



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



Lois Klassen's rose garden. Photo: Julia Born Toews

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Upcoming Events
MHSBC Annual Fundraiser

The Mennonite Farmer and the State: Friend or Foe in the Global Context

with Dr. Royden Loewen, chair of Mennonite studies at University of Winnipeg. 23 Sept, 2:30pm, King Rd MB, 32068 King Rd, Abbotsford. \$15 tickets include faspas!

The annual fundraiser for the Mennonite Historical Society of BC will feature Dr. Royden Loewen, chair of Mennonite Studies and professor of history at the University of Winnipeg. He is also the editor of the annual publication *Journal of Mennonite Studies*. The fundraiser will take place at 2:30 pm, 23 September 2018, at King Road MB Church, 32068 King Road, Abbotsford.

Dr. Loewen's topic will be "The Mennonite Farmer and the State: Friend or Foe in the Global Context." Mennonites have a long history in agriculture. Their relationships as farming communities with the state in its diverse forms – monarchic, communist, authoritarian, or democratic – have been varied and often stormy. Royden Loewen, always a captivating speaker, knows this subject matter well.

We'd love to see you at the fundraiser. Karen Bergen's catering service will provide light food, or *faspas*, after the talk, and the MEI Concert Choir will provide music. Cost is a mere \$15.00. See the MHSBC website for updates.

Genealogy Workshop

For the genealogists, our don't-miss Annual Genealogy Workshop will be held Friday-Saturday November 9 (evening) and November 10, 2018. Experts Dr. Glenn Penner and Dr. Tim Janzen will present.



Barn on Hilliers Estate farm, Qualicum. Photo: Bergen Farms

Editorial

By Robert Martens

Mennonites have historically been hostile to art – or so goes the stereotype. But stereotypes are clichés, and clichés are half-truths. In my possession are the complete works of Schiller, inherited from my teacher grandfather. The great German writers such as Goethe and Schiller constituted a kind of pantheon for Russian Mennonites.

It's true that the ethic of simplicity, asceticism, and unadorned lifestyle were part of the Anabaptist-Mennonite story from the very beginning, and that this ethic is a counter to literature and art, perceived as mere frivolous adornment. During the Dutch "Golden Age" of Mennonitism, that was only partially true, however. Mennonite painting and writing flourished.

As Mennonites moved on, the "quiet in the land" retreated from social and artistic engagement. Mennonites in Russia, though, towards the end of their sojourn there, were becoming increasingly sophisticated in music performance, church architecture, and the study of literature – as noted above – but lost all that with the advent of revolution.

It took some time for Russian Mennonite immigrants to Canada to recover any interest in the arts. Living was often hand-to-mouth. The ethnic group, struggling to survive, did not easily abide criticism. In the last decades, however, Mennonite literature has become a robust force in Canada.

This issue of *Roots and Branches* touches down, ever so slightly, into that rich world of Mennonites and the arts.

Letter to the editors

I joyfully read *Roots and Branches* from cover to cover as soon as it arrives. The tranquil painting by Chris Friesen on the current cover is a cooling summer treat. However, I am sorry to hear a few negative tones. Some critics infer that the cruelty and slaughter Mennonites experienced was meted out to them because of mistreatment of Russian servants and villagers. Perhaps it sometimes happened, but the journals of my mother, Maria Martens, show the opposite: their interdependence. I am sharing a bit with you.

Although the original Mennonite agreement with the Russian government forbade proselytizing to their religion, it did not prevent them from sharing their faith while living and working together.

Before the era of electric appliances, most large households needed domestic help. In Franz and Katharina Martens' home in Altonau No. 9, they usually had an indoor and outdoor helper, but in summer, and during the busy harvest time, additional workers were needed. Fortunately, there were willing workers in nearby Russian villages.

The Martens home hosted many visitors and long-term guests. Franz, as minister and *Ältester*, travelled much and frequently brought home fellow conference attendees, etc.. Eldest daughter Tina earlier had studied abroad and on return invited classmates in, and conducted Sunday school classes in the back yard. She and two friends were preparing for mission work in Africa, but started evangelizing at home. All these people needed a well-kept place to stay with good food provided.

When Katharina Martens and her eldest daughter travelled to a clinic for a month's medical treatment, 13-year-old Maria, just out of local school, was left in charge of the household. Katharina Martens had prepared a weekly menu and a proportional food chart for the work crew. Together with Russian Nadeschda and Warka, a soldier's wife, they fared well. The only mishap was that when the girls brought food to the harvesters in the

field, they forgot to bring salt for their first meal.

For seven years Pawlo worked seasonally with Maria's father Franz. When Pawlo prepared to go home, in addition to his wages Franz Martens gave him a new suit or material for one. Pawlo's wife questioned this generosity, and so the next year Katharina Martens also sent material for his wife and knitted stockings for their child. Later, when Pawlo was drafted into the army, they also sent him food parcels.

A young riding helper, Jaschka, 15, was let go after harvest, too. Slowly and reluctantly he walked toward the yard fence and leaned over it crying. When Martens asked, "Why are you crying?" he replied, "I want to stay here." My Grandpa Martens soon found things for Jaschka to do so he could remain.

Two more examples of good relationships:

1. Maria's grandmother took 16-year-old Susana to a Russian village for native home remedy treatment.

They stayed there so the teenager would hopefully recover from her rheumatic fever and painful ulcers.

2. On the dreadful November 29, 1919, night of Nestor Machno's slaughtering rampage, the Martens girls were directed to take a buggy and hurry to their former Russian worker's home. There they found refuge and were reconnected with their parents.

However, the Martens family's past kindness did not shield them from atrocity. Wilhelm, their only son, was shot and 22 more close relatives were also murdered. Many other families lived and suffered similarly.

Hilda J. Klassen Born
Abbotsford

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Katherina and Franz W. Martens. Photo courtesy of Hilda J. Klassen Born

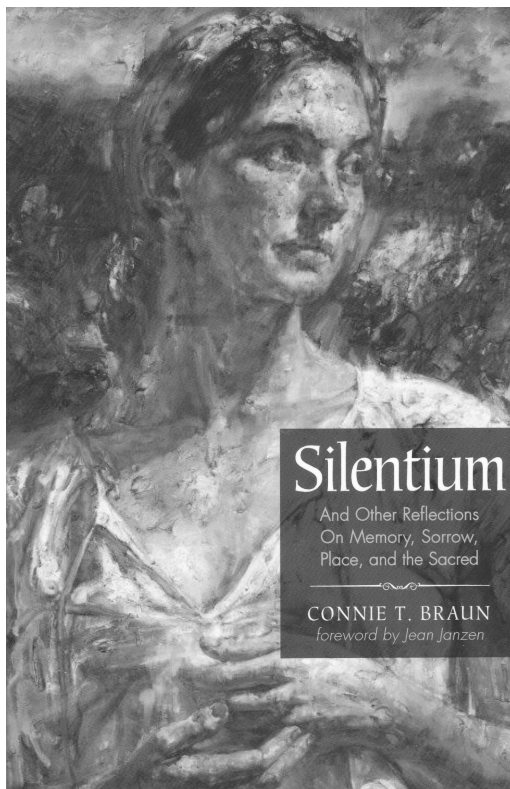
Book Launch

Connie Braun, *Silentium*, April 18, 2018

Reported by Louise Bergen Price

“Silence also tells a story.”

Silentium, Connie Braun’s reflections of her mother’s life through memoir, poetry, and personal essay, is not only a book to read from cover to cover, but a source to



dip in, time and again, revealing new insights with each reading.

Her reflections go well beyond her mother’s story and extend to Braun’s own life journey, exploring what it means to grow up as a child of refugees, living in the shadow of loss and in the silence that often accompa-

nies trauma. Rather than “probe and dig” for information, Braun said at her lecture that she learned to “reflect more, listen, and trust that silence also tells a story.”

“I believe truth seeks the light,” Braun said. “We crack the door into darkness, and eventually the stories seek their own light.” It is important to mourn our own history in order to “recognize the stories of others that need to be acknowledged and mourned.”

In mourning her own history, Braun did not shy from difficult subjects, including her visit to the site of a Jewish death camp near Stuffhof (or Sztutowo, near Gdansk, Poland) with Stanislaw, their Polish guide. She learned that 56 Mennonite families lived in the village itself, some involved in the building of the camp, others hiring Jewish slave workers. “The story of my heritage is tangled with this story, and confronted by darkness here...” she commented (148).

Braun’s lecture and readings followed the same trajectory as the book, beginning with her childhood understanding of her background, to the various trips she made to Poland – her mother’s place of birth – to arrive at “not the end of the journey, but the place where I am trying to piece together my own path to a kind of spiritual healing.”

Silentium and Other reflections on Memory, Story, Place and the Sacred is published by Wipf and Stock, 2017, and is available from booksellers and at the Mennonite Heritage Museum bookshop.

Gallery Opening

Three Second Peaks, paintings by Neil Peter Dyck

January 26, 2018

Reported by Robert Martens

Artist Neil Peter Dyck could not possibly be described as pushy or aggressive. At the opening reception of his art exhibit at the Mennonite Heritage Museum, Dyck was asked to speak a few words into a microphone. He mentioned that his artwork was inspired originally by the landscapes of southern Manitoba; then, “I don’t know what else to say. I’m happy you came.”

At that point, Museum chair Richard Thiessen took the initiative to ask questions. He asked Dyck first about his unique artistic style. It’s a process, said Dyck of laying



Neil Dyck on the left, with Richard Thiessen.

Photo: Louise Bergen Price

down tape, then using paint, photos, or online images to complete the work. The style, he said, has become more

elaborate with the years.

How, asked one of the fifty some attendees, did your style evolve? Dyck credited his experience in art school in 2003, as well as his time spent with interior painting, where laying down tape is part of the job. The artistic process, he said, is natural and intuitive. When he starts a painting, he doesn't really know how it will turn out. With time, though, he has come to know in advance how one layer will affect another. The results are a kind of collage.

A very young attendee asked, how long have you been painting? Since childhood, Dyck replied; his current style has emerged over the last fifteen or sixteen years. With that, the formal part of the evening ended.

Dyck's brilliantly coloured artwork conveys a spirit of joy that is irresistible. He is a Manitoban artist currently based in Vancouver, BC. Dyck has exhibited across Canada, including the Toronto International Art Fair, and was awarded the Heinz Jordan Prize in Painting in 2004 and 2005 and the Artist in Residence in Yellowknife, NWT in February 2016.

Gallery Opening ***Stars and Dark Matter,*** **Quilts by Lois Klassen**

2 pm, 15 June 2018, Mennonite Heritage Museum

Reported by Robert Martens

On a very warm spring afternoon, some seventy-five individuals attended a gallery opening featuring the vibrant quilts – fabric art – of Lois Klassen. Her exhibit, *Stars and Dark Matter*, focuses on light interacting with dark. Our moments of joy, said Klassen, like the light in her quilts, are better appreciated when darkness stands as a backdrop.

From early childhood, said Lois, she had been interested in fabric design. Her mother made clothes, working without patterns, based on images in fashion magazines. In the 1970s, Lois began quilting, her work evolving significantly over time: "I'm not so interested in function anymore," she said, "but more interested now in solving creative puzzles." Her art has become "more playful, bold and bright."

Why the title for the exhibit, *Stars and Dark*

Matter? First of all, Klassen's fabric art features "a lot of stars," she said. Then, when searching the internet for the meaning of dark matter, she came across an image of blackness broken by bursts of light. Whatever the actual scientific definition of dark matter, the title seemed natural, she said, since she has always been interested in how dark interrelates with light. Klassen remarked that she likes to inject "an element of chaos" – dark matter? – into her work.

Klassen's quilts are entirely machined, made with cotton purchased from local shops. She works without computer assist or stitch regulator. Consequently, looking closely, "you will find irregularities." She remarked that "in being a Mennonite, I'm reverting to type." Lois is also involved in making refugee quilts, another common Mennonite practice. There is nothing insular about her quilts, though; their implications are universal.



