

Mennonite Historian



Volume V, Number 4
December, 1979



Photo: Rudy Regehr

In November, Aeltester Bernhard Sawatzky, of Novosibirsk, Siberia, visited the Heritage Centre, together with fellow delegates from the AUCECB, Traugott Quiring, Sergei Nicolaev and Jacob Fast.

The "Kirchliche" Mennonites in the USSR

The situation and future of Mennonites in the Soviet Union continues to be of interest to many fellow-Mennonites throughout the world. An unprecedented reunion at the tenth Mennonite World Conference in 1978, and the recent visit to Canada of Aeltester Bernhard Sawatzky has added strength and intensity to a relationship which has developed significantly in recent years.¹

Aeltester Sawatzky came as the leading minister of the so-called "kirchliche" Mennonite congregation at Novosibirsk, a growing city of about a million and a half in Siberia, RSFSR, in the Soviet Union. As such he brought to Canadian Mennonite congregations the greetings not only of about

130 members in his own congregation, but of several thousands of "kirchliche" Mennonites² living in many of the fifteen republics of the Union.

The pre-revolution Mennonite community in Russia had divided into eight or ten sub-groups of which the largest two were the Mennonite church, and the Mennonite Brethren church. The former, as the great majority, essentially sustained the traditions and practices brought to Russia in the emigrations of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Though heavily concentrated in the mother colonies of Chortitza and Molotschna, they had formed large communities also in the new settlements of the

Crimea, the Volga River and Ural Mountains area, and Siberia further east.

As for millions of other Russians, the first World War, the Great October Revolution, the Civil War, collectivization and World War II caused many drastic community disruptions, and much personal distress. Fundamental changes in Mennonite congregational life resulted as well. Most churches were eventually closed, and the great majority of church leaders who chose to stay in the Soviet Union in the 1920's were subsequently exiled. In many cases they were never seen again.³ Contacts with the rest of the world almost ceased.

As the rigors of the thirties, forties and fifties began to recede, information about the Soviet Mennonites could become available again. For "kirchliche" Mennonites the figure of 20,000 baptized adults remaining came to be quoted in the West;⁴ the total of 50,000 for all Mennonite-related groups was used as well. By the middle fifties revivals had begun to occur in many places and Mennonite congregations began to take root once more.⁵

Aeltester Sawatzky's congregation shared some of the "gathering" experiences of many other localities. Individual Mennonite families began to arrive in Novosibirsk soon after World War II, though with little opportunity to worship together. Some occasionally attended the local Baptist congregation.⁶ During the next decade or so a few small Mennonite fellowships began to form in the suburbs of the city. Several Mennonite Brethren families also moved to Novosibirsk and joined the local Baptist congregation. Such leaders as David Klassen and Jacob Esau began to preach in surrounding villages. Although finally pressured to leave the Baptist group to which they belonged, their influence continued, and they were able also to help some of the "kirchliche" Mennonites become better established in the faith.

By 1955 the latter had begun to meet as a separate fellowship, following the patterns of their former worship settings, and hoping to sustain the German language as a medium of communication. They were unable to gain the protection and sponsorship of the Baptist union and could not find the *Initiativniki*

(cont. from p. 1)

group altogether congenial either. This created delays in registration, and complicated acquisitions of needed worship books and Christian literature for the members.⁷

When Aeltester Heinrich Voth of Krasnovishersk visited the city in 1956, these scattered elements began to fuse into a single unit. Voth conducted a baptism in March, 1956, and on a second visit the following year baptized a further 60 persons, ordained a local leader Franz Wiebe to serve as minister, and arranged for others to assist. State pressures caused considerable dispersion of leadership in the early sixties and regular church services ceased for the period 1961-1967. Infrequently, members continued to meet in homes. Though some families also left the city, other Mennonite families arrived so that the potential for renewed congregational life did not disappear. (to be continued) *Lawrence Klippenstein*

Notes

1. The delegation to the Mennonite World Conference at Wichita, Kansas, included Michael Zhidkov, Sergei Nikolaev, Traugott Quiring, Jacob Fast, Heinrich Goertzen, and Bernhard Sawatzky. They had hoped to visit Canada on that trip, but had to postpone the plan. The recent trip of a delegation to Canada in a sense completed that mission. This group included the above delegation, but without Heinrich Goertzen and Michael Zhidkov. Cf. Allen Siebert, "Russian Visitors arrive in Winnipeg," *Mennonite Reporter*, November 12, 1979, 1.

2. Russian Mennonite denominational labels seem to defy precise English translations. Registered Mennonite churches in the Soviet Union bear the names *Tserkovnyi mennonity* (lit. "Church", or "kirchliche" Mennonites) and *Bratskii mennonity* (Brethren Mennonites). In this essay the former will be called simply Mennonites (occasionally "kirchliche") and the latter, Mennonite Brethren.

