



# Roots and Branches

Periodical of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC

*“What we have heard and known  
we will tell the next generation.”*  
Psalm 78



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# Editorial

By Maryann Tjart Jantzen

It's June, the gateway to summer: that time of warm, relaxing days that invite a change of pace—but perhaps also a time when we are reluctant to think of unpleasant aspects of the past. But history marches on, no matter the time of year.

It's been over seventy years since the post-war evacuation and overland movement of Mennonites from Ukraine to Germany, as they sought to escape the incursion of the Soviet military. This momentous period is rightfully memorialized with celebration for those who escaped to the West and sadness for those who were sent back to the Soviet Union after its forces invaded Germany. However, historians have also been increasingly examining the complex dynamics occurring prior to the evacuation when many Mennonites in Ukraine welcomed the German army as deliverers freeing them from Soviet oppression.

Our feature articles in this issue examine early 20<sup>th</sup> century Mennonite responses to National Socialism from

a variety of angles, from both within the beleaguered Ukrainian Mennonite settlements and from the safety of Canada. From our contemporary perspective, it is easy to see that Mennonite support for the German invasion of Ukraine—and indeed for the ascent to power of Hitler in Germany—were not historically wise decisions, given the horrors perpetuated by Nazi Germany. However, it is also clear that those living in the tumult of the moment and struggling to survive did not have the advantage of our retrospective perspective. Thus, we should not be surprised to read of pro-German sentiments from those who experienced Soviet oppression and welcomed German intervention—or of those who joined Hitler's military, either voluntarily or through coercion. Or even of those who actively participated in Nazi death squads.

It is important that we acknowledge the complexities of the situation, even as we abhor the actions of Mennonites who embraced Nazi ideology. At the same time, we can learn from the past to be wary of seductive political movements that pit one ethnic or religious group against another, or that draw us into a destructive nationalism, regardless of the circumstances, lest we also be judged as wanting by historical consensus in the future.

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## Film Event, May 6, 2018

Reviewed by Helen Rose Pauls

*Seven Points on Earth*, a film by Ode Productions, together with The Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies, was produced by Royden Loewen and directed by Paul Plett. The British Columbia premiere of this documentary about Mennonite farmers around the world took place May 6 at Matsqui Centennial Auditorium in Abbotsford.

Farming is at the core of survival. Mennonites, many of whom have long been involved in agriculture, live all over the globe; in fact, a total of two million Mennonites live in 87 countries. This film features seven farming communities located in Zimbabwe, Siberia, Netherlands, Manitoba, Iowa, Bolivia, and Java; in these communities, farming methods vary from horse-and-buggy to high technology. The film explores how these entirely different farm communities respond to issues such as the environment, climate change, food security, government, culture and religion. It addresses issues such as how being Mennonite influences interaction with the earth. How do simplicity, community and non-violence apply?

In the film, centuries of farm skills are brought to the

fore. Most of the farms depicted have been in the families for generations. Varied farm products featured in the film include milk, ground nuts, honey, pork, eggs, chicken, wheat, and oranges. A common message seems evident: all the farmers believe they are fortunate to farm and feel privileged to know where food comes from.

*The film is available for screening upon request at the Mennonite Heritage Museum.*

### Upcoming Events

#### MHSBC Fall Fundraiser

Sunday, September 23 at 2:30pm

Speaker: Royden Loewen. Topic is to be determined. See our website for upcoming information.

Refreshments to follow in the church gym.

King Road MB Church, Abbotsford, BC

#### MCC Relief Sale

Friday, September 14 and Saturday, September 15

MHSBC will again have a booth. Volunteers will be available to help visitors research family genealogies.

Tradex, Abbotsford, BC



## Book Launch

### *Flight: Mennonites facing the Soviet empire in 1929/30, from the pages of the Mennonitische Rundschau*

Winnipeg: Eden Echoes Publishing, 2018. 720 pp.

Reported by Maryann Tjart Jantzen

On May 2, 2018, Harold and Naomi Jantz gave a presentation at the Mennonite Heritage Museum featuring a recently published collection of translated material from the 1929-1930 issues of the *Mennonitische Rundschau*. The more than 700-page tome grew out of Jantz's desire to know more about this period of time so crucial to the Russian Mennonite experience.

By 1929, Stalin had consolidated his power and begun to implement his first five-year plan, with its focus on industrialism, collectivization, and confiscation of private property, resulting in harsh realities for those the Soviets deemed *kulaks* as their property was confiscated, their appeals to emigrate denied (out of an estimated 15-20,000 "German Russians" who gathered in Moscow in 1929 seeking permission to leave, fewer than 6000, including 3885 Mennonites, were able to leave) and many exiled to far-flung regions.

Jantz, a former long-time editor of the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, stated that during 1929-30 very few if any newspapers covered more ground related to what was going on in Russia than the weekly *Mennonitische Rundschau*, which by 1929 was being published in Winnipeg and was becoming increasingly known as the paper of the Russian Mennonites. During this time, the newspaper frequently featured articles on the dire situation of Russian Mennonites still living in the USSR; letters, often with requests for help from those left behind in the Soviet Union; and requests for information about missing or displaced relatives, etc. Taken as a whole, the material provides a vital panoramic view of the political, economic and cultur-

al context in which Russian Mennonites were caught up during this time period.

Wanting to make this material more accessible to a non-German speaking audience, Jantz spent years painstakingly translating and sometimes summarizing the material from the original German into English. He is to be commended for ensuring this legacy from a troubled past will not be forgotten.

## Book Report on *Flight*

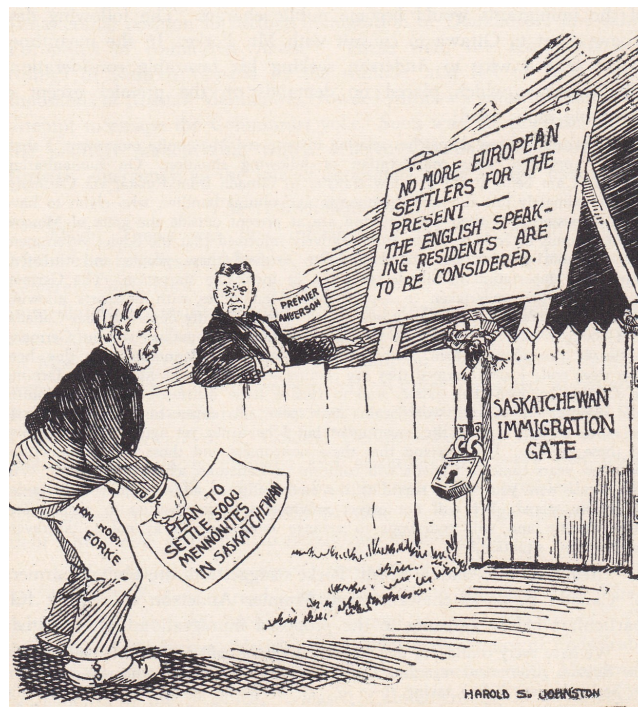
Reviewed by Robert Martens

In his introduction, Harold Jantz outlines the events of 1929 through 1930, a time when emigration first became difficult for Russian Mennonites, and then, impossible. There was Canadian resistance to Mennonite newcomers, especially in Saskatchewan. Germany, on the other hand, was extremely helpful to these refugees.

The book contains reports, letters, scholarly articles by German nationals and Mennonite intellectuals such as B.H. Unruh, lists, appeals, and documents. A translated document that stands out is a pamphlet produced by the Soviets' League of the Militant Godless. Jantz has translated some articles and summarized others. The result is a massive book with a forty-page index.

Jantz's book begins and ends with heart-wrenching quotations. On the title page is an expression of gratitude from the refugees of Moelln, Hammerstein, and Prenzlau: "What you have done for the least of these my brethren, you have done unto me. Matt. 25. He will reward it; this is our prayer and belief."

And on the closing pages, a citation from a speech by refugee Peter Klassen at the camp in Moelln declares, "Forget everything you once owned; what you earlier hoped and planned to do. Forget too the awful things people did to you. Forget! you must forget! So you might become free both now and for the future. If you can't forget, you are lost" (676).



7. Editorial page cartoon in the "Toronto Mail and Empire," November 27, 1929.

Image: Frank Epp: *Mennonite Exodus*, p. 246

# 150 for 150 at the MHSBC: Volunteer Recognitions

By Jennifer Martens

On International Volunteer Day, December 5, 2016, the *Volunteer Canada* and *Volunteer Ottawa* organizations, along with other volunteer centres across Canada, launched the “Canada 150 for 150 Volunteer Challenge.” This was a nationwide campaign to encourage Canadians to give 150 hours of volunteer service time in 2017 to celebrate Canada’s 150th anniversary (learn more about this challenge by searching #Volunteer150for150 on social media).

Volunteers at the Mennonite Historical Society of BC logged their hours to participate in this national challenge. Ella Born meticulously recorded and tracked each person’s hours. At the volunteer appreciation luncheon this past April, volunteers who worked 150 or more hours for the Historical Society in 2017 were recognized. Those with the most hours received a recognition certificate and a “Canada 150” logo mug or money bin as a small token of appreciation. Two volunteers were recognized as “First to Reach 150”: long-time MHSBC volunteers Robert Martens and Arlene Peters.

Those with 150 or more logged volunteer hours received a Canada pin along with a certificate, courtesy of the City of Abbotsford. By the end of 2017, 27 volunteers had achieved over 150 hours of service for the society: Irene Adkin (171), Hildegard Baerg (217), Dora Becker (259), Erna Block (193), Marie Doerksen (176), Joan Enns (239), Don Fehr (382), Waltrude Gortzen (312), Dolores Harder (381), Cheryl Isaac (258), Hilda Klassen (168), Linda Klassen (429), Agnes Loewen (193), Robert Martens (455), Sandi Massie (168), Helen Nickel (241), Elma Pauls (282), Wilf Penner (283), Arlene Peters (689), Vern Peters (389), Peter Rahn (270), Helga Rempel (170), Irmgard Thiessen (298), Julia Toews (307), Laura Unger (403), Dolores Wall (178), and Pat Wood (297). These totals reveal a remarkable record of volunteer service and



Top Awards: Robert Martens, Julia Toews, Pat Wood, Linda Klassen, Laura Unger. (Not pictured: Don Fehr and Dolores Harder.) Photo Credit: Carrie Hiscock of Carrie’s Camera

illustrate the spirit of volunteerism that is alive at the Historical Society.

Each spring volunteers receive an invitation to a special appreciation luncheon in recognition of their valuable contribution to the MHSBC. This year’s theme was “Beauty Blooms Where You Are.” The following volunteers were recognized with a gift card for years of service: Sally Dueck (5 years); Don Fehr, Dora Becker, John Friesen, Irma Giesbrecht, Arnold Klassen, Agnes Loewen, and Robert Martens (10 years); Marie Doerksen (15 years); and Louise Bergen Price (20 years). The gifts were sponsored by Blue Continent Transportation Ltd. Countless people have benefited immeasurably from the quality, care, expertise and faithfulness of our volunteers. The Society could not carry on without the passion and dedication of the 65 on-site and off-site volunteers who serve with the support of the MHSBC board, memberships and donors.

Learn more about volunteering for the Historical Society or about sponsoring this and other events by visiting the website [www.mhsbc.org](http://www.mhsbc.org), calling 604-853-6177, or emailing [archives@mhsbc.com](mailto:archives@mhsbc.com). We have many volunteer positions and sponsorship opportunities open. Help ensure that the MHSBC continues for future generations by asking about our Legacy programs. We would love to hear from you!



# Mennonites and German Nationalism

By Gerhard Rempel

Translated by Robert Martens

The German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, signed in August 1939, not only surprised Russian Mennonites but also touched them directly. Like some others, *Oberschulze* [mayor] Hans Epp of Chortitza was released from prison, returned home, and then played a key role in the area around Zaporozhe. Despite some treacherous dealings, the calm that resulted from the Pact interrupted hostilities between the two totalitarian regimes and muted the shriek of propaganda. This allowed the resumption of contacts with relatives abroad and restored hope for better times. Secretly, however, deportations to the Gulag continued, and *Volksdeutschen* (ethnic Germans), especially their prominent leaders, remained under surveillance by the secret service. Hitler had meanwhile attacked Poland and other countries in the West; war could now break out in Europe without Russia so much as lifting a finger. On the contrary, Russia and Germany even exchanged some ethnic groups in occupied Poland. With this began the racially based *Ostraumpolitik* (Eastern Policy) that brought death to so many. This policy aimed at annihilating Jews and other “useless” races and promoted ethnic Germans as new pioneers in the East as far as the Ural Mountains.