Lois Klassen with one of her featured quilts. Photo: Julia Born Toews

Pieter Pietersz, Mennonite Reformer and Writer

By Robert Martens

The citizens of seventeenth century Netherlands were riding a wave of prosperity greater than anything previously seen. Fed by an ethic of hard work, especially among the Dutch Reformed and Mennonites, a new capitalism emerged, providing a level of affluence that anticipated the wealth of our contemporary Western world. A willingness to take great financial risks in order to accumulate capital was characteristic of the time. The result was often conspicuous consumption. A Dutch historian wrote in 1662 that many of the homes of business owners boasted “splendid marble and alabaster columns, floors inlaid with gold, and the rooms hung with valuable tapestries of gold- or silver-stamped leather” (qtd Koop 61). It seemed that economic progress would have no end.

The Golden Age

The Netherlands of the 1600s was an exhilarating place in which to live. After throwing off the shackles of their tyrannical Spanish overlords, the Dutch exulted in a political and commercial freedom that turned their tiny nation into a global economic superpower.

Agriculture still thrived, but the chances for making real wealth could be found in weaving and textiles, shipbuilding, whaling, and especially the booming trade in herring, so valuable that Dutch ships needed to be armed. The average standard of living skyrocketed. Under these conditions, it is no wonder that some church leaders were wondering aloud whether a rich man or woman could still achieve salvation. It is a contemporary stereotype that Protestant churches heartily endorsed the rise of wealth, that prosperity was regarded as a blessing from the Creator. On the contrary, the Reformed clergy of the time warned against excessive self-indulgence, emphasizing that greed and ostentation could destroy their congregations’ special covenant with God.

The opulence and social sophistication was such that it has become known, among Mennonites, as the Golden Age. For some Mennonite reformers of that time, however, the age was not so “golden.” Pieter Pietersz (1574-

1651) was a leading and outspoken voice among them. Of course poverty was still an immense social problem, but the typical Mennonite was now prosperous, and throughout his adult life Pietersz called for a return to the simple values of Anabaptism. Pietersz was a Dutch Mennonite preacher, serving the congregation at De Rijp from 1600 to 1625, and then at Zaandam until his death. He was a member of the more “liberal” Waterlander faction which had been formed in the 1550s as a reaction to the harsh policy of the ban and excommunication among “Mennists.” He was also a participant in the Mennonite discussion groups which called themselves *Vredestadsburgers* (citizens of the city of peace) and advocated a reformation of devotional and ethical beliefs. The *Vredestadsburgers* based their new spirituality on the popular mysticism of Thomas á Kempis, Johannes Tauler, and Meister Eckhart, but also emphasized an active life of discipleship and concern for the poor.

Holding a mirror to fellow-Mennonites

Pietersz was not a trained minister. His early vocation had been that of windmill maker, but during his lifetime he wrote prolifically, creating tracts and books that were

later read by Mennonites around the world, and especially by the reform-minded Kleinegemeinde. One of his most significant works was *Spiegel der Giergheydt*, or *Mirror of Greed*, written in the form of a dialogue between a faithful believer and an ambitious man who seeks only wealth and honour. The essay insistently calls for a return to the Anabaptist ideals of simplicity and mutual aid. Faithful Christians, writes Pietersz, will avoid the excessive accumulation of capital, and minister to the destitute without

regard to their religious beliefs. Money, he writes, is not inherently evil. However, an obsession with money, the state of greed, is a profound sin. The choice, Pietersz writes, is between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of earth. The true believer will take Christ’s teachings absolutely seriously, and will live out a life that places righteousness over temporal security. And such a life should not be onerous. It is not a subjection to divine coercion, but an inner conviction that arises out of a God-given joy. And the church community, emphasizes Pie-

Money, he writes, is not inherently evil. However, an obsession with money, the state of greed, is a profound sin.

tersz, should be united in the kingdom of heaven. Karl Koop describes Pietersz' convictions this way: "As various kernels of corn are brought together with water and then baked through fire without exuding differences, so also true Christendom consisted in the unity of Christians formed to become one bread. That being the case, it was no longer possible for rich Christians and poor Christians to live alongside one another, where the social and economic discrepancies and injustices were blatantly obvious" (69). The essay ends, of course, with the capitulation of the greedy man to the virtuous one.

The road to a city of peace

Pietersz' best known work is *Wegh na Vreden-stadt*, or *Way to the City of Peace*, a book written again in the form of a dialogue. It bears some resemblance to John Bunyan's masterpiece, *Pilgrim's Progress*, written some time later, thus giving rise to speculation that Bunyan may have borrowed a bit from his Dutch predecessor. Pietersz' divine kingdom, however, is more bound to the present place and time, rather than focusing on a perfect heaven after death. Salvation is closely tied to a journey of discipleship, to God's few simple commandments of love. The primary virtue is *Gelassenheit*, complete surrender to the goodness of God. Babel, the world of power and wealth, must be profoundly rejected. However, it should be noted that Pietersz is always careful to buttress his arguments with Scripture, and that justification by grace is frequently mentioned. Scripture is the paramount authority, backed by reason, experience, and tradition.

Are there merchants in the City of Peace? "The kind you describe who create chaos and forget God we do not have. ... Those who are here have the name of God written on their forehead. ... Their buying and selling is sim-

ple, without deception, or scheming, where, at the least, no one seeks to undermine or gain advantage over another, treating others as they would want to be treated themselves" (qtd in Harder 5). True followers of Christ "look upon big banquets, excessive drinking, expensive clothes and jewelry, large houses and decorations as needless expenses" (qtd in Harder 6). Pietersz also addresses the issue of protection of merchant vessels by arms: "there are still so many who want to carry the

Christian name yet sail out on ships loaded with ammunition for war, powder and lead, guns and swords in order to protect their goods" (6). The faithful Christian community, writes Pietersz, "are so completely nonresistant even as sheep resist no one, but seek to flee, leaving their wool on the thistles, hedges, and fences" (Harder 6).

And what should be the believer's attitude towards authority? Obey the authorities, says Pietersz, but do not serve in positions of power such as magistrate. The leaders of the City of Peace are very different from that of the "world": "the very least of Christian brothers may unashamedly speak to them and counsel them ... they receive teaching as gladly as they teach ... they do not seek their own, but what is best for the neighbour" (7). The fundamental quality of the City of Peace is the unity of all its citizens, from the least to the greatest. Even if there is disuni-

ty, true followers of peace would not be troubled, "for they belong to God and are well content; then their heart does not become troubled or restless" (8).

The flawed moralist

Pietersz was of course not always capable of heeding his own teachings. Ironically, despite his constant appeals to church unity, he himself was caught up in major theological quarrels. He could be rather highhandedly moral-

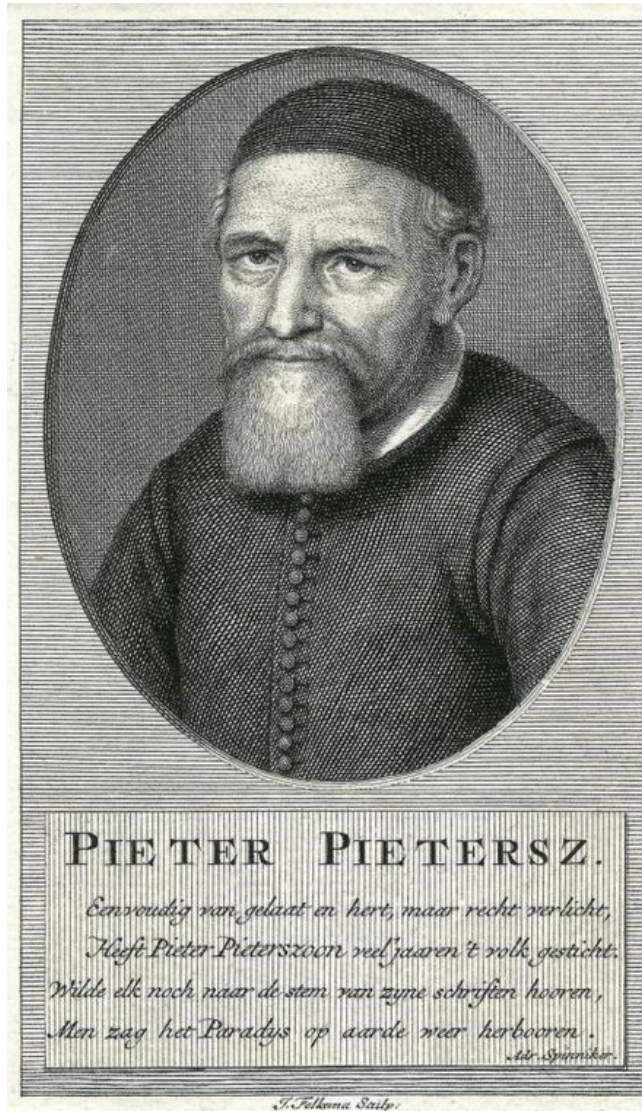


Photo: GAMEO

istic: he writes that the narrow road “offers pleasures for the eyes and flesh, with beer and wine in the celebration of the god Bacchus: whatever one wishes, to fill the stomach as each one pleases, as the masses go by, drunkards, whoremongers, exhibitionists, greedy people, haughty people, cruel people, selfish people” (qtd in Harder 9). Regarding tobacco, he writes: “Time is so precious and passes so quickly that we must use it wisely to bear the fruit for God. ... All is wiped out through this

“...I advise all simple people who have not yet formed this habit, keep yourself pure, and use your time better than by blowing smoke and stink”

shameful practice. Therefore I advise all simple people who have not yet formed this habit, keep yourself pure, and use your time better than by blowing smoke and stink” (9). Yet even at his most preachy, Pietersz exhibits a remarkable charm and tolerance: “But if someone in great need uses this [tobacco] as medicine for sick eyes or other illness, using it in so-

briety without causing offence to others, even as other medicine is used, that is another matter. For all created things can be good in a measure” (9).

Finally, is it possible here on earth to create the kind of utopia that the City of Peace represents? In the conclusion to his book, Pietersz declares that the perfect and divine community is more a journey than an end: “Some might conclude, since there is no strife in the City of Peace and no greedy person lives there ... this must be understood as speaking of the fully mature, who have achieved perfect peace. ... I have made known in this booklet my opinions and faith, that is: that it is possible in this life, by God’s grace, to live in peace with a good conscience and with one’s soul at rest, so that one is content with the leading of God. ... But this state is not reached in a day, or in a year, but by the steps we climb, and through diligent persistence in the school of Christ to which end we have the holy life of Christ as example” (9). The citizens of the City of Peace are travellers, broken by circumstance and imperfection, but inwardly and deeply aware of the perfect ways of love.

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The following is an excerpt from the writings of Pieter Pietersz.

I live with the Peace-makers for they are my children. I reside with the humble who are of a contrite spirit. I dwell with those who love me for they keep my sayings. I reside with those who count all things but injury and dung for the sake of the excellency and knowledge of me. I live with those who want nothing other than what God wants. I dwell with those who would want to say with truth, “Lord, if only I have You, I desire for nothing else under heaven or on earth.”

I gladly live with those who lament their own transgressions before me with earnest repentance and who seek my grace with firm trust. I reside with those who are poor in spirit and who consider themselves the least of all the blessed ones and at all times in humility esteem each other higher than themselves. I dwell with those who receive all things from my hand with thanks, poverty as well as wealth, suffering as well as joy, reproach as well as good favour. I reside with those who are pure in heart for they shall eternally look upon me with joy.

These are the ones in which I dwell, this is the true Israel of God, these are the new creatures. This is the poor wretched people which I have preserved for myself, and they trust in my name. These are those who hate injustice, including covetousness. These are the ones that I show my hidden treasures. These are the ones who have left everything for my sake. And therefore in me they find eternal peace.

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**“The Mennonite Preacher Anslo:
‘Whoever wishes to see Anslo must also
hear him’”**

“Der Mennonitenprediger Anslo: ‘Wer Anslo sehen will, der muss ihn hören.’” Jahrbuch für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay Jahrgang 17 (Nov. 2016): 77-85.

By Uwe Friesen

Translated by Robert Martens

My first contact with the Mennonite preacher Anslo occurred in the year 2000 during a guided tour of the Gemäldegalerie Berlin, where we paused before this work of art. Our museum guide spoke thoughtfully and respectfully on the content and background of the painting. Since that time this rather innocuous experience has stayed with me.

