



Roots & Branches

Vol. 29 No. 1
February 2023

Periodical of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC

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

PSALM 78



First Ski. Acrylic on Canvas.

Herta Klassen

CONTENTS

Editorial	2
Music that Shaped Our Mennonite Souls.	2
Book Launches: Ellie Sawatzky, Sarah Ens, Lorraine Isaak, Loretta Willems	4
Orenburg Colony.	6
Life in Pretoria Before the Turmoil	13
The Calamitous Mennonite Settlement of Terek	17
Life and Death in Terek	21
Book Reviews: <i>On Holy Ground</i> , Dora Dueck, ed.	27
<i>Circling the Globe</i> by Doris Penner	28
BC's New "Mennonite" Premier	29
Goodbyes at the Museum and Historical Society: Remembering Peter Enns (1933-2022)	30
Remembering William Giesbrecht and Henry Thiessen.	31

Herta Klassen lives in Merritt, British Columbia. See more of her work at [instagram@hertaklassenart](https://www.instagram.com/hertaklassenart).

Artist statement (from the artist's Facebook page):

Creating art is my passion. Living in this beautiful corner of the earth is a gift that keeps giving to me as the seasons come and go. Perhaps, with my art, I'm trying to capture glimpses of this beauty so that it can linger in my or your home and continue to feed our souls.

I enjoy experimenting with both watercolours and acrylics on a variety of surfaces to create my art. At this time, I make very few limited-edition prints, so that the painting you buy is truly a one-of-a-kind piece.

"Art captures the eternal in the everyday, and it is the eternal that feeds the soul."

~Thomas Moore

Editorial

■ By Maryann Tjart Jantzen

It's the end of February and I'm thankful for the lengthening daylight, with its promise of spring. And, in the aftermath of the last few years, I'm sure we are all also thankful to be able to increasingly mingle together. These days, the Museum and Historical Society spaces are bustling with activity. The café is now open Monday to Friday, with daily offerings of delicious baking and soup (and *vereniki* with *schmaundt fat* on Tuesdays!). If you are in good health, please come and see us, enjoy coffee and a snack, peruse the exhibits and let the receptionist know that you'd like to venture upstairs to explore your family history.

Historical accounts of Mennonites settling in pre-Soviet Russia often focus on the significant events and people of the original Chortitza and Molotschna Colonies. But the many daughter colonies that emerged from these settlements all have their own unique histories. This issue features two of these settlements: Orenburg, the only Mennonite colony to survive as an intact, although diminished, settlement until the doors to immigrate to Germany were opened during the 1970s, and the doomed Terek Settlement, the youngest daughter colony, which lasted less than a quarter of a century. If you, like me, have family who originated in one of these settlements, you will be eager to learn more about

them. Each has a unique narrative shaped by specific geographical, cultural and political circumstances, with many community and individual stories still waiting to be told.

In this issue we also pay tribute to valued Historical Society and Museum volunteers whom we have lost in the past year. We honour their contributions to enriching and expanding our understanding of our Mennonite heritage and history.



Maryann Tjart Jantzen speaking at the MHSBC fundraiser, Abbotsford, October 2, 2022.

Photo credit: Jennifer Martens.

Errata

The June 2022 issue of Roots and Branches included excerpts from Irene Plett's "found" poem, "War Relief Diary." We mistakenly used a different title ("War Diary: Spring 2022 Russian Invasion, Ukraine"), and omitted a link to the full poem, found here:

<https://ireneplett.weebly.com/blog/war-relief-diary>

The September 2022 issue included an incorrect photo caption: p. 10, "...where Katherine's two daughters were buried in 1910." This should read "...buried in 1929."

Music that Shaped Our Mennonite Souls

MHSBC Annual Fundraiser, 2 October 2022, South Abbotsford MB Church

■ Reported by Robert Martens

The Mennonite Historical Society of BC marked its fiftieth anniversary with a celebratory afternoon of music in the Mennonite tradition. The first performing group, the Mennonite Educational Institute Concert Choir directed by Dean Wedel, was perhaps a bit more Menno-contemporary, with music from diverse cultures and syncopated beats. It was a lovely way to open—youthfully joyful. The choir was accompanied by pianist Caroline Simpson, who stepped in last-minute to perform throughout the afternoon.



Harry Heidebrecht narrating stories of hymns at the MHSBC fundraiser in Abbotsford.

MHSBC files.

In her introductory talk, Maryann Tjart Jantzen affirmed that the audience would be hearing “music that has shaped and inspired many of us.” Music, she said, “has the power to calm our hearts and ease our pain.” It can also lead to change, as in the Baltic states’ “Singing Revolution.” Further, “music can shape a culture’s self-understanding.” Possibly—though the evidence is scanty at this point—early Prussian Mennonites may not have permitted any singing in their churches, “so as not to draw attention to themselves.” Music became a vital part of Mennonite life after their migration to Russia, and especially under the influence of gospel-oriented Pietism that developed in the German Lutheran church but then spread into Mennonite colonies in Russia as well. From then on, four-part harmony choral music became a passion for Russian Mennonites, who published a series of hymnbooks.

A handful of hymns were performed through the afternoon, and not only that—the stories behind them were told. Harry Heidebrecht indicated that “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty” (*Lobe den Herrn*) had Pietist origins. “Now thank we all our God” (*Nun danket alle Gott*), a song of praise, was written by a pastor during the horrors of the Thirty Years War, in which millions died. The hymn was a “freedom song” for Mennonites fleeing the Soviet Union; they would sing it upon crossing the border into the West. Heidebrecht has in his possession a hymnbook originating in the Mennonite colony of Terek in the Caucasus, passed down to him by his family.

“*Wehrlos und verlassen*,” or “When I’m lonely and defenceless,” is not the same hymn, said Jantzen, as “In the rifted rock,” though they share the same melody. The song is based on Psalm 91:4: “He will cover you with his feathers.” The German lyrics have been translated by the skilful American Mennonite poet Jean Janzen.



The Archival Singers presenting the choral anthem “*Willkommen uns*” at the MHSBC fundraiser.

MHSBC files.

Louise Price told the story behind the moving hymn, “*So nimm denn meine Hände*,” or “Take thou my hand, O Father.” The song was sung by Mennonites boarding trains in the burgeoning Soviet Union, when the destination might have been unknown—freedom, or labour camps. It was also the song that comforted Bergen Price’s grandfather as he was arrested by the NKVD in 1938.

Perhaps the most “historical” part of the afternoon



MEI concert choir opening the afternoon of the MHSBC fundraiser.

MHSBC files.

was the performance of “Welcome back,” or “*Willkommen uns*.” Julia Toews, an expert musician, told the story. A frail song manuscript dating from Russian Mennonite days was sent to MHSBC. It was her task to decipher the lines and squiggles, the music written in *Ziffern*, a numbering system that replaced notes on a staff. She managed—“so this is fun”—and the song was performed that afternoon by the Archival Singers, a group of enthusiastic singers specifically assembled to perform this piece.

The afternoon continued with the congregational singing of “Bringing in the Sheaves,” in order, remarked Harry Heidebrecht, “to acknowledge the influence of American evangelicalism” of the nineteenth century. A video of Brian Doerksen’s pandemic recording of “To the river I am going,” with a virtual choir, ended the presentation. Not quite ended—a singing of the Doxology was followed by a very Mennonite—and animated—*faspa*.

BOOK LAUNCH

Ellie Sawatzky, *None of This Belongs to Me*.
Gibsons, BC: Nightwood Editions, 2021.
Sarah Ens, *Flyway*. Winnipeg, MB:
Turnstone Press, 2022.

2 pm, 10 September 2022,
Mennonite Heritage Museum

■ Reported by Robert Martens

Two remarkable young Mennonite poets presented their recent books of poems to a keen audience on a hot, muggy day in September. A smoky day as well, the result of forest fires.

Ellie Sawatzky and Sarah Ens met at a UBC poetry workshop and since then have maintained a close friendship. Sawatzky, originally from Ontario, led off the afternoon. Her book, she said, “still feels new. A decade of my life went into this book, a very formative decade.” The poems in *None of This Belongs to Me* focus on family: mother/daughter relationships, sacrifices of forebears, stories about the passing of generations. Probably, genuinely Mennonite themes.

Ens’s book, overtly Mennonite in tone, is quite different. *Flyway* constitutes a single long poem that tells the story of the sufferings of ancestors in the Soviet Union to their settling on the Canadian Prairies. Her eye is frequently focused on landscape, but the book is political too: the welcoming of German troops in Ukraine during World War II, the displacement of the Indigenous by Mennonite refugees and settlers. Her poetry strongly reflects her home province of Manitoba.

BOOK LAUNCH

Lorraine Isaak, *Sehnsucht: The Story of Grisch—
A Life in Letters*. Altona, MB: Friesen Press, 2022.

2 pm, 15 October 2022,
Mennonite Heritage Museum

■ Reported by Robert Martens

She grew up in Steinbach, said author Lorraine Isaak, and lived not far from her grandparents, but somehow they seemed distant, unknowable. Her Grandfather Willms—Gerhard in Russia, George in Canada, and Grisch (pronounced *greesch*) to friends and family—was a particular enigma. Later in life, after Isaak



Ellie Sawatzky (left) and Sarah Ens at the September 10th book launch.

MHSCB files.

It was clear, during the question period following the readings, that the audience had been paying close attention. Phrases were quoted, lines recited. Ens was asked about the difficulty of writing such a long poem. It was almost a “relief,” was her response. Creating short, concise poems, she indicated, may be more difficult. Sawatzky was asked about the sensitivities of writing about living people, the hurt it might cause. At a previous launch, she said, her mother responded to that question with a joke: “We’re OK, we’ve had time.” Both writers agreed that such writing has to come from “a place of love,” but that they have the right to tell their story.

Each also acknowledged their luck in having parents who encouraged them to write.



Janet Boldt, Lorraine Isaak, & Maryann Tjart Jantzen at Lorraine Isaak’s book launch.

MHSCB files.

had moved to BC, her grandfather came to visit her in a dream. “I couldn’t understand what he was wanting,” she said. It didn’t help that her grandparents were the sort who were reluctant to talk about their traumatizing experiences as Russian Mennonites who saw far too much after the Bolshevik Revolution.

“There were so many gaps in his life,” said Isaak about her Grandfather Grisch, and what photos existed “didn’t tie together in any way.” Despite that, Isaak began writing vignettes about her grandfather in 2015; some of those are included in *Sehnsucht*. And then everything changed dramatically. Isaak received from relatives a box of about one hundred handwritten letters, in German, some by Grisch, some written to him from correspondents in the Soviet Union. “It was a little bit overwhelming,” said Isaak. Translation into idiomatic English was difficult, but friends Janet Boldt and Maryann Tjart Jantzen helped out.

Then COVID hit. For Isaak, it was in a sense “a gift.” “I needed to focus ... and COVID helped me.” As Isaak,

Boldt, and Jantzen went to work, “the stories began to unfold, emotionally, painfully.” Details came together. A picture emerged of who Grisch “was internally.” A book was in the making. A further giant leap happened when the decision was made to tell Grisch’s story chronologically. “When that was done,” remarked Isaak, “the story truly unfolded.”

The chronological approach revealed that, for a few years, letters from some relatives in the USSR entirely disappeared. Women had been *verschleppt*, dragged away, to Kazakhstan by the paranoid Stalinist regime. Men and boys had been exiled to Siberia. After Stalin’s death in 1953, the picture turned ever so slowly for the better. But so much—so many—had been lost. And that leads to the word, *Sehnsucht*, in the title. It’s a word that’s difficult to translate, said Isaak: nostalgia, longing, missing. It might be defined as “parts of life that are never resolved.” Lorraine Isaak’s grandfather was smitten with it, and *The Story of Grisch* was written, among other reasons, to capture in words that unresolved longing.

BOOK LAUNCH

Loretta Willems,
*The Gift of Laughter: The Story of a California
Mennonite Family*. CreateSpace, 2017.
Child Bride: Remembering a Young Mother.
Self-published, 2019.

29 October 2022, Mennonite Heritage Museum

■ Reported by Helen Rose Pauls

Gathered at the Mennonite Heritage Museum on a Saturday afternoon, we listened to Loretta Willems discuss the formation of her two books. Loretta came to an appreciation of her Mennonite heritage after reading C. Henry Smith’s *Story of the Mennonites* in her mid years. She began to research her roots, asking questions and interviewing relatives.

The journey of Loretta’s family into the New World from Russia took them to Mountain Lake, Minnesota, in the 1870s, continued in Saskatchewan, and then went on in California: Fresno, Dinuba, Reedley, and many small towns in between, ever in search of an economic foothold. Whereas they were wheat farmers, they learned about fruit production, pruning, and marketing in the beautiful fertile valleys of northern California.

Many of the vignettes stem from Loretta’s childhood



Loretta Willems signing books at the October 29th book launch.

Photo credit: Wendie Nickel.

in the forties. “My dad’s family were storytellers and I observed them like a stage play. We grew up listening to stories,” says Loretta. “Life was hard for my grandmother who married at fourteen and bore fourteen sons and daughters, but she had a great sense of humour and enjoyed her children. They could sit around the table and laugh together. That was her legacy.”

