

Mennonite Historian

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



Sean Goerzen with his new family book that documents 10,382 Görtzen descendants. See story beginning on page 2. Photo credit: Sean Goerzen.

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A New Görtzen Family Book

Conrad Stoesz's interview with author Sean Goerzen

In 2023, Sean Goerzen was finally able to hold the book he had been working on for several years. Using a question-and-answer format, I interviewed Sean, asking him to reflect on the project and the research process.

CS: Whose family and descendants are traced in this book?

SG: The book is on the descendants of David Georg Görtzen (GRanDMA #62878) and Gertruda Toews Görtzen (GRanDMA #62879). David was born on 16 June 1793 in Petershagen, Prussia.

According to the 1835 Molotschna Census, David and Gertruda had nine children: eight boys and one girl. However, we know from the Tiegenhagen church register that there was also a son born in Prussia who died in infancy. Of David and Gertruda's nine surviving, known children, we were able to track down living descendants from six of the lines.

At the completion of the book, we were able to account for 10,328 descendants of David and Gertruda!

CS: How long have you been working on this project?

SG: I began working on this book project in January 2020. My father and

co-author, Glen, began researching the Görtzen family line in the 1980s, when he was a teenager. This included interviewing immediate family members, often through letters, as well as writing letters to some distant Görtzen relatives that were discovered in Germany.

CS: What were the major hurdles you encountered in this project?

SG: As someone living in Canada, I take it for granted that I know who the families of my grandparents' siblings are; I would be able to make connections with a couple of phone calls. However, many of the descendants in this book do not live in Canada; they are *Russlanddeutsche Umsiedler* (Russian-German resettlers).

This group was often disconnected from their wider family as they were sent to far off areas, such as Kazakhstan or eastern Russia. While contact may have been maintained through letters, most of the time people would not be able to tell me where their second cousins were. This was a significant barrier; it made filling out and updating some family lines challenging.

In addition, while there were a significant number of family lines that could be found in EWZ records (*Einwanderungszentralstelle*), their current locations were nearly impossible to figure out, even for the children that were likely still alive.

CS: How did you come to be interested in family history?

SG: I became interested in family history at a young age. My grandfather, Albert Schmidt of Altona, was a history teacher and would frequently tell me about local Mennonite history. I remember the first time he acquired the GRanDMA genealogical database; we looked for my Goerzen side of the family.

My great-grandpa, Hermann Goerzen, came to Canada in 1927 from the Molotschna colony. He came with negative experiences from trauma and would not talk about the past with his family. Due to this, we knew very little about our Goerzen family, just that the name of his father was Kornelius, and that he died at 80 when Hermann was 12. Given the mystery that shrouded our Goerzen line, I was always very curious to know which Görtzens in the world might in fact be our relatives.

CS: Some see genealogy as a waste of time, so why is it important to you?

SG: Throughout the project, there were so many times that people remarked how shocked they were that such a "young"

person would be interested to work on this type of project. (I was 27 when I started working on the book.)

Many of the people I interviewed were advanced in age themselves. Had I waited more than ten years, I definitely would not have had as much success documenting their family information as I did.

You often hear people say, "I regret that I didn't ask more questions while my grandparents were still living." So I would say that people who see genealogy as a waste of time now, probably in their later years, will be grateful that the work has been done to chronicle their family's history and genealogy.

CS: What are some of your favourite reactions to the completed work?

SG: Following the publication of the book, I received many photos from people with their new books in hand.

One memorable message was from a Jakob Görzen, who sent me a photo from a gathering with his immediate family. The photo shows seven or eight people at a table, each with a book. The caption reads, *Jetzt wird studiert* (now it's being studied).

CS: What are some of the layout choices you made and incorporated in the book?

SG: One of the things that I really wanted to avoid with my book was an unwieldy numbering system. Often genealogies use numbering schemes that go up to eight or nine digits, with a mix of letters and numbers. I always found this confusing. After three or four digits, you lose track of how the numbers actually relate to each other.

So, in my book, I limited the digit system to about four digits, restarting the numbers at the beginning of each chapter (there is one chapter for each child of David and Gertruda). I also have three to four generation families listed on a page—a couple, their children, their grandchildren, and sometimes their great-grandchildren for smaller families.

On my visit to Germany, I was able to see a family genealogy that a publisher had done recently. I even got in contact with that author and used some of her formatting styles.

CS: What would you do differently if you were to do another book?

SG: For a future book, I would try to be more consistent across the chapters. In some sections, I included a significant

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Genealogy and Family History

The 1835 Molotschna Colony Revision List (Census)

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

In the previous issue of the *Mennonite Historian*, I provided a short introduction to the Russian Revision Lists (RL). The largest, and most important for Mennonite genealogists, is the 1835 Molotschna Colony RL. This census was conducted between January 2nd and March 18th.^{1,2}

It counts 9,140 individuals in 1,254 family units and includes information on several hundred others who are mentioned but not counted. These were males who died between 1816 and 1835, as well as the fathers mentioned in the patronymics of the household heads. In total, about 10,000 unique individuals are mentioned.

The 1835 RL is part of a large collection of documents found in the Odesa state archives (Fond 89, Opis 1), which contains the records of the Agricultural Society and the extensive correspondence of Johann Cornies.³ The census was microfilmed in 1990–91. Unfortunately, the microfilm was of such poor quality that the German⁴ and English⁵ translations contained many errors. A second microfilming in 2000 yielded a much higher quality copy.⁶ Unfortunately, this happened after the census data was entered into the GRanDMA database.⁷ This microfilm shows that the original document contains many added comments, most of which are barely legible on the microfilm. These, often cryptic, comments contain much valuable genealogical information. Last year, I obtained good quality colour photographs from the Odesa archives. I had these professionally translated. The translation and a guide can be found on the mennonitegenealogy.com website.⁸

The 1835 RL shows the movement of individuals and families between the 1816 and 1835 RLs, as well as between the 1835 and 1850 RLs. For example, looking at the entries for Wernersdorf, one can see that this village was settled mostly by families coming from the Chortitz colony. Wernersdorf was founded around 1824 with 24 original properties. The 1835 RL shows that, of these, 13 (54%) came from the Chortitz Colony, eight (one-third, or 33%) came from other Molotschna villages and three (one-eighth, or 13%) came from Prussia the year before the

village was established. One might think that overflow from the surplus of Chortitz landless families moved to Wernersdorf, but the Chortitz Colony had just settled about 50 families into the three villages of Rosengart, Blumengart, and Neuhorst.

