

MENNONITE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF BC

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Newsletter January 1999

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

"Grace Across the Generations"

**Join us for an evening of faith stories in our Heritage Lecture series as told
by Walter Bergen**

At Garden Park Tower

(2825 Clearbrook Rd., parking available underground)

on

January 23, 1999 (Saturday) at 7:00 p.m.

Walter Bergen, a skilled and moving story teller brings to life profound truths of our Mennonite past. His stories about family difficulties and distress in Ukraine in the 1930's, the vision of a few Canadian Mennonite leaders, and the grace of God from generation to generation will enrich our understanding of our past.

Walter and Janet Bergen were MCC country representatives in Russia from 1993-1996. Currently Walter is MCC BC's Director of Resource Development.

Future Heritage Lectures

Please note these upcoming events:

March 6, 1999, 7:00 p.m. at the Garden Park Tower. **Ruth Derksen-Siemens** has researched the history of the Mennonite **Maedchenheim** in Vancouver. She will present some of her findings and we expect to hear accounts of life at Maedchenheim from several former residents. We particularly want to invite ladies who were involved in this important part of our history.

May 8, 1999, 7:00 p.m. at the Garden Park Tower. **Dr. Paul Toews**, Fresno, California. Dr. Toews teaches history at Fresno Pacific University and is the director of the Historical Commission of the North American MB Conference. Dr. Toews will be discussing similarities and differences between Canadian and US Mennonites. More details will follow in the next newsletter.

October 30, 1999, 7:00 p.m. at the Garden Park Tower. **Dr. Wally Unger**, Columbia Bible College President will be speaking on "**Mennonites and Millennium Madness.**"

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 to the work of the BC Mennonite Historical Society. It is edited by Henry Neufeld with the assistance of Hugo Friesen and Loretta Krueger. Contributions are welcome. Correspondence can be directed to : Newsletter, MHS 211-2825 Clearbrook Rd, Abbotsford, BC V2T 6S3. Tel: (604) 853-6177

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The Memorial Wall Project was launched last year and provides an opportunity to purchase a memorial plaque in honor 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, 24 plaques have been purchased. Please consider buying a plaque (\$500.00) to honor an individual's involvement in Mennonite life and to contribute to the work of the BC Mennonite Historical Society.

At the MHS Centre

Since moving to our present location on the second floor of the Garden Park Tower a year ago, archivist Hugo Friesen notes a marked increase in visitors to the centre. A number of volunteers who work on a regular basis have helped the MHS open our office from 9:00-4:00 Monday - Friday. Visitors are welcome to browse through the material, engage in historical or genealogical searches, or view our displays.

A recent donation which hangs on our office wall is a decorative wall hanging sewn by residents of the deaf and dumb school at Tiege, Russia. This runner, made

by school residents Agatha (Wiebe) and Henry Redekop was donated by Henry and Frieda Isaak of Abbotsford. Our thanks to the Isaaks for this exceptional and beautiful gift.

Tribute to Gerhard Peters

We would like to honour a person who has made a major contribution to our Society. He is Gerhard I. Peters.

Mr. Peters was born in 1906 in a village called Hierschau in the Molotschna colony and emigrated to Canada in 1925. He was called to the ministry in 1945 and was ordained a year later after serving a number of churches in the Fraser Valley. With a wife and five children he attended CMBC in Winnipeg and later graduated with a Bachelor of Theology degree.

Over his lifetime he has served at least four churches, the Commission on Home Missions, the Mennonite Benevolent Society, the Canadian Mission Board, the CMBC Board, the BC Conference, the MCC Board, and the provincial Peace Committee of the Mennonite Church.

From 1978 to 1989 he served as the president of the Mennonite Historical Society and we owe a debt of gratitude to Mr. Peters for being the driving force behind the development of this Society. During his tenure as President he collected artifacts, photos, books, and many museum items which were expertly preserved, recorded and displayed in the Golden Age Society Community Centre. Anna Wiens, now deceased, served as volunteer curator.

We would like to say thank you to Mr. Peters for his leadership over the 11 years of his presidency.

FROM THE PRESIDENT

As we approach the end of 1998, I would like to thank all who have contributed to the success of our Society through volunteer work and the sharing of your financial resources. For those who responded to our financial appeals, we thank you. For those who were unable to join us at our meetings or dinners and would like to contribute, you may still do so.

May God warm our hearts as we celebrate his coming and make us thankful for our rich spiritual heritage.

PEACE: MAKERS OR TAKERS?

by Henry Neufeld

Mennonites tend to take nonresistance for granted and as a divine right, said Dr. Al Reimer at the BC Mennonite Historical Society fund raising dinner on October 17. Exemption from military service has often been a legal right given by various countries; a right that Mennonites have regarded as inviolable.

