



# Roots and Branches

Periodical of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC

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

Psalm 78



**MHM** | mennonite  
heritage museum

## Table of Contents

Ray Dirks art exhibit.....	3
New East Reserve atlas.....	4
Official opening of Mennonite History Museum.....	5
A presentation by Rosedale Mennonite Church.....	5

The legend of Nestor Mahkno.....	7
Diary of Peter Klassen.....	13
Grossmutter's Schatz.....	16
Mennonite Studies grants awarded.....	17
Book review: <i>From Suffering to Solidarity</i> .....	18
Poem: Looking At The Mountains.....	19

# Editorial

By Robert Martens

The universe, scientists tell us, is composed mostly of dark matter, a hypothetical substance that cannot be seen but can be inferred from its gravitational effects. Sometimes it may seem that much of the moral universe, too, is composed of dark matter – in this case, human evil, unseeable, illogical, inexplicable.

This issue of *Roots and Branches* focuses on Nestor Makhno, the Ukrainian anarchist leader whom Mennonites have traditionally regarded as the embodiment of evil. Dark matter indeed. Scanning the Internet, however, will soon show that for many, Makhno was not simply a murderer and thug. In fact, for some he was a freedom fighter.

There can be no doubt about the atrocities committed by the army of Nestor Makhno. With time, though, our evaluation of this tormented (and tormenting) figure may change. We at *Roots and Branches* would love to hear how our readers feel about the man who was so instrumental in destroying Mennonite colonies in the Ukraine.

## Letters to the editors

Re. “Major Developments among Canadian Mennonites, 1870s through 1930s” (R&B Nov. 2015)

I enjoyed reading your articles in the R & B. There is one thing that hit me though: it was Clayton Kratz that disappeared without a trace when he went to Russia for MCC, not Orie Miller.

Keep up the good work,  
Jim Baerg  
Abbotsford

Thank you for the wonderful article by Robert Martens on Vietnamese Pastor Ken Ha in your August 2015 issue. For further background, I would like your readers to know that the current Vietnamese Christian Church began over five years earlier as a church plant between the Vancouver Vietnamese Mennonite Church, Emmanuel Mennonite Church, and Mennonite Church BC. The church planting pastor was Nhien Pham, who had previ-

ous experience planting Vietnamese churches in a number of locations, and was then serving as the pastor of the Vancouver Vietnamese Mennonite Church where he continues in ministry today. As the vision for Vietnamese ministry in Abbotsford grew, Nhien Pham and our Emmanuel ministry support team called Ken Ha to pastor the Abbotsford group and free up Nhien for the Vancouver church and ministry in Vietnam. We thank Nhien Pham for his vision and dedication, and for a successful transition to the current Vietnamese Christian Church which continues as “a church within a church” as part of our ministry here at Emmanuel Mennonite Church, Abbotsford, BC.

With thanks for your consideration,  
April Yamasaki  
Abbotsford

I always enjoy reading your magazine, and Russian Mennonite history. Your November issue article on Canadian Mennonites, 1870s through 1930s, by Wilf Penner is such a good piece, but does contain an error which I’m sure others have pointed out to you. On page 10, 2nd column, it was Clayton Kratz, not Orie O. Miller, who disappeared in Ukraine in 1920. Miller lived until 1977 and was Executive Secretary of MCC, Sec. of Eastern Mennonite Mission board, helped start MEDA, was President of Miller Hess shoe company, and along with Harold S. Bender served on most of the major Mennonite Church boards and committees during much of the 20th Century. Miller promoted Mennonite World Conference, inter-Mennonite endeavors, and worked well with General Conference Mennonite leaders. I recommend to your readers John E. Sharp’s recent (2015) book, *My Calling to Fulfill: The Orie O. Miller Story*, published by Herald Press.

I look forward to Wilf Penner’s third installment. And I’m anxious to see your new archives building.

Ray Kauffman  
Albany, OR

We welcome letters to the editor. Address them to Editor, *Roots and Branches*, 1818 Clearbrook Road, Abbotsford, BC, V2T 5X4, or email them to [archives@mhsbc.com](mailto:archives@mhsbc.com). Please write “letter to the editor” in the subject line of the email. Letters may be edited for length or content.



## MHSBC events

### *Along the Road to Freedom: an exhibit honouring heroic Mennonite women*

By Louise Bergen Price  
based on a lecture by Ray  
Dirks, December 12, 2015

It is fitting that the first exhibit at the new Mennonite Heritage Museum Gallery is artist Ray Dirks' *Along the Road to Freedom*. This exhibit of twenty-two paintings tells the stories of women and their children who escaped from the Soviet Union in the 1920s and during World War II. In his lecture on December 12, artist Ray Dirks explained how the exhibit came about, and why he felt drawn to tell this story.

"In 2008, four senior citizens came to see me at the [Winnipeg Mennonite Heritage Centre] gallery. All four were children brought out of Russia on the 1943 Great Trek by their mothers, three of them widows. They wanted to initiate something to honour their mothers and other women like them while people with direct links to the women were still alive. They feared with their own passing – the passing of the last of the people of the Great Trek – that even more people will forget or not even care to know their own stories."



Ray Dirks at work. Photo: mennonitemuseum.org

This initiative led to the formation of the *Along the Road to Freedom* project. After much discussion with Dirks, the project committee decided on a series of paintings, each honouring one woman, and sponsored by that woman's family. These paintings would not belong to the sponsors but would, after touring North America, become part of a permanent collection based in Winnipeg.

The stories of many of the women were depressingly similar: loss of home and family, persecution, starvation, relocation, new beginnings in a foreign land. To set the stories apart, and to draw the viewer in, Dirks needed to make each painting unique: "I'd ask for names of favourite hymns, did the woman have a hobby, a favourite Bible verse. Often, visual resources were pretty meagre. I'd ask for stories, situations that were important, might have been turning points. Then, I'd try to recreate those scenes in as historically accurate a way as possible." Often, Dirks extended the search to archives and online resources.

Each story was anchored in a particular location: a homestead, railway station, trek, city square. The painting often included what some might have considered "minor moments" but which spoke volumes to Dirks. An example of one such moment occurred when he heard Margarete Bergmann's story. For decades, Bergmann had moved from place to place, first within Russia, then fleeing from country to country as a refugee before moving to Paraguay. When she finally settled in Canada, she bought herself something she'd always longed for and

## Future events

### **Genealogy Workshop**

The annual MHSBC genealogy workshop will be held Saturday, March 5, 2016, at the Mennonite Heritage Museum, 1818 Clearbrook Road, Abbotsford. Genealogists Tim Janzen and Glenn Penner will present. For information contact MHSBC, 1818 Clearbrook Rd., at 604-853-6177 or archives@mhsbc.com.

### **AGM for the Mennonite Historical Society of BC**

The Annual General Meeting of the Mennonite Historical Society will take place April 8, 2016. The venue will be Ricky's Country Restaurant (formerly ABC) at 32080 Marshall Road, Abbotsford. Please watch the MHSBC website for starting time and other details.



Margarete Bergmann's doll; detail from painting.

never had – a doll. This doll was featured prominently in the painting honouring Bergmann.

Once both Dirks and the sponsoring family were happy with his preliminary sketch, he would begin to paint. The whole process was time-consuming: “As a rule, just to get to the point of starting the painting took longer than I usually spend to

finish an entire painting. But, that is how it should be. I feel these paintings must satisfy the family, be as historically accurate as possible, tell the story in ways that both continue the common stream that flows through the artworks and points out the uniqueness of each journey, and I want to feel I have properly and respectfully honoured the subjects.”

For Dirks, the work was a personal journey into his own past. “I am proud of my upbringing, my heritage. This project is ‘very Mennonite’ when thinking of those mostly of Dutch heritage who fled to Prussia, moved on to Russia, thinking of those who know what *Zwieback* is and have memories of German hymns sung in spine-tingling harmony.”

Dirks acknowledged that “well over half the people worldwide who identify as Mennonites do not have Eu-

ropean roots. We are now broadly rooted.” He explained that “this exhibit comes from a time when we were more exclusive. That is no longer the case and that is good, is how it should be. However, that does not lessen the importance of the stories of these women. They should be remembered. As the church changes, why run from the roots? These stories, these examples, these testimonies, should be with us. Instead of jettisoning or hiding our heritage, let’s embrace it and also those stories of the newer Mennonites among us. There should be room for all.”

While these stories are specific to Russian Mennonites, Dirks emphasized they are also “universal and timeless.” He added, “As new refugees seek refuge, we need to remember we, or our ancestors, were once doing the same. Not long ago, after looking at the paintings, a Christian Congolese woman came to me and said, ‘This is my story.’ A Kurdish Muslim woman said the same.”

