

Mennonite Historical Society of BC NEWSLETTER

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

#211-2825 Clearbrook Rd. Abbotsford, BC V2T 6S3

Tel: 604-853-6177 Fax: 604-853-6246 Email: mennohis@rapidnet.net

Web: www.rapidnet.bc.ca/~mennohis



HERITAGE LECTURES

- ❖ Cornelia Lehn, writer and church worker will speak at the next Heritage Lecture series on **February 19, 2000, at Garden Park Tower, at 7:00 p.m.** Her topic will be **"A Frontier Challenge: The Story of the Conference of Mennonites in BC."** Lehn is the author of several children's books related to Mennonite history and is the author of a history of the Conference of Mennonites in BC, *Frontier Challenge* (1990).

- ❖ Alf Siemens will be speaking on **"Reflections on Pioneering - a consideration of the experience of the Mennonite Pioneering Generation in the Fraser Valley."** This lecture is scheduled for **May 6, 2000, at the Garden Park Tower, at 7:00 p.m.**

BCMHS Board Members:

- ❖ Walter Bergen (Abb.)
- ❖ Hugo Friesen (Abb.), Archivist
- ❖ David Giesbrecht (Abb.), Secretary
- ❖ Edward Hildebrand (Van.), Treasurer
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- ❖ Henry Rempel (Chwk), Vice President
- ❖ William Riediger (Vancouver),
- ❖ Lillian Toews (Vancouver).

CLARENCE BAUMAN AND THE BLESSED HERMITAGE

by Louise Price with thanks to Walter Paetkau.

If you go for a short hike at Camp Squeah, up past the Chapel in the sky and toward the cliffs where campers go rappelling, you'll come across a small cabin and a few other outbuildings. "A hermit used to live here," a camper will probably tell you. "He'd come down for food once in a while. But he doesn't live here anymore. I think he's dead."

The "hermit" was Mennonite theologian Clarence Bauman, for many years a professor at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in Elkhart. Bauman is perhaps best known for his teachings on the Sermon on the Mount. He built the retreat in the early 70 s, from lumber he salvaged from local lumber mills. For about ten years, he and his wife Alice spent their summers at this retreat. It was not a vacation site. On the portal to the hermitage, Bauman had written these words:

*This blessed little hermitage
is dedicated to the glory of God
for the discernment of his will
through contemplation and study.
(from a letter to Walter and Mabel Paetkau, 1990.)*

I hiked to the site on a Sunday in May, expecting to find a tumble-down cabin that a "hermit" would live in. I found a small cabin built with great care and workmanship, that incorporates a tree and a rock face into its design.

The MHS Newsletter is produced periodically to inform and promote the work of the BC Mennonite Historical Society. The newsletter is mailed to people who contribute \$25.00 or more to the work of MHS. It is edited by Henry Neufeld with the assistance of Hugo Friesen and Loretta Krueger. Contributions are welcome. Direct correspondence to: Newsletter, BCMHS, 211-2825 Clearbrook Rd. Abbotsford, BC. V2T 6S3. Tel: (604) 853-6177

A smaller building, St. Michael's hut (the study) perches on the edge of the cliff; its window overlooking the grandeur of the valley below. Further down the slope is an A-frame building that was to be a chapel for silent meetings. It was roofed-in, but the walls were never completed. An outhouse, complete with half-moon on the door, completes the hermitage.

I sat on the stone wall of the chapel, ate an apple, and relaxed in the beauty of the surroundings. Here, by this fire pit, Clarence and Alice would sit with friends, sipping tea and discussing life. Clarence liked to greet his friends by asking, "What have you been thinking about this year?"

Below the cliff, in the distance, I heard the constant rumble and whine of traffic. A motorcycle roared by on the logging road. I wondered about the noise - I have been used to thinking that silence is necessary for contemplation.

Clarence would not find this disturbing, his friend and former student Walter Paetkau told me. His response would be to say that contemplation is not limited to the quiet and pristine. Noise is also part of God's creation.

The Blessed Hermitage was a working retreat; the Bauman's had to bring in water, fuel, food. After Clarence Bauman's ill health made it impossible for him to spend his summers there, the hermitage stood vacant, except for an occasional visit by someone seeking a place for contemplation and retreat.

Bauman's vision for his Blessed Hermitage was that it would continue to be used for study and meditation. He wrote: "We need times of profound reflection on our relationship to God, to others, and to ourselves - times that can give our life memory and future, cohesion and continuity, and provide the resources to love and to care, to become at peace with ourselves, with God and people and all things - and to provide an anchor to carry us over the terrible catastrophes of life and history without sinking into the abyss of despair, without losing faith and hope, and without being swept along by the sheer momentum of our turbulent age." (from a letter to Walter and Mabel Paetkau, 1990.)

Bauman died in 1995, after a lengthy struggle with Parkinson's disease. The buildings still stand, a testimony to faith, beauty and workmanship. But the floor of the study is rotting, and the moss-covered cedar shakes may need replacing soon.

Bauman once said, "The hermitage is not part of a housing project, and therefore need not to be occupied in order to fulfill its spiritual intention.

