

# 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

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**Die Mennonitische Rundschau**  
Lasset uns fleißig sein zu halten die Einheit  
im Geist.  
46. Jahrg. Scottsdale, Pa., 16. Mai 1923.

**Freie und geeignete Pfingsten allen  
den Lesern haben und drücken  
Die Göttern und das Trübsalpersonal.  
Hilfslieferung.**

... (text continues) ...

**Erklärung der Tabellen.**  
... (text continues) ...

**Tabellen der Speise-Operationen 1922.**  
... (text continues) ...

**Statistik der Hungersnöte in der Ukraine 1917-1922.**

Jahr	Speise-Operationen	Statistik der Hungersnöte
1917	...	...
1918	...	...
1919	...	...
1920	...	...
1921	...	...
1922	...	...

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## Coming events

May 10, 3 pm. **Celebrating the Contributions of *Der Bote* and *Die Mennonitische Rundschau*.**  
Eben-Ezer Mennonite Church, 2051 Windsor St. Abbotsford. See article below.

May 16, 3pm. **Annual General Meeting.** Garden Park Tower, 2825 Clearbrook Rd.

October 18 & 19. **"Sixty Years of Peace and Plenty: Mennonite Refugees Remember."**

Emmanuel Mennonite Church, 3471 Clearbrook Rd., Abbotsford.

Saturday afternoon from 2 pm. Visiting, photo and artifact exhibits, author book signings, music, drama, film: *The Great Trek*.

Saturday evening 6 pm. Annual Fundraising Banquet with Dr. Harry Loewen.

Topic: The experiences of post-WWII Mennonites who came to North and South America, and those who were sent back East against their will to suffer in the Gulag of the Soviet Union. The lecture will conclude with experiences of the Mennonite "Aussiedler" (resettlers) living in Germany today.

Sunday afternoon at 2:30 pm. Festival of thanksgiving in story and song.

## Celebrating the Contributions of *Der Bote* and *Die Mennonitische Rundschau*

by Helen Rose Pauls

On May 10 guest speakers Helen Franz and David Ewert will explore the significant contributions of two German Mennonite papers, *Der Bote*, and *Die Mennonitische Rundschau*. Ingrid Janzen Lamp, the last editor of *Der Bote*, will be at our meeting. In addition, some of our constituents will offer personal responses to the papers.

*Der Bote* began in 1923 as *Der Mennonitische Immigrantenbote*, edited by Dietrich H. Epp, who had emigrated from Russia to Rosthern, Saskatchewan the year before, and perceived a need for a paper to establish connections among Mennonite immigrants. He invited the immigrants to share their hopes and joys, and extended the common bond of friendship towards the established Mennonite community in western Canada, which had exemplified Christian charity in their aid to the immigrants.

Together with his wife, Dietrich Epp produced the papers, printed by Rosthern Valley News Printing Service, folded them, pasted on addresses and one cent stamps and sent them to an ever wider audience. David Toews encouraged Epp to use the paper to unite the scattered Mennonite communities.

In 1947, *Der Bote* merged with U.S. based *Christlicher Bundesbote* and became the weekly paper for the General Conference Mennonite Church. Over the years, it provided news, spiritual food and important information to Mennonites in United States, Canada, Mexico, South America and Europe. Later it was produced bi-weekly.

As German speaking elderly folk in Canada and the United States passed on, and newer papers emerged to serve Mennonite communities in Mexico, Europe and South America, the need for *Der Bote* dwindled. In March 2008, publication ceased. Many mourn its loss and the sense of connection it provided.

*Die Mennonitische Rundschau* began in Nebraska in 1880, much earlier than *Der Bote*, and did not have a particularly Mennonite Brethren slant until it was bought by editor Hermann Neufeld, who moved it to Winnipeg in 1923. In 1945, an MB group bought Christian Press and took over publishing the paper. The MB conference made it the official German publication of the Mennonite Brethren Conference in 1960.

The *Zionsbote*, founded in 1884, was the first MB publication in North America, and also had a readership in Russia of 1,000 subscribers. However, it was discontinued in 1964, and the *Mennonitische Rundschau* was recommended to all those who still wished a German language newspaper.

The *Mennonitische Rundschau* filled a significant need for immigrants who entered Canada in the 1920s and the late 1940s and who preferred a German newspaper. The *Rundschau* ceased publication on January 2008. It is greatly missed by many who especially liked to read the historic and detailed obituaries of old friends and relatives.

Adapted from reports in *Mennonite Historian*.

**Roots and Branches** is a publication of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC and is mailed three times per year to those who donate \$25.00 or more per year. All donations will be receipted for tax purposes. Your contributions are needed to further this work!

**Directors:** Ben Braun, David Giesbrecht, Ed Hildebrand, John Konrad, Robert Martens, Peter Neudorf, Helen Rose Pauls, Louise Bergen Price, Lora Sawatsky, Ben Stobbe, Richard Thiessen & John B. Toews. **Editor:** Louise Bergen Price. **Contributing editors:** Helen Rose Pauls & Robert Martens **Archive Director:** David Giesbrecht **Staff:** Mary Ann Quiring **Copy editing:** Hugo and Jean Friesen

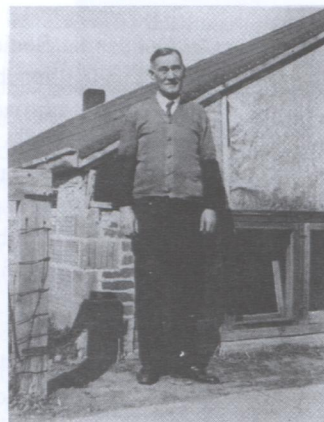
## Dietrich Heinrich Epp: founder of Der Bote

by Louise Bergen Price

Dietrich Epp, former teacher of the Zentralschule and director of the Teachers' Seminary in Chortitza Rosental, emigrated to Canada in July 1923 and arrived in Rosthern, Saskatchewan in time to help with the harvest. He was a strong man, his biographer says, 43 years old, not used to hard physical work. His job that day was to shovel the oats as it poured into the granary. In the beginning, all went well, Epp later said. But as the granary filled with oats, he sank in deeper and deeper. He tried to work on his knees, even lying down—it didn't help. And still more oats poured in. In his opinion, the granary was completely full, but Mr. Wieler said it could hold lots more. That evening Epp began to wonder if he could find work in Canada other than farming!

A newspaper for immigrants would be a good undertaking, he mused. The Immigrant Committee was enthusiastic, and the idea for *Der Mennonitische Immigrantebote* was born. with Dietrich Epp as editor. The first issue appeared January 1924. All the type had been handset by Epp and his assistant Agathe Lehn, neither of whom was experienced in this work. When all 300 copies had been printed, Epp placed them in a baby carriage and brought them home, where he and his wife Malwine folded and addressed them. Often, Malwine wrote little notes in the margins of newspapers that were being sent to relatives and friends; a practical way to save paper and stamps! Epp remained editor of *Der Bote* until his death in 1955. He was 80 years old.

from *Dietrich Heinrich Epp, aus seinem Leben*, edited by Abram Berg.  
Saskatoon: Hesse House of Printing, 1973.



## Through the Red Gate: Voices from Stalin's Gulag

by Helen Rose Pauls



No one was turned away, but every seat at Bakerview Church was filled on February 23, 2008 for *Through the Red Gate: Voices from Stalin's Gulag*, produced by Dr. Ruth Derksen Siemens and Moyra Rodger of Out-To-See Entertainment.

For the past six years, hundreds of letters written by Russian Mennonites in Stalin's gulag to Canadian relatives, found in a Campbell's soup box in the Bergen attic, have consumed Ruth Derksen Siemens, becoming the basis of her Ph. D. in the philosophy of language, as well as the impetus behind the film. Painstakingly translated over three years by Anna and Peter Bergen, some of the letters were edited and compiled by Peter into a book for their extended family.

Although it is perhaps the darkest story in Russian Mennonite history, the world knows little of the catastrophic events of the 1930s, when sometimes entire families were sentenced to prison in Stalin's gulag, a vast network of slave labour camps. The survival rate was often one winter. Millions perished.

The film is comprised of Ruth's videotaped interviews with Peter Bergen, who tells the story of finding and translating the letters; and of reenactments of his family's dramatic escape from the Soviet Union in 1929 on the last train to Latvia, through the border's Red Gate, and into safety from deportation to Stalin's gulag.

The film also features live interviews with two of the letter writers, Lena Bergen Dirksen and Tina Regehr, who tell their stories of survival. Whereas Tina speaks a broken English, Lena's German narrative is obscured with English voice-overs which weaken the power and passion of her words. Perhaps subtitles could have been used here.

Ruth's book, *Remember Us: Letters from Stalin's Gulag*, was launched with a presentation of the volume to Neil Bergen, son of Anna and Peter.

