

Roots and branches

Newsletter of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC

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

Editorial..... 2
 Coming events:..... 2
 Remember Us As We
 Remember You: Letters from
 the Gulag. 3
 Days of Terror in Orloff..... 4
 In Defence of Mothers and
 Sisters 5
 When Being a Conscientious
 Objector was not Enough 6
 Canadian Peace Foundation:
 Alphabet Soup..... 9
 My Mennonite Youth..... 12
 Board Member Profile: Robert
 Martens 14
 Arthur Kroeger, Hard Passage 15
 Plautdietsch News 16
 Peter Daniel Loewen 17
 First Mennonite Church, Burns
 Lake..... 18
 Recipes for Festive Occasions . 19
 Plautdietsch on the Internet 19
 A Festive Day at
 Grandmother's House 20



Art by Edith Krause

And on Earth, Peace.

Editorial

In the season of "Peace on Earth, goodwill to all" we pause to remember times and places where people live in fear, and peace is an abstract idea. From the Machno terror and the Siberian Gulag to civil war in Afghanistan and Sudan, the words "Peace on Earth" ring hollow. How do we work for peace and justice? Forty years ago, a group of young Mennonites in the United States believed that just being conscientious objectors wasn't enough, and challenged the Mennonite Church conference in Turner, Oregon. How do we respond to increasing militarization in Canada today?

"Peace work" must also happen in our everyday lives: Dave Hubert describes ways we can be involved in various Mennonite peace institutions.

For many of us, coming to Canada in the years following WWII brought an end to years of refugee life and fears of being "repatriated" to the Soviet Union. In October 2008 we will be celebrating 60 years of freedom. If you have stories, poems or songs that you would like to contribute, either to the event or to the newsletter that will commemorate this time, please contact us.

Wishing all of you peace and a good and wonder full year!

LBP

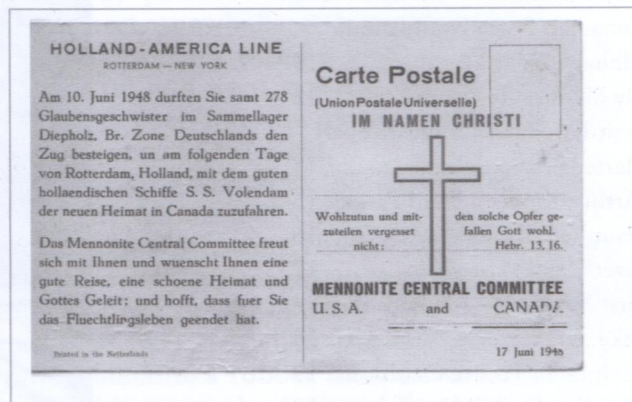
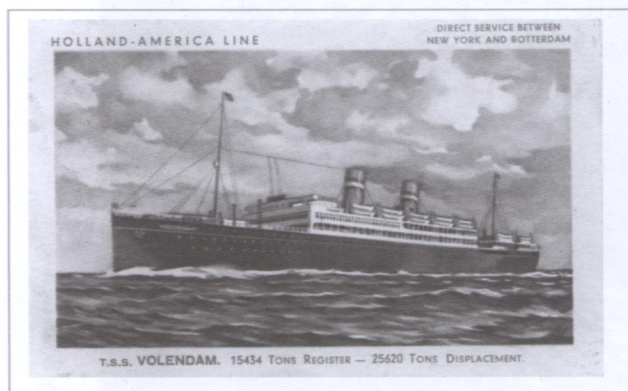
Coming events

February 23. Remember Us as We Remember You: Letters from Stalin's Gulag. Documentary film "Through the Red Gate" and book launch by Ruth Derksen Siemens. Venue: Bakerview MB, 2285 Clearbrook Road. Doors open at 6pm for art exhibit by Edith Krause, Shireen Cotterall and Hilda Goertzen; film and lecture at 7pm. See page 3 for more details.

May 10. Celebrating the Contributions of Der Bote and Die Mennonitische Rundschau. These periodicals served their constituencies faithfully for many years. *Die Rundschau* has already ceased publication; *Der Bote* will cease as of June 2008. Further details will follow.

October 18-19. Sixty Years of Peace and Plenty: Mennonite Refugees Remember. Tentative schedule:

Saturday afternoon: Registration, visiting, displays, slide show, book table, screening of "The Great Trek" film. Saturday evening: Annual fundraising banquet with Dr. Harry Loewen. Sunday afternoon: Festival of Remembrance and Thanksgiving in story and song.



The S.S. Volendam which brought hundreds of Mennonite refugees to Canada. On back of the postcard: "On June 10, 1948, you and 278 other brothers and sisters from the Diepholz camp in the British zone of Germany came by train to Rotterdam, Holland where the good ship S.S. Volendam was waiting to take you to your new home in Canada. MCC rejoices with you and wishes you a good trip, a beautiful homeland and God's leading; and hopes that this brings to an end your life as a refugee."

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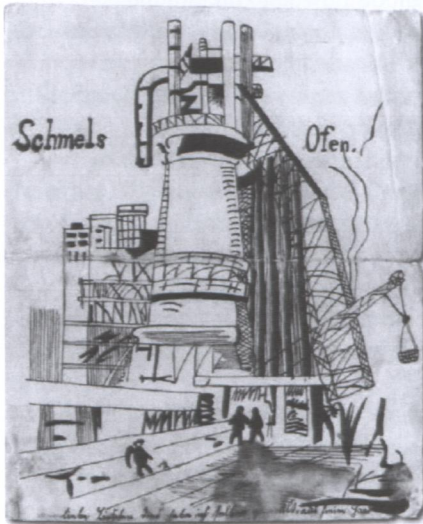
Letters from Stalin's Gulag

Lecture and book launch by Ruth Derksen Siemens,

"Remember us as we remember you" – the plea from a father for his family in a prison camp in Stalin's Gulag empire. Jasch Regehr's letter is a criminal offence. Documents of the NKVD, the Soviet Union's secret police agency, confirm that "correspondence abroad" is punishable by arrest and imprisonment without trial.

Yet somehow this father's letter was delivered to a tiny prairie town in Canada. From 1930-38, other letters (463) written by Russian Mennonites – a nine-year old girl, her mother, brother and sister, extended family and friends – arrived in Carlyle, Saskatchewan at the home of Franz and Liese Barga. Stored in a Campbell's Soup box, they traveled from attic to attic for nearly 60 years. In 1989, Peter Barga, son of the recipients, discovered the fragile cardboard box. For three years, Peter and his wife Anne translated, compiled, and distributed copies to their family.

On February 23, 2008, Ruth Derksen Siemens will briefly describe the letters and their tenuous journey. However, the focus of the evening is the film, *Through the Red Gate.* Also included in the evening will be the launch of the book *"Remember Us": Letters from Stalin's Gulag.* The book and DVD will be available to purchase. Several artists (Edith Krause, Shireen Cotterall and Hilda Goertzen) will also be exhibiting their work. A father's plea to "remember" will not go unheeded. We will remember and we will honour those who wrote.



.....

March 8, 1932. My family is at work—all of them. Papa has been taken. Here about 50% have been taken because of the bread. The government has no more. One horse's head costs 40 rubles and one pound butter 25 rubles. If we had not received parcels we would have starved to death long ago. Many people die around here. Uncle Hans has died too. Aunt Susie and the children have typhus and nothing to eat. It is very sad in this Russia and everyone is without bread. We never have enough to eat and it is so terrible to be hungry all the time."

Letter and sketch by 12-year-old Tina Regehr. To the left, the smelter where Tina worked. Read the complete letter and more about the project at www.gulagletters.com

Instead of a Preface¹ by Anna Akhmatova

In the dreadful years of the Yezhov terror I spent seventeen months in prison queues in Leningrad. One day someone 'identified' me. Then a woman standing behind me, blue with cold, who of course had never heard my name, woke from that trance characteristic of us all and asked in my ear (there, everyone spoke in whispers):

- Ah, can you describe this?

And I said: I can.

Then something like a tormented smile passed over what had once been her face.

¹ Translated by A. S. Kline © 2005 All Rights Reserved. 'This work may be freely reproduced, stored, and transmitted, electronically or otherwise, for any non-commercial purpose.' <http://tkline.pgcc.net/PITBR/Russian/Akhmatova.htm>

Days of Terror in Orloff

by Helene Friesen Neumann Wiens, translated by Richard and Elfrieda (Neumann) Ratslaff

The harvest in 1919 had been fairly good. Farmers had piled up large straw piles at the back of their farm yards. Then we received news that a band under Machno would also arrive at our village, Orloff No. 6.