3. Olga Rempel's recent book about Minister Aron Toews, entitled *Einer von Vielen*, depicts these experiences dramatically.

4. F.H. Epp, "The Mennonites in the Soviet Union," in R.H. Marshall, ed. *Aspects of Religion in the Soviet Union 1917-1967* (Chicago, 1971), 296. Reliable statistics are, in fact, not yet available outside the Soviet Union. Cf. especially Walter Sawatsky, "Union of Soviet Socialist Republics" in *Mennonite World Handbook* (Lombard, Ill., 1979) ed. by Paul Kraybill, for the best estimates today.

5. The revivals are briefly discussed in Walter Sawatsky, "Mennonite Congregations in the Soviet Union Today," *Mennonite Life*, XXXIII, March, 1978, 13ff.

6. The existence and growth of Baptist congregations in the USSR has been greatly aided by the formation of the All-Union Council of Evangelical-Christian-Baptists in 1944, and the possibility of registering for any group accepted into the Union.

7. The *Initiativniki* (Action Group) represented Baptists and others who would not join the Union, and therefore remained unregistered as congregations. A good number of Mennonite Brethren and some Mennonites were associated with these groups also. Sawatsky, "Union of Soviet Socialist Republics," 65-67.

New Acquisitions

*A microfilm copy of the issues of *Red River Valley Echo* (formerly *Altona Echo*), 1941-1978, Vol. 1-38. Donated by Friesen Printers, Altona, Man.

*Missing issues of *Christliches Jahrbuch* (1897-1920), published in south Russia, and edited by A. Kroeker. Courtesy of MB Archives, Winnipeg, J.P. Dyck, Springstein, and Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, Kansas.

*Records of Assiniboine Mennonite Mission Camp, (now Camp Assiniboia), Springstein, Manitoba. Courtesy of J. Martens, Winnipeg.

*Microfilm copy of *Friedensstimme* and *Der Botschafter*, both Mennonite newspapers of the period 1906-1914 in south Russia. Almost complete run for both.

*Manuscripts and library books of the late C.C. Neufeld. Courtesy of Mrs. Gertrude Neufeld, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

*Records of the Conference of United Mennonite Churches in Ontario, 15 boxes.

*Files of Burwalde Album editorial office. Courtesy of Isaac Froese, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

*Papers of Rev. Jacob Gerbrandt, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan formerly from Drake.

*Records of the Red River Valley Mutual Insurance, early years. Altona, Manitoba. Includes *Waisenamt* materials. Courtesy of Frank Sudermann.

*Sermons and manuscripts related to the history of the Sommerfelder Mennonite Church. Courtesy of Jake Peters, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

*Files (including many filmstrips) of MCC (Manitoba). Courtesy of Vern Ratzlaff.

*Papers of H.T. Klaassen, Rosthern, Saskatchewan.

*Records of The Pas Mennonite Mission, Manitoba. Courtesy of Menno Wiebe.

*Treasury files of the Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Manitoba. Courtesy of D.H. Loewen, Altona, Man.

*P.A. Rempel papers, including correspondence from his brother, Aeltester Jacob A. Rempel, of south Russia. Courtesy of D.G. Friesen, Altona, Man.

*Jacob T. Gerbrand, papers. Courtesy of John T. Wiens, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Archives Day

Archives is still a new word for many people. Its mysteries are being unravelled however. At the Mennonite Heritage Centre, Archives Day may have helped us to "open up" the program to a growing number of curious persons who wonder what is going on.

Actually a number of smaller and larger community groups had earlier received on-the-spot presentations and tours to acquaint them with archives development at the Centre. Our visitors' register includes well over 500 entries in the last five months alone.

On a broader front, we have sought to relate to Archives Week in Canada as a whole. The Association of Canadian Archivists placed that label on the period of November 1-8. It coincided almost exactly with the first anniversary of public activity at the Mennonite Heritage Centre, and seemed like a good time to talk about that as well.

On November 5 about fifty or more persons from the community and the CMBC campus looked over the new art and sculpture display, and enjoyed a leisurely cup of coffee, with doughnuts, in the guest area of the archives. Several displays had been prepared for the occasion, recent acquisitions and books for sale being two. Three or four persons brought in new manuscript deposits at this time.

Visitors are always welcome. The archives area is open daily Monday to Friday from 8:30 a.m. - 5 p.m. The displays can be viewed free of charge. For tour arrangements call 1-204-888-6781, or write to Mennonite Heritage Centre, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Special arrangements for evenings or Saturdays can be made as well.

