



Roots and Branches

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

Psalm 78

A Tale of Two Journeys: Mennonite Delegates and the Empress of Russia

This article continues the story, "From Danzig to Russia," begun in Roots and Branches Aug. 2014. See map on back cover for route.

By Louise Bergen Price

It was already the end of October 1786 when Johann Bartsch and Jakob Hoeppner, delegated by Mennonites in the Danzig area to search for a suitable homeland in South Russia, bid farewell to friends and families and boarded a sailing ship for Riga. Storms loomed on the Baltic, but the ship's captain reassured them: God had promised they would arrive safely.

After eight rough days at sea, the delegates disembarked in Riga. Snow had blanketed the city, transforming roads into winter highways for horse-drawn sleighs, and after a stop to rest and replenish supplies, the delegates were speeding their way to Dubrovna, a distance of about six hundred kilometres. Their next stop was Kremenchug, the capital of New Russia, nearly eight hundred kilometres away. Here they received advice on possible settlement areas from Potemkin. The last leg of their journey took them over seemingly endless steppe to Kherson, where they settled for the winter.



Portrait of Catherine the Great in travelling costume, 1787, by Mikhail Shibanov. Source: Wikipedia

Kherson, a new city at the mouth of the Dnieper, was in a state of frantic preparation for Empress Catherine II's visit, with 18,000 labourers at work building churches, barracks, and public buildings, as well as private homes. It was a cosmopolitan city whose shops boasted goods brought by merchant ships from Greece, Constantinople and France. On December 28, when Potemkin arrived for a final inspection, Bartsch and Hoeppner likely heard the burst of cannon fire that heralded the viceroy's arrival.

Throughout the winter and into the spring, whenever

the weather permitted, the two men scouted for an ideal place to settle up to three hundred Mennonite farmer families. Their requirements were fertile soil, water, trees for lumber, and ready access to market.

Eventually they decided on a site on the Lower Dnieper across from the town of Berislav. After drawing up a long list of conditions that would need
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Editorial

By Robert Martens

The story of Ukraine is a long and tortured one but marked by great resilience. It was founded as the Kievan Rus’ around 880 by Varangians moving south and enjoyed its “Golden Age” at the turn of the first millennium under Vladimir the Great, who turned the country to Byzantine Christianity. In the thirteenth century the region was devastated by Mongols. Thereafter, Ukraine became the victim of invasion and foreign dominance, particularly by Lithuania, Poland and Russia. It was finally absorbed into the Soviet Union in the 1920s and only re-gained its independence in 1991. The suffering continues: Ukraine is currently the target of Russian-supported invasion and of Western policy makers attempting to expand their economic hegemony.

For Russian Mennonites, Ukraine has achieved an almost mythical status. The country was known as South Russia when the first Mennonite immigrants arrived from Prussia. Louise Bergen Price’s article recounts the pomp and circumstance of Catherine the Great’s celebratory cavalcade into the Ukraine, part of which would then be awarded to Mennonite settlers. In the 1920s, the Russian civil war devastated the Ukraine and thousands of Mennonites flocked to Moscow in a bid to escape the destruction. Those who stayed were forced to endure the Stalinist holocaust that claimed millions of lives. These stories also appear in this issue.

When Mennonites living in Russia parted from each other, frequently they sang – in four-part harmony – the lovely and heartbreaking German hymn, *So nimm’ denn meine Hände und führe mich* (Take my hands and lead me). Today, North American Mennonites who fled Ukraine nearly a century ago enjoy riches that would have been unimaginable to their ancestors. Even so, the words of this hymn, which speak of God’s lost children wandering in the night, have not lost their power.

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to be met if interested families were to settle there, the delegates returned to Kremenchug to await Catherine’s arrival.

Catherine II’s tour

Catherine II’s diamond anniversary trip was meant to dazzle and impress. Her entourage of 2,300 souls left St. Petersburg in January, travelling in fourteen luxurious coaches outfitted with runners, 124 sleighs and forty freight wagons; at each stop, 560 fresh horses waited. Huge bonfires blazed along the road to light the way: “...it was thus that the proud Empress of the North, in the midst of the deepest night, willed and commanded that there should be light” (Ségur 9).

Catherine’s personal entourage of twenty-four included her senior courtiers as well as her lover, Alexander Dmitriev-Mamonov. Also included were foreign ambassadors of Austria (Count Cobenzl), England (Baron FitzHerbert), and France (Count de Ségur, who wrote the most detailed account of this voyage). Each morning at six, the empress met with her ministers, after which she breakfasted. By nine, the cavalcade was on its way. Evenings and nights were spent at the homes of wealthy landowners. After supper, Catherine entertained for some time, then retreated to work until eleven.

The first section of the trip, from St. Petersburg to Kiev, through forests, frozen marshes and numerous small towns and villages – a distance of over 1,000 kilometres – took twenty-two days. Now everyone settled in Kiev, waiting for the Dnieper to thaw. Catherine continued to work and to entertain; her attendants complained of boredom in the “majestic ruins and miserable barracks” of the city (Ségur 42).

On May 1, amidst pomp and splendour, Catherine and her attendants boarded eleven galleys, each with its own toilet, bedroom, sitting room and orchestra. The galleys were accompanied downriver by a fleet of eighty boats. In his memoir, Ségur writes that “[t]he snow had disappeared: a beautiful verdure covered the earth; the country was enamelled with flowers; a brilliant sun animated

and enlivened every object. The air resounded with the harmonious music of our galleys” (93).

