

# Mennonite Historical Society of BC NEWSLETTER

*What we have heard and known we will tell the next generation. Ps.78*

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**GARDEN PARK MEMORIAL  
DEDICATED, MAY 28,2000**

The MHS Newsletter is produced periodically to inform and promote the work of the BC Mennonite Historical Society. The newsletter is mailed to people who contribute \$25.00 or more to the work of MHS. It is edited by Henry Neufeld with the assistance of Hugo Friesen and Loretta Krueger. Contributions are welcome. Direct correspondence to: Newsletter, BCMHS, 211-2825 Clearbrook Rd. Abbotsford. BC. V2T 6S3. Tel: (604) 853-6177 Hours: 9:00am-4:00pm - Monday-Friday.



## Monument Dedication

*by Henry Neufeld.*

Between the rains on Sunday, May 28th, the sun shone briefly during the dedication ceremony of a monument commemorating the many people who perished in the Soviet Union's prisons and labour camps from 1917 - 1989.



**Lighting candles in remembrance of lost loved ones.**

The rain may have stopped, but teardrops began to flow as almost three hundred participants were asked to light a candle and announce the name of a loved one who had perished. Jake Quiring's three brothers and his parents-in-law died between 1933 and 1943.

Quiring along with Jake Siemens had the vision for the six foot high monument located on the busy Clearbrook Road near Garden Park Tower. John B Toews reminded the crowd of the difficulties faced by those who perished.

Walter Bergen, who led the prayer of dedication, reminded the crowd that this dedication was not only of a monument, but also to us to live lives worthy of the calling of Christ.

Harold Dyck, from Ottawa, whose grandfather was killed on 26 October 1919 at Eichenfeld, Russia, read a poem based on Genesis 4:10, "A Lament." Dyck's father was present for the dedication service.

John B. Toews, while visiting Russia in 1990, met a man who researched 92 people sent to exile. Of this group, 21 were executed and 14 died of natural causes. "We stand here, this afternoon, deeply conscious of a tragedy that struck family, extended family or friends... it was massive, deliberate, orchestrated killing of the human race," said Toews.

Toews identified several groups from that era who should be remembered: those who died in the anarchy of the revolution after 1917, those who in the 1930's (usually ordinary people sent to northern camps never to return), those who perished in the great purge of 1936 - 1938, and the victims of the Nazi invasion in 1941.

"These people died," said Toews, "with no loved ones at their side, they were separated from their families and their spiritual communities. Yet many died in faith, recalling verses of Scripture, a favourite hymn, or a sermon."

"We gather in silence and sorrow," said Toews, "we are comforted that many believed; we are reminded that we are only sojourners and their deaths remind us that we are happiest when we keep the heavenly city in mind." As the traffic roared by on Clearbrook road, Toews reminded us that we are strangers and pilgrims here.

In his prayer of dedication Walter Bergen prayed for forgiveness for the oppressors, that they too might find faith. "As we drive by this place and our children ask us what those stones mean, we need to be prepared to tell them the story."

## Memorial Dedication

*The following comments were made by John B. Toews at the monument dedication service on May 28, 2000 in Clearbrook. Dr. Toews teaches history at Regent College.*

In June 1990 I met Abraham Berg, aged 78 in Karaganda, Kazakhstan. he was a survivor of a massive prison camp system known as Karlag, some 250 km in circumference.



A year later he shared a retirement project with me. He had compiled mini-biographies of some ninety people he had once known in his home village of Blumenort, Molotschna.

Relatives, friends and secret police records informed him that of those ninety, fifty five died in exile, twenty one were executed and fourteen died of natural causes - including deaths in prison as a result of imprisonment. Here was a graphic example of what happened to thousands of Mennonites under Soviet rule.

This afternoon we gather to honour and remember these victims. As we stand here each of us are deeply conscious of the particular tragedy which engulfed friends and members of our immediate and extended families. As the evidence of what happened under early communism and later under Stalin accumulates, it becomes increasingly evident that our experience as Mennonites was only one small part of what may prove to be one of the most massive, deliberately orchestrated killings of innocent human beings in the history of the world.

