



# 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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## Sixty Years of Peace and Plenty: A Celebration

Top: Waltraut Bartel, Waldemar Janzen.

Bottom: Jane Grunau, John Schirr, Hilda Janzen Goertzen

Mennonite Historical Society of BC 211-2825 Clearbrook Rd., Abbotsford, BC. V2T 6S3

Phone: 604-853-6177 Fax: 604-853-6246 Email: archives@mhsbc.com

website: www.mhsbc.com

Hours: 9am-4pm Monday-Friday



## Editorial

"We can have whatever we choose."

"The secret was suppressed."

"I began tracing the secret back through history."

A few comments drawn from *The Secret*, an expertly crafted video based on the best-selling book of the same name. Comments which imply, over the swell of music and rapidly edited visuals, that we must return to some inner source, long neglected and hidden, in order to achieve our goals. To become rich.

"I think of myself as a magnet."

"Thoughts become things."

"The law of attraction will give you what you want every time."

*The Secret* might be, perhaps, a corrective for the passivity and pessimism of our Mennonite past, good counsel to think positively and live with joy. "Start with what you're grateful for." But is this history? Is human experience simply a camouflage for the secret of optimism and wealth? What of the suffering we as Mennonites know only too well, the wars, the genocide, the floods of refugees?

And is this, perhaps, religion? *The Secret* is couched in sacred language. The three steps to wealth, according to the video, are (1) ask (2) believe (with "unwavering faith") and (3) receive. So similar to Scripture: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." So similar, but Jesus was not a millionaire.

The message of *The Secret* is symptomatic of the extreme individualism of our times. "Whatever you're feeling and thinking today, that is your future." The Mennonite story, to its credit, has largely rejected the relative values and atomistic egotism that has grown into a global culture. The Anabaptists reacted forcefully against the powerfully violent kingdoms of their time. In succeeding centuries, and in response to persecution, Mennonites retreated to quieter corners of states and empires, but like the Anabaptists, linked belief with the ideal of community.

In recent times, Mennonites have largely assimilated to the mainstream. Still, a stubborn independent streak persists. Traditionalist Mennonites, of course, such as the Amish, openly reject a society that says, "If it feels right, go for it." But the more conventional church membership also frequently repudiates the sprawl of global individualism, and still yearns for the personal touch, the supportive community. The projects of MCC, for example, are small scale. Congregations maintain a great deal of autonomy from the authority of conferences, unlike many other denominations. Mennonites on the left and right, teachers, doctors, entrepreneurs, harbour a mistrust for the crush of big bureaucracy, big business, big military.

Living in community, person to person, is not a secret.

By Robert Martens

## Upcoming Events in 2009

1. March 13, 7 p.m.  
**PETE: Moving Manmade Mountains**  
Bakerview gym.  
2285 Clearbrook Rd.



Peter Friesen

Come see the film about Yarrow boy, Peter Friesen, self-taught engineer, who became North America's pre-eminent mover of heritage buildings and lighthouses. (Read more on Friesen on page 19.)

We will also be featuring stories by Mennonite entrepreneurs John Redecop and Art Block.

3. May 24, 3 p.m. **Blessed Assurance: An Afternoon of Gospel Music.** With anecdotes, historical sketches and inspired song leading by Evan Kreider, plus a Gospel quartet and trio. Bakerview Church gym, 2285 Clearbrook Rd. Tickets \$10, available from the archives or at the door.

3. May 24, 5 p.m. (following Gospel Music event). **MHSBC Annual General Meeting** at Bakerview church. Annual report will be available on our website. Everyone welcome.

4. Oct. 17, 2009 Eben-Ezer Mennonite Church **Annual fundraising banquet. Speaker : Dr. Jakob Warkentin.**



## Meet our office staff

by Helen Rose Pauls

### Mary Ann Quiring



If you drop into the MHS archives on Tuesday, Wednesday or Friday, chances are you will meet Mary Ann (Friesen) Quiring, who keeps a close eye on the entrance door from her vantage point at the office computer.

Mary Ann came to us as a volunteer shortly after MHSBC opened their office in the Garden Park Tower. In 2002, she replaced Loretta Krueger as office manager/bookkeeper. Her day to day operations include answering a busy phone, selling tickets to events, tracking and receipting donations and paying bills, ordering supplies, managing the photocopier, plus all of the details that the various sub-committees drop into her lap.

Mary Ann's first word was Spanish, *Si* or *yes*, and this positive attitude continues. Growing up in the big city, Mary Ann lived in both Burnaby and Vancouver as a child, attending Point Grey Secondary School. Thirty-five years ago, she married Ernie, and their favorite vacation of all time was the *Mennonite Heritage Cruise*.

Her elusive spare time is spent with two wonderful grandchildren, Molly Ariana, born to daughter Melissa and Sheldon Enns; and Jacob Ernest David, born to daughter Angie and Steven Boldt. "Having grandchildren is like having your own fan club," she says, and adds that she never would have thought that at age fifty-five she'd be sitting in a big cardboard box, playing hide and seek, and enjoying it!

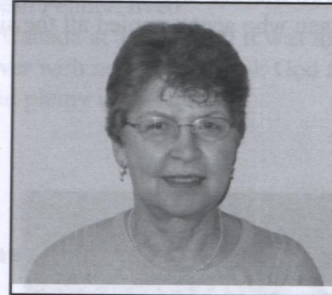
At her church, she has served as Sunday School teacher, on the decorating committee and as librarian. She also enjoys being a wedding coordinator, researching genealogy, reading mysteries and playing the odd computer game.

### Elisabeth Klassen

If you come to the archive office on a Monday or a Thursday morning, you will meet Elisabeth Klassen. Elisabeth's last job was church administrator in Pemberton where her bookkeeping and computer skills were very useful.

She was born Elisabeth Wieler in Neuendorf, Chortitza, and remembers the trek west to Germany in 1943, and resettlement in Poland with many aunts and uncles when she was a little girl. Here her father was sent to the front, leaving her mother and six daughters behind. She remembers her mother singing with them for courage. The family fled west and was reunited, eventually being sponsored by cousins in B.C. Older daughters worked as maids in Vancouver to pay the "*Reise Schuld*" travel debt, while younger ones picked raspberries.

Elisabeth loved school and met her husband, Neil Klassen, in grade 12 at MEI. She finished grade 13 and worked in a bank in Vancouver, supporting her husband as he studied. They then moved to Ocean Falls for a time, and later to Campbell River, where Neil was an instrument mechanic at the pulp mill and she raised three children. They moved to Mt. Lehman where he became the pastor of East Aldergrove Church [now Ross Road Church] and later to Armstrong, where she worked in a bank.



Elisabeth enjoyed the role of pastor's wife, doing home visitation, leading Bible studies and Home Groups. After 3 years in Armstrong, they studied in Fresno Seminary. It was during a stint in Fort St. John that Elisabeth took college courses in accounting, computers and creative writing. Here her husband had a head injury which changed their lives. They moved to Abbotsford where Elisabeth worked for the Golden Age Society, and later to Pemberton.

Elisabeth's hobbies are reading, cross stitch and family history. For 14 years she has used *Brother's Keeper* to research 1300 family names. Family gatherings are a favorite pastime and the Wieler clan now numbers 104.

"The archives are a very nice place to be," says Elisabeth. "There is a sense of community and helping each other."

**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, Connie Braun, David Giesbrecht, Ed Hildebrand, John Konrad, Robert Martens, Peter Neudorf, Helen Rose Pauls, Louise Bergen Price, 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 & Elisabeth Klassen. **Copy editing:** Hugo and Jean Friesen.



## Sixty Years of Peace and Plenty: the Celebration

The celebration began in the Saturday afternoon as crowds of "48ers" gathered at Emmanuel Church to browse table displays of books, documents, photos, maps, and artifacts. As visitors enjoyed coffee, platz, buns and *jereschte tweekback* (rusks) they laughed and cried together about the "old days." Occasionally there were emotional embraces between long-lost friends. Hymns and folks songs played by the accordion-harmonica duet of Dietrich Rempel and John Schirr brought smiles to many faces as they hummed or sang along to tunes such as "Es wollt ein Man nach seiner Heimat reisen."

At the book table, Andreas Schroeder, Connie Braun and Waldemar Janzen signed copies and discussed their work, while in the sanctuary, people watched in silence as scenes from Otto Klassen's movie, *The Great Trek*, unfolded. It was a memorable afternoon, and many thanks are due to Selma Hooze and her committee for all their work putting this together. Stories about Marie Rehsler and Waltraut Bartel's table displays follow.

The banquet committee, together with caterer Karen Bergen, planned and presented a delicious banquet, followed by Professor Harry Loewen's lecture (see page 8) and a plaque was unveiled to honour the MCCworkers who gave such dedicated service to help thousands of refugees find new homes in Canada.