Village homes along the Dnieper were embellished with garlands of flowers and arches to simulate castles; townsfolk dressed in their finest staged folk dances in the empress’ honour. While some of this display may have been “smoke and mirrors” for the empress’ benefit, the travellers also noticed large numbers of flourishing immigrant villages: Greeks, Germans and Poles, as well as villages of discharged soldiers and sailors. Population in the area had increased from 240,000 at the beginning of Potemkin’s administration to the current 800,000 (108).

On May 11, the royal party reached Kremenchug. Here again, Potemkin had done all in his power to impress his empress: “A mansion of large extent, built and arranged according to the taste of the Empress; an English garden, into which the magic of Prince Potemkin had caused trees of extraordinary size to be transplanted at great expense; a charming prospect, varied by wood, water and flowers; twelve thousand men newly armed and equipped; all the nobility of the government assembled and richly dressed; a collection of merchants from all parts of the empire” (107). A highlight for Catherine was a mock battle that included forty-five squadrons of cavalry, numerous infantry and a corps of Cossacks.

The delegates meet the empress

Johann Bartsch and Jakob Hoeppner were already in Kremenchug when the royal entourage arrived. On May 13, Catherine, “according to her custom, which she never varied” (110), gave audience to those who appeared: traders, clergy, authorities. It was likely at this point that she requested a meeting with the two Mennonite delegates.

Hoeppner and Bartsch had been coached on

how to act in front of Her Majesty, and were prompt to kiss the proffered hand. Then Hoeppner addressed the empress in her native tongue. He explained that

they were deputized by three hundred Mennonite families to search for suitable lands in response to Her Majesty’s invitation. Now they were overjoyed to see the “eternal Majesty’s gracious countenance” and to “beg the protection and grace of her Majesty” (Hildebrandt 16).

Catherine seems to have been taken with the two men – they were, after all, well-spoken and fairly young (Hoeppner was 39 and Bartsch only 30) – and invited them to accompany her entourage to Crimea. An invitation by the empress was equal to an order and the deputies professed themselves willing to go.

According to an account that may be apocryphal, Potemkin asked Hoeppner what impression he had gained of the empress. Hoeppner remarked that he had a good impression; however, he had noticed that she had a slight squint.

Potemkin was astonished. “You’re an audacious fellow,” he said. “Counts and ambassadors – let alone ordinary mortals – approach the Empress with downcast eyes, and you’ve looked directly into her face. But you are correct about her eyes” (Peters 9).

The royal flotilla trip down the Dnieper was leisurely, due in part to ships occasionally running aground. Along the banks, travellers saw settlements of Zaporizhian Cossacks, once “destructive robbers,” now become “an obedient and laborious people” (Ségur 110).

Meanwhile, Emperor Joseph II of Austria was impatiently awaiting Catherine’s arrival in Kherson, the two monarchs proposing to discuss a possible military alliance against the Turks. When the barges again ran aground on May 19, Catherine and a small group headed south by carriage, meeting the emperor in Kaydak, just above the first of the rapids that would put an end to the river cruise segment of the journey.



Memorial pillar of Catherine's visit to Crimea. Photo: Louise Bergen Price

The following day the entire assembly travelled by carriage to the Cossack town of Polovytisia where Catherine II laid the foundations of a new city, Ekaterinoslav (“Catherine’s Glory”).

To the Crimea

The river cruise now over, the royal assembly travelled south by coach. Ségur recounts that “[o]n leaving Ekaterinoslaff, we entered upon what is called in Russia the steppes – vast and solitary meadows altogether destitute of trees, and varied only at great intervals by hillocks quite bare, with some paltry rivulets winding at their feet. We often traversed seven or eight leagues without encountering a man, a house or a bush” (114).

One can imagine that the deputies, who had seen their prospective home in winter and early spring, would have welcomed the opportunity of seeing it in the bloom of summer. Years later, Gogol would describe a journey to South Russia in these words: “The whole surface of the earth looked like a green-gold ocean, upon which were sprinkled millions of different flowers. Through the tall, slender stems of the grass peeped light-blue, dark-blue and lilac corn-flowers; the yellow broom thrust up its pyramidal head; the parasol-shaped white flowers of the yarrow dotted its surface. A wheat-ear, brought God knows whence, was filling out to ripening. ... Devil take you, Steppe, how beautiful you are ! ...” (Gogol).

The distance from Ekaterinoslav (today Dnepropetrovsk) to Kherson is just over three hundred kilometres, a distance the royal party, with fresh horses waiting along the way, covered in three days.

Meanwhile, the Turks, watching from the sidelines as Catherine flaunted her new acquisitions, were not idle. Near Ochakov, where Catherine wished to cross over to Kilburn, ten Turkish vessels positioned themselves across the Dnieper. According to Ségur, Catherine renounced her plans with “very evident vexation. There being nothing which could any longer delay us, we set out for the Crimea...” (119).

The Crimean peninsula was a recent acquisition of the Russian Empire. Part of the Ottoman Empire for three hundred years, it had become a Russian

protectorate in 1774. Nine years later, Russia summarily annexed the territory and immediately set about building the Black Sea fleet to protect her claim. Turkey was furious, and readied for war.

Catherine did not let the threat of a future war spoil her journey. If the trip down the Dnieper had been extravagant, the opulence of the Crimean tour left nothing to be desired. Newspapers all over the world reported on the extravagant balls, fireworks and other festivities. These reports were read by the delegates’ friends in Danzig who were, no doubt, in awe of the deputies’ experience, but likely wondered how two simple Mennonite men, a merchant and a farmer, were adjusting to all this magnificence.

The royal tour almost ended in tragedy when Catherine’s heavy coach, pulled by spirited horses, went out of control as it descended to the ancient Khanate town of Bakhchysarai. The company watched in horror, expecting the carriage to be dashed to pieces on the rocks, until it finally came to a stop. Catherine seemed unfazed by the experience, and the tour continued without further incident, visiting several sites in Crimea before embarking on the return trip through Kremenchug to St. Petersburg.

