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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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Brother and sister Jacob and Liese Bergen, Germany, 1944. Liese was sent to Siberia the following year with her mother and sisters. The siblings would finally all meet as a group 50 years later.

Roots and Branches

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Editorial

By Robert Martens

Cornelius Penner bringing a petition to Nikita Khrushchev, 23 Sep. 1960.
Source: Frank Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 472

When Joseph Stalin died in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev was ready and prepared. He had held a number of influential positions in the Soviet bureaucracy since its inception, and in the years before Stalin's death, installed friends and supporters in places where they might come in handy if "Uncle Joe" were to die. And die he did, either naturally or by poison – as some allege – and few among his associates mourned the passing of the great genius of fear. Within a short time span, Khrushchev consolidated his power and soon was named first secretary of the Communist Party. A few old-timers, notably Stalin's security chief Lavrenty Beria, were summarily executed. Then, remarkably, the terror stopped.

What followed is known today as the Khrushchev Thaw. Under Khrushchev's leadership, certain freedoms were slowly and (usually) carefully granted to a nation that had suffered terror for decades. In February 1956, he delivered the so-called "Secret Speech" to a closed session of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party. The Secret Speech, perhaps not quite as secret as commonly supposed, required a great deal from Khrushchev; in his memoir he recounts that he was terrified in the days leading up to the Congress. But he had carefully prepared, as always, and had meticulously gathered support for what he was about to do. The speech was a denunciation of the "cult of the individual" which Stalin had practised during his decades in power. In fact it was a very incomplete exposure of Stalin's atrocities that focused primarily on his abuse of Party members. Despite its limits, it stunned many in the Congress and set in motion reforms on a scale that would not be equalled until the days of Mikhail Gorbachev.

During the Thaw, cultural activities such as dance, composition and film were encouraged. Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's great novel about life in the Gulag, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, was allowed to be published. In 1961 Stalin's body was removed from the famed mausoleum in Moscow. Khrushchev travelled to China and the U.S. in an effort to "normalize relations." Most importantly, millions of prisoners – Mennonites among them – were released in the mid-1950s from the slave labour camps of the Gulag.

The process of de-Stalinization, however, was far from complete. When the citizens of the Soviet empire tasted a little freedom, they naturally wanted more. This, however, was not permitted. During moments of crisis, when the state perceived public protest as dangerous, Stalinism would re-emerge. This response became clearly apparent when the Hungarian uprising of 1956 was harshly suppressed; when the Berlin Wall was built in 1961; and when the world was drawn to the brink of nuclear war during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

The Thaw was nevertheless a great accomplishment. When a mutiny was staged against Khrushchev in 1957, the rebels were not executed but simply expelled from the Party. The prevailing atmosphere of fear had been lessened. When Khrushchev himself was deposed in 1964, he apparently did so without great protest and retired peacefully to his dacha in the countryside.

For a man with an extensive career in a totalitarian regime, it was a remarkable turn-around. Khrushchev himself had been implicated in mass executions and the exiling of perhaps millions to slave labour camps. He was an individual of great ambiguity, uneducated but shrewd, charming but abrasive – and willing to admit his own role in the crimes of Stalin's regime. After retirement he said, "My arms are up to the elbows in blood. That is the most terrible thing that lies in my soul."

Other quotes from the inscrutable Nikita Khrushchev:

"They say that the Soviet delegates smile. That smile is genuine. It is not artificial. We wish to live in peace, tranquillity. But if anyone believes that our smiles involve abandonment of the teaching of Marx, Engels and Lenin, he deceives himself seriously. Those who wait for that must wait until a shrimp learns to whistle" (said to East German dignitaries, 1955).

"Whether you like it or not, history is on our side. We will bury you" (to Western ambassadors, 1956).

"Berlin is the testicle of the West. When I want the West to scream, I squeeze Berlin" (Yugoslavia, 1963).

"If [West German Chancellor] Adenauer were here with us in the sauna, we could see for ourselves that Germany is and will remain divided but also that Germany never will rise again" (to Finland's president while in a sauna).

"Politicians are the same all over. They promise to build a bridge even when there is no river" (Belgrade, 1963).

"If you start throwing hedgehogs under me, I shall throw a couple of porcupines under you" (*New York Times*, 1963).

Future Event: MHSBC Dessert Fundraiser

"A Small Sign of Life and Love": Letters from the Soviet Union during the Khrushchev Thaw

3 pm, Sunday, September 18, 2016, King Road MB Church, 32068 King Road, Abbotsford

By Louise Bergen Price

When the Iron Curtain slammed down after the Second World War, dividing Soviet Bloc countries from the rest of the world, a great silence descended. Twenty thousand Russian Mennonites, crammed into boxcars and shipped east – "repatriated" to the Soviet Union – had seemingly vanished.

As one year slipped into another without any news, friends and relatives who had escaped to safety after the war began to lose hope. Was it possible that all the exiles had perished in Siberia's harsh penal colonies? Knowing Stalin's methods, it was not an unrealistic thought. Years of uncertainty were especially difficult for children separated from parents, and spouses from their partners.

And then, Stalin died. Almost immediately, rules of internal exile within the Soviet Union were relaxed. Mennonites scattered throughout isolated communities learned of other Mennonites living nearby.

Those who remembered addresses of family in Canada took courage in hand and began to write. Often, these letters included a note from a friend or neighbour also looking for *Lebenszeichen* – signs of life – from lost family members. Many of these letters were forwarded to the Canadian Mennonite periodicals, *Die Mennonitische Rundschau* and *Der Bote*. It is easy to imagine how eagerly family members pored over the columns of these periodicals each week, studying each letter for any hint of news.

