



Mennonite Historical Society of BC Newsletter

Vol. 8 No. 1

Winter 2002

The MHS Newsletter is produced periodically to inform and to promote the work of the BC Historical Society. It is mailed to people who contribute \$25 or more per year to the work of the society.

Editorial Committee:
Henry Neufeld, Louise Price, Helen Rose Pauls, with help from Loretta Kruger and Hugo Friesen.
Contributions are welcome.

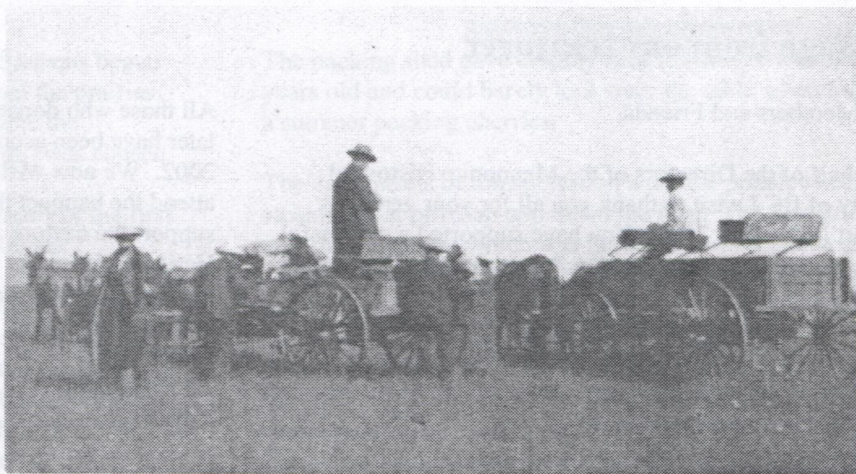
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**WHAT WE HAVE
HEARD AND
KNOWN, WE WILL
TELL THE NEXT
GENERATION.
Ps. 78**

Mennonites in Mexico

a people unto themselves: a historic overview

Come and hear guest speaker David Friesen talk about his experiences. Friesen was born in Mexico and is currently on MCC assignment with the Kanadier. Following the lecture and slide presentation, you are invited to join us in a traditional Mexican Mennonite Fasha.



Canadian Mennonite delegates searching for suitable land in Mexico in 1921

**Place: Eben-Ezer Mennonite Church
2051 Windsor St. Abbotsford**

(Eben-Ezer is at the corner of Marshall and Windsor, near the MCC warehouse. Coming from the west, take the Clearbrook Exit, cross Clearbrook Rd. proceeding west on Marshall Rd. to Windsor. From the east take the Clearbrook exit south, then turn right onto Marshall Rd. immediately after you cross the overpass.)

Date: Saturday, Feb. 16 Time: 7 PM

Tickets are free, but please phone ahead for reservations.

Mennonite Historical Society of BC, 211-2825 Clearbrook Rd. Abbotsford, BC
V2T 6S3 Tel. (604) 853-6177 Fax (604) 853-6246 email: mennohist@rapidnet.net
www.mhsbc.com Hours 9:00am -4:00 pm Monday to Friday.

Editorial

Several months ago, we received a letter from Mrs. Matilda Williams, in which she told us about a Mennonite community which had once existed in Renata, BC. In this issue, we are pleased to present *Renata—the village that was* as part of our “The way we were” series. Thank you to Mrs. Matilda Williams for an article which is both historical and personal.

We would welcome more accounts of Mennonite communities in other parts of BC. Help us keep our history alive!

If you have not visited the Society’s office lately, drop by to see the picture gallery which features lives of the Mexican Mennonites.

If you have pictures or stories to add to this gallery display, the archival office will be pleased to hear from you. The archive office is also looking for more photos and information on early business ventures in B.C. All photos will be returned to you. If you prefer to donate photos, they will be included in the archival collection. Call Jean Neufeld for more information. (604-853-6177)

A reminder as well: your newsletter subscription is included in the Society’s \$25/year membership fee. If you have donated a minimum of \$25 in the past year, your name is automatically placed on the membership list.