Sunday afternoon's celebration featured writers Helen Grace Lescheid, Andreas Schroeder, Louise Bergen Price, and Elsie Neufeld. Steve Klassen presented a tribute to his grandfather, C.F. Klassen, and Rob van Dyck read from his Grandfather's memoir.

A celebration like this would not have been complete without singing, and Peter Goertzen led the congregation in *Kernlieder* (Mennonite hymns) as well as folk songs. Hilda Goertzen enthralled the audience with her rendition of "Lili Marlen" a WWII song enjoyed by soldiers on both sides of the battle. Many thanks also to pianist Jane Grunau who accompanied all the singing.



Dietrich Rempel and John Schirr

### Mennonites in Deutsch Kasun, Poland

by Marie Rehsler



Marie's Parents

The first Mennonites came to Kasun in the 1700s. By 1862, there was a population of 1,399 in this German-speaking settlement in Poland. My father, Leo (Leonard) Ewert, was born in 1898, and at the age of 22, he was voted by the congregation to be their pastor. He took up this calling on October 21, 1928. He also worked in the Post Office in nearby Bugmuende. We had a beautiful orchard and father would drive the thirty kilometres to Warsaw to sell fruit very early in the morning. He drove with horse and buggy. The main street through Kasun, the "Schosee," was on top of the dike near the Vistula River. At one time the church stood on the river side of the dike, but because of flooding, it was later rebuilt on the other side.

In the photos you will see some of the items I displayed, including the Bible that my parents received from the church on their marriage in 1929. Another item is a woolen blanket that belonged to my mother and was worn by her on September 7, 1939, when Polish authorities forced all the women and children to come to the church. (All the men of our area had been imprisoned on September 1) Our Ältester, (leading minister) Rudolf Bartel, had been accused of cutting telephone wires. This was considered treason, and they were going to make an example of him. So it was mostly women and children who watched Ältester Bartel being shot. I was one of the children, two years and seven months; my two-month-old brother Max was wrapped up in the blanket in my mother's arms.

Because the situation was dangerous, my sister took me and we fled from our home to that of my grandparents who lived a short distance away. We hid my special doll in our pump organ. On September 17, the German army



came into our area and we could go home. I was delighted to have my doll again! In 1942, my sister Helene, who was a nurse in Germany, came home for a visit. When she left, she took the doll with her, saying she would crochet new doll clothes for me. I did not see my sister, or my doll, again until 1947 when we were reunited.

In July 1944, we fled Deutsch Kazun for good. We spent Christmas in Heubuden in the Danziger Werder, then we had to flee again, ending up in the refugee camp in Fallingbostel.

I also displayed a Singer Sewing Machine that my father converted into a hand-driven machine. It came from Poland, and Mother used it for many years here in Canada. She was a beautiful seamstress, and I displayed some of her undergarments that had a lot of cut-work done, as well as clothes that she had sewn for my brother and me. One of the pictures on display showed my father holding the church books before packing them while my brothers Helmuth and Siegfried, and my sister Helen and her son Richard watched.



When Father left Kasun, he took with him the church books that had not been destroyed by bombs, as well as the beautiful bead-embroidered altar cloth and the communion vessels.

We left Bremerhafen on November 4, 1948 and arrived in Quebec City on November 14 (Prince Charles' birthday). We stopped in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta to visit friends and family and arrived in Yarrow on December 4, where our sponsor, Elizabeth Penner, lived.

My father arrived in Canada at age 50, and it was the fifth time he had started over with nothing. I thank God for the sixty years of peace and plenty in this country.



### **A Return to Marienwerder and the buried treasure** by Andre Pekovitch

As the East German border guard slowly paraded back and forth in front of the black gate, his eyes narrowed at the van that approached from the Polish border. Two beautiful young women sat in front; two men and an older woman in the back. The West German licence plates could not hide that these people were not your usual German visitors - too much of the West in them.

Inside the van, members of the Bartel and Cornelsen family waited nervously. Almost forty years earlier, in the coldest days of January 1945, Waltraut Bartel, together with two prisoners-of-war, dug a pit in the woodshed and buried the family heirlooms of Bavarian crystal, Meissen china, silver and wedding gifts dating back to 1883 in containers in the near-frozen ground. Now these treasures were carefully packed in boxes in the back of the van. If the guards decided to search the vehicle, how could the family prove ownership after all this time? There was little knowledge about the long history of Mennonites in this area, a history that had come to a sudden end in January, 1945.



The story begins in the Marienwerder in what became Prussia after its annexation in the 1760s by Frederick the Great. Though Mennonites had been landowners in the Danzig area and the lower Werder since the sixteenth



century, and were well integrated into society as merchants, engineers and distillers,<sup>1</sup> the upper Werder beyond Marienburg was populated by a greater variety of peoples, many of whom existed on leased land, since additional land ownership for Mennonites and others who sought military exemption had been prohibited since 1786. In 1850, the Redemption Law permitted Mennonite leaseholders who had leased the land in the Werder since 1786 to finally own the land they had worked for many years.

Tragheimerweide, established in 1724, was the last large settlement of Mennonites established in West Prussia. At the junction of the Weichsel (Vistula) and the Nogat rivers, a few kilometers from modern-day Sztum, the descendants of mostly-Friesian congregations in Kulm and Graudenz sought leave to plant a new church, and a variety of towns grew up in this region. Though the congregation was never more than 700 strong, the region became wealthy as the farmers worked the land with great profitability. This brought many other immigrants, from Silesian farmers, Friesian lowlanders, Methodists and Jews, and even Jehovah's Witnesses, to join the occasional Polish landlords that remained.

Marie Katharina Wiehler, youngest of three, was born in 1895 to Hermann and Katharina Wiehler in the Mennonite community of Thiensdorf, some 50 kilometers to the south in the delta of the Nogat river. Hermann was a farmer as well as the mayor, and Marie took full advantage of her position as the mayor's little girl when it suited her. The village teacher, Lehrer Mortzfeld, had a large family and found it difficult to make ends meet without an advance on his monthly salary. While Herr Wiehler was known for correctness, his daughter could request an advance for the teacher; in exchange, she would not be punished for undone homework!

Hermann and Katharina had rebuilt their own house in Thiensdorf after the great flood of 1888 in which the water remained until June of that year, frustrating efforts of the experienced Mennonite dyke-builders, and making for a lean year for farmers. But the land remained productive, and the farmers did well enough so that on the eve of the First World War, Hermann retired, left the farm to his younger son, and moved to Elbing with his wife and Marie. Here Marie met Franz Benno Cornelsen, born in 1894 also in Thiensdorf, and the son of the local Ältester.



27 Mai, 1943. Cornelsen Silver wedding. (Hermann in Africa)  
Back : Ruth, Dorothea, Waltraut u. Hans-Peter Bartel, Irmgard,  
Erwin, Hanna, Klaus. Front: Marie, Friedhelm, Franz, Marianne

Before the end of the war, Hermann was dead of blood poisoning from a farm injury while helping his son. A few months later, his daughter Marie married Franz Cornelsen and the couple bought a farm on the outskirts of the small village of Tragheimerweide. Despite the war, the area had been relatively untouched, farming was good, and life was full. Marie's earlier sojourn in Elbing had introduced her to many relatives in the region, and she, together with her cousin Selma Lemke (Wiehler) set about to keep family connections alive. Their hard work led to the first Wiehler family gathering in Grunau in 1921, and under their tutelage, the Wiehler family genealogy was assembled from 1802 onward, beginning with Nicolaus Wiehler of Lichtefelde, and to whom there are surely family connections to Wielers in Russia.

Waltraut Cornelsen was the first girl born to Marie, and second child of nine. Her brothers Erwin Cornelsen, and the one that followed, Hermann, caused her no end of grief, and her high spirits led each to practical jokes on the other at all times. Later came Irmgard, twins Hanna and Ruth, then Dorothea, Klaus and Marianne. School reined in some of the high spirits, but there was much to do on the farm which prospered in the time between the wars; even hyperinflation in Germany caused little permanent damage to the farm community. The church was large, and Franz became a minister in the church, while Marie played the organ in services.

Then came the Second World War. Despite a Mennonite tradition of peacemaking, the call to war was strong in West Prussia. Erwin and Hermann, joining the effort in 1940, were taken prisoner in 1942 and 1943. In 1944 Franz was conscripted into the *Volkssturm*'s last-ditch defense effort, and was also taken prisoner. By now, Waltraut had married Hans-Peter Bartel, but since her husband was serving, she remained on the family home with her first son Friedhelm and her younger siblings, as well as her mother, Marie Cornelsen, and her Oma, Katharina

<sup>1</sup> Brandy produced by Mennonites in the Werder became known as *Mennonite waters*.