Essentially, it is a symbol of Divine Presence at the vital edge of our consciousness of time and space." To others, he strived to live according to these teachings. The Blessed Hermitage is a visible symbol of a spiritual quest.

The fact is, though, that the buildings are steadily eroding. The BC Mennonite Historical Society has been approached and been asked whether to take it on as a project; to commemorate, somehow, this "10 year blip in our history" How can we do this? Here are several options:

1. Restore the buildings, and encourage people to use them as a spiritual retreat center.
2. Sign post the area, describing the vision that brought it into being, and the people who had the vision. A symbol, or benchmark: "This is what it was; this is what it is"
3. Let the buildings gradually return to nature. Remove the artifacts (magazines, food, articles of clothing, etc.) to a museum.

Bauman's teachings on the beatitudes deeply influenced the students who studied under him. In his personal life, and his relations to others, he strived to live according to these teachings. The Blessed Hermitage is a visible symbol of a spiritual quest.

St. Francis once said, "Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words." Perhaps, just by its presence, the Blessed Hermitage can continue to speak to us. If you are interested in this project, or know of someone who might be, please contact the BC Mennonite Historical Society.



Mennonite Historical Society of Canada

David Giesbrecht is BCMHS representative to the Canadian Mennonite Historical Society and provides this report.

Meeting of the Canadian Historical Society:

Provincial Reports: Each participating province reports on the activities and achievements of the year. It is really quite extraordinary to see the energy and diversity with which the Mennonite story is being told and nurtured in a variety of ways across the country. For instance the Ontario Committee annually sponsors two scholarships for deserving students; the Manitoba Committee celebrated the 125th anniversary of the arrival of Mennonites at the Forks including a special 12-page insert in the Winnipeg Free Press; the Saskatchewan Committee hosted the Menno Simons display (designed by the Kauffman Museum in Kansas); the Alberta people planned a workshop on how to write church histories.

Activities of MHSC: A major new initiative of the Society, called Divergent Voices, involves a six-year plan in cooperation with MCC Canada, which we anticipate will yield several histories, including the "Kanadier" story and a book reflecting on Mennonite-Aboriginal themes.

New Histories: The Society is supporting two history projects. Dr. Ted Reghr is writing a one-volume history of Mennonites in Canada, and Dr. Marlene Epp has submitted a proposal to write a history of Canadian Mennonite women, with a working title, *Women, Gender and Families in Canadian Mennonite Families*.

Major Conference: In October 2000 the Society is sponsoring a conference in Winnipeg to examine Mennonite-Aboriginal relationships. A call for papers has been issued, inviting both academic and popular (story telling) responses.

Activities of Chair-Mennonite Studies: A significant part of these meeting also includes hearing from Dr. Royden Loewen, Chair in Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg and also the chair of the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada. In addition to his teaching and public lectures, Dr. Loewen's latest book has just been published: *From The Inside Out: The World of Mennonite Diarists, 1863-1928*.

Ukraine Meeting: Archivist and historian Dr. Lawrence Klippenstein reported on the May 29th Khortitsa 99 event in the Ukraine which brought together Mennonite and Ukrainian scholars around the theme, *Mennonites in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union*. Dr. Klippenstein reminded us of the perils and the promises that such international gatherings can bring.

Executive Elections: For the coming year MHSC officers include Royden Loewen (Chair); David Giesbrecht (Vice-Chair); Lareen Harder-Gissing (Treasurer); Sam Steiner (Secretary).

New Books: Several recent publications, now in the Columbia Bible College library:

Ewert, David. **Finding Your Way: Confronting Issues in the MB Church**

Huebert, Helmut. **Events and People: Events in Russian Mennonite History and the People That Made Them Happen.**

Loewen, Royden. **From The Inside Out: The Rural Worlds of Mennonite Diarists.**

Stoesz, Edgar and Muriel Stackley. **Garden in The Wilderness: Mennonite Communities In the Paraguayan Chaco, 1927-1997**

Canadian Mennonite Encyclopedia Online (CMEO) Sub-Committee: Excellent progress in launching this new electronic data base is being made. To date over 2000 entries have been added to our website, much of this information taken from the Mennonite Encyclopedia. Public response is growing as represented by several hundred hits each week. New subject entries will be considered as either Level One (where only basic information will provided with approximately 500 word articles), and Level Two, offering fuller treatment including images, maps and sound clips if warranted. Level Two entries may also include larger interpretive essays. Links to related information will naturally occur throughout. Sam Steiner, librarian at Conrad Grebel College, was recognized for his diligence and expertise in editing CMEO.



Sardis (Greendale) Village Meetings

by Hugo Friesen, translated from German.

Mennonite historian John B. Toews recently donated some important Greendale materials to our archives. He received these materials around 1976 from Aron A. Rempel, father of Alex and Hilda Rempel, staunch supporters of MHS of BC. Mr. Rempel was well known in the Sardis settlement, later known as Greendale. He was involved with the development of the community, served as secretary for many community meetings, and was active in the Greendale MB church.