And still, each time that I see this picture on a wall, at least three things strike me: the woman with the bright cloth in her hand; the open hand of the male; the thick books on the table. And the question arises, “What do these images say to me?” Long ago I determined to enter more deeply into this painting, to understand how it came about.

What and who then are standing before me? To clarify: In 1641, Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1606-1669) fashioned an oil painting entitled *The Mennonite Preacher Anslo and His Wife* on canvas, with dimensions of 176 x 210 centimetres. It remains one of the most remarkable works of art in the *Gemäldegalerie* (art gallery) – at least for me – and at the same time it is highly unusual, indeed peculiar, how a Mennonite couple have been represented by means of light and shadow; and how over centuries it still speaks to people of varying languages, cultures, and faiths. The Mennonite Cornelis Klaesz Anslo was during his time a not overly well-known Mennonite preacher and cloth merchant in Amsterdam. In the painting, words that are not audible to the ear interact with the visible images. Beside the man sits his wife. Speaking and listening – those are my first impressions of the work of art.

I begin my search for an answer to the questions: Why did Rembrandt decide to “immortalize” this married couple? What is he endeavouring to say? Was he himself a Mennonite, an Anabaptist?

Let us look more closely at the life of this world-renowned artist.



Self-portrait 1660, by Rembrandt. Source: Wikipedia

Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1606-1669)

Rembrandt was born July 15, 1606 in Leiden and died October 4, 1669 in Amsterdam. He was the eighth of nine children; his father was a miller, and his mother, a baker. Over the years he has become known as the greatest artist of what is known in Europe as the baroque era, lasting from the end of the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth. He is usually known by his first name, Rembrandt.

Rembrandt attended primary school from 1612 to 1616, and then, from 1616 to 1620, a Calvinist Latin school in which he was schooled in biblical history and the classics. After a brief period of art education in Leiden with the painter Pieter Lastman, Rembrandt opened his own art studio in 1625 in his parents' home. In 1631 he moved to the great city of Amsterdam, where he soon achieved recognition as a notable artist, taking numerous commissions for portraits from wealthy entrepreneurs. In 1632 alone, for example, he was commissioned to do thirty art pieces.

Not only was Rembrandt a gifted painter, he was also enormously talented in drawing and etching. He taught emerging young artists in his studio. His own works of art encompassed landscapes, life-like portraits, self-portraits clearly defined by gesture and facial feature, as

well as numerous depictions of mythological and biblical characters. He especially loved working with contrast in darkness and light; this feature is clear in the portrait of the Mennonite preacher. Today it is known that he produced about 350 important paintings, 300 etchings, and 1000 drawings.

The private life of Rembrandt

On July 2, 1634, he married Saskia van Uylenburgh, the daughter of a prosperous nobleman. Three children were born to the couple, two of whom died in childhood. Rembrandt had a difficult relationship with his in-laws, who accused him of being a spendthrift. His wife's death in 1642 left a huge gap in his life, and his artistic productivity waned. New relationships led to further complications, even landing him in court.

Throughout this time Rembrandt was accepting lucrative commissions but this did not prevent him from falling into additional difficulties, and in 1656 he was declared insolvent. In advanced age he was able to work in the businesses of friends and take new orders; teaching students was also a source of income.

On October 4, 1669, Rembrandt died penniless but famous. Already in his lifetime he was known as an exceptional artist, one of the best of his century: even the king of England acquired some of his works.

Who was Anslo?

He was a wealthy and respected lay preacher in Amsterdam and exerted considerable influence among Dutch Mennonites; he was prominent in the Waterlander community, a church of biblical integrity. His father had placed the Anslo home at the disposal of the community, and it had become a residence for poverty-stricken elderly people.

Anslo belonged to the more moderate Mennonites of his time, those who were no longer so opposed to art-work as many had been at the end of the sixteenth century. In fact, there were rich Mennonites who owned collections of art; paintings could even be found hanging in Mennonites' living rooms. (It was only later that it became customary not to tolerate any paintings in the homes of Mennonites, especially self-portraits, in order to prevent "the idolatry of the image.")

The size of the painting indicates that its owner was wealthy: Anslo is represented as a textile merchant, a profession that involved significant earnings, but also as a preacher in his work room. Upon a table lies luxurious carpeting, and upon this an opened Bible. The fur trim

the married couple is wearing also points to a prosperous social standing, and yet this is not the painting's central focus. It is not wealth, but faith that occupies the centre of attention. Light illuminates the Word.

At the time of this portrait Anslo is almost 50 years old. He has a full black beard and is still soundly energetic. As he leans towards the right, his white collar and illuminated face are thrown into conspicuous relief.

The painting: "The Mennonite Preacher Anslo and His Wife"

"Ah, Rembrandt, voice of Cornelis, the visible is insignificant, the invisible is experienced with the ears, whoever wishes to see Anslo must hear him." (J. A. Emmens, *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, 7, 1956, 133)

As in many other cases, this painting was undoubtedly commissioned work. The married couple on the painting are Cornelis Claez Anslo and his wife Aeltje Gerritse Schouten. Cornelis was a wealthy shipowner and textiles merchant from Amsterdam, but was at the same time a respected Anabaptist preacher with a gift for oratory. When he moved to central Amsterdam in 1641, he employed Rembrandt to paint his portrait. At the time, it was common for the wealthy to have themselves "immortalized" in paint.

The painting finds the couple in mid-communication; meaning is expressed via an arc of action-speaker-listener-life. It is obvious, of course, that it is Anslo who is speaking. His mouth is open; he gestures with his hand to the opened Bible in order to emphasize what he is saying. His words are almost audible. I as observer feel myself part of the proclamation of the pure Word. His hand inhabits the centre of the painting as though it would break through the surface.

Aeltje Anslo is immersed in her listening. This is apparent in the slight lean of her head, in the turn of the ear towards her husband's words; she does not want to miss a single syllable.

The light falls upon the book, the faces, and Anslo's hands at the centre. From all this emerges a primary theme: speaking and hearing are visible, and the more the observer focuses on the painting, the more the speaking is audible. The spoken word becomes a thing both heard and touched by the observer.

Anslo's upper body has turned and his arm is thrust into the room.

It is especially remarkable how the observer sees Anslo from below. I as observer of the painting find my-



The Mennonite Preacher Anslo and his Wife, by Rembrandt. Source: Flickr

self on the floor, listening, similarly to when I sit in church and look upwards at the pulpit in order to hear the preacher.

Two traditions are juxtaposed in this painting: Protestant Reformation versus Catholic Counter-Reformation. The Protestant tradition is [as represented in the painting] grounded on a Christian faith that is transmitted through the pure Word, the Bible. The unblemished Word that brings salvation to the faithful stands firmly in the painting's central point. It is through gesture that the content of the opened book is conveyed to the listener. Perhaps Anslo, as the awarder of the contract, demanded that he as Mennonite preacher be front and centre; and that subsequently his wife becomes the receiver of the Word conveyed through his gestures that signify what he is about to say.

It is worth considering if Rembrandt expressing here his conception of Christianity as he understood it during his early years as a painter did so because he felt drawn to the Mennonites. Baldinucci [1624-1696], a historian who was born in Florence and who gave a great deal of attention to the life of Rembrandt, praises Rembrandt's ability to paint in intense contrasts of darkness and light, and is furthermore of the opinion that the painter was also a Mennonite. Casting a favourable light upon this opinion is the fact that Rembrandt had a close relationship with the famous Mennonite preacher whose portrait he painted. The desire of Anabaptists/Mennonites was to practise Christianity according to the model expressed in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), and, according to the pure Word, through the love of one's neighbour. Rembrandt probably felt drawn to this ethic for at least a period of time.

The background of the painting is also carefully laid out so that it doesn't become the centre of attention. It is striking that the candle on the candelabra is not lit, and yet Anslo's books, collar, face and hand are illuminated, as are his wife's head, collar and hands. It might be asked, are these things lit by the pure Word, which in turn is communicated through verbal and physical expression? The wall is bare; no images deflect attention from the Word of God, ensuring that the Word is communicated undisturbed. "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image" (Ex. 20:4): this verse, proverbial among Mennonites, here finds practical expression.

In the background stands a bookshelf, heavily curtained so that most of the volumes are hidden from view. These books lend the preacher complete and full authority to retain his acquired wisdom as a kind of backdrop, to bring it closer to the attentive listener at the appropriate moment and then to interpret it.

The Word lives: it illuminates the life of the woman, it symbolically invites everyone to approach it – the Word, the Bible, and Christ himself – and to be influenced by it. Because the painting also lives, it seems that it is unfinished, that its movement carries it on; the painting's dark framing that shrouds the light like an arch projects the entire scene outwards.

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The author writes: My name is Uwe Friesen Sawatzky, and I was born in Menno Colony, Paraguay in 1966. My grandparents, born in Canada, immigrated to the Paraguayan Chaco in 1927; they were among the pioneers of the first Mennonite colony in Paraguay. I was raised in the village of Ebenfeld and attended its one-room village school, in which all the children of the community were taught by a single man. Following that, I attended secondary school (*Zentralschule / colegio*) in Loma Plata. My professional education took place in Filadelfia, where I attend the Mennonite colonies' teacher training college (*Instituto de Formación Docente*); and finally, in Asunción, I achieved a diploma in the teaching of history and geography from the middle grades through to the twelfth. I then taught in both primary and secondary schools. Today I work as an instructor at the teachers college, but most of my time is devoted to the publication of historical articles and books on the Mennonite story. For a few years I have been chair of the *Verein für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay* (Society of History and Culture of Mennonites in Paraguay), founded in 1999. We research the history of Mennonites in Paraguay; present lectures; and, since 2000, publish yearbooks which focus on relevant historical themes. I am married with three children, and still live in my home village.

The Journey of Gordon Friesen

By Robert Martens

At the 2012 MHS fundraiser banquet, speaker Rudy Wiebe remarked that his novel, Peace Shall Destroy Many, has sometimes been referred to as the first English-language Mennonite novel. But there is another, he said, that preceded his own: Flamethrowers, by American Gordon Friesen. And if you can find it, he said, it's worth looking at. Rudy's comments inspired some research on my part: first of all, to find a copy of Flamethrowers, not an easy task, as the book is long out of print; and then, to learn more about the life of Gordon Friesen. What I found was intriguing, and at times, astonishing.

Impoverished beginnings

Gordon Friesen was born March 3, 1909, in Weatherford, Oklahoma. His home town, founded in 1898, was a rough and tumble Old West railroad village, initially consisting of one general store and 24 saloons. It was named after William Weatherford, who marked law and order in his jurisdiction by the notches on his gun. Friesen's family, however, including all four grandparents, had immigrated into North America way back in 1874; they were part of a wave of Mennonites who established the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church in Gnadenau, Kansas. Jacob Friesen, Gordon's father, was the second child born there. The Friesen family, though, was never able to rise above subsistence levels of poverty, let alone achieve any financial success. In the early 1890s, they moved to the newly opened up – and former Indian lands – of the Oklahoma Territory, where they home-

steaded near Weatherford, and affiliated with the Krimmer MB Church. After Gordon was born in Weatherford, the family moved again, to a farm south of Dodge City, Kansas, again settling near a Krimmer congregation. But seven years and one crop later, the bank foreclosed on the Friesen farm, and in 1923 the family returned to Weatherford. Gordon spent the next years of his life living on the farmstead near town.

Depression: economic and personal

Friesen attended one year of college in Weatherford, but it is clear that something was going terribly wrong, and he dropped out of school after only one year. In fact, he was suffering from severe depression and anxiety.

Paramount in his afflictions was a nightmarish agoraphobia, which prevented him from leaving the farmhouse for any length of time. He later described his torment in a letter to his cousin and best friend, Menno

Duerksen: "I get the courage to walk south to the garden, or east to the old trees on the hill. I start bravely. I walk along feeling fine; my thoughts wander on the wind, my eyes revel in the green sweep of the wheat fields, and the red gashes of canyons. It hammers, slows. I think, over and over, each second, my

Peace Shall Destroy Many has sometimes been referred to as the first English-language Mennonite novel. But there is another, [Rudy Wiebe] said, that preceded his own: *Flamethrowers*, by American Gordon Friesen.