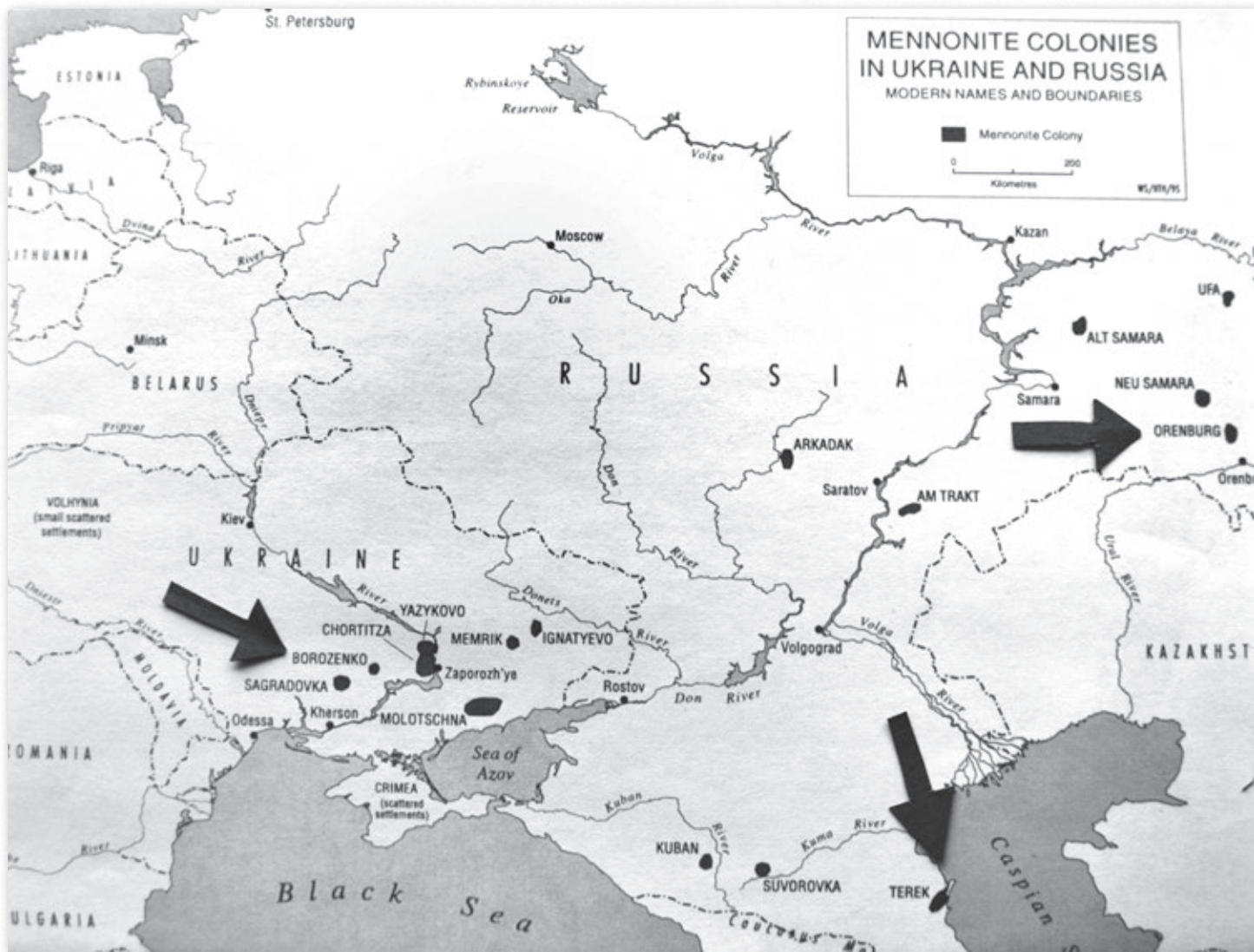
One of the participants remarked on the stark contrast to many of our stories of the forties. Stories of

fleeing, banishment, starvation, loss, death and emigration for the survivors. Laughing? Not so much!

“Writing truth into family stories is controversial but worthwhile,” Loretta said. There are dark secrets here,

falling from grace and even despair, but always there are stories and laughter.

Both books are available at the Museum.



Map of Ukraine & Russia showing the locations of the Orenburg and Terek Settlements, the two settlements featured in this issue.

Map source: *Mennonite Historical Atlas* by William Schroeder & Helmut Huebert.

Orenburg Colony

Karl Fast. *Orenburg: die letzte mennonitische Ansiedlung in Osteuropa.*

Winnipeg: Das Bunte Fenster, 1995.

■ Translated by Dora Becker. Introduced by Robert Martens

Dora died July 23, 2022. We deeply miss her gentle and buoyant spirit. A tribute to Dora will be appear in the June 2023 issue of Roots and Branches.

The Orenburg Colony was a rather late Mennonite settlement but for geopolitical reasons it lasted longer than almost any other. Like all the daughter colonies established by the earliest settlements,

Chortitza and Molotschna, Orenburg was essentially intended as a place to restore land to the Mennonite poor. In 1892-93 a commission from Chortitza bought land in the province of Orenburg from the brothers Deyevka. The purchase was made in winter, when the land could not even be seen; it was an unusual lapse in judgement for normally cautious Mennonites. The



Village of Dolinowka, Orenburg Colony.

Photo source: *Als Ihre Zeit Erfüllt War*. Quiring & Bartel, p. 149.

colony, interestingly, never received an official name and was known either as Orenburg or Deyevka.

The beginnings of the Orenburg Settlement were incredibly difficult, and in succeeding years crop failures were frequent. As late as 1907-8, many of the Orenburg Mennonites gave up on their colony and migrated to Siberia. Life, however, gradually improved as churches, schools and medical facilities were founded. In 1915, while World War I was still being waged, some six thousand German prisoners of war were interned in Orenburg. This story was later told in a novel by Hans Harder, *Das sibirische Tor* (The Siberian Gate).

Like many Mennonite colonies, Orenburg suffered profoundly after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. The famine that ensued during the early 1920s was somewhat ameliorated by the work of American Mennonite Relief. In 1926 about three hundred Orenburg residents were able to immigrate to Canada but when the doors to emigration slammed shut in 1929, many from Orenburg, driven by a last-minute panic, were stranded “at the gates of Moscow.” Exile and imprisonment were the fate of numerous Orenburgers during the years of the Stalinist terror.

When the German army invaded the USSR in 1941, it never reached Orenburg. Consequently, the colony was not evacuated, and hence survived, weak and attenuated, until the doors to Germany were opened during the

1970s. It appears that so many Orenburgers then left for Germany that nothing of the colony now remains.

In 1995, Karl Fast, who was born in Orenburg, wrote a German-language memoir/history of the settlement: *Orenburg: die letzte mennonitische Ansiedlung in Osteuropa* (Orenburg: The Last Mennonite Settlement in East Europe). MHSBC volunteer Dora Becker has ably translated the book. Excerpts follow, slightly edited. The translation is available to the public at the MHSBC office.

Difficult early years

The first settlers arrived at the Platovka Station at the beginning of March. Those families with small children had numerous difficulties. And it was also not a simple matter to find transportation for the number of people arriving in order to locate them at their appointed destination. In the sparsely populated steppes, the roads were bad. When they finally arrived at their new location, it was not easy to find temporary accommodation.

Fortunately, all the buildings found on the original pieces of land were also purchased; that is, haylofts, barns, granaries and other various sheds. In these buildings they found their first shelter. Naturally, it was very poor and crowded, but the Russian villages were too far away for the settlers to have been able to live there. Only a very few had the opportunity to find accommodations with the Russians. (19)



A particular problem was the breaking of the virgin sod, since there was no means of pulling power. One had not yet been able to acquire horses. There were also problems with the harvested grain. There was not enough to bake bread and be sufficient for the next seeding. It was essential that each person work through his own hunger in this early time.

Nevertheless, it was heavenly in the summer to view the wide, beautiful scenes of nature. The boundless horizon of the steppes with the bountiful grasses, the many fragrant flowers and the musical songs of the many varieties of birds were impressive. The hearts of the settlers must have overflowed with praise and shouts of “See the omnipotence of God!” Many animals were also found in the steppes: the badger, wolf, marmot, and many more. Today almost all of these animals are gone. Man has driven them away.

Even as beautiful as the summer was, so the winter, with its blizzards tearing through the land, was grim. The mark of the snowstorm was even more gruesome when accompanied by the howling of the wolves. Then peace and quiet was only found by the fireside seat in the “little room.” For many, this sort of weather proved too uncomfortable and some settlers roused themselves and moved back to the Ukraine.

It was also a misery for the children who attended school, since they did not have proper clothes for the severe winter. The most pressing need was for warm footwear. Most people used wooden shoes at that time. There simply wasn’t enough money for warm felt shoes.

The majority, however, who did persevere managed to progress against all difficulties. Thus passed the first three, four years. It took until 1888 and 1899—after the people had established themselves—that life became better. (20)

In summer there was so much to do that it was almost impossible to think straight. The opposite was true for the winter. The endless evenings could become very boring. In the beginning there were no books or newspapers. When they were available, they were very outdated by the time they arrived in the villages. (21)

Education

The early years of instruction were on a very light experimental basis. The program was repeatedly revised and textbooks were constantly being rewritten. Instruction

was in German and Russian. German was used for the following subjects: religion, German literature, German grammar, reading, writing and singing. For geography, history and arithmetic, Russian was the language of instruction, as well as for Russian literature, reading and writing. In those times, much of the learning was by memorization; and a fine handwriting was considered important. The day’s instruction was divided into six hours, with the exception of Saturday, when only three hours of teaching was done. Attendance at elementary school was mandatory but high school [*Zentralschule*] was voluntary. The instruction in the village schools continued uninterrupted no matter if the harvests were good or bad. With the outbreak of World War I, the high school teachers were called up and the schools were converted into boarding schools for German interns. (31, 32)

Social conflict

In the first thirty years of the establishment of the Deyevka Church (1894-1924), approximately thirty preachers served there. At the highest point the church numbered 1,300 members. The Orenburg Settlement experienced the same difficulties as [Mennonite churches elsewhere] even though the social contrasts here were very distinct. There were really only two groups among the people—the very poor and the not so poor. The not so poor Mennonites had a little easier time keeping their heads above water. They had more horses and so were able to prepare their land in a better fashion; therefore, they had better harvests than the others. They also had fewer debts.

Things were quite different for the very poor. They felt totally held back and believed that they had been overlooked and cheated. They also believed that they were not treated justly since the burdens of the colony had been divided evenly among the poor as well as the others. They were treated the same way as all those who owned fully working establishments. Sometimes the poverty was the result of laziness and carelessness; and sometimes, though seldom, drunkenness. This last cause was very seldom the case in the beginning of the settlement. Generally, it was the desire of the pioneers to help the poorer families as much as possible. Help was given through church coffers and those who cared for the poor, so that no one suffered needlessly. (35)



Bashkir and German Internees in Lowaja Derewnja, Orenburg.

Photo source: *Als Ihre Zeit Erfuellt War*, Quiring & Bartel, p. 146.

Interned German prisoners

Approximately one year after the outbreak of the war, all German-speaking people and Austrian citizens living in Russia were interned in the Orenburg Settlement. They remained in the settlement for the duration of the war under police supervision.

The Orenburg people were required to billet the internees in their houses. The outbreak of the war and the arrival of the many internees caused some problems for the Mennonite settlers. Why and for what reason such a massive killing of people? Why the suffering of the many innocent internees? Weren't they also people like the Mennonites? It almost seemed as though the philosophy of life of the Mennonites would crumble. And yet, life went on. Somehow the harvest was brought in despite the lack of pulling power and human strength. It was almost impossible to find substitutes for the conscripted horses. The high school in Pretoria had to be closed because of a lack of teachers.

1917 began badly. More and more men were drafted. Conscriptions of meat, horses and other war necessary materials occurred more frequently. Grain reserves soon melted away. Much more was consumed than was harvested. The unrest in the land continued to increase. Dwellings were overcrowded with prisoners. Often, serious disputes took place. (45)

Civil war

Towards the end of December, the front continued to approach. The thunder of cannons was clearly audible. During New Year's Day night, the Red Army retreated from the Orenburg Settlement since the White Army had become stronger. In most cases, the vehicles that

had been confiscated by the White Army were never returned. The villagers who had been forced to drive the vehicles abandoned them, hid themselves wherever they could, and with the departure of the White Army were able to return home without incident.