On Friday, November 29, 1919, Machno's bandits arrived. Our children came home from school early. Several men had entered the school, so the teachers instructed the children to hurry home.

Not long after, men on horses and with wagons rode into our village from our end.

The road was very muddy, and we had thick fog, allowing some people to escape and hide behind the piles of straw heaped in the back of the farmyards.

Soon, seven riders came into the Fast's yard. (My grandparents rented a house in the back of the yard of Abram Fast, the first place on the south end of the village).

Mrs. Fast, the Grandmother, and grown-up daughter Neta, as well as Abram and Just, were in our house. No one wanted to stay in the large house. The Heinrich Blocks and two children were also at our place. I wanted my husband to hide, but he wouldn't leave us.

Some of the men dismounted. Mr. Fast and the mute, Jacob, were at the barn door. The bandits encircled Mr. Fast. As my husband rushed to help, a bandit hit him with a blow of the hand: he was to stay back. Then, two riders came to our door. By this time, I also had gone outside. One of the bandits dismounted, while the other charged at my husband and gave him such a blow on the head with his sword that he fell, and blood flowed to the ground. Then he demanded money from me. My husband raised himself up and said, "I have the money," and gave it to the bandit who was standing beside him.

The rider raised his sword to give me a blow to the head, but the other bandit pulled me away. The rider then attacked my husband again, while the other man pushed me into the bedroom and demanded more money. He placed his revolver on my chest and cried out, "I will shoot you!"

"Father, forgive them, for they are drunk and do not know what they are doing," I prayed in Russian. Then he did to me what they did to many women and girls ~

"Father, forgive them, for they are drunk and do not know what they are doing," I prayed in Russian. Then he did to me what they did to many women and girls...

Only on ten farms did the straw piles remain, the rest were all set on fire. In ten places the houses were burning. As evening approached, the sight was terrible. On the ground, a very bright fire, above, dark smoke, and then fog. Dead or wounded people lay on almost every yard. It was terrible, for there was no one to help. All who were left alive had to fend for themselves.

The bandits left before evening leaving thirty-nine dead; several died later from their wounds. In the cemetery, a long grave was dug, and straw was brought by wagon and placed in the bottom of it. The corpses were placed into the grave as they were found...More straw was piled on top of the bodies and then covered with earth. I did not see any of the corpses. I was busy with my wounded husband. This happened Friday afternoon.

On Sunday, the first help arrived from Orloff No. 4 : Franz Bahnmann, Peter Janzen, and Aron Jacob Janzen, who had all been Sanitäter during the war, dressed the wounds. By Wednesday, the school was a hospital.... In the afternoon, they also brought my husband there. I had been very much afraid that I would not give him the proper care, and was relieved to have that worry taken from me. I cooked and baked, and brought it there to help feed the sick. A number of these also died from their wounds. The Blocks' house had been burned down so the Heinrich Blocks and two children lived with me until mid January when school reopened. The remaining wounded were placed in a small house beside the school where they received care. My husband and Peter Wiebe from No. 12 were taken in by Mrs. Siemens in the *Sommerstube*, including board; one of the Sanitäter walked there and dressed their wounds. After several weeks, my husband came home, but several wounds were still not healed, and I had to continue dressing them. Hans and Jasch had undertaken to take care of the livestock, and by dividing the workload, they were able to carry it out very well.

The Russian peasants were given much of the land that had belonged to the German villages. We, who had been without land, also received an allotment of land. We planted grain, several desjatinen, as well as sunflowers to make oil, watermelons, beans and pumpkins to feed cows. We always had work to do. Obtaining footwear and clothing became an ever greater worry. To me now, it is a miracle that we were able to do it.



Helene Friesen Neumann Wiens

In Defence of Mothers and Sisters

by Henry Neufeld.

The ultimate test of non-resistance for Mennonites in Russia occurred during the Bolshevik revolution. Non-resistance seemed ludicrous to many in the face of mounting violence. The armed Mennonite resistance reflected a bankruptcy in Mennonite peace theology, said historian Dr. John B. Toews in a recent Mennonite Historical Society of BC lecture.

The Russian government had collapsed, the army disintegrated and was fighting amongst itself, and there was no police force: a situation ripe for criminal gangs and would-be-warlords wanting to seize power. This was what the Mennonites in Ukraine faced in 1918–1920. In that situation, said Toews, armed gangs came and took whatever they wanted, murdering and raping in the process. Do you surrender to these lowest forms of evil or do you resist? Do you protect your mother and sisters?

Retired history professor (University of Calgary and Regent College), Toews said when Mennonites found themselves in that chaotic situation, some decided to resist. They formed armed militia units, the *Selbstschutz* (self-defence) whose purpose was to protect, not to fight. Gradually they moved from being protectors and engaged in armed conflict.

In considering armed self-defence, Mennonite church leaders debated the idea; they affirmed the non-resistance principle but allowed individuals to disagree and follow their own conscience. “A key element in the Mennonite confession of faith was declared optional,” said Toews.

In the self-contained and self-governing Mennonite villages of Ukraine the line between government and church was unclear, blurring the interests of church and state. “The Mennonites had made a decision (allowing individuals to join the *Selbstschutz*) and the Mennonite church is debating its theology of non-resistance when in fact it is already compromised,” he said.

Toews did not fully blame the Mennonite pastors, many of whom lacked theological training. They were influenced by German evangelists whose preaching and teaching brought renewal to the soul along with overtones of German nationalism. The biblical and historic peace position did not retain its importance.

Initially the self-defence idea seemed logical: the villages were threatened and self-defence was very different from actual participation in war. Protecting family and home was a fundamental duty. Mennonites were seduced into fighting with the White Russian army against the Red Russians. The Red army was victorious and consequences began to be felt in Mennonite villages.

The consequence of violence often is more violence. The Mennonite foray into militarism came to an ignoble end. Some members of the self-defence group were tried and executed by a military tribunal in Melitopol. Mennonite villages were attacked, people massacred, and village buildings were burned: retaliation for Mennonite armed activity.

Toews said the Mennonites finally did what they should have done all along: they organized a prayer meeting and prayed for forgiveness. In times of crisis, he said, the interests of the state tend to triumph over the church.

Toews noted that *Selbstschutz* advocates lacked a long term perspective; to them non-resistance in the face of growing violence directed at families, women and children seemed ludicrous. The position of self-defence also reflected a bankrupt theology: Mennonite leaders had listened to German theologians, none of whom considered non-resistance to be part of the gospel. When faced with violent evil to person and property the historic peace position seemed an abstract principle.

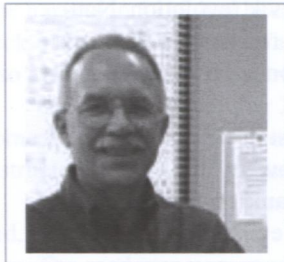
We should not judge our ancestors too harshly, Toews cautioned, for, “like us, they lacked a theology of the suffering church.” For Mennonites in Ukraine, life was comfortable, perhaps too comfortable. Then they had to learn to become a suffering church.

If history tends to repeat itself, this lecture raises some troubling questions. What would we do if our well-ordered world erupted into chaos and lawlessness? Are we too comfortable with our government so that our prophetic voice is lost in the bureaucratic maelstrom? Do we look on idly as our country becomes increasingly militaristic? If the self-defence in Ukraine represented a bankruptcy in peace theology, is that theology being practiced today? If, as Toews said, we need a theology of a suffering church, what might that look like?

The annual MHSBC fundraising banquet attracted over 400 people. The program also included hymn singing and a stirring rendition of *Jerusalem* played by cellist Joel Stobbe and accompanied by Linda Stobbe on piano.

When being a Conscientious Objector was not enough

by Tim Beachy from a sermon at Langley Mennonite Fellowship, Peace Sunday, November 2007.



Isaiah 2: 4 “He will judge the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.”

This is a vision we can only envision.

Evil still walks the land. Canada, during our time, has become one of the biggest exporters of arms and ammunition. We must pray and act to oppose our country's adoption of the evil economics of war.

I became eligible for the US military draft in July 1965, just at a time when the American invasion and war in Vietnam was heating up. I was registered for the military draft in Dawson County Montana as a Conscientious Objector and was therefore eligible for ‘Alternate Service,’ in a hospital, a Voluntary Service project or some other non-combatant role.

However, I knew I would never be drafted – no Mennonite men had been drafted in that county since 1940, because an attempted lynching of a Mennonite Minister in Dawson County had brought great shame – and, because the Mennonite people in the County were now a powerful economic force.

