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Roots and Branches

Periodical of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC

"What we have heard and known
we will tell the next generation."
Psalm 78

Women Walking Strong, by Linda Klippenstein. See page 31 for artist bio.

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Editorial

By Robert Martens

In the multi-layered Mennonite puzzle, flux and identity are two key pieces. Flux: Mennonites have a reputation for being on the move. Sometimes this is forced, as in the flight of Russian Mennonites to South and North America. Forced from home by political conditions and the demands of conscience.

Identity: What happens to the Mennonite sense of community, of *Gemeinde*, of a common faith in God, when that community is uprooted and transplanted to a different land or continent? Or the communal identity of those who were snatched from their homes by totalitarian regimes such as Stalin's?

This issue looks at flux and identity from very different perspectives. In safer times, the travelling preachers of Mennonite Russia ventured far and wide to help bind the community. In contrast, Brazilian Mennonites struggled under pioneer conditions, could not hold out, and eventually urbanized, developing a very different church structure. In the 1920s, Russian Mennonites counted themselves lucky just to leave; they could not have imagined the North American lifestyle which they would be obliged to adapt.

A kind of movement exists even in Glenn Penner's research article on German nationals moving into the Mennonite community. Mennonites have always been in flux, and trying to pin down their identity is consequently fraught with difficulty.

North Americans are a restless bunch, often on the move, and Mennonites are no exception. They remain in flux, and this time, within an acutely individualistic society. What does this mean for the identity of a group that once prided itself on its sense of community?

Letter to the editors

Janice and I are very grateful for the work that the Society is doing, and especially for the periodical *Roots and Branches*: always informative, comprehensive: you seek to give historical value to the broad range of the Mennonite experience and activities. It was important to highlight the amazing life and service of MCC celebrating 100 years of word and deed in the name of Jesus. A highlight from the June edition was the article by Vern Giesbrecht, "Conflicts with the Law: Mennonites, Hutterites and Doukhobors." During this COVID-19 time you're working under difficult circumstances. I am deeply grateful for the dedication of the staff and the volunteers. Too seldom do I express my gratitude or write a response to the articles. Thank you for your diligence.

John Goerz (email)

Mennonites in Brazil

by Robert Martens

Peter P. Klassen. *Die schwarzen Reiter. Geschichten zur Geschichte eines Glaubensprinzips*. (The Black Riders. Stories on the History of a Principle of Faith) Uchte, Germany: Sonnentau Verlag, 1999. 273 pp.

In *Die schwarzen Reiter*, Paraguayan novelist and historian Peter P. Klassen has combined history, fiction, and creative non-fiction in an examination of the Mennonite adherence – or lack of adherence – to the principle of nonresistance. He is a superlative storyteller and wordsmith, and the book is recommended for those conversant in German.* In *The Black Riders*, Klassen presents a series of diverse narratives on Mennonites and "the peace principle," such as the slow assimilative slide of Mennonites in Germany and their ultimate embrace of the state; the taking up of arms by young Mennonites in Russia against marauding anarchists and bandits; and the attacks on Mennonite settlers in Paraguay by Amoreo Indians and the subsequent debates among villagers on self-defence. One perhaps lesser known history is that of Mennonite settlers in Brazil, who are sometimes overlooked because of their relatively small numbers. Klassen covers that story in a chapter entitled "*Familie Janzen und der Wehrdienst in Brasilien*" (The Janzen Family and the Military Draft in Brazil).

The story opens with the hard life of young Gerhard Janzen in the small village of Auhagen, Brazil. In 1938 the German language has been banned by a new federal president, and Gerhard's name has forcibly been changed to Geraldo by his Catholic nun teachers; still, his primary language is Low German. As Mennonite history is no longer permitted to be taught, Gerhard's knowledge of his past is very shaky. The notion of nonresistance lingers in Mennonite villages but is not strong, and by the time Gerhard comes of age, the military draft is no longer

a controversial issue. Klassen writes, "In the villages in the Krauel [Valley], the opinion was widespread that there was no point in resisting government orders" (179).** Thus when Gerhard/Geraldo is drafted and sent to Rio de Janeiro for training, he discovers that he is delighted with the military life: "The smart uniform fit him as though it had been poured on, and the polished iron-fitted boots endowed him with confidence when he and his comrades were out on the town" (181).

At this point the plot flashes back to the story of Russian Mennonite refugees: "The fate which Geraldo Janzen now faced at the age of eighteen had already been determined for him in the cradle" (181). Heinrich and Tina Janzen, among the last of Mennonite fugitives to escape the Soviet regime, are encamped in 1930 in the German town of Mölln. Canada is their desired land of immigration, but the doors have been closed by the Canadian government. One option would be not to emigrate at all: "To be able to stay in Germany, the country of the ancestors, the motherland – as it was then lovingly called – that would have fit the dreams [of the refugees] even more so than Canada" (183). The German government under Chancellor Paul von Hindenburg has enabled the flight of the final stream of Mennonite refugees from the Soviet regime, and Mennonites are deeply grateful. For this family, Germany, however, is not a practical option, as the country has been deeply impoverished by the Great War and the obligations of the Treaty of Versailles. And the possible rise of Communism within Germany itself is a nightmare for them.

Peter P. Klassen. Photo source: Wikipedia.

The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) has negotiated long and hard for refugee settlement land in Paraguay, along with a "Privilegium" which includes exemption from military service. The German government has other ideas. The Hanseatic Colonization League in Hamburg has acquired land in the Krauel Valley in Santa Catarina State, Brazil, and is urging Mennonites to settle in that area. Heinrich and Tina Janzen are deeply conflicted. Brazil is refusing to offer the privilege of military exemption to anyone thinking of moving there. "And our nonresistance," asks Tina, "how important is it really?" Heinrich Janzen answers, "Professor [Harold] Bender, who has come all the way from North America just because of this issue, places it above everything. He calls it our principle of faith for which our ancestors have sacrificed so much. He spoke especially about Anabaptism, and some of that was completely new to me. I have the impression that, whatever Paraguay is, he only cares whether our nonresistance is guaranteed" (187). "And what about the future of our sons," asks Tina, "isn't that the most important thing?" Heinrich responds, "But who can say what is right, or what will be right later for our sons?" (188). The couple opt for Brazil.

Settlement in the ancient forests of Brazil does not go well. From year to year conditions worsen economically, and when Hitler's National Socialist Party comes to prominence in Germany, some Brazilian Mennonites long to return to Europe. "Would it now be possible to leave the shabby huts and unfertile land behind and go home to the Reich, as it was fondly called in the many newspapers arriving from Germany?" writes Klassen. "All Germans, it was said, would together build a new community of the people. What could be better than finally, after all the wanderings and homelessness, to take part in that?" (193) "If military service is inescapable," says Heinrich to his wife, " – and I have little hope for our situation in Brazil – I would rather see my sons as German soldiers" (194).

The German dreams will not materialize. Representatives of the Reich refuse to assist these Mennonites in repatriation to Europe after having spent vast sums helping them settle in Brazil. In 1938 Brazilian President Getulio Vargas clamps down on all things Germanic, expelling diplomats and insisting that all education be carried on in Portuguese. These measures are eventually lifted, but by that time Mennonite youth no longer wish to leave Brazil. Klassen writes, "A new generation had grown up here that felt no connection to the old ties of Mennonites to Russia and to the German homeland, those ties that had driven their elders so powerfully. Brazil, with its great diversity, had become home" (199).

The book describes how the early Mennonite settlements eventually collapse completely, and the settlers move on. The Janzens relocate in Neu Witmarsum, close to the large city of Curitiba. They are traditionalists: "Their greatest concern was that their children would

not be exposed to the temptations of the city. In life on the land they still felt there was hope to maintain the traditional values of life in the settler community: the language, customs, and more generally, the life of the family" (199-200). In the new Mennonite settlements, however, prosperity is finally achieved.

Young Mennonite man (Johannes Toews) during compulsory military duty in Brazil. Photo Source: *Im Schweisse Deines Angesichts,* Walter Quiring, p. 113.

At this point, Klassen's story shifts back to where it began. Young draftee Geraldo Janzen is thrilled to find that he enjoys the discipline of army life. He invites his parents to view him marching in a military parade. When they spot him from the stands, they feel a sense that they have "finally arrived": "What was it that so overwhelmed them that they trembled with excitement? After all the years of persecution in Russia, after the disillusionment of their longing for Germany, after the year-round sense of exclusion in Brazil, they finally felt part of what was happening around them. Both of them participated in the storm of applause that raged through the stands. What stories they would tell back in Witmarsum!" (202)

The Brazilian Mennonites had always stressed an honourable and godly life, and that now seems primary to Geraldo's mother: "Tina Janzen took home with her a sense of comfort that was more important to her than the [peace] principle of Mennonite history. Gerhard had remained a pious man. He was, in his behaviour and beliefs, an open witness in a way that he had never been either in the village or church. She and her husband returned filled with happiness to their valley home" (203).

* Klassen's novel *Elisabeth* is reviewed in *Roots and Branches* Nov. 2013.

** All translations by Robert Martens.

* * * * * * *

The children sat on the trunk of a tree. We sang and prayed and then I explained how our Saviour had been born in a stable like our hut, and how he lay in grass and straw. The birth of Jesus seemed a lot like our own childhood here in the cabin, with the great poverty that we were living at that time. Then we began to sing. But this time we sang with all the happiness of our hearts and with lungs wide open. The children expressed their joy at being alive, their love and their homesickness in the song. – Susanna Hamm, 1930 (qtd in Prieto Valladares 57)

The search for a new home

Peter P. Klassen's story is superb, but focuses on the peace principle, and of course the history of Mennonites in Brazil is much more than that. A handful of Mennonites had in fact arrived in Brazil as early as the 1640s, but were forced to leave when the Dutch were evicted from this part of the New World by the Portuguese. It would be nearly three hundred years later before Mennonites would return (Prieto Valladares).

Brazil is an immense country, the fifth largest in the world in terms of geography and population. It was colonized by the Portuguese, who established a booming slave trade that would only be abolished in 1888. Brazil achieved independence in 1822, and was declared a Republic in 1889. This land was so enormous, so wild, and so diverse that it cast fear into the hearts of early Mennonite settlers.

Mennonites were gathering "at the gates of Moscow" in 1929 by the thousands, desperate to escape the tyranny and chaos of the new Soviet Russia. The minority who managed to get out were greeted by the MCC in Germany, where the refugees were housed in relief camps in Mölln, Prenzlau and Hammerstein. B. H. Unruh, who later would be tainted by his compliance with the Third Reich, nevertheless shone here, and was a crucial figure in negotiating both the exit of refugees from Russia and their emigration to new lands. MCC had hammered out a deal with the Paraguayan authorities which granted tracts of land as well as privileges, including exemption from the military, to new Mennonite immigrants. Naturally, Paraguay then became MCC's recommended place of settlement. Brazil, however, was also an option, endorsed by the Hamburg-based Hanseatic Colonization League and the German authorities. The Dutch Mennonite Emigration Bureau (*Hollandsch Doopsgezind Emigrantion Bureau*), acting on its motto,

Early home in the Krauel, S.C., Brazil. Painting by Johann Janzen. Located at the Heimat Museum, Witmarsum, Paraná, Brazil.