Art displays by Hilda Janzen Goertzen, Edith Krause and Shireen Cotterall powerfully integrated images of the letters with photographs of the period.

The Mennonite Historical Society of BC was asked to keep the evening "secular and academic" by the producers of the film, but when Joel Stobbe played "Wehrlos und Verlassen" (In the Rifted Rock I'm Resting) on his cello at the conclusion of the evening, there was no restraining the crescendo of humming voices joined in harmony, as the familiar melody united the audience. Surely this is how our faith was sustained during dark and subversive times. "But God has never forsaken us."

## Gerhard Ens receives Award of Excellence

from a news release by Conrad Stoesz, Centre for MB Studies/Mennonite Heritage Centre



Gerhard Ens received the Award of Excellence from the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada for his life-long advancement of Mennonite history as a minister, teacher, editor, historical society/museum promoter, German and Low German broadcaster.

Ens began his career as a teacher in the village of Gnadenfeld, Manitoba where he taught 60 children in 8 grades in a one-room school. During WWII, as a committed conscientious-objector, he worked as an orderly in a mental hospital. He returned to teaching at the Mennonite Collegiate Institute, in Gretna, Manitoba, where he served for 31 years, including ten years as principal.

Ens was a founding member of the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society in 1958 and sat on the board of the Mennonite Heritage Village Museum from 1958-2004. In 1972 he was asked to produce a Low German radio broadcast to promote the centennial of the Manitoba Mennonite settlement. Very quickly this 15-minute program was lengthened to 30 minutes. Ens was never paid for his broadcasts, which continued for 34 years and over 1,400 programs.

In 1977, Ens moved to Winnipeg to become editor of *Der Bote*, a Canadian-based, German language paper. He also became a lay minister at the Sargent Avenue Mennonite Church, where he preached and taught the German Bible Study.

On accepting his award, Ens said that since Low German Mennonites have no place in Europe they can call home, "Low German has become a home where people can move in and out of and express themselves."

## Meet board member Richard Thiessen

by Helen Rose Pauls

If you ever get e-mails from Richard Thiessen, you will notice that each one ends with the missive, "I believe in moderation. I work on genealogy only on days that end in Y." His number one hobby is Mennonite genealogy, but he also finds time for the genealogy of various royal families. Little wonder then that Richard, shortly after he moved here from Winnipeg to become Columbia Bible College librarian in 2000, consented to John Konrad's request that he join the Mennonite Historical Society Board.

Richard is on the Events Committee where his many Winnipeg contacts are invaluable. He is also on the Genealogy Committee and coordinates projects such as the indexing of EWZ (*Einwanderungszentrale*) microfilms and the management of our information technology.

Born and raised in Chilliwack where his parents Abe and Anne (Esau) Thiessen still live, Richard attended East Chilliwack MB Church (now Chilliwack Central) where he was baptized, and later Broadway MB Church. He attended Little Mountain Elementary, and Chilliwack Junior and Senior High Schools, where he excelled in music: saxophone, jazz band and jazz choir, as well as completing Royal Conservatory of Music grade ten in piano. Richard completed a B.A. in history and music at UBC, enjoyed a year at Capernwray Sweden, and went on to earn a Master of Divinity degree at Fresno MB Biblical Seminary, and a Master of Library Science degree at UBC. After 22 years of schooling, Richard was finally ready for a job: college librarian at MBBC in Winnipeg.

In 2000, Richard succeeded fellow board member David Giesbrecht as librarian at CBC, where he also manages the website and is interim academic dean responsible for faculty. He is also assistant managing editor of Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online (GAMEO), treasurer of the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada, and on the executive committee of West Abbotsford Mennonite Church. Somehow he still finds time for his family: wife Karen Heidebrecht Thiessen, who is pastor at West Abbotsford Mennonite Church, and three growing boys, Abram, Solomon and Isaac, who are very involved in music and sports. He is passing on his hockey card collection to them, except for the Montreal Canadiens! In his spare time, he collects stamps and grows day lilies. Richard particularly enjoys Mennonite foods, the top of the list being Grandma Esau's chicken noodle soup.

"I enjoy every aspect of Mennonite History," says Richard, "and I want to assist in preserving the story of how God has worked in the lives of this 'peculiar' people. My physical and spiritual ancestors have passed on a strong faith to me and I feel that it is my responsibility to tell their story to future generations."



## Meet our Volunteers

### Laura Enns

Laura (Wiebe) Enns, a teacher, mother and grandmother, has a keen interest in history and has recently joined the volunteer staff at our archival centre. She has had a wide range of teaching experience mostly in the public school system, but has also taught at the MEI elementary school. In addition, she and her husband, Ed Enns, taught English in Lithuania during the summers of 1997 and 1998. Ed and Laura returned to Lithuania in 2002 and 2006 and Laura again taught English while her husband, Ed Enns, supervised the building of the lecture hall, gymnasium and student residence of the Lithuanian Christian College. She taught English at the College, at an orphanage and for employees of a shipping company. "What a rewarding experience this was," comments Laura. Teaching a new language is all about communication so I had a great opportunity to get to know my students well." Laura's connection with Lithuania did not end with teaching. She has acquired a daughter-in-law who is a graduate of the Lithuanian Christian College.

While traveling in Russia and the Ukraine, Laura became interested in her own Mennonite history and visited the former sites of Mennonites in the Ukraine and Russia. Because of Laura's interest in history, her husband encouraged her to join the volunteers at the Mennonite Historical Society archives. Through Erica Suderman, Laura became aware of the need for volunteers at the archives and has since joined Erica and her team of volunteers who are working on the InMagic project.

In addition to volunteering at the archives and at M2W2, Laura's hobbies include quilting, reading, traveling, walking. Monday's volunteers have enjoyed getting to know Laura Enns and appreciate the skills she brings particularly to the InMagic project.

by Laura Enns and Lora Sawatsky

### Linda (Froese) Shirley



I first discovered the Mennonite Historical Society when I moved to Abbotsford, British Columbia in 2005. Since then I have visited it often to help research my family tree and by doing so became grounded again to my Mennonite roots, therefore wanting to give back to those who have helped me along the way so others may be helped. At present I am working in creating and entering databases for the Mennonite Historical Society.

I am a Medical Office Assistant and work for two doctors, one a general practitioner, the other a psychiatrist. I have two grown children who both reside in the Abbotsford area. I have a vast interest in hobbies, genealogy research, creative writing, was a member of the National Amateur Publishers Association where I was awarded an English Laureate Award for one of my writings about the history of my family.

I also like to sew, cook, sail, knit, read and work with my husband on his hobby of model train building. All in all I enjoy life and like to keep active. One of my goals is to erect a headstone that contains all the names of the destitute in the graveyard in my hometown in Rosthern, Saskatchewan.

## Archive News

- Number of volunteers: 35
- Average visitors to archive office on Wednesdays: 10
- Items processed for InMagic: 112 regular boxes with 30 cm of textual material in each box, plus 33 document boxes, for a total of 38.6 metres of textual material.
- Number of photographs scanned for InMagic files: 600
- Free DNA kits available. For more information, email [archives@mhsbc.com](mailto:archives@mhsbc.com) or go on the website [www.mennonitedna.com](http://www.mennonitedna.com).

## Roots and branches

by Louise Bergen Price

When Ed Hildebrand started attending MHSBC lectures after becoming a director in 1994, only 20-30 people were in attendance. He learned that historical society events were not advertised, and that no computerized mailing list existed, only a number of multi-paged, typed and stapled lists that had been compiled from time to time. It was no wonder that so few people showed up, he thought.

Ed decided to take action. "Since I had no other responsibilities as a Director at that time I asked our secretary, Theresa Unruh at that time, shortly followed by Karletta Munchinsky, to convert these individual lists to a unified computerized membership and mailing list. When this was completed in late 1994, I undertook to prepare and mail out a notice about a month before the next meeting and all subsequent events. The result was immediately rewarded with a four fold increase in attendance at the next Heritage Lecture."

Since the back page of the notice was empty, Ed filled the space with notice of other events or items of interest to Historical Society members. "It was always grandly called a newsletter even though it was originally only a notice of meeting," Ed says. Over the next few years, the newsletter grew to three or four pages.

Ed was editor and sole contributor until 1999, when Henry Neufeld took over the job of editor. Shortly after, Louise Bergen Price joined the editorial team, taking over the position of editor in 2001. Contributing editors have been Helen Rose Pauls, Henry Neufeld, Lora Sawatsky, and Robert Martens; numerous writers, artists and poets have allowed us to use their work, or have produced work specifically for our newsletter.

In 2003, the name of the newsletter was changed to *Roots and Branches*. It appeared 4 times a year, at 16 pages per issue. This was later changed to 3 issues a year at 20 pages per issue.