With Hitler’s drive to the East, two men took on new roles in the arena of Reich politics: Heinrich Himmler became the Reich commissar for the consolidation of German peoples (*Festigung Deutschen Volkstums*), and Alfred Rosenberg, minister of the Reich Ministry for occupied lands in the East. Himself a *Volksdeutsche* (Germans in terms of people or race, regardless of citizenship), Rosenberg was attracted to *Volksdeutschen*, especially Mennonites; while Himmler was eager to use them for his own political and genocidal goals. Soon after the attack on Russia in June

1941, Himmler and Rosenberg took three courses of action in order to reach Soviet Germans: the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle - Sonderkommando Russland* (ethnic German centre - special command Russia); the *Sonderkommando Stumpp* (special command Stumpp); and the *Einsatzkommando 6* (operational command) belonging to *Einsatzgruppe C* (task force). Operational Command 6 recruited twenty young Mennonite volunteers from the villages of Chortitza to assist the security services. They, together with other Ukrainian and Russian volunteers, participated in the so-called “massacre of Zaporozhe” in a gravel pit south of the former village of Schoenwiese in October 1941. This was the first instance in which Mennonites were actively involved in the Holocaust. *SS Hauptsturmführer* (head storm trooper) Heinrich Wiens, a Mennonite from Muntau in Molotschna, took command of *Einsatzkommando 12* and carried out several massacres in the area of Pyatigorsk in the Caucasus, most notably the notorious slaughter in the glass factory near Mineralye Vody.

The Waffen SS, founded by Himmler in 1940, developed into an effective elite fighting force that was joined by many ethnic German volunteers, including young Mennonites who had given up their traditional adherence to nonresistance. Ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutschen*) were represented in nearly every facet of the [National Socialist] Party. For example, the *Hitlerjugend*, both young men and women, marched through the streets of Chortitza and Halbstadt, accompanied by numerous photographers who enthusiastically documented the procession. With these newly uniformed people whirling through Mennonite villages with their proud Hitler salutes, the impression

might have been given that these clean settlements had been transformed into a small mirror image of the Third Reich on the Dniepr River. This impression was corroborated by Rosenberg’s lightning visit to Chortitza and Himmler’s spectacular stay in Halbstadt in 1942.

The *Sonderkommando Russland* (SkR), usually with the prefix VoMi attached (*Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* or ethnic German centre), was a large and important SS subdivision that had emerged in 1930 from a complex of earlier competing organizations such as the *Volksbund*



Horst Hoffmeyer, who would commit suicide in 1944 to evade Soviet imprisonment. Photo: Gerlach: *Die Russlandmennoniten*, p. 88.

*für das Deutschtum im Ausland* (People's Federation for German Peoples Abroad). Himmler officially appointed one of his best commanders, Horst Hoffmeyer, as head of the SkR, ostensibly under the command of senior SS and police officers who were based in Kiev. Hoffmeyer, however, was quite independent of the SS henchmen and generally communicated with Himmler directly. He established his headquarters near Odessa and began, with a small troop of hand-picked men, to assemble, register, and protect ethnic Germans within an area to be known as Transnistria. The mandate Himmler gave him was comprehensive. The SkR provided social services, offered clothing and protection, built and occupied schools with teachers, but also organized military units under the command of the SS in order to defend these ethnic German enclaves. Since the task forces (*Einsatzgruppen*) pursued a single task – to find and kill Jews – Hoffmeyer refused in one case to pursue such a “dirty business” that was surely not part of his mandate. He flew to Berlin to clarify the situation but was told to follow orders. Thus began the involvement of the SkR in the genocide in cases where Jewish refugees were found and there was no task force to take care of it. The military units consisting of ethnic Germans were gradually integrated into the *Sicherheitsdienst*, or SD (security services), and into the assistant police force, and were occasionally recruited to continue the bloody work of the Holocaust in other regions such as the Mennonite settlements of Halbstadt and Chortitza, where the VoMi/SkR in fact maintained their offices. Towards the end of the German occupation, Hoffmeyer's *Sonderkommando* was used to protect ethnic Germans, including Mennonites, during their evacuation to the Warthegau in Poland.

Meanwhile, Hermann Rossner, the VoMi/SkR leader in Halbstadt, played a significant role in recruiting Mennonite volunteers for special rider squadrons (*Reiterschwadron*) that became an important component of the Waffen SS Division “Florian Geyer.” [Florian Geyer was a nobleman who led the “Black Company,” a group of peasants, against the aristocracy during the Peasants’ War 1524-5.] This occurred immediately after the notorious visits

of Himmler and Rosenberg to the region. Other high-ranking Party members also paid special attention to the Mennonites. Even Hitler was secretly flown into Zaporozhe in order to shore up the defence of the Wehrmacht against Soviet troops stationed a few dozen kilometres away. This supposed secret did not escape the rumour mill in Mennonite villages, as the diaries of Anna Sudermann [a Mennonite teacher] point out.

The *Sonderkommando Stumpp* also took up the task of conveying National Socialist ideology to ethnic Germans. Stumpp was likely the most prolific researcher and chronicler of Russian Germans. He was born in Alexanderhilf near Odessa but spent most of his professional life in Germany. Rosenberg's Ministry of the East commissioned him to create a cadastre-like overview of all occupied ethnic German villages after the invasion. [A cadastre is a comprehensive register of the real estate or real property's metes-and-bounds of a country



Rosenberg at Nuremberg. He was hanged for war crimes on 16 October 1946. Source: *Wikicommons* photo

(*Wikipedia*).] He set up headquarters in Dnepropetrovsk and immediately entrusted two Mennonites to this task in sixty villages around the Mennonite settlements of Chortitza and Halbstadt. Each village selected local teachers or officials to engage in research and, on the basis of surveys, to write the story of their community. The resulting databank provides a glimpse into the impact of Stalinist “dekulakization” and politics of deportation, as well as into the workings of the Holocaust in each village. Other demographic records divided individuals on the so-called German People’s List (*Deutsche Volksliste*) according to the specifications of National Socialist race theory and determined their worth to the

Third Reich. On this basis, most ethnic Germans were issued “VD Passports” (*Volksdeutsch*), except for those who had married Jews or Russians or were otherwise considered unreliable. Stumpp’s organization decided on life or death. Persons in Category 4 of the People’s List were designated for annihilation by Himmler’s task forces (*Einsatzgruppen*) or by their Ukrainian and ethnic German accomplices.

#### Sources

Rempel, Gerhard. “Nationalsozialistische Aktivitäten in mennonitischem Gebiet.” n.d. *Mennonitisches Lexicon*(*MennLex*). [www.mennlex.de](http://www.mennlex.de)

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#### Press Release

U Winnipeg Russian Mennonite Fellowship to crack open KGB archives, 26 February 2018

In the 1930s, thousands of Mennonites disappeared in the Soviet Union without a trace. The KGB archives in Ukraine has thousands of files on these missing Mennonites and a newly announced U Winnipeg Fellowship wants to crack into these archives to uncover the stories of lost relatives, ancestors and more.

Through the Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg the newly created Paul Toews Fellowship in Russian Mennonite History will help mine these archives.

Recent postdoctoral fellow at the Centre Dr. Aileen Friesen has undertaken extensive archival research in Russia, and notes there is an urgency to access these KGB files: “these records are now fully open, but they stand the chance of being closed once again should the political situation in Ukraine change.” The Paul Toews Fellowship will fund researchers in recording, translating and archiving these KGB materials in the Mennonite Heritage Archives in Winnipeg.

The Fellowship will also support other research programs. These include conferences, graduate and postdoctoral fellowships on Russian Mennonite history, funds for visiting scholarships, and other archival research in both Ukraine and Russia.

#### Press Release

From Jon Isaak, executive secretary, Mennonite Brethren Historical Commission

The MB Historical Commission announces the award of two archival grants: the 2017 infrastructure grant and the 2018 summer internship.

1. Mama Makeka House of Hope was awarded a \$2,000 archival infrastructure grant in December 2017 to outfit the newly-constructed library/archives room at the Mazala Center for Professional Resourcing in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo. The Mazala Center is a resource hub, promoting education, peacebuilding, health care, and research, particularly in Congo, the Great Lake Region of Africa. The infrastructure grant will provide the tools needed to preserve, describe, and make accessible the historical records relating to the development of Congolese Mennonite churches.

2. Emma Sorenson is the summer archival intern for 2018. She will spend a total of five weeks visiting each of the MB archival centres in North America (Fresno, Hillsboro, Winnipeg, and Abbotsford) during the months of May and June 2018. Emma’s focus interests are Mennonite relief & development initiatives and migration patterns – the theological promptings that shaped them initially, the ways they have changed over time, and the prospects for shaping Mennonite communities of faith today. A third-year history student at Fresno Pacific University, Emma attends the Rosedale Bible Church, an MB church in Bakersfield, California.



# Mennonites and the Holocaust

An Excerpt from Gerhard Rempel's Article in *The Mennonite*

What might have motivated the genocidal deeds of Mennonites such as Jack Reimer, Heinrich Wiens and other less-well-known cohorts, such as the dozen or more volunteers who, according to Alexander Rempel, joined as SD auxiliaries in the massacre of Zaporozhia? The Lutherans from Katharinendorf appear to have joined the killer group out of sheer idleness and boredom. Others probably found attractive the idea of exercising power – in uniform and with a gun – over their perceived enemies.

Mennonites who had survived the Stalinist purges were strongly inclined to admire Hitler, the anti-Stalin, and were often willing to join any Nazi organization as a kind of reflexive, passionate action. Much the same motivation was undoubtedly behind the comparatively large number of Mennonite volunteers for the *Waffen-SS* and *Wehrmacht* as well as behind their participation in various police forces.

Many Mennonite survivors of the Stalinist terror and anti-kulak and deportation campaigns expressed virulent hatred for both Jews and Communists as equivalent evils. Mennonites generally resented, envied and despised Jews because so many of them seem to have been found in the ranks of the Soviet secret police and the Communist party cadre as well as among the supervisors and managers of collective farms and local government agencies. Anna Sudermann, for example, reported that she encountered them all too frequently in the judicial system, in the role of interrogating judges and state attorneys and police chiefs.

Hence, it was easy to regard Jews as part of the Soviet class enemy on whom raw revenge could now be exacted under the guise of official “police” work, since few Mennonites were probably keen enough to distinguish between normal policing and outright murder committed under the auspices of the *Einsatzkommando*. But how they ultimately justified their actions of murder against innocent civilians, women and children among them, is a

dark mystery that cries out for a deeper explanation.

If Jack Reimer became a perpetrator in the Holocaust in order to survive, Heinrich Wiens did it to advance his lifetime career in the SS.

What are we to make of the Mennonite mayors of Zaporozhia and Novo Zaporozhia, as well as Chortitza or Osterwick, all of them appointed by the *Wehrmacht*, who were in power when the massacre at Zaporozhia took place? They stand at the top of hundreds of Mennonites who joined the German Army or worked for a host of German-Nazi agencies. They could not deny they were at least witnesses to or observers of the Holocaust. But how much responsibility or guilt should they have to assume?

In 1942, the mayor of Osterwick, my hometown, re-



Hans Epp, Mennonite mayor of Chortitza 1941-1943

Source: Gerlach: *Die Russlandmennoniten*, p. 83.

ported to German authorities a fellow townsman who happened to be a Jew married to a Mennonite woman. This Jew, who had spent his whole life with Mennonites and even spoke *Plautdietsch*, was arrested and killed. For a few months my own family lived in the house of this family. It was known as the *Judenhaus*. Recalling that experience fills me with the same ominous feeling Anna Sudermann expressed when she discovered that the free clothing she received from the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* distribution center came from the Jews killed at Babi Yar in Kiev.

How much guilt and condemnation are shared by those Mennonites who witnessed and observed or benefited from the Holocaust in their midst?

Source (extract)

Rempel, Gerhard. “Mennonites and the Holocaust.” *The Mennonite*. 2012. [themennonite.org](http://themennonite.org)

Gerhard Rempel was born on August 10, 1934, in the village of Osterwick, Ukraine, to Gerhard Rempel and Helene Wiens Rempel. He passed away on March 30, 2014, in West Palm Beach, Florida. His parents and infant brothers, Hans and Victor, preceded him in death...

The village of Gerhard's birth was part of a farming colony on the Dnieper River settled in the nineteenth century by German Mennonite immigrants. He and his family became displaced refugees during World War II. The family was separated in 1945 when Gerhard's father

was drafted into the German army and he, his mother and sister, along with thousands of other displaced persons, fled to the West. In 1949, the family immigrated to the United States, arriving in Boston Harbor on April 24. They settled in Hillsboro, Kansas, a small farming community that had been founded by German Mennonites in the late nineteenth century.

Gerhard received his Ph.D. in German history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He taught European history for 30 years at Western New England University in Springfield, Massachusetts, where he served as chairman of the History Department and Director of the Comparative Cultures Program. Gary and Ann lived and

raised their children in the neighboring community of Longmeadow. He retired as Professor Emeritus with Ann to Jupiter, Florida, in 1999, and enjoyed a happy retirement in the sun.

During his later years he continued to research, write, and publish scholarly work about World War II and the history of Mennonites in Europe.

Source

"Obituary for Gerhard Rempel." *ObitTree*. 2014.

[www.obittree.com](http://www.obittree.com)

**Frank Henry Epp. *An Analysis of Germanism and National Socialism in the Immigrant Newspaper of a Canadian Minority Group, the Mennonites, in the 1930s.***

Doctoral thesis for the University of Manitoba, 1965.