Thank you for your support.

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Message from our treasurer

Dear Members and Friends,

On behalf of the Directors of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC I wish to thank you all for your generous support in the year 2001. You have supported a successful program that will be further detailed in the Annual Report.

We are now facing a challenging new year that we hope will again meet your expectations and ask for your continued support.

All those who donated at the banquet in October 2001 or later have been accorded membership status for the year 2002. We now wish to remind those that were unable to attend the banquet that we also need your support. If you support the nurture and maintenance of our Mennonite Heritage please use the enclosed envelope to renew your membership with a donation of \$25.00 or more. We want and need your help.

Thank you,
Ed Hildebrand
Treasurer

Letters

Assistance, please!

I would like to reconnect with Gerald Rempel, my 2nd cousin. We went to school together in 1932-35 in Rosthern, SK. Gerald had a sister named Helen. Many thanks.

Maria (Friesen) Reimer. 604-854-3225



Emigrants awaiting the arrival of the train at Winkler to begin their trip to Mexico.

The way we were: *Renata, the village that was*

by Matilda Williams

Renata, originally called *Dog Creek* was a small village nestled between the Lower Arrow Lakes and the Monashee Mountains. It was founded by three French men in 1897, who came to prospect the valley. They built a hotel which lodged loggers, prospectors, and travelers. Ten years later, they sold the hotel to Fred Nash, who cleared the land and planted the first orchard.

In 1907, Western Land Company sent Frank Siemens as their agent to buy all available land in the area. They subdivided the land, and Siemens began selling the land to Mennonite families from the prairies. During this time, a contest was held to name the community. *Renata*, which means 'rebirth,' was chosen.

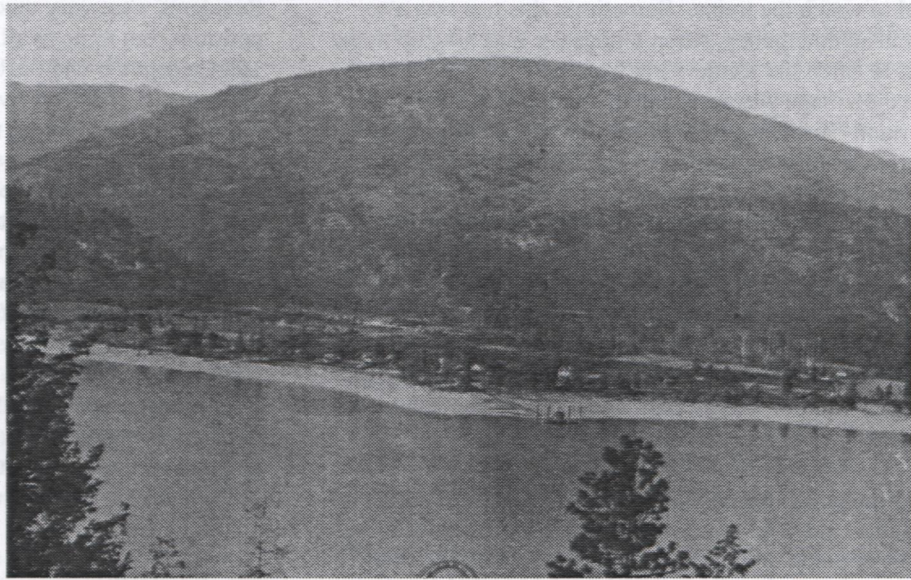
Mr. and Mrs. Frank Siemens were the parents of the first baby born in Renata. They named her 'Renata'.

The early settlers included my grandparents, Peter and Agatha Harms, who, along with their five sons and two daughters, set to work clearing the land and planting orchards. My father, William, along with his brothers Peter and Abe, started logging and bought a sawmill. They added a box factory and later a pipe factory to manufacture irrigation pipes. The mills provided work for the community while they waited for the orchards to come into production.