Mission to St. Petersburg

Hoeppner and Bartsch remained in Kremenchug, waiting for Potemkin to finalize the terms of their agreement. After they finally received their twenty-point petition on July 15, they asked for permission to continue to St. Petersburg to request a royal charter of privileges. When Potemkin assured them that there was no need – his word should suffice – the delegates replied that a viceroy’s position was temporary, but a charter signed by the empress would be valid forever. Hearing this, Potemkin not only agreed to their request, but awarded them several ducats for the journey.

Their mission almost complete, the delegates now boarded a stagecoach for St. Petersburg. On July 22, with the city almost in sight, the courier misjudged the speed of his horses, and the stagecoach overturned. Hoeppner’s leg was broken. When Hoeppner worried about how he could appear in court without his boots, he was relieved to hear that the dress code at court required shoes and stockings

rather than boots.

While Hoeppner and Bartsch waited for an audience, Catherine II was dealing with two grim realities: famine and war. The famine, the fourth such during her reign, was so severe that Russian nobles were receiving no money from their estates, but had to feed their peasants (serfs) from their own pockets. Catherine’s response was to put an end to fêtes and to scold landlords who had allowed their people to starve. Where earlier she had dispensed boatloads of oranges, there were now bread carts. Yet her empathy was short lived, as Prince de Ligne reported in his rather snide manner: “A cloud obscured for a moment the august and serene brow of CATHERINE THE GREAT: she shut herself up with two of her ministers and only recovered her gayety as she got into the carriage” (Ligne 41-42).

It was not as easy to dismiss the threat of war. After a few weeks of posturing on both sides, Turkey sent an ultimatum that Russia evacuate Crimea and the shoreline of the Black Sea. Russia rejected Turkish demands. On August 10, 1787, Turkey declared war.

Although Hoeppner and Bartsch would likely have read about the war in newspapers of the day, they did not realize the direct impact this war would have on their settlement schemes. From St. Petersburg, the delegates sent a *Schreiben* (written document) home to reassure their families that all was well. Bartsch’s letter to his wife, Susanna, is a very careful one, with no overt mention of the business at hand, and one wonders if the deputies suspected that Danzig authorities, trying to hinder migration, might intercept and read their mail: “...This is probably the last letter I will ever in my life write to you *from Russia*” Bartsch writes [my italics]. “We have basically finished everything we set out to do... As things stand now, our affairs are being wound up, but I cannot say when we will get there...” (Klippenstein 81).

On August 27, the deputies received a summons to appear at court to meet the Tsarovich Paul and his wife, Maria Feodorovna. Paul did not allow them to kiss his hand, as was the custom; rather, he leaned forward and kissed each man on the cheek.

Now events gathered speed. Count Bezborodko, the chancellor, drew up the document in

abbreviated form; it was signed by Catherine II in the presence of the delegates on September 7, and counter signed by Bezborodko. Finally, the delegates, accompanied by Georg Trappe, were free to head home with the good news of a new future for their people on the fertile fields near Berislav.

Potemkin, also pleased with the results, wrote to his Scottish banker, “As her Imperial Majesty has deigned to accord privileges to the Mennonites who wish to come to settle in the Government of Ekaterinoslav ... be so good as to prepare the necessary sums in Danzig, Riga and Kherson for their voyage and settlement” (Montefiore 282).

Their mission over, Johann Bartsch and Jakob Hoeppner were finally free to head home. They arrived in Danzig to great fanfare on November 11. A new chapter in the story of the Mennonites was about to begin.

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The Martyrdom of Jacob Rempel

By Robert Martens

In recent years, Russian Mennonite memoirs have become commonplace, and are testament to the survival of the human spirit. These memoirs, however, are the stories of the “winners,” of those who escaped the atrocities of the Soviet Union and eventually lived comfortable lives in North America. The account of Jacob A. Rempel’s life, *Ältesten J. A. Rempels Lebens- und Leidensgeschichte* (Elder J. A. Rempel’s Story of Living and Suffering), is profoundly different. P. A. Rempel, Jacob’s brother, was stricken with grief and rage when he wrote this booklet in 1946 shortly after learning of his sibling’s death. Yet even his simple and elegant prose pales in comparison with the stark vividness of Jacob’s letters, on which this short biography is fundamentally based. Perhaps only a first-hand account can adequately convey the horrors of Stalin’s Soviet Union and its vast complex of prison camps: the Gulag.

Born April 9, 1883, in Heuboden (near Nikopol), Jacob was the oldest in a family of thirteen. He was a precocious child. Although the family frequently moved, Jacob excelled in school and acquired a reputation as a bookworm. He especially loved mathematics. As a young adult, Jacob taught for a brief time in a *Judenplan* village, where Mennonites were mandated by the Russian government to live side by side with Jews and teach them the art of agriculture. He subsequently acquired his teacher’s licence in Orenburg and taught Mennonite students in Neuhorst, Chortitza Colony. Apparently, young Jacob sowed his wild oats – the details in this booklet are unspoken – but eventually stated his aspiration to be a missionary. A wealthy Mennonite mill owner thereupon took Jacob under his wing and sponsored his education at the *Predigerschule* (Preachers School) in Basel, Switzerland, from 1906 to 1912. These were probably the best years of Rempel’s life. He revelled in the learning experi-

ence, filling the gaps in his education by enrolling in theology and philosophy courses at the city university.