Dirks’ wish is that the paintings be a blessing to those who see them: “I hope they are notes like the one Betty Wieler wrote to her children about Anna Bergmann: Remember her. Remember she brought your grandmother here. Without that having happened, you would not be here enjoying a good life. Remember not to seek revenge. Remember not to boil on for generations over what was lost. Remember not so you can someday take back what was stolen. Remember in spite of all she went through, all she lost, the example she left was one of faith, love, kindness, even forgiveness.”

Once the exhibit has toured North America, a print version that will tour Europe and eventually find a home in Ukraine is planned. An *Along the Road to Freedom* book will also be released.

## MMHS releases a new publication

On Saturday, October 17 the EastMenn Historical Committee (EHC), a standing committee of the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, unveiled its latest publication, the 256-page *Historical Atlas of the East Reserve*, edited by Ernest N. Braun and Glen R. Klassen, before a capacity crowd at the Chortitz Heritage Church in Randolph, Manitoba.

Starting in 2009, the EHC began research for a historical atlas of the East Reserve. The East Reserve, today coinciding approximately with the 8 Townships of the Rural Municipality of Hanover, was originally granted to immigrant Mennonites from Imperial Russia in 1873, and settled in the years 1874-6. The new hardcover,

full-colour atlas begins with a chapter on geology and Indigenous peoples as well as some notes on early European influence. The core of the book consists of early maps of the Reserve and a chapter dedicated to each Township, including the Scratching River Settlement in the Morris area. The East Reserve eventually contained about 60 village place names, which are positioned on the maps and described in the narrative. While the format is coffee-table, the book’s content will serve as a definitive reference volume on the East Reserve and Scratching River. The suggested retail price is \$50.00 plus shipping and handling.

Books can be ordered from Connie Wiebe at the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg. Direct inquiries to Jake Peters at [jmepeters@shaw.ca](mailto:jmepeters@shaw.ca).



# Official opening of Mennonite Heritage Museum, January 22, 2016

Reported by Robert Martens

As blue sky broke through a cloudy British Columbia day, a large crowd assembled to witness the ribbon-cutting ceremony that marked the official opening of the Mennonite Heritage Museum (MHM), 1818 Clearbrook Road, in Abbotsford. Among those in attendance were several dignitaries, including Abbotsford Mayor Henry Braun and several City councillors. On the podium for the ceremony were MHM Executive Director Richard Thiessen; project originator Peter Redekop; BC Premier Christie Clark; Abbotsford MP Ed Fast; and Abbotsford South MLA Darryl Plecas.

Richard Thiessen led off a brief round of speeches, saying that he hoped the Museum would “bear witness to the Mennonite story for generations to come.” He introduced the next speaker, Peter Redekop, by sketching Redekop’s flight from the Stalinist Soviet Union, his immigration to Canada, and his successful career here as a builder and developer. Redekop then spoke briefly, expressing gratitude in particular to the storytellers featured in the Museum.

Christie Clark thanked Mennonites for being “salt and light to the world” and for being “a community dedicated to peace, to community service.” Ed Fast spoke next, affirming his pride in being part of the Mennonite heritage, describing it as “a story of great perseverance and often of tragedy.”

Concluding the series of speeches was MHM Director of Development, Dave Batten. He praised Peter

Redekop’s long string of successful building developments but stated that “not one of them holds a candle to this development here.” Batten added that the MHM has been in liaison with the University of the Fraser Valley; as a result, UFV students will be tending to the raspberry and blueberry fields on the Museum property.

The five dignitaries on the podium then stood for the official ribbon-cutting, before the crowd dispersed to indulge in a little caffeine and sugar and to explore the impressive new building.

The office of MHSBC will now be located inside the Museum. More on the development of the Museum will appear in the June issue of *Roots and Branches*.



Visitors enjoy the exhibits at the Mennonite History Museum grand opening. Photo: Diana Hiebert

---

## A presentation by Rosedale Mennonite Church

Reported by Robert Martens

On November 13, 2015, at Clearbrook MB Church in Abbotsford, the congregation of Rosedale Mennonite Church gave a presentation about their lifestyle and beliefs at an event sponsored by the Mennonite Historical Society of BC. Several carloads of Rosedale members – men, women and children – had driven out to Abbotsford. They were a talkative, friendly, and gracious group of people. It was a remarkable evening.

\*

A few months earlier, in May of 2015, I drove to Rosedale, BC, to attend the 10:00 am service of Rosedale Mennonite Church. It may seem strange to some that this congregation is a church plant of the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church (or conference), formed in 1968 when a group of bishops and deacons separated amicably from the Lancaster Mennonite Conference. The intention of the new conference was to retain traditional dress and customs, to foster a life of separation from mainstream society, and to live by a standard known as the Rules and Discipline: in short, to restore what were perceived as core and historic Mennonite values. Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church grew rapidly, from

twenty-seven congregations in 1969 to seventy-seven in 2010, including several in BC and the western U.S. Church planting – accomplished when several families agree to move together to another area to establish a new Mennonite community – has resulted in congregations as far away as Guatemala, Paraguay and Ghana.

The Rosedale Mennonite Church building is a neat small structure with wooden pews and floors and an arch-shaped interior. During the service, women were seated on the left, men on the right. The men were dressed in plain black jackets over white shirts; the women, in traditional long dresses, often colourful or floral, also wore bonnets. Children were very quiet. Women did not speak within the sanctuary. The first hour began with several hymns – and this may have been my biggest surprise – in four-part harmony, well sung, conducted by a young man who led with a strong voice. A Scripture reading followed, focusing on the theme of the Good Shepherd, of God's concern for the broken, and of our constant need of divine help. The congregation then broke up into Sunday school classes.

The second hour began with a short sermon, which led into a final lengthy sermon emphasizing the “hardness” of the Christian life – hard even when we are sheltered in the mercy of God. At noon, lunch was served, after which the entire congregation was to meet for prison visitation. Before I left, pastor John Wiens remarked to me that we live in an age of “Wal-Mart grace.”

\*

It was John Wiens who delivered a stirring talk at Clearbrook MB on November 13 – the day, coincidentally, of the atrocities in Paris. A major theme was heritage and the moral imperative to retain it. Wiens referred frequently to the origins of the Anabaptist/Mennonite movement. “Men who had a vision came to an understanding of Scripture,” he said. “Where there is no vision of the past, more than likely there is no vision of the future.” Today, he said, there is a great pressure for the church to conform to the ways of the world. The boundaries of the church, however, are fixed, and when they fail, the world enters. Wiens paraphrased Paul: “I’m dead to the world and the world is dead to me.”

The church, he said, should be both a safe haven and “living epistle,” but “today there is no shortage of a profession of Christianity – *profession* without *possession*.” He added that “the value of our heritage is only maintained when the practice is maintained.” Christians should be judged by their “outworking.” Wiens also remarked that Western society – including the Christian

church – has wandered far from the ethics of simplicity and mutual assistance: “We have lost the idea of pilgrimage in this world of affluence.”

John Wiens ended his talk by listing some fundamental values of his church. Eastern Pennsylvania congregations run their own schools. (Teachers receive an allowance from the membership, as do ministers, deacons, and bishops.) They carry no insurance except where mandated by law. They observe the “ordinances,” including a prohibition on divorce. They practise nonresistance – “How can a person put to death a person that God has created?” Finally, Eastern Pennsylvania Church Mennonites do not get involved “in the running of this world”: in other words, there is no participation in government.

The event was followed by lively and warm conversation over coffee and sweets.

\*

John Wiens writes, Rosedale Mennonite Church had its beginning in August 2008. Five families from the interior of northern BC were asked to relocate. Three local families attend regularly. Three additional families have moved to Rosedale as well. Our regular Sunday morning attendance ranges from forty-five to fifty.

Numerous times we are asked, “Why are you here?” This valley seems to have many churches.

1. The world as a whole has a drift from Christendom.
2. We see an erosion of truth.
3. The reducing of the seriousness of sin.

Our first three years we worshipped in rental spaces. Then the Lord opened the way for us to purchase a place on Church Street in Rosedale (an Anglican church built in 1912).

Our interest is to be “where” and “what” God really intends for the Church to be.

“I will build my Church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matt. 16:18)

The permissiveness of our day cannot and will not break down the promises and power of Jesus Christ in the building of His Church.

#### Sources

Neuenschwander, Jesse. “Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church.” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 2010. [www.gameo.org](http://www.gameo.org)

Paetkau, Walter. Conversation with Robert Martens, 3 June 2015.

Wiens, John. Fax to MHSBC office. 23 Sep. 2015.



# The legend of Nestor Makhno: terrorist or freedom fighter?

By Robert Martens

“I, on behalf of all partisans of all units, declare that all robberies, looting and violence will not be allowed in any case while I’m responsible in front of the Revolution, and will be stopped by me at the very root.” – Nestor Makhno, 1918, after his army had helped capture Ekaterinoslav

“Actually, I’m all for robberies and for violence in general, I shot everyone.” – Nestor Makhno, after being driven out of Ukraine (both cited Berejnaya 4)

Who was the real Nestor Makhno? To Mennonites he is known as a monstrous killer who stopped at nothing during his army’s occupation of the Ukraine Mennonite colonies. To the Russian Soviets he was known as a savage beast, a traitor to the Revolution. To many Ukrainians today he is romanticized as a hero of state independence. And to judge by the Internet, Nestor Makhno is often regarded as an idealistic anarchist who struggled to establish a regime of true individual freedom.