It was a focused genocide in which some were simply executed while the majority were killed by willful eliminating the conditions and circumstances essential to life. People died by the millions; our relatives and friends were among them. Late in 1930 some seven thousand Mennonites from settlements along the tributaries of the Volga river (Ufa, Samara, Orenburg) were deported to Karaganda, Kazakhstan. Two years later only two thousand were still alive. Conditions essential for their survival simply did not exist.

This afternoon we are specifically thinking of our people - Mennonites who were innocent victims of a world out of control.

#### **Revolution aftermath**

Today we want to remember those who perished amid the anarchy and civil war following the October Revolution in 1917.

We recall the massacre in Blumenort, Molotschna, Tiege, and Muensterberg in Zagradovka and

Eichenfeld (Dubovka) in Yazkovo.

We must not forget the three or four or six or eight who fell victim to anarchistic rage in scores of Mennonite villages and farms.

#### **The 1930's**

Today we remember those of our loved ones who perished in the early 1930's, who were frequently victims of forced collectivization - ordinary people sent to northern camps never to return. Some twenty I came across a letter written on November 25, 1930 by a young Mennonite girl known only as Katja. Her mother sent the letter to B. H. Unruh in Germany and so it survived.

*I have just cried my heart out. My heart wants to break for pain, I think, dear mother, brother and sisters, that I will not see you again on this earth.... We thought things could not get worse...and they are becoming worse and unbearable...It is too much, there is no peace...Yesterday amid storm and cold we had to go out...I had to walk eight verst in deep snow...I am virtually barefoot...We have not eaten in two days: no water, no bread, no soup. Today we went begging and thank God we got a few pieces of bread...At present the temperature stands at 45'...Maybe you could send some dried bread, hunger hurts very much. If I don't starve to death. I will probably freeze.*

*One day follows another and nothing changes. They only torment us further, if only the end was in sight...If only I wasn't so tired I think I could survive a bit longer...It's almost noon and we still have had nothing to eat or drink...I went begging for two days without getting anything. Begging is so hard for me...Today I searched for bread crusts...I no longer worry about the next day. If I have eaten something today I am happy and content, and give the coming day over to God.*

We can add to Katja's portrait the horrors of the Great Purge (1936-38) when few of those arrested in the village of Gnadenheim, Molotschna.



All were placed in the same camp. A year later only five survived.

With the Nazi invasion of Russia in 1941 came the mass deportation of all Germans living in western Russia. Today we possess copies of the orders signed by Beria on September 23, 1941. Among other things he orders that all Germans be deported from the Zapor region between September 23 and October 2. Today we commemorate those who did not survive the long journey to the Asiatic Republics and Eastern Siberia or those who died soon after their arrival.

Beria soon signed another order which brought into being the so-called Trud-Army (work army) which, by August 1943, included a large number of German and Mennonite women. Reports by the various camp leaders were sent back to Moscow and detailed living conditions. Almost all distinguished between those who were fully dressed (they possessed outer clothing) and represented about 30% of the inhabitants. Another 30% were partially dressed (they possessed underwear.) Most notable was the lack of footwear. The reports note that many go to work barefoot, that they live in tents and mud huts with no heating, and that they suffer from poor nutrition. Furthermore there are no bathing facilities, no medical services, and disease is rampant. Of course people died by the hundreds and thousands.

And when you die you die

- with no loved ones by your side
- with no one to say farewell to
- with no record of your personal struggle
- with no one to inform your loved ones of your death.

You die surrounded by an uncaring world often encompassed by the silence of the high Arctic. You are separated from your spiritual community

- with no common reading of the Word
- with no common singing of familiar hymns
- with no one to pray with you.

And yet many, many die in faith, perhaps remembering memorized Scripture, a sermon heard long ago or verses of a hymn. Many Mennonites died believing the words of Romans.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8, 38-39)

We are gathered here in silence and sorrow at the loss of so many loved ones and of course we ask "Why, O Lord?" But we are comforted by the fact that most believed

- that we have here no abiding city
- that we are only sojourners waiting to return to our true homeland
- that we are citizens of another kingdom.