Rempel’s years in Basel, however, were a bit of a culture shock: [11 Mar. 1907] “Liberalism reigns in Basel. May God protect me from it” (11).^{*} And this deeply religious young man often felt inadequate to the challenge: [31 Dec. 1910] “How wonderful this year was! How much joy it has brought me! Each evening I could lie down in a soft bed, and wake up

“Without love the world is dead.”

in the morning strengthened and healthy. I have perhaps nothing to regret. Nothing? Oh yes. I have often wept and trembled over my own self. God is so good! He loves me” (11). But he never lost his intense idealism: [26 Apr. 1910] “For love I could give up everything. For love, that God creates in us to connect us with others. Without love the world is dead. People despair even of themselves. Only by pure, spiritual love. The greatest evils in the world are

brought about by lack of love. The greatest accomplishments of humankind spring from love. The greatest men were optimists. They saw the good side of people, they knew the power of love” (12).

In 1912 Rempel’s studies were interrupted. He was reluctant to leave Basel, but he needed to return home to help out his family, and anticipated a newly-offered teaching job in Chortitza with delight: [30 Jan. 1912] “To be there, to live there, to be surrounded by youth, to describe the struggles of the forefathers with love and warmth, to lead them into contemporary life, to raise their gaze to God, to step into the world of the people – weary from the burdens of the day, plagued by care – to sing alongside them in the Song until their breasts swell with the love of life: that will be a joy for me” (12-13). Back in Russia, Rempel found satisfaction in his teaching career, and he also fell in love. He described marriage with his typical youthful idealism: [16 Mar. 1911] “I want to be ready to taste life, to be joyful, to make joyful, I will call a woman directly into my heart: Here I bring you the entire world, a whole

heaven” (13).

In 1914 Jacob married Mariechen Sudermann, and the couple were blessed with two children. Then commenced what seems an endless chain of tragedy for Jacob Rempel. Mariechen died of the global Spanish flu epidemic in 1918; her death occurred as the Russian Empire was collapsing into chaos – what the writer P. A. Rempel calls “the dance of Death.” Even while the Mennonite colonies were disintegrating, however, Jacob was asked to pastor the church at Neu Chortitza. Rempel was shocked by the invitation: [24 Apr. 1919] “I will not write of this sudden and overpowering event. I don’t have the inner calm to express it in words” (15). Rempel was clearly a man of high sensitivity, distressed by the call to leadership in revolutionary Russia, but he accepted. In 1921, he also married a second time, to Sophie Sudermann, sister of his deceased wife. It was to be a close marriage but fractured by the colossal evils of the time.

Rempel wrestled with the idea of emigration, but eventually decided against it; he did not want to abandon his calling as elder. In 1925 he travelled to Switzerland as a delegate to the four hundred years jubilee of the Mennonite/Anabaptist church. From there he wrote, “It is something else to be outside of Russia. I think one could forget everything here and start a new life. But the suffering at home, the great church communities – they call me powerfully. One can emigrate with wife and child, but not with the community” (16). When Rempel returned home to Russia, conditions there seemed to improve for a time. He decided he would stay in Russia with his family and work on a Bible school project – if that did not work out, he said, he would emigrate. By the time the project collapsed, however, it was too late. [17 July 1928] “All the passes are finally blocked. Yet we stand firm. Is that God’s will, or human counsel?” (18)

What P. A. Rempel calls the martyrdom of his brother was about to begin. In the dead of night Jacob Rempel and his family were thrown out of their home. Even in this, the Rempels found spiritual meaning: [6 Oct. 1929] “In the beginning I was worried about Sophie. Now she’s proved to me that



Jakob Aaron Rempel.
Photo: <http://www.martyrstories.org>

she’s just as strong as I am. ‘Now we’re free of everything!’ – that was her answer to the theft of our home. No earthly possessions weigh us down, nothing binds us to any place. The heavens are our home” (20). But there was despair as well, as the family joined thousands of desperate people in Moscow, hoping to get out of Russia before the doors closed: [8 Sept. 1929] “Next week begin the wanderings with my wife and six children. We ought to be afraid, but we rejoice that we can suffer and die together. At the walls of Moscow we wish to die along with our children, to be with our Father above. Sing us then our song of the grave” (19).

The details of Jacob’s life from here on, writes P. A. Rempel, are scanty; what is known is drawn mostly from letters. Jacob was arrested, spent some seven months in the notorious Lubyanka prison, then was sentenced to ten years in Solovki, a large labour camp on the Solovetsky Islands in the White Sea: [29 June 1930] “We are travelling the greatest

ways of suffering because of our faith. Seven and a half months the torments of hell, now ten years more. God help us. ... Send me my winter things, my furs, etc. I'm on the way to Solovki. We can't see each other again until summer 1931. ... Don't despair, my beloved wife. Kiss the children. Your beloved, a suffering witness for Christ" (23).

Amidst the horrors of the prison camp, Jacob deteriorated in both mind and body. P. A. Rempel pieces together evidence that he tried to escape, that he was recaptured, and that he nearly died of typhus. In 1934 Jacob wrote Sophie, describing himself almost manically in the third person: "In previous years he considered himself poor. What must he say now? He is struggling with himself even today, on whether to mention how terrible conditions are. His nerves are stretched, his heart sick, hard work and a struggle to exist. ... He tore up a draft of a letter that ended with 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' Yes, my love, don't be shocked. His wanderings lead through a deep and foggy night in which there are no stars" (27).