Irrigation systems were built on the two creeks running through the village to provide water for orchards and homes.

The sawmill burned down in 1924, after which my father helped my grandfather in his orchard. Later, he bought the family orchard.

In 1928, the Renata Co-operative Union was organized to provide an outlet for farmers to sell their fruit. In 1933, a packing shed was built. In a good year, they sold thousands of crates of cherries, peaches and apples.



Looking at Renata from across the lake, approx. 1914

The packing shed gave employment to many. I was eleven years old and could barely look over the table when I spent a summer packing cherries.

The only means of transportation were the paddlewheel steamers that plied up and down the lake. The best known was the SS Minto, which was built in eastern Canada and shipped to Nakusp, where it was assembled and launched in 1898.

Although most of the residents of Renata were Mennonite, they did not all embrace the Mennonite faith. The first Mennonite Church met in the home of Frank Siemens. Later, Rev. Peter Dyck conducted services in German. My father's family belonged to the General Church of the New Jerusalem (followers of Emanuel Swedenborg.) When my Aunt Margaret Harms married Henry Toews, Rev. John Zacharias from Saskatchewan made his first visit. Lutheran and Anglican ministers also visited the town. Since there was no church building in the community, services were conducted in the schoolhouse.

My mother, Elizabeth Heppner, came to Renata to visit her father, John Heppner in 1927. She married my father in 1928. I was born in 1934, the third in a family of four children. I attended the one-room school with about twenty pupils. Turnover of teachers was high, probably due to the isolation. The highlight of the year was the Christmas concert. The Co-op packinghouse would be turned into a theatre and everyone would attend.

Renata con't

Swimming, hiking, ice-skating and sleigh riding kept us busy. A favourite hike was a five-mile hike up to the tunnel to watch the trains. Sometimes this trip was also made in an emergency, when villagers could hike up to the tunnel to catch the Kettle Valley trains.

Since the village was so isolated, visiting was very important. Birthdays were always an excuse to join the celebrant's home for *faspa*. Community pig butcherings were annual events. Residents would gather at each other's homes to help butcher pigs and prepare the meat. This was an all-day affair that would often begin with an early breakfast.

My family moved from Renata to Vancouver Island in 1946 in order for us to have better access to educational opportunities, but we still maintained close ties to the village.

In 1954, the S.S. Minto was retired because she was getting too old. She was terribly missed. Transportation became sporadic until a road was built between Syringa and Deer Park, and a cable ferry was installed to serve Renata.

In 1954, residents heard rumours that a dam was being planned, and that Renata would be flooded. Residents were very much opposed to this, and signed petitions, but to no avail. The Columbia River Treaty of 1964 meant the end of Renata. It was very hard on the residents, as they had lived there for many years and moving meant adapting to a different way of life.

In recent years, the water level behind the dam is so low, that Renata is above water again. I have walked on the concrete slab that was installed over the cemetery. A plaque containing the names of those buried in Renata is installed in the Robson Cemetery.) It is almost as if flooding the Arrow Lakes was in vain.

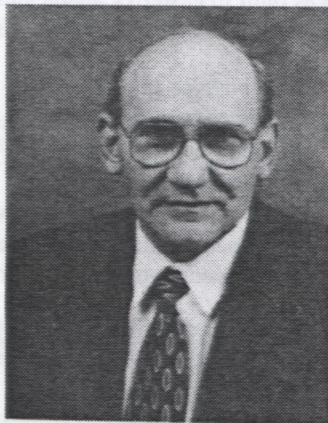
Every three years since 1987, a Renata reunion is held at Syringa Provincial Park. We gather to renew old friendships and to reminisce about the good times we had in Renata.

(Matilda Williams now lives in Namaimo, BC)

Board profiles: David Giesbrecht

by Henry Neufeld

David Giesbrecht has always had an interest in history and has been on the board of the BC Mennonite Historical



Society for about 10 years. He is vice chair of the Society and also serves on the Events Committee, which has responsibility for organizing the popular lecture series.