Wiehler. Marie and Waltraut kept the family together and the farm running, even when the German army boarded two prisoners of war, Bill from Scotland and Bernard from Britain, with them.

On January 22, 1945, in the coldest part of the coldest winter in memory, orders came to flee. While many did, including Hanna, Ruth and Dorthera, the remaining Cornelsens, with all their men either at the front or in POW camps, decided to stay.

In these uncertain days, Waltraut gathered the family heirlooms – Bavarian crystal, fine china, wedding gifts dating back three generations – wrapped them in linens, and crated them in improvised capsules of old metal canners and an oak chest. Late one night in weather 25-below, she and the two prisoners of war went out to the woodshed, dug a pit six feet deep in ground, and buried the containers, hoping, but never expecting, to see them again.

The next day the Russians marched onto the farm, and the demands, the drinking and the violence began. The Cornelsen home now became the command post for the crossing of the Weichsel against a German counteroffensive, and the family was forced to a farm in nearby Pestlin for a month, enduring persecution by Russian soldiers, who abducted young Irmgard. After months of brutality in the East, she was released, but died on the train home and was buried in a mass grave east of the Oder river.



Gert, Waltraut, Oma Wiehler, Friedhelm,  
Marie Cornelsen.

When the family returned home, they found it had been confiscated by Poles, who could have had their choice of abandoned German farms, but chose this particular one. Franz Kavka and his family allowed the Cornelsens one room upstairs, and limited access to some of their farm animals, but hunger was ever with the family. Their one pig suddenly disappeared one night, and the smell of roast in the Kavka's kitchen left no doubt where it had gone.

Through Christmas of 1945, there was no word of any of the men; then, abruptly, one night in 1946, the Polish militia arrived with a truck at the door, and with kicks and shoves, bundled the family off to the Polish labour camp at Nova Wioska. Months of incarceration followed on this labour farm, everyone working in the fields and barns. Two rays of hope came in this time. One was a visit from Menno Fast and another young American from MCC who were seeking out scattered Mennonites in Poland. They brought

with them blankets, canned goods and most of all, the hope of being set free. The second was the return of father Franz Cornelsen from the POW camp in Poland. He had been captured, and was lined up against a wall to be shot when a Polish neighbour, the father of Waltraut's dear friend Steffi Majewski, stopped the guards and took Franz away.

In October 1947, they were finally deported from Poland to Germany, arriving in Löbau in the Russian zone. After Ruth and Dorothea sneaked into the camp to set them free, they set off at night for the British zone, pulling Oma along with them in a little wagon, sneaking over the border between Russian patrols.

While some of the family established homes in West Germany, others, including Waltraut's, came to Canada. As new immigrants arriving in Agassiz, speaking little or no English, Waltraut and her husband Hans-Peter Bartel worked at what they could until they could buy a farm and raise three boys. Keeping dairy cows for forty years kept Waltraut's connection to the land alive, as well as the memory of those heirlooms buried in Polish soil. Waltraut and her sisters maintained a relationship through the years with the Kavkas, writing and visiting periodically and supporting the family when times were lean. Finally, in 1984, Waltraut decided it was time. The heirlooms had remained buried long enough.

In August, she traveled to West Germany with her youngest son Rudy and his wife Brenda, her grandson Gordon, and her niece Dorothea. They purchased a van, drove through East Germany and Poland to the farm.

Although Franz Kavka was dead, his son and daughter-in-law remained on the land. The farm was in a sorry state of disrepair, but the woodshed still stood, and Waltraut's memory was undimmed. Kavka's son was reluctant to allow them to remove anything from the property, but the daughter-in-law was sympathetic, and one night provided a diversion, allowing Waltraut to lead Gordon and Rudy to the woodshed to dig up the treasure.

Miraculously, though the containers and wrappings had disintegrated, the heirlooms, dishes and crystal were mostly unbroken. Quickly, they were packed into cartons and loaded into the van, and the family took their leave without hindrance.



It was a long drive along country highways through the dark, yet all too soon came the Polish border, and beyond it, the East German one, and an explanation had to be provided. Hiding the cartons underneath piles of clothing and luggage was a first step to guard against discovery from any but the most cursory of searches, but what story to use if the guards became inquisitive? Too much time had elapsed for Waltraut to claim legitimate ownership of the china, and smuggling was punished harshly. They would simply have to brazen it out at the border.

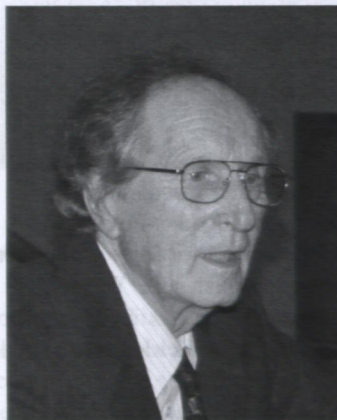
Plan A, recalls Dorothea, was to put the women, both attractive blondes, up front; the border guards were sure to pay more attention to them than their duties. But how to ensure that the guards' attention did not wander to the back? Well, that required Plan B, which was never thought out, and never required, for, after only a cursory look into the back, the guards waved them on.

Crossing the East German border to the West involved a more intense inspection, but as the property was not German, eventually the little band was released with heirlooms intact. The group then drove to Karlsruhe, where mother Marie and the astounded Cornelsen siblings unpacked the cartons. Though a few items remained behind as heirlooms for other family members, most were crated for shipment to Canada.

Here again more problems were encountered - the shipment could not be insured due to its nature as heirlooms with an expired status, and indeed its export would have been illegal. When the shipment arrived in Canada, the customs officer assigned had no idea that Poland had ever been part of Germany or under Russian occupation, and thought the story was made up to get valuables into the country. It took more meetings with senior officers to set the historical record straight before the dishes could be taken home and displayed. Many are now on display in the Agassiz Historical Museum together with information on their provenance, and the story has been told in the local newspaper as well.

Historical ties remain with the family in Poland. Polish neighbours who continue to farm the land make the family welcome on return trips, and the family farm has now passed through the son, recently deceased, to the daughter-in-law and her children. For the Wiehler/Cornelsen clan, the connection with Polish soil remains, keeping the memory of Mennonites in the Marienwerder alive.

### **Saturday Evening: Lecture summary<sup>2</sup> by Dr. Harry Loewen**



At this sixtieth anniversary we have several Mennonite groups represented. During and after World War II their experiences were more or less similar. They all came out of very difficult times during and after the war years. A majority of them were women and their children who were driven out of their homeland and faced an uncertain future. Many of their men, husbands and fathers, as we have seen, were either exiled or executed.

At the end of the war, the 35,000 Mennonites were divided involuntarily into two groups. The largest group was repatriated to the dreaded Soviet Union, where Mennonites suffered as never before, at least not since the time of the 16th-century Anabaptist martyrs (Smith 525). The smaller group, only 12,000, was able to come West, to South and North America. ...

Many of these [formerly repatriated] people are today in Germany where they enjoy a freedom they have never known before. This freedom to serve God, as they have experienced him in difficult times, they guard jealously. They may be somewhat strict and perhaps a bit too legalistic in applying their faith and ethical practices, but there is no doubt that their witness is both sincere and biblical. They remain grateful to God for bringing them to a "spacious place," a country of freedom, and they pray that they will never lose this faith and freedom again.

The group that went to South America, beginning in 1947, joined other Mennonites in what they called the "green hell" and eventually created their homes in what are now blooming deserts. The Paraguayan Mennonites are perhaps the only group that was able to reproduce the life which their ancestors enjoyed in pre-revolution Russia, an

<sup>2</sup> Read the entire lecture online at <http://www.mhsbc.com/20081018/Harry.htm>



existence that combined the religious and the so-called secular aspects of life all in one (Isaak, 107). The Neuland Colony and the other post-WWII Paraguayan groups today model a Christian faith and life for both Mennonites and non-Mennonites around them. Like Canadian Mennonites, they struggle, to be sure, with materialism and the "world," but they sincerely seek to live by the biblical faith of their forebears.

The group that came to Canada after World War II was perhaps the most fortunate, for it came to a modern democratic country which allowed the newcomers to strike roots, to prosper materially, and to enjoy the freedom to worship their God. God has brought this group "to a spacious place." In these sixty years there was much space to grow, not only materially and culturally, but also spiritually. Those of us who belong to this group, are grateful to God and to our fellow Canadian Mennonites who helped us on our way.

But today there is also a need for all of us to recommit ourselves to this God of our fathers and mothers--and for some of us it is also necessary to return to our spiritual roots. There are some who not only want to forget their dark and painful past, but also forget the God who has led them so faithfully. We need to remember and to study our tear-filled and blood-drenched history, and God's faithful leading in it--and we must pass this heritage on to our children and grandchildren.