In 1934 Rempel once more escaped the camp, and over that winter received the care of fellow Mennonites. During that time he meditated on Jesus' command to hate the world for His sake: "Therefore, all alone, separated from all people and earthly support, only then is it possible for God to protect, not from ruin or suffering, but from despair. I had to learn that earthly love is a hindrance, and that only the power of hate [Luke 14:26] leads to the place where one is truly free and has room for the power of God. The denial of the most precious things on earth must be lived in word and deed" (31). But despair and mental breakdown remained a threat: [26 June 1935] "We have only one wish – to die. And if it weren't outright suicide, we'd refuse all help and leave this world behind. All that remains for us is to live a beggar's life until the Lord finds another way for us" (32).

Rempel managed to visit his near-starving family, but was unable to find work to support

them, and once again was arrested. Because of poor health he was given a clerical job in the work camp. On December 2, 1937, he managed to write a long love letter to his family, addressing first his children, and then Sophie, his wife: "Thoughts of you have driven me nearly mad. Yes, in April and May 1936 I actually did lose my reason. That [madness] has gone, and disappeared completely in April 1937, when I was sentenced. Now I've reached a place of calm. I know that God has chosen me for this, so I

"Rempel's booklet contains the story of a life in which there is no divine rescue..."

will carry the burden with dignity. To be sure it would be easier for you and for me if I were to die. But I'm so thankful to God that he has found me worthy to experience all this. I trust Him, and await from Him a way out of my plight. May God defend you all, my loved ones, from despair. A heartfelt greeting for all, all" (34).

Rempel's sufferings, however, seemed unbearable and had no end. Soon he again suffered from mental and emotional collapse. Details of his later life are scarce. In 1945, however, his brother in Canada learned that Jacob had been shot along with five other men in the winter of 1941, during the German army's apparently unstoppable advance towards Moscow. P. A. Rempel's booklet contains the story of a life in which there is no divine rescue, and all ends bleakly.

Why then did he write it? At the request of friends, he says, and of course to raise funds and to help out Jacob's surviving family. But also, he writes, "because I personally believe that we are responsible to our martyrs, and that we must acknowledge them in this way" (7). His brother Jacob, he says, was worthy to say along with Paul, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." (II Tim. 4:6)

*All translations from the original book are by R. Martens.

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"No Place on the Planet. No Home but Heaven: Mennonites and Jews on the Move" A talk by Dan Unrau

Reported by Robert Martens

On November 1, 2014, at Bakerview MB Church in Abbotsford, Dan Unrau, writer, speaker, and storyteller, gave a talk on the similarities between Mennonites and Jews – and the differences.

He began with a story. In the 1980s, Unrau was a student at Jerusalem University College, and in one of his classes, a female Conservative rabbi remarked, "Of course we Jews insist that our children date and marry Jews only." The students in the class "were more than mildly outraged at the notion of such narrow thinking and parental, religious control." Amidst the uproar, Unrau "finally chimed in. 'I know what she's talking about,' [he] said, 'I'm Mennonite.'"¹

Another story: Unrau related that "my devout mother never asked once, in my girl-chasing years, whether a girlfriend was a Christian – she just wanted to know what the girl's last name was." In his home, said Unrau, being Mennonite was a declaration of both faith and of culture. It also meant being part of a peoplehood. In fact, on one occasion, when asked what her nationality was, Unrau's mother replied, "Mennonite."

As Unrau began studying Judaism and the Jewish people, he encountered what were for him some startling similarities between the peoplehood of Jews and of Mennonites. Both are defined culturally and/or religiously, he said. And the story of each is that of people on the move. An elderly Jewish man in Tel Aviv once asked Unrau "if Mennonites, too, kept their hats on all the time, as they knew they'd probably have to get going soon."

Midway through the evening, Unrau temporarily surrendered the stage to Richard Thiessen, who sketched the history of the "Russian Mennonite" stream. Generally, said Thiessen, the story of Mennonites in emigration follows a standard three-part pattern: (1) Mennonites are invited by particu-

lar authorities to settle down in a given area, and typically then carry on with very little interference from government; (2) the government eventually restricts the liberties and rights of the Mennonite settlers; (3) the Mennonites relocate.

In the last half of his talk, Unrau outlined some differences between Mennonite and Jewish peoplehood. Jews, who traditionally have emphasized righteousness over theology, hearken back to a Covenant, a land promised by Yahweh to his people. This Covenant is "held sacred" even by secular Jews. Mennonites, in contrast, have adopted the sentiment of the hymn, "This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through." There was no ultimate promised land for Mennonites – only the promise of God's grace and guidance.

And both groups, Unrau said, have been on the move for centuries. Jews, however, have been driven from land to land by racism and murder. "Despite enormous hardships for both Mennonite and Jewish people, [migration] has been rather more uncomplicated for Mennonites than for Jews." Mennonites were seeking peace, self-determination, economic opportunity, and exemption from military duty, among other things, and their migrations were often partially voluntary.

But the similarities are great as well. Both Jews and Mennonites have moved "with a huge sense of destiny and community, a people committed to their own identity and their understanding of God in their lives – if they harboured a spiritual sense – and if not, at least by a shared language."

Unrau concluded the evening by dividing the audience into discussion groups and asking them to consider a series of questions. For example, "Has it been a blessing or a curse to have, or not have, a believed biblical injunction to a certain piece of land?" Is it possible, Unrau asked, that the concept of a "promised land" is in fact a curse? And are Mennonites, by contrast, fortunate to have considered themselves pilgrims who are "just a-passing through?"

¹ All quotations are taken from Dan Unrau's own script for the evening.

MB Studies project grants awarded

From a press release by Jon Isaak, executive secretary, MB Historical Commission

Andrew Dyck, Nina Schroeder and Gil Dueck are the 2014 recipients of the first MB Studies projects grants. Each award comes with a grant of \$2,500. The Historical Commission is pleased to make these awards, noting that these projects represent the kind of work that it wants to support, encourage, and fund.