Their deaths remind us that we are happiest when we keep the perspective of the heavenly city in mind. As we pass this memorial in the weeks and years to come - yes, it will remind us of our loss - but hopefully we will hear the many voices from the past calling us to faithfulness by reminding us that we are pilgrims and strangers here.



**Flowers around the monument symbolize death & new growth.**



## A Lament

"The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground."  
(Genesis 4:10)

Your lonesome voice is pained and shrill  
And heard by haunted souls who seek and still  
Can't find a restful thought to right  
Mass butchery and terror on that grim night  
When Cain rose up in Eichenfeld.

Let not your plaintive voice be faded  
In winds and plains, by theories and by history.  
The Russian soil which took your blood  
Has cursed your slayers to cruel misery,  
As prisoners of their own dark treachery.

Let your sad Steppe's sepulcher lament  
From a brother's grave, dug shallow by your trembling child  
Intent, midst carnage, rape and human gore, to tribute death with dignity.  
Your epitaph--an anguished widow's weeping prayers;  
Huddled orphans' noble bent--your silent elegy.

Cry on, kind father, o'er feather grass and lavender  
To us who never touched your face, your heirs,  
That we might know your dreams, your faith and gentle cares  
And not forget our loss that tragic night  
When Cain rose up in Eichenfeld.

*by Harold J Dyck*

This poem was read by Harold J. Dyck at the monument dedication service on May 28. Harold Dyck and his father attended the ceremony. Harold Dyck, formerly of Yarrow, comments:

*In commemoration of my Grandfather's assassination, 80 years ago, on the evening of October 26, 1919, in the small village of Eichenfeld in southern Russia. He and most men in that village aged 16 years and older were executed by the Makhnovshchina--an army of anarchist brigands--in a night of murder, rape and pillage. It was left, a few days later, to the remaining male children, including my father who was now one of the older boys, to assemble the more than 80 bodies--some killed by shooting, others stabbed or quartered by sabre--and bury them in shallow graves ("brothers' graves"). There was no funeral service for fear of snipers and thieves who still occupied the village.*



## The Making of the Monument

*by Jacob Quiring.*

In 1998 many of us immigrants remembered 50 years in Canada. My wife and I thought it appropriate to have a celebration and Jake and Agnes Harder showed interest in this. In September 1998 we attended a seniors retreat at Columbia Bible Camp. I approached Rev. J. Neufeld, of Clearbrook, who supported the idea of a monument commemorating our relatives who perished in the Soviet Union.

At the retreat I asked who had lost relatives in the Soviet Union and about 70% raised their hands. When asked if it was a good idea to erect a memorial, there was no opposition.

We organized a committee and set ourselves two goals: to have a thanksgiving for our fifty years in Canada and to collect funds for MCC and a memorial. We reached an agreement with MCC that all the funds that required receipts would go to MCC and the rest would be available for a memorial fund.

After the celebration about \$28,000.00 went to MCC and \$2,400.00 was retained for the memorial. Jake Siemens joined our board. We knew our funds were insufficient for the project and we solicited from a number of people. The Clearbrook MB church gave us \$179.00 the rest we took out of our pockets.

We are indebted to a number of contributors and are thankful to the Golden Age Society, the City of Abbotsford, and the Parks Board for letting us place a memorial at that location. It was an act of love to those we held in great respect and admiration.



**Jacob A. Dyck of Richmond, formerly of Eichenfeld, U.S.S.R., & Dr. John B. Toews**

## Pioneering Mennonites

*by Henry Neufeld*

"When I first face my piece of bush on King Road I broke down and wept; then I spit in my hands and took up the axe." These words, spoken at the funeral of an Abbotsford area Mennonite pioneer, describe the challenges pioneers faced, said Prof. Alfred Siemens at the May 6 lecture of the BC MHS.

"Forests are removed and houses, farms, barns and arable land take their place, it has been a positive imperative in North America," said Siemens who has long been concerned about the relationship between people and the land.