The letters brought joy and they brought heartache. Reading them now, sixty years later, I am moved to tears by the raw emotion in the letters:

"My sister Maria Prieb (born Rempel) is searching for her husband, Woldemar Jacob Prieb, born Mar. 4, 1908 in Reichenfeld, Saparoschje. They were separated during the flight to Germany. His wife and two little children were sent to Siberia, then later to Molotov [Perm] in the northern part of the Ural Mountains."

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Bernard Rempel and his daughters reunited with wife and mother after 17 years. Frank Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 471

"Here lives a Katherina Heinrich Klaus. She is 60 years old and has been lame since birth. She has no family and is searching for her brother Heinrich H. Klaus, born in Saratow. In 1914, he was 35 or 36 and emigrated to South or North America. She asks if anyone has any information about him."

"My name is Heinrich Odenbach from South Russia, Chortitza Colony, Neuendorf village. I was born in 1878, thus already 77 years old and am searching for my children: son Peter, born 1908; Abram, 1919; David, 1920; Heinrich, 1926; Gerhard Stobbe; daughters Lena, 1907; Mariechen, 1915; twins Neta and Lena, 1925. [perhaps a blended family?] ... All have vanished without a trace. ..."

"I have written to Sara B. that Lena's husband has married. She had also waited for him. She has buried all three children. She's all alone and in pitiful circumstances. But she requests the address [presumably of the husband] if you have it."

"In Russia is a Mrs. Enns who stayed behind in Kulm [Prussia] because she was recovering from childbirth [when the others fled]. She is all alone. Her two youngest children have died. She searches for her parents."

"Papa, we and Mama have always prayed for our father, that he should be alive and well. And what have you written to us – you assumed that we were dead and have remarried! How could you? ..."

These letters and some of the personal stories connected with them are the focus of the Mennonite Historical Society's Fall Fundraising Event, an afternoon of story and song acknowledging the pain and heartache brought about by separation but also celebrating the joys of family and friends once again in contact with each other.

If anyone has letters from the Soviet Union for the years 1955-56 that they would be willing to share, please contact the Mennonite Historical Society of BC.

Colin Neufeldt lecture: The Public and Private Lives of Mennonite Collective Farm Chairmen

Reported by Robert Martens

Colin Neufeldt

Until recently, little has been known about collective farms in the Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, Russian archives finally made Soviet-era records available to the public. This development was a bonanza for a scholar such as Colin Neufeldt, who took the opportunity to research thousands of archival documents pertaining to farm collectivization and Mennonite involvement – both forced and voluntary – in that process.

Neufeldt's lecture on June 25 at Clearbrook MB Church in Abbotsford, overflowing with detail, was an impressive culmination of years of research. His topic centred on the councils that governed Soviet farm collectives and on the Mennonites who served on those councils. How complicit were they in the brutality of Stalin's totalitarian regime? Some, Neufeldt pointed out, even cooperated with the notorious secret police. But when the existence of their very own families were at stake, how much blame can be attached to Mennonite chairmen of collective farm councils? (In all his research, Neufeldt could not find evidence of a single female Mennonite chair of a Soviet farm collective.)

By the time collectives were installed on a mass scale in the USSR, Mennonites had already been involved in organizing collectives under the guidance of BB Janz. Janz was leader of the Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage in Ukraine, a society established in order to protect Mennonite interests and cooperate as necessary with the new Communist regime in Moscow. Within a few years, though, the Union was abolished, considered at best unnecessary and at worst an enemy of the state. An atmosphere of heightened paranoia prevailed. Anyone who had previously been a little better off than the masses of workers and peasants – or even perceived to have been so – was now labelled a kulak (in Russian, "fist") and subject to deportation and slave labour. In this process of dekulakization, Mennonites were routinely selected as victims. Meanwhile, the government was spreading fear by fanning contrived rumours of war with the West, collectivizing private landholdings, and imposing high taxes and grain quotas. Out of sheer terror, millions of peasants signed on as members of collectives, hoping this would keep them safe from dekulakization.

Several forms of collectives were being developed by Moscow. The *sovkhoz*, a version of farming based on a factory model, was relatively uncommon. The *kolkhoz* was a kind of peasant commune, and was far more usual across the USSR. Mennonites living in the former colonies of Molotschna and Chortitza were more likely to be involved in the *artel*, a type of commune that allowed for minimal private plots of land, often crucial for the survival of workers during the hard times that followed. During the 1930s, collectivization was extremely rapid; the regions of the former Mennonite colonies were renamed Molochansk and Khortytsia.

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In Mennonite areas, Mennonites were not only chairmen, but frequently filled all the positions on collective councils. Experience was not important for chairmen; in fact, the illiterate and inexperienced were often intentionally selected. This policy of selecting chairmen on the basis of class rather than skill was an obvious recipe for disaster. Indeed the entire system of collectivization was inefficient and grew increasingly brutal. The first duty of the chairman was to the rules and ideology of the state; duty to the collective's members was lower on the list, and members would only receive food and wages once the government-established quota was fulfilled. Members were also frustrated by the inconsistent policy on private gardens, acceptable, it seemed, one day and traitorous the next. They were also incensed when the best buildings on the collective, usually the former homes of prosperous farmers, were used as barns or granaries, while members were forced to live in inadequate housing.