The accounts of this charismatic leader are so wildly different that the truth seems nearly impossible to ferret out. Makhno, perpetrator of terror upon the Mennonite colonies, and commander of the largest anarchist army ever assembled, has become mythologized: a legend that is larger than life.

## *Early life*

Nestor Makhno, youngest of five children, was born in 1888 in Gulyaipole, in the Ekaterinoslav region of the Ukraine, to a miserably poor family. His legend begins early: the story goes that the clothes of the priest who was baptizing little Nestor caught fire! It was a hard childhood: his father, a coachman, died young. Makhno later wrote, “Five of us, orphaned brothers, one smaller than the other, were left in the hands of our poor mother, who had nothing in the world. I dimly remember my early childhood, deprived of the usual child’s games and fun, marred by the horrible need and poverty our family had to endure, until the boys grew up enough to earn their living” (qtd in Berejnaya 1). The boy studied in pa-

rochial school, but apparently didn’t take his studies seriously until a beating from his mother changed his mind.

At the age of eleven, Nestor worked as a shepherd and ox driver on a Janzen estate in Silberfeld. In his memoirs he would recall, “At this time I began to experience anger, envy and even hatred toward the landowner and especially towards his children – those young slackers who often strolled past me sleek and healthy, well-dressed, well-groomed and scented; while I was filthy, dressed in rags, barefoot, and reeked of manure from cleaning the calves’ barn” (cited in Wiki 4-5).<sup>1</sup> Later Ma-

khnno apprenticed as a carpenter, and apparently also worked in Gulyaipole at the Mennonite-owned Kroeger plant.

## *Adolescence and radicalization*

At age sixteen Nestor was part of a theatre group called “The Union of Poor Bread Growers,” which in actuality was a cover for a revolutionary group of young men who, like Robin Hood, robbed from the rich and gave to the poor. In 1906 he was arrested for the first time, but was soon released for lack of evidence. In 1908, however, this group of young men committed murder during one of their robbery sprees, and this time Makhno was sentenced to death by hanging. The death sentence was commuted to a sentence of ten years in prison when Makhno produced evidence – forged – that he was underage.

His next years were spent in Butyrskaya Prison, much of that time cuffed or in solitary confinement. The dampness of his cells probably caused the onset of tuberculosis; he had a lung amputated by the prison doctor. However, Makhno used these years to educate himself, reading both classic and modern Russian literature, and even writing poetry. His “political education” came about through conversations with fellow-prisoner and Russian anarchist leader Peter Arshinov.

And then came the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. The prison doors were opened.

## *Early revolutionary career*

Makhno returned home to Gulyaipole and married a peasant girl, but their stillborn son seemed to wreck the marriage, and the two soon broke up. Later (1919) he was to marry Agafya Kuzmenko, a schoolteacher, who became his aide, and even participated in some of the



Astoria Hotel in Dnipropetrovsk, where Makhno was headquartered in 1919 as indicated by plaque on wall.

Photo: H. Thiessen

killing. The couple had a daughter, Yelena. Years afterwards, during World War II, Agafya and Yelena were deported to a German concentration camp, and following that, transported to a Soviet labour camp, from which they were released only in 1953, after Stalin's death. Agafya died in Kazakhstan in 1978. Her story of suffering remains to be told. (see her brief statement below)

Meanwhile, Nestor Makhno resumed his life of revolutionary activity. His popularity was such that he was elected to five different posts in Gulyaipole, including the local soviet – already his charisma was clearly evident, and he took advantage. After the Brest-Litovsk Treaty of 1918 ended Russian participation in World War I and ceded the Ukraine to Germany as part of the negotiations, Makhno travelled to Moscow to meet with Lenin. What he saw there appalled him: Moscow, he wrote, was the “capital of revolution on paper”; the Bolsheviks were “bunches of charlatans who for the sake of personal profit and extreme sensations ... destroy the working people” (qtd in Berejnaya 3). Lenin sent him back to Ukraine with orders to start a civil war. Makhno responded by forming a small army of forty men under the black flag of anarchism; the army grew rapidly as his fame spread. His charisma and military genius soon won him the name of Bat'ka (little father) Makhno.

The Communist Reds, tsarist Whites, German army, Ukrainian nationalists, and a multiplicity of armed gangs were murdering, raping and looting across the Ukraine. Makhno was an enemy to them all. He was a brilliant guerrilla tactician, and he became the terror of the countryside. Isaac Babel, a commissar in the Red Army, wrote, “Makhno was as protean as nature herself. Haycarts deployed in battle array took towns, a wedding procession approaching the headquarters of a district executive committee suddenly opens a concentrated fire...” (qtd in Simkin 1). As all factions were doing, Makhno's men brutally executed their captives; on one occasion Makhno had a priest burned alive in a train's steam engine.

Events were occurring that would deeply implicate the Mennonite colonies in Makhno's quarrels. The occupying Austrian army shot one of his brothers, tortured another to death, and burned down his mother's home. In 1918, with the aid of “German colonists,” they captured a pro-Makhnovist village and murdered many of its people. In Makhno's mind, Mennonites were “German.” It was time for revenge.

### *The Mennonite colonies*

Nestor Makhno has forged a place in the Mennonite mind as a perpetrator of mass atrocities in the Mennonite colonies of South Russia. Most of the brutality took place

between October and December of 1919: in that time 827 were killed, about 67% of total Mennonite civil war deaths – to say nothing of rape, plunder, and torture, as well as the spread of typhus. Hardest hit were the settlements of Borozenko, Sagradovka, and Chortitza. On the night of November 26, eighty-one men and four women were murdered by Makhnovists in the village of Eichen-dorf alone. Some young Mennonite men responded by creating the *Selbstschutz*, a self-defence corps, but after some initial successes – and an unfortunate alliance with the murderous Whites – this foray ended in disaster.

How complicit in these atrocities was Makhno himself? It must be remembered that his followers were poor, beaten-down, often drunk. Makhno could not, or refused to impose discipline. Even as his movement tried to organize a systematic anarchist regime, complete with assemblies, delegates, and committees, it was found necessary at one point to proclaim that “all orders must be obeyed provided that the commanding officer was sober at the time of giving it” (qtd in Yanowitz 2). There is little question that Makhno himself was an alcoholic, or at least drank frequently and hard. When his memoirist, Voline (actual name Eichenbaum), later argued and broke with his companion, he accused his former friend of sex orgies, drunken escapades, and anti-Semitism. Some of these charges are likely true. At the same time, Makhno himself seems rarely to have been present while the massacres of Mennonites were taking place. He preferred to simply let loose the dogs of war from his home village of Gulyaipole. And some of the atrocities actually occurred at the hands of local bandits, rather than Makhnovists. Makhno's extreme cruelty, however, will not be soon forgotten by Russian Mennonites.

### *Struggle with the Bolsheviks*

Meanwhile, Makhno's Black Army played a game of cat and mouse with the Reds. One day these armies would be allied; the next, killing each other with enthusiasm. In 1918, Makhno's men, with the help of the Bolsheviks, took Ekaterinoslav and set up a local “anarchist” government. They then cooperated with the Reds in driving the White Army of General Wrangel from Crimea. At the same time, the Bolsheviks prevented supplies from reaching the anarchist troops: there was no love lost between Blacks and Reds, and any cooperation was simply a temporary truce of convenience. Back in Moscow, Lenin had begun, immediately after seizing power, to eradicate his former anarchist supporters.

According to Makhno, messages from the Bolsheviks ordering his assassination were intercepted. When almost half of the Blacks were struck by typhus, Soviet leader Leon Trotsky decided it was time to strike. In 1919, after a battle in Perekop, the Ukraine, 5000 of Ma-



khno's men who had survived the conflict were apparently murdered in cold blood by the Soviets. Makhno's reaction was swift and brutal. He launched a "non-stop killing spree" in which "Communist Party members, Soviet commissars, chekists and any other Soviet officials were tortured, publicly executed and killed in the most horrible ways, and it is this very image of the merciless monster that appeared in the history schoolbooks in the time of the USSR" (Berejnaya 5).

