Volume 18 Number 1 February 2012

Roots and Branches

Periodical of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC

"What we have heard and known
we will tell the next generation."
Psalm 78

Photo credit: Katrine Kaarsmaker

Exploring Mennonite Spirituality

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Editorial

by Andrew Dyck

Mennonite spirituality. For some, this phrase is an oxymoron—as incongruous as jumbo shrimp or civil war. Mennonites have often been known for their lifestyle practices of discipleship, community, and non-resistant love (as described by Harold Bender in *The Anabaptist Vision*). Some Mennonites would identify evangelism, social justice, a simple lifestyle, and/or scripture study as significant lifestyle practices. In recent decades, as Mennonites have sought an inner, transformative spiritual vitality, some have looked to charismatics and contemplatives for a spirituality that is deeper than practice alone.

I am convinced that there is Mennonite spirituality—or even spiritualties. Spirituality includes encounters with God, talk about such encounters, and practices that both contribute to and result from those encounters. Christians understand these encounters as a relationship with God, in Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit, within the community of believers. David Augsburger goes further in his book *Dissident Discipleship: A Spirituality of Self-Surrender, Love of God and Love of Neighbour.* Augsburger writes that a three-dimensional spirituality is more than a growing self-discovery (as in much contemporary writing on spirituality), and more than encountering a transcendent God (as in much Christian writing). Spirituality also entails living with and for the people around us (an Anabaptist emphasis).

The history of Mennonites is rich with stories of lived spirituality. It is true that Mennonites have often emphasized practices that express love towards people. Mennonites have also, however, given attention to their inner lives and to their relationship with God. Menno Simons, for instance, taught that God's Holy Spirit teaches believers and transforms them to become cheerful, peaceful, pious and holy. Mennonite Brethren in Russia and Canada taught an experience of "assurance of salvation." The 1995 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, in a chapter entitled "Christian Spirituality," identifies practices that integrate experiences of God, inner transformation and ethical living.

Sometimes Mennonite spirituality has been three-dimensional. At other times Mennonite spirituality has been impoverished—whether through over-emphasizing one dimension, or by losing the connections between practice and inner reflection. Not surprisingly, subsequent renewals of Mennonite spirituality have come about through the influence of people from other Christian traditions, and also through recovery of what has been forgotten in the Mennonites' own Anabaptist heritage.

I am thankful that *Roots and Branches* has chosen to explore Mennonite spirituality. I believe that by reading about Mennonite spirituality, both current and historical, we can learn to recognize the presence and work of God's Spirit. This, in turn, offers the prospect of recognizing the Holy Spirit's presence today. As a Mennonite church leader, I look forward to discovering how such "in-sight"—an important feature of Christian spirituality—might help people to participate together in God's mission of reconciling the world in Christ.

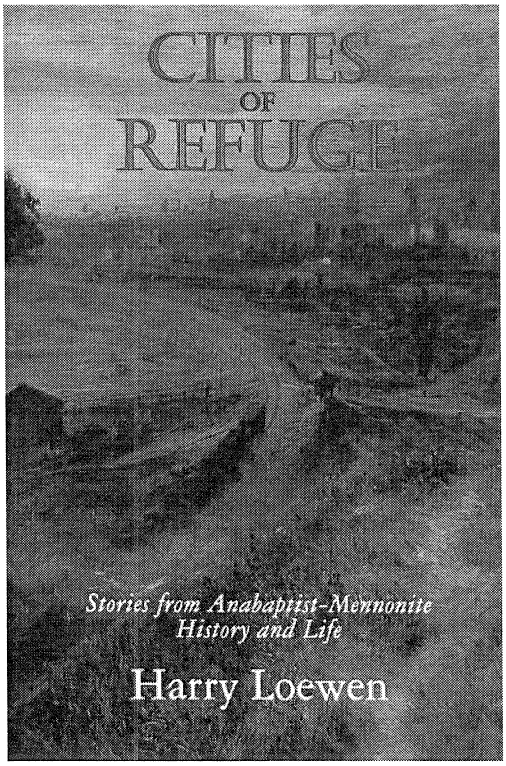
Andrew Dyck lives in Abbotsford with his wife Martha. They have three adult sons. He works part-time as the executive secretary for the bi-national Mennonite Brethren Historical Commission while writing his PhD dissertation on contemplative practices and Mennonite Brethren spirituality. He was a Mennonite Brethren pastor for fifteen years.

Upcoming event, Spring 2012.

March 24, 7pm: Selected Stories from the book *Cities of Refuge*

MHSBC presents an evening of storytelling with Dr. Harry Loewen in the Magnolia Room at the Garden Park Tower, 2825 Clearbrook Road, Abbotsford, B.C. Loewen will share stories from his book that will be new to most of his audience. Some of these stories may be shocking, but they are all true, and we can learn from them about what being an Anabaptist-Mennonite means.

Admission is free, and light refreshments will follow Loewen's storytelling.



Russian Mennonite Spirituality

by Dr. John B Toews

"Spirituality" as a term has been in vogue for several decades. Its application has not always been Christian. In the 1970s people travelled to the East to find their gurus and to achieve enlightenment. Spirituality entrepreneurs bought properties, established cult followings and, if possible, persuaded some media star to endorse their teachings. We need think only of movements like Silva Mind Control, Transcendental Meditation or Zen Buddhism.

Yet our concern is Christian spirituality and, in a narrower sense, Mennonite spirituality. How can we define a somewhat nebulous term even if we qualify it by using the word "Christian?" Concepts like personal communion with God or experiencing the reality of God's Kingdom come to mind. Long ago Augustine prayed, "Let me know you, O God." That desire for intimacy with God lies at the heart of Christian spirituality.

Historically, the desire for such intimacy often emerges whenever it is blocked by other priorities like concern with organization, theological dogmatism, pastoral professionalism or simply nominalism in the life of the church. Throughout the Middle Ages, concerned saints protested the rigidity of theology and church structure by advocating various systems of mysticism that connected the individual directly to God. They stressed ongoing prayer and contemplation. The phenomenon of intimate God-connectedness is also part of our Anabaptist/Mennonite story but was often only sporadic and momentary. It permeated the *Martyrs Mirror,* then almost vanished in succeeding centuries. That is not to say the spiritual was not there. Almost any century generated devotional literature, catechismal instruction for baptismal preparation, exposition of the Scripture through preaching and, especially in the Polish/Prussian/Russian tradition, moral teaching often tinged with legalism. In any given decade, such activity ensured a serious Christianity and deep piety among those who listened and believed.

But how well does all this apply to our narrow definition of Christian spirituality?

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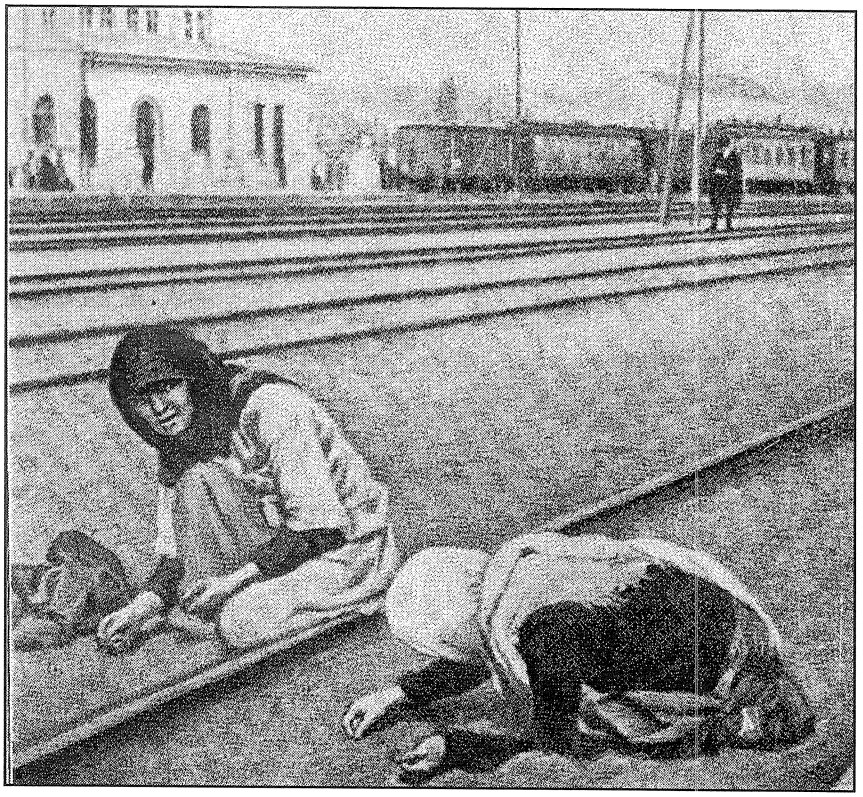

Photo Credit: Abr. Kroeker. Meine Flucht. Streigau: Theodor Urban, 1931.

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Periodically, renewal and revival restored a living relationship of trust in a personal God among our Mennonite forebears, but sustaining the hunger to know and experience God intimately was difficult. Rather quickly we succumbed to the temptation to define what it meant to be a disciple. Behaviour patterns, sometimes dictated by ethnic custom, soon rigidly defined the marks of a sound Christianity. Custom often imposed a time-lock on what was once a vibrant spirituality. Conformity became piety. The "God Moments" of renewal were codified. Religious vitality was stifled by the erection of fences and borders.

If an ecstatic, personal spirituality periodically re-emerged, conflictive assessments of what was happening were sure to surface. There was an overwhelming temptation to control and regulate the "untidiness" of renewal.