Most of the 700 newsletters from each printing are mailed to members. Some are distributed at churches, others at MHSBC events, and the rest are available for visitors to the archives. Since the newsletter also appears on our Society's website, it has garnered readers all over the world.

## A Mennonite History Conference, Siberia 2010

from a report by Peter Penner

A new Mennonite History Conference is being planned to follow the conferences of Chortitza and Molotschna in 1999 and 2004. On the planning committee that met in December 2007 were Royden Loewen, Hans Werner, Ken Reddig, Paul Toews, Olga Shmakina, Aileen Friesen, Peter Letkeman and Peter Penner. The site of the proposed conference will be at the Akademgorodok University south of Novosibirsk.

A report by Peter Penner states: "*In part this followed from the earlier Siberia-Initiative of 2001 which led to the employment of Novosibirsk scholar Andrej Savin to search out documents about Mennonites in the Russian archives of Omsk, Novosibirsk, Tomsk, Barnaul, and also Moscow. This venture, organized by Paul Toews and supported by funds from the children of the late Peter Dick, Vineland, Ontario, resulted the publication in 2006 of Savin's book listing about 1,000 such documents. (The English translation is: Ethno Confessions in a Soviet State: Mennonites in Siberia, 1920-1980, Annotated Archival Listing of Archival Documents and Materials, Select Documents.) This work is now in the process of being translated.*

*"How the young Savin first came to notice was through his multiform publications in German translation in conjunction with Detlef Brandes in Düsseldorf, Germany. What especially alerted us to his astonishing abilities in Russian and German was his joint publication in 2001 with Brandes of the volume entitled Die Sibiriendeutschen im Sowjetstaat, 1919-1938. Their combined work indicated the fact that Savin and other Russian historians had already, within ten years of the fall of communism, fathomed much of the Mennonite story in Siberia in the midst of the Germans in Russia story."*

At a second meeting in January, architect Rudy Friesen joined the planning committee. The projected date of the conference is May/June 2010. Early in 2009, a call for papers will be made that will focus on "Siberian Mennonites and other Religious Minorities in the Soviet Experience."

The conference will be co-sponsored by the University of Winnipeg and the Russian Academy of Sciences. Also participating with the North American team are Novosibirsk scholar Andre Savin, and archivist and Omsk historian Peter Vibe. Victor Fast and Johannes Dyck will represent the *Aussiedler* community of Germany.

## Ben Horsch

by Robert Martens

*Once in a generation or two, a gifted, charismatic leader emerges within a religious and ethnic community to leave an indelible cultural and spiritual legacy. Such a leader is a "Wegweiser" (one who shows the way) for his people and changes the goal and direction of artistic and spiritual development for generations to come. Ben Horsch was such a leader in the sphere of music. (George Wiebe)*

"I did not seek for a career among Mennonites," Ben Horsch once remarked, "but I found acceptance, which surprised me. Actually I was forgiven a lot simply because I was not an ethnic Mennonite and didn't know any better." Horsch was born November 19, 1907 in a German Lutheran village near Odessa, and emigrated with his family to Winnipeg in 1909. Here the Horsch family attended a Lutheran church until they joined the North End Mennonite Brethren congregation in 1919. From the beginning, Ben was taught to love all forms of music; his father Edward was an organist who did not draw sharp distinctions between the sacred and secular.

After some years of private music study, Ben Horsch was employed by Winnipeg Bible Institute as choir director and theory teacher from 1932-38. He went on to study four years in Los Angeles. In 1943 he was invited by AH Unruh to teach at the Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg, where he directed choir and orchestra until 1955. It was not always easy. Horsch, with his eclectic taste in music and his appreciation for everything from simple Mennonite *Kernlieder* (core hymns of the faith) to the complexities of Handel and Bach, had to sell his vision to audiences that favoured "evangelical" music over the classics. The latter were sometimes viewed as too artistic to be useful to God. Horsch's charisma and patience eventually won the battle, however, as he led concert tours and directed *Sängerfeste* (choir festivals) across Canada, in the process becoming a legend in the Mennonite community. Horsch went on to be a producer of serious music for CBC radio in Winnipeg between 1959 and 1973.

On 24 November 2007 at Bakerview MB Church in Abbotsford, Peter Letkemann celebrated the publication of his new book, *The Ben Horsch Story* (Winnipeg: Christian Press, 2007). Letkemann is a historian, entrepreneur, and talented musician who has earned a doctorate with a thesis on Russian Mennonite hymnody. He knew Ben and Esther Horsch for twenty years, but only began his biographical work after Ben underwent serious prostate surgery in January 1987. The result is a 500-page book with some seventy photos. "Ben would say," Letkemann remarked with a grin, "too many pages, too many footnotes."

A number of the Horsch extended family were in attendance at the Abbotsford book launch, including Ruth, a niece of Ben and Esther. Ruth opened the evening with a violin performance of a number from Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. John Toews introduced the guest, and remarked that this was a special evening: first, because November is rather an unusual month for this kind of function; second, Ben Horsch was a special person; and third, regarding something "close to the Mennonite heart," Letkemann had paid his own air fare.

*The Ben Horsch Story* was officially launched a few days earlier in Winnipeg, on the one hundredth anniversary of Horsch's birthday. Letkemann commented that the audience was bigger in Abbotsford, perhaps "because all the Winnipeggers moved here." The book was a labour of love. There were times, Letkemann remarked, that he "kept delaying the book to keep Ben alive." Although Horsch and Letkemann did not agree on everything – apparently Horsch was not enamoured of organs in churches, for example – the two were intimate friends. Letkemann inherited boxes of correspondence and paraphernalia which enabled him to complete the biography.

A twenty-seven minute video documents his life, from childhood musical aspirations to the nostalgia of old age. "I think music chose me," Horsch said. The video includes some fascinating moments from the filming of a *Sängerfest* held in 1987 to celebrate Horsch's eightieth birthday. In his address to the audience, Horsch typically opened with a joke (on aging), and then commented on the Mennonite musical transition from *Kernlieder* to classical music, and from there to sophisticated Mennonite composers.

It is clear that Horsch was a much admired, and even more, much loved individual. "He had a gift of remaining contemporary," was a comment in the video. "He had an enjoyment of life." "He was God's most joyous troubadour." This love for Horsch was further accentuated at the evening's end, when several former students and associates of Horsch took to the microphone. The emotions of memory were intense, and some tears were shed. Ben Horsch had a profound influence on Mennonite musicology, and on the individuals who respected and loved him. It is to be hoped, considering the mediocrity of some current musical trends, that his legacy will not be in vain.

*The Ben Horsch Story* can be purchased at the Mennonite Historical Society archives. For copyright reasons, the video is not available for purchase, but may be borrowed.

## A Heart can Endure Anything: the life journey of Elisabeth Thiessen

Charlotte Hofmann-Hege. *Alles kann ein Herz ertragen: die weite Lebensreise der Elisabeth Thiessen*. Heilbronn: Eugen Salzer-Verlag, 1989.

by Louise Bergen Price



When German author Charlotte Hofmann-Hege first met her cousin Elisabeth Thiessen, a *Rücksiedler* just returned from Russia, her compassion was tinged with relief that she herself was not in that situation. Over the next twelve years, the two women met often at family events, and although Hofmann-Hege heard stories of Thiessen's experiences, much remained untold. That all changed after Thiessen's death, when the author received a box of yellowed papers and letters. The story that unfolds in this book is heartbreaking, yet it represents what happened to millions. Although *Alles kann ein Herz ertragen* has not been translated into English (all the translations below are my own), it is a story that deserves to be heard.

Elisabeth (Liesel), the third child of Anna and David Muselmann, was born in the summer of 1897 in Schweinfurt am Main, Germany. When she was 12, both parents died of tuberculosis, and Liesel and her six siblings were taken in by their maternal grandmother. Liesel learned to be a seamstress, and the

next few years were placid and uneventful.

In 1911, Benjamin Unruh and his wife, Frida (Liesel's aunt), came to Germany for an extended visit from their home in Ukraine. Frida was pregnant with her fourth child. Would Liesel be interested in a job as nursemaid? Liesel agreed, and accompanied the Unruhs to Ukraine in 1912. She was happy there. "I feel like a fish in water," she wrote to her Grandmother. "Everything is so different here, nature, the life around me, everything. When the children and I wander over meadow and fields, everything blooms. Birds, flowers, grasses, all rejoice. It is a wonderful land" (33).