David was born in Elm Creek, Manitoba, the son of John and Helen

(Janzen) Giesbrecht. When David was seven years old his family moved to BC and settled in the Yarrow area.

David attended Yarrow Elementary, the Sharon Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Yarrow, Mennonite Brethren Bible Institute (now Columbia Bible College), UBC, and he has a MLIS (master of Library and Information Science) from the University of Western Ontario. His career includes teaching in Lillooet and Abbotsford. For the last 18 years, until his retirement in 2000, he was librarian at Columbia Bible College.

David and Elizabeth Dahl married in 1963 and they have two children, Clarence and Karen. Elizabeth is retired from her teaching position in Abbotsford. David and Elizabeth, who attend Bakerview MB church, have an impressive 30-year history of involvement with MCC, including two three-year terms of volunteer teaching in Nigeria and Jamaica. David also served on the executive and was chair of MCC BC.

In addition to his work with the BC MHS, David is vice chair of the MHS of Canada and a member of the North American MB Conference Historical Commission. He served on the Board of M2W2 and is presently on the Board of Communications for the Canadian MB Conference. He is a member of the Abbotsford Museum Society and the Yarrow Research Committee.

David enjoys gardening, writing, traveling, reading, and having coffee with friends. Recently he read "Women Without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War" by Marlene Epp.

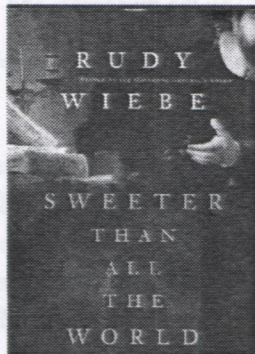
David sees the BC MHS providing a significant work of preserving and telling the larger Mennonite story and values the sense of collegiality on the MHS Board. "We need to remind people that a tree with its roots cut off will soon wither and die."

Book Reviews:

Two fiction books based on Mennonite history were published shortly before Christmas by well-known Canadian authors. Reviewed by Helen Rose Pauls,

Rudy Wiebe, *Sweeter Than All the World*.

Alfred A. Knopf, Canada, 2001



Wiebe, who has twice won the Governor-General's award, turns to his own history to write this book. Into a story about the Mennonite past that spans five centuries, Rudy Wiebe weaves a modern tale about the son of Canadian Mennonite immigrants who has "made good", but has lost his moral compass.

Adam Wiebe, an affluent doctor in Edmonton, faces the collapse of his marriage and loss of contact with his daughter, who has chosen to travel the world without communicating with her family. In his search for what is meaningful in life, he explores his Mennonite origins.

This search takes him back to a time in Holland during the Reformation, when early followers of Menno Simons were being tortured and executed. Graphic details include a daughter recalling how a blacksmith forced white-hot screws onto her mother's tongue, so that she could not speak or sing praises as she marched to her death at the hands of the Roman Catholic Church.

Wiebe describes the life of his forbears in Danzig, Poland, where the Mennonites flee to escape the Inquisition. The life of an earlier Adam Wiebe, an engineer who helps to drain the swamps in their new land, dominates this chapter. This Adam Wiebe has invented the cable car to transport landfill from one side of the river delta to another. He has organized the building of a wall around Danzig that protects the city for one hundred and fifty years. The author brilliantly shows how the industry and ingenuity of the Mennonites helps them to thrive in their new surroundings, but how their reluctance to bear arms causes another migration, this time to Russia.

Rudy Wiebe picks and chooses enough bits of stories from the Russian experience to depict both the prosperity and the horror of that time. He is brave enough to address the subject of rape, as seen through the ordeal of two Mennonite women fearing the Russian soldiers as they flee their homeland and try to find refuge in war torn Germany.

The Canadian pioneering story, as experienced by so many of our parents, takes place on a homestead in the

northern Alberta wilderness. Here young Adam Wiebe is born in the thirties, the youngest child of Low-German speaking immigrant parents. Here he interacts with his siblings, learns to enjoy the freedom of the great outdoors, and realizes that he and his family are somehow different from the other Canadian kids with whom he attends school. Although Adam's father seems a harsh man, it is the tenderness of his mother that makes his young life sweet. The book takes its title from her song, "Sweeter than all the world to me".