Homeless family walks to San Diego in 1939 from Phoenix, Arizona. US Library of Congress. Photo: Dorthea Lange

brain can understand nothing else: 'One more breath and I fall. Blackness. Now. This second ... this second ... this second ... the end, now'" (qtd in Born 120). Meanwhile, almost incredibly, Friesen was writing his first novel, *Flamethrowers*.

It was Menno who, in 1937, helped change Gordon's life. In a 2001 letter to Robert Kreider, Menno Duerksen wrote, "There came a time when I decided to play a trick

on Gordon. ... Somehow, through his writing, the people of the Federal Writer's Project in Oklahoma City offered him a job. But he wouldn't leave his room to go because of his Agoraphobia. That was when I decided to play my trick on him. ... One day as we sat in my car I started the engine and took off. He began screaming for me to stop and let him out but I had made up my mind and kept going. After awhile he calmed down and stopped screaming at me" (qtd in Born 126). And so it was that, while Gordon's family fled the Dust Bowl by trekking to California,

Gordon himself remained in Oklahoma City, working as a journalist.

A partner in marriage and politics

Friesen was slowly cutting his ties with his Krimmer Mennonite community. He was also moving to the radical American left. After the FBI and local police raided a Communist bookstore, arrested six people, and staged a book-burning in the local football stadium, Friesen wrote a series of letters to the *Oklahoma Times* denouncing the raids. Bob Wood, head of the Oklahoma branch of the Communist Party, then recruited him to sit as chair of the Oklahoma Political Prisoners' Defense Committee. It was here that he met Agnes (Sis) Cunningham.

Sis had been born close to Weatherford, and was raised in poverty by a socialist father. Like the Friesens, the Cunninghams lost their farm to the bank, and Sis moved on, first to Teachers' College, and then to leftist activism, participating in a political theatre troupe and organizing for the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union. Like Gordon, she was apparently a Communist Party member. In 1941, three months after Sis met Gordon – and shortly after the couple had moved to New York City – they were married, and their marriage would last a lifetime.

Flamethrowers

Friesen's novel, *Flamethrowers*, was published by Caxton Printers in 1936. Its themes reflect the anguish that Friesen was feeling at this time, feeling increasingly alienated from his Mennonite community, but not at all welcome in democratic, capitalist America. The novel's first long chapter tells the story of the Franzman family escaping across a river out of Russia with the help of an untrustworthy Russian guide. Very strangely – and perhaps reflecting Friesen's own Communist bias of that time – the Franzmans are fleeing tsarist conscription into the military even before World War I, rather than the Soviet brutality that was to follow. While crossing the river, the family are shot at by tsarist henchmen, and in panic, the Russian guide drops baby Joseph into the surging water. The mother, Theresa, and son Peter, who will be the lead character in the novel, are permanently traumatized by the incident.

The remainder of *Flamethrowers* consists of brief vignettes of the Franzmans' life in Kansas and Oklahoma: the hatred of the tormented Theresa for Peter, irrationally blaming him for the death of his baby brother; the obtuseness of Peter's father, repeatedly failing to understand the family dynamics; the cruelty and despair of the honoured elder Isaac Liese; and Peter's own persistent despair, rarely rising off this dark and tortuous earth either in his farming community or in college. Peter loves the land, loves the workers who live so happily on the land, but finds only hypocrisy in the ideals of mutual help and pacifism of his community (which is never identified as Mennonite, but clearly is meant to be so). But college brings no relief: after a speech by Dr. Jonsell, an important man on campus, Peter muses, as he repeatedly does in the novel, that lust for power is the human being's primary instinct:

"That night in his room Peter's thoughts

returned inevitably to Dr. Jonsell's prayer. In a way, the thing coming from Jonsell's lips, though colored by an air of refinement, was essentially the same as that which came from the lips of the dirty, shaggy-bearded men, stinking offensively of the cow barn, in Blumenhof [his home town]. But there had been a difference. Jonsell's prayer had not possessed the honesty and sincerity that lay behind the prayers of the shaggy-bearded soldiers of Christ" (Friesen 295).

In truth, despair is the keynote of the novel, and there is very little plot beyond the embittered waking dream that Peter lives. Each time that some kind of redemption seems possible, Friesen draws back and does not permit it to happen. Perhaps for that reason, *Flamethrowers* sold very poorly. Yet it received a rave review in *The Harvard Crimson*: "Every living being is a flamethrower, a rifle, spurting flame into the souls of all those around him. ... [T]here is a complete and utter surrender on the part of the author to the emotions he portrays, and the result is an amazing, complete, and very powerful book" (thecrimson.com). Friesen's next novel, *Unrest*, was never published; in a 1937 letter to Menno Duerksen, Friesen wrote that "*Unrest* still lies unrestfully at Caxton's" (qtd in Born 108).

The new folk movement

But the lives of Gordon and Sis were about to enter a



Friesen and Cunningham. Source: <https://folkways.si.edu/sis-cunningham-activist-broadsideeditor/struggle-protest-american-folk/music/article/smithsonian>

new phase. In 1940, folk-singers Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger were touring Oklahoma when they met the Friesens and invited them to move to New York City. A year later, with Gordon needing medical treatment for his heart, and with both Sis and Gordon panicked by the government-sanctioned vigilante attacks on leftist activists, the Friesens made that move. For a brief time they joined the Almanac Singers, a folk group with a shifting membership that included Seeger and Guthrie. Little money was made, however, and although the Friesens would never break free of poverty, the next decade was particularly nightmarish for them. "We had no money for recreation," Sis later recalled. "Rummage sale clothes, shoes, soup kitchen food, job hunting for the next rotten job. Looking for some place to live – not just exist" (qtd in "Crimson").

In 1942 they moved to Detroit, Gordon working as a journalist, Sis at a war plant, and meanwhile raising two daughters. Some of Gordon's leftist friends entered the service to fight the good fight against fascism, but Gordon, perhaps still clinging to his cherished Mennonite ideal of non-violence, refused to serve in the military. The Friesens returned to New York in 1944.

Broadside

In 1961, Pete Seeger suggested a new magazine that would print new American protest songs, which were proliferating at that time in the wake of the Vietnam War. The next year, the first issue of *Broadside* was printed in New York; the editors were Gordon Friesen and Sis Cunningham. It was strictly a labour of love. Gordon could not get a job as a journalist, as he had been blacklisted along the way, and he and Sis worked at odd jobs, sometimes at minimum pay. The office for *Broadside* was the small room that was their living quarters, located in a low-income project development. Their two growing daughters worked selflessly alongside. "There was no slick paper; only sixteen-pound mimeo at eighty cents a ream," wrote Sis. "But though the magazine in appearance was lowly, its aims were lofty" (Cunningham & Friesen 283). Pete Seeger and his wife contributed financially in order to keep the magazine alive.

Broadside developed a reputation in the folk music world. The premier issue featured the first ever Bob Dylan song to appear in print, "Talkin John Birch Society Blues." Over the years, Sis and Gordon welcomed folk singers to their tiny home, encouraged them, and printed their new songs. The magazine featured the work of performers such as Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton, Buffy Sainte-

Marie, Johnny Cash – and Dylan's song "Blowin in the Wind," one year before it was recorded by Peter, Paul and Mary.

Circulation peaked at about 2500 and then went into decline as public interest in folk songs waned. But by 1988, when *Broadside* finally folded, one thousand songs had been printed in 187 issues. Gordon Friesen died in 1996; Sis Cunningham followed him in 2004.

*

Following a casual remark by Rudy Wiebe, I seem to have travelled far afield. Despite his Mennonite upbringing, can Gordon Friesen really be defined as a Mennonite? And especially in light of his Communist support, at least early on? His novel Flamethrowers, however, captures a longing for a Mennonite past and the ideals of a Mennonite community that caused him great anguish as he left many of his traditions and beliefs behind. Furthermore, it seems he continued to cherish the Mennonite emphasis on mutual aid, nonviolence, and distrust of elites. Of his religious beliefs towards the end of his life, one can only speculate.

In 1999, three years after Gordon's death, a joint autobiography by Sis and Gordon was published. Ironically, this book remains in print. But the words contributed by Gordon seem to indicate a man with a kindly heart and at ease with himself, so different from the author of the novel. Perhaps he eventually discovered some kind of peace.

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The Child's Shape of Death

By Leonard Neufeldt

The boy is you, the trees
call themselves branches,
and the elephant mountain is always there
even when it leaves the window
in your room and watches you go
outside. "That boy must be out there
again" Mother tells the rooms.
"Not yet three and refuses to nap"

Dog barks head down to your feet.
The branches are walking slowly
like big people, and the bird that sings
your song has been hushed by them
or by Mother or maybe the shadows

You follow Dog to your neighbour,
Mrs. Froese, because she hugs you
all the way inside her white apron
and long blue dress

"Onkel Froese has gone to heaven"
she says as she lifts you up two steps
into the first room and boosts you
so you can see the bee on his hands
and kiss his cheek because he hasn't gone yet,
he's napping in a box bed,
his face hard and mouth blue.
Outside she puts you down in a small shade
that moves like Dog's ears and eyes
when he sleeps, and she gives you
a sugar bun, soft and warm in your mouth.
You hold what's left with both hands

Dog has gone. "It's time" says Mrs. Froese.
The branches do not let the bird sing
and the mountain is blue and asleep.
Mother is calling and calling. You will tell her
Mrs. Froese took you inside to see
Onkel Froese: he is soon going to heaven
but he's sleeping now



Funeral of Martin P. Epp. Photo: Neuendorf in *Bild und Wort*, p. 372

Leonard Neufeldt is the author of eight collections of poetry, including two chapbooks. His latest volume is Painting Over Sketches of Anatolia, the main part of which consists of poems growing out of his annual stays in Turkey. Painting Over Sketches was published in 2015 by Signature Editions, Winnipeg, MB.

Christmas in Prison

By Elizabeth Fast Struve

Translated by Robert Martens

The poem was written 19 December 1949; the explanation, 10 December 1977. The poem appeared in Our Paper (Unser Blatt) Christmas Day in a refugee camp, supported by Mennonite Central Committee, at Gronau/Westfalen. The paper was an "Auswanderungsblatt des MCC Lagers": "An Emigrant Paper of the MCC Camp."

Explanation of the poem

It happened on the 24th of December, 1945 – Christmas Eve.

I had been in Russian/Polish prisons since 1 January 1945, torn from all my loved ones. Even my 3½-year-old daughter Valentine was forcibly snatched from my arms; the other mothers had been violated in the same way. I knew nothing about Valentine's fate.

I had already been dragged through a number of prisons and prison camps, and this Christmas Eve found me in a train station near Bromberg [Bydgoszcz], where our half-starved group of women was brought by the camp guard to work in coal shipment. It was cold and windy, and our clothing was meagre; our heads were shaved bald. The work was heavy and dirty. There was no opportunity to clean ourselves up.

The guards were posted in the distance so as to protect themselves from the cold and coal dust, but near enough that they could keep an eye on us. Despite the harassment, hunger, cold, and blows from rubber truncheons, memories of Christmas crept into my heart. I thought back to my childhood in Russia where my beloved mother, a young widow, gathered her six children around her, especially at sundown during the Advent and Christmas seasons, to lead us in singing the old but ever new Advent and Christmas songs along with her guitar. A particular song that spoke to our current plight now came to me. I sang it softly, and my heart was warmed by the beautiful words and memories. My Christmas song was infectious, and the women, who

came from a variety of communities and confessions, sang along, uncertainly at first, then louder, with whatever energy they could muster. But quite softly, of course.

Our group consisted of about twenty women of varying ages, and all were from the same prison cell. We had no idea what the song would mean to us this very evening.

It was late at night when we were brought, after a long march, hungry and exhausted back to barracks. Because we were not expected at camp, there was no food waiting for us – unless one counts some left-over watery soup in which a few pieces of potato swam. At that time there were thousands in our prison camp.