I might close with the words of Psalm 78:1-4 (our Society's motto, by the way): "Give ear, O my people... I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us. We will not hide them from [our] children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done."

### Sunday afternoon

Sunday afternoon's program took participants on an historic journey, following the story of Mennonites in the Soviet Union from the 1920s, through the tumultuous years of repression, famine and war to their new homes in Canada. This program was repeated in Sherbrooke Mennonite Church on January 18; a write-up on that event will follow in the next newsletter. Below are photos and comments from some of those who attended at Emmanuel.



Presenters: Andreas Schroeder, Steve Klassen, Connie Braun, Louise Price, Helen Lescheid, Elsie K. Neufeld

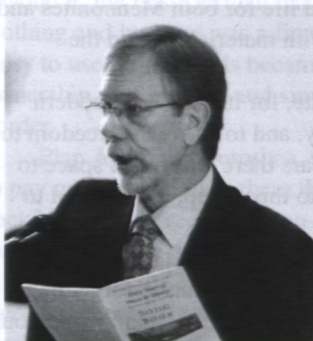
I would like to congratulate and thank the Events Committee and all who participated in preparing and delivering this moving celebration. It was truly a festival of thanksgiving for those who lived through this traumatic period of uncertainty and suffering. It also reminded us of all those left behind or forcibly repatriated to endure more suffering. The program reflected that we have been able to forgive and let go rather than rail at those who imposed this terror on us. (John Konrad, President of MHSBC)

I'd like to extend my congratulations to all of you for a very moving and successful event on Sunday afternoon. Response was overwhelmingly positive. And it was really special for me to be there with you. (Robert Martens)

Photo at right, Robert Martens







Peter Goertzen conducting

Totally enjoyed the service this afternoon... I had absolutely no idea what a huge event this was and what it was actually all about. I cried tears of sorrow and laughter. It was truly a gift and a surprise at that... The songs were perfect as they were interspersed with the readings and it all just appealed to the senses...such visuals with the readings!! Who needs power point? ... It saddens me that there are so few young people there to hear the stories...how will they be remembered.... It is a history that should not and cannot be forgotten.

(Marlene)

"As a daughter of parents who lived through the event, I found the celebration deeply moving. I regretted not being able to share the experience with my parents but the evening brought rich memories flooding back. I recognized again their deep faith and tenacious spirit. As I pondered my life in this "land of plenty", I made a commitment to be more involved with refugee concerns. As others brought our parents to a new land of opportunity and safety, so must we, too, carry on that torch. Thank you for telling the story in such a creative way. The voice of Hilda Goertzen singing Lilli Marlene continues to ring through my soul - I never understood, until that afternoon, the significance of that song for my parents. Thank you for the celebration, but more importantly for telling the story." (Charlotte Siemens)



**Working with the Doukobours:** the story of Stefan Petkau and Frieda Petkau Fast  
by Helen Rose Pauls



At ninety, Frieda Fast still lives in her own apartment in Chilliwack surrounded by the things she loves most: books of every kind. Besides books, scrapbooks containing all the writing she has done over the years for *Der Bote* and *Die Mennonitische Rundschau* are revealed when she opens the doors on two end tables, full to the top. Now that these two newspapers have ceased publication, she has nowhere to send her writing and her life's purpose has diminished. "What will happen to all of my writing when I die?" she asks. I assure her that every article and every newspaper issue is safely stored in the MHS archives.

Born in the Mennonite village of Neu Chortitza, Ukraine, Frieda became a language teacher of Russian and German under the Soviets in 1936. She married a Russian, Stefan Nicolaevitch Minaev, who later took her last name, Petkau, to be less visible during the trek to Germany.



"Stefan had a big post under the Soviets, as 'Chief of County' in Ukraine, with 90 villages under him, and the family lived well," Frieda recalls. However, he had been a cadet under the czars, so the Soviets interrogated him at times, and Frieda remembers being called into a dark room, someone lighting a cigarette to give the room an ominous glow, and the questions flowing. "We didn't lie very badly," she says.

When they decided to escape in 1943 with the Mennonite trek heading west, they had a chauffeur driving their car and two matched Arabian horses pulling wagons, manned by Russians and full of foodstuffs: sacks of dried fruit, canisters of butter, salted bacon, flour, and household goods. Officers soon led the horses away and the foodstuffs disappeared in the night. They were put on a train and over-wintered in Galicia.

When they arrived in Germany, Frieda received a teaching post immediately and Stefan cared for their two girls. They both were baptized in the Gronau refugee camp. After seven years in Germany and two more children, Frieda and Stefan were sponsored to come to Canada in 1951, with a one year contract to work for a Mennonite farmer in Saskatchewan.

Thus began one of the hardest years of their lives, living on the prairies in minus 50 degree weather in a log shack which lacked proper chinking, while Stefan was assigned to clear land with a horse and chain. At one point, the well was frozen and they burned the fence to heat the cabin and melt snow.

One evening, they were invited to hear a Russian choir sing in Saskatoon: a Doukhobor group from Grand Forks. "They hired both of us on the spot to teach Russian to their children and so we moved to BC," says Frieda. Here they became a part of George and Erna Martens' house church, begun in 1948, originally a project started by the West Coast Children's Mission and the Canada Inland Mission in 1945 under Peter Schroeder, who was commissioned to work among people of Russian origin. "There was a 'Gospel Chapel,' a lively missionary church, in a big room in the huge brick former Doukhobor house where the Martens lived," says Frieda. "There we sang 'Count your blessings, name them one by one,' and worship was taken seriously. We knelt to pray and boldly witnessed for Christ. I learned to openly speak about my faith and even taught Sunday school. We were so thankful for the church, where we were uplifted and strengthened through the word of God. We offered a special gratitude to the Lord for freeing us from the yoke of Communism. Stefan did not have to be interrogated each month. The nightmares stopped."

Even though they were very poor, they were able to buy 40 chickens, plant a garden and orchard, and the Doukhobors shared with them their strawberries and raspberries. Soon Stefan was a sought-after Russian teacher and known all over the Kootenays, as he also worked for the Russian Doukhobor newspaper. "Working with the Doukhobors was wonderful," says Frieda, "as they were a gentle people who recited psalms, although the 'Sons of Freedom' (radical Doukhobor sect) were impossible to understand. Stefan went to their village over the river on a tiny suspension bridge to teach on the weekends. Once we sent Annie there to get milk and she came home quickly, saying she would never go back there again as the whole group was lying in the field with no clothes on."

The Petkau children became close friends with the Martens children and the two families had wonderful times together. The Martens also spoke Russian, making the transition to Canadian life much simpler. Frieda easily learned English at night school, but Stefan found it much harder. Church fellowship was warm, and the little house church which the Martens founded got its first building in 1955, affiliating with the BC Conference of MB churches in 1976. "Many Doukhobors began to attend there later on," says Frieda.

After Stefan's death, Frieda moved to Chilliwack and married Henry Fast in 1975. They attended the Yarrow United Mennonite Church and she began to write for the German Mennonite newspapers. Presently, Frieda attends the Greendale First Mennonite Church, where she was the *Bote* correspondent until recently. Her advice to the next generation is "To make melody in your heart to the Lord; giving thanks always. To be grateful is a gift from God and a deliberate and inner attitude of the spirit, and a vital ingredient to our well being."



Frieda and Stefan Petkau

Details for this article came from an interview with Frieda Petkau Fast; from the article, "Gratitude" written by Frieda Petkau Fast; from GAMEO: "Gospel Chapel Fellowship, Grand Forks, B.C., Canada".



## Ben and Linda's Ukraine

by Ben and Linda Stobbe



This week we had some unexpected hotel-seeking guests who showed up at the Mennonite Centre fairly late on Wednesday evening. Christian Aid is a humanitarian aid organization which has its roots in conservative Mennonite churches, primarily in Pennsylvania. They started their aid work in Rumania when it was still part of the Soviet Union and have been working in a village south of Kiev for many years. Three of their workers from Kiev and two Mission officials from the United States dropped in to visit, having been told about the Mennonite Centre. Fortunately, for them and for Linda, they found room at the Inn in Tokmak, otherwise our little apartment would have resembled a Kiev subway car.

We had a delightful visit that evening, and Ben gave them a tour of Molochanks and its Mennonite past the following morning. They were intrigued that we would work with people outside the evangelical church, as they limit their work to people of the "household of faith." Three of our brothers sported beards and our Ukrainian staff immediately concluded that they had seen their first real-live Amish people-- after all, they believe themselves to be authorities on such matters after having watched the movie "Witness." Ben took them to the former Willms flour mill which is now in receivership, and after they took many pictures of the building he noticed a crowd of former workers standing around, no doubt wondering if the "Amish" were going to buy out the mill.

