

Mennonite Historian

A PUBLICATION OF THE MENNONITE HERITAGE ARCHIVES



Back Row (L-R): Katharina (Braun) Pauls, Johann Schellenberg, Helena (Pauls) Schellenberg, Anna Pauls, Maria (Pauls) Braun. Front Row (L-R): Daniel Franz Pauls, Franz Pauls, Helena (Peters) Pauls, Cornelius Pauls, Daniel Braun. Daniel and Maria (Pauls) Braun on the extreme right of the photograph were the victims of a multiple murder on May 16, 1912 on the Reinfeld Estate in the Yazykovo Colony. Armed bandits murdered Maria (38), her daughter Maria (18), a housekeeper and a nanny. Photo Credit: Mona Krahm.

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The Reinfeld Murders of 1912: A Braun Family Tragedy

by Mona Krahm

Mona Krahm is a great-grandniece of Daniel and Maria (Pauls) Braun. Her grandmother, Agnes (Pauls) Krahm, was connected to both lines of the family—descended from Daniel Braun through her mother and from Maria (Pauls) Braun through her father.

On May 6, 1912, armed bandits entered the home of Daniel and Maria (Pauls) Braun (GM# 535830) in Reinfeld, Yazykovo, Chortitza. Maria and her eldest daughter were killed, while her two eldest sons, Franz and Jakob, were severely wounded. The housekeeper and the nanny also died of injuries sustained in the attack. The brutality of the crime left the Braun family devastated, and the wider Mennonite community shaken, shattering their sense of security. The tragedy was a precursor to the lawlessness that would consume southern Imperial Russia on the eve of war and revolution. For the Braun family, life was irrevocably altered, leaving a permanent scar on those who survived that night.

The events in Reinfeld were extensively reported in local Mennonite newspapers, such as *Friedensstimme* and *Der Botschafter*. A fuller personal perspective comes from Helena (Pauls) Schellenberg Redekopp,¹ Daniel Braun's sister-in-law, whose memoir *Reinfeld*

(compiled by Johann Epp) provides the most detailed firsthand account.² Though she did not witness the murders directly, she encountered the aftermath that night and recorded the experience in vivid detail. The devotional almanac *Christlicher Familien-Kalender* also recounted the tragedy, framing it using themes of crime, justice, and God's guidance.

The Reinfeld Murders

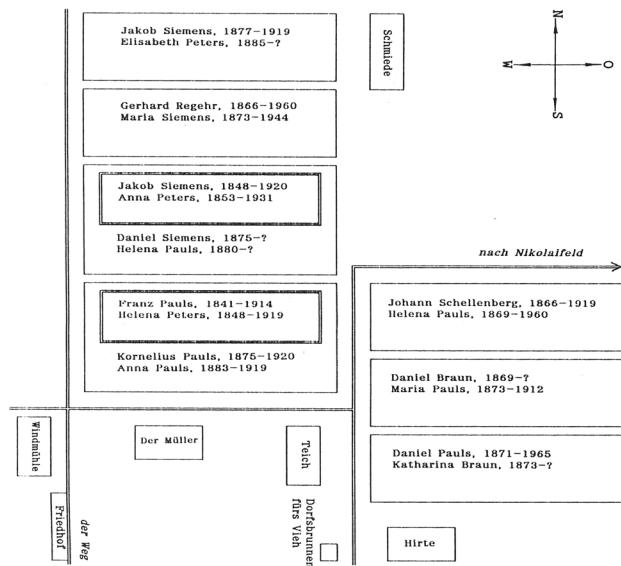
On May 6, 1912, Mennonites from across the Chortitza region gathered in Einlage to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Among those attending was Daniel Braun of Reinfeld, Yazykovo. After a day of festivities and fellowship, Daniel began his journey home, where his wife and children awaited him.

Travelling with Daniel were his two brothers-in-law, Johann Penner of Adelsheim and Kornelius Friesen of Rosenthal. They had also attended the celebrations. The trip from Einlage to Reinfeld was about 25 kilometers, a three-hour journey by horse-drawn wagon. Along the way, they discussed the recent passing of Daniel's mother and the division of her estate. Daniel carried the inheritance money with him.

Earlier that day, Russian farmhands had overheard rumors about the "Braun inheritance." The news of a large sum, later reported to be 5000 rubles, spread quickly among the locals.³ The inheritance was a significant amount, which in 1912 equaled many years of earnings for an average worker.

As is common with remembered tragedies, some confusion remains about the night's sequence of events. The main uncertainty concerns Daniel Braun's location during the attack, whether he was at home or still returning from Einlage. Helena's memoir recalls an earlier attack that evening on the Siemens farmstead, just before Daniel got home. Daniel stopped at 9:30 pm at the Pauls'

residence to drop off Kornelius. While there, they heard gunfire from the Siemens estate they paid little attention to the shots and continued talking. At the Siemens farm, the robbers reportedly obtained directions to the Braun household. This sequence makes sense geographically, as the Siemens farm was the first property encountered in that part of Reinfeld. The bandits themselves seemed confused by the boundaries between farms, uncertain whose farmstead to target. According to *Der Botschafter*, two witnesses offered differing timelines: one believing Daniel to be still on the road, the other claiming he was already at home, had eaten dinner, visited a neighbor to borrow equipment,



It is uncertain which Siemens farm was the location of the initial violence. I would assume it to be the farmstead at the top of the page owned by Jacob Siemens and Elizabeth Peters. Daniel and Kornelius reportedly heard the gunshots while at the Pauls' farm. The map shows there were three separate Pauls residences, adding to the confusion that night. Image Credit: Reinfeld, 56.

and then returned to come upon the tragedy.⁴ The *Friedensstimme* describes yet a third version, in which Daniel was home when the robbers arrived, was shot in the arm before his wife was killed, and Maria's mother was strangled.⁵ This account was a mistaken report that circulated in the confusion of the time. The number of attackers also varies; some sources say four, others eight, but most mention six or seven. The differences between eyewitness accounts and documented sources make it challenging to establish an exact timeline for May 6, 1912.

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Genealogy and Family History

Early Sources for the Chortitza Mennonite Settlement in Russia

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

The history of the settlement and early years of the Chortitza colony has been the subject of numerous articles, books, book chapters and web pages.¹ Unfortunately, much of what has appeared in the last few decades is based on secondary and tertiary sources. These, and other works occasionally cite older, often original, sources. In many cases these truly primary sources are only available in archives and are handwritten in their original language (Russian or German), making them difficult to evaluate by present-day North American researchers. Some original Russian and German documents have been transcribed or have been translated from Russian into German or from Russian or German into English. Often, the original sources for claims made in more recent published articles are very difficult to track down. For example, there are many published claims that 228 Mennonite families founded the Chortitza colony in 1788 – 1790.² Only one of these properly cites the earliest archival source.³ That source document is found in the Russian State Historical Archive in St. Petersburg (RGIA Fond 383 Opis 29 Delo 161) and has been translated and posted on the mennonitegenealogy.com website.⁴