Suddenly, terror – we heard drunken guards raging through our barracks, down through the hallway, room by room. We heard the blows, the cries and screams of the women. Allegedly some in the barracks had been singing Christmas songs, and now these women were being dragged out. Their prospects were grim. And the guards were nearing our quarters.

The women who had learned my Christmas song that day now implored me to sing that song when the guards would burst in; then all of us would be dragged away together as a group. I agreed, but hesitantly.

And then the guards suddenly stood before us, bawling at us and brandishing their rubber truncheons. My courage vanished. I was standing nearest the door and would receive the first blows from their truncheons, and the thought came to me: what if the women let me down and wouldn't sing along? But then, as the bel-lowing guards stood before me and shone a flashlight in my face – there was no lighting in the barracks – I began to sing, and everyone chimed joyously in.

For me, this Christmas celebration was the loveliest of all. God was nearer to me in those moments than ever before or afterwards: Christmas can be celebrated anywhere with the proper spirit.

And thus the explanation of my poem that I only wrote later in 1949, in the refugee camp at Gronau/Westfalen after my release. In prison there had been no pen nor paper, and indeed it was extremely dangerous to have those things in one's possession.

...poem to follow on page 18.

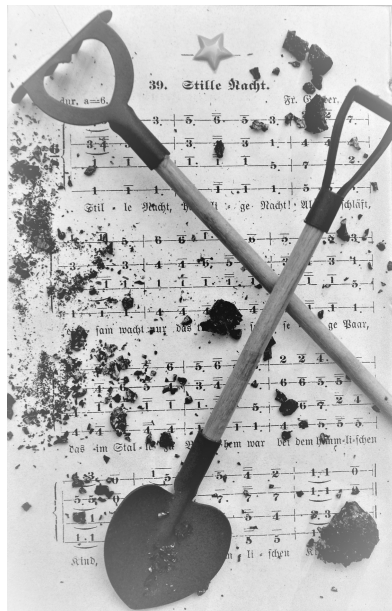


Photo: Julia Born Toews

Weihnachten im Gefängnis

Wie lagen wir so eng zusammen,
ganz einander Mann an Mann,
und wussten nicht, was wir verschuldet,
dass man uns ganz die Freiheit nahm.

Die Lieben wollten wir im Leben
noch alle einmal wiederseh'n,
doch wussten wir nicht ob hienieden
mit Gottes Will' es würd gescheh'n.

Die dunkle Nacht sank auf uns nieder;
im Geiste waren wir zu Haus',
wo man jetzt sang die Weihnachtslieder
und ruhte von Sorgen aus.

Ein Grauen ging durch uns're Glieder:
horch, was war das nebenan?
War das Gestöhn von Frauen wieder,
das aus der Nachbarkammer kam?

So war es, und wir drängten näher
uns einander Mann an Mann;
bis es dann wieder stille wurde;
nur unser Zittern hielt noch an.

Nun war die Reih' an uns gekommen!
Wer wird nun wohl der Nächste sein?
Dich drängten wir uns aneinander
und warteten voll Angst und Pein.

Wir rangen uns're Händ' gen Himmel:
O Herr, erbarm dich, soll es sein,
dass wir nicht mal in dieser Kammer
am heut'gen Christfest dürfen sein?

Mit Toben und mit düstrem Brüllen
drang jetzt die Wache zu uns ein.
"Wer wird hier jetzt noch Weihnacht singen,
der setzt sein Leben dafür ein!"

Ganz leise drang's von unsern Lippen
wie ein Gebet stieg's hoch empor
zu dem allmächt'gen Vater droben,
dass Er es hör zu dieser Stund':

Christmas in Prison

How tightly packed we lay,
limb to limb, not understanding
what crime we had committed
to have our freedom taken away.

We ached to see our loved ones
once again, within this lifetime,
but could not know if, by God's will,
we would meet them here on earth.

Black night sank upon us;
in our hearts we were home again,
singing Christmas songs,
finding relief from our sorrows.

A shiver ran through us:
listen – what was happening near by?
Was that the groans of women
in the neighbouring cell?

Yes it was, and we gathered
in close embrace,
until all was still again –
but our trembling was unceasing.

Now it was our turn!
Who would be next to suffer?
We clutched each other
in utter anguish.

We wrung our hands towards heaven:
Oh God, have mercy, can it be
that even in this cell we would
not be allowed to mark Christmas?

And now the guards forced their way in,
raging, bellowing,
"Whoever dares to sing Christmas songs
will forfeit her life!"

Softly, like a prayer from our lips
that climbed heavenward
to the almighty Father above:
hear us in our hour of need!

“Heil’ge Weihnacht, Nacht der Nächte,
die den Heiland uns gebracht;
wer heut’ deiner nicht gedächte,
den umringt noch finstre Nacht.

Heil’ge Weihnacht, sei willkommen,
sei gegrüsst von Gross und Klein,
Selig, wer dich aufgenommen,
selig, wer dich ladet ein...”

Stille war’s in uns geworden,
und wir zitterten nicht mehr;
denn der Weihnachtsklang im Herzen
drang durch unsre Kammer hehr.

Sprachlos stand der trunkne Wachtmann,
wusste nicht wie ihm geschah!
Sollte er nun weiter wüten
oder schweigen nun wohl gar?

Voller Staunen wir es sahen,
dass er alle stehen liess
und mit seinem Gummiknüppel
die Baracke gar verliess!

Kniend sanken wir zu Boden;
dankten dem allmächt’gen Gott
für die schönste Weihnachtsgabe,
dass er uns das Leben gab!

Beteten für alle Lieben,
die daheim dem Christbaum nah’ –
damit sie in aller Ruhe
singen können “Stille Nacht”!

“Holy Christmas, night of nights,
that our Saviour brought to us:
they who do not remember you today
are plunged in deepest darkness.

We welcome you, holy Christmas,
all greet you, great and small,
blessed are those who embrace you,
blessed are those who invite you in.”

Calm had come to our hearts
and we trembled no more,
as the sounds of Christmas in our hearts
rang sublimely through our cell.

The drunken guard was struck dumb,
he couldn’t grasp what was happening!
What should he do: rage further –
or hold his peace?

Astonished, we watched him
turn his back and leave,
storming out of the prison
with his rubber truncheon.

We sank, kneeling, to the floor,
in thanks to our almighty God
for giving us the loveliest Christmas present
of our entire lives.

We prayed for all our loved ones
back at home near the Christmas tree –
prayed that they could sing “Silent Night”
in perfect peace!

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The Groenings, the Simpsons and the Mennonites

By Dale Sudermann

The Simpsons is the best satire of contemporary American culture. For those interested in Mennonites involved in mass culture, it is also a case study of a family morphing from immigrant Mennonite experience to pop culture celebrity in four generations.

For two decades *The Simpsons* cartoon show on the Fox network has made people laugh and groan at the antics of the most dysfunctional – but ultimately loving – family in America. Homer and Marge Simpson and their three children, Bart the brat, Lisa the child genius and Maggie the pacifier-sucking infant, along with Grandpa Abraham, live in the mythical city of Springfield.

The creative genius of the show, Matt Groening, has been coy about Springfield's location – even suggesting it might be Winnipeg, Manitoba, since his father was born Canadian. He has alluded to the Mennonite and German-language origins of his family. Matt Groening has recreated his own family tree in the names of his cartoon characters. Most obviously, his real life parents are Homer and Margaret Groening, and he does have a sister named Lisa¹.

The show is preoccupied with religious – and some might say also sacrilegious – themes. From Reverend Lovejoy, of complex denominational identity, to Ned Flanders, the born-again, Bible believing neighbor, Groening wrestles with complex issues of faith and meaning in all his characters.

When Bart's tree house burns down, the Amish show up for a barn raising.

Marge says, "Oh, those Amish are so industrious, unlike those shiftless Mennonites," and the scene shifts to "Mennonites" shooting dice and smoking cigarettes. In-jokes like this go over the heads of most viewers.

Reconstructing the genealogy of Matt Groening, one finds a fascinating saga.

The story begins in the 1870s when Abraham Groening emigrated from the Ukraine and became a leading member of the Gnadenau Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church located southwest of Hillsboro in Marion County, Kansas. He was a school board member of a



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one-room school district and hired his 16-year-old son, Abram Abraham Groening – soon known as AA Groening – to teach a room full of youngsters – most of them his siblings.

In 1908, AA Groening is among the first 39 students in the newly opened Tabor College meeting in the Mennonite Brethren Church in Hillsboro. Seven years later he graduates and begins some graduate work at Kansas University and teaches part-time at his alma mater. He is what is known as a promising young lad.

But there is a shadow on the horizon. War fever is breaking out with the looming conflict with Germany. The Groenings speak both High German and the Plautdietsch dialect. They are pacifists by religious conviction. A draft notice is sent to AA Groening.

Vigilante groups in Kansas are out to prove their patriotism and protect America by kicking some German pacifist's butt. One night, they pick Abraham Groening as a target. He gets wind of this and drives his family to his brother-in-law's house. John Siebert hides the car in the barn, the Groenings in the attic, and tells his own family to keep quiet. The youngest child was later told she nearly suffocated as her sister held her hand over her mouth to keep quiet. The vigilantes came on horseback with torches and guns, circling the house but not entering. Shortly thereafter, on September 18, 1918 the *pater familias* Abraham Groening had a quick farm sale and moved his family to Hepburn, Saskatchewan. Apparently they later relocated to Main Centre, Saskatchewan.

According to the Investigative Reports of the Bureau of Investigation, 1908-1922, roll # 705, an agent from the Bureau of Investigation – the predecessor of the FBI – came to Hillsboro looking for AA Groening. He interrogated John Siebert rather firmly. Siebert claims he does not speak the English so good, does not recall ever discussing religion or politics with Groening and says that Groening went to Canada because he thought farming would be easier near the Arctic Circle. The draft-dodging AA Groening marries in Canada, begins a family and has a son named Homer. When the war is over he does more graduate work at the University of California and returns to Tabor College as a professor in 1920. By 1930 he is Dean of Tabor College and instrumental in starting the athletic department. His parents have also returned to Hillsboro and retire there.

In 1930, AA Groening and family, including his ten-year-old son, Homer², move to Oregon where AA teaches at Albany College – later known as Lewis and Clark College.

Homer marries Margaret Wiggam. He has strong aesthetic interests and works in advertising but also makes films, writes poetry and draws cartoons. He fights in World War Two as a pilot – which probably produced some interesting conversations with his father.

Homer and Margaret have a son Matthew Abram Groening born in 1954. Matt remembers his father's encouragement for sketching and cartooning. Matt graduates from Evergreen State College³, gets a slacker job in a record store and begins selling his cartoons known as *Life in Hell* from the front counter. He gets an offer to do a cartoon series and the Simpsons begin. The pop icon names his son Matthew Abram Groening – the fourth generation to use this biblical name⁴.

In 1972, AA Groening returns to Tabor College to receive a distinguished alumni award. He and his wife walk through the old church building where he first took college classes.

In the 1980s Homer Groening returns to Hillsboro and takes assorted cousins and relatives to lunch at the old Iron Kettle Restaurant – the hangout of townspeople and farmers. He thanks them for their kindness to his family.

This is an inter-generational saga. Abraham Groening is an immigrant from the Ukraine to central Kansas and part of the larger Mennonite migration. He is a leader in the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church – a group somewhat more conservative than even the pietist Mennonite Brethren. The motivations of faith that prompted him to relocate his family a second time to Canada to avoid the drafting of his sons into the military are complex and unknown. His son Abram Abraham Groening is equally complex and worthy of more research. Here is a man who goes from teaching in a one-room school at age sixteen to a doctorate in science with time at Kansas University, the University of California – probably Berkeley – and the University of Chicago. Somehow he is able to return to his Mennonite Brethren alma mater as faculty and even briefly as Dean without controversy. He moves on to Oregon and continues a distinguished career. His religious affiliation later in life is unknown.

Homer Groening bridges into the world of advertis-

Marge says, "Oh, those Amish are so industrious, unlike those shiftless Mennonites," and the scene shifts to "Mennonites" shooting dice and smoking cigarettes.

ing, media and illustration. The fact that he is a World War II veteran must have produced some interesting dialogues with his father.