"It is our task to aid our brethren," also assisted refugees in the move to Brazil (Bender et al. 2). On January 16, 1930, the *Monte Olivia* sailed from Hamburg for Brazil with thirty-three Mennonite families on board under the leadership of Heinrich Martins.

Pioneer colonies

The lands acquired by the Hanseatic Colonization League, now at the disposal of Mennonite immigrants, were located in the remote Krauel Valley in the southern Brazilian state of Santa Catarina. After one hundred fifty Mennonite families had arrived here, it was discovered to their great disappointment that the settlement lands were too small for their needs. Further shiploads of immigrants, totalling ninety families, were diverted to the forbidding ancient forests of the Stoltz Plateau south of the original settlements, and in 1934 thirty-four Mennonite families travelling from Harbin, China, also were settled on the Stoltz. The Krauel Colony eventually founded three small towns: Waldheim, Gnadental, and Witmarsum. In time, the colony became generally known as Witmarsum.

To call the new settlement lands a disappointment is understating the case. Russian Mennonites, used to the wide-open steppes, were now confronted with the *Urwald*, the ancient old-growth forests. "In the midst of the mountains, to the south, north, and west, locked in by a chain of mountains almost impossible to climb, separated from the world outside, in the middle of the zone where springs of water feed the upper part of the river Krauel": thus pioneer David Nikkel described the landscape (qtd in Prieto Valladares 55). For a few years the settlers persisted, growing corn and manioc and raising pigs. Cooperatives were established and became the centres of economic, civic, and social life. In keeping with the literate Mennonite tradition, a colony newspaper, *Die Brücke* (The Bridge), was published between 1932 and 1938.

Despite help from the Germans and Dutch, however, the poverty of the colonies only worsened. Harold Bender, travelling through the area in 1939, wrote, "Living conditions are naturally still very primitive in every respect, yet I found as much contentment, if not more, here among these struggling, poverty-stricken Mennonite refugee families, as among our wealthy and prosperous Mennonite farming communities in North America, where autos, tractors, radio, pianos, etc., are counted as necessities of life" (61).

A lovely compliment, but perhaps a bit condescending? The Mennonite settlers were, in fact, hugely disillusioned by the Krauel and Stoltz Colonies, and some were eyeing fascist Germany as a place of possible return, far away from their extreme poverty in Brazil. (In fact, about one hundred individuals did manage to move to Germany.) Articles extolling the Germanic race appeared in *Die Brücke*, and in 1938 the Krauel colony leaders sent birthday greetings to Hitler. Germanic influences were shut down that same year by Brazilian president Getulio Vargas. Mennonite schools were no longer permitted to use the German language, and the study of Mennonite history consequently languished. *Die Brücke* was closed down. A Mennonite publication would only reappear in 1954, with the quaint title of *Bibel und Pflug* (Bible and Plough). National Socialism did not ultimately, however, make inroads among Brazilian Mennonite youth as it did in Paraguay. This difference may have been partly due to the growing relationship of the Brazilian colonies with North American Mennonite churches.

Dispersion

Within a few years – dates vary according to reports – the Krauel and Stoltz settlements had emptied out. It was a bitter disappointment for many, but poverty in the colonies had been increasing year to year due, among other factors, to poor land and geographic isolation. In 1951 Neu Witmarsum was established near Curitiba in the state of Paraná, north of the original colonies. Neu Witmarsum was tightly controlled, with no private ownership of land allowed; it was not long before the new colony was flourishing. In 1951 Colonia Nova was created in the vicinity of Bagé near the Uruguayan border. This colony was unique in that it was solely Mennonite Brethren (MB), building close relationships with North

Secondary school in the Krauel valley, S. C., Brazil, by Johannes Janzen. Located at Heimat Museum, Witmarsum, Paraná, Brazil.

American MB churches, and even opening a Bible school which featured Canadian C.C. Peters as a teacher.

Some Mennonites were moving to cities, raising deep concern among traditionalists who were striving to maintain farming within the colony structure. A few settled in the large city of São Paulo, where they rapidly urbanized. It was Curitiba and its barrios, Boqueirão and Xaxim, however, that were the most attractive destinations for Mennonite migrants. And here the dairy business was "discovered," propelling Mennonite farmers to a prosperity hitherto unimagined. Bender wrote already in 1939, "In a short time the Mennonites have captured the milk business of this city [Curitiba], and every morning about fifty Mennonite milk wagons can be seen driving to town delivering milk" (63). The pace of integration was rapid: Mennonites were becoming Brazilians.

Brazilians were also becoming Mennonites. In the 1940s a revival took place among "ethnic" Mennonites, and a call to mission was heard. Over the next decades, social enterprises, such as orphanages and girls' homes, were established, and MCC, which had felt somewhat snubbed when early settlers had chosen Brazil over Paraguay, reestablished full contact and cooperated in social projects. Evangelism was a partner to social outreach. The result was explosive growth in indigenous Mennonite congregations, and Latino church membership eventually far outstripped "ethnic" numbers. The church was being urbanized.

Fragmentation and integration

Between 1964 and 1985, Brazil suffered under the iron thumb of military dictatorship. Torture and murder of dissidents became commonplace. During these years, many Brazilian Catholic clergy were drawn to "liberation theology," which advocated for the dispossessed. Meanwhile, the Pentecostalist movement took off beyond anyone's expectations, its charismatic practices affecting Mennonite churches as well. These were dangerous years for social engagement, and Mennonites tended to focus on evangelism and remain neutral on political issues.

Although Christian unity had sometimes been demonstrated in the Krauel and Stoltz Colonies, even there the "Mennonite disease" of dissension had taken root, with Mennonite Brethren and the *Mennonitengemeinde* (MG; part of what was then known in North America as General Conference) confronting one another. In later years the dissension continued; churches were splitting, for example, in Boqueirão and Xaxim. A parade of various conferences followed: the *Associação das Igrejas Menonitas do Brasil* (AIMB, the Mennonite Church of Brazil) was formed in 1952; and the *Associação das Igrejas Irmãos Menonitas do Brasil* (AIIMB, MB Church of Brazil) in 1960. In 1966, reflecting the Mennonite integration into Brazilian society as well as church outreach, a Portuguese language MB conference was formed: the *Convenção das Igrejas Irmãos do Brasil* (CIIMB, Conference of MB Churches of Brazil).

But integration was also happening, as Mennonites discovered their commonalities. In 1986, the AIIMB and CIIMB merged as the *Convenção das Igrejas Irmãos Menonitas* (COBIM); this represented a unification of different language and cultural groupings under one roof, reflecting the huge diversity of the land of Brazil. In Witmarsum, Mennonites resolved some of their internal conflicts when they built a single church building – quite beautiful – to house both MB and MG.

Prosperity and stability

Mennonite Brethren church in Vila Guira, Curitiba, Paraná, Brazil. Photo: Julia M. Toews, 2009.

AMAS building in Witmarsum, Paraná, Brazil, 2009.
Photo: Julia M. Toews.

Brazilian Mennonites were now able to look beyond their congregational groups. Orphanages and schools had long been pet projects of Mennonites in Brazil, and in 1970, the Mennonite Association for Social Assistance (AMAS) was formed. The new organization worked closely with MCC and the International Mennonite Organization (IMO), opening day care centres, schools, and professional training programs. Missionaries were sent into urban centres, doing evangelical and social work. In 1957, the *Associação Evangélica Menonitas* (AEM) was established by Portuguese-speaking Mennonites in São Paulo State, the goal being to plant churches and carry out charitable enterprises. Currently, AEM is even doing mission work on the continent of Africa.

After extremely difficult beginnings, Brazilian Mennonites had achieved an economic and social stability that made possible the hosting of the Mennonite World Conference in Curitiba in 1972. Today, prosperity has been achieved by many, notably those living around Curitiba and in Neu Witmarsum (now usually called simply Witmarsum). In 2012, there were nearly 13,000 Mennonite church members and 130 congregations in Brazil.

New times, old problems? an afterthought

The Brazilian Mennonite church has changed so profoundly that the original Mennonite colonies in Brazil might seem archaic, a distant memory. An eleven-minute video on the website vimeo.com displays the beauty and tranquillity of Witmarsum, but also its problems: the youth are leaving. After the Brazilian soya boom, land became too expensive for many of the young to start a career in farming, and besides, the cities still remain seductive for youth. In the video a young man remarks, "When you're young, you have a mentality of enjoying life. You were born into this rural environment, the colony and its tradition: a Mennonite tradition that is very rigid. People end up turning their backs on their own origins" (*Witmarsum*).

The youth drain in the colony has been so great that a local entrepreneur has proposed a radical idea: "My idea is to turn the colony into a tourist centre. I always tell them the colony will depend on tourism and not on agriculture any longer" (*Witmarsum*).

A notion the Krauel and Stoltz pioneers could not have imagined in their wildest dreams – or nightmares.

> *Goodbye Krauel. You were our home. You were the most beautiful place in the world when we were young. The songwriter says, "I can't be at home, I must go into the world." And so we would call our friends from another time: the Krauel sends greetings, it flows from west to east, the waterfall murmurs as it always did, and in the mountains of the ancient forest, ghosts tell stories of the Mennonites who once lived here fifty years ago.* (Pauls 17, trans. rm)

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Short Biography of Johann J. Janzen: Elder, Teacher, Preacher, Artist

