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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

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Skin of a City, graphite on painted birch bark, 2014, by Diana Hiebert

Guest Editorial

What the Historical Society Means to Me

By Diana Hiebert

When I stepped into the role of Office and Volunteer Manager at MHSBC in October 2015, I thought I knew the make-up of a Mennonite: conservative, tribal, thrifty, and old-fashioned. Having being born into a Mennonite heritage as well as having attended a Mennonite high school and an MB church, I was certainly prepped on knowing the facts, the history of "Mennonite-ism" if you will. However, it wasn't until I started working at the Historical Society that I *felt* like I might be able to truly own my Mennonite heritage. I can't attribute this change of heart to my daily pilgrimage past the raspberry public art near the Clearbrook exit or my many rounds through the "Mennonites in the Fraser Valley" exhibit every day. I truly believe it was the process of getting to know many of the passionate, knowledgeable, wickedly funny, and dedicated staff and volunteers who make up the Historical Society. Through this process, I became aware of some of my preconceived and misguided ideas regarding Mennonites.

I came to the Society ready to wrangle volunteers into "getting the job done" for the good of our non-profit organization. Instead, from very early on, I noticed that the Society had no shortage of willing volunteers; I was overwhelmed by how easy it was to voice a need and watch as volunteers quietly and humbly stepped into a role. I can't quite articulate how completely this dumbfounded me. Having volunteered for many years in a variety of organizations, I understand the sacrifices that volunteers make to give of their time and energy. But these Mennonites did so with incredible ease – seemingly, without a second thought.

Our volunteers and staff have recently dedicated a great deal of time to the Historical Society and new Museum. It has been a busy but rewarding past few months. I've seen the Society change locations and expand while the people involved remained true to who they really are at their core. Truthfully, like all transitions, this one has had its challenges: new routines to learn; a new facility with its own set of quirks; archival and incoming holdings to organize; a new computer network to create and troubleshoot; and the list goes on! Nevertheless, there's no doubt in my mind that the Historical Society's move to the Mennonite Heritage Museum facility has increased our visitor count and added to our running list of volunteers. We've also gained an area of 2,016 square feet – which we are quickly filling. In spite of new challenges and benefits, I've had the privilege of seeing the Mennonite Historical Society retain its core: a tight-knit group of individuals who have completely transformed my idea of what and who a Mennonite really is.

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. Please write "letter to the editor" in the subject line of the email. Letters may be edited for length or content.

MHSBC Genealogy Workshop: 5 March 2016

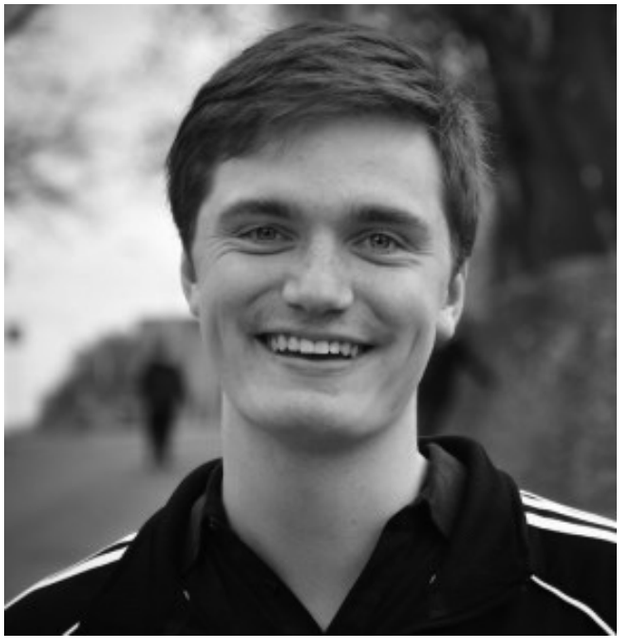
Reported by Richard Thiessen

On Saturday, March 5, the Society held its annual genealogy workshop. The day-long workshop was held at the Mennonite Heritage Museum. Forty registrants, including a number of first-time attendees, participated. The three presenters included Dr. Glenn Penner of Guelph, Ontario, Dr. Tim Janzen of Portland, Oregon, and David Loewen of Abbotsford. Penner gave two presentations: the first focused on Mennonites in Polish civil records; the second was a summary of recent developments in West Prussian Mennonite genealogical research. Janzen presented a summary of recent developments in Russian Mennonite genealogical research, highlighting a number of census lists from the early nineteenth century that will be made available in the near future.

After lunch, Dave Loewen gave a presentation on self-publishing one's family history. He brought along several examples for attendees to view, and it is safe to say that he inspired many in attendance to consider self-publishing as an affordable option, especially for smaller projects with short print runs. Janzen finished off the day with a presentation on how to make genealogical connections using DNA results. Participants were "warned" that the presentation might get a bit technical and were given the option of a tour of the Society's new home on the second floor of the Museum, but all stayed and were encouraged to pursue DNA testing to solve their own genealogical questions.

A second genealogy workshop will held at the usual time in November later this year.

Archival Internship 2016



Andrew Brown is the recipient of the Mennonite Brethren Historical Commission's summer archival internship for 2016. As intern, Andrew will spend a total of five weeks visiting each of the MB archival centres in North America (Fresno, Hillsboro, Winnipeg, and Abbotsford) during the months of May and June. In addition to discovering the unique character of each of these Mennonite archives, he will explore the stories and images housed in them, especially pursuing his interest in the MB experience of World War II in the U.S. and Canada and with North American politics in general.

Andrew is a senior student completing a BA degree (history and political studies) in April 2016 at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba. He has aspirations of becoming a high school history teacher, hopefully teaching Canadian history and Mennonite history.

Tribute to Paul Toews

By Wayne Steffen

Paul Toews, Ph.D., emeritus professor of history at Fresno Pacific University, died on Friday, November 27, 2015, his 75th birthday, at his home in Fresno. The middle son of Mennonite Brethren patriarch J.B. Toews and wife Nettie, Paul Toews spent 44 years on the history faculty, retiring in 2013. He is survived by his wife Olga, daughter Renee, son Matthew, brothers John and James, and their respective families.

"Paul's significance to Fresno Pacific University, the Mennonite Brethren Church and the larger Mennonite world is almost incalculable," states Kevin Enns-Rempel, director of Hiebert Library and a colleague and former student of Toews. "As an instructor at Fresno Pacific University he shaped the lives of countless young scholars, many of whom have gone on to successful careers in academia and other fields. As director of the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies and the Mennonite Brethren Church Historical Commission, he fostered a sense of historical identity for that denomination. As an author and Mennonite heritage tour leader he helped to contextualize the broader North American and European Mennonite story for many audiences. His most recent work in identifying and making available Mennonite source documents in Russian and Ukrainian archives has shed new light on that significant part of Mennonite history."

In 1972, J.B. Toews helped establish the MB Historical Commission, serving as executive director of the commission and the Center for MB Studies in FPU's Hiebert Library. Later, Paul Toews also served in this role.

Humble about his own legacy, Paul Toews said he sought to encourage students to encounter a broader intellectual world. He stated, "I hope students became more sympathetic and tolerant to other understandings. We need to remember, as the Apostle Paul wrote, 'We do see through a glass darkly.'"

The memorial service was held at 2 pm, December 12, at College Community Church Mennonite Brethren, Clovis, California, where he was a member.

Wayne Steffen works in media relations and is university editor at Fresno Pacific University. The above is an abbreviated version of a tribute to Paul Toews posted at www.fresno.edu.

Future events

The Public and Private Lives of Mennonite Collective Farm Chairmen in Ukraine in the early 1930s
Dr. Colin Neufeldt from Edmonton, AB
Saturday, 25 June 2016, 7:00 pm
Clearbrook Mennonite Brethren Church, Abbotsford. For information contact MHSBC, 1818 Clearbrook Rd., at 604-853-6177 or archives@mhsbc.com.

"A small sign of life and love": Letters out of the Soviet Union during the Khrushchev Thaw
MHSBC Fall Fundraising Dessert Banquet
Sunday, 18 September 2016. Location to be announced.

Mennonite Historical Society of Canada 2016 Awards of Excellence

During its early January annual general meeting in Abbotsford, the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada presented awards of excellence to Hugo Friesen and Ted Regehr for their archival work.

Hugo Friesen (1930-) was born in Manitoba and moved to Greendale, BC, as a young child. After graduating from Sharon Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Yarrow, he attended Tabor College and then Goshen College, graduating in 1955. Hugo and his wife, Jean, whom he met while studying in the U.S., returned to the Fraser Valley after his college graduation, and Hugo began his teaching career at Sharon Mennonite Collegiate. Hugo was on staff from 1955 to 1963, and served as principal of the school for five years.

In 1963 Hugo and his family served in Hong Kong with Mennonite Central Committee. Upon his return to BC in 1966, Hugo taught in the public school system in Maple Ridge for a few years before becoming principal of Mennonite Educational Institute in Abbotsford in 1969. He served as principal for ten years and continued teaching at MEI until 1989.

In the 1980s Hugo became involved with the early attempts to organize a Mennonite archive in British Columbia. Hugo was present at an organizational meeting in the fall of 1987 where the idea of a British Columbia Mennonite historical centre was born. After another term of service with MCC, this time at Akron from 1989 to 1993, Hugo and Jean returned once again to Abbotsford, and Hugo became the archivist for the Mennonite Historical Society of BC.

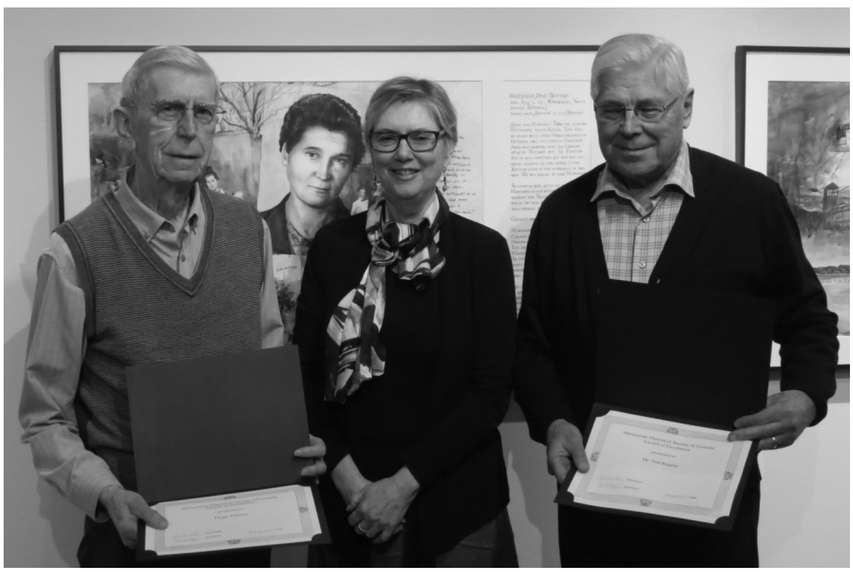
Hugo served in this capacity for twelve years until 2005, and has continued volunteering for the Society to this day. Hugo coordinated all of the activities in the Archives in its early years, including supervising volunteers, organizing, cataloguing, and classifying archival materials, assisting with genealogical research, and representing the Society at regional meetings of the BC Archives Association. Hugo's wife Jean also volunteered for the Society for a number of years, and was one of many volunteers under Hugo's leadership who have helped to create the rich archival collection that we enjoy today.

Hugo Friesen set a high standard of public service with his much appreciated contributions at the MHSBC Archives and has left a rich legacy of public service to the Mennonite community in the province.

Ted Regehr (1937-) was born in Coaldale, Alberta. He received a BA from the University of Alberta in 1959, an MA from Carleton University in 1963, and a PhD in History from the University of Alberta in 1967. From about 1960 to 1968 Ted worked in the Public Archives of Canada, serving as head of the Records Branch during his last years there. In 1968 he joined the history department of the University of Saskatchewan, eventually becoming head of the department.

Although Ted's teaching career was focused on Canadian history, he has had a long involvement in Mennonite history. From December 1975 to December 1981 he served as president of the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada. He has also been active on the editorial board of the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online and as an adviser to MCC's Historical Committee. He has published many books on Canadian and Mennonite history. After retiring, Ted settled in Calgary where he has become an invaluable member of the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta. He is an active board member and regular volunteer who oversees the archives and library.