This Alternate Service agreement for Mennonite draftees had been negotiated between the US government and Mennonite leaders during the first great war and again during the second great war. It was believed to be a great victory and a cornerstone agreement for the church.

Though we did not realize it at the time, the war was to expand dramatically over the next four years and would carve the American people in two as well as to severely strain the Mennonite church in the United States.

When I went to Hesston College in the fall of 1965, I joined the little “peace club.” We did educational events, attended meetings and studied the church's position on peace and war. We did not go in marches, let alone lead them or challenge the church in any way – we supported our church's position. We felt privileged.

The Vietnam War continued to expand and heat up. It was also becoming a war on College campuses and the streets of the USA. By the time I went to Goshen College in 1967, many thousands of Vietnamese were dying by bombing, burned to death by napalm and murdered in the open markets. Body counts were the measuring stick of success for the US Army. Americans too were dying – thousands each year.

The temperature was going up amongst the American people and around the world. Young people were demanding change – all across the world – and the powerful in America were totally confounded.

I joined the Goshen College Peace Society. While many College campuses were in chaos (being taken over by various movements, for example the Students for a Democratic Society), our campus was a supportive haven. Our professors challenged us to do more. Our chapel services were a place of free expression of anger towards the war and towards American duplicity in mass murder in a foreign land. Our coffee houses were alive with movement talk. We prayed for the peace and civil rights movements to drop their differences and bring themselves together.

We marched through the city of Goshen and experienced the very hostile jeers and taunts from city residents. We marched on Washington, invaded Washington and during a meeting of Mennonite College Peace Clubs in Washington we attended the Senator Fulbright Hearings on the war, joining others in cheering to the point of being driven from the room. We became part of a great big movement.

In 1968, as the American election was approaching, many of became politically active. Goshen students fought that election street to street across many cities in many states that were holding primary elections— Pennsylvania, Indiana, Ohio, Wisconsin, Nebraska, and Oregon. We left school en mass to work for political candidates who were against the war. We were part of the great victory and experienced the flood of satisfaction when the sitting president Lyndon Johnson announced on March 31 that he wouldn't be running again.

Many of us worked for Eugene McCarthy, a strongly Catholic Christian, who called us to work. We wanted him to become president. And, as we did that, our professors were cheering us on and giving us passing grades even while we never went to classes – they were our friends and supporters.

Then came the fateful days of that spring and summer of 1968. Here are five events that stick in my mind:

- April 4 –Martin Luther King, a great hero of us all, a man who brought the civil rights movement together with the anti-war movement, was killed by a sniper.
- April 23–At Columbia University in New York, students who were opposed to the university's defence contracts occupied several campus buildings. They were later routed live on television by "New York's finest". University campuses everywhere were in turmoil.
- June 5–Robert Kennedy, the obvious winner of the next election for President, was shot and killed in Los Angeles.
- August 21–The Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia to crush the Reform movement there.
- August 23-28–the US National Democratic Party held its convention amid a virtual war zone of riots and mass arrests in Chicago.

It became clear that the young and the idealistic would not win this struggle. We went home and gave up on America. But then we turned to look towards ourselves. It had become obvious to us that we were among the most privileged in America. We did not have to go to war. While we went to college virtually free (on forgiven loans from the National Defense Student Loan program), the young men being drafted were almost all poor and illiterate and mostly black from the southern US and the big cities. Anyone with money or with a way to attend college could avoid the draft. (Witness George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld. Witness us white Mennonite kids.)

We began to see that we were complicit in the war. Our Goshen College Peace Society became more focused. We studied our roots and held late night conversations with professors. By the spring of 1969 we set out a plan to confront our church on its "Peace position" – the core of that position being the agreement for Alternate Service for Mennonite draftees.

We felt it was wrong to

- Exclude non-Mennonite Christians from Conscientious Objector status:
- And, why couldn't Muhammad Ali be exempted?
- And, why couldn't all young men of conscience be exempted? and then;
- Why couldn't anyone for any reason be exempted?
- This was such an unjust war that, anyone who threw sand into the gears should be supported.

Some of our professors backed away. We lost many supporters at Goshen. Some of our group fell away. It became a difficult time.

We decided to confront Mennonite Church directly at its conference at Turner, Oregon in August of 1969. We hoped to get the support of the Conference for our position that non-co-operation with the military draft is an acceptable position. Later, Fred Lamar Kniss described the confrontation like this:

External and internal polarization (in the Mennonite church) came together most dramatically at the Mennonite general conference meeting in 1969. A number of Mennonite draft resisters hitchhiked to the conference in Turner, Oregon, and camped in tents outside the auditorium. They were there to introduce a resolution that non-co-operation with the draft would be officially recognized as a legitimate alternative to institutionalized Alternate Service program. Ultimately they were successful. There was however, significant opposition to the countercultural style of their dress and grooming. Draft resistance was seen by the traditionalists as allied with other, more threatening countercultural lifestyle practices.²

Yes, some of us were a bit bizarre, by any standard. No, we were not all righteous – some not very righteous at all. But we were all, in our own ways, carrying the values of Christ's love and non-resistance. We had many failings but we were searching for a place, in a world gone seemingly insane, for a supportive home.

The powerful Brunk brothers, George and Truman, spoke passionately against our resolution. A local Bishop openly decried the "negative publicity" being generated by these invading, "sinful," outsiders. The speakers *against* were loud and long; the speakers *for* were meek and mild.

² *Disquiet in the Land: Cultural Conflict in American Mennonite Communities* by Fred Lamar Kniss. Rutgers University Pr. 1997.

But a healing did occur in that conference. Mediation, a powerful foot-washing and communion service made that conference seem like home. The resolution passed. There was celebration. We went home.

Response to Conscription and Militarism (Mennonite Church Resolution, 1969)

We reaffirm our position statements of the Mennonite General Conference made in 1937 and 1951 with regard to peace, war, military service, and positive Christian service according to the Church's interpretation of the life and teachings of Christ.

1. We pledge to renew our efforts to educate the youth of the Mennonite Church in our historic non-resistant faith.
2. We ask the Committee on Peace and Social Concerns and the MCC Peace Section to examine closely our present policy of cooperation with the Selective Service System.
3. We recognize the validity of non-cooperation as a legitimate witness and pledge the offices of our brotherhood to minister to young men in any eventuality they incur in costly discipleship.
4. We instruct our counseling agencies to work more closely in assisting young men who have chosen to migrate to another country for conscience' sake.
5. We ask the service organizations of the church to express a willingness to accept individuals into service programs who cannot conscientiously cooperate with the Selective Service System.
6. We will increase our draft counseling programs both to Mennonites and non-Mennonites.
7. We continue to support church-related alternate service as a legitimate option for those who do not feel called to a position of non-cooperation. Even though some consider such service a compromise in our witness against war, we will support anyone who is willing to affirm the preservation and enrichment of life over the destruction of life by accepting an alternate service assignment.
8. We commend to our brotherhood the position of Christian service as vocation not only for men conscripted by Selective Service, but also for those young men of draft age not conscripted, for young women, and for persons of all ages.
9. We counsel our brotherhood to respect civil authority, to obey it in all areas where it does not violate conscience, and to reject the spirit of violence of our age.

Tim Beachy is a member of Langley Mennonite Fellowship in Langley, BC.

The regenerated do not go to war, nor engage in strife. They are children of peace who have 'beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning forks, and know no war' (Isaiah 2:4, Micah 4:3). ... Our weapons are not weapons with which cities and countries may be destroyed, walls and gates broken down, and human blood shed in torrents like water. But they are weapons with which the spiritual kingdom of the devil is destroyed. ... Christ is our fortress; patience our weapon of defense; the Word of God our sword. ... Iron and metal spears and swords we leave to those who, alas, regard human blood and swine's blood of well-nigh equal value.³

Menno Simons



³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Menno_Simons

Canadian Peace Foundation: Alphabet Soup

by Dave Hubert

MWC. MEDA. MCC. MDS. A Mennonite alphabet soup. MMI. MHS. EMU. MBMS. MMA. MBM. AIMM. MBDO. Hasn't this soup got too many "M's"? Are there acronyms without an "M"? What about CFGB, VORP, LCC, CPT? At least the stranglehold of the "M's" has been broken. TAP. CPI. MAMA. AJPR. CPF. M2W2. More scrabbled letters to pick out of the alphabet soup.

This alphabet soup, and the organizations these acronyms represent, was almost 500 years in the making. To make sense of it, we must understand the historical development of the Mennonite peoplehood.