By Julia M. Born Toews

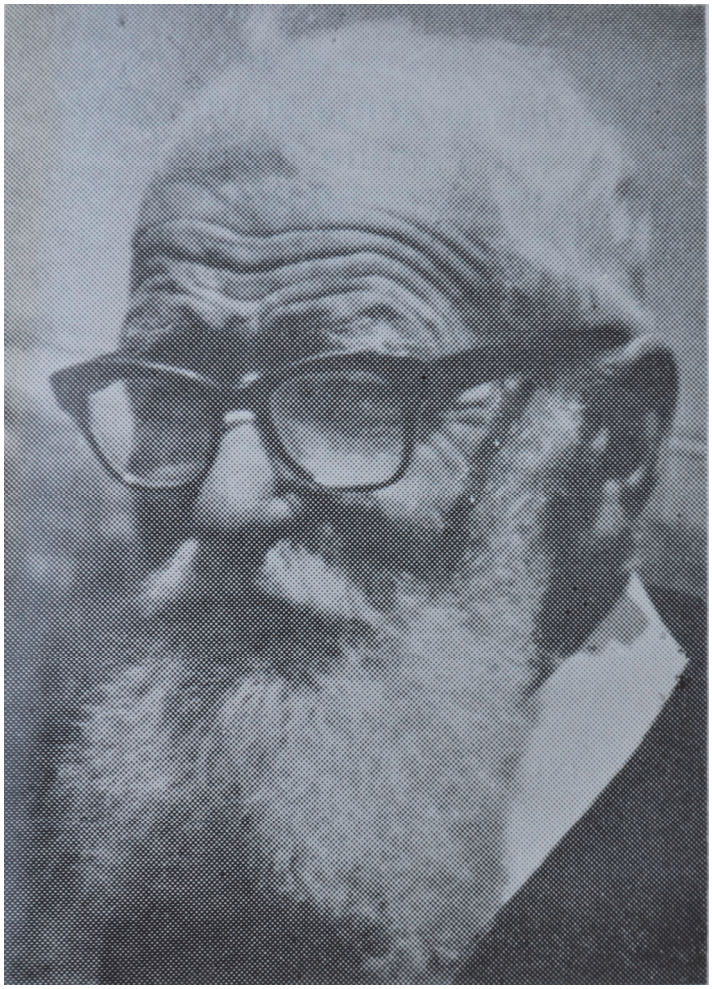
"What am I going to do there?" Johann J. Janzen asked his wife, Louise. "I can't hack down trees in the jungle." The family of nine had fled from Russia, ending up in Germany via Moscow. Now, as refugees, they had to decide where they could go. Johann, a preacher, teacher, and above all, an artist, was not cut out for the kind of life that was required to survive in the hilly jungles of southern Brazil. The land would need to be cleared first by slashing and burning. But no other place became available, so to Brazil they went, to a place called Stoltzplateau, a hilly region in Santa Catarina state, to begin a pioneering life. Slowly Johann and Louise came to appreciate the beauty of this new country, and he began to create many paintings of this new landscape. He also built all the furniture for their first house. His daughters knit shirts, and his wife worked in the fields. She relates that she enjoyed working on the *roça*, the name given to the earth once the trees had been burned off: "At first we had no stove," she writes cheerfully, "so I cooked the beans over an outdoor stove made of two tree stumps."

Born in Turkestan on May 29, 1883, Johann Janzen trained as a teacher and artist. In 1900 he was baptized into the Mennonite Brethren church. He married Louise Wedel in 1906. From 1911-1925 he taught school in Samara and Neu Samara. The couple returned to Nikolaipol, Turkestan, in 1925, where Johann took part in inaugurating the Allianz Gemeinde. In 1929 they travelled via Moscow to Brazil. When he arrived in Stoltzplateau, he found he could continue his work as a preacher, teacher and artist in the growing colony. Later, when this settlement closed and the Janzens moved to the next state of Paraná, to a place that became known as Witmarsum, he continued in his chosen profession. He also encouraged the youth to begin a mission work in the surrounding area. And he kept on painting.

Peter Pauls Jr. sums up the work of this man: "Elder Johann Janzen was for many a father in Christ, a teacher, preacher, a genius of a painter, a blessing for the community. Honour his memory."

Johann Janzen died in São Paulo, February 20, 1964.

On a personal note: when my parents, Henry C. and Esther (Brandt) Born, moved to Brazil in 1961, one of the first things they did was commission a painting of the Brazilian landscape from this artist. It was displayed in every home we lived in from then on.



Johann H. Janzen. Source: Peter Pauls, Jr., ed. *Mennoniten in Brasilien Gedenkschrift*.

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Mennonite Grain Farmers: Myth, Reality, and Shades of Truth

Mennonites Leave Mexico in Search of Water

Posted December 8, 2015, by Dale Wiehoff

In the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua, severe drought is driving Mennonite farmers off the land. A closer look at the history of Mennonite migration reveals a pattern connected to drought and dry land farming for the last one hundred fifty years.

Near the tiny village of Santa Rita, fifty miles from Ciudad Juarez, Mennonite farmers are packing up their belongings and heading for Argentina. Mennonites have a history of migration brought on by persecution for their uncompromising pacifist religious beliefs, but this latest relocation is the result of a drought that has ravaged the region since 2012.

With predictions that water will run out in the next twenty years from overuse, all kinds of farmers will be moving out of Chihuahua and looking for land and water to grow the corn, beans, pecans, apples, dairy and other agricultural products that have been the mainstay of this arid part of northern Mexico.

Mennonites were originally a Dutch Anabaptist religious community, established in the Netherlands in the 1500s. They moved east across Europe to escape religious harassment into the lush Vistula Delta of Prussia and then south into Russia, the Ukraine and the Crimea, and eventually as far as Siberia and Turkestan before reversing course and going west to America.

A major Mennonite migration to the U.S. from Russia took place in the 1870s, in the midst of a worldwide period of intense drought, parallel to what is happening in Chihuahua today.

Over the decades, the Mennonites perfected dryland farming practices that helped turn Russia from a grain importing country into a grain exporter. But the exemption from military service provided by czars as far back as Catherine the Great began to weaken and restrictive laws governing land ownership in Russia prevented Mennonites in the Ukraine from establishing new farms. The lack of access to land sent some Mennonites further east to Siberia and south to Turkey.

All these events were taking place in the midst of an El Niño driven drought and famine that, by some estimates, killed 60 million people world-wide between 1870 and 1890.

Fortunately for the Russian Mennonites, the opening of the American west, along with the arrival of trains, led to a reversal of their easterly migration and a jump across the Atlantic to the Great Plains states. They brought with them their knowledge of dryland farming and grain production. And this was not just any grain but Turkey Red, or, as we call it today, hard red winter wheat.

Their arrival and introduction of more resilient crops and practices came at a crucial moment. The world-wide drought conditions hit the American west just as the Mennonites were getting off the train. In addition to no rains, the droughts unleashed hordes of grasshoppers in search of any and all plant life in a broad swath of land from Minnesota to Texas.

Queso menonita – Mennonite cheese in Chihuahua, Mexico.
Photo source: https//geo-mexico.com

The combination of drought and locusts transformed the landscape to leafless trees and barren fields. Corn, the leading grain crop across Kansas and Nebraska, was wiped out in many places, creating demand for Turkey Red wheat that was planted in the fall and harvested in the early summer. By 1910, wheat had replaced corn as the leading crop in Kansas and remains so today.

The conversion of the great western prairies from grassland and grazing to

farmland growing wheat was a massive ecological, economic and social development that contributed to the U.S. becoming a major world power. The expanded wheat harvest from the Great Plains came in time to meet the increased demands for grain brought on by World War I. The price collapse that followed the war led to the rise of the populist movement, and its insistence on fair prices for farmers set the stage for New Deal farm programs that followed.

The next period of drought in the Great Plains created the Dust Bowl of the 1920s and 1930s. Thousands of farm families fled the devastation brought on by economic collapse and drought. By 1940, 2.5 million people had moved out of the Great Plains states.

At the same time, starting in the 1920s, thousands of Mennonite farmers who had settled in Canada as part of the 1870s migration out of Russia and Turkey, started moving to Mexico over disagreements with the Canadian government. The new colonies used their knowledge of dryland farming to build successful farms that have become known for a local cheese. Today there are 60,000 Mennonites in Chihuahua, where they have turned to drilling deep wells for irrigation, causing problems with neighbours and local authorities.

For Mennonites it is an old story that combines religious beliefs, farming practices and weather; all three seem to conspire to keep them wandering in search of a place to farm. But all farming practices that produce more and more without regard for the costs, including the cost of water, will only shorten the cycle between growing abundant crops and farmers going out of business.

This article was written as part of the Think Forward *blog (www.iatp.org), which is written by staff of the U.S. Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. Dale Wiehoff grew up in St. Cloud, Minnesota, farmed for a time in Wisconsin, and has worked for various foundations and institutions. He was elected to a three-year term on the Wedge Community Co-op board in 2010 and currently serves on the board of the Working Families Organization headquartered in Brooklyn, New York.*

Some of the opinions expressed by Dale Wiehoff are controversial – perhaps mistaken. History isn't at all a clear line of events; historians, trying to decipher a welter of information, work with theories and assumptions. In the following article, Norman Saul, professor emeritus at the University of Kansas, expresses a historical perspective quite different from that of Wiehoff. Once again, we are presented with theories, assumptions, and possible errors. (Only extracts are printed here. For the full article see http://www.turkeyred.org/resources/Turkey%20Red%20Saul%20Vol%2022%20Num%203.pdf)

Myth and History: Turkey Red Wheat and the "Kansas Miracle"

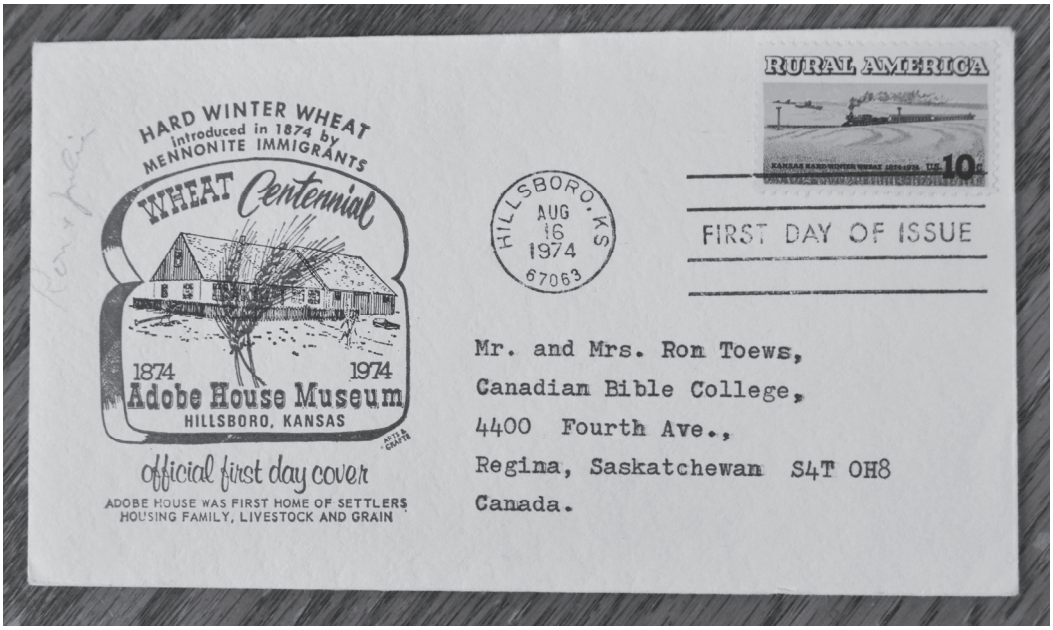
By Norman E. Saul

In 1873 and 1874 a number of Mennonite families in southern Russia commenced a long migration by train and steamship to America. There, after considering several possible locations, most of them chose the virgin prairie of Kansas, where railroads like the Santa Fe had many sections of land – stretching in a checkerboard pattern across the state – to sell cheap. The largest group, from the Molochna-Ukrainian village of Alexanderwohl, alone bought sixty-five of them from the Santa Fe in Marion, McPherson, and Harvey counties and homesteaded quite a few more. When these people left Russia, each family (it was later believed) brought a sack or crock of wheat, a hard red wheat which made Kansas famous and an economically prosperous agricultural state. ... That is the story. It is a nice, neat one. ...