On another front, the Blacks were battling the White Army of General Wrangel in the Ukraine. They fell back, then surprised the Whites with an all-out attack, and retook the southern Ukraine. All this occurred under yet another truce between Blacks and Reds. However, less than two weeks after this victory, on November 26, 1920, Makhno's headquarters staff, who had been invited to Moscow for a planning conference, were arrested and immediately executed. Moscow ordered the total destruction of Makhno's army; despite massive



Makhno prisoners, Eichenfeld, 1919.  
Photo: [//chort.square7.ch/BEich.htm](http://chort.square7.ch/BEich.htm)

numbers of Red soldiers defecting to the Blacks, Makhno's cause was lost. Even a last-gasp alliance with nationalist Ukrainian leader Symon Petliura could not save him. In 1921, exhausted and wounded – he reportedly lost a leg – Makhno was finally driven from his homeland.

### *Exile*

Makhno fled with the ragged remains of his army through Romania, Poland, Danzig, Berlin, and ultimately Paris. Along the way he was twice arrested. He escaped once, and the second time was released with the help of Alexander Berkman, an anarchist leader who had spent time in prison for an attempted assassination, but eventually settled down in Paris and worked as a writer and editor (Berkman would commit suicide in 1936, unable to bear the constant pain of a prostate condition). In Paris, Makhno worked as a carpenter, a stagehand at the Paris Opera and at film studios, and as a labourer at the Renault factory. He wrote his memoirs here, but seemed a broken man, spending his time gambling and drinking at the Vincennes horse racetrack. He claimed to hate the "poison" of the big cities, and longed for his homeland. Additionally, many of his political cohorts broke with him when he proposed a model of anarchism based on a practical system of committee management; from his experiences in Ukraine, Makhno knew the realistic difficulties of ruling without any government.

Nestor Makhno died on July 6, 1934, of tuberculosis – surely alcohol must have been a factor – and was buried in Père Lachaise Cemetery. Five hundred people attended his funeral.

### *The legend*

The larger-than-life Nestor Makhno seems to be undergoing a revival of sorts. Russian and Ukrainian songs have been written about him; a television miniseries, *Nine Lives of Nestor Makhno*, was produced in Russia in 2005; and a brief and flickering video image of the man can be found on YouTube. He is idealized by supporters, demonized by his victims; opinions expressed both in print and on the Internet are so markedly different that they all must be met with a certain degree of skepticism. Given that research is based on often sketchy evidence, even the brief history above, it must be admitted, is subject to correction.

An unnamed Mennonite, whose own family fell into the clutches of the Makhnovists, writes on the Internet that "political upheavals rarely sort neatly into 'pure' victims or offenders." After noting that Makhno's terror may have resulted in the "disproportionate rate of Alzheimer's and depression within the Canadian prairie

Mennonite community,” this writer asks whether Mennonite affluence placed them on the “wrong side of the Russian Revolution” (Bartimaeus 3). His own great-grandmother had bravely nursed and fed Makhnovists when they occupied her home, and may have thus prevented further violence. He wonders, is it possible to learn from the Makhno terror “to better build capacity for creative nonviolent responses to genocide today?” (Bartimaeus 4)

Should such questions even be asked? Are they an insult to those who died so horribly and needlessly? Can some things simply not be forgiven? What can we learn from the genocidal mania of a Ukrainian anarchist who seems to have passed from history into legend?

<sup>1</sup>Makhno’s memoirs have been published in two volumes by Black Cat Press, Edmonton, 2007 and 2009.

#### Sources

Berejnaya, Tina. “Nestor Makhno.” *Russapedia*. n.d.

[www.russiapedia.rt.com](http://www.russiapedia.rt.com)

“Nestor Ivanovych Makhno or Bat’ko Makhno.” *Wikipedia*.

2013. [en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org)

Peters, Victor. *Nestor Makhno: das Leben eines Anarchisten*.

Winnipeg: Echo Books, 1969. (Photo credits)

“Pilgrimage to the Ukraine: Revisioning History through Restorative Justice.” *Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries*.

n.d. [www.bcm-net.org](http://www.bcm-net.org)

Rempel, John G. “Makhno, Nestor (1888-1934).” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1957.

[www.gameo.org](http://www.gameo.org)

Simkin, John. “Nestor Makhno.” *Spartacus Educational*. 1997.

[www.spartacus-educational.com](http://www.spartacus-educational.com)

“Wayne.” “The Makhnovists and the Mennonites: war and peace in the Ukrainian Revolution.” *Libcom.org*. Accessed 2013. [www.libcom.org](http://www.libcom.org)

Yanowitz, Jason. “The Makhno Myth.” *International Socialist Review* 53 (May-June 2007). [www.isreview.org](http://www.isreview.org)



Mass Grave in Sagradovka. Photo: Peters, 59

## Contemporary accounts

*A brief statement by Agafya A. Kuzmenko Makhno survives (no date is given):*

In 1917 fate brought me together with a man who I imagined to be the people’s liberator from Tsarist tyranny, Nestor Ivanovich Makhno. I lived through many, many misfortunes and scandals with him during the Civil War. When his army was defeated and the remnants scattered we fled to Poland. There we were tried and deported. We finally ended up in France. In Paris the White émigrés and Petlyura supporters gave us a hostile reception because Makhno had fought against the White Guards and Ukrainian nationalists. Life in Paris was very hard. After quite some difficulty Makhno managed to get a job at a film studio, and I found work as a laundress for a rich family. Nestor suffered from tuberculosis and the effects of his wartime wounds, he was sick all the time. From time to time he would work a little – as well as making props and scenery at a film studio he was a shoemaker for a while and later worked at a French newspaper office. He also wrote his memoirs.

#### Source

Kuzmenko, Agafya A. “Memoirs.” *The Nestor Makhno Archive*. [www.nestormakno.info](http://www.nestormakno.info)

*Written by Nestor Makhno while in exile. It appeared in Dyelo Truda, No. 9, February 1926, 9-10. Here it is clear that the Bolsheviks were, in his mind, the primary enemy.*

It shall soon be eight years since the blood of anarchists began to flow because of their refusal to servilely bow before the violence or effrontery of [the Bolsheviks] who have seized power, nor before their famously lying ideology and their utter irresponsibility.

In that criminal act, an act that cannot be described as other than a bloodlust of the Bolshevik gods, the finest offspring of the revolution [the anarchists] have perished because they were the most loyal exponents of revolutionary ideals and because they could not be bribed into betraying them. In honestly defending the precepts of the revolution, these children of the revolution sought to fend off the madness of the Bolshevik gods and find a way out of their dead end, so as to forge a path to real freedom and genuine equality of the toilers. ...

The Bolsheviks have hidden the true state of affairs in Russia from the eyes of toilers the world over, particularly their utter bankruptcy in the mat-



ter of building socialism, when this is all too apparent to all those who have eyes to see. ...

The Bolsheviks have jettisoned the idea of equality, not just in practice but also in theory, for the very enunciation of it strikes them as dangerous now. This is quite understandable, for their entire rule depends on a diametrically contrasting notion, on a screaming inequality, the entire horror and evils of which have battered upon the backs of the workers. Let us hope that the toilers of every country may draw the necessary conclusions and, in turn, finish with the Bolsheviks, those exponents of the idea of slavery and oppressors of labour.

Source

Makhno, Nestor. "The Idea of Equality and the Bolsheviks."

Alexandre Sirda, ed. Paul Sharkey, trans. n.d. *Spunk Library*. [www.spunk.org](http://www.spunk.org)

## Nestor Makhno, as described by his companion Voline

By Robert Martens

Vsevolod Mikhailovich Eichenbaum was born in 1882 in Voronezh, where both his mother and father practised medicine. Due to his prosperous beginnings, Eichenbaum was well-educated, attended high school in Voronezh, and learned French and German before he entered the faculty of law at the university in St. Petersburg. In 1901 he broke with his parents and later took part in the revolutionary insurrection of 1905. During this time he renamed himself Voline – "Man of Freedom."

Voline was arrested, escaped, and finally became immersed in anarchist politics. A brilliant and literate individual, he edited the anarchist paper *Golos Truda*, or *Voice of Labour*, which attracted thousands of readers in Russia and North America. When the Russian Revolution broke out in 1917, Voline fought on the side of the Bolsheviks, but quickly became disillusioned with them, and then joined Nestor Makhno in the Ukraine. During the next few years, he was twice captured and imprisoned by the Bolsheviks, the first time while he was seriously ill with typhus. In 1920 he was expelled from the Soviet Union into Germany.

Voline continued his political activities by writing, translating, editing, and helping organize anarchist organizations. In 1939 he moved to Marseilles, where his partner, Anna Grigorievna, died. Voline was devastated by her death, and never recovered emotionally. He managed to survive World War II, but died of tuberculosis in 1945. His book, *La Révolution inconnue* (The Unknown Revolution), a telling of his experiences in revolutionary



Makhno and fellow anarchist Alexander Berkman in Paris, 1927.

Photo: [www.Spartacus-educational.com/USABerkman](http://www.Spartacus-educational.com/USABerkman)

Russia and Ukraine, was published posthumously.