The donated materials include various municipal maps which clearly show the location of Greendale in relation to Chilliwack and Yarrow, and all roads existing in the 1940's. Also included are lists of residents, probably needed as a result of the 1948 flood which devastated the area.

Most importantly, included are two small notebooks of original minutes, written mostly by secretary Rempel, of settlement meetings held from 1942-1946. These meetings were held to discuss non-church issues that pertained to the whole settlement (village) which included both the First Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren church members.

Written in German and often difficult to decipher, the minutes are brief and to the point, leaving much to the imagination as to the ardent discussions which must have taken place. The translation went through two levels; first to decipherable German, then to English.

The larger context of this period is World War II and its immediate aftermath. Mennonite families began to buy property in the Sardis area as early as 1930 when the Aron Rempels, Henry Duecks (later pastor of the MB church) and others were the first to settle there.

Church services began in 1930 with the formal organization of the MB church on January 11, 1931. The First Mennonite church was organized on October 31, 1931.

The elected leader of the settlement (village) meetings was Jacob F. Janzen, a local business man who owned and operated Janzen's Store, located on the corner of South Sumas and Sumas Prairie Road. He was the father of Lena (Janzen) Harder, wife of Nick Harder. Inhabitants looked to Jacob Janzen to provide leadership for a variety of internal issues the settlement was experiencing and he also provided contact with the Chilliwack municipal council.

This article provides a summary of the issues faced by this relatively new growing community. A great deal of discussion surrounded the problems of safety and security, probably because the larger municipality did not provide these services. Consequently the settlers found it necessary to establish an ambulance service in 1942 using the cars of local residents.

Fire protection was another key concern and there was discussion about buying a fire truck as well as organizing a network of men who could respond quickly to fires. A speed limit of 25 mph for the main street, Sumas Prairie Road, was discussed as were street signs, street lights, and bus shelters for school children. Concern is also mentioned that children should be taught to walk on the left side of the road for their safety. Keeping order in the community was addressed; apparently community young people were misbehaving on the school grounds so regulations were set up, including a 9:00 p.m. curfew. Fathers on each street were to make sure there was adherence to these rules. A Halloween incident, not detailed in the minutes, at a certain Mr. Peters place was deplored by many in the community.

Undoubtedly these difficulties encouraged the leaders to consider the need to provide wholesome activities in the community. Property was purchased, a Youth & Sports Society was established, and later a roller skating rink was built.

The German language was still in use and a German school operated for a number of years. Among the teachers were Mrs. Jacob Schroeder and Mr. Ben Friesen.

Two other issues became important during those years. The first was the repayment of the Reiseschuld (travel debt) owed by people who fled Russia in the 1920's. The money was owed to the Canadian Pacific Railway Co. that had generously underwritten their travel to Canada. Repayment dragged out over a long period partly because of poverty in the first years. Later there was reluctance or inability to repay by some persons and people across Canada were asked to help eliminate the debt.

Greendale had a \$300.00 debt to be paid at the Chilliwack Bank of Commerce.

There was a great deal of controversy over this problem. The minutes of late 1945 state: "we are familiar with the situation faced by those of our faith in foreign lands who, after they have been misused and pushed around, are now looking for help and a home. Should this become possible then it would be very necessary that we should not be a hindrance." The elimination of the Reiseschuld in Greendale is not detailed in the minutes but it is well known that through the efforts of men such as C.F. Klassen it was finally accomplished for all.

Another important issue in Greendale was supplying of food for relief work. In 1945 - 46 money and clothing was donated while fruit and meat canning was done in Yarrow. At one point Rev. Henry Dueck encouraged people at a meeting and he "points out how much the settlement has been able to accomplish through unity and willingness in the past, and challenges us not to neglect the poor...."

The community also purchased property for a cemetery. In 1942 these settlers encouraged the purchase of victory bonds. There was also talk of giving the settlement a distinctive name but this was not finalized until December 1, 1950.

It was interesting to get a glimpse of these years through these recorded minutes because this was during my growing up years in Greendale. Credit must be given to the pioneers for their sincere attempts to provide a structure and guidance to a developing community.

For additional information about the early days of Greendale I recommend: The Greendale Mennonite Brethren Church 1931 - 1981 by Katherine Harder and "A History of the First Mennonite Church, Greendale, BC", by Gerhard I. Peters.



Bits & Pieces

- ❖ **Recent Acquisition.** Recently the MHS of BC received a copy of an "Inventory of Mennonite Tombstone readings from the Weichsel-delta, Prussia 1993-1999". This inventory was donated by one of our members, Erwin Wieler of Surrey, BC. This past summer he joined a group of Netherlanders who have been going to the former Prussia in the past 7 years to find and record inscriptions on tombstones in Mennonite cemeteries. Some familiar places included are Heubuden, Ladekopp and Ellerwald. The leader of these expeditions was Maartin 't Hart of Aalsmeer, The Netherlands. Anyone is welcome to come to our Archives to check out this information.