But for Liesel the time of rejoicing was short. Two years later, Germany and Russia were at war; anti-German feelings ran high. Those with German citizenship were especially at risk, and on Liesel's eighteenth birthday, July 20, 1915, she was deported to the Mennonite village of Ufa, near Siberia. After a difficult beginning with a family that treated her as a slave, she was invited to join the Thiessen family in their estate nearby. On October 13, 1916, she wrote an enthusiastic letter home. "Nature here is glorious. Now in autumn the many birches with their golden colours are especially beautiful" (47). The Thiessens had seven children, but only daughter Katja was then at home. Three girls were away at school; three sons had joined the Russian army. Katja and Liesel became best friends, playing guitar, piano and balalaika together, crocheting, embroidering, sewing.

In March 1917, the Czarist regime was overthrown. Kerensky took over the government, and promised a delegation of Mennonites that they'd have representation in the new government; Liesel's uncle Benjamin Unruh was voted in to the new Ukrainian Congress. "It seemed that the day of freedom and peace was nearer than ever before, and a new and better time was breaking..." (51).

The promised peace was not to be. The October Revolution which brought Lenin to power also unleashed a civil war with unimaginable horrors. In February, the Thiessen estate was burned and looted, and the family became refugees. "Four black angels ride over Russian soil.... Plunder, Destruction, Hunger and Death. They transform Holy Russia into a hell" (60).

An end to the war against Germany was negotiated, and the Thiessens' sons returned home. Liesel and Hans Thiessen (Liesel referred to him as Wanja or Hansel) were drawn to each other. In a letter in summer 1920, Liesel announced their engagement. "I love my Hansel more than anything, but I also love my homeland. Today I can't imagine that I'll grow old and grey here. But becoming old and grey is an unlikelihood in times such as these. This is how far the *Red Paradise* has brought us" (68).

In August 1921, the young couple married and moved into a small wooden cabin. "In spite of everything ... we are happy together, we're healthy and enjoy working.... If we can manage to bring together enough so that we have more-or-less enough to eat, and don't have to freeze too much, then we'll be satisfied" (76). These modest hopes were not to be. Millions starved in the famine of 1921/22, and typhus struck again. Liesel, who'd already survived

the disease once, fell ill again, although this time not as seriously. In Germany, concerned relatives worked hard to get emigration papers for her. Liesel thanked them for the papers. She could not come now, she wrote, because she was married; her mother-in-law did not want Hans to leave. "How could I be happy without my Hansel?" she asked. "And what if I couldn't return?" (78)

The end of the civil war was a relief to everyone. Any kind of government was better than anarchy.

The crops of 1924 were better than expected; now life would become easier. And the young couple was expecting their first child. But no sooner was the crop under cover than everything was taken from them, simply because Hans was the son of an estate owner. In a nearby village they found a plundered schoolhouse with no doors, windows or heating. Here they were permitted to stay for a few weeks, and here on October 24, their daughter Magdalene was born.

The following day, a blizzard hit; it was freezing in their shelter. Liesel, weakened from the difficult birth, contracted pneumonia. Soon she was no longer able to nurse little Magdalene. Although the Russian *babuschka* Hans had hired to help did everything she could, the baby died. It was several months before Liesel regained her strength.

In the meantime, emigration fever consumed Russian Mennonites. Benjamin Unruh and Abraham Friesen started negotiations with Canada. But although the CPR and the German government helped with funding, the money raised was a drop in the bucket for the many thousands who wished to escape. In December 1925 Liesel wrote: "Our parents now definitely want to emigrate to America. They see no future here.... Everything we have has been sold, yet it is still not enough money for us all. Wanja and I cannot come along yet. In the south, many Mennonites were able to get credit ... but here in the north so many difficulties..." (90).

Finally, Liesel decided that she'd travel to Germany and try to rescue Hans from there, but before she could do so, Hans' mother fell ill. Liesel stayed with her until she died. Now travel to Germany was impossible since Liesel was expecting a child. Still, she and Hans kept working towards emigrating together.

By December, all the papers except for the Russian passports were in order. Money for bribes was needed to obtain passports, money they did not have. And there were cases where desperate people had spent all their money in a bid to get passports, and still did not receive them. Their dream of leaving became an impossibility. To her eighty-year-old grandmother, Liesel wrote: "Not to see you again breaks my heart. Can you send me a photo of yourself? We've wished to have photos taken ourselves, but sometimes we have no money, other times no clothes, and then the roads become impassable" (96).

The following year, a package from Germany, sent years earlier, arrived; the contents saved their lives. "Our poverty teaches us to be thankful. That is why we don't despair. Every sunbeam brings deep joy; every day of grace, unending bliss. Each evening that our hunger is mostly satisfied, is a gift for us. And how happy our child [Jascha] is in spite of it all, and how he beams even in his rags" (99).

But fate had more hardships in store. In spring 1929, their small house was set afire. The family escaped with their lives. Eventually, they were able to move into a small cabin. Here baby David was born.

In 1931, when *kulaks*<sup>1</sup> were being sent to Siberia, Liesel, Hans and their two children were "resettled" to Anscheke, just south of the taiga. That summer, Hans was arrested and imprisoned for several weeks. After his release, he suffered from poor health, both physical and mental.

Liesel's Christmas letter of 1931 to relatives in Canada was heart-breaking. First she expressed thanks for the five dollar gift. Then the terrible news: little Jascha had had the measles. "Finally he stood up in his bed and looked up, as if seeing something wonderful. He had always wished for a drum. Then he laughed so happily, laughed and laughed loudly and happily, until after a few moments, he suddenly fell down. Eyes and lips closed forever.... He was five years old, a wonderful child." But that wasn't all the bad news: "A few days later, our dear little David was full of red spots. He did not seem ill.... But this especially patient and happy child also had to die after one week.... [H]e was two years old" (108).



**Benjamin Unruh**

<sup>1</sup> *Kulak*: 'tight-fisted'; a term that originally described wealthy peasants, later used to describe anyone who used hired help, sold surplus goods on the market, or was involved in commerce. Stalinist policy from 1930 on was to eliminate the kulaks as a class, either by deportation or by death sentence.

Still, Liesel did not despair. The joy in Jascha's eyes before he died comforted her. Soon she was pregnant again. There was little food, and after the birth, Liesel became ill. The baby died in six weeks.

In 1935, the German relatives received the last letter from the USSR, this one from Liesel's father-in-law. Then there was silence. Later, Liesel's brother Heinrich put all the letters into a large envelope marked, "Elisabeth Thiessen, geb. (born) Muselmann, 1897-1933 – the story of an orphan child."

For Stalin, sending *kulaks* to Siberia was not enough punishment, it seems. His Great Purge of 1937-38 reached even into the poorest homes. In November, Hans was arrested. "You don't need to handcuff me," he said. Then he turned to Liesel, now six months pregnant. "Raise our child well," he said.

Again Liesel had a hard labour. And again her child died, this time at just under one year.

Liesel was devastated. Neighbours took care of her, and buried the child. It was a long time before she regained both physical and mental health.

Years went by. Liesel still hoped for Hans' return, but, like most who "disappeared" during those years, he was never heard from again. Several times Liesel was severely injured in the work place. An accident in a mine resulted in broken bones and memory loss: Liesel could no longer remember her brother's address.

In 1953, news of Stalin's death brought hope for change. It was a discouraging time for Liesel – while others now received mail from relatives in foreign lands, none came to her door. Finally, in 1966, she remembered a fragment of her brother's address. On March 19, neighbour and friend, Anna Ewert, encouraged Liesel to write a short letter to her family members. Anna enclosed this letter and the address fragment in a letter to her own friends in East Germany. On May 2, Anna Ewert's friends received the letter and forwarded it to the Muselmann home where it arrived a few days later, and an astonished Heinrich Muselmann realized that his sister was still alive.

It seems fitting that in her reply to her brother's letter, Liesel quotes a verse from the book of Job. Yet she does not quote a passage of complaints against God; rather she writes: "My dear, very dear, brothers and sister, far away, but close to my heart: 'God does great things that we cannot comprehend. (Job 37:5)' After 32 years, I receive a sign of life from you! And aside from Christian and David, all are still alive! ... I assumed no one had survived, or perhaps no one was interested in me.... I cried to God that he would help me understand why you were silent. It was too bitter. Then, at night in a dream, I remembered part of Heinrich's address.... When I received your letter, I became ill from joy for 3 days, and couldn't write back.... My motto is: Love your fate, for it is God's way to your heart" (146-147).

One year later, on May 6, 1967, Liesel was on her way to Germany. After a joyous reunion, Liesel tried to adjust to life there, but it was difficult. She was bewildered by the consumerism, the stress, the busyness. People had everything they needed, and still fussed about unnecessary things. When did people actually find the time to learn how to live and how to die, she wondered. Topics that made an impression on them one day had been forgotten by the next. "The whole Western world is a murky pool of sin" (160), she complained. She remembered the clear starlit Siberian sky, the deep silence, the simple folk with whom she felt a closer connection than with her German relatives.