It certainly isn't hard to understand why Christian groups in the former Soviet Union countries want to work within their own communities. After all, churches during the communist years certainly feared infiltration by Soviet authorities and therefore developed a sense of mistrust and suspicion of anyone new and, to some extent, even each other. That may be why even now Baptists prefer working with Baptists, Pentecostals with Pentecostals, and Orthodox with Orthodox. Long before Soviet times, Mennonites preferred working and dealing with people of "their own kind." Now, when the Mennonite Centre has made it clear that we want to work with all groups regardless of their backgrounds, some in North America and others in Ukraine have raised their eyebrows and given us quizzical looks. Giving money to village mayors, hospital administrators, and school directors does involved an element of trust--sadly trust is lacking in this society. As an example, just going from our apartment, getting our car out of the garage, and going into our office requires seven different keys. Everyone seems to have double locks and yapping guard dogs. Even our staff quickly differentiate who is Ukrainian, Russian, and Jewish.

Therefore, when a group of people from a small former Mennonite village, Udarnik, phoned us and asked us to visit them, it came as a bit of a surprise. They enticed us by stating they had a Mennonite church building they wanted to save from demolition. We were contacted, not by any church or missions group in Udarnik --we were approached by educators schooled under the Soviet system who simply wanted to know more about their village history. And now this little group of villagers has made a monument honoring their Mennonite past.

This week they proudly showed us pictures of their dedication service for the monument. There, among the local and regional dignitaries, stood the local Orthodox priest, extending his hand of blessing over a granite stone that reads in Russian, Ukrainian, and English: "To the inhabitants of the villages of Alexanderkrone, Friedensruh, Kleefeld, Lichtfelde, Prangenau, Neukirch, Steinfeld, who fell in the wars, *holodomor*, repression and deportation."



And then John Wiens, a Mennonite missionary in Zaparozhye, tells us how excited he is to be working with an Orthodox believer who will soon begin working as translator for his sermons. Our "household of faith" may be much bigger here than we ever imagined; only by extending trust do we start to appreciate its increasing scope.

*From Ben and Linda's blog of September 14, 2008. (<http://lindaandben.blogspot.com/>) Read more about the Mennonite Centre in Ukraine and the work of volunteers there at <http://www.mennonitecentre.ca/>. If you would like to donate, cheques are payable to Friends of the Mennonite Centre in Ukraine or FOMCU. American checks should be made out to MFC-FOMCU. Mail to: Paul Siemens, Treasurer, FOMCU 5 Monarchwood Crescent, Toronto, ON, Canada, M3A 1H3.*



## Mennonite Entrepreneurs

Remember these? Some Mennonite businesses advertising in the MEI Yearbook, 1960-63.

 <p><b>Peacock</b> RUG &amp; DRAPERIES 31025 TRANS-CANADA HIGHWAY Box 520, CLEARBROOK</p> <p><b>HENRY MATTIES</b> PROPRIETOR</p> <p>DRAPES RUGS &amp; TILES PAINTS FLOOR APPLIANCES AWNINGS</p> <p>Specializing in <i>Beauti-Plant</i> Drapes</p> <p>RES: 859-5739 OFFICE: 859-5877</p>	<p><b>Clearbrook Barber Shop</b></p> <p><i>I need your head to run my business.</i></p> <p><b>CLEARBROOK 5-10-15 STORE</b> Shop for Your Everyday Needs and School Supplies</p> <p>Phone 859-8223 J. K. BINK</p>	<p><b>FUNK'S SUPERMARKET</b></p> <p>Groceries — Produce — Meat — Cold storage Lockers</p> <p>853-2641 Clearbrook</p> <p><b>Penner's Pharmacy</b> "Your Health Is Our Concern" Prescriptions — Drugs — Sundries</p> <p>Clearbrook Shopping Centre Clearbrook</p>	<p><b>HEPPNER CREDIT JEWELERS</b> Fully Guaranteed Watch and Jewelry Repairs Watches — Diamonds</p> <p><b>Clearbrook</b></p>  <p>BOX 409, CLEARBROOK, B.C.</p> <p>CAMERAS, RADIOS, T.V. SALES &amp; SERVICE</p> <p>HENRY LOEWEN J. SARATYK 859-2471</p>
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**A View from the past:** The following is an excerpt titled "Industrial Developments" from the the pamphlet *A Brief History of Mennonites in British Columbia, 1867-1967*.<sup>3</sup> (This is a copy of the original, without corrections.)

1.) In 1931 John H. Martens of Yarrow started a truckline with one truck. In 1947 it was incorporated into Yarrow Freight and Fuels and a few more trucks were added, with John H. Martens as president and Herman S. Loewen as secretary-treasurer. Yarrow Freight and Fuels soon became one of the major freight haulers in the Upper Fraser Valley, and it also branched out into Highway Construction.

In 1954 Diamond Construction Co. Ltd. was incorporated. This company has grown over the past 12 years to one of the largest Sub-contractors in B.C. It also reached the status to qualify to become a member of the Heavy Construction Ass'n of B.C. A qualified contractor must do over a \$1,000,000.00 worth of work per year.

In 1963 Pine Pass Construction was incorporated all the while under the same ownership with John H. Martens as president and Herman S. Loewen as secretary-treasurer. This Company to-day is one of the largest gravel crushing contractors in B.C.

2.) Contractor Joe Klassen, formerly of Yarrow, has built many homes and all the larger schools in the Fraser Valley, including a number of Overwaitea Stores and a large portion of mining construction.

3.) H. & B. (Harry Berg) Construction started as a small electrical contractor, later it changed over to Gas Fitting and Construction for B.C. Electric. Now they are under major construction. They built the thoroughfare in Whalley and sewer installations in other small towns. To-day, they are contracting in the Columbia Power Projects, constructing approach-bridges and dam work.

4.) One of the largest automobile dealers is Dueck on Broadway in Vancouver. This Company provides new cars for the people in Vancouver and the Fraser Valley.

5.) Dueck's Lumber Yards provide building contractors with all the necessary building material. They have spread through the valley from Hope to Langley and across the Fraser River.

6.) John and Arthur Bargaen, of Yarrow went into wholesale door manufacturing in Vancouver and have become wealthy.,

7.) Block Brothers Real Estate and Construction Enterprises in Vancouver. Originally from Yarrow, they started their business in Vancouver in 1955. Today - a quotation from the Province, October 8, 1965: "Their companies own about 1,200 suites in Greater Vancouver, built at a cost of 10 to 12 million. This puts them among the largest landowners in the area. Block Brothers handle 22% of the real estate volume through the Vancouver Real Estate Board.

<sup>3</sup> G. G. Baerg, *A Brief History of Mennonites in British Columbia, 1867-1967*. "Histories of ethnic groups in British Columbia." Yarrow: Columbia Press, 1967. p 8-9.



## Early Anabaptist/Mennonite Entrepreneurs

by Robert Martens

Throughout their nearly five hundred years of history, Mennonites have often harboured a suspicion of entrepreneurs in their midst. Their attitudes were ambivalent: admiration for success and for profit, interpreted as a blessing from God, and on the other hand, mistrust of interaction with the "world," of money earned other than off the land. Some Mennonite entrepreneurs, when they have attained a certain degree of wealth seemingly excessive and "tainted" to their church community, have felt obligated to move on to another denomination. Nevertheless Mennonites have frequently managed to make a lucrative living in the business world. The early Anabaptists were communalist and sharing by nature, and the wealthy among them must have been as scarce as compassionate inquisitors. But even in an era when the capitalist system was just beginning to develop, there were Anabaptists who stepped out and made the first tentative steps into the sphere of profit and loss.

Pilgram Marpeck was one of these rather rare individuals. Independent and free-thinking, he was too much a man of his own mind to found a church group that might have been his personal legacy, and consequently he is little remembered today. He was born around 1490 somewhere near Rattenberg in the Inn Valley of Tyrol. His lineage was distinguished, and it is known that several of his ancestors served as magistrates. Marpeck was well-educated, and would later write extensively in a scholarly, latinized style on matters of theology. In 1520 he and his wife Anna entered their names into the *Brotherhood of Mining Workers of Rattenberg*. Pilgram went on to serve on several councils and to occupy the highly esteemed position of *Bergrichter* (miners' magistrate) for the city. He became a wealthy man, at one point loaning money to King Ferdinand at 5 percent interest. But Anabaptism was influencing him, and when he refused to report dissidents among the miners to the authorities, Marpeck was forced to forfeit his fortune and leave the city in 1528.