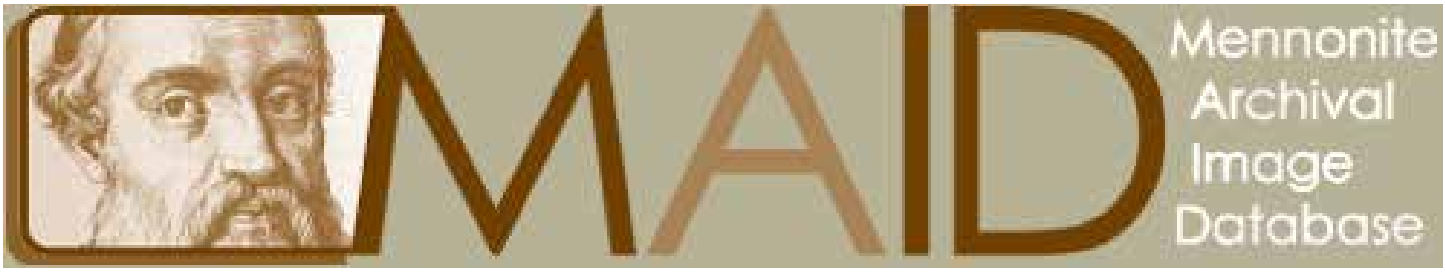
The hostility of the peasantry to the communist state grew so great that in 1930 Stalin published the article, "Dizzy with Success," in which he blamed collectivization's problems on overzealous local officials. Millions of peasants interpreted that article to mean that they could leave the collectives and farm once again on their own. Another reign of terror in that same year drove them back. Then in 1931 Moscow ordered a mass deportation of "kulaks" to the camps of the Gulag; the consequence was a severe shortage of labour in the collectives. The system was becoming increasingly untenable, as the state demanded near-impossible or impossible crop quotas from the collectives. Farm equipment was kept in "tractor stations" and frequently unavailable when needed. During the time of harvest, 20-hour workdays were not uncommon in a desperate bid to fill the demanded state quotas. The chairmen of the collective councils, who were compelled to attend seemingly endless meetings with Stalinist ideologues, were held personally responsible for the failures or successes of their farms.

Chairmanship was a place of extreme vulnerability for anyone, let alone Mennonites. Chairmen could be bribed with parties, alcohol, or sexual favours – one Mennonite chairman was publicly shamed as a result of an affair with a local Mennonite woman – but at the same time they never knew when or where they might be betrayed. Chairmen were either praised or vilified in the local press. It was a constant battle for survival; on one occasion a Mennonite chairman went on the offensive by denouncing five of his Mennonite workers as "vermin."

In the second half of his lecture, Colin Neufeldt spoke of the famine that was partially the result of government policy (he was quick to point out that there were multiple factors behind the famine). Between 1932 and 1934, about four to eight million people starved to death across the Soviet Union, and perhaps three to four million in the Ukraine. The quotas demanded by the government became increasingly unrealistic; surprise searches were staged to ferret out the last grain of wheat that peasants might have hidden to avoid starvation. Mennonite chairmen were complicit in these atrocities. In 1932 Moscow passed what is known as the Seven Eight Decree (so called because it was passed on the seventh day of the eighth month), by which absolutely everything that lay upon the land of a collective was considered state property. Now even the picking up of stray grains of wheat was considered a crime against the state. The Passport Law made things worse: mobility of the peasantry was strictly controlled, so that starving individuals were not even permitted to leave the boundaries of the collective in search of food. The collective farm, Neufeldt pointed out, was now similar to a concentration camp. Ironically, expulsion from the collective was used as a punishment by chairmen (Mennonites among them) who felt threatened. Expulsion was more or less equivalent to a death sentence.

As party activists across the Soviet Union invaded the collectives and stormed into their meetings to denounce and blacklist council chairmen, the time of Mennonites as chairmen came to an end. Government purges eliminated nearly all Mennonites in positions of authority by 1933-34. Mennonite complicity in state repression had aided in the destruction of their own communities, said Neufeldt; chairmen had often acted in conflict with their own people and were harshly resented. Yet they had unwittingly placed themselves in a position of extreme vulnerability. The job of chair was clearly untenable. Mennonite chairmen were attacked both from above and below, and in the end paid the price.

Colin Neufeldt lives an "uber-active" life; he teaches history at the University of Alberta, practises law, and is an expert plumber and gasfitter just in case his two primary careers happen to fail. His speciality is the study of Mennonites in the former Soviet Union.



Mennonite Archival Image Database – a growing resource

Press release by Conrad Stoesz

The Mennonite Archival Image Database is growing and extending its reach for people looking for rare images. On the eve of its first anniversary, the Mennonite Archival Image Database (MAID) welcomes the Mennonite Library & Archives (ML&A) at Fresno Pacific University as its newest archival partner. ML&A is the eighth MAID partner and the first outside Canada, an addition which enhances MAID's vision of being a source for "the discovery of photographs of Mennonite life from around the world." MAID's eight partners have now collectively uploaded over 82,000 photographic descriptions into our Internet-accessible database (archives.mhsc.ca); nearly 19,000 of these have scanned images attached.

With each new partner the Mennonite family and network becomes larger and stronger. Archival photo experts from each centre help provide valuable information about photos in their own collection and collaborate with other partners, thus improving the contextual knowledge of various collections, benefiting everyone. Over time, and as families and their records scatter, information becomes lost. However, as photo experts work at posting and describing photos, connections between photos held in different archives are found. It is not uncommon for two, three, or four archivists to be in discussion on a series of photos. Each archivist can supply important pieces of the puzzle that bring us collectively closer to identifying a photo or people in the photo. Each archivist has long-standing knowledge and networks that can be tapped to help identify people, places and events. Through the collaborative network of MAID and its partners, the Mennonite community of yesterday is slowly being reconstituted.