Andrew Dyck, well-known in BC as the former pastor of King Road MB and, more recently, Highland Community Church, teaches at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, and is a PhD candidate at International Baptist Seminary in Prague. His project title is *The Place of Contemplative Practices within the Spirituality of Canadian Mennonite Brethren*. Dyck is making a detailed description of the spiritual life of Mennonite Brethren over the past 165 years, including ways in which Mennonite Brethren have appropriated practices from other Christian groups. He hopes the project will promote “engagements marked by generosity, discernment, and integrity among people of diverse Christian traditions.”

Future Event

Path of Thorns: Soviet Mennonite Life under Communist and Nazi Rule

With Dr. Harvey L. Dyck. Presented by MHSBC
Friday, 17 April 2015 at 7:00 pm
Admission free, light refreshments included
Clearbrook MB Church, 2719 Clearbrook Road, Abbotsford, BC

Jacob Neufeld’s extraordinary memoir documents his imprisonment in a Soviet labour camp in the 1930s, and his epic trek out of the Soviet Union, first to Germany in 1943 and then to Canada in 1949. Harvey Dyck, emeritus professor of history at the University of Toronto, translated and edited the memoir and, based on his deep understanding of Soviet Mennonite history, wrote the introduction and analysis. Dyck will talk about the relevance of this remarkable book to the present generation.

Nina Schroeder of Winnipeg is currently a PhD student at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario. Her project title is *Picturing Anabaptism: Mennonites and the Art Market in the Dutch Golden Age*. Schroeder is exploring 17th-century Mennonite artistic engagement and how it contributed to Anabaptist cultural and religious heritage. She hopes the project “will shed new light on a period of Anabaptist history that has many fascinating parallels with the current urban Mennonite experience in North America.”

Gil Dueck teaches at Bethany College in Hepburn, Saskatchewan, and is a PhD candidate at Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, Netherlands. His project title is *Faith Development in Emerging Adulthood: Toward a Developmental Theological Anthropology*. Dueck is pairing a theological engagement with the question of faith development among emerging adults, paying particular attention to the Canadian Mennonite Brethren context. He hopes “this research can both fill an existing ‘developmental gap’ in the theological anthropology of the Canadian Mennonite Brethren church, while affirming and clarifying its historic emphasis on personal, experiential faith.”

The MB studies project grants are made possible with support from US and Canadian Mennonite Brethren Churches. See www.mbhhistory.org for information on these awards and other research grants and internships offered by the MB Historical Commission.



Nina Shroeder



Gil Dueck



Andrew Dyck

BOOK REVIEWS

John B. Toews, translator and editor. *Mennonites in Ukraine Amid Civil War and Anarchy (1917-1920)*. Fresno: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 2013. 198 pp.

Reviewed by Robert Martens

John B. Toews’ most recent publication is a compilation of documents describing the extreme violence Mennonites experienced in the Ukraine following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Many of the documents were written during this time of violence, and they are remarkably vivid, sometimes appalling. At their worst, the descriptions of brutality and suffering are not for readers with weak stomachs. They offer an important “inside view,” as Toews puts it, into those years that have become the stuff of legend in Russian Mennonite memory. However, those documents that were written during the panic of the moment, writes Toews, often exhibit minimal understanding of the gigantic historical forces that were engulfing the Mennonite colonies: “They reflect the experiences of ordinary people writing about what was for them a world in chaos” (ix).

In his excellent introduction (although there are some editing/proofing glitches), Toews outlines the history of the Ukrainian Mennonite colonies between 1917 and 1920. After the October Revolution of 1917, the Soviets occupied the Ukraine and with their incompetence generally undid what Mennonites (and German-speaking Lutherans and Catholics) had accomplished over many decades in southern Russia. Theft and violence became commonplace. In the 1918 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, Russia ceded the Ukraine to German control, and it is no surprise that Mennonites generally welcomed the relative stability that followed.

In post-revolutionary Russia, however, violence still threatened the Ukraine. Militias roamed the land contending for power. Three personalities dominated the scene: Simon Petlyura, a Ukrainian nationalist fighting for independence; the Cossack Ataman Grigor’ev, whose aspirations seemed to shift with the wind; and most important, Nestor Ma-

khno, who would become the scourge of the Mennonite colonies. After being freed from prison following the Bolshevik Revolution, Makhno returned to his Ukrainian homeland, where he raised an army of thousands of fighters fuelled by vodka and resentment.

After the German occupying army entered the Ukraine in April 1918, the German military asked for support in defending the land against the various militias. German-speaking Lutheran and Catholic villagers, lacking any tradition of pacifism, were quick to respond positively. Mennonites, however, vacillated. The principle of nonresistance had been fundamental to their beliefs for hundreds of years: could they simply turn their backs on it now? In light of the murders and rapes taking place in their colonies, however, many felt it was time to fight back, and soon a Mennonite *Selbstschutz* (self-defence force) joined Lutherans, Catholics, and the German army in defending their land. An All-Mennonite Conference finally assembled in Lichtenau, Molochna Colony, between June 30 and July 2, 1918, to discuss the issue. After a debate that frequently turned rancorous, it was determined that the Mennonite churches would reaffirm their non-resistant stance, but that it was up to the individual to decide whether he would take up arms. In a sense, this was a decision taken “after the horse was out of the barn”: some young Mennonites, attracted by the romance of military life, had already donned the German uniform as early as April of that year.