The story of Turkey Red wheat is second perhaps only to Dorothy and Toto in making Kansas famous in national as well as local lore. Prominence was given to it in a 1985 article on Kansas in the *National Geographic*, and in March of 1989 it was featured in *The New Yorker* in a three-part series on the Great Plains by Ian Frazier, that later became a best-seller in book form. Quoting from the article: [1985] ... "Most important, the Mennonites knew what to plant. Each Mennonite family had brought along a bushel or more of Crimean wheat from Russia. This wheat, a hard, red, short-stemmed variety later called Turkey Red, was resistant to heat, cold, and drought. It was the right crop for the plains, and the Mennonites knew how to cultivate it." ...

Why Kansas? Land agents of the Santa Fe, such as C. B. Schmidt, certainly had something to do with their choosing Kansas. The Mennonites were also guided by co-religionists from Illinois and Indiana (such as the Funks, the Krehbiels, and the Wiebes) who knew good agricultural opportunities when they saw them. And officials of Kansas, who had seen their state crippled by drought and the worst grasshopper plague in history in 1874, bent over backwards to satisfy these new, peaceful, and agriculturally-experienced settlers; flexible conscription laws and welcome mats greeted them at every depot. ...

A number of contemporary descriptions exist of the early settlers getting off trains in Kansas, packed several families to a car. Local newspapers printed detailed accounts of their appearance, even their sounds and smells, and the goods they brought with them: clothing, blankets, pots and pans and always a tea kettle, perhaps a straw mattress or two, some furniture and small tools, bibles. There is no mention of bags or crocks of wheat, which should have been of special interest to Kansans. If Turkey Red wheat came to Kansas in 1874, it was quite successfully smuggled in. The new immigrants brought what they could carry – for 10,000 miles through several stopovers, aboard crowded trains and ships. ... [I]n some of the surviving testimony of settlers, it is clearly stated that seed wheat was among the items purchased [by Mennonites] that first year.



First Day issue of U.S. postal stamp and envelope, 1974, celebrating the introduction of Hard Winter Wheat by Mennonites in 1874. Photo source: Julia M. Toews files.

When and how did the story of Mennonites carrying wheat to Kansas gain currency? The first public references to the 1874 Mennonites bringing Turkey Red date to the early 1900s. ... There is much confusion and many contradictions (sic), however, in these accounts. Finally, early in 1927, Bliss Isley, an editor of the *Wichita Beacon*, set out to trace the origins of Turkey Red for a Sunday feature article. ... [He] enlisted the aid of David Richert, a mathematics professor at Bethel College, who asked his students to enquire in their communities when they went home for the weekend as to the origin of Turkey Red Wheat.

One of these Bethel undergraduates found an elderly woman living in Hillsboro, Anna Barkman Wohlgemuth, who recalled at age eight obeying her father's instructions back in their Crimean village of Annenfeld (which happens to mean Anna's field), to pick out, quoting Isely, "the best seeds from their bins – ONE GRAIN AT A TIME." ...

The Anna Barkman story thus became an important part of the Turkey Red myth. Unfortunately, it is rather unscientifically documented, and Mrs. Wohlgemuth died shortly afterward without apparently writing anything down. ... Moreover, characteristic of myths, this story from one family of a particular Mennonite sect in the Crimea was quickly expanded to include every Mennonite family who emigrated from various places in Russia. ...

When does Turkey Red really come into the picture? ... The answers can be found in the time and complexities involved in the triumph of winter wheat over spring wheat, of hard wheat over soft, and of wheat over corn.

In 1873, before the Mennonites arrived, Kansas was primarily a corn state and most of the wheat was planted in spring. But a few had followed an earlier Indian practice – around Shawnee Mission – of planting wheat in the fall. ... What these fall sowings suffered in the way of winter kill was often made up by better yields in a dry summer than that planted in the spring, as the winter wheat would benefit more from early spring moisture and escape summer rust damage. ... Finally, T. C. Henry, an ambitious real estate agent and promoter, planted about 500 acres of wheat in a field just east of Abilene in the fall of 1873 and expanded it to 1,200 acres the following year. ... In 1875, Kansas farmers, including the new Mennonite immigrants from Russia, increased their wheat sowings substantially to 750,000 acres, two thirds of it in winter wheat. ...

The wheat experiments in Kansas were promoted by large farm entrepreneurs such as Henry, by millers, exporters, and railroads, by state officials, and by cereal grain specialists. In 1887 the Kansas Agricultural College's experimental farm near Manhattan was testing 51 distinct varieties under the supervision of Edward Mason Shelton, who, interestingly, was originally from England.

Though some of these were hard wheats with Russian, Turkish, and Bulgarian labels, Shelton still recommended Early Red May or Zimmerman, both soft wheats, for Kansas, but he noted that a Turkey wheat, which he referred to as "amber" in color, was being grown successfully in McPherson County – that is, in Mennonite territory.

Shelton also reported that the advantages of some of these new Russian varieties were greater hardiness, and therefore less winter kill, and for at least one Turkish variety, resistance to black rust, which was a special problem encountered by all summer varieties that ripened late in the season. But a major disadvantage remained – milling – although this is a kind of chicken and egg problem: which comes first, the mill or the wheat? These hard varieties were generally classified at the time as "macaroni" wheats. ... In the United States, there was ... a lack of milling facilities that could handle hard wheat.

[A] vastly increased immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe to American urban areas was changing the American flour market. By the mid-1880s, some of this new demand was met by a Newton miller of Ukrainian Mennonite origin (although he converted to the Presbyterian faith at marriage) – Bernhard Warkentin. In 1885 and 1886 in quest of wheat varieties he, in fact, made two trips back to Russia, where his father was still in the milling business. In the Crimea and in the Berdiansk (Sea of Azov) exporting area, with which he was most familiar, was grown a general class of hard, red spring wheat known as *arnautka*, strains of which had localized names such as *Krimka* and *Krasnoia Turka* or Red Turkey. He brought back a carload of *arnautka* – which means "Albanian" in Russian – and pioneered the further testing of samples in Kansas with the help of Shelton and his successor, Mark Carleton.

Warkentin also contributed in another way; he adapted milling machinery in Kansas to steel rollers of the Minneapolis kind that could grind hard wheat more effectively. ...

Several more years of testing followed. In 1898, as an agricultural explorer for the Department of Agriculture, Carleton toured Russia extensively and brought back a very hard durum wheat from the Volga region called Kubanka, which was initially tried in Kansas. Two years later, Warkentin, representing the Kansas Millers' Association, and Carleton visited South Russia together and pinpointed a village in the Crimea which had been practicing advanced seed selection. Warkentin apparently bought the crop, for the next year 15,000 bushels were shipped from Odessa to Kansas City (like carrying coal to Newcastle) and from there by carload to various points in Kansas. This was no doubt Turkey Red, but other *arnautka* or "Turkey" strains of hard red wheat, one labelled "Kharkov" from its place of origin, were introduced from Russia by Carleton about the same time.

The Kansas Agricultural College finally realized the importance of having an experimental farm in prime wheat country and established one near Hays in 1902. Thanks to the success there of Kharkov and subsequent agricultural extension promotion, by 1909 it [grain growing] had swept Kansas, and corn definitely and permanently into second rank. The *Wichita Eagle* reported in 1909 that wheat growers were highly interested in Kharkov wheat, and the next year the *Kansas Farmer* praised hard wheat of the "Turkish type" and advised all wheat growers to obtain good seed of "hard red winter wheat of the 'Turkey type,' preferably Kharkov or Turkey," as if this was the first time it had made such a recommendation. Perhaps, then, 1910 marks the achievement of the Kansas miracle. ...

This miracle of Kansas wheat, and it certainly can still be called one, was thus a combination of things: determined, hardworking immigrants arriving from areas of Europe where corn was unknown; clever land promotion by people like Henry and Schmidt; cheap and convenient railroad and homesteading land; the drought and grasshoppers wiping out spring wheat and corn in 1874; experimentation and seed selection over a number of decades by millers and agricultural specialists such as Warkentin, Krehbiel, Shelton, and Carleton; the industrial revolution that perfected milling and transportation technology while also packing cities with people hungry for spaghetti and macaroni and good, cheap bread; and perhaps, but not yet founded on historical fact, that week or so of painstaking seed picking by Anna Barkman that at least provided a colorful and appropriate folk image for agricultural change; but above all, by soil and climate conditions and the social, economic, and political environment of a very unique part of the world.

Norman Saul, professor emeritus at the University of Kansas, has done extensive research in Russia, Europe, and the US. He has lectured widely throughout Kansas and the broader region on topics relating to Russia, the Balkans, and Germans from Russia as a charter member of the Kansas Humanities Council Speakers Bureau. *The above article was published in* Heritage of the Great Plains, *Vol. XXII #3 (Summer 1989): 1-13.*

Three Miracles and A Humble Beginning

By David F. Loewen

A time of turmoil in Siberia

Rosenwald, in the Barnaul Settlement, was home to my grandparents. For Heinrich Dietrich and Sarah Neumann and their Mennonite neighbours, the years 1917 to 1922 were years of privation, illness, anxiety, famine, and fear – fear for their lives, based on rumours from nearby communities. When Heinrich Neumann went to town (Slavgorod), it would take several days, and son David recalls standing at the window, anxiously waiting for him to return. On one occasion, Heinrich was arrested for selling butter on the black market, but regardless of the danger, everyone used the black market, because of the ever-present hunger; the money was used to buy other goods. The policeman who took Heinrich in, instructed him to follow; however, Heinrich Neumann wasn't one to give in very easily, and the policeman was not very well-trained. As they walked through a crowd, Heinrich slipped his overcoat on and disappeared into the crowd, averting the officer's efforts to find him.

Mennonite farmers were forced to surrender grain and livestock for the sustenance of the urban centres to the west through an inefficient system of collection and shipment that resulted in the rotting and wasting of huge amounts of valuable grain and meat. Often the last grain farmers had set aside for spring planting was taken, resulting in the famine of the early 1920s. This condition was duly observed and reported on by a visiting delegation from North America, leading to the response from American Mennonite Relief. By 1924 there was starvation and lack of clothing, bedding, machinery and livestock throughout the Mennonite settlements of Siberia, and particularly Slavgorod and nearby Barnaul Settlement. The report of the overall situation was extremely gloomy and indicated dire need.

While some of their fellow neighbours had absolutely nothing to wear, the Neumann children always had something that could pass as clothes. For his sons, Heinrich Neumann manufactured cow-hide pants. He first tanned the hides, leaving on the hair, then sewed the pants from the hide. The tanning job was poor, since such essentials as the "oil" were not available. This would leave the finished product stiff and unwieldy, and the hair served as a great haven for lice.

Heinrich Dietrich and Sara Neumann.
All photos in this article courtesy of Dave Loewen.

Hunger

David Neumann remembers looking out of the window, witnessing the approaching sleighs accompanied by soldiers who had come to haul away the last bushel of grain. His mother told him to get away from the window or he might get shot. Food had become scarce (pumpkins for breakfast, lunch and dinner) and clothes, as scarce as food. It was at this time that the Neumanns were the recipients of thirty pounds of white flour, sent to each family by MCC.