Liesel's relatives did their best for her, but the culture gap was great, and Liesel was unhappy. A change came when she provided hospice care for an old woman; later, after the woman's death, her children gave Liesel their mother's furniture. Now Liesel was no longer dependant on others for everything, and gradually she began to enjoy life again. When author Charlotte Hofmann-Hege telephoned her cousin to inquire how she was doing, Liesel responded, "At this moment, I'm doing very well. But as a whole, something always occurs to make sure that I'm not too happy. Let's see what happens next" (171). What happened next was a stroke. It seemed that Liesel would now have to live in a retirement home. During the wait for a place to become available, Ernst and Liese Landes, a couple who offered hospice, took Liesel in. Before long, the Landes decided to offer Liesel a permanent home with them, and to care for her as long as possible. This they did, and Liesel lived to celebrate her 85 birthday with family and friends. A month later, she quietly passed on. Her last words, in a scribbled note found clutched in her hands, were: "Body, soul, spirit: three-in-one.... Love! Love! Love!... Till we meet again up above..." (182).

## **"But the Lord has never forsaken us": Maria Bergen's Life Story**

by Wanda Derksen-Bergen

If you asked one of Maria (Mika) Bergen's great grandchildren to say "*Molotschna*," they'd probably think it was a funny word and would have the rest of the adults in the family laughing at their efforts. This was the place where in another time, a sweet little girl entered the Goerzen family, bringing smiles and warmth to those who surrounded her.

Maria Goerzen was born in the village of Paulsheim, Molotschna, Ukraine on September 10th, 1925 to Johann and Katharina Heidebrecht Goerzen. She was the third child in a family of four children, two boys and two girls, and was affectionately known as Mika. She herself writes that her childhood was a happy time and they were blessed, but there were tough times ahead. On October 24, 1937, her father was taken from the family along with many other men. Maria was only 12 years old when her mother was left alone with four children to raise, and in spite of the hardship they had to endure, it was accompanied by the assurance of God's presence. In Mika's words, "*Aber der Herr hat uns nie verlassen*," meaning "but God never forsook us."

More ominous dates were etched in Maria's memory – on June 22, 1941, Germany declared war on Russia and on September 3 of that year, her brother, Heinz, was taken. Her oldest brother, Hans, had been teaching in the Volga and he, too, disappeared, leaving only the women in the family. Again she writes, "*Aber der Herr hat uns nie verlassen*."

A day after her eighteenth birthday, 1943, Maria, her younger sister, Katie, and her mother left their home with two horses and a wagon packed with their few belongings. The harshness of winter made traveling treacherous, and they faced the realities of cold, hunger and thirst. By March 11, 1944, they arrived in Warthegau where they boarded a train for the remainder of the trip. Miraculously, they experienced divine protection and in God's own mysterious ways, it was the Germans who helped them out of Russia.



**Women baking at a refugee camp.**

January 18, 1948 in the Volendam Mennonite Gemeinde.

One of the biggest blessings in Mika's life came when she met and married her life partner, Gerhard/George Bergen. They married in Volendam on December 3, 1949 and the family can attest to their married bliss. Their wedding invitation read, "Praise the Lord, oh my soul, and forget not the good things He has done." They truly shared a strong faith, were deeply committed to each other, cared for one another oh so tenderly, and stood by each other through good times and hard times.



**Katie and Maria Goerzen  
with their mother Katherina**

They spent one year in Poland, one in Germany, and one year in Holland before boarding the Volendam in 1947 to cross the big ocean to yet another home. Unbeknownst to her, Maria's future husband, Gerhard Bergen, was also on that ship.

Creating a new home in Paraguay was a huge challenge, and the image of Maria and Katie on each end of a large saw with a giant log in between is a small testament to their hard work. Amidst the onerous task of blazing a new trail, there was always the assurance of God's presence and help in time of need. Maria's strong faith in Christ led to her baptism on



**On the way to Canada**

Gerhard and Maria celebrated their love with a growing family – Martha, George and Bruno were born in Paraguay--and then the family uprooted once again, this time to the Fraser Valley in 1955. On April 27, 1959, heartbreak struck as they gave birth to a stillborn daughter, but the shadows of those clouds were to be somewhat broken by the arrival of Marlene, their bright sunshine! The children's memories of playing with all the Siemens cousins on Townline Road are still alive and well, and Maria used to say how simple and happy those times were. There were jobs to do – berries to pick, pigs to butcher, meals to organize and cook at the Menno Home, as well as children to raise and send off to school, but rarely did a day pass without making time to gather together to share a drink of *Mate*.

Maria cared for both her own mother and her mother-in-law until they passed away. Katie, her sister, continued to be a treasure in her life, and even though she was the younger sister, Katie predicted that Mika would outlive her. The tears flowed long and hard when Katie passed away almost five years ago.

However, the devastation of losing family was accompanied by the joy of welcoming new family members. Over the years, all four children found special life partners, and, as they each started families of their own, grandchildren opened a wonderful chapter in the lives of Gerhard and Maria and inspired them with new energy.

Mika had a special way of creating a comfort zone for her children and grandchildren, whether it was with her hug, kiss and smile or by all the favourite foods she cooked and baked. Her *zwieback* were a standby for everyone in the family, symbolic of her own steady presence in each of our lives. The *vereniki* were the best ever, her cabbage rolls converted those who thought they didn't like them, her meat *piroschke* were always passed to the grandkids who devoured them. She warmed our hearts with her borscht and bean soups, and taught her kids and grandkids how to 'make it' by adding a little bit of this, tasting this to see if it had enough salt, maybe a little more of this, leaving everyone a bit bewildered on how to carry on this rich tradition. Her sewing expertise wrapped each grandchild in the comfort of a blanket and when a patch was needed, she was always more than willing. When the great grandkids, were born, she knit special comfort wraps for them, too.

That comfort zone extended past the immediate family to the many visitors she welcomed in her home. She had a way of putting newcomers at ease, and when at a dinner conversation someone would be a bit critical, her response was always, "Everybody has something!"

In April of 1997, after Gerhard had survived one bout of cancer, the doctor gave Maria and the family the stunning news that the cancer was back. Although loneliness had been a part of her early life, the biggest challenge came after Gerhard passed away on August 6, 1997. The next ten years would be some of her loneliest and even though her children and grandchildren were all relatively close by, there was no filling that empty ache.

Her church family and friends were a huge support to her, as they always had been. Ebenezer was a place of spiritual fellowship and inspiration for her through the years. Her coffee times and evenings of playing dominoes with her special friends kept her going, as did the sharing of all the latest news over the phone lines.

Maria was not without health issues that came with her years of growing older, and in May of last year, she was hospitalized with serious heart concerns. After recovering, she claimed she hadn't felt better in a long time; to her children, she seemed a bit invincible. When she fell ill at the family Easter dinner everyone trusted it would be another bout for her to survive. She'd been in the hospital less than a day when the doctor called to say the family needed to make some important decisions. Little did they know it was time to say goodbye. After a time of physical struggle, her body relaxed and she spent her last few hours peacefully, with family at her side, holding her hands, stroking her face, showering her with tears and kisses. Patience was not one of Maria's strongest virtues – when she wanted to accomplish something, she wanted it now, and it appears she approached her death the same way she did her life, with no time to lose. In the end, she suffered little, she never had to move out of her own home, and no doubt, she was welcomed in heaven by not only her Divine Creator but also by her husband, Gerhard, her sister, Katie, and many other loved ones.

## Erasmus and *Praise of Folly*

(Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, London, England: Penguin, 1971)

reviewed by Robert Martens

"...Folly creates societies and maintains empires, officialdom, religion, law courts and councils - in fact the whole of human life is nothing but a sport of folly" (102).

Erasmus, the brilliant scholar, writer and religious activist who profoundly influenced the Reformation, founded no school or sect and never left the Catholic Church. For these reasons this "moderate" figure has been somewhat ignored. Erasmus, however, as an "evangelical humanist" who tenaciously attacked the abuses of the Church, played a huge role in sparking the schisms of religious reform. The scholars of the late medieval period had turned their backs on the rational gospel of Aquinas and were teaching the primacy of religious observances and rites. The torture of "heretics" in order to bring them back to the Church fold was considered absolutely normal. It seemed clear to Erasmus, who perceived the divine even in the ancient Greeks and Romans, that the Church sacraments must always be secondary to following the simple gospel of Christ. With this emphasis on living a good Christian life, he broke as well with Luther's dogma of absolute justification by faith. We have only to follow in Jesus' footsteps, he taught, and the early Anabaptists could not have agreed more.

