

Mennonite Historical Society
of
British Columbia

NEWSLETTER

April 1997

Dear Members and Friends,

We urge all to attend the Annual General Meeting of your Society on April 26, 1997. In addition to routine business, there will be several other items on the agenda. First, there will be a lecture by Dr. John B. Toews of Regent College on the development of singing in four part harmony among Russian Mennonites, together with the performance of representative music. Later we will tell you more about our new premises and a new project.

Please attend, and be sure to note the change of location. Our regular meeting place is not available.

Heritage Lectures

Our first Heritage lecture for 1997 was given by Dr. Harvey Dyck.

"The Soviet Mennonite Inferno"
A Tale of Incredible Terror, Suffering, and Sorrow.
A Tale Still Largely Untold.

It is impossible to do justice to this story in the following few paragraphs and therefore your Society is reproducing a tape recording of this lecture. Copies will be on sale at the next meeting.

Dr. Dyck's lecture was based on a combination of the horrors of Communism he had heard from his elders while still a boy, and the confirmation of these stories that he has gleaned from his examination of the official Soviet Archives in Zaporoshje. The story is one of unending misery and woe caused by Revolution, Civil War, Collectivization, Purges, Deportations, War and the Great Trek, and then the Return to the Slave Labour Camps of Siberia. It is the story of the Communist plague that befell the Mennonite community in Russia in 1917, and over the next four decades, extinguished all traces of this once thriving commonwealth. The people were robbed, raped, banished into exile where they either froze or were worked and starved to death, or simply shot. Before their agony finally ended, about thirty thousand people had perished - mostly men but also many women and children.

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Along with the official records in these dusty old files, Harvey found copies of personal correspondence from individuals dealing with their cases. He detailed two of these letters from two mothers, both of whom came from the village of Neuendorf, Old Colony, and both of whom happened to be named Hildebrand. They pleaded for mercy, or at least a delay in their banishment so that their children would not be exposed to travel in the Russian winter. In both cases these requests were denied with a brusque 'REJECTED' scrawled across the face of the letter. The mothers were instead ordered to report forthwith to the station for transport, carrying not more than 75 kilos of baggage for the entire family.

These crimes cannot be undone, the victims cannot be made whole, the perpetrators cannot be punished, nor do we seek vengeance. But maybe we can do something to quiet their souls. For this purpose an international effort named 'Memorial 98' is being organized to commemorate the sacrifices of these innocent people. This will consist of four main parts.

First, that 1998 be recognized by all Mennonite groups and agencies as a memorial year dedicated to all who suffered in the Soviet Mennonite Inferno.

Second, that a book be written wherein the story of the Mennonite Inferno will be told. This book is to be ready by mid-1998 and therefore will have to be co-authored. Six scholars have already volunteered to write sections dealing with their fields of expertise, and hopefully one or two more contributors will be found among the 'Aussiedler' in Germany.

Third, that a complete list be compiled of the victims of the Soviet Mennonite Inferno.

Fourth, that a permanent memorial be erected to commemorate the victims. Neither the location nor the design has yet been chosen.

Dr. Dyck ended his presentation with a plea for support for this project and a statement that, 'we seek neither justice nor vengeance, but only a memorial.'

They lost their community and all their earthly goods,
Their friends, their families, and even their lives,
But never their Faith.

Special Event

The Menno Simons Center cordially invites members of the Society to a special lecture by:
Brian Froese - A graduate student at Regent College

Topic: "From Chicken Coops to Condos."

The growth of Mennonite business in the Fraser Valley. The talk will be based on his research for a degree of Master of Christian Studies in Church History.

Time: April 18, 1997 at 7:30 PM

Place: Menno Simons Center

4000 West 11th Avenue, Vancouver.

Coffee and Dessert to follow.