Correction: In the book review of *The Mennonite People* (MH, Sept., 1979) the reference to C. H. Smith should have read . . . add C. J. Dyck's *An Introduction to Mennonite History . . .* In parag. 5 "non" should be deleted. Our apologies!

Resource Centre

WAYS AND MEANS

CONFERENCE
OF MENNONITES IN CANADA
600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3P 0M4 204/888-6781



Films

The Coming of the Mennonites to North America

20 minutes, color, 16 mm.

The major Mennonite migrations from 1683 (Switzerland to Pennsylvania) to the post World War II period.

And When Their Time Had Come

45 minutes, black and white.

The story of the Russian Mennonites and the struggles they went through after the collapse of their way of life in the wake of the revolution in 1917. Includes emigration to Western Canada.

Beyond This Land

42 minutes, color.

A 1972 documentary on the Amish Mennonite Sesquicentennial in Wilmont Township, Ontario.

Menno's Reins

60 minutes, color.

Traces the 450 year history of the Mennonite people, with focus on Canadian Mennonites.

Wichita '78

11 minutes, color.

On the 10th Mennonite World Conference held in Wichita, Kansas.

9th Mennonite World Conference

35 minutes, color.

Scenes from the 9th World Conference held in Curitiba, Brazil. On life in Brazil, some of the issues emphasized, interviews with delegates and guests, and the profile of the Mennonite church.



Slide-sets

Faith of our Fathers

From the beginning of Anabaptism to the migration to the new world. Complete version - 240 slides; short version - 160 slides.

Heritage Series Slide Set

8 mini sets of 5 slides each on the following topics: Fraktur Writing; The Life of Menno Simons; Mennonite Meetinghouses; The Life of Conrad Grebel; Habaner Pottery; The Life of Georg Blaurock; Secret Meeting Places; The Life of Felix Manz.



Filmstrips

Mennonite Migrations to Ontario; Mennonite Migrations to Western Canada; Mennonite Way of Life; Mennonite Contributions to Canadian Society. A series of four filmstrips of approximately 15 minutes in length each. Script and cassette included.

Ten Mennonite World Conference

Filmstrip and cassette.



Games

Anabaptist Heritage Games

To teach factual information in a relaxed setting.

- BAP** - attempts to familiarize players with beliefs and practices of Anabaptists and/or present day denominations and sects who have an Anabaptist tradition.
- What 'N Where** - teaches facts about places, dates, and events in Anabaptist history.
- Persecution** - familiarizes players with some persons who have made significant contributions to the Anabaptist heritage.

For further information write to the above address.

Rental Free to Conference of Mennonites in Canada Congregations.

Book Reviews

Frank H. Epp, **Stories with Meaning**, Waterloo, Ontario: Mennonite Historical Society of Canada, 1979. 32 pp., pb., \$2.00. Reviewed by Gerhard Ens, Winnipeg, Man.

One of the more prolific editors and writers on the Canadian Mennonite scene, a journalist and historian of no mean repute, Dr. Frank H. Epp, has now presented us with a concise "how to" booklet; how to make history writing a "do-it-yourself" project, as it were. It has come none too soon. Local and congregational histories are rolling off the presses at a rate one would scarcely have believed possible a short decade and a half ago. Unfortunately some of these have been poorly researched and badly written, among them not a few edited and written by a "committee". It is most timely that Epp argues the case for a single editor or writer of any history.

This very comprehensive yet concise book of directions is particularly valuable and practicable in the eyes of this reviewer, because of its constant references to already published and available volumes like those under discussion. The author finds both strength and weaknesses in the examples which he quotes, and he urges the would-be writer to emulate the strengths and avoid the pitfalls if possible.

The author does not shy away from some of the very practical problems that confront the compiler and writer of local and congregational history. Two are the matter of publishing and financing. His wide experience in this field results in valuable advice as to the do's and don't's in printing, publishing, marketing and financing. Too many Mennonite authors in the past were discouraged by lagging sales of technically inferior products. Epp and a few other Mennonite writers have been able to break through this barrier. The congregational historians will not have the big-time publishers waiting at their doorsteps, but this is no reason to have books leave a printshop with badly matched type face, poorly aligned pages and almost non-recognizable illustrations.

Epp's booklet itself is a model of good publishing: clear print on non-crowded pages, profusely and tastefully illustrated. Every historian and chronicler of history should read this booklet before sitting down at the typewriter or threading his (her) tape recorder to secure material for one more historical publication.

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Irene F. Petkau, ed. **Just When We Were: The Story of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada**. Winnipeg, Manitoba: The History Archives Committee of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1978. 60 pp., pb., \$6.00. Reviewed by Rodney Sawatsky, Conrad Grebel College,

Waterloo, Ont.

The sub-title says it well. This is more a story than a history in the technical sense. This is a piece of art - not a monologue but a dialogue. It is completed only with the response of the reader.