The 1835 RL also shows that, in 1836, a total of 44 family units moved to the Chortitz Colony.⁹ That was more than 10 times the yearly average number. Why would such a large number of Molotschna Mennonites be moving to a colony that was not only full, but had no plans to establish new villages? The 1835 RL shows that only three of the 44 family units were landowning. Most of these family units were single men or small sub-families who were living in the households of established landowners. Did these people move to the Chortitz Colony in anticipation of the establishment of the Bergthal Colony? If so, nearly all were unsuccessful, with only five of these families moving on to Bergthal. The 1835 RL also shows the move of 24 families to establish Landskrone in 1839 and 25 families to establish Hierschau in 1848.

The following are some notable observations:

Only one female head of household is found in the 1835 RL—that of the widow Catharina Born (age 62) at #30 Schoenau. Her husband, Abraham, died in Heubuden, Prussia, in 1813. She, together with three daughters, moved to Schoenau in 1814.⁷

There are 17 illegitimate children identified in 1835. These were mostly illegitimate children born to unwed mothers who later married other men and the children are registered under their stepfathers.

The entry for Schoensee #25 shows that Anna (GRanDMA #46604), the daughter of Franz Thiessen, was exiled to Siberia. Her story can be found elsewhere.¹⁰ Another Mennonite who was exiled, this time back to Prussia, was Abraham Lemke (#53324) of Schoenau #28. His situation is complicated, and I will write about this in the future. A third case is found in the supplementary information added to the census after 1835. A note added to the entry of Heinrich Wiens (#47016) at #16 Gnadenheim states that he emigrated to Prussia in 1847. He was, in fact, deported to West Prussia because of his conflict with Johann Cornies.¹¹

The 1835 RL refers back to the 1816 RL for males. This shows that several men who were registered in the Molotschna Colony in 1816 were in Prussia. They include Johann Fast (#45072), Heinrich Sudermann (#313770), Gerhard Friesen (#175204), and Gerhard Fast (#45025). These men all returned before the 1835 census. These are only a fraction of the men who travelled to and from Prussia before 1835. In most cases, such a trip would have been for the collection of inheritance.¹² In many cases, adventurous young men went to Prussia to visit relatives and look for brides.

An unusual entry is found under Grossweide #10. In the household of David Ewert is the family of Heinrich Holzrichter, a.k.a. Abraham Goertz. At this point, it is unclear as to why he was also known as Abraham Goertz. He is called Heinrich Holzrichter in all other Russian documents (#61894).

A major advantage to a spreadsheet is that (unlike a text document) it can be manipulated in order to do statistical analyses. For example, the deaths of males between 1816 and 1835 are noted in this RL. These confirm Johann Cornies's claim that there were few additional deaths in the colony during the cholera epidemic of 1830.¹³ Similarly, one can look at the ages of the population registered in the Molotschna Colony in 1835. A look at the immigration years shows that the vast majority of the Molotschna Mennonites arrived in the periods 1803–10 and 1816–22. These examples barely scratch the surface when it comes to the statistical information one can glean from this spreadsheet.

The translation of the 1835 RL, together with an introduction and guide, can be found on the mennonitegenealogy.com website.⁸

Endnotes

1. Odesa State Archives, Ukraine (Fond 89, Opis 1, Delo 357).
2. <https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/1835cens.htm>
3. Ingrid Epp and Harvey L. Dyck, *The Peter J. Braun Russian Mennonite Archive, 1803–1920: A Research Guide* (Toronto, 1996). Mennonite Heritage Archives microfilm #457.
4. Johann Epp, *Die Volkszählung im Molotschna Mennoniengebiet von 1835* (Lage, 2004).
5. Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society (Winnipeg, 1995). Handwritten manuscript.
6. Mennonite Heritage Archives, microfilm #803.
7. More information about the GRanDMA database can be found at <https://www.grandmaonline.org/gmolstore/pc/Overview-d1.htm>.

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Göertzen Family Book

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amount of biographical data for the families. While that was my intention initially for the whole book, it proved too onerous to gather that much information for each family.

CS: What are the things that were important for the success of the project?

SG: One consistent compliment I get is the large number of photos in the book, along with descriptions of who is in the

photo. I did not always take the time to gather descriptions for all the photos. So that is another thing I would do differently.

Still, I am incredibly happy with how the formatting of the genealogy came together, especially how the colour coding turned out. It is satisfying to look at and doesn't overwhelm readers with too much on each page.

One of the things that made this project much more manageable was delegating work. I would often find one member of an extended family who shared interest in

the project; they were willing to put in a significant amount of their own time toward gathering their family's information, which then helped move the project forward.

I am grateful to the countless people who put in lots of hours to bring the project to completion!

Sean Goerzen is a band teacher living in Winnipeg. Readers who want to know more about Sean's book or how to obtain copies can contact him at <seangoerzen08@hotmail.com>.



Isby Bergen (first row, right) is pictured here as part of the Conference of Mennonite Churches (CMC) Annual Sessions, Gretna - Host Committee, 1977. Back row (l-r): George Rempel, Cornie Driedger, Rudy Friesen, Ken Loewen; middle row: Jake Sawatsky and Abe Loewen; front row: David F. Friesen, Alf Loewen, Jake Enns, and Isby Bergen. In the late 1940s, Isby hosted music teacher Annetta de Graaff in her Altona home on weekends for several years, until Annetta returned to the Netherlands in 1950. Among the items Annetta left with Isby was a box of photos. See below for the story of how those photos were finally returned to Annetta's daughter 75 years later. Photo credit: MAID CA MHC ORG-E-321-176.0.

Mother's 75-Year-Old Photo Collection Connects with Daughter

by Dan Dyck, Winnipeg

Isby (Elizabeth) Bergen,¹ a local Altona historian, enjoyed a long career as a regular contributor to the *Altona Echo*² in Altona, Manitoba. In her will, Bergen left a collection of photos and article clippings in the care of her friend, Martha Martens. The two women formed a lifelong friendship after meeting at the Altona Bergthaler Mennonite Church.

Among Bergen's effects was a shoebox of photos belonging to Annetta de Graaff,³ an exchange student from the Netherlands who lodged weekends at Bergen's family

home while teaching music in Altona. The adventurous de Graaff promised to return to Canada to collect the items. But life intervened, and she didn't come back. Bergen held on to de Graaff's photos for over 50 years.