First one must ask what documents from the first dozen years of the Chortitza colony have survived and where are they? Until 1801 colony administration was in the hands of Russian-appointed Directors (Major Jean v. Essen (1789-93), Baron Johann v. Brackel (1793-97), and Johann Brigontzev (1797-1801)), who mostly used deputy Jacob Hoeppner as an intermediary. Although village mayors were elected during this time, there is no evidence of a colony Oberschulz or administrative office within the colony. Those documents not in the Director's office were held by private individuals, mainly Jacob Hoeppner. Hoeppner handed over all his papers related to the immigration and settlement of the colony during the conflict of 1794.⁵ From 1801 on the Chortitza colony, together

with other foreign colonies, was under the control of the Guardianship Committee for Foreign Colonists (henceforth called the Guardianship Committee). In 1801, a census of the colony was taken and elections were held for village Schulzen and the colony Oberschulz.⁶ The administrative office (Gebietsamt) was located in the village of Chortitz and colony records were held there. In addition, there are large collections of Guardianship Committee records in the Odesa and Dnipro state archives in Ukraine.⁷ However, the Guardianship Committee was not established until 1801. The Odesa and Dnipro archives, which hold the Guardianship Committee records, have very little on the time before 1801. The state archives of Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine (formerly Alexandrovsk, Russia) contain a wealth of material from the early communist period, but almost nothing related to the Chortitza settlement before 1801.⁸ The Gebietsamt records were lost or destroyed towards the end of World War II.⁹ Many personal, and some archival, records were destroyed during the time of the post-World War I anarchy and civil war. Many documents were confiscated by the communists and later lost or destroyed. There was also considerable destruction and confiscation of many documents towards the end of World War II.¹⁰ The majority of pre-1801 Chortitza colony archival documents are found in the Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA) in St. Petersburg. These documents, found mostly in Fond 383 were thoroughly mined by historian David G. Rempel and have since been microfilmed and/or digitally scanned.¹¹

For many years, Edwin Hoeppner, a professional meteorologist and avid Mennonite history researcher, collected material on the early Chortitza colony and, in particular, on his ancestor Jacob Hoeppner.¹² When Ed became ill his records were given to former MHC archivist Lawrence Klippenstein, who was also researching the Mennonite immigration to the Chortitza colony. When I retired and moved to Winnipeg in 2017, Lawrence passed the material he and Ed had collected on to me. The nucleus of the documents collected by Ed and Lawrence

were letters in possession of an Epp family in Saskatchewan, often referred to as the *Hildebrand Nachlass*, since the originals were collected by Peter Hildebrand and his descendants. Over the last eight years I have collected a substantial number of additional documents. This includes an English translation of David Epp's *Die Chortitzer Mennoniten*,¹³ many colony and government reports (including a detailed 1798 report by Samuel Kontenius, president of the Guardianship Committee, who reported that the colony was unlikely to survive),¹⁴ and many letters (some of which have never been published). I have organized these documents, had them translated, and posted these on the MHA website.¹⁵ At present 57 items have been posted. The letters are of special interest. They reflect a first-hand account of what was happening during the emigration/immigration period and the early years of the colony. The contents of these letters make it clear that they were just a fraction of the total private correspondence between the early Chortitza colony settlers and their friends and relatives in Prussia. These letters were often a significant challenge for the translators. The sentence structure and overall poor-quality German reflect the limited education received by most of those who left Prussia in 1788–1798. The purpose of this project was to make translations of these letters and other original documents available, without interpretation or analysis.

These early documents show that the death toll during the first dozen years was exceptionally high. For example, many of the household heads listed for the original 228 families¹⁶ are not found in the more complete listing of the 1793 households and even more are missing from the 1795 census.¹⁷ Since only one family is known to have returned to Prussia during these years, one must conclude that these men died between 1789 and 1795. A comparison shows that an astounding one in every four household heads died during those 6 years! A comparison of the 1795 and 1801 censuses shows a continued, high death rate. This rather high death rate was certainly not unique to the household heads. The death toll among infants and small children, which cannot be counted using the available documents, must have been even higher.

(cont'd on p. 10)

The Reinfeld Murders of 1912

(cont'd from p. 2)

According to Helena (Pauls) Schellenberg, Daniel Braun's sister-in-law, the tragedy began before Daniel reached home. In her recollection armed men entered the Siemens farm, forcing the workers into the cookhouse and demanding directions to the Pauls' home. In the chaos, one worker tried to escape but was shot, the bullet only grazing his head. Another worker was held hostage. The motive appeared to be the widely discussed inheritance. With three Pauls farms nearby, the workers became confused and were unable to give clear directions, which frustrated the bandits and led them to demand the Brauns' location instead.

The events of the night were profoundly influenced by Reinfeld's geography. Although the map suggests the farms are close together, each Mennonite family maintained its own yard and fields, often spanning about 175 acres. The Yazykovo settlement was planned so that fields lay directly behind each home and typically, it took about 10 to 15 minutes to walk to a neighbor's house. The Brauns' and Pauls' homes were on the same road, likely less than a kilometer apart, while the Siemens' farm was probably one or two kilometers away, depending on which Siemens farm the bandits started. During the attacks, these distances fueled confusion, making it difficult to determine which farm was under threat and hindering any quick attempt to run for help between farmsteads.

According to Helena, the robbers approached the Braun home in silence. Daniel's wife, Maria (Pauls) Braun, answered the door and told them the men would soon return. Frustrated by their inability to find the men or the family inheritance, the robbers grew more threatening, shouting 'Ruki werch! (Hands up!)' as they demanded money and possessions. Maria and her daughter handed over the household's 35 rubles, but this only deepened the robbers' disappointment. As their anger escalated and attempts to placate them failed, violence broke out: Maria (Pauls) Braun (38) was fatally stabbed in the heart and back, and her daughter, Maria (18), was stabbed multiple times and killed. The violence did not stop there. Maria's two

eldest sons were also severely injured: Franz (16) was stabbed repeatedly, and Jacob (14) was shot while attempting to flee. The housekeeper was fatally wounded, and the nanny, though shot and stabbed repeatedly, clung to life.

Despite being shot in the back, Jacob fled the room for help. As the bandits quickly grasped the implications of his escape, Jacob struggled across the yard towards the Pauls' farm. Daniel and Johann, who had just dropped off Cornelius Friesen, saw him approaching, and by then, others were also being alerted. Meanwhile, the robbers sensed that people were gathering, and fled on foot into the darkness, harming no one else as they vanished into the night.

Daniel arrived home and burst into the summer room. There, he was confronted by a devastating sight. His wife, Maria (38), and their eldest daughter (18) lay lifeless in a pool of blood, both with multiple wounds. In shock, he desperately tried to revive them, pouring a bucket of water over them. It was a hopeless effort. Overcome with grief, he soon discovered that the housekeeper was also dead. Amid the horror, Daniel noticed a glimmer of hope. His injured son, Franz, was still alive, though gravely wounded. The nanny, clinging to life as well, had courageously protected the youngest children during the ordeal. Daniel then turned his attention to the rest of his family. Lena, the youngest, was just seven months old and still in her cradle. Heinrich (10), Luise (8), Daniel (5), and Cornelius (3) were found hiding unharmed in the cellar. In Helena's account, Maria and her daughter died from their wounds that night. However, the *Friedensstimme* reported that the two were first taken to the hospital.⁶

Soon, more family and friends arrived at the home. Together, they cared for the injured and comforted the children. Arrangements were quickly made to call the doctor and notify the police. Helena recalls that "Franz, was so cut up, he had fourteen wounds stitched, especially on his head, even his lips were cut. His life hung by a thread. He was under surveillance day and night. Doctor Gowenda did everything he could."⁷ Fourteen-year-old Jacob survived, despite having a bullet lodged in his back. It was miraculous that he managed to run for help and that the bullet had not severed his spine. Later, doctors in Ekaterinoslav examined him and determined it was too risky to remove

the bullet, so he would have to live with it. The nanny, gravely wounded, succumbed to her injuries the following day, raising the death toll from that night to four.