David describes the event: "Mother baked bread, white loaves of bread … fluffy as goose feathers … mother called me and laid on my outstretched hand a delicious, beautiful, slice of white bread; a piece measuring perhaps 8 by 6 inches and an inch and a half thick, still warm from the oven. To the best of my knowledge, that was the first slice of white bread I had ever held in my hand … but alas, the fate of this particular piece of bread was as tragic as the sinking of the Titanic in 1912. You see, as I approached the wagon, holding the slice in one hand, dad asked me to hook the tug of the cow's harness into the whipple tree … here I was, with my outstretched hand in a flat horizontal position, the bread resting on it, ready to be devoured on the wagon journey … it so happened that the bread was directly behind the cow … just then, in the midst of the tug-fastening operation, the cow relieved herself of whatever you want to call it, hit the bulls eye dead centre, covering bread, hand and all with a thick layer of cow jam. It

broke my little heart."

When flour became scarce, it was mixed with seeds from a bitter weed, resulting in a bitter-tasting bread that even the hungriest found almost impossible to swallow. Pumpkin became a staple, and explains why many, if not all, of the Neumanns developed a permanent distaste for anything made of pumpkin.

The impossible decision to emigrate – or not

Better times and a gradual improvement did return, as noted in a report to the Mennonite community in North America. Private farming and ownership continued until 1925. A new spirit among the settlers was evident, building was in progress, and improvements and repairs were noticeable everywhere. By 1926, the Neumanns had begun to make an economic recovery of sorts. Heinrich Neumann's farming ambitions had grown, as had his family, and he had rebuilt his animal stock. In addition, he was engaged in a modest commercial enterprise, supplying his village and neighbouring villages with groceries and an assortment of dry goods. In 1926, the next-door village of Gruenfeld started collective farming; however, Stalin's radical collectivization only began in 1928, two years after the Neumann family had emigrated.

When the invitation for interested people to apply to emigrate to Canada arrived in the spring of 1926, Heinrich's reply was "No, we will not go." The destination of choice had been Mexico until somewhat later, when people were being told that Canada was a better choice. In 1926, Canadian Pacific Railway's medical inspector, Dr. Drury, made hurried visits to Slavgorod, Omsk, and Orenburg, in addition to visits to Ukraine. Unknown to the Mennonite communities at that time, Dr. Drury's stamp on the medical certificate meant life.

Three miracles

Families interested in emigrating were to present themselves at the nearby village to have their photos taken. The Neumann children were sent to school instead, much to their disappointment, although it's questionable if they appreciated the significance of this opportunity. Then, as David Neumann puts it in his memoirs, the first of three miracles happened: "Suddenly, brother Jake came to school in full gallop on the old brown mare, telling us kids to come home quickly to go and have our pictures taken. Dad had changed his mind and was now ready to seek an opportunity to emigrate."

The second miracle referred to in his memoirs relates to the medical examination by Dr. Drury. The examinations took place at the nearby village of Alexandrovka; he examined prospective emigrants by village, and unknown to all applicants, once the quota of prospective emigrants was reached, he was to cut off all further examinations.

Back row, left to right: Peter, John, Dick, Neil, Dave.
Front row, left to right: Henry, George, Jake. Circa 1945.

Heinrich Neumann had requested an exception for his family – that they be examined immediately – due to his responsibilities in his store. It was a government-owned cooperative store, and Heinrich did not have permission to close it. His request was granted. As it turned out, before the village of Rosenwald's turn came, Dr. Drury had reached his quota, and consequently, apart from the Neumann family, no Rosenwald family was able to join that group of fortunate emigrants. Very few Asiatic Mennonites managed to leave the Soviet Union after this opportunity, and in fact, Heinrich was the only one of eleven siblings who managed to leave at this time (one sister later managed to make her way to Paraguay).

The third miracle, at that same

medical examination, occurred when little John, in his mother's arms, kept grabbing for the doctor's eyeglasses, thus distracting him from examining two-year-old Maria very thoroughly. Had he done so, he would have discovered a very ill girl, and surely denied the Neumann family the opportunity to emigrate, at least at that time. Maria died before the Neumann family left for Canada.

Leaving with nothing – and a visit to the zoo

It wasn't until after harvesting that year that the passports arrived; the family had been waiting since seeding time in the spring. In the meantime, Heinrich Neumann had sold his farm and his livestock to Dietrich Friesen (who eventually found his way to Greendale, British Columbia), resulting in a lot of second-guessing about whether he had made the right decision. The passports arrived on October 15, after which Heinrich joined a group of men who travelled to the station to build bunks inside sixteen train cars assigned to their group of two hundred families, totalling 450 emigrants.

Their departure from Rosenwald was met with a negative response from some. Henry's friend told him that it was "… more luck than brains in you being able to go." Even Heinrich's own brother appeared to be jealous, if not resentful, according to David Neumann. It was a courageous thing, as it was for all emigrants, to leave family, friends, familiar surroundings and one's country with a large family and little or no money, for an unknown country where many adjustments would have to be made.

Three days after the arrival of the passports, on October 18, the Neumann family departed for Slavgorod, the nearest railway centre. One horse and buggy were all they had left. Heinrich and Sarah rode in the buggy, while the children accompanied their few worldly possessions on a wagon provided by a neighbour. Four families were assigned to each railway freight car, smaller than the freight cars one is accustomed to seeing on our rails today. The party of two hundred families left the Slavgorod station with Peter Epp as their leader. Today there is no trace of many of the villages originally established by Mennonites in the Barnaul settlement.

At some point prior to reaching Moscow, Heinrich proceeded ahead of the party by passenger train to have one child's name removed from the passport. Infant daughter Maria had died in May 1925 after the application had been made. To proceed without doing so might have jeopardized their successful departure from Russia. The group was delayed for a short period of time in Moscow (length of time is uncertain), so Heinrich and the three oldest sons took advantage of the opportunity to visit the Moscow zoo. Jake Neumann describes it as "the most elaborate collection of wild animals anywhere on display at that time." David Neumann writes, "Imagine what it must have been like for us from Siberia to see lions, elephants, tigers, etc. All the wildlife I had ever seen were gophers, rabbits, and on one occasion, a wolf."

From left to right: Helen, Sally, Kay, Margaret, Hilrie, circa 1948.

Naturally, like any other boy his age would have been, David was most disappointed to be left behind with the younger siblings. So, he and two other boys suffering the same fate made the decision to run away: "Down the street we went for several blocks and hid behind some buildings. Just then, we heard the locomotive give a whistle, a warning that the train was to be moved … we came out of hiding and down that street so fast, all the courage of running away had vanished by one whistle of that train!"

And humble new beginnings

Their journey, starting in Slavgorod, took them by train

to Riga, Latvia, via Moscow; by CPR ship (the *Baltara*) to London, via the Kiel Canal; by CPR ship (the *Montclare*) from Southampton to Quebec, arriving on November 24, 1926. They were met by an MCC representative named Zacharias. He asked Heinrich where they were going, to which he replied, "Canada." Where in Canada were they going? asked Zacharias. Heinrich had no idea. Next, he was asked whether he had any relatives in Canada, to which Sarah Neumann responded that she had an uncle. Zacharias then wanted to know where this uncle lived, but Sarah didn't know, so he asked her his name. Sarah replied, "Abram Schellenberg," to which Zacharias replied, "Oh, I know where he lives." He immediately sent a telegraph to the Schellenbergs, informing them that a family of ten would be landing on their doorstep in three days. By arrangement with the CPR and the Canadian government, the relatives were obliged to accommodate this new immigrant family, the Neumanns. So off they went on the last leg of their month-long journey, by CPR train, to Hague, Saskatchewan, where the Schellenberg family awaited their house guests.

Heinrich Neumann had $80.00 in his pocket and a travel debt of $1600.00 at 6% interest owing to the CPR. The oldest siblings worked nearby – Henry (16) on a farm and Sara, my mother (11), in a house where the mother of the family was ill. Heinrich and sons Jake and Dietrich made a few dollars cutting firewood. A very humble Canadian beginning indeed, for the Heinrich Dietrich Neumann family. Including spouses, the descendants of Heinrich and Sarah Neumann number 443 today.

Canadians Through Miracles: Heinrich Dietrich & Sarah Neumann Family. David F. Loewen, Self-published: Lulu.com, 2016.

Memoirs of Aaron Priesz

Translated by Dora Becker
Introduced by Robert Martens

During World War II, certain elements of the Soviet population, especially ethnic German groups, were conscripted into forced labour under the supervision of the KGB (Soviet secret police). Mennonites, stubborn and independent, were considered suspicious by the state. They suffered disproportionately.

Aaron Priesz, a member of the Mennonite Orenburg Colony, was forced into what became known as the Labour or Work Army (*Trud Armii*). He later wrote a memoir of his experiences as a Soviet slave labourer. The memoir is included in Karl Fast's history, *Orenburg: die letzte mennonitische Ansiedlung in Osteuropa* (Orenburg: The Last Mennonite Settlement in East Europe). MHSBC volunteer Dora Becker has translated the entire volume; it can be accessed at the Society office. The following is part of Priesz's memoir included in Fast's book and the translation (189-198).

Dora, a volunteer for years at MHSBC, has suffered some health issues recently. As a volunteer she was invariably energetic and kind. We wish her well.

Orders to depart

On March 21, 1942, all male settlers were required to gather in the area centre and to be fully equipped with food and clothing. Even at the first count the MGB [Ministry for State Security 1946-1953] took its first sacrifice. Teachers Hans Dyck and Jakob Regier from Dolinovka were among those taken. They had both worked in Petrovka as teachers. Peter Harder from Chortitza and Heinrich Rempel, known as a point man for the MGB, were also among those sacrificed. All of these disappeared without a trace; they never surfaced again.

On March 23, 1942, [all the gathered men] were taken to the train station in Novo-Sergeyevka. Even at this stage many were asking themselves if they would ever see their homes again. And, in truth, many were not able to ever return home. Their bones rest in some foreign place. No one in Novo-Sergeyevka knew anything about the arrival of the men and so there were no prior arrangements made. There were no train cars available for further transport and the railway company was in no hurry to take care of this matter.

Finally, on March 30, 1942, the train cars arrived, actually cattle cars. Now the cars were prepared. Plank beds were made and the cars were equipped with a makeshift heater. If the men wanted any heat, coal had to be stolen at the train stops. Because of this manner of looking after themselves much great damage was done, for the men took anything that would burn and threw it into the stove. The men worked until late in the evening building the plank beds until the cars were ready for their transportation. There was just one thing that they had

not fully recognized. The beds had been built in such a manner, one above the other, so that the men could only use their places in a prone position.

After they were loaded [into the train cars] the military appeared. For most of the men this was a huge insult. It was shown in this manner that the Germans were no longer trusted. They were handled as prisoners and internees now, no longer as loyal citizens as they had been before. The train began its journey and it was soon evident that they were headed west. It is difficult to say how many men found themselves on this journey, but it was several hundred out of the villages that belonged to the Alexandrov region. The guards kept a watchful eye on the men day and night. The men were not allowed to take a step without being observed, not even to attend to their basic bodily necessities.