Bergen died in 2001. When the estate was dispersed, Martens found out that she had been assigned responsibility for the collection. "I tried to find someone who knew her, but I didn't get anywhere with it," said Martens. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to Martens, de Graaff passed away just two months after Bergen died.

"I don't like to throw any pictures away, and Isby often mentioned that Annetta had said she would come back for the pictures," said Martens.

Years passed. "Since my age is

creeping up on me, I thought I would give it another try," said Martens. In June 2023, she contacted Conrad Stoesz for help.

Stoesz, an archivist at the Mennonite Heritage Archives in Winnipeg, is frequently called upon to help make connections among Mennonite genealogy researchers. But finding de Graaff or a living relative presented a new level of challenge for Stoesz. He would need help to navigate family archives in the Dutch language in the Netherlands.

Stoesz reached out to a member in his vast network of contacts. Jo-Ann (UnRuh) Bakker, formerly of Winnipeg but currently living in Switzerland, was one such contact. Jo-Ann had first reached out to Stoesz in 2013 for help in researching her own Mennonite ancestry.

Bakker already had considerable experience piecing together her mother's French-Canadian heritage in the early 1990s, but she knew little about her father's Mennonite ancestry. "I hadn't really taken a stab at working on my Mennonite family history, thinking that since Russian documents were almost impossible to access [at that time], it was not going to be possible," said Bakker.

Blocked access to Russian Mennonite records was a set-back, but it didn't dampen Bakker's interest in her father's background. When she discovered the Mennonite GRanDMA genealogical database,⁴ she resumed research into her father's ancestry. "I don't know how many times I almost fell off my chair discovering that Mennonites weren't the stereotypes I had thought," she said.

With decades of genealogical research experience, Bakker agreed to help Stoesz and Martens with their quest. With only de Graaff's name to go on, Bakker researched a grave marker database in the Netherlands. Dutch women often used their birth names throughout their lives, which helped Bakker find the lead she needed.

Dutch people are part of a genealogy system in the Netherlands called NGV. Her experience with the various Dutch archives and databases offered a starting point in the search for de Graaff. Bakker and her husband, Henny, have plenty of prior experience searching NGV for her husband's family tree. "Henny and I go to one or more archives whenever we're in the Netherlands visiting family," she said. Henry helps Jo-Ann with Dutch language translation.

"I decided that if I couldn't find something on the internet, my next step would be to contact the NGV. It was just lucky that the burial information online was the key to me finding Annetta right off the bat," said Bakker.

"Then newspapers.com had a few articles about Annetta in Ohio and in Manitoba. The planets were aligned, I guess!"

Bakker called her find "very lucky because in the Netherlands, due to shortage of land, grave space is at a premium and is leased for 10 to 20 years. Then the gravestone will be destroyed, and a new burial will take place in that space. Most people do not have a surviving gravestone as a result. It seems that because this is a family grave, it still exists."

Equipped with de Graaff's birth and death dates, Bakker consulted myheritage.com and found a "Petra Aarsen" with a linked email address. Bakker sent an inquiry to Aarsen. "I thought Petra was Annetta's granddaughter or niece, but she goes by Madelon [Ottenhoff-Aarsen]," said Bakker.

Madelon Ottenhoff-Aarsen is de Graaff's daughter. She was thrilled to hear from Bakker. Unaware of the photo collection, she wrote back to Bakker: "We grew up with the stories of Bluffton College and Altona. [My mother] had lovely photos of herself with a big dog."

Looking at the photos is emotional for Ottenhoff-Aarsen. "What a shame it is that mom isn't here anymore to look at the photos together," she said. Her only sibling, a sister named Marjet, died in 2015 and can't share in the experience either.

Even though many of the photos don't have labels, the collection adds visual details to the stories Ottenhoff-Aarsen heard about her mother's adventures in North America, and why she chose to leave the Netherlands just after the Second World War.

As Ottenhoff-Aarsen recounts, her mother was helping distribute food at an MCC soup kitchen. "A big American man with a cigar in his mouth" invited her mother to study in the USA. "She thought it was a joke, but it ended up true. This was 1945, just after the war, and the Netherlands was one big mess. So she thought, 'Why not?' I guess it was just nice to be away from all the horror she saw in the five years of war," said Ottenhoff-Aarsen.

Already a qualified speech therapist, de Graaff chose to pursue her passion for music in North America. She moved between Bluffton College in Ohio and Canadian Mennonite Bible College (CMBC) in Winnipeg, studying music at both schools. (Her name appears in a Bluffton College "Class of 1950" student list,⁵ a student of voice and organ.)



Annetta de Graaff spinning yarn in front of her house in Spaarndam, Netherlands. Photo credit: Madelon Ottenhoff-Aarsen.

While in Manitoba, de Graaff travelled to Altona to teach music. A 1977 historical reflection piece in the town's paper, by now re-named Red River Valley Echo, reports: "By the fall of 1946, the local Bergthaler Mennonite church was looking for someone to teach voice, violin, and piano for the forthcoming school term. Through Canadian Mennonite Bible College, they made contact with Miss Annetta de Graaff of Leeuwarden, Holland,⁶ a student at the college who began her assignments in late October by coming out every weekend."⁷

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Madelon Ottenhoff-Aarsen, daughter of Annetta de Graaff, was thrilled to receive in 2023 her deceased mother's photo collection from the time she spent in Canada after the Second World War. Photo credit: Madelon Ottenhoff-Aarsen.

Mennonite Heritage Archives

The Mennonite Periodical, *Unser Blatt* (1925–1928)

by Edward G. Krahn, Lorette West, Manitoba

Why is *Unser Blatt* so significant? As historian Cornelius Krahn stated in 1959, “The paper is today one of the best

sources of information on the religious and cultural life of the Mennonites of Russia during that period.”¹ Despite recent findings of new archival sources and material in Europe, Krahn’s statement still stands—*Unser Blatt* remains one of the finest historical resources for Mennonite life in the early Soviet period.

The iconic photo of the delegates in Moscow during the January 1925 Second Martyrs’ Synod reminds us of the historical importance of this meeting for *Russlaender*

(cont’d on p. 9)



The front page of the first issue (October 1925) of the All-Mennonite Conference periodical, *Unser Blatt*. Soviet authorization of the paper was short-lived, ending in 1928.