January 1, 1919, found the villages without any soldiers. Now peace reigned in the villages. The Soviet government immediately took the reins firmly into their hands. A brand-new system came to the people, a system that until now had not been in existence. A glowing future was promised to the villagers, brotherhood, equality and freedom for all. Many had a horror of this future. (50)

In the fall of 1920, here and there, robber bands appeared who stole mostly cattle, grain and other provisions. Even some Mennonites handled themselves badly during this time. There were some who joined the thieves. Others were overzealous in the punishment of the thieves. When the thieves were apprehended, they were often mercilessly beaten. Many died as the result of these beatings. For example, citizens Cornelius Lehn and Peter Janzen stole sheep. This thievery was discussed at the district meeting and it was decided to give the matter over to the people's court. The two accused were transported from village to village on the way to Pokrovka where the people's court was to sit. During that journey they were so badly beaten that they died on the street in Pretoria. The instigators of the beating were citizens Johann Wiebe and Peter Vogt from Pretoria. Peter Vogt died after several years, but Johann Wiebe later immigrated to the United States. Those guilty of this misdeed were therefore never punished. The

majority of the thieves were driven to stealing by deep need. Most of the thievery was simply an act of desperation. (53-54)

Aid from brothers and sisters

Early in the fall of 1921 the face of famine was evident. Beggars were the first sign of the coming famine of 1921. They arrived in ever-growing numbers in the Mennonite villages. On every street these starved and emaciated bodies were to be seen; yes, one could even see the corpses of the starved on the roadsides. The miserable alms were not sufficient to allow them to reach the next village. So the people gazed at the coming winter with the dreaded question: how would they be able to find seed for sowing in the spring? Without help from outside there would be no sowing and without seeds all was lost. Every district meeting was centred on the question: "Where will we get bread?"

In the time of greatest need, help came from America. The Mennonite Central Committee had become active. Not only survival goods were shipped but authorized personnel answerable for the equitable distribution of the items also arrived. In every village one man was elected who was responsible for the giving out of the goods. If a person had no more food supplies, he was required to register with this authority, and then, as a needy person, he was given the necessary supplies. The elected official then took the list of needy persons to Klubnikovo where the American representative for the Mennonite help, D. R. Hoeppner, had his office. Hoeppner came from Hillsboro, Kansas. By profession, he was a watchmaker and an optician, but took the time for eight years to help with the need in Europe. He worked in Frankfurt to begin with, under the auspices of the Quakers. Later he was enlisted by the MCC. (55,56)

The Soviet terror

Difficulties for the [Orenburg] Bible School became ever greater and the requirements of the Soviets became ever more severe. Again and again Preacher Toews was required to travel to Orenburg and defend the continuation of the Bible school. From time to time he was accompanied by Peter Paetkau and David Paetkau on these journeys. After one of these journeys, Bishop Paetkau reported the following to the congregation: "We must pray much more fervently for the state of

our school. I was amazed at the bad time Toews had with the authorities in Orenburg. He chooses over and over again to face these people and defend us." After that day, much prayer was offered for Toews whenever he went to Orenburg. The OGPU (*Otdel Glavnogo Polititsheskogo Upravleniya*) [secret police] did by now have its agents in the Mennonite settlements and they kept them firmly on course. Fortunately for Toews, the official with whom Toews constantly had to deal was sympathetic towards him and towards Mennonites in general, and allowed his "soft hand" to deal with the situation from time to time. It was this official who ordered the school closed in March 1926. At that time an army officer came to arrest Toews. However, he was satisfied with the promise by Toews to present himself in three days at the offices of the OGPU in Orenburg. They did try to open the school once more in Orenburg city, but it was not possible. The doors of the school were permanently closed. On March 15 Toews was arrested in his own home. Teachers Rogalsky and Rempel were both exiled; Peter Koehn died after great suffering in the Caucasus. (65-66)

1933 became a year of terror with its many reprisals. In this year, the remaining kulaks [a term of derision for so-called affluent peasants] were liquidated. In order to give this situation a semblance of justice, gatherings were again instituted in the villages. This measure was taken at the end of August 1933. The harvest was almost over. The meetings were designed and the place chosen in such a manner that no one was able to overhear the proceedings. Officials stood watch outside. At the meeting, a Party representative by the name of Byeryukov from Orenburg was present. In his reports he stated that, lately, the kulaks in many areas had done shoddy work because they had not yet gotten over the loss of their belongings. Circumstances such as this worked negatively for the collective. Therefore, it was necessary to remove the kulaks entirely. Only after a liquidation of all kulaks could the work of collectivization move forward in a peaceful manner. The kulaks, as well as the representative, would once again feel content and make themselves comfortable in another location.

In Alisovo the citizens submitted a request for the presence of the kulaks Koehn and Warkentin, stating they were willing to return all of their possessions, and to receive them as members in the collective. The

answer to that was that both of these families were to be removed immediately because they were too respected in the community. The exile took place at the end of August. As the families were escorted away, they were accompanied by virtually all the residents, weeping as they went. The farewell was heart-rending. The families were brought to a barren region in the mountains and left there to their fate. They had no tools, no transportation; they had nothing to help them prepare for winter. There was nothing left for those poor folk but to dig themselves into the earth. The hollows were covered with straw. There was also no water in this region. Men, women, the aged and children lived in these hollows. And above this horror stood the watchword: "For a bright future!" (77)

1937 began well. Winter was not too cold yet there was lots of snow. Spring was not late in coming and everything moved smoothly forward. The newspapers were filled with accounts of a new constitution. With this new constitution, new leaders in the governing soviets in the USSR were to be elected. At the same time all other soviet leaders, including the village governments, were to be changed through elections. All farmers were now divided into groups of ten (*krushok*).

Every group had an "agitator" who explained the new constitution to them; that was supposed to be the most ultra-democratic document in the whole world. Attendance at these meetings was mandatory. Every failure to attend these propaganda meetings was counted as an anti-Soviet leaning. In order to keep the people in check, quite innocent persons were arrested and forced to disappear, never to be seen again. No search or questioning helped in this case. When anyone pled for answers too often, they were taken for questioning themselves and interrogated. Thus, every protest was squelched. People were arrested at their workplace, during travel. Mother and father were taken from their small children, and no one cared about the orphans, unless some compassionate person took them on. These repressions began in April and continued for the rest of that year. The elections were over but the arrests continued. (79)

"The Great Patriotic War": World War II

The call to report for duty of all men between the ages of 16 to 55 came at the end of March (either 21st or 22nd) 1942. In the village of Pretoria alone this affected sixty-eight men. Taken as a whole, the Orenburg Settlement must have yielded hundreds of men. They were ordered to bring some provisions, some clothing and underwear along. Then the men were transported away with many interruptions regarding their work....*

Such a situation could not continue for very long, particularly when the most prudent and watchful collective leaders were arrested. The seeding of new crops could not be completed in Pretoria in 1944, and so the land was simply left fallow. Weeds began to prosper in the fields. 1945 brought a very poor harvest in Orenburg. Tractors stood idle in the fields. The little that had been seeded was not harvestable because there was no harvest machinery. Old threshing machines and stone boats were dragged into use but the result was very poor. The end of the war brought some change to the Orenburg Settlement: the evacuees, who until then had helped with the work, were allowed to return to their homes. That definitely constricted the work force severely. However, no one from the Labour Army was allowed to return. Until 1947 the situation did not change. Only those who were no longer able to work in the camps were released. It wasn't until some years after the war's end, when the young people began to reach maturity and the Labour Armies were finally disbanded, that life in the Orenburg villages reached some semblance of normality. (90)

Fortunately, some of the Labour Army people came home in 1956. Those who were ill or no longer able to work were released very soon after, and some actually before, the end of the war. The bulk of the workers, however, were forced to work a further ten years in the "rebuilding program." Until the death of Stalin, eight years after the end of the war, it seemed as if there was no end in sight to the slavery system. The desire of the steely dictator to suppress the people seemed to have no limits. He ordered ever more drastic measures in order to secure the State. (91)

* This refers to the *Trud Armii*, Russian Labour Army, essentially a slave labour corps of both men and women. See "Memoirs of Aaron Priesz," contained in the Orenburg volume, and excerpted in *Roots and Branches*, Sep. 2020, p. 16.

Revival

In the year of 1960, a huge turnaround occurred in the collectives. The change brought wages for the work of the collective farmers. Payment of the collective workers with hard cash began in January 1, 1960. Until that time workers had been credited with predetermined work units for their labour. So began a new period for the farmers, a new time. This change meant a completely upsetting, and at the same time, a very welcome event. Persons who have never experienced such a life-changing event simply cannot imagine themselves in that situation. Until that time, for decades, one had lived only on promises and accumulating disappointments, one after the other. Now it would become different.

At the beginning there were still problems to overcome, but slowly, everything came together on the same track. The collective farmer, debased to a peasant, now received the hope that he would be able to keep his home and his family in a humane condition. Yes, people once again began to make plans. (93)

In spite of the freedom granted through the constitution of the USSR, all church buildings and meeting houses had effectively been locked since the end of the 1920s. The government discovered so many exceptions that, practically speaking, it became impossible to openly hold religious gatherings. Added to this, of course, all the preachers and bishops had been arrested and exiled during the years of oppression and cleansings. We must also remember that the Orenburg Settlement did not experience a short resurgence of new life such as the settlements in Ukraine did under the German occupation. If a spiritual awakening should occur after the death of Stalin, then it would have to begin at the very roots, spontaneously.

That is exactly what happened. Even during the early difficult years after the war, there began a sort of barracks church among those imprisoned and interned in all parts of the USSR. Without formally ordained ministers, in many cases without a Bible or hymnal, men gathered together to sing and pray. The songs they knew by memory. After some time, handwritten song books were passed from hand to hand. The same held true for Bible texts that had been memorized or that had been copied from still existing scattered Bibles here and there. People sought and found their way to faith in the Father. There were larger and smaller revivals. The seed spread

in the barracks later found a home in the various settlements where it sent down roots and bore fruit. (95-6)

The end of Orenburg

At the beginning of the 1970s the move to resettle in the German Republic really began to gain momentum. The government of the German Republic welcomed [ethnic German] immigrants with generosity and open arms. The transit camp at Unna-Massen was the first goal for most of the immigrants after they had passed the Friedland Camp, situated on the border between East and West Germany. From Unna-Massen the immigrants moved on to housing in the many subsidized housing developments that were scattered all across Germany. The bulk of them went to the small towns around Bielefeld or to the city of Bielefeld itself. They moved to Espelkamp, Detmold and Leopoldshöhe, to Lage and Neuwied, Bad Salzuflen and Bechterdissen, and to many other locations.

Today there is almost no region in the realm of the former German Republic (before the joining of East and West Germany), whether large or small, where immigrants from the Soviet Union have not found their place. With time the swell of immigrants dwindled but after 1987 rose again. Among the many Germans who came "home" after 1987 there were, of course, also many from Orenburg. They left everything they had in the villages or sold all their goods and chattels dirt cheap. After the ethnic Germans had left their villages, people from other ethnic backgrounds moved into the empty houses. Very few Mennonites remain in the Orenburg villages. Those folks remaining either have no relatives in the German Republic that care about them or they are married to non-Mennonites. Some are also simply not willing to emigrate. It would seem as though the story of the Mennonites in Orenburg, as well as in the rest of Russia, has come to an end. The actual end appears to be a question that only time will answer. Very likely, those remaining will be absorbed by other ethnic groups. (III-12)

Other sources

Krahn, Cornelius and Lawrence Klippenstein. "Orenburg Mennonite Settlement (Orenburg Oblast, Russia)." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1989. www.gameo.org

Schroeder, William and Helmut Huebert. *Mennonite Historical Atlas*. Winnipeg: Springfield Publishers, 1996.



Photo source: David F. Loewen

Life in Pretoria Before the Turmoil

■ By David F. Loewen

Pretoria, village #14 in the Orenburg settlement, was founded in 1903. Owing to the Mennonites' sympathies with the Afrikaans-speaking Boers, as opposed to "the English" of South Africa, Pretoria was named after the principal city of the Boers. The village consisted of a wide dirt road separating two rows of houses, with approximately fifteen to seventeen homes on either side of the street. A public school stood on the north side of the street, in the middle of the village, and a high school (*Zentralschule*) stood at the end of the street, on the south side.

Pretoria, located near the Ural Mountains, had a continental climate with hot and dry summers and very cold winters. The region was hilly and the source of many rivers ending in the Sakmara basin, which is connected to the Volga River. In the spring, the Karaguy was very dangerous as it overflowed its banks, and then flowed into the Gusicha River, which passed Pretoria on the southern boundary, joining the Uran. To the north, flowed the Obshchy Syrt. During the thawing of those rivers, it became dangerous, and many bridges were swept away. The Karaguy quickly dried up and created a swamp between the Gusicha and Obshchy Syrt.

The surrounding vicinity was relatively flat and except for the trees planted by settlers, the surrounding region was almost treeless. Each farmer had about an acre of land for his buildings and for his garden, with the buildings standing in the centre of the lot and a garden at the front or toward the street, and another at the back. In the front garden, flowers were usually planted—roses, tulips, lilacs, irises, and poppies. There were also gooseberry and currant bushes as well as rhubarb. Some gardens had apple, crab apple, and hazelnut trees, and a wooden fence was usually erected around the front garden, or at least along the roadside.

Abraham and Maria Loewen, with their four children, arrived here in 1903, coming from Heuboden in the Borozenko colony. During the twenty-three years that they lived in Pretoria, nine more children would be added to their family, two of whom died as young children. Their first eleven years in Pretoria sharply contrasted with their last twelve—the first relatively prosperous and peaceful; the second, tumultuous and economically challenging.