The following excerpts from that book are taken from "Voline: Nestor Makhno and Anarchism in the Russian Revolution," a chapter in *The Essential Works of Anarchism*, edited by Marshall S. Shatz (New York: Bantam Books, 1971). It probably doesn't need to be said that Voline's historical account is grossly inaccurate. Reading this sometimes requires a strong stomach; at the same time, it is an eyewitness account, and reflects the point of view of many people, even today. Voline eventually broke with Makhno and harshly denounced him.

Back in Gulyaipole, Makhno came to the decision to die or obtain victory for the peasants, and in no event to leave the region. The news of his return spread rapidly from village to village. He did not delay starting his mission openly among the great masses of peasants, speaking at improvised meetings, writing and distributing letters and tracts. ... He declared tirelessly that the workers should now take their fates into their own hands and not let their freedom to act be taken from them. His stirring appeal was heard, in a few weeks, by many villages and whole districts, preparing the masses for the great events of the future.

Besides his appeals, Makhno proceeded immediately to direct action. His first concern was to form a revolutionary military unit, sufficiently strong to guarantee freedom of propaganda and action in the villages and towns and at the same time to begin guerrilla operations. This unit was quickly organized, for among the villages there were marvellously combative elements, ready for action. They only lacked a good organizer. Makhno was the man.

His first unit undertook two tasks, namely, pursuing

energetically the work of propaganda and organization among the peasants and carrying on a stubborn armed struggle against all their enemies. The guiding principle of this merciless struggle was as follows. No lord who persecuted the peasants, no policeman of the Hetman [head of state], no Russian or German officer who was an implacable enemy of the peasants, deserved any pity; he must be destroyed. ...

Swift as the wind, intrepid, pitiless towards their enemies, they fell thunderously on some estate, massacred all the sworn enemies of the peasants and disappeared as rapidly as they had come. The next day, Makhno would be 100 kilometres away, would appear in some town, massacre the national guard, officers and noblemen, and vanish before the German troops had time to realize what had happened. ...

The whole peasant population gave the partisans devoted, active and skillful support. Everywhere along their routes they were sure of finding, whenever they needed it, a safe lodging, food, horses, even arms. Often the peasants would hide them in their own homes at the risk of their own lives. ...

Many villages were pitilessly punished for their attitude towards the insurgents, all the men being atrociously beaten with ramrods and some of the more strongly suspected peasants being shot on the spot. Some villages were even burned down in revenge. But nothing could reduce the fierce resistance of the working people to the invaders and their agents, the landed nobility and the counter-revolutionaries. ...

The Makhnovist partisans never exerted any pressure on the peasants, confining themselves to propagating the idea of free communes. The latter were formed on the initiative of the poor peasants themselves. ...

As for free ideological activity, exchange of ideas, discussion, propaganda and the freedom of organizations and associations of a non-authoritarian nature, the Makhnovists guaranteed, everywhere and integrally, the revolutionary principles of freedom of speech, press, conscience, assembly, and political, ideological or other association. In all the cities and towns that were occupied, they began by lifting all prohibitions and repealing all the restrictions imposed on the organs of the press and on political organizations of whatever power.

At Berdiansk, the prison was dynamited, in the pres-

ence of an enormous crowd, which took an active part in its destruction. At Alexandrovsk, Krivoi-Rog, Ekaterinoslav and elsewhere, the prisons were demolished or burned. Everywhere the workers cheered this act.

...[At a Makhnovist congress held October 20, 1919] Immediately a right-wing Socialist asked for the floor. He delivered a violent attack on the organizers of the congress. "Comrade delegates," he said, "we Socialists consid-

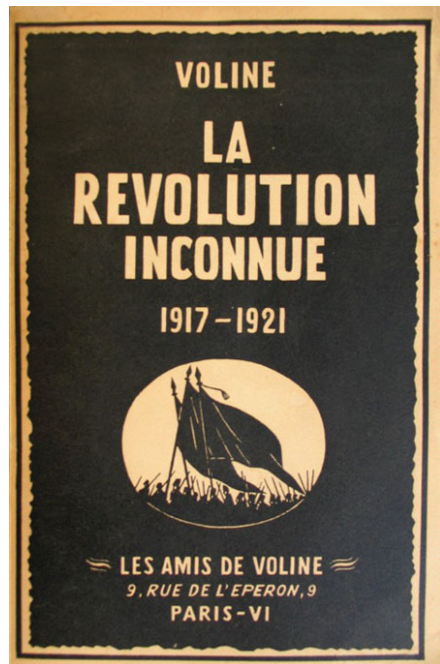
er it our duty to warn you that a disgraceful comedy is being acted here. They are not imposing anything on you, they say! Yet already they have very adroitly imposed an Anarchist chairman on you, and you will continue to be manoeuvred by these people."

Makhno, who had arrived a few minutes earlier to wish the congress good luck and excuse himself for having to leave for the front, took the floor and replied sharply to the Socialist speaker. He reminded the delegates of the complete freedom of their election, and, accusing the Socialists of being the faithful defenders of the bourgeoisie, he advised their representatives not to disturb the work of the congress by political interventions. "You are not delegates," he ended, "Therefore, if the congress does not please you, you are free to leave."

Nobody opposed this, and four or five Socialists demonstratively left the hall, protesting vehemently at such an "expulsion." Nobody seemed to regret their departure. On the contrary, the meeting seemed satisfied and a little less frigid than before. ...

Among other things, the congress resolved numerous problems concerning the [Makhnovist] Insurrectionary Army, its organization and reinforcement. It was decided that the whole male population, up to the age of 48, would go to serve in this army. In keeping with the spirit of the congress, this enrolment would be voluntary, but as general and numerous as possible, in view of the extremely dangerous and precarious situation in which the region found itself.

The congress also decided that the supplying of the army would be done primarily by free gifts from the peasants, in addition to the spoils of victory and requisitions from the privileged groups. The size of these gifts would be carefully established, according to the size of each family. (454-78)



Source:

[www.ephemanar.net/aout11.html](http://www.ephemanar.net/aout11.html)



# From the archives: the diary of Peter Klassen

Introduction to Peter Klassen by Robert Martens

The gifted writer Peter Klassen was born in Ohrloff, Molotchna Colony, South Russia, in 1889. He was the beneficiary of a good fundamental education, attending business school and achieving his teacher's certificate. In 1892 he married Elisabet (Liese) Loewen and the two enjoyed a long and happy marriage. Throughout his life, Peter was fascinated by the workings of the world and was driven by an indomitable urge to express his passions in poetry, short stories and novels. He was also an inventor, designing tools and systems to facilitate farm life.

Before 1917, Peter Klassen had been a community leader and in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, he became a marked man. Persistence, courage, and a bit of bribery enabled him to escape Russia and immigrate with his family to Saskatchewan. For twenty years the Klassens lived in the tiny town of Superb, where Peter, an untalented (or uninterested) farmer, worked as a minister for the General Conference Mennonite Church. It was also in Superb that he did most of his writing. His two-volume novel, *Heimat Einmal* (Once a Home), is a page-turner that describes both the brutality that emerged during the revolutionary Russian years and the ethical integrity that somehow survived the chaos. Klassen's superb short story "*Grossmutter's Schatz*" (Grandmother's Sweetheart) was included in *Nordlicht* (Northern Light), an anthology of German-Canadian literature published in 1977. And in 1951 the Canadian Mennonite Conference printed five thousand copies of Klassen's anti-war novel *Verlorene Söhne* (Lost Sons) to promote peace principles. [These books are all available in the MHSBC library. Klassen wrote exclusively in High German.]

In 1948 the Klassen family moved to Yarrow, BC. Peter opened a bookstore, but the family never managed to break free from poverty. Peter Klassen, whose health had been questionable since his youth, died of a stroke in 1953.

The following is an extract from the diary Peter Klas-

sen kept during the years of Russian upheaval. They were translated by his daughter Eleonore Klassen Ellwood and transcribed to CD format. The full diaries, as well as photos and other family stories, can be found in the Family Histories section of the MHSBC library. I have slightly re-edited the excerpts below to strengthen clarity.

A short biography of Peter Klassen can be found in *Windows to a Village: Life Studies of Yarrow Pioneers*, ed. Robert Martens, Maryann Tjart Jantzen and Harvey Neufeldt. Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2007.