The Mennonite Heritage Archives (MHA) in Winnipeg has begun work on scanning and posting online the *Unser Blatt* periodical (<https://collections.mharchives.ca/Unser-Blatt-Intro/>; create a free account to view this and other titles). This project is part of commemorating the migration of 1920s-era Mennonites from the Soviet Union to Canada. MHA is looking for unbound copies of this publication to make scanning easier. By scanning and posting online, the wear on the original copies is reduced, and access to this rare resource is increased. Readers of the *Mennonite Historian* are invited to help with funding this project (<https://www.mharchives.ca/how-to/donate-finances/>).

Voices from EMC



Alfredo Dominguez is pictured here handing out material during a literature campaign. He was a 14-year-old student at the EMC school in Picacho, the first Mexican village in which the EMC established a mission station. Until this point, EMC outreach had been limited to Low-German speaking Mennonites in nearby Cuauhtemoc. In a 1963 issue of *The Messenger*, Edmar Fast reported that villagers were eager for reading material. The importance of literature was recognized early in EMC outreach efforts. Initially, it was made available at a medical clinic, and soon Dora Friesen began a mailing list of 19 people. Within a year, the list had grown beyond her capacity to keep up, and a committee was formed. By 1963, the mailing list had 700 names and thousands of pieces of literature were being mailed. Text and photo credit: Erica Fehr.



More news from MHA: We are pleased to have a three-person complement of summer staff this year: (l-r) Michaela Hiebert, Isaiah Letkeman, and Sara Dyck. Through a partnership with the Association for Manitoba Archives, Endow Manitoba, and the University of Manitoba, Michaela is with us for three months. Isaiah is starting his second year with us. Funding comes through the Government of Canada’s Young Canada Works program administered through the Canadian Council of Archives. And Sara Dyck is starting her fourth year at MHA, funded through private donations. All three will be working at sorting, organizing historically significant materials, creating finding aids, and helping to respond to researcher requests. Photo credit: Conrad Stoesz.

Class Reunion, 53 Years Later

by Charlotte (Lepp) McCrae, Brandon

Knowing only little of my grandparents' life in Russia, and not much about my Opa's teaching career, I began hunting for any information I could find. I gathered references from the schools where Opa taught in Manitoba, and then a second cousin sent me a newspaper clipping about him published in the *Carillon News* on 28 May 1965. Now I had some information to assist in researching further back to Russia.

My grandfather was Jacob J. Penner, born on 12 September 1891, in Lichtenau, Molotschna, South Russia, the eighth of nine children born to Jacob Penner and Maria Wiens. Jacob was able to receive his education through the kindness of his Wiens uncle, and later became a teacher.

The Halbstadt Zentralschule (Halbstadt, Molotschna Mennonite Settlement, Zaporizhia Oblast, Ukraine) had a three-year education program for training teachers. It was from this secondary school that Jacob Penner graduated in 1912. (See photo below.)

Jacob Penner and Margaretha Braun married in 1918. Due to uncertain times, the family with their four young children (Maria born in 1919, John born in 1921, Jacob born in 1923, and Rudy born in 1925) made the decision to immigrate to Canada, arriving at Springstein, Manitoba, on 23 December 1925.

Jacob found employment on numerous farms in southern Manitoba and continued to study English. The times were difficult and often discouraging, but their faith in God together with support from Margaretha's Braun family, who
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Nearly 20 years at 1310 Taylor Ave. This is a photo taken at the grand opening of the Mennonite Brethren Ministry centre at 1310 Taylor Ave. in Winnipeg on April 15, 2005. The new, two-storey building housed the Canadian Conference of MB Churches (CCMBC) national ministries at the time: Church planting, leadership development/church health, stewardship/financial services, discipleship/education ministries, publications (*Mennonitische Rundschau* and *MB Herald*), and conference CMBS archives. Taken in the new CMBS archives reading room, in the foreground are (l-r) Brigitte Penner, Marianne Dulder, and Helga Kasdorf (*Rundschau* staff); in the background (l-r) are Karen Hume (receptionist) and Conrad Stoesz (archivist). Photo credit: CCMBC staff.



The graduating class of the Halbstadt Zentralschule, 1912. Jacob Penner (identified by arrow) is standing with the other graduates. Photo credit: Heather Martens Rempel and the Jacob J. & Margaretha Penner Family photograph archives.

75-Year-Old Photo Collection

(cont'd from p. 5)

When in Altona, she stayed in Isby Bergen's family home, instructing students there. The two became friends. By 1950, de Graaff had returned to the Netherlands to look after her ailing mother. Letters Ottenhoff-Aarsen discovered in the shoebox indicate that Bergen and de Graaff exchanged correspondence after her return to the Netherlands.

In 1953, de Graaff married Jan Willem Aarsen. The couple had two daughters before Jan Aarsen died in 1961. De Graaff then moved her young family to Rotterdam where she worked full-time as a speech therapist. Now a single mother, she supplemented her income by teaching music. An accomplished singer, pianist, and violinist, de Graaff gave concerts as a singer well into her senior years, said Ottenhoff-Aarsen.

In 1995, de Graaff married Louis Nicolaas van der Hoek in Haarlem. She continued to enjoy her many creative pursuits, which included handicrafts such as spinning yarn, weaving, knitting, and crocheting.

"My mom was a very artistic, outgoing, caring person, very interested in other people," said Ottenhoff-Aarsen.

When de Graaff shared with her daughters about her time in Canada, "she spoke mostly about the winter, all the snow, a dog her friends in Altona had, the friends she made, and the singing in the churches."

As a younger woman, hearing her mother's stories about Canada inspired Ottenhoff-Aarsen to undertake her own international adventure. In 1983, she worked at the Menno Home, a seniors' care facility in Grunthal, Manitoba, under the auspices of Mennonite Central Committee's International Visitor Exchange Program.

Ottenhoff-Aarsen said, "I didn't know there were still photos in Altona. It would have been nice to visit there when I was in Grunthal, but at that time, I didn't have a driver's license. And I didn't know that much about Isby, only that they were friends when mom was in Canada."

Seeing the photos and reading the letters has helped Ottenhoff-Aarsen fill in some gaps in her mother's life. The letters also revealed a surprise to Ottenhoff-

Aarsen. "[Mom] describes her years when she came home and the years of marriage with my father and their plans to return to Canada, which I didn't know anything about."

She adds that "I would like to thank the people who took the trouble to track me down. [The collection] is a part of our family history and it tells the story of a very important part of my mom's life, that later on also became a part of my life."