Erasmus was born in Holland around 1469, the illegitimate son of a future priest and of a physician's daughter. He was enrolled in the well-known school at Deventer where he developed his life-long passion for ancient texts in the service of religion. The school was also a centre of the Brethren of the Common Life and of the "modern devotion" movement, which taught ethical and scriptural piety and largely ignored the sacraments. Erasmus entered a monastery but as a vital and abrasive scholar he never felt at home there. In 1499 he visited England and became close friends with Thomas More, who later wrote the famous *Utopia* and was beheaded by Henry VIII. Erasmus' years in England were likely the happiest of his life: his *Praise of Folly*, written in the early sixteenth century, was dedicated to More. Later, depressed by religious corruption, and especially by the warlike pope Julius II, Erasmus turned down the offer of an appointment in the Church. Frequently he lived in poverty. He welcomed the reforming influence of the new pope Leo X, but by now the schisms of the Reformation were unstoppable, and Erasmus died in 1536, deeply saddened by the bitter conflicts within Christianity which he had, in a sense, helped engender.

*Praise of Folly* is a masterpiece of wit and style, by no means flawless, but so daring that one wonders how Erasmus escaped the heretic's pyre. The speaker is the goddess Folly who claims she is the most worshipped of all deities: though "Folly is in poor repute even amongst the greatest fools, still, I am the only one ... whose divine powers can gladden the hearts of gods and men" (63). *Praise of Folly* can be roughly divided into three sections. The first is relatively light-hearted and bantering, "my bit of nonsense" (57) as Erasmus calls it. Yet the attack is already on: "...you can find a good many people whose religious sense is so distorted that they find the most serious blasphemies against Christ more bearable than the slightest joke on pope or prince..." (60).

There is much here with which Anabaptist/Mennonites would have agreed. Erasmus assails the cult of Mary and the saints, and the buying of salvation through the magic of indulgences: "And what am I to say about those who enjoy deluding themselves with imaginary pardons for their sins?" (127) He introduces Plutus, god of wealth and self-indulgence, as the father of Folly. He echoes the Anabaptist/Mennonite idealization of humility when he says that humankind, unlike God's animal creation, are unwilling to live within their natural limitations. He writes that Jupiter "has bestowed far more passion than reason" (87) to humankind, and that anger and lust control human beings like empires. Certainly the ascetic inclinations of Anabaptist/Mennonites are in correspondence here. Yet Erasmus' differences with the radical reformation are clear: as a humanist scholar, he contends that humanist reason should be a moderating influence. Erasmus, unlike the often vociferous early Anabaptists, was always a mediator at heart.

In the second section of *Praise of Folly*, Erasmus' compatibility with Anabaptist/Mennonite doctrine is even more evident. The bantering tone disappears. Erasmus speaks in his own voice, and the critique is scathing. For theologians, he writes, "it is a lesser crime to butcher a thousand men than for a poor man to cobble his shoe ... on the Lord's day" (155). These same theologians "are so happy in their self-satisfaction ... that they haven't even a spare moment in which to read even once through the gospel..." (161). As for monks, Erasmus says, "the whole tribe



is ... universally loathed" (164). Cardinals and supreme pontiffs "spend all [their] resources on the purchase of their position, which once bought has to be protected by the sword, by poison, by violence of every kind" (179). The climax of this second section is a savage attack on war that recalls Menno Simons' later writings. "[S]ince the Christian Church was founded on blood, strengthened by blood and increased in blood, [the supreme pontiffs] continue to manage its affairs by the sword as if Christ has perished and can no longer protect his own people in his own way.... And there's no lack of learned sycophants to put the name of zeal, piety and valour to this manifest insanity..." (181). If churchmen were serious about the gospel, Erasmus cries, they would "renounce their ambitions for the office" and "take the place of the apostles who were poor men" (178). In this section Erasmus has a prophetic voice that Anabaptist/Mennonites would certainly have found welcome; indeed the more educated among them would certainly have been familiar with *Praise of Folly*.

The third section of the book takes a sharp turn in its definition of "folly." "God's foolishness is wiser than men" (196). Divine folly is the simple way of the gospel: Christ did not wish humankind "to be redeemed in any other way save by the folly of the cross and through his simple, ignorant apostles.... He taught them to shun wisdom, and made his appeal through the example of children, lilies, mustard-seed and humble sparrows, all foolish, senseless things" (199). The beautiful writing here surely recalls the Anabaptist/Mennonite ideals of simplicity and *Gelassenheit* (peace, calmness, possessing without possessing).

Erasmus later wrote in a letter, that "I've no enemy whom I wouldn't prefer to make my friend, if I could" (215). This was likely an aspiration which he never quite achieved, as his disposition was too contentious for tranquil coexistence with his contemporaries. Anabaptist/Mennonites also talked much about love of enemy, but practice did not always reflect reality. Erasmus adopted a conciliatory position and the murderous struggles of the Reformation broke his heart. In the end, despite his loathing for hierarchical corruption, he never left the Catholic Church. The Anabaptist/Mennonites deeply felt that a rupture with the medieval church was necessary, even obligatory, and many paid for their beliefs with their lives. In later years, however, many Mennonites would thoroughly assimilate into the economic and political structures of mainstream society, while the more traditional among them, such as Old Order or Amish, would maintain that a rupture was still necessary. Erasmus attempted a middle way of maintaining one's spiritual integrity within the dominant structure, in this case the Catholic Church. If he was not altogether successful in this attempt, he consistently acted with integrity and in good faith. To be sure Erasmus was a man of his time, prejudiced against women, Jews, and the "common man" (he was writing for an educated class). But just as he inspired Anabaptist/Mennonites of the sixteenth century, he can speak to us today in language that sometimes sounds positively contemporary: "Fools ... are rolling in money and are put in charge of affairs of state; they flourish, in short, in every way" (184).

## Rhubarb

by Louise Bergen Price

The first real treat of spring is easy: a saucer of sugar and a stalk of rhubarb, fresh from the garden. And later, of course, there's rhubarb platz, tangy and sweet, with a golden brown crumb topping. What can be better?

The origins of the word "rhubarb" are easier to see in the German word "Rhabarber." "Rha" is the ancient name for the Volga River, on whose banks rhubarb has grown wild for centuries, likely brought there from China by Eurasian tribes such as Mogols or Scythians. "Barbar" comes from the Greek "barbaros" meaning foreign; thus, a foreign plant from the Volga. Because we eat the stems, not the fruit, rhubarb is actually a vegetable.

Although rhubarb has been used for centuries as a medicinal plant, it has only been used in cooking since sugar became readily available. It came to North America in the 1820s, moving west with the settlers. In D.H. Peters list of typical spring menus in Chortitza in the early 1900s, "a large Rhubarb Platz" is the main item on a typical Saturday supper. Rhubarb also appears in Mennonite dishes in Moos, piroshke, wine and verenike.



### Fruit Platz

Stir together 2 cups flour, ½ tsp salt, 2 Tbsp sugar, 4 tsp baking powder. Cut in 3 Tbsp butter or shortening. Mix ½ cup milk with 1 egg, add to flour mixture. Dough will be sticky. Press into greased baking pan. Cover dough with cut-up rhubarb. Sprinkle top with crumbs made of 1 cup sugar (or more) 1 cup flour, 4 Tbsp butter. Bake at 350° F for 30 minutes, or till lightly browned.

## Amish Grace

Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, and David L. Weaver-Zercher. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2007.  
reviewed by Robert Martens

*"You mean some people actually thought we got together to plan forgiveness?"*

(49) (Amish grandmother)

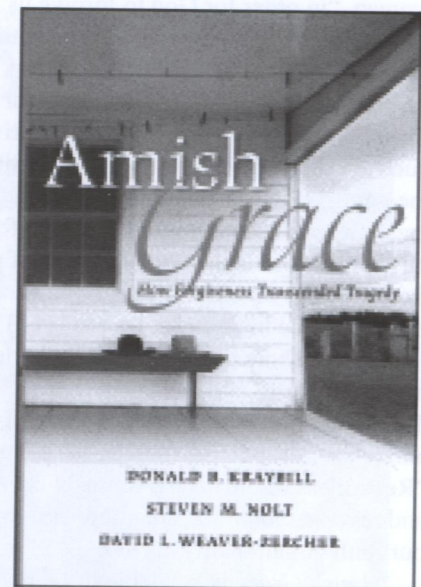
The village of Nickel Mines in the Amish settlement of Lancaster consists of nothing more than an auction building. The paper will deal with the Mennonite refugees who after the Second World War came to Canada, the USA, and South America, and with those who were sent back East against their will to suffer in the Gulag of the Soviet Union. It will conclude with some experiences of the Mennonite "Aussiedler" (resettlers) living in Germany today. a few houses, a crossroads, and a school. The one-room school is a private facility run by the Amish for their children, and is one of many that were built as a counter to the consolidation of large public schools that occurred in the mid-twentieth century. On October 2, 2006, Charles Carl Roberts IV, a thirty-two year old milk deliveryman, parked his truck near the auction building at Nickel Mines. He was carrying with him plastic zip ties, a 9-mm handgun, a 12-gauge shotgun, a 30-06 rifle, a stun gun, and six hundred rounds of ammunition. At 10:15 am, a young Amish teacher named Emma called her students back to class from recess. A few minutes later, Roberts entered the classroom with his pistol and ordered everyone there to lie face down on the floor. Emma and her mother, who was visiting, managed to flee and run to the nearest farm, screaming for help. Roberts tied the legs and feet of some of the girls and ordered the boys and remaining visiting adults to leave. "Would you pray for me?" he asked the girls. Then the police arrived, and a standoff began. Roberts, referring to the death of his firstborn child, turned to the Amish girls and said, "I'm going to make you pay for my daughter." One of the older students, realizing now what was happening, and hoping to protect the younger girls there, said, "Shoot me first." Roberts then shot the ten children bound on the floor, killing five, and finally turned the pistol on himself. Five Amish girls survived.