"That attitude has often led to complacency and even hypocrisy as Mennonites paid lip service to nonresistance while living safely in isolation from the rest of the world," said Reimer.

Reimer, a retired University of Winnipeg English professor, said this position on pacifism reminded him of the Mennonite who believed so strongly in nonresistance that he refused to wrestle with his own conscience. Reimer is the author of *My Harp has Turned to Mourning* (1985), a historical novel examining the upheaval in Russian Mennonite communities from 1905 - 1924.

During WW2 a young Mennonite man in military uniform showed up in Reimer's Kliene Gemeinde church in Steinbach. This incident is the basis for Reimer's short story *When the War Came to Kleindarp*, included in his lecture.

The story reflected a wartime dilemma where the Mennonite church failed those who enlisted, said Reimer. The danger lies in taking nonresistance for granted and "not knowing how to apply it creatively or teach it to others."

Reimer estimates that about 12% of Mennonites in WW1 Russia and WW2 Canada served in the armed forces. The contrasts in wartime service by Mennonites in the two countries are really significant, he said.

Hospital and forestry service

Reimer noted the establishment of an alternative service program in Russia at the start of WWI. Thousands of Mennonite men served in the hospital train service and in forestry work.

"Mennonites in Russia greeted the outbreak of war in 1914 with patriotic fervour and were ready to help in the war effort in any way consistent with their nonresistant

principles," said Reimer. The Canadian situation was different: there was no outpouring of patriotism and no firm plans for alternative service.

Russian Mennonites did exactly what their doctrine of nonresistance called for, binding the wounds rather than inflicting them. In Canada an agreement was finally reached in 1941 calling for civilian labour in nonmilitary camps to work in national parks and highway construction.

Getting conscientious objector (CO) status in Canada was far from automatic for Mennonites. Reimer related an incident of a Manitoba judge asking a farm boy why he didn't want to go to war. The innocent youth replied: "God loves all people and doesn't want us to kill them." "Does God love even Hitler?" asked the judge. "Yes he even loves you."

Mennonite militia

Law and order broke down during the Russian revolution (1917). Retreating German soldiers helped Mennonites organize a *Selbstschutz*, a self defense militia serving as a police force against marauding terrorists.

For the first time ever Mennonites formed their own military units, noted Reimer. "Some of the most respected ministers and leaders led the way by arguing that nonresistance didn't apply in this dire emergency," said Reimer.

Reimer expressed concern for Canadian Mennonites who joined the military and returned to their home communities after the war. "CO's were welcomed back with open arms by church and community, the returning military service men were not," he said.

This latter group, instead of being offered compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation, met with indifference or condemnation and rejection. "The pity is that many of these men could have been 'saved' for Mennonitism had they been welcomed back into church and community," said Reimer.

Reimer wants Mennonites to be peacemakers rather than peace takers. A stand against all violence would be a creative and biblical way to revive our centuries old legacy, he concluded.

The evening included music by tenor John Thiessen and a review of Mennonite Historical projects by John Konrad, Chair of the BCMHS. Appreciation is expressed to all who attended and support the work of the BCMHS.

Genealogy at MHS of BC.

GENEALOGY:

An account of one's descent from an ancestor or ancestors, by the enumeration of the immediate persons; a pedigree, lineage, family stock. (Oxford English Dictionary)

Some of the materials available at the Historical Society include:

- * family histories - over 100 family history books giving background information, stories, and genealogical information.
- * over 170 individual history files listed alphabetically by individual names.
- * family registers of 249 families residing in BC.
- * Mennonite History books, including histories of specific villages in Russia.
- * church membership books and files for many of the early Conference of Mennonites in BC churches as well as the Yarrow and Greendale MB churches.
- * computer access to the Internet to assist in searching for genealogical information and Grandma CD which contains over 267,000 Russian Mennonite names. If you are not familiar with computer use, our staff will help you.

- * a variety of resource books including
Mennonite Historical Atlas,
From Prussia to Russia - 300 Years by B.H. Unruh,
The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia,
 by Peter M. Friesen,
Bergthal Gemeinde Buch by John Dyck,
Reinlander Gemeinde Buch by John Dyck and William Harms,
1880 Village Census of the Mennonite West Reserve.

Doing Genealogy

This material was originally prepared by Anna Epp Ens, Winnipeg, for a seminar sponsored by the Winnipeg Genealogy Committee of the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society. The latest revision was created for the World Wide Web in March 1996 by Alf Redekopp.