By 1920, Pretoria's population stood at 304, consisting of thirty-three families farming approximately 5,500 acres. It had a small store, owned by Peter P. Dyck, stocked with small amounts of cloth, candy, sugar,



Pretoria youth, 1925, a year before the Loewen family emigrated. My father, Martin Loewen, is second row from the back, 4th from the left. Helena Loewen is third row from the back, middle.

Photo source: David Loewen files

coffee, tea, etc., as well as non-food items such as guitars and violins. Purchases could be paid for in cash or with farm produce like butter and eggs. In addition, the village also had a post office.

This is a description of life in Pretoria, as recalled by Loewen family members sixty years later. Tina Loewen and Jacob Loewen, ages ten and nineteen respectively at the time of their last year in Pretoria, provided most of these recollections.

Livelihood

Pretoria was a Mennonite village not unlike any other, with homes along a common street, each with a plot of land for personal gardens and buildings, and further removed from the village, land for growing crops and pastureland. In Pretoria's case, this land was northeast of the village, with each farmer assigned a plot of about sixty hectares. There were no fences, only a strip of unploughed land as a divider.

The pastureland was jointly owned. In the morning, during the summer months, after the cows had been milked, they were taken to the main street, where the herdsman gathered the cows, starting from the east end and exiting the village at the west end, taking them to the common pastureland for the day. In the evening, the herdsman returned from the west and, as the cows walked along the street, each farmer collected his own

cows out of the herd. After feeding and milking, the milk was separated, or just left standing overnight. In the morning, the cream was spooned from the top of the milk. For the most part, the cream was churned [into butter] and sold, or traded for other food, either in the local store or taken to Orenburg whenever someone went. Orenburg was approximately seventy kilometres south of Pretoria. Abraham Loewen would make that trip only once or twice a year. It would take three days to make this trip and usually two or three farmers would travel together, as it was not safe to travel alone because of thieves or wolves. Abraham Loewen supplemented the family income with his trade—blacksmithing. He was, in fact, the village's sole blacksmith.

Butter was also made at the Loewen farm, but it too, like cream, was not intended for personal consumption. Tina Loewen recalls seldom getting butter to spread on their bread, since it was destined for sale. The flour for the bread her mother baked was made from their own grain, ground up in a mill owned by Isaak Friesen in the neighbouring village of Karaguy. Tina remembers the times when they did get a taste of these special, delicious treats. When her mother churned butter, and after she had let the buttermilk run out of the homemade churn, the children were given a piece of bread, and with their fingers they would wipe up the little bit of butter left on the churn and spread it on their bread. Normally, their bread was eaten with salt.

Harvest time was always a time that everyone looked forward to with great anticipation. For the children, watermelons were likely near the top of their list. Watermelons were primarily for eating fresh, but also for making syrup. In the fall, the ripe watermelons were loaded onto hayracks and taken home. Some were put into barrels for pickling, which was a delicious winter treat. The young boys would enjoy stealing watermelons from neighbours who might have nicer tasting melons than their own. Henry Loewen recalls that "We boys could hardly wait until the watermelons were ripe enough to eat, so we used to cut a hole in one end with a knife, to test the middle of the fruit. This part was

called the *obramche* and was the sweetest part of the melon. If we were caught, our knives were taken away, but then we would flatten some nails and make a little hole in the watermelon to check it out. If it was ripe, we would eat it but if it was still green, we would put back the plug and turn it to the bottom. They would rot anyway, and we got a few spankings for doing it.”

Sunflower seeds were for eating and also for making oil.

Church life

There was no church building in Pretoria, but *Kirchen-Gemeinden* Mennonites (non-Mennonite Brethren) held monthly services in the public school. They did not meet every Sunday because they did not have a minister in their village. Henry recalls that this visiting pastor would often stop in at their home. And when they did meet, they had no Sunday school. The Mennonite Brethren Church had a *Versammlungshaus* (meeting place) in Karaguy.

Children, as a rule, did not attend church. Tina recalls going to church one Sunday and seeing three men (her father, Abraham Loewen, was one of them) sitting at the front on chairs. They were the *Vorsänger* (song leaders) as they had no instruments. Some members of the Mennonite Brethren Church lived in Pretoria and taught Sunday school in their homes.

“I remember being at Neufelds’ home with Jacob Peters as my teacher,” recalls Tina, “and we sang *Gott ist die Liebe* (God Is Love) and other songs. We also had Sunday school classes at Euses and at Vogts. Here, the girls were our teachers. One Sunday they took us to Karaguy to their church where we presented a program.”

Activities

Daily life for children was generally unstructured, and often they were expected to find their own “entertainment.” There wasn’t much for them to do in the winter, except perhaps go for sleigh rides. In the spring they could visit the fields to play or pick flowers, which grew wild in the surrounding countryside. Tina remembers picking differently coloured tulips on the hillside in the spring, and they would also go to the pastureland looking for *Süaromp*, or sorrel. “We would gather the sorrel leaves in our aprons and take it home for mother to cook *moos* or soup.”

Children might also be called upon to help with the

calves. Once the weather was nice, the young children and some adults would take the young calves to the pasture, where the younger children had to form a circle and hold hands. The calves were then put inside this circle and loosened from the rope. If one of the children let go of another’s hand, the calves would escape. The older children then had to round up the strays and bring them back into the circle. Once the calves were trained to stay in a group (this took a few days), they were turned over to a herdsman, who took them to the pasture for the day.

Tina Loewen remembers that “in the fall the children would go into the grain fields to glean after the grain had been cut and hauled home for threshing. We would pick up individual ears of grain, put them into a sack and take them home, where we would then beat the sack with a stick to separate the kernels from the straw. The grain would then be placed on a canvas to allow the wind to blow the chaff away. Later in the fall, a Russian peddler would arrive on a horse-drawn, two-wheeled cart full of apples. He would drive along the village calling “apples for sale.” We children were then allowed to take the grain we had gleaned and exchange it for apples. We were allowed to have one apple (was that ever a treasure!) and the rest were turned over to mother who would use them to bake something for us—either *platz*, *perishky*, or fritters.”

Jacob Loewen describes life as very monotonous before school came to the village:

During those years we played a lot, and since our parents and the older brothers and sisters were occupied with farm work, we younger ones were on our own. There was one unwritten rule—children had to take care of each other. For the one- to three-year-olds, the older four- to six-year-olds were responsible. And woe to anyone of the older children who neglected to take adequate care of the younger children. I was punished only once by my mother because Daniel was crying in the cradle because he was wet and I had not changed his diapers, and Mary had fallen into the mud and dirtied herself. To learn responsibility for others was drilled into us in our younger years. I must say that I appreciated this. My gifting as a teacher helped me. To illustrate, our young neighbour lady,

who had a baby, often treated me like one of her children. Since her child did not want to sleep in the afternoon without me, I would tell him different fables and he would fall asleep. For this I would be given some pastry, which we never received at home. Furthermore, this gave me a chance to forego the afternoon nap, which I did not like.

Abram Loewen, one of the oldest in the family, remembers that chores and school were the focus of his young years: stomping the straw and manure to make “bricks” to heat the oven, raiding the watermelon patch with friends, and walking miles, carrying butter to sell in a nearby Russian village. There were two sloughs nearby where people would go to swim or take their horses to swim and get cleaned. Sometimes they swam in the Gusicha River where the water was shallow, which Tina remembers doing. They had no bathing suits and of course, “girls and boys would never go swimming at the same time.”

Abram, who loved to read, enjoyed any books having to do with the “American Indian.” One told of a brave going swimming at midnight in the river. This so gripped him that one moonlit, summer night, he crept out of the house, walked the mile or so to the river and went swimming. It didn’t really meet expectations—it was merely spooky, and he didn’t stay long. His love of swimming and reading, however, remained strong throughout his life.

Easter was less exciting for the children than Christmas, but it was nonetheless an important religious holiday and family time. They had *moos* (fruit soup) and ham and decorated *paska* (Easter bread). They also had coloured Easter eggs. About ten days before Easter, wheat kernels would be placed in a plate filled with dirt, and at Easter it would be about five or six inches high. The coloured eggs were then placed among the green wheat. Pentecost was another church holiday when baptisms were usually held. May 1 was a government holiday, and the schools had outings on this day. The children would go to the pastureland and play games, since they had no parks. (Jacob Loewen)

Clothing

For clothing, children had only the bare essentials. For the Loewen children, that meant only two changes of

clothing. Tina remembers that “one day it rained and I fell into a puddle of water. I had to change into my winter dress, which was woolly and sharp, so it was itchy. I cried myself to sleep on a pile of hay in the barn. When I awoke, the sun was shining, and the dress had dried.”

The Loewen children didn’t own a pair of shoes until they left for Canada. In the summer they were always barefoot and in the winter they had high boots (*Buhr Stiefeln*) made from wool, or they wore slippers (*Pantoffeln*). These slippers were made with wooden soles and a strip of leather or cloth at the top over the front part of the foot. These wooden slippers would also be used as skates in the winter when there was ice. For head covering in the winter, the girls had a large square scarf (*Tuch*) which they used to cover their head and also to cover shoulders and body, as they had no coat or sweater. The boys had caps, a jacket, and high boots.

Diet

Breakfasts consisted of bread, milk, *Pripps* (beverage made from ground, roasted grain), and coffee. Other meals were noodle soup, *Klöße* (large noodles) with sausage or ham, borscht, bean soup, gooseberry *moos*, hot milk with noodles, scrambled or cooked eggs, fried potatoes, crackling, homemade sausage, beef roast, hamburger, mutton, pork, chicken, ducks, and geese.

Butchering pigs or beef was a time of community, which usually occurred in late fall. Two or three families would usually join together early in the morning. Two or three pigs were butchered, scalded, and cleaned, and the meat was sorted. Some was used for sausage; some for hamburger; and some for ham. The sausages were made the same day and also smoked overnight. Meat requiring to be smoked was hung above the furnace, in the chimney. Liver sausage was also made. The hams were salted and left for a certain number of days and then smoked. They also made head cheese and rendered the lard.

When work was done, they served a big supper to all those neighbours who had helped. A few days later they would do the same thing at one of the other homes. This meat had to last for almost a year, or at least as long as they could store it. They had no refrigerators and so the shed became the best place to store it. Once winter set in, it would not thaw until spring.

Transportation

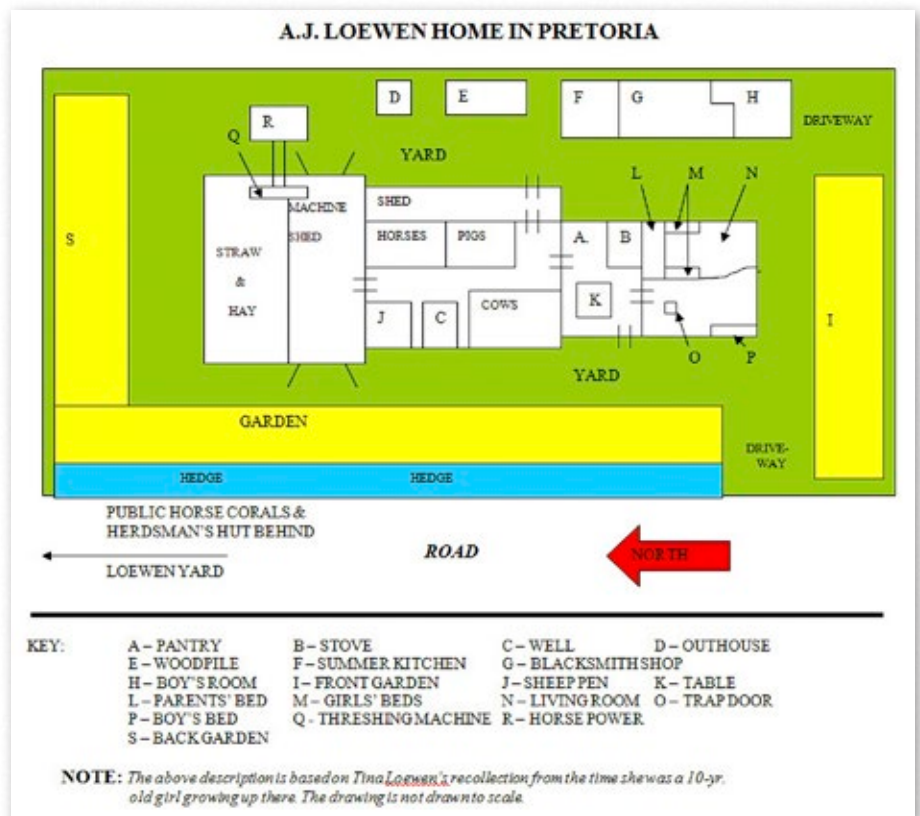
During the winter, travel was by horse-drawn sled. The seat in the sled was built high enough so that the small children could be put underneath. A fur coat was put under the seat for the children to sit or lie on. They were then covered up with fur skins to keep them warm. The parents sat in the seat and of course the passengers under the seat couldn't see a thing, but at least they were warm and could accompany their parents on visits. In the summer, they travelled by horse and wagon, or they walked, but very little long-distance travelling was done.

In the spring, when the snow would melt quickly, the homemade, wooden bridge across the Gusicha would often wash away. This was the bridge that connected Pretoria with the villages to the north, and in particular, Suvorovka, where Maria Loewen's parents lived. Almost every year, the farmers had to make a new dike and bridge.