Bakker enjoyed the challenge of finding a family connection to de Graaff. "Being a member of the Facebook Mennonite Genealogy and History Group and other genealogy groups, if I see a post where I might be able to help someone, even if it has nothing to do with me, I enjoy trying to help out in whatever way I can. I'm also glad if someone takes the time to help me," she said.

Martens is pleased that the photo collection has found a home. She said, "If someone found pictures of my family, I would appreciate it if they made an effort to return them."

Dan Dyck is a volunteer writer at the Mennonite Heritage Archives.

Endnotes

1. Born 9 March 1908, Hague, Saskatchewan; died 1 November 2001, Altona, Manitoba.
2. Later renamed the *Red River Valley Echo*, it ceased publication in 2020 after 79 years in existence.
3. Born 11 January 1922, Rotterdam, Netherlands; died 7 January 2001, Haarlem, Netherlands.
4. <https://grandmaonline.org/gmol-7/login.asp>
5. <https://www.blufftonforever.com/post/bluffton-college-grads-1950-59>
6. Actually, Leeuwarden, Netherlands. Holland is a province in the Netherlands. Leeuwarden is in the province of Friesland.
7. *Red River Valley Echo*, Wed., March 9, 1977.

1835 Molotschna Colony RL

(cont'd from p. 3)

8. The details of my editing process are found in the introduction of the translation, https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/Molotschna_Mennonite_Settlement_Census_1835.pdf.
9. See the extraction here: https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/1836_Transfers_Molotschna_to_Chortitza.htm.
10. Delbert Plett, *The Golden Years: The Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde in Russia, 1812–1849* (Steinbach, 1985), 178–181.
11. John R. Staples, *Johann Cornies, the Mennonites, and Russian Colonialism in Southern Ukraine* (Toronto, 2024), 205–216.
12. See here for information on inheritance from Prussia to Russia: https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/Prussia_to_Russia_Mennonite_Inheritance_Documents.pdf.
13. Harvey L. Dyck, Ingrid I. Epp, and John R. Staples, *Transformation of the Southern Ukrainian Steppe: Letters and Papers of Johann Cornies, Volume I, 1812–1835* (Toronto, 2015), 194–205.

Class Reunion

(cont'd from p. 7)

had arrived in Manitoba a few weeks prior, proved to be great sources of encouragement.

In 1928, daughter Anna was born, and, in 1929, Jacob decided to continue his education at the Normal School (teachers' college) in Winnipeg to become a certified "Canadian teacher."

In March 1930, daughter Ericka was born, and, in August, Jacob signed his first contract with the Department of Education.

Daughter Margarete was born in 1936, and now the family was complete.

Jacob taught in several schools in Manitoba, including Blumenhof School (1947–1952), where he was also the principal. While teaching at another school, the Moray School in 1958, Jacob's dear wife, Margaretha, passed away.

In August 1960, Jacob married Justina Dueck. Then, in 1961, Jacob retired after a 31-year teaching career.

Justina was the only Oma Penner I knew. She was a wonderful Oma. I can just see her being the most welcoming hostess for the school reunion in their home 53 years after their graduation in 1912. (See photo at right.)

Here is the genealogical information I collected on the five graduates from the class of 1912 that gathered at the 1965 reunion.

Jacob Johann Thiessen—born 31 August 1893, Klippenfeld, Molotschna, South Russia; Died 25 August 1977, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, GRanDMA #405904.

Jacob J. Penner—born 12 September 1891, Lichtenau, Molotschna, South Russia; Died 24 March 1969, Steinbach, Manitoba, GRanDMA #221555.

Cornelius H. Tiessen—born 31 March 1893, Steinfeld, Sagradovka, South Russia; Died 20 March 1968, London, Ontario, GRanDMA #1018023.

Cornelius Wall—born 25 September 1893, Blumenort, Molotschna, South Russia; Died 17 November 1985, Hillsboro, Kansas, GRanDMA #108030.

David Jacob Abrahams—born 14 August 1894, Franzthal, Molotschna, South Russia; Died 7 June 1966, Pigeon Lake, Manitoba, GRanDMA #226576.

Charlotte (Lepp) McCrae is the granddaughter of J.J. Penner. She is married to Allan McCrae, funeral director, now retired. They have three children and seven grandchildren.

Unser Blatt

(cont'd from p. 6)

Mennonites.² The subsequent repression of these church leaders by the State Political Directorate (GPU) resulted in the torture, imprisonment, and killing of most who remained in Russia. Only 20 of the 77 church leaders in that historical photo managed to evade capture and leave the Soviet Union.

Petition for a Seminary and a Periodical

The delegates had gathered in 1925 to hear the response from the new Soviet government to the petitions that their representatives (*Kommission fuer Kirchenangelegenheiten* [KfK]) had taken to the Soviet government on their behalf in May the previous year.³ In addition to the request for alternative military service, they sought permission to assemble freely as churches, to administer religious schools and conferences, to teach their children the Christian faith, to establish orphanages, to publish religious instructional material, and to be free of any special taxation. Two items were of particular importance for the delegates: they wanted permission to establish a seminary and a periodical. It was reported to the 1925 assembly that their representatives (KfK) had secured Soviet permission to advance one of these items, and that there was potential for success on the second.

For several years, the issue of a Mennonite theological school had been a

desire of all the Conferences of Mennonite churches (a.k.a., the All-Mennonite Conference). While there had been short-lived Bible schools, the odd summer Bible camp for clergy, and support for some individuals to travel to Germany and Switzerland for theological training at non-Mennonite schools, Mennonites in Russia had been unable to establish their own theological school for developing a stream of trained clergy. One solution had been to elect clergy from among the secondary school teachers, particularly those teaching religion in the Mennonite schools. In the early days of *Unser Blatt*, there were updates from the Mayak Bible School in Ufa,⁴ which had been founded in 1923 with the intent of becoming such a seminary for educating clergy.

With verbal permission to proceed coming in October 1926, a general Bible school in Melitopol began to take shape, with an opening planned for fall 1927. However, written permission was never received, and the project was eventually abandoned. Despite the prior hints of potential approval for the Melitopol school, the government direction evolved away from the more open New Economic Policy, and the dream of a Mennonite seminary was never realized. Unknown to the 1925 delegates, after the death of Lenin, Soviet policy wavered with uncertain and mixed messaging while Stalin worked to consolidate his power.

