

# **Mennonite Historical Society of BC**

#211-2825 Clearbrook Rd. Abbotsford BC V2T 6S3 Phone:853-6177 Fax:853-6246 E-mail:mennohis@rapidnet.net

## **NEWSLETTER SEPTEMBER 1998**

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

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### **Heritage Lecture and Fund Raising Banquet**

The next heritage banquet and lecture is scheduled for **Saturday, October 17, 1998, at 6:00 p.m.** at the:

**Garden Park Towers  
2825 Clearbrook Road  
(Parking available in the basement.)**

**Dr. Al Reimer, Winnipeg, will be speaking on  
"The Price of the Non-Resistance Position to Mennonites in Imperial  
Russia (WWI) and in Canada (WWII)"**

A native of Manitoba (Steinbach) and former Professor at the University of Winnipeg, Reimer is the author of "My Harp has Turned to Mourning" (1995).

Tickets for the banquet and lecture are only \$12.00 and are available from the Mennonite Historical Society office at (604) 853-6177.

Please plan to attend this dinner to learn about our past and to support the work of the BC Mennonite Historical Society.

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### **New Office Hours**

- **Archives hours** -Commencing October 1st our hours will be extended from **9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.** This will be implemented on a three-month trial period.

The **Memorial Wall Project** was launched last year and provides an opportunity to purchase a memorial plaque in honour of someone whose legacy you wish remembered. Along with the plaques that will be displayed publicly, each subscriber will submit a written testament to the honoree. To date eighteen plaques have been purchased. Please consider buying a plaque (\$500.00) to honour an individual's contribution and to contribute to the work of the BC Mennonite Historical Society.



**John B. Toews (Reedley, California)  
1906-1998**

On May 9, 1998, John B. Toews died in Reedley, California. Toews was perhaps the most influential Mennonite Brethren leader in the 20th century. His life spanned most of the century and he was one of the last MB leaders who grew up in Russia, experienced the trauma of revolution, civil war and famine, and then fled to a new homeland in North America.

Toews was active in many different leadership roles in the MB denomination. Included were periods of presidency of Bethany Bible Institute, MB Bible College, and MB Biblical Seminary. He pastored several congregations, and was executive director of the Historical Commission for over ten years. Whatever his position, Toews never wasted time in putting his own stamp on the area he directed.

In the area of MB history and theology, Toews spearheaded the efforts to coordinate the work of three major archival centres (Fresno, Hillsboro, Winnipeg). He initiated a major drive to collect archival materials and also to microfilm most of the congregational record of MB congregations in the US and Canada. The massive work of translating Peter M. Friesen's *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Russland* (1789-1910) was undertaken under his leadership. Other publications on MB history and theology were also produced largely because of his inspirational leadership.

Toews published two major books in the later years of his retirement. The first (1993), entitled *Pilgrimage of Faith, The Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia and North America 1860-1990* was an exploration of the theological developments in the MB church during this era. Toews were especially concerned about the loss of the Anabaptist theology of discipleship and

the adoption of North American evangelistic techniques. "Amid three decades of evangelistic activity," he said, "Mennonite Brethren have not been spared the trend of accommodating the message of the gospel to culture that is open to the benefits of salvation but does not want to 'take up the cross and follow me'" (258-9).

Toews last book (1995) was his autobiography, entitled *JB: The Autobiography of a Twentieth Century Mennonite Pilgrim*. In the forward Wally Kroeker remarks, "No one of our generation has experienced JB's measure of Mennonite Brethren history. He is the last of those who overlapped with the first generation of our fellowship. He has presided over and helped shape our collective experience through most of this century. In some ways he is Mennonite Brethren history. His life spent in devotion to the church, is a microcosm of the swirling changes that have buffeted and burnished our pilgrimage together." (Reprinted with permission from Mennonite Historian, June 1998.)

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**Engendering the Past: Women and Men in Mennonite History**

University of Winnipeg, October 16-17, 1998.

This conference will explore and analyse the way in which gender -- the experience of being a man or woman -- has influenced Mennonite history. Presentations on evolving Mennonite concepts of femininity and masculinity and female -- male relations in Mennonite communities. Leading scholars on Mennonite history, including James Urry will present papers at the conference. Katie Funk-Wiebe will be the keynote speaker at a banquet on Saturday evening. For more information contact Roydon Loewen at (204)339-0959.

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### **Secular society and BC Mennonites: MB growth**

At the May "One People, Many Voices" conference Trinity Western University historian Robert Burkinshaw discussed the growth of MB's in BC. Henry Neufeld prepared the following summary.

Burkinshaw traced the rapid growth of MB's in BC to the work of the West Coast Children's Mission that initially focused on child evangelism. The resulting mission stations developed into congregations with adult converts who had no previous connections with the Mennonite Brethren.

Could these new congregations be accepted or assimilated into the MB conference? In the 1950's the answer was "no, they can go to the Baptists, and several did." By 1961 five of these new congregations were welcomed into the MB conference. "That seemed to open the floodgates," said Burkinshaw.