- ❖ **Mennonite Homesteads on the Hague-Osler Reserve, 1891-1999.** By Leonard Dahl, President of the Saskatchewan Mennonite Historical Society. A reference work on the communities of Mennonites who settled north of Saskatoon. The book (\$45.00) can be ordered from Leonard Dahl, Box 364, Aberdeen, Sask. S0K 0A0.

- ❖ **Salem Church -100 years**
Last summer the Salem Church of Waldheim, Saskatchewan, observed their 100th anniversary. A group of settlers arrived from Bridgewater, South Dakota sent by the Salem church (KMB). This was a rural church until 1962 when the church moved to Waldheim. A history of this congregation was produced for the celebration and is available from the Salem Church, Waldheim SK, S0K 4R0 (from Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian)

- ❖ **Saskatchewan Bergthalers -125 years**
The Bergthaler Mennonites left Russia in 1874 (165 families) and after arriving at The Forks in Winnipeg they settled in villages near Steinbach. By 1875 about 4000 families of Bergthalers had arrived in Manitoba. With land scarce in Manitoba many moved to the NWT, now Saskatchewan, in the early 1890's. (from Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian)

- ❖ **From Anabaptist Seed**, by C. Arnold Snyder.
Snyder is an internationally recognized historian and was commissioned by the Mennonite World Conference to write this book. In the preface Larry Miller, MWC executive secretary, writes, "This booklet should not be received as the normative or exhaustive statement for the faith and life of contemporary Anabaptist-related churches. But it can be taken as an indispensable text of reference for all who seek a succinct and reliable articulation of the common historical core of Anabaptist identity - one element in the process of letting Anabaptist Christianity be powerfully relevant even today, both locally and globally." This 54 page booklet is available for \$6.25 (Cdn) from Pandora Press, 51 Pandora Ave., Kitchener, Ont., N2H 3C1.

- ❖ **October 14, 2000.**
Annual fund raising banquet of the BC Mennonite Historical Society with speaker **Dr. John B. Toews**.



AT THE OFFICE...

Visit our archives in Garden Park Towers to see the displays and check these bargains:

Cassette Tapes and CD's

The Russian Mennonite Story, a series of 12 tapes

by John B. Toews. \$80.00

Knockin' at Your Door, Ingrid Suderman. Tape \$10.00

Abbotsford Tenors in Concert, a CD of their concert November 12, 1999. \$15.00

Plautdietsche Dankleeda Oolt en Nie, CD \$15.00; tape \$10.00

Hear My Prayer, Ingrid Suderman. Tape \$10.00

Singing at the Fire, - Voices of Anabaptist Martyrs, EMU Chamber Singers. CD \$15.00

Books

Mennonite Historical Atlas, Schroeder/Huebert. \$30.00

Gaste Und Fremdlinge, (Strangers and Pilgrims), Abe Warkentin. Photographs of Mennonite People in Latin America. \$40.00



MENNONITES AND SCHOOLS IN NORTH AMERICA

by Albert J. Meyer, executive secretary of the Mennonite Board of Education. (Reprinted from *Courier*, publication of the Mennonite World Conference)

There are some things we can learn by observing the world around us. But we cannot learn about Napoleon or Francis of Assisi or Abraham or Jesus by direct observation - we have to be told about them by someone who has seen or heard, or read what someone who knew about them has written.

Some of the telling and reading can happen as children grow up in the family. Some of it happens in congregational Sunday schools and church meetings. But where a church has schools, the learnings through life experiences in families and churches can be "processed," enhanced, and complemented in these church institutions. Students can be helped to grow from being church-attenders to becoming active church participants and leaders.

Mennonites and Brethren in Christ have been minority people in their cultures throughout most of their history. A minority people cannot simply rely on the mass culture in which it finds itself to communicate the stories and values it considers important to the oncoming generations. Schools are one means the older generations can use to communicate some of the experiences and insights they have found valuable to younger generations.

A staff leader of an Evangelical association of churches in Canada has said, "Per person, statistically speaking, you Mennonites are the most education-minded of the church groups in Canada."

Among other Christian groups in North America, none have as many students in their higher educational institutions per adult member as the largest bodies of Mennonites. Mennonites in North America have been "education-minded." Some churches have elementary schools. Conferences and other groups sponsor high schools and several Bible institutes. Mennonite churches have three theological seminaries.

The major North American Mennonite educational institutions are asking about ways they can better serve students who want to learn but who cannot spend full years of residential study on their campuses. Some new educational programs and schools are being established in cities with Mennonite populations. Distance education programs using new technologies are being initiated.

In addition to their task of educating the younger generations, Mennonite schools have research and service responsibilities.

Governmental agricultural schools do more than educate future farmers - they do research and provide extension services to help farmers and agribusinesses in their regions more directly, as well. Similarly, North American Mennonite schools have teams of scholars who engage in research studies on the work of the church in changing times and who help meet church needs by writing, speaking, and assuming some church leadership responsibilities.

The principle task of the schools, however, is to share the learnings and experiences of those who have gone before with the church of the future and to engage young people and future leaders in the mission of the church in our times. North American Mennonites want to tell the next generation and those they will serve of "the glorious deeds and the mighty miracles of the Lord."