For the longest part of Mennonite history, persecution meant the full flavour of the soup could not develop, and the full genius of the Mennonite peoplehood could not find full expression. Since the end of the First World War, freedom from persecution and relative economic stability provided the opportunity in North America for the soup to mature and for the sweet smell of kingdom theology to find expression in the collective activities of the Mennonite peoplehood.

A word about the "genius of the Mennonite peoplehood." This genius resides not in a charismatic leader or leaders, but it is firmly rooted in the understandings and beliefs of the mass of the Mennonite people. This is not to say that there have not been outstanding and visionary leaders. There have been, and there continue to be. It is noteworthy, however, that most of these leaders have not been clergymen. They include business people, scholars, professionals, farmers,

musicians and artists. And a few preachers. The point is that the leaders who have made a real difference have come from within the peoplehood: the Mennonite view of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, interpreted by a people who have a profound understanding for the priesthood of all believers, applies to everyone in the pews.

These developments have two important theological roots. The first is the primacy of the ethical teachings of Jesus, most importantly as presented in the Sermon on the Mount. The second is the Mennonite view of the church as Christian counterculture – as God's new community.

Mennonite contributions to the development of western thought are significant. The emergence of the Mennonite church in 1525 in Switzerland and in the 1530s in the Netherlands led to an immediate confrontation with the established churches of the day, with the host society in which these Anabaptists lived, and with the governments which ruled these societies. Mennonites refused to bend to the dictates of civil and ecclesiastical rulers, preferring to die rather than to recant their beliefs.

However, the severe persecution and repression of the Mennonites encouraged invisibility in most parts of Europe. They became "*die Stillen im Lande*" (the quiet in the land) out of fear that their persecutors would appear. When the pressure subsided, however, the vision of justice and service rooted in the ethos and theology of the Sermon of the Mount asserted itself. In 1688, Mennonites in Germantown, Pennsylvania signed the first protest against slavery in America.

As economic conditions in the Mennonite colonies of southern Russia improved in the 1800s, all manner of service institutions came into being – schools, hospitals, orphanages, mental institutions, schools for the deaf and dumb, post-secondary schools and "*die Armenkasse*" (the fund for the impoverished). This evolution of service as an incarnation of theology was ended by the Communist Revolution in 1917, but the impetus it had developed carried over into North America, Paraguay and Brazil as the 20th century progressed. The impetus of the Dutch/ German/ Russian Mennonites provided half the ingredients for the alphabet soup



The other half of the ingredients came from the Swiss and south German

Mennonites who began settling in North America in 1683. Having suffered longer and more sustained persecution than their northern confreres, the Swiss Mennonites were, if anything, even more inclined to be "*die Stillen im Lande*." Nevertheless, when the terrible depredations of the Communist Revolution and subsequent civil war ravaged Russia, it was primarily the Swiss Mennonites who mixed the first major letters for the modern pot of alphabet soup – MCC (Mennonite Central Committee) – to bring relief to the starving of Southern Russia.

From the vantage of 2003 (when this article was written) it is possible to discern a pattern of the master chef in preparing and

mixing the soup. The ingredients were people from within the larger Mennonite community getting together to discuss an issue that needed to be addressed. Most of these people had drunk deeply from the New Testament. Many had gone to Bible school, Bible college or university. A good number had been influenced by writings like *The Anabaptist Vision* by Harold S. Bender, and *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, edited by G.F. Hershberger. Many were in business, others were farmers, some were professionals and there were a goodly number of scholars among them. A few were preachers. Many had served an apprenticeship of Christian service with MCC. As they discussed it became clear that "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." that something should be done.



The formation of MEDA in 1953 is a case in point.

Mennonite businessmen felt challenged to give expression to their faith, and this led to the formation of MEDA (Mennonite Economic Development Associates) to help address the conditions of dire poverty in the Mennonite colonies of Paraguay. While this was evolving, CIBA (Church Industry and Business Associates) was developing in the American Midwest and MBA (Mennonite Business Associates) was developing in the eastern United States. CIBA and MBA merged to form MIBA in 1976, and in 1981 MIBA and MEDA coalesced under the MEDA banner.

The importance of Mennonite modeling should not be underestimated. This modeling has been evident in many different areas. The

earliest records of institutional micro-lending go back to 1973 when MEDA and MCC began experimenting with micro-credit. To a very large extent, it was MEDA that popularized the notion that the poor are bankable. This is a huge contribution to the field of international development and poverty reduction. And, while it is a significant component of peacebuilding, it is also a fact unknown to the Mennonite rank and file.

Another example of modeling is the Canadian Food Grains Bank (CFGB). Originally started among the Mennonites of southern Manitoba, and sponsored by MCC, it quickly gained acceptance by eleven other denominations as a superior approach to addressing hunger in the world. Today, just two decades after its inception, CFGB has become one of the most highly respected international NGOs addressing world hunger. Not only that, CFGB is becoming increasingly involved in discussing food security and food justice policies at the most senior levels of international governance. A third example of modeling is Ten Thousand Villages. Starting out as an effort to help third world artisans market their crafts, it has grown into a sturdy organization supporting many, many artisans. It was also the inspiration for the formation of Tradecraft, an alternative marketing organization for third world goods in the UK.



MDS (Mennonite Disaster Service) is another organization that arose spontaneously from within the Mennonite peoplehood. It started at a picnic in Kansas in

1950 when picnickers wondered what they could do to promote wholeness and shalom for people who had been victimized by natural disaster. Mennonites, and by now, many others who know about MDS, spontaneously volunteer to rebuild and restore homes, lives and communities disturbed by natural disaster. Mustard seeds that grow into the largest of the herbs are yet another manifestation of healing emanating from a New Testament concept of the church as counterculture. The Church, God's new community, models shalom so powerful that it invites the principalities and powers to conversion.

One mustard seed that grew is the curbside recycling program that has spread to almost all of North America. In 1978, Dave Worth, later the Executive Director of MCC Ontario, began small recycling drives with a few volunteers on a parking lot in Kitchener. This group thought it wrong that valuable materials be consigned to the dump. Their leadership was rewarded. Soon these recycling drives were generating so many materials that the volunteers had difficulty keeping up. Today the mustard seed planted by the small band of volunteers has grown into a mighty tree with literally tens of millions of leaves. These leaves are the blue boxes and blue bags that are picked up on a weekly basis from the curbsides of North American cities and elsewhere.

Another mustard seed is growing and has the potential of making just as significant a contribution as the blue box program. This is the mustard seed of restorative justice. The restorative justice approach to criminality is gaining significant momentum and has within it the potential of completely reforming

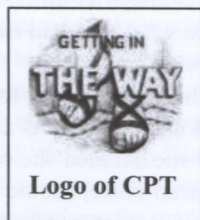
the criminal justice system in Canada. This movement started as VORP, the Victim Offender Reconciliation Program of MCC and grew out of the experience of several people in MCC Ontario in the 1970s. The VORP program has two foci. One of these works at humanizing the prisons of Canada through a program of inmate visitation and support for inmate families. The other mediates between victims and those who have offended against them. It is this latter program that has within it the potential of bringing healing and restoration to both victims and victimizers.

Yet another mustard seed is waiting to sprout. Mennonites have worked closely enough with Muslims to realize that Muslims are “people of the book,” and that, like Christians, they also have a peace tradition. Muslims are enjoined by the Qur’an and Sharia law to respect other “people of the book.” At a time when Islam perceives itself to be under siege, should Mennonites not be seeking ways of building bridges to the Muslim world, both in North America and elsewhere?

Other initiatives – IDE (International Development Enterprises); LCC (Lithuania Christian College); CPT (Christian Peacemaker Teams); CPF (Canadian Peace Foundation); ERS (Edmonton Recycling Society); AJPR (Action for Justice, Peace and Reconciliation – part of the Congolese Mennonite Brethren Church); CPI (Christian Peacemakers International); MMI (Mennonite Mutual Insurance);

ICF (Indian Creek Foundation); MHS (Mennonite Health Services); EMU (Eastern Mennonite University); MMA (Mennonite Mutual Aid); MBDO (Mennonite Brethren Development Organization – part of the Mennonite Brethren Church in India); and a bushel of other alphabet soup letters, far too numerous to mention here, have also arisen from within the Mennonite peoplehood.