Thesis reviewed by Robert Martens

Although he died at a young age in 1986, Frank H. Epp was already widely known in the Mennonite community as historian, teacher, editor, administrator, and pastor. He had published the first two volumes of the definitive history, *Mennonites in Canada*, and was midway through the third when he passed away.<sup>1</sup> Epp also served as president of Conrad Grebel College, board member of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in Canada, and editor of both *The Canadian Mennonite* and the *Mennonite Reporter*. Yet his doctoral dissertation was never published. Perhaps its subject matter was too controversial for the time: the paper argued that Mennonite newspapers of the 1930s frequently supported a "Germanism" that was sometimes biased towards a positive evaluation of the Third Reich. Today, the original copy of Epp's Ph.D. thesis is contained in the archives of the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario, but reprints are available in some libraries and the thesis in its entirety can be accessed online. In light of the current re-examination of the role of German Mennonites in Hitler's regime, Epp's ideas are well worth considering. Furthermore, Epp writes beautifully – the prose here is not dry academia.

In his thesis, Epp confined his focus to issues of *Der Bote* (*The Messenger*) published in the 1930s. He chose to study this Mennonite newspaper over *Die Mennonit-*

*ische Rundschau* (*The Mennonite Overview*) and *Die Steinbach Post* for four reasons: superior journalism; proximity to the German experience (its Russian Mennonite refugee readers felt they owed a great deal to Germany); a wide range of content; and editorial independence (no funding from the church). Epp's idea was to measure by the inch the amount of "Germanist" con-



Benjamin H. Unruh. Source: GAMEO

tent in the newspaper during the decade when pro-German feeling reached its peak.

*Der Bote* was started in 1923 in Rosthern, Saskatchewan, by Dietrich Epp, who remained its editor for several decades. The paper was primarily intended as a communications forum for Russian Mennonite immigrants. Dietrich Epp, born in Russia – where he taught for a time – was a respected spokesperson among Mennonites. He bore personal responsibility for the financial burdens of his newspaper, and clearly cared deeply for his work (the paper only received church support many years later). *Der Bote* contained a great variety of material: devotionals, poetry, storytelling, news, and particularly opinion pieces. The latter were subsumed under the heading, *Aus den Gemeinden für die Gemeinden* (from the churches for the churches). It was here that Frank Epp found the majority of pro-Germanist material.

Epp broke down Germanist material into three basic categories: cultural, racial, and political. In the cultural category, various writers emphasized the importance of German as *die Muttersprache*, the mother tongue; extolled German literature and idealized Goethe; and reported on significant events such as “German days.” For example, “We German Mennonites are a religious society. Through the German language a significant stream of religious thought flows through our churches. This stream enriches the life of our families and churches. With the neglect of the German language this stream will cease and our church life will dry up” (D.P. Esau qtd in Epp 86).<sup>2</sup>

In the racial Germanist category, it was variously argued that biology is ordained by God; that blood is permanent but that belief is transitory; that mixed marriage is of the devil; and that Mennonites are not of Dutch ancestry but are part of the Germanic race. Articles on “racialism” were heavily favourable to cultural and racial Germanist arguments, although there were dissenters.

Opinion pieces in the political category were by far the most prevalent, but here it must be remarked that about thirty percent were unfavourable to the politics of

the German Reich. On the favourable side, writers expressed their euphoria over the revival of the German nation; contended that only Germany could save Europe from Communism; pointed out that Hitler was a Christian; asserted that Jews had been behind the rise of Communism; and insisted on a *Tatchristentum*, a practical Christianity that is not afraid of involvement in politics. Among writers favourable to political Germanism were some respected leaders: for example, C.F. Klassen wrote,

“We don’t consider German people to be angels ... but in spite of this we thank God that at last a man has been found who consolidated the national idea, who had courage to clean up the social democratic rotteness, the Communist insanity, and many Jewish machinations....” (qtd in 126). Even David Toews, reporting on the Mennonite World Conference held in Amsterdam in 1936, wrote, “I have been impressed with the general popular approval given to Hitler in Germany. I have met none who were opposed to the chancellor” (qtd in 259).<sup>3</sup>

Many voices were unfavourable to political Germanism, of course, or ambivalent on the topic – during the 1930s, Russian Mennonite immigrants were engaged in a prolonged debate on assimilation to Canadian culture and the issues were difficult ones for an often-traumatized refugee group. Some of those opposed to political Germanism argued that blood ties are not as important as faith; others, that Mennonites should abstain from politics and that God’s kingdom is not of this world. One writer contended that the German nation is far too bellicose and that Jews attained their standard of living not through some mysterious conspiracy but because of their talent. Mennonite leader B.B. Janz in particular argued long and loud that Mennonites should be apolitical, and that when they had entered the political realm – such as the self-defence squads in the Ukraine – the results had been disastrous. “Let us not make the mistake,” he wrote, “of nurturing to maturity a German beer patriotism and remaining strangers in our own country. Let us make Canada our real homeland” (qtd in 159).

The two strongest voices favourable to political Ger-



Frank Epp. 1929-1986. Photo: GAMEO



manism were living in Germany itself. B.H. Unruh, a talented leader who had a crucial role in the flight of Mennonite refugees from the Soviet Union, insisted that Mennonites had always been Germanic, even when they were living in Holland or the northern European lowlands. He added that Hitler had great respect for the individual and would never permit the state to dominate the lives of its citizens. The most passionate advocate for political Germanism may have been the brilliant writer and thinker Walter Quiring. Like Unruh, he contended that Dutch Mennonites were merely a branch of the Germanic, and that a strong piece of evidence for this was that their everyday language was a form of German: *Plattdeutsch*. “The Mennonites from Russia,” he wrote, “are Germans, German according to their blood, German according to their language, German according to their essence and customs, and most of them are German also in the innermost part of their heart” (qtd in 232). Quiring praised “*die Lehre vom Blut*,” “the teaching of the blood,” and argued that different blood types should not mix. He argued that nonresistance is secondary to Christian belief, that it might even be Communist (235). In 1935, Quiring even “reviewed” *Mein Kampf*, Hitler’s memoir, writing, “No German can remain indifferent or undecided by the reading of this book. It grips everyone and all come to the conclusion that Hitler is speaking to them out of the reader’s very soul” (qtd in 237).

Some readers of Frank Epp’s dissertation were offended by his premises. Epp himself conceded that, while *Der Bote* writers were heavily in favour of cultural and racial Germanism, only seventy-one percent were favourable to its political expression. Furthermore, twenty-six percent of favourable political commentary came from B.H. Unruh and Walter Quiring, both of whom were living in Germany at the time. One of Epp’s detractors, quoted anonymously (at the writer’s request) in Epp’s thesis, maintained that pro-Germanist writers in *Der Bote* were largely marginal members of the Mennonite community, and that anti-Germanist Mennonites wouldn’t bother to write or would even decide to leave the community.

In his paper, Epp counters these arguments by pointing out that most of the pro-Germanist writers were leading voices in the Mennonite community and were making solid and practical political recommendations in *Der Bote*. He points out that the 1933 yearbook of the Mennonite Church in Canada contains favourable Germanist comments in the minutes. Also significant, argues Epp, is the fact that B.H. Unruh and Walter Quiring were honoured long after the Second World War ended.

In the racial Germanist category, it was variously argued that biology is ordained by God; that blood is permanent but that belief is transitory; that mixed marriage is of the devil; and that Mennonites are not of Dutch ancestry but are part of the Germanic race.

Quiring was appointed editor of *Der Bote* in 1955.

Frank Epp concludes that the entire pro-Germanist experiment was a profound failure and in fact may have been instrumental in the loss of the German language among Canadian Mennonites. He quotes H.A. Peters, writing in a 1964 issue of *Der Bote*: “It is an irony of circumstances, that in Canada the zealous promoters of German language ... actually were engaged in a common cause with those determined to bring about the death of the German-breathed *Mennonitentum* [untranslatable; “Mennoniteness”]. In their great eagerness to preserve a mother tongue and with it the Mennonite ethnic heritage, the entire Mennonite culture became identified with the culture of the German Reich” (326).

A copy of Epp’s thesis can be accessed in the MHSBC library.

<sup>1</sup> The third volume was completed by noted historian Ted Regehr.

<sup>2</sup> Translations are by Frank Epp.

<sup>3</sup> David Toews and C.F. Klassen were tireless in their efforts to bring Russian Mennonite refugees to sanctuary in the West.

# A Tale of Two Editors

By Robert Martens

*Mennonite newspapers became important agents and facilitators as their readers made the difficult transition from quietism to activism. (Regehr MiC 386)*

Frank Epp and Walter Quiring both served as long-time editors of Mennonite newspapers. Both were respected – by different constituencies – within the Mennonite community. The two men could not have been more dissimilar.

Frank Henry Epp, the third of thirteen children, was born in 1929 in Lena, Manitoba, to Heinrich and Anna (Enns) Epp. Frank was educated in theology, communications, and history and went on to a distinguished career. He was founder and editor of *The Canadian Mennonite*, part-time pastor in four congregations, sat on the board of MCC Canada, and was active in politics, even running as a candidate for the federal Liberal Party in 1979 and 1980 (he lost). Epp may be best known for his history of Russian Mennonite refugees, *Mennonite Exodus*; his books on the politics of the Middle East; and his three-volume history of Mennonites in Canada. During his lifetime, however, Epp was notable for his outspoken views, usually to the left, which he unabashedly promulgated as editor of *The Canadian Mennonite* and later the *Mennonite Reporter*. Epp died in 1986.

On the opposite end of the political spectrum from Frank Epp was Walter Quiring, who lamented the loss by Mennonites of their German heritage. He was born in 1893 in the Chortitza colony to Jacob and Anna (Epp) Quiring and spent his early years in Russia,

serving as a teacher for a time in Chortitza. In 1921, Walter, together with his wife and son, fled the violence of post-Revolutionary Russia and settled down in Germany. Here he became involved in aiding Mennonite refugees; meanwhile, he earned a doctorate at the University of Munich. In 1932 Quiring travelled to Paraguay and later published two books on what he had learned in that country's Mennonite colonies. Quiring's career was forever tainted by his enthusiastic and unwavering support for the fascist regime of Adolf Hitler. Nonetheless, upon his immigration to Canada, he was appointed editor of *Der Bote*. In 1963, Quiring resigned as editor and accepted an offer to teach at the University of Winnipeg,

Epp was an advocate of evangelicalism, hoping that an evangelically-oriented Mennonite church would break the stranglehold of Germanic traditionalism...

**The Canadian Mennonite**  
"If you live what I teach, you are really my disciples."—Jesus.  
Subscription—\$2.00 yearly; \$2.00 U.S. & Foreign. ALTONA, MANITOBA, Friday, October 16, 1953. Vol. 1.

**Annual School Meeting Held at M.C.I., Gretna**  
"Shall the Mennonite Collegiate Institute at Gretna, our traditional school day faculty in Winnipeg, so that it's school work will coincide with that of all other institutions. This was one of the numerous interesting issues that were discussed at the annual school meeting of the M.C.I. on October 10. Approximately 70 church representatives and school friends attended the meeting. Bishop J. M. Paula, chairman of the Board of Directors, made the opening and directed the meeting. Challenging the delegates to do some long-range planning, he emphasized that we must learn to know the breadth, length, depth and height of God's leading program. We are often inclined to be short-sighted and narrow-minded, he said. Shortly after the opening, Rev. Paula announced that the Home Economics Department of the school was badly in need of a new sewing machine. Public schools could get them at a reduced price and also receive help from the government, he said, but the M.C.I. being a private school, was unable to get the government grant which would reduce the actual cost of a Singer machine to approximately \$10.00. He appealed to the school meeting for a generous gift. In the afternoon session, he announced that the meeting had not only given the grant, but donated enough to purchase a new sewing machine. Rev. P. B. Harber, in the Board, delivered the speaker's message. Reading Isaiah 55:1-4, he dealt with the situation which greets us here in new problems, problems that call for new solutions. "Our schools must not only be a place to learn, but a place to transform," he said. "They must be a place where we can see the fruit of God's work in the lives of our students." Mr. Harber also stated that the modern situation has brought us new problems, problems that call for new solutions. "The old argument, 'I'll give you a good education for a good price' is no longer valid," he said. "The old argument, 'I'll give you a good education for a good price' is no longer valid," he said. "The old argument, 'I'll give you a good education for a good price' is no longer valid," he said. (Continued on Page 2)

**Hinerant Ministry For Old Colony Bishop**  
Bishop Jacob Friesen of the Old Colony Mennonite Church of Manitoba also has ministerial congregations in Saskatchewan and Central British Columbia. Since one of our ministers died and another moved away, we are in need of more ministers, said Rev. Friesen in an interview. Together with three other ministers Bishop Friesen also serves the congregations at Chortitza, Chortitz and Reinfeld.

**ard Hertzler Reviews Religious Social Conditions In Germany**  
Hertzler, a German Mennonite leader, travelling under the auspices of the M.C.C., spoke in the Altona Reinfeld church on Sunday, October 20. A. T. Friesen, instructor at the Reinfeld Bible College, was the main speaker. Rev. Friesen of the Old Colony Mennonite Church of Manitoba also has ministerial congregations in Saskatchewan and Central British Columbia. Since one of our ministers died and another moved away, we are in need of more ministers, said Rev. Friesen in an interview. Together with three other ministers Bishop Friesen also serves the congregations at Chortitza, Chortitz and Reinfeld.