Matthew Abram Groening certainly knew the story of his family. While it is said that “Grandpa Abraham” was a mere coincidence presented by his scriptwriters, certainly Matt Groening has retained control of names used in the show.

How much of this is coincidence and merely the whimsy of a creative genius remains open to discussion. One suspects that a more careful examination of the life of AA Groening as the bridge figure would solve part of this puzzle.

Footnotes interpolated by Robert Martens

¹ And a sister Maggie. (www.en.wikipedia.org)

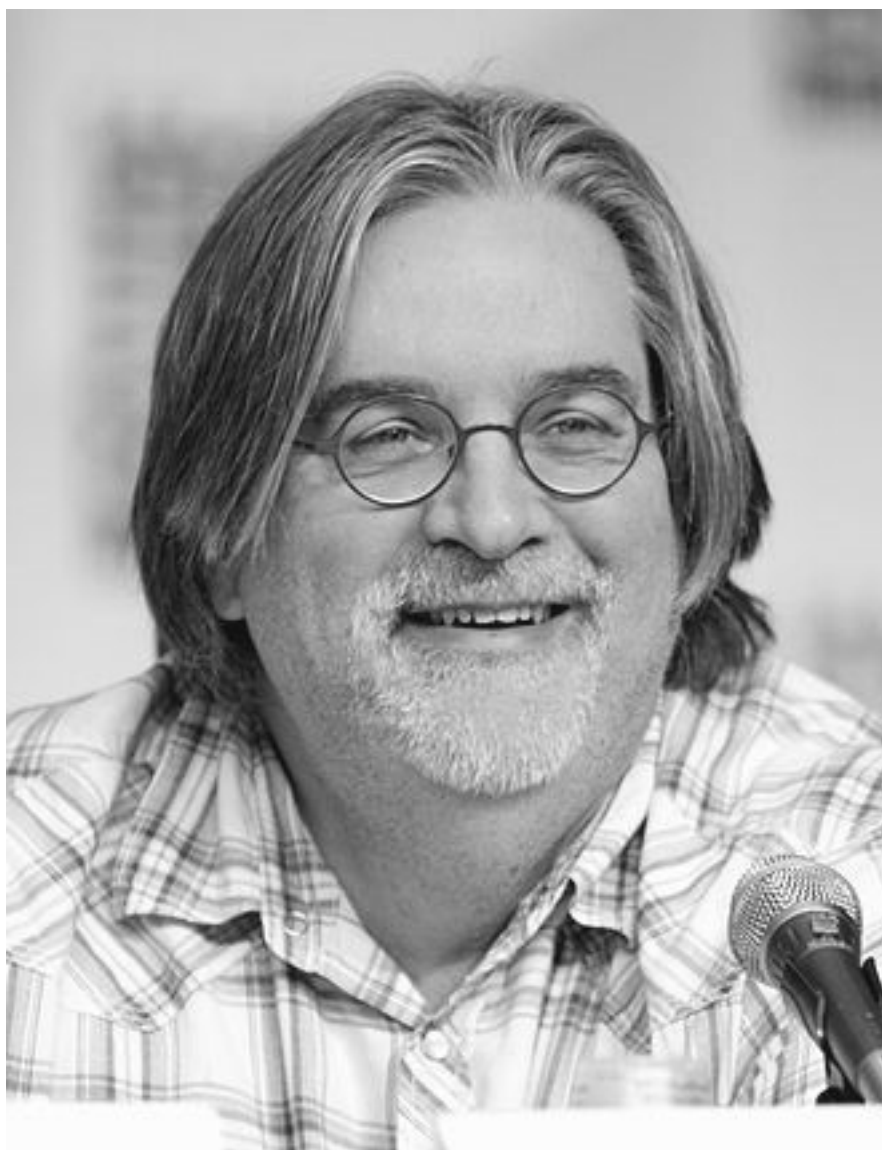
² “Homer, born in Main Centre, Saskatchewan, Canada, grew up in a Mennonite, Plautdietsch-speaking family.” (www.en.wikipedia.org)

³ In Olympia, Washington. Groening describes it as “a hippie college, with no grades or required classes, that drew every weirdo in the Northwest.” (www.en.wikipedia.org)

⁴ Matt Groening has another son named Homer, who goes by the name of Will. (www.en.wikipedia.org)

A modified version of this article was published in the August 16, 2007 Hillsboro Free Press in the “View from Afar column” written by Dale Suderman, with thanks to the entire staff of the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies (Hillsboro, Kansas) and other townspeople for their assistance in researching this article.

Daniel Born of Chicago writes, “Dale was a regular columnist for the Free Press until his stroke left him unable to write. I should add that he wrote for a number of other publications as well ... Dale’s personal papers are archived at Bethel College, where they are sealed for twenty-five years after his death, at his request. I can tell you that Dale was a brilliant conversationalist and a truly original writer and thinker. He received his B.A. from Tabor College and a Master’s in theology from AMBS in Elkhart.”



Matt Groening at the 2010 San Diego Comic-Con.

Photo: Gage Skidmore, Wikipedia

Upcoming Events—Mark Your Calendars

September 23

Annual Fundraiser: The Mennonite Farmer and the State

See information on page 2 and 24 for details.

November 4

Mennonite Boys in the Russian and German Armies

Hans Werner will speak. 2:30pm at Level Ground Church.

November 9 and 10

Genealogy Workshops

Watch our website for details.

December 17 to January 11

MHSBC office is closed for holidays

Petersdorf

This article is a summary of the Introduction in The Descendants of Daniel D. Peters, 1794-1879, by Herbert D. Peters, 2001.

By David F. Loewen

Both the Prussian census of 1772 and the diary of Ältester Gerhard Wiebe refer to Baumgart, Prussia, as the residence of Elias Peters. Elias' son Daniel Peters married Elisabeth Brandt; the couple had only one child, according to records: Daniel Daniel Peters (1794-1879). He immigrated to Russia in 1806 with his maternal grandparents, Jakob J. and Susanna Brandt, although this fact is contradicted in some documents.

In 1817, Daniel D. Peters married Katharina Hamm, daughter of Michael Hamm and Maria Goossen. Their first home was in Schoensee, and in 1822 the family moved to the village of Rueckenau (both in Molotschna Colony). Around 1835, he moved his family north to the Chortitza Colony area.

As a young man, Daniel Peters had been a locksmith and served as a preacher but appeared not to be satisfied with either profession. Little recorded history of his early years exists, but whatever he turned his attention to yielded significant financial returns. He accumulated a large enough sum of money to buy 6000 dessiatines, or just over 16,000 acres of land. When he moved north in 1835, he built his first home near the Dnepr River, about 18 kilometres north of Chortitza, and here he started farming and raising sheep.

Around 1840, Daniel Peters traded his 16,000-acre estate on the Dnepr River for a parcel of land near the main road from Zaporozhye to Ekaterinoslav. This road was used for both commercial and military traffic, consisting of either horse-power or ox-power. He built up a thriving business, trading his well-fed sheep for the underfed and

tired sheep of the drovers who were taking their animals further south to sell to the military, which was poised for battle with Turkey over the Crimea (the Crimean War 1853-1856).

This estate became known as Petersdorf, located 18 kilometres north of the village of Chortitza in the Old Colony (also called Chortitza). In 1869, its isolation came to an end when the Old Colony purchased 23,350 acres north of Petersdorf to provide farming land for their increasing population. Here, the four villages, Nikolaifeld, Franzfeld, Adelsheim, and Eichenfeld were established. Three years later, Hochfeld was founded on an additional 2,590 acres. Eventually, Petersdorf was incorporated into the Yazykovo *volost* (an administrative subdivision; some years later the Mennonite settlement of Yazykovo was established in the area).

Was Petersdorf a village or a large estate? The entire population consisted of the descendants of Daniel D. Peters. In fact, because the population grew so large and the land base was adequate, two more "villages" were

established on Daniel Peters' land holdings.

Daniel Peters had 18 children, of which 11 survived into adulthood. Most of them also had large families. The Peters family grew very quickly with 70 married grandchildren. These families gradually began to disperse because the fields were too far from the village to be manageable. Each of Daniel's children was given about 1000 acres so that they could establish their own *khu-tor*, or "village." Katharina (Peters) and Paul Peters founded Paulheim; Helena and Franz Pauls with Anna and Jakob Siemens founded Reinfeld; Maria and Bernhard

Pauls emigrated to Kan-

sas. Brothers Heinrich, Kornelius, and Jakob Peters, with their families, moved to Nikolaipol. Maria Janzen Peters, widow of Daniel D. Peters' oldest son, Daniel, moved to



Daniel Peters. Photo courtesy of Dave Loewen

Liebensfeld; and Elisabeth and Jakob Krause moved to Petrovka. Some of the grandchildren moved to Orenburg and even Siberia. By the turn of the century, with some exceptions, only the extended families of Johann and Franz Peters remained in Petersdorf.

The main street of Petersdorf ran parallel to a small stream which flowed through the village. Large home plots lined either side, with back yards abutting onto the stream, on which three dams were constructed to create pleasant ponds large enough to be stocked with fish. The largest pond was over 200 metres in length. The village included homes for the schoolteacher, the shepherd, the night watchman, the herdsman, the blacksmith and other workers. Because of the large size of homesteads, it was possible to plant significant orchards and gardens, including corn and melon patches, right in the village. Johann D. Peters and his son Daniel were noted for their skill in propagating many varieties of fruit trees. The barns were not attached to the houses but set apart. Houses were rectangular with steep roofs that covered large attics used for storage of wheat and other grains.

The main industry was grain farming and raising of cattle, pigs, sheep, and horses. With an abundant supply of soil, brick manufacturing became very profitable and employed a sizeable work force; keeping up with the demand was challenging at the best of times. The factory remained in operation until 1914.

The “Golden Era” of Petersdorf came to an end with the Revolution and Civil War. The horrific ending is well-documented elsewhere; suffice it to say that many members of the extended Peters family were victims of the pillaging and murderous rampaging by hordes of bandits in 1919. In 1926, prior to emigrating to Canada, some former residents returned to see what was left of the village. They found the dams in a state of deterioration; the buildings were in shambles and overgrown with weeds.

It was not until 2001 that visitors found the abandoned and neglected cemetery. Great-great-granddaughters of Daniel D. Peters (Anita Regehr Toews, Mary Regehr Dueck, and Lorraine Regehr Harms) found it to be “a jumble of weeds and overturned stones.” Mary writes, “It was a very moving experience to walk these ancestral areas and be the first since the 1920s to actually find the Petersdorf cemetery.” They managed to turn over one large tombstone which bore the inscription:




Anita Regehr Toews, Mary Regehr Dueck, and Lorraine Regehr Harms at the Petersdorf cemetery . Photo courtesy of Dave Loewen

“Andenken dem Vater Johann Peters, geb. 29 November 1833, gest. 11 April 1906. Selig sind die Toten, die in dem Herrn sterben.” (In remembrance of father Johann Peters, born 29 November 1833, died 11 April 1906. Blessed

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The Yarrow Athletic Association: Achieving the Aim (Part 2)

By Elmer G. Wiens

The Yarrow Athletic Association (YAA) was actively involved in providing secular recreational activities and facilities in the Mennonite community of Yarrow, BC, from 1947 to 1953. It operated in a community where the two Mennonite churches struggled to dissuade its adherents from assimilating to the surrounding and dominant Anglo society (Regehr). However, many Yarrow residents perceived movies and sporting events, often regarded as taboo in the community, as inoffensive. Particularly, the young adults found ways to engage in these activities in nearby Chilliwack, where other and more serious worldly temptations waited.

Perhaps an unintended consequence of the YAA was to address the demand for entertainment: movies whose content could be monitored by community approbation and athletic events where smoking and alcohol were prohibited and interaction with non-Mennonites was limited. It could be suggested that the YAA had a role in delaying the community's assimilation into the mainstream Canadian society.

Almost all the YAA members and the young men who played on its teams had a Mennonite background and came from Yarrow. Large, boisterous crowds attended the ballgames, and residents were proud of their teams' winning ways. Although the YAA was organized along cooperative lines, its teams were determinedly competitive. The YAA organized another popular competition: the annual pheasant shooting contest.

