



# Roots and Branches

Periodical of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC

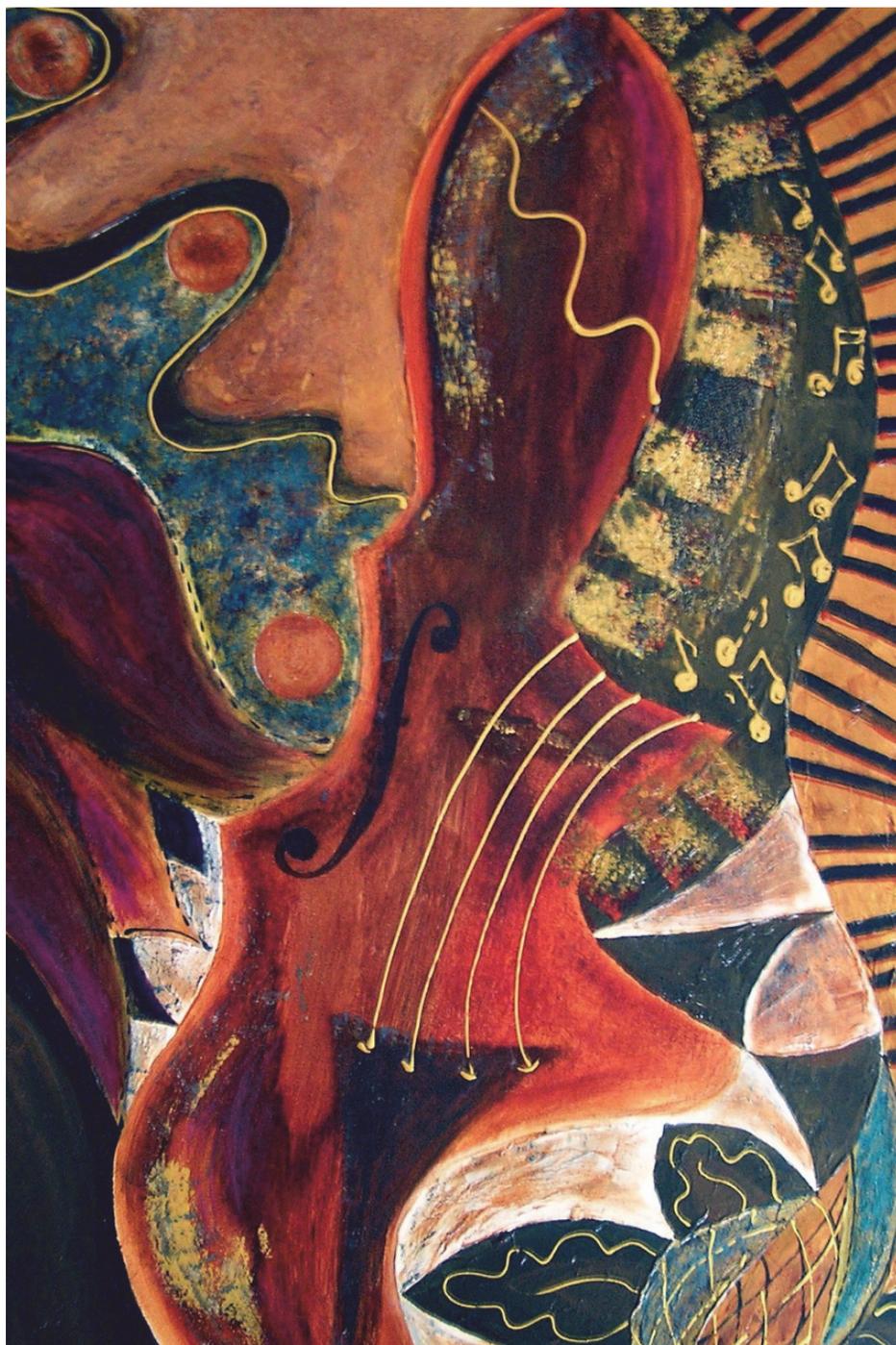
*“What we have heard and known  
we will tell the next generation.”*

Psalm 78

## Mennonites and Music

### Table of Contents

Letters to the editor.....2-4  
 Fundraiser: Alternative Responses  
 to the Call to Arms.....4  
 Conscientious objectors.....5  
 Genealogy Workshop.....6  
 Menno Comedy Nite.....7  
 That Mennonite Joke.....8  
 Site Dedication for the Memorial to  
 Victims of Communism.....9  
 Music and Mennonites.....10  
 “Awake my Soul to praise thee” ..13  
 Hilda Janzen Goertzen.....15  
 Hilda Goertzen and Music.....16  
 “The Song” .....17  
 A Short Historical Framework for  
 “The Song” .....19  
 Mennonite “Medicine” .....22  
 Finding the Perfect Lamp.....24  
 Book Review.....25  
 Book Launches.....27-31



*The Dancing Violin*  
 painting by Hilda Goertzen  
 Courtesy of Peter Goertzen

# Editorial

By Robert Martens

A few decades ago, I spent a day or two with Amish Mennonites in southern Ontario. I retain vivid memories of their hospitality, their celebrations over immense helpings of dessert, their fancifully-built octagonal stable – and their music. Singing was an integral element of their church services, but how different from what I had experienced before. The Amish sang hymns in a slow drawn-out dirge that was somehow hypnotic.

Mainline Mennonite denominations learned, during the nineteenth century, the pleasures of four-part harmony. In my hometown village of Yarrow, everyone was taught to sing, and even those who had a tin ear would participate in choir practice. Before the mid-nineteenth century, however, Russian Mennonites would have sung much like the Amish I met in Ontario.

Several articles in this issue of *Roots and Branches* focus on Mennonites and music. Much more, of course, could have been written, especially on how music has changed in mainline Mennonite churches. Choirs are an endangered species. Sunday morning music has often become an onstage performance. Are these changes positive or negative? Do they respond to a social demand, especially from the young? These are complex issues, and lead to a further intriguing question: What comes next?

## Letters to the Editors

Re Peter Penner's July 17, 2017 letter to the editor.

*The following letter has been slightly condensed and edited.*

A fascinating issue. I read it from cover to cover; congratulations to Lacey Friesen.

The name of Gerhard Fast immediately piqued my interest – I have a little song booklet from him, received in March 1949 in Hahrdorf, Kreis Goslar am Harz. Before we left for Fallingbostal and emigrated to Canada, G. Fast visited us from Goslar, 7 kms away.

Fast was our family's (Frank and Helen Rempel plus children, Helen, Dietrich, John, Henry and Frank's) first pastor after WWII. How did this happen? I am not exactly sure, but I do have some *Anknüpfungspunkte* (connecting points). From the end of February to the end of March 1945 we found refuge in Wernigerode where my youngest brother, Frank, was finally hospitalized after our hurried desperate flight in January from Rotibar,

Oder, in an open horse-drawn carriage. The temperature was -45°; Frank, 1½, ill with double pneumonia.

One day, Mom and we youngsters, plus several other Mennonite mothers with children, watched the *Hitlerjugend* parade from the sidewalk when a very distinguished white-haired gentleman stopped and politely inquired if we were Mennonites. He was Gerhard Fast, and for years he had lived in Wernigerode and preached on Russian-language radio programs for *Licht im Osten* (Light from the East).

During the German occupation of Ukraine, he had been part of the *Sonderkommando* (special unit) that documented Mennonite villages, including Osterwick where we lived. His military uniform was golden-brown. (In her book, *The Steppes are the Colour of Sepia*, Connie Braun refers to him as *Der Goldene Fasan* (the golden pheasant)).

Although we were relocated several times, somehow we stayed in touch with Gerhard Fast. In October 1945, while our family was at our meagre supper in our one-room dwelling, there was a knock at our door. My father was with us, having found us in September after a 3-month stint as a Russian prisoner at Auschwitz. At the door was Gerhard Fast, accompanied by none other than C.F. Klassen!

Gerhard Fast continued as our *Seelsorger* (spiritual guide) for the next 4 years. In 1946, my mother had a near fatal heart attack. Fast gave her communion before what seemed her imminent death. Ever so slowly my mother rallied. We came to Canada in 1949. She died peacefully in Menno Home, 6 months short of her 101st birthday! Dietrich Rempel Abbotsford



*Hitlerjugend* marching. Photo: Museemkoeln.de

Re "Tracing Ancient Mennonite Ancestry: The History of the Vistula Delta and Poland During the Viking Age," *Roots and Branches*, July 2017.

In the July 2017 issue of *Roots and Branches*, Bill and Norma (Loewen) Male suggest that the Genographics Project be used to "obtain your DNA haplogroup." I should point out that the Mennonite DNA Project recommends that interested persons do their DNA testing with Family Tree DNA (FTDNA). FTDNA has been used by

the Mennonite DNA project since 2006 and provides a wide range of DNA testing<sup>[1]</sup>. For those interested in autosomal DNA testing, the company 23andMe is also recommended<sup>[2]</sup>.

This article also states that according to the analysis by the Genographics project, Norma's earliest maternal line ancestry (incorrectly called "maternal surname line") is Danish. This is a somewhat misleading statement in that this early female ancestor would have likely existed before the Scandinavian people occupied this region and long before Denmark existed. The authors then go on to use circumstantial evidence to claim that her earliest known maternal line, great-great-grandmother Wedel's paternal Wedel ancestry, might be Danish. The article backs this up by using information from My Heritage<sup>[3]</sup> that of 45,000 people with the surname Wedel, 37% live in the US, 24% live in Germany, and 14% live in Denmark. This data would indicate that Wedel is a German surname, not Danish (ignoring the US since the vast majority of its population is descended from immigrants). The bottom line here is that, at this point, no one knows the origins (German, Danish, etc.) of the Mennonite Wedel family. The necessary records simply do not exist and likely never existed. An alternative would be to have Wedel men of non-Mennonite descent, who can reliably trace their Wedel ancestry back at least 400 years to a specific location in Europe, do a Y-DNA test. Three Wedel men of Mennonite descent have already been tested. They are distantly related to each other, and their Y-DNA matches. Any match between the Mennonite and non-Mennonite Wedel men would provide very important clues as to the origins of the Mennonite Wedels. This has already been done with the Koop and the Fehr families.

The article also speculates, based purely on circumstantial evidence, that the Loewen and Unruh surnames may have originated in Poland/Prussia. The Mennonite surname Loewen comes from the Dutch first name Lewen, which has many variations (the variation Lieven is still used as a first name among the Flemish Dutch and Lieuwe is still being used in Friesland)<sup>[4]</sup>. There is documented evidence to back this up, and I can state this with some confidence. An important point to consider is that, prior to the Anabaptist movement, surnames such as Wedel, Loewen, Unruh, Penner, etc. did not have much meaning. Anabaptism started up at about the same time as northern continental Europeans took on permanent family names. In some parts of the Netherlands and Scandinavia permanent family names did not appear

until the 1800s! Early Mennonite records indicate that some families did not have permanent family names in Prussia until the 1600s, generations after their ancestors arrived from Germany or the Netherlands.

People should be very cautious about taking DNA results which assign one's maternal (via analysis of mitochondrial DNA) or paternal (via analysis of Y-DNA) results to a single ancestor who lived thousands of years ago and projecting that onto their more recent ancestors of 300 to 500 years ago. Our pre-Mennonite ancestry is predominantly Northern European. There has been much movement of peoples in Europe over the centuries and millennia. One should be very cautious about assigning an early ancestry to a specific location using DNA results. This situation is likely to improve in the future as more people are tested and as better models are developed to analyze DNA results. We need many thousands more people of Low-German Mennonite descent to do Y-DNA, mitochondrial DNA and autosomal DNA tests before we can reliably make the kind of predictions that some of the DNA testing companies purport to do.