The art form is a collage. Photographs, documents, newspaper clippings, extracts from conference minutes and reports, interpretive comments from conference leaders, are combined to provide an impressionistic representation of the Canadian Conference story.

Superimposed on the collage is an interpretive theme, "just when we were...". When do we read, what do we see? Has the conference been pursuing "every wind of doctrine" only to find them all tainted with vanity? Or possibly seeking the best vessel for the treasure, only to find that they are all earthen? Will the next 75 years move this conference into a maturity which overcomes the adolescence of the first 75 years? Or is the "just when we were" dynamic the inevitable result of seeking to be God's people in the midst of the world? Like good art, the question is posed for us, the reader supplies the answer.

In a time when history does not sell well, this piece is a most creative vehicle to encourage the necessary reflection on the past for the sake of the present and the future. Hopefully we'll see more of this same genre!

Future works will want to take into consideration some shortcomings in this piece. The binding is poor and the organization is somewhat confusing. The thematic comments might also be better correlated with the collage material.

* * *

Barbara Claassen Smucker, **Days of Terror**. Toronto, Clarke, Irwin & Company Limited, 1979. Pp. 156, \$8.95. Reviewed by LaVerna Klippenstein, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Those who remember **Henry's Red Sea**, those with an interest in the Mennonite migration from Russia to Canada after the revolution, and those looking for an outstanding historical novel for older children and young people, will welcome Barbara Smucker's new book.

Days of Terror is the story of the Neufeld family, caught in the horrors of anarchy, war and famine. They struggled against bandits, disease and hunger. They face the temptation to compromise their position of non-violence. They are shaken by loss of religious freedom, imprisonment of Grandfather and by the knowledge that Otto, the eldest, has joined the Self Defense army.

Miraculously, after much suffering, those who are strong enough are offered passage to North America. There is the pain of parting, the uncertainty of a taxing journey and finally relief and deep gratitude at the warm welcome and prospects of a new life in Canada.

Told through the eyes of young Peter, the story deals realistically with trials and

tragedy and reveals the strength and stability which the Christian faith gives to a family in crisis.

This is the author's fifth book and like the others demonstrates Mrs. Smucker's talent for combining historical accuracy with exciting fiction. She has again "recreated a dramatic period of history with vigour and authenticity.

Parents will appreciate that the book is divided into three sections: Peace, Terror, Deliverance, which remind readers of the perspective of hope from which events are seen by the Neufeld family. Their gratitude for God's care is transferred to the reader and affirms the validity of the Christian faith.

Church librarians should make this book a top priority purchase. Families who read it together will make a significant investment in enriched understanding and appreciation for the strength and courage which brought twentieth-century Mennonite immigrants to this country.

Other New Books

Klassen, Anne, ed. **Under God's Wings**. Portage La Prairie, Manitoba. Box 717, 1979. 172 pp., pb., \$2.50. Inspirational articles.

Klassen I. P. **Die Insel Chortitza**. Winnipeg, Manitoba, 205-300 Hawthorne Avenue, 1979. 126 pp., pb., \$7.50; hardcover, \$8.50.

Kroeker, Nettie. **They Left Their Mark**. Winnipeg, Manitoba, 903-1100 Henderson Highway, 1979. 185 pp., pb., \$3.50.

Mennonitisches Jahrbuch 1980. Konferenz sueddeutscher Mennonitengemeinden, West Germany, 1979. 146 pp., pb., \$6.50. Order from: Christian Bookstore, 266 Hawthorne Ave., Winnipeg, Man.

Neudorf J. J. **Spuren**. Osler, Saskatchewan, 1979. pb. Poems and memoirs.

Ratzlaff, D. **Wymyschle**. Calgary, Alberta, 5504 Centre Street, 1979. 62 pp., \$3.00. About Mennonites from Poland.

Riegert, Paul W. **2005 Memories**. Regina, Saskatchewan, University of Regina, 1979. 129 pp., hardcover, \$10.00.

Rempel, Olga. **Einer von Vielen**. Winnipeg, Manitoba, CMBC Publications, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., 1979. 201 pp., pb., \$10.00. Biography and diary of Rev. Aron Toews in Soviet Russia.

Tilitzky, Jacob, ed. **Churches in Profile: Conference of Mennonites in B.C.** Clearbrook, B.C., 1978. 118 pp.

Tiessen, Henry B. **The Molotoschna Colony**. Kitchener, Ontario, 291 Weber Street East, 1979. 110 pp., pb., \$7.50.

Zeman, Jarold K., ed. **The Believers' Church in Canada**. Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1483 Pembina Highway, 1979. 410 pp., pb., \$9.95. Essays by Mennonite and Baptist writers.