The following account of the YAA during 1949 and 1950 is based on minutes provided by Mary Froese (YAA *Minutes*).

***** 1949 *****

President Hepting reported at the first YAA meeting of the year on January 12, 1949, that after all the bills were paid, the YAA's bank account's balance was "very small," and that a \$50.00 rental fee was due to Mr. Knox for the ballpark. Pete Nightingale and Fred Hendricks were appointed to collect overdue membership fees from delinquent members. J.H. Hepting reported that the provincial government intended to collect a 25% amusement tax from YAA revenues. He planned to meet with Mr. Turnbull, the head of the Amusement Tax Commission,

to resolve this issue.

With the failure of the Yarrow Grower's Co-operative Association in 1948/49, the YAA assumed total responsibility for Yarrow's Senior B softball team.

At its meeting on February 2, 1949, the YAA elected Johnny Giesbrecht to manage the team. Under his direction, sixteen local business sponsors paid \$25 per year to have their names placed on the backs of the team's uniforms. The \$400 collected covered the cost of team operations, buying uniforms and jackets, plus entry fees and insurance. The gate fees collected at games in Yarrow were used to pay for the umpires and the cost of maintaining the ballpark.

This public-private partnership between the public based YAA and Yarrow's private entrepreneurs provided a stable, successful arrangement until 1953.

A special meeting was held on March 1, 1949, to elect the YAA executive. The executive and directors of the YAA for 1949 were John Hepting, president; Bill Siddall, vice-president; Len Froese, secretary-treasurer; Dick Epp, manager of the works committee; Jack Dick, assistant manager; and Eddy Froese, advertising and promotions.

President Hepting detailed a letter received from Mr. Turnbull exempting the YAA from the provincial amusement tax. Johnny Giesbrecht reported that uniforms, jackets, and ball caps were ordered from Sparlings Sporting Goods in Vancouver for \$24 per set.

When the Knox ball diamond was not ready for games by late March, Yarrow's Senior and Junior teams played an exhibition softball game on the public school grounds.

The Chilliwack Progress (Mar 23, 1949) reported that "the Y.A.A. (Senior B) team will have players from the former Yarrow Growers and Yarrow Lumbermen teams." Talented players from the previous year's championship Intermediate team augmented this roster of experienced players.

At the YAA's meeting on April 7, 1949, Johnny Giesbrecht reported that the team's uniforms and jackets had arrived, and that Yarrow's team would compete in the Chilliwack Senior B league, with games starting in May. (The eight-team Chilliwack Senior League's executive members were Frank Kickbush, president; K. French, vice-president; and P. Andres, secretary-treasurer.)

The YAA decided to build more bleachers and a wooden fence on the sides of the South Wilson Road ball diamond, with more seats to be built behind the backstop if necessary. The possibility of entering a Junior softball team into the BC final playoffs was also discussed.

The year's fundraising dinner held at Yarrow's Bright Spot Café was well attended by YAA members and friends, including Cornie Sukkau, Eddie Froese, Johnny Giesbrecht, Henry Froese, Johnny Hepting, Henry Hepting, Len Froese, Steve Szabo, Doug Corbough, Fred Hendrichs, Pete Nightingale, and Henry Fast.

At the meeting held on May 2, 1949, Johnny Wittenberg moved and Pete Nightingale seconded a motion that season's tickets would be sold for all ball games played at the YAA Wilson Road ballpark.

The executive meeting held on May 17, 1949, approved the request by the 1948 Yarrow Co-op YAA Intermediate team to play an exhibition game at the YAA ballpark for the purpose of raising funds for a banquet, at which the BC Championship Trophy would be presented.

As of June 6, 1949, the YAA was still soliciting bids to take the first crop of hay on both the YAA ballpark and its Boundary Road property. It was decided at the meeting held on this date that season passes would not be sold in 1949 because of a "lack of time."

At a joint meeting on June 17, 1949, the YAA and the Yarrow Junior Chamber of Commerce (YJCC) executives reached an agreement whereby the YJCC would continue to sponsor the Junior softball team, with games to be held at the YAA Ballpark.

The Senior B softball team, managed by Johnny Giesbrecht and coached by Irvin Froese, provided the highlight of 1949 for the YAA, and perhaps for the village of Yarrow, by winning the BC Senior League softball championship (Martens).

After the summer, the YAA continued to raise funds by showing movies at the Yarrow public school. At the meeting on September 26, 1949, members voted to resume regular shows on Tuesday and Saturday nights



Fundraiser at Yarrow's Bright Spot Café. Photo courtesy of Elmer G. Wiens

commencing at 7:30 pm with an admission fee of 35 cents. Bill Siddall collected admission; Johnny Wittenberg ushered; and Eddy Froese promoted the shows. Members agreed that the softball club's caps and uniforms should be turned in to the YAA for cleaning in preparation for next year's ball season. The payment of a bill from Jake Derksen of the Vedder Lumber Yard for lumber delivered to the YAA ballpark was also discussed.

The members at the November 21, 1949, meeting discussed levelling their YAA Boundary Road property to build a hall. Elected to the entertainment committee were Johnny Giesbrecht, Bill Siddall, and J.D. Esau.

The YAA closed the very successful year of 1949 with



The 1949 YAA Senior B softball team's members.

Back row: Len Froese, Jake Neufeldt, Pete Ratzlaff, Hank Harder, George Berg, Henry Funk, Alex Rempel, John Adrian, Henry Neufeldt.

Front row: George Derksen, Alex Fast, Johnny Giesbrecht, George Thiessen, Peter Wall, George Enns, Irvin Froese.

Photo courtesy of Elmer G. Wiens

its meeting on December 14. Elected to the executive were John Hepting, president; Bill Siddall, vice-president; Len Froese, secretary-treasurer; and Ike Petkau and Ben Braun, directors. J.D. Esau was asked to build a frame to be erected at the Bright Spot Café for advertising shows. The bill for lumber from Jake Derksen was in order and accepted for payment by the YAA. The quorum for official YAA meetings was reduced from fifteen to ten members.

***** 1950 *****

Members' hopes were high for another successful year. At the first meeting of the YAA on March 7, 1950, the YAA intended to level their Boundary Road property to build a hall, but it was waiting for bulldozing equipment from the Vedder army camp to become available. Members decided to award a trophy to Jake Neufeldt, the winner of the 1949 pheasant shooting contest, an event to be held each year thereafter. Members voted unanimously to sponsor a Senior B softball team, with Johnny Giesbrecht, manager, Henry Neufeldt, coach, and Len Froese, ball team representative. Ben Braun volunteered to be in charge of the Wilson Road ballpark; Fred Hendricks volunteered to be in charge of gates at the ballpark. New team jackets would be purchased for the upcoming season.

The YAA executive decided on April 3, 1950, to engage a private projectionist to show their movies at the public school. After an arrangement made by J. H. Hepting with Mr. Gordon West fell through, Hepting undertook to run the shows and book the films during the spring and summer.

Because many of the 1949 Senior softball team's players had moved from Yarrow to take jobs elsewhere, the members at the April 20, 1950 meeting decided to sponsor an Intermediate softball team instead of a Senior B team. President J.H. Hepting agreed to meet with George Knox to extend the lease of the ballpark grounds for another three years.

At the June 7 meeting held in the basement of the public school, Ike Petkau and Ben Braun reported that the new board fence and repairs to the ballpark were completed. Special thanks were voiced to George Derksen for donating his truck and tractor, and to other volunteers, including children, for their time and labour. Abe Epp and Ben Braun volunteered to be umpires at the home ball games during the year. John Hepting reported that George Knox agreed to rent his property on a yearly

basis, provided he would retain use of the land beyond the outfield.

J. H. Hepting resigned as president at the meeting of the directors held at the post office on June 12, 1950. Bill Siddall agreed to be the acting president until the next AGM in 1951.

The annual pheasant shooting contest was the main topic of the September 26, 1950, meeting held in the public school basement. Len Froese was elected to be the official judge. The contest was to begin on October 13, 1950. The whole pheasant, including all its feathers, were to be brought to the judge. The pheasant with the most rings on its longest tail feather would be the winner, ties broken by the length of this feather. Moreover, any individual winning the contest three years in a row would get to keep the trophy. The pheasant contest fee was set at \$1. On a lighter note, Jake Neufeldt stated he would donate \$1,000 to the YAA should he win first horse in the Irish Sweepstakes. The YAA's minutes did not indicate if this occurred.

At the last meeting of the YAA in 1950 held on October 23, J.H. Hepting reported a contract with Andrew F. Kotowich of New Westminster to show movies. Under the terms of the contract dated October 18, 1950, Kotowich committed to rent the school basement from the YAA and to use their equipment to present one movie per week, progressing to possibly three shows later on. The members decided to decline Mr. Kotowich's offer to buy their small projector and movie screen for \$350.

Although the YAA softball team did not win a trophy in 1950, expectations were high for the following year. The YAA was achieving its objectives.

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Victoria: Friesen Press, 2016. 277 pp.

Reviewed by Robert Martens

Though historian and writer Peter Penner spent much of his life outside the Mennonite community, he never abandoned his roots. He makes this point forcefully in the introduction to his memoir, *A Time to Be Born*: “In the mid-sixties, by moving to New Brunswick, we joined that large group of Mennonites who live outside the organized Mennonite churches to which they once belonged, perhaps only as children or young people. In my case, as these pages will show, I never got away from them completely” (xii). Penner’s memoir is an articulate description of his role within a transitional and assimilative generation of Mennonites.

Peter Penner was born in 1925 in Siberia and immigrated to Canada with his family in the following year. Sponsorship by Bergthaler Mennonites enabled the Penners to make that move. The family settled initially on the West Reserve but soon moved to Ontario, where young Peter received much of his education. He attended Prairie Bible Institute, where he formulated a life-long interest in mission work. Peter married Justina Janzen in 1949, and then attended Mennonite Brethren Bible College in the 1950s.

Penner’s adult career began in ministry, leading several churches, teaching briefly at East Chilliwack Bible School and Mennonite Educational Institute, and serving with the West Coast Children’s Mission. In the 1960s, though, he felt that his passions were moving towards academia. Peter earned a B.A. at the University of Waterloo, and his M.A. and Ph.D. at McMaster University in Hamilton. He landed a job at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick in 1964. Penner taught there for twenty-seven years while researching, writing, and publishing a myriad of papers as well as eight books. His best-known publications are probably *No Longer at Arm’s Length: Mennonite Brethren Church Planting in Canada* and *Russians, North Americans, and Telugus:*

The MB Mission in India, 1885-1975. The latter resulted from Penner’s long-standing interest in India and the British presence there.

But these are the barest bones of Peter Penner’s life. His character is far more clearly expressed in his own words, and some excerpts from his memoir follow:

His first move: “During the spring or early summer of 1931 we left the rented place in Manitoba behind and headed by car for Niagara Peninsula. Taking our trusty Chevrolet we set out and had uneventful travelling once we had replaced all the tires! Erna and I sat on a trunk, I believe, filled with food, probably Geroestetes (roasted Zwiebach, two-decker buns), and cookies. As it turned out, this was the first of many long trips across the Canadian and American landscapes by car” (7).

Early schooling: “I completed my elementary school schooling at Rittenhouse School with good grades in 1939. It was because I felt well liked at Rittenhouse by these friends whose families hailed from the British Isles that I took an early and intense interest in all things British and I learned to appreciate the strong Canadian identity within the British Empire” (16).

Conscientious objection: “Late in life I learned that I belonged to the silent generation, those born between 1925 and 1942. ... That silent generation includes thousands upon thousands who tried to stay out of fighting by seeking deferment. ... Official attitude of dislike for me was indicated by being sent a ticket to proceed to Green Timbers, BC, leaving home two days before Christmas, 1943” (22).

Fundamentalism: “I was shaken when in 1952 some Saskatchewan MB congregations lobbied our faculty to take a stand against the new *Revised Standard Version* (RSV) of the Bible. ... The Christian anti-Communists of the day wrote the translators off as ‘pinkies’ (near Communists). As a result of this intellectual upheaval, in the midst of my full year in Waterloo College, I journalized that I was ‘no longer a fundamentalist, but an evangelical.’”