The creation of the *Selbstschutz* resulted in disaster. In October 1918 the German army withdrew from the Ukraine after Germany surrendered to the Allies. In the absence of any stabilizing government, roaming forces, especially those under the command of Makhno, exacted a terrible revenge upon young Mennonite men defending their land.¹ Some Mennonite soldiers retreated to the Crimea, some hid, others were executed by Makhno’s men or by the Soviets.² Mennonite villages were attacked and burned, women were raped, men were tortured and killed.

Why, asks Toews, was the *Selbstschutz* formed so quickly and with such little opposition, in contra-

vention of the long-standing Mennonite value of nonresistance? In light of the brutality of Makhno's militias in particular, it is easy to understand the urge to defend village and family. There were other factors as well, writes Toews. In the Mennonite colonies, where church ministers shared control of the villages with Mennonite mayors, in a sense the distinction between church and state had been lost. The voices of Mennonite ministers who favoured nonresistance were frequently shouted down: "Perhaps there were those in the community whose values favoured the state rather than those of the church" (3). Additionally, Mennonite ministers themselves were unsure of the principle of nonresistance: they had been influenced by visiting German evangelicals who emphasized personal piety over social behaviour. Finally, non-participation in the military had been a privilege granted by the Russian state to Mennonites for so long that the idea of nonresistance had become mere background noise.

Toews writes that the prevailing spirit of evil was contagious: "Historians prefer to speculate on issues relating to cause and effect rather than address the question of human evil. ... [Makhnovites] had regressed to the degree that the ongoing horror seemed to be a normal state of affairs. They rode out again and again and committed the same atrocities. What occurred went well beyond righting past wrongs or addressing economic irregularities. ... In the prevailing chaos the normal balance between evil and goodness moved unequivocally toward evil. ... In the name of self-protection and idealistic causes, Mennonites unwittingly began to participate in the mass violence engulfing them" (7-8).

The documents Toews has compiled and translated focus on the violence that occurred in the colonies of Khortitsa, Molochna, Yazykovo, Borosenko, and Ignatyev. Many of these accounts are chilling. For example, in an article written in 1926 for the *Mennonitische Rundschau*, David Quiring describes his experience of the 1919 Eichenfeld massacre – in which seventy-nine men and three women were murdered in one day – with a vividness that is nearly unbearable. As appalling as that mas-

sacre was, there seems to have been some Mennonite provocation by the *Selbstschutz*. Peter von Kampen (apparently a former German soldier), one of the strongest leaders of the Mennonite self-defence forces, seems to have been something of a sociopathic killer, leading Mennonite militias who took no prisoners and who shot starving Russian villagers coming to Mennonite villages looking for assistance. Shortly before the Eichenfeld massacre, von Kampen and his men travelled to Eichenfeld, surrounded the building where the village council was domiciled, and then murdered them (152).

Toews' book ends with the little-known events that took place in Batum, Georgia, to which several hundred Mennonites fled in the hope of emigrating from there to North America. Very few of these managed to escape the Soviet Union; at least twenty percent died in appalling circumstances of tropical diseases such as malaria. Just before he tells those stories, though, Toews inserts some light into the picture with a few beautifully articulated reflections on the Ukrainian violence written by individuals such as Mennonite leader B. B. Janz. Another such voice is that of Abraham Kroeker, who continued to publish the *Friedensstimme* (*Voice of Peace*, a Mennonite newspaper) under dangerous conditions in 1919. These men write with exceptional grace.

The following excerpt is not typical of the documents in this volume; in fact, with the wide diversity of points of view represented, no one document could be called "typical." This excerpt brings to life some of the fears and abuses associated with the birth of the *Selbstschutz*.

G. J. Derksen, "The Founding of the *Selbstschutz*." (pp. 88-89, no date of writing cited)

In the Halbstadt District

The beginnings were already there when the German army recruited for the [military] drills. There was also the indecisive position [taken by] the [All-Mennonite] Conference. Now the *Selbstschutz* adherents themselves took action. There was a general

meeting of [settlement] representatives in the Mennonite Brethren Church in Ruekenau under the chairmanship of H. Schroeder. As already indicated, banditry emerged everywhere after the withdrawal of the German Army. Now the consequences of seeking revenge and forcibly reclaiming stolen goods [under the German occupation] became apparent. Four armed and mounted riders were of no consequence. A proposal was presented: the mobilization of all men between thirty and thirty-seven. There was no inclination to tolerate the nonresistant or respect their faith and conscience. A respected representative from Rosenort, P. Bergmann, who for many years had advised the district as a tax expert, tried to point to Mennonite history and God's help [in the past].

"Out with you!" they shouted.

When he tried to speak a second time the chairman screamed, "Take him out!" The pacifists were silenced and a resolution for general mobilization was passed. In Blumenort a youth refused to take arms on the grounds of conscience. "Hang your conscience on the twig-fence." He was laid over a saddle and "made willing." Unfortunately that was not the only instance. Various methods [of persuasion] were found.

District Assembly in Gnadenfeld

The main agenda item related to the arming of the *Selbstschutz*. Delegates appeared from all villages at the Gnadenfeld *volost* (administrative unit). Abram Rempel from Gnadenfeld was elected as chairman of the meeting and [as head of] the *Selbstschutz*. Rev. D. Janzen of the Mennonite church in Rudnerweide had the courage and trust in God to warn his fellow citizens. He dared to point to God's help that had sustained our people for 400 years. He [God] would continue to help.