1. For the FTDNA website go to: <https://www.familytreedna.com>.  
For the Mennonite project go to <https://www.familytreedna.com/project-join-request.aspx?group=Mennonite&projecttype=DG>.
2. For the 23andMe Canadian website go to: <https://www.23andme.com/en-ca/>.
3. The MyHeritage website is at <https://www.myheritage.com/>.
4. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lieven\\_\(given\\_name\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lieven_(given_name))

Glenn Penner  
Guelph, Ontario

## Upcoming Events

### MHSBC Annual General Meeting

Friday, April 6 at 1:30pm

Annual reports, discussion, and voting for members

Ricky's Country Restaurant, 32080 Marshall Road, Abbotsford

### Moving From Fear to Gratitude:

#### Mennonite Immigration to Canada after WW II

Date and location to be determined

Watch for further details on our website at [www.mhsbc.com](http://www.mhsbc.com)

## Letters to the Editor, continued

Re “Conscientious Objectors in WW1 and the Canadian Government” (*Roots and Branches*, Sept 2017).

I have just finished reading “Conscientious Objectors in WW1 and the Canadian Government (vol. 23, no. 3, p. 5). I was interested in the reference to Klaas Peters, “a Mennonite only in name.” I have been investigating Gerhard Ens, sometime MLA for Rosthern, who was also “a Mennonite only in name.” He was also a close associate of “Bishop” David Toews. Like Klaas Peters, Gerhard Ens

was a leader of a New Jerusalem congregation – in Rosthern in Ens’ case. I looked Klaas Peters up on GAMEO but could not find anything.

My interest in Ens is of someone who was both inside and outside the Mennonite experience in western Canada and who accomplished great things for the Mennonite community by facilitating immigration – especially from Russia in the 1920s. It would appear that Ens and Peters had things in common and I would like to find out more about him.

Ronald Toews  
Smithers

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## November 2017 Fundraiser

### *Legacy: Alternative Responses to the Call to Arms*



Conscientious objectors who were honoured on November 12, 2017. Photo courtesy of MHSBC

Reported by Maryann Tjart Jantzen

On the afternoon of November 12, 2017, the Mennonite Historical Society of BC held a special fund-raising event that featured Conrad Stoesz’s well-received film, *The Last Objectors: A World War II Documentary*, which focuses on Canadian Mennonite men who served in non-combatant roles during World War II. Before the screening of the film, Stoesz, archivist at the Mennonite Heritage Centre, University of Winnipeg, explained how his growing interest in the history of Canadian Mennonite conscientious objectors (his father had been a CO but had not wanted to talk much about the experience) culminated in the making of the film, which is based on hours of interviews with former non-combatants. He

emphasized the importance of recording the stories of the past, because they will influence our present lives and decisions. The film has already been aired on CBC four times to very positive responses. Stoesz stated that “Because the faith story is put in a historical context people are open. ... Violence is nothing new. It’s the response that can be unique.”

The program also included special music as well as Julia Toews’s powerful tribute to her father, who was imprisoned in Manitoba during the war because of his conscientious objector stance. Amazingly, thirteen former non-combatants, some of whom were featured in the film, were able to attend the event. A delicious *faspa* followed the program.

## A Conscientious Objector in Canada – One Man’s Story

By Julia Born Toews

In early spring 1942, an officer of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police walked into Olfert’s Sunrise Co-op store in the southern Manitoba village of Rhineland. He presented the 21-year-old store clerk, Henry Born, with a summons to appear in court for not responding to the call to join the Canadian military.

Henry Born was my father, and he spoke of his war-time experiences with us, his family; he also expressed some details in his autobiography titled *In the Company of God*. In his book, Henry writes, “I had received my military call-up papers earlier, but, although not a Christian at that time, I did not feel that I could engage in an activity that required me to take another person’s life and I notified the military authorities that I would not respond to the call... .”

His older brother George and other of his acquaintances had previously been given conscientious objector (CO) status; hence he was not much disturbed about the possible outcome of this hearing. With his parents present to support him, three judges interviewed him. “They tried to change my mind,” he writes, “but I informed the court that I was willing to take the consequences of my decision. Thereupon the crown prosecutor recommended that the maximum penalty be given me – a year in jail with hard labour.” Henry took leave of his parents, his father spoke a prayer committing him to God’s care, and he was taken to a detention centre in Winnipeg and later to jail in Headingly, Manitoba. Headingly is a minimum, medium, and maximum-security institution.

At this time World War II was not going well for the Allied Forces. “No doubt,” Henry surmises in his book, “the intent was to send a message to the Mennonite communities that failure to comply with the War Services Act would be met with a strict application of the maximum penalty.”

Here is where his story takes a little twist.



Julia Toews. Photo courtesy of MHSBC

Henry began his year of hard labour working in the kitchen, perhaps a difficult job for a Mennonite farm boy. But he went about his work with good will, and shortly after was assigned to guard trustee duties and then to assistant clerk in the main jail office. About three months later this work led to the position of head clerk, the most responsible position an inmate could fill. This role put him in direct operational contact with the administration, the guards, the requisition officers, and even the governor of the institution. His responsibilities were to keep the records and files of all the inmates, to type all the correspondence going out from the administration, and to submit monthly reports to the government authorities.

An added benefit was that he had opportunities to relieve some of the initial shock that other COs felt upon entering jail. “Most of the Mennonite COs could be identified by the names on the warrants,” he noted in his autobiography, “... it was quite hilarious to see the tension drain out of their faces when [they came into my office and] I would address them in the Low German dialect... .” It was also during this time that Henry came to faith in Jesus, and committed his life to God.

After ten months (two months off for good behaviour) Henry was released from prison and went home. Within a month he received another call to military service. This time, he consulted the bishop of the local church, Mr. D. Schulz, who suggested they meet with one of the judges in Winnipeg and ask for Henry to be granted CO status. It turned out that this judge did not have any record of previous developments in Henry’s case, so he would not consider his petition but informed Henry that if he did not report for service he would have no alternative but to sentence him to jail.

“I just finished a year as a prisoner in Headingly,” Henry blurted out. The judge gave him an astonished look and, after some consideration, changed his mind and assigned him to a farm in Neepawa, Manitoba. Three weeks later, Henry needed to return home for an appen-

dectomy. While recuperating he took a job as secretary with a fire insurance company.

“When the official two-month leave for recovery had expired,” Henry writes, “the president of the insurance company accompanied me to the Selective Services offices in Winnipeg and arranged for me to remain in the employ of the company and pay part of my salary to the Red Cross organization.” Henry stayed with this company till the war ended. “I hope,” Henry concludes, “that my contribution to the Red Cross helped save lives and enabled families, who were torn apart through the war, to come together again.”

Henry’s knowledge of administration and office work stood him in good stead later in life as he was a teacher,

Bible school administrator and pastor – doing the work of peace in many countries, often among the very people displaced by war.

Henry included a short poem in his book summing up these events and, I think, reflecting his inner attitude to this experience in his young life:

Two men looked out from prison bars;  
One saw mud, the other stars.

Frederick Langbridge (British clergyman and poet, 1849-1922)

*Julia M. Toews told this story at the annual MHSBC fundraiser on 12 November 2017.*

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## MHSBC Genealogy Workshop 3-4 November 2017

Reported by Dave Loewen

The title of Friday’s session with Tim Janzen had me hooked – “What do I do with my Autosomal\* DNA Test Results?” Anything else I might glean from the weekend’s sessions would be a bonus. I always enjoy Glenn Penner’s presentations on genealogy, and more often than not, I come away with numerous “nuggets” to apply to my own genealogical archiving, but this year I was going to become more knowledgeable about my own DNA results.

As it turned out, Saturday’s sessions were more valuable to me than Friday’s, not to fault Tim Janzen. I was absorbed in his presentation, and as always, impressed with his grasp of this complex subject. The scope of his own personal research employing DNA cannot be overstated. The purpose for his DNA analysis is the “brick wall” that he and many other genealogists must deal with – getting past the early 1800s. Significant number of records for those years have been permanently lost, leaving only a sophisticated chromosome-mapping technique to break through this barrier. For me, this is not an issue, as both my wife’s and my own family trees extend back to the mid to early 1700s. Tim shared several pages of notes, which may be obtained by contacting Tim through email.

On Saturday, both Glenn and Tim presented us with an abundance of information related to DNA testing and genealogical research. Tim provided an overview of nu-

merous companies that provide DNA testing, explaining the pros and cons of each. Glenn has researched the Hiebert/Huebert family lines, as well as some others he referenced. Interestingly, some Mennonites with dissimilar names share common ancestry. Glenn pointed out some of the obstacles faced in trying to proceed past a certain point in time. He brought to our attention the value of sale-of-property records in identifying members of those particular families. (I can personally attest to that, as such records assisted me in eliminating two men, who had long been assumed to be the two oldest members of a particular family, from my family tree).

Both Glenn and Tim shared a wealth of information about resources such as periodicals, newspapers, and websites. A nugget I left with is an awareness and appreciation of the *Rundschau* as an invaluable source for anecdotal information, as well as genealogical information. Indices for the years 1878 to 1939 are the starting point, and most, if not all issues, can be found at the Historical Society. Not only is the *Rundschau* rich in genealogical information through its obituaries, but a perusal of the indices reveals a treasure-trove of articles and letters, written and sent to North America by individuals in Russia. These letters and articles, depending on the author or location, may prove to be invaluable in piecing together the story of ancestors which otherwise may remain lost.

Glenn has suggested that he will ask the Mennonite Historical Society in Abbotsford to post these resources online for those who may be interested in downloading them.

\* autosome: a chromosome that is not a sex chromosome

# Menno Comedy Nite

30 September 2017

With Orlando Braun, Matt Falk, and Danny Unrau

Reported by Robert Martens

A line was crossed when the Mennonite Historical Society of BC sponsored an event that might have not have been considered a few years ago: a Mennonite comedy night. The evening featured young comedian Matt Falk, filmmaker and producer Orlando Braun, and minister and writer Danny Unrau.

Host for the event, Danny Unrau, an avid storyteller, started the evening by declaring, “Thirty years of pastoring and I finally get to tell a story.” A church member, he said, once faulted him for telling stories rather than delivering sermons. “Well, I’m sorry,” Unrau replied, “I’m only trying to be like Jesus.”

That set the tone for the evening: smart, sassy – and crossed lines. After all, comedy is often based on saying things in public that shock the audience into laughter. Mennonites and laughter? This was a repeated theme at the event: “A full house,” remarked Unrau, “but why did you come? If you’re not a Mennonite, you probably came just to see us smile.”

Unrau introduced Orlando Braun, director of *That Mennonite Joke*, a short film on that oxymoron, Mennonite humour (see review below). Braun’s motivation for making the film derived from a comment he heard on television that Mennonites are not funny. “Why?” was his reaction, “I grew up with so much laughter.”

After intermission, Unrau presented Matt Falk to the crowd by recalling what he had been told by Jewish comedians: “There are enough tears in our world that we need to laugh.” Falk, at a young age already expert in co-



L-R: Film producer Orlando Braun with host Danny Unrau.

Photo: Janice Bahnman

medic timing and gesture, started his act with, “I have never seen so many Mennonites at a show that was not free.” Falk, born and raised in Niverville, Manitoba, once lived in Abbotsford for six months “because I wanted to break into show business.” At the time, he had no idea that so many Mennonites live in the area.

Tears and laughter: Falk joked about Mennonite migration. “Opa came from Russia,” he said, “That’s what my people do, they flee, they’re very good at fleeing.” Then, he said, once his ancestors arrived in Paraguay, “They looked at their watch, it’s time to flee again, they landed in Manitoba in a boat.” Crossed lines: jokes with an edge. Before he wound up his 45-minute act, Falk remarked that “the Bible is deeply engrained in me, but I shut it out on stage.”

The evening ended with a Q & A session that started slowly but quickly became lively. Braun said that *That Mennonite Joke* has now been screened coast to coast. When he had asked Falk to appear in a film on Mennonite humour, Falk responded, “This will be the shortest movie ever made.” Nevertheless, two years later it opened to a Steinbach crowd that lined up for the premiere in Manitoba winter weather.

The Q & A session touched on some serious matters. Responding to an audience question on whether he has incorporated emotional issues in his act, Falk said that he has talked onstage about his attempts at weight loss. But he also has difficulties with anxiety, he said, and has not yet processed that topic enough to use it as comic material in public.