The murders shattered the Braun family and sent shockwaves through the Mennonite colonies, with news spreading rapidly. According to the *Friedensstimme*



Top: Nikolai Maslow (23), Wassilijs Pjesdotinski (21); **Middle:** Wladimir Tarassiewitsch (19), Stanislaw Drchowitsch (21); **Bottom:** Porfiri Barafej (21), Wilejij Guba (23). Photo credit: *Christlicher Familien-Kalender* (1914): 123 and 124.

the funeral was held on May 9, 1912.⁸ Nearly 3,000 mourners attended, including delegations from neighboring colonies.

Successive issues of the *Friedensstimme* all reported that an investigation began immediately.⁹ For capital crimes such as the Braun family murders, jurisdiction automatically transferred to the Halbstadt court in the Molotschna. To ensure a

thorough investigation, officials revisited the crime scene and carefully documented evidence. *Der Botschafter* reported that a doctor determined the victims' wounds were inflicted by a double-edged knife.¹⁰ Notably, a similar knife had recently been purchased in Nikolaipol by a Russian laborer, who was subsequently arrested, though he denied any involvement in the crime. In response, Ekaterinoslav police launched an intensive search for the perpetrators.

Finally, the *Christlicher Familien-Kalender* writes that the trial was held in Halbstadt in November 1913.¹¹ The publication relates the case of six young men, in their late teens or early twenties, who were tried before a military court and sentenced to death by “hanging by rope.” Their photographs were published on pages 123 and 124 of the January 1914 issue. The *Kalender* cites the Russian journal *Ogonёk* (*Ogonyok*), an illustrated magazine published in St. Petersburg, as the source of these images. *Ogonyok* was noted for its courtroom and crime photography before 1917. However, examination of relevant issues from this period has not uncovered the photographs identified by the *Kalender*.¹²

Although the Braun robbery and murders was reported widely, with contemporary newspapers such as *Friedensstimme* and *Der Botschafter* covering the investigation, rewards, interrogations, and the role of the Halbstadt magistrate. Yet across these reputable outlets, no convictions or executions were ever confirmed, leaving the resolution of the case unclear. Helena Schellenberg's detailed memoir likewise offers no mention of arrests, even as she continues the story into later years.

After the murders, Daniel Braun was left a widower with seven children. At forty-two, Daniel married Helena Dyck on February 6, 1913, in Reinfeld, less than a year after losing his first wife. The following years remained difficult.

In 1913, Daniel Braun married Helena Dyck, with whom he had four more children: Erna (1914), Johann (1916), Helena (1918-who died young), and Gerhard (1923). In 1917, the Brauns were repeatedly attacked by gangs of robbers, one of whom attempted to take him away. Afterwards, the Brauns moved to Peter Töews's in Franzfeld. Their sons, Jakob and Heinrich, remained in their household. In 1917, Franz Braun died of pulmonary

tuberculosis, and in 1918, Jakob Braun died of typhus. In 1918, the Brauns were living in their house again. In 1919, they moved again, this time to Kronthal. They later emigrated to Canada.¹³

between 1944 and 1950. He was an active member of both the North Kildonan Mennonite Brethren Church and the Winkler Mennonite Brethren Church. Daniel died in Manitoba at the age of 81.¹⁴

After 1912, Daniel Braun's children carried the weight of that night for the rest of their lives. As for the younger children, hidden safely in the cellar and left unharmed, they grew up stronger; however, the memories of what had happened never left them.

Franz, 16 at the time of the attack, was stabbed 14 times and survived only after a long and painful recovery. Once restored to health, he traveled to Germany to pursue his studies. However, with the outbreak of World War I, Franz attempted to return to Russia in the company of a friend, Jakob Braun (no relation), but both were arrested and imprisoned for nine months. Despite overcoming so much, Franz contracted tuberculosis and died in Germany in 1917 at the age of 21, never able to return home. He had been engaged to Maria Kranz, but they were never able to wed.

Jacob, 14 in 1912, was shot in the back and left with a bullet lodged in his spine. Doctors in Ekaterinoslav considered it inoperable. Years later, he suffered another

terrible accident: a hayfork pierced his mouth and palate, inflicting a wound that never fully healed. He never married and, at 20, died of spotted typhus.

Heinrich Braun, ten years old at the time of the Reinfeld attack, was among the younger children hidden in the cellar that night. In 1925, at the age of 24, he married Greta Niebuhr and remained in

Daniel immigrated with his wife, Helena, and sons Daniel and Kornelius, from his first marriage, and children Erna, Johann, and Gerhard from his second marriage. Notably missing is Daniel and Helena's third child, born in 1918. Helena writes in her memoir that **Young Helena died young**. Image Credit: MHA CMBC fonds card number 4060.

the Chortitza Region for the rest of his life. His life was cut short when he died of tuberculosis (then called consumption) at the age of 36.

Elisabeth (Luise) Braun was only eight years old when her mother was killed. In 1925, she married Heinrich Kornelius Pauls in Kronthal, and together they had five children. In 1938 Heinrich was arrested and deported to Siberia, from which he never returned. During World War II, Luise fled to Poland with her four surviving children. In 1947 she immigrated with them to Neuland Colony, Paraguay, and later, in 1959, resettled in Winnipeg to join her father and stepmother. She lived to the age of 97.

Daniel Braun (the younger) was only seven years old at the time of the Reinfeld attacks. In 1926 he immigrated to Canada with his father and stepmother. He later married Greta Martens in Winnipeg in 1933, and together they had four children. Daniel lived a long life, passing away at the age of 79 in Abbotsford, British Columbia.

Cornelius Braun was only three years old when his mother was killed. At the age of 17, he immigrated to Canada with his

(cont'd on p. 10)

MHA Update

by Conrad Stoesz

The Mennonite Heritage Archives is a wonderful place for research, including research by university students. Each student at Canadian Mennonite



Hannah Friesen. Photo Credit: Conrad Stoesz.

University completes a Work Integrated Learning component (practicum) in a position connected to their interests and degree. We are pleased to host Hannah Friesen who has been learning about her family, the community of Steinbach, and the art and science behind archives.

One of the goals of the Mennonite Heritage Archives is to provide access to historically significant materials to our community. One of the ways we are doing this is by digitizing materials and including them on our digital platform <https://collections.mharchives.ca/>. Signing up for a free account provides access at no cost to now over 130,000 pages of newspapers, magazines, and archival materials. We are working with the Mennonite Archives of Ontario, who has provided us with scans of *The Canadian Mennonite* that we have made word searchable and are posting and tagging on the site. The weekly newspaper

began in 1953 and ran until 1971.

