Neoma Jantz) addresses a group gathered in Winnipeg for the launch of his book, *Flight*, on Tuesday, April 10, 2018, at the CommonWord resource centre, Canadian Mennonite University. Photo credit: Steve Salmikowski, ChronicCreative.

## KGB Archives Opened

(cont'd from page 5)

In order to make these archival documents accessible not only to scholars but to everyone, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko submitted legislation on 9 April 2015 to the Ukrainian Duma (Parliament): “On Access to the Archives of Repressive Agencies of [the] Totalitarian Communist Regime of 1917–1991.”<sup>6</sup> Under Article 3 of the legislation, there is a lengthy list of the various former Soviet institutions recognized as “Repressive Agencies.” They include, first of all, the “State Security Police” founded in December 1917 as the *Cheka* (All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counterrevolution and Sabotage). The *Cheka* was superseded in 1922 by the GPU (State Political Directorate). After the formation of the USSR (later, in December 1922), the agency was renamed as the OGPU (Joint State Political Directorate). In 1934, the OGPU was then incorporated into the NKVD (People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs). Many organizational changes followed.<sup>7</sup> In 1946, it was reorganized as the MVD (Ministry of State Security) and, finally, in 1954, it became the KGB (Committee for State Security), which lasted until the end of the Soviet Union in December 1991.<sup>8</sup>

The main function of these various agencies was to protect the state security of the USSR through a variety of repressive measures—including the arrest and exile of suspected “enemies of the state” to the labour camps of the GULag, assassinations, executions, and mass deportations of “kulaks” (peasant farmers wealthy enough to own land and hire labour) and various ethnic minorities (including Germans). They were assisted in their repressive measures by the Supreme Court, the People’s courts, a variety of provincial [*okrug*], district [*rayon*], and regional courts, and a host of other agencies whose officials and activities were incompatible with the fundamental human rights of Soviet citizens.

Articles 4, 5, and 6 of the 2015 legislation outlined the basic principles guaranteeing access to archival information: “The state guarantees free access to archival information” and “the state provides digitization of archival information.” In other words, all persons can access materials freely, make their own

заседания тройки Управления НКВД по Воронежской области	
20 января 1938 г.	
СЛУШАЛИ:	ПОСТАНОВИЛИ:
<p>Дело Новохоперского Райотделения НКВД №-24699 по обвинению ПЕТЕРС Петра Давыдовича 1880 г.рожд. урожд. с.Водяное, Запорожского р-на, Днепропетровской обл., прожив. пос.централь Новохоперского р-на, Воронеж. обл., б.кулак, раскулаченного в 1930 г., судимого в 1933 г. за антисоветскую деятельность на 3 г.Сектата. До ареста без определенных занятий.</p> <p>Обвиняется в том, что проводил анти-советскую агитацию порожженческого характера. Высказывал террористические намерения против руководителей ВКП(б). Восхвалял расстрелянных врагов народа. Извращал в контрреволюционном духе постановления правительства о хлебопоставках.</p> <p>Содержится в тюрьме г.Бобров</p> <p>сек. 732. 8/37 г. Секретарь тройки</p>	<p>ПЕТЕРС Петра Давыдовича</p> <p><b>РАСТРЕЛЯТЬ.</b></p> <p>Дело сдать в архив.</p>

Scan of a document (conviction report) in the file of Peter David Peters from Zentral (Novokhopiorsk District), a former Russian estate purchased in 1908 by Peters and about 30 other Mennonite farm families from the Khortitza Region (about 800 kilometers to the southwest) in order to establish their own farms. An English translation of the document is below. Photo credit for all three images in the article: Peter Letkemann.

Excerpt from the minutes of the meeting of the Troika of the NKVD in Voronezh Region, 20 January 1938.	
HEARD	RESOLVED
<p>File No. 24699 of the rayon division of NKVD in Novokhopiorsk regarding PETERS, Peter David, born 1880 in Vodyanoe, Zaporozhe rayon, Dnepropetrovsk Region, living in Zentral, Novokhopiorsk rayon, Voronezh region, former Kulak, dekulakized 1930, sentenced in 1933 to 3 years because of anti-Soviet activity. Sectarian, with no regular occupation prior to his arrest.</p> <p>Accused of anti-Soviet activity; harboured terrorist intentions against the leaders of the Communist Party; praised enemies of the people who had been executed; distorted governmental laws regarding grain requisitions in a counter-revolutionary manner.</p> <p>Is being held in the Bobrov Prison</p> <p>Secretary of the Troika (Signature)</p>	<p>PETERS, Peter David is sentenced to</p> <p><b>DEATH BY SHOOTING</b></p> <p>The file is to be placed in the archives</p>

English translation by Peter Letkemann of Peter David Peters’s conviction report and record of sentence.

digital photographs or scans, or order scans of specific files. The long-term purpose of the legislation is to assist in “restoring the national memory of the Ukrainian people” (Article 6, no. 5).