ML&A has begun entering photographs into MAID from its rich collections, which consist of tens of thousands of photographs. Highlights include the Henry J. Wiens photographs of Mennonite Brethren church buildings, photographs of Mennonite Brethren congregational life on the west coast of the United States, the Fresno Pacific University photograph collection, and a massive collection of Mennonite Brethren mission photographs from around the world. Kevin Enns-Rempel (library director) and Hannah Keeney (archivist) are coordinating photograph entries from Fresno; this process involves selecting images and providing descriptions that will make them searchable on the Internet. "These photographs have been available in the archives for many years, but only to those researchers able to visit the archives," says Enns-Rempel. "MAID will make these photographs visible to the world, and will spur interest in the larger archival collections at Fresno."

The Mennonite Library and Archives is one of four North American archival centres for the Mennonite Brethren church in North America. It is located in the Hiebert Library at Fresno Pacific University. The Archives holds records of the Pacific District Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, Fresno Pacific University, and personal manuscript collections related to the Mennonite Brethren church. In addition to the archival collections, the ML&A also holds an Anabaptist/Mennonite library collection of nearly 17,000 volumes.

The Mennonite Archival Image Database is a project of the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada. It was launched in 2015 by seven original partners: the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies (Winnipeg), the Mennonite Archives of Ontario, the Mennonite Heritage Centre (Winnipeg), the D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation, and the Mennonite Historical Societies of Alberta, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan.

Conrad Stoesz is archivist at the Mennonite Heritage Centre and the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Winnipeg.

A Church in Exile

By Robert Martens with Louise Bergen Price

One death is a tragedy: a million deaths are a statistic. – Joseph Stalin

USSR anti-religious campaign (1921-28). Source: Wikipedia

Mennonites had flourished in the Russian empire for over 125 years, and despite social turbulence early in the twentieth century, many of them believed that their peaceful way of life would continue for years to come. It all came crashing down after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Over the next decades, Mennonites who were unable to flee the country would endure the Communist holocaust in which tens of millions of Russians died: executed, starved, or slowly worked to death in labour camps. Yet somehow a suffering church, Mennonite and otherwise, endured. This story has taken some time to surface, taking place as it did behind the impenetrable Iron Curtain of the Soviet empire. Only since the 1990s, when the USSR finally collapsed, have KGB (Soviet Security) files been available to the public, and even then inconsistently. And the Mennonite story in particular has been difficult to uncover, since Soviets did not distinguish between Mennonites and other German ethnic groups: they were all simply "German," and therefore suspect. Additionally, Mennonite identity sometimes seemed to be lost as Mennonites joined forces with other German-speaking Christians, particularly the Baptists. Yet as the Soviet empire slowly deteriorated after the death of Stalin and oppression eased, a Mennonite church reappeared, though radically changed by the long decades of suppression.

Revolution, terror, and survival

In the years immediately following the Revolution, many Mennonites held out hope that they could coexist with the new regime. In 1925 their representatives met at an all-union conference to articulate their requests for religious liberty. Of course these efforts all came to nothing. In fact the assembly eventually became known as the "martyrs' conference," since so many of its delegates vanished into the Soviet Gulag (the chain of labour camps). Meanwhile, Baptists and Pentecostals met in 1926 to declare their loyalty to the Communist state. In 1927 the acting patriarch of the Orthodox Church announced his church's loyalty as well.

The horror that followed swept countless individuals to their deaths, but Christian leaders and their families were often particularly targeted. In the 1930s the first mass deportations to Siberia took place. Men, women and children were jammed into unlit cattle cars with little ventilation, and transported thousands of kilometres while they endured hunger, sleep deprivation, suffocating heat,

freezing cold, and illness. Colin Neufeldt states that "the rail cars soon became death wagons, filled with the cries of suffering exiles and the stench of rotting corpses" (280). Trainloads of deportees were sometimes simply released into the wilderness. Escape from the Gulag's labour camps was nearly impossible. The Soviet Union's agony reached a sort of climax during the Great Terror of 1937-38, when a large percentage of homes lost fathers and sons (women were targeted as well but not in the same numbers). Then in 1941, after Hitler's forces invaded the USSR, the Communist regime declared Kazakhstan a vital mining area, and under the command of the *Spetskomandatura* (Deportation Authorities), nearly 900,000 citizens of German heritage were deported to work in and around Kazakhstani mines.. About 25% of the deportees died. Even children, the elderly, the weak and the starving were forced to report regularly to the authorities.

Mennonite identity

For the Mennonite churches, this exile was catastrophic, and yet they managed to survive. For those Mennonites who came under temporary German occupation during World War II, renewed faith was a possibility; churches were reopened, young people learned Bible stories and hymns, and were baptized by ministers such as Heinrich Winter. For those who were scattered into exile, however, continued faith was a matter of dogged persistence. With many of the men gone through executions, disappearances, and war, women now took up the leadership of the remaining small groups of believers, despite the traditionally paternalistic nature of their church. And for Mennonites who did not despair and lose their faith, an association with Evangelical Baptists, Lutherans, and Pentecostals – or even with Orthodox or Old Believers – became an option. As Stricker writes, "In times of need, one did not ask about a fellow-believer's denomination: one was glad to be able to pray together in German; and if someone had a portion of a hymn book or a few pages of the Bible these were a blessing for all" (297). This blurring of denominational lines was simply a matter of survival. Mennonites particularly favoured association with Baptists. The suffering generation "did not face a choice *between Mennonitism and being Baptist but between being Baptist and atheism*, or, to put it a little more mildly, between transitioning to being Baptist and a secularization of their way of life" (Weiss 137; italics in the original). Stalin's Great Terror and the deportations of the 1930s and 1940s had erased church boundaries.