The years 1914/1915 marked the end of a relatively prosperous and peaceful sojourn of eleven years in Pretoria, a turning point in the life of the Loewens, and the beginning of a period of twelve difficult years, culminating in their emigration. The Great War would consume Europe for the next four years. Maria Loewen's mother

died in 1914 and her father and nine-year-old son in the following year. Shortly thereafter, their homeland would be thrown into turmoil through revolution, civil war, famine, and disease, at the end of which, two more sons would be forever separated from them. In 1926, Abraham and Maria Loewen emigrated to Canada, both leaving all their siblings and one son behind.

Note: For Dave Loewen's story about Jacob Levin, the "one son left behind," see Roots & Branches June 2021, Vol. 27, No.2, and Vol 28, No. 1.



The Calamitous Mennonite Settlement of Terek

■ By Robert Martens

In 1851, the great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy was conscripted into military service in the Caucasus, the vast, rugged region lying between the Black and Caspian Seas. A brutal battle for control had been raging there for many decades. The Russians and Persians both lusted for dominance there, and the region had alternated between subjugation by a Christian Russian empire and an ambitious Muslim Persian nation.



Leo Tolstoy, 1854, as an army officer. Photo source: ullstein bild - <https://www.gettyimages.ca>.

The nomadic clans who lived in the Caucasus were caught in the middle. They did not take successive invasions passively. The Chechen, Nogai, Taulin, and Kumyk peoples were unruly and warlike subjects, and violence was a way of life for many of them both in times of war and of peace.

His military service in the Caucasus—as well as in the Crimean War a few years later—changed Leo Tolstoy forever. He would write about his experiences there in the historical stories, “The

Prisoner of the Caucasus” and “Hadji Murat.” Especially in the latter work, the Russian rulers, who finally subjugated the area with unreserved ruthlessness in the mid-nineteenth century, come off looking much worse than the Islamic insurgents. The Muslim rebel Hadji Murat is a far more honest and forthright character than the Russian aristocrats sent to deal with him. Tolstoy’s wartime involvement was a catalyst for his metamorphosis from a dissipated elitist aristocrat to an advocate of anarchism and nonviolence, and he came to admire the nonresistant stance of Russian Mennonites.

The Mennonites who formed the Terek colony in 1901 alongside the Caspian Sea may not have been reading their Tolstoy, or they might otherwise have heeded his warnings. Terek, named after the Terek River which flows into the Caspian Sea, was the last colony to be established by Russian Mennonites, and unlike previous colonies, it saw only the merest flickers of success: “...Mennonites debated the decision to purchase this land on the basis of economic and health concerns; it did not cross their minds that Mennonite properties and lives might be jeopardized by their neighbours” (Terry Martin qtd. in Friesen 2). And so they moved “right into the heart of this maelstrom” (Friesen 2).

In the Terek settlement, Mennonites were once again moving onto land previously occupied by Indigenous inhabitants. This time, however, the Indigenous fought back—and Mennonites responded with gunfire.

Slow beginnings

About 66,950 acres were purchased in the Caucasus by the Molotschna colony, primarily to settle the landless. The land was bought for some one million rubles from two brothers, princes Alexander and Konstantin Lvov, with some of the acreage set aside for the landless, and other lands made available for purchase in order to raise funds for the new colony. Terek was designed as a colony with seventeen villages. From the very outset, though, the endeavour seemed cursed, and two of the villages never saw the light of day.

The grossly inadequate roads were overcome, but the new settlers bungled enormously at the inception. Convinced that they could do better than previous farmers, the Mennonites ploughed under the irrigation ditches that they found. It was a disastrous misstep, and

crop failures were mostly the norm until the ditches were restored. The settlers had learned their lesson. A major canal called Talma was restored in 1909, and in 1911, a second canal, the Richart, was built by the Mennonites themselves. C.P. Toews, who lived in Terek and later published a history of the colony, describes the effort: “And so the work was carried out: The settlers were too poor to hire labourers to do the digging, and so had to carry out the entire project by themselves. Young and old took part, twelve-year old children, boys and girls, women and old men, and some of them lost their health doing this. The very survival of the individual, however, was involved, and the entirety of the settlement as well, and the determination to carry through led ultimately to a complete success” (26).*



Talma Canal.

Photo source: MAID 408-001.jpg.

Sufficient water was only one of many problems. Corruption and bribery in government were ongoing. A flood occurred, and when it receded, malaria and typhus arrived in its wake. The Mennonite settlers built a dam to restrain the Sulak River, which had been overflowing every year. Other difficulties were more difficult to avert. The area suffered from periodic plagues of locusts. C. P. Toews describes one such event: “A long wall of hay and straw was built and soaked with petroleum in order to burn up the locusts as soon as they hit the wall. They weren’t stopped by the flames, however, and so many arrived that the fire was extinguished.... Billions died in the flames, but their hordes seemed undiminished” (36).

Probably the greatest obstacle, though, was theft, harassment, and even murder. Livestock, especially horses, were constantly being stolen by the people of the area. Outright violence was perhaps unusual, but murders did occur, and settlers often lived in fear.

* All translations by Robert Martens. C. P. Toews’ book was translated in 1972 by Isaac A. Dyck of New Westminster, BC, who did a good job, but may have had an inadequate grasp of English. I have translated from the original German.



Choir in Kartsch, Terek settlement.

Photo source: *Als Ihre Zeit Erfüllt War*, Quiring & Bartel, p. 114.

Momentary progress

This is not to say that the settlers lived in an ongoing state of hostility with their neighbours. The Nogai and Kumyks may have had a history as warrior peoples but they also treasured the discipline of hospitality, and many a Mennonite had friends among the locals.

Terek organized and after 1911 achieved a degree of prosperity. The first teachers in the colony knew little more than their pupils but in time the schools improved markedly. A minimal medical system served the community; no doctors served the area, but a *Feldscher*, or medic, did his best, and midwives ushered new lives into the Mennonite world. A bank was established, and after very spare beginnings, flourished. Churches were a natural part of the Mennonite landscape, and seem to have prospered: a Mennonite Brethren Church in the village of Talma, 1901; and two Mennonite Churches in Khartch and Müdelburg, 1902 and 1908. Church choirs, it seemed, were greatly treasured and quite sophisticated.

And oil was discovered. Settlers noticed that some of the water had a gassy smell. C. P. Toews writes about an artesian well that delivered more water than any other: “Much gas sprang from the earth along with the water. When a burning match was held over the water flowing from the pipes, a foot-long flame sprang up and burned uninterruptedly until it was put out” (16). An oil concession was leased to an English-Russian firm.

Life was simple and hard, but it had its joys. Anna Baergen Adrian (1902-2004), who was born and raised in Terek, writes in her memoir about obtaining supplies in the colony: “We were able to purchase our most necessary supplies at the two stores, one in #2 village and

one in #9. We would go to Petrovsk or even Khassav-Yurt for bigger shopping trips and this would mean staying overnight. Every once in a while, one of us children was permitted to accompany the parents on these shopping trips and it was always a very exciting experience for the lucky child to have this privilege.” However, “This trip would take us through the villages number 1 to 5, then we drove through a forest, dangerous, because of robber bands roaming around” (2).

War, revolution and flight

World War I put an abrupt end to the evolution of the community. Mennonite men up to the age of forty-two were conscripted for service as medics or foresters, leaving families with inadequate labour. A Cossack who had little sympathy for German settlers was put in charge of the volost (the district government). Toews writes, “The volost imposed intolerable demands on contributions of horses, beef cattle, wagons, and wagon hauling” (41). Toews also claims that the government confiscated Mennonite cattle rather than those of the Nogai or Kumyk because Mennonites raised larger animals; that claim, though, seems somewhat self-serving.

With the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the situation became far worse for the Mennonites of Terek. Banditry and violence increased markedly, so much so that the district administration proposed forming groups of local militia. “A few young Mennonites,” writes Toews, “along with Lutherans and Catholics who lived in the settlement, wanted to accept the proposal. We were directly confronted with the question of whether we wished to maintain nonresistance or not” (47). The community voted “no.” In spite of that decision, though, some individuals who were directly threatened by violence defended themselves against marauders.

In 1917, the village of Nikolaevich was attacked. Two Mennonites were killed, and three of the attacking band as well, when the Mennonites fired back. Mennonites recognized acquaintances among the riders. Then four Mennonites were murdered in the village of Talma. Robbery and rape were on the rise.

It was past time to evacuate. The decision was made to flee the settlement on the morning of February 9, 1918. Before that could happen, word was received that a band of Chechens was riding towards the Terek, bent on revenge for deaths incurred in a previous battle. In a panic, Mennonites packed what they could

and fled through the night, fearing throughout that the Chechens might attack at any moment. The line of refugees on that nighttime road stretched for three kilometres. Stragglers, or those who stayed behind, were robbed, writes Toews, even of their shoes and overcoats.

Anna Baergen's family had been robbed in 1917 of all their horses. She writes, "We packed in great haste—could take with us whatever we wanted. But, because we were without horses, we were obliged to ask others to help us. We took mainly our clothes and bedding. We left behind all the furniture, Mother's sewing machine, all our farm machinery. In the barn we turned our cows and calves loose, chased our pigs and chickens out of doors, so they could fend for themselves" (6).

The Mennonite evacuees headed in groups towards Petrovsk, a seaport city. They were robbed and threatened along the way, but on the other hand were sometimes kindly received and given shelter by the locals. One Mennonite group was supported on its journey by an Indigenous militia (C. P. Toews calls them "Tatars," an umbrella term for the peoples of the region). When the Mennonites reached Petrovsk, their accompanying militia demanded payment in kind: one horse from each of the teams in the wagon train. The Mennonites were apparently shocked by this but decided to accede. The young among them, who were generally less prosperous than the rest and owned fewer horses, had to be persuaded to go along with the demand.

Then word arrived that the Terek settlement had been ransacked. There was nothing to return to. The Mennonites loaded their possessions onto a train and left for Suvorovka, a Mennonite settlement in the northern Caucasus.

Conclusions and questions

And yet, remarkably, almost unbelievably, some Mennonites did return to Terek. In 1920, after a new republic comprising Dagestan, Ingushetia, Chechnya, and the rest of the northern Caucasus had been declared, Mennonites were invited by the authorities to rebuild their Terek settlement. They were given generous terms, such as the return of their property and land; free seed grain; full religious freedom; and exemption from military service.

The returning settlers experienced peace and success

for a short while, and then, once again, the robberies and murders intensified. It was the end of Terek. The remaining Mennonites straggled out of the settlement; many were able to immigrate to Canada.

And what of the settler-Indigenous relationship in Terek? Scholar Aileen Friesen writes that Kumyks had cooperated with Mennonites in a planning session. With them they had brought a militia that rode to neighbouring Nogai and Taulin villages to retrieve stolen Mennonite goods. The militia were billeted by Mennonites overnight. When Mennonites fled, they were extended hospitality in the Muslim villages of Kazi-Yurt and Kostek.

As for the militia's demand for horses as payment, Friesen writes, "Mennonites felt betrayed as their protectors asked for compensation. While I have no evidence, I'm sure that Muslims felt shocked by the ingratitude of Mennonites..." (3).

The formation of Terek colony could be described as an enormous mistake. Mennonites and Muslims, colonizers and Indigenous, came into inevitable conflict. Yet there was kindness, too, and hospitality, and generosity. It's a complicated story, violence and peace in a single frame.

Sources

- Adrian, Anna Baergen. *Memoirs*. Trans. by Mary J. Thiessen. Clearbrook: Memoirs Publishing, 1994. Cited by permission.
- "Dagestan." *Wikipedia*. 2022. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dagestan>
- Friesen, Aileen. "Searching for Common Ground: Muslim-Mennonite Encounters." *Anabaptist Historians*. 2017. <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2017/01/26/searching-for-common-ground-muslim-mennonite-encounters/>
- Krahn, Cornelius. "Terek Mennonite Brethren Church (Talma, Republic of Dagestan, Russia)." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1959.
- "Terek Mennonite Church (Khartch, Republic of Dagestan, Russia)." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1959.
- "Terek Mennonite Settlement (Republic of Dagestan, Russia)." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1959.
- "Leo Tolstoy." *Wikipedia*. 2022. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leo_Tolstoy
- Toews, C. P. *Die Tereker Ansiedlung, Mennonitische Kolonie im Vorderkaukasus: Entstehung, Entwicklung und Untergang 1901-1918/1925*. Steinbach MB: Steinbach Post, 1945.
- Toews, C. P. *The Terek Settlement, Mennonite Colony in the Caucasus: Origin [sic], Growth and Abandonment. 1901-1918/1925*. Trans. by Isaac A. Dyck. Yarrow: Columbia Press, 1972.
- Tolstoy, Leo. *The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories*. Trans. by Richard Pevear & Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Knopf, 2009.

Life and Death in Terek

■ By Maryann Tjart Jantzen

Much of the information in this article is based on the memories of Mary Balzer Tjart and Katrina Balzer Esau, recorded in preparation for a Balzer family reunion in the early 1980s. All Balzer family photos are from Maryann Tjart Jantzen's files.