And then the media frenzy began.

"In many respects," write the authors of *Amish Grace*, "the last safe place in America's collective imagination had suddenly disappeared" (16).

Yet, appalling as was the crime, the focus of the media was on the willingness of the Amish to forgive the murderer. "We shouldn't think evil of the man who did this," said the grandfather of one of the victims (45). More than half of the mourners at Roberts' funeral were Amish; several of them embraced the widow, Amy, and told her that they forgave her. The Amish participated in committees and trust funds that extended aid to the Roberts family. "Sometimes some of our people think we should do more evangelistic work...", said an Amish farmer, "but this forgiveness story made more of a witness for us all over the world than anything else we can ever do" (52). Instead of precipitating a series of lawsuits, as would normally occur, the murders of the children brought the community closer together. How, and why, were the Amish able so quickly to forgive the unforgivable? The authors of *Amish Grace* have done a masterful job in explaining a phenomenon so foreign to mainstream culture, and indeed to our world in general.

"If we don't forgive, we won't be forgiven," said an Amish carpenter (85). Kraybill, Nolt and Weaver-Zercher point out that the very foundation of Amish culture is forgiveness, that children are raised from childbirth to be humble, surrendering, reconciling. The Amish emphasize the discipleship of meekness and nonresistance based on the New Testament, and particularly on the Beatitudes. The Lord's Prayer, with its plea to "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," is recited daily. The Amish history of martyrs who forgave their tormentors, as chronicled in *Martyrs Mirror*, is a vivid and enduring presence. *Gelassenheit*, or yieldedness, which implies a respect for authority and the Amish *Ordnung* (the community order), as well as a striving for a humble and gentle spirit, is the bedrock of Amish "theology." "My father and mother always tried to make sure the other person got the best end of the deal," wrote an Amish man for a periodical (115). Amish sermons invariably begin with a statement of personal inadequacy by the preacher. The biannual Communion services, in which the only real sacrament is perhaps the



community, are gatherings based on forgiveness of wrongs and on restoration. And, based on Matthew 6:14-15, the Amish invert the normal Protestant tenet that we should forgive because God forgave us: "But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." "We have to forgive [Roberts]," said an Amish woman, "in order for God to forgive us" (45).

The Amish are not us, say the authors of *Amish Grace*; in contrast to the extreme individualism of our mainstream society, Amish forgiveness is habitual, a cultural norm, a daily walk, a living thing of flesh and blood. This does not mean that forgiveness for the Amish is necessarily any easier than for the rest of us, say the authors. The book moves deftly from the narrative of the tragedy to an analysis of Amish community, and finally to the question of what forgiveness fundamentally means. Forgiveness is not pardon, the authors claim, either for us or for the Amish, and the evil is not excused. The Amish are a realistic people, not nearly as isolated from the societal mainstream as some might think, and forgiveness is a difficult and intentional process for them even though they are raised to think instinctively in terms of reconciliation. Even after the decision is made to forgive, emotional release from feelings of vengeance may be a long time coming. "We are not always able to forgive," said an Amish minister, "We have struggles too" (113).

The authors of this book do not idealize the Amish. They explore the apparent contradiction (concluding it is not) of a culture which readily forgives a child murderer but shuns an Amish woman who marries an "outsider." They point out that, in cases of spousal or sexual abuse, the frequent Amish response of forgiveness is inappropriate and leads to inaction. And yet, for a world riven by violence, this story of forgiveness is a kind of miracle. "Regardless of the details of the Nickel Mines story, one message remains clear: religion was not used to justify rage and revenge but to inspire goodness, forgiveness, and grace. And that is the big lesson for the rest of us regardless of our faith or nationality" (183).

*Amish Grace* is available through the House of James. All proceeds go to the Mennonite Central Committee.

### The Old Order Amish in North America: a brief history

by Louise Bergen Price



Amish schoolhouse, Ohio.

Photo by A.E. Crane, Public Domain

Mennonites and Amish share a common Anabaptist heritage going back to the Protestant Reformation. In 1693, Jakob Ammann proposed a number of changes that he believed would revitalize the Anabaptist movement, changes that are still part of the Amish belief. These practices included footwashing during twice-yearly communion services, a prohibition against wearing fashionable clothing or trimming beards, and the practice of shunning. It was Ammann's insistence on shunning those members who had been excommunicated for wrongdoing that caused a split between his followers and other Anabaptists, including Mennonites, in Switzerland and Alsace.

The Amish migrated from Europe to North America between 1700-1800; all those remaining in Europe were absorbed into other denominations. In Canada, they are found in Ontario; in the US, they live in nearly 400 different settlements in 27 states. Today they total approximately 220,000 adults and children.

Between 1862-1878, the Amish divided, primarily into two major groups: the Old Order Amish, and the Amish Mennonites. Most of the Amish Mennonites later joined with regional Mennonite conferences.

Cornerstones of Amish religious life are the German Luther Bible, the *Martyrs Mirror*, the *Ausbund* (*Hymnbook*) and the 1632 Dordrecht Confession of Faith. Especially important are Jesus' teachings on the Sermon on the Mount.

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## The Picture

by Helen Rose Pauls



Interest in one's roots is sometimes spurred by chance acquaintance.

In the summer of 2002, my husband and I traveled to Berlin to visit the family of an exchange student we had hosted. My aunt had encouraged us to visit my father's cousins, who had recently resettled in Bersenbruck, Germany from the Soviet Union. As we drove from Berlin to Frankfurt, we realized that Bersenbruck was enroute. We decided to make contact and found their home with ease.

A bond developed between us with the first greeting, and as I stepped into the living room, there hung the picture: a photo of my paternal grandparents on the occasion of their fiftieth anniversary in 1963, surrounded by their seven children, as well as grandchildren and a great grandchild, and seated under the trees bordering their church in the village of Arnold on Sumas Flats, Abbotsford. The picture hung in my home as well, parents and siblings smiling into the camera as forty-one of us celebrated with beloved grandparents.

We eagerly identified everyone, but a great sadness filled the air. "Your grandfather urged all of us to flee our farms once Lenin and communism came to power," said cousin Maria, "but our parents said they would wait until after the harvest."

I had heard the story. In 1926, my grandfather decided to walk away from his farm in Sagradowka, South Russia with his wife and family and took a train to Moscow to obtain passports and passage to Canada. He had begged all of his dozen siblings to do likewise, but they had hesitated. After years of war, revolution, anarchy, disease, famine and uncertainty, the fields were full of ready wheat and the animal herds were once again sleek. They trusted that good times were returning at last, and promised to consider emigration at a later date.

Grandfather was in one of the last Mennonite groups to leave Russia. The doors closed. Some of his relatives were rounded up in 1930 from their formerly idyllic farms and villages and sent into Stalin's gulag. In the late 1930s, many men, merely for their Germanic heritage, were accused of sabotage or espionage, seized from their homes at night, and "disappeared." In 1941, entire villages were banished to the hinterlands of Kazakhstan to labour on communal farms and in coal mines. Many of these families consisted only of women and children. Thousands perished of cold, starvation, and disease.

For years, my dad's few remaining cousins had studied the picture, sent to them when Khrushchev lifted the Iron Curtain. They had marveled at the obvious peace and prosperity in the photograph, the smiles, the abundance of children, and the fact that my grandparents could celebrate 50 years of marriage. They had brought the picture with them to Germany, where it hung in a place of honour above the sofa.

### **The Way we Were: Guenther's Box Factory, Yarrow**

#### Box Factory Girls

Girls in bridal white blouses  
walking to Guenther's box factory  
when Bible School had closed  
and azaleas opened like swans.  
Bees hadn't yet roused berry fields  
and no one else in town was hiring.  
Not even guys with hopped-up cars  
and open-throttle exaggerations  
knew much about the box factory girls.