Burkinshaw said this strong evangelistic imperative led "some of the established (MB) churches to change cultural and Anabaptist distinctives" in order to welcome those from the community.

From 1961 to the present the number of MB congregations in BC went from 17 to 82. Most of these churches involved converts from non-MB backgrounds. As well, Spanish, Laotian, Punjabi, and other language congregations emerged. Such church growth results are unique to BC.

### **Growth Factors**

Burkinshaw identified three factors that contributed to this growth.

1) Relatively recent settlement of Mennonites in BC.

Mennonites have not been in BC long enough to develop cohesiveness in relative isolation in specific geographic areas. This

can be contrasted with Mennonite settlements elsewhere in Canada where the settlements are older and were somewhat more isolated, enabling the sense of cohesiveness to develop.

2) Priorities of leadership.

Burkinshaw noted that Frank Epp observed a shift from other Mennonite groups to the MB's in the 1930's and 1940's. Epp's explanation was that the MB's had stronger leadership and a clear missionary thrust. In the 1940's and 1950's the west Coast Children's Mission was the most active outreach to non-MB's in the country. From 1970-1990 the issues facing Mennonites were no longer cultural issues like language, but Anabaptist distinctives and which of those distinctives should be preserved. Historian Peter Penner's observation about this period was that in BC the MB's "...sloughed off those identifying characteristics of our brotherhood; we did not want to be held up in our main emphasis -- evangelism -- by awkward elements in our theology." MB leaders were clear that evangelism had a priority above all denominational distinctives.

3) Character of BC Society.

Burkinshaw described BC society as unique in Canada and perhaps in North America. BC has a transient secular society with rapid population growth. From 1961-1991 the population of BC more than doubled, he said. BC is a province of immigrants, "We have never had a majority of people born here." BCer's are transient; once people move to BC they have a habit of moving far more frequently than anywhere else in Canada. In terms of secularity, census figures show BCer's as the highest in Canada for people who register themselves as having "no religion" (30%). BC has the lowest church attendance in Canada and North America.



### **Population Growth**

Much of BC's population growth took place in areas where MB's were settled or had established outreach churches. For instance in the Abbotsford area the population grew by six times while the provincial population doubled. The mainline churches could not move and follow this population shift and the total number of mainline churches remained the same, "By the 1960's" Burkinshaw said, "the mainline Protestant groups were so weak in BC that there was a relative vacuum."

Evangelical denominations such as the MB's who had strong church planting programs were simply able to move into the vacuum and provide alternatives. The MB's debated priorities, said Burkinshaw, and decided that with so many unchurched people, church planting and evangelism should have priority. These priorities were pursued regardless of other costs, he said.

"The character of BC society -- transient, secular, and rapid growth -- combined with the internal dynamics of the largest Mennonite group, the MB's, lead to the unique situation of rapid growth and development in BC," he said.

In the discussion following Burkinshaw's presentation it was observed that there is a decreasing interest in conference loyalty among BC MB's and that giving to conference causes has plateaued. One participant commented that MB's have an openness to other religious movements and have selected uncritically from groups such as the charismatic and the Vineyard movement.

Burkinshaw said that of the 21,000 who worship in a BC MB church, over half are newcomers who have not had time to gain loyalty to the larger church programs. John Redekop commented that the struggle for a clear theology has not yet been resolved.

**Of Borders and Boundaries: Reflections on Mennonite Unity and Separation in the Modern Era.** (Dr. Urry's presentation at the May 1998 history conference summarized by Henry Neufeld.)

Being Mennonites involves not just belonging to a community of faith but also to a community of place, said New Zealand historian, James Urry. The interconnect-edness of faith and community is reflected in kinship and marriage resulting in a "sense of peoplehood," he said. He noted that conferences and conference board meetings provide opportunities for social connections that are very important.

The mass migration of Mennonites to Canada up to 1950 brought Mennonites in touch with each other. These migrations resulted in one group of Mennonites becoming more conservative while the other group moved along with developments in the larger society. This was the pattern in Russia and again in Canada.

### **Grunthal**

In studying the community of Grunthal, Manitoba, Urry wondered "when did Mennonites become Mennonites... when did separation from others give way to an interconnectedness." He sought to explore the origins of the greater unifying identity.

On driving to Grunthal Urry was told "we are entering our area," in effect crossing a border, not a boundary. Mennonites have never had a territorial state because that would be contrary to their faith. "But we have Mennonite communities of place, and governments have recognized these," he said.

In Grunthal the Russlander have their orientation east and west: most of their relatives settled in Canada. For the Kleine gemeente, the orientation is north and south, since many have relatives in the US and Mexico.



Urry noted that sports rivalry (hockey and baseball) between Mennonite and non-Mennonite communities "made a mockery of the principles of non-resistance."

### **Reserves**

Grunthal is the "West Reserve" and Urry noted that a "reserve" is a land area set aside for a specific group. A reserve also denotes a community of place and social relations along with a degree of political autonomy. In Manitoba the Indians, Metis, Mennonites and Icelanders were given reserves. About the reserves in Manitoba Urry said "Mennonites were a state within a state;" they had territory and governing structures.