Scholars such as Walter Sawatsky have pointed out that Mennonites nearly lost their identity in these disastrous years. First, over 20,000 Mennonites fled to North and South America in the 1920s, taking most of their leadership with them. The ministers and elders who remained in Russia were quickly arrested. Second, in the following decades of terror, primarily men were arrested, so that remaining Mennonite families often consisted of women and children. And children who were arrested along with their families received little or no education in the labour camps. Those who did eventually manage to make it to university were educated by an atheistic faculty and regime. Finally, the distinguishing features of the Mennonite faith were harshly suppressed by the state. For example, after 1936, Mennonites were forced to turn their backs on the principle of nonresistance and to accept military service. Consequently, years later Mennonites would sometimes identify themselves as "Low German-speaking Baptists" (Stricker 300). "Mennonitism had been decapitated" (Weiss 134).

Church organization in the Soviet Union

Church life under Stalin's iron thumb had become farcical. In 1929 the Law on Religious Organizations, extremely restrictive, bureaucratic, and intentionally vague, was proclaimed. It would remain in effect, with some minor changes, until the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Four churches were allowed to exist so that the Soviet regime could display its "freedom of religion" to the outside world. One church was led by Mikhail Orlov, a known collaborator with the KGB. In 1937 he even became leader of the government-sponsored All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians (Dyck 99).

During World War II, or the Great Patriotic War, as it is known in Russia to this day, the government eased some of its restrictions. The Baptist Union had been dissolved in 1935 when its last leader was arrested, but in 1943 the Orthodox Church regained its official patriarchate, and in 1944 Evangelical leaders were invited to a conference in Moscow. Here the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists (AUCECB, sometimes referred to as the All-Union Council) was formed to regulate the Soviet empire's Protestant churches. In reality it was infiltrated by the KGB and run by the Communist Central Committee, but churches took what they could get. The All-Union Council issued statements to the effect that it was firmly and eternally loyal to the patriotic cause of the war; meanwhile, it took the opportunity to expand rapidly, including in the Ukraine. Even funerals became events of public worship.

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Mennonites likely played a very small role in the formation of the All-Union Council. Many of them were still living as deportees, and thus might not even have known about the faraway events taking place in Moscow. Even so, during the war the beginnings of revival were already taking place during a time of exile. The driving force behind the nascent fellowship groups was those who had little or nothing to lose: mostly women and, interestingly, youth. Against the odds, some mothers had managed to maintain the faith within their families. Of course meetings were clandestine – and in German: ["Mennonites] were protected in part because they used German even during wartime. ... they could not even pray in Russian" (Dyck 102).

In 1955 the Soviet government finally abolished the deportation status of Germans in the Soviet Union, and Mennonites were once again free to move – but not back to European Russia. As a consequence, many settled in Asian parts of the USSR, particularly in Karaganda, a city currently located in Kazakhstan. A relaxation in state control, sometimes called "the Khrushchev Thaw," set in after Stalin's death in 1953. German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer arrived in Moscow in 1955 and negotiated on behalf of German ethnic groups. An amnesty for many political prisoners was also proclaimed. Thereafter, Evangelicals "immediately began their sacrificial and dangerous service as itinerant preachers" (Stricker 297). Between 1955 and 1958, a major revival took place among Mennonites, and previously secretive fellowships grew into official churches. The Evangelical Christian Baptist (ECB) congregation in Karaganda grew to almost 1000 members, 65% of these being German speakers. Mennonites, recognizing the need for security and official recognition of their churches, now turned to the All-Union Council. They were especially attracted to their Baptist counterparts, who shared the tradition of adult baptism, and eventually about half of Mennonite congregations joined the AUCECB. In 1978, the organization even sent representatives to the Mennonite World Conference in Wichita, Kansas.

The "resurrection" of Mennonite identity

Surprisingly "Mennoniteness" did not disappear and became a contentious issue within the All-Union Council. Many Mennonites still held pacifism dear. And their traditionally strong aversion to hierarchy led them to regard the All-Union Council as nothing more than a temporary expediency. Alexander Weiss of the Slavgorod Evangelical Christian Baptist Church remarked in 2010, "Although it has a Mennonite section, Mennonites do not recognize the AUCECB as their own" (135). Mennonites retained their desire for autonomous congregations. In Karaganda, a strong feeling of discomfort among Mennonites in the ECB church led to the establishment of a Mennonite Brethren congregation that grew rapidly. MB churches sprang up in many areas of the USSR, sometimes absorbing the Old Church Mennonites into their ranks; however, Old Church members, lacking an evangelical tradition, did not adapt as well to the prevailing theme of "revival."

Autonomous congregations were sometimes an option. Joining the All-Union Council was far easier and less dangerous. A third option, perhaps the most risky, was affiliating with the underground unregistered churches organized under the Council of Churches of the Evangelical Christian-Baptists (CCECB), whose members were also known as *Initsiavniki*. This affiliation was, however, an uncomfortable fit for many Mennonites. They did not perceive themselves as human rights activists, but as "the quiet in the land" who simply desired freedom from state intervention. A huge gulf existed between "the 'meek' Mennonite Brethren and the 'refractory' *Initsiavniki*" (Stricker 306). And there was the issue of respect: in the All-Union Council, Mennonites were simply called Baptists, but at the same time organizers "stressed the presence of MBs in its union"; in contrast, the Council of Churches "with its strict leadership did not tolerate divisions even in the names of its members and designated all groups as Evangelical Christian-Baptists" (Dyck 108).