The processing camp

On April 6 the journey by train ended. The Ulyanovsk station had been reached. A processing camp was located here and from this location people were sent in every direction. Ulyanovsk is not a large city but it's attractive. Its houses are situated on straight streets and the whole city is on a mountain. In order to reach the city one must climb thirty-six stairs. The city is beside the Volga which the Russians have praised as "little mother."

The new arrivals were shown an empty barracks that really was more of a framework than an actual dwelling place for humans. There was no finishing on the inside, and no doors and no windows. Fortunately there were some empty houses nearby. The houses were gutted and with the salvaged materials the barracks for the Work Army were built. Before night came each man had his camp. Certainly, the double plank bunks were hard and uncomfortable.

The Work Army men from Alexandrov region spent ten days in the processing camp. They had not yet reached the end of their journey; of course, they had no idea where they would be sent. That was a war secret. In this camp the men were divided into groups, then marched through the town to a bathing establishment in order to cleanse themselves. On the way to the bath house the men passed the house where Lenin was born, since Lenin came from Ulyanovsk. This house had been converted into a museum. Some of the men entered the house in order to view it; others sought out the home because they viewed Stalin as their great leader. What they had experienced and would experience because of his system was enough for them in the meantime.

Leaving for the unknown

They left the processing camp approximately in the middle of April and travelled by foot another thirty-five kilometres. To traverse this distance while carrying their possessions was quite difficult even though a freight wagon was provided for their use. However, very little luggage was able to be put aboard the wagon so that most of their things had to be carried by foot. Many a piece of luggage was left by the wayside.

The route of the march took the Orenburg column in the direction of Sviyazhk. However, they only went as far as a Russian village named Tyeleshovka, thirty-five kilometres from Ulyanovsk, on the shores of the Sviyaga River. This river enters the Volga not far from Ulyanovsk. There were other villages in this area, Russian and Chuvash [a Turkic ethnic group] villages. The residents of these villages had been warned against the Germans. They had been told that they [the Germans] were prisoners of war and they were branded as enemies of the Soviet Union. The column had spread out considerably during the march and only at dusk were they able to reach a Russian village. Only when the whole group had reached the village were any negotiations begun for lodging.

The guards became frightened when they found no lodging in the village that was big enough to provide space for everyone. There was nothing left to do but to billet the men in the houses of the Russians. So the citizens were able to become acquainted with the Germans and to acknowledge that they were not criminals as they had been told. The night passed quietly. Everyone was dead tired and each one tried to get enough rest to face the next day, for the march must be continued.

In the morning the march continued. No one had any idea where we would end up and indeed, where we were. Flight, under these circumstances and without any kind of travel papers, was out of the question. It was safest to stay with the large group.

The labour camp

Finally, on April 18 the goal was reached. In hindsight the provisions for the trip were insufficient. The men had to eat the provisions that they had brought from home. The transport had been given enough supplies but they were not enough for the men. They were cheated or otherwise pushed aside. Everyone knew this but no one dared to do anything about it. It would have been useless and dangerous. The men arrived in a state of hunger at the camp and now their state of weakness

rapidly advanced.

Their accommodation, a local schoolhouse, was much too small, and therefore dwellings must now be built. First, scaffolding needed to be built; for a roof a tarp was used. The men initially slept on the bare ground. When it rained, small streams somehow forked their way through the camp to the outside again. With time, proper dwelling places were built in which the men could sleep on plank bunks. As far as bed linens were concerned, there was no question, for only those brought from home were available. After all, the men were not brought here to sleep but rather to work in the forests. The commanding officers with their handling of the Germans gave no thought one way or the other to the need of these people for rest at night after their hard labour.

A forest road had to be constructed around the total work site. Only then could the falling of the trees begin. Every day began with a roll call. The camp was completely surrounded by a barbed wire fence. There was a guardhouse with a heavily armed sentry on duty at the gate. The entire Orenburg Colony was no longer at the mercy of their chairman. "I have been given every right! I have the right to exterminate you!" said the work camp commander. They were forced to be silent since they were the outlaws.

Constructing railroad tracks

A train track was the first order of work to be done. The materials as well as the dirt for the track bed had to be brought to the site by wheelbarrow. However, for that an access built from wooden planks was required. The planks were situated about three kilometres away on the shores of the Sviyaga Sea. They had been floated there from a nearby sawmill. Now the men had to carry the planks on their shoulders from the shore to the building site. There was no other source of pulling power, and the men became weaker from day to day because of the unrelenting labour.

The earth for the track bed had to be brought into line with wheelbarrows. A quota was set of six to seven cubic metres of excavated dirt for one day's labour per man. When the pit from which the dirt was taken became deeper and the bed became higher, the quota was lowered somewhat. The pit had to be one metre and ten centimetres deep. Once the dirt had been brought to the track bed it was levelled and then pounded firm and hardened with a wooden compactor. So the complete track bed was pounded by hand. That was very hard work without any foreseeable end, but the camp directors left the Work Army no choice. Everything was done by hand. Work was done from sunup until sundown with a half-hour break at noon. Very soon the results of this overwork on the men became evident, particularly on the younger ones whose hands were totally ruined. Many, with time, became so weak that they were scarcely able to cut a piece of bread with a knife. Others had trouble with their feet and still others suffered from shattered nerves. Those completely unable to work were taken to the convalescent detachment.

Workers building a railroad with wheelbarrows.
Photo source: https://en.topwar.ru

Those who were able to fulfill their quota 100% were given seven hundred grams of bread; if however, 110% was achieved, that person even received nine hundred grams of the insipid bread. This reward was only achieved by a very few. Actually, the results of a brigade depended greatly upon the brigadier. If he knew how to motivate his workers to their highest output, they received the designated rations that could keep up their strength. The brigadier also needed to know how to remain in the good graces of his supervisor. Much depended upon this relationship with the supervisor in the distribution of the rations. Those brigades whose brigadiers did not know how to get the most out of their men spiralled steadily downward under the weight of their loads until it was impossible to get out of the hole. As a rule, hunger and sickness followed.

Anything to stay alive

At the beginning, the Orenburg men had some provisions that they had brought from home but when the private stash had been consumed, they began to barter their few blankets and winter clothes. It was strongly believed that the war would be ended with the defeat of Russia before the beginning of the second winter and therefore the warmer clothes and blankets would not be needed; but that proved to be a delusion.

One thing, however, did prove useful to the men. The track that they were working on ran through fields of grain and vegetable gardens. It was only

necessary to wait until the fruit of these fields was ripe. In this way the men had a rich source of food and the *kolkhoz* [collective farm] did not have to harvest so much.

So a lively bartering began between the Work Army workers and the people who worked the land. It was a risky business to sneak out of the camp at night and with hidden means make one's way to the nearby Russian villages. In the villages a little food was traded for the things they needed or one simply went from house to house and begged a piece of bread like a small child. Abram Olfert wrote the following memory:

Aaron Priesz in white shirt. Others unknown. Photo: Karl Fast, *Orenburg.* p. 60

"I had safely reached the village and began to return to camp under cover of night. I successfully arrived at the hole in the fence by which I had previously crawled out. However, at the other side of the fence stood the sentry who had observed me the previous night. He took my backpack with the garnered provisions, made note of my name, brigade and also the village where I had been. Then he let me go, but the loss of my things bothered me so much that I returned to the sentry and begged for the return of my backpack. The sentry seemingly allowed himself to weaken and returned the backpack. I ran back to the camp and satisfied my deepest hunger. In the morning we had roll call. I placed myself in the last row of my brigade. Because the sentry had only seen my face by moonlight, he was not able to recognize me among the many muffled faces. Because of this I was able to escape punishment."

Without any break, work on the train track continued, rain or not. There were supervisors at every corner to make sure that everything was done according to instructions. A supervisor had the responsibility to make sure that the track bed was up to par. If he was able to ram his staff into the ground, the men had to do more compacting. Only when, with all his weight, he was no longer able to drive his pole into the ground was the bed considered strong enough and the work moved along. Many a groan was offered up by the men but without any use. Many lost all hope and many never returned home from this causeway.

At last it was fall; the potatoes in the fields beside the train causeway and the grain were tall and ripe enough that they could be eaten. Of course that was forbidden, but the supervisors allowed it to happen since they profited from better work from the men. Once in a while tragedy struck. It happened that one brigade had selected seven men to raid the potato sacks. They had success. Slowly they stole along the train causeway when suddenly they saw a KGB man standing in front of them. Their hearts sank into their boots. Suddenly, as if rehearsed, the KGB man turned his back to them and went his way as if he had seen nothing. There were people like that, too!

Finally, the train bed was completed and tracks and crossties were brought. The building of the train station also neared the end. The next job was the laying of the crossties. The 12.5-metre steel tracks had to be manhandled into place on the backs of the men. One of the very difficult jobs was the compacting and laying of the crossties. A water line also needed to be placed. For that a canal had to be dug from the station to the Sviyaga River in which the line could be laid. There was so much hard labour to be done!

Celebrating the achievement

Finally the day of transfer of the train line arrived and a small celebration was planned. Even the Work Army men were to be given something extra to eat. A long table was brought to the yard for that purpose and the hungry men stood before it. When the cook was ready to serve his meal he realized he had forgotten the forks. He went to get them. The men had been waiting for this moment. At first, they stretched out their necks and then the first hand reached out to the food; and in a blink of an eye the men had served the food with their bare hands and without further fuss – it was gone. The cook was too late with his forks.

On November 7, the annual celebration of the October Revolution, the first train arrived carrying the high officials. This first run withstood the test glowingly. When the cost of the labourers was taken into consideration, it had taken more than 200% of the daily quotas to complete. However, the workers were not paid anything. Every once in a while they were asked if they wouldn't want to donate their sorely earned wages to purchase a Panzer tank or an airplane. The Work Army men had no choice and so "donated" their total wages for the equipping of the Soviet Army.

Reiseprediger (Travelling Minister) David Duerksen

David Dürksen, "*Reisebericht*" (Travel Report), *Zions-Bote*, 1894, No. 49, p. 3.

Translated by George Duerksen, with Robert Martens

George Duerksen, a volunteer at the Mennonite Heritage Museum, writes that David Dürksen, who wrote this report in 1894, was his father's uncle. George's father was Gerhard Abram Duerksen.

Dear readers!

After the annual conference in Reinfeld, I was able in May to do God's work in the Crimea for thirteen days. During that time, I had opportunity to witness to attentive listeners at eight meetings, some small, some larger, about the message of Christ.

On June 1, I left with the Lord's blessing the children of God in this area, as well as my family, and travelled to Samara and Orenburg, that is, not to the cities but to the Mennonite villages in these administrations. Until Charkov the ride was comfortable but from there to Samara the train was overfilled. Where six was the accommodation, now there were up to ten persons. That was tiring but by God's grace we arrived healthy. From Samara city to Sorochinskaya the ride was better again. On June 5, early morning, we arrived happily at the last-mentioned station. A wagon belonging to Br. Peter Riediger from Pleshanovsk was waiting there for us. Such thoughtfulness is appreciated. May God reward the brother. By 2 in the afternoon, with our high-quality wagon, we had covered the fifty versts from Sorochinskaya to Pleshanovsk. I stayed with my relatives the Gerhard Neufelds and that is where I met Peter Riediger. Warm greetings and recent experiences were exchanged.