Source: www.mhsc.ca



Hugo Friesen and Ted Regehr presented with awards. Photo: MHSC website

Why Mennonites Are Preoccupied With Their Past

By Daphne Esau Kamphuis

I learned little about my Russian Mennonite heritage during my childhood – intellectually at least. My father had no desire to revisit his past in Russia after settling in Canada in 1925, and my mother was born to Russian Mennonites who had immigrated in the 1870s. At various junctures, however, I have explored my roots through reading, taking a Mennonite Heritage Cruise to Ukraine, and joining a study tour in the Netherlands. My interest in my tradition was rekindled most recently by Wayne Northey's article, "Why I am (not) a Mennonite," in the August 2014 issue of *Roots and Branches*.

Northey begins his article by referencing his Anglican scholar friend Ron Dart's observation that "ethnic Mennonites are perhaps more taken with their history than any other religious group in Canada" (7). He goes on to discuss this notion from the perspective of the possible "holier-than-thou" attitude of all Protestant (including Radical Protestant) groups, a perspective I tend to agree with. It's easy to view one's own particular values as superior. But Dart's observation directs my curiosity back towards a question I posed in a Regent College paper I wrote several years ago: What might have caused the varying responses to trauma in Russian Mennonite immigrants following Russia's civil war, the Bolshevik revolution and Stalin's regime? Engaging with my father's family story that includes some who were displaced following World War II, I observed that although many Russian Mennonite immigrants survived and thrived, others floundered, while still others remained crushed and broken. The issue of post-crisis trauma continues to intrigue me, and Northey's article invites a revisiting of the topic.

As Northey points out, there are legitimate reasons for ethnic Mennonites' fixation on their past. He cites Bruce Hiebert's suggestion that the preoccupation may be due, in part, to a history of recurrent flight from persecution dating back to the sixteenth century. "Such unwelcomeness," writes Northey, "indeed might make one understandably turn a tad defensive, circle the wagons, become, well, somewhat economically, socially, and politically self-absorbed." I concur with that analysis, and I wish to explore the notion of self-preoccupation further by looking at the intense emotional struggles sustained by some Mennonite immigrants and their families.

Before discussing the topic of emotional suffering, however, I want to stress that Northey also highlights the generosity and goodwill that Mennonites have extended to many outside their community. "Paradoxically," he writes, "Mennonite ethnocentricity has spread its wings outward into an amazing embrace of neighbour and enemy … at both the justice and charity poles. I was initially drawn (still am) to Mennonites by their peace and justice theology, and by the Mennonite Central Committee." This outward-directed goodwill demonstrates that many Mennonites have transcended their troubled narratives and have come to identify with an overarching narrative of compassion and generosity.

And is it possible that the impact of trauma in Mennonite history has been minimized and misunderstood?

We continue to hear stories of faith and resilience, most recently through the compelling artwork of Ray Dirks, whose visual portrayal of the stories of strong, resilient Mennonite women was recently featured at the BC Mennonite Historical Society gallery in Abbotsford. We honour all those men and women who through courageous living and the good fortunes of grace recovered their spirit and found their vocation. They have responded to the question which Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl (*Man's Search for Meaning*) invites victims of trauma to explore: "What does my life ask of me?"

But what about those who remained entangled in the suffering of the past and encumbered their families with the vestiges of their trauma and grief? Those whose preoccupation with their past was palpable but incomprehensible to others? As I ponder these issues, two questions surface: might the self-preoccupation of some Mennonites be a result of inadequate articulation of their personal (and communal) narratives? And is it possible that the impact of trauma in Mennonite history has been minimized and misunderstood?

In a paper for a recent graduate course at Trinity Western University, I researched both Russian Mennonite and Jewish Holocaust literature, weaving my father's story into some of the historical narrative I was encountering. Incorporating fragments of narrative theory, I made use of Wheaton College English Professor Alan Jacobs' comments on narrative theology, based on his

reading of authors Leslie Newbigin, Stanley Hauerwas, and others (1). Jacobs, along with these authors, affirms the Christian narrative as a communal one: it is God's story that we both tell and participate in. Jacobs maintains that "the life of the individual Christian … makes sense and achieves meaning through participation in [the] communally recounted narrative." And he adds, "Even the various forms of theological activity can be redescribed in narrational terms, as when Newbigin writes of 'the congregation as hermeneutic of the Gospel': interpretation of Scripture for Newbigin is not so much what a particular scholar *writes* as what a particular community of believers *enacts*."

...the traumatic lives of our ancestors have marked us for life.

Jacobs' statement suggests a potential disconnect between what community leaders teach and what the members live out. His ideas beg a closer look at both community members and their leaders to see which beliefs are appropriated into their lives. Reflecting on Jacobs' observations, I wonder if some of the stories of Mennonites might actually conceal and even perpetuate, rather than elucidate, some of their preoccupation with their past. I wonder how much of the trauma that was witnessed and experienced has been omitted from the narratives, and what that omission has meant for the processing of the trauma.

I am not implying that ethnic Mennonite narratives are lacking in veracity or that the stories don't portray a powerful faith and trust in God. I am not suggesting that our forbears did not weep over the traumatic events of their Russian sojourn. But I wonder if some traumatic stories have been diminished or reshaped as victories, making it difficult to truly *make sense* of the past and thereby *make sense* of the present.

What do I mean by *making sense* of the narrative? Daniel Siegel, clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine and author of the internationally acclaimed texts *The Mindful Brain* and *The Developing Mind*, maintains that it is essential for those with troubled histories to develop a "coherent narrative." He says that even if we did not come through childhood with a "coherent narrative," as adults we can acquire a narrative that provides a foundation for strength and resilience (172). We procure that "coherent narrative," he says, when we make sense of how our difficult life experiences have impacted us (72-73).[1]

"Making sense" of the impact of difficult life experiences involves acknowledging that trauma has been registered in the body and psyche as well as the spirit. Gaining the capacity to see the impact of the suffering does not mean that trauma victims settle for a life of wallowing in the pain caused by their past, nor does it mean that the effects of the trauma will necessarily be overcome in this life. But making sense of the experiences can influence the response to a traumatic history so that the preoccupation with the past diminishes and its place is both acknowledged and assimilated into personhood. When we understand how our difficult experiences have impacted us, we gain self-knowledge and may even become capable of articulating our stories.

Although many of us, over time, have experienced a measure of healing from trauma, we are coming to understand, through recent neuroscientific studies, that the traumatic lives of our ancestors have marked us for life. Instead of sealing our fate, however, these findings can actually help us make sense of our lives.

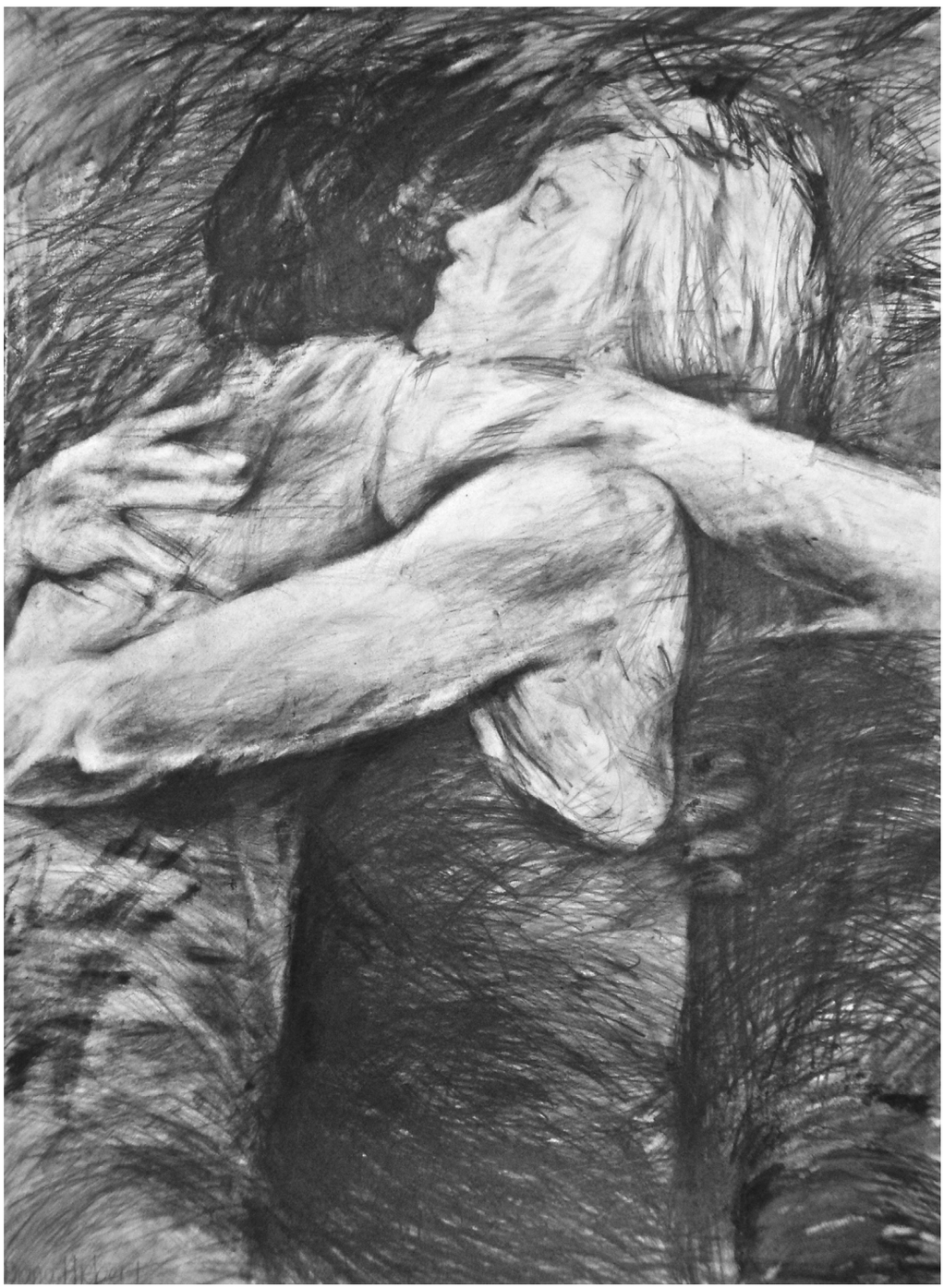
In her 2014 Webinar Series on trauma, Dr. Ruth Bucyzinski, president of the National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine, discusses the topic of "epigenetic transgenerational inheritance" (ETI) as it pertains to the treatment of trauma. Epigenesis refers to an alteration in the expression of a gene as a result of environmental stimuli. With regard to epigenetic transgenerational inheritance, environmental factors can affect, *positively* or *negatively*, the manner in which genetic material is expressed in the succeeding generations ("epigenesis").

Bucyzinski cites an ongoing neuroscientific study led by Ahmad R. Hariri and his research team at Duke University that is "working to link genes, brain activity, and other biological markers that could indicate a risk for mental illness in young adults" (1153-55). The study, which involved eighty college-age participants, demonstrates how tiny molecules (methyl groups) can attach themselves to DNA and ultimately alter the expression of a gene. "Essentially, the methyl groups will regulate where and when a gene is active," Bucyzinski says. In this process of epigenesis, the genetic code of the DNA does not change structurally; but in response to environmental signals such as stress and trauma, the attached molecule can influence chemical changes in the body (e.g. serotonin regulation), which affects how the genetic code is read. The hypothesis is that these attached molecules can become transgenerationally inherited markers

and possible predictors of mood disorders such as depression and PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), both for those who have suffered trauma and for the succeeding generations.

In an article entitled "Epigenetic Transgenerational Transmission of Holocaust Trauma," Natan P. Kellerman observes that Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma (TTT) "renders some children of survivors vulnerable to stress while others become more resilient." He goes on to say, "Further studies may justify the introduction of a new diagnostic entity – transgenerational stress disorder – with immediate relevance for the assessment, prevention, and treatment of the offspring of many kinds of trauma survivors" (33-39).

These neurogenic studies reveal the various fallouts of epigenetic transgenerational inheritance and help us grasp both possibilities: inherited stress and inherited resilience. They illuminate the emotional and physical realities that lie behind some of the preoccupation of Mennonites (and all the other groups in the world who have suffered trauma) with their past.



Wrap Me, graphite on paper, 2011, by Diana Hiebert

Traditionally, in Mennonite communities there have been both acceptable and unacceptable ways of telling stories. Many individuals have not told their stories because addressing issues such as rape and incest has been a matter of shame, even for the victims. Silence, at times, has been demanded in order to preserve the family honour; other times it has been a misguided attempt to hold to the community's requirement of practising forgiveness. Even grief has not always been voiced or welcomed.