**Frank H. Epp, Editor Of Canadian Mennonite**  
This is the first issue of The Canadian Mennonite, which D. W. Friesen & Sons Ltd. expect to publish weekly from this date on. It will be devoted to the affairs of all Mennonites across Canada. Frank H. Epp has been appointed editor of this new publication. He is well known in Mennonite circles throughout the West, having been editor of the Youth Page in "Der Bote" for the past two years. His high school education was completed at the Mennonite Collegiate Institute, Gretna, and at Abbotsford, B.C. After completing Normal School in Vancouver, he taught for one year before enrolling in the Canadian Mennonite Bible College, from which he graduated this summer. He is the son of Rev. and Mrs. H. M. Epp, Mount Lebanon, B.C. Mr. Epp married Helen Dick, of Leamington, Ont., in June of this year. Following an extended tour to British Columbia, Mr. and Mrs. Epp returned to Winnipeg early this month, settling in Altona two weeks ago. The Canadian Mennonite will be published in the interests of all Mennonite church groups in Canada. In its contents it will present articles of information, such as news items of general interest from the various Mennonite districts, and correspondence from readers; also articles of instruction and inspiration, such as book reviews, stories, sermons and devotional material, discussion, etc. In doing this, it will seek to present the pure teachings of the Bible as interpreted and proclaimed by the Mennonite Church, reaching out to many Canadian Mennonite young people and others who do not, or cannot, read German-language publications, and present a united witness to their Canadian neighbors. The subscription price will be \$2.00 a year in Canada, and \$3.00 outside of Canada. —The Publishers

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but his teaching career was cut short when colleagues and police became aware of his dark political past. Today he might be best known for his two superb pictorial books: *In the fullness of time: 150 years of Mennonite sojourn in Russia* and *Mennonites in Canada: A Pictorial Review*. Walter Quiring eventually returned to Germany where he died in 1983.

In 1953, D. W. Friesen, the well-known publishing house located in Altona, Manitoba, made a decision to start a Mennonite newspaper and appointed Frank Epp as its editor; Epp stayed on in that role until 1967. Ted Regehr describes him as “an exceptionally talented but also pugnacious and at times abrasive editorial writer and public speaker. ... He clearly saw his role to be that of a journalist and was determined to make the paper more than a denominational mouth-piece” (Regehr *MiC* 387). *The Canadian Mennonite*, a newspaper tabloid that defied the conventions of glossy church magazines, evidently suited Frank Epp’s style. “Is it not true,” he wrote, “that the way we preach the gospel on Sundays has hardly any bearing on the way we hire workers, buy land, and sell cars?” (qtd in Regehr *MiC* 388) Epp was an advocate of evangelicalism, hoping that an evangelically-oriented Mennonite church would break the stranglehold of Germanic traditionalism, but expressed his bitter disillusionment with the current crop of preachers: “Nothing will be so great a tragedy as a world evangelism that simply reinforced the wicked western way of life” (qtd in *MiC* 389). He was also a vocal peace activist, supporting the influx of American draft dodgers during the Vietnam War.

For several years, D. W. Friesen covered the losses incurred by *The Canadian Mennonite* but the paper finally folded in 1971. Less than a year later, the *Mennonite Reporter* was established; Frank Epp was named its editor. He continued in that role until 1973. This paper was funded by the Conference of Mennonites in Canada and reverted to the name *Canadian Mennonite* in 1997.

In 1955, Dietrich Epp, until then the first and only editor of *Der Bote*, died. By that time, the paper was receiving financial support from Mennonite churches and was no longer the independent voice it once had been. J.J. Thiessen, who was chair of both the Conference of Mennonites in Canada and of the editorial board of *Der*

*Bote*, decided that the paper needed to maintain its traditionalist points of view; he appointed Walter Quiring as editor. Over the next years, Walter Quiring and Frank Epp carried on a sometimes rancorous debate. Epp was sharply critical of Quiring’s involvement with National Socialism; Quiring was “a determined and talented critic of the peacemaking agenda of the *Canadian Mennonite* and of MCC Peace and Social Concerns Committees” (Regehr *MiC* 403). Quiring published a devastating review of a book Epp had written on the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, citing numerous errors. The battle between the two editors became even fiercer, if possible, during the era of American draft dodgers. Quiring believed that peace protestors do not promote peace; on the contrary, he wrote, their activities disrupt the social order. He



Walter Quiring. Photo: GAMEO

would likely have been quite happy to have seen *The Canadian Mennonite* shut down.

Walter Quiring, of course, was often on the wrong side of the ethical debate. Despite Quiring’s genuineness and brilliance, and although Quiring’s two pictorial books are classics of Mennonite history, Frank Epp is certainly remembered today with greater fondness. In an obituary, Ted Regehr writes of Epp: “As co-founder and editor of the first English language Canadian Mennonite newspaper, *The Canadian Mennonite*, he led in the language changes and addressed new and sometimes controversial issues, but he also retained and propagated a great love and respect for the very rich Mennonite heritage. Contemporaries found the paper informative, inspiring, and sometimes irritating. Those in Mennonite Studies find it a treasure trove of information about Mennonites in transition” (*JMS* 268).

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**Ben Goossen. *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era*.**

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. 266 pp.

Reviewed by Robert Martens

“Religious nationalism”: what could that possibly mean? In his controversial new book, *Chosen Nation*, Harvard scholar Ben Goossen insists that, historically, “ethnic” Mennonites have perceived themselves as a “religious nation.” “In the same years,” he writes, “that Zionists began asserting a separate Jewish nationality, some Mennonites presented their own confession as a national body. ... Here was a nationalism compatible even with pacifism” (“Goossen” 3). For many years, says Goossen, Zionists were alone in their claim to be a nation set apart by ethnicity and faith. Recently, however, faith-based and often violent fundamentalism has been on the rise, and it is time, he contends, for Mennonites to acknowledge their own historical entanglement in exclusivist ethnic ideology. Doubtless this held true during the era of the Third Reich, when most German Mennonites accepted or even supported the Hitler regime.

Early in his book, Ben Goossen muses on the transience of any collectivity such as the state, or an ethnic grouping such as Mennonites. He asserts that collectivities are fluid, constantly changing. “If certain collectivities crystalized at a particular instant, they were likely to crumble moments later” (11). It might be more valuable, says Goossen, to study social groupings at “the ragged edges” where they “trail off, turn into something else” (11). In other words, labelling a group of constantly changing individuals as any sort of collectivity is an act of imagination.

This research method seems to be based on an extreme form of individualism (or deconstructionism) in which collectivities are as much fiction as fact. The political, writes Goossen, is always personal. Mennonites at one time visualized themselves as a global religious and ethnic entity – and perhaps they still do. This, says Goossen, is a fraud. Goossen even accuses Mennonite historians of positing a “creation myth” (200) of Swiss and Dutch origins – a myth because an Anabaptist-Mennonite collectivity has no concrete reality.

*Chosen Nation* begins with the history of German Mennonites. This is a story that has already been well covered by Mark Janzen in his book *German Soldiers* (see *Roots & Branches* July 2013), and Goossen is retelling this history from a slightly different perspective. Be-

fore modernization and official statehood, German Mennonites resided mostly in three clusters: the northwest, northeast, and south of German lands. These settlements were clearly distinct from each other in terms of culture, economy, and so on. Theology and Dutch heritage were some of the unifying factors. Eventually, overseas – and, later, continental – missions became a common interest.

Then the national myth of a German diaspora emerged, with the myth of a Mennonite diaspora on its heels. Mennonites, like Germans, began to perceive themselves as a global peoplehood, scattered, certainly, but with a transcendent ethnic and religious commonality. German Mennonite leaders such as Carl Harder and Wilhelm Mannhardt, progressive and assimilationist, yet



Jakob Bergen, circa 1943. Ethnic German young men, including Mennonites, were drafted into Wehrmacht and Waffen SS between 1941-1945. Photo courtesy of Louise Bergen Price

true believers in a Mennonite “nation,” began repatriating the past to create a Mennonite identity. Goossen calls men such as this “activists,” spokespersons who urge on a collectivity that may not even exist. They are often met, writes Goossen, by “indifference” – individuals in that so-called collectivity may simply ignore the ideologues and get on with their own lives.

The “activists,” however, kept up the barrage of ideology, creating the Mennonite Union, based in Berlin, in 1881. The Union’s goals were to unify Mennonites in a common cause and attach them to the newly formed German state established in 1871. And even though the majority of German Mennonites paid no heed to the Union as an organization, the Union’s backing of military service and salaried clergy gained support. “We have come to believe,” it declared, “that the principle of nonresistance is untenable in a modern state” (qtd in Goossen 90). German Mennonites eventually bought into the myth of “Mennonite Germanness”: during World War I, only one-third of their enlisted young men chose non-combatant service.

At this point, Goossen’s perspective veers off into greater personal bias. For example, he makes the first of many allegations against Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), which, he argues, was deeply enmeshed in the imposture of ethnic Mennonite exclusivity. MCC, Goossen writes, was guilty of adopting a myth of a Russian Mennonite golden age when it helped create a “Mennonite state” for refugees in Paraguay.

And then things got much worse. During the time of the Third Reich, German Mennonites submitted to racial testing in order to prove their Aryan purity. Goossen writes that “Mennonites and others often were not merely the subjects of Nazi racism, but also its authors” (122). Union chair Emil Händiges reported to Reich bureaucrats, “Today the German Mennonites perform military duties without any qualifications” (qtd in Goossen 127). Mennonites indulged in writing family histories and studying genealogies, says Goossen, in order to demonstrate their ethnic German fitness. Perhaps the most vocal Mennonite supporter of the fascist regime – another would be Walter Quiring – was Benjamin Unruh. “Today,” Unruh states, “the vast majority of ethnically German Mennonites across the whole world stand on the side of Adolf Hitler” (qtd in 150). Unruh declared his

pleasure on meeting with Heinrich Himmler, the psychotic leader of the *Schutzstaffel* (SS).

Goossen saves some of his harshest judgements for Mennonite survivors of the Soviet totalitarian regime. In 1941 German forces invaded Russia. While occupying the Ukraine, Himmler improvised a Holocaust on its

Jewish inhabitants. Even though Nazi leaders – and B. H. Unruh as well – were shocked by the ruins of former Mennonite enclaves in the Ukraine – Goossen argues that Mennonites enthusiastically cooperated with SS forces. Mennonite relationships with Jews had previously been good, writes Goossen, but now anti-Semitism became common. Goossen contends that many Mennonites participated in ethnic extermination; that Himmler formed a Mennonite cavalry; that Mennonite church services pandered to the German invaders. When Mennonites joined retreating German forces in 1943, they stole

wagons and equipment from Ukrainian locals, claims Goossen, and their men served as self-defence forces on the Great Trek westward. Goossen’s accusations are broad, with little room left, perhaps, for historical balance. He pays scant attention to the fact that Soviet Mennonites, devastated by Stalinist totalitarianism, were consumed by the need for survival.

In Goossen’s estimation, Mennonite behaviour after World War II scarcely improved. He concedes that Soviet Mennonite refugees were involved in an “accidental nationalism”: in order to claim refugee status, they were forced to describe themselves as neither Russian nor German. For expediency’s sake, their “nationality” was defined as “Mennonite.” Nevertheless, Goossen declares that MCC, capitalizing on its reputation as a provider of aid, played the race card in its efforts to rescue Mennonite refugees. MCC activist Peter Dyck, says Goossen, argued that the situation of ethnic Mennonites was similar to that of Jews. Other allegations: that MCC tested Russian Mennonite refugees for their “Mennoniteness” much as the Third Reich had tested for Aryanism; that MCC fell short by bringing Nazi party members to North America; that globally, MCC had an “ambition for centralized control” (183). American Mennonite leader Harold Bender, who according to Goossen argued for a romanticized “Anabaptist vision,” is also accused of pandering to ethnicity. “We are the children of our past,” said Bender, “and that past both calls and qualifies us for

...it is time, he contends, for Mennonites to acknowledge their own historical entanglement in exclusivist ethnic ideology.

the task of a world-wide peace action today” (qtd in 187).

A final parting shot is reserved for the repatriation of Soviet ethnic Germans to Germany – the so-called *Aussiedler*: “This program reflected both a condemnation and a continuation of Nazi race policies” (195). The result of the program, writes Goossen, was disappointment: Soviet refugees, finding European culture alien to their own experience, failed to mix and adapt.

With this, Benjamin Goossen returns to his research method and to his contention that collectivities are so fluid as to defy definition: “[C]ollectivist narratives rarely resulted in coherent ‘imagined communities’” (207). And he returns to his central thesis: “The development of Mennonitism as an imagined global collectivity would be unintelligible without the parallel rise of German nationalist discourses” (201). He concludes that only with the lucid examination of collectivist forces “will we be able to imagine nationalism without nations, religion without religions” (212). Goossen may be echoing Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s speculation on a “religionless Christianity,” but it might be asked if any institution, even the smallest committee, can survive without boundaries and some form of exclusivism. Nevertheless, *Chosen Nation*, provocative and one-sided as it might be, is already inciting a greater self-scrutiny of the Mennonite story.