The birth of the Mennonite Brethren Church in 1860 is a case in point. Current documentation appears to suggest that its origins can be traced to a house church type of revival that stressed the interior life and personal religious experience. Surviving conversion accounts of the first two decades are not easily standardized. Repentance was often associated with a lengthy penitential agony that eventually climaxed in moments of spiritual ecstasy. It was associated with joy and a strong sense of salvation assurance. Yet these individuals lived in a larger religious community characterized by custom and orthodoxy. This new definition of spirituality was not easily tolerated and ensured several decades of tension and misunderstanding.

There was a surprising development within the Brethren ranks. Whereas the earliest renewal accounts tend to be "untidy" in the conversion patterns they generated, the third decade accounts (1890s) reflect a set formula and emphasize time, date and place. In a sense, conversion became codified. Another trend was not unrelated. The Brethren secession document of 1860 invoked strong moral judgement on the then existing Russian Mennonite Christianity. From the very beginning Brethren spirituality had a legalistic, judgemental component.

In this sense it blended well into historic Mennonitism with its rightful concern with discipleship and Christian living. Did that concern prematurely quench spirituality as we are defining it? Not surprisingly, the other Russian Mennonites soon accused the Brethren of being too legalistic and judgemental in their definition of discipleship. The historian Peter M. Friesen lamented what he called "Mennonite melancholy"when speaking of Mennonite spirituality. Perhaps it has to do with an inability to sustain a life in the Spirit. Mennonites have to do good, help, fix things, and organize into a well functioning community. In this regard the achievements of the Russian Mennonites are outstanding. We thrive in the exterior life but all too often languish when it comes to the interior life.

A Lutheran renewal in Germany, often called the *Blankenburg Allianz*, reached the Russian Mennonite colonies early in the twentieth century. It called for personal faith, a life in the Spirit and a celebration of the Eucharist among believers, irrespective of denominational lines. Members of the Mennonite and Brethren churches were equally impacted. Both groups carefully patrolled their borders when it came to incorporating the new spirituality. In the end individuals drawn to the *Allianz* found they could not live comfortably in either community and formed

their own congregations. It seemed that, in the words of the ancient monk Arsenius, Russian Mennonites found it difficult to "flee, be silent and pray always." Theirs was not a spirituality of the desert.

Was it possible that Russian Mennonite spirituality in the early twentieth century might well have been crippled by a functional, transgenerational Christianity that did most things right yet curtailed intimacy with God? Such a statement seems surely heretical, since the Russian Mennonite world of that day functioned with a civic and religious efficiency never before achieved. Church structures, both local and corporate, were precisely defined. Long standing ecclesiastical organizations deftly managed internal or external problems confronting the church. Mennonite clergy, while unsalaried, nevertheless constituted something of a professional elite with accepted ordination procedures, preaching privileges and control of baptismal and communion rites as well as an assumption of the submission of the laity. With few exceptions theological education was by apprenticeship, a system that ensured continuity both in doctrine and church practice. It seemed that all things were in place and worked well.

If "spirituality" meant "living the Gospel," Russian Mennonites scored high. By 1914 they had founded and supported an impressive array of benevolent and welfare institutions that benefited populations beyond the borders of their own communities. Hospitals and a nurses' training school ensured that the most up-to-date medical services were available. A mental hospital, seniors' homes, an orphanage, a school for the deaf and hearing impaired all pointed to the "Christianness" of a well developed social conscience. Christian publications, either imported or locally produced, were widely accessible. Russian Mennonites were secure in their identity and even the threat of assimilation into Russian culture appeared manageable. Few anticipated that World War I would set into motion a series of cataclysmic developments that virtually eradicated all vestiges of Mennonite cultural and religious identity. It seemed ironic that, as their world collapsed, their spirituality flowered.

There were several identifiable stages in that process. Revolution and civil war brought widespread physical destruction, disease, famine and death. Some still clung to the hope of reconstructing what had been, others seized the opportunity to emigrate. All hope for continuity vanished with Stalin's ascendancy and the radical restructuring of the economy. Arrests and exiles became common place. In the early 1930s Ukraine experienced the second great famine of the Bolshevik era. Forced collectivization which targeted the "kulak" ("wealthy tight-fisted peasant") meant exile for many Mennonites. Survival in northern and eastern camps that had often not yet been built was problematic. A third destructive stage involved the so-called "Great Terror" of 1937-38 with its arbitrary arrests, long-term sentences or simply outright execution. As a result, most Mennonite villages were populated by women, children and the aged.

In Ukraine the final stage of Mennonite dissolution came with the Nazi invasion in 1941. Stalin ordered the deportation of all Germans in Ukraine, a project somewhat thwarted by the rapid advance of the German army. With the German retreat in 1943, Mennonites and Germans behind the German lines fled westward. Those deported eastward faced further dispersion as conscripts for Stalin's "Work Army" or collective farms in the Asiatic republics. The circumstances allowed for minimal community life or even family life.

What has all this to do with twentieth-century Russian Mennonite spirituality? It is difficult to document the collective response to the affliction and distress of more that two decades. Here and there reminiscences or letters provide accounts of special

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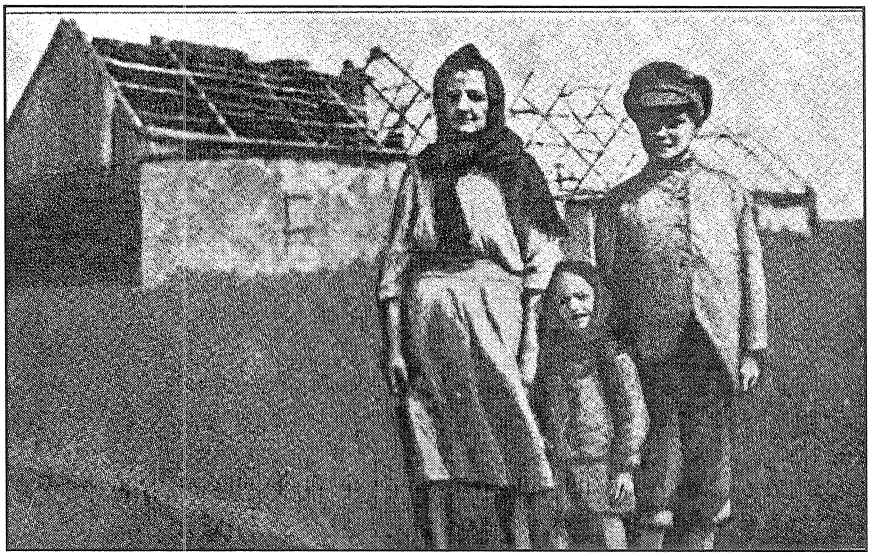

Photo Credit: Meine Flucht

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encounters with God or evidence of sustaining faith amid impossible circumstances. In this setting the vocabulary of the programmatic and institutionalized spirituality of our day – spiritual exercises, mentors, soul care, meditation – appears superficial and trivial. By contrast there is only authenticity, truthfulness, vulnerability. No other spectators except God watch the wounded and exposed soul.

The spirituality content of Mennonite manuscript and printed sources reflecting Mennonite exile and Gulag experiences is extremely variable. Some give expression to the pain of these experiences by simply listing events and happenings in a prosaic, factual fashion. On the whole, men have an inability to portray their interior life and the impact of events upon their soul. The pathos surrounding them somehow needs to be controlled and recorded in a detached fashion. Life must have structure, even amid chaos. When considerable time has elapsed between the events and the writing of the memoirs, some men tend to become "preachy," generously citing Scripture. It seems almost as if they want to establish control or give divine meaning to their life narratives. Often the reader who is looking for evidence of divine intimacy or profound soul encounters will be disappointed.

By contrast, the reminiscences of women are self-disclosing, frank and intimate. The reader has the sense of raw faith amid raw circumstances. Though events may be sequenced much like the recollections of men, women's accounts are straightforward and direct; their recall is more graphic and self-disclosing. There is deep emotion, even if the memoirs are recorded long after the events they describe. As women disclose the discontinuity of their lives, they exhibit a simplistic, tenacious clinging to God. There is an expectation that God will respond to the deepest needs of their souls. There is a sense of immediacy, of touching the very fabric of life. Perhaps the words of a simple yet theologically profound song apply:

Dance, dance whoever you may be
For I am the Lord of the dance said He.

The women's dance with Christ is heartfelt, tender and intimate. His presence meets the deepest needs of their souls.

It was difficult to sustain the tempo of that dance after Stalin's death in 1953. Exile from home villages, the breakup of the community and family, survival as isolated strangers in the camps and collective farms of the eastern Russian empire – was it possible to rebuild and forge a new identity? If one were to search for vestiges of spirituality beyond the individual experience during the 1930s and 1940s, we might find it amid songs remembered, Bible verses recited, prayers spoken, and Bible stories told to children. There were spontaneous small gatherings of believers that often generated widespread conversions. Such renewal was largely the result of female leadership and female spirituality.

It was only in 1955 that Germans collectively were free to leave the "special settlements" of forced labour battalions where some had lived since Hitler's invasion in 1941. Now the exiles, mostly men, returned to homes and fellowship groups established by women. In many instances a sad scenario ensued. Long dormant memories of a bygone church order and male leadership re-emerged. Women were set aside and their contribution minimized. Isolated from one another by the vastness of the Soviet eastern empire, these devoted women had raised Mennonite spirituality to unprecedented heights. Now normalcy allowed ancient memories and patterns to set the stage for the post-Stalin Mennonite church. What had been would now be. Past memories became sacred. A decades old spirituality was revived, but with it came a return to conformity and legalism. A liberty and even joy achieved amid suffering was replaced

Photo Credit: Meine Flucht

by a discipleship based on regulations and group submission to law. Nostalgia for the certainties of the past may have helped many congregations to chart unknown seas, but Christian freedom and liberty were sacrificed in the process. Strict church order, moralistic preaching and a conformist piety ensured a return to "Mennonite melancholy." Once more, as in the past, spirituality was institutionalized. Piety triumphed over spirituality.