Siemens, a retired UBC geography professor, was born in Lethbridge, Alberta. His family moved to the Abbotsford area in 1944. In the 1960's Siemens studied Mennonite pioneers in Mexico and Belize. More recently he has been associated with the Inst. of Ecology in Mexico where he is a visiting professor studying pioneering in forested areas of Mexico.

A pioneer is one who goes before, who opens up the way for others to follow, a forerunner. In focusing on the Mennonite pioneers who cleared virgin soils in the Abbotsford area in the 1920 - 1940 era, Siemens noted that these pioneers cleared large trees and stumps, only to find not rich prairie soil, but sandy soil and gravel. Eventually they discovered that berries did well in this soil.

These people were strong and positive, said Siemens. The role of the church and the faith community is important in pioneering, because a strong nucleus in a community is needed. Many of these Mennonite people pioneered twice, he said, first in the prairies, then in BC.

Now, half a century later, these pioneers look at the rapid escalation of real estate values and wish they still had the land.

Siemens heard the same things from Mexican pioneers that he heard from Mennonites in BC. "The trees are large, we're poor, we're doing this for our children, we're willing to sacrifice for their future."

While Siemens noted that pioneering is often seen as a male "conquering activity" he commented on the important role of women in the pioneering efforts.



Loneliness, retaining one's sanity in isolation, running a household, and raising children all speak to the resourcefulness of the pioneer women.

Siemens noted that flying over the Fraser Valley now we see the forests coming back, largely because the inhabitants no longer make their living from the land. Using the land and stewardship are important.

In responding to questions, Siemens commented on the importance of preserving some of the natural vegetation as part of our stewardship of the land responsibilities. He sees the Agricultural Land Reserve as "a stonewalling action... much of that land (in the ALR) is not arable," he said. His concern about the relationship between people and land continues.

### MHS Annual Meeting: 1999 in Review

Just prior to the lecture by Dr. Alfred Siemens, the MHS held it's annual meeting and distributed annual reports reviewing the 1999 activities.

### Heritage Lectures

Four lectures were held in 1999 **Walter Bergen** spoke on *Menonite Martyrs - Stories of the 20th Century* focused on faith and life experiences of Mennonites during the Soviet era.

**Ruth Doerksen-Siemens** lecture on *Girls' Homes in Vancouver - A History of Community* recounted the important role working girls had in sustaining the Mennonite community and entering urban life.

**Dr. Paul Toews'** lecture on *United States and Canadian Mennonites: does the 49th Parallel Make a Difference?* Toews noted that Canadian Mennonites are more urbanized than their American cousins and have developed a more prominent economic and cultural presence.

**Dr. Walter Unger's** lecture on *Mennonite Millennial Madness* reviewed Klaas Epp's obsession with the end times.

### Other Events

A genealogical workshop, held on 16 October 1999 featured **Dr. Tim Janzen**, from Portland, Oregon.

Mennonite naming practices, research resources, and computer use for genealogical research were discussed.

Another genealogical workshop is scheduled for **Saturday, 21 October 2000**. Contact our office for details, 853 - 6177.

The Abbotsford Three Tenors MHS benefit concert on 17 November 1999 was well attended. We are grateful to **Wilmer Neufeld, John Thiessen, and Ray Harris** for sharing their gift of music, as well as pianists **Helen Nickel** and **Carissa Neufeld**. A CD made of this evening's performance was made and about 100 copies are left for sale. Contact our office for these CDs which make excellent gifts.

### Memorial Wall

Twenty eight plaques have been sold, honouring BC Mennonite pioneers. These plaques are on display at our office and we invite you to visit this display.

This project, spearheaded by MHS Board member **Lillian Toews**, provides funds for the MHS Endowment Fund. A plaque costs \$500.00 and we invite you to consider this as a family project to honour our ancestors. Tax deductible receipts will be issued.