It is noteworthy, however, that the 20th century has seen many defections from the Mennonite community. Many Mennonites seem to be ashamed of the heritage that has made such significant contributions to the evolution of western society and thought. Many of these seem to prefer a pottage of fundamentalist evangelicalism that will provide comfort with current cultural norms while enabling them to assimilate into the blandness of contemporary civil religion. Others, more aware of this spiritual heritage have stayed the course and have been joined by people from other faith traditions who have seen in this heritage an authentic manifestation of the Gospel of Christ.



that generate war. Nevertheless, Mennonite peacebuilding is, for the most part, poorly focused,

piecemeal and uncoordinated. Generally, this peacemaking does not challenge the governing structures and the personnel who manage these structures. These personnel and structures are often the instigators or supporters of military action. Despite the fact that Mennonites have developed the ability to suggest sound alternatives to military action, there appears to be a reluctance to do so. Instead of recommending life-giving alternatives to war rooted in the Gospel of Christ, Mennonites have generally acquiesced to war and reverted to the role of the “*die Stillen im Lande*” when the drums of war start beating.

This begs a question. The initiatives cited above grew without an overarching structure. They grew like yeast leavening a lump of dough. Would it be best to let this process work with peacemaking, or would it be better to deliberately plan and structure an organization to assemble resources, develop strategies and take action to promote alternatives to the prevailing government and military structures? Could another organization firmly rooted in the Mennonite peoplehood, thoroughly committed to the ethos of the Sermon on the Mount, and with a proven track record of global innovation, take on an initiative to advance the global peace agenda? Could that organization be MEDA? Or is another addition to the alphabet soup needed?

Abridged by Robert Martens

“True evangelical faith cannot lie dormant. It clothes the naked, it feeds the hungry, it comforts the sorrowful, it shelters the destitute, it serves those that harm it, it binds up that which is wounded, it has become all things to all people.” Menno Simons

In the Steps of Menno

by Louise Bergen Price

Several years ago, a group of Dutch Mennonites envisioned a Mennonite center in Witmarsum, Menno Simons' birth place.

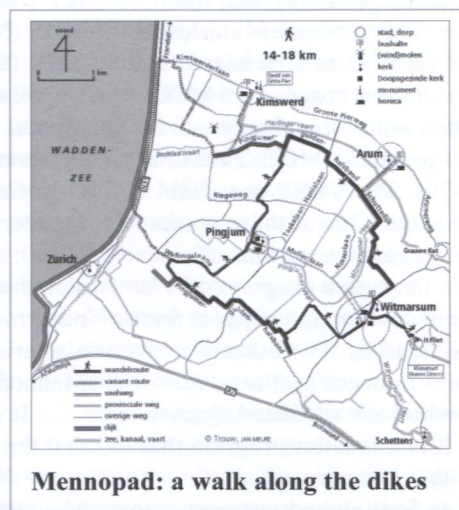
According to Anne S. de Jong, president of the *Algemene Doopsgezind Societeit* (the Dutch Mennonite Conference) and member of the planning group, the centre "should become a place of meeting, contemplation, inspiration and study. In this centre the Mennonites will demonstrate their vision for faith in practice. It should be a place for us and for those who come after us."⁴

The original plan would have called for donations of several millions of dollars. Lack of funding has changed the focus of the group, but the vision remains. The "Revised Perspective of May 2007" lists a number of lower-cost, exciting initiatives. Instead of building a separate centre, "the hub of the activities will be in Witmarsum and the hidden church at Pingjum. The fulcrum of the development has been moved to spiritual/theological content and cultural/historical projects and tourism." The first exhibit will be "Passing the Comfort," a quilt collection that recently toured a number of North American cities.

Tourists will be able to follow a clearly marked bicycle or car route, starting at the church in Witmarsum and ending in Berlikum, or follow the 'Mennopad' a 14-18 kilometre walk along the dikes, in the footsteps of Menno Simons. Along the way, visitors can take a sidetrack to visit villages and churches. Some sections of the dike pathway are asphalt, but most is still an 'earthly paradise.'

The International Menno Simons Center (IMSC) also has plans for a digital documents center. Currently, their Dutch website <mennosimonscentrum.nl> features a photo exhibition entitled *Women in the Picture*. Catalogue title: *Myth and Reality of Anabaptist/Mennonite Women, ca 1512-1900*. Photo descriptions are in both Dutch and English.

Also being planned are a Menno Simon essay contest and the composition of an international hosting team comprised of volunteers from North America. More details will follow in the spring issue of our newsletter.



My Mennonite Youth

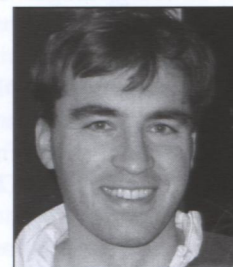
by Gijsbert Schilthuis

When the phone rang, I was working on an answer for Louise Bergen Price. She asked me to write about my "Mennonite youth" in the Netherlands; after all it is the country of Menno Simons. But progress was slow. I wondered whether I had even had a specific Mennonite upbringing. Wasn't it just like all the other kids?

It was my sister on the phone. After lengthy travels she had come home for Christmas and to replenish her bank account. Expecting jokes and complaints about her day job at the time, I was happily surprised when she told me she decided she wanted to be baptized and that it would take place at Easter. Not me, but, my about-to-be-baptized sister, should be writing this story.

Discussing her choice, and later reading a draft of her self-written confession of faith, childhood memories came trickling back: the small and cozy Mennonite church in Middelstum where we grew up, Sunday school with the children of the Dutch Reformed and the Rereformed Church (the triple reformed church did not participate), and later the International Youth Conference in the Mennonite Church of the regional capital Groningen.

Not that I went to church a lot. Well, I did go to the building often, to help mow the lawn, turn on the heaters on Saturday evening, whitewash the walls, or, when I was older, climb the ladder to replace broken tiles on the roof. Church was work, and not always voluntary. Specifically mailings I thought rather tedious. My father wrote these on a classic typewriter, after which the newsletter was printed using an old-fashioned duplicator. After a long evening, he would come into the living room with ink stained hands; somehow he always managed to get it done. Then my sister and I came on the scene: folding the newsletters, sticking them into envelopes, putting stickers on the



⁴ "PRESS RELEASE Mennonite World Conference March 3, 2005, from www.mwc-cmm.org/News/MWC/050303rls2.html

envelopes, and bicycle delivery. Although the church membership and list of “friends” was small, they seemed to



Old postcard photo of
Middelstum church.

(www.gds.doopsgezind.nl/middelstum)

live in all corners of the village and beyond. I think I was especially annoyed when I found out that a classmate, son of a local entrepreneur, got paid per envelope delivered for his father.

Whatever Mennonite was, I only discovered later. Church was for special occasions. I especially remember those Christmases. At the time, in absence of a regular minister, and with everyone else booked for Christmas, daddy would prepare and conduct the service himself. He would ask my sister and me to read the Christmas story in a lovely version by children’s author and artist, Dick Bruna, and to play Christmas songs on our recorders. (I would like to take the opportunity to apologize for that recorder playing, although we did practice a lot.)

When I was 17, I remember asking to attend the communion service, held once a year on Good Friday. I had never been to one, and wanted to know what it was all about, before I left to become an MCC trainee in Canada later that year. Don’t blame my parents for this lack of education though. For a teenager it didn’t seem particularly exciting. And it did not look or feel like a distinct way of life: Mennonite, or *Doopsgezind* in Dutch, was simply there. In hindsight it seems that with the stories from Peter Dyck and other Mennonites across North America, my personal Mennonite story got perspective.

And there was local history too. Some of the farms, where I used to deliver the church newsletters, had been in the hands of Mennonite families for generations. One farm particularly, called Melkema, had been farmed by descendants of one particular Mennonite family from the sixteenth century until the middle of the twentieth. In those early days services were held in secret at home and it is well possible that Menno himself spoke, ate a good meal and spent the night at Melkema, before moving on to other places to spread his ideas about Christianity and to stay out of the hands of the authorities. Granted, such thoughts did not cross my mind when I jumped the ditches around neighbouring fields. And I am sure my mother did not especially care for the historic dirt and duckweed she had to scrub out of my hair. Nowadays, the Melkema farmhouse is a restaurant, but a modern painting of the old barn hangs as an icon on the white church walls.

More history we found in the baptismal register of the church, which we studied the days leading up to the baptism of my sister, who was about to become a Mennonite sister too. Digging back into the nineteenth century we found older family members in the register, several with the same name as my sister’s.

It felt like Christmas in spring, all those careful preparations for a special day. With a small church of 14 members (soon to be 15!) and around 25 “fellowship friends,” organizational matters came down on a few people. Some weeks before the service, a small session with Church members was arranged, where my sister read her confession statement. Then of course invitations for the service had to be sent, much more widely this time. A cleaning party needed to ensure the church looked proper and flowers were arranged. Kneeling pillows had to be brought down from the church attic and the copper font had to be polished. At home food and drink was being prepared, to ensure we could serve family members and friends from afar a good lunch, and raise a glass.