Beginnings

This is a story of life and death in the Terek Mennonite settlement, located near the west coast of the Caspian Sea, on the left bank of the Sulak River, in present day Dagestan (northeastern Caucasus). My mother Mary Balzer Tjart's story of loss and trauma—but also of resilience and survival—is only one of many such Mennonite narratives of life disrupted by the chaos of the Russian Revolution. But it's the individual narratives that make concrete for us the abstracts of historical details so we can more fully understand the experiences of those who have gone before. Her story, while unique, is also representative of so many other global refugee narratives: accounts of loss, trauma, and displacement, and, hopefully, new beginnings.

Mary, the third child of David and Marie (Flaming) Balzer, was born on June 13, 1907, in Talma (village #3). The recently established Terek settlement had a moderate climate of “dry and hot summers, rainy autumns, and cool winters with little snow and yearly precipitation of 20 to 30 cm” (“Kumyks”). The day of her birth, surely attended by a local Mennonite midwife, was likely warm and sunny, an auspicious time for a new life to begin.

Her landless parents had met and married in their home village of Schardau, Molotschna. Bringing with them one-year-old daughter Kathrina (Tina), they had arrived in Terek in 1904. According to C.P. Toews, their journey would have taken up to a week, first with “difficult and tiresome” days spent ferrying their goods and livestock to the train station, and then a three-to-four-day train ride, after which they still had to navigate primitive roads enroute to their new village (10-11).



Mary Balzer in Swift Current, Sk., 1934.

Surely apprehensive about the journey, David (27) and Marie (25) must also have been excited about their future as landowners in a new colony. But, according to daughter Mary's memories, Terek had not been her parents' first choice; rather, they had wanted to immigrate to Canada. However, grandfather Balzer did not approve and instead lent them money to settle in Terek. How different their life might have been if they had moved

across the ocean instead of into the politically volatile Terek region!

When they first arrived, the family lived with friends Franz and Anna (Duerksen) Enns, until their own house was built. Enns, whom Mary described “as a very kind person,” served the colony as a community leader, minister and homeopathic medic, and later assisted the Balzer family during difficult times (his son

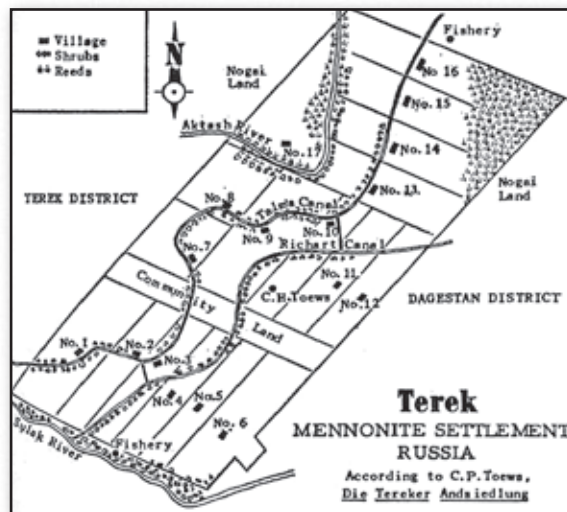


Photo credit: “Terek Settlement,” Gameo

Gerhard Enns was my family's doctor in Chilliwack; one of my earliest memories is of visiting his dispensary at about age three to have a chicken bone removed from my throat).

Likely the couple had no idea of the fraught political situation they were entering, although they may have been aware of other concerns. Historian Terry Martin writes that "the acquisition of the Terek lands was roundly criticized in the Mennonite press, but only on economic and health grounds. Security concerns were not expressed" (1). Despite these concerns, "the settlement eventually "consisted of 536 families with 3,400 persons" (Krahn).

But security soon became a major preoccupation. Aileen Friesen writes that in the Terek Province, "Mennonites established a small enclave surrounded by various groups of Sunni Muslims, such as the Nogai, the Kumyks, and a little further away, the Chechens." Tensions between these groups and Imperial Russia had long preceded the arrival of the Mennonite settlers. In addition, "the 1905 revolution [precursor to the 1917 Bolshevik overthrow of the imperial government] created political upheavals, especially in the border regions." Terry Martin states that "nowhere were the upheavals more brutal than in the Caucasus. Thus, the new Terek settlers suddenly faced a dilemma ... of life and death significance to them. How does one deal with the threat, not of war, but of anarchy?" (1)

The colonists sent petitions to Russian officials, asking for protection from the marauding bandits. With little response, left to their own resources, they began to pay protection money to the corrupt local district officials. At one point in time, Martin writes, "the Terekers agreed to 'hire' a thief as 'shepherd' for each village. He would serve as the village's 'guarantor.' These *Otvetchiki* (from the Russian verb 'to answer for') became a normal feature of Terek life until the colony's demise in 1918" (1); however, thieving continued sporadically. When a delegation later travelled to St. Peterburg to plead for help, some government action was taken: "Punitive expeditions were sent into the region, and numerous native villages were annihilated" (2).

With the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and its aftermath into the following year, chaos erupted. However, there was no longer a "strong central government to petition." Thus, the Terek Mennonites had to choose to "fight or flee" (2).

And some chose to fight, a decision with tragic consequences for Mary's family.

Life in Talma

Times were hard during the family's first years in the colony, with crop failures and occasional infestations of locusts. The spring melt from the rugged Caucasus mountains carried to the Caspian Sea by the Sulak and Aktash rivers close to the community meant flooding was common in late spring and early summer, bringing mosquitoes and malarial fever. In 1905, an estimated 105 members of the colony had succumbed to malaria and typhus (Toews 26). Mary's eldest sister, Tina, remembers that she and her father were especially susceptible to malarial fevers. The school year ended in May because that was when the fever began to spread. When sick, the children would be given a few drops of a bitter tasting medicine (likely quinine) every morning, with the fevers, accompanied by headaches, usually lasting a week or two.

But in the years after Mary's birth, conditions improved and prosperity seemed a distinct possibility for the colonists. Irrigation canals were reopened, providing much needed moisture for summer crops planted on the sandy soil, and dikes were built to prevent floods. Businesses were established and the future must have seemed promising. Tina remembers that the village of Talma "boasted a brick-drying kiln, a shop, ... and a two-storied mill, which was located across the street from the school." Toews reports that it also had a pharmacy, from which the proprietor, Mr. Bitting, distributed medicines. Although the colony had no resident



Mennonite home in Talma that was still standing in the 1990s. Terry Martin.

Photo source: MAID 408-002_141.jpg.

doctor, a German *Feldsher* (trained medic) acted as its “chief medical officer” (20). The *Kirchliche* church the family attended was located between Talma and Kartsch (village #2). On Sunday afternoons the Balzer children attended Sunday school at the Mennonite Brethren Church at the other end of Talma.

Though the family was affiliated with the *Kirchliche* church, they were receptive to Mennonite Brethren practices; David’s younger brother Daniel had been baptized into the MB church, and so also would Mary be, years later.

These must have been optimistic years for the family, despite the challenges of establishing a new homestead with limited resources. According to Tina, the family lived in a house of three rooms: a kitchen, bedroom, and parlour (*Grosse Stube*) which was reserved mostly for “visiting occasions,” although of necessity two of the children slept in this room.

The house, the first one on the village street, close to the home of a “Tatar”^{*} shepherd (likely the indigenous guard paid to safeguard the village), was constructed of bricks made from clay and straw, with thick walls, and a thatched roof made of local reeds. The adjoining barn and the house shared the same roof. The family hoped to build a bigger house, though that opportunity vanished when World War I broke out.

My mother and her sister Tina had many sunny memories of their childhood home. Mary mused that when she moved to Greendale (near Chilliwack), she felt a sense of familiarity because of the surrounding mountain views. (CP Toews mentions that the snow-capped Elbrus, the highest mountain of the Caucasus range, was visible from the colony (8).) Having grown up in the moderate Terek climate, she appreciated the mild Fraser Valley weather after having spent more than a decade in colder Saskatchewan.

Tina remembers the huge mulberry tree “that bore much fruit” growing outside the kitchen window, “in whose shade” the children “loved to play.” The family homestead featured “orchards and vineyards” and many flowers. Her father grafted many fruit trees and she

particularly remembers an apple tree “that bore three different kinds of apples” and also a branch that “was loaded with pears.”^{**} Mostly self-sufficient, the family had a well-equipped larder, with pickled herring and watermelon in “little wooden barrels” and homemade butter that “ran through [our] fingers” during the hot weather. “Homemade yeast” was a necessity, to be shared with neighbours if needed, since bread was baked daily. Preserved meat stored in lard was kept in earthenware containers, and “a long, smoked fish ... always hung at the end of the cupboard.” In the wooden wardrobe in the parlour was always “a bag of raisins, a *Zuckerhut* [sugar loaf] and walnuts.”

The family had eight cows, six horses, a few pigs and many geese (on the dairy farm in Greendale, Mary added to the family income by raising and selling geese and ducks; her favourite

Christmas dinner was always roast goose with *bubbat*). They supplemented their diet with fish caught in the nearby river (likely the Talma Canal). Tina remembers how, “armed with baskets,” they would “wade knee-deep in the water, and facing upstream, [catch] twice as many fish as we needed.”

Tina emphasizes the value her father placed on reading, though only a few books and the family Bible rested on a shelf in the parlour. She particularly remembers commiserating with the pilgrim in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* “who was always so tired.” In this room were also her mother’s *Hauben* (caplets)—the white one she wore after marriage and the black one she wore to church. The children also loved to look at the pictures on the sewing patterns that were stored in this room.

On a shelf in the bedroom, father David kept a songbook, an abacus and the administrative “books for the church.” Also stored in the room was mother’s “fine porcelain,” keepsakes that she treasured. On one occasion when Mother was at church, Mary accidentally broke some of these dishes. Although her mother sobbed with sadness, she did not punish her but sat the children down and had them memorize the following *Gedicht*:



David Balzer,
in service during WWI.

* Mennonites from Terek (including CP Toews) often referred to their Muslim neighbours as “Tatars,” a ubiquitous term that did not distinguish between the differing local tribal groups.

** A long-time garden enthusiast, I grew up surrounded by my mother’s vegetable and flower gardens; I wonder now how many generations back this love for plants reaches.

*Gottes Auge schaut vom Himmel
Auf die Großen, auf die Kleinen,
Und die Nacht ist wie im Licht,
Darum tuh das Boese nicht.
Sind auch Vater, Mutter weit,
Er ist bei dir allezeit.
Darum tuh das Boese nicht.*

[God's eyes look down from heaven
On the big ones and the small.
And the night is like the light,
Therefore, do no wrong.
Even when Father and Mother go away,
He is with you all the time.
Therefore, do no wrong.]

In 1912 David was called to a preaching ministry in the *Kirchliche* church (a copy of one of his sermons, handwritten in Gothic script, is lodged in the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies archives), and Tina remembers how he would prepare his sermons in the parlour, while Mother would tell the children to be quiet. When he came home after being selected by the church, “we all kneeled and father prayed a lot.” She was puzzled because she “did not comprehend what was happening.” Mary remembers him praying “that his words would be accepted and understood.”

Darker days

In 1914, during World War I, just before Christmas, thirty-seven-year-old David Balzer was drafted (even though he had already earlier done compulsory forestry service) by the Russian military. During three years of service, he worked as an orderly assisting wounded soldiers and/or as an aide to Russian military officers. Tina remembers how the family gathered for prayer and Bible reading the night before his departure. He was only allowed one leave in three years of service.

Now Mary's mother, pregnant, with seven children, ages eleven to two, was solely responsible for the household and farm. Sister Agnes was born six months later in May 2015. Tina had to drop out of school to help, as hired help was impossible to procure. She (age 11-12) and mother Marie worked on seeding and harvesting of the fields (likely winter wheat), and had to dig open the irrigation ditches on their appointed day. Sister Sarah, age 9-10, was left at home to do the housework and look after the six younger children, including baby Agnes.

Mother and Tina also harvested hay, which, after it was baled, was sold to the local tribal people for cattle feed. The hay was gathered into long stacks to protect it from rain and then formed into heavy bales. Tina found it very hard to “carry the heavy bales into the barn to feed the cattle.” Both Tina and Mary reminisced that, because of all the difficult circumstances of these years, they had received only four years of schooling (in Canada, Mary not only learned to speak English but later taught herself to read and write English).

Both Mary and Tina remember their mother's courage and strong faith, even as she shouldered the burden of parenting eight children and managing the farm. Tina remembers her often singing, in particular the song, “*Stern auf den ich schaue*” (The Star upon which I Gaze), comforting her children “with the thought that our father would soon be coming home.” Although her mother must often have been exhausted, Mary remembers her telling the children stories while she peeled potatoes for the evening meal.

Death and departure

In 1917-18, more storm clouds gathered after the Russian Revolution erupted. Father David's return from military service in the fall of 1917 was a time of great joy for the family. However, this joy “was short-lived.” Tina remembers that, during “this time of political instability and anarchy, bands of robbers and vandals terrorized the country, attacking and plundering villages.”