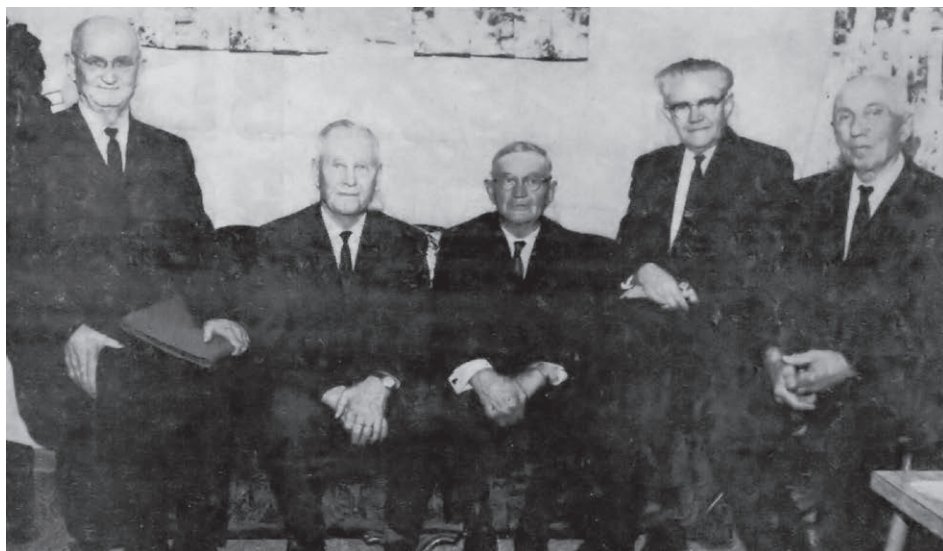
Unser Blatt Achieves Authorization

However, on the second initiative, there was more success. The KfK managed to secure Soviet permission for the Mennonite Conferences to proceed with the publication of their own periodical, *Unser Blatt*. Optimism ran so high at this good news that during the 1925 Conference advance subscriptions were sold. And in October 1925, the first issue was published. The front cover featured the iconic image of the Second Martyrs' Synod photograph, showing the delegates in the Moscow snow, January 1925.

While there had been other short-lived publications, these periodicals were generally limited in scope. There had been earlier publications of the *Mennonitisches Jahrbuch* (1905–1913),⁵ along with tracts, devotional calendars, songbooks, and materials for religious studies. Copies of German and North American publications were also circulated through Mennonite libraries and reading rooms in Russia.

There had been *Der Botschafter* (1905–1914), which attempted to connect Mennonites across the Conferences. Its publisher was Johann Thiessen, with co-editors David H. Epp and Heinrich Ediger, the father of the Moscow 1925 Conference delegate, Alexander Ediger. *Der Botschafter* was born during the turbulent times of the war with Japan and the first Revolution in 1905. It ranged from six to eight pages, along with two pages of advertising to help subsidize its operation. On matters of religion, it reflected the traditional thinking of the churches, but also discussed broader topics such as politics, education, and science. It did get caught up in the political turmoil of political strikes within the printing industry at Ekaterinoslav, so printing was moved to Berdyansk at Ediger's own printshop. However, the First World War brought an end to many German-language periodicals published in Russia, including *Der Botschafter*.

Another such enterprise was the Raduga (Rainbow) publishing house. It published the semi-weekly *Friedensstimme*, a short-lived voice for the Mennonite Brethren, and the *Liederperlen*, a monthly publication containing songs that was first published in 1889. Raduga was also known for being the publisher of P.M. Friesen's *Die Alt-Evangelical Mennonitische Bruederschaft in Russland, 1789–1910*. Raduga publications were printed in Halbstadt, Molotschna Colony,



These five men graduated from a teachers' college in Russia in 1912. The whole class of 17 planned a reunion in 1917, but the Russian Revolution prevented it. Finally, on 2 May 1965, the remaining members of that class finally did have their reunion. It was just 53 years later. From left to right, they are J.J. Thiessen, Saskatoon, J.J. Penner of Steinbach, C.H. Tiessen of Leamington, Cornelius Wall of Winnipeg, and David Abrahams of Pigeon Lake, Manitoba. The reunion took place at the home of J.J. and Justina Penner in Steinbach. Photo credit: Carillon News.

with a heavy emphasis on contributing to the spread of German-based, evangelical theology.

But there had never been an “official organ” of the *Allgemeine Bundeskonferenz der Mennonitengemeinden in Russland* (General Conference of the Mennonite Congregations in Russia).

Permission had been given in 1925 to the All-Russian Mennonite Agricultural Association to publish the agricultural magazine, *Der Praktische Landwirt* (1925–1926). This publication provided practical advice for successful agricultural management and statistics. The first edition was published on 15 May 1925; but it soon suffered the wrath of Soviet censors and was forced to cease publication by the end of 1926.

The May 1924 petition to the government had been for Mennonite Conferences under the leadership of the KfK to publish their own religious materials to “remedy the lack of books in our communities by providing them with Bibles, handouts, aids, as well as Christian literature in general, not excluding periodicals.”⁶ This permission was granted. So at the 1925 Second Martyrs’ Synod, *Aeltester* Alexander Ediger of Schoensee, Kornelius Kornelius Martens of Grossweide, and Aron Dueck of Margenau were elected as the organizing committee for the KfK. It was no surprise that Ediger was also elected as editor of *Unser Blatt* and Martens as managing editor. Both men were familiar with the print industry and publications. Ediger’s father, Heinrich A. Ediger, had been a bank manager and owner of a printing company in Berdyansk. Besides being editor of *Unser Blatt*, Ediger also wrote articles for the periodical.

While Martens ran the business end of *Unser Blatt*, he was well suited for this role, as he had previously been involved with the Raduga enterprise. He also contributed a number of articles; he was a prolific writer, especially of poems, several of which found their way into North American publications.

Another major contributor was *Aeltester* David Heinrich Epp. For a number of years, Epp had been the chairman of KfK. He was also known for helping to bring Bethania Hospital into existence and as the co-founder of the Chortitza Girls School. He was a historian of note, writing several history books and a *katechismus* to prepare young people for baptism. In later years,

he contributed to *Der Bote* of Rosthern. He had been an early promoter and lobbyist for a Mennonite periodical.

Besides the first edition of *Unser Blatt* that featured the iconic group photo from the January 1925 Conference in Moscow, there were reports on the events of the Conference. The publication format was 9 ¾ inches by 6 ½ inches, ranging from 16 to 24 pages. *Unser Blatt* made a major contribution towards uniting the Mennonite Conferences at a time when interaction between churches was limited and state-sponsored, antireligious propaganda was growing.