The silencing of grief was likely, at least in part, a coping strategy, as the searing pain of loss was too debilitating. Some who grieved the loss of loved ones were not encouraged to repeat their stories unless they had reached a "victorious" resolution within themselves. This "forgetting what was behind" may have been advocated from admirable motives since it represented the attempt to "reach forward to what is before" (Phil. 3:13). But untold stories are generally unprocessed stories and

unexpressed grief often becomes repressed grief that ultimately seeks other modes of expression: rage, attempts to control, or perfectionism, to name only a few. Acceptable or respectable avenues for telling the stories were not readily available to many in those past days of large families, dire poverty and the stresses of day-to-day subsistence.

It is well understood today that relating one's narrative requires a hospitable environment: an empathic and nonjudgemental listener and a good deal of space and time. Storytelling in a validating environment helps the storyteller make sense of life, whereas an approach in which the storyteller is encouraged simply to overcome or surmount the effects of trauma is no balm for healing.

Intervention, graphite on paper, 2011, by Diana Hiebert

Reflecting on my own family of origin, I see how my ancestors lived their complicated lives with immense faith and trust in God. But I also see how their adherence to communally-acceptable metanarratives may have obscured their understanding of what actually happened to them in the very cells of their bodies, eliminating the possibility of "making sense" of their narratives.

Like countless children of his time, my father lost several siblings and his mother to typhus. In 1925, his father, stepmother, and four siblings were fortunate enough to immigrate to Canada, but several married siblings and their families remained behind in Russia. Due to difficult and painful family dynamics, one young, unmarried sister also stayed behind, and en route, the brother who was closest in age to my father was detained in England because of a minor health problem. This brother was never reunited with the family and died in one of Germany's institutes for the mentally ill. Family members pieced this story together from overheard fragments of conversation. We received no coherent storyline about these events and their aftermath.

When I reflect on the unspoken sadness, grief and loss endured by my father, I feel great empathy for him. I suspect

that his story, too, was never invited. I did not always feel compassion towards him, however, as there were many hard things for me to bear as a child and as a teen. Both storytelling and story-reading, however, have made it easier for me to feel for his losses and to be reconciled to my own.

Writers like Rudy Wiebe, Dora Dueck, and Katie Funk Wiebe are several of many storytellers who have uncovered issues that have kept traumatized Russian Mennonites silent over the years. Writing with both sensitivity and honesty, their stories illustrate philosophy professor Richard Kearney's theory of narrative sympathy (140). Kearney maintains that only by means of narrative sympathy can we learn to love others truly without harming them, and even to see life from their perspective.

...respectable avenues for telling these stories were not readily available to many in those past days of large families, dire poverty and the stresses of day-to-day subsistence.

Storytellers need story listeners. Hearing stories is not the exclusive role of therapists and spiritual directors. Compassionate friends and acquaintances can also become present, listen compassionately, and honour lament and grief. As Richard Kearney writes, "Every story is a play of at least three persons [author/actor/addressee] whose outcome is never final" (156).

Many Mennonites forged their way through suffering and were resilient. However, trauma victims whose emotional difficulties persisted throughout their lives may not have known the extent to which their difficult experiences impacted them. But we have seen that there are resources available for developing coherent narratives and enlarging the possibilities for healing: we can add to our faith the knowledge available from neuroscience and the goodness derived from storytelling. As we are released from our stories of the past, we can find our place in the larger story of the present and gain hope for the future. In this way our stories of suffering become our community's graced history.

Someone asked the American poet Robert Frost, who was no stranger to depression and whose son took his own life (*robert/frost/farm*), if he had hope for the future. Frost replied, "Yes, and even for the past … that it will turn out all right for what it was – something I can accept – mistakes made by the self I had to be or was not able to be" (*writersalmanac*).

[1]Siegel writes, "We make sense of our lives by creating stories that weave our left hemisphere's narrator function with the autobiographical memory storage of our right hemisphere. By detecting blockages to narrative integration and then doing the necessary work to overcome them, we can free ourselves and ultimately our children from the cross-generational patterns we want to avoid creating.

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Daphne Esau Kamphuis is a long-time member of Highland Community Church (MB) in Abbotsford, BC, where she leads worship, preaches occasionally, and facilitates Group Spiritual Direction. She holds an MA in Theological Studies from Regent College and loves writing and studying. Daphne and her husband Art have three adult children and six grandchildren who try to keep their grandparents young, hauling them out for kayaking and trail-walking

Mystics, Madmen & Menno Simons

By Bruce Hiebert

It is time for a reappraisal of the role of Menno Simons as an Anabaptist leader. Ever since the publication in the 1940s of Harold S. Bender's famous article, "The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision," the emphasis in Mennonite history and theology has been upon the early Swiss Anabaptists of the 1520s and their vision. What has been forgotten is that ten years later, quite independently of the Swiss Anabaptist perspective, Menno Simons articulated a distinctly Dutch version of Anabaptism, one that would displace the Swiss variety for over 400 years.

Silhouette of Menno Simon's meeting house in Witmarsum. Monument designed by Joute de Graaf. Photo: Louise Bergen Price, 2008

Bender's shift in perspective, one which was followed by John Howard Yoder, William Klassen, and other brilliant students of his, opened the door to a refreshed Mennonite Church. These individuals broke down barriers of culture to make Mennonite ideals appealing to a new generation both inside and outside the Mennonite world. Though a long time in coming, it also provided the basis for fending off the destructive impact of Dispensational Fundamentalism.

However, this shift came at a cost: the loss of the distinctive vision of Menno Simons. But even more than that, it cost Mennonites their ability to understand much of what makes them who they are. In order to understand contemporary Mennonites, one must understand Menno Simons (1496-1561). To understand Menno Simons one must understand the Dutch world in which he lived and from which he took his inspiration.

The Dutch world of Menno Simons was one of mysticism, lay piety, and revolutionary violence. It was a world of Catholicism dominated by a humanism rooted in the ideals of hard work, human perfection and union with God. Yet at the same time it harboured fanatics and violent revolutionaries. It was in the midst of these contending forces that Menno Simons articulated a new kind of Christianity, a stream of Anabaptism that emphasized separation from the world, good order, and peacefulness.

One of the most powerful contributions of the Dutch Catholic Church to the formation of the Mennonite Church was made by the Brethren of the Common Life. Started in the late 1300s, this group of deeply committed and pious lay people and clerics worked in ministries of education and publication. While there is no known direct connection between this group and Menno Simons, they were reflective of and contributed to a strong Dutch religious mindset of good works in the context of prayer and the pursuit of godliness.

No less important were the ideas of late medieval Catholic mysticism. With its three steps of purification, illumination, and subsequent union with God, it was the source of Simons' emphasis on purity among Christians. It was the required first step in the process of moving toward human perfection, something that many believed was achievable through the grace of God.

But in contrast, there was also the violence of the times. The Netherlands suffered invasion and violent unrest throughout the 1500s as the increasingly wealthy towns and cities struggled for independence in the context of foreign domination. There was also the constant undercurrent of peasant unrest, since peasant revolts were the normal route to improved conditions for the serfs.

The transformative figure in this situation was Melchior Hoffman (1495-1543). A furrier by trade, and appointed as a Lutheran minister by Martin Luther, Hoffman drifted throughout the Baltic region preaching reform. Popular with the people, he was not popular with other Lutheran reformers, a key reason he often moved. During a stay in Strasbourg he encountered the Anabaptists and subsequently joined their movement. As an Anabaptist he was welcomed in the Rhine lowlands, converting many to the Anabaptist perspective, including brothers Obbe and Dirk Philips, who would become close companions of Menno Simons and key figures in the emerging Mennonite church. The heart of Hoffman's message was twofold: first, live a repentant and reformed life; and second, the end of time is coming and Jesus will return in 1533, beginning in the city of Strasbourg. During this second event Christians would join with God in a purging Holy War against the ungodly. His followers, the Melchiorites or Covenanters, spread his message throughout the Netherlands.

With Hoffman's imprisonment in 1533, and in the context of the fierce persecutions then occurring, especially in the Flemish lowlands, the Melchiorites focused

on Muenster in lowlands Germany as the site for Christ's return. The city itself welcomed the radicals and other refugees from persecution. This led to massive upheaval in the city. The subsequent battles and violent conquest of the city in 1534 by Catholic forces only proved to many that the end of time was upon them and a revolt was necessary. Led by Jan van Geelen, an escapee from Muenster, armed Anabaptists captured a monastery and subsequently planned an attack on Amsterdam city council, an attack in which van Geelen was killed.

These events horrified Menno Simons and triggered his own transformation. As an evangelical and reforming Catholic priest, he preached strongly against the Anabaptists and their violence. But he also wondered if his own reform efforts were contributing to the unrest. Forced underground because of his reform efforts, he emerged in 1537 as the newly married and baptized leader of the most peaceful of Hoffman's Anabaptist followers. His ministry would from now on be in the midst of these revolutionaries, as one of them, even if as one who was deeply committed to the path of good works, prayer, and peacefulness.

Closest to Simons at first was Obbe Philips (c. 1500-1568), barber, surgeon, and ordained leader of the Melchiorites. But the two parted ways over time as Philips became increasingly distressed by Simons' work to organize a church. For Philips, Christianity was primarily a matter of the heart, of the invisible life of the Spirit working in the inner being. Simons' emphasis on external purity and strong church order struck him as a violation of the gospel and he came to regret his association with Simons and the movement.

The "hidden church" in Pingjum, Menno Simon's birthplace. Photo: Louise Bergen Price, 2008

David Joris (c. 1501-1556) was also a colleague of Simons at first. Joris was a deeply devout and spiritual man, a church window painter by profession and writer of hymns. Joris sought to unite the Anabaptists after Muenster and bring them to a way of peace. But for Joris, like Philips, the way was one of inner conviction of God's truth, not external obedience. Joris and Simons came to despise each other, a fact not helped by the fact that Joris' followers were accused of being sexual libertines, a not uncommon reality among those who live only by the truth of the inner spirit (Joris was a rigorous ascetic and no accusations were ever directed at him).

There was also Jan van Batenburg (1495-1538), a religious terrorist of the Dutch and German lowlands. He and his Anabaptist followers, called the "sword-minded," roamed the countryside carrying out acts of violence, including plundering churches. While Batenburg himself was executed in 1538, the movement itself still caused problems as late as 1552 or 1553.

It was between these poles of violence and inward Spirit-following that Simons worked to shape a religious movement. Building off of the Dutch Catholic-humanist sensibility of good works and pure living, he fostered a movement that gained the respect of many, was tolerated in some places, and only moderately persecuted in others. Simons himself crossed the Dutch, German, Danish, and Polish lowlands, a hunted man, preaching, writing, baptizing, and ordaining leaders as he went. It was his peaceful path that finally prevailed and became the central reality of Anabaptism. After his death his writings were translated into German, and his views continued to spread, crossing the Atlantic to the English Colonies and eastward to Russia. Today his vision and practices can be found in many peoples, a testimony to the power of one man and the world that produced him.

Anabaptism comes in many forms. By far the most powerful form historically – and still today – is the vision of strong community, good order, and peacefulness relentlessly spread by Menno Simons. That, not the more spiritual or existentialist versions held by the early Swiss and other peaceful Anabaptists, is the current that runs deep in the contemporary Mennonite church. It is the spirituality of quiet good works in the context of an orderly community, and it is possible on the basis of this vision to yet again energize a new generation of Mennonites.

Bruce Hiebert is a Mennonite historian and ethicist. He is an Abbotsford resident, member of Langley Mennonite Fellowship, and teaches at University Canada West. Dr. Hiebert is a founding member of the Mennonite Faith and Learning Society and helped develop the Mennonite Studies Certificate at University of the Fraser Valley.

Quiring-Loewen Trust: A Legacy of Walter Quiring and Jacob A. Loewen

By Gladys Loewen and Sharon Loewen Shepherd

50th Celebration of the Embera Wounaan Church in Chepo Panama, February 27, 2010. Photo: DJ Pauls

The Quiring-Loewen Trust (QL Trust) was established in 1986 by Jacob A. Loewen in memory of his maternal uncle, Walter Quiring. Its mandate was to provide small grants for research, writing, and publication in areas that reflected both Jacob's and Walter's heritage and professional pursuits. Priorities included:

- Loewen-Quiring history,
- Mennonite studies and the rethinking of Mennonites' values and place in history,
- Mennonites in Third World development, and
- Mennonites in cross-cultural communication.