The legislation was officially published by the *Voice of Ukraine* on 20 May 2015 (no. 87) and, since then, archival materials have been available not only to scholars, but also to all individuals—both in Ukraine and elsewhere in the world—looking for information on the fate of their family and friends.

During the communist regime (1917–1991), the repressive agencies kept detailed records of their activities and stored these records in special “secret”

Security Archives facilities—separate and apart from the State Historical Archives (e.g., in Kiev, Zaporozhe, Dnepropetrovsk, Kherson, Odessa, and other cities). Andrey Kohut, current director of the State Archive of the Security Service of Ukraine in Kiev, stated in October 2017 that there were almost 800,000 case files, of which some 250,000 were stored in Kiev.<sup>9</sup>

The files can range in size from several pages to several volumes, with detailed records of arrest, interrogation, sentencing, and execution or exile. In example no. 1 from the file of Peter David Peters in Zentral (see above), we can read that he was accused of “anti-Soviet activity” and sentenced to death by shooting on 20



January 1938. The execution was carried out on 26 February 1938.<sup>10</sup>

One of the most interesting features is that most files contain photographs of the accused, often taken just days prior to their execution, as was the photo of Franz Harms (see image at right), provided to me by his family from Orenburg.<sup>11</sup>

Several European and North American scholars have already taken advantage of the recent initiatives to make accessible the NKVD/KGB records. They have produced important new studies on previously unknown aspects of the Stalinist terror regime. One of the first in English was published in late 2017 by Prof. Lynne Viola from the University of Toronto. Her book, *Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial*, is a unique study of NKVD perpetrators, “members of the Soviet security police, who themselves had worked as interrogators, jailers and executioners during the darkest days of the terror.” The NKVD “were responsible for countless false arrests, unjust imprisonments under deplorable conditions, the torture of prisoners, and executions.” However, she points out that “they too met the same fate that had claimed their victims.” In the years 1939–1942, several thousand former NKVD officials were arrested, tried for “violations against socialist legality” and executed or exiled to the GULag labour camps.<sup>12</sup>

To date, no Mennonite scholars have travelled to Ukraine and taken advantage of the open KGB files to investigate in greater detail the fate of the thousands of Mennonite victims of Stalinist terror. As far as I know, participants of the Mennonite Heritage Cruise, planned for summer 2018,<sup>13</sup> will be granted access to archives in Zaporizhzhia and Kiev in order to view (and photograph) the files of family members who fell victim to Stalinist terror and repression. These initial Mennonite contacts will hopefully encourage others to write for information or contribute to the Paul Toews Fellowship Fund at the Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies (CTMS) at the University of Winnipeg.<sup>14</sup>

The hope of the CTMS, in cooperation with Canadian Mennonite University and the Mennonite Heritage Archives, is to raise sufficient funds to assemble a team of four or five experienced researchers who can travel to archival centres in Kiev, Zaporizhzhia, and other cities for a period of several weeks to explore the Mennonite story, make digital copies of the relevant



**Photo of Franz Harms taken days before his execution and included with his arrest and conviction file archived with the KGB files.**

files, and publish their findings in scholarly journals. Such a project will go a long way in providing a deeper understanding of the fate of thousands of Mennonite men and women who disappeared during the years of the Stalinist terror and repression in the Soviet Union.