There are now more than 50 episodes of our show, "Tales from the Mennonite Heritage Archives" Recent episodes include a three-part series exploring who Nestor Makhno was, smallpox vaccinations, and a conversation with author and satirist Andrew Unger. You can listen to these at your leisure on our website www.mharchives.ca/tales-from-the-archives/ or through podcast platforms such as Apple Podcasts and Spotify by searching for "Tales from the Mennonite Heritage Archives." Thanks to community funders and Golden West Radio for keeping this show going.

2025 marks significant anniversaries in our community with the 500th anniversary of Anabaptism and the 150th anniversary of the establishment of Mennonite communities on the former West Reserve in Manitoba. Conrad has been invited to speak on these broad themes a number of times recently including at Steinbach Mennonite Church, Sterling Mennonite Fellowship, Fort Garry Mennonite Fellowship, Douglas Mennonite Church, and Fort Garry Mennonite Brethren church. It is good to be in the community, connecting and providing stories and content from the archives.

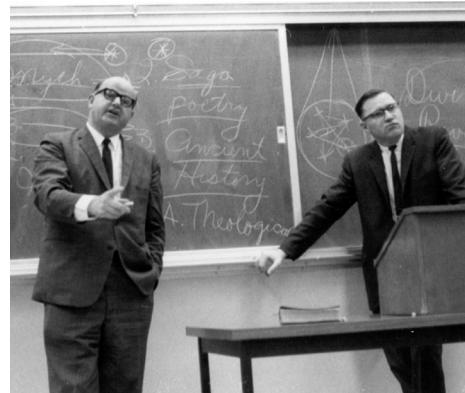
As the year draws to a close, we are grateful for the many ways we have been encouraged in our work through your words and financial support. We rely on community funding for roughly 25 percent of our budget. If you would like to contribute, please contact us.

Voices from EMC and MB Pasts

EMC

Archie Penner, born in Landmark, Manitoba, in 1917, was one of EMC's most influential theologians. He studied at three Bible colleges and received his PhD at the University of Iowa. He married Elvira in 1947, and they had three children. Archie was instrumental in opening the Red Rock Bible Camp; he taught at Steinbach Bible College and Malone College in Ohio. He also pastored, did construction work and wrote five books. He promoted critical thinking and was not afraid to

write on controversial topics, maintaining the respect of conservative thinkers while exploring broader viewpoints. He was passionate about the Mennonite



position on non-resistance and taught it often. He is pictured here lecturing at a Mennonite Student Conference at the UofM in Winnipeg, January 1968. Penner is pictured here on the left with Glen Klassen, chairman, on the right.

Mennonite Brethren

For many decades, attending Bible school was a rite of passage for many Mennonite youth. Mennonite churches and denominations were directly responsible for some 45 of the approximately 150 Bible schools established by Protestant groups in Canada, and Mennonites also supported several inter-denominational or non-denominational schools. While some joked that these should be called



Winkler Bible Institute Students playing Monopoly. Photo Credit: CMBS, NP139-03-27

"bridal schools" due to the significant number of students who found their life partner while attending Bible school, these schools were significant in passing on the Christian faith and Mennonite distinctives to the next generation.

Johann Cornies and Agronom Gavel's 1848 Biographical Appreciation

by James Urry

Johann Cornies (1789-1848) is widely acknowledged as an important figure in Mennonite history and in the history of southern Russia. Born in Prussia, he emigrated with his family to Russia as a youth and settled in the village of Ohrloff in the Molochna Colony. He and his brothers, as successful farmers, purchased lands outside the Colony initially to raise sheep. Johann, however, also devoted himself to a wide range of economic and social reforms among his Mennonite co-religionists and his non-Mennonite neighbours: Nogai Tatars, State Peasants, sectarian groups, and other foreign colonists. His achievements in agriculture and forestry soon drew the attention of government officials who recognised his knowledge and skills that mirrored their own hopes for the development of southern Russia and they gave him the power and resources to expand his activities. His

1909,¹ and in 1911 a leading biographical dictionary recognised his significance.² During his own lifetime, however, Cornies received official recognition while foreign and domestic experts visited him and wrote glowing accounts of his work. It is therefore unsurprising that his death was widely reported. In 1848, shortly after his death, a biography of Cornies' life was published as a special supplement of the colonists' newspaper and in abbreviated form in the journal of the Ministry of State Domains, the body responsible for foreign colonists, including Mennonites.³ The Biography soon became an important source for Mennonites and non-Mennonites on Cornies' life and is still widely recognised.⁴ In 1984 the German text was translated into English and published with comments by Harvey L. Dyck.⁵ The discovery of the extensive archive containing Cornies' papers and letters has extended understanding of Cornies life and work but the Biography is still referred to.⁶

Although the original author of the biography is identified as an agronomist and by his surname, Gavel, no one appears to have identified who he was. Harvey Dyck noted that Gavel's biography was "detailed and influential" and called it "a laudatory, 6000-word biographical appreciation" that had been prepared "at the request of the Chairman of the Supervisory Committee" and written by an agronomist of that agency, von Gavel, on the basis of "personal acquaintance" and written reports.⁷ Other accounts, including one recently

by a Ukrainian scholar, mention the Biography but provide few additional details on Gavel.⁸ Recently, however, John R. Staples has published a letter from Gavel to Cornies dated a year before Cornies' death in which Gavel's initial, "Fr" is given. In a footnote and in a list of Cornies' correspondents, Staples identifies Fr. Gavel as a "Ministry of

State agronomist" while in his biography of Cornies he suggests Gavel worked as an agronomist for the Guardianship Committee, the body administering foreign colonists, including Mennonites.⁹ While Gavel appears to have been closely involved with government bodies there is one further clue to his position in Odessa in his letter to Cornies. Gavel provides Cornies with his address in Odessa and he names himself as "Professor Gavel," not as Agronomist Gavel or attached to any governmental position

So, who exactly was Agronomist Gavel?

Friedrich Theodor von Gavel (1819-1890) was a Lutheran, from a noble Baltic family of Swedish descent and estate owners near Riga in the Russian Governorate of Livland.¹⁰ Between 1839 and 1843 he studied economics at Dorpat University and in 1843 joined the Richelieu Lyceum in Odessa where he is reported to have lectured on agriculture and forestry.¹¹ In a source dated 1852 he was listed as still holding the post of Adjunct Professor at the Lyceum most likely in the biology section that dealt with agricultural issues.¹² So when he wrote the Biography of Cornies he was still attached to the Lyceum.

The Richelieu Lyceum was established in 1817 and named after the Governor General of New Russia, Armand-Emmanuel de Vignerot du Plessis, duc de Richelieu, who had also been instrumental in the settling of Mennonites in the region. Although it at first functioned as a high school (Gymnasium), it gradually established separate departments, one of which was biology.¹³ In 1837 the Lyceum gained the status of an institution of higher learning and in 1841 an agricultural section was established. Presumably this is why Gavel had been employed.¹⁴ The increased status of the school occurred at the same time that the Ministry of State Domains was established and a new generation of enlightened bureaucrats began to develop the Empire's resources.¹⁵ This included the Empire's extensive state-owned lands and its people that included state peasants and foreign colonists and Mennonites. This is the context in which Cornies would rise to prominence. By 1856, the Lyceum became the basis for the Imperial University of New Russia (Novorossiya) established in 1865.