The following day was Sunday and we gathered in the large and wonderful church at Lugovsk. A sizable congregation was there. Many warm greetings on the churchyard, and many nods to familiar faces as we sat inside; there was a great show of love for each other. We all delighted in the gifts of God's house, and benefited from the knowledge that Jesus Christ, always present to us, was crucified and rose again for us sinners. What a blessing for us all!

In the following weekdays we met in the morning in the Lugovsk church for Bible courses, and in the afterhours for Bible discussions. These were wonderful days experiencing God's nearness, sometimes more, sometimes less. So I continued to work by God's grace until June 20, also visiting with relatives and friends. In all the homes where I visited, I experienced warm Christian hospitality. I have some concern that perhaps we travelling ministers are spoiled. The best rooms, the best beds, the best meals, the best wagons are available to the travelling ministers. I had these same experiences in the district of Samara. May God reward them.

Upon my request the brethren provided a wagon to take me to Br. Günther's estate on June 21. In the evening we had a Bible study with the estate foreman and his wife. After we enjoyed very pleasant accommodations, the foreman drove us on the 23rd to the district of Orenburg. At approximately 9 am, we arrived at the Kornelius Fehrs. We rested, prayed, and set the program which was to follow in that settlement, and then got to work. The Lord was with us, protected us and blessed us; we experienced this in prayer meetings, Bible studies, home visits and church services.

Next, Br. Fehr drove us to the Molotschna Mennonite settlement. There are two Mennonite settlements in Orenburg that are very close together; they might as well be one. One comes from the Chortitza group, and the other, from the Molotschna mother colony. The Chortitza colony established the following fourteen villages: Chortitz, Petrovka, Sipyak, Kamenka, Dyeyevka, Nikolayevka, Fyedorovka, Romanovka, Dolunovka, Rodnichnaya, Dubrovka, Kichkas, Syuvorovka, and Pretoria. The villages founded by the Molotschna colony are Kubanka, Klubnikov, Stepanovka, Allisova, Kamoshova, Chornoserii, Karagui, Selyonnaya. That God blessed the zeal and hard work is amazing, even in the settlements in Orenburg plagued by bad harvests. As we travel through the villages, how the people order things so industriously is remarkable. The schools and churches and carefully planned homes and usually well-cultivated fields attest to this. The typically well-attended churches allow us to hope that they continue to seek the blessing of the Lord.

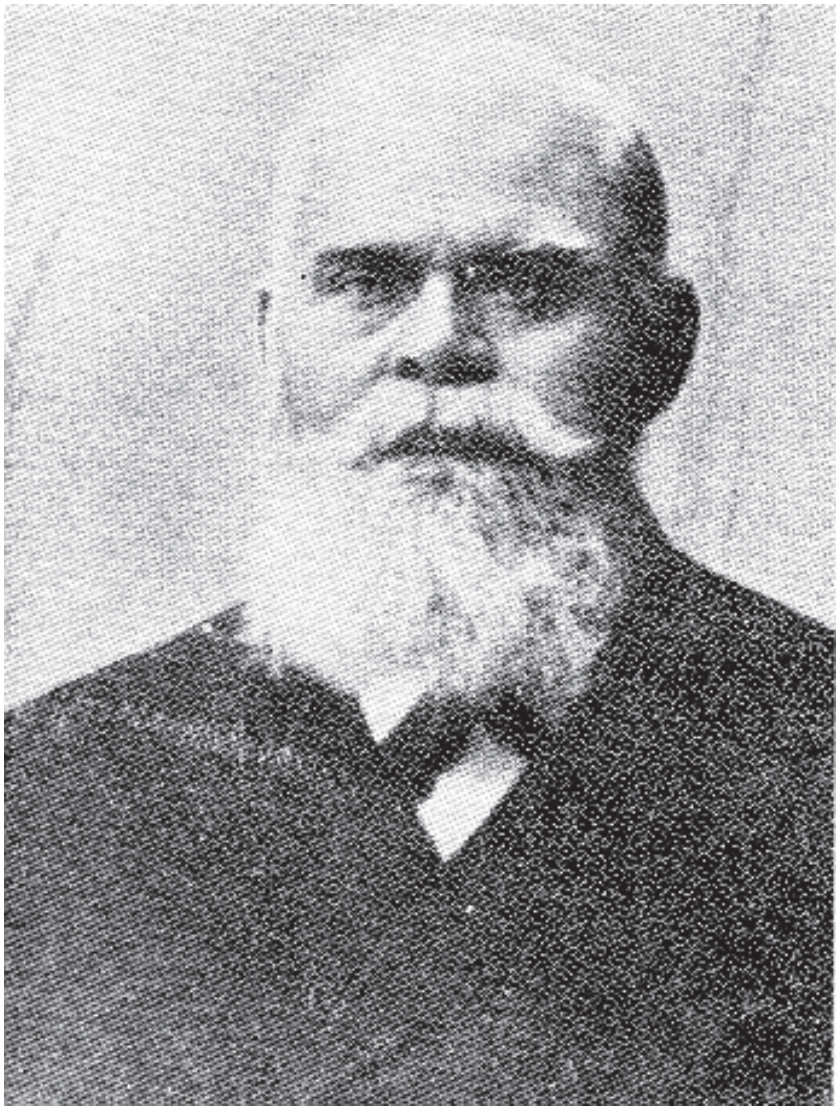
Soon the time had passed and the dear brothers Jakob Bergen and Wilhelm Giesbrecht from the Molotschna settlement took me to Petrovka, about forty-five versts [1 verst=about 1.1 km] from the settlement and three versts from the train station in Platovka, a Russian village. Sadly, we parted and I was able to stay in a Mennonite home. There are several Mennonite families here.

On the 28th I boarded the train and arrived by God's grace at Kurman Kemelchi at 11 pm. At home I found everything in reasonably good order. Thanks to the Lord for his protection and many thanks for all the love that was shown me in my travels.

In the months of July and August I have been reading, studying and writing during the week and on Sundays, working at church.

On September 8, at the request of Br. Schellenberg, we drove through Molotschna to Memrik for a meeting. This trip took sixteen days because of visitations and church meetings along the way. The Lord helped and blessed us. From September 23 until November 19 I visited in the Crimea in homes and churches. In the congregational meeting we would sing, pray, read, speak, study, teach, comfort, and admonish, but we also listened, learned, and were comforted and admonished. When we come home, we read the letters and answer them, keep church records, strengthen ourselves through reading and prayer, recuperate, and so on.

On November 12 I went with Br. Peter Goerzen from here and Br. Joh.[ann] Dyck from Chokmak to Zagradovka. A Bible course was to take place there. We travelled by train and arrived on the first day at Schoenwiese, near Alexandrovsk, where we imparted the Word to a small but interested group of listeners. We were accommodated by the Phillip Isaaks.



David Duerksen. Photo source: GAMEO.

The next day we crossed the Dnieper by wagon to the train station at Kichkas. From there, it was seven hours to the train station at Nikolo-Koyelsk near the Zagradovka settlement. Two brothers Bärg arrived for us with a covered wagon. In spite of mud and darkness we arrived safely at the home of the Br. Bärg senior family at 11 pm. God bless the people for all their sacrificial efforts on our behalf.

The following day was Sunday, and the Sun of the Gospel, the justice of Christ, illuminated the church service. It was a joy to see Brs. Jakob Janz from Friedensfeld, Abram Wall from Milloradovka, and Wilhelm Klassen from Yekaterinovka there. Later the Brothers Kornelius Neufeld from Pleshanovsk, Johann Schellenberg from Reinfeld, and Kornelius Isaak from Alexanderpol. These were days of blessing, strengthening in the Word, visiting homes, schools and congregations with Bible studies, Bible courses, and so on. Too soon the days arrived when some had to leave. If I remember correctly, Br. Dückman took us on the 28th to the late train at Nikolo-Koyelsk, and we arrived home safely on the 20th. God had protected us and our families.

In December I was able to work in the Crimea again. We had a blessed Christmas season and a New Year blessed by God. In January and February we were able to visit twenty communities, bearing witness to God's wondrous love.

From the conference until now, there were 177 days when I was working outside my home, preaching ninety sermons, and visiting seventy villages and 110 homes. God helped, helps, and will continue to help. Honour and praise be to God forever.

With regards to all the readers, I remain humbly in Christ,

D. Dürksen

My Angel Story

by Peter Plett, with Irene Plett, writer

Angels are everywhere at Christmas. An angel appeared to Mary to tell her that she would have a holy Child. Another appeared in a dream to her fiancé, Joseph, telling him to stand by Mary. Angels told shepherds about the newborn Saviour lying in a manger.
But angels aren't just for the distant past. They can show up today, exactly when we need them. We're encouraged to be kind to strangers, who might actually be angels. This is an account of my father's real-life encounter with an angel. (Irene Plett)

In 1945, I met an angel. He didn't have wings or look different than any of us, but he was there for a miracle that saved my life.

I had been drafted into the German army at the tail end of the Second World War, when the Germans weren't doing well. We were captured right after we got to the front.

The Americans put me and my friend, John Wiens, into a shelterless camp for prisoners of war in Bretzenheim, Germany. They kept thousands of us squashed like sardines, on muddy farmland surrounded by barbed wire. We were divided into twenty-four barbed-wire pens, each with about 3,000 men. For three months, we had next to nothing to eat and only a cup of river water each day to drink. Our only roof was a wool blanket I'd received – another miracle that happened earlier – which kept the downpours from drenching us.

I didn't know why I was in that torturous place, but I believed in God's power and leading. When people around me were dying or losing their minds every day, I didn't expect to survive either. It was my faith that kept me alive and kept me sane.

A wonderful memory stayed with me, of my mother and her sisters singing beautiful Christian songs in the evenings. The governing Communists of the Soviet Union prohibited any expression of faith, preaching their atheist agenda, but the danger never stopped my mother from reading the Bible and singing songs of faith.

I was grateful for the New Testament that my sister Anna gave me. She told me, "I think you need this more than I do." When we were first processed by the American guards, the guard tore up all of John's family photos and threw them on the ground. I was next, and showed them my New Testament. The guard must have known what it was, because he let me keep it, and let me pass.

I shared my New Testament with other prisoners who were hungry for the faith I had. Sometimes someone would borrow it for a couple of days, and I thought I'd lost it. With three thousand men in our section, I couldn't find the one who'd taken it or even remember who it was. But the little Bible would always come back to me the whole time I was there.

I especially remember sharing my faith with Johann Loewen, a tall, strong man who gave his life to Christ when we knelt in the dirt together to pray. What a joyful experience in that dark place!