Falk described a difficult and slow-building career as a stand-up. He tries to keep his act more or less the same for a wild variation in audiences. “As a Christian my act isn’t dirty in clubs, isn’t churchy in churches.”

“Humour,” he said, “is a great way to bring walls down.” Lines, ideally, are erased. But his most important mission, said Falk, happens offstage, affirming the message of Jesus. That comment drew a round of applause.



Comedian Matt Falk  
Photo: Janice Bahnman

## ***That Mennonite Joke***

Directed and written by Orlando Braun. Starring Matt Falk. 19:19

Reviewed by Robert Martens

During the film, Canadian Mennonite comedian Matt Falk is on stage before a live audience. “I am a Mennonite,” he says, “A Mennonite is like a Catholic but with less dancing and more guilt.” At the time of this performance, Falk remarks in the voice-over, he only dared use two Mennonite jokes. Yet, when he tells them in the film’s opening sequences, the audience – do they know what Mennonites are? – explodes in laughter.

The film’s “plot” unwinds something like this: Falk has recently taken second place at the World Series of Comedy in Las Vegas, where he sprinkled a few Mennonite jokes into his act, even though, he says, “I didn’t know much about my culture.” Now he has been contracted to do a live Canadian television special. Are Mennonites funny enough, he asks, to be included in his act?

So with this deadline in mind, in the film Falk embarks on a “walk-about” to learn more about his heritage. He begins his quest as an innocent: Falk belongs to the first generation in his family, he says, who don’t speak

any *Plautdietsch*. In a series of brief interviews, Falk pursues his private Holy Grail: what could possibly be funny about Mennonites? Among those appearing on camera:

~ Brian Bartel, owner of a café in Steinbach, Manitoba. No alcohol is served in his shop, says Bartel, but there is a closet for Mennonite drinkers.

~ Nathan Dueck, a poet who has written about a Mennonite going to war. Some *Plautdietsch* is used in his writing, including the strong language that is habitual in that dialect: “Oma would never say this in English.”

~ Best-selling author Miriam Toews. Her novels deal with tragedy, but “It’s a funny/sad thing,” she says. “How many Mennonites,” she asks, “does it take to change a light bulb?” “I don’t know,” says Falk. “Change?” she replies, and “Thanks

for laughing.”

~ Royden Loewen, chair of Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg. Why is Mennonite humour noteworthy? “They’re pacifists, they don’t go to war, they take life seriously, they are questing people,” he says. And yet, “You scratch the surface and you find hilarious human beings.”

~ Andrea Dyck, curator at the Mennonite Heritage Village in Steinbach. *Plautdietsch* jokes are on audio display at the Village; one translates as, “If it doesn’t rain, at least the poor man can dry his shirt” – a non-sequitur that works better in the original tongue.

~ Corny Rempel, a Mennonite Elvis impersonator (!). “What’s cheaper,” he asks, “taking one Mennonite with you fishing, or two? Two, because then they both won’t drink your beer.”

~ 3MP, a musical group who perform in *Plautdietsch*. The language, they claim, is inherently droll. “In one of our songs we have a marriage breakup,” and yet, sung in *Plautdietsch* – “It’s funny!”

The conclusion of Matt Falk’s “walk-about”? “Whether I like it or not, my Mennonite upbringing is the lens in which I see the world. I’m not going to hide from it, I’m going to embrace it – and follow the laughs.”

Sources

*Prairie Boy Productions*. [www.prairieboyproductions.com](http://www.prairieboyproductions.com)  
*YouTube*. *That Mennonite Joke*. 2017. [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

# Site Dedication for the Memorial to Victims of Communism

By Walter Friesen

*This submission has been edited slightly. Previous issues of Roots and Branches have noted the participation of Ruth Derksen Siemens in the Memorial project.*

I was invited to attend the site dedication for the monument in Ottawa on 2 Nov. 2017 as I have made donations to the project. However, a few days before the event I was asked to be a speaker at the ceremony in order to have a recognition of the “Mennonite community.” I was glad to agree to this. The event was honoured with the Heritage Minister of Canada (Mélanie Jolie) leading the ceremony. Present in the audience were about 100 people. I was told about 30 were MPs, about 20, senators, and about 20, ambassadors of various countries with a Communist history. A notable crowd indeed. The ambassador of Georgia came to me afterwards to give me a very heartfelt “thank you” for my sharing, as it exactly reflected the experiences of his family and his father. His words – and I paraphrase – “and now we the grandchildren live with that and need to act to prevent it from happening to others.”

## **Speech by Walter Friesen at the site dedication of the Tribute to Liberty**

My father was born in South Russia, now the Ukraine, in a Mennonite village about half-way between Zaporozhe and Odessa. The Mennonite community had moved to Russia in the late 1700s and was well established and highly productive in the Russian economy. Most were farmers, industrialists, and educators. This was also a close-knit community of Anabaptist Christians. After the Russian Revolution the Communists implemented policies that would strip people of the means to survive with a strategy of removing all leaders, teachers, ministers, etc., from the communities. Most of those removed were never seen again. The Communists also removed all grain and horses from the communities; thus, the remaining people had no food – or means of growing food – and many died of starvation, diseases that set in, or were killed outright by the Communists. My uncle, as a young boy, was one of those who had to go through the villages and count those who had died. My grandfather did not live to come to Canada.

This memorial is very important to ensure that, through the passage of time, these events are not forgotten, and that future generations will identify with the evils that were perpetrated by the Communists. The acts continue in Communist countries to this day. Canada is a wonderful country and I am very thankful that my parents were allowed to come here as they fled from the terrors of Communism.

Walter Friesen was born (1945) and raised in Manitoba and lives in Toronto. He is the grandchild of Johann Isaac Friesen (1878-1922) who lived in South Russia in the Mennonite village Georgstal. The village was in the Fuerstenland settlement. Walter is an electrical engineering graduate from the University of Manitoba and had a successful career in the field of urban transit. He is now retired and has spent some of his time in establishing a monument in Ukraine (2009) to the people who disappeared, never to be seen again, under the rule of Stalin.

Walter adds, “I have no special role in that project other than being a supporter and the project leaders know me from past encounters. They know I am in support of the project and do not mind my promoting it when appropriate to do so. The Ottawa opportunity was a good way to fly the Mennonite flag.”

## **Volunteer at the Mennonite Historical Society of B.C.**

- ⇒ Make a difference in your community
- ⇒ Preserve Mennonite heritage for future generations
- ⇒ Work with other passionate volunteers

Interested applicants should direct inquiries to [archives@mhsbc.com](mailto:archives@mhsbc.com) or 604-853-6177.

We are looking for volunteers of all ages!

Thank you for your interest!

# Music and Mennonites

## The Harmonious Mennonite

By Robert Martens

*Most of the material for this article is drawn from Peter Letkemann's massive The Hymnody and Choral Music of Mennonites in Russia: 1789-1915. University of Toronto: 1985. Translated by P. Letkemann. Part of Letkemann's work can be found in the MHSBC library. Columbia Bible College has a complete copy.*

Well into the nineteenth century, Russian Mennonites were singing as they had learned in northern Europe: in a slow and heavy unison led by a *Vorsänger* (lead singer). By the 1870s, the situation had dramatically changed, with many church choirs and choral societies singing in enthusiastic harmony. These changes, as is always the case, were the result of deep-seated cultural transformations. However, it is also always true that certain individuals are chosen – or choose – to lead the way with new ideas. With regard to Russian Mennonite music, Heinrich Franz was that individual. His work changed Mennonite singing forever.

### *A European-educated Mennonite*

Franz was born to Mennonite parents in Horst, West Prussia, in 1812, while the Napoleonic wars were still raging. He attended secondary school in a village near Marienburg. Among the staff there was Friedrich Wilhelm Lange, a talented teacher influenced by Pietism – which in turn would inspire the emergence of the Mennonite Brethren. Lange and Franz would become close friends.

Franz, clearly gifted, went on to higher education, passing the Prussian state teachers examination at age 19. Whatever his reasons, he left his teaching job in Germany, and in 1834 joined the flow of Mennonite migration to Molotschna Colony in South Russia. In 1835 he landed his first permanent job as a teacher in the newly-founded village of Gnadenfeld, where F. W. Lange became a prominent elder and minister. Two years later, Heinrich married Agatha Suderman, with whom he had four children.

### *Revolutionizing Russian Mennonite music*

In Gnadenfeld, Franz, consciously or not, undertook two efforts that would transform the world of Mennonite music: first, he introduced the *Ziffern* system and, second, compiled a *Choralbuch*. The system of *Ziffern*, or numbers, as musical notation had been used previously in continental Europe. Some had suggested that *Ziffern* as notation be used in schools and churches, while traditional notation should be confined to opera and the concert hall. The utilization of *Ziffern*, however, was fairly popular among German educators during Franz's lifetime.

His greatest achievement, though, may have been the compilation of the *Choralbuch*, or hymnbook, that would be used over the next decades. Franz wrote, "In order to do my small part in restoring the singing in my school – and through it the worship services of the congregation in which I had been hired as teacher – to its original purity and uniformity, I arranged all the hymns of our *Gesangbuch* (songbook) according to their poetic metre in 1837. Together with a dear friend who was knowledgeable in the area of hymnody, I collected all the melodies required to fit these metres. At the time, I wrote down only the tunes [in other words, not four-

part harmony]" (qtd in Letkemann 241). The "dear friend" to whom Franz refers is F. W. Lange, here unnamed because conflict had forced Lange out of Gnadenfeld. As it turned out, the two friends were much alike: Franz himself was notoriously difficult to get along with.

Nevertheless, the *Ziffern*, *Choralbuch*, and Franz's system of teaching music soon became well-known, as teachers from surrounding villages observed annual public examinations in Gnadenfeld, and as students absorbed Franz's teachings, graduated, and moved on, taking a little bit of Heinrich Franz with them.



Heinrich Franz. Photo: Willi Vogt

### *Teaching in the heart of the colonies*

In 1844 Franz resigned his position in Gnadenfeld and assumed a position as supervisor of a boarding home in Ekaterinoslav. If conflict was a possible factor in his leaving Gnadenfeld, certainly a primary motivation in living temporarily in a large and expanding city was to learn the Russian language. Two years later, however, Franz accepted an offer to teach in the *Zentralschule* (secondary school) in the Old Colony, Chortitza. Here he

replaced Heinrich Heese, a Lutheran by birth and known as an excellent teacher. Heese admired the new instructor's skills but did not like Franz at all: "He is a capable teacher in his lessons – but his egoism, which he also instils in his pupils – what poison!" (quoted in Letkemann 242)

Franz taught in Chortitza for twelve years and eventually won the respect of Mennonite and Russian officials alike. In 1852 he was mandated to publish two books: the arithmetic tables which he had created eighteen years earlier and had used in his

classes and the *Choralbuch*. One year later, Franz's *Aufgaben für's Tafelrechnen* (Lessons in Calculation) was published in Odessa.

The *Choralbuch*, however, did not appear until 1860, delayed by a number of factors. First, the original hymns had appeared only in melody and now needed to be expanded into the four-part harmony dear to Franz's heart. "The more diligently music instruction will be promoted in the schools," wrote Franz, "the sooner the desire will arise to sing the chorales in more than one part. In order to meet this desire, all of the melodies in the *Choralbuch* have been set in four parts" (qtd in Letkemann 243-4).

Second, in this updated version of the *Choralbuch*, Franz borrowed an additional 137 songs from the Lutheran and Reformed traditions. He was accused of expanding the repertoire in order to make more money on publication – some Mennonites had an aversion to success and profit – but in fact Franz may have been trying to speak to a more diverse audience. Considerable religious strife (or renewal?) had occurred during his work on the hymnbook, and indeed the Mennonite Brethren, influenced especially by Lutheran and Baptist Pietism, would break off from the "Old Church" in 1860. The kindest interpretation would be that Franz was attempting to build bridges between factions.

The third factor, though, casts a shadow on Heinrich Franz's possible motivations. The publication of the *Choralbuch* was partly delayed by a conflict that forced the resignation of Franz from the *Zentralschule*.