## *Excerpts from the diaries*

*May 25th, 1918. Friday.*

Quiet till noon, nothing unusual. B. was taken by the Reds after the Cossacks had left it. In the afternoon the ? [illegible in the original script] came and by supper time

But when the battle got so close that the bullets were whistling by the houses, and one, it seemed to me, missed me by a hair, I went indoors, but only long enough to smoke a cigarette.

there might have been 200 men in the village and then the scouts in the surrounding areas, 100 men or maybe more. Then suddenly toward evening in the direction of ?, 4 shots rang out, the sniping by the scouts had begun. In a flash the C.s [Cossacks] were on their horses, gathered on the street and rode at a trot to ? the end of the village, where they waited. The C. scouts withdrew, shooting. Suddenly the rattle of machine gun fire sounded from the other side of the ? to ? where the C.s were

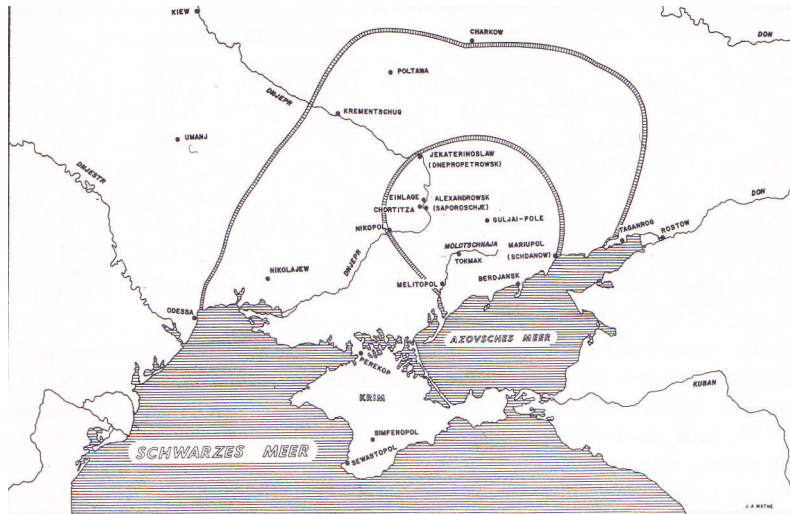
hidden. They are being shot at with machine guns. A cannon shot rumbles through the air, and then another. The shells are landing to the right of Ebenfeld, about 3-4 versts away, boring into the earth and then exploding with a mighty bang in a cloud of swirling dust and smoke. Immediately following this a division of C.s stormed away to meet again above Ebenfeld with the Gross ? and away they went in a full gallop over the fields in the direction of Ediger's estate and Reinfeld. In the meantime there was a little skirmish until the Cossacks withdrew to C.

I was outside the whole time, watching it all. But when the battle got so close that the bullets were whistling by the houses, and one, it seemed to me, missed me by a hair, I went indoors, but only long enough to smoke a cigarette. Then I went out again. The R.s [Reds] followed the C.s to D. and then turned back on the other side of the ? while they drove ?'s herd of horses before

them and also chose 5 horses from our herd and took them away, never to be seen again. Great excitement. People want to escape and yet they want to stay. Some have started to load their things, others have spent the whole time in their cellar. Although the dangers are very real, that evening there was still some laughter about this one or that one because of their cowardice.

But the following sad example shows that mockery is wrong and there are real dangers: Yesterday, the 24th, Thursday. Mr. Eitzen of A. has Mr. Epp from here at his place to do some carpentry work. When Epp hears the roar of cannons, he is uneasy and demands to be taken

back home. Eitzen harnesses the horse and himself drives Epp home. Most of the Ebenfeld people were gathered here on the school yard to discuss the situation, when the two arrived in the one-horse cart. Eitzen stops there and when he hears that we have decided to stay put he drives back to A. At his shepherd's place he sees the R. G. [Red Guard], drives there, turns back when he hears nothing new and drives back to his yard where it is suspiciously quiet and no one comes to greet him. When he enters his house there is the same unnatural stillness and there is no answer to his call. When he fearfully hurries through the house he finds his oldest daughter, Maria, lying bloody, unconscious, in the corner room. When he calls her by name she turns with a jerk and stares wildly at her father. He rushes through the house calling. At last his second son, Abram, appears but is speechless from fear and can only make incomprehensible gestures. Then Mrs. Eitzen comes out of the cellar and tells him, "Maria was tidying in the sitting room. There was shooting to be heard in the distance. The R.s were pursuing a Kirghiz shepherd with his herd and were shooting at him. Suddenly Maria collapses and calls 'Now they have hit me!' Maria Fast was in the room too, and she called us. We hurried in. Johann bandaged Maria, the bullet had gone through the back of her head, and because she showed no signs of life we thought she was dead, laid a pillow under her head and made our way into the cellar!"



Makhno sphere of influence in the Civil war. Inner circle shows main concentration of power. Photo: Peters, 59

*May 26th, 1918. Saturday.*

Quiet until noon. In the afternoon the Cossack scouts showed up again and shortly thereafter, the whole army. Nervously we awaited the course of events. Today is my birthday. The Russians were still using the Julian calendar. There is no happy mood, at any moment the cannons can go off again. After supper it started again! First to the right of us and then left over the H., some cannon shots. Shots at a group of horsemen. Gunfire and the rattle of machine guns and the battle is on before our eyes. The Cossacks coming from all sides set themselves up at the last house (Abr. Klassen, mayor), and waited for

the others who had been scattered along the heights and were now sneaking past the houses through gardens and lanes, through vegetable patches and grain fields. But now on the other side of the H. the shots were ringing out more frequently and the machine guns were busily firing. When the fighting C.s from the other side of the H. had moved behind the village they sped off, keeping a distance of about 10 yards between riders, to ?.

Now the Reds came through the village in pursuit of the C.s. They set up the machine guns on the hill between us and ? and there they go again. When such a row of bullets comes whistling through the air it sounds like a flock of twittering starlings. A shell whistles and hisses over us and explodes at the end of the village 72 yards from the last house. If it had gone one arshin [approx. 1 yard] further to the right, it would have hit the gable of

...the seconds spent waiting for the shell to get here and explode seem like a little eternity.

the house. So we sit waiting in anxious anticipation – will there be more shells? But most of the C.s have ridden out of the village, which the R.s can see very well from the church tower, and no more shots followed.

I get out of the cellar and go outside. Gradually more people appear from their houses. I go to see where the shell had burst. When there are no more shots, some people venture out of their houses again and some come to look at the hole and the shell shards that are lying around. Then I dig up the brass tip with the detonator of the shell, which had penetrated the earth by another 1/2 arshin. It is rainy, wet and cool. It is fairly dark, about 8:30 pm, my wife and I and a few others are standing beside our well, looking at the shell fragments, when suddenly a muffled bang, a long drawn out whistle which quickly becomes louder as it approaches, tells us another one is on the way. I call to everyone to disperse quickly and to drop to the ground. I run to one side and throw myself down flat on

the ground. My wife just runs across the yard to the neighbour's house and doesn't hear my call to drop to the ground. She stops. Mr. S. hides behind the well and I believe the others are on the ground. It takes only seconds for the shell to travel the 7 versts from ? to us, and everything happens faster than I can tell it and yet – the seconds spent waiting for the shell to get here and explode seem like a little eternity. First one hears a muffled rumble, like far away thunder, then a blended descant of whistling and rustling, like the harvest wind rustling through the leafless trees; then an ever louder wail accompanied by a hissing sound like that of that of a locomotive venting steam under high pressure. This intensifies, so that when the shell is closer than one verst, the buzzing and pounding, the wailing and whistling produce tones that only a flying shell can produce. I at least have only once in my life heard a sound like this, or one that resembles it. That was the whistling and crunching of snow on a hard-packed snow covered road at 28° frost, by moonlight on a perfectly calm night, when a sleigh

with iron-clad runners drove by a house with a picket fence along the street and up to the house. I was standing alone in the yard and was so startled by the noise I couldn't move from the spot. It sounded as though an object was whistling through the air at me but it turned out to be an ordinary sleigh. At that time I scolded myself for being a coward, because I was so startled; today I tell myself that if I hear a sleigh making a sound like that again it will remind me of a shell.

As soon as the bang of the explosion followed, I rose with a silent prayer, "God be praised! That one passed over us!" So too the others rose and dashed off, except for one man who wanted to go into our cellar. As our cellar was only a small hole, and we ourselves barely had room in it, I told him to hurry home. Lisa and I with our sleepy children Pete and Lilly in our arms, and Greta, hurried into the cellar. We put Lilly on a plank which lay over the potato box and laid Pete on the floor. Lisa and Greta sat on the floor. I feared we'd have another three shots, one after the other, as usual. As none followed,



Peter J. Klassen. Photo: Frontispiece, Grossmutter's Schatz

I went outside. With the rain and the howling wind it was creepy. At first there was no one to be seen, but after I had gone back to the cellar and then out again several times, the odd one or two people could be seen on the yards. The Cs., with the exception of some observers on the top of straw stacks, had all disappeared. The shell had hit at neighbor Flammings' place across the street, about 8 yards from the house. It burst against the windows, shattering four and tearing out the ? but it didn't hit any one. But 8 yards further and it would have hit a house where a number of children were sleeping next to the wall. After speaking with several people, I decided not to stay in the cellar, but Lisa was hard to persuade to come up. About 11 o'clock, after spending two hours there, we brought the children up, made beds for everyone on the floor of the corner room. After entrusting ourselves to the protection of the Lord, we lay down fully clothed to try to get some rest after the excitements of the day although we had little hope of getting any sleep.