### Endnotes

1. Bill Redekop, “U of W fellowship will help fund research of KGB files,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, 27 February 2018. See: <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/local/u-of-w-fellowship-will-help-fund-research-of-kgb-files-on-mennonites-who-vanished-during-stalins-ukraine-purges-475247193.html>
2. Peter Letkemann, “Mennonites in the Soviet Inferno, 1917–1956,” *Preservings* no. 13 (December 1998), 10–11. See also, Peter Letkemann, “The Fate of Mennonites in the Volga-Ural Region, 1929–1941,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, vol. 26 (2008), 181–200.
3. Peter Letkemann, *A Book of Remembrance, Mennonites in Arkadak and Zentral, 1908–1941* (Winnipeg: Old Oak, 2017), xxvi–xxix.
4. “Victims of political terror in the USSR,” see: <http://www.lists.memo.ru/index.htm>
5. <http://www.reabit.org.ua/>
6. The Ukrainian Text can be found at: <http://zakon3.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/316-19/paran16#n16&p=> and the English text at: <http://www.memory.gov.ua/laws/law-ukraine-access-archives-repressive-agencies-totalitarian-communist-regime-1917-1991>
7. For a brief history of the NKVD, see: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NKVD>
8. William R. Corson and Robvert T. Crowley, *The New KGB: Engine of Soviet Power*, updated edition (New York: William Morrow, 1985).
9. See: <http://argumentua.com/stati/limit-dlya-rasstrel-ov-v-ussr-sostavlyal-26150-chelovek-no-ego-uvelichili-vtroe>. The main archives of Ukraine’s Security Service (SBU) can be contacted at the email [arhivsbu@ssu.gov.ua](mailto:arhivsbu@ssu.gov.ua). See Ihor Vynokurov at: <http://www.ukraine.com/forums/genealogy/16728-kgb-records-declassified-2.html>

10. Letkemann, *A Book of Remembrance*, 303–306.

11. For more photos, see Tomasz Kizny, *La Grande Terreur en URSS 1937–1938* (Lausanne: Les Editions Noir sur Blanc, 2013).

12. Lynne Viola, *Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3, 39. An interesting 30-minute interview with Prof. Viola on 10 June 1917, can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJ13TAf830A>

13. For the Mennonite Heritage Cruise website, see: <http://www.mennoniteheritagecruise.ca/>

14. For the CTMS website, see: <http://www.thectms.org/>

## Errors in Mennonite Genealogy

*cont’d from page 3*

### Endnotes

1. [http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/1776\\_West\\_Prussia\\_Census.pdf](http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/1776_West_Prussia_Census.pdf)
2. [http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/West\\_Prussian\\_Mennonite\\_Villages\\_Alph.htm](http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/West_Prussian_Mennonite_Villages_Alph.htm)
3. <http://www.odessa3.org/collections/land/wprussia/>
4. <http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/1820danz.htm>
5. One example is the bizarre claim that the surname of Gary Doer, former Premier of Manitoba, is somehow derived from the Mennonite family name Doerksen.

## P.W. Enns and a Mennonite Archive Building, 40 Years Ago

*by Conrad Stoesz*

“E<sup>k</sup> mott eascht too Mamma raede” (I must first talk to Mother), Peter W. Enns would say when faced with an important decision. In the mid-1970s, there was one such decision that Peter and Helena were asked to make. Reverend Gerhard Lohrenz— influential Mennonite leader with a vision for establishing a building to house the Mennonite archives—was the one posing the question this time. While the Mennonite archival program had begun in 1933, it had grown and, in 1974, hired its first paid staff person, Lawrence Klippenstein. Lohrenz believed a building for the collection was now needed and approached P.W. Enns to fund the project.

Peter W. Enns (1912–2004) married Helena Buhler (1909–1993) in 1931 and the pair began farming near Winkler, Manitoba. Peter supplemented his farming income by making speciality shoes. After a stint operating a John Deere dealership in the Niverville area, Peter returned to farm in the Winkler area in 1945. Peter’s mind was always whirling with ideas. For example, seeing an opportunity, he bought surplus war planes at a cheap rate and used the parts—like hydraulics—to create hoists that turned a regular truck into a dump



**Mennonite Heritage Archives building in Winnipeg under construction in 1978.** Photo credit: MHA.

truck. He also built a bombardier-type snow vehicle for Manitoba Hydro, which was later used by Dr. Cornelius Wiebe when he needed to make house calls.

In the mid-1950s, Peter bought a faltering plumbing shop in Winkler with his two sons-in-law as partners, Phil Ens and Peter Elias. The partnership was a success and they were able to make the shop profitable. Some winters, Peter and Helena would head south and help with MCC projects in the US. On one trip, he met Harry Martens of the Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. Peter felt it was a divine call when Martens asked him to help build the chapel on campus. While in Elkhart, P.W. was introduced to the recreational vehicle (R.V.) industry; he believed he could do something similar in Winkler.

While Winkler was neither near suppliers or a big market for R.V. products, P.W. had no doubt that this was a good idea and that it would succeed—failure was not a word in his vocabulary. Triple E—playing off the alliteration of the three last names—was incorporated in 1964 and sales soon vindicated P.W.’s vision for an R.V. industry in Winkler. The business quickly expanded and in 1977 had \$1.2 M in assets.