Come to think of it, I think that is my Mennonite youth. Preparations. Helping out. Nothing glorious or deep, simply helping my parents with the upkeep of the church. “We cannot simply abandon the church here,” my father once said, “when there have been Mennonites in this area for five hundred years.” In a world awash with opinions and change, such preparations may be the rituals that bring some peace and contemplation, like cooking a meal and setting the table at home.

I am sure my father and mother will smile at this observation, and sigh that it is a lot of work and not always easy. But on that glorious Easter Sunday of 2007 when my sister was baptized, it seemed well worth the effort. And I was asked, are you next?

Gijs Schilthuis lives in Brussels, Belgium where he works in the agriculture department of the E.U.

...it is well possible that Menno himself spoke, ate a good meal and spent the night at Melkema, before moving on to other places to spread his ideas ... Granted, such thoughts did not cross my mind when I jumped the ditches around neighbouring fields. And I am sure my mother did not especially care for the historic dirt and duckweed she had to scrub out of my hair.

Board Member Profile: Robert Martens

as interviewed by Helen Rose Pauls

What is your role at MHS?

I am official poet-laureate of MHS, and intend to write an epic poem on the triumphs and tragedies of our history called "The Mennonitead." It will spare no one and will win the Booker Prize.

On a less self-deluding level, I am a member of the newsletter committee, and it's been a consistent pleasure to work with Louise Bergen Price and Helen Rose Pauls. As the "bookish one," I've done a number of book reviews, among other things.

How did you become involved?

A position opened up and was offered to me on the newsletter committee, and expecting that a large salary would be paid for my work, I accepted the position. To my consternation, I have now joined the vast throng of Mennonite volunteers.

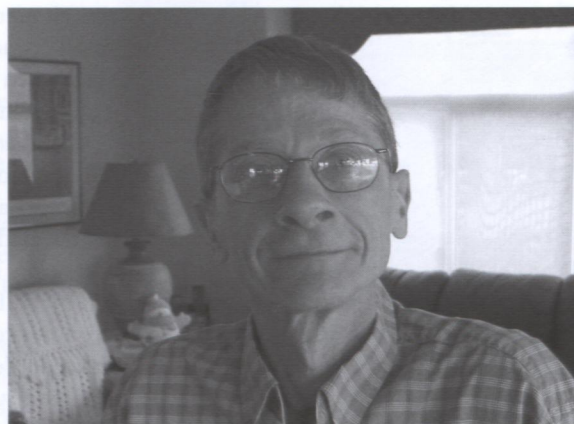
I have been involved in recent years in the Yarrow Research Committee, which has now published three volumes on the story of that village. (The most recent, *Windows to a Village*, is now on sale at the MHS Archives.) My interest in my ethnic roots, like so many others, has deepened with age, and the Yarrow projects were a catalyst.

Where were you born and where did you grow up?

I was born and raised in the navel of the Mennonite world, Yarrow, BC, which began as a full-fledged utopian Mennonite community and slowly disintegrated over the decades as younger generations assimilated into the mainstream. It was an experience of power and control, on the negative side, and of concern and sharing, on the positive. I certainly don't regret having grown up in a genuine community, as many today, especially among the young, have lost much of their sense of what it means to live together.

What schools did you attend?

I attended a private high school in Yarrow, Sharon High. In its early years it was still rather insular, but by the time I reached high school level, it had moved on. (We now were allowed to watch movies, but dancing was still suspect.) Yarrow was changing rapidly. The staff in Sharon's last years were remarkably enlightened and stimulating, and included individuals such as Jack Dueck, Howard Dyck, Vic Vogt and Vern Ratzlaff.



After Sharon, I moved on to the stormiest years of Simon Fraser University, where we students naively tried to turn the world upside down. Innocently destructive years, perhaps, but fascinating – and we were part of the movement to put a stop to the Vietnam War.

What was/is your life's work?

Why are Mennonites always so inquisitive about work? No time for play?

I was genuinely one of the drop-out generation, rather Mennonite in a sense, in my "traditionalist" rejection of mainstream society. This resulted in a long career, eventually, in Canada Post and the rough and tumble realism of blue collar Canada.

Family stuff? Single. Why do you ask?

Hobbies?

Excoriating the powerful and corrupt.

My violin playing stopped when my hands folded not in prayer, but in arthritis. I miss the violin deeply but my passion for music remains. I also write poetry when my cats will allow me.

Favourite car, colour, food, or book? "Blue" to all of the above.

Why are you involved in MHS?

An old proverb states, "If you are obsessed by history, you lose an eye. If you ignore history, you lose both." Our society seems to be determined to cut links with the past. We are, in my opinion, a culture driven by individualism and egotism, with little or no respect for the lessons of our ancestors. A spiritual quality is being lost. We need to reconnect for our own sanity.

Anything else? No.

Arthur Kroeger, *Hard Passage* (University of Alberta Press, 2007)

reviewed by Robert Martens

“When I was growing up in Alberta in the 1930s and 1940s,” writes Arthur Kroeger, “there were some things about my family that puzzled me” (1). His mother, for example, warned that a time might come when he would be glad to find anything to eat. He was forced to hide his toy gun because his father would destroy it if it was found. What did these things mean? Kroeger’s Mennonite past “had been of hardly any interest to me in my earlier years. When I was an adolescent, my goal had been to become as much like my peer group as possible.... To have been an ‘ethnic’ was to experience the power of conformist pressures, and to grow up on the prairies with a German name during the war was to know the discomforts of being different” (2). In 1971, however, after the death of Heinrich Kroeger, his father, Arthur inherited a box of papers that Heinrich had collected over the years, and began to satisfy a growing curiosity about his parents’ story. The box contained diaries, postcards, letters, documents and photos. “As my reading progressed,” writes Kroeger, “my eyes would widen from time to time, and I would catch myself on the point of saying aloud, ‘Mother and Dad lived through *that*?’” (4)



Hard Passage is the telling of the family story, but Kroeger emphasizes that it is much more than that. The Kroeger family experience paralleled the experiences of thousands of Russian Mennonite families, and Mennonite life on the Canadian prairies was much like that of other immigrants of the time. *Hard Passage* is a highly-skilled interweaving of the Kroeger story, of Mennonite history, and of immigrant participation in the development of Canada. It is a fast-paced narrative, detailed and simply told. As an individual who has rediscovered his heritage, Kroeger writes with a sense of recognition, of revelation, almost like an “outsider” of an ethnic past discovering that he is “in.”

Heinrich Kroeger was related to the family that manufactured the well-known Kroeger clocks. Born in the village of Rosental in the Chortitza colony, he would have lived a modest and comfortable life were it not for the Russian Revolution. In 1911 he noted in his diary: “We threshed the load that was left over before breakfast. Then we went for the last two loads of wheat.... We went to the Dnieper for a swim towards evening. The hired man trimmed the straw stacks” (18). Although Arthur Kroeger chronicles the conflicts within Mennonite colony life, he sometimes rather idealizes it: “If in the 1920s the Bolsheviks had chosen to examine Mennonite practices – which they decidedly did not – they would likely have found a model of community agricultural management that worked, unlike the collective farms that Stalin imposed....” (20)

In 1912 Heinrich married Helena Rempel, a lively and loving woman of relatively low economic status. They lived a satisfying life together, with Heinrich becoming a partner in a wagon factory, but World War I ended the tranquility. Heinrich served as a medical orderly on a train. During this time he stopped making entries in his diary and began to look backwards to happier years; this was a state of mind that would linger into his old age. Then came the Russian Revolution and the ensuing civil war. The Mennonite colonies descended into chaos. Heinrich wrote: “Had [Red Army] soldiers billeted and fed them. 99 rubles and 10 rubles for butter, then for laundry and repairing 5 rubles, 25 rubles for food” (50). The terror of the Makhno years followed, and soon many Mennonites were clamouring to leave the USSR.