## A Response to Ben Goossen: Was C.F. Klassen an Anti-Semite?

By David Giesbrecht

Each generation of scholars has the privilege, perhaps even an obligation, to fashion its own historiography. Among the present crop of rising stars is Harvard student Benjamin W. Goossen, who describes himself as “a global historian of religion and science” (1).

His 2017 published book, *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era*, is generating some animated responses. Winnipeg reviewer Peter Letkemann considers Goossen’s book “full of factual errors and errors of interpretation.” Moreover, Letkemann finds Goossen’s book so disappointing that he chides Princeton University Press for publishing such flawed scholarship (11). Victor Winter, a survivor of those times, takes strong objection to Goossen’s telling of the story, finding him “well off the mark ... intentionally antagonistic” (10). Barb Draper in her review also finds Goossen’s line of thinking

“unconvincing” (31). Responding to Draper, Goossen reiterates the opinion expressed in his book that “C.F. Klassen was an anti-Semite who owned shares in Canada’s largest Nazi newspaper” (“Letter” 10). Given the historic gravity of such an incrimination, sober consideration must be given to Goossen’s indictment.

### *A candid admission*

Unravelling the many layers of the era in which CF was a prominent actor is fraught with complexity. The long-standing status of CF is that “[T]hrough his tireless labors and extensive speaking tours on behalf of relief efforts ... [he] became not only the symbol of Mennonite relief and refugee service to Mennonites in general but a strong influence for better mutual understanding and cooperation among Mennonites across denominational lines” (Bender & Thiessen 2). If Goossen’s reconstruction is correct, then a new understanding of CF will need to emerge. If, however, Goossen’s allegation is not sustainable, or circumstantial at best, then this young scholar must acknowledge his unwarranted attack on CF.

### *Considering the witness of those who remember CFK*

Since the memory of CF is still alive for surviving contemporaries, I have consulted with members of the extended Klassen family who were frequent visitors in CF’s household, and with several scholars who were well aware of him either personally or through their research and writing. Significantly, not one of these people considers CF Klassen to have been anti-Semitic. Pro-German, certainly. But cultivating and propagating anti-Semitic views, no.

### *Considering sources Goossen cites*

One major source Goossen cites is the 1997 study by Alan Davies and Marilyn Nefsky, *How Silent Were the Churches: Canadian Protestantism and the Jewish Plight during the Nazi Era*. Significantly (I think), these authors quote the Jewish historian, Uriel Tal, as saying, “A straight line cannot be drawn from Luther to Hitler without distorting historical truth” (26). How profound. Such a straight-line historiography is also problematic when Goossen seems to apply it to CF. As

**Letkemann finds  
Goossen’s book so  
disappointing that he  
chides Princeton  
University Press for  
publishing such  
flawed scholarship...**



expected, Davies and Nefsky discuss what is widely known: that “an undetermined number of Mennonites in Canada were pro-German (during the 1930s, early 1940s) for cultural and linguistic reasons” (106f). The presence of such sentiments among Canadian Mennonites does of course not implicate all Mennonites, nor does it follow that C.F. Klassen’s pro-German convictions so easily translate into anti-Semitism.

Further, Goossen seems to lean heavily for his perceptions on an article written by CF in *Der Bote*, 19 April 1933. Careful scrutiny of this opinion piece is necessary:

- CF begins by saying that it is his burden to refute the accusation that (perhaps he) or Mennonites generally were guilty of Jew-baiting (*Judenhetze*).
- From the context it is clear that a certain Dr. Navall (Dr. Dietrich Neufeld, author of *A Russian Dance of Death*) has been making accusations against Mennonites and admonishing them to live more like Quakers.
- In response, CF admits to admiration for Quakers, and then asks what the reference to Quakers has to do with the egregious suffering of so many people in Soviet Russia.
- CF casts doubt on Dr. Navall’s statement that Jews have suffered more than any other racial group as a result of the Russian Revolution.
- Further, CF regrets all gratuitous suffering caused by the Revolution. And berates Dr. Navall for his characterization of the Revolution. CF emphasizes that only those who have for several years personally experienced the Soviet horrors (as he had), including Nestor Makhno’s desecration, are qualified to speak to this issue with accuracy.
- CF notes that he is not making the case that Germans are angelic. However, he goes on to say that, given all the turmoil (in Germany and Russia), he thanks God that a leader (Hitler) is finally emerging who has the courage to start a nationalistic movement which will defeat the Communists.
- He notes that if Jews have suffered disproportionately, it is precisely because they are so politically active. He reiterates that, as in Russia, Jews are aggressively promoting Communism in Germany.
- Then CF offers that he can confidently describe these political developments without being guilty of



57. The executive of AMLV: H. F. Dyck, secretary; P. F. Froese, chairman; and C. F. Klassen, vice-chairman. Photo was taken on September 9, 1928, just 14 days before Klassen’s departure for Canada.

Source: Epp, Frank. *Mennonite Exodus*, p. 225

anti-Semitism.

- He notes further that it is hypocritical for Jews to complain about being targeted for suffering when by 1933 already millions of people in Russia have been murdered – emphasizing that so many victims in Russia were killed both spiritually and physically.
- If only a few Jews are attacked in Germany, then the American media is full of sensationalist lies.
- He denies any “Jew-baiting,” since Israel represents God’s chosen people. Nor is it right that Christians discriminate against any group.

#### *Considering the necessity for historical context*

A historical perspective is critical at this point. *Der Bote* published this entry on April 19, 1933. Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933, and this at a time when German Communists were in serious contention for power. For instance, in the 1932 election for the Reichstag, Communists won 89 seats, making them the third most populous of 17 parties (Wikipedia). At this moment in history there was a palpable fear that, as in Russia, Communism was sweeping over Germany. Not insignificant to CF’s perspective must have been his own harrowing escape from the Soviet Union in 1928, while his close friend and colleague in Moscow, Peter Froese, was sent to the Gulag. And further, by 1933 the Soviets had already unleashed immense suffering on their own citizens. It is therefore not insidious that

among Mennonites there was widespread optimism that Hitler was the man to turn back the surging tide of Communism.

My sense is that CF's perspective at the time would also have been informed by the common knowledge that Jews were prominently represented in the early Soviet leadership. Sir Winston Churchill, writing in the *Illustrated Sunday Herald* of 8 February 1920, puts it this way, "With the notable exception of Lenin, the majority of leading figures are Jews. Moreover, the principal inspiration and the driving power comes from Jewish leaders" (5).

Another significant historical note. On 4 April 1919 the *Jewish Chronicle* commented, "There is much in the fact of Bolshevism itself, in the fact that so many Jews are Bolsheviks, in the fact that the ideals of Bolshevism at many points are consonant with the finest ideals of Judaism" (8). To reflect on the documented record of history, if uncomfortable for some, does not equate to anti-Semitism.

Without identifying which paper he is talking about, Goossen asserts that CF owned shares in Canada's largest Nazi newspaper. If he is referring to *Deutsche Zeitung für Canada*, according to a newspaper of the era, the *Winnipeg Evening Tribune*, CF owned three shares in this paper (11). Without being able to assess CF's thinking in purchasing these shares, due caution is expedient in what and how much one reads into this matter.

### Conclusions

Benjamin Goossen is right in portraying the regrettable involvement of some Russian Mennonites in the extermination of Ukrainian Jews. He is also correct in pointing to the sympathies some Canadian Mennonites harboured for National Socialism. Regrettably, he does not document those Canadian Mennonite leaders like B. B. Janz who from the outset robustly rejected Hitlerian ideology. Summing up his political convictions in a statement widely carried in the Mennonite media and in the *Lethbridge Herald* in January 1939, B. B. Janz declared, "Am I a National Socialist – God forbid" (qtd in Epp 325).

Taken together, Goossen's argument that CF was an anti-Semite suspiciously resembles an untenable "straight-line" historiography. What is certain is that CF was not afraid to own his own opinions. Had he harbored antipathy towards Jewish people, his thinking in this regard would have been widely known.

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## Genealogy Column: The Ties that Bind GRANDMA: First in a Series

By Bruce Hiebert

Is GRANDMA accurate?

The GRANDMA (Genealogical Registry and Database of Mennonite Ancestry) database is one of the wonders of the genealogical world. This project of the California Mennonite Historical Society, as well as thousands of contributors and researchers, seeks to produce a correct listing of all the descendants of the Dutch-Prussian-Russian (low-German speaking) stream of Mennonites. Currently there are over 1.3 million individual entries. It is available in two versions, either a download or online subscription. You may obtain a copy by googling *California Mennonite Historical Society* and going from there. I encourage you to do so, and if you are at all interested in this stream of Mennonites, to purchase or subscribe to the database.

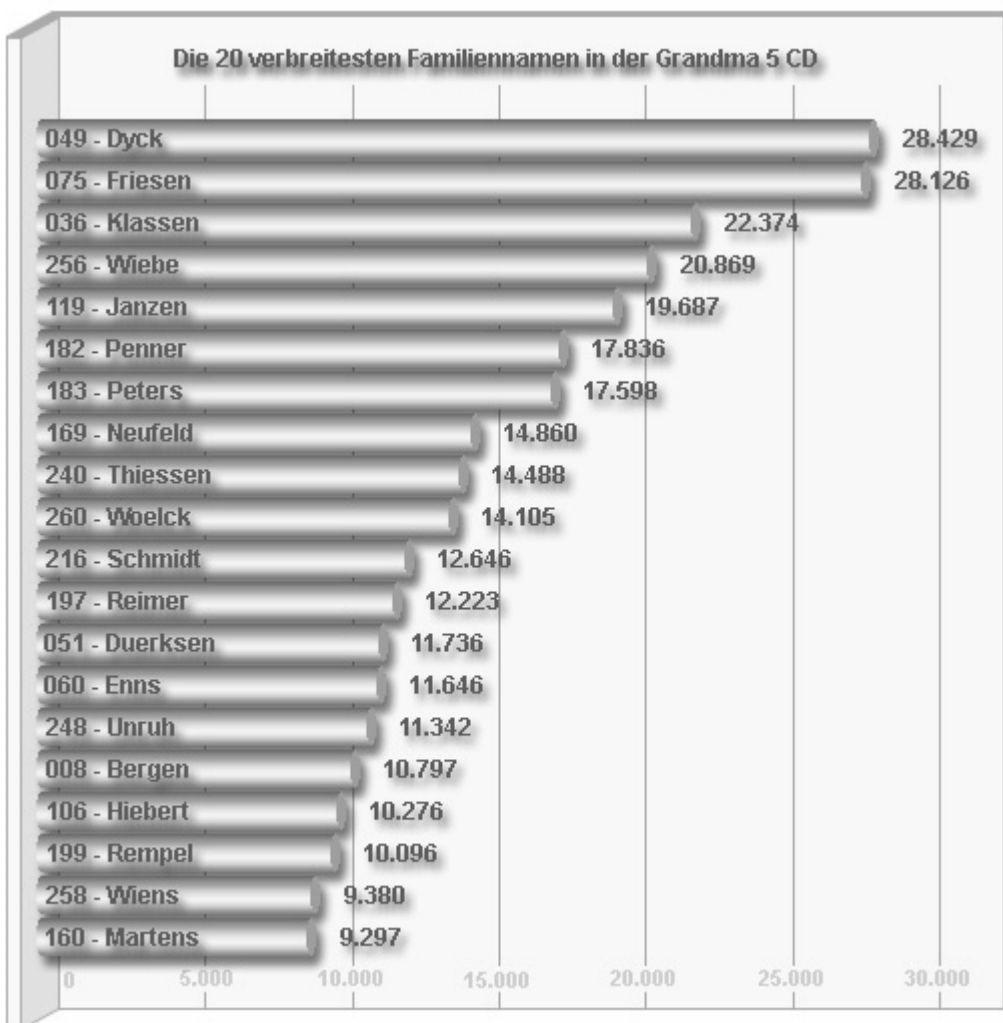
The answer is, it depends on what you mean by accurate. On the one hand, it is an extraordinarily accurate and useful source of information. On the other hand, it is a frustratingly incomplete record with significant gaps and many errors ranging from the minor to the major. So let's explore those two sides and see what they mean.

I have checked through the data with regard to my family records. Checking the GRANDMA entries against birth certificates, family records, and other sources, my examination indicates that for every 100 pieces of information, at least 99 of them are correct. At that it is more accurate than any of the relevant genealogical books and the various attempts at family genealogies developed by others. As far as I can tell, it is the single most accurate source of family information that exists

for my family.

But, as anyone who has worked with the database in detail can tell you, that is not the whole story. It has inaccuracies. Lots of information is off, perhaps not by much, but errors are there. They may have come in through any number of routes and they need correction. The compilers are working the best they can to correct errors. But it is a difficult job. Here are some of the reasons why errors creep in and are hard to get out:

One of the main sources for GRANDMA is family genealogies. While the Hiebert records say one thing, the Janzen records say something else about the same people. It turns out my grandmother, who was key to many of the Hiebert records, made many errors (including my name). The Janzen branch, to whom my grandmother is distantly related, made fewer errors. But they made some too. So which is correct? There are Hieberts who believe the Hiebert records are more accurate and Janzens who believe the Janzen records are more accurate. My re-



The 20 most common Mennonite names in GRANDMA CD 5. Source: [www.chort.square7.ch](http://www.chort.square7.ch)

search suggests the Janzen records are more accurate but try to convince my Hiebert relatives of that! But what about the places where the Janzen records are wrong? The GRANDMA compilers have to listen to ongoing issues from both sides, and then see if there are other records that will resolve the problem, assuming those don't have inaccuracies too.