* * *

Russian Mennonite letters and even memoirs reflecting the upheavals that followed the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 exist in large numbers. Those that document the dissolution of Mennonite society constitute a majority, while those reflecting our narrow definition of spirituality are in the minority. Often they combine both themes. The following are only a very small sampling of what is available.

A letter from Katya in a northern camp, November 25, 1930:

I have just cried my heart out. My heart wants to break for pain. I think, dear mother, brothers 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.... In the Omsk prison I managed ... but this is too much. Yesterday amid storm and cold we had to go out.... I had to walk 8 verst in deep snow.... (At Omsk) I always had warm feet. When we left they took our shoes away, 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 minus 45 degrees. I haven't a single kopeck. Sending parcels and money doesn't help. We get neither.... I want to endure until my pilgrimage ends ... and I can rest my weary body at a place prepared by the Lord.

There are still more people coming here, the place is overfilled.... 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 can hardly walk any more.... Even though I am almost dying of hunger, I hope I'll survive and experience the hour when we (happy and healthy) see each other again. As long as I live no one will take this hope from me. I comfort myself with the thought that for God nothing is impossible. Should the ancient God not be able to free us from this slavery.... The right hand of the highest can change all things.... I am now going to God's school where I have already learned a lot and am daily learning.

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. He knows what I need and where it will come from.

Excerpts from the letters of Susan Toews:

The Lord can and will help us all, so let us not lose our faith in Him (January 9, 1930).

If God wants us to stay alive, He will provide the means (March 26, 1931).

The Lord has helped us until now and He will continue to help if we only trust Him (August 19, 1931).

Next month I'm 40. We know what has been, and what is to come we'll leave with the Lord (December 26, 1931).

If things elsewhere are as bad as here, then the end is near and our suffering will intensify, but He who hears the cries of his children will not forsake us (February 21, 1932).

Yet if we are to remain alive the Lord will have ways and means to keep us. If not He will give us grace to depart for home where all earthly sorrow ceases (May 31, 1934).

This goes on [the lack of food] day after day, and often one has to ask oneself, "Oh Lord why?" Yet He has always helped and will continue to help (March 10, 1935).

I am content with what God has decided. Do we really need anything more? (April 7, 1937)

Susan's last letter was written from Melitopol on April 13, 1941. With Hitler's invasion of Russia all Germans living there were loaded on trains and sent to Kazakhstan. Here the Toews sisters lived in a hut dug into the ground. Susan died on July 10, 1943.

From the memoirs of Justina Martens (1943-44):

I had an almost new kerchief which I wanted to exchange for milk. One morning as we went to work it was so cold that I decided to wear the kerchief until the day became warmer.

It was a long way to the hay field. I felt warm, took off my kerchief, folded it and put it in my jacket which I later took off and carried under my arm. When we arrived at our destination, I looked for my kerchief. It was gone! I told the ladies, who were all Germans, that I had to go back for it. They said I'd never find it again because we had cut across the fields. I told them that the Lord knew I needed the kerchief and that I would find it again....Trusting the Lord I went to the next hay stack, knelt and asked the Lord for his guidance and help. Sadly I returned. I was tired and discouraged. Suddenly a few steps in front of me I saw my kerchief. I could not believe it, I fell on my knees and amid tears thanked God for the miracle. I forgot all about my tiredness and quickly walked back to the women who were waiting for me. I waved with my kerchief and they were happy for me.

A Personal Journey

(an abridged excerpt from a sermon)

by Leonard Neufeldt

1. I was born and raised in Yarrow, British Columbia: a predominantly Mennonite Brethren village comprised almost 100% of Dutch-Russian Mennonite immigrants who had fled the Soviet Union after Stalin came to power. They had to leave behind their Russian Mennonite colonial system, but it had not left them. Yarrow, one of the two first Mennonite settlements in BC, and very soon the principal one, was to be the Jerusalem of BC Mennonitism, a hybrid community constituted mainly of their colonial Russian way of life and some necessary Canadian adjustments. Like most other young men in the village, my father, a pioneer, was baptized shortly before he was married. As a candidate for church membership, he had to affirm some kind of experience of divine forgiveness as well as loyalty to the local congregation. The church was our social and religious centre. We were culturally segregated by choice, and we attended Mennonite schools five days each week, German religious school on Saturday, and Sunday School on Sunday.

However, over time Yarrow witnessed the gradual collapse of this experiment in replicating the Russian Mennonite way of life and religious practice. What replaced it was North American religious fundamentalism and conservative evangelicalism. In 1949 a minister who had rebelled against his ministerial father's tolerant views in favor of fundamentalism and trained at Prairie Bible Institute, a fundamentalist bastion, assumed the leadership by popular vote. A decade later my Uncle Peter, a conservative evangelical, became the minister. By then I had already moved to greener fields far away.

2. After my first year of university in BC, I spent three years of studies at the Mennonite Brethren Bible College and College of Arts (now part of Canadian Mennonite University) in Winnipeg, the capital city of Manitoba. Simultaneously, I took courses at the University of Winnipeg. At MBBC, I spent most of my evenings reading in the library until the lights were turned off. As I was leaving the library one evening, a professor I greatly admired and loved happened to be at the door. "Len," he commented, "You spend much time in the library. What are you reading?" "Mostly the books that have the warning on the inside of the cover that the views of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the college," I replied. "Good!" he responded. "Good for you." I had become a liberal evangelical – quite liberal.

After graduate studies at the University of Illinois, I began slowly drifting into the quasi-religious stream, and in my almost 35 years of university life, I drew more and more into the current of this stream. Yet I also found myself swimming upstream; in my heart I was something like a very liberal evangelical, in my head dismissing much of traditional Christian teaching.

All the while I was a blue-blooded Mennonite, proud of my heritage, openly identifying with it, and ready to defend Mennonites who, in my view, were not being treated fairly or justly, whether I agreed with any of their views or not. And I continued to consume verenki, borscht, and farmer's sausage with gusto.

4. Moments of counter-current in my professional years:

(a) An evening with the late Roy Vogt, a distinguished economist at the University of Manitoba as well as a Mennonite literary editor and lay theologian. As we discussed our personal religious journeys, Roy observed with considerable energy that as a blue-blooded Mennonite he had had no concept or experience of grace until he spent a year or two at the University of Hamburg in Germany studying under the renowned theologian of grace, Helmut Thielecke, who is known for statements such as this: "While we are at worship, the wolves may be howling in our souls. Thus our need for the grace of God." When Vogt returned to North America, he visited an enormous number of Mennonite writings and many Mennonite churches but failed to find a credible theology of grace. For years I reflected on that evening's discussion; only in recent years did I find out some of its meaning.

(b) Early in my career I read William James on the "will to believe" and decided that this volitional inclination was probably in me. But more recently I read Paul on the gifts of the spirit and was surprised to find faith defined as a gift of God's spirit. So, the will to believe was a gift. I could acknowledge it with thanks and accept grace with gratitude.

Photo Credit: Katrine Kaarsmaker

(c) When Purdue University first established a program in Jewish Studies, I and several other colleagues were asked whether we would be willing to help out as a freebie to help the program lift off and fly on its own. I readily consented. Some of our closest friends were Jews, and this assignment would introduce us to the Jewish community in the area. My 17-year association with Jewish Studies was one of the most gratifying experiences of my life. Perhaps the most important insight I gained from this association is that skepticism and doubt need not be hostile to faith but could serve as the fertile soil for both grace and faith.

A will to believe, the gift of faith, a personal acknowledgement of grace, the freedom to question and doubt with the quasi-religious, a will to believe, faith, grace. The wolves do not howl. What is offered is inner calm, composure, an imperturbable spirit. Don't be anxious about the future, the Jesus of Matthew taught us. What I've just described is what Mennonites over the centuries have called "*Gelassenheit.*" It is a beautiful concept, and despite what the commentary of our Confession of Faith states, the term has never meant submission or obedience. It means tranquility, the lack of spiritual anxiety. This is the flowering and fruit of grace.

Leonard Neufeldt is Professor Emeritus of New England Studies and former Chair of American Studies at Purdue University. He was born and raised in Yarrow, BC.

Der alte Gott lebt noch *(The ancient God still lives)*

Introduction and translation by Louise Bergen Price

I first came across the quotation Der alte Gott lebt noch (the old/ancient God still lives) in a letter written to my Great-aunt, Mariechen Janzen Koslowsky, consoling her for the death of her son (and only child), fallen in battle in March 1945. Mariechen's husband had died in a prison camp in 1936. Her parents and two brothers had died of starvation in the Gulag, while two other brothers were presumed dead. Of her whole family, only one sister remained.

Words of comfort do not seem adequate in these circumstances, Mariechen's cousin, Johann G. Rempel, writes. Instead, he will send her the same words a father used to comfort his family during the Machno terrors: "The old God still lives." Katja's letter, in the earlier article by John B. Toews also refers to the "ancient God."

Both Mariechen and Katja would have recognized this quote from the following story found in Deutsches Lesebuch für Volksschulen in Rußland.

Auerbacher Ludwig. *From Deutsches Lesebuch für Volksschulen in Rußland.* Prischib: Gottlieb Schaad, 1919.