### Archives

Our archives continue to be an excellent resource for people researching family history, church history and information on Mennonite churches and organizations. Our books, documents, photographs and other material provide a great environment for research. Loretta Krueger is our part time secretary, and along with archivist Hugo Friesen and a number of volunteers maintain an orderly and efficient resource centre. We had about 1500 visitors in 1999.

New acquisitions in 1999 included;

- the John B. Toews collection includes over 30 boxes of his personal collection.
- church files from Community Church, Vernon Community Church, and First United Mennonite Church of Vancouver.
- Sharon Mennonite Collegiate Institute (Yarrow); annual reports and by-laws.
- Lists of those who died in Swift & North Colonies, Mexico, 1922 - 1986, compiled by Jakob J. Friesen.
- Inventory of Mennonite tombstones in former Prussia by a group of Dutch Mennonites and Canadian Edwin Wheeler.
- Fuerstenland Baptism Register (microfilm)



### Finances

The audited financial reports for 1999 show income for the year of \$43,4000 and expenses of 42,200, leaving a small surplus of \$1,200.

We want to acknowledge and thank the many supporters of the work of the BC Mennonite Historical Society. We are grateful for a growing and supportive membership. Special thanks were given to Board Member and treasurer Ed Hildebrand and his family for making a substantial donation of shares to our Society in order to launch the Endowment fund. We invite others to consider making donations of shares to our Society; contact our office or Bill Riediger (222-9650) for more information.

### UPCOMING EVENT

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#### "RUSSIAN MENNONITE WOMEN CONFRONT STALINISM"

This is the title of the lecture by **Dr. John B. Toews** scheduled for **Saturday, October 14, 2000**, at Garden Park Tower. Plan to attend this event.

What happened to them when...

- their men were arrested, exiled, or shot in the 1930's
- they were subjected to collective farm labour
- there was no food for their children
- the last churches closed by 1935
- they were exiled to Siberia and Central Asia in 1941
- they were drafted into the work army in 1943

Plan to attend this fund raising dinner and lecture.

More information will follow in the next Newsletter.

### BCMHS Board Members:

Walter Bergen (Abbotsford)  
Hugo Friesen (Abbotsford), Archivist  
David Giesbrecht (Abbotsford), Secretary  
Edward Hildebrand (Vancouver), Treasurer  
John Konrad (West Vancouver), President  
Peter Neudorf (North Vancouver),  
Henry Neufeld (Delta), Newsletter  
Jean Neufeld (Abbotsford)  
Louise Price (Abbotsford)  
Helen Rose Pauls (Chilliwack)  
William Riediger (Vancouver)  
John B. Toews (Vancouver)  
Henry Rempel (Chilliwack), Vice President

### Donations to BC MHS

The work of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC is being greatly assisted by contributions and donations from members and friends. The Historical Society is authorized to issue receipts for taxation purposes. We appreciate the documents, photographs and other historical material that has been donated to the Society.

#### In the dry season - make a gift

Treasurer Ed Hildebrand notes that summer is the dry season in BC; a time to enjoy our vacations. It is also a "dry season" for revenue for the BC MHS. Our rent, utility and operating expenses do not dry up in summer. We invite our readers to support the work of the BC MHS by renewing their membership and by making a donation to the Society to support this work. **Please use the enclosed envelope to make a contribution to support the work of your Society.** With deepest thanks.

#### Gifts in Kind

You can also help the Historical society by donating property, stocks and bonds. For more information please contact MHS Board members Ed Hildebrand or Bill Riediger.

#### WANTED:

##### ➤ Old Photographs.

If you have old photographs of historical (family pictures, homesteading photos, etc) value, we invite you to arrange to bring them to the MHS office and have them scanned so copies can be kept in our archives; you may keep your originals. Please contact our office (604) 853-6177.

##### ➤ Recipe Books

We are interested in adding to our collection of Mennonite recipe books. Please contact our office if you have books you would like to donate.

##### ➤ Documents & Diaries

If you have diaries and documents you would like kept in the archives, please contact our office.

##### ➤ Display Case

Do you have a 3 or 4 shelf antique display case with glass doors that you would be willing to donate to our center? We would like to display special artifacts, books, etc. for all to see.