LAMENT OF THE TEREKER REFUGEES

(Klageschrei der Tereker Fluechtlinge)

Introduction by Hugo Friesen, archivist.

According to the Mennonite Encyclopedia the Terek settlement near the Caspian Sea, just north of the Caucasus mountains, was begun in 1901 by landless Mennonites and others from the Molotschna colony. There were many difficulties but with persistence some progress was made and the settlers got along quite well.

After 1917 they were harassed by the local population of Tatars, Nogays, and Kumers. Eventually the settlers were forced to leave and fled to the Kuban area. On arrival in Kuban the Lament (Klageschrei) was written.

The Lament was found in a handwritten Ziphern" (numbers) songbook belonging to well known Yarrow resident David J. Klassen, father of Agatha, Anne, and David Klassen, presently all from Abbotsford. The booklet came from Bernhard Fast of Winnipeg and contains poetry probably written by the owner.

On March 8, 1918, we the undersigned refugees of Chassaw-Yurter (Khassav-Yurt) settlements arrived on our flight in Welikoknyaschesk, Kub. Geb. (Kuban district) where we have taken a rest for a time to send this lament about the brutal violence done to us by our one time neighbours, the Tatars and Tschechnians, to our brothers in all the world. At the same time the following men ... are assigned to find ways and means to seek help for us in our unbearable situation.

About 20 years ago, with the agreement of the local government, a settlement (colony) was begun on the wild steppe among the barbarian natives in Chasaw-Yurter area of Terek district. The land was purchased by agreement from Tatar and Russian estate owners for cash.

After struggling with all the difficulties of a new settlement it was possible with much privation to establish an existence although we constantly suffered robbery and murder at the hands of the Asiatic population.

The brutality of our neighbours increased so much that by 1917 our field workers did their work under life threatening conditions during which there were a number of instances of robbery and murder behind the plows. Even church services in some villages could only take place under armed guard.

Because of these circumstances, representatives of our settlements consulted with leaders of the natives, the princes and spiritual leaders, and also directly with the people to put aside these grievances. Each time our representatives were given the best promises which however were never kept. After we had seen through the intentions of the Tatars it became clear that they were not only intent on robbery but aimed for complete destruction of our settlements and the eradication of a number of the villages which had dared to defend themselves.

Therefore we requested a short time so that we could safely withdraw and thus could at least save our lives. But even this final request was not agreed to. In answer, they surrounded our villages, besieged them for days, shooting at them. If it hadn't been that all the men were on watch day and night completely equipped to defend,

we would have all been lost. Naturally there was some loss of life on our side. So we had to leave our well-equipped houses and farms, taking only our most necessary possessions, especially the "Furage". Some villages were invaded in the end (in the last hour), stripped of everything down to their under clothes, shamefully violated, and their foodstuffs were forcefully taken and trampled into the mud.

More than 100 families were forcefully detained in Aul Chasi-Furt and forced to sell their possessions, including cattle which they had hurriedly taken along, for a ridiculous price and then to sign a paper stating that on their flight they were sheltered in the best possible way while burdensome materials were gathered. A number of villagers only got away thanks to the help of a unit of volunteer soldiers who heard about our plight and then in spite of the crossfire and under protection of darkness at night, came away with their bare lives and then were harassed all the way to the river Terek.

On the highways and byways a number of our family fathers (among them Berh. Fast, preacher, and Edgar Veyhl), yes and even women and children were shamefully murdered and robbed. How low these wild hordes who terrorized us were willing to stoop is shown most clearly in that they in the most degrading way, opened up graves in the cemeteries where those whom they had disgracefully murdered were buried.

Our settlement (colony) consisted of 40 villages on a number of estates with about 1200 families living in an area of about 60,000 Desjtina. The colony was cultivated, drained, built up, planted and had a number of artesian wells. As a result of the arbitrary will of the rough robber bands we had to leave the following possessions behind:

1. 60,000 Desj. Land @ 200 rubles = 12,000,000R
 2. In buildings, fruit trees, vineyards, cattle, machinery, implements, grain, furniture, etc= 35,000,000R
- Total property value about 47,000,000R

As compensation for the loss of grain seeds in 1918 and for travel passports a certain percentage may be calculated in terms of taxes. There are special lists of property of each settler.

Now we stand naked, bare and helpless. In light of our 20 years of experiences with the native people regarding their unfaithfulness and readiness to rob and take revenge we declare herewith that we do not see any possibility of ever returning to our settlement. We state our desire that our losses, after special taxes, be reimbursed at normal prices and are gladly ready to establish a new settlement under peaceful and orderly conditions.

Therefore the above mentioned faithful men are asked to search diligently for possibilities of finding a new settlement opportunity. If there would be found a ray of hope for us who are comfortless we ask our leaders to call us together so that we who have fled in all directions could receive through newspaper articles the direction as to the time and place where we could meet for a consultation.