It was a Sunday morning. The sun shone bright and warm into the room and a gentle refreshing breeze came through the open window. Outside, under a blue sky, the birds exulted and all of nature, clothed in green and bedecked with flowers, appeared like a bride on her wedding day. But although joy reigned outdoors, in the room only sadness and depression held sway. Even the housewife, usually cheerful and lively, sat with downcast eyes and a sad countenance at her breakfast. Finally she arose without eating, wiped a tear from her eye, and hurried to the door.

It seemed as though a curse had been placed on the house. Inflation was rampant, business did poorly, taxes had become ever more burdensome and the household income diminished from year to year. The future seemed to hold only poverty and scorn. The husband, who was normally an industrious and orderly man, had long been saddened by the state of affairs, so much so that he had deep misgivings over the future; sometimes he even stated that he may as well do away with himself and put an end to this hopeless and miserable existence. No words of encouragement from his wife did any good; neither did any attempts by his friends to console him. He only became more quiet and depressed.

The well-disposed reader will think that it is no wonder that finally the wife also lost her courage and joy. But her sadness came from a completely different source, as we will soon learn. When the husband noticed that his wife was mourning as she left the room, he stopped her and said, "I won't let you go until you tell me what's wrong."

She said nothing for a while, and then sighed. "Ah, dear husband, I dreamed last night that our dear Lord God has died and the dear angels were burying his body."

"Ridiculous!" said her husband. "How can you believe something so stupid? Think about it my Love, God can't die!"

Then the face of his wife became cheerful, and she took both of her husband's hands, and, holding them tenderly she said, "So he still lives, the ancient God?"

"Yes, of course," said her husband.

"Who could doubt that?"

Then she embraced him, and looking at him with her dear eyes glowing with hope, peace and joy she said, "Now then, Man of my Heart, if the ancient God still lives, why don't we believe and trust in him, who has counted each hair on our heads and who lets nothing happen that is not in his will; who clothes the lilies and nourishes the sparrows and the young ravens who cry for food."

At these words, it seemed to the husband as if his eyes were opened and the ice around his heart melted. And he laughed for the first time in a very long while, and he thanked his dear wife for the trick that she played on him in order to renew his hope and trust in God. And now the sun shone cheerfully into the room and on the contented couple, and the breeze refreshed their transfigured faces, and the birds exulted loud thanks from their hearts to God.

Mennonite Templers

by Robert Martens

[The Templers] possessed rich spiritual gifts in the areas of pedagogy, ethics and social responsibility.... We are gripped by deep sorrow when we deal with the topic of the quarrels and differences of these three groups of brothers, that is, the old Gemeinde, the Brethren and the Templers, since within all of them there were some of the best men of the century. (PM Friesen qted in Sawatzky 23)

Mention "Mennonite Templers" and the reaction will very likely be absolute bafflement. The very name seems to suggest a cult. Or it might be confused with the Knights Templar, the order that originated with the Crusades and is currently a popular theme in pulp fiction. Even Mennonite historians have largely neglected the Templers, considering the movement too peripheral, perhaps, or too unorthodox. The Russian Templer groups, however, had roots in the same German Pietism as did the Mennonite Brethren – the Lutheran evangelist and reformer Edouard Wuest was an avid Templer supporter – and some of the best and brightest Mennonites found a home among the "Friends of Jeru salem," as the Templers were also known. In fact, most Russian Templers were Mennonites, and nearly all, even while enlisting in Templer congregations, retained their Mennonite status, partially in order not to lose their special ethnic privileges granted by the Russian state. And in the ferment of the landless revolt of the 1860s in which Mennonite Brethren were heavily implicated, the Templers played a significant role.

The *Deutscher Tempel* (German temple) found its origins among the Pietists of Wuerttemberg, who reacted against the perceived stale liturgy of the established Lutheran Church, and emphasized the renewal of both the inner spiritual life and outward Christian practice. The Templers were, in their early stages, awash in the irrational forces of apocalypticism. After prelate Johann Albrecht Bengel prophesied that the world would end in 1836, groups of Pietists emigrated to Russia, hoping to find refuge there from the Antichrist and intending to move on from Russia to Palestine, where the central events of Christ's return would take place. Some of them formed colonies near the Mennonite settlement of Molotschna. The Pietists eventually became quite comfortable in their new home, however, and a further emigration to the Holy Land seemed to be temporarily forgotten.

In Germany, meanwhile, Christoph Hoffmann agitated for Pietist-influenced reform in a weekly journal, *Süddeutsche Warte* (South German Watchtower), and became so popular with the public that he was elected to the Frankfurt Parliament in 1848. Soon he came to the conclusion, however, as had so many Anabaptist/Mennonites before him, that state power was inherently unspiritual and corrupt. "I feel very strongly," he wrote, "that it would be of great value if a number of needy and resourceful people would be united in a land of their own where they could develop a healthy social life for mankind" (Sawatzky 12). To that end Hoffmann proposed a gathered community of a holy people who would live together in preparation for the Kingdom of God on earth.

Conflict with the Lutheran establishment was inevitable, but the Friends of Jerusalem pressed forward, purchasing a rather decrepit estate called Kirschenhardthof to serve as their headquarters. When Hoffmann took it upon himself to perform confirmation rituals there, the Lutheran Church formally excommunicated his entire congregation. As a result the Temple Society was founded in 1861, the name finding its basis in Scripture: "Let yourself be built up as living stones as the temple of God among humanity" (Sawatzky 15). The movement immediately flourished, despite quarrels among its leaders, with a total of some 3000 members in Germany, Russia and America. The first attempts at establishing colonies in Palestine ended in failure and death, but further efforts succeeded, with settlements lasting until just after World War II. Templers developed the famous Jaffa Orange brand, and played a major role in the development of the city of Haifa. From the start, the Templers placed a high priority on education and knowledge of current events, initially, perhaps, as a prerequisite for understanding the social and political conditions of the end times. Rather oddly, this emphasis on the intellect was to transform them over the years from a fervently Pietist outgrowth into a universalist rationalist group with some affinities to the Unitarian Church.

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Mennonites became connected with the Templer movement when Johannes Lange, from the Molotschna village of Gnadenfeld, was sent for a three-year education at Kirschenhardthof, where a school had been established. He returned to Russia seized with an irrepressible and somewhat arrogant vision of what Templers could accomplish. In 1857 he cooperated with other Mennonites in the founding of a school in Gnadenfeld, thereby intending to raise educational standards and develop Mennonite consciousness of ethics and history. The first efforts of the Russian Templers were entangled with those of the Mennonite Brethren reformers, and landlessness was most certainly a major issue. Templers sometimes quarrelled with their Mennonite Brethren counterparts in their struggle with the Old Church, but cooperation occurred as well.

It was a time of deep and shameful division among Russian Mennonites. Johannes Lange was imprisoned for five months. In 1863 the Templers officially seceded from the old *Gemeinde* as the Evangelical Mennonite Church of Gnadenfeld. Finally, the Friends of Jerusalem, concluding that life in the Molotschna had become untenable, founded several colonies in the Caucasus, including Orbelianovka and Tempelhof, which grew from primitive conditions of disease and theft into prosperous settlements. In 1888, Alexander III personally visited what was by now considered the model village of Tempelhof.