After 1528 Marpeck lived for a time in Strasbourg, earning a highly successful living as engineer. Marpeck stood at the beginning of a long tradition of Mennonites skilled in draining and irrigating the land; he devised an extremely complex drainage and water system in Strasbourg, as well wood-floating flumes<sup>4</sup> originating in the Black Forest. The admiration of local authorities, however, soon turned sour, and Marpeck's participation in Anabaptist activities even landed him briefly in prison. By 1532 he was ordered to leave the city. Interestingly, when he requested a stay of the order so that he could dispose of his holdings, the response was affirmative, indicating that he was still somewhat trusted by a council that recognized his great talents.

Between 1532 and 1544 Marpeck lived in the Grisons area of Switzerland, very likely making his home in Chur. Again his engineering successes were remarkable, as he helped provide Swiss weavers with water; weaving, it should be noted, was not an unusual occupation among Anabaptists. Marpeck was engaging passionately in the current Anabaptist debates, carrying on a lengthy disputation, for example, with Caspar von Schwenckfeld, who interpreted the living out of gospel as a purely inner experience. Schwenckfeld's language was sometimes insulting and hostile. Marpeck, an innately gentle and giving man, and at ease in various social spheres, never replied in kind. By nature a moderate, he toyed with the idea of joining the Hutterites but soon rejected what he perceived as their authoritarian decision-making. Marpeck was, as entrepreneurs commonly are, an independent minded individual, and he firmly rejected the concept of community of goods. He simply would not interpret gospel as literalistically, perhaps oppressively, as some other Anabaptists: "the potential for human freedom opened up for humanity through the human Christ was a value which dare not be lost" (Klassen 175).

By 1544 the political climate in Augsburg had changed enough that Marpeck was invited by that city to serve there as engineer. Again he displayed his technical genius by constructing waterways for wood and improving aqueducts. His talents must have been invaluable to the city: although he was forbidden to publish or to organize mass Anabaptist meetings, he cheerfully ignored all prohibitions, and yet retained his position as engineer until his natural death in 1556 (dying in bed was an achievement for Anabaptists in this era of persecution). Marpeck was an unusual religious dissident, tolerant, loving, accepting, and critical of what he perceived as oppressive Anabaptist community strictures. He was also unusual in that he was both a loyal citizen and fervent reformer. It was a moderation in values that would often characterize Mennonite entrepreneurs: Marpeck "knew that those who remain united with Christ can go forth and eat and drink with sinners even as Jesus did" (Klassen 176). He moved relatively effortlessly between the worlds of commerce and religious reform. Later generations of Mennonites might have interpreted Pilgram Marpeck's individualistic love of freedom as the first step on the slippery slope of assimilation.

<sup>4</sup> A **flume** is an open artificial water channel, in the form of a gravity chute, that leads water from a diversion dam or weir completely aside a natural flow. (definition from: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flume>)



In response to fierce persecution, Anabaptists consolidated themselves as Mennonites, a farming folk, “the quiet in the land.” In the Netherlands, however, Mennonites found prosperity during the “Golden Age” of the sixteenth century, and many achieved great wealth in commerce, especially in the lucrative herring trade. The Mennonite influence had been great in Harlingen, and had even contributed to a building boom. The Spanish, however, arrived there unexpectedly in 1568, and governed harshly, sometimes brutally, under the orders of Philip II. Adam Wybe, or Wiebe (full name, Adam Wijbe von Harlingen), and his brother Jacob fled eastward from their Harlingen home, with Adam eventually settling by 1616 in Danzig, present day Gdansk. Here Adam was to achieve fame, like Marpeck, as an engineer of genius.

And, like Marpeck, Wiebe has been nearly forgotten, his birthdate unknown, despite the strange circumstance that his name yet survives in Gdansk with a Wiebe Wall, Wiebe Square, Wiebe Armoury, and Wiebe Bastion (the last two rather ironic for a pacifist Mennonite). Adam Wiebe may also be the ancestor of most people who now bear that name.<sup>5</sup> Wiebe overhauled Danzig’s water distribution system using wooden pipes that traversed the city and as a delightful byproduct were the source of numerous fountains. He was most admired, however, for his work on fortifications. Hostilities between Sweden and Poland threatened the very existence of Danzig, and Wiebe was contracted by city authorities to buttress walls and bastions. The result was Wiebe’s most spectacular achievement, the construction of Europe’s first cable car. In order to move massive amounts of earth for the building of bastions, Wiebe directed that a cable line be strung from the Bischoffsberg (Bishop’s Mountain) across the Radaune River. Buckets were filled there with earth, attached to the line, sent across the river to Danzig fortifications, and then returned empty by force of gravity. A copper engraving, which still survives, was etched of this feat; an overblown poem was written in Wiebe’s honour; and Riga, Warsaw, Thorn, and Elbing sought out his services.

Although he was to die in 1652 in debt, Adam Wiebe was an ambitious man who bought land near Pasewark shortly before his death. “A copper engraving that is stored in the Danzig Archives depicts the head of this man with clear, bright eyes in a small but energetic face. The powerfully formed nose and the eyebrows, the light wrinkles on the cheeks tell of the inventiveness and strength of this man” (board.ancestors.com). Adam Wiebe passed on his sense of enterprise to his two sons: Abraham Wiebe became Adam’s successor as Danzig engineer, and Jakob was a master waterworks builder along the Nogat River.

Mennonites would go on to commercial and business success in Russia and North America. Except for traditionalists such as the Amish, their farming days have long since vanished, in chronological terms certainly, but also culturally – Mennonites have largely urbanized and assimilated to the mainstream, and how often would one meet a young Mennonite with aspirations to agriculture? And yet, in the past, the rise of an entrepreneurial class has sometimes been a painful one, with supporters of ethnic values mistrustful of business men and women who crossed the boundaries of the village into a global ethos of competition, gain and loss.<sup>6</sup> Does some suspicion survive, perhaps, even today?

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### How my grandfather taught me to wrap presents

by Karl Olfert

My grandfather, Abram A. Olfert, appears to have found his entrepreneurial spirit early in life. He recounts in his autobiography, *The Invisible Hand*, that his father, while a successful farmer of over 1000 acres, was not a farmer at heart. My great-grandfather’s interest lay in the business world, and to that end he operated an agricultural implement dealership in addition to farming and other horticultural pursuits (56). Farming did not appeal to my grandfather either, even at that early age, other than to the extent he was able to tend to the motorized machinery (52). In comparing himself to his brothers, he said, “Driving a team of horses did not appeal to me. I was the business man, the entrepreneur of the family as my later life would show” (52).

<sup>5</sup> Adam Wiebe has recently appeared as a character in Rudy Wiebe’s most recent novel, *Sweeter than All the World*.

<sup>6</sup> For a thorough analysis of Mennonite community-entrepreneur relations, there is Calvin Redekop’s excellent *Mennonite Entrepreneurs*, with Stephen Ainlay and Robert Siemens (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1995).



My grandfather's early adult life, as with many in Russia at the time, was beset by war, revolution, famine, struggling to make ends meet, family displacement, two years of labour camp and, finally, emigrating to Canada in 1928 to join his family in southern Manitoba during the month of November. His difficult years in Russia, however, merely interrupted his business pursuits, for his entrepreneurial spirit was very much intact. According to him, there is not much to do during the winter months on a farm in southern Manitoba. "I did not enjoy being idle and soon an idea was beginning to form in my head. I would start a business, namely, a small store which I would operate from our home" (83). My grandfather had an idea and seized the opportunity, thus beginning a lengthy career in the business world. His creativity would carry him through paid, volunteer and other related pursuits until his death at age 100 years.



Abe Olfert

Photo Abbotsford Times

He had already retired once by the time he hired me, at the ripe age of 12, to work in the family printing business. For him, "retirement" was more about moving from one opportunity to another. The retirement, in this particular case, was from Funk's Supermarket to join in business with his son who had a printing concern. My grandfather quickly expanded that to selling instruments, stationery and Bibles. He hired me at the princely sum of 25 cents per hour, but anything was better than battling heat, spiders and thorns in the raspberry field. My job, under his guidance, was to work in the bindery part of the printing operation. This essentially meant finishing the printed project (collating, binding, sorting, packaging, etc.) and preparing for delivery to or pick up by the customer. Each job was to be carefully packaged for final delivery. Smaller jobs were to be wrapped in brown packaging paper.

On one occasion, Grandpa told me to re-wrap a package because it did not meet his quality control specifications. My grumbled retort suggested that it was no big deal because the customer would open it right away anyway – so what is the point? Indeed, I had seen some customers rip open the package to inspect the contents even before paying for it, though a sample was always attached to the outside of the package.