The seed money for the Trust came from an inheritance of Walter Quiring's Canadian holdings.

Jacob named his wife, Anne, and their four children – Gladys, DJ, Sharon, and Bill – as trustees, responsible for assisting him in administering the activities of the Trust. Following Jacob's death in 2006, Anne's and Jacob's children continued to administer the QL Trust. After Anne's death in 2013, granddaughter Allison Felker joined the trustees. Within a short time the trustees, recognizing the challenges of keeping the Trust relevant and active without a central operator, a role that Jacob had occupied, mindfully and respectfully decided to close the Trust. It was officially closed in 2015 in accordance with Canada Revenue Agency procedures.

The Quiring-Loewen Trust funded more than forty diverse grants over twenty-nine years to projects in Canada, the U.S., Russia, and Central and South America. Examples include a donation to the UBC Museum of Anthropology of Jake's and Anne's artifacts dating from their work with the Wounaan indigenous people in Colombia; publication of *Half in the Sun: Anthology of Mennonite Writing*, and a West Coast Issue of *Rhubarb* (a Mennonite literary magazine); Sound Nonviolent Opponents of War (SNOW); the history of Yarrow, BC publication series; a youth at-risk project in Cali, Colombia, in collaboration with *Fundación Evaristo García*; a biography of C.F. Klassen and his role with MCC supporting Mennonite refugees; and an inclusion audit at the University of Sioux Falls that set positive developmental goals to support cultural inclusion and diversity.

Some grants were chosen because they had personal meaning for trustees. One such project involved processing and printing Jacob's slides from his MB mission work between 1948 and 1957 with the Wounaan people. Trustee DJ Pauls brought the printed photos to Panama for the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the Embera/Wounaan MB Church that Jacob had helped establish; she was deeply touched by the excitement of Wounaan/Embera individuals as they were able to see rare photos of themselves as children, as well as previously unbeknownst photos of deceased parents and older relatives. A grant was also given to Peter Sawatsky [see Sawatsky's MEDA article later in this issue] to produce a satellite map of the Paraguayan jungle to assist in negotiating land boundaries for the displaced Ayoreo indigenous people. As both Walter and Jacob had researched and worked with the Mennonite colonies and the surrounding indigenous people of the Paraguayan Chaco, this project offered personal, historical connections.

Other grants have retrospectively generated interesting Mennonite connections. For instance, Walter Quiring served from 1955 to 1963 as editor of *Der Bote*, a German publication avidly read by Russian Mennonite

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immigrants. Jacob's children remember their grandfather, Abram Loewen, reading *Der Bote* aloud to his wife, Katherine, in Yarrow, BC. It is interesting to note that the first QL grant was awarded in 1988 to Lawrence Klippenstein and the Manitoba Mennonite Heritage Society for archiving the now defunct *Der Bote*. The Loewen sibling trustees met Lawrence in Omsk, Siberia, in 2010 at a *Mennonites in Siberia and Asiatic Russia* conference and learned that Lawrence, in fact, is a cousin to Margaretha Klippenstein Enns, Anne Loewen's mother. The QL Trust provided a grant to the Omsk conference organizers; the Loewen siblings attended out of historical interest, since both Jacob and Anne were born in Mennonite Russian colonies.

At the Omsk conference, the siblings also heard Marlene Epp present a paper on the "The Transnational Labour of Mennonite Midwives in Siberia, Asiatic Russia, and Canada," which included references to Margaretha Klippenstein Enns, one of the midwives she had researched for this presentation. The QL Trust had provided a grant to Marlene in 1993 for her research regarding the role of women immigrants in Mennonite families. Marlene's extensive research was later cited in a QL-funded essay, "Who's Cooking the Borscht: A Perspective on Social Identity," which was co-authored by the four Loewen siblings and published in *Mothering Mennonite* by Demeter Press; the essay examined the roles and identities of their Mennonite Brethren grandmothers and mother.

Jacob Loewen's vision was to create a Trust that welcomed small, personal projects which would expand the learning of the Mennonite world; the inheritance from Walter Quiring allowed the vision to be realized. The Mennonite uncle and nephew, consummate writers, linguists, academics and researchers, lived a generation apart, but their strikingly similar interests coalesced in the creation of the QL Trust. The closing of the Trust leaves a small but distinct footprint in the Mennonite world, a fitting legacy to the lives of Walter Quiring and Jacob Loewen.

Jacob A. Loewen leading Embera people in a dedication service, Jaqué region of Panama circa 1960s. Photo: Jacob A. Loewen

The Genealogy Corner: The Ties that Bind

This is an abridged version of an article that was sent to MHSBC. The complete version can be accessed in the MHSBC archives. Further information can be found at http://franzjakobhuebert.org/index.html

By Dave Hubert

The 2015 reunion of the Hübert family at Columbia Bible College in Clearbrook brought together three family members from three continents: Jacob F. Hübert from Brazil; Franz F. Hübert from Canada; and Henry F. Hübert, a recent immigrant to Germany from Russia. Most of the Henry F. Hübert family came to Germany from Russia in the recent past. Following are a few of the family stories shared at the gathering by Dave Hubert, grandson of Franz F. Hübert.

Franz Jakob Hübert was a descendant of David Johann Hübert and Aganetha Giesbrecht, who settled in Muntau, Molotschna Colony, in 1803/4. Although Franz Jakob did not inherit a farm, and so by implication was not a major landowner, the photo indicates that his was nevertheless a family of some means (see page 15). His sons are all fashionably dressed and their mustaches would have been acceptable in the court of the tsar. On the table, covered with a crocheted tablecloth, is a Bible and a flute, with potted flowers in front of the table. Son Franz F. sports a sterling silver pocket watch attached to a clearly visible silver chain. Obviously, the family appreciated music and beauty and attached enough importance to the Bible to make it part of the centrepiece of the photo. They were of sufficient means to hire a photographer and likely belonged to the more progressive members of the larger Russian Mennonite community. Although this branch of the family were not the heirs of the *Wirtschaft* in an agrarian society, they made reasonably comfortable lives for themselves in this farming society. The fact that the whole family relocated to Siberia to become landowners around the turn of the century indicates the importance they continued to attach, not only to land ownership, but also to farming.

The peasants all crossed themselves before partaking of the food, but the Mennonite boys just bowed their heads, leading their hosts to conclude that they were atheists and therefore communists.

Franz Jacob's son, Franz Franz Hübert (my grandfather), was a shrewd and aggressive businessman and an able manager. By the time of the Russian Revolution and the ensuing civil war, he had built up a large and successful farming operation. He ran a strict household and brooked no nonsense. When his eldest son, Franz, then about 11 or 12, acted up, his father ordered him to leave. His sisters suggested that he apologize and promise never to act up again. This Franz did, and his father relented. During the civil war, when Franz was 19, the White Army requisitioned a load of wheat from the family. Franz headed off to deliver the wheat and was never seen again.

The civil war was difficult for my father (Jacob F.) as well. One day officers from the White Army appeared in Tiegerweide, pointed their guns at young men and ordered them to come with them. Though pacifist, they knew better than to refuse [and were conscripted into the White Army]. They were ordered to drag a cannon through the forest until they neared a railroad track. There, on a Sunday morning, they set it up and waited until an armoured locomotive pulling several cars came into range.

The armoured locomotive (similar to the one in *Dr. Zhivago*), was part of the effort of the Red Army to gain control of the countryside. The officers of the White Army fired a fusillade at the locomotive and disabled it. My father reported that when the villagers in the church heard that the train had been wrecked, they came out of the church singing songs of thanksgiving. The peasantry, at least in this part of Russia, disliked the Reds.

Sometime later the Whites were routed. Jacob F., along with three other young men from his village, escaped to evade capture by the Reds. Hungry, they approached a peasant family and were invited to share a meal. The peasants all crossed themselves before partaking of the food, but the Mennonite boys just bowed their heads, leading their hosts to conclude that they were atheists and therefore communists. Before the meal was over, White Army soldiers arrested the young men and marched them to the edge of the village to a makeshift firing range. Fortunately, just as the firing squad was

Franz Jakob Hübert and his family.
Seated from left to right: Franz F. Hübert (1875-1964), who later moved to Canada, and his wife, Helena Wiebe (1877-1903); Lena Esau Hübert, 5th wife of Franz Jakob; Franz Jakob Hübert (1850-1920). On his lap is Franz F. Hübert's daughter Helen (1896-1924).
Standing: Second from left: David Hubert between his stepmother's sons, Jacob and Dietrich Esau; Jakob F. (who later moved to Brazil) and Heinrich (who died young in Russia); then daughter Anna; finally, half-sister Tina, the daughter of Franz Jakob Hübert and his second wife. Tina had an older brother Abram, who is not pictured. The mother of Jakob, Franz, Heinrich, Anna and David was Elizabeth Janzen (1852-1891).
Photo: courtesy of Dave Hubert

preparing the execution, the White officer recognized them as his men and called off the execution. Jacob F. Hübert later immigrated to Brazil.

My grandfather Franz F. Hübert thought that communism didn't have staying power and would collapse under its own weight. In 1926, the village soviet in Tiegerweide began to enact communist ideology: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need." One of Franz's brothers-in-laws, not nearly as ambitious or hardworking, had a large family but a small landholding; Franz was now required to give half of his farm to this relative. This so angered him that he threatened to emigrate.

Not surprisingly, this caused a serious family rift, not to mention a church quandary. How could the brother-in-law, an MB no less, be so unreasonable as to accept the land? Franz's brother, Elder Jakob F. Hübert, was called from Margenau to help try restore harmony to the family and the church. Nevertheless, the decision to emigrate stood. Franz Hubert converted all his holdings into gold and in 1927 the family left for Canada, managing to smuggle out all the gold.

Franz F. Hübert settled in Coaldale where his sons Jacob, Henry, Peter and David and their families farmed and became deeply involved in the affairs of the community. Two of his daughters moved to BC where their children and grandchildren live today. John Allan Hubert, the eldest son of David, has been a prominent leader in the Coaldale MB Church and MCC Alberta.

Book Reviews

Gerhard Fast. *In den Steppen Sibiriens (In the Siberian Steppes)*. Rosthern, SK: J. Heese, 1957.

By Robert Martens [all translations by RM]

> When I look back into the past and view our leaders in the mind's eye, it seems wonderful to me to know how many there were who were ready to do everything they could to serve their brothers. This summer I have lived a great deal in the past, and my heart has been warmed by the experience. (Peter B. Epp, qtd. in Fast 82)

These are the words of an eyewitness to the building of the Siberian Mennonite colonies near the beginning of the twentieth century: words imbued with a nostalgia for a settlement that lasted for only a few years.

Gerhard Fast's German-language history of the beginnings, rise, and ultimate destruction of the Barnaul/Slavgorod Siberian colonies is based on eyewitness accounts such as the example above – and on his own experiences there. The book is a meticulous setting down of facts: the relevant articles in the G*lobal Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (GAMEO) seem to be largely based on Fast's work. On the other hand, the book is remarkably vivid in the telling, relating both the good and the bad, the camaraderie and the quarrels, the joyful and the catastrophic. Fast's book was published to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Siberian colonies' establishment, yet it is so well-written that its stories feel as though they happened just yesterday.

As so often expressed by Mennonites in a variety of situations, the Siberian story has "*ein schwerer Anfang*": a difficult beginning. In 1906 the Russian government, in an attempt to settle the eastern regions of the country, offered settlers free land, reduction in taxes, and other privileges in order to tempt pioneers to the vast Kulundian steppes of Siberia. These steppes constitute a vast tract of land in southwestern Siberia dotted by salt lakes such as Kulunda. Rainfall is meagre; the climate, challenging. When Mennonite delegates surveyed the land they were considering as their destination, they were nearly overcome by the desolate remoteness of the seemingly endless steppe, even though the soil often appeared rich. Prospective Mennonite settlers felt, though, that they had nowhere else to go: they consisted mostly of the poor and landless, pushed to the fringes of their home Mennonite colonies, condescended to and used as cheap labour. Siberia might be a place of independence. And for once, the mother colonies – perhaps driven by a sense of guilt – were generous in their support for the new venture. Mennonites from a variety of colonies were on the road by 1907.

