

**Mennonite Historical Society
of
British Columbia
*June 1996***

NEWSLETTER

Dear Members and Friends,

Your Society has concluded a successful first half of 1996. During this season we have sponsored three Heritage Lectures, strengthened our Board and further improved our archival collection.

Heritage Lectures

Our three Heritage Lectures were of their normal high quality and were well attended by appreciative audiences.

1. February 17, 1996 - Dr. Harvey Dyck

The Zaporoshje Project

Dr. Harvey Dyck has recently gained access to the Soviet Archives for the Southern Ukraine in the city of Zaporoshje and has negotiated permission to microfilm and bring to Canada copies of these records. In them he has found a wealth of information as to the individual fates of our people during the 1920's, 30's, and 40's.

Many of our brethren suffered cruelly during those Stalinist years. We cannot undo, or make right the past. But we can search out and enter into a permanent record the history of these individuals and in some cases determine their final resting place. In this way we might lay their memories to rest in a proper manner since most were never accorded a Christian burial.

This is a major project that will take several years to complete. Our budgetary commitment for 1996 is \$10,000. To date we have received designated donations from our membership of just over \$3,000. We have also been promised a special donation of \$2,000.US by the North American MB Historical Commission of Fresno, California. We are most grateful for this support, and feel confident that our members and friends will help us meet the balance of our commitment!

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2. March 30, 1996 - Dr. Abraham Friesen

"The oppressor and the oppressed,
how ironic they often become one and the same."

Dr. Friesen's discourse on early Anabaptist history covered two main themes, the evolution of the persecuted into persecutors, and, the essential fraud of most persecutions.

First Dr. Friesen illustrated how throughout history some element of the Christian community has been persecuted, and then all too often has become the persecutor of others. The first Christians were persecuted by the Roman and Jewish authorities. When the Donatists who wanted to keep the church small and pure established themselves as an authority, they suppressed all those that wanted to expand into a more all inclusive, or "Catholic" church. When this latter group became the official church in 312 AD under the auspices of the Emperor Constantine, they in turn would brook no opposition and persecuted all deviants from the established order. Augustine, who had been the leading voice for freedom, now became the advocate of oppression. Next came Luther, Zwingli, and other leaders of the Protestant Reformation. They rose in protest against the corrupt clergy of the official church and demanded the freedom to interpret the Gospels for themselves. But as soon as they received the support of a civil authority, Luther and Zwingli emulated Augustine and suppressed and persecuted those who dared to question their authority and dared to insist on a return to the original message of the gospels, namely the Anabaptists. Dr Friesen's final question, or maybe warning, on this subject was, "Are we in turn becoming intolerant of all who differ from us?"

Dr. Friesen's second theme discussed the falseness and total sham of the reason given for the persecution of the Anabaptists. They were persecuted and often put to death for the 'sin' of re-baptism. This rite had been practised for centuries by the Catholic Church in the institutions considered to be the purest embodiment of the Faith, namely the monasteries. Entry into the Holy Orders was considered a conversion experience and a re-baptism since all had been baptized at birth. The official church based its approval on Acts 19, where it is written that Paul baptized with water all those who had earlier been baptized by John the Baptist. When this inconsistency was pointed out, it was ignored because the established church was now supported by the power of the state and did not have to justify itself.

3. May 11, 1996 - Dr. Walter Klaassen

In his dissertation Dr. Klaassen led us through some of the historical facts that led to first, the Protestant Reformation and then the rise of Anabaptism.

The early years of the sixteenth century were hard for the common people of Europe. Their incomes did not rise while at the same time price inflation, largely caused by the import of gold from the New World, grew rapidly and impoverished the people who had no gold. Landlords, ie. the nobility and the clergy, insisted on increased rents to maintain their own standard of living in the face of rising prices. Again the common folk became poorer. This situation led to outright rebellion and the so-called Peasant's War which the peasants lost at the Battle of Frankenhausen in 1525. In this conflict the Church was on the side of the authorities, not the people.

Ordinary people were not educated but they also were not stupid. They were well able to discern the contrast between the luxury and opulence of the Church and the simple life of Jesus, which they equated with their own station. They demanded an end to this dichotomy and a return to the simple message of hope, faith and equity contained in the Gospels.

When Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the door of Wittenberg Cathedral, he provided the spark for a revolt against the established Church. Luther, Zwingli, and others demanded an end to corruption in the clergy and succeeded in deposing the Catholic Church as the established religious institution in many parts of Europe. When they received the support of a civil authority, they in turn tended to suppress the masses. [Luther had in fact disowned the Peasant's War.] However, the spark of freedom, once lit, could not be extinguished. The common people demanded control of their church and clergy, and insisted on a return to the simple faith of the Gospels. They suffered horribly, and many were put to death for their faith. Their persecutors were not only the Catholic Church but also the newly established Protestant Churches. Intolerance continues, but in the end, the common people will have their church.

Board of Directors

At the Annual General Meeting held on May 11, 1996, three new Directors were elected. We welcome to the Board:

- Kelly Harms - Archivist at the City of Vancouver
- John Konrad - Management Consultant
- Lillian Toews - Retired Psychiatric Social Worker

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They will join Lorne Dick, David Giesbrecht, Edward Hildebrand, Agatha Klassen, Peter Neudorf, Henry Rempel, William Riediger, Hans Schellenberg, and Ruth Derksen Siemens as Directors of your Society.

On June 20, 1996, the Directors named the following table officers:

President:	William Riediger
Vice President:	Henry Rempel
Secretary:	Ruth Derksen Siemens
Treasurer:	Edward Hildebrand

The Archives

During July and August the Archives will be open to the public Monday to Thursday from 9:00 AM to 12:00 Noon. We have many items that may be important to members and friends interested in their heritage and welcome your visit. Some significant and easily accessible items are:

- 85 Genealogies and Family Histories.
- 250 Photographs, captioned and organized.
- An English translation of the 1835 Molotschna Census.
- MCC/BC records of Colonization and "Reiseschuld".
- A small collection on the "Selbstschutz".
- A collection of maps highlighting Mennonite settlements.

No further meetings are planned for the summer. The next NEWSLETTER We will be sent to all members on our mailing list in early September to apprise you of our Fall program. We again thank you for your past support but must remind you that our revenue is still under budget. Please help us as you can. We wish you all a good Summer.

The Directors