Only three months later, on January 30, 1918, David Balzer was dead at age forty, murdered after being taken hostage by a group of twenty-two bandits who had come to loot the village of Talma. He and other representatives from the colony had been on their way to ask for help from local government officials because of frequent raids by bandits. Just outside the village, they were apprehended and held as hostages. According to Toews, the leader of the bandits “instructed the guards to kill these men if there was any shooting in the village” (53). After some villagers fired back in self-defence, the four men were shot. David Balzer died immediately (see Toews, pages 52-53, for a fuller account).

Tina speaks of her vivid memories of that traumatic day: “The hooligans jumped on our wagon and forced the men back into our village. They stopped by the fence across the street from our house. Mother ran out and pleaded with father to come into the house but

the bandits would not let him. Father called to mother to run into the house and instruct all to lie down flat on the floor.... In the meantime, a group of would-be defenders ... opened fire and shot the leader of the bandits.... This triggered an all-out gunfight. The bandits ... ran down the street shooting at random.... [Four] of our villagers were shot, including our beloved father. ... What a terrible day that was!"

David Balzer's funeral was held in the nearby Mennonite Brethren church, and Mary remembers youngest sister Agnes, almost three, walking round and round the coffin, asking her father to get up. Age thirty-eight, Marie was now widowed, with eight children, and four months pregnant with her ninth child, Elizabeth (Liese), who would die in August 1919, shortly after the family arrived at their grandfather's home in Schardau, Molotschna Colony.

Although some in the settlement had chosen armed resistance, soon flight became inevitable as the colonists realized they could not withstand the anarchic forces assailing them. Then began days of terror, with villagers barricading their windows and banding together for protection. Tina recounted that "we ate little and prayed much" as the periodic raids continued. After nine days a decision was made to evacuate the colony. Mary remembers it as "a terrible time. In one evening, we baked, prepared food and packed some clothing. Mother was able to sell some goods and animals and this money helped to keep the family from starvation during the next few years."

The trek began on February 8, which was cold and rainy, with the whole family in one wagon, along with whatever goods they could take along. Neighbour Jacob Schellenberg, age seventeen, went along to help drive the wagon: Mary recounts that "all the animals were left behind. You can imagine how little we could take along. This is how the family left their home, never to see it again." According to Tina, the community's cattle that had not been taken by the bandits were "driven behind the wagons." Mary remembers that the line of "people and wagons was as far as one could see.... We had barely left the house when the Tartar people were already there to plunder.... This is how [we] left [our] homeland, never to see it again."

As the colonists fled, hostile armed groups raided their livestock and threatened to kill them and/or kidnap the women and children, only to be dissuaded by friendly locals who provided refuge. Finally, they arrived

at Kasi-Yurt where they found shelter with friendly Kumyks (one of the local tribes). Three weeks later, after moving to several locations, they were able to board a train. Tina remembers that "much to our relief we crossed the Terek River and thereby the boundary of the Terek."

Aileen Friesen points out the complexity of the cultural/political situation the Mennonites experienced during this time of chaos. Despite the violence they experienced, "there were moments when the values of friendship, hospitality, and dialogue joined Mennonites with their Muslim neighbours. As the raids on Mennonite villages intensified during 1918, Mennonites not only prayed for God's mercy, they also approached some of their Muslim neighbours (the Kumyks) living in the villages of Kazi-Yurt and Kostek for help. The Kumyks sent representatives to a meeting held at the Mennonite Brethren Church in the village of Talma (village #3) to discuss the situation. They brought a detachment of the militia, which travelled to the neighbouring Nogai and Taulin villages to confiscate goods stolen from the Mennonites.... When it became apparent that the settlement could not be saved, Mennonites fled to Kazi-Yurt and Kostek where they were welcomed by the local population and extended significant hospitality. Those who could not make it to these villages were helped by Muslim acquaintances to safety through alternative routes."

Eventually, after more than a month of uncertainty, on March 3, the Balzer family, with many others, arrived by train in Suvorovka, a Mennonite settlement about 554 kilometres northwest of the Terek settlement. They could go no further because of the violent political conflict still engulfing much of southern Russia. Along with another family of eight, the Balzers were billeted in the home of the Heinrich Ennses (his wife's name is unknown), a family of four, in the village of Grossfuerstental. Tina recounts that all twenty-one persons slept wherever they could, on benches, floors, chairs, etc., and together ate at a big table in a granary. Sometimes soldiers occupying the town were also present, sleeping on the kitchen floor. On August 11, 1918, youngest sister Liese was born.

During their stay in Grossfuerstental, a typhus outbreak ravaged the community, likely due to lice infestations in crowded and unsanitary living conditions; many died, including Mr. Enns, the family's host. During

this time, the Balzer family moved into the three-room village school with two other families. Mary remembers that when her mother became critically ill, Elder Franz Enns, who was providing medical assistance, “informed the children that she would surely die.” He pleaded with God that “she should be saved as her family members needed her so desperately.” Then the children also became sick. Still very ill, her mother would “crawl on hands and knees attending to her family.” The two youngest were being cared for by other families. During this time, food was scarce, and the family depended on what was given to them by other villagers.

Once spring came, time was spent gathering straw and stubble to burn for heating. Mary, then eleven, and sister Sarah, thirteen, worked as live-in nannies, only able to briefly see the rest of the family on Sundays. Mary remembers how lonely she was during this time of separation. Mother and Tina worked in the village fields hoeing corn, taking with them ten-year-old Jacob, who stirred up too much trouble to be left behind. Margaret, age eight, was left to look after four siblings, the youngest only eight months old (necessity demands extraordinary measures).

Finally, in August 1919, more than one-and-a-half years after fleeing their home, some of the refugees continued to Molotschna by train, with four families to a freight car. This journey brought more challenges. At times, the freight cars were left stranded on side tracks in the middle of a field while the locomotives were conscripted for other tasks. Four of the Balzer children became seriously ill. What should have been a three-day journey lasted two weeks. Since the food they had brought ran out or spoiled, mother Marie, along with others, would walk to the “nearest villages” to find food. Sometimes this took all day.

The family arrived in Molotschna on a Sunday afternoon in late summer, with no one there to greet them since they had been expected days earlier. Eventually, someone gave them a wagon ride to their widowed grandfather’s house in Schardau, where he lived with his also widowed younger son, Daniel. Tina remembers Grandfather Balzer daily reading his Bible and interceding for each of the family on bended knee.



Balzer family, likely 1925, after death of mother Marie. Top row (L. to R.): Jacob, Mary (aged 16), Sarah, David. Bottom row: John, Agnes, stepfather/uncle Daniel, Margaret.

Then he would sing, “*Ach mein Herr Jesus/ wenn ich Dich nicht hätte* (Oh My Lord Jesus, If I Didn’t Have You).” Grandfather Jacob Balzer died in Schardau, age eighty-seven, in December 1934, weakened by the famine of the preceding years.

Mary records that “thieving and plundering” occurred here too. Historical accounts record that, until late 1920, “several fronts of the Red-White military clashes moved back and forth between the Mennonite villages, resulting in further property destruction and loss of life” (Klippenstein). Mary also told of how her mother and others had been beaten by soldiers. Then the drought of 1921 resulted in crop failures, leading to a shortage of food. Beggars would go from house to house asking for food. Supplies and livestock were being increasingly confiscated by the governing authorities. In August 1923, sixteen-year-old Mary was baptized by minister Johann A. Toews in the Alexanderthal Mennonite Brethren church, not far from Schardau (today only the foundations of the church are still standing).

In 1920, at age forty-one, Marie Flaming Balzer married Daniel, her husband’s widowed younger brother, then in his early thirties. Five years later, on April 26, 1925, Marie died, her life shortened by complications of diabetes and much hardship. As daughter Mary wrote, she died “an old women at the young age of forty-six.” A family picture



Mary Balzer, 1941, with Jacob Tjart, just before their marriage.

of stepfather Daniel and seven of the eight siblings reveals sombre faces and haunted eyes that had surely seen far too much tragedy.

In the fall of the same year, Mary and seven of her siblings, together with Daniel and his new wife, Sara, began their migration to Canada. The Balzer family sailed via Southampton to Quebec City on the SS *Montnairn*, arriving in Quebec City on 24 October 1925 and then travelling on by train to southern Saskatchewan. Oldest sister Tina and husband Henrich Esau came to Canada a year later. While Mary and her family had escaped the horrors of communist Russia, for which they were forever grateful, new challenges awaited them in their new homeland.

Sources

Esau, Kathrina Balzer. "An Insight into the Balzer Family History," as told to Elenore Esau, early 1980s.

- Friesen, Aileen. "Searching for Common Ground: Muslim-Mennonite Encounters." *Anabaptist Historians*. 2017. <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2017/01/26/searching-for-common-ground-muslim-mennonite-encounters>
- Klippenstein, Lawrence. "Russian Revolution and Civil War." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1989. https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Russian_Revolution_and_Civil_War
- Krahn, Cornelius. "Terek Mennonite Settlement (Republic of Dagestan, Russia)." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1959.
- "Kumyks-Orientalism." *Countries and their Cultures*. n.d. <https://www.everyculture.com/Russia-Eurasia-China/Kumyks-Orientalism.html>
- Martin, Terry. "The Terekers Dilemma: A Prelude to the *Selbstschutz*." *Mennonite Historian*. Volume XVII, no. 4, December 1991, 1-2.
- Tjart, Mary Balzer. "Life story." Transcribed into English by Henry Tjart, early 1980s.
- Toews, C. P. *The Terek Settlement, Mennonite Colony in the Caucasus: Origin [sic], Growth and Abandonment 1901-1918/1925*. Trans. by Isaac A. Dyck. Yarrow: Columbia Press, 1972.

BOOK REVIEWS

Dora Dueck, editor. *On Holy Ground: Stories by and about women in ministry leadership in the Mennonite Brethren Church*. Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2022.

■ Reviewed by Helen Rose Pauls

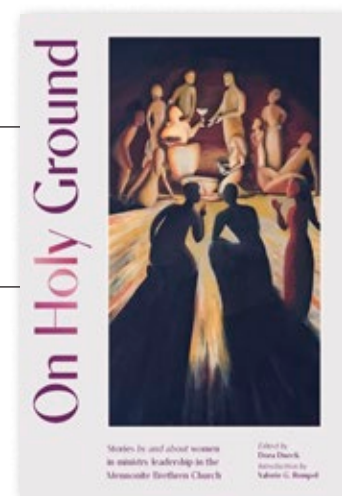
The Mennonite Brethren Historical Commission of the United States and Canada was the group which organized *Stories by and about women in ministry leadership in the Mennonite Brethren Church* with the proviso that "the views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the Mennonite Brethren Historical Commission." It seems that might have been enough to shield the Commission from these honest firsthand accounts. The controversy that surrounds the book has them flying off the shelves at the Mennonite Heritage Museum. Three pages of insight on the gay issue by Mary Anne Isaak caused the MB Conference to recall the first printing. Subsequent printings have the three pages deleted, although the Mennonite Heritage Museum provides them as an insert.

The book is well worth reading, full of personal details and gripping vignettes. The fifteen women church leaders who contributed to this collection express their sense of calling inspired by their deep love for God. Invited by their faith communities to serve because of their giftedness, they share struggles, pain, joy and

hope. Writers tell honest and intimate stories of being affirmed, connected, and encouraged as well as being silenced.

Karen Hubert-Sanchez, who fills any and every role in Thailand, describes feeling as if her head is being pushed under water in North American settings. Valerie Rempel in her introduction states that these stories affirm over and over again a deep sense of God's presence and goodness. Valerie says, "What comes through is a sense of privilege to be called by God and to serve the church." Brad Sumner calls these stories heart-stirring, written by wise and seasoned leaders.

In 1999, the joint Mennonite Brethren Conference blessed women for all ministry roles except those of ordination and senior pastor. In 2006, the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Conference voted seventy-seven percent in favour of leaving the "women in leadership question" up to individual churches. David Wiebe, former Canadian MB Conference Chair, expresses a hope that "local churches and conference bodies reach



out with grateful hearts and accept these gifted women, calling and affirming them into their rightful place.” Perhaps the life stories of pioneer female church leaders shared in this book will enable that to happen.

Doris Penner. *Circling the Globe: The Story of the Evangelical Mennonite Conference.* Steinbach: Derksen Printers, 2020. 256 pp.

God had ordained his people would always be a small and weak community engaged in spiritual warfare with the world (55).

In 1812, Klaas Reimer instigated a break from the Russian Mennonite church, which he believed had adapted itself excessively to the ways of the “world.” In fact, it had become, he thought, dissolute, and a new vision was needed, a new church that would live in the purity and simplicity that the early Christians had preached. The result was the formation of the *Kleine Gemeinde*, the “small church,” a name that originated in the taunts of Reimer’s opponents, and was happily adopted by the new, tiny congregation. The *Kleine Gemeinde* remained small, perhaps insular, for many years, but in *Circling the Globe*, author Doris Penner traces its development and considerable expansion over some two hundred years. Today, the *Kleine Gemeinde* is known as the Evangelical Mennonite Conference (EMC). This represents something of a sea change. From a tiny community that resisted society and its ways, and did not speak much about personal conversion, the EMC has become outer-focused, adaptable, and, especially, evangelical, as its name implies.