The Wiebe family loses their battle with the wilderness and moves to the small town of Coaldale in southern Alberta, where day jobs can support a family. Young Adam eventually trains as a doctor and ventures far beyond the confines of his strict Mennonite world.

By studying his own history, Adam Wiebe discovers that religious faith and commitment to family are the anchors that have given his people strength and life throughout the generations and that it is not too late to make changes and redeem his own.

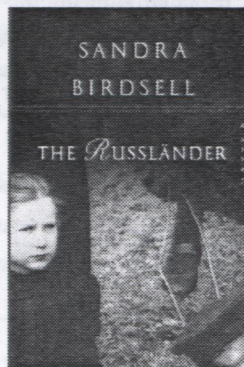
Many stories about Mennonite history have glossed over the difficult and disquieting parts, bearing a triumphal tone. Wiebe explains, in the review of his book in Maclean's magazine [Oct. 22, 2001] why this is so: "When people have suffered great personal trauma, they often don't talk about it....I mean, what do you do with the horrible things that happened to you? The last thing you want to do is inflict them on your children."

Now that we are a little more removed in time from these stories, perhaps we can face some of them.

This book is available at most bookstores.

Sandra Birdsell, *The Russländer*.

McClelland & Stewart, 2001



Enjoying several months on the bestseller list and short listed for the coveted Giller prize, *The Russländer* also explores Mennonite history, but depicts only one short segment during the Russian Revolution. The author, Sandra Birdsell, who lives in Regina, has Mennonite roots

on her mother's side; Metis and French Canadian on her father's.

Russländer con't

The book revolves around the experiences of a teenager, Katya Vogt, during the utter confusion of the Russian revolution and the ensuing anarchy. Her father is a farm manager on the huge Mennonite estate of the Suderman family. He is depicted as a good man: fair to the Russian workers he is asked to supervise, loyal to the Suderman family even during times of deep discouragement at their duplicity, and loving to his wife and many children. He is a man caught between two opposing social classes, as the darkness of insubordination and insurrection descend on the prosperous and well-ordered Mennonite society.

We get a picture of Mennonite life just before the revolution that changed everything, through Katya's eyes. The wealthy Suderman family spurns her beautiful older sister although their son would gladly have her as his wife, and he is forced to marry a cousin to consolidate family fortunes. Her father is promised land of his own, but each year, when the heads of the Suderman clan come together for fiscal planning, this promise is unfulfilled. Perhaps Vogt does his job too well. Katya and her siblings are allowed to go to the school run by a private tutor with the estate owner's children, but she is always somehow "lesser" than the well-dressed and prissy wealthy girls. The Russian families are totally unschooled. Everyone knows their place. Birdsell alludes to other instances where rank and wealth allow the Sudermans to dismiss their own wrongdoing.

There is foreshadowing of evil coming from outside this sheltered world, but one is almost unprepared for the brutal massacre of the Suderman family; for the glee with which roving bandits and his own workers, slice and hack the elder Suderman to death.

Stories needed for future newsletters:

We are seeking specific short stories suitable for the April and July newsletters that deal with women's experiences. Stories of struggle, triumph and loss, especially during the years of difficulty after the Russian Revolution and under Stalin are welcome, as are stories about emigration to Canada and starting a new home. Stories may be in either English or German; we will translate and edit for length and clarity when necessary. Articles should be between 300-500 words, (1/2 - 1 page when typed) and any pictures sent will be returned.

Please submit articles for the April issue of the newsletter before March 15, to Helen Rose Pauls, 6671 Chadsey Road, Chilliwack, B.C. V2R 4K8 or e-mail them using Microsoft Word to ehpauls@telus.net.