Signatures: Chairman: K. Cornies; Secretary: B. Fast



A MENNONITE ELDER'S STORY

"Jakob Toews - Elder of the Lichtenau Mennonite Church (Molotschna)" Der Botschafter, Vol. 6 (1911), No. 2, pp. 2-3. Translated by John B. Toews.

On May 4, 1909, our much beloved elder Jakob Toews passed on to his eternal rest, leaving a difficult and responsible office after a long, hard and work-filled life. Many people in our large congregation expressed an interest in knowing something more about his earlier life. I will do the best I can. Fortunately, the elder wrote a short autobiography four years before his death, May 1905, which eased my task considerably. I found it when looking through his papers. His children were not aware such a document existed.

The former elder, Jakob Toews, was born on March 25, 1822, on farm number nineteen in Fuerstenau (Molotschna). His father was Abraham Toews, minister of the Heubuden congregation in Prussia. His mother was Elisabeth Warketin. The Toews and their six children arrived in Russia from Prussia late in 1823, spending the winter in Petershagen. They lived on one of two farms owned by a Jakob Janzen. In 1824 they purchased a farm from a Harder and joined the Schoensee congregation. The father of the family suffered from consumption and died in the spring of 1827. He was buried on the second day of Easter in the Fuerstenau cemetery.

His widow remarried a bachelor, Michael Regehr of Ladekopp, in the same year. He was a smithy who owned a blacksmith shop and kept several workers. The step-son, Abraham Toews, apprenticed with him. The farm was enlarged. Regehr built a windmill and established both a vinegar and brick factory. Abraham was in charge of the blacksmith shop, Franz the windmill, Aron the farm and Isaak, together with the brew master, looked after the vinegar factory. Jakob had to go to school since he was to become the educated one in the family. One day, amid the normalcy of daily life, a new adventure entered the life of the step father and his now grown youngest son. It stood in sharp contrast to the monotony of everyday village life.

Regehr appears to have been an energetic and multi-talented man who demonstrated greater initiative than most of his fellow villagers.

Regehr was to collect a large number of hymnals published in West Prussia for the Mennonite churches in Russia.¹ Many preparations were made for the long and arduous journey. A covered wagon, few of which existed in the colonies at that time was purchased. Three strong horses as well as essential food and supplies for men and beasts were also acquired.

The group left on the last day of Pentecost 1838. Step-son Jakob was the driver. Regehr was accompanied by Wilhelm Schroeder from Fuerstenau, Peter Wiens from Halbstadt and two young men who had recently come from Prussia. Regehr and his fellow passengers arrived in Fuerstenau, Prussia, on September 22. Young Jakob was overwhelmed by new impressions which none of his contemporaries had experienced or seen.

Regehr did rather well selling the goods he acquired in Prussia. After a year and a half (in 1840) he decided to return to Prussia in order to purchase more wares. This time he decided to take his wife with him so that she might have the opportunity to visit her former homeland once more and meet old friends and relatives. In Prussia he purchased all kinds of tableware and other items which were not available in the colonies. Well satisfied with his purchases he left for home. Disaster struck at the Russian border. Customs not only seized all his wares but levied an enormous fine which exceeded all his financial assets. Deeply saddened by the loss, Jakob's elderly parents finally reached home.

Disaster seldom strikes only once. New difficulties emerged. He (Regehr) had incurred many debts expanding his business. When his creditors heard of his losses they all demanded their money. Regehr could not pay and his creditors purchased his assets at half their value. The prosperous Regehr family was plunged into poverty. Only a few horses and several implements remained. This happened in 1842. What now? Regehr moved to Berdyansk and rented a small hotel. Since it did not generate an adequate cash flow, he built a blacksmith shop on the seashore, hired a workman and an apprentice and once more pursued his old profession.

The business prospered. Jakob, who was eighteen at the time, worked alongside his father. After a few years Jakob took the place of the hired hand. Regehr gave up the hotel and built a residence next to the blacksmith shop. His vocation proved profitable. He began to construct covered tops for wagons whose under-carriages were manufactured by another supplier. Now the family suffered no want and enjoyed an ample supply of daily bread.

Unfortunately in 1848 Mrs Regehr died of cholera in

Berdyansk. Regehr had been involved in various commercial enterprises. He bought wheat in the colonies on behalf of the Berdyansk businessman Abraham Wiebe. On other occasions he brought butter or other agricultural products to the city. Sometimes he did well, sometimes not. Regehr resented the earlier loss of his rather substantial holdings to his creditors. Eventually he found comfort in drink and when intoxicated bitterly blamed his co-religionists. Upset by Regehr's dissipated lifestyle, the guardians of his step-son Jakob removed him while his mother was still alive and relocated him in the colony.² He was reluctant to leave his mother and step father, whom he loved like a real father, but the decision of the guardians was law and Jakob was brought to his brother Aron Toews in Fuerstenau. Not long after he began to work in the blacksmith shop of Johann Fast in Ladekopp.