Another key source are church records. These are wonderful third-party sources that provide deep access to much information that would otherwise be lost and they often keep records over generations. But they aren't always reliable either. People left the church, and when they did, the church records lost all track of them, unless they showed up later in another set of church records. And then, is the Agatha Peters in the First Mennonite Church, Saskatoon, records the same as the Agathe Friesen who shows up in the Rosthern records two years later? The birthdate is the same, but the husband is different. Did her first husband die and she remarried and that's why she moved? Or is it someone else entirely?

Accidental deletions are common to both sets of records. Many children died young. Some are carefully remembered and others are not. Every time you see a gap of more than three years between children in a family, there is a good chance another child was born but died before their first birthday. Who has that information? How do you reach back generations to get it?

Deliberate misinformation is relatively common as well. Many women have birthdates that vary by as much as two years. It seems that many of them had the habit of dropping a year when they got married. In the absence of birth certificates, who was to know? So one of the rules is to always accept the earlier birthdate for women when there is a conflict, as there often is (which may mean Great-Grandmother Petkau was actually 103 when she died, not 101 as everyone thought). As well, divorce happened, though it was illegal and considered immoral. Typically, one spouse moved from one community to another and then remarried some years later. Some families acknowledged this fact and others pretended that one of the two had died. Others ignored the new

marriage. Either way, the records are usually wrong on this one.

Gender biases also appear. More attention is usually paid to male descendants than to female descendants, with resulting greater depth and accuracy in male records than in female ones. I can't say that I've seen a lot of this one in GRANDMA, but it is still there.

And so it goes. There are many inaccuracies in the records, some accidental, some inadvertent, some from a failure to tell truth from falsehood, and some because an error is the best information currently available. Sometimes the GRANDMA records are accurate and the family records are wrong. Sometimes it's the other way around. Don't write off a piece of information because you think it's wrong. Instead, check out your sources and see what might be correct. And if you can prove you have the correct information, get in touch with the database managers. It is continually being updated and improved (See the website.).

Use GRANDMA with caution. But remember, it might be right and your family records wrong! It is still the best general source available.

*This is the first of what is hoped to be a series of columns about the nature and use of the GRANDMA database. If you have questions or suggestions for columns, please direct them to [brucehiebert@shaw.ca](mailto:brucehiebert@shaw.ca).*

*Bruce Hiebert Ph.D. is a Mennonite historian and ethicist who uses the GRANDMA database as one of his major sources of information. He lives in Abbotsford. Feel free to send him your questions.*

**The compilers are working the best they can to correct errors. But it is a difficult job.**



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# Hop Picking in the Early 1940s

By Elizabeth Dahl  
Giesbrecht

History presents windows of opportunity to connect community members in meaningful ways. For early twentieth-century Mennonite immigrants to the Fraser Valley, hop picking not only offered a context for social networking, but also a lucrative means of earning some much-needed money.

Hops, a botanical cousin to cannabis, was planted in a narrow band near the Canadian forty-ninth parallel in a climate zone where the vines thrived. Five large plantations populated the Fraser Valley, all of which needed a large labour supply each fall to harvest the scent- and pollen-laden buds. Given the pioneering challenges these abstemious Mennonites faced, they likely paid scant attention to the end products of their labours. Few seemed to care that hops were a key ingredient in making beer. Mennonite-picked hops would surely end up in the ubiquitous yeast used in all kitchens. Or certainly as herbal remedies for ulcers or Crohn's disease. Less certain were Mennonite convictions – as some said – that hops could help to mitigate menopausal and menstrual symptoms or become a tonic for hot flashes.

What a delightful discovery then to find in one of my mother's treasured cookbooks a recipe for bread baking with homemade hop-yeast. The ingredients included,

- 2 ounces dry hops (equal to 3 teabags)
- 4 quarts of water
- One half cup brown sugar
- One half cup salt
- 4 cups flour



Family members of Jacob Epp: from left: son Peter, grandfather Jacob Epp, daughter Susan Epp, daughter Tina Epp Dahl, daughter Mary Epp, son-in-Law Henry Dahl; front: granddaughter Betty, c. 2 years old. Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Giesbrecht

With these ingredients came precise instructions. Mix water with the hops and boil for 30 minutes. Strain and cool to lukewarm. Place the hops and water in an earthenware bowl. Add the salt and sugar. Mix in half the flour and part of the cool water. Then add the rest of the flour. Let this mixture stand for three days. On the third day boil and mash 6 potatoes. Add to the hop mixture and let stand for one more day.

Keep the mixture warm as you work. Shake the bottles frequently. This concoction will keep for two months. Strain the bottle contents before using a half cup of the yeast-brew per commercial package as suggested.

My mother was a wonderful cook. Each Saturday the aroma from her bread baking filled our family kitchen and the bread was a staple at most of our family meals.

**Few seemed to care that hops were a key ingredient in making beer.**

# Abram Nachtigal's hop picking-time blues

*A translation from my grandfather's circa-1930s "Im Hopfenernte" (At Hop Harvest Time)*

By Larry Nightingale

Grey dawn settles over the village – little Yarrow town,  
the fog lifts from the mountain slope.  
The women are already hurrying about the houses and barnyards,  
the men too – already on the go.  
Morning's milking has left the cows milked dry,  
roosters have crowed themselves hoarse,  
everywhere, in everything, it can be seen how life turns  
in the bigger circumstance – cogs in the wheel.

Children half-asleep step out of their beds  
infants are disturbed from sweet slumber.  
Oh, this life – a long hard trial  
of which all, inwardly, are indignant.  
The little calf also, is tied with a halter  
where a water bucket is set.  
"My little yearling, if you can, make the most of your time  
as all's too soon hard-earned and spent in this bullied and bullish world!"

Hard-worn hands are packing cold lunches in the kitchens  
because rumbling guts will feel empty by noon.  
Oh from where, in the end, does the dear Lord God find  
enough for so many?  
The worms too want to gnaw.  
Is there not a green leaf for each and every one?  
So in our worries over our human lot  
we're begging and anxious, even when harvest is full.

For a human being lives not but for today  
but wants to know what tomorrow holds.  
Therefore all this restless striving and all this sacrifice,  
therefore all the nights robbed of sleep,  
therefore all the calloused, blistered hands  
blindly stretched out toward some vague elusive prosperity,  
for yet another tired turn,  
oh, tell me, what has not been tried, and tried again!

All the rail-thin figures standing alongside the road through town  
all with their troubles and their needs  
awaiting transport – the big truck – the town's dusty old fire-wagon  
that will shuttle them on, over to the patchwork quilt of hop-yards,  
with their baskets and boxes and buckets – all types  
all what can possibly be shouldered, carried in arms.

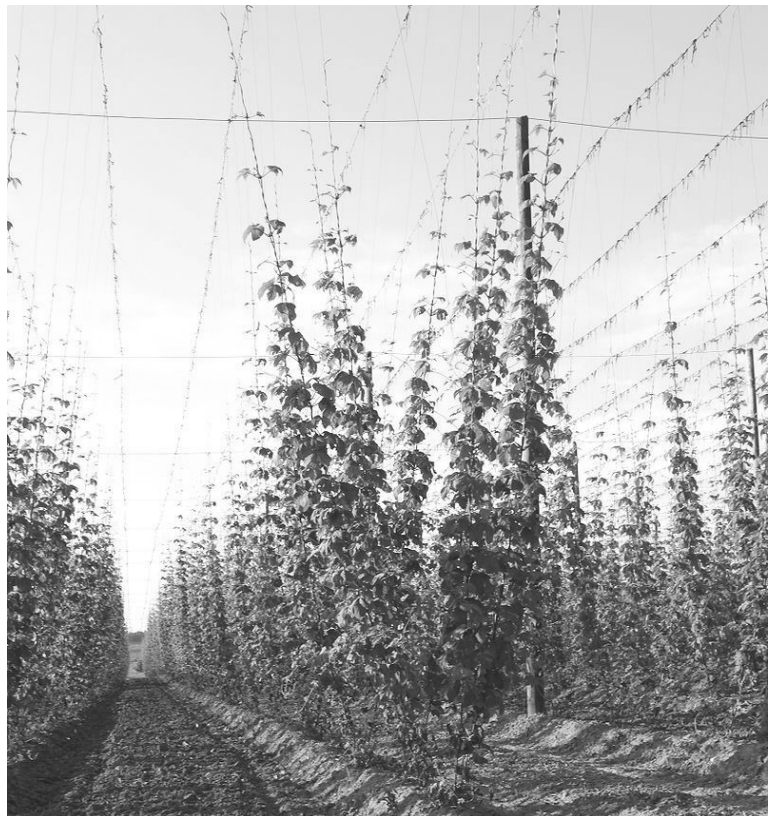
all are bound for the picking fields,  
yes all, all, can come along on this dreary ride.

What a sight all round the picker yards!  
A motley colourful crew  
of black men, brown men,  
long-bearded turbaned ones as well  
and our grey-haired Mennonite grandmothers, senile grandfathers  
and pale young immigrant mothers with babes at breast  
and all the refugee child labourers – already too much experienced  
labouring on with necessary resolve and intent.

From in among the wistful and prayerful is heard soft singing  
(little Annie sings soprano, the tenor is young Marie).  
Ah, to this, one pauses to listen willingly  
sweet oscillations of a longing heartfelt melody.  
Oh, so homesick, I brushed aside my tears.  
Out in those endless yards stretching on and on  
it filled my heart with a great yearning.  
Bless you, dearest singers – little “nightingales.” God bless us all.

*Abram Nachtigal* (1876-1950) was an itinerant preacher, teacher, storyteller and poet. Born in Russia, he died at his small family farm with its silkworm mulberry trees in Yarrow, BC. Upon his passing, the major portion of his writings went up in smoke at the local dump, and two red-handed “criminals” (uncles of this surviving poem's translator), now also long gone, should be eternally ashamed and must have known better.

*Larry Nightingale*, raised in Yarrow, BC, and a longtime Vancouver resident, is a still-alive-and-kicking grandson of the poem's author (whom he didn't quite get to meet, arriving a small handful of years too late) and is a writer and a seemingly-on-extended-hiatus drawer and painter and library tech/research assistant. He easily relates to his Reverend grandfather's existential blues.



# Immigrant Ships: The *International*

*This is the third in a series on immigrant ships.*

By Robert Martens

In 1877, Lady and Governor General Lord Dufferin visited Fisher's Landing, now Fisher, Minnesota, via the steamboat *Minnesota*. In her diary, the Lady wrote of the "very narrow and extremely sinuous river. I can tell you that we go from one bank to the other, crushing and crashing against the trees, which grow down to the waterside; the branches sweep over the deck and fly in our faces, and leave pieces behind them. I had just written this when I gave a shriek as I saw my ink bottle on the point of being swept overboard by an intrusive tree; and D's [Lord Dufferin's] hat was knocked off his head by it. The consequence of this curious navigation is that we never really go on for more than three minutes at a time; we run against one bank, our steam is shut off, and in some mysterious manner we swing round till our bow is into the other; then we rebound, and go on a few yards, till the sharp curve brings us up against the side. Our stern wheel is very often ashore, and our captain and pilot must require the patience of saints ...

This exceedingly twisty river is the "Red Lake River"; it is forty miles to travel though the distance is only

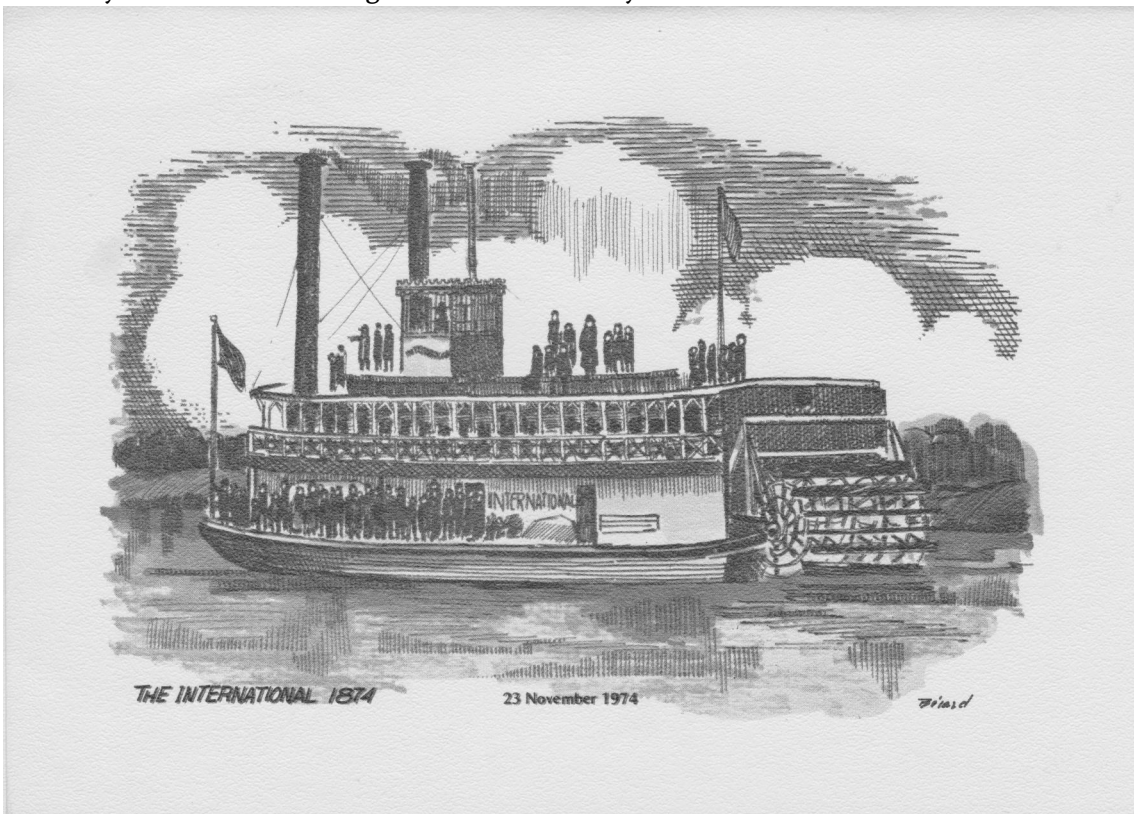
twelve from point to point. When we reach the Red River itself, we found the stream wide enough for us to go straight down it, less sinuous, but quite as muddy and uninteresting. Trees come down to the water's edge, and one can see nothing beyond them; behind stretches out the prairie, and every now and then we were just able to see how thin the screen of trees really is between the river and the plains" (qtd in McFadden 6).