Katya witnesses some of the carnage, but is able to slip away with one of her sisters to a hiding place her father has prepared in the greenhouse for such a time as this. Together with their baby sister who is found crawling and crying in the wreckage of the Suderman farm office, they are the sole survivors of the large Vogt family. Her lovely sister is "put on the ground" by the murderers and perishes, although Katya does not fully understand what has happened to her sister until months later.

There is a time of regrouping. Relatives from the Chortitza villages, who have survived the initial onslaughts of the brigands, rescue the three sisters and try to care for them, although their own storehouses of food have been looted and their households have shrunk. Katya, although treated kindly by extended family members, wanders the village trying to understand what has happened to her dear little brothers, her parents, her older sister whom she admired so much. We get a glimpse of the ravages of malnutrition, disease and starvation that followed the time of Mahknov.

Read together, these two books give one a broad and diverse portrait of Mennonite life in other times. One wonders what the trajectory will be into the future and how our modern "Mennonite" society in Canada will be analyzed and viewed by generations to come. We are still too close to it to make concrete interpretations.

The Russländer can be purchased wherever books are sold, but it was hard to find a copy in the Abbotsford area during December. It seems that this particular book was the Christmas gift of choice in the local Mennonite community.

New Books at our library

by **Hugo Friesen**

Jacob's Journey. Autobiography by J.M.Klassen (2001)

You Are Wherever You Go. Hilda Born (2001)

In the Company of God. Autobiography by Henry Born. (2000)

Where They Once Toiled: a Visit to the Vistula River Valley. E.R. Brandt (1992)

The Balancing of the Clouds. John Unrau (2000)

The Visionary Legacy of Ron Wiebe. Ron Wiebe (2000)

Grigorievka: Village and Family Stories. Ed. by Ted Friesen and Elisabeth Peters !1998)

A Leader for His Time. Biography of J.J.Thiessen by Esther Epp-Tiessen. (2001)

Next Event: Lecture "Women without Men—The Stalin Years" May 11, 2002

A fascinating topic with lecturer Marlene Epp. Epp is an instructor of history and Canadian studies at the University of Waterloo and University of Toronto, and is the author of *Women without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War*.
More information will follow.

Letters from the past

Letter by Katherina Janzen, edited and translated by Louise Price

Heinrich and Katherina Janzen and their four sons, Heinrich, Johann, Peter and Wilhelm were banished to Siberia in the summer of 1931. Jakob Koslowsky, their son-in-law, went to Siberia in fall of 1931 to try to get them released, but was not successful and returned to Rosental alone. Later, the Koslowsky's received this letter. This translation is based on a handwritten copy of the original. The copy was not signed.

Barschiev, 16 December, 1931

Longingly we wait for news that you have arrived home safely, and how you found everything back at home. Is everyone well? Papa became quite sick after you left, is better now. Wilhelm became ill with appendicitis and stabbing pains under the ribs, the doctor says he needs better food and rest, and yet he must go to work. We thank God that he gave us the joy that you could visit us; it is a great comfort to us that you now know where we are and you know our need. Heinrich is almost inconsolable. He has to work outside again, and his feet are so swollen.

Tell the Heinrichs family that Frau Julius Heinrichs was buried today after work. Last week, when they received three parcels, she said it was too late for her. Now she is released from her suffering. An old Russian has died, too. Many women are sick. The work is too hard but there is no mercy. Often we think we have been abandoned by God. May God give us strength that we do not despair when we hear so much dreadful news. I believe Wilhelm is much sicker than we know. The doctor shook his head when he examined him. He looks as if he's suffering and would like to eat something else. It is so hard when we see our loved ones suffering and we can do nothing to ease their pain. I'm almost overcome by despair when I see how he hungers for something else. The doctor comes from the city but he may only diagnose—he is forbidden to give sick leave, since there are not supposed to be any sick people. Just work in any way you can until you can no longer stand up. We have had no news from the city—no hope, I suppose. The Lord's will be done!