In his autobiography Jakob writes:

There was no church in Berdyansk as yet. For some time I had the desire to join the church. This was especially the case when I read Mark 16 and the questions and answers in our catechism, "who believes and is baptized will be saved." On Pentecost, 1848, I was baptized upon my confession of faith in the Petershagen church by the revered elder Dietrich Warkentin. Now my longing was satisfied.

Jakob Toews worked for Fast until August 1851. During his last year he was paid 240 rubles per year and had accumulated some savings. Since he was a good craftsman capable of supporting a family, he married the widow Harder (nee Maria Epp) on August 25, 1851. His wife had a daughter from her first marriage named Gertrude, who unfortunately died in 1852. Jakob's marriage produced no children and his wife died after four years.

He married a second time in 1855. The bride was a Margaretha Enns from Blumenort. The wedding took place in Petershagen on December 1 in the groom's home, which he himself had built. It was the last house on the left side of the street in the direction of Halbstadt.

In 1856 Toews' parents-in-law, the Abraham Enns in Blumenort, sold farmstead number nine to Jakob for 6,500 rubles. The couple moved there in May. Here the dear elder had to deal with the vicissitudes of life common to all mortals. Some experience greater hardships, others less. During the night of July 25/26, 1858 (Saturday night to Sunday morning) fire erupted at the neighbouring Willims' residence. The Toews' residence and farm buildings were also consumed by the flames. The granary was destroyed, and with it the grain yield for the entire year. Nothing was left. On Sunday morning the young couple stood beside the smouldering ruins of what had once been their home. There was not even a piece of bread for breakfast. Jakob's father-in-law, who lived with them, walked over to the

Gerhard Neufelds and brought back some bread and butter. The cows were taken out of the corral and milked. Their first breakfast was eaten in the blacksmith shop near the street, which had escaped the fire.

The ways of the Lord are wonderful. He leads us into anguish and affliction, then helps us out, allowing the sun to shine after the storm. "All lay in ruin and ashes," elder Toews wrote, "but what did wailing and crying help? No, take courage, trust in God and get to work. Success must come, and it did." Wood and bricks were acquired and the construction began. The brick walls of the home remained standing and only needed minor repairs. The barn had to be rebuilt from the foundation. When winter came the family was able to move into their makeshift home. The year 1859 brought a bountiful harvest and a new granary was built in 1860.

In 1853, when Toews' first wife was still alive, he was elected as a song leader in the Petershagen church. He later held the same position in Lichtenau. It was also here in the Lichtenau church that he was first elected minister with some 148 votes on December 4, 1862. He preached his first sermon on Acts 3: 19-20 on December 23.

In 1869 the honoured elder Dietrich Warkentin passed away. The three congregations which he served - Lichtenau, Petershagen and Schoensee - elected the minister Toews as their joint elder on January 14, 1869, with three hundred and fifty votes. The solemn installation of the newly elected elder took place on April 22, the third day of Easter. Elder Bernhard Harder of the Margenau church presided with prayer and the laying on of hands. One thousand four hundred and ninety people attended the event.

The elder's jottings stop at this point and I find it difficult to complete the story. I was a fellow minister with him in the church, but he was old and I was young. I travelled with him on many occasions and shared the congregational work with him. I often admired the determination and decisiveness of our elder. He never wavered on an issue - he was either for or against it. If he had judged hastily and later regretted it, he apologized and admitted his error. This generated a deep respect for the man.

In April 1894, we celebrated his twenty-fifth year in office. By then he had admitted over three thousand people into the congregation through baptism. I could not determine how many people he buried or at how many weddings he officiated. He also ordained several elders and ministers.

Elder Toews was a stalwart man who rarely complained. During the last years of his life he contracted an eye disease which, though painless, reduced his vision. He celebrated his gold wedding anniversary on December 1, 1905, in the Lichtenau church. Most of the congregation attended.

The elders Heinrich Unruh, Abraham Goertz and Heinrich Koop served as guest speakers.

In 1907 the elder and I travelled to the general conference in New York, Bachmut region. During this journey I realized how much the dear elder was aging. When his wife and their son-in-law left the train at Pissmennaya in order to travel to Krutoyarovka, the elder left the train and fell asleep on the bench during the brief stopover. I urged him to stay with us henceforth. Once we arrived in New York we stayed with the Jakob Dycks, who looked after us very graciously. The elder lay down to rest immediately after the meal. He did not feel well throughout the conference and left a day early for Pissmennaya where he rejoined his wife.

His eyesight steadily deteriorated and the last year of his life was especially difficult because of his diminishing eyesight. In spite of his age he submitted to an eye operation which did not have the desired results. While he was still in the Muntau hospital lightning struck his house, burnt his barn and granary and killed his son-in-law J. Willms. Though he continued to deteriorate, some of his old energy still remained. The barn and granary were immediately rebuilt with help from his neighbours. Weather permitting he still attended church.

On April 20, 1909, he attended the funeral of his friend J. Neufeld, but did not preach. He spoke the closing prayer following the funeral meal. When they drove home the horses spooked and the driver, his little grandson, could not control them. He grabbed the lines and calmed the excited animals. Apparently the strain proved too much for him and he came down with pneumonia on the following day. He never left his sickbed. When I visited him he told me his time had come to appear before God. When I asked him whether he was afraid he replied in his confident fashion, 'No, I die on the merits of Christ.'