F dur a=3.  
Mäßig.

4. Gott ist die Liebe.

1. Gott ist die Liebe, läßt mich erlösen; Gott ist die Liebe, er liebt auch mich. Drum sag ich noch ein-mal: Gott ist die Liebe, Gott ist die Liebe! Er liebt auch mich.

Sample of Ziffern in hymn "Gott ist die Liebe"

#### "School of brothers"

In 1858 Heinrich Franz returned to Gnadenfeld to teach at the newly-formed *Bruderschule* (literally, "brother school," perhaps foreshadowing the emergence of the Mennonite Brethren). Colloquially, though, the institution was known as the *Waisenschule*, school for orphans, since it was founded to educate the poverty-stricken and orphaned as well as children from prosperous families. The appointment of Franz was a controversial one from the start. Two of the staff objected to his arrival, insisting that he was not inspired by a "living faith" (qtd in Letkemann 245). After his hiring, three teachers resigned; all were later founders of the Mennonite Brethren community.

Even the administration that hired Franz did not quite trust him. Hoping to eventually replace Franz, they sent a young man, Johannes Lange (who was related to F. W.), to Württemberg for teacher training. When Lange returned, he worked alongside Heinrich Franz until the latter, frustrated by the snub, resigned, and taught privately in Gnadenfeld for the next five years. This experiment did not turn out well for the *Bruderschule*: Lange joined forces with the Mennonite Templers, was briefly incarcerated, and then left for a Templer settlement in the Kuban.

#### A distinguished and difficult career

Franz found a kind of sanctuary in a private school operated by Jacob Dick on his estate, Rosenhof. According to

some witnesses, however, Franz's thirteen years at the school did not provide sanctuary for his students. Franz's pupil Heinrich A. Ediger wrote, "Franz made his most lasting impression through his strong personality and his draconian severity. ... His spirit and his use of corporal punishment produced both enthusiastic supporters and determined opponents among his students" (qtd in Letkemann 247-8). Ediger added, however, "Four-part singing, especially the chorales, was diligently fostered by him. It is largely thanks to Lehrer Franz that the monotonous and plodding manner of congregational singing received fresh life ..." (qtd in Letkemann 248).

It might be noted that Ediger had nothing but praise for Heinrich's son, also named Heinrich, who taught at Rosenhof for two years before moving on. Heinrich Jr. was a kindly individual who had a passion for folk songs as well as for hymns.

### *A harmonious Mennonite?*

In 1880, after fifty years of teaching, Heinrich Franz Sr. retired to Neu-Halbstadt, where he taught at the new *Mädchenschule*, or girls' school. His wife, Agatha, died in 1882. Then Franz turned once again to publishing. After the prominent minister and poet, Bernhard Harder, died, Franz collected over one thousand of Harder's songs and poems and had them published in 1888. One year later, the Mennonite master of the songbook died.

Franz, a lover of musical harmony, may not himself have led a harmonious life. His *Choralbuch*, however, was a remarkable creation that provided a musical model for succeeding generations, stabilized the repertoire, and promoted a passion for choral singing among Mennonites that would last for decades. Historian P. M. Friesen wrote a fitting portrait of the man: "His language was an elegant, grammatically correct High German of the educated classes in Prussia; pedantically restricted, however, to boundaries that could not be crossed: thus, and not otherwise! He was the ideal of an elementary school teacher as desired by the Prussian school directives of that day ... His personality was imposing; the impression at a first meeting with him was almost stately. The stamp of genius was clearly visible" (qtd in Letkemann 249).

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MHSBC has a copy of Franz's *Choralbuch* in its songbook collection. The title page reads *Choralbuch zunächst zum Gebrauch in der mennonitischen Schulen Südrusslands. Herausgegeben von H. Franz. Druck von Breitkopf und Härtel, Leipzig, 1860.* (Songbook primarily for use in South Russian Mennonite schools. Published by H. Franz. Printed by Breitkopf and Härtel, Leipzig.) Also in the songbook collection is a much later version of the *Choralbuch*, second American edition, 1902.



a) Missionaries (Russian and American) of the Nalgonda Mission 1899.

"The Song" (see article on page 19) was written to welcome missionaries from India back to Russia. This photo is from the early Indian church in Nalgonda. Source: P.M Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia*, p. 677.

## “Awake my Soul to praise thee!”

An excerpt from “A Sunday Morning in the Year 1840 on Chortitza Island,” by Kornelius Hildebrandt

Introduced and translated by Louise Bergen Price

“O that our Lord Jesus would no longer be greeted with such distorted singing in our churches, from which even the angels turn away in offense!” Thus Heinrich Heese, long time educator in both Chortitza and Molotschna colonies, lamented in a report around 1860 (Friesen 113). However, Kornelius Hildebrandt (1833-1920),

looking back at church services of his childhood, sees instead a simpler time of unquestioning faith and simple piety. For him, even the singing is imbued with a nostalgic charm. On this particular Sunday in 1840, when Kornelius is seven, the “honourable fathers” are already on their way to the schoolhouse where church services will be held. Each *Ohmke* (older man) wears the same knee-length frock-coat he worn to his first baptism years earlier. Since then, the seams have been let out to accommodate middle-aged girth; the worn cloth signifies years of life experience. Each man carries a hymnbook with wood covers and bound in pigskin.

The women, in blue or green cotton dresses, walk alongside their men. They wear blue hand-knit wool stockings, spun and dyed by their own hands. Over their shoulders they wear a brown shawl, criss-crossed over the breast and tied securely in the back. A black Sunday bonnet conceals hair and ears and even part of the forehead. Each *Muhmke* (older woman) carries, along with her hymnbook, a posy of *Marienblatt* (costmary), a tansy-like herb smelling of balsam. If costmary is not available, a rose or bunch of wild thyme will do. Unmarried daughters with merry, coquettish eyes are dressed much like their mothers, with loosely tied kerchiefs in place of bonnets. Older sons wear a jacket or *Schirkassinrock*; their younger brothers are in white shirt sleeves. Little children stay at home under the supervision of an older sister, or a Russian maid. “My parents,” Kornelius re-



Kornelius Hildebrandt (bottom left) and his family at an outing to the Dnieper River. Photo: <http://chort.square7.ch/Fam/Fam78.jpg>

marks, “had the opinion that children need to be taught with love and by example, but little religion. The Lord Jesus embraced and blessed the little ones, but did not require them to follow him” (50). The schoolroom is not large – men sit on the right; women, on the left. Aside from a murmured, “Good morning,” no one speaks. The room is filled with a quiet, pious anticipation.

Thus far, a summary – now to Kornelius’ own masterful storytelling:

Now the *Vorsänger* (songleader) strides forth from the teacher’s living quarters and walks in measured, ceremonial steps to his place near the still-empty seat of the minister. ... In a worshipful manner, he takes his place, pages through his hymnbook, coughs, and then announces: “*Auf, auf mein Geist zu loben! Number 358!*” (Awake my soul to praise thee!) After a short pause, he repeats, “Number 358.” A second pause – then he raises his stentorian voice in song. None of the other parishioners are inhibited either – not like many of those with young blood but old hearts today – and soon fifty voices are raised in a full-throated enthusiasm as if to cause the walls of Jericho to tumble down, or the Midianites to flee in terror. They sing with full lung power, certainly with much sliding up and down between the notes C and A, and high C, and yet without any hesitation to the very end.

A few moments to catch their breath, then the song before the sermon, number 86: *Liebster Jesu, wir sind hier*. (Dearest Lord Jesus, we are here.) The *Vorsänger* could

have saved his breath rather than announce the number, for every *Ohmke* and *Muhmke* knows where to find “Dearest Jesus,” and most know it by heart. In the old days, many humble pious souls, especially old women, tried to still their spiritual hunger through the hymnbook, and therefore were more familiar with it than many church members today. But the *Vorsänger* is conscious of his responsibility, and calls out “86” once more. He calls so loudly that anyone at home in the third house down the road would have heard, for the windows facing Jerusalem stand wide open, as they had done in the time of Daniel in the Bible. ... [After the sermon] the preacher sits, leans over to the *Vorsänger* and whispers, “I’d like you to lead the song, *Folget mir, ruft uns das Leben.*” (Follow me, our Saviour calls.) The *Vorsänger* replies in barely audible whisper, “I’m not certain of the melody, but I’ll hum it to myself first.” Self-confidence wins out over doubt; he announces the song and begins immediately to sing. Words and music don’t scan, and no one joins in. He tries it again, this time quietly (although everyone hears) but it still doesn’t fit. Patiently, everyone waits for the *Vorsänger* to find the key to this mystery.

The *Vorsänger*, however, follows the example of the widow in the Gospel story who, by her very persistence, wins her case with the unjust judge. He doesn’t give in, but lets his voice tentatively glide up and down until he comes across familiar pathways. When a little old mother joins in with a trembling voice, his swells to a powerful roar, catch-

ing everyone else up with him. And if in the end the text doesn’t match the tune, the extra words are simply swallowed. The music rises and falls like “clanging of swords and crashing of waves” so that the loose panes of glass in the old window frames begin to rattle. And our Lord above must certainly be taking pleasure in it all!

*Kornelius Hildebrandt was a second-generation Russian Mennonite. Son of long-time elder Jakob Hildebrandt, Kornelius grew up on Chortitza Island. In his youth, he apprenticed as a clockmaker in Chortitza, later setting up his own factory producing farm equipment. He had, according to his great-nephew, historian David Rempel, a “fine sense of humour, an observing eye, and a narrator’s gift for story-telling” (56).*

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## Who are they?



Taken March 2, 1941, at Campbell Studios in Vancouver: the wedding party of Jacob Tjart and Maria Balzer. I am wondering if anyone can identify one or more of the six flower girls in the picture, all of whom had been part of Maria’s Sunday school class at Vancouver Mennonite Brethren Church. If you have any information, please pass it on by email, snail mail or phone to Maryann Tjart Jantzen, care of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC.

## ***Avanti*: An exhibit of the art of Hilda Janzen Goertzen (1949-2016)**



Calvin Dyck with violin and Betty Suderman at the piano.

Photo: Louise Bergen Price

Reviewed by Louise Bergen Price

*Avanti*, Italian for the art of moving forward – a theme Hilda Janzen Goertzen explored in many of her paintings – was also the title of an art exhibit at the Mennonite Heritage Museum during September 2017. Hilda’s *Avanti* paintings feature an arched doorway inviting us as viewers to enter and follow the path even though we may not know where it leads. The exhibit, featuring a wide variety of paintings, was installed by Peter Goertzen.

Hilda’s life path led from Buenos Aires, Argentina, where she was born, through numerous provinces in Canada before she and husband Peter settled in Rosedale, BC, where she taught music. Although Hilda had always been interested in various forms of art, she started painting in a serious way in 1992. She was greatly influenced by painters such as Monet and van Gogh whose works she studied while visiting museums in France, Spain and

Italy. When Hilda could no longer paint due to illness, she often rode her bicycle around Rosedale, photographing the natural beauty of the landscape and describing her trips on her blog.

At the official opening of the *Avanti* exhibit on September 10, son Michael Goertzen read vignettes of Hilda’s life. Entitled “Remembering Hilda through her art”; “Childhood in Buenos Aires”; “Hilda and Music”; “In Paris 1 & 2”; and “The *Avanti* Paintings and *Liebesleid*,” these vignettes were interspersed with music selections by Calvin Dyck (violin) and Betty Suderman (piano).

For those of us in the audience who knew Hilda – and there were many – the event was a fitting tribute to a fiery spirit with a seemingly inexhaustible enjoyment of life.

## Hilda Goertzen and Music

By Michael Goertzen

*Michael Goertzen is the son of Hilda Janzen Goertzen. He gave the following tribute at the Avanti performance.*

Music was of central importance to Hilda throughout her life. She remembers her father able to pick up and play nearly any instrument within reach. He claimed that “for a violin to sound good, you have to make it cry.” Hilda had many talents and interests that I witnessed as I grew up. Macramé, pottery, calligraphy, tole painting, knitting, photography, but perhaps the most impactful for me was the way she could sing. She had a clear, crystalline soprano. Perfect intonation. I remember Hilda singing from my earliest days: in and around the house, at church events, weddings, Altona Choir performances. Not so many years ago she dressed the part and sang “Lili Marlene” for a Mennonite Historical Society of BC event.