Basic steps in doing Genealogy

1. Sort out your reasons for wanting to get into doing genealogy and what you are hoping to achieve. Discussing your interest with others, including an active genealogist, can be helpful.
2. Decide the scope of your interest; i.e. what generations do you wish to include (e.g., Canadian, Russian, Prussian)

and what it is you wish to know, e.g., dates, places, profession, stories, etc.

3. Write down what you know about your family. Check out all written family sources, e.g., autobiographies, obituaries, diaries, birth certificates, and other documents, photos, etc.

4. Through calls, interviews and letters go to the living next of kin, relatives and friends of the family for information. Pursue all the clues they provide. Involve as many relatives as you can in the project.

5. Visit centres for genealogical research where staff can give further direction.

6. Decide on a method of recording and filing the information. Use a numbering system and an appropriate legend. Be sure to document carefully all the sources from which your information is taken.

7. Decide on and develop a format of organizing the information for the purpose you intended it, e.g., family tree, listings, charts, etc.

See also "**On Tracing Roots and Making Family Trees**" by Lawrence Klippenstein and Alf Redekopp's "*Genealogy - Where Does One begin?*" in the "Introduction" of *A Guide to Genealogical Research* at the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Neufeld, Neudorf, Niebuhr, etc.

by Peter Neudorf

These names originate from the North Sea marshes. The first reference to the name "Neufeld" in the Weichseldelta area is in 1601. It relates to the theft of wood where Gert Niefelts blames a "Hollander" (Dutch) individual for the theft.

In the Weichseldelta the Mennonites were referred to as "Die Hollander." At the mouths of the Elbe and Wesser rivers newly drained land was often referred to as "Niefeld" (new field). New inhabitants acquired names such as Neufeld, Niebuhr (new farmer), Niestatter (new place), Niedarp (new village). In a similar manner the builder of "Deich" (dikes) became Dyck or Dick. The watcher of the dike was the "Diechgraf" (Teichgraf or Teichroeb). It appears the Neufelds moved to West Prussia from the "Wilstermarsch" after 1560 because the Loysen were looking for experienced dike builders.

In the 17th century the "Grosswerder-Gesamtgemeinde" became the church home of the Neufelds. Harm Niefelt was the "Altester" from 1676 - 1696. In the 1776 census, 33 Neufelt families are recorded. Beginning in 1789 about 50 families named Neufeld emigrated from Prussia to Russia.

Sources: Die Ost und westpreussischen Mennoniten
Horst Penner
Mennonitische Namen Peters/Thiesen

Genealogy: A Beginning

by Edith Fransen

The following article appeared in the Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian and is reprinted here with the author's permission.

I recently ended my social work career after 32 years, married a rural "Saskatchewanite" and moved from Winnipeg, MB to Watrous, SK. Apart from new opportunities and responsibilities involved in a marriage and life in a new community, I have become consumed by a compelling interest in genealogy. Where did it all begin? Where is it now? And where is it going? When I was a teen-ager my mother diligently pursued her passion, pouring over some of the same books that genealogists still value, and writing hundreds of letters to anyone in Europe, North and South America that might be remotely connected to her. She worked in relative isolation, but was most persistent, and created four large hand-written volumes of the Klassens, Dicks, Goosens and Nickels.

As I peruse her material I am constantly impressed with the scope of her project, the type of information she gathered and that this was all accomplished in a pre-technology era. Many years after my mother's death, her data was entered onto a computer genealogy programme (Family Tree Maker) and a year ago, I was privileged to obtain a copy of it. What a delight to receive 5,000 relatives whose specific related-ness I can ascertain with a few keyboard strokes.

Russia visit

My own interest in genealogy was sparked in 1977 by two events: a family reunion to celebrate my father's 70th birthday and a trip for 5 of our family to the Ukraine to visit the villages of our ancestors, Kazakhstan, and to

Kyrgystan to meet my father's first cousins and their descendants. They stayed in the former Soviet Union when others emigrated to North America in the 1870's and in the 1920's. In preparation for these two events I developed pedigree charts.

I ordered documentation of births, marriages and deaths from Ontario's Vital Statistics and was amazed at the many errors; interestingly they were quite willing to amend their records based on my recommended corrections. Whereas there was considerable information on my mother's ancestors, no one had ever focused on my father's lineage, namely Fransens, Wicherts, Funks and Peters. I began scratching the surface, collecting bits and pieces of information.