# Großmutter's Schatz (Grandmother's Treasure, or Sweetheart)

By Louise Bergen Price

It is often suggested that Mennonites in South Russia knew little of the world beyond their colonies. If this was ever the case, the Crimean War ended that isolation. From each Mennonite village, *Podwoden* (horse and wagon) were requisitioned to carry supplies to the battlefield and to bring the wounded back. Often these wounded Russian soldiers were nursed back to health in Mennonite hospitals and homes.

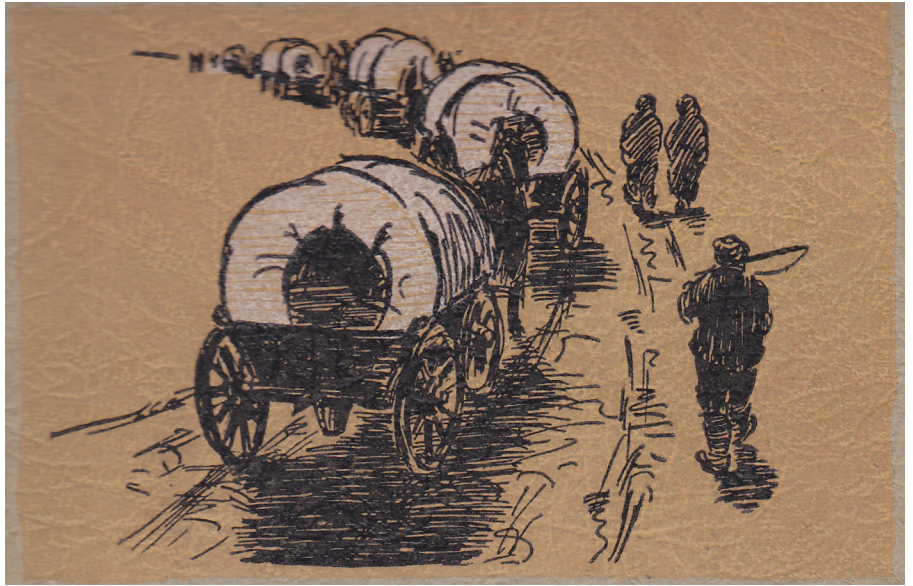
Peter Klassen's novella, *Großmutter's Schatz*, gives us a glimpse into the Mennonite world of the 1850s, showing how Mennonites were affected by their interaction with people of other nationalities, not only in South Russia, but later in Canada as well. In contrast to much of Klassen's other work, this story is charming and upbeat.

The village of Waldesruh is ordered to send ten *Fuhrwagen* (transport wagons); the decision as to who will go is determined by lot. Twenty-year-old Fritz Harder and his friend Jasch Neufeld are among those who make the 300 kilometre trek to the Crimea with cargo of grain. The young men are excited by the adventure, and at first, all is well. The road across the steppe is in good condition, the sun is shining, and they make good progress.

Once they join the main army transport road, confusion reigns. They join long trains of wagons, sometimes six or more abreast. Sometimes they meet caravans coming towards them, from "only God knows where," with exhausted horses plodding along at a snail's pace. In order to get around the caravans, they have to cut across deep wagon ruts. Axles, wheels and traces break.

Day after day, rain seeps down. Tarps protect wagons, but marching soldiers also need shelter, and often crawl under cover to get warm. Provisions disappear; lice remain.

The young Mennonite men finally reach Simferopol towards the end of October, but instead of being allowed to return home, they are commanded to transport food and munitions to the battle front at Balaklava. As they wait for further orders, ever more infantry, cavalry and



*Großmutter's Schatz*. Cover of book. Illustrated by Arnold Dyck.

artillery pass by. Now thoroughly afraid, Fritz and Jasch decide to take advantage of the confusion and escape.

Suddenly, a horse races into the clearing and a heavily wounded man in a British uniform slides to the ground. What to do now? They can't leave him to die. Quickly they dress his wounds and load him onto the wagon. As a last minute thought, they pick up his pistol.

Once Fritz and Jascha are safely back at Waldesruh, Jasch's sister Lena nurses the wounded man, McMurray, back to health. Before he leaves the family, the British soldier gives Lena a photograph of himself, inscribed, teasingly, "To my sweetheart. Lesley McMurray, 1855."

Years go by. Lena and Fritz marry, and have a daughter, Greta. More years pass. Greta marries Hans Wall. Their only daughter, another Lena, marries Franz Friesen in 1900. Since parents and grandparents have each had only one child, Lena receives a large inheritance. By 1914, the young couple is wealthy.

Ten years later, war, famine and revolution have drained away most of their possessions and the family emigrates to Canada. At the last minute, they decide to take the photograph of "Grandmother's sweetheart" with them, along with McMurray's pistol.

In Canada, the Friesens buy a farm. Their hard work pays off; by 1932, they have only \$1500 left on their mortgage. Then the Depression hits. The Friesens' farm is worth \$14,000 but the bank will repossess it if they can't make payments. Once again, they will lose everything.

Just days before the foreclosure, fate intervenes in the

form of an “English” couple who have car trouble along the road, and are invited to the farmhouse for a meal. While Franz Friesen fixes the car, daughter Helen shows the visitors the family photo album.

Suddenly, the visitors point to a photograph. “Who’s that?”

“Grandma’s sweetheart,” the girl explains, adding that the photograph belonged to her great-grandmother.

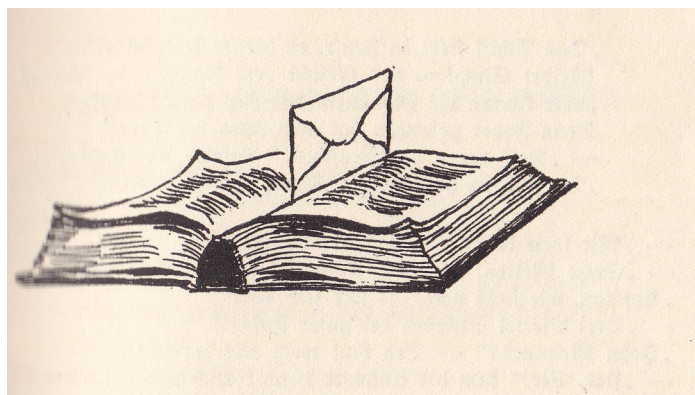
At supper, when the couple appears anxious to hear more, Franz tells what he knows, even fetching the pistol. He is surprised when the visitors offer to buy photo and pistol, but refuses to sell the family mementos. The English couple directs the conversation to the impending foreclosure. Friesen is not pleased that his daughter has shared their problems with these strangers, but finally acknowledges that unless he can come up with the money, he’ll lose the farm.

As the visitors are about to leave, the woman rushes back into the house to fetch her purse. Then, with many thanks, they leave.

The following morning, as Franz prepares for family devotions, he finds a note in his Bible. It reads, “For the first time in my life, I have become a thief, but you’ve left me no choice. I hope my reimbursement will be enough to cover the value of the stolen goods, and that you won’t prosecute me.”

“I would have sold him that pistol for \$10,” Franz mutters, “but it seemed too steep a price, and I didn’t want to give it to him for nothing. And now this fine gentleman has become a thief!”

Something else is missing. In the photo album, in place of “*Grossmutter’s Schatz*” they find an envelope. “Enclosed is \$2,000 to pay your debts,” reads the note. “Grandma’s sweetheart was my grandfather! Yours, C.L. McMurray.”



The letter in the Bible. *Grossmutter’s Schatz*, p. 53.

Illustration by Arnold Dyck .

Klassen, Peter (Quidam). *Grossmutter’s Schatz und andere Geschichten, Gedichte und Fabeln; illustrationen von Arnold Dyck*. Superb, SK: Selbstverlag des Verfassers, 1939. 132 pp.

Peter Klassen’s German-language novella is included in *Unter dem Nordlicht: Anthology of German-Mennonite Writing in Canada*. Ed. Georg K. Epp & Heinrich Wiebe. Winnipeg: Mennonite German Society of Canada, 1977. The book can be accessed in the MHSBC library.

## Mennonite Studies project grants awarded

Press release by Jon Isaak, executive director, Centre for MB Studies

Anicka Fast, Harold Jantz, and Jayaker Yennamalla are 2015 recipients of the Mennonite Brethren Historical Commission’s MB studies project grants.

Anicka is a doctoral student in Mission Studies at Boston University School of Theology and comes from Montreal. She worked with MCC in Democratic Republic of Congo for three years. Annicka’s project title is “Identity and power in mission: a study of cross-cultural relationships among North American and Congolese Mennonites.”

Harold is from Winnipeg and served for many years as the editor of the *MB Herald* and later as founding editor/publisher of *Christian Week*. His project involves translating and publishing selected letters, formal reports, news stories, lists, and commentary that appeared in the weekly German-language newspaper, *Mennonitische Rundschau*, from the beginning of 1929 to the end of 1930. Harold’s project title is “Flight through Moscow: a *Rundschau* Reader.”