There were those who wanted to stay. Heinrich’s brother Abram argued that times would get better. Mennonite leader BB Janz, however, was not fooled by Communist promises, and did the perilous work of facilitating Mennonite emigration. There was also the problem of finding a country willing to accept Mennonite immigrants. In Canada, for example, Prime Minister Robert Borden passed an Order-in-Council prohibiting the entry of Doukhobors, Hutterites and Mennonites “...because, owing to their peculiar customs, habits, modes of living, and methods of holding property, they are not likely to become assimilated...” (76) Then Mackenzie King, who had grown up in the Waterloo area and was well-disposed towards Mennonites, won election in 1922 as prime minister and the doors opened for the *Russländer*. David Toews worked incessantly on behalf of these Russian Mennonite refugees, and cut a deal with Colonel John Dennis and Edward Beatty of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) to sponsor their passage. “It is hard to visualize a 21st-century chief executive matching the compassion and extraordinarily enlightened corporate self-interest displayed by Sir Edward Beatty over more than two decades.” (93). Between the Russian Revolution and 1929, when Stalin shut the doors to emigration, more than twenty

thousand Mennonites managed to escape, mostly to Canada. They were, however, as Arthur Kroeger emphasizes, merely a small fraction of the nearly 3 million refugees that fled the USSR during those years.

The final two thirds of *Hard Passage* is devoted to the archetypically Canadian story of immigration, poverty, and resiliency. The Kroegers arrived in their new land just before the onset of the Great Depression in 1929. Many Mennonites, including the Kroegers, were settled on unprofitable prairie farms often abandoned by their owners. The Kroegers eventually homesteaded with Davey Jones, a soft-spoken “bachelor,” one of a number of prairie settlers “who were single and would remain so all their lives.... Protracted isolation, particularly during harsh prairie winters, had turned some of them into harmless eccentrics” (129). The Kroeger family faced an intense, nearly incomprehensible poverty in the “great lone land.” When a badly-bruised shipment of apples arrived in nearby Naco, Saskatchewan, “Helena asked for and was given the peels and cores, which she brought home and boiled. For the next two days, the family lived on apple sauce” (136). Through all this, David Toews laboured tirelessly to raise money on behalf of the *Reiseschuld*, the debt incurred to the CPR for transportation of Russian Mennonites to Canada. In 1946, on his final sickbed, Toews was brought the news that the debt had been paid off. “Then, when the realization sank in that the huge moral burden had finally been lifted from his shoulders, Toews wept uncontrollably” (170).

The poverty was so great that Heinrich Kroeger eventually seemed to give up energy and hope. He and Helena remained permanently and heavily burdened with their past. In fact, *Hard Passage* itself, even in its final pages recounting the successful life trajectories of Arthur Kroeger’s siblings, seems elegiac and smitten with sorrow. A family photo of Heinrich with his sons (219) shows confident, forward-looking young men with their ill-at-ease father at the centre. Heinrich, Kroeger writes, “would walk downtown to see what was happening at his sons’ garage, but he viewed events there in a detached way. The world around him was somewhat interesting, but it was not his world” (234). Helena, as well, could be paralyzed by her past. In 1958, after a local murder, she died because the killing “brought back the years of anarchic violence that she and Heinrich had lived through in Russia after 1917.... For Helena, news of the violence ... was a nightmare from the past, and that trauma took her life” (243-4).

Little now remains of the former Mennonite life in Russia. Visitors to Ukraine “who are searching out their Mennonite roots are greeted with great hospitality and warmth, but few of the local residents have any sense of what the visits are really about” (231). The chronicles of *Hard Passage* are rich and vivid, but Kroeger seems to perceive history as a vanishing shadowland. Of what value is remembrance? In 1998 Arthur Kroeger visited the site of the Davey Jones farm where his family had lived for several years. “The only remaining evidence of habitation was a rusting bedspring in the prairie sod where Davey’s house had once stood” (254).

Plautdietsch News



The Low German film, *Stellet Licht*, (*Silent Light*) won the jury award at the famous Cannes Festival and recently played at the New York Film Festival where it garnered the following review: “*Never predictable but always audacious, Mexican director Carlos Reygadas has made the world’s first talking picture in the medieval German dialect called Plautdietsch. Silent Light is set in Northern Mexico’s ascetic, self-contained Mennonite community and cast almost entirely with Mennonite non-actors. Building in emotional intensity, this elemental tale of love and betrayal is at once an ethnographic exploration and an homage to Dreyer’s Ordet...*”⁵ Author Miriam Toews is one of the actors.

.....

If you love Low German story storytelling, Rueben Epp’s CD *Dit en Jant op Plautdietsch* will have you laughing and crying. Stories and poems by Rueben Epp and others, read at a live performance in Germany. Available for \$20 at the archives.

⁵ www.filmcomment.org/nyff/program/films/stelletlichtsilentlight.html

Peter Daniel Loewen

by Robert Martens



Peter Daniel Loewen, born in south Russia (now Ukraine), had his hopes for a teaching career dashed by the Russian Revolution. His older brother,

Daniel, was murdered by “revolutionaries,” but Peter managed to escape with his family to Canada in 1923. For a few years he lived in the prairies. In 1930 he found a new and beloved home in the Mennonite village of Yarrow: “[T]here were places along the road where tall trees on either side met and formed a natural canopy of green foliage,” he wrote in his memoirs, “I had this joyous warm feeling of having come home.”

Soon Loewen was both teacher and administrator at the new Yarrow Elim Bible School. It was, however, as Sunday school superintendent of the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church that he was to make his major contribution to the life of the community. For twenty-six years he filled this role efficiently, enthusiastically and innovatively. Loewen was a key confidant of pastor John Harder during this time, when the congregation was the largest of its kind in Canada.

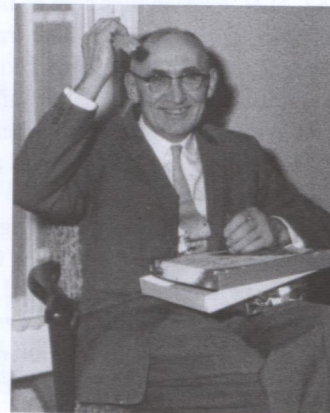
Peter D. Loewen, always a man with a lively mind, moved through his lifetime from a relatively rigid world-view to a kind and tolerant one. In *Windows to a Village*, Leonard Neufeldt traces the career and spiritual evolution of this unobtrusive and devoted community leader.

Peter Loewen: Yarrow Insider

by Leonard Neufeldt

That Peter Loewen could be both insider and dreamer suggests contradiction in his life, and rightly so. The difference between finite hopes and delusional infinite hope, however, explains away some of the contradiction. Loewen’s dreams were tied, in the main, to hopes and commitments that helped set boundaries but also helped to shape the world of the possible in Yarrow. In retrospect, it can be said that, despite his service in earlier years on behalf of a conservative order, his dreams became vehicles of gradual progress in his community and its Mennonite Brethren Church. Furthermore, his dreams nurtured a willingness to embrace changes in his own life, notably in his later years. Occasionally, his dreams also made him a champion of changes that some others saw as unwelcome possibilities, but which he saw as signifying the future. Above all, these dreams fuelled, on the one hand, his desire to be a major figure in Yarrow’s story, and on the other, his readiness to work in inauspicious and collaborative ways in which personal triumphs were not the goal and in which encouragement and credit were easily shared.

Son and grandson of community mayors in Russia, Loewen was not a pioneer in the sense of first settler. He was a pioneer in helping to establish much-needed institutions, especially in the domains of religious education, language instruction, and congregational administration in a community already of substantial size but short on the kind of training and leadership he could offer. The Yarrow he adopted as his new home was comprised of Russian Mennonites with dissimilar interests: working toward acculturation and assimilation, replicating the culturally distinct colonial Mennonite commonwealth of Russia, and creating a Mennonite Brethren centre in British Columbia that would combine the commonwealth ideal with pietism, rigorous self- and corporate discipline,



and evangelistic fervour. His ambition, boundless energy, dedication to church work, and skills as a builder of coalitions and forger of consensus presented a good match for the immediate needs of the community in all of these respects. The fact that he could continue in later decades to be an influential man for all seasons in Yarrow, however, depended less on the need for new institutions and the skills to manage them and more on the nature of the man himself.

The Way We Were: First Mennonite Church, Burns Lake

by Helen Rose Pauls

The first Mennonite settlers in the Burns Lake area were Old Colony Mennonites from the prairies who built two churches in Cheslatta and Grassy Plains in the 1940s. The churches were used as private schools during the week, but this important component to 'life apart' came to an end when the government insisted that settlers enroll their children in public school. Of further concern to the elders was the long absences of fathers who worked in the sawmills. Consequently, most of this group moved to Fort St. John in 1958.

In the meantime, Mexican Mennonites moved to the area to work in the mills, as did Sommerfelders from the prairies and General Conference (GC) Mennonites from southern BC. In 1952, a group of 15 families met in homes to have a *Singstund* from the Sommerfelder hymn book or the more modern *Evangeliumslieder*. In the absence of a minister, "No one was brave enough to speak or pray aloud," says Cornelia Lehn in her book, *Frontier Challenge*.