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The account of Cornies' life by Friedrich von Gavel, 1848.
Title and final statement identification.

work soon expanded to include a wide range of economic enterprises including educational reforms and control of other Mennonite settlements.

As Mennonites began to write their own history, Cornies was acknowledged as an important figure in their past. A biography of his life and work appeared in

A Year of Celebrations

The summer of 2025 was marked with families celebrating 100 or 150 years in Canada. The Petkau and Blatz families were two of these that made extensive use of the MHA collections. eds.

Petkau Family Reunion

By Arlene Petkau, daughter of David and Betty (Schapansky) Petkau

Marge Pauls Falk, 101 years old, walked into our Petkau family reunion in Morden, Manitoba at the perfect moment on that sunny Saturday, August 16, 2025. That perfect moment came exactly when 60 descendants of Maria (Grunau) and Julius Paetkau were talking about the history of Arkadak, the Russian village where Maria and Julius farmed and raised nine of their ten children. This was the village they left behind exactly 100 years ago in August, 1925, as they began their trek to Canada.

“Where were you born, Marge?” one cousin asked, as Marge sat down with her son, Richard Pauls, at a table at the Morden Activity Centre. “Well, in Arkadak, in 1924. My mother was a Paetkau, a relative of yours. We grew up with your grandparents and we played with your parents in that village,” Marge told us older cousins. “Your family was very important to us. They left for Canada the year before we did.” All three generations of Petkaus, ages two to 90, gave an audible gasp. We immediately knew that Marge had just given us an incredible gift. She was our living connection to our grandparents and parents and she was going to celebrate our family’s 100 years in Canada with us that day.

While doing research for our 100th anniversary celebration, cousins searched their family photo albums, genealogy records, letters and diaries for details and information to share.

One cousin, Glenda (Petkau) Dyck, found this entry in her Dad’s journal. Cornie Petkau wrote:

“Once upon a time, many, many years ago in a country far, far away from here, I was born in 1918, the seventh of 10 children. As our parents were not happy with the political climate of the country of our birth,

they applied for emigration status. This is not always easy to get, but one average day when Dad was out harvesting, word came that we had just received permission to emigrate. He right away unhitched the horses, went home, and two weeks later, we were on our way to Canada. I was far too young to be involved in the decision-making, but we as a family are certainly glad that this happened.”¹

And so the trek to Canada began. Our grandparents and parents were about to leave Arkadak’s Village no. 7 called Lidyevka. Maria and Julius left the crop in the field and packed up their nine children—Peter, 19, Maria, 18, Margaret, 17, all born in Burwalde, Russia, and Henry, 14, Abram, 11, Jacob, 9, Cornie, 7, Julius, 4, and David, 2, all born in Arkadak. Their 10th and last child, George, would be born in Canada in 1926.

According to Peter Letkeman, 31 people from Arkadak Village no. 7 along with Mennonites from all six other Arkadak villages boarded the train for Canada

“A large group of 343 persons was



Marge Pauls Falk (nee Enns) (b. 1924) with her son Richard Pauls in Morden, MB, August 16, 2025. Photo Credit: Arlene Petkau

assembled and left Arkadak on 8 August 1925. It was pouring rain, but those who remained behind at the station sang, “Gott mit euch, bis wir uns wiederseh’n”, (“God be with you ‘til we meet again”).

The family arrived in Winkler on September 7, 1925, where Cornelius



Maria (Grunau) and Julius Paetkau family, August 1925. Back row: Henry, Margaret, Mary, Peter. Front row: Jacob, David, Grandma Maria, Cornelius, Julius, Grandpa Julius, Abram.

Grunau, our grandmother’s brother, was waiting for them. He had arrived in Winkler in 1923.

Our grandparents and parents lived with relatives for their first few weeks in Manitoba before buying 160 acres just west of Winkler, MB. In later years, they farmed in Hochfeld and then moved to a farm just east of Morden in 1934. Our grandparents Maria and Julius retired to Morden in 1948.

Our family will always be incredibly grateful to our grandparents for their brave decision to come to Canada in 1925. They left their farm, their church, their friends and relatives in search of freedom from anarchy, civil war and starvation so that they could practice their Christian faith freely as Mennonites without fear of persecution. To God be the glory. Truly, a reason to celebrate with thanksgiving 100 years later...and every day.

Endnotes

1. Excerpt from Cornie Petkau’s diary, with permission from his daughter Glenda (Petkau) Dyck

2. Peter Letkemann, *A Book of Remembrance: Mennonites in Arkadak and Zentral, 1908-1941* (Winnipeg: Old Oak Publishing, 2016), 38

3. Letkeman, 201.

Blatz Family Reunion

By Blatz Reunion Committee

We join the story already in progress. It is July 13, 1875. A young couple, Gerhard Blatz (b.1847) and his wife, Susanna Wall (b.1850) of six years arrived in Quebec City, Canada, on the S.S. Peruvian. They had come from their small village of Olgafeld in the Fuerstenland Colony of South Russia. They had just buried their fourth child (Gerhard) back in their little village of South Russia. And just two years earlier Gerhard's father, Andreas had passed away at 53. So, Gerhard and Susanna made this trip to Canada with his mother-in-law Susanna (Krahn) Wall and his wife's three brothers and sister.

They traveled across Europe by wagon train, river boats, and many trains. Through countries with different languages, diseases, and immigration laws. Conditions would have been cramped and uncomfortable. They crossed the Atlantic on the S.S. Peruvian with over 500 other Mennonites. All with the hope of a prosperous and better life. And now their journey was nearly over. They would need to travel the great lakes by boat, take the train from Duluth to Moorhead MN, and finally a river cruise on the S.S. International down the Red River to the immigration sheds at Fort Dufferin, Manitoba Canada. From there, they would set out to a new village called Rosengart in the Mennonite West Reserve. They trekked across the open prairie, which we now call the RM of Rhineland. The humid August summer heat was in the low 30s. There were no trees to provide shade from the burning sun. Occasionally they came across a creek or a puddle of water to drink from and cool themselves. There were very few paths to follow so often Gerhard, or one of his brother-in-laws, would walk out in front cutting a path for the rest of the family through the waist-high prairie grass. In the evening the mosquitoes attacked them in swarms driving them mad. They settled on NE 7-1-3W, there was nothing there and they had to build a farm from scratch. It was too late to go back. And the realization of knowing that they would never go back would have been overwhelming. Just two weeks later, on July 27 Gerhard's uncle Daniel Daniel Blatz and his 3rd wife

Helena Rempel along with their children, grandchildren and relatives arrived in Quebec City aboard the S.S. Manitoban. At this time the Blatz's could keep contact with their relatives in South Russia through the *Mennonitishe Rundschau*.