Grandpa's kindly but firm response was that this was beside the point. The primary objective, he noted, is always high quality customer service and high quality products. If the wrapping is neat and done with care, it shows the customer that we pay attention to detail, are concerned about customer satisfaction, and desire good customer relations. Almost 40 years later, that lesson is still with me.

Abram Olfert's gift was not necessarily his entrepreneurial spirit, although he had that in spades. He was able to discern a niche or need for a particular service or product and he creatively developed ideas and plans in response. More important, however, is the way he communicated his ideas and included others in implementing his plans. His friendly manner, easy laugh, clear communication and management style resulted in others participating in the solution, as opposed to complaining about the problem. My grandfather carefully built his various businesses and ventures one carefully wrapped package at a time.

### Level Ground Trading Ltd.

by Robert Martens

What do we think of when we drink a cup of coffee? Quality? Price? Does fair compensation to the coffee producer ever cross our minds? In 2007, the Business Examiner named Level Ground Trading the Vancouver Island Small Business of the Year. Level Ground was founded with the intention of trading "fairly and directly with small-scale producers in developing countries, and to market their products in North America, offering ... customers ethical choices."<sup>7</sup> Yes, but can idealism and business converge to make a profit?

"This award is very comprehensive; it recognizes all the components of what we do," said Stacey Toews, Director of Community Engagement and Level Ground co-owner. "Over 10 years, the question has always been, 'Yeah, they're nice, but do they know how to run a business?'"<sup>8</sup> The Business Examiner award indeed recognized Level Ground for ethical trade relationships, waste reduction initiatives, and environmental contributions such as minimal packaging, but also for a 22 percent increase in sales in 2007. Level Ground is a very successful firm.

The concept of dealing fairly with small-scale producers in order to alleviate poverty through independent development is nothing new to the Mennonite tradition. In fact, as Stacey Toews points out, MCC has practised fair trade for decades; one example is the Ten Thousand Villages stores, where producers of the items for sale are guaranteed a fair return (Level Ground Coffee is one of the products on sale). Stacey is concerned, however, that as

<sup>7</sup> [www.levelground.com](http://www.levelground.com)

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*



the idea of "fair trade" has become trendy, big players in the coffee market have entered the "politically correct" fair trade business, but may not have been entirely frank about how much of their product is actually based on ethical principles. Stacey outlined his vision of fair trade business in an online interview:

*1. Could you describe a little of your personal background.*

Born in Regina, raised in the prairies and on Vancouver Island, grew up in the public school system, always helping out on farms. Father was a CMA pastor, parents and grandparents on both sides offered the best of what was Mennonite: hard work, fair treatment of others, respect for God's word, passion for missions, etc. I graduated from Canadian Bible College in Regina (since moved to Calgary) and worked for a year in the Philippines with students and street people, and then worked for 6 years as a pastor of youth and English speaking ministries at a Chinese church in Victoria.

*2. Would you tell us something of the Level Ground Story.*

My wife, Laurie Klassen, and myself were married in '92. We hooked up with another family, Hugo and Tracey Ciro. This relationship started in '97 and so did Level Ground Trading. Laurie's family had extensive history with Hugo, who had been born and raised in Colombia. That was our key connection to coffee. Our business started out and has remained fully focused on justice for farmers and quality in the cup of customers. We saw lots of business models that were profiting from global trade and knew what we didn't like. But we wanted to provide an alternative to all that we didn't like so that people like ourselves in North America could have ethical choices in the marketplace. Our goal was that development and dignity would come about in producer communities and the lives of farmers with whom we traded because customers here in N.A. would purchase our products as a means of backing our mission.

*3. Have you found the fair trade concept a successful one? Do you think there are spiritual and human rights involved in this business?*

We've steadily grown. Customers have responded. Largest challenge has been the "copycat" behaviour of other businesses who have seen the "trendiness" of Fair Trade and have jumped on board. There are very few businesses that work in coffee like ourselves who purchase directly from farmers, pay above Fair Trade threshold prices, and work toward dialogue with producers, etc., as we do. Those businesses that do I respect and see as partners. Those who market to the customer telling them that this purchase they are making will make them "feel good" cause me concern for the entire movement because I see this diluting the effectiveness of fair trade and taking the focus off of the producer impact which is how the growth of the movement needs to be measured.

*4. Tell us about the award Level Ground recently received.*

Please look on YouTube or Happyfrog to view an approximately 6-minute video which shows me speaking about our awards. These include: Ethics in Action, EcoStar Award, WorkLife BC Award, and most recently we've been awarded the Vancouver Island Small Business of the Year.

*5. Is a sustainable economy possible? Does small business have a special role to play?*

Our business has a powerful role to play because it's providing jobs for staff that pay competitively, offer extended benefits, matching ethical RRSP contributions, growth bonuses shared by all staff, free recycling for staff households that encompass virtually all of their household waste, and even subsidies for low emission commuting to work. I have hope in a more sustainable future by seeing diversification of crops for farmers, stronger local economies, and possibly far less coffee trading for the planet.

Level Ground currently markets coffee, dried fruit and cane sugar originating with producers in Colombia, Bolivia, Peru, Tanzania and Ethiopia.

References: [www.levelground.com](http://www.levelground.com); Stacey Toews, telephone and online interviews.

**Community announcement:** On Thursday, February 26, 2009, Columbia Bible College and Mennonite Foundation of Canada invite you to attend their free *Wills and Estate Planning Seminars*. Session I: 9-11 a.m. Session II: 7:30-9:30 p.m. Refreshments will be provided. **Presenters are :** Clayton Loewen, Gerald Barkman and Sherri Grosz. To reserve, call 604-853-3567 ext. 344, or email: [advancement@columbiabc.edu](mailto:advancement@columbiabc.edu)



## Book Reviews

**Andreas Schroeder, *Renovating Heaven*. Lantzville: Oolichan Books, 2008. Reviewed by Robert Martens**

Letters like the one my father received on September 8, 1956, always caused consternation in the family.

For one thing, the address was typed, not handwritten. For another, the return address – BALLISTER, CLARK, MARSHALL & ROBSON – was printed in gilt-coloured ink. Only “the English” sent letters like that....

Such letters almost always meant trouble (13).



Andreas Schroeder, Erwin Cornelsen

These opening lines of Andreas Schroeder’s novel, *Renovating Heaven*, delineate the distinctiveness of traditional Mennonite culture from the “outside world” with affection, humour, and perhaps a hint of tragedy. The book in fact seems centred around distinctives, or contraries: comedy in contrast with tragedy; happiness with sorrow; respect with mockery; and family solidarity with dysfunction. In the end, however, Schroeder’s electrifying narrative may arrive at some kind of merging, an integration of randomness, bleakness, gratitude, understanding – all driven by the breaking of an insular Mennonite upbringing. Or the blessings of simply being human.

The novel is in three parts. The first, “Eating My Father’s Island,” tells the story of Peter Niebuhr’s childhood in Agassiz, BC, and is punctuated by the account of his parents’ meeting and marriage in wartorn Germany. The mother, Margarete, a woman of warmth and hidden talents, is the glue that holds the family together. On the other hand, Reinhard, the father, is a gloomy, defeated man, who “felt as if he was arriving just as everyone else was leaving” (20). The one break he receives in life, announced in the letter from “the English,” is the winning in a contest of an island. Perhaps, as Onkel Jacob suggests, this is “a low trick – exactly what you’d expect from the English. Father’s island was just a worthless heap of rocks and bush” (35). The local banker, however, isn’t so sure. The island just might be a promising investment, and for once Father’s pessimism, which generally provides him “with fewer problems within the Mennonite community” (36) than unseemly cheerfulness, is overcome by hope for the future. He purchases a car. He constructs a boat, dubbed the John 3:16, that turns out to be entirely unseaworthy. He is even invited to sit on the church fundraising committee. “Mother, who had consulted Romans 3:6, urged Father to accept. ‘You work too hard,’ she pointed out. ‘You should be able to sit down too, once in a while’” (58).

Eventually, however, the dream unravels. Despite the father’s very Mennonite work ethic – “The only holidays the Mennonites ever talked about involved heaven” (22) – the family’s finances deteriorate to the point of desperation. Peter experiences, for the first time, a frank conversation between his parents, and senses in his mother “the load of sorrow she carried all her adult life” (32). The farm is ultimately lost. The family moves to Vancouver. And the father, in a rare act of release, of letting go, sells the island. The sale is celebrated with a dinner, a kind of family communion, an “eating of the island.”