Indeed *ein schwerer Anfang*: gruelling wagon train journeys through rain and snow; sod huts hurriedly built to beat the first winter; steppe fires that threatened to raze villages, and sometimes did; snowstorms so blinding that one man died attempting to cross the street. In GAMEO's Siberia essay, the land is described as desolate. It would, however, not have seemed so to the Kirghiz nomads who roamed the steppe with their superb herds of horses. When Mennonites (who were a mere fraction of the settlers moving in) occupied the land, the Kirghiz were displaced from their ancient ways of life. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the Kirghiz seemed to have fallen somewhat into penury and beggary, cooperation with their new Mennonite neighbours remained the norm.

Perhaps the severe climate mandated cooperation. One of the many surprises contained in Fast's book is the immediate friendship between settling Mennonites and the political exiles – or children of exiles – who had been banished to Siberia years before. Fast cites P.J. Wiebe as stating, "It was a joy to watch how relationships between the original dwellers and the Mennonites became so friendly and how trust between the two increasingly grew. Apparently these people were unfamiliar with evils such as theft and betrayal, suspicion and scheming, and hence anxious locking of doors or concealment of goods and belongings were unknown" (qtd in Fast 35). It should be noted that the Russian authorities had demanded that land be distributed to males only, and that farms be large and single-owned (*khutors*). Mennonites had other ideas. Women had long been part of their system of inheritance, and now they simply ignored the Russian demands, distributed land to families, and built in traditional cooperative style: a tightly-knit village along a single street with larger owned properties surrounding the barns, residences, school, and church. Community, author Gerhard Fast repeats several times, was a priority.

With aid from American Mennonites, the Siberian colonists soon prospered. The village of Orloff had been prechosen as administrative centre of the Barnaul

Colony; Barnaul was the closest city of any substantial size. A few years later, the Russian government demonstrated its seriousness in establishing Siberian settlement by building a brand new urban trade centre, Slavgorod, to provide closer markets for farm goods and consequently higher prices for those goods. Slavgorod became the new administrative centre for the region. With the building of railways and the discovery of the lucrative dairy trade – grain crops had been, in that harsh climate, only moderately successful – Siberian Mennonites were doing very well within a few years. Talented leaders were a godsend. Churches, steam mills, and orphanages were established. When Prime Minister Stolypin visited the Slavgorod Colony – and Mennonites lined the streets to catch a glimpse of the "great man" – he commented that the Colony was a model that should be emulated by Russians themselves. Mennonites quickly built a monument in his honour.

And then came, as Gerhard Fast writes, *die Katastrophe*. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917; the rise of anti-Communist General Kolchak in Siberia's largest city, Omsk; an uprising of peasants in support of the Reds, savagely suppressed by Kolchak's bands of Cossacks, Poles, and Czechs; the defeat and retreat of Kolchak; and the abandonment of Mennonites to the mercy of an ignorant horde of Red ideologues. Many of these events came to a head in 1919, the same year anarchist Nestor Makhno was ravaging the Ukraine. Grain and stock were confiscated by the Reds and transported into cities where they were frequently wasted. An unimaginable inflation followed. People starved to death as a consequence of the Bolshevik-caused famine. There was some softening of conditions when American Mennonite Relief arrived to help out, and when Lenin temporarily allowed small business to operate during a brief period known as the New Economic Plan. By 1929, however, with Stalin now firmly in command, Mennonite Siberian colonies were doomed. Men were frequently arrested in the middle of the night, never to be seen again. Even entire families were transported to the slave labour camps of northern Russia, where many Mennonites – among millions of others – froze or starved to death.

A lucky few managed to emigrate from the Soviet Union before the doors closed in 1929. The rest were fated to endure one of the greatest holocausts in human history. But did they endure as a culture? In the mid-1950s, a Mennonite travelling through Siberia assessed the Mennonite remnant still living there as uprooted and listless, their tradition having been almost completely forgotten. He may have been wrong. More recent visitors to Siberia have found Mennonites still farming, living together, speaking Low German, and attending lengthy church services. Human resilience, it might be said, is too often underestimated.

In den Steppen Sibiriens (despite a few pages of dry data, names of elders, churches, dates, and so on) is packed with vividly told stories. One such excerpt follows. It is not a story of oppression and misery; rather it is one of nostalgia for times past.

In the Snowstorm

Soon we are seated on our sled and headed towards our home village. Both of us are wrapped in huge sheepskins and are wearing felt boots, fur hats, and large gloves. Only our eyes and noses peek out. Our great strong brown horse gallops valiantly before the sled, knowing, of course, that he is headed for his familiar stable. When we have travelled about one kilometre from the village, the snowstorm starts up again with renewed rage. Visibility is zero. The road upon which we travel is well used, but the familiar shrubbery that normally serves as road markers now appears only here and there.

The wind becomes stronger and more menacing and the storm howls with even greater rage, driving the snow with a mad fury.

"If this keeps up...," we say, and then fall once again into silence, our gaze fixed upon the way ahead. Our old and experienced brown horse stays determinedly on the road, knowing that if he wanders even one step left or right, he will be floundering through soft snow.

The wind becomes stronger and more menacing and the storm howls with even greater rage, driving the snow with a mad fury. Nothing more can be seen of the road, nothing more of the shrubbery, the road markers. Suddenly the horse veers off to the left. "He's getting off the road," I think, and pull him back to the right. The horse obeys unwillingly – because he is not mistaken. He knows that the road turns left here towards Blumenort. People, however, assume they are cleverer than he, and he must obey. Once again he tries to turn left, back to the road, but once again he is corrected. Now he is wading to his knees through deep snow and makes his way

forward laboriously, step by step. “Brrr!” I finally say, “We’re lost!”

My brother takes the reins and I climb down from the sled to look for the way. I go left – no road. I go right – no road. I search in front, behind – all in vain. I can’t get too far from the sled or I could lose that too. I take a few steps, call my brother, he answers. I can’t go so far from the sled that my brother and I can no longer hear each other. If that were to happen, we are lost, would never find each other again, and would freeze to death alone. “Can’t find a thing,” I finally say to my brother as I climb, out of breath, back on the sled. “We’re lost. If God doesn’t save us, we will die.”

My brother says nothing, he knows I am right. I take the reins, speak words of encouragement to our horse, and the journey into the unknown begins again. Remarkably, our horse tries once again to turn left, but I guide him to the right. I’m still certain that we have gone mistakenly to the left.

The great Siberian steppe has become a howling, raging, whirling Charybdis. No way out! “We’re going to freeze to death in the snowstorm,” we think with horror.

And our horse plods on, one hoof at a time. “Hey! Two trees! Aron, we’re saved! That’s the forest close to Hochstädt behind the gardens. Look at the snow, it’s deeper here, a good sign that we’re near the forest. If we just travel straight forward, we can’t miss the village.”

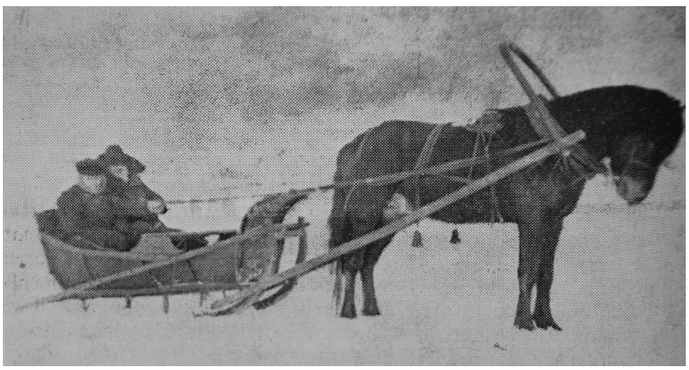
But what’s this? The horse is walking on but the sled doesn’t move. A coupling has slipped from the icy shafts, and the horse travels on easily, but only a couple of steps, and then the reins hold him back. Luckily I am clinging to the reins, or our horse would have been loose.

“Aron, take the reins, I’ll try to harness the horse.”

I give my brother the reins, climb down from the sled, and lead the horse between the shafts in order to harness him again. And this is not easy, because doing this with gloves on is impossible, and without gloves my fingers are soon so stiff that they don’t move.

I put the gloves back on and clap my hands to drive back my blood into the stiffened joints. The storm blows snow into my wide-open sheepskin and glues my nose and eyes shut. – We are lost! – I throw a despairing glance at the heavens, try it one more time, and look – success! Our horse is back in harness. I slip quickly back into the sled and say to my brother, “Take the reins and drive on. My fingers are frozen. We’ll soon be in the village.”

My brother takes the reins, yells a few encouraging words to our horse, and it wades once again through



Siberian sleigh. Peter Janzens from Rosenwald. Photo: page 38

deep drifts. It can only be a few minutes to the village, since we know the woods around Hochstädt are very near to town. But why don’t we see any more trees except for a couple of birch? Is this not the forest near the village? Have we gone wrong? But no, no, that was the forest, we are certain. We wandered off the road to the left, that we know. It’s possible that these trees are the outer two and we can’t see the rest. Then forward, and courage!

We travel on for ten minutes, for a half hour – no village. We travel on for an hour – no village. We are lost, absolutely lost, we have journeyed on into the evening and have found neither road nor village, and we will freeze miserably to death in this snowstorm.

“I can’t hold the reins anymore,” says my brother, “my fingers are completely stiff.” Without a word I take the reins from him. My fingers have become a little warmer.

But what’s the use? We are lost. I tie down the reins and let our horse wander as he wishes. Maybe he will find a village somewhere.

And our horse strides forwards. When he notices that he is no longer being guided, he tries again to turn left. No one prevents him, and he walks on in an entirely different direction. My brother and I, wrapped in our sheepskins, sit on the sled and think – of our death.

Dear mother, do you know that your sons are travelling to their death? There in the front is a bundle containing a black shawl that I had bought my mother for Christmas. You will have it yet, you will wear it in our funeral procession.

And it’s Christmas! Yesterday there were lights and celebration; today, in ice and snow, the last day of our lives, today – death! Oh our lovely young lives! So soon they come to an end. Die? No, no, we don’t want to die, we want to live.

“Gerhard ... I’m freezing ... my feet are cold ... Gerhard ... we’re going to die.” I have no answer. I know

there is no hope.

And our brown horse strides step by step through deep, deep snow.

Whuuuu! hhuuuu! shshsh! The storm howls on. It throws ever more snow upon the freezing brothers. Neither says a word. We have nothing to say, we are lost, bound to die, our hands and feet are stiff. The snowstorm howls and roars louder, the cold licks us like a blood-thirsty wolf, its long red tongue hangs from its jaws, white foam from his clacking teeth spills upon the snow.

Oh, what if wolves will come to devour us? If they find our corpses? If my parents and brothers find only bones? No, no, not that, freezing to death, perhaps, but not to be eaten by wolves!

"Wait, Aron, what's that? A shrub? A road marker?" We sit upright. One leap, and I'm off the sled. A few steps, and I call joyfully, "It's the road, the road, we're saved!"

A half hour later we are in the neighbouring village of Rosenwald. We drive to the home of teacher Thielmann, thaw the ice and snow from our faces, everything has frozen together in a thick mass. By sundown the storm recedes and we travel home. It is only five kilometres to Schöntal.

"But children, you travelled in weather like this!" calls our terrified mother as we walk in. "I was so worried, but your father comforted me, he told me you would never dare travel in this kind of weather. My sons! You could have been lost in the storm!"

We look at each other silently.

In the stall, our horse stands and eats his hay. Without you, where would we be now?

Two years later he had to be shot. He was suffering from glanders. When I came home in spring, he lay buried in the fields.

Gerhard Fast (40-43)

Additional source

Krahn, Cornelius. "Slavgorod Mennonite Settlement (Siberia, Russia)." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1959. www.gameo.org

Connie T. Braun. *Unspoken: an inheritance of words*. Vancouver: Fern Hill Publications, 2014.

Introduced by Robert Martens

Connie Braun's book of poetry is a meditation on family, loss, and especially memory: memory of people and loves that really, in their essence, can't be spoken. The poems emanate from Braun's Russian Mennonite heritage, and some return to – and awaken – the Russian years. Others look back from a Canadian landscape that somehow still feels alien.

All the poems in this heartfelt book are accompanied by photographs, and there is a special poignancy in connecting words with faces in sepia – faces of family who, in some cases, are long gone – but there is a kind of memorial, even resurrection in Connie Braun's words.

This lovely and accessible book can be accessed in the MHSBC library.

