Arlette Kouwenhoven. *The Fehrs: Four centuries of Mennonite migration*. Translated from the Dutch by Leslie Fast. Leiden, Netherlands: Winco Press, 2013. 264 pp.
Book review by Robert Martens

It was 2010, in the traditionalist Mennonite colony of Sabinal, Chihuahua state, Mexico, and Dutch anthropologist Arlette Kouwenhoven had developed close ties with the family of David and Maria Fehr. "At first, conversation was reserved, gradually became a little freer, but was always restricted. In Sabinal there is more silence than speaking, more prayer than laughter. The resignation with which self-imposed restrictions are endured is humbling. The obstinacy with which every expression of childlike enthusiasm is nipped in the bud, and each attempt at accomplishment and excellence is shackled and branded as pride, is rather depressing. Who are these people, how did they come to settle in this place? Where does their zeal come from? Did the Mennonites of the past also live isolated from the world?" (20) David Fehr and his family, Kouwenhoven reports, were feeling restless, feeling the call of the modern outside world. How did this closed community result, wonders Kouwenhoven, when early Anabaptist communities were widely engaged with the society around them?

Arlette Kouwenhoven, author of *The Fehrs*, reports that, to her knowledge, she is not related to any Mennonite anywhere in the world. Yet her interest in the Mennonite/Anabaptist story was piqued by her visit to Sabinal, and her affection for the people living there. "Some casual probing strikes a chord somewhere, an unexpected sense of belonging, a nostalgic feeling is awakened that is not based on any apparent shared experience, and yet is so appealing that the idea cannot be abandoned" (20). The idea was to probe the historical background of the Mennonite community by tracing the genealogy of the Fehr family through 400 years of migration. The book that resulted, using the hook of the Fehr lineage, is a wonderfully accessible and warm retelling of the Russian Mennonite story, from its Anabaptist beginnings to its emigrations to North and South America. Kouwenhoven divides her book into historical sections.

Amsterdam 1612

The story begins with the oldest known Fehr, Gijsbert de Veer, born in 1556. Gijsbert grew up when the terror of Anabaptist martyrdom was fading. As a boy in an Anabaptist family, Kouwenhoven writes, Gijsbert had heard the stories of torture and faithfulness of early Anabaptists, meeting secretly to read the Bible and console each other – apparently over mugs of beer – through years of brutal persecution. It was master organizer Menno Simons who consolidated the small flock of religious rebels. Even so, division was frequent. Already during Menno's lifetime, liberal Frisians and conservative Flemish were attacking each other with great enthusiasm.

At the same time, the Mennonite emphasis on simple living led to monetary savings and ultimate prosperity. In 1578, a bloodless coup by Protestants in Amsterdam had freed the city from the oppressive rule of the Spanish. The Dutch economy soon led the European world. In 1612, Gijsbert de Veer, already a wealthy entrepreneur in the grain trade, moved with his family to Danzig to increase his fortune.

Poland/Prussia 1612-1789

The Dutch were flocking to Danzig (today's Gdansk in Poland), with Anabaptist/Mennonites among them. Soon the Dutch controlled the lucrative trading centre in Danzig; Mennonite businessmen mingled with their Dutch counterparts in the Artushof, a club for rich entrepreneurs, where gambling, drinking, and business dealing ruled the day.

Mennonites, though, faced severe restrictions from the locals, perhaps simply out of jealousy; they were barred from city residence and from membership in the guilds. They became successful, Kouwenhoven muses, perhaps *because of* the restrictions, as they were then forced into creative solutions for success. The suburbs they occupied outside the city were some of the most beautiful locales in the region. The Mennonite-owned Momber *Kaffee-Haus* was a renowned centre for drinking coffee or wine, smoking, discussing business, and reading newspapers. Mennonites became so good at liqueur production that for a time, Kouwenhoven says, "Mennonite" and "distiller" were virtually synonymous. And of course they became famous for dyking and drainage, including in their number the brilliant engineer Adam Wiebe.

But Mennonites were also famous for mutual aid. Support for the poor, even for those outside their own religious/ethnic group, became part of their tradition, and has endured to this day. Generous giving was as much a necessity as a virtue, because Danzig was in decline: plague killed tens of thousands, recurring wars devastated the land, and finally in 1749 severe legislative restrictions on Mennonite business drove many to poverty overnight. Mennonites moved en masse into the Polish *polder*, the drained delta to the southeast, and there excelled once again in farming, dyke management, windmill and fire insurance organizations, and of course, mutual aid. Literacy was part of their success, as it was considered vital for children to learn to read the Bible.

But talk of migration was soon once again in the air. In 1772 Prussia took control of the *polder*, and it wasn't long before the Prussian authorities were demanding full integration of all citizens into the state; this included military service. Mennonites, writes Kouwenhoven, have traditionally resented state intrusion into their lives, and in 1789 many of them, at the invitation of Tsarina Catherine the Great, emigrated to the Russian empire.