Throughout all of this, my father, Nicholas Fransen, has been a major source of information and encouragement. Born in 1907 in the Molotschna, and still living in Vineland, Ontario, his recollection of detail has always been invaluable. If he did not know the information, he often directed me to persons who might be helpful. He pointed me to a German document that Aeltester Johann Bartel (born November 27, 1866) of Posnovka, West Prussia? had written to my great-uncle Aeltester Johann I. Wichert of Vineland, Ontario on May 9, 1938, regarding the Wichert relatives. My father transcribed this document into the Latin script and it gave me considerable information to create a pedigree chart dating to 1736.

My father also pointed me to a one page document written by the daughter-in-law of my great-grandmother's twin sister (Katherina Funk), regarding the Funks who emigrated from Molotschna to Kansas in the 1870's and who were lost to us. These two documents formed the basis of the pedigree charts for our 1978 reunion. At that time I had not gathered data on relatives other than our direct lineage. I did not have time to become immersed in genealogy at the time, but felt that "someday" that would happen. During our 1978 trip to the Soviet Union I collected minimal information about various family groups I met at that time.

My genealogy work lay dormant after that, other than occasional notes I would make on information I thought would be helpful. This included comments my father occasionally made or reference to some family names I

came across in my reading. Genealogy work can be both addictive and very time-consuming (therefore it is an excellent hobby), but this also means many people do not get around to it while pursuing a full-time career. Genealogy work often happens in fits and starts until retirement; people at this stage of life are more interested in their roots to the extent that genealogy demands it.

Puzzle pieces

Some other clues helpful in my research were: i) looking for the names of the original or previous communities in which families lived; ii) certain families liked certain names (Elizabeth, Anna, Jakob, Kornelius) and repeated them either one generation after the other, or within the same generation if an older person by a certain name had died at a young age; also first or second cousins often had the same name; iii) checking on which emigration wave a person came, iv) checking which community a person or family came to in Canada or USA; v) checking where a person was buried (most of my Funk relatives who came to Kansas in 1874 settled in the Bruderthal community near Hillsboro and were subsequently buried there); vi) keeping ears and eyes open for information that can be an important part to a puzzle.

Genealogy is like a jigsaw puzzle; one small piece can be extremely important and lead to a host of other pieces. Many people maintain records about their families and often it is a matter of finding the right person who cares enough about such details and is willing to share the data. NOT everyone is interested in this pre-occupation with family history; be sensitive to this. Most people doing genealogy are committed to sharing their data, because they see it as a mutual support network. It is helpful to have regular contacts with someone that IS interested in genealogy to share ideas, frustrations and joys.

In the beginning

For beginners, start by writing down names, dates and birthplaces, marriages and deaths of your immediate relatives. Then branch out in whichever lineage you are wanting to pursue. Gaps of information will appear. Proceed by asking senior members of your family: parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, or people who knew your ancestors. Be sensitive to their degree of interest in YOUR

project as you are asking them about details regarding their lives; they may or may not be willing to share easily. Try to ensure the information is specific and accurate; note your sources. Information can later be contradicted and it helps to know its source and reliability. Some genealogists collect names, dates, and some notes on one or many lines of their ancestry; others choose a more limited scope and write stories and historical facts on certain individuals in their ancestry.

Many genealogists use forms to collect data. I initially used forms from the Mormon church and found them quite good. Other times I have simply written the information I obtained on paper and then entered it onto my Family Tree Maker programme. There are other software genealogy programmes (e.g. Brother's Keeper, Reunion, the Mormon programme, etc). The greatest advantage of these is that information is easily entered and retrieved, and can be organized in various useful ways.

I have been fortunate in being able to add over 3,000 names to the Fransen, Wichert, and Funk side of my father's family without too much digging. For some unknown reason, the trail of my great-grandmother, Maria Peters born in Friedensdorf, Molotschna in 1852 ends abruptly with her death in Mariawohl, Molotschna in 1910. The genealogy section of MennoLink (a Mennonite e-mail subscription service) has been helpful and pointed me to a valuable Funk Family Tree available for \$5.00 from the Bethel College Library and Archives. This led to an awareness of a Family History book compiled in Utah in 1965, which I am still trying to access.

Places to research include: Mennonite libraries and archives; Russian Mennonite Genealogical Resources, GRANDMA (The Genealogical Registry and Database of Mennonite Ancestry), Mennonite Historical Societies, Molotschna school and census records, church yearbooks, newspapers for births and deaths, etc. Many of these are accessible via the Internet. No doubt there are many other resources that people who are addicted to this pursuit, can share with one another.