Unser Blatt published reports from various communities and congregations, provided statistics, and addressed the new Soviet laws as they related to religious sects (as Mennonites were now called) and to conscientious objectors to war. The review of new Soviet laws was published in Russian in *Unser Blatt*. In keeping with the concerns raised by the Conferences—that there was little knowledge of Anabaptism and Mennonite history among the congregations—articles were written on Menno Simons and Johann Cornies. Sermon ideas and resources were provided to promote consistent understanding of Mennonite beliefs and practices.

Other topics included institutional updates (such as Bethania Hospital), ordinations of *Aeltesters*, elections of clergy, mission efforts (such as in India), and faith practices (such as the Lord’s Supper).

At the 1925 Conference, there had been much discussion on how to reach the youth, in particular the challenge of not being able to teach religion to those under 18 and now attending state-run schools. The delegate from Fuerstenland reported how they had developed youth choirs, which had become a successful gathering point for their youth. The first issue included Franz Thiessen’s stirring presentation to the Conference on how music, choirs, and *Saengerfests* could be used to engage youth in the communities. To emphasize the importance of music, new song lyrics were provided in the publication, along with story ideas for children. Seasonal issues included ideas for celebrating Christmas; line drawings and illustrations helped to liven up the publication, especially for the Christmas editions.

In 1926, there was even an obituary on Hermann Peter Friedrichsen (1866–1926)

from Crimea who had been one of the driving forces and spiritual leaders for the All-Mennonite organization. Friedrichsen was one of the very few delegates of those who remained in the Soviet Union to die of natural causes. Later editions included obituaries of other noted Mennonite leaders.

Increasingly, Ediger had to deal with censorship of the publication. Because *Unser Blatt* was printed in Melitopol, it was under the watchful eye of Soviet government agents who increasingly raised concerns. In the early days of *Unser Blatt*, contributors would sign their names to articles, over time they started to use only their initials, and then articles were printed without any named authors. Whole topics were no longer covered as censorship became more prevalent.

The KfK and *Unser Blatt* soon became known to the GPU, which published a 1926 report on the “foreign colonist population”⁷ in Ukraine. They reported how the Mennonite self-defence militia units in previous years had been tied to the White Army. The report also indicated how Mennonites separated themselves from other communities and how Germany took an interest in the plight of the Mennonites during the famine years. The report spoke with concern about Mennonite clergy: how they organized, how they had come to be seen as the strongest sect in Ukraine, how they promoted strong religious propaganda, using tools like *Unser Blatt* to minimize Soviet influence. Especially concerning was how Mennonite clergy related to youth, creating meetings for young people that included religious discussions, using sports, choirs, and songs to influence young people. The push back of this critique indicates that Stalin and his policies were gaining the upper hand in the power struggle.

*The Backstory to the KfK*⁸

The KfK had been established initially in 1910 as the *Glaubenskommission*, to deal with the growing tension with the government. (At the 1912 Conference, it was renamed the KfK.) Because the Russian Duma had stripped Mennonites of their settlement “privileges” and declared them a “sect,” the KfK became the lobbying wing of the All-Mennonite Conference. It became the executive committee of the Conference, tasked with carrying out the decisions made at the Conferences and to respond quickly to the rapidly changing

political environment. At the 1917 Conference, it was decided that due to the critical issues facing the Mennonites and the need for rapid response, the chair of the KfK would receive a salary and dedicate his efforts fulltime to the Conference.

The 1917 revolution brought about a temporary pause in KfK activities. The first Conference to be held post revolution was held in Chortitza in October 1922. A new executive was elected, and the committee's powers remained the same, with the addition of special authorization to respond in cases of emergency.

The Chortitza Conference occurred during the first year of the Russian famine. The interests of Mennonites were represented in Moscow by Peter F. Froese and Cornelius F. Klassen following the Revolution. This was based on the authorization by the government to allow religious groups to join the "United Council of Religious Brotherhoods and Groups in Moscow." When this group was forced to dissolve, there was no legal basis for the lobbying efforts. The idea was raised by Mennonites that a purely Mennonite organization be formed. In October 1922, a meeting of Mennonite Conferences took place in Alexanderthal and a draft constitution to form a religious and economic union for an *Allrussischer Mennonitischer Landwirtschaftlicher Verein* was brought forward. But under the laws of the Soviet, this could not be carried out, so the two different wings separated, with the All-Mennonite Conference using the KfK for matters of the church.

As noted, the KfK played a major role in arranging the Second Martyrs' Synod in Moscow in 1925. While the KfK succeeded in securing Soviet authorization for one of its petitions, the publication of *Unser Blatt*, even that turned into a mixed blessing. By late 1927, Stalin had consolidated his power with a new policy initiative called "Revolution from Above." This included nationalization of industrial production, abolition of the market economy, collectivization of agricultural lands, the domination of the Communist Party, and Stalin's assertion of absolute power.

The "reign of terror" began with a direct attack on landholders, industrialists, and those associated with the old regime. Engineers, teachers, academics, *kulaks* (farmers wealthy enough to own their own land and hire labourers), and clergy were identified as "enemies of the state." In

particular, those Mennonite ministers who had been involved with alternative service were earmarked for early arrest. The Moscow delegates started to be arrested in 1927. Ironically, Soviet agents knew who the Mennonite leaders were from the pre-subscription list for the *Unser Blatt* generated at the October 1925 Conference, the only permission they had secured!

The critique against Mennonite clergy (and *Unser Blatt*) was also an attack against the New Economic Policy, which was now seen as having allowed these seditious freedoms to occur. Not surprisingly, it was those who were associated with this critique that were swept up in the call to eradicate the "enemies of the state" when Stalin achieved power.

At the last Conference in Melitopol of the Ukrainian Mennonite churches in 1926, Soviet government agents asked why the KfK had not sought approval prior to sending *Unser Blatt* subscriptions to Mennonites in the rest of the Soviet Union. The Soviet observers noted that the KfK had sought approval prior to sending copies of *Unser Blatt* to North America, so why had they not asked for permission to send the periodical out of Ukraine to Mennonites in other parts of the Soviet Union? Clearly a weak critique since the periodical had already secured national authorization at the Moscow 1925 Conference. However, the critique showed that the Soviets were willing to use any justification, even false, in order to curtail communication between Mennonite Conferences. It was a signal of what was to come.