Mennonites were quite involved in local politics in the 1920's and 1930's, said Urry, but there was little involvement in the broader political scene.

Urry observed that the "Russlander" Mennonites (the group that settled in Canada in the 1920's) were quite integrated into a sense of national allegiance in Russia before they were forced to flee their Russian homeland. For many of this group Russia remained their "Heimat." For the children of the Russlander, Canada became their country.

### **Mobility**

Urry considered it significant that Canada has Russlander and US does not. The Russlander came to Canada as individuals, families or in kinship groups, not as congregational communities. He sees this mobility as an important characteristic. "The more educated your children become, the more likely they are to leave home and community," he said.

### **Part of a community**

The local identity of person is important. Urry sees the interconnectedness with a community in the social relationships reflected in a web of kinship and marriage.

"Being Mennonite involves not only belonging to a community of faith, but also to a community of place," he said.

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### **75 Years Ago**

1998 marks the 75th anniversary of a major Mennonite immigration from Russia to Canada. On June 22, 1923 over 700 people left the Chortitza colony and arrived in Rosthern Saskatchewan a month later. By 1930 more than 20,000 Mennonites had arrived in Canada.

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The **MHS Newsletter** is produced periodically to inform and promote the work of the BC Mennonite Historical Society. The newsletter is mailed to those who contribute \$25.00 or more annually to the work of the MHS. It is edited by Henry Neufeld with the assistance of Hugo Friesen and Loretta Krueger. Correspondence can be directed to: Newsletter, MHS, 211-2825 Clearbrook Rd, Abbotsford, BC V2T 6S3. Tel:(604) 853-6177.

**Receipts issued annually** - The BC Mennonite Historical Society is a registered non profit organization and provides receipts for financial donations to the society. We recently introduced a computerized system for issuing receipts and future receipts will be provided once near the end of the calendar year.

### **BCMHS BOARD MEMBERS:**

Lorne Dick (Abbotsford)  
David Giesbrecht (Abbotsford)  
Edward Hildebrand (Vancouver)  
John Konrad (Vancouver)  
Peter Neudorf (North Vancouver)  
Henry Neufeld (Delta)  
Henry Rempel (Chilliwack)  
William Riediger (Vancouver)  
Lillian Toews (Vancouver)



## BOOKS

John B. Toews, *Journeys: Mennonite Stories of Faith and Survival in Stalin's Russia*. (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1998). Pb, 226pp., \$24.95. (Available in the archives.)

Reviewed by Iris Christine Hiebert, summer student, Mennonite Heritage Centre.

This book, the fourteenth in the "Perspectives on Mennonite Life and Thought" series, is a wonderful collection of stories collected, translated, and compiled by John B. Toews. These four survival stories introduce the reader to four remarkable people who survived Stalin's reign of terror in Russia.

Because the original texts of autobiographical material had to be translated into English, difficulties arose when compiling the accounts. Toews' attempt at creating a collection with a sense of continuity was evidently not easy since the material was often disorganized and repetitive. This was found in the oral and written accounts. In addition, he had to make translation and editing decisions to maintain a natural flow to the stories, while preserving elements of authenticity. In spite of these difficulties Toews has done an admirable job of creating a sense of continuity in which the reader can, decades later, enter the experiences that these four shared through their memoirs.

Through these sketches the reader is introduced to four people, two men and two women, who had much in common. All were Mennonites living in a peaceful land where they received freedom of religion and military exemption. Each lived through the horror of Stalin's reign of terror and many life-threatening experiences. Through these difficult years they often wondered where the loving God of their faith was. These were commonalities to all four, yet each of their stories is unique.

Anna and Justina's oral stories are very intimate and share many personal details of their experiences. These women's stories include self-disclosure of the struggles they had with life itself. On the other hand, Abram and Aron's written accounts reveal a need for a sense of order in the memories of the chaotic life they were once forced to live. Although Anna, Justina, Abram, and Aron's accounts each have their unique differences, it is evident that, although there were times when they struggled with doubt, fear and despair, they continued to look upward to God as their guide and, like Job of the Old Testament, attested their faith in Him.

In spite of the fact that the memoirs are told as separate stories, they have a common thread in their situations, faith, and culture, which tie them together allowing a cohesion that characterize an outstanding book. (Reprinted with permission from the Mennonite Historian, June 1998. John B. Toews teaches at Regent College, Van.)

## Der Bote Anniversary

A committee has been created to celebrate the 75th anniversary of Der Bote. Founded in Rosthern Saskatchewan, it was first published on January 14, 1924, and has been published weekly since.

A variety of activities are scheduled for the anniversary year. Readers of the paper will note a series of articles reflecting on past editors, board members and topics. Special dinners and crokinole tournaments will be held. Most of these events will be fund raisers to assist in the ongoing compilation of the Index for Der Bote.

Unique to this anniversary is the limited production of 75 crokinole boards that have the anniversary logo of Der Bote imprinted on the boards. These boards will be available to the person who can win them at special fundraising tournaments or who have made a significant donation to the indexing project. Details will be announced in Der Bote and in future issues of the Historian. (Reprinted from Menn. Hist., June 1998).