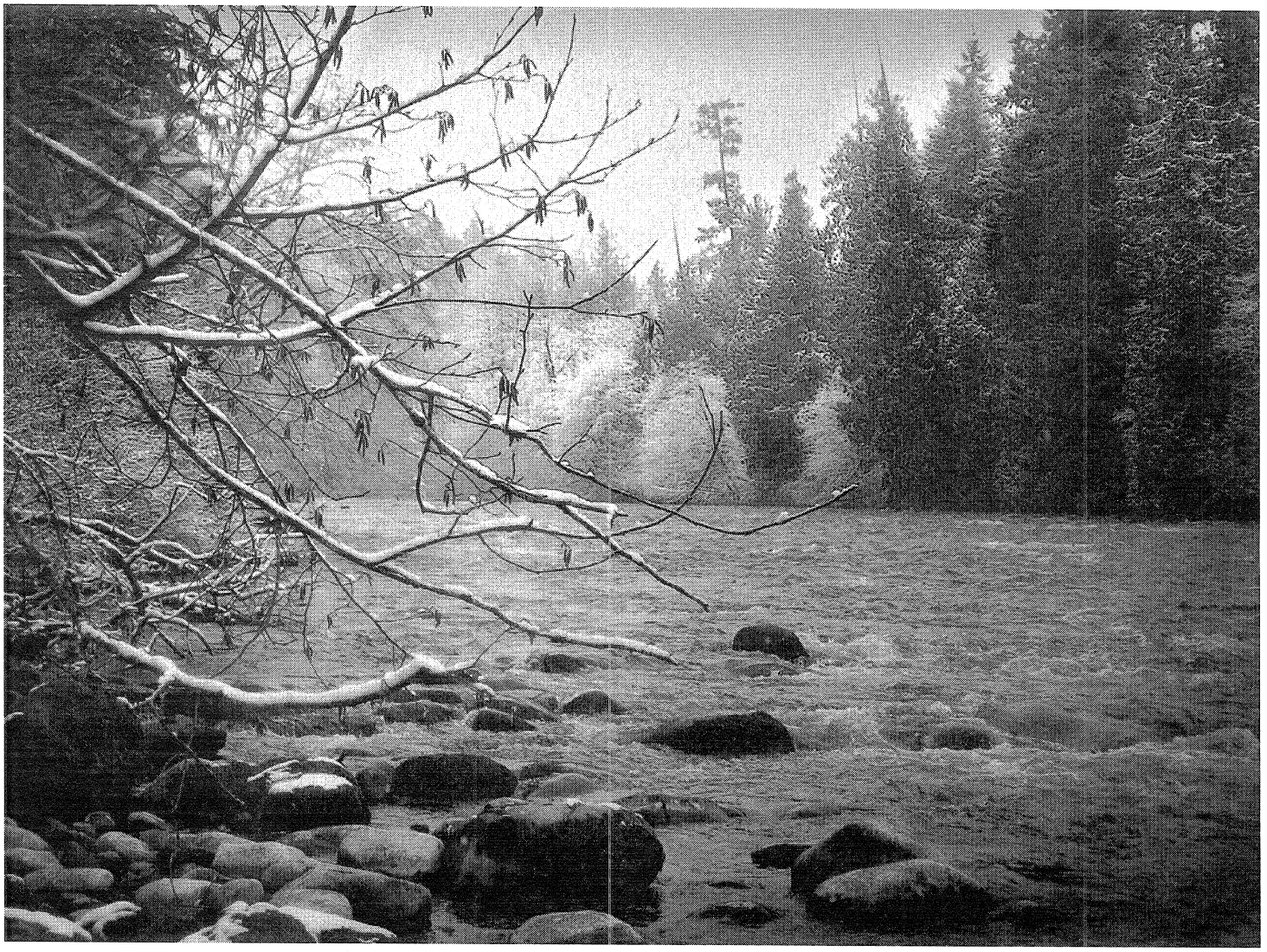


Photo Credit: Katrine Kaarsmaker

Several Temple congregations were also inaugurated in the Mennonite villages of Wohldemfuerst and Alexanderfeld in the Kuban. The Templers in this area were nearly one hundred percent Mennonite. Here a measure of cooperation, a Temple ideal, was finally realized, with Mennonite Brethren and Templers actually holding joint services for a time before finally separating.According to Sawatkzy, "This

separation seems to have taken place in a spirit of mutual respect and toleration.... When the Mennonite Brethren group gathered in Wohldemfuerst the Templers met in Alexanderfeld and vice versa. People met along the way and greeted each other. In their daily life they formed a common community" (29).

After the thirty-year land lease expired in the Caucasus, the Templers were obliged, but with state aid, to relocate to the new colonies of Romanovka and especially Olgino, which now became the centre of the movement in Russia. The cultural and educational standards were exceptionally high in Olgino, which counted university graduates among its members and supported activities such as a number of choirs, bands, a string orchestra, and a theatre which even staged a production of Goethe's *Faust.* Conflict among Templers was not unusual, but the ideal was commonality, a transcendence of dogma, and a search for God-given truths outside of narrow denominationalism. With these priorities of intellect and universality, the Templers were beginning to distinguish themselves from the general Mennonite population, and moving far beyond their Pietist origins.

The Russian Templer settlements eventually suffered the ravages of revolution and Stalinist brutality all too familiar to Mennonites. Meanwhile, the Temple colonies in Palestine suffered a temporary setback when several hundred members were interned in Egypt by the British during World War I. Compensation was paid out, however, by the Mandate government of Palestine, and between the two great wars, the Templers flourished, founding the Bank of the Temple Society and the famous Allenby Hotel. For some, unfortunately, "Germanness" seemed to trump universalist ideals, when a number of young Templer men enlisted in Hitler's armed forces. The result was once again internment, with barbed-wired being strung around their colonies, and eventual deportation of all but the weak and sick to Germany and Australia in the late 1940s.

Today only about one thousand Templers remain, mostly in Australia, where youth clubs and homes for the aged have been established through their efforts, and even a new temple built. The Templers, however, are no longer a community-based organization, but constitute a union of focus and interest groups, for which Jesus is seen more as an example than as a son of God. Perhaps their ideals of including all humankind as children of God contributed to the secularization and waning of a once vibrant spiritual movement. On the other hand, at a time in Russia when Mennonites were engaged in embarrassing political and religious disputes, the Temple ideal of cooperation beyond all legalistic dogma could have done much to restore lost love and respect.

* * *

What is the essence of your religion? We answer: Our religion consists of trying to establish a direct relationship to our deity, of desiring to discern God's will for our life in the world. We recognize the primacy of all truth, the nobility of all that is beautiful and perfect and the divinity of all that is good. We seek to realize all divine demands for a moral order in our life and in the world. Our religion is thus not a religion of faith and confession, but one of life and works; it is a way of life.

The source from which we take the impetus for such a life is the love which has been implanted by the deity into mankind and awakened there – the love of truth, of the noble and beautiful and of the good; in a word, the love for all that is divine and eternally valid. And that shall be your religion too. A wellspring of such a life-giving religion must spring up in your innermost being. You are not to believe and confess a God whom you learn about today and who is debated away tomorrow. You are to know the divinity which is at work within your own spirit; your spiritual eye shall become open to its view of the world and of humanity and your will shall be attuned to that spirit's will. Your religion shall be a direction in life also; a courageous partaking of the noble goals in life and the eternal verities of humanity. In this religion you shall work together with the leading spirits of the ages and of all peoples and gain strength from them. Whoever holds high the banner of truth, whoever displays to the world the pure ideals by artistic creation, whoever strives for the good of humanity with all his moral power – these are your brothers in spirit, regardless of nation, class or profession. Let their striving be united with yours, their work with yours, their spirit with yours. (Elder Dietrich Dyck, at a 1913 Temple confirmation in Olgino qted in Sawatzky 43)

Sawatzky, Heinrich. *Mennonite Templers.* trans. & ed., Victor Doerksen. Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1990.
Wikipedia

My Ecumenical Journey

by Vern Ratzlaff

My ecumenical journey started at Princess Margaret High School, Surrey, in the 1950s, when a group of us met for prayer and worship as part of the Inter-School Christian Fellowship (ISCF) chapter there. I don't remember the religious affiliations of the other students or that of the sponsor, Mr. Stewart, a caring person who taught English in class and Christian gentleness in all of life. It continued at the University of British Columbia through Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF) meeting and a prayer cell thereof (with Anglican, Baptist and Mennonite members); this interaction with Student Christian Movement people prodded me to a larger vision of the church's mission.

But openness to other parts of the Christian faith took a sinister turn when I was teaching in a Mennonite school in Yarrow, BC. It was the early 1960s, and I received a telephone call from the priest-principal of the Catholic school in Chilliwack, who said that since the Vatican conference had just concluded and that Catholics were being encouraged to reach out to fellow Christians, would I come to speak to his students about Mennonites. I was very upset that he had invited me, when I should have invited him first.

Involvement with IVCF and ISCF intensified in Manitoba, where for a few years I was part-time on staff with IVCF, with primary responsibilities for theological input at retreats and community seminars – working, studying and praying with the whole spectrum of church traditions.

Teaching at the University of Winnipeg with spiritual mentors like Ken Hamilton was another rich experience. My work with Mennonite Central Committee in Manitoba, and the formation of the Manitoba Council for International Cooperation also strengthened commitment to inter-church activities; opportunities also came to speak across the whole spectrum of the Christian faith community. I found my Mennonite perspectives on evangelism and social concerns a rich mix to be shared with various churches – with the "evangelical" I stressed social concern; with the "mainline" I stressed outreach and evangelism.

With a Mennonite Central Committee assignment in Egypt came a new learning curve, working with Presbyterian, Catholic, and Orthodox adherents in a context where the church was a minority (only about 10% of the total population) and had survived two millennia of harassment, discrimination and persecution (from Romans, Byzantines and Moslems). With the Orthodox, common experiences of martyrdom and suspicion of empire building resulted in a rich companionship. Their story (although not, perhaps, the liturgy!) was my story.

Later, life in Saskatoon simply extended all this ecumenism; meaningful were close friendships with others on the Christian continuum (I think especially of the Catholic bishop, James Mahoney, at whose funeral I gave the homily; and Alan Minarcik, United Church of Canada pastor – the list is long). I was asked to start an advisory committee to the Regional Health Board that would mobilize religious bodies to better deliver health care, and so for seven years I chaired a group of Christians, Jews, Sikhs, Hindus, Moslems, Buddhists and First Nations representatives to ensure that the spiritual needs of patients (and to some extent also staff) were met.

My commitment to interfaith involvement comes from Paul's words that God has made of one blood all people; my commitment to inter-church life comes from a line in the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in the communion of saints" – that reflects my conviction that we are not the first and that we are not alone. My theology as an Anabaptist is grounded on cynicism of any authority – political, economic, ecclesial, and theological – a theology that keeps me open to whom I can work, fellowship and worship with.

Now in retirement, I pastor a small rural Mennonite congregation (part-time) and am on the faculty of the local Lutheran seminary – a good mix, together with the garden.

Vern has taught at high school, bible college and university; he was director of MCC (Manitoba and Eqypt) and on the pastoral team of the Nutana Park Mennonite Church, Saskatoon; now retired, he is part-time pastor of the Aberdeen Mennonite Church and on the faculty of the Lutheran seminary, Saskatoon.

UFV continues to expand its Mennonite Studies program.

by Bruce Hiebert

The University of the Fraser Valley continues to expand the courses it offers as part of the Mennonite Studies Certificate. This fall the university introduced a number of courses, including The *Mennonite Experience in Russia*, taught by Dr. Bruce Hiebert. This well-attended course covered the first settlement of Mennonites in Russia through to the *Umsiedler* exit of the 1980s. As a result of the course, University of Toronto Press has brought back into print the Rempel and Carlson book, *A Mennonite Family in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union*. This Russian Mennonite history course joins existing history courses in Mennonite-Anabaptist origins and the Canadian Mennonite experience.