Jayaker is a doctoral student at the Federated Faculty for Research in Religion and Culture (Serampore College) in Kottayam, Kerala, India. Jayaker’s research interests include the MB missionary movement’s impact on social change in India, the Dalit Christian experience of socio-cultural, political, and economic transformation, and the contribution of indigenous Christian workers in bringing about social change. His project title is “MB Mission for social change in South Telangana (1899-1958).”



## Book review

Andrew Klager, editor. *From Suffering to Solidarity: The Historical Seeds of Mennonite Interreligious, Interethnic, and International Peacebuilding*. Pickwick Publications, 2015. With a foreword by Marc Gopin.

Book reviewed by Ron Dart

The publication, *From Suffering to Solidarity*, is a must read “plough-to-soil” book. The tome is multilayered and conveys, in the most poignant and convincing manner, the varied seeds that have produced the best of Mennonite peacebuilding. There are a variety of books (past and present) on Mennonite peacebuilding, but few embody the sheer depth and breadth of *From Suffering to Solidarity*. Andrew Klager deserves many a generous kudo both for the authors he has brought together in this book and for the quality of the essays within each section of this finely wrought portal into Mennonite peacebuilding.

*From Suffering to Solidarity* is divided, wisely so, into three parts: 1) Historical Conditions of Anabaptist-Mennonite Peacebuilding Approaches; 2) Analysis of the Historically Conditioned Mennonite Peacebuilding Approaches; and 3) Application of Mennonite Peacebuilding Approaches in Conflict Settings. Each of the seventeen chapters, in different ways and means, often lands well on the relationship between theory and practice in the Anabaptist-Mennonite peacebuilding tradition (past and present).

The subtitle of the book is also a significant pointer to the content of the text – peacebuilding within interreligious, interethnic and international contexts – and this tome also faithfully ponders the many historic seeds that have produced such ripe fruit on the Mennonite peace-

building tree. In short, *From Suffering to Solidarity* highlights, in the wisest and most graphic manner, the best of the Mennonite tradition: how Mennonites have allowed the suffering they have lived through to give them a practical and “in the trenches” solidarity with others who have also suffered – such is the in-depth genius of both the finest of the Mennonite way and of this book.

There are several issues I would have enjoyed seeing better reflected. First, the time has surely come when the impact of Erasmus on the first generation of Anabaptists-Mennonites can no longer be ignored nor denied. The impact of Erasmus is inferred but not substantively pondered in *From Suffering to Solidarity*.

Second, and in a sense correlated with the Erasmus-Anabaptist-Mennonite connection, the relationship between the state and society – that is, between top-down and bottom-up peacebuilding – could have been delved into much deeper. There is a tendency amongst Mennonites to be suspicious of statist top-down peacebuilding and to overemphasize society bottom-up approaches to peacebuilding. Erasmus held high the significance of living in the dynamic tension of state/society as a means of peacebuilding, and the Mennonite way could learn much from this more nuanced model of peacebuilding.

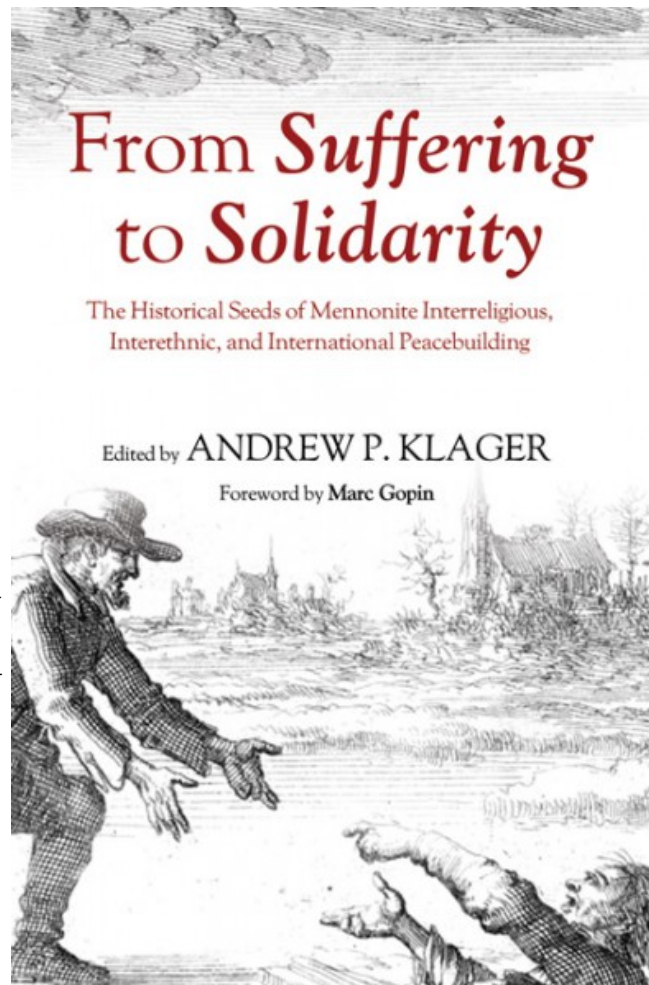
Nevertheless, *From Suffering to Solidarity* is a must-read gem of a book – pure gold.

The task of reading, inwardly digesting and living forth the best of the historic Anabaptist-

Mennonite peacebuilding way could not have been better told than through Andrew Klager’s careful crafting and synthesizing of such finely written material.

*A copy of this book will be available for reference soon in the MHSBC office.*

*Ron Dart teaches in the Department of Political Science, Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of the Fraser Valley.*





# Roots and Branches

is a publication of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC and is mailed four times per year to all members. An annual membership is \$35.00.

*Your contributions are needed to further this work! All donations will be receipted for tax purposes.*

**Directors:** Jim Baerg, Vi Chappell, Don Fehr, Cheryl Isaac, Arnold Klassen, Robert Martens, Wilf Penner, Richard Thiessen, Maryann Tjart Jantzen, John Van Dyck, Laura Unger, Elmer G. Wiens

**Editor this issue:** Robert Martens

**Associate editors:** Maryann Tjart Janzen, Louise Bergen Price

**Editorial Committee:** Anne Andres, Louise Bergen Price, Vi Chappell, Robert Martens, Heather Pauls Murray, Wilf Penner, Maryann Tjart Jantzen

**Design:** Heather Pauls Murray

**Staff:** Diana Hiebert, Mary Ann Quiring

**Mennonite Historical Society of BC**  
1818 Clearbrook Rd.  
Abbotsford, BC V2T 5X4  
Phone: 604-853-6177  
Fax: 604-853-6246  
Email: archives@mhsbc.com  
Website: www.mhsbc.com  
Hours: 10am-4pm Monday-Friday

## Looking At The Mountains

*For Julius and Katharina Derksen*

By Elmer Wiens

*Lavarov, The Caucasus, 1925*

The Slav bandits and rogue soldiers are gone.  
After years of war and revolution, Lenin and the Bolsheviks control Russia. But here in the Caucasus along the Rostov-Baku railroad, Mohammed's people dwell.

Yesterday, Gerhard Harder shot a Mohammedan from the mountains  
breaking into his sheep shed. After Tienche bandaged his leg, I took him on the wagon to the authorities.  
We complain; they just smile and say, "You have too much."

Too much! Beautiful Lavarov, Mennonite village pioneered ten years ago. Four years as a Czarist soldier. Still wearing my re-soled army boots with my re-souled heart.  
Everything changes slowly; then everything is gone.

In the Ukraine, they arrested Mennonite ministers.  
In Sagradovka, they murdered Tienche's brother's family.  
Must we leave again, when there is enough for everyone?  
Why does mankind emaciate the amplex of God's creation?

The Crimean Saribasch farm was the best: grapes and watermelon; the Black Sea coast. The brothers and I swam naked like Russian men. The resorts paid good money for fresh vegetables, fruit, and milk.

In last week's letter, brother Johann in Manitoba said, "Take the train to Moscow. Get exit permits for Canadian Immigration in Riga." He has a farm in Gnadental and even an automobile, near Tienche's Hutterite relatives.

I love looking at the mountains. Late into summer the snow on Mt. Elbrus reflects the evening sunlight and the waxing moonlight. Mt. Camel has a double hump, and Mt. Jelesenaja has hot and cold healing springs.

A young Mennonite couple from the Ural Mountains want to buy our farm. Should we move again?

Elmer Wiens grew up in Yarrow, BC. He attended Yarrow's MB Church but also participated in youth activities at Yarrow's Alliance Church. At UBC he studied mathematics, computer science, and economics. Elmer lectured at universities in Canada and the USA, and worked as a government economist. He is a member of the board of directors of MHSBC.





Paintings by Ray Dirks. Top: Maria Redekop Wall. Bottom: Tina Peters