New Russia 1789-1874

Prince Potemkin, friend and lover of Catherine, was placed in charge of "German" immigration. In his dealings with Mennonites, Kouwenhoven writes, Potemkin probably engaged in a double-cross: the land they were promised was declared uninhabitable and dangerous, and Mennonites were forced to settle in the region of Chortitza, land owned by Potemkin himself. They received special guarantees from the state, eventually formalized in the Privilegium of 1800: military exemption, tax breaks, government loans, and special dispensations on the production and sale of beer and liqueurs. Catherine, herself of Prussian origin, had confidence that these new immigrants would succeed, and succeed they did, by virtue of hard work and community organization. It should be said that Arlette Kouwenhoven tells this story vividly, with a poignant evocation of village life, loves and deaths, and such incidents as the Big Fire of Neu Osterwick in 1863 – Mrs. Teichröb, who accidentally set the fire when she overheated lard on the stove, burning down 70 buildings, eventually went insane with the guilt.

Migration again became a topic of conversation. Conservative Mennonites were complaining of a moral decline among their people; for example, the youth, they declared, had learned to drink as hard as the Russians. Was this moral decline a reality, asks Kouwenhoven; or perhaps conservative reformers were just now recognizing vices that had long been part of Mennonite life? Another factor in talk of migration was the education reforms of Johann Cornies, who pushed traditionalists too hard, claims Kouwenhoven, and severely lacked in empathy. In any case, in the 1870s Mennonites were again moving en masse, this time to Canada and the United States. Not all among them were rigid traditionalists, writes the author; many were simply landless and needed to move.

Canada 1874-1922

Canada was offering better guarantees than the US on military exemption and community control of education. Soon Mennonites made the prairies blossom in the East and West Reserves of Manitoba, sometimes in areas considered hopeless by other immigrants. Mennonites shortly abandoned the village system they had developed in Russia and adopted the open single farm arrangement more practical for raising wheat. But technology soon invaded their simple lifestyle; Kouwenhoven tells the story of a Mennonite woman dreadfully burned by an exploding automobile gas tank. And then the Canadian government broke its own promises, demanding government control of education and imposing restrictions on military exemption. The authorities, Kouwenhoven writes, simply pushed too hard. Traditionalist Mennonites again decided to move on, this time to Mexico.

Mexico 1922-2011, and beyond

The northern Mexican state of Chihuahua was chosen for its isolation, and for the challenges involved. Hardship brings the community together, says Kouwenhoven; and technology is only rejected among traditionalist Mennonites if it will damage the community. Under incredibly difficult conditions, however, Mennonites managed to eventually succeed and even prosper. But conditions have deteriorated in recent years. Education among Mennonites has remained so substandard that the surrounding Mexican population has surpassed them. There is again the problem of the landless. Drug cartels have made everyday life a dangerous affair. The young are attracted to a more comfortable lifestyle in the cities. And so traditionalists once again talk about moving on, away from "the world," with all its seductions of technology and easy living.

The way of the cross

There is a limit to community control, writes Arlette Kouwenhoven: "Sometimes even brotherly love loses out" (213). Throughout her book, the author has been tracing the Fehr family line, and finally, here she is with her restless friends David and Maria Fehr in Sabinal, as they push the boundaries of the *Gemeinde* (community). How, she asks, has a "traditionalist" community moved so far from its actual origins and traditions? "The Anabaptist movement of the sixteenth century was a colourful mixture of individuals of various kinds, each with his or her place in the broader society in which they fully participated. It was on a voluntary basis that they joined together and chose to be re-baptized" (214).

Alternate ways

Are there alternatives to traditionalist communities that can still display integrity and generosity? Earlier in her book, Kouwenhoven briefly tells the story of the Russian Revolution and the terror that followed. Brothers CA and AA de Fehr had chosen not to leave Russia in the 1870s, and had become prosperous businessmen. After they escaped the Soviet regime in the 1920s, losing everything in the process, the de Fehrs ended up on the Canadian prairie. Here new Mennonite immigrants, well-educated and ambitious, quickly surpassed their compatriots who had emigrated in the 1870s. With the help of a German friend and business partner, CA de Fehr established a leading Canadian importing and sales firm. AA de Fehr's son Art created Palliser Furniture, Canada's biggest furniture manufacturer. During his lifetime, CA helped with the Canadian Colonization Board and the resettling of Mennonite immigrants, participated in the founding of the Mennonite Brethren Bible College (now Canadian Mennonite University), and was involved in the creation of MEDA (Mennonite Economic Development Associates). Art de Fehr intentionally hires immigrants in his plants, has worked for the MCC, and has represented the United Nations in refugee work in Somalia.

Is this an alternative model for traditionalist Mennonites, asks Kouwenhoven. She gives no definitive answer. Instead, she closes her remarkable book by dedicating it to David and Maria Fehr of Sabinal. “Who knows, perhaps in ten years I will write a sequel about what awaits them in the future, a future that hopefully looks brighter than much of their past” (240).