Peter was a business man but also church and conference man—always involved in one way or another. He attended the 1972 annual Conference of Mennonites in Canada gathering in Waterloo, Ontario,

where the idea of an archival building was discussed. Some time between 1972 and 1976, Rev. Lohrenz approached P.W. about funding the project; but unbeknownst to most, the price tag for the Heritage Centre was \$650,000—half of what P.W.’s company was worth!

P.W. took the request seriously and brought on a few minor financial backers. He then consulted with Helena and his partners. Next, he took the extra step of presenting the idea to his congregation. He was not asking for financial help from the congregation, but for the blessing from the Winkler Bergthaler Mennonite Church.

At the 1976 annual session, Peter raised an important question: Would the Conference accept a gift that was earmarked for a project that the Conference has not yet approved? There was a lengthy debate, which carried over to the following year. At the same gathering a year later in May 1977, the resolution passed to accept the money offered by Enns for the building of the Mennonite Heritage Centre. Things moved quickly with a ground-breaking ceremony on August 28, 1977. Sixty people were in attendance. By March 1978, the building was under construction; it was completed by the end of October 1978 (see photo above).

However, Peter wanted to do more than provide the “lion’s share” of the funding; he wanted give more personally and offered to construct the main doors of the building. Enns drew on his creative abilities and

tested them, creating a few prototypes. The result was a wood relief carving on the entrance doors depicting the rays of light from heaven shining on the world with the words from John 1:1 encircling a globe. Today, the art piece has been moved indoors, away from the harsh outdoor elements (see photo at on next page).

At the opening on January 26, 1979, Gerhard Lohrenz emphasized that the Heritage Centre was an archive for all Mennonite people; it was to be a unifying force and a reminder that “together we can be more effective and helpful than

individually.” Lohrenz believed that the Mennonite people suffered from a “feeling of inferiority” and that “we must have more self-confidence, because we have a very worthwhile contribution to make to the society ... and we can do this best when we remain loyal to the best in our heritage. ... We are playing an increasingly greater role in the economic, cultural, and political life of our society. Can we do this and remain loyal to our heritage?... We need an ongoing interpretation of our position and function in this new setting. We expect MHC to help us do just that.”

The construction of the Mennonite Heritage Centre was made possible by Gerhard Lohrenz, P.W. Enns, and the conference body that trusted their leadership. Forty years ago, there was great vision, effort, and resources invested in the archives, something that has become an invaluable resource to the Mennonite community.

Today, the Mennonite Heritage Archives partnership on the campus of Canadian Mennonite University continues to carry forward the original vision of an archive in Winnipeg for the Mennonite community. The pressing question now is: How can we care for digitally-born records and computer files? To carry out the vision in the 21st century, we need a renewed investment in the archives to face the electronic records challenge.

What P.W. knew to be true 40 years ago is still true today—we can do more together than separately.



Hand-carved wooden doors at MHA made by P.W. Enns. Photo credit: Conrad Stoesz.

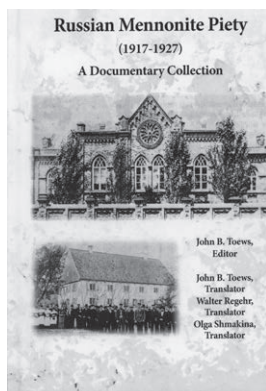
## Book Note

by Jon Isaak

John B. Toews, ed., *Russian Mennonite Piety (1917–1927): A Documentary Collection* (Hillsboro Free Press, 2018), 231 pp.

This is the fourth volume in a series of English translations of German documents that John B. Toews first collected and published as *The Mennonites in Russia, 1917–1930: Selected Documents* (1975). As with the other volumes, the three people that worked on the translations for the fourth volume are Walter Regehr, Olga Shmakina, and John B. Toews.