Fall Banquet Report: Remembering Stalin's Gulag.

by Maryann Tjart Jantzen and Bruce Hiebert

Approximately three hundred guests attended the MHSBC annual fundraising banquet, held on Oct. 15, 2011, at Emmanuel church in Abbotsford, BC. After an excellently prepared meal and a stimulating time of visiting around the tables, attenders moved into the church sanctuary to hear Lorin Friesen's special music and Colin Neufeldt's sobering lecture entitled "The Experience of Mennonite Exiles at Siberian Special Settlements (1930-1933)."

Central to Dr. Neufeldt's presentation were his accounts of the experiences of Mennonites interned in the gulags. Working with a wide range of sources and illustrating his lecture with archival pictures, Neufeldt explored the difficulties of the internment, from arrest through harrowing travel conditions, to the terrible conditions of the camps. Thousands of Mennonites died in these camps as extreme work quotas, harsh conditions, terrible weather, and insufficient food took their toll. Many went begging at nearby Russian villages. Others desperately waited for expected parcels and money from Canada.

In this presentation, Neufeldt continued to explore the Mennonite experience in Stalin's Russia that has been the focus of his ongoing research. As new materials become available, he expands his in-depth examination of what happened to the thousands of Mennonites who suffered under the Communist regime.

Photo from Kroeker. Meine Flucht

Book Review

Brandt, Gareth. *Under Construction: Reframing Men's Spirituality.* Waterloo & Scottdale: Herald Press, 2009.

by Robert Martens

The term "male spirituality" conjures up images of beating drums around a campfire, of howling with the wolves, of man as a "warrior." Not so, writes Gareth Brandt in his book *Under Construction:* "Personally, I do not find the warrior at all helpful for developing a relevant and constructive spirituality in an age of increasing terror and violence" (37). Among evangelicals, writes Brandt, the emphasis on "a tougher, wilder masculine spirituality" (36) is an aggressive retort to the feminist movement. If in fact there is such a thing as "male spirituality," he writes, it must be inclusive and peace-building.

Brandt's book is a personal journey, a series of discoveries and meditations. Using ten metaphors based on the life story of the biblical Joseph, he turns the concept of the male warrior upside down.

He begins, for example, with the concept of "Beloved": "You were loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, bosses, and friends ever had the opportunity to say anything about you. You are beloved before anything else" (66). Accepting love, Brandt argues, is not a mark of timidity: "It is often difficult for men to let themselves be the beloved. The 'letting' takes active courage" (63).

All of Brandt's chosen metaphors are intended to "reframe men's spirituality," that is, to repudiate the warrior motif. The "Dreamer" grows from the assertive and individuated visions of the young man into a faith that comprehends the all: "The end point of spiritual growth is when the self is completely unified with God, others, and creation" (76-7). The spiritual "Journey" is a pilgrimage that overcomes fear and ends in a discovered community of love and faith. In our individualistic global culture where the concept of journey has been lost, Brandt contends, young men may seek out false communities such as gangs.

Even the masculine "Builder" of family and career needs to become more inward and reflective. Work is a sacred calling; money as the bottom line is an illusion; power must be redefined as empowering others; and fathering means letting go. In "Reconciliation," Brandt's unwarriorlike, Anabaptist-based inclinations are perhaps the most apparent: "Male maturity is more about the wisdom of building peace than about the wildness of making war" (173). Violence, he writes, is weakness. A communal spirituality – one that includes even death – is the ideal. Make no mistake, though, Brandt argues, citing Gandhi and King, anger against injustice is an essential part of any authentic spirituality. Passivity is not an option.

Under Construction: Reframing Men's Spirituality is written primarily for men, and for men of the Christian church. Some readers might feel that its language to be somewhat restrictive. The book, on the other hand, is accessible, thoughtful and provocative. It is also an act of courage. In "Wounded," Gareth Brandt tells of the sexual abuse he suffered as a young man at the hands of a trusted mentor. This book is the powerful story of his pilgrimage from pain to an epiphany of trust and reconciliation.

Book Review

Loewen, Harry. *Cities of Refuge: Stories from Anabaptist-Mennonite History and Life*. Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2010.

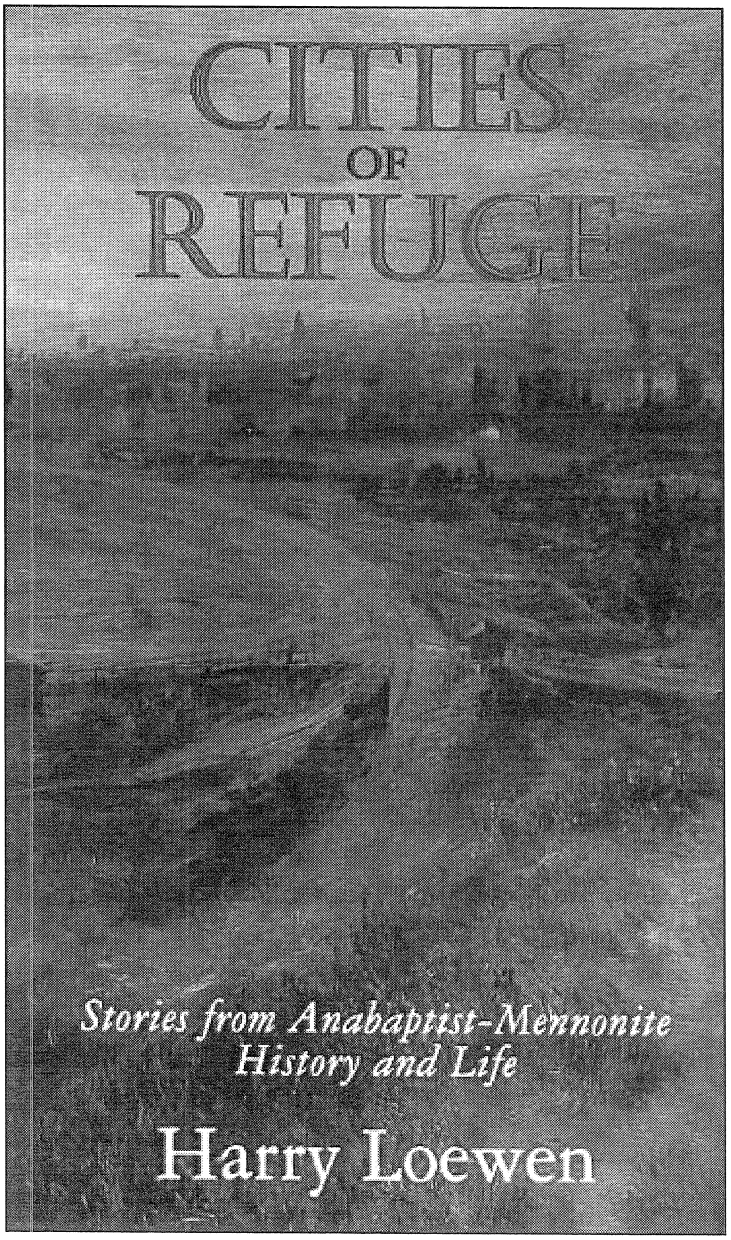
by David Giesbrecht.

There are many ways of writing history, ranging from academic to a more popular vein. In *Cities of Refuge*, Harry Loewen has chosen an approach that will be accessible to a wide reading audience. Continuing his story telling where he left off in *No Permanent City*, Loewen has penned another thirty-seven stories from the nooks and crannies of Anabaptist/Mennonite experience.

The entries are arranged in approximate chronological order, with the first story, "The City on a Hill," taking readers back to the dawn of Anabaptism and the tragic death of Felix Manz by drowning in the Limat River. Remarkably, as Manz was bound and pushed into the water, he sang a song of praise in Latin. By contrast, the last story, "He stepped on the American flag!" is about persecution of Mennonites in the USA during World War I, when a mob dragged minister Daniel Diener out of his rural Kansas home to tar and feather him, ostensibly for refusing to purchase war bonds.

Many early Anabaptists had little tolerance for artistic expression. Given their commitment to simple living, art seemed a frivolous diversion from true worship of God. However, this prejudice diminished among Dutch Mennonites with the emergence of significant numbers of Mennonite painters and engravers. In "No Graven Images!" readers meet Enoch Seemann, a *Vermahner*, or lay pastor, who became an accomplished portrait painter, and was appointed city painter *(Stadtmaler)* of Danzig. However, such public prominence was an affront to his severe Flemish Mennonite congregation, who placed him under the ban. In response, the Seemann family moved to England where Enoch became a portrait painter for British royalty. Little of his artistic work seems to have survived.

Several of the stories draw connections between Mennonites and famous individuals. For instance, "Spinoza among Dutch Mennonites" describes the close friendship of brilliant philosopher Baruch Spinoza with Mennonites who often met with him to discuss his ideas, and in time published most of his writings.



Similarly improbable was the friendship between Peter the Great, Tsar of Russia, and several Dutch Mennonites. In 1697 Peter came to Holland to study shipbuilding. During this time the ever curious Peter also met with prominent Dutch doctors, questioning them on how medical science might be improved in Russia.

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Peter was singularly impressed with the Mennonite doctor Nicholas Bidloo, whom he later invited to Russia. In 1717 Bidloo became the Tsar's personal physician and founder of the first Moscow Hospital School. As an expression of appreciation for his Mennonite friend, Peter presented him with a parcel of riverside property in Moscow, where Dr. Bidloo designed and planted a Renaissance garden.