I remember Hilda revelling in the vocal performance of Irving Berlin’s “Anything You Can Do (I Can Do Better),” where the duet centres on competitiveness between a male and female in a relationship. She and my father seemed to be asked to sing at every function we



*Above: Michael reading a tribute to his mother.*

*Photo: Louise Bergen Price*

*Top right: Hilda as "Lili Marlene." Photo: MHSBC*

attended while I was growing up, and they sang this piece more times than I could count. The female voice inevitably, with a definitive high A, would win the duet every time. This attested to Hilda’s confidence in her talents. This song wasn’t only a performance but part of the belief she held in herself, with a Buenos Aires swagger.

Hilda told me before she died that she thought that her mother Katja listened to her proudly when she sang in a performance. In her last decade Hilda began writing simple songs and playing them on a piano and ukulele. Music remained, throughout life, one of her great comforts and was bound to her sense of worship.

My first memory as a three-year-old is sitting on a little wooden stool crafted by Hilda’s father Johann. While I sat, I watched her cook. And while she cooked, she sang. The song, now more a story than any real recollection, was the most sorrowful melody I had or would ever hear. And as she sang this song, I cried. When she stopped singing, I stopped crying. When she started up again, so did I, and I remember her piercing blue eyes passing something on to me. Something like a test. Something like a haunting. It was a pivotal moment of generational transference, full of spirits in the room. My grandmother Katja listening somewhere with approval. My mother’s voice meeting her father’s requirements of the violin: “You have to make it cry.”

## The Song: MHSBC Volunteers at Work

By Peter Rahn

I arrive at my usual time, 9:30 am Thursday morning, eager to get to work on a unique story involving my father's siblings during the Khrushchev years in the Soviet Union. I sign in so that the MHSBC administration can prove to various grant-giving foundations how much volunteer support our organization has. When I get to my desk, I find that a copy of a curious manuscript has been placed there. It is written in Gothic script and consists of rows of written text interspersed with rows of numbers. As I gaze at this rather interesting document, I am reminded of a book of songs that I inherited from my musical grandfather who was a poet, composer, arranger and choir conductor. That book contained song lyrics in lines interspersed with numbers; they were called *Ziffern* (literally, numbers). This present document must be of a similar genre.<sup>1</sup>

It isn't long before Jennifer, our congenial director of volunteers, is at my elbow and announces that she has a special job for me, namely that I transliterate the Gothic text into Latin script and then translate the German into English. Well, so much for my ancestral family story. I dig out some old Gothic cursive scripts and attack the text in front of me. It is very hard to read the very miniscule letter forms. So I use the photocopier to enlarge the script, only to find that enlargement, while making some letters more clear, also has the opposite effect in that the expansion creates gaps in the line so that connections are sometimes lost and individual letters become unreadable. Finally, we make a scanned copy in pdf form which can be enlarged or reduced at will on a computer screen.

Later on that morning, the lady who gifted us with this document appears

Roman	Fraktur	Written
A a	A,a	A,a
B b	B,b	B,b
C c	C,c	C,c
D d	D,d	D,d
E e	E,e	E,e
F f	F,f	F,f
G g	G,g	G,g
H h	H,h	H,h
I i	I,i	I,i
J j	J,j	J,j
K k	K,k	K,k
L l	L,l	L,l
M m	M,m	M,m
N n	N,n	N,n
O o	O,o	O,o
P p	P,p	P,p
Q q	Q,q	Q,q
R r	R,r	R,r
S s	S,s	S,s
T t	T,t	T,t
U u	U,u	U,u
V v	V,v	V,v
W w	W,w	W,w
X x	X,x	X,x
Y y	Y,y	Y,y
Z z	Z,z	Z,z

and gives me a brief written history of the text. It seems that the document is a copy of a song composed by an ancestor. At the same time she wishes to confirm whether the poet/composer of this song was in fact one of those who helped found the Mennonite Brethren *Gemeinde* (church/congregation) in Rückenau, Molotschna, in the 1860s. I take her to our library where she rummages around in several Mennonite histories, seemingly without any luck. Finally, we find an account of the founders of the Rückenau MB church, her ancestor's name clearly listed on it. I make some photocopies, charge her \$.70 and send her on her way satisfied. And I now have a bit more context for *the song* itself that celebrates the return to the Mennonite colonies in the Ukraine of the first Mennonite missionaries to India: Abraham and Maria Friesen.

The transliteration is of utmost importance, since the aim is to fit the notes to the words. After several hours spread over approximately three Thursdays, during

which I have managed to transliterate a substantial portion of the text, I recognize that I am simply glaring at the document without making much progress. What is needed is a different pair of eyes. I telephone co-volunteer Hugo Friesen, whose ability to read Gothic surpasses mine and he graciously agrees to complete my attempt to transliterate the text. The next Thursday I have a completed transliteration and a translation into English on my desk. After an exchange of emails and some tweaking to make the transliteration as accurate as possible, I am told that one of our volunteers, Julia Toews, is adept at transforming *Ziffern* into notes. The following Thursday (that's five weeks later, if you're counting), a beautiful melody wafts its way from the main hall up to our ears on the second floor. Wow! We are almost finished with this – but then a new wrinkle.

The music suggests to Julia that we need to read the entire document horizontally across, rather than down the left side and then down the right side, as Hugo and I have transliterated it. So I embark on putting the text together in the fashion suggested by Julia. In some

places it seems to make more sense. I send it to Hugo, who does not seem completely convinced. So Julia soldiers on, and now we are in a position to return the transliterated and translated document to the family that sought our help. But doubts will always remain whether we got it exactly right. For that we would really have to consult the poet/composer. That is no longer possible. So we must be satisfied with the fact that we have done our cooperative best!

<sup>1</sup>“Significant changes in church music, both in Russia and North America, occurred in the 19th century. In 1837 Heinrich Franz, a Prussian Mennonite teacher in a southern Russian Mennonite school, began to compile sacred hymns to be sung in Mennonite schools and churches. He introduced a modified system of musical notation using numbers (*Ziffern*), rather than notes, to represent the degrees of the scale. That made it possible for singers to read and sing, at sight, the melody. Similar notations denoted simple four-part harmonies, and by 1860 several Mennonite hymnals with four-part numerical notations were published.” Ted Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada 1839-1970: A People Transformed*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996, p. 274.

The MHSBC Board is grateful for the members and donors who consistently ensure that the financial goals of the Society are being met, as they have been for the last 45 years. As we go into 2018, we will continue to sell memberships and host our annual fundraising event.

Although these ways of meeting our financial obligations have been successful in the past, our annual income is trending significantly downward, while our expenses have increased. Thus, the Board will be engaging in a review of our fundraising strategies and wish to engage and consult with our constituents to determine how best to achieve our financial goals in the future. If you have an interest in actively participating in this process, we would like to hear from you.

Please contact the office by phone or email or in person. Thank you.

**Mennonite Historical Society of BC**

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# A Short Historical Framework for “The Song”

By Peter Rahn

In 1889, after four years of training at a Baptist missionary school in Hamburg-Horn, Germany, Maria Martens Friesen and her husband, Abraham J. Friesen (born in Einlage in the Chortitza region of the Ukraine), went to evangelize among the Telugu-speaking people near Hyderabad in Southern India. This endeavour was undertaken with the support of the Mennonite Brethren (MB) Church in the Ukraine (especially the Rückenau congregation) and in cooperation with the American Baptist Church which had already begun work in this area of India. During the next seven years the Friesens presided over the building and equipping of a large missionary complex at Nalgonda and founded an MB church that grew from 178 converts in 1891 to 325 baptized members by 1892. In 1897 the Friesens returned home to the Ukraine on furlough and spent approximately sixteen months travelling throughout the Mennonite villages of the Ukraine and other parts of Europe reporting on their work in India (Penner).

While the interest in missions was growing (stimulated partly by the founding of the Mennonite Brethren Church in the latter half of the nineteenth century), there was also significant development in choral singing in the Mennonite colonies of the Ukraine. In 1837 the teacher Heinrich Franz began to collect traditional hymn tunes and gave them a fixed form using *Ziffern* notation. This *Choralbuch* was published in 1860. It contained 137 tunes from various church traditions and 26 tunes that were unique to the Russian Mennonite tradition. Moreover, Franz included four-part settings which he taught to his students in the schools, first in the Chortitza settlement, and then in Gnadenfeld, Molotschna Colony, as part of the curriculum. This gave rise to an increased interest in choral singing and the establishment of many choral societies (*Gesangvereine*) throughout the Mennonite colonies.

At the same time there was considerable resistance to this new approach to choral singing; some critics perceived choral music as “the world” intruding into traditional Mennonite faith and worship that emphasized separation from the so-called “world.” In fact, according to a contemporary study, it was not until about 1890 that

many churches in the Molotschna had a choir that sang on Sunday mornings (Berg).

Based on its content, one can assume that “The Song” was composed for a welcome home event for the Friesens, probably early in 1897. It was composed on behalf of the Friedensfeld *Gesangverein* that, based on the observations of an independent German choral director and teacher in 1894, was one of two outstanding Mennonite choral societies among the many in the Ukraine (Schweiger). It seems to have drawn its choristers from Borozenko and the nearby Nepluyevka colonies. This choir was directed by Bernhardt Dueck and, in contrast to most other *Gesangvereine*, populated mainly by young people. It seems likely that this choral society was involved, partly because of its reputation and partly because the Steinau MB congregation had built a new church with seating for 500 people in 1890.

Moreover, the church at Steinau was an affiliate of the MB church at Einlage, the parental home of Abraham J. Friesen (hence a likely first stop for the couple). Isaak Schroeder, whose signature is found in both Gothic and Russian on the back of the manuscript of “The Song,” was born in 1882 in Steinau. In all probability he was one of the young people who participated in an early welcome home service for the Friesens at which the Friedensfeld *Gesangverein* performed “The Song.” It may even have been held in the Steinau MB church that had been built for just such an occasion (since its village MB membership was less than 100 people) (Schroeder & Huebert).

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## Choral Anthem from Friedensfeld

G Moll (minor) a = 7 Gefühlsvoll  
 Composer & Lyricist: Isaac Schröder

Transliterated by Peter Rahn & Hugo Friesen  
 Music transcribed by Julia M. Toews

1. Welch Schmer - zens - ruf dringt uns zu Oh - ren? Ach kommt her - ü - ber  
 Sonst sind un - rett - bar wir ver - lor - ne ge - knecht - et un - ter  
 2. Ach graut euch nicht vor den Ty - ra - nen, nicht von den Göt - zen  
 Wir zie - hen mit ge - weih - ten Fuß - nan, Gott bringt die Göt - zen  
 3. Heut sind schon ü - ber sie - ben Jah - re seit je - nem wicht - gen  
 Wo wir den true - en Mis - sions - paa - re mit Gott zu Rei - se

Helft uns doch!  
 Sa - tans Joch. Seht zwei - mal hun - dert Mi - li - o - nen und  
 Die - nern all. Lebt wohl auch, schmerz - lich wird das Schei - den, doch  
 Bald zu Fall! Ob tau - send fa - len mir zur Rech - ten, Ob  
 Aug - gen - blick.  
 Wünsch - ten Glück.

mehr noch schau - en seh - nent aus, dort un - ter In - di - ens  
 ruft der Herr "Ver - säu - men nicht!" Das Lieb - ste wei - hen wir  
 Pes - sti - lenz und Seu - che droht. Der Herr be - schir - met

hei - ßen Zo - nen nach Ret - tung aus das To - des Graus! Ist  
 ihn mit Freu - den, ob - zwar mit Schmerzen das Herz fast bricht! Uns  
 Den Ge - ruf - ten und führt ihn herr - lich aus der Not. Ja

Kei - ner da der Sich ent - schei - det mit Got - tes Bot - schaft  
 trö - sten sei - ne Hei - lands - wor - te. Ver - laßt um mei - net  
 wun - der - bar der Herr re - gie - ret durch schwe - re Stür - me,

aus zu ziehn? Wie Jesus sein Schäf - lein wei - det mit  
 Wil - len ihr' Ge - schwis - ter, El - tern, fin - det dort - an ihr  
 Kampf und Not hat Er euch true - e Heim ge - füh - ret. Ge -

lie - bend sant - ten Hir - ten - sinn.  
 hun - dert fäl - ti - ges und hier!  
 lobt sei heut der true - e Gott.