"Spit in his face," shouted the chairman, "my

finger will pull the trigger and shoot as long as it has strength." It was incredible that Rev. D. Janzen was supported by no one, not even his fellow workers. Why not? One of his colleagues felt that any opposition was useless and that the [*Selbstschutz*] leaders



Memorial for Mennonite victims of massacre in Borosenko. Photo: Louise Bergen Price

were prepared to crush any and all opposition. The decision: arm all those up to age thirty-seven. In Wernersdorf a young man refused, claiming he was a conscientious objector. Fear was used to persuade him. He was blindfolded and ordered to hold open the sides of his unbuttoned coat. "Speak your last will and testament," he was told. "We will

count to three and if you refuse we will shoot you." At "one" he was silent. At "two," the answer was still no. At "three," the shot was fired but the bullet only struck the [opened] coat. The young brother, however, collapsed from fright and died of a heart attack. The poor wife was given a sack of flour as compensation for a murdered husband.

The leadership in the Mennonite Brethren Church in Alexandertal opposed the *Selbstschutz*. On the Sunday after [the meeting] the voice of a messenger intoned Isaiah 59:1,2: "Behold the Lord's hand is not too short to save, nor His ear too dull to hear, but your sins have separated you and your God," and Jeremiah 2:13: "My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken Me, the Fountain of living waters, and they have hewn out for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, which cannot hold water." In his sermon the speaker pointed to the great God and His strong arm. He led his people out of Egypt with His lofty, strong arm and that [great] God would protect us.

This book can be purchased at the MHSBC office.

1 Revenge was taken upon Lutherans and Catholics as well, and even Jews suffered torture and execution.

2 In the confusion of warfare, Mennonite self-defence forces had mistakenly attacked Soviet troops.

Grand Opening: MCC Offices and Thrift Store

By Helen Rose Pauls

A cold and blustery day did not discourage the huge crowd that gathered under tents on December 6, 2014 to witness the grand opening and ribbon cutting for the new MCC centre on Gladys Avenue, Abbotsford, BC.

MCC (Mennonite Central Committee) relief and development work has a long and illustrious history in the province and particularly in the Fraser Valley, home to thousands of Mennonites. The trajectory of MCC in this province has closely followed the rags-to-riches experience of Mennonites living here. We can trace the growth of the Abbotsford MCC warehouse from a pickers' cabin to a huge industrial-size building.

MCC work in BC began in Yarrow in 1941 when Abram A. Wiens became secretary-treasurer of the Board of General Welfare and Immigration, which was a forerunner of MCC BC. He opened an

office in his home. By 1943 the name of the organization was changed to Provincial Mennonite Relief Committee of BC and it had expanded to the Wiens garage, and then once again to a pickers' cabin. Soon a chicken house was refurbished and became the office and clothing depot. Twice a year, clothing drives brought in boxes of wares that were sorted, mended, baled and sent to MCC Canada for overseas relief. Although most of the constituency was struggling to get a start in a new land, they knew what it was like to be hungry and cold. Generosity poured from them.

Even the berry cannery on Eckert Road in Yarrow was used off-season by volunteers. Tons of meat, fruit, jam and vegetables from local farms were canned and shipped overseas: \$35,000.00 worth in 1948 alone. In the same year, \$256,675.00 worth of goods and cash were sent to Europe and Paraguay.

In 1973, MCC began to sell donated items deemed too impractical for overseas use in the converted Clearbrook Post Office on Clearbrook Road¹. The upstairs housed MCC offices and the board room and the downstairs became MCC Sales. The



Canning meat, fruit and vegetables for MCC relief in 1948 at the berry cannery on Eckert Road, Yarrow. Photo: from the files of the late Alex Rempel, Sardis, B.C.

Roots and Branches

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concept of thrift shops was born, and in the next three years Mennonite communities in Yarrow, Vancouver and Kelowna organized and established their own stores; later Kamloops, Langley and Chilliwack also began stores. In 1988, the Clearbrook Furniture and Appliance Store opened its doors. New offices and a warehouse for overseas relief were built on Marshall Road, and a huge thrift store in Clearbrook on South Fraser Way replaced MCC Sales.

Devotion to the work of MCC has continued in the Fraser Valley. Thousands of volunteers make time every week to sort, price and sell donated goods in local thrift stores or to work in the warehouse, generating millions of dollars for the broader work of MCC worldwide. It is a win-win situation as goods are recycled, reused, and renewed; the local poor have an affordable place to shop, and proceeds help those in need overseas. Not the least of the benefits of these thrift shops is the sense of purpose and community they provide for the volunteers.

The vision for a large new MCC centre in Abbotsford began two years ago, and the goal of raising fifteen million dollars towards the project has almost been reached (2015). Keeping the daunting project moving forward were visionary entrepreneur Fred Strumpski, site supervisor Ed Enns and project coordinator Susan Beachy. The new building houses the BC warehouse, a thrift shop, quilting room, a Ten Thousand Villages outlet and a very popular restaurant, The Common Place.

Dignitaries at the grand opening included new Abbotsford Mayor Henry Braun, MLA Ed Fast, MCC Canada leader Don Peters and local MCC director Wayne Bremner. The ribbon cutting group was comprised of representatives from diverse facets of MCC, including former board member Siegfried Bartel, now one hundred years old, and a young girl who symbolized the future. Even the homeless individuals from the tent village across the road joined in the sausage-on-a-bun luncheon that followed.

¹ Clearbrook has since amalgamated with the City of Abbotsford.

For more information on MCC's history in BC, see *Footprints of Compassion: The Story of MCC B.C. 1964-1989*, edited by Helen Grace Lescheid, 1989.

A Tale of Two Journeys: Route Taken



Map courtesy of Edwin D. Hoeppner. An earlier version was published in *Preservings* (26) 2006. This revised version with country borders drawn in was published in *Heritage Review*, periodical of the Germans from Russia Heritage Society, Dec. 2014 Vol. 44 No. 4. Edwin D. Hoeppner's source materials and comments about the delegates' route will be posted online at www.mhsbc.com.