When the BC Conference became aware of this group in 1953, N.N. Friesen was sent to hold meetings. His visit was much appreciated, and he traveled from Jasper to Prince Rupert, finding many brothers and sisters who had gone north to work in the sawmills, but who still spoke German and were from various Mennonite backgrounds. He served communion and also brought much needed used clothing.

In Burns Lake, Friesen held meetings at the home of Isaac Dyck, a GC Mennonite from Swift Current. People were happy to come and had a wonderful time of fellowship. He encouraged Agnes Goertzen to start a Sunday School and soon 26 children attended.

A year later, Elmer and Ruth Dick came as pastor and public school teacher for this group. As the remaining Sommerfelder and Old Colony groups would not allow other ministers into their gatherings, N.N. Friesen approached Victoria to place Mennonite teachers into the local public schools, and Ruth filled this need, also holding adult evening classes in the little Sunday School house. Altogether, 6 Mennonite teachers went into the region with the encouragement of the Mennonite Missions Committee, but paid by the B.C. government.

Meanwhile, in 1958, West Abbotsford Church started Ootsa Lake Bible Camp south of Burns Lake as a youth service project. Soon, responsibilities were shared with the Burns Lake group. BC Mennonite Youth Organization supported underprivileged children to attend camp at Ootsa Lake and provided Christian literature for them as a follow up.

In 1959, the church group formally organized with 33 charter members. The Dicks served until 1963, when John Friesens from Grande Prairie took over, followed by Ed Giesbrecht (1969-1975) and Abe Buhler (1975-1981.)



Willing Workers sewing circle began in 1954 and faithfully supported the work with fund-raising auction sales of their sewing items, MCC films, baby, bridal and "special need" showers. Some volunteered at the local hospital, and others did soap making for the MCC center in Yarrow. They held rummage and bake sales in store fronts and supplied snacks for the camp. In 1965, they sent members to the BC Women's Conference. At first their meetings were in High German with all the visiting in Low German, but a gradual change to English occurred here too.

A program started by Abe Buhler was the training of prospective leaders. The congregation also expanded into Sunday Schools at Topley and Granisle, purchasing a van to transport children. The Topley venture closed in 1975, but Granisle became a church. They also established a group home for adults with mental disabilities.

At present the Burns Lake church has 107 members and continues to reach out with 'Alpha' programs, Pioneer Clubs, Youth Church and 'Operation Blessing.'

Two smaller Mennonite churches in the area are affiliated with the *Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church*: Danskin Mennonite Church with 41 members and Decker Lake Mennonite Church with 55.

References:

Lehn, Cornelia. *Frontier Challenge*. Conference of Mennonites in BC, 1990.

"*History of B.C. Mennonite Women in Mission 1939-1976*"

"News n' Notes, Mennonite Church B.C."

Recipes for Festive Occasions

by Helen Rose Pauls

Snowballs and Crème Sauce*

Meringue:

2 large egg whites,
¼ tsp. cream of tartar, ¼ cup
sugar

Crème:

2 Tbsp. corn starch, 3 Tbsp. sugar
2 cups milk 2 beaten egg yolks
½ tsp. vanilla

Meringue: Beat first 2 ingredients until foamy. Add sugar and beat until stiff. Shape meringue into 5 ovals and place in simmering water [1 inch deep in a fry pan] for 2-4 minutes, until set. Prepare crème by blending ingredients and boiling for 1 minute. Place crème in dessert dish and top with meringue. Makes 5 servings.

*from Norma Jost Voth's *Mennonite Foods and Folkways from South Russia*.



Watermelon Pickles

Perhaps these were invented to make use of watermelon rinds normally discarded. Like so many folk recipes, the pickles are made from the poorest cuts but are simply delicious.

Method: Cut 2 inches of rind with a bit of pink showing, paring off the outer green layer.

Cut strips into 2 inch chunks; soak in brine overnight (1 gallon water and 3 Tbsp. salt.)

Drain, rinse and boil for an hour in syrup made from 1 ½ cups cider vinegar, 3 cups sugar, 1 Tbsp. cloves, 1 stick cinnamon, 1 Tbsp. allspice. (spices should be tied up in a cloth).

Pack into pint jars, cover with the boiling syrup and seal at once.

Ammonia Cookies

Mix 2 cups sugar with 1 cup margarine. Add 4 tsp. baking ammonia dissolved in 1 cup whipping cream

Add 1 cup milk, ½ tsp. salt, ½ tsp peppermint oil, 5-6 cups flour

Roll out to ½ inch thickness and cut into desired shapes.

Brush with water and sprinkle a bit of sugar on top before baking (or ice when cool.)

Bake on greased sheet at 400 degrees for 8-10 minutes.

Be prepared for an unusual smell in the house when these are baking...babies in diapers will be looked upon with suspicion!

My husband remembers being sent to the drugstore for baking ammonia when he was a little immigrant boy of six who spoke no English. To his surprise, the druggist knew what *Hirschhornsalz* was. He produced it from behind the counter and wrapped it in many layers of newspaper because of the pungent odor.

Plautdietsch on the Internet

Remember *Koop en Bua* by Arnold Dyck? Hear their antics, and much more, on www.Plautcast.com with Vern Neufeld and Ken Sawatzky.

Stuck for a word in Low German? There's an excellent dictionary online by Herman Rempel that can help you out: www.mennolink.org/doc/lg/index.html

Check out website <www.plautdietsch-freunde.de/> for Mennonite Low German resources. According to this site, there are about half a million Low German speakers in the world; in Germany, since the arrival of Mennonite migrants from Russia, they number about 200,000. "Der Plautdietsch-Verein bietet mit seinen Internetseiten, Fachkonferenzen und mit der Zeitschrift **Plautdietsch FRIND** ein internationales Forum für alle, die Plautdietsch sprechen, hören, lesen, schreiben oder sich einfach nur dafür interessieren." Sample copies of Plautdietsch Frind can be seen at the archive office.

A Festive Day at Grandmother's House

Grandmother was the soul of the family; no festivity or birthday passed where the whole family, children and children's children, were not gathered at her house. Near the drawing room was the "middle room" in which everyone most liked to congregate. Here stood the piano, too.

In those days, children were not allowed to disturb the adults who were visiting. In the winter, this meant the whole troop had to stay in Grandmother's bedroom. In this room was a sleepbench used for sitting in the daytime. At night, it was opened and inside were featherbeds and pillows. Grandmother liked to sleep here. The room also had a fine bed with a white bedspread and many pillows with lace-covered pillowcases, and a glass display cupboard. In the middle stood a table and chairs and around this we children sat and stood and played with the few toys and books available for us. Very small children sat on the sleepbench on the laps of nursemaids; older ones crawled on the floor and were teased by still older ones, so that they yelled constantly. Children who could already read brought out the book *Die Krabeltasche* – that was so scary! Grandmother's large Luther Bibel with pictures by famous artists was next. The Old Testament was so interesting with pictures about the departure from Egypt, the journey through the desert, and the many snakes. Then there was Daniel in the Lion's Den, and others.

It seemed like a long time until the adults finally went into the dining room. Here was a long long table with Grandfather at the head. Against the wall sat the uncles according to age: Jasch Dyck, Jasch Wiebe, Heinrich Janz, then Grandmother, and Aunt Pauls at the end. The wives of my uncles sat opposite them.

There was roast duck with stuffing, potatoes with clear fat, canned watermelon and pumpkin pickles. For dessert, snowballs with vanilla sauce.

The adults ate long and a lot, and conversed without end, at least so it seemed to us children. Finally, they stood up and went into the middle room to play music. Now was the time for children to rush into the dining room, and the cold roast duck with potatoes and cold gravy tasted splendid.

I ate quickly, for from the middle room rang wonderful music, and because I was a lover of music, I crept softly to my Mama and could not get enough. There was Tante Tina Dyck, a wonderful pianist, and Huebert's Jasch who played *Ass's Death* by Grieg and an *Intermezzo* by Mascagni on the cello.

These lovely family feasts continued until the Revolution when we fled to the Crimea. We returned for a short time in 1918 when the German troops occupied Ukraine, but left for good when Machno's robber bands came. Never did we hear Grandmother despondent in this time; she believed firmly in God's guidance and comforted us. She died after a short illness in 1922 when her soul glided over to the wonderland that is prepared for those who believe.



*An excerpt from the written memoir of Katerine (Katjuscha) Thiessen (1901-1994)
of a family gathering at her grandmother's house in Schönwiese, Ukraine.*

Contributed by her sister, Helen Klassen.