Collapse of the Soviet empire

The year 1959 marked a return to religious repression with the anti-religious campaign of Nikita Khrushchev, and these conditions would not ease until his deposal in 1964. Khrushchev stated that Christianity would soon be nothing but a relic in a museum and that he intended to present the last Christian standing on state television. Despite his crusade, religion survived in the Soviet Union and outlasted the Communist state that disintegrated in 1991. As relative freedom arrived, however, tens of thousands of Mennonites accepted the invitation of West Germany to immigrate and become German citizens.

But not all. When a conference on Mennonite issues was held in Omsk in 2010, some attendees were surprised to find a facsimile of their forebears in rural Siberia. William Yoder reported, "Someone wandering through a pristine village like Mirolyubovka ... could think that he/she was in Paraguay or Mexico. Little girls in pigtails and long dresses run about; one speaks and laughs in Low German. ... Village life is centred around agriculture: Church services often only begin after the

milking is done at 10 p.m." (2). The Omsk Brotherhood, founded in 1907 to organize German-speaking Christians, was re-established, remarkably, in 1957 after decades of unimaginably cruel oppression by the Soviet state. And Walter Willems, a farmer from BC, even "returned" to Siberia, investing in mills and a bakery in the village of Apollonovka.

The endurance of Mennonites in the Soviet empire is nothing short of astonishing. They were a church in exile in their own land. And yet some Russian Mennonites today "have sensed an attitude [in the West] that joining with the Baptists is a betrayal, and therefore they no longer have a place in Mennonite history" (Sawatsky 332). Perhaps we Mennonites in the West have no right to judge. Living as we do in comfort and prosperity, perhaps we have lost the capacity to understand the sufferings of our brothers and sisters in the Soviet holocaust.

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Lenin sweeping away oligarchs, religious leaders, monarchs. Source: "Vladimir Lenin," Wikipedia

"The fog of religion"

The following is an extract from an article written by Vladimir Lenin, in Novaya Zhizn (New Life)*, Nr. 28, December 3, 1905. Trans. B. Baggins. Marxist Internet Archive, www.marxists.org*

Present-day society is wholly based on the exploitation of the vast masses of the working class by a tiny minority of the population, the class of the landowners and that of the capitalists. It is a slave society, since the "free" workers, who all their life work for the capitalists, are "entitled" only to such means of subsistence as are essential for the maintenance of slaves who produce profit, for the safeguarding and perpetuation of capitalist slavery.

The economic oppression of the workers inevitably calls forth and engenders every kind of political oppression and social humiliation, the coarsening and darkening of the spiritual and moral life of the masses. The workers may secure a greater or lesser degree of political liberty to fight for their economic emancipation, but no amount of liberty will rid them of poverty, unemployment, and oppression until the power of capital is overthrown. Religion is one of the forms of spiritual oppression which everywhere weighs down heavily upon the masses of the people, overburdened by their perpetual work for others, by want and isolation. Impotence of the exploited classes in their struggle against

cont'd next page

the exploiters just as inevitably gives rise to the belief in a better life after death as impotence of the savage in his battle with nature gives rise to belief in gods, devils, miracles, and the like. Those who toil and live in want all their lives are taught by religion to be submissive and patient while here on earth, and to take comfort in the hope of a heavenly reward. But those who live by the labour of others are taught by religion to practise charity while on earth, thus offering them a very cheap way of justifying their entire existence as exploiters and selling them at a moderate price tickets to well-being in heaven. Religion is opium for the people. Religion is a sort of spiritual booze, in which the slaves of capital drown their human image, their demand for a life more or less worthy of man.

But a slave who has become conscious of his slavery and has risen to struggle for his emancipation has already half ceased to be a slave. The modern class-conscious worker, reared by large-scale factory industry and enlightened by urban life, contemptuously casts aside religious prejudices, leaves heaven to the priests and bourgeois bigots, and tries to win a better life for himself here on earth. The proletariat of today takes the side of socialism, which enlists science in the battle against the fog of religion, and frees the workers from their belief in life after death by welding them together to fight in the present for a better life on earth.

Worshipping in their "heart language": Mennonite Japanese Christian Fellowship

By Louise Bergen Price

Based on reports by pastors Takahiko Yoshiyuki and Gerald Neufeld, various members of the congregation, and information from the Pilgrimage Project (www.mcbc.ca/church-histories-2/)

In 1982, when Anna Dyck, a Mennonite missionary who had served in Japan for thirty-eight years, retired to Surrey, she was challenged to establish a ministry for the Japanese-speaking community there. The Conference of Mennonites in BC (now MCBC) became involved and in 1992 Surrey Mennonite Church was formed. Five years later, when Anna Dyck moved to Drake, Saskatchewan, the small group welcomed Pastor Takahiko "Yoshi" Yoshiyuki, who was sent to Canada by the Japan Mennonite Church. He was also supported as a church planter by the Conference of Mennonite Churches in BC.

During the first year of Pastor Yoshiyuki's service, a difference arose between members. "There came a time when we had a split," writes a founding member about the church's early years, "and we left and formed a new group with a new name, Mennonite Japanese Christian Fellowship (MJCF)."

In May 2000, MJCF officially became a member of what is now MCBC (Mennonite Church British Columbia). During his ministry in BC (1998-2008), Yoshiyuki also fostered a new church plant, the North Shore Japanese church, which joined the Conference in 2003. Why the Mennonite connection in these churches? Some members had experienced worship in Mennonite churches in Japan. For others, it was the connection with aid work and pacifism: "MJCF had strong feelings similar to that of the Mennonite church," writes Yoshiyuki.