## *Steamboats on the Red River*

The names of the immigrant ships that brought Russian Mennonites across the ocean during the 20th century are reasonably well known. In the 1870s, though, hundreds of Mennonites arrived in Manitoba via riverboat. Several thousand individuals, mostly from the "Old Colony" of Chortitza, found new homes in both the U.S. and Canada during that decade. The more progressive, flexible Mennonites tended to settle in the Great Plains of the United States. Those who were more traditionalist generally chose to occupy lands in the West and East Reserves of Manitoba. The first of the Canada-bound group, all from Bergthal Colony, arrived in Manitoba on the steamboat *International* in 1876. Theirs is a remarkable story.

## *Turmoil in the Russian empire*

The privileged status of Mennonites in Russia was in danger. As the decade of the 1870s approached, the authorities were engaged in the process of modernization, or Russification, an attempt to bring the empire closer to a European state model. Ethnic groups living in Russia were, in nationalist eyes, becoming suspect. State laws and regulations would apply to every citizen living in the empire, and that meant, for example, that Mennonites would now be subject to conscription. Representatives from the major colonies of



Heritage Series card, Clearbrook Golden Age Society. Printed A. Olfert & Sons. 1974.



Chortitza and Molotschna attempted to negotiate with the government but with no apparent success.

Traditionalists from Chortitza, Fuerstenland, and Bergthal were frustrated, even outraged. The *Privilegium* of 1800, which guaranteed them certain rights such as freedom from the obligation to serve in the military, was being disregarded. Promises, they felt, had been broken. Led by men such as Cornelius Jansen and Leonhard Sudermann, Mennonites began the search for a new land in which to settle, a land where a new *Privilegium* might be granted. The most outspoken among them were the traditionalist Kleine Gemeinde and occupants of Bergthal Colony.

To add fuel to the fire, in 1872 the Canadian government sent William Hespeler to Russia to assure Mennonites living there that, if they moved to Canada, they would have the “fullest assurance as to freedom from military service” (Krahn & Ens 2). Hespeler, a German-Canadian entrepreneur and politician living in Manitoba, was instrumental in convincing traditionalist Mennonites to settle on the Canadian prairies. After the Great War of 1917, Hespeler would be reviled for bringing German-speaking immigrants into Canada, and he would die in obscurity in Vancouver. That was far in the future, however. His efforts in 1872 prompted Mennonites to send a twelve-man delegation to North America to investigate possibilities for settlement there. The Kleine Gemeinde, a conservative reforming group of Mennonites established in the early 1800s, sent David Klassen and Cornelius Toews as their delegates. Bergthal Colony, traditionalist as well, dispatched Jacob Peters and Heinrich Wiebe to represent its interests.

### *An offshoot of the Old Colony*

The extraordinary story of the Bergthaler begins in 1833. Chortitza, the first Mennonite colony established in Russia, had grown so rapidly that many of its inhabitants were now landless. To mitigate the problem, the “Old Colony” bought a tract of land for the dispossessed – or for those who wished to start again. The new settlement on the open steppe, unbroken except for a rock outcropping on the northwest corner, was named Bergthal (mountain valley).

In 1836 active settlement began. The Bergthaler group turned out to be exceptionally traditionalist, with its religious traditions “varying little from the practices used in Danzig 100 years earlier” (Schroeder & Huebert

118). Education was universal but rudimentary. By the 1870s Bergthal Colony had flourished to the point that it had its own landless problems. Russification was the jolt that prompted the colony – in its entirety – to emigrate.

### *Scouting the prairie*

The two Bergthal delegates arrived in Berlin (now Kitchener), Ontario, in March of 1873 and were warmly welcomed, if a little oddly, by the wealthy and relatively assimilated Swiss Mennonite Jacob Y. Shantz. Shantz was a great promoter of settlement in Manitoba and even kept records of Mennonites moving there. The Bergthaler, however, took the long way around, investigating land prospects in Kansas, Texas, Colorado and Nebraska before sailing down the Red River to meet the other ten delegates in Manitoba. William Hespeler was waiting there to introduce them to the governor.

A group of twenty-four individuals on five wagons then travelled to the area which would later be known as the East Reserve. For most of them, the disappointment was palpable and immediate, nearly all of them leaving for the United States before they had even seen much of the East Reserve. The Kleine Gemeinde and Bergthaler delegates stayed behind and, accompanied by William Hespeler, inspected the lands later to be called the West Reserve.

A decision to settle in Manitoba was bolstered by assurances in Ottawa in July 1873 that a new *Privilegium* would be issued. Mennonite settlers were assured of exemption from military service; free land grants; the right to manage their own schools; the right not to take an oath in court; and last but not least, a cash grant for passage from Hamburg to Fort Garry (now Winnipeg) (Krahn & Ens 3). An elder later reported, “The congregation chose Canada because it is under the protection of the Queen of England and, therefore, we believe that the principle of nonresistance will be maintained there for a longer period of time and also that the school and the church will be under our own administration” (qtd in Krahn & Ens 3).

### *Mass migration*

The Colony of Bergthal made the decision to transplant its entire settlement to Manitoba between 1874 and 1876. Though it was difficult to sell their land, Bergthaler began moving out in 1874. The following year, a group waiting at a train station witnessed a red

Ethnic groups  
living in Russia  
were, in  
nationalist  
eyes,  
becoming  
suspect.

glow on the horizon: half the village of Bergthal was burning down. This catastrophe must have been regarded as symbolic.

Somehow the plans for moving an entire colony of almost 3,000 persons worked. After transplantation, 41 Bergthaler villages were founded on the East Reserve; the more progressive of the immigrants from the Old Colony tended to settle on the West Reserve. (Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites settled on both reserves.) “*Aller Anfang ist schwer*” – every beginning is difficult – runs the Mennonite proverb, and settlement on the vast northern prairies was extraordinarily hard. And it must have been the hardest for those first to arrive: a few hundred Bergthaler on the steamboat *International*.

### *Steamboats on the Red*

The North American continent was open for business – on land that was occupied by the Indigenous. In those days, that was not seen as an obstacle. The driving force for business trade on the Red River was Sir George Simpson, governor of the Hudson’s Bay Company; he was looking for ways to improve transport between St. Paul, Minnesota, and Fort Garry (which would be known as Winnipeg after the rebellion of the Métis under Louis Riel).

In this early version of “free trade,” the Americans were keenly interested as well. James W. Taylor, later American consul at Winnipeg, wrote, “When the whistle

Voyages took place only between April and October; the river was iced over during the rest of the year.

shall sound the advent of the first steamboat in Fort Garry, Bishop Tache, who has prayed so earnestly and waited so long, will spring instantly to his feet, and, raising his hands reverently above his head, exclaim, ‘In the name of God, let the bells of St. Boniface ring, for civilization has come’” (qtd in McFadden 4). Then the St. Paul Chamber of Commerce offered \$1,000 to the first person able to put a boat on the Red River. A St. Paul contractor, Anson Northup, took up the challenge, but not before negotiating an increase to his reward to \$2,000.

Northup purchased a boat called the *North Star*, sailed it part ways north, disassembled it, hauled the pieces 150 miles overland during one of the worst winters ever, re-assembled it, rechristened it the *Anson Northup*, and steamed triumphantly into Fort Garry on 10 June 1859.

His epic journey was made, however, partially in vain. Northup hoped to negotiate a lucrative contract with the Hudson’s Bay Company but the Burbank brothers stole the business from under his nose by reaching a secret deal with the Company. The Burbanks did, however, pay Northup \$8,000 for the boat, which was then again renamed the *Pioneer*. In 1861 the boat, once again under the ownership of the Hudson’s Bay Company, sank.

### *The International*

For a few years, river business sputtered on. In 1859 Captain John Pond’s boat, the *Freighter*, ran aground and was abandoned. Two years later, the enterprising Burbanks bought the ship, refurbished it, and rechristened it the *International*. The Hudson’s Bay Company subsequently bought the boat and put it into service carrying mail between Fort Garry and Pembina. Otherwise, though, the *International* was barely used. The entrepreneurial dream of cross-border river trade was nearly defunct by 1862.

The railroads, temporarily at least, changed everything. The Northern Pacific Railroad arrived in Moorhead, Minnesota, in 1871, facilitating trade between St. Paul and the Red River; trade could then continue north from the river port. American James Hill built the steamboat *Selkirk* – the Canadian-derived name invokes interna-

## Royalwood Farms Ltd

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Housebarn in Neubergthal, Manitoba. Photo: Louise Bergen Price

tional trade – and sailed it into Fort Garry/Winnipeg. The voyage caught the attention of the Hudson's Bay Company, which immediately put the *International* back into full-time operation. In partnership with Hill, the Company inaugurated the Red River Transportation Line. Business took off. Within a short time, the new firm was operating three new steamboats – the *Dakota*, *Alpha* and *Cheyenne* – as well as twenty barges.

In the midst of this flurry of activity, the Bergthaler arrived and contracted passage up the Red River on the *International*. A well-known photo documents its arrival in Manitoba.

### Endings

Steamboat trade flourished over the next few years.

Voyages took place only between April and October; the river was iced over during the rest of the year. The average trip between Moorhead, Minnesota, and Winnipeg took ten days. The *International* held the record for the quickest trip at five days and eighteen hours, the bad news being that two crewmen were lost during the voyage.

Thousands of traditionalist Mennonites, feeling betrayed, left for new colonies in Mexico.

By the 1880s, however, a new system of railroad traffic

was in place. The construction of the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad in the United States and of the Canadian Pacific Railway north of the border heralded a form of transport far more efficient than steamships on the Red River. Traffic by water sharply declined. Mennonite settlements in Manitoba also hit a roadblock. A mere fifty years later, the Canadian government reneged on promises made to Mennonites in 1873. Thousands of traditionalist Mennonites, feeling betrayed, left for new colonies in Mexico.

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## ***The Outsiders' Gaze.***

Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society,  
2015. 198 pp.

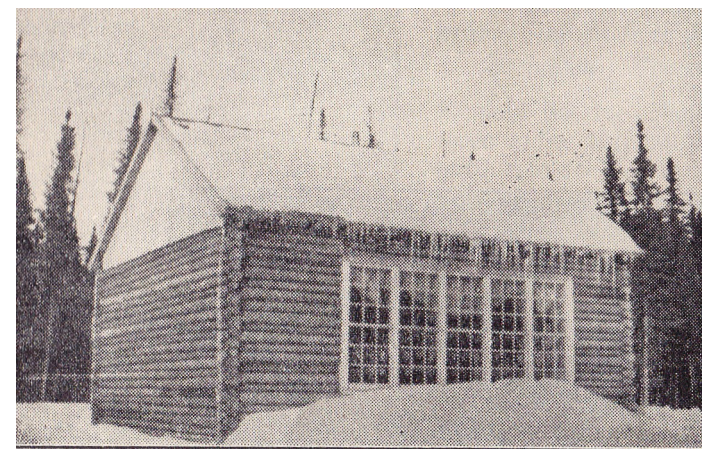
Reviewed by Robert Martens

*In '75 the few settlers at Pembina Mountain fondly hoped that in the course of fifteen or twenty years this plain would become settled, notwithstanding the absence of timber. Before the summer was over, a large line of camp fires, extending for miles and miles, announced one evening to the lonely settlers that six thousand Mennonites had located on seventeen townships. (Jeff Gee qtd in Outsiders' 162)*

To the "outside world," these settlers were a strange bunch. Between 1874 and 1880 about seven thousand Mennonites left their Russian homes and immigrated to Manitoba. These Mennonites were from the "conservative" wing, isolationist, and determined to hold on to their traditions of village, church, nonresistance, farming, and separation from the powers that be. These immigrants, the "Old Colony" Mennonites, came to Manitoba with government guarantees of non-conscription into the military; limited but strong self-governance of administration and education; and the right to not take the oath. They initially settled into villages based on their own Russian model: a long main street with narrow properties, with large assigned farming properties in the area surrounding the immediate village. They were a strange bunch indeed to "outsiders": these Mennonites were reclusive but talkative, niggardly but generous – and yet they soon thrived in treeless areas of Manitoba once considered of limited worth.