# Mennonite “Medicine”

Introduction by Robert Martens

When I was a boy growing up in the Russian Mennonite enclave of Yarrow, BC, many a village cupboard contained (and concealed) a strange-looking bottle of brownish liquid that attracted my childish curiosity. I was told it was called *Alpenkräuter*, a medicine restricted to adult use. Calling it “medicine” may, well, have been a half-truth.

In the charming story that follows, Oregonian Thomas A. Wiebe relates that he learned only in his adulthood what *Alpenkräuter* actually meant. By the way, the tune/*Lied* that so impressed Mr. Wiebe reminds me of a hymn I loved in my youth: *Was kann es schöneres geben?* (What could be more beautiful?) The reader may or may not agree.

## *Das echte Lied der Alpenkräuter*

By Thomas A. Wiebe, July 28, 2013

When I was growing up, my father taught us a little ditty from his Mennonite boyhood:

*Da war ein Mann in Tode Loch,  
Und kein er sahe Mann,  
Und im dem letzen Stunden,  
Stunden,  
Hat er das Alpenkreuter gefunden.*

It was a charming little tune, and I would sing or hum it on the off occasion during my youth. At no time did it occur to my father to translate or to explain the song, nor did it occur to me to ask. I suppose sometimes the music is captivating enough. Some time in my teens, my curiosity was finally aroused regarding its meaning and perhaps its place in Midwestern Mennonite culture, so...

I employed my high school German to first produce the song lyrics above, then to produce the following rough translation:

*There was a man at death's door,  
And there was no one around,  
But in his last hours,  
Hours,  
He found an Alpine cross.*

The compound noun *Alpenkreuter* had been a challenge, as the second word, *Kreuter*, did not seem to translate directly, so I had made my best guess as some Low German variant of *Kreuz*, or cross. Pondering this for a bit, I came up with the following interpretation: A dying man, wandering alone in the Alps, stumbled across an Alpine cross and thereby was saved, the cross being a Christian cross that either pointed his way to last-minute heavenly salvation or was a last-minute guide to a nearby house of penitents, or some such thing.

I suppose I leaned towards a religious interpretation because the Mennonite culture was hard-shaped by its particular interpretation of the Luther Bible, so much so that from Luther's time to my father's boyhood in the 1930s in Oklahoma, Mennonites favored closed communities where they could keep their religious traditions and speak and teach the German language, so that all members could read and understand the Luther Bible.

Years later, curious as to the accuracy of my translation and interpretation of this song, I approached my father and my Uncle Ron, who was visiting at the time, and

ran all of this by them. They listened first to the translation, at the end of which smiles began to play about their lips, but they waited until I had finished my interpretation of the lyrics before they together, eyeing each other knowingly, burst into sustained laughter. Obviously, I had gotten something very wrong, and I waited patiently to be let in on the joke.

Together they pointed out first, that the translation was good save one word: the problematic *Kreuter*. It was actually *Alpenkräuter*, or Alpine herbs! (eu and äu have the same sound in German: “Oy.” I had neglected the second diphthong as a possibility.) Before I could start on a reinter-



pretation of the lyrics, they further explained that *Alpenkräuter* was in fact a patent medicine popular in the rural US, not always for its overripe claims as a cure-all, but often as an “acceptable” or even legal source of alcohol in areas that either frowned on alcoholic consumption (e.g., Mennonite farming villages) or where it was prohibited altogether. They estimated that the alcoholic content was probably around 40%, and observed that it wasn’t uncommon to see empty *Alpenkräuter* bottles thrown to the side of the road at the end of a weekend.

So *Das echte Lied der Alpenkräuter*, or the genuine *Alpenkräuter* song, was in fact an advertising ditty for an herbal cure-all, much like the more well-known *Jägermeister*, popular more for its alcoholic content than its curative powers. The song was pointed directly at the German-speaking population of the U.S., and its success as a reminder of the *Alpenkräuter* product was carried on to another generation strictly by the catchiness of the tune, well after the product itself ceased to be available or even recognizable.

The tunefulness of the song held my interest, enough so that I eventually become curious as to its meaning, which turned out to be even more interesting than my first confused attempts to understand it, and helped to soften the edges of my limited picture of what my father’s Mennonite heritage was, a picture drawn initially from the religious aspects of a group known first as a Christian sect, adding to a less formal and more human portrait.

#### Notes

1. When I mentioned my confusion recently over the word *Alpenkräuter* to my brother Craig, he immediately translated it correctly; his German is much better than mine.
2. The *Alpenkräuter* sold in the Midwest at that time was most probably Forni’s (or Fahrney’s) *Alpenkräuter Blutbeleger*, or Alpine herbal blood revitalizer. Fahrney’s made many similar products, including an *Alpenkräuter* laxative, which is pictured here. One of their advertising broadsides makes the typical claims of a panacea: “The old reliable family medicine that you have used years ago, and that was discovered by old Dr. Fahrney in 1780. You will remember that it is a sure cure for Impure Blood, Liver Complaint, Constipation, Biliousness, Indigestion, Dyspepsia, Headache, Malaria, Chills and Fever, etc., etc.; also, a sure preventative from all fevers. Space forbids to give a full explanation of it...” [Perhaps more apropos: Belated modesty forbids any more exaggeration.]
3. There exists today an Austrian product called *Gurktaler Alpenkräuter*, at 27% alcohol a popular herbal *schnapps* product, which has similarly been advertised as a curative, remedy and panacea.

Thomas A. Wiebe writes on occasion at the Oregon Scribbler on diverse subjects. A native Oregonian, he remains interested in his Mennonite ancestry and in riding his bicycle about the countryside. This article appeared on his blog and is reprinted with permission.

#### Appendix by Robert Martens

Information on the company that produced *Alpenkräuter* seems a tad shaky. In 1821 Jacob Fahrney settled in Pennsylvania – Mennonite country – where he practised the “healing arts” and developed a “Blood Vitalizer.”

Jacob, who served as a minister in a German Baptist church, passed on his knowledge of herbal medicine to his son, Peter. Dr. Peter Fahrney (today he might be known as a naturopath) initially practised in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where he certainly would have associated with – and perhaps treated – Mennonites.

Peter moved on, though, and reportedly enrolled in the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy. Here he improved the Blood Vitalizer and marketed it with great success. In 1869 Peter Fahrney opened a “laboratory” in Chicago and was soon selling his herbal products throughout the United States and Canada, mostly to German-speaking communities. The laboratory was destroyed in the Chicago Fire of 1871 but Fahrney quickly rebuilt. The company, which had a subsidiary in Winnipeg, was sold in the 1960s.



The National Museum of American History website provides the following information on *Alpenkräuter*:

The indications or uses for this product as provided by the manufacturer: This medicine is designed for relief from constipation and the following symptoms: upset stomach, indigestion, coated tongue, flatulence, loss of appetite, headache, nervousness, restlessness, and loss of sleep when these troubles are due to constipation. The carminative-stomachic action creates a feeling of warmth and comfort in the stomach. *Alpen Krauter* helps to expel gas from the stomach and intestines and eliminate waste products by way of the bowels.

Date made: after 1922.

Maker: Dr. Peter Fahrney and Sons Company

Physical Description:

alcohol 14%; drug-active ingredients: senna, fennel, mandrake root, peppermint, spearmint, mountain mint, horsemint, sarsaparilla, sassafras, hyssop, blessed thistle, ditanny, ground ivy, johnswort, lemon balm, sage, spike-nard, yarrow.

Made in Chicago, subsidiary in Winnipeg.

“To visit meant eating, laughing, drinking *Pripps* – no church Mennonite in Speedwell drank alcohol; true a bottle of *Alpenkräuter* had a higher alcohol content than any wine, but it was advertised in the weekly *Rundschau* as an excellent medicine ‘to cleanse all body systems,’ and two tablespoons every evening before bed was perfectly acceptable to my mother for her ever-unsettled stomach.” (Rudy Wiebe, *Of This Earth: A Mennonite Boyhood in the Boreal Forest*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2006. p. 217.)

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## Looking for the Perfect Lamp

By Elsie Neufeld

In yet another used-standing-lamp-quest, I visited the MCC thrift store on 43rd & Fraser Street in Vancouver. After browsing the “treasures” displayed on shelves spanning the front section of the building, I arrived in the furniture section at the back of the store. All my filters (do I have any left; sometimes I wonder!) fell away as I saw three South Asian men seated around a coffee table, chatting. “Oh!” I blurted, “what a beautiful sight!” Their conversation halted, they looked up at me, unsmiling. “It’s just that...I mean...this area of Vancouver used to be all Mennonite – my people, I’m a Mennonite – and now the neighbourhood is mostly your people – Indo-Canadian – and here you are, sitting in the MCC store... .” I blurted on and on, about how I was from Abbotsford, which, in my childhood, was like this section of Fraser then, mostly Mennonites, and back then, you’d see men huddled on street corners, visiting in their language... .

The man in the middle finally spoke. Said, “Mennonite thinking is like our way of thinking. It is about non-violence, and helping people. We are not so different.” “Have you lived here long? Did you work in the mills? Do you have a university education?” My questions tumbled out, without giving time for a response. The irony, I kept thinking; the irony! Then, suddenly, what was said finally stopped my thoughts and run-on-questions. “I am a volunteer here.” From his chest, the man in the middle lifted a tag on which was written: “MCC Volunteer.”

“Oh,” I said. “Oh!”

“Yes, and these two” – he pointed to either side of him – “I bring them here to help me help the people here. If there is anything you need us to carry for you, or you need to know information about, you ask, and I will get it for you. You are a Mennonite?” he asked.

“Yes. I was raised a Mennonite. And you? Are you Sikhs?”

“Yes. But we are all the same. Our thinking, if it is Sikh, or Islam, or the Christian, we are all to help each other. And if someone is violent to me, I am to turn,” and with this he turned his cheek as if he’d just been slapped. “We are not to kill anyone. If you study the Sikh way you will understand what I am saying. Now, is there something I can help you with, then you ask

and I will carry it for you.”

It was then I asked his name (Sukdev), but the other two did not respond. “If it is the blue tag, it is 50% off,” he added. I asked if I could take a photo to remember our meeting, and they posed. Thereafter I browsed the store, and sure enough, found the exact lamp I was looking for. No sooner had I stopped to examine it when Sukdev appeared at my side. “You want me to carry this to the front?” he asked. “Yes.”

He returned. “What else can I help you find?” “Well, I’m looking for a desk chair. Maybe this one will be narrow enough. I have an old desk, and I should have measured it. Perhaps I will do that before I buy a chair.” “You like this chair?” he asked. “I give it to you for \$25.00. It’s yours. Shall I carry it to the front?” I laughed, and declined the sale price and offer to bring it to the till. Told him it was nice to meet him, and wished him a good day.

At the till, I was served by a woman I’ll call Tina (not her real name, which was just as quintessentially a Mennonite name for a woman of her age). “I just had the most interesting conversation with the three men at the back,” I said. “Oh,” she said, rather tersely. She rolled her eyes. Yes, rolled her eyes! “It was wonderful to see; I took their photo,” I said, to emphasize that I meant “interesting” in the best sense of the word. “Well, you know. One of them was a policeman in India,” she said with a tone that left me puzzled and a bit sad. Did she not see the irony of it? Did she feel “displaced” by the new, now mostly Indo-Canadian demographic of South Fraser which, back in the 1960s to 1980s was predominantly Mennonite? What, if any, conversations had she had with the three?