Also included in Loewen's compilation are heart-rending stories of harsh treatment Mennonites experienced in Soviet Russia. "A strange land has become our homeland" chronicles the heroic leadership of Peter Rogalsky and Peter Janzen (the latter known to be hard of hearing and tough as cow leather) in leading a group of Ufa Mennonites, including young men who had participated in the *Selbstschutz* (self-defence), in their escape from Communist tyranny. Against all odds, this group was able to find passage on a decrepit boat sailing from the Georgian Port of Batumi for Constantinople, where MCC had established an immigration centre.

Sadly, not all Mennonites were fortunate enough to escape Soviet brutality. "From the Soviet Gulag to Canada" tells the graphic account of Jacob and Frieda Friesen, who as young people were exiled, along with their families, to the Lake Baikal region in eastern Siberia. Here all able-bodied individuals were forced into slave labour conditions so cruel that survival was barely possible. Eventually Jacob and Elfrieda met on a collective farm and married in 1953. Providentially, Elfrieda's father, Cornelius Penner, had earlier emigrated to Winnipeg. During Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's visit to the United Nations in New York in 1960, Penner was able to get within shouting distance of the Russian leader, calling out, "Mr. Khrushchev, please help me." This act of courage resulted in a brief meeting with Khrushchev himself, the outcome of which was permission for the Friesens to emigrate to Canada in 1972. A 2006 edition of the *Vancouver Sun* provided an extensive account of the Friesen saga.

Loewen also tells how the long shadow of Nazi tyranny fell on Mennonites during the war years. "Mennonite Martyrs in World War II" disturbingly chronicles the struggle in the souls of Dutch Mennonites about how to respond to German occupation. Some Mennonites like Pastor Cornelius B. Hyklkema accommodated the ideology of National Socialism in their theology and sought to propagate it. Others, and probably the vast majority of Dutch Mennonites, abhorred Nazi racism. Pastors such as Albert Keuter courageously denounced the deportation of Jews. For publicly exhibiting the courage of their convictions, Keuter and his son became martyrs for their faith. In "The All-Too-Human Miracle," Loewen narrates how 1,115 Soviet-born Mennonites dramatically escaped in 1947 from a devastated Berlin, then militarily controlled by the Red Army.

Several of the stories also provide insight into Mennonite experiences in post-Soviet settings. *"Dokta Apsche"* tells of the indomitable midwife and chiropractor Katharina Ratzlaff Epp, who with her family settled in the Paraguayan Chaco. Here she became not only a much-sought-after midwife delivering babies under often primitive conditions, but also the confidante of many lonely Mennonite women, as well as the conscience of abusive men. By contrast, "Mennonites Help Build an Ice Ship" links Canadian Mennonite conscientious objectors (COs) with highly secretive World War II technology. British inventor Geoffrey Pyke believed that a solidly built ice ship would be durable enough to withstand the destructive power of German submarines. With the somewhat sceptical support of Prime Ministers Churchill and Mackenzie King, Allied war planners agreed to build a 1,000 ton prototype aircraft carrier at Patricia Lake in Alberta. This endeavour was classified as the Habbakuk Project, but COs pressed into service for this monstrosity referred to it as Noah's Ark. In fact, they did not know the intended purposes of this ice ship. CO David D. Goerzen later recalled, "Who would have suspected that a warship, intended to sail the Atlantic, would be constructed in a secluded lake that was hundreds of miles from the ocean?" (250)

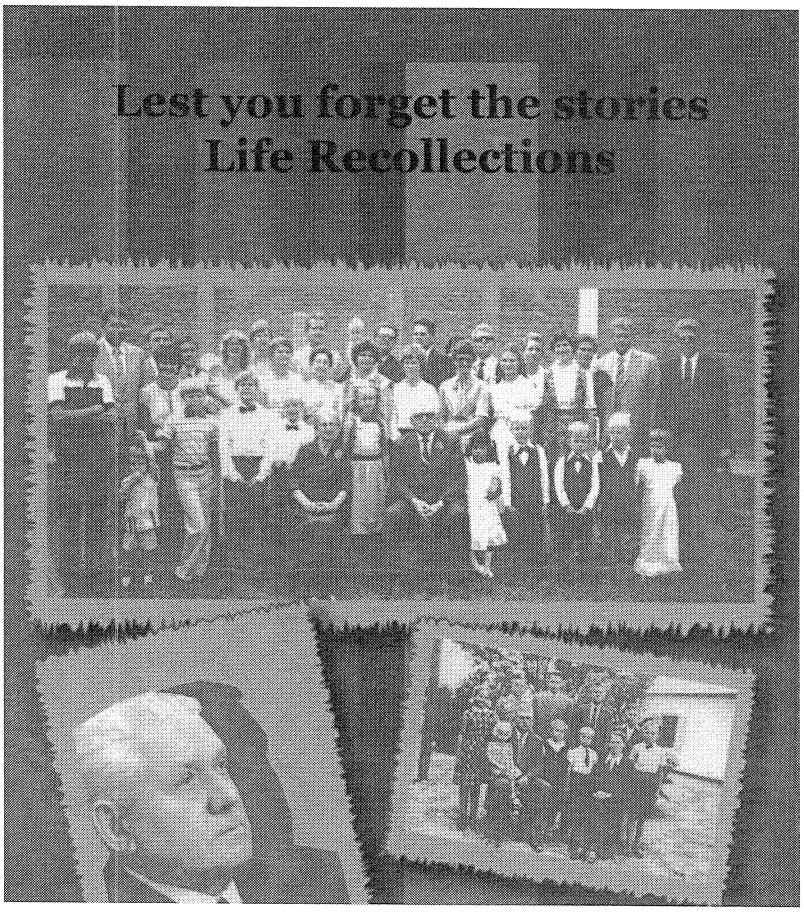
The thirty-seven stories in this collection offer fascinating and often little known glimpses into 500 years of the Mennonite sojourn. As well, the author's thorough acquaintance with history intensifies a rich reading experience. Anyone who enjoys a good story will not be disappointed.

Book Review

Duerksen, Heinrich. *Lest You Forget the Stories: Life Recollections.* Trans. Jake Balzer. Asunción: Editora Litocolor S.R.L. 2009.

by Robert Martens

Speaking fluent Russian in his youth and attending a Lutheran church, Heinrich Duerksen was already learning how to deal with the world beyond the Mennonite community. These skills, combined with a natural shrewdness and commitment to the ideas of progress and unity, later helped steer him through some profoundly difficult years as head mayor of Fernheim Colony in Paraguay.



From the start, Duerksen was peering into the future. His father, an estate manager in the Caucasus, was reluctant to leave Russia after the October Revolution, but Heinrich regarded emigration to Paraguay as an opportunity for self-advancement. In his articulate and thoughtful memoir, *Lest You Forget the Stories,* Heinrich Duerksen tells the story of his flight with the wave of 1920s Russian Mennonite refugees that journeyed through Germany and on to the Paraguayan Chaco, and of his family, political, and social life in Fernheim Colony.

The memoir is a document of its time. Duerksen's work at Yalve Sanga, the settlement organized by Mennonites as an aid project for the indigenous peoples of Paraguay, is sometimes described in terms that would be not used today. On the other hand, Duerksen's account of the influences of Hitler's National Socialism upon the Paraguayan community is both objective and honest. This book deserves to be read alone for the light cast upon those struggles. Duerksen's book, however, is much more than that, outlining in engaging detail how Fernheim, with the building of the Trans Chaco Highway and with large lines of credit from North America, achieved an impressive spurt of economic and social growth. Duerksen's hard work, not without controversy and opposition, was a vital part of that process.

Duerksen concludes the memoir with some intriguing thoughts on the future of Paraguayan Mennonites, who have been politically attacked as an arrogant and oppressive "state within a state." "We must realize," he writes, "that privileges are difficult to preserve in democratic states" (169). Integration, he says, is the key – not assimilation. Mennonites must practise peace by helping the landless and raising the standard of living of the Paraguayan poor. In this intriguing memoir, Heinrich Duerksen relates his vital role in the ascent from desperate poverty to the current affluence of the Mennonite colonies in the Chaco. Their survival, he suggests, depends not only on astute financial decisions, but on the Christian exercise of justice.

Loving the Silence

by Frieda Pätkau Fast

The Russian Revolution had turned everything upside down. The Bolsheviks made their changes with force. Their slogans were, "Religion is the opiate of the masses," and the words of the Internationale, "No higher power can save us, no God, no Kaiser, no tribune."

In 1925, our family lived in Neu Chortiza, Baratov. My father, Heinrich Pätkau, had died of typhus that he had contracted after World War I, leaving my mother with six children: Tina, Heinrich, Greta, Jakob, Lena, and me (Frieda). We did not have enough to eat.

We had inherited our home from our grandfather, *Ältester* (Elder) Jakob Pätkau. The clergy were accustomed to meeting in our home, and this continued even after both Father and Grandfather had passed away. It was a tragic time for clergy. Although the churches were still open, and baptisms and other church functions continued as much as possible, arrests were taking place.

One day my mother called all six of us to the table for a snack. Someone had given her a piece of honeycomb. What a feast that was! Six children gathered lovingly around their mother. We were so busy eating, we didn't notice at first when a man came into the room. He was a very nice-looking man, none other than Ältester Jakob Rempel. We were all sticky with honey, and Mother was embarrassed. I don't remember if Mother offered him anything to eat; there was probably nothing in the house.