Part II, “Renovating Heaven,” begins with a brilliant comic episode about escapee rabbits, but darkness soon intrudes. Peter, now living with his family in Vancouver, grows away from the Mennonite culture that had held him like a womb. The title refers to the father’s obsessive and painfully slow renovation of the Niebuhr home. In the big city, ethnicity and community are alien concepts, and “[i]n the absence of any other common language, it was your house that told your neighbours everything about you” (90). Describing what “Mennonite” means can be awkward, perhaps nearly impossible, but Schroeder generally handles it deftly. “My father’s relationship with the Rest of the World was never very comfortable. This was, for the most part, quite intentional. Mennonites had always been told to avoid excessive contact with ‘The World,’ and Father took that instruction quite seriously” (89). Peter’s relationship with his father gradually crumbles, at times turning toxic. “The fact was that city life had been ploughing through our family cohesion like a bulldozer” (127). A death in the family occurs. The pain of that passing, as well as the influence of a girlfriend who can’t comprehend a culture that defines itself by “do nots,” impel Peter into a life of trendy and lonely rebellion. His father, afflicted by overwhelming feelings of guilt which only become clear near the novel’s conclusion, rejects his son’s poetic efforts, further widening the gulf between them. And finally, after decades of meticulous labour, the renovations are completed and the house is proudly sold. The ultimate twist in the plot, however, says more about hell than heaven.

In part III, “Toccata in D,” the sudden change to an interior, “novelistic” style is almost shocking. Two narratives are intertwined: the courtship of Reinhard and Margarete during World War II, and the journey of Peter,



now an adult, to Germany in a quest to learn something about the mysteries of his past. Schroeder's novel seems oddly real here, autobiographical, and indeed much of the book is his authentic history perforated by fiction. Peter finds the house where he was born: "Both the house and the church and even the nearby graveyard were so well kept and so orderly, it made me feel almost sad, even a little irritated, that so much of our history, all that love and anger, all those misunderstandings, anxieties and dreams, could have burned and danced in this place leaving so little outward sign of the struggle" (182). *Renovating Heaven* ends with the uncovering of a secret that turns the entire book upside down. The comedy of the first two sections now rings a bit hollow. Peter is faced with a suspension, an appalling comprehension, a confession that runs up against the harshest aspects of the Mennonite story. "It began to dawn on me why it might be simpler and easier to know, or to find, one's history irretrievably eradicated" (182). Yet his journey through the contraries of pain and laughter seems to reach, not a conclusion, as that is impossible, but a certain ineffable completeness.

**Connie Braun, *The Steppes are the Colour of Sepia*. Vancouver: Ronsdale, 2008.**  
reviewed by Helen Rose Pauls

Many Mennonite refugees who came to Canada after World War II are celebrating 60 years of peace and plenty this year, but most of their harrowing stories are still hidden, too difficult to recall, and unbelievable to those raised in Canada and to the privileged next generation.

Connie Braun tells the story of her father, Peter Letkeman, "who has reached the place not of remembering, because I truly think he never forgot, but of telling."

There is obvious trust between father and daughter as she retells his memories in a frank, descriptive way that does not shy away from the horrifying details: a life of fear, want, and shifting homelessness under Stalin's regime; the gulag incarceration of Grandfather; the trek to Germany; a daily struggle for food and shelter; working for several difficult hosts as a 15-year-old; farm labour and basket weaving to bring in much needed cash as the "head" of the family; the trip to Canada; and starting anew.

Throughout the book, the metaphor of water recurs: "river of time," "stream of memory," and Peter's father on his deathbed as a refugee recites the verse, "the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land...a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing from the hills to the valleys...a land where bread will not be scarce." The elder Letkeman's life of perseverance and trust in God in the face of oppression, violence, and war, built character that produced hope for the future of his family.

Near the end of the book, Connie, who was raised in Canada in peace and plenty, comments on the sweetness of her present life.

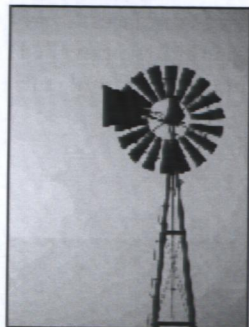
We need to read about the experiences of refugees to fully appreciate and be thankful for this sweetness, and we owe Peter Letkeman our thanks for allowing his daughter to recount his candid memories.

The book includes six maps and more than 25 black and white photos. Notes and a selected bibliography at the end of the book point the interested reader to other books on this topic.



Connie Braun

**Pete: Moving Manmaide Mountains. A scene from the film about Peter Friesen, Mennonite entrepreneur.**



*Clambering four stories above the hard prairie floor, Pete slips. He's barely two seconds from certain injury, perhaps death, when his outstretched left hand manages to grab a steel cross member.*

*He hangs there, twisting in the air, desperately seeking a foothold. Years of hard farm work have given Pete sinewy arms and hands, with the strength of a young adult, even though he is just seven years old. He hangs on and completes his climb to the top of the windmill to replace the broken part.*

*There is just one thought going through his head: "Was für ein dumkopf!" . . . He fixes the windmill, then, despite the cold, sits there thinking about where he went wrong.<sup>9</sup>*

Come see the film about North America's foremost mover of buildings, March 13, 7 p.m. at the Bakerview Gym, 2285 Clearbrook Rd.

<sup>9</sup> From [www.petethemovie.com/The\\_Man.htm](http://www.petethemovie.com/The_Man.htm)



## Celebrate the Lights

by Helen Lescheid



On Christmas eve, 1944, fifty kilometres from the front, and under threat of air strikes, Helen Lescheid's mother bundled up her four small children, ages 8 to 2, blew out the oil lamp, and slipped with them into the darkness. "Tonight we're going to a party," she said...

We stepped onto the crisp snow covering the farmyard. A moon crescent hung above a large house across the yard where the estate owners lived-kind people who treated us refugees well. It, too, was shrouded in darkness.

Mother lifted Katie and shuffled her to her back; she'd carry her piggyback for the five kilometres.

"Hang tight onto my coat collar," she coaxed. Then, turning towards us girls, she said, "You take Fred's hands." My younger sister and I complied. We had often taken care of our little brother while Mother had culled potatoes in the big barns or had done other chores for the landowners.

At the road, we stopped. Although I knew it well from my treks to school, I could barely make out the houses on either side of the street. No street lights were allowed now. Windows heavily draped permitted no light to seep out of the houses.

My mother hesitated for a brief moment. Then she said, "Come, we'll take the shortcut across the fields."

The snow crunched as four pairs of feet punched holes in the white expanse of open fields. Stars spangled the vault of sky above us. A blood-red glow smeared the eastern sky. At times, an explosion sent flames shooting into the sky.

"Girls, recite your poems to me." Mother's voice sounded a bit shaky. Her arms aching, she put Katie down on the snowy ground. Our recitations of Christmas poems made white puffs in the cold night air.

When we finished, Mother said, "Speak up loud and clear when your turn comes. No mumbling." She lifted Katie once more onto her back, and we began to walk again. On and on we walked. But we were far too excited to be tired.

Finally, we arrived at our friends' house. The door opened, and we stepped inside. I felt I had stepped into heaven itself. Lights! A whole roomful of lights.

Candlelight flickered from a small Christmas tree and bounced out of happy children's eyes. Heavily-draped windows kept the light inside-for us to revel in. Red paper chains decked the tree; delicate paper cherubs smiled down upon us.

We squeezed in amongst children and women sitting on the floor. Soon the room filled with singing: "Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht" (Silent Night, Holy Night). "Welch ein Jubel, welche Freude..." Some mothers sang alto, the rest of us, soprano. We sang, with gusto and from memory, songs that lifted our hearts above the terrors of war and inspired new hope for the days ahead.

I can't remember our long trek home that night, but I do remember the wonderful gifts I received. My right pocket bulged with the most beautiful ball I'd ever seen. A very colourful ball it was. Much later, I learned it had been made out of scrunched-up rags wrapped in rainbow-coloured yarn, probably gleaned from unravelling old sweaters. The other pocket held three cookies!

Soon after that wonderful Christmas party, we were evacuated. Icy winds blew snow into our faces as we cowered on an uncovered hay wagon pulled by two scrawny horses. With the front so close behind, we travelled day and night. Once it was safe to stop, we slept in drafty barns. We ate hunks of frozen bread and drank the occasional cup of milk supplied by a Red Cross jeep.

But the warm memory of that Christmas celebration shone like a small candle in the darkness.

Excerpted from the short story, "Celebrate the Lights" from *To Stand on Mountains*, a collection of stories and meditations by Helen Grace Lescheid. Essence Publishing, c2005. To order a copy, contact the author at [helenlescheid@shaw.ca](mailto:helenlescheid@shaw.ca) or by mail at 17-1973 Winfield Drive, Abbotsford, BC. V3G 1K6 A new edition of Lescheid's *Lead, Kindly Light* will be available in April, 2009. It's the true story of a mother with four small children, forced to flee Russia during World War II. Years of struggle finally bring the family to the freedom and safety of Canada. A triumphant tale of survival and victory!