The Mennonite Blatz families in Canada are direct descendants of Daniel Blatz (Platz)(GM#164864) who was born to a Catholic family in the area around Heidelberg in 1788. It is not known when the family moved to Russia, however Daniel became a Mennonite sometime between 1820 and 1822 after marrying Elizabeth Klassen.¹ There were five known children born to this marriage. Daniel Daniel (b.1817), Abraham (b.1819), Andreas (b.1820), Maria (b.1821) and Peter D. (about 1823). The children were born and raised in the Neuendorf, Chortitza Colony of South Russia. Only the oldest child, Daniel Daniel (b.1817) immigrated to Canada from this generation. They emigrated from the Bergthal Colony on July 27th, 1875. Abraham (b.1819) had at least three children, but none are known to have made it to Canada. Andreas' (b.1820) son Gerhard Blatz (b.1847) was the first Blatz to immigrate to Canada on July 13, 1875. He emigrated from Olgafeld, Fuerstenland Colony with his wife Susanna Wall and her widowed mother Susanna (Krahn) Wall, along with three of her brothers and a sister. They made their new home in Rosengart (NE 7 - 1 - 3W). Of Andreas' children, only the two youngest daughters Elizabeth and Helena did not come to Canada. There were at least three of Isaak and Maria (Blatz) Dueck's (b.1821) children who came to Canada. Peter D. Blatz's (b. about 1823) son Peter (b.1842) immigrated in 1891 with four of his children.²

The Blatz 150th Anniversary of Canadian Immigration was celebrated on July 26 & 27, 2025 at the Lowe Farm Park. We sold Blatz hats and T-shirts with the Blatz crest on the front and our slogan in *Plautdietsch* on the back "Dit es ne Blatze

sach, du woascht daut nijch vestohne" (This is a Blatz thing, you wouldn't understand it). Mary Dyck & Judy Thiessen ran the registration table and as a result they got to speak to everyone. There were a few that only spoke low German and it was fun to use our native language. We sold Sunday Supper tickets, handed out a Blatz Immigration Information Booklet, fridge magnets and name tags. The committee visited the CMU Mennonite Heritage Archives center, and famous Mennonite landmarks for information as well as checking out a number of graveyards. We also went to Gerhard Blatz's homestead of NE 7-1-3W on the Mennonite West Reserve and dug up a pail of dirt. We dug up half a dozen pails of dirt from our early ancestors' lands. We put the dirt in 2 oz. jars, labeled them with the name and land description and location. These were handed out to those who donated to help fund this event. A shed filled with displays of the history of the Blatz's journey to Canada and family tree were available. Relatives came from Saskatchewan, Ontario, Nova Scotia, Alberta, North Dakota, Texas, and Mexico.

On Saturday afternoon Conrad Stoesz (archivist for MHA center) shared what our ancestors were up against when they first arrived in Canada. And Sunday we were entertained with music by Madeleine Hiebert. A special testimony given by Abe Friesen of LeCrete AB on his recovery



Blatz reunion organizing committee: l-r: Mary Dyck, (b. 1972), Blumenheim, Swift Current Colony, Mexico; Judy (Blatz) Thiessen, (b. 1943), Rose Farm, S.D.; Dan Blatz, (b. 1957), Morden, Mb.; Dulaney Blatz (b. 1963), Kane, Mb. Photo credit: Dulaney Blatz.

from a life-threatening accident, and by his Faith in God had been healed. This was a weekend for eating, visiting,

(cont'd on p. 11)

Gavel's Biographical Appreciation

(cont'd from p. 7)

Exactly what role Gavel played in these developments is unclear. From a selection of his contributions to journals of the period he appears to have had a particular interest and expertise in livestock. In 1853 he assisted in the efforts to inoculate cattle against the cattle-killing disease of Rinderpest that had devastated the region's animals in previous years.¹⁶ Gavel's first child was born in Odessa but the second in Livonia in 1854 so he may have returned home by then. In later life he is recorded as an estate owner and involved, as his status required, in local affairs.¹⁷

Endnotes

1. David H. Epp, *Johann Cornies: Züge aus seinem Leben und Wirken*. (Berdiansk, 1909); republished in Canada in 1946 and translated into English in 1995.

2. "Kornis, Ivan Ivanovich." *Russkiy biograficheskiy slovar'*, (9)(1911): 266-67.

3. "Beilage." *Unterhaltungsblatte für deutsche Ansiedler im südlichen Russland*, (10)(1848): 9-18 at <https://chortitza.org/Buch/Walt1.pdf>; "I.I. Cornies. Biografi sel'skikh khozyayev." *Zhurnal Ministerstva Gosudarstvennykh Imushchesstv* (29): 10-12, 1848, 220-231, at: <https://media.chortitza.org/pdf/viewer.php?file=Buch/CornB.pdf>

4. See, for instance, Alexander Petzholdt, *Reise im westlichen und südlichen europäischen Russland im Jahre 1855*. (Leipzig: Hermann Fries, 1864), 190 ft: "I am using the biography compiled by the agronomist Gavel as a result of his personal acquaintance with the deceased and on the basis of written reports that were handed over, which appeared in the Odessa *Unterhaltungsblatt*, October 1844 [sic]"

5. Harvey L. Dyck, "Agronomist Gavel's biography of Johann Cornies (1789-1848)." *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 2, 1984, 29-41.

6. The Cornies "Letters and Papers" edited by Harvey L. Dyck, Ingrid I Epp and John R. Staples have been published in three volumes by the University of Toronto Press, under the title *Transformation of the Southern Ukrainian Steppe* and Staples has also published a biography of Cornies, *Johann Cornies, the Mennonites, and Russian Colonialism in Southern Ukraine* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2024).

7. Dyck, "Russian servitor and Mennonite hero: light and shadow in images of Johann Cornies." *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 2, 1984, 11.

8. N. V. Venger, "Khazyayin rehionu: Yohann Kornis ta kolonizatsiyni protsesy na Pivdennomu Zakhodi Rosiys'koyi imperiyi (persha polovyna XIX st.)" *Universum Historiae et Archeologiae/ The Universe of History and Archeology/ Universum istoriyi ta arkheolohiyi Unyversum ystoryy y arkheolohyy*. 2 (27), 2, 2019: 125-40.

9. *Transformation of the Southern Ukrainian Steppe III*, 2025, 462, 590; Staples, *Johann Cornies*, 248.

10. On the Gavel family see [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gavel_\(Adelsgeschlecht\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gavel_(Adelsgeschlecht)); on Friedrich, <https://www.geni.com/people/Friedrich-Theodor-von-Gavel/4710601351520124633>; <https://amburger-ios-regensburg.de/index.php?id=66417>

11. *Mittheilungen der Kaiserlichen freien ökonomischen Gesellschaft zu St. Petersburg*. Leipzig, 1844, 370; *Das Inland: eine Wochenschrift für d. Tagesgeschichte Liv-, Esth- und Curlands* *Geschichte, Geographie, Statistik und Literatur*, 12, 21 March 1844, 191.

12. *Album Academicum der Kaiserlichen Universität Dorpat. Zur Jubel-Fcier ihres funfzigjährigen Bestehens, am 12. December 1852*. (Dorpat: Heinrich Laakmann, 1852), 92.

13. <https://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5C%5CI%5CRichelieuLyceum.htm>

14. On the expansion of the Lyceu's role, see *Bericht an Se. Majestät den Kaiser von Russland über das Ministerium des Öffentlichen Unterrichts: für das Jahr 183* (Hamburg: Nestler & Melle, 1840), 55-60.