Memory is a taste in my mouth...

thick and warm
like cream and butter sauce
you generously poured
over cottage cheese dumplings
or those you filled with sour cherries,
ones you picked from your own trees
and swiftly pitted with your thumbs by the pail-full,
stones you missed slipping out easily
past my lips like family secrets.
Warm pockets of summertime sprinkled with sugar –
the sweet taste
of another place.

You tended your garden plot here,
where other Polish and Russian neighbours lived,
growing cucumbers, carrots and sugar-snap peas,
edible kisses for your English-speaking grandchildren,
little hybrids hungering to belong to your lost Eden.
In your small kitchen, a picture of Jesus,
the bread rising,
chicken soup simmering, noodles you kneaded
laid out on your table to dry.

Long, tangled ribbons of affection
our family ties.

Or borscht thick with tomatoes and cabbage,
glimmering with globules of fat from the meat,
not just old bones for the broth
like when my mother was small.

And those golden nuggets you planted
– eyes from the old world.

How carefully you sowed the seeds
from your home-place, so small, precious,
as if jewellery you smuggled out
when you fled, though you never owned any.
The only tangible belongings you managed
to salvage, the closest thing I had
to your unspoken memories,

these potatoes were your currency as you offered
[them to me
by the bowlful,
steaming, buttered and salted,
as though I needed such a rich bribe

to love an old woman. (13-14)

The Plough in Spring
"To die is as hard as to pull a plough in spring."
- Anna Kamienska

I saw you once again,
just for a moment, as I passed
by in a car. Not in this country,

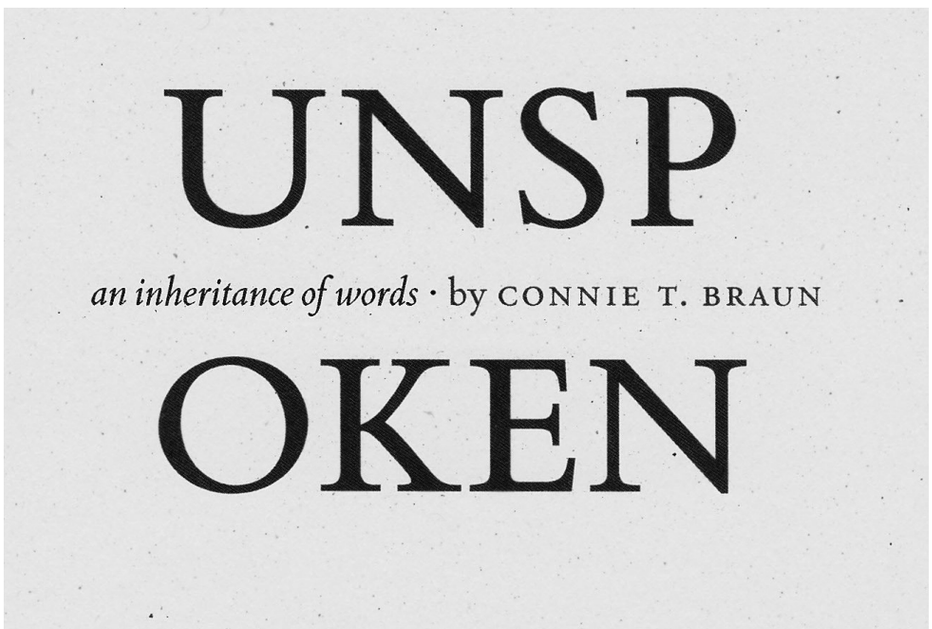
but far away,
lost place of fertile land and river,
and even there, at that speed,
I recognized you

harrowing the field
for potatoes, the brown mare's hide
gleaming, your eyes
shaded by your cap. I was not
mistaken, the sunlight in my eyes

illuminating you like that,
behind the plough in spring,
not of this earth anymore.

Connie T. Braun is a poet, memoirist, speaker and instructor. Connie has written and published in diverse genres including poetry, memoir, book reviews and academic papers. Her areas of interest and expertise include Mennonite Studies and Creative Writing. Connie writes on themes of family history, ethnicity, immigration/emigration, loss, (dis)placement and (dis)location. Her personal family research has culminated in rich poetry tracing her own roots, as well as in the writing of her books, The Steppes Are The Colour of Sepia *published in 2008 by Ronsdale Press and* Unspoken: An Inheritance of Words *(2016). (www.conniebraun.com)*

Connie Braun.
Photo: www.conniebraun.com



Elizabeth Reimer Bartel. *The Yellow House: Poems of Life and Love*. Self-published. 2015. 155 pp.

Introduced by Robert Martens

Although Elizabeth Reimer Bartel has already published a novel, a memoir, a poetry anthology (co-published with a group of women), and now a book of poetry all her own, she might be described as a "late bloomer." Born in 1925, she only started writing when she felt it was time. "Reading has been my greatest joy all my life," she says. "I had to read enough before I was ready to write" (Author Event). *The Yellow House*, written in her advanced age, is in a sense a nostalgic memoir of a long life lived among treasured family and friends.

The yellow house in which Reimer Bartel was born was situated at the corner of Main Street and Reimer Avenue in Steinbach, Manitoba, and was built by "the eccentric Reimers" (press release) who helped found the town in 1874. This book of poetry ends with a story: the death of her grandmother in the yellow house and the Mennonite funeral rituals that follow. *The Yellow House* frequently speaks of death, doubt, and loss; the poems are written from the perspective of a woman who has indeed lost much and is facing her own mortality. The book is not dark, though. It is imbued with humour, whimsy, and an abiding faith. These poems are stories in poetic form, written simply and accessibly, and with a vividness of detail that is remarkable.

The second of the following two poems speaks to old age and death; the first, to the wonder of life's renewal.

Sources
"Author Event: Elizabeth Reimer Bartel, 'By Whatever Name.'" *Vancouver Island Regional Library*. 2012. www.virl.bc.ca
Press release. Hardcopy sent to reviewer. 2015.

There Is No Weight

She springs into my arms
A magnet fixed between us
A bond which will never break
Instinctively my arm bends
To make a seat for her
So I can hold her close.
The sweetness of infant flesh
Encircles us.

I stroke a tear-stained cheek
smooth dampened hair
murmur comfort
my lips against her ear.
Our breathing slows
she hiccups once or twice
sighs, slumps down half-asleep
a heaviness against my shoulder.

There is no weight like it in all the world. (143)

We're the Old Ones Now

I watch my sister, determined
as a hungry leghorn, chin forward
as she prepares to cross the street
among the ghosts of generations past
our forebears that begat children here
sang and prayed
dealt in the goods of this world
and the next.

My sister steps off the curb
where the cottonwoods
once bowed
in an ordered row before the house
and my maiden aunt
hair centre-parted, smooth
cheeks flushed with mercantile blood
her shapely feet passing cheerful geraniums
bordering the walk.
Daily she crossed the wide street
fine shoes picking their way
through the mud
and ruts of spring, the dust of summer
all of her drawn
to her first real love: the store.

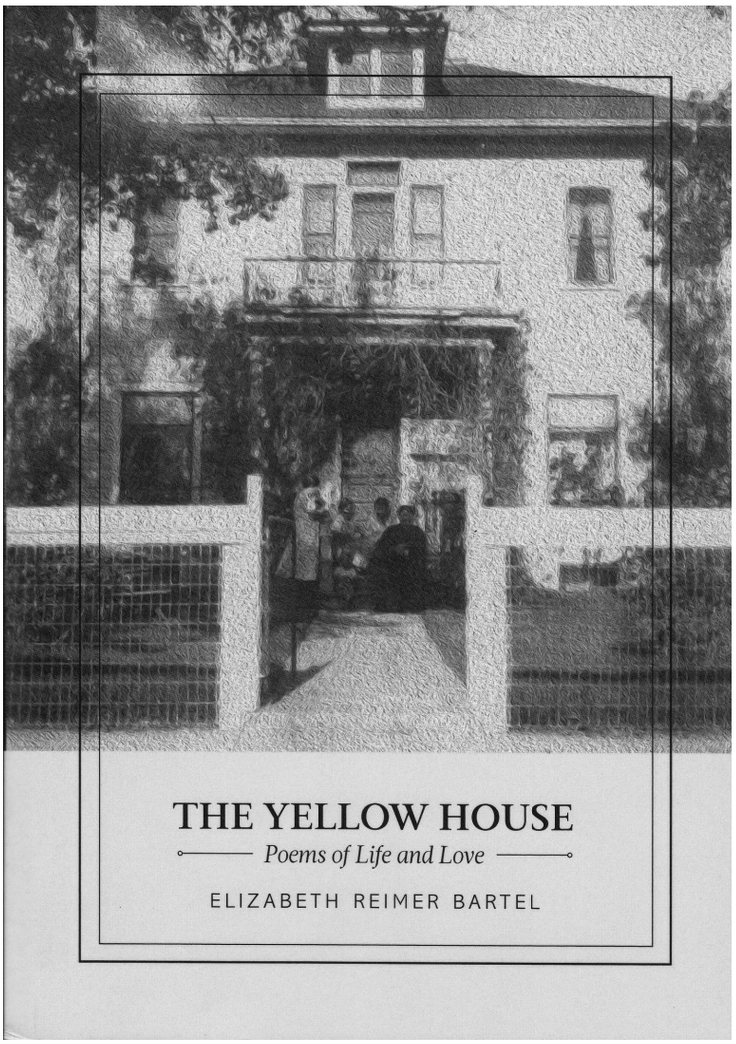
At the end my aunt became confused
asked every time we met
which one of her brother Johnny's girls I was
while across the street the big windows
of the store glittered.

My maiden aunt is gone.
The store and family home dismantled
oak banisters and brass door knobs
auctioned off
the stout beams and boards
hauled away in truckloads by the Hutterites
to build their chicken barns.

Now there's the polished granite of the bank
here on this street
hard-edged concrete planters trailing vines
ornamental trees
historical plaques commemorating pioneers.

But we're the old ones now,
my sister crossing the street
and I'm the one who trembles and sees
how much she looks like our long dead aunt.

The Yellow House is available at the MHSBC library or can be purchased by emailing the author at deliztel@shaw.ca.



Samuel J. Steiner. *In Search of Promised Lands: A Religious History of Mennonites in Ontario*. Harrisonburg & Kitchener: Herald Press, 2015. 587 pp. + notes (877 pp.)

By Robert Martens

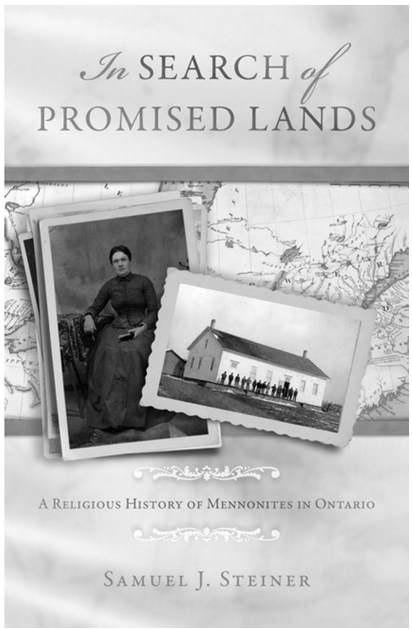
As a young American, Sam Steiner turned against his Mennonite heritage, became involved in radical politics, and evaded the draft by fleeing to Canada. His life took a different trajectory in Ontario, where he rediscovered the Anabaptist/Mennonite faith and enjoyed a long career as archivist for the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario. Steiner's massive history of Ontario Mennonites, *In Search of Promised Lands*, seems to reflect these two very different phases of his life. The "young radical Steiner" is interested in the social movements and ethics of Mennonite church life, while the "archivist Steiner" is absorbed in a multitude of historical detail. The resulting book is so thorough that another history of Ontario Mennonites may not be needed for many years to come.

For BC Mennonites accustomed to the Russian story, the history of the far more diverse Mennonites in eastern North America may seem almost alien. The first Mennonite settlers in North America, writes Steiner, were well-to-do Dutch-speaking Germans attracted by William Penn's invitation in 1683 to settle in the New World. They were followed by Swiss Mennonites whose unity had been ruptured by the reforming Amish. North American Mennonites soon prospered and grew in numbers, even though many of their young were leaving the church. With occasional exceptions, life on the east coast was generally peaceful. Some Mennonites were influenced by a kind of Pietism that prioritized emotional conversion experiences over the humility of life in community. The ensuing conflicts between this new individualistic religion and traditionalist "separatist" groupings – as Steiner calls them – would continue to haunt Mennonites for hundreds of years.