The editors of *The Outsiders' Gaze* have compiled an intriguing set of documents written by "outsiders," individuals from outside the Mennonite settlements who were trying to understand this insular German-speaking horde. Some of these writers have a good understanding of Mennonite history and culture; others are wildly misinformed, sometimes bigoted. All but one of these documents were written between 1874 and 1922. On the latter date, a new stream of Mennonites, this one very dif-

"...[T]hough the villages look fairly neat, on closer inspection the Mennonites do not give a great impression of cleanliness, and however pious they may be, do not carry out the next maxim to Godliness"



Das erste Schulhaus in Reesor, Nord-Ontario

Schoolhouse in Reesor, Ontario. Dyck: *Mennonitische Volkswarte* 1935, p. 44

ferent, fled Russia for Canada; thousands of these Russian refugees arrived in the Prairies just as many of the Old Colony were preparing to leave Manitoba for a more independent way of life in places such as Mexico.

The points of view in this book regarding this odd group of settlers range widely. The reclusive nature of the Old Colony Mennonites was a huge roadblock to un-

derstanding; even American John F. Funk, editor of the *Herald of Truth*, speaks of his fellow-Mennonites almost as though they were an alien race.

Three general perspectives, however, predominate in this book:

1. These immigrants are filthy, ignorant and stingy. "...[T]hough the villages look fairly neat, on closer inspection the Mennonites do not give a great im-

pression of cleanliness, and however pious they may be, do not carry out the next maxim to Godliness" (*Manitoba Free Press* 49-50). These perceptions may be due to the primitive and harsh conditions of Mennonite life in the early years.

2. The Old Colony are romanticized as bearers of honest tradition. "Their business integrity is of a very high order. In fact, this is so generally recognized that banks are eager for their paper, and loan companies place them high on the list of desirable borrowers" (E. Cora Hind 107). This same writer, a feminist who petitioned Ottawa for the female vote, describes Mennonite homes in rap-turous terms.

3. These Mennonites are excellent foreign settlers but need to be assimilated to a progressive society. "[A]



"The Mennonite German is a barbarous dialect; it has not been improved by ninety years' sojourn in Russia. But it served as a medium of communication."

young Mennonite wearing good Canadian clothing and speaking good English readily, is, in person, no way distinctive from his fellow of British heritage. This is as it should be" (J.

F. Galbraith 138). From this perspective, the breaking down of the Mennonite village system and the conversion to individual section farming can only be a good thing – and, naturally, the assimilation of Mennonite children into public schools is entirely desirable.

*The Outsiders' Gaze* contains opinions (and some intriguing stories) so divergent that the book might best be described by quoting the writers themselves. Here are a few excerpts:

\*"All innovations such as choirs, organs, and fervent preaching were frowned upon. Sermons of prodigious length were read monotonously in 'high German' from manuscripts, but the uncomfortable, backless, wooden seats warded off drowsiness" (C. A. Dawson 8).

\*"In fact all are quite satisfied, and appear to be the most happy set of people it has been my lot to meet. They are very kind and sociable and will make good neighbours to those who settle next to them" (J. W. Down 23).

\*"The Mennonite German is a barbarous dialect; it has not been improved by ninety years' sojourn in Russia. But it served as a medium of communication. ... The Mennonites are, almost without exception, well-to-do people. What is the mysterious connection between the doctrine of non-resistance and worldly prosperity? Why do they always go together?" (Henry J. Van Dyck 40, 41)

\*"I have been informed that the older Mennonites look with disfavor on their younger brethren and sisters, for hiring out with Canadians, and means are being used to prevent it as much as possible. The old folk have a rather sad expression of countenance, but the young people are about as jolly and laugh as heartily as most other young folk do" (David Currie 46).

\*"As a race, they are thrifty and industrious, but their neighbours say the women do most of the work" (*Manitoba Free Press* 50).

\*"They are temperate; but they are not water drinkers on principle. They relish a glass of whiskey and still more a glass of brandy if they can enjoy it without payment" (W. Fraser Rae 64).

\*"Mennonites reject ecclesiastical tradition, the writings of the Church Fathers and the decisions of councils. For Mennonites the Holy Scripture is the only rule of faith and, despite their profound ignorance, each believes they better fathom the meaning of Scripture than the most learned doctors" (Fr. Jean-Théobald Bitsche 73).

\*"When once settled, they remain, and look upon the place as their home, working the land with the best intention of making the best of it, without any idea of selling and moving on should an opportunity occur of turning their holdings into cash, and thus restlessly seeking a new home almost before they had become established in their old one" (W. Henry Barneby 83).

\*"The Mennonite women do not take any active part in public affairs. In domestic concerns, they are supreme. If there is any final authority required the woman is most emphatically the head of the house" (E. Cora Hind 104).

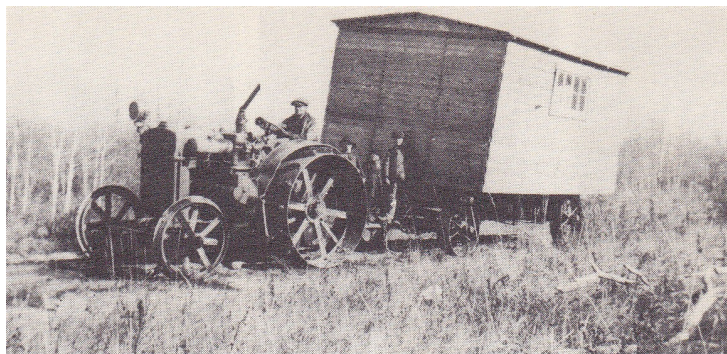
\*"Still, it is a remarkable fact that amidst that capitalist civilisation some twenty thousand men should continue to live, and to thrive, under a system of partial communism and passive resistance to the State which they have maintained for more than three hundred years against all persecutions" (Peter Kropotkin 114).

\*"One aim of Mennonite life, it seems, is to keep its people loyal to the soil. And that is a fundamental thing in these days of farm-need. ... It is a Mennonite custom to have coffee and bread-and-butter and perhaps jam, every afternoon at four o'clock. The men leave off ploughing and come in from the fields for their cup of this refreshing hot drink. ... I fear that all our Canadian farmers are

"They are temperate; but they are not water drinkers on principle. They relish a glass of whiskey and still more a glass of brandy if they can enjoy it without payment."

not so well looked after by their wives in the cold autumn afternoons at the ploughing! The coffee is ground fresh in the little mill over the stove at every making – a pointer for any who wish to adopt this custom" (Victoria Hayward 194-5).

*The Outsiders' Gaze* is available for purchase online or can be accessed in the MHSBC library.



"Moving." Source: Quiring: *Mennonites in Canada*, p. 19

# Saying Goodbye to Ed Hildebrand

By Louise Bergen Price

Ed Hildebrand, long-time member and supporter of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC, died peacefully in his sleep on December 22, 2017. His life and work were instrumental in shaping MHSBC into what it is today.

Ed's father, Dietrich Hildebrand, immigrated to Canada from South Russia in 1923, settling in Saskatchewan. In 1927, he married Mary Hooze, a fellow Russian Mennonite. A year later, their first son, Edwin, was born.

Ed's earliest memories were of playing in the hot sun with his brother and sister, and of the busy threshing season. But the family would not stay in the prairies long.

When the Depression made farming impossible, his parents packed up what little they had and moved to Greendale, BC, in 1934, where Ed started school. Two years later, they moved again, to Vancouver. Ed remembered that "[during]

these years we were poor, but as children we never really felt deprived. ... Everyone we knew was equally poor, so we were all happy together. Our poverty was not of the 'grinding' variety, at least not as far as we children were concerned. ... Luxuries we had none. Our idea of a holiday was to spend two weeks in the hopyards. There we could live in a cabin away from home and earn a few dollars. The cabins were only rude shacks with wood bunks, straw mattresses, and communal bathrooms. We only earned a few dollars for working dawn till dusk but to us it was a splendid holiday" (Hildebrand 182-3).

After high school graduation, Ed worked for a firm in the lumber business. It was the start of a successful career that would see him eventually become CEO of Western Forest Products.

After his retirement, he was able to devote himself to an interest in history and genealogy. In 1990 he began working on *Hildebrand: A Family History*. At first, the object was a family genealogy, but it soon grew into something much larger. In Ed's words: "Then I said to myself, 'Why not try to do better? Why not go back as far as you can and relate where and how these people lived?'" (7)

Through his research, Ed was able to trace the family history back to a likely ancestor, Heinrich Hildebrand, born in 1700 on the outskirts of Danzig. Throughout the book, genealogies and stories of Ed's ancestors are interspersed with the history of the times. Ed states that while this his-

tory may be well-known to his contemporaries, "this book is really written for future generations" (7). Often, Ed's wry humour slips into the narrative, as when he writes, "We do not have detailed information on the Hildebrand farm or the settlement called Herzenberg because this writer was not smart enough, or interested enough, to ask his father or uncles the right questions when they were still alive" (88).

His strong interest in history led Ed to become involved with the fledgling Mennonite Historical Society of BC. In order to publicize lectures and other events, Ed put together a one-page newsletter that would eventually grow into the periodical *Roots and Branches*. During his fourteen years on the board (1995-2009), Ed also served as treasurer and secretary. David Giesbrecht, a fellow board member for many years, credited Ed with stable leadership, careful financial management, wise council at board meetings, and significant bridge-building within the Mennonite community, as well as being a mentor and visionary.

Ed's visionary role resulted in what is now known as the



Edward and Agnes Hildebrand circa 1950.

Source: Hildebrand: a Family history, p. 184.

Edward D. Hildebrand Endowment Fund, created in 1990 with contributions from several individuals. Later, Ed augmented the Endowment with a significant financial gift. According to board chair, Richard Thiessen, the Fund has been crucial to the success of MHSBC – approximately 20% of the Society's annual operating revenue derives from interest drawn from the Fund. He emphasizes that "the Fund has created a stable financial position for the Society that is unmatched by any other Mennonite Historical Society in Canada.

Income generated by the Fund has been used to supplement membership and donation income, and assets in the Fund have been used by the Society to purchase capital assets, particularly in conjunction with the move to the Museum in 2015."

Ed was a man of many accomplishments, but perhaps the following quote expresses his legacy best: "Throughout his life, Edward took it upon himself to give more to the world than he took back, and should be remembered for the many lives he made better through his hard work and industry" ("Obituary").

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*Your contributions are needed to further this work! All donations will be receipted for tax purposes. Please note that, for reasons of legality, membership fees cannot be receipted for tax purposes.*

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**Design:** Heather Pauls Murray

**Staff:** Jennifer Martens, Mary Ann Quiring

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

## Gallery Opening

**Christopher Friesen exhibit: *Scroll Through History***

May 11, 2018, Mennonite Heritage Museum

Reported by Robert Martens

A steady stream of young and old trickled through the doors of the Mennonite Heritage Museum on Friday, May 11. The attraction was a brand-new exhibit by Fraser Valley artist Christopher Friesen, currently residing in Langley. Some of the younger crowd were Friesen's art students – Friesen teaches at the University of the Fraser Valley.

Perhaps "brand-new exhibit" is a case of hyperbole: most of these water-colour paintings were recently shown at The Reach Gallery and Museum in Abbotsford. Friesen told me that he had added several new works and had intended to display yet another. Time had prevented that, however, as Friesen is going on sabbatical, and he has been working without a break just to keep up.

While visiting a collection in New York City, Friesen's attention was caught by the paintings of pre-impressionist Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796-1875), especially the landscapes among them. He admired the obvious brush strokes in Corot's work. Previously, Christopher told me, he had been involved in abstract art but decided to take the risk of a radical break into landscape by "re-creating" the works of Corot. Corot, he said, was an incredibly prolific painter, creating 3,000 works during his lifetime. Today, said Friesen, 10,000 of those are in the United States – counterfeits, of course.

Landscapes, he remarked, are rarely done anymore. Friesen decided to integrate, as is currently common in the art world, the abstract and the representational in his *Scroll Through History* series. He uses Corot's titles for his own paintings, transformations of the original Corots, after which the Friesen version can be compared with those of the French master. Christopher has diverged from Corot by deleting all human figures from his own artwork: first, because art without human figures works better in the digital world, for example, *Instagram*; second, because Canadian landscape painters like the Group of Seven have traditionally been all landscape with no human content.

When I asked about the ecological implications of his work, Christopher responded that he sees the Fraser Valley in Corot's paintings – the landscapes are that similar.

Source  
[www.cristallgallery.com](http://www.cristallgallery.com)





*Ville d'avray cowherd in a clearing near a pond 1872*, 46x67 oil, acrylic wash on canvas, 2018, by Chris Friesen.