I think there may have to be a sequel to this story, even though, yes, I found the perfect lamp!

“Our thinking, if it is  
Sikh, or Islam, or the  
Christian, we are all to  
help each other.”

## Book Review

John B. Toews and Paul Toews, editors.

### ***All-Russian Mennonite Agricultural Union (1923-1927): Minutes, Reports, Correspondence.***

Translated by John B. Toews, Walter Regehr, Olga Shmakina. Center for Mennonite Studies. 417 pp.

Reviewed by Robert Martens

Revolution, civil war, banditry, crop failure, typhus, famine: the post-World War I years brought unmitigated disaster to Mennonites living in Russia. In 1920, North American Mennonites responded by creating the Mennonite Central Committee, which under the designation American Mennonite Relief managed to ease the sufferings of Russian Mennonites (and others), especially in the Ukraine. Then the Leninist government in Moscow, finally acknowledging the famine plaguing much of Russia, made some temporary concessions to the free market. The situation improved markedly. Nonetheless, Mennonites were facing the stark question: should they stay in Russia and hope for the best? Or leave while emigration was still possible? In response, two very different organizations were established: The Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage (*Verband der Bürger Holländischer Herkunft* [VBHH]) in 1922; and the All-Russian Mennonite Agricultural Union (*All-Russischer Mennonitischer Landwirtschaftlicher Verband* [AMLV]) in 1923.

Documents emanating from the VBHH have already appeared in book form, the result of a collaboration between cousins Paul and John B. Toews. Paul taught at Ukraine’s Zaporizhzhye State University from 2003-4 and again from 2004-5. During those years he spent some time in the state archives in St. Petersburg and Moscow (he also married Russia Intourist guide Olga Shmakina in 2005), discovering a collection of AMLV files in Moscow. Toews arranged for the microfilming of these documents, which then found a home in Mennonite archives in Fresno, Winnipeg and Abbotsford. Before Paul’s death in 2015, he worked with John B. and others to translate, edit, and publish those documents. The resulting hardcover book also includes some superb writing by John on the historical events leading up to the AMLV.

The VBHH and AMLV shared some common goals but their perspectives were quite different. The first, the Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage, was guided by B.B. Janz, a realist who foresaw the impending disaster for Mennonites in the Soviet Union. However, though the name of the

Union pointedly avoided the use of the word “Mennonite,” Janz was profoundly dedicated to the maintenance of the Mennonite community. Superficially, the VBHH dedicated itself to famine relief and exemption for Mennonites from military service. Its deeper objective, though, may have been to assist with the emigration of as many Mennonites as possible from Russia. In his persistent negotiations with Moscow, Janz insisted that “removing the surplus population” would alleviate economic difficulties in Russia (7).

Meanwhile, among founding members of the All-Russian Mennonite Agricultural Union, emigration was also counselled by many, but a greater optimism prevailed.

John B. Toews writes, “A researcher delving into the many surviving records of Mennonite interaction with early Bolshevism may be astounded at the sheer audacity of one of the smallest minorities in the vast Soviet Empire. Were Mennonite negotiators ignorant of the radical ideological premises that undergirded Bolshevism? Did pride in their obvious agricultural accomplishments blind them to the fact that this trump card of the past could hardly be played in the new setting?” (5-6)

In the case of the AMLV, this question might receive a partial answer in the character of the Union’s leader, Peter F. Froese. Froese, an immensely persistent and skilled negotiator who took advantage of good relationships with the few real Soviet idealists still in power, was optimistic that Mennonites could cooperate with a Communist regime. He had a tolerance for socialist ideas and believed that Mennonites might safely, if only partially, assimilate into the new Soviet state. Froese, who married a Russian woman, later wrote, “The tasks that faced us were obvious: unification, emigration, reconstruction. It was clear to us that many had lost hope for a continuing existence with human dignity in Russia and wished to emigrate. It was clear to us that an emigration of everyone was impossible and that we would need to undertake the reconstruction of our economic life. We did not know what lay ahead. At this point the future did not appear hopeless and we saw some employment possibilities” (13).

After a series of complicated and indeed dangerous negotiations, a constitution for the AMLV was finally approved by the Soviet authorities. The first assembly of delegates met in 1923. The Statute of the Union speaks to such issues as education and promotion of agriculture;

the establishment of agricultural implement and machinery factories; communal welfare, including insurance; sales and the securing of capital; membership rights and duties; assets; and conditions of liquidation of the AMLV. The liquidation, in fact, was not long in coming. In 1927 the Union was declared illegal and its leaders arrested. Peter F. Froese spent nine and a half years in prison and two more in a prison camp. Against the odds, he survived, and died of cancer in Germany in 1957.

The documents of the AMLV, John B. Toews points out, are prosaic, business-like, and impersonal, in stark contrast to the files of the VBHH, which vividly describe the suffering and passion of the era. What then, asks Toews, is good reason for the editing and trans-

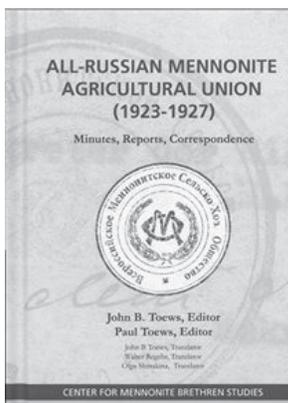
lation of these AMLV documents? The book’s epilogue describing the brutal imprisonment of Froese and his colleagues might provide an answer. Toews writes, “In contrast to ideological theories as to how the world should be run, [AMLV] Union supporters demonstrated an admirable tenacity in promoting an agricultural system that had worked in the past. In the end they could not cope with the transient policy fluctuations of the new regime. Perhaps a collection of this sort constitutes a tribute to principled men and women who, in many cases, paid for their courage and audacity in the prison camps of the 1930s” (10).

*This book can be accessed in the MHSBC office library and can be borrowed from the Columbia Bible College library.*

The epilogue in John B. Toews’ book is a riveting account by Cornelius Reimer of his arrest, interrogation and incarceration in the Soviet prison system, where by chance he met his friend Peter Franz Froese. Reimer was one of the key leaders of the AMLV. An excerpt follows:

*After many months of solitary confinement in the round tower [of the Butyrka Prison in Moscow] they brought Froese to common cell number 79 in the Butyrka Prison, where, completely unexpectedly, I met him after [my] ten-and-a-half-month incarceration in the “inner prison” of the so-called Lubyanka.*

*I was transferred to the Butyrka Prison to save my life. I was physically and totally exhausted due to a lack of fresh air (I was not allowed outside for ten and a half months) and from the nightly terror scenes. Medical examinations determined I suffered from a severe intestinal*



disorder. I was now actually allowed ten to fifteen-minute walks in the prison yard.

According to GPU regulations prisoners involved in the same process were never allowed to meet. An oversight on the part of the prison administration brought me into cell 79 where P.F. Froese was transferred from the tower of horrors. We both viewed our meeting as God's gracious leading.

We were so thankful and happy to be in the same cell. The other prisoners in our overflowed cell allowed us to sleep next to one another. We were able to quietly converse and pray in the nightly silence, if one might actually call it that. It was a cell from the time of Catherine the Great with sixty bunks. In the Soviet period it held 240 prisoners from every race, segment of society and region of the vast land. They were crowded together awaiting their fate after the interrogator was unable to beat any more [information] out of them. ...

In this cell Froese and I learned to know the positive and negative aspects of all Russia, both in the pre-Soviet and Soviet eras. This from citizens facing death whose character is more sharply delineated during their last weeks and hours. The nobility or baseness of character, faith and unbelief, resignation or despair – all crystallize with special clarity in such a human crowd.

I was delighted by the interest P. Froese had in all these people, how he observed and evaluated them and sought to discover and awaken human dignity in completely degenerate individuals. Some were interested in our outward calmness, which reflected our inner calmness.

One quarter to one third of the inhabitants of this cell were thieves, murderers, bank robbers and one-time Red communists or commissars. Criminals of all sorts, terrorists and peasants opposed to the Soviets – many of these anticipated the death sentence and sought to prepare for it in their own fashion. Both of us often had the opportunity to learn to know these people and be a help to them as they were curious about our tranquillity of soul. It even confused the GPU spies smuggled into the cell.

Most of our fellow sufferers were innocent – former state officials, professors, writers, artists, actors, military and marine personnel, industrial specialists, former workers of foreign relief agencies, farmers, and spiritual leaders of all confessions and nationalities. Those regarded as spies came from the borderlands – Balts, Chinese, Japanese, Indians, Mohammedans, Asiatic and Caucasian partisans, and silent opponents of communism. Many awaited the death sentence calmly and with dignity. One

sensed their quiet resentment against the foreign domination of communism.

Both of us resolved to make mental notes for later use in the event we remained alive and had the opportunity. Clever and cunning GPU spies tried to instigate race hatreds. I marvelled how P.F. Froese, gifted speaker and psychologist that he was, managed to mediate fights and uphold human rights and human dignity. Each day in our cell demanded a special measure of spiritual and mental strength. This was especially true when prisoners became deranged and exploded in anger as a result of the physical and mental abuse they suffered. They caused all prisoners to cower in fear. (408-410)

### Book Launch

## **All-Russian Mennonite Agricultural Union (1923-1927): Minutes, Reports, Correspondence.**

John B. Toews. Co-editor, Paul Toews.  
September 23, 2017

Reported by Robert Martens

About sixty people attended the book launch of John B. Toews' most recent book, a collection of documents originating from the All-Russian Mennonite Agricultural Union.

"A riveting title!" quipped MHSBC chair Richard Thiessen. John B. Toews concurred; it is an indication of interest in Mennonite history, he said, when an "obscure topic" such as this one can attract so many people. Add to that the fact that the book revolves around "a series of complicated events," as Toews put it, and any notion of light reading is quickly dispelled.

Historical outlines were handed out in order to shed some light on the tumultuous times that followed the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. World War I ended for the Russians with the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, and the German military temporarily occupied Ukraine. That time was succeeded by civil war, famine, economic collapse under the new Soviet regime, and the New Economic Policy introduced by Lenin in the hopes of reviving some semblance of order. The All-Russian Mennonite Agricultural Union was one attempt, as Toews expressed it, "of a Mennonite people seeking to survive against incredible odds."

The book, aside from an introduction and epilogue, is a series of translated documents that somehow managed

to outlast the depredations of the Soviet empire. “The past is very fragile,” said Toews, “if you don’t record it, it disappears.” On the other hand, he said, “Mennonites are people who leave a lot of records behind – sometimes I think too much.”

Toews remarked that he had “a troubled relationship with this book”: the microfilm of the documents was sometimes of poor quality; the “regionalized German vocabulary” used by the Union was occasionally difficult to understand; the documents “lack high drama”; and, finally, there was the enormous loss to cancer of John’s friend and colleague, Paul Toews, who co-edited the manuscript.

So why, asked Toews, should you buy this book? First of all, he said, “the spine and cover are actually quite sensual.” And stocking an academic tome such as this one on your bookshelf could be a bragging point!

More seriously, said Toews, the documents point to the actions of people who were putting their lives on the line for the sake of their principles. The documents also uncover what an astounding job American Mennonite Relief (AMR) did in saving lives in 1920s Russia. As many as 38,000 meals were served in a single day, and about fifty Fordson tractors were donated to farmers who had lost their workhorses to death or confiscation. “What the Americans did for our forbears in Russia,” said Toews, “should not be forgotten.” Neither, he argued, should the legacy of Alvin J. Miller, an educated American of Amish origin, who directed AMR, but whose legacy now seems to be neglected because of some shadows in his past. Mennonites, remarked Toews, need to learn to act with a greater sense of grace.

All proceeds from book sales will be donated to the Mennonite Heritage Museum and the Mennonite Historical Society of BC.

\*

John B. Toews’ feelings on marginalized Mennonites are strong enough that he maintains it is time a biography is written on Alvin J. Miller. Toews also speaks highly of another Mennonite who is largely disregarded to this day: Abram A. Friesen.