A large part of *Russian Mennonite Piety* is dedicated to a translation of the meeting minutes from the All-Mennonite



Conferences, held annually from 1917 to 1927. This was a joint-Mennonite conference (Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren) first held in 1883 to preside over virtually all aspects of

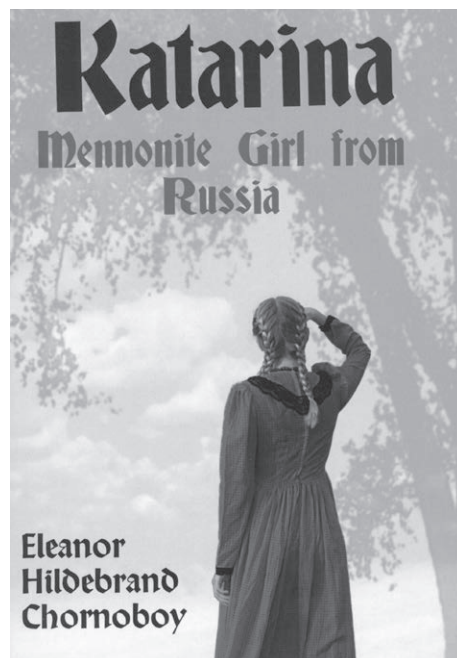
Mennonite life (i.e., piety) in Russia (missions, publications, forestry service, itinerant ministry, benevolent institutions, religious instruction, etc.).

When the tsar was overthrown in 1917, the minutes of the All-Mennonite Conferences show intense organizational

activity aimed at revitalizing all aspects of Mennonite life. Apparently, the vision was to coexist as a Mennonite minority with the many other minorities in Soviet Russia. However, by 1927, it was clear that the Soviets would not allow Mennonites to continue their economic and religious practices.

This book preserves in English the record of a courageous and creative period in Mennonite life.

## Book Reviews



Eleanor Hildebrand Chornoboy, *Katarina: Mennonite Girl from Russia* (2017), 375 pp.

Reviewed by Elfrieda Neufeld Schroeder

Chornoboy's historical novel begins in 1873 in southeastern Ukraine. Fourteen-year-old Katarina Friesen and her family live in the small village of Silberbach, northwest of Mariupol, on the Sea of Azov.

In many ways, life in this small village is ideal for a child like Katarina. Chornoboy does not hesitate to draw attention to the prejudices and unchristian attitudes prevalent among Mennonites at that time. Katarina hears discussions about the unfair distribution of land, which had forced her family and others to move away from their home in the Chortitza Colony and establish another village in a remote area in order to survive. She is upset when she learns about the villagers' attitude toward the local Ukrainians, often treating them as second-rate citizens, as illustrated in the following snippet. "To

marry someone outside the Mennonite faith was unthinkable. ... Justina Peters had been sweet on a Ukrainian boy, but, when he came to visit, her father had bellowed at him like a mad bull: 'Away with you, you dirty swine. Don't you ever set foot on my yard again'" (p. 23).

Most families in Katarina's village had many children, but her family was different because she was an only child. For that reason, Katarina relates more closely to the adults in her family, and it is through their conversations that the reader learns about the history of the Mennonites in Ukraine. This works well for the most part, but at times Katarina does come across as unrealistic and precocious. It seems that the author projects our more progressive thinking onto that time (e.g., Katarina argues with her friends about Ukrainians and Mennonites going to the same school and learning from each other about their various customs and beliefs [pp. 44-46]). I'm not sure this would have been a topic of conversation between young girls, or even older adults at that time. It simply wasn't done.

When her parents decide to emigrate to Canada, Katarina's ideal world falls apart. She misses her grandparents, her friends, and especially a Ukrainian boy (her secret, forbidden love). Tragedy strikes the family and Katarina must deal with grief that is too heavy for a young girl to bear. She is treated unjustly and physically abused by some of her own people. But there are also good people and friends who come to her rescue.

I could not help but draw comparisons between *Katarina* and another recently published historical novel about Ukrainians who came to Canada in the late 1800s (*Kalyna*, by Pam Clark). Their experience is very similar to that of the Mennonites. I have often wished for more material about Mennonites in Ukraine and their emigration to Canada during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Our attention seems to have been diverted to the more dramatic and bloodier time periods of the Bolshevik revolution and the Communist takeover (1917–1922). I was delighted to discover Chornoboy's novel. It helped me gain more insight into Mennonite life at an earlier time both in Ukraine and in Canada.

Chornoboy includes an extensive glossary of *Plautdietsch* (Low German) words at the end of the novel which is

helpful for those readers not familiar with the language.