Still, Penner’s point of view, in this charming little history, is persistently antagonistic to a corrupt and selfish “world.” The early church, she writes, lost its purity when the Roman emperor Constantine announced that the empire would be henceforth Christian. Over the next thousand years, despite attempts at reform, the church was in a downward slide. It was not until the Reformation that efforts to revivify the Christian life took hold in the European consciousness. Anabaptists were on the fringe of the revolution against the debased old church, and for that were nearly persecuted out of existence. In peril of their lives, they retreated, becoming Mennonites, “the quiet in the land.”

Their efforts to live purely and simply, writes Penner, deteriorated over time. Klaas Reimer (1770-1837), living

As to the controversy, Mary Anne Isaak says that it would be sad if this overshadows the voices of the fifteen contributors.



Doris Penner.

Photo source: book cover.

in Neunboden, near Danzig, was appalled that Mennonite leaders, in his words, “allowed everyone to do as they pleased” (39). He reacted by joining a splinter group distinct from the *Grosse Gemeinde*, the “big church,” as Doris Penner calls it. Historians, she writes, have analyzed Reimer in two ways: “as negative, seeing Reimer as a narrow-minded rebel, or as positive, pegging him as a forward-thinking reformer, seeking a pure church” (40). Though she recognizes Reimer’s faults, it is clear on which side she falls in that debate.

In 1804, seeing little hope for pure living among Prussian Mennonites, Klaas Reimer moved with his wife Maria and their family to the Molotschna colony in South Russia. He was to be disappointed in the move, writes Penner: “Reimer must have been dismayed to discover that church problems appeared to have followed him from Prussia” (41). Then in 1806, Maria died. Klaas remarried a twenty-year-old woman, Helena Friesen, who gave birth to ten children. Half of them died as children.

Reimer’s difficulties were augmented when he found himself in conflict with a village elder, Jacob Enns. The elder, writes Penner, was “hot-tempered and tactless”; otherwise, Reimer might have been willing to work with him. It was not to be. Persons of dubious character, Reimer charged, were being allowed to participate in communion. Yet Reimer was reluctant to leave the church, and agonized over what to do. He wrote, “Unfit as I was, God did not allow me to surrender to the situation, although the thought frequently came to me that it would be better to do so; for surely nothing could be changed. When these anxieties came upon me, I turned to the study of the Holy Scriptures and the writings of Menno Simons after which all thoughts of yielding left me” (42).

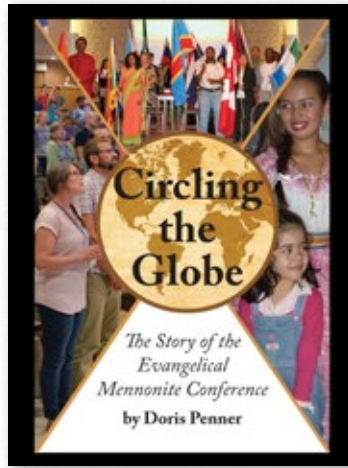
In 1812, Reimer refused to attend communion. In 1817

he was ordained by his splinter group, celebrated communion, and the break with the larger church became official. The Kleine Gemeinde left for a number of reasons, writes Penner. The new little congregation opposed the beating of workers; advocated a simple lifestyle; cleaved to principles of peace; supported a strong ban on straying members; and promoted the strict separation of church and state. The Kleine Gemeinde would be “the salt of the earth.”

The new church’s ideals engendered accusations of having “a superior attitude in thinking themselves better than their neighbours who stayed with the church” (47). Faced with those denunciations, in 1865 nearly the entire Kleine Gemeinde moved on and formed the colony of Borosenko. There seemed to be no escape, however, from the “Mennonite disease”: the small splinter group occasionally itself broke into even smaller splinters.

In the early 1870s, the Russian government began to enforce “reforms,” including universal conscription. Many of the more conservative Mennonites at that point felt they could no longer rely on the authorities. The Kleine Gemeinde distrusted even the concept of alternative service, and appointed two men to join a team of twelve Mennonite delegates who would scout out the possibilities of immigration to North America. In the mid-1870s, the Kleine Gemeinde joined thousands of other Mennonites in a mass movement to the New World. Many among them immigrated to the United States, but the Kleine Gemeinde chose Canada, despite its harsher climate. They were lured to the East Reserve, lands east of the Red River in Manitoba, by Canadian government promises that would allow them control over education and guarantee exemption from the military.

Pioneer life on the prairies was impossibly difficult,



but the Kleine Gemeinde survived through harsh winters, dying children, and poor crops. Some eventually moved to the United States. And more splits occurred. John Holdeman’s preaching drew away church members; and in 1948 some of the Kleine Gemeinde moved to Mexico, where a more isolated lifestyle could be practised.

In the 1950s, however, the small church saw a remarkable spurt in growth. Already in 1946, the individual

Kleine Gemeinde congregations were given more autonomy—for one hundred and forty years the Gemeinde, however scattered, had formed a single church. Then the evangelists appeared, and a transformation took place. Billy Graham and George Brunk introduced the concept of an emotional personal conversion, an idea that had previously been secondary among the Kleine Gemeinde.

A name change took place in keeping with the new outlook. In 1952, the church became the Evangelical Mennonite Church; and modernized further in 1959, taking on the name of Evangelical Mennonite Conference. A board of missions was established. Church plants became fundamental, and included new “non-ethnic” congregations. A transition took place from German to English language usage in the ECM. Eventually, higher education became somewhat acceptable.

This story, however, writes Penner, is open-ended. “In the early years, the church was caught up in figuring out what the Christian lifestyle should look like according to biblical principles. This is an ongoing struggle which tends to put churches into a ‘liberal’ or ‘conservative’ category” (198). The arguments raised two hundred years ago by Klaas Reimer still persist within a small but lively Mennonite conference.

BC’s New “Mennonite” Premier

Ralph Friesen, author of *Dad, God, and Me: Remembering a Mennonite Pastor and His Wayward Son* (see *Roots and Branches* June 2022), mused on the British Columbia premiership of David Eby on the Facebook page, *Mennonite Genealogy and History*. He will be presenting his book at the Mennonite Heritage Museum in February 2023. The article has been slightly edited.

David Eby was sworn in as the thirty-seventh premier of British Columbia on November 18, 2022. So it is fitting that we claim him, today, as “Mennonite.”



David Eby.

<https://www.wikimedia.org>

Eby's great-grandparents, Vernon Eby and Lorena Kramp, are buried in the First Mennonite Cemetery in Waterloo, Ontario, according to *Find a Grave* (<https://www.findagrave.com/>). Evidently, they would have been Swiss Mennonites. Their son Robert became a first lieutenant in the Canadian Navy in World War II, married a non-Mennonite, and his funeral was celebrated by a Catholic priest. Robert's son Brian became a lawyer and "with his loving wife and partner Laura

Eby (née Keates) successfully raised four wilful children without the benefit of corporal punishment." So that's getting further from qualifying for Mennonite—no spankings. But Brian redeems himself by being a fan of Bruce Springsteen and Bob Dylan. As for David Eby, in his youth he played in and provided vocals for several electro-indie rock bands, so he's got the singing gene, though "electro-indie" does raise doubts. Anyway, that's our new premier.

GOODBYES AT THE MUSEUM AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Remembering Peter Enns (1933–2022)

■ By Lois Klassen

Volunteering at the Mennonite Heritage Museum was, for Peter Enns, the last of many post-retirement positions which brought him fulfilment and satisfaction after he left behind his lengthy career in public school teaching and school administration. His list of life-long volunteer and post-retirement postings reveals his varied skills and interests and is impressive in its length. He was, at one time or another, a Grade 8 girls basketball coach, a member of a quartet with a regular "gig" on a Bellingham radio station (King's Messengers), a church moderator, MB conference secretary, board chair at Tabor Home Society (now Tabor Village), interim administrator of the International Baccalaureate program at Abbotsford Senior Secondary, interim president of Lithuania Christian College (LCC; now Lithuania International University), associate dean at ACTS seminary at Trinity Western University, where he played an important role in bringing the Canadian MB Conference into the seminary, and, finally, a volunteer at the Mennonite Heritage Museum. No wonder he was described at his funeral as a man with a broad network of connections and is remembered as someone who honoured the best in people.

It was not only the skills and experience he gained while dealing with students and staff in his more-than-three-decades career in education that allowed him to succeed in all of these "side gigs" but also his character attributes of humility, patience, calmness, and wisdom. All of these attributes are attested to by those closest to him. At his funeral, his children, grandchildren, friends and colleagues shared warmly remembered anecdotes that illustrated their experience of the best of Peter Enns.

His family recalls how patiently he taught them his favourite sports and how he continued to participate in sports with

them as he aged. His grandchildren recall his willingness to spend time inventing scavenger hunts for them and his gentle form of discipline, which was calmly to call their name, recalling them to better behaviour. Other family members remember how he quietly left the table to do the dishes after family meals, setting an example for them while allowing their grandmother to spend time with them.

Peter's wife, Joan, points out that he never sought involvement in spheres of influence. In each case, he was approached by others and invited to participate. It is consistent with his character that he saw these offers not as a chance to wield power or influence but as opportunities to serve his church and his community. Sometimes the challenges inherent in the roles he was offered made him hesitate. His friends Dennis and Rene Neumann recall that Peter's initial response to the invitation to be LCC's first president was, "I am not qualified for the job" (a statement belied by his years of experience and his post-graduate degree in the field of education). They recounted how one particular incident which occurred during his tenure as LCC president illustrates the character traits which, despite his humble



Peter Enns. Photo source: Enns family archives.

assessment of his own abilities, uniquely qualified him for a job requiring expertise in both administration and in diplomacy:

LCC was moving 50 students from an old Soviet-style dorm to LCC's newly renovated student residence. Peter had made all the necessary arrangements for a smooth transfer for the students. Moving day arrived and at the last minute the city inspector failed the final inspection, [citing] some deficiencies. Peter decided to object and took his two architects and staff to try to have the decision reversed. After 40 minutes of discussions and argument in Lithuanian, Peter knew by the resounding "NO" that we had lost. As people were putting on their coats to leave, Peter calmly asked if he could speak. Through a translator he addressed the chair. "Sir, because of your decision today, 50 young students [have

no place to sleep] tonight and future nights until this deficiency is corrected. Is that what you want?" The official was taken aback, looked down, and after a thoughtful moment replied, "Mr. Enns, you have my approval. Please move in."

Peter was my uncle, one of my father's many younger siblings. I, too, along with colleagues, friends and family, remember his deep steady voice, calm demeanour and his gentle humour. What better can be said of a man than that he was "an example of compassion and patience," "a stable, dependable rock," "positive in his comments," "an encourager," "a model for how to live," "firm and fair," "an anchor for his family," "tender-hearted," and "displayed a trust and confidence in God?" Peter Enns is sorely missed. May his soul rest in peace.

Remembering William Giesbrecht and Henry Thiessen

■ By Robert Martens

We have recently lost some much-loved volunteers at the Mennonite Heritage Museum and Mennonite Historical Society. William (Bill) Giesbrecht was born in Manitoba in 1932, and was rather lucky to be a Canadian citizen: his parents were on the last train carrying Mennonites out of the emerging Soviet Union in 1929. He led a busy life, teaching elementary Grades 4 and 5, and high school 6 and 7, for thirty-three years. Later, he worked at the Mennonite Central Committee complex in Abbotsford, and volunteered at the Mennonite Heritage Museum for several years.

Bill's wife, Frieda Marie (Krahn), whom he married in 1955, died in 2020 in Abbotsford. Bill passed away in 2022. His enthusiasm as a volunteer and his willingness to serve were immensely valued at the Museum.

Bill Giesbrecht was good friends with Henry Thiessen, another volunteer lost to the Museum in 2022. Henry was born in Winnipeg in 1938. His family farmed in Arnaud but since making a living there was difficult, moved to St. Catharines, Ontario, where Henry graduated from Eden Christian College. He later studied at Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg, where he met and married Leona Schmidt in 1965.

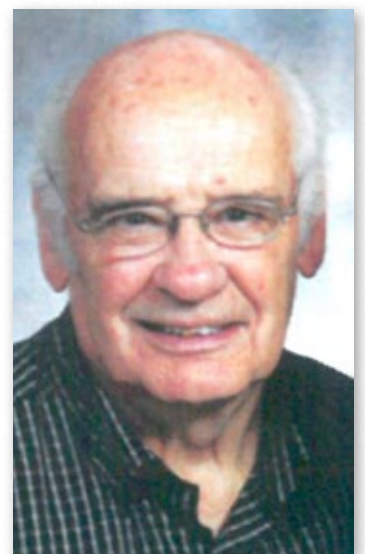
Soon after their marriage, the couple moved to São Paulo, Brazil, to teach at the Pan American Christian Academy. Henry served as administrator there for the next fourteen years. After a number of mission trips, the couple relocated to Abbotsford in 1986, where Henry worked as assistant pastor at Bakerview MB Church and later volunteered at the Mennonite Heritage Museum.

These two volunteers, gentle spirits both, are deeply missed at the Museum.



Bill Giesbrecht.

Photo source: Wiebe & Jeske.



Henry Thiessen.

Photo source: Wiebe & Jeske.