In later years, I often wondered what happened to this intelligent and dedicated servant of God. From Delbert Plett's book *Diese Steine* (These Stones), I learned that Rempel and his family were among thousands who flocked to Moscow in 1929, hoping to emigrate. Instead, he was arrested and sentenced to ten years in Solowetzkije, Ostrowa. In 1932 he escaped, only to be arrested again. Once more he escaped, and in 1935 he fled to Turkestan where he lived with his son. In a letter that survives from this time, Rempel wonders how Jesus would have reacted to loss of family, imprisonment, or torture: "I became convinced that He would not speak out but he would remain silent even as he had when he experienced suffering. Then I, too, not only became silent but began to love the silence above everything" (Plett, 476).

Rempel was arrested again in March 1936, and imprisoned first in Vladimir (near Moscow) and then at Orel. The last letter his family received from him was dated 12 June, 1941. Rempel was a true martyr, and I honour him and all who lost their lives defending their faith in our Saviour. It is because of meeting this true servant of God when I was a child that I love Christ so deeply and believe his Word so firmly.

Plett, Delbert & Reger, Adina. *Diese Steine: Die Russlandmennoniten*. Steinbach: Crossway Publications, 2001. http://www.plettfoundation.org/Books/DieseSteine/230- 483.

GAMEO . "Jakob A. Rempel."

Frieda Pätkau Fast was born in Neu Chortitza, Ukraine, and now lives in Chilliwack, BC. For many years, she was a correspondent for Der Bote. *This is her third article for* Roots and Branches.

Rempel at a Siberian work camp

Gift Giving in Ukraine

An Entry from Ben and Linda Stobbe's Ukraine Blog

Saturday, August 13, 2011

Gift giving in most cultures can be a challenge at best. Gift giving in response to an invitation or an act of kindness or thoughtfulness can be an added complication. During Soviet times you appeared to have more options – a Bic pen, a T-shirt, or a pair of jeans was greatly appreciated. Now, with the vast array of consumer goods in Ukraine you have to be aware not only of cultural differences but also of finding something that is unique and truly valued. Our task in this regard has been made easier by a Mennonite organization and many people in Canada.

The Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia regularly receives donations of old Mennonite songbooks which were originally published in South Russia (now Ukraine). The Society often has several copies of the same book. Some of these books came from Halbstadt, Alexanderwohl, and Odessa; some have the handwritten names of the villages written inside the front cover. These *Liederperlen* and *Gesangbuecher* were among the items that families could not part with when they fled and provided encouragement and comfort to their owners.

Some of these books have been taken back to Ukraine and offered as gifts to local schools, universities, libraries, museums, and churches. This week we gave a *Gesangbuecher* dating back to the early 1900s to the library in Molochansk. When we pointed out that this book was published a mere 25 metres from the current library, the librarian was astounded. She exclaimed, "I am going to phone the newspaper to tell them what we just got!"

Thank you families, and thank you Mennonite Historical Society.

These aren't the only books published in Ukraine that we give out. The Ukrainian translation of Rudy Friesen's *Building on the Past* was recently published in Melitopol. People regularly come to the Mennonite Centre to buy the book at an affordable 50 UAH ($6). Several months ago a pastor bought several books for his congregation.

We also give these books away as gifts to schools, universities, libraries, museums, and influential leaders. We are still looking at how to make it available to Ukrainians for purchase online. One person who received the book in Melitopol this week simply said, "I never knew this story." This week alone the book went to a group from Lviv, the Ministry of Culture in Kiev, the library in Molochansk, a museum in Vasilievka, and the Director of the Social Care Centre in Tokmak.

Here, as in so many countries, villages are dying. It is interesting to see what they once were, as well as the spirit of the people who once lived there. The *Gesangbuecher* and *Liederperlen* speak of a spiritual home; Rudy's book illustrates the architecture of our earthly homes. The old books talk about our future and the new book talks about our past.

A church songbook placed in a school museum, or a copy of *Building on the Past* given to a village mayor show that people with common values and a sense of God's leading were able to forge a very productive and satisfying life in this grassland.

In describing the historical context of the Mennonite experience in Ukraine, Rudy says that Mennonites who are now coming to visit this country are doing so "neither to glorify nor mourn the past, nor to reclaim what they once owned, but in a spirit of mutual embrace." It is a wonderful experience to give a book, a kiss on the cheek, and a warm embrace. This is truly gift-giving.

For more information on the work of the Mennonite Centre visit our website at

http://www.mennonitecentre.ca

Quilte

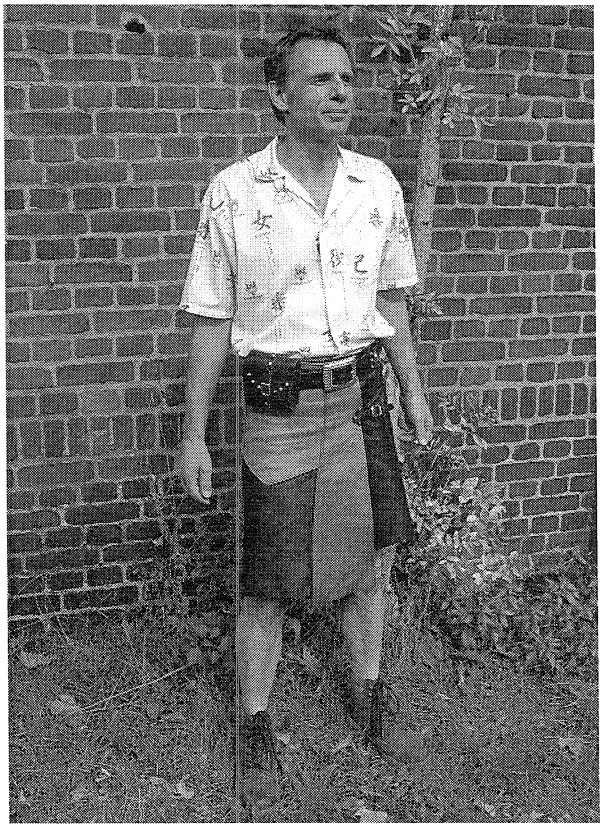
From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

The quilte is a mid-calf-length garment that has been worn as the traditional dress of men and male youths within Mennonite culture since the 16th century. The quilte originated as a garment that was both functional and modest: it permitted its wearer to assume the bow-legged position required for stoking (the harvesting of grain stalks by hand), while ensuring that the private parts of the wearer were not open to public view. Quiltes are similar in some respects to the Scottish Ulg, but are usually constructed of leather that has been rendered supple through chewing. Some ceremonial quiltes, usually worn at weddings, funerals, or the annual fall celebration of sobsenheizen, are made from brightly coloured patches of fabric in the well-known tradition of Mennonite quilting, which is undoubtedly the source of the name quilte. The Low-German name for the quilte is *schmootzenhosen.*

History

Little is known about the origin of the quilte. References to the garment first appear in Anabaptist tracts and culinary sources from the early 1540s. The earliest extant depiction of a quilte is a woodcut, reproduced in a treatise on poultry in 1587. Through the nineteenth century, under the influence of NoahWebster's simplified spelling system, quilte was sometimes spelled kwilt. In the early 20th century quiltes came under attack from both the more conservative and more liberal sides of the Mennonite community. For the conservatives, the tendency of some youths to decorate their quiltes with homemade trinkets -- such as dried slices of farmer sausage, carved depictions of Anabaptist Martyrs, or pieces of lint twisted into ribbons -- devalued the original utilitarian purpose of the quilte. For the liberals, the quilte -- which was designed in part to constrain the male private parts -- became a sign of a repressive attitude toward sexuality. For the most part, these conflicting perspectives were resolved at the 1978 Steinbach Congress. Today, the quilte persists as the standard garb of Mennonite men in Canadian communities such as Kitchener-Waterloo and American cities such as Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

* This article was placed on Wikipedia by an unknown author as a spoof. It was quickly removed.



Roots and Branches

is a publication of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC and is mailed three times per year to those who donate $25.00 or more per year. All donations will be receipted for tax purposes.

Your contributions are needed to further this work!

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Editorial Committee: Robert Martens, Louise Bergen Price, Heather Murray, Maryann Tjart Jantzen, Wilf Penner, Anne Andres

Staff: Mary Ann Quiring, Elisabeth Klassen

Mennonite Historical Society of BC
211-2825 Clearbrook Rd.
Abbotsford, BC V2T 6S3
Phone: 604-853-6177
Fax: 604-853-6246
Email: archives@mhsbc.com
Website: www.mhsbc.com
Hours: 9am-4pm Monday-Friday

Artist's Bio: Katrine Kaarsemaker

"Sometimes I like to take pictures"

Katrine Kaarsemaker grew up in the lower mainland (Clearbrook and Fort Langley) and Burkina Faso where her parents were MCC country reps (1990-1994). Perhaps this African experience inspired the love of travel that has taken her to many corners of the world: Australia, Africa, Central America, and Europe. In 2007, she went on the Camino Santiago pilgrimage—several of the photographs featured in this issue are from the pilgrimage. When she is not travelling or planting trees, Katrine can be found building a small home on Gabriola Island.

Katrine's photographic art can be found on Flickr at http://www.flickr.com/photos/k-kaarse/

Photo credit: Katrine Kaarsmaker

listen
the silence
after explosions of eye-rattling
gusts sudden as a grass fire
near the freeway

if you can't hear the silence
settling in, if you can't
walk over alone, sit down
with it in the shade of large oaks
let it touch you

let it whisper, "I am here,"
the emptiness filling you
like the slow throb of grace
where will you find
mercy enough to hold you when
the days turn cold
every word chilled
by the wind driving
an endless flotilla of clouds
flattened by the frozen earth?

P.S. Just outside our town limits
anyone can listen to the quiet
of an underground stream
that runs much farther
than they said only
a few years ago. Our town
now drinks from that stream.

~ Leonard Neufeldt