*Elfrieda was born in Chortitza, Ukraine, just before the German invasion and consequent flight of her family to Poland and Germany. Her family spent five years in the Paraguayan Chaco, before immigrating to Canada in 1952. She and her husband lived many years in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaïre, ex-Belgian Congo), returning to Canada in 1984. They moved from Ontario to Manitoba in 2008. Elfrieda received her PhD in German Language and Literature in 2001. She is a translator, freelance writer, and grandmother of eight. You can read more of her writing in her blog: [ens-intransit.blogspot.ca/](http://ens-intransit.blogspot.ca/)*



Waldemar Janzen, *Reminiscences of My Father Wladimir Janzen: Teacher, Minister, Gulag Survivor, July 26, 1900–May 15, 1957* (2017), 140 pp.

Reviewed by Peter Letkemann

Waldemar Janzen—former Professor of Old Testament and German at Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg—last saw his father Wladimir in 1936 in a Soviet prison in Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine. Young Waldemar was only four years old. He poignantly remembered this last meeting: “I had a few minutes in Papa’s arms. He talked calmly to me, admonished me to be good to Mother and assured me of his love.”

His father had been arrested on 5 December 1935, tried as an “enemy of the state” on a fabricated charge of promoting “counter-revolutionary propaganda,” and sentenced to eight years in a remote GULag labour camp near Karaganda, Kazakhstan.

During the years from 1934 to 1941, well over one-half of all adult Mennonite males in the Soviet Union (even some women) were arrested on similar trumped-up charges and torn from their families. Most were never heard from again. Up to 80% or more, especially those taken in 1937–38, were executed within weeks of their arrest.

Wladimir Janzen (1900–1957) was one of the few who survived his years in the labour camps and was permitted to communicate with his family. Waldemar Janzen referred briefly to this correspondence earlier in his own personal memoir, *Growing Up in Turbulent Times* (Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2007). In this current book, he provides further details on the content and meaning of these postcards and letters.

In the five years from 1936 to 1941, young Waldemar received 13 short letters and two postcards from his father. After the German invasion of the USSR in the summer of 1941, all correspondence ceased until 1948. When Wladimir Janzen was able to resume contact in 1948, his wife and son were already living in Waterloo, Ontario, with the family of Wladimir’s paternal uncle, Rev. Jacob H. Janzen. Over the next two years, they received another 11 postcards and two letters, until Father Wladimir was re-arrested and exiled again.

Fortunately, Wladimir survived his years in exile because he was able to work as a bookkeeper in the camp office. After his release, he returned to Karaganda and was able to resume correspondence early in 1955. Over the next two-and-a-half years he wrote over 40 lengthy letters to his wife and son and received as many in return from Canada. Waldemar Janzen’s summarization of this extensive correspondence makes up the bulk of the book.

He writes: “A...difficult task for Father was that of relating to a son he had last seen as a little boy... [but] to establish a mode of relating was Father’s main concern in this correspondence.” Knowing that all letters were closely monitored by censors, Father did not write about his life in the GULag;

instead he tried to report on “positive” aspects of his life—he had enough food to eat and clothes to wear—and was able to enjoy relations with his sister Ira and her son Walter, as well as with his uncle Paul Friesen (the son of historian P.M. Friesen and a well-known artist in Karaganda).

In September 1955, German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer travelled to Moscow to negotiate the release of the remaining German prisoners of war in the Soviet Union. Included in the negotiations was a provision to allow for family reunification of individuals living in the USSR with spouses or children in the West. As far as I know, none were allowed to reunite with families until at least the early 1960s.

But when Father Wladimir learned of this “possibility,” he began the long and complicated application process. His first application was rejected in March 1957, but in May 1957, he began again. Tragically, this process was cut short on 15 May 1957 when he was hit by a motorcar and killed while crossing the street from the post office to the immigration department in downtown Karaganda.

These deeply moving personal “reminiscences” reveal much of what life was like in the Stalinist era and in the difficult post-war years for countless individuals and families separated by the Iron Curtain. And Prof. Janzen asks whether it is possible to truly understand this life of suffering. For him, “the distant saint [became] more real, more human, and therefore also closer to me.” He was “a man of faith and faithfulness,” robbed of all his aspirations by “the revolution, followed by the violent period of anarchy [civil war] and eventually the brutal Stalinist regime.”

He continues: “Only after seeing the maltreated sufferer can one appreciate the saint in Father, a saint with a cross to bear, rather than a halo. And yet, Father did not become bitter and vengeful. He retained his dignity, his appreciation of art and culture, [and] his concern for the people about him.”

These are characteristics I have noticed among the men and women in many of the *Umsiedler* communities in Germany that I have visited over the past 30 years—people who went through many of the same trials and ordeals so movingly and eloquently presented in Wladimir Janzen’s correspondence with his wife and son.