East Chilliwack Bible School: “When one of my fellow graduates from MB Bible College wrote to ask about ECBS in April 1959, I told him that East Chilliwack represented a ‘one-church affair,’ whose board expected two to do the work of three on the salary of one! I also told him that ‘I am actually quite proud of my role in helping close down ECBS in 1959 because it was better for the young people’” (54). “Quite a number of young people now decided to go the MB Bible Institute, Abbotsford, as



Peter Penner.
Photo: Friesen Press

this was a much better situation for them in every way” (54).

Change of career: “I was coming back with a nagging question: did I want to be a minister or historian? Why was I daring to consider a change?” (59)

New career as a university teacher: “For many people life begins at forty. For me, this was the beginning of my second generation. Everything in Sackville was new and much to our liking” (80).

Full professorship: “When it came to applying for a full professorship, as one had to do, I needed five references, four from outside the University. One of my referees was able to show how productive I had been in that world outside the University. This work in another sphere which was part of our Anabaptist witness impressed the relevant committee. My hyperactivity began with the 1974 series on ‘Mennonites in the Maritimes’ published in the *Mennonite Reporter*, based in Waterloo, Ontario. These and other pieces were readily accepted by the editors and appreciated by the readers” (131).

What’s in a name? “Already in 1965 when we moved to the Maritimes, there was growing concern among many that the Mennonite Brethren were losing what they called their ‘distinctives,’ but also any Anabaptist persuasion they may have had. After 1970 these were shunted aside in favour of transforming MB congregations into community churches without the Mennonite name. For some time John H. Redekop tried hard to convince MBs to adopt the name ‘Anabaptist Mennonite,’ but without success. Other people began to take notice and one writer in the *Mennonite Mirror* in 1990 wrote that the MBs were getting set ‘to jettison their embarrassing name’” (153).

On writing the story of MB missions in India: “When I became distressed again by what I was discovering in the missionary correspondence, I was quite determined to do what Paul [Toews] wanted: ‘demythologize’ the Mission. This I did by letting all the human interest aspects of life and death, word and work, and the rhythm of life between the plains and the hills, unfold, or unravel. ... The missionaries provided a great human interest story in line with Shakespeare’s maxim: ‘All the world’s a stage and all the men and women merely players.’ No one of us would have done any better. My interviews with those that lasted only one term convinced me that to have ‘failed’ in India was not a disgrace. Of course I could not leave this work without a ‘legacy’ chapter to end the manuscript. While I could not end without pointing to the colonial remnants in the struggle for

property and institutions, I could write of the positive legacy of the India MB church with its enormous potential where and when the Spirit of God is in control” (248-9).

This book is available in the MHSBC library.

Richard Toews. *The Quiet in the Land*.

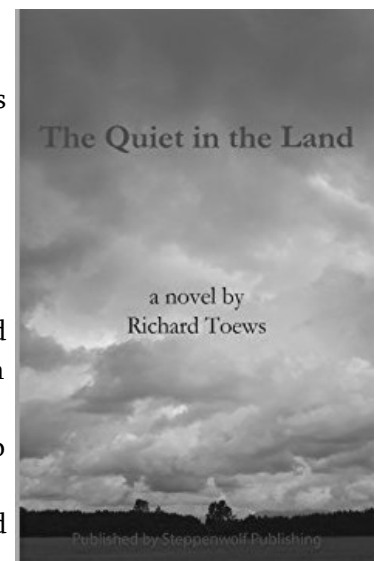
CreateSpace. 2017. 252 pp.

Reviewed by Helen Rose Pauls

The setting is Russia, the early 1900s. Johann, the 16-year-old son of a Mennonite minister, sees a huge contradiction between Mennonite beliefs about peace and justice and how life is actually lived out in his village. He sees hired Russian workers treated “as objects of derision, convenient products, as a means to enhance Mennonite wealth; no better than cattle.” On the other hand, he hears about God’s love and mercy for all. Johann begins to question the actions of his people and seeks answers for this contradiction between the sermons he hears and how life is actually lived out: the Sermon on the Mount vs. Mennonite entitlement. Although Russia is a haven for these exceptional Mennonite farmers and industrialists, free of religious persecution and interference – their way of life does not match their words.

Johann is deeply influenced by three people close to him. His uncle Jacob, a veteran of World War I, encourages him to challenge the status quo. His teacher Mr. Enns is a Marxist who helps Johann see that sometimes revolution is necessary. Visiting Piotra, his childhood friend and son of a Russian serf, in his shabby village opens Johann’s mind to the unfairness of the rich towards the poor.

Although Johann goes to Moscow to train as a doctor, he ends up in Petrograd (St. Petersburg) as a revolutionary inspired by the writings of Maxim Gorky. Together with his girlfriend, Natasha, they strive to bring the kingdom of God to earth. Reality is harsh and Johann is tossed into a Moscow jail for seven years as a political prisoner, where he finally realizes that the revolution is a



failure. The leaders have no concept of equality and fairness.

The chapters describing the pulse of the revolution as it builds – civil war, warfare and bloodshed in the Mennonite villages – are hard to read but mesmerizing. The story casts a new light on these events, a perspective that we have seldom considered and need to be aware of. I strongly recommend this book for a new way of considering our Mennonite history.

The author states that “Mennonites survived because they understood something about community; the profound strength of endurance that comes from a deep understanding that if everyone pulled together, it was possible for a people to survive anything.” Ultimately, though, the book asks, “What does it mean to be human in a world of suffering?”

Ironically, it was after the book was completed that author Richard Toews became aware that his father’s uncle had joined the revolutionaries to fight against the Tsarist empire.

Reminiscences of My Father Wladimir Janzen: Teacher, Minister, Gulag Survivor July 26, 1900-May 15, 1957,
by Waldemar Janzen. Winnipeg, 2017.

Reviewed by Louise Bergen Price

Waldemar Janzen was 4 years old when he last saw his father, Wladimir, in a prison in Melitopol. He remembers that he slipped through the barriers, evading guards, and was caught up in his father’s arms. “He talked calmly to me, admonished me to be good to Mother, assured me of his love...” (21). Following this visit, his father was sent to a concentration camp in Kazakhstan.

In the USSR, political prisoners incarcerated prior to 1937/38 were still allowed to write and receive several letters a year. It was through these letters – and subsequent letters when Waldemar and his mother were living in Canada – that Waldemar learned to know his father, who, prior to his imprisonment, had been a teacher and minister in South Russia. Waldemar’s own life story is detailed in his book, *Growing up in Turbulent Times: Memoirs of Soviet Oppression, Refugee Life in Germany, and Immigrant Adjustment to Canada* (Winnipeg, CMU, 2007).

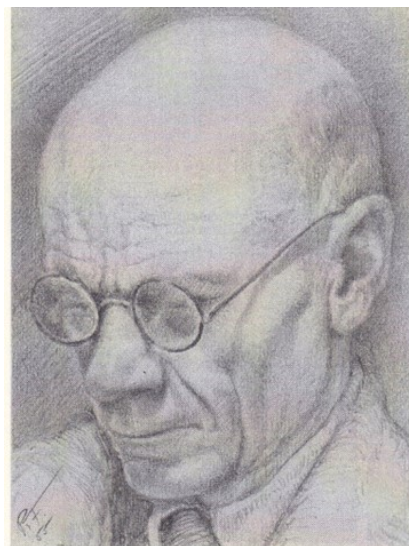
Reminiscences of my Father is arranged in three main sections: Early Correspondence; Reconnecting with Father after World War II; and The Final Correspondence.

Although the author’s mother, Helene Dück Janzen, lost all her correspondence during her flight as a refugee, Waldemar was able to save thirteen letters and two postcards sent to him by his father. The letters, addressed to his *Liebes Söhnchen* (dear little son), tell about his life in the prison camp, although always in positive terms. They recall events of the past and

even incorporate “long distance teaching” (26). At the time Waldemar assumes his father was “living in an intriguing world far away, where there were camels and where interesting things were happening” (29). It is not until he is a father himself that he recognizes the pain, sadness and longing under the surface.

In 1943, Waldemar and his mother flee Ukraine with the retreating German forces. While refugees in Germany, they hear news that Wladimir is alive, but it is not until October 1948, when they are settled with relatives in Kitchener-Waterloo, that they receive a postcard from him in Karaganda. Wladimir writes that he is “free” and has moved in with his sister Ira and her family, and that he is healthy and has enough to eat. Other news is obviously written with great care not to upset the censors. Even so, in 1950 Wladimir is arrested again, and the letters cease. They resume in 1955, after Stalin’s death.

The last section of the book groups Wladimir’s letters from 1955-1957 according to theme. Waldemar describes his father’s final years, his day-to-day life in Karaganda, his friends and family, his disappointment when attempts for family reunification fail, his life as a Christian, and his untimely death on May 15, 1957 at age 57. A chapter details his funeral and tells of the effect his life has on family and on fellow believers in his community, as well as on his wife and son in Canada. “All these years,” Waldemar would record in his diary, “we have watched the worldwide [political] situation, thinking that our reunification with Father was dependent on it. And now it is a simple car accident that makes our separation permanent. It affects me more deeply than one would expect after so long a separation. But this is also embedded in



Pencil drawing of Wladimir Janzen by Paul Friesen. *Reminiscences of My Father*, p. 64.

Roots and Branches

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God's will" (92).

Waldemar Janzen concludes this short book with two appendices. In the first, he summarizes the contents of letters he received from his father between 1955-57. It was not always easy to accept the advice given from afar, Janzen writes, especially since his father had little knowledge of the world his son inhabited, yet he understood that his father was motivated by a natural instinct to parent.

Through the process of translating and transcribing the letters, Waldemar Janzen states that he has become closer to his father since it has made him aware of how their worldviews are similar, especially in regard to matters of faith. To the question as to why there is so much evil in the world, Waldemar poses the question, "But then, why is there so much love, and so much that is good? The one is as unexplainable as the other." It is his contention that "our human mind, through our senses, cannot understand the structure, much less the meaning, of the universe. Most of it remains a mystery." It is our "experiences of people and situations" that teach us of the "existence of love, goodness, truth, and more – that we can accept in faith as adequate guidance for a good life" (124). In this belief, Waldemar Janzen echoes the thoughts of his father who wrote the following in a sermon: "Even in many earthly contexts, our senses and our intellect often have to yield to faith in trustworthy witnesses, rather than to rely solely on our own senses and intellect" (124).

Wladimir's wife, Helene, outlived her husband by almost fifty years. While in Canada, she took training as a laboratory technician and worked in Winnipeg General Hospital for many years. She became a member of First Mennonite Church and wrote numerous articles for the Mennonite periodical, *Der Bote*. In 1978, she wrote a series of articles telling the life story of her husband, published in *Der Bote* nos. 15-17, and titled, "*Wirken und Leben eines der letzten Prediger, Wladimir H. Janzen in der alten Heimat Südrusslands*." (Work and life of Wladimir H. Janzen, one of the last ministers of the old homeland in South Russia.) Helene Janzen received many messages of appreciation for these articles. Her son writes, "It was a story much larger than that of my parents, a story full of experiences shared by thousands, perhaps millions, of victims of Soviet oppression" (137).

In transcribing and translating the letters, Waldemar Janzen, with the assistance of his wife, Mary, had two goals: to make this material available to their children, and to make the account, and the letters, available to interested people at the Heritage Centre Archives of Mennonite Church Canada in Winnipeg. It is fortunate for students of Mennonite history that *Reminiscences of my Father, Wladimir Janzen* grew out of this project. The book is available from the Mennonite Heritage Archives bookstore in Winnipeg.



To laugh often and much

By Bessie Anderson Stanley (1905) adapted
(often attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson)

To laugh often and much;
to win the respect of intelligent people
and the affection of children;
to earn the appreciation of honest critics
and endure the betrayal of false friends;
to appreciate beauty;
to find the best in others;
to leave the world a bit better
whether by a healthy child, a garden patch,
or a redeemed social condition;
to know that one life has breathed easier
because you lived here.
This is to have succeeded.



Lois Klassen’s garden in Yarrow, BC. Photo: Julia Born Toews