The American Revolutionary War and political pressure on Mennonites to participate in the militia

finally convinced some that it was time to leave. The first confirmed Mennonite settlement in Ontario developed in the Vineland area in 1786. These settlers were followed by a stream of other Mennonites, travelling by horse and wagon to hoped-for "promised lands." Some of their villages and churches were built on land owned by Mohawk Joseph Brant (Thayendanegea). He was treated shabbily by the British authorities, leaving a bitter legacy that persists to this day. Mennonites also lived through the War of 1812; while they resisted being implicated in violence, many profited from the conflict.

Until that time, Ontario Mennonites had been relatively ecumenical, and had cooperated quite easily with other faith groups. In Ontario, after the pioneering era was over, this situation changed. Evangelical groups won over many Mennonites: "The religious condition of these people is indeed wretched," wrote Wilhelm Orwig of the Evangelical Association, a Pietist grouping that included some Mennonites. "Their religion mostly consists in the observance of some rites and plain dress" (qtd in Steiner 97). The Mennonite "wars" that followed often turned vicious, and a plethora of different groupings emerged, including the Reforming Mennonites, some of whom were exclusionary to the point that they covered their ears during the sermon of a minister from outside their circles. Quarrels often revolved around personal rivalries, but Steiner cautions against dismissing the concerns of Mennonite separatists as trivial. Separatist opposition to Sunday school, for example, emerged from a concern that hierarchy was being challenged, that Mennonite principles such as peace were being usurped by mainstream evangelical concerns, and that a new religious individualism was winning the day. The ideology of modernism was indeed a challenge to traditionalist notions of community.



The many Mennonite and Amish conferences of Ontario changed rapidly as economic prosperity arrived in the late 1800s. English became the language of everyday discourse and of the church; urban missions proliferated; women's organizations sprang up, even as their autonomy was challenged by male leaders; and fundamentalism (behind the strong voices of American Reuben A. Torrey, editor of *The Fundamentals*, and Ontario leader John S. Coffman) infiltrated and then dominated some Mennonite conferences. In response, the separatist Old Order Mennonite group formed in 1889.

And then the upheaval of the First World War temporarily united the quarrelling Mennonite factions. The peace witness, writes Steiner, had rarely been taught by Mennonites in previous decades, and the Great War caught them off guard. Thus it was that initially the various churches worked against each other until it was realized how much they needed to collaborate in order to protect their young men from the draft. S. F. Coffman eventually won the confidence of even the separatist orders and became the representative of peace concerns for all Ontario Mennonites. Since the Mennonites of eastern Canada were now speaking English, they did not experience the severe discrimination their German-speaking brothers and sisters endured in the West. Nevertheless, the Canadian government of the time was mindlessly patriotic, at one point disenfranchising Doukhobors and Mennonites. Ontario Mennonites responded by forming the Non-Resistant Relief Organization, intended to provide war relief to Canadian families and thus blunt the barrage of criticism levelled at them.

The end of the war brought a stream of Russian Mennonite refugees to Ontario, and the combination of the newer and longer-settled groups was like oil and water: the new arrivals had very different customs from those of North American Mennonites, and disputes occurred frequently. Russian Mennonites also brought with them their own kind of divisiveness: the United Mennonites, Mennonite Brethren, and Allianz. Meanwhile, the struggle between assimilationists and separatists continued, the first emphasizing individuality and salvation; the latter, humility and community life.

It took the Second World War to engender some unity once again among Ontario Mennonites. Conferences were held, statements were issued, and representation made to government. The Non-Resistant Relief Organization was resurrected but its leadership was now aging and enervated; it soon gave way to the Mennonite Central Committee, which established an office in Kitchener in 1944. In 1940 the Brethren in Christ instigated an assembly at which the Conference of Historic Peace Churches was created. Quakers and Mennonites partici-

pated. In the end, however, twenty-five percent of young Mennonite men in Ontario enlisted in the armed forces.

After the war the old conflicts continued. Some churches, such as the Mennonite Brethren in Christ, left the Mennonite community completely. The more assimilated Mennonites built schools – such as Eden Christian College in Virgil and, later, Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo – to "safeguard their young people from the world and to bolster the principle of nonconformity" (355). Credit unions were built, choirs were formed, and paid ministry became the norm. On the Old Order side of things, though, such innovations as family allowance payments and the Canada Pension Plan were fiercely resisted. These Mennonites were frequently represented before government officials by educated Mennonites from the assimilationist wing.

By the 1950s, and during the following decades, thousands of Old Order Mennonites, descendants of those who had fled North America for Latin countries such as Mexico in order to retain their identity, flocked into Ontario. Most of these Low German speakers were simply seeking a better life for their families. They were targeted for conversion by evangelical Mennonites; this was often bitterly resented. By 2011, 40,000 Low German speakers were living in Ontario, creating their own churches and bringing with them their own successes and failures. In the 1970s and 1980s, another stream of Mennonites was created when Asian refugees, aided and welcomed by Ontario Mennonites, decided to stay – perhaps out of gratitude – within the various Mennonite conferences.

Sam Steiner breaks down the Mennonite communities into four categories: Assimilated Mennonites, who have struggled to maintain their identity; Old Order, not at all frozen in time but adapting to the circumstances in order to preserve their communities; Separatist Conservatives, evangelical, but emphasizing dress codes and Mennonite values; and finally Evangelical Conservatives, usually fundamentalist and giving less priority to values such as the peace witness. Late in Steiner's book, a chart shows thirty-three different Mennonite groups in Ontario in 2012. The diversity is staggering – and sometimes bewildering. Though the mass of detail in this book may be a bit overwhelming for some readers, Steiner has done a superb job of disentangling the facts and writing the story with simplicity and clarity.

In Search of Promised Lands can be purchased online or accessed at the MHSBC library.

Stories from Berry Flats: The Pastoral Visit

By Helen Rose Pauls

Deacon Harder mentioned it first after his lengthy opening prayer the first Sunday in June. "We, the deacons, together with one of the ministers, will endeavour to visit all the church members over the summer, preferably in the evening, right after supper."

"Now, in summer?" thought Katie Geddert frantically. "I am so busy picking berries with the children all day, I don't even have time to sweep the floor, much less bake something special for the church leaders."

Tina Lenzmann wrung her hands in consternation. "Why now, in the busiest season?" she asked herself. She suddenly looked down to reassure herself that she wasn't showing. A twelfth child growing inside her to be born before Christmas. She didn't like to have to serve company when she was showing. It made her uncomfortable, especially serving men. Maybe William would explain that she was ill and line up the children himself while their eldest daughter, Hilda, served. Yes, she would do that. Bake an apple *platz* in the morning before heading out to the berry fields and let Hilda face the church leaders in the evening. Good plan.

Marie Plett looked around the women's side of the church and met Agnes Harder's eyes, while rolling her own. Agnes deftly slit her throat with her forefinger and winked at Marie, the only confidante she had among the church women. How could she explain why her eldest, Charlotte, had moved up north to live with her older brother and his wife, and was no longer attending? Or what had happened to the nice "English" boyfriend who used to come to *Jugendverein* (youth meetings) with Charlotte? She would have to be creative.

Bertha Driediger in the last row on the women's side felt her whole body jump when she heard the announcement. Jump so suddenly that baby Henry lost his latch and cried for the breast. Evenings were frantic in summer, everyone coming in from the berry fields hungry and tired. Phillip needing peace and quiet in the eve-

...although they could not vote in church, they could bend their men's ears – and the message got through.

nings after a hideous day of assigning pickers their rows, watching that they picked clean, weighing flats and trucking them all the way to the cannery before the berries turned to mush and mould, sure to get a "jam grade." And the children would all have to be clean and respectable. She simply could not cope. It was all too much.

Five heads came together during coffee time at the September meeting of the Berry Flats Mennonite Brethren Church sewing circle, which was suspended during the busy summer season. "Well, how did the pastoral visit go?" asked Katie Geddert of her friends.

"Oh, well," said Tina Lenzmann, now in full maternity dress. "Hilda got the children all ready and served the *platz* and coffee and they all kneeled, even Johnny, and prayed in a circle. William must have strong-armed him to do that. I watched from the heat register hole by the upstairs chimney and they all closed their eyes and even little Billy lisped, '*Segne, Vater, diese Speise*' (Bless oh father, this our meal), and everyone actually laughed."

Mennonite women working in an outdoor summer kitchen. Photo: Arthur Voth Photographs, 1947-1949. HM4-387 Box 1 Folder 3 photo 49. Mennonite Church USA Archives - Goshen. Goshen, Indiana.

Marie Plett said she had been so nervous, she took the huge soup pot with borscht from the stove, the same soup pot in which she usually heated Henry's bath water, and poured the whole thing into the galvanized bath tub. Fortunately, none of the visitors visited the little room where tomato red still streaked the tub. Frantically getting something on the table for supper was another story!

Bertha Driediger hung her head and listened, consternation growing on her face. Finally she spoke, "Well, Pastor Kliewer came by with Deacon Johann Thiessen and you know how righteous he is. Well, wouldn't you know it but young Freddy used this time to ask his big sister the meaning of a new word he had just heard in the berry patch. 'Oh,' said Eleanor who is fifteen already and knows it all. 'That means dogs really liking each other.' The silence was so deep we all held our breath until we saw Deacon Harder smiling and he tousled Freddy's hair, end of story."

Katie Geddert laughed a bit hysterically. "I was canning the last batch of pears," she said, "and they still needed to boil fifteen more minutes when the deacons arrived. So I looked at the clock and added a few pieces of wood to the fire. The kitchen where we sat got so hot, the meeting was very short. Phillip was asked if all the children were *gläubich.* Phillip said yes and they said a quick prayer and off they went."

Agnes Harder spoke last. "We had just finished washing the berry juice and dirt from everyone and making sure that bows were tied and hair slicked down when the church visitors arrived. We were all sitting in a huge circle in the front room nervously looking around. Wouldn't you know it but I suddenly saw that the *Abreisskalender* (devotional calendar with one page for each day of the year) was out by three weeks, and hanging there for all to see. So who has time for all that when the work is screaming? As soon as I noticed it, I jumped up to serve the coffee, stood right in front of it and quietly picked it off the nail and tucked it into my apron. Fortunately, Deacon Goosen's back was to me and Deacon Harder didn't bat an eye. The streusel cake I made for once was delicious, and no hard questions were asked and I think we all passed with flying colours." She winked at Marie Plett, who still kept her secret.

That night the sewing circle made a pledge that never again would the pastoral visit be scheduled for the summer months and although they could not vote in church, they could bend their men's ears – and the message got through. From then on, the Berry Flats Mennonite Brethren Church held pastoral visits in January when the berry canes slumbered and the nights were long.

Mennonite Brethren Historical Commission
Press Release

Historical Commission rolls out more funded initiatives

June 8, 2016

Winnipeg, Manitoba—Reflections from a summer intern, a book launch, several new grants, and a tour of the new Mennonite Heritage Museum were all part of the annual general meeting (AGM) of the Mennonite Brethren Historical Commission that took place on June 3 and 4 in Abbotsford, British Columbia.

The Commission works with a network of four Mennonite Brethren archival centres: Center for M.B. Studies (Hillsboro, Kansas), Mennonite Library & Archives (Fresno, California), Mennonite Historical Society of B.C. (Abbotsford, B.C.), and Centre for M.B. Studies (Winnipeg, Manitoba).

This year's AGM was hosted by the Mennonite Heritage Museum (http://mennonite-museum.org/). The four archives reported on various projects that each is developing. These include book publications, digitization projects, acquisitions of church and family records, consulting on research projects, and conferences. Of special note was the growing collection of scanned historical photos on the Mennonite Archival Image Database (https://archives/mhsc.ca/).

Andrew Brown, this year's student archival intern, reported on his summer internship so far. He is spending one week at each archive, helping with ongoing archival tasks and doing his own research on Mennonite refugees of conflict and war.

Dorothy Peters and Christine Kampen's book *Daughters in the House of Jacob* was launched during the weekend in the lobby of the Mennonite Heritage Museum. About 130 people gathered on Saturday afternoon to hear the authors describe how they, a Bible professor and a pastor, trace the migration of their vocational calling across generations and gender, back to their Bible teaching-preaching grandfather Jacob and to their unforgettable great-grandmother Agatha. The authors interviewed elder-storytellers and investigated leads through a trail of letters, pictures, and documents, while reflecting on their own journeys and solving a few mysteries along the way. Copies of this Commission publication are available from Kindred Productions (http://www.kindredproductions.com/).