When Toews published his earlier set of documents, *Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage in Ukraine (1922–1927): Mennonite and Soviet Documents*, he largely relied on records collected and maintained by Abram A. Friesen. Friesen (1885–1948) was born in the Molotschna settlement in South Russia, attended the Halbstadt secondary school, and went on to study at the University of Odessa. For ten years he taught at the Halbstadt *Kom-*

*merzschule* (School of Commerce).

Friesen is better known for his work with the Study Commission, a delegation of four men appointed in 1920 to investigate land opportunities in North America for emigrating Russian Mennonites. Friesen decided against returning to Europe and stayed on in Rosthern, Saskatchewan, where he acted as business manager for the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization from 1922 to 1926. After a board conflict, he resigned. Friesen’s story is, in part, a tragic one. His personal idiosyncrasies and quarrel with board members seem to have overshadowed his accomplishments – his entry in GAMEO (Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online) is brief and lacks detail.

John B. Toews’ fact sheet, distributed at the September 23 book launch, included a short biography of A.A. Friesen. It may go a little way to rectifying the record.

Source for the above

Rempel, John G. “Friesen, Abram A. (1885-1948).” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1956.  
[www.gameo.org](http://www.gameo.org)

## A Note on A.A. Friesen

By John B. Toews

In 1919, delegates attending a hastily called meeting in Rueckenau, Molotschna, elected Abraham A. Friesen as the chairperson of a Study Commission to explore potential settlement sites abroad. By then Ukraine had already endured a lengthy period of war, civil war and anarchy. Friesen and other Commission members left Ukraine on January 1, 1920, travelling by way of Crimea and Constantinople. They visited co-religionists in Germany, Holland and Switzerland, then left for New York, arriving there on June 13, 1920. While fellow Commission member B.H. Unruh soon returned to Germany, Friesen visited Mennonite communities in Canada and the United States, making some nineteen different trips by train and automobile. Always meticulous, he documented every journey. Surviving records indicate he travelled 34,650 miles, not counting a trip to Mexico where he conferred with high government officials regarding possible settlement in Mexico.

It was in the United States that he managed to portray the plight of the Mennonites in Russia to a geographically scattered audience. In this process, he had to unravel the enormous complexity of the American Mennonite scene, both in terms of its many different groups as well as seeking to identify helpful organizations and persons.

Some of these groups met with him in Newton, Kansas, on July 14, 1920. Friesen, thanks to his proficiency in both English and German, significantly influenced the dialogue at the meeting of all-Mennonite relief committees meeting in Elkhart, Indiana, on July 27, 1920. On that day, the formation of the Mennonite Central Commission addressed one of the Russian Mennonite Study Commission's major concerns – material aid for the devastated and starving Mennonite settlements in Russia. The other agenda, possible settlement sites for Mennonites fleeing Russia, was more difficult to address.

Eventually he was hired by the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization and became their key contact person in regard to Russian Mennonite leaders and the emigration issues they faced. Unfortunately, in the heat of the moment of a CMBC office dispute, he resigned. Later, when he regained his equilibrium, he asked to be reinstated, but Board members refused. He then got a job as manager of a lumber yard in Rabbit Lake, Saskatchewan. He died of a heart attack and is buried in the Rabbit Lake cemetery.

## Book Launch

# *Berry Flats*

Helen Rose Pauls, September 9, 2017

Reported by Robert Martens

*Think of these stories as layers of berry flats stacked in the shed: a little bit juicy and a little bit sweet, with a tart aftertaste, and a burst of recognition.* (Pauls 7)

A large crowd squeezed into the Mennonite Heritage Museum to celebrate the launch of Helen Rose Pauls' most recent publication, a collection of short stories entitled *Berry Flats*. The steady rain was not a deterrent; in fact, it was likely welcome after a summer in which the smoke of forest fires frequently obscured the blue of the Fraser Valley sky.

"Welcome to Berry Flats," Pauls began, and then quoted American novelist Thomas Wolfe: "You can't go home again." But in this book of sixteen stories, she said, "I try."

We often feel a nostalgia for our home communities, for the places in which we grew up, said Pauls. This is not always realistic, she added; Mennonite villages have sometimes been oppressive to the point that they "turned

off young people." Pauls said that this was not true of her own experience, that she always felt loved in the Mennonite settlement called Arnold. "When Arnold people meet," she said, "they hug." Pauls' mythical village of Berry Flats is, of course, a stand-in for Arnold, viewed through a veil of nostalgia.

Helen Pauls began her readings with the preface from *Berry Flats*, which asks the question: "How do you create a Mennonite village in British Columbia?" The answers given in the preface are poignant: hard work, depression-weary families, cooperation, the church at the centre, plentiful children, a culture of semi-isolation – and then comes assimilation to end it all, as the succeeding generations move away.

The memories remain. Pauls read three stories from her collection, often drawing a number of belly laughs from her audience. Her sharp sense of comedy is pervasive in her stories. The first story she read (and the first in the book), "What's in a Name?" is a slightly ridiculous yet oddly credible yarn on the naming of a new



# Berry Flats

By Helen Rose Pauls

Mennonite community. Pauls' second reading, though, "Baby Row," might have elicited more tearful smiles than chuckles. Her writing often conveys, simultaneously, the contraries of humour and pathos.

Helen Pauls ended her presentation by referring to her previous book, *Refugee*, which is the memoir of her mother-in-law. *Berry Flats*, she said, is purely a piece of fiction. Still, she said, "Characters came to me fully clothed and talking to each other."

## Book Launch

### ***Under Siberian Skies***

David Funk. October 14, 2017

Reported by Robert Martens

The story of the Mennonite flight from the settlement of Shumanovka is pure truth, and yet it defies the imagination. After the Bolshevik Revolution, thousands of Mennonites accepted the Soviet offer to settle the largely undeveloped lands along the Amur River which marks the border between Russia and China. Most of the settlers came here from Siberia, and were hoping that the isolation of the area would protect them from the long reach of the state. They had barely established their villages, however, when Stalin's brutal henchmen reappeared and forced collectivization on them.

A leader of the collective, Jakob Siemens, was instrumental in secretly working out a plan of escape. On the night of December 16, 1930, with temperatures plunging to 50 degrees below zero, nearly the entire village of Shumanovka, 217 persons in all, crossed the iced-over Amur River. The flight was successful. By February, with the aid of Chinese guides, the migrants reached the international city of Harbin and eventually found freedom in South America and the United States.

Fraser Valley writer and artist David Funk has written a historical novel based on this incident. On 14 October 2017, at the Mennonite Heritage Museum, he presented his new novel, *Under Siberian Skies*, third in his trilogy of stories on Siberian Mennonites (*On the Banks of the Irtys River* and *The Last Train to Leningrad* are the first two). The book launch was attended by about seventy people.

Since his parents are of Siberian origin, said Funk, that particular history is both captivating and important to him. A number of Mennonite novels have delved into the Ukrainian/South Russian experience – such as Al

Reimer's *My Harp Is Turned to Mourning* – but the Siberian story has made only rare appearances in Mennonite literature. Since numerous Westerners resided in the Siberian city of Omsk near the beginning of the twentieth century, research material, said Funk, is relatively easy to come by. The foreigners left Omsk and took their stories home with them.

Funk's first two novels, he said, were based on family experiences, but for his third, "I wanted to write a book that had nothing to do with family." He was also drawn by the stories of refugees; the novel begins with a citation by writer Warsan Shire: "No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark." We need to tell the stories of ancestral refugees, said Funk, so "we can get to know who they are but also to understand ourselves."

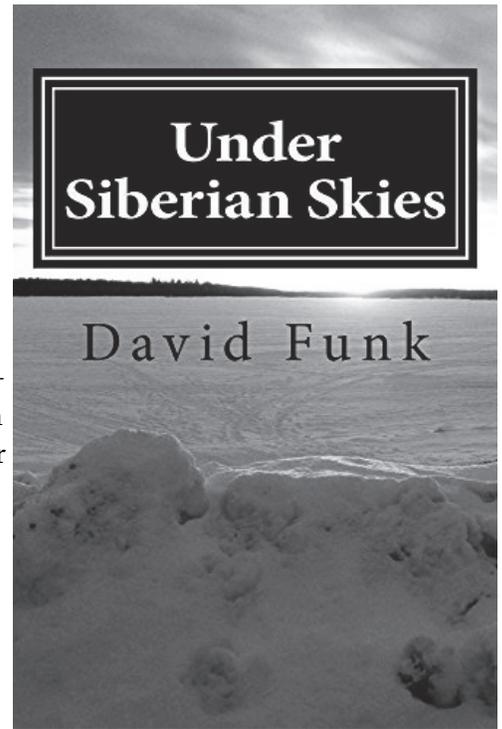
Funk went on to describe the writing process, which he called exhausting. Meticulous research, of course, comes first. Then he arrives at a series of events which he wants to describe; they are fixed, but the characters he creates to inhabit those events don't necessarily do what he first intended.

David Funk grew up on an Abbotsford farm and has been a teacher for most of his career. He also achieved an M.Div. at seminary. After retirement, he found he suddenly had time to write. His stories, he acknowledged, are often based on experiences of violence and dislocation that can be deeply traumatic. "How do you understand evil?" asked Funk. "How do you live out Jesus' command to forgive?"

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# Roots and Branches

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## Book Launch

### *The Quiet in the Land*

Richard Toews. November 30, 2017

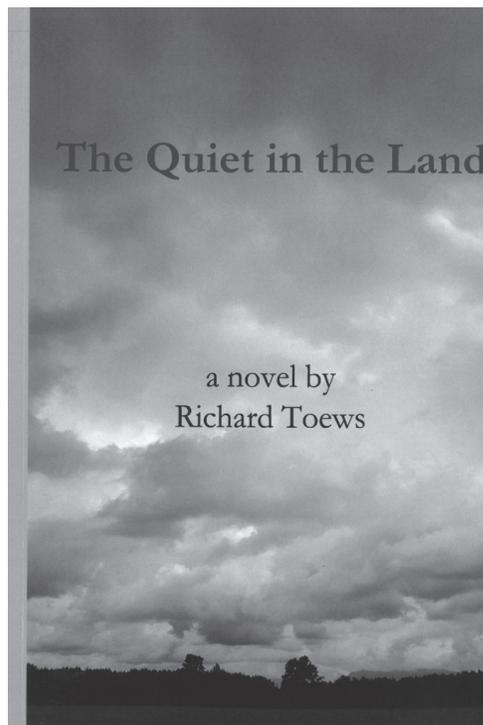
Reported by Robert Martens

On another wet BC evening, Richard Toews presented his novel, *The Quiet in the Land*, to about 45 attendees at the Mennonite Heritage Museum. Toews began the event by explaining how his book came to be. Simple curiosity was a factor: even in childhood, said Toews, he would ask his parents questions until his father responded, “Enough already!”

But why tell a story rather than write a history? Characters in a novel, remarked Toews, exist in a different reality than the rest of us, but “they are not figments of the imagination.” In a sense, they are as real as you or I. Their function is to “speak truth to power”; they constitute a “cloud of witnesses” whose language is that of mystery, a language that shows us how to live.

*The Quiet in the Land* tells the story of a Mennonite who lives through the violent era of the Bolshevik Revolution and chooses to join that revolution. We live in a world of powerful institutions, said Toews, and must ask the questions: What do those institutions do to those on the fringe who are considered “dangerous?” What is the role of the church in a world where abusive power holds sway? Many Mennonites in Russia, Toews contended, treated their ethnic Russian workers as though they were cattle. Given the abuses, he said, it is plausible that a young Mennonite might choose to join the revolution.

After reading from his book, Toews spoke about his own story with respect to the novel. A conversation with an aunt revealed that an ancestral relation of his had been a Russian revolutionary – very much like Johann, the main character in the novel. “I am the great-nephew of a Bolshevik,” he said. It was a jarring revelation that affirmed, for him, where his imagination had led him in writing *The Quiet in the Land*.





*Avanti IV, 2006, acrylic, by Hilda Goertzen*  
Courtesy of Peter Goertzen