15. W. Bruce Lincoln, *In the Vanguard of Reform: Russia's Enlightened Bureaucrats, 1825-1861* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Press, 1982).

16. See the report of the Scientific Committee of the Ministry of State Domains: *Bericht über die ersten, auf Befehl Sr. Majestät des Kaisers, in Neurussland angestellten Impfungen der Rinderpest*. (St. Petersburg: E. Pratz, 1854), 47.

17. See entry in *Album Academicum der Kaiserlichen Universität Dorpat*. C. Mattiesen. 1889, 287.

9. See: <https://www.mennonitehistorian.ca/42.4.MHDec16.pdf>.

10. See for example: a) <https://www.mennonitehistorian.ca/31.1.MHMar05.pdf> and b) <https://www.mennonitehistorian.ca/45.1.MHMar19.pdf>.

11. Rempel, "Mennonite Commonwealth" and David G. Rempel, "From Danzig to Russia," *Mennonite Life*, (Jan 1969): 8-28. <https://mla.bethelks.edu/mla/archive/pre2000/1969jan.pdf>

12. See for example: a) <https://www.mennonitehistorian.ca/14.4.MHDec88.pdf> and b) <https://www.mharchives.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/EdHoeppnerPaperTranscribed.pdf>.

13. <https://www.mharchives.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/DavidEpp-Chortitz-Mennonites-Edited.pdf>

14. <https://www.mharchives.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/1798a-Kontenius-ReportWatermark.pdf>

15. <https://www.mharchives.ca/documents-regarding-the-early-chortitza-mennonite-settlement>

16. Rempel, "Mennonite Commonwealth."

17. https://mgr.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/Chortitza_Mennonite_Settlement_Census_1795.pdf

18. See link in fn. 15 above.

Reinfeld Murders

(cont'd from p. 5)

father and stepmother. He later married Anna Enns, and together they built their life in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Cornelius lived to the age of 83, passing away in Winnipeg on August 7, 1992.¹⁵

Lena was only seven months old when her mother was killed. In October 1913 she underwent surgery in Chortitza, though the reason is unclear. Shortly afterward, she died from complications of diphtheria and the operation.

The murders in Reinfeld on May 6, 1912, shattered the Braun family and plunged the Mennonite community into grief. The tragedy devastated Daniel, his children, and their home, leaving behind wounds that would never fully heal. Fear and sorrow became a part of daily life. For years, the memory of that night haunted the community, serving as a constant reminder of all that was lost.

The story of the Reinfeld murders appeared in newspapers, almanacs, and family memoirs, with each version reflecting the perspective of the person recounting it. These accounts reveal not only the horror of that night but also the various ways people tried to make sense of and cope with the tragedy.

In retrospect, the Reinfeld murders foreshadowed the violent uncertainties that would engulf Mennonite villages in the years ahead. When the Russian state collapsed and banditry escalated after 1917, Mennonites often recalled Reinfeld

as an early warning. Some saw in it a justification for the later *Selbstschutz* (self-defence) movement, while others viewed it as a testament to the enduring risks of violence in a pacifist community.

Endnotes

1. Helena was born Helena Pauls. She married Johann Schellenberg in 1888 and they had 10 children. After Johann's death in 1919, she married Heinrich Redekop in 1921.

2. Johann Epp, ed., *Reinfeld: Die Lebensbeschreibung der Großmutter Helena Schellenberg (Redekopp) und unseres Onkels Franz Schellenberg, Der Stammbaum Schellenberg, Pauls, Peters* (Bielefeld: Johann Epp, 1989).

3. Der Botchafter, 37 (May 11, 1912).

4. Ibid.

5. Friedenstimme, 41 (June 9, 1912)

6. Friedenstimme, 38 (May 19, 1912)

7. Reinfeld, 14.

8. Friedenstimme, 39 (May 26, 1912)

9. Friedenstimme, (37, 38, 39, 41).

10. Der Botschafter, 37 (May 11, 1912)

11. Abram Kroeker, *Christlicher Familien-Kalender* (1914), pp. 122-124.

12. Ogonyok. (1913, no. 38 and no. 39) St. Petersburg: S. M. Propper, Galernaya, 40.

13. Reinfeld, 14.

14. Mennonitische Rundschau 74(27)(July 7, 1951): 14.

15. Ancestry.ca and Find a Grave, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/122645588/cornelius-brun>. Needs confirmation.

A Year of Celebrations: Blatz Family Reunion

(cont'd from p. 9)

storytelling!

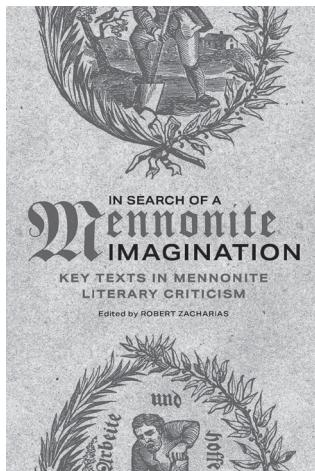
We found 64 descendants of Daniel Blatz (b.1789) who have immigrated to Canada between 1875 and 1970. The Blatz families have spread throughout Canada, the United States, Latin America and abroad. We could not have shared the happy experiences that we did at this Blatz gathering if it were not for our ancestors. Today, the villages and colonies where the Blatz families once lived in the Ukraine are destroyed by the Russian/Ukraine war. We thank God for guiding the path of our ancestors and sparing them on their journey to Canada. And for giving them a strong faith that provides us with what we have today.

Endnotes

1. see Glenn H. Penner, "Family Myths and Legends," *Preservings* (18)(2018): 37-42.

2. This information was found in old letters in the *Mennonitische Rundschau*.

Book Reviews



Robert Zacharias, ed., *In Search of a Mennonite Imagination: Key Texts in Mennonite Literary Criticism* (Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2025), pp. 716.

Reviewed by: Robert Martens, Abbotsford

Robert Zacharias, teacher at York University in Toronto, took on a project that seemed implausible, if not impossible. Sue Sorenson, the new director at CMU Press, suggested that he submit a manuscript on literary studies; the Press was looking for new work. Zacharias responded with the idea of an anthology of Mennonite literary criticism, but pointed out that such a project would entail an enormous amount of work: years of research and documentation, tracking down publishers and authors. "The whole thing, really," he writes, "was frankly unrealistic." But Sorenson, as he writes, "called my bluff" (xi). And so Zacharias chose writings from among 1,300 texts, wrote an introduction for each selection, and placed them chronologically in a volume so massive that just picking it up is a bit intimidating. It's also an insightful, powerful look back at literary criticism of "Mennolit."

Some authors expressed reluctance to having their earlier work published, which might at this point seem "dated." However, they generally responded with "enthusiasm and grace," and in any case, Zacharias writes, "there is little to be ashamed of in the essays collected here" ... (xiii).