If you are able to send us something for our sick ones, that might help. Barley is no worse than millet. If possible, he should be eating some fat. That is a difficult assignment. He hungers for Obstsuppe. A Mr. Isaak Berhr. Bergen arrived yesterday with 20 Pud of products. Many people received with joy, but we remained empty. We still haven't received your parcel, or the money you sent, and our need is great. No potatoes, no cereal, and soon it will be Christmas. I don't know how I'll be able to see the despairing faces around me when I can neither help nor comfort. May God give me strength. I hoped there would be something for us today—sadly, there was not. Please report if possible in the next parcel—write between the lines of the newspaper. Hans received a parcel last week from his friends. I don't know what to write; I despair.

I wish you a happy Christmas and a blessed New Year! Have forgotten something. Please send a calendar and a fine toothed comb. On Dec 12, Frau Heinrichs died, the 13th she was buried at twilight by lantern light. Only her family, and Papa and Heinrich helped. It seemed so sad to me...

What happened later? Peter escaped, and made his way back to Chortitza-Rosental, where he was able to obtain new papers. He was arrested in 1937, and not heard from again. Jakob, Katherine and their sons Heinrich and Wilhelm starved to death the winter of 1932/33. Johann survived for ten more years. For a while, he worked in a dairy operation, where conditions were better. In 1941, he wrote that he was being sent further north, and wished he could go to his parents and brothers. He was never heard from again.

Sina, Who Waters the Mennonite Graves

by Helen Rose Pauls

Her Christmas letter to me starts out the very same way mine does to my cousins who are Aussiedler in Neuwied, "My German is not so good but I hope you can understand it." The difference is that her German has a Russian influence and mine is Anglicized.

We met Sina when we visited the Mennonite graves on Insel Chortitza as part of the 1999 Mennonite Heritage Cruise Tour in Ukraine. I had visited this graveyard twenty years earlier with Gerhard Lorenz on one of his marathon Mennonite history tours of the Soviet Union.



At that time, we had scrambled and plunged through thistles and tall grasses to find the dirt encrusted headstones bearing familiar names, hidden in the underbrush.

Now all was different. Cleared dirt paths surrounded the ancient slabs and writing was more legible. Orange and golden marigolds, like surprises from God, flourished at the base of the stones. And there she stood, a kindly looking grandmother wearing a gardening apron and carrying a plastic jug from which she was pouring water on the flowers. We approached her and she greeted us in German. She could easily recognize the tourists who came from America to explore their roots.

She got the water up from the Dnieper River, she said. There was a place close by to get down to the stream. She grew the flowers from seeds she saved each fall and planted each spring. Not much variety, but more each year.

We had heard that seeds were very scarce in the former Soviet Union. Seeds were what we had thought to bring when our tour directors suggested that each tourist have small gifts ready for the locals. In August, just before the trip, I managed to get 400 packages of flower and vegetable seeds still left on the shelves of the garden shop for 17 cents a package. "Just put in a number to satisfy the bar code," suggested the manager to the sales lady when I explained our mission.

What fun my husband had being mobbed by the old women who are the roadside fruit sellers when he began to distribute the seed packages. Seeds were also what we were taking back to Canada as our souvenir: sunflower seeds from my grandfather's village in Sagraadowka.

By now our flower seeds were all given away, but we still had some vegetable seed packets: kohlrabi, radishes, beans. Sina accepted them with wonder and thanks. She seemed very moved and we exchanged addresses. Sina was one of the survivors of the German Lutherans who had also accepted Catherine the Great's invitation to come to Russia.

That Christmas we sent her a greeting and a picture of our family. She sent us news that the kohlrabi and radishes, which she had planted in her sister's garden, had been mostly eaten by caterpillars. But the beans had been very good. In fact she had never tasted such good beans, and had saved half of them for seed for the next year. This year, I sent her a picture of the Ukrainian sunflowers which form a backdrop to my flower garden.

"Why do you bother with the Mennonite graves?" we asked her.

"My mother is buried very far from here and I cannot visit her grave," she replied. "So on Sundays, I come here to think about my mother, and water the German graves."