At first, MJCF met in members' homes. A founding member writes, "We had trouble finding a church building where we could meet and had to change our worship location several times. At last, we settled at Saint Helen's Anglican church. Since then, Pastor Gerald Neufeld came [Pastor Yoshiyuki returned to Japan in 2008], and we moved to Living Hope [Living Hope Christian Fellowship in Surrey, an "international" Mennonite congregation that includes Chinese, African, and Karen (from Myanmar) members.] I think it's good that we are united in worship with God at the centre. Because there are many new people coming, our prayer is that they be led to faith."

Although the focus of the church is on Japanese speakers, MJCF has also welcomed those from other backgrounds, both as ministers and as members. Korean pastor Sung-Rok Cho served as associate pastor from 2003-2008, followed by current pastor, Gerald Neufeld. Yoshiyuki writes, "In MJCF the focus, of course, is on Japanese speakers, but people without Japanese background and non-Japanese speakers have also participated. Exchange students from Trinity Western University in Langley have also become members. ... Our activities are bringing in a variety of people beyond just the Japanese community."

Neufeld states, "The primary language at MJCF is Japanese. Once a month I give the message in English and project Japanese on-screen. Twice a month I speak in Japanese and project English, and once a month we have a Sunday for sharing testimonies. Each Sunday we have a children's feature that is often translated into English. For grades 2 and under, the Sunday School class is in Japanese. For grades 3 and up, the classes are mainly in English, although sometimes with translation for people recently arriving from Japan. We give support to new immigrants in various ways, but have no formal program to do this. We've helped people move into new apartments, helped some find work, helped with babysitting, etc."

Neufeld would like the church to become fully bilingual to provide better service and attract more members. He states, "We need to encourage and support more translators so that we can have everything in both Japanese and English. I believe there should not be times where some may not understand because something is not translated. Whereas people may come to the church because they have a Japanese connection, we still have many children who do not understand any Japanese, and we have spouses of Japanese who only know English. We need to include these people, but also keep the Japanese language for those who don't speak English. I see our church growing as a community learning to interact in healthy ways with all ages, but also growing as people who reach out in their various communities. I also see us growing in prayer and in our expression of the joy of life in Christ. Rather than looking more and more inward, I see MJCF growing in service to those around us, to both Japanese-speakers and others."

Although MJCF is a small congregation with an average attendance of twenty adults and as many children, it functions as part of the larger Asian-Canadian community. Former pastor Yoshiyuki writes, "At its beginning MJCF had help from Korean Christians. When we struggled because we didn't have a place to worship, the Korean Kwanglim Methodist Church was ready to help. Also, Korean pastor Sung-Rok Cho served as an associate pastor. In addition to this, when MJCF had Tuesday meetings it was the Korean community that offered a place to meet. We also had support from a Korean professor from Trinity Western University who offered home space for meetings and gave messages."

Pastor Neufeld adds that the church is "part of a network of Japanese churches called Canadian Japanese Ministries (CJM). Board representatives from various Japanese congregations across Canada meet annually to share together and support each other. CJM produces a newsletter and also provides support for special gatherings, a camp ministry, and a new church plant." Neufeld also works with the pastor of the Vancouver Japanese Gospel Church in leading monthly Bible studies. Although it has no formal connection with Mennonite churches in Japan, MJCF was involved in fundraising for victims of the 2011 tsunami. Neufeld writes, "Several times we've sponsored musicians to come to give fundraising concerts and raise awareness of those who struggle to recover, even years later."

Locally, the church helps new arrivals from Japan settle into life in Canada. Occasionally, it has joined Living Hope in community events such as barbeques or Christmas programs. Since 2010 it has also participated in the MCC relief sale, selling sushi from a booth.

MJCF sushi booth at annual MCC Festival fundraiser, Abbotsford.
Source: Gerald Neufeld

Gerald Neufeld believes that the church has a sense, though problematic, of being part of MCBC, which supports the church through the Evangelism and Church Development Committee. Although the church at times has sent delegates to MCBC annual meetings, the language barrier is a problem especially when discussions centre around issues "far from the everyday challenges of a small immigrant congregation." As pastor, he finds the MCBC connection important, asserting that "...I personally feel a lot of support from MCBC through pastors' meetings, conferences and events such as the annual pastor-spouse retreat sponsored by MCBC."

For Gerald Neufeld, the Mennonite Japanese Christian Fellowship is "a place where new Christians are encouraged in a caring community. It is a group that places a high value on hospitality and fellowship." It is also a place "where Japanese speakers come to worship in their 'heart language.'"

Gerald Neufeld grew up in the "North End" of Hamilton, Ontario, where he learned to love meeting all kinds of people. He met his wife, Rie, while serving in Tokyo and Miyazaki, Japan. In 2008, after serving for 13 years with what is now Mennonite Church Canada Witness, the couple came with their three children to work with the Mennonite Japanese Christian Fellowship in Surrey, BC.

Book Review:

Dora Dueck. *What You Get at Home.*

Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2012. 178 pp.

Reviewed by Robert Martens

In 2011, Dora Dueck's novel, *This Hidden Thing*, won the McNally Robinson Book of the Year Award, which is bestowed annually for the best adult English-language writing in the province of Manitoba. Dueck is a historian as well as a novelist, sitting as the Winnipeg representative on the board of the MB Historical Commission. Recently she has published a book of short stories entitled *What You Get at Home*.