Remarks by John Konrad at our Annual Fund-raising Dinner on October 17, 1998

We are pleased that you have come tonight to support the Society in its goal to remember and preserve our Mennonite heritage. Last year, we adopted the motto from Psalm 78:3&4: *"What we have heard and know we will tell the next generation."* Our presence here today attests to the fact that we appreciate the teachings and values passed on to us by our forbearers. Many of us took these values for granted in our youth but have since learned that they are in fact the foundation of our lives. Others have taken a good part of their lives to reach this point and a few have tried to deny their past only to suffer great turmoil in their lives. The wise accept who they are and build on these values.

Last year at this dinner, John Redekop pointed out that to be Mennonite may be either a faith or an ethnic issue and for many of us these two are one and the same thing. Within our churches, we must respect the pluralism that has resulted from the sharing of our faith with others and from assimilation with other faith groups. We can appreciate our heritage without denying that of others.

So much for our reason for being. How can the Society help us remember and value our heritage? We are the repository of archival material from our churches and institutions. This material - yearbooks, minutes, pictures and files is available to anyone including scholars and writers who want to research and communicate what is of value in our past. We have preserved the papers and files of many of our church and institutional leaders for the benefit of our people at large. We have an increasing volume of family histories and computer-based files allowing us to explore our roots in some cases back to the 16th and 17th centuries. We have books and periodicals in hard copy or on microfilm which define our past. We have funded, with sister organizations in North America, the recovery of material that was considered lost or destroyed in the Russian revolution and Soviet era. This is to help our researchers piece together what happened to many of our people who lost their lives, families and property in that country.

Over the past 6 years we have provided funding of almost \$100,000 to the following projects:

- We were an original partner with other archives in recovering the Braun Archive from Odessa. We have a copy here in our centre comprising some 300,000 pages of documents on some 77 microfilm reels. This information covers the period 1820 to 1920 and contains the complete Molotschna census of 1835 and school records of our grandparents' generation.
- We have incurred major capital costs in acquiring the BC archives which comprises the records of our churches and institutions.
- We are providing on-going support to the Zaporoshje Project to acquire micro-filmed copies of records pertaining to Mennonites in Russia from 1920 to the present. These records are in the Russian and Soviet archives in Zaporoshje.
- We have assisted in funding the publication of the three-volume series, *Mennonites in Canada*, and are supporting further efforts to record our history.
- Over the last 15 months, we have established our new centre in this building. We have incurred significant costs in developing our facilities. These costs comprised leasehold improvements, furnishings and moving expenses.

Our new premises allow us to store, access and display our archival materials. We have in the last year celebrated our move into the new facilities and many of you have visited us. We now have an Internet web site and you can communicate with us by phone, fax or E-mail. Our hours have been extended from mornings only to full days five days a week. We have search capabilities to access computer data bases for those interested in family history. We offer for sale a selection of books which address our heritage.

This Society is owned by its members. It has no official sponsorship. Governments are severely constrained financially and show little interest in cultural organizations like ours. We have begun a campaign to enlist the support of our business community but we are not optimistic that we will receive substantial support. The mainstay of our support must come from our members.

I would like to throw out a challenge today. We know from discussions with our own children that the next generation will unlikely be able to gather and publish historical records which cover our parents' and grandparents' generation. This is because of language and increasing assimilation with Canadian culture. This makes it all the more urgent that we preserve information about our heritage while we can. Our generation has the interest and the means to do this.

Today we want to thank you for your past support and to ask for your continuing help this year. You can help us in several ways.

First, we need your financial support. Our operating expenses are in the order of \$30,000 per year. We invite you to make a donation today. Please use the envelopes left at your table. We accept cheques, or if it is more convenient, you may use the credit card authorization slips at your table. If you would like to help us but are unprepared today, take an envelope with you and mail it back to us, or drop it off when you visit our centre. We have kept the tickets for this dinner below our cost to encourage more people to come. We appreciate your generosity and thank you for coming out today.

Second, you can volunteer to help us at the centre. We are very encouraged with the response to our appeal last year. We have been able to extend our hours and to launch more projects because of this support.

Third, in the last year, we have launched our memorial project which is to honour people who have gone before us, as pioneers, as church or community leaders, or as family members who could not join us in Canada and perished abroad. We are encouraged by the response we have received and will shortly begin the construction of our memorial wall. A number of plaques are on display at the table and you are encouraged to stop by to learn more about this project. Funds from this projects will help to build up our endowment fund and to support future projects.

Finally, we have a number of books on display which are for sale.

As a contributor to our society, you become or remain a member of our society. You will be on our mailing list and will receive our regular newsletters. We are in the process of upgrading our computer software and will be issuing receipts for donations received today as well as earlier this year.

John ended his remarks by thanking for the encouragement supporters had given during the past year, for the financial support at our regular events and for participation in the evening's fund- raising event. He closed the meeting with prayer.