Inside the front door the girls exchanged  
the fragrance of early morning muskrat grass  
for the sweet astringency of freshly cut wood.  
They stopped to watch two men,  
nails in their teeth and brains, cobble raspberry flats,  
side and bottom slats to grooved ends with shingle nails,  
two hammer strokes per nail and taped fingers,  
and then the crooning scream of the mill saw next door.

Below the loft to the right of the door  
darkness stayed the whole day. Above the loft  
light spilled through skylight windows  
and wide cracks around them, and gathered flecks  
of dust into lines that bent the loft's two-by-four  
railing. Sandals clacking at the heels,  
they mounted the ladder rungs  
and held the second last one, looked up

as though to find a sunspot floating in the eye.  
And then, at the top, their blouses caught  
the light. They tied their hair up,  
sat down straight-backed,  
napes stretched, arms forward,  
before chest high cast-iron staplers,  
heads ready to bob like pianists.  
Three percussive notes: dismissively  
they flung the box into the cage below,  
a pint box of two pieces  
stapled and tossed in a single motion.

The young man who started work before the girls  
and lowered his eyes when they climbed the ladder,  
sometimes every second rung,  
increased the pace of his two-handed jamming,  
six boxes at a time-hullocks we called them-  
twice into each flat. He stacked flats  
with fresh hullocks shiny as sap,  
soon to be spotted with red stains  
of the first picking.

As summer came on, another stapler was hired.  
Fingers and pedal feet grew more desperate.  
When the girls' eyes met,  
heads would stop bobbing,  
and they nodded sidelong to each other,

laughing soundlessly, keeping their secrets  
in the loft till the dark rose from beneath  
to disconnect their machines. They climbed  
the ladder down, their feet slightly spread.

If the guys with cars stood in the doorway  
or stepped inside to watch the girls descend  
one after the other, the girls looked  
at each other, retied their hair,  
and knew exactly where to step in the dark  
to leave through another door  
and walk together on the cedar sidewalk  
of Yarrow Central Road, past vague shapes  
of church and Co-op Store and school,  
toward the coming season.

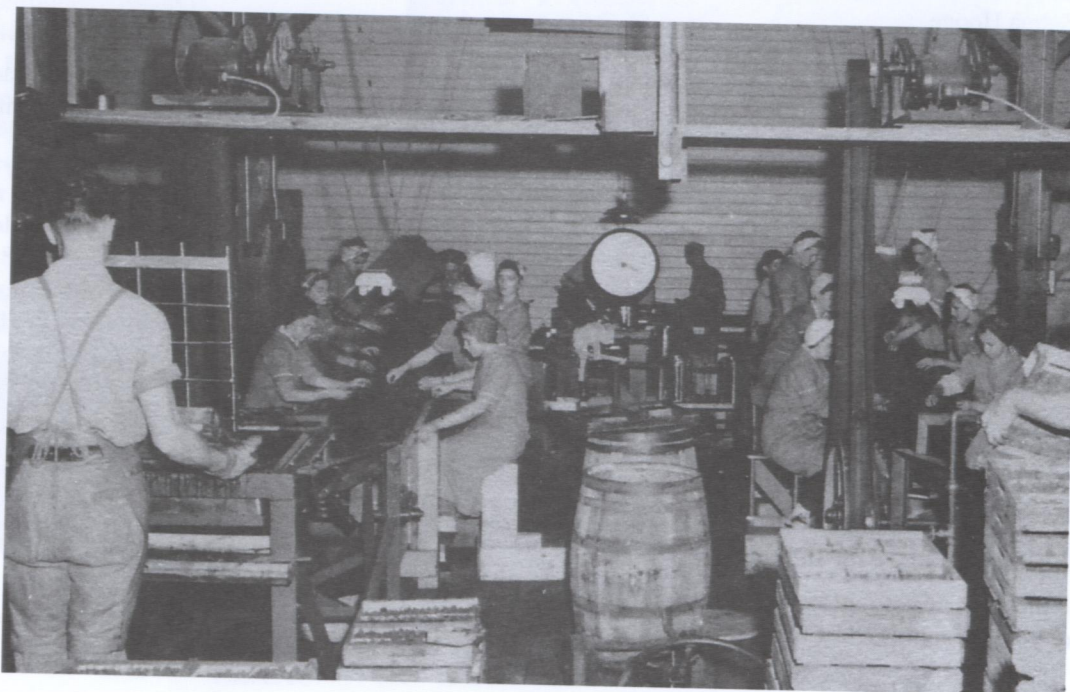
Always they had their work cut out for them,  
one day fastened to the next in quick succession,  
tossed down to be assembled in larger frames  
freshly numbered: love, double weddings  
under twin arches, still-births, many children,  
parents sometimes senile, sometimes lucid  
and wanting to die but saying so only to each other

and their daughters. Memories of hard work,  
four-foot stapler machines accompanying  
the imagined, and the cage  
full to the top with boxes by nightfall;  
in the morning thinking of what will be,  
walking a mile and more down Central Road  
on the moss-bordered wooden walk,  
picking white Yarrow flowers, flinging them aside  
like raspberry boxes before they reached the door.

They'd look up the ladder where staplers waited,  
where shiny slats were turned into boxes  
and shadows into wind and hair into leaves  
shivering against stems  
when morning seeps like cold canal water  
through berry rows and grows large as the field.  
And their sandalled feet  
counted the steps of the ladder again.

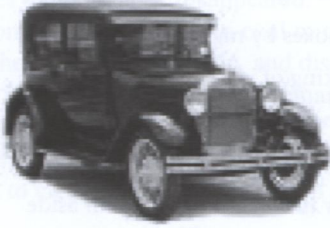
by Leonard Neufeldt

from *Half in the Sun*; anthology of Mennonite Writing.  
Vancouver: Ronsdale, 2006



Young people working in a fruit cannery

## Der Erlkönig auf Deutschamerikanisch



Wer driven denn so spät durch die Nacht wie a Blitz?  
Das ist der Pa and sein kleiner Fritz.  
Die Road is bumpy, voll Mud und Sand.  
Die Car ist alt und second Hand.

“Mein Sohn was heidst Du so bang Dein Gesicht?”  
“Siehst Vater Du, die Train Tracks dort nicht?”  
Und um die Kurve da raced a Train.  
Die Engine choked und die Car bleibt stehn.  
“Ach lieber Fritz, das ist allright,  
Wir puschen die Car auf die andere Seit.”  
Der Papa schiebt und der Fritze steered  
Da ist dann weiter auch gar nichts passiert.

“Ach Daddy, mein Daddy - und hörst du nicht?  
Der Cylinder rattled und die Axel bricht.”  
“Sei ruhig, bleib ruhig, mein Kind.  
Der Windschild is busted, da blast rein der Wind.  
Don't worry now, gleich sind wir zuhaus,  
und stretchen uns auf dem Sofa aus.  
Nu Fritz, sei a Sport, ich bet Dich a Dime,  
in twenty five Minutes sind wir daheim.”

“Ach Papa, ach Papa, ach guck mal den Steam,  
und unten läuft raus das Gasoline.  
Was knocked denn da? Ich glaub am End,  
die Bearings, die sind ausgebrennt.”  
“Ach Fritz, Du machst mich awful nervös  
und bist Du nicht still, so werd ich bö.”  
“Mei Vater, mei Vater, ach stopp die Maschin!”  
Ein Punktüre - ein Krach - und ein Rad is dahin.

Dem Vater grauset - er fährt was er kann  
und Inch by Inch sie ratteln on.  
Erreichen den Hof mit Müh und Not,  
da pufft das Flivver, die Engine war tot.

Kurt M. Stein

(clip art from: <http://www.antiquecar.com/clipart.php>)

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## Sixty Years of Peace and Plenty: a survey

Prepared by Selma Hooge

As you are aware, we will be celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of WWII Mennonite refugees arriving in Canada. Please assist us with planning the event by responding to the questionnaire below. Feel free to answer only some of the questions, or tell stories of other events that relate to the refugee years, and the beginnings in Canada or Paraguay. Feel free to answer in German or English. Send your replies to MHSBC in care of Selma Hooge, or email Selma at [hooge@telus.net](mailto:hooge@telus.net).

Name, address, etc. \_\_\_\_\_

From where did you flee in 1943? Train or Trek?

Names of the refugee camps you lived in.

Left Europe on \_\_\_\_\_ From harbour \_\_\_\_\_

Name of ship \_\_\_\_\_ Arrived where \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have a story to share for the special Newsletter?

Do you have pictures or artifacts we could use for our October celebration?

Tell us about your first home in Canada, your first impressions, first job.



[www.internetclipart.com/mmisc/SV.htm](http://www.internetclipart.com/mmisc/SV.htm)