M.B. Historical Commission 2016 annual general meeting (l to r): Andrew Brown (summer intern), J Janzen, Richard Thiessen, Patricia Janzen Loewen, Don Isaac, Dora Dueck, Julia Reimer, Hannah Keeney, Jon Isaak, and Peggy Goertzen. Missing members include Valerie Rempel and Kevin Enns-Rempel. Photo: Mary Ann Quiring

MEDA sponsored dairy project. Photo: http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/programs/archives/holdings/organizations/CMBC_Series/CMBC06.htm

MEDA: The Mustard Seed That Won't Stop Growing

By Peter and Helen Sawatzky

A dairy farm in the semi-arid world of the Paraguayan Chaco in 1953 looked very much like a fish out of water. That at least was the sentiment of some early Mennonite settlers who were struggling to just barely survive. Only rich people from the North (America, that is) would pour precious capital into a venture that was doomed to fail. Capital for a tannery made sense; cattle were plentiful. Hides went to waste for lack of tanning facilities. Capital for a shoe factory made a lot of sense because the latter two made use of readily available resources – hides and local knowhow – filling a real need for affordable footwear and other leather products. But a dairy farm in the Chaco – that was really quite a stretch.

As a teenager growing up in the Chaco and passing by that dairy operation just outside Filadelfia, I wondered how that type of project could be sustainable, not to mention profitable. Was there no better way to invest their capital? But then, it wasn't my money. And I had more pressing matters to attend to. Now, some 60-plus years later, the rest of the story has been told in multiple ways and settings.

The Mennonite pioneers of the Fernheim Colony, with Filadelfia as its administrative centre, were mostly refugees who fled the USSR in the years leading up to 1930. This settlement was Mennonite Central Committee's second major project, less than ten years after the first project: soup kitchens for starving brothers and sisters in the faith, and many of their neighbours, in Ukraine. "At the peak of the MCC relief effort in summer 1922, 140 kitchens distributed 38,600 rations daily," says historian Paul Toews. The circumstances surrounding the first project gave birth to the now iconic MCC when Mennonites in America put their differences aside in favour of cooperating to offer relief to desperate

people in Ukraine.

Many of the survivors from Ukraine found their way to Germany by 1930, only to be told they had to move on. Some found sponsors in North America while others had to be sponsored en masse by MCC and brought to Paraguay. Paraguay was ready to receive more Mennonites like it had received just three years earlier to settle in the Chaco, in a community known as Menno Colony or Chortitzer Committee.

MCC's relief work shifted from Ukraine in the early 1920s to the Fernheim Colony in the Chaco in the 1930s. By the end of World War II, MCC's resources were stretched to the limit when the next wave of about 3000 Mennonites needed a welcoming country. My mother, with five children in tow, was on the first crossing of the *Volendam* heading to South America; the refugees on board were accompanied by Peter and Elfrieda Dyck. It can truly be said that they, together with many committed volunteers, did a lot of hard work while God handled all the impossible challenges along the way.

Once securely settled in the Chaco and out of reach of the Red Army, many a settler had time for a reality check. Would MCC's relief hand-outs be the new normal? When would the manna from the North dry up? Was there a way other than having to fight the elements of nature: drought, locusts, leafcutter ants, and the brutality of conquering the tenacious Chaco world in blistering heat?

Much soul-searching, especially by key leaders in the North American Mennonite communities, gave birth to a new concept: self-help, moving from hand-outs to economic development and sustainable practices; matching resources and appropriate technologies with available knowhow, supplemented by affordable access to capital.

In the few years of its existence, MCC was fully engaged in relief work. Sustainable development had not been on its agenda. However, now that question begged for a response. Development aid made a lot of sense in theory, but what would that look like in an inhospitable world like the Chaco, with settlers who understood the Ukrainian steppe but were at a loss in a semi-arid jungle?

While the leaders – foreign and local – were wrestling with survival in and adaptation to the new world, we children lived in the here-and-now. We enjoyed the security our parents offered and the freedoms inherent in a sheltered, closely-knit community of friends and relatives. We enjoyed our mostly carefree new world.

It remains a fact of history, that the development aid, for all its value, was too slow for many. Several thousand settlers left the colonies in search of better chances to survive. Germany and Canada became the destinations of choice. However, thanks to the commitment of leaders in North America, development aid – commonly referred to as "self-help" – was given a chance. After all, the many who remained in the Chaco could not go it alone. The need for economic aid offered fertile ground for an idea for which the time was right: to offer repayable loans at affordable terms in order to stimulate economic development.

Thus Mennonite Economic Development Associates – MEDA – was conceived. It sprouted, took root, and grew. MEDA became a lending institution with compassion and was based on a new business model: the success of the borrower became the measure of the bottom line. MEDA members donated funds to the organization, which in turn used these funds to offer micro financing. Initially, qualifying settlers received start-up capital for three ventures.

It was only a matter of years before MEDA's business model spread...

MEDA's first venture in the 1950s was Sarona, a cattle breeding and dairy operation in Fernheim Colony, followed soon after by a small tannery called Sinfin, which operated until the late 1990s. Its third project was the Fortuna factory in Filadelfia, which made shoes, saddles and cowboy chaps from the leather produced by the tannery. These and other projects not only helped meet immediate economic needs but also helped nourish an entrepreneurial climate to facilitate other opportunities.

Wally Kroeker[1] has summarized it this way: "December 10, 1953: MEDA is formed in the Atlantic Hotel in Chicago. … 1953-1968 were years of exploration, of trial and error, of experimentation, of caution, of working with limited funds; of few projects, and few people. They were years where assistance was provided to fellow Mennonites who, although settled in different continents, were of the same ethnic stock, members of the same church conferences and in many cases, blood relatives. ... MEDA organization was extremely simple and decision-making often informal and spontaneous. MEDA business was carried on from the homes of the active officers. From 1953 - 1968 there were 33 projects in operation in six different countries. It was clearly impossible for MEDA members, *who were all* active businessmen and heavily involved in local church and com-

MEDA-sponsored project. Photo: http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/programs/archives/holdings/organizations/CMBC_Series/CMBC06.html

munity activities to do justice to their MEDA responsibilities in addition to all their other commitments." It was only a matter of a few years before MEDA's business model spread to neighbouring Indigenous communities in the Chaco and to various grassroots communities in other countries.

By 1959 my family had immigrated to Canada, thus closing another chapter in our lives. Then in 1969, upon my unforeseen return to Neuland, I found a community in severe economic distress. Practically every week a family or two put their meagre belongings up for auction and left.

But MCC – and now MEDA – had not pulled up stakes. As I surveyed the Chaco scene, I, alongside many others, realized "fright and flight" was not a viable response to the challenges at hand. Community leaders and many a private community member raised the banner of *Gemeinnutz vor Eigennutz* (Ask not what the community can do for you but what you can do for the community).

The MEDA business model had taken root and was spreading. It was in the late 1970s, after we had returned to Canada, that my wife and I became members of MEDA and participated in the development of one particular Indigenous community. We helped finance the purchase of farm machinery for one village in order to address a shortage of animal traction at the onset of the first small spring rains. Missing out on early ploughing and seeding could spell shortfall in homegrown produce and also in major cash crops. MEDA Canada obtained matching funds from CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency), thus leveraging personal donations and multiplying very limited finances. However, MEDA's business model, while successful in settler communities, could not transfer seamlessly to this project in the Indigenous village, mostly for cultural reasons.

The expected outcomes as envisioned by donors fell short; however, the lessons offered, when properly assessed, guarded against ventures of a similar kind with much greater capital at stake. My friend and colleague Dr. Walter Regehr put it this way: "This project has taught us to identify all the pitfalls which we need to avoid or prepare for when we get to the next project."

Mennoworld.org[2] reports, "The Sarona Dairy repaid MEDA's investment in full over the next 20 years

and went on to spin off other dairies that today provide more than half of Paraguay's milk products. An offshoot of the dairy industry has been raising beef cattle. Today, the beef cattle business in the Chaco is even bigger and more profitable than the original dairy business…. Mennonite refugees in Paraguay have transitioned from needing help to helping others by building and supporting schools and hospitals for Indigenous people. In a matter of 40 years, the refugees went from struggling to survive to setting up their own MEDA organization, which now helps others in Paraguay and around the world."

The greatest spinoff by far of these efforts was the formation of MEDA-Py[3] in 1996 with a very active program of *Nachbarschaftshilfe*, a program to help Indigenous and Latino neighbours become financially more self-sufficient.

Funding sources also have broadened over the decades. A matching-funds concept has expanded from the one dollar external matching for every dollar donated personally in the 1980s, to an average of about five dollars for every one personal dollar by 2015. Matching dollars for well-planned special projects come from governments and foundations, with CIDA being the largest donor. Through leveraging, in 2015 MEDA was able to help 36.5 million families in fifty-two countries realize their God-given potential to live healthier, more economically sustainable lives.

From a rare meeting of Mennonite hearts and minds on July 27-28, 1920, in Elkhart Indiana, USA, to feed starving members of common faith in Ukraine, to refugee settlement programs after the 1930s, to development aid well beyond the community of common faith, the mustard seed of cooperation and faith-in-action has grown into a global tree with many branches.[4]

As privileged early recipients, then as firsthand observers of assisted self-help, and later as active sponsors and MEDA members, we embrace the MEDA approach as a mustard seed of the twentieth century. We delight in the fact that the few withered and dry branches along the way could not impede nor set back a rare outpouring of generosity spanning the globe. At times we are tempted to sneak a peek behind the curtain to catch a glimpse of what this thriving community of MEDA might look like by 2116.

The MEDA approach remains firmly engrained in us 24/7, the risky "dairy farm in the semi-arid Chaco" notwithstanding. For us, MEDA has been an experience worth living personally, and a story worth sharing globally.

For further information, see www.meda.org

[1] www.meda.org/a-short-history This brief summary of MEDA's history is a blog post by Wally Kroeker. This particular article seems to have been removed from the website.

[2] See more at: http://www.mennoworld.org/archived/2009/4/13/meda-returns-paraguay-roots/#sthash.IpG1uuNu.dpuf

[3] MEDA-Py, short for MEDA Paraguay, sponsoring projects in the Chaco and also in East Paraguay.

[4] Matt. 13:31-32 (NIV): 31 He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. 32 Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches."

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MEDA is an international economic development organization whose mission is to create business solutions to poverty. Founded in 1953 by a group of Mennonite business professionals, we partner with the poor to start or grow small and medium-sized businesses in developing regions around the world. Our expertise includes a full range of economic development tools: financial services, improved technology, business training, better access to markets and equity investment. Our work most often focuses on women, youth and the rural poor. We believe that all people deserve the opportunity to earn a livelihood and that unleashing entrepreneurship is a powerful way to alleviate poverty.

Website: www.meda.org

Roots and Branches

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Diana Hiebert admiring an exhibit in the Mennonite Heritage Museum.
Photo: Rally Creative

Featured Artist

Diana Hiebert is an eclectic artist and aspiring curator from Abbotsford, BC. She earned a BA in Art + Design at Trinity Western University, Langley, BC, in April 2015 and has since enjoyed working as Exhibition and Public Activity Animator at The Reach Gallery Museum, and more recently, as Office and Volunteer Manager at the Mennonite Historical Society of BC and the Mennonite Heritage Museum. At the same time, she has volunteered as Curator of Programming for Emerge at The Reach, a non-profit organization designed to support aspiring artists and arts professionals in the Fraser Valley.

Diana enjoys channeling her creativity into writing, drawing, painting, installation, fibre art, and photography; through these media, she often explores the relationship between individuals and their environment. She has had a number of solo shows and her work has been published in *Mars' Hill*, *MB Herald*, and the Trinity Western University English department literary journal, *spaces.*

As of this summer, Diana will be moving to Ottawa. Her work over the last year as Office and Volunteer Manager for both MHSBC and the Mennonite Heritage Museum has been much appreciated and we wish her well as she begins this exciting new adventure. Diana is looking forward to pursuing her MA in Art History at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario in September 2016. She will be researching the history of Mennonite craft culture and its influence on the work of contemporary Canadian artists with Mennonite heritage.

What Happened Before Grandmother's House, graphite and watercolour cut-outs on paper, 2014, by Diana Hiebert