Dueck's stories in this collection are deftly written and finely nuanced: each character, each situation and event seems convincingly real. Tiny washes of emotion colour a routine scene. Motivations tip incidents into unexpected directions. And sorrow, anger and jealousy intrude in ways we would all find familiar. Dueck's stories, though, aren't cynical: they are narratives of individuals finding their way to points of meaning, love, and redemption.

Perhaps because she is writing from what she knows, or is propelled by her historical interests,, many of Dueck's stories feature Mennonite characters. "In the Village of Women" features a Paraguayan Mennonite woman who has been betrayed by her suitor. "Helping Isaak" recalls the lives of Mennonites living through the Stalinist terror. The stories with Mennonite themes tend to deal with crisis situations and human suffering.

It could be argued that some of the "non-Mennonite" stories in this book are among the best. They are concerned with the commonplace, the routine of life in the secure country of Canada, but in such a way that the mundane is frequently redemptive. "An Advance on an Uncertain Feature" describes a first (very uncertain) date from the conflicting and confused perspectives of a young man and woman. And "The Rocking Chair," a story about a sibling quarrel over a father's inheritance, is a near perfect recounting of human weaknesses – and, ultimately, faith.

The final seven stories in the collection revolve around a single character, Liese, who emigrates to Canada from Paraguay, encounters a culture clash, dates, marries, enters the routine of wedded life, raises children, fights and makes up, finds friends, reads through the night, discovers the Canadian work-out regime: all the great and little things that constitute a remarkable/unremarkable life. In the end, though, Liese experiences an extraordinary conversion.

In one of the intermediate stories, "Mama, Like a Mirage," Liese is still grappling with Canadian ways. The following extract is the beginning of that story:

Book Extract from *What You Get at Home*

That winter, the year Robert turns one, Anita Johnson – the woman from the church who's befriended Liese – starts doing exercises every morning with a television show and walking three or four times a week regardless of the weather, and then she joins a women's club called a spa. She's "into" fitness, she says, and Liese, who still struggles with English prepositions on occasion, finds it odd that Anita would talk about her relentless activity as if it's a tunnel she crawls inside.

Maybe that's how it is when you get so busy with something and it's all you can see, she thinks. Until you're into something else. She wonders aloud if she'll be abandoned too.

Johnny says she's being unreasonable. "You're friends," he says.

"She can't resist. I'm new. I need her expertise."

"Oh jeez," he says. "Why are you always so suspicious?"

Johnnie, she thinks, is glad for whoever shows up, never mind quality. Or durability.

Then Anita calls and says she has a guest pass and would Liese want to join her for the evening? "I know you'll love it, Louise," she says, using the English version of Liese's name. "You're not overweight or anything, I know, but it's more than that. It's about overall fitness. Feeling energetic and really refreshed. You wouldn't believe how much better I feel since I've been going. Not just physically better, but in every single way."

She pauses but Liese doesn't say anything so she hurries on. "Plus you'll have some idea of what I'm up to, you know what I mean? You'll be able to visualize the place."

"Well..." Liese can't tell her the reasons she doesn't want to go. Not, at least, the ones that come to her first. She can't say, I'd rather not because it's dark outside. Or, you've called me as a last resort, haven't you?

"I know it's short notice," Anita is saying, as if she can hear what Liese is thinking. "I meant to call you earlier, but today's been such a whirl!"

She can't say winter is hard on her, that it's summer in Paraguay now, where she grew up, and no one ever believes you could miss the heat. She can't say that she's still unnerved by unfamiliar situations.

Anita will think she needs to console her. She'll repeat her name to show how much she cares. "But Louise," she'll say, "you've been here five years already. And think of it, Louise, how awfully much courage it took you to come. How brave and strong you've been."

Their friendship has too many sentences like that in it.

"I'll check with Johnnie," she says.

The table is cluttered with dishes, the brown stoneware plates, his and hers, their orange sunflowers streaked with gravy, looking even more grotesque than before they'd spooned their suppers onto them. She'd exclaimed over the set when they got it as a wedding gift but she despises it now. Eating on those fat showy petals day after day.

A chunk of meatball has fallen onto the seat of Robert's highchair. There's a pickle on the floor, just out of her reach. And the curtains aren't drawn for the night.

This never bothers Johnnie. "We're on the second floor," he says, "so who's looking in?" One of the hooks is off the rod and a narrow ridge of ice lines the bottom of her window.

Liese sees the letter-in-progress to her parents, the pale blue aerogram, so light, so insubstantial, lying on the spindly-legged coffee table they picked up cheap at a garage sale. But oh how heavy with endeavour it is: such careful words, so cramped and slanted, composed about anything she can think of that may be informative or lend itself to further elaboration, every line tucked closely under the last. To make it worth sending.

Once a month, a letter home. When you leave home, Liese knows, you have to reassure your mother.

"Up to you," Johnnie says when she whispers the invitation. "I can do the dishes, put Robert to bed." (137-139)

What You Get at Home can be accessed in the MHSBC library or purchased online.

Annual Fundraising Event

A Small Sign of Life and Love: Letters from the Soviet Union During the Khrushchev Thaw

Sunday, September 18: 3:00 p.m.

King Road MB Church, 32068 King Rd, Abbotsford, BC

Program will be followed by faspa (late afternoon lunch) and dessert.

Tickets are $10.00.

Tickets available at the MHSBC Office (1818 Clearbrook Road, Abbotsford), over the phone (604-853-6177), or by email (archives@mhsbc.com).

Mennonite Historical Society of BC

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Poster designed by Nancy Timmermans.