The book is not a "best of" collection, Zacharias points out, and so includes a huge variety of significant texts, some of which do not quite fit contemporary assumptions. Extreme diversity. Put two

Mennonites in a room, and you'll have three different opinions. So: are Mennonite writers part of the community, or outsiders looking in? The debate seems perennial. An early essay by H. B. Burkholder (1873) warns Mennonite youth against trashy novels. And that may have been an early blow in the wrestling match between a traditionally conservative community and its writers who often opted for reactivity. In 1965, Warren Kliewer urged the church to honour the artist's wish to destroy. A few years later, Elmer Suderman praised Mennonite literature that probes a complacent conscience as a "sacrament of disturbance" (122). Di Brandt wrote in 1992 that the "new Mennonite writing exists as transgression" (288); Al Reimer (in a very balanced essay) referred to the outsider-prophet (354); and Patrick Friesen's trope, mentioned by Reimer, remains iconic today: the writer with "one foot in, one foot out" (338).

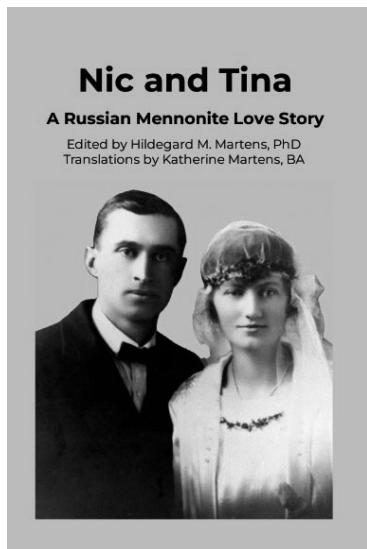
On the other hand, John Ruth, in a brilliant essay, wrote in 1977 that, despite the "scruples" of a sometimes rigid culture, he wished to see "the imaginative courage for the literary artist to become involved in the very soul-drama of his covenant-community" (172). Hildi Froese Tiessen, a perennial presence on the Mennonite literary scene, argued in 1978 that binary modes of thinking, i.e., "in" and "out," are inadequate.

Then, the age-old question, forever unresolved: what on earth is a Mennonite? If there is no such thing, might Mennonite literary criticism have any utility at all? Margaret Loewen Reimer wondered in 1977 if any literature can even be called "Mennonite." Ann Hostetler (2004) stated, quite correctly, that there is no such thing as a representative Mennonite. Casey Plett in 2023 argued that searching for cultural identity is a trap. "If you want to call yourself a Mennonite, you can. If you don't, don't" (702). But can deconstructing our identity also be a trap? Once again, Hildi Froese Tiessen (2013): "we do not need to get rid of history and memory and tradition, but rather simply to challenge their claims to normativity" (599). Sofia Samatar wrote in 2017 of her "dream of a world Mennonite literature" (655). And then the editor himself, Robert Zacharias, in his paper on the "Mennonite/s Writing Project," maintained that we may have

become too focused on “negating identity-based fields,” that there is something fundamentally lacking in not taking the “frame” seriously (658).

Perhaps the last word might be left to Jeff Gundy. He’s referring to Mennonite poets specifically, but could it also be said—in faith—of Mennonite writers in general? “I doubt that they will save us, but I believe they can make us a little less lost” (438).

Robert Martens is a poet and a writer of local histories. He lives in Abbotsford, B.C. .



Hildegard M. Martens and Katherine Martens, editor and translator. *Nic and Tina: A Russian Mennonite Love Story* (Toronto: Hildegard M. Martens, 2025) 342 pp. (Print on demand by Lulu.com).

by Alf Redekopp

This book is a publication of a series of letters, originally in old German script, that were preserved, transcribed and translated. The letters tell much of the life story of two immigrants who arrived in Canada as young adults in 1924 and 1925 from the then newly formed Soviet Union. Nic (Nicolai J.) Martens, born 1900, immigrated with two younger brothers, Gerhard and Jacob, age 16 and 14, respectively, their parents having both died; Tina (Katharina Willms), born 1902, immigrated in 1925 with her parents and siblings. Although Nic and Tina had met briefly while still in Ukraine, they

really came to know each other once in Canada at the Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Gretna, Manitoba, where they both attended in order to learn English and acquire a Canadian high school education. Nic had already been a teacher before coming to Canada and wanted to continue in that career in Canada. During the summer months when school was out, Nic worked on his brother-in-law Jacob Poetker’s farm in Osborne, Manitoba, while Tina worked with her parents on a farm in Elie, Manitoba. The first letter in the collection, dated 26 June 1926 is written by Tina to Nic:

“Dear Nicolai, I would really like to go for a walk with you, do you know where to? To the bench where we both stood on Friday...”, she writes as her opening sentence. The second paragraph begins, “I first told Papa on Sunday morning of our engagement.” “Halloh!” was his startled reply.

Part one of this publication consists of the courtship letters written between June and December 1926, before they married on 29 December 1926. Nic had returned to school in Gretna in the fall, and Tina joined him in Gretna in early 1927.

Part two of this publication consists of letters written during Nic and Tina’s early married life, 1927-1933. There are letters written to Tina’s parents and to Nic’s siblings, and there are letters exchanged between Nic and Tina when he was away looking for a teaching position or when he accepted a position in a remote location and Tina was not with him. Nic spends one school year teaching near Niverville, Manitoba, and then in the summer of 1928 they moved to southern Ontario where Tina’s parents had moved and were living in Wheatley. Nic enrolled in the Normal School in London for teacher training and also got a substitute teaching position in Forest, Ontario. Tina gave birth to their daughter in February 1929 while Nic was teaching there. Also, for several months in 1929 Tina was in the London Sanitorium. Nic spent a summer studying in Toronto before accepting a teaching position in Cochrane for the 1929-1930 school year. Then from 1931-1937 Nic was the teacher in Reesor, Ontario. For a few of those years, Tina was with Nic in Reesor, until the spring of 1934, when Tina returned south before the end of the school year for health reasons.

Part three of this publication consists of letters during Tina’s stay at the Niagara Peninsula Sanitorium in St. Catharines, Ontario, where she was treated for tuberculosis for over three years, and finally discharged by July 1937.

Part four covers the period from mid-1937 to 1950, the remaining years of Nic and Tina’s life together. There are fewer letters in number because they are living together, but there are still times when Nic’s employment and Tina’s health forced a physical separation.

Readers of this book can observe how an immigrant couple learn about Canadian society. The letters reveal the courage and determination of this couple to live a fulfilling life in Canada in the face of many challenges—language, foreign customs, and financial strain. Tina’s detailed description of her diagnosis and treatment of TB in the 1930s provides a valuable history of how TB was treated at the time, as seen from a medical and personal point of view.

The letters also provide a glimpse into the religious and society life of the times. Dissatisfaction with narrow religious attitudes is expressed by both of them as they dream of finding the “right church” with tolerant and compassionate attitudes. The editors have inserted minimal but valuable notes between various letters to provide context for a better understanding of the letters and for what may be missing. At points, this reader wished there could have been a few more notes or perhaps a minimal family tree to refer back to in order to remember the relationship to persons mentioned, apart from the primary subjects, and perhaps a map to show the locations mentioned.

I would highly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in immigration history, history of tuberculosis treatment, and the use of the common everyday family letters to tell a family story. But to do that, the letters need to be preserved and made accessible. Thank you Katherine and Hildegard for doing that with this project!

Alf Redekopp, former director of Mennonite Heritage Archives, lives in St. Catharines, Ontario, where he continues to be active in Mennonite historical projects such as the Global Anabaptist Encyclopedia Online and Mennonite Archival Information Database.