*Jesus Thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress
In these arrayed before God I'll stand
When I will pass through heavens gate*

He said these and a few more words before his impending journey to the Father.

His hour of departure came on May 4, 1909, at 8 PM. He died at the age of eighty-four years, one month and ten days. His funeral was held on May 9. Most of his congregation was in attendance. The memory of a righteous person is always blessed. His wife, who had been his faithful partner for fifty-three and a half years fell ill a few days later and died on May 10 at 10 AM. She was buried on May 12.

Now they see their Lord in whom they believed and whom they loved before they saw Him. On the Sunday following their burial, the Lichtenau congregation stood and sang a hymn in memory of their departed shepherd.

Kornelius Loewen, Minister

Blumenstein, October 25, 1910.

NOTES:

1. In his diary entries of 1839 David Epp of Chortitza mentions that his community was interested in importing some 1,500 hymnals from Prussia. The hymnal in question probably involves the Prussian Mennonite Geistliches Gesangbuch first published in 1767. An eighth edition of the hymnal was published in Marienburg in 1838 and it was probably this hymnal which Jakob's step father transported. In 1844 the Russian Mennonites published their own edition of the Prussian Mennonite hymnal in Odessa.

2. In Russian Mennonite practice the power of the guardian(s) was absolute. The inheritance system ensured that each child, male or female, inherited equally. It also, as in Jakob's case, protected the children against abusive or incapable adoptive parents.

Helena Wieler/Martens - A Profile

An unobtrusive grave marker located in the south-west corner of the former cemetery of the Coaldale Mennonite Brethren Church bears the simple inscription:

Helena Martens (1851-1928)

Helena was the seventh of ten children born to Jakob Thielmann and Agatha Letkemann of Neukirch, Molotschna. As a young child she lived in Alexanderkrone, Molotschna. Some five years after her father's death in 1862 the family moved to the newly established Friedensfeld settlement. Here Helena joined a small Mennonite Brethren congregation in 1868.

In 1872 she married Johann Wieler, a convert to the newly emerging Brethren Church. He was soon preaching among orthodox Ukrainians and Russians and because of such activities, had already been imprisoned in Odessa prior to his marriage. His commitment to the rise of the Russian evangelical movement in the Ukraine set the stage for frequent relocations and resulting hardship. Johann's rather strident portrait of prominence and achievement in the story of the early Brethren is tempered by Helena's autobiography written in 1922. Her account tells us something about the high cost of providing a home and stability for this Brethren teacher, preacher and evangelist.

There were visitors like Kornelius Unruh and Peter M. Friesen who in 1873 came for weeks and months at a time.

It did not seem to matter that the birth of her first child was imminent. All the while Johann sought to secure a livelihood by establishing private schools, first in Friedensfeld (1874), then in Nikopol (1875). The four to six boarding students who lived with them were Helena's concern. Helena gave birth to four children between 1873 and 1877 all of whom died. As she expressed it, "they lay buried in a large grave on a little hill in Nikopol."

By 1879 Helena found herself in Halbstadt where Johannes taught pedagogy. She tersely reports: "nineteen students had their meals with us, thirteen of whom roomed with us."

Between 1880 and 1882 visitors and three pregnancies continued to add to life's complexities. One of the three daughters died in 1881. Johann now decided to become an itinerant minister for the Brethren and the family moved to Tiege, Molotschna in 1883.

False charges brought against Johann by a Russian brother forced him to flee to Hamburg, Germany in 1885. Helena writes, "I went outside and the world seemed so dark - as though it was enshrouded in fog." Meanwhile another son Gerhard, was born in August 1885. He died just after his first birthday. Johann's attempt to return to Russia failed and again he was forced to flee - this time to Berlin. After burying little Gerhard, Helena left Russia to join him crying "the whole way to Berlin." Unable to remain in Germany the family settled in Tulscha, Rumania, where Johann helped plant a new church. During its construction he was injured. Illness set in and Johann died in a Bucharest hospital on July 30, 1889.

Helena returned to Friedensfeld in 1889. Her second marriage (1895) to Franz Martens, a wealthy Rueckenau widower, ended with his death of a heart attack in 1907. She emigrated to Canada during the 1920s, settling first in Rosthern, Saskatchewan, then in Coaldale, Alberta.

What an extraordinary woman! How did she manage to maintain hearth and home amid frequent relocations? And what of the energy required to sustain the physical and emotional needs of the young resident students? How did she sustain personal faith and equilibrium when by 1908 she had buried both her husbands and seven of her ten children? In addition she was left with six foster children that Franz Martens had accepted into his home. Perhaps two sentences in the last paragraphs of her autobiography hold an answer. "It is February 25th today - a beautifully warm day. We are thinking of planting some vegetables. We place our hope in God that everything will turn out well."

John B. Toews -

With special thanks to Victor Thiessen of Abbotsford, BC., for allowing the use of Helena's autobiography.