The publication had indeed been sent in exchange for obtaining North American publications. The editor of *Der Bote* in the 28 April 1926 issue noted the new Mennonite publication from the Soviet Union, as did the editor of *Die Mennonitische Rundschau*. In 1928, *Die Rundschau* and *Der Bote* both noted the demise of the publication.⁹

Among the John Horsch Papers at the Mennonite Church USA Archives, there is correspondence from Kornelius Martens, who agrees to exchange *Unser Blatt* for the *Gospel Herald* but warns of censorship.

Harold S. Bender, editor of *The College Record: Review Supplement*,¹⁰ in his regular Mennonite Literature review column, announced with great fanfare "a new Mennonite journal in Russia, *Unser Blatt*." In his review, he misread the actual events taking place in the Soviet, stating:

The new journal is the first Mennonite publication in Russia since the Soviet was established. Apparently, the anti-religious program of the Soviet government is not so far reaching and effective as many Americans had thought since the government granted permission for the publication. A reading of the reports of church activities reveals further that there is practically no restriction on the customary organization and activities of the churches, such as preaching, prayer meetings, evangelistic campaigns, etc. In fact, at least in some districts there apparently never was any restriction.

He goes on to say:

The prohibition of religious instruction of children seems yet to be in force, yet one report speaks of the continued maintenance of Mennonite schools as far as Hochschule, with government support.

In his review of the three issues received by Goshen College, he notes that the publication's content suggests "material and spiritual recovery of Mennonite Churches in Russia and Siberia." Perhaps there is some foreboding in his last paragraph, where he discusses extracts of new Soviet regulations, "which unfortunately could not be translated out of the Russian into English." Unlike *Der Bote* and *Die Rundschau*, I could find no comments by Bender on the demise of *Unser Blatt*.

With the full power of Stalin's government aimed at the eradication of the "enemies of the state," the liberties of the New Economic Policy that had authorized *Unser Blatt* were reversed. *Unser Blatt* was shut down in 1928.

As noted in the GAMEO article on *Unser Blatt*, very few sets of the periodical ever made their way to North America, and only a few are preserved in archival collections in the United States and Canada.¹¹ Individuals in Germany are known to hold single issues of the publication.

However, the impact of the periodical during its short period of operations lingered on. Its memory was evident when the Mennonite Central Committee at its Gronau refugee camp in Germany started to publish a semimonthly periodical for the refugees from Russia. They named their periodical *Unser Blatt* after that important Soviet Mennonite publication. The editor throughout its run (1947–1950)

was Siegfried Janzen. The journal was a free publication distributed to the refugees, with a circulation of about 1,000.

The last whisper of memory appeared in Brazil, where another periodical was named *Unser Blatt*, published by the General Conference Mennonites in South America, 1967–1968.

For historians and researchers, *Unser Blatt* (1925–1928) is a window on a time where Mennonites in the Soviet Union—with hope and determination—made a stand for what they believed. They made a valiant effort to preserve their way of life, willing at great personal sacrifice to stand against the repressive authorities of the day, seeking freedom of belief and practice for their communities.¹² This is why MHA's current scanning initiative is so important.

Ed Krahn is a semi-retired museum program manager and Mennonite historian. One of his current projects is to research, document, and preserve the history of the 1925 Second Martyrs' Synod. If you have information related to any of the delegates, please contact him at <edgkrah@gmail.com>.

Endnotes

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Growing up as J.C. Reimer's Granddaughter

by Verna Reitmeier, Winnipeg

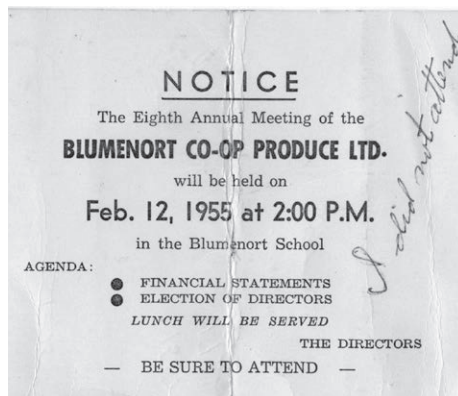
Some time ago, I was looking through sold papers left over from my grandpa Reimer's (John C. Reimer, 1894–1990) estate. By now, most of the important diaries, documents, and memorabilia had been divided among the family or donated to museums or archives, but now I discovered a small, yellowed notice to the Blumenort Co-op Produce, Ltd., annual meeting on Feb. 12, 1955. (You should know that my grandpa saved every paper, ad, or notice that entered their home!)

Written on the front of the postcard sized meeting notice were the handwritten words, "I did not attend." (See image below.) It looks like Grandpa did not heed the notice's reminder to "Be sure to attend."

I flipped over the postcard and was surprised to see that Grandpa had written a brief history of migrations of the Mennonite people. Here, as written so many years ago, are those words: *From Germany to Germantown 1683; American Revolution 1775; First Mennonites to Canada from USA 1799; Netherlands to Prussia 1550; and Prussia to Russia 1789.*

And, just like that, Grandpa handed down a history lesson to me. This was a typical experience, growing up with Grandpa Reimer. History infused my life.

I recall how JC, as he was known, began gathering articles for the museum in the little Klaas Reimer store located near our house in Steinbach. Occasionally,



1955 notice postcard for the annual meeting of the Blumenort Co-op Produce, Ltd., mailed to J.C. Reimer. Mennonite migration chronology is noted on reverse. Photo credit: Verna Reitmeier.

he'd allow us into the store, and I must admit that sometimes my curiosity got the better of me. At about age five, I nibbled on an ancient biscuit left over in a barrel, possibly from the old H.W. Reimer store. Needless to say, it tasted as old as it was!

I was used to Grandpa coming over to discuss with my dad, Almon Reimer, where the right kind of grasses could be found to thatch the log cabin located at the new Mennonite Heritage Village (MHV) museum in Steinbach, or where a tumble-down part of Steinbach's first windmill could be found in a local cow pasture.

When the Old Colony church building was moved to the MHV museum, we were enlisted by Grandpa to wipe down the long benches. Even now, I've joined other family members to do the annual cleaning of the Klaas Reimer Store, also now at MHV museum.

I love how this upbringing brought me an appreciation for Mennonite history and my roots, tracing our family's story back to 1874, when they first came to Canada—and even much further back in time to days in Russia, Poland, and the Netherlands.

Thank you, Grandpa, for making history alive for your grandchildren, and for helping to preserve many wonderful memories.

Verna Reitmeier is a retired teacher who volunteers at the Mennonite Heritage Archives in Winnipeg.