A German officer from outside warned us about plans for the prisoners in our section. "You'll be shipped from here to Paris, and from Paris to Russia, because all of you are Russian citizens." We'd been lumped with soldiers from the Vlasov Army, who were considered traitors to Russia. Although we were born in Russia, we identified more with our German heritage and were now German citizens. We were terrified of being sent to Gulag prison camps or simply executed if we were sent to Russia. We knew many who'd suffered that fate, but thus far we'd

Feld des Jammers memorial erected in 1966 at the location of the Bretzenheim Disarmed Enemy Forces prisoner camp. Photo: https:de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feld des Jammers

Peter Plett with daughter Irene Plett.

managed to escape.

Our angel helped us to escape again.

One morning, as John Wiens and I were standing there, someone tapped me on the shoulder. I looked back at this man in a German uniform whom I'd never seen before, but who knew my name. He said, "Peter, we have to get out of here!"

I said, "Yeah, but how?"

He pointed to the fence and said, "Do you see what I see?"

I looked and said, "I see a hole in the barbed wire!" It was incredible. A two-foot (60 centimetres) diameter hole looked as if it had been precisely cut with a torch. We had no idea how it got there, but I believe that God put it there.

The man said, "That's where we have to go through! Just wait."

He told us that his name was also John Wiens. "I've just come back from the Russian front," he said. "Someone I met there told me, 'If you ever need help, go to my parents at Jettingen bei Augsburg, in Bavaria.' That's where we have to go." He handed me a piece of paper with the name of the community (now Jettingen-Scheppach).

People were shot for even approaching within six feet (1.8 metres) of the fence. But after a while, a black cloud appeared over us. Then the cloud burst and it began raining so heavily that we couldn't see the guards with machine guns. We knew they couldn't see us either! This man told us, "Now we have to go through."

I crawled through the hole in the fence, the two John Wienses following me. Although the space was tight, we weren't even scratched. We went into the main roadway that passed through the middle of the camp.

We saw a German guard there; they used Germans to keep the peace. It seemed that because of the downpour, he didn't want to stop long, but asked, "And where do you want to go?"

I had a ready answer: "To Jettingen bei Augsburg!"

He told us, "Oh, that's Bavaria. The Bavarians are in number 18. Run there and report! Hurry!"

It was still pouring rain and the guards couldn't see us when we ran to number 18. At the gate, a German guard asked, "What do you want here?"

"Well, we want to go to Jettingen bei Augsburg, in Bavaria."

"Okay, come on in!" Maybe because it was raining so hard, he didn't want any trouble either. He added, "Go to that tent and report."

At the only tent in the whole camp, German guards were sitting at a desk and writing, while people reported there. He said, "Go and report at that desk."

I was first in line. When the guard asked, "Papers please," I showed him my passport and army papers. "You want to go to Jettingen bei Augsburg?" he asked.

"Yes, yes," I said.

"Have you got somebody there?"

"Yes," I said. I didn't know who it was, but there must be somebody there.

"Okay," he said, and handed me a form that he'd filled out. I didn't know what it was, but later we realized that we'd been given release papers!

My friend John Wiens was next. After he reported, we looked around, but our new friend had disappeared! Three of us had entered the tent, but he was nowhere in sight. I believe he was an angel sent by God to save us!

The guards told us to go and lie down in the outdoor area, saying, "Wait until you're called."

After three days, we were called and put on the train to Augsburg. We were on the first train with three thousand people who were freed from the prison camp! The Bavarian section was the first to be released.

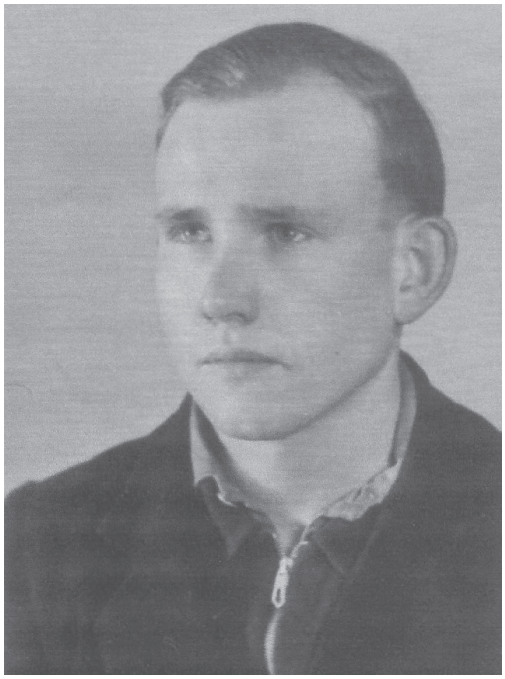
I didn't know then, but Jettingen bei Augsburg was the birthplace of an officer who tried to kill Hitler. Col. Claus Schenk, Graf von Stauffenberg (Count of Stauffenberg), hid a bomb in a briefcase and left it under a table where Hitler was meeting. The plot failed and the colonel was shot. But maybe naming Jettingen as our destination didn't hurt when it came to our release!

The others in our original section were sent to Russian prison camps. I heard what happened to them a couple of years later, when I met another former prisoner. Fritz Schulz, a farmer I worked for in Buchholz an der Aller in West Germany, had been right across the road-

way from our section. I asked, "What happened to the Vlasov Army?"

He said, "The French army came and took them all out of there and shipped them to Russia. But the day they found out that they would be sent to Russia, over three hundred committed suicide."

I heard about one survivor years later when I ran into Peter Loewen in Vancouver. Peter was the cousin of Johann Loewen, who had accepted Christ when I shared my faith with him. He told me that Johann had died, but had often shared his faith with others. Peter survived the prisoner of war camp, and was sent to a Russian Gulag, which he also survived. He eventually immigrated to Germany, where he was buried in Epe. I was so glad that I could show him the love of the Lord, which he could then share with many others. That faith must have helped him to survive, the way it did for me.



Peter Plett as a young man. Photo courtesy of Irene Plett.

Prisoners were held at Bretzenheim long after the war was over, so I was fortunate to get out at all. Erich Werner, who wrote his memoirs of the camp, was there for over three years, until December 1948.* The way he describes his early time there is exactly how it was for me.

Years later, the pastor of our church visited my home. Wes Dahl of the South Langley MB Church said, "You know what? I've shared your angel story with lots of people!" It was striking that he called it my angel story. But there's no doubt, that's what it is!

But not the only one!

*Erich Werner, *Kriegsgefangenenlager Bretzenheim: Ein Bericht* (Bretzenheim Prisoner of War Camp: A Report), (Ortsgemeinde [community of] Bretzenheim, 1993).

Genealogy Corner: the Ties that Bind

Joining and Leaving the Mennonite Community: A Genealogical Perspective

Part 2: The Molotschna Colony 1803-1835

By Glenn H. Penner (gpenner@uoguelph.ca)

In this part of the series I look at the early influx of Germans into the Molotschna Mennonite colony. The 1835 census of the Molotschna colony [1] serves as a convenient reference and ending point, since the year after, a large number of Germans who joined the Mennonites in Brandenburg arrived in the colony. They will be the topic of a separate part of this series. Note that GM# refers to the person's number in the GRANDMA database (Genealogical Registry and Database of Mennonite Ancestry) [2].

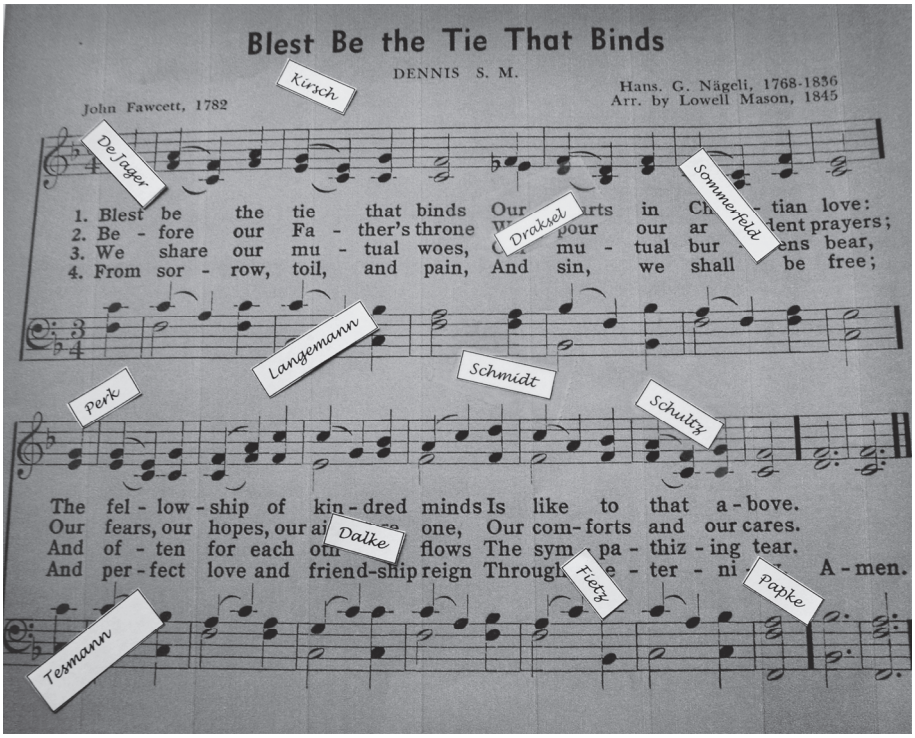
Peter Christian Dalke (b. 1779; GM#3506). This family was originally Lutheran and became Mennonite very shortly before emigrating from West Prussia. At the time of their immigration to the Molotschna colony (1821) they were classified as Mennonite [3].

Jacob Isaac De Jager (b. 1803; GM#51912). Jacob De Jager was an unmarried man when he immigrated from the Mennonite community of Hamburg, Germany, to the Molotschna colony in 1827. He was the cousin of Jacob van der Smissen, the pastor of the Danzig church from 1826-35 [4]. Johann De Jager (1897-1980; GM#1024856) is the only known member of this family to have immigrated to North America. He was not related to **Carl Jaeger** (1783-1839; GM#198860), mentioned in Part 1.

Johann Draksel (no dates available; GM#265600). It is not known if he ever became a Mennonite. His children, Christian (b. 1774), Jacob (b. 1785) and Veronica (Fronika) (b. 1791), are found in the village of Rueckenau in 1811 together with their mother, Magdalena. This family name does not appear in any Mennonite records after the 1835 census of Mennonites in the Molotschna colony.

Johann Fietz (b. 1797; GM#345063). According to the 1835 census, he was living with his wife Anna and daughter Margaretha in the household of his stepfather,

the Mennonite Cornelius Weiss, at Muntau #6. By 1847 he was the owner of the property, but by 1852 the property had passed on to a Heinrich Epp [5]. Cornelius Weiss must have married Fietz's mother sometime after the Molotschna colony census of 1814 [6].



Source: Montage, by Julia Toews.

Cornelius Kirsch (b. 1798; GM#60370). According to the 1835 census, he was living at #14 Alexanderwohl. By 1847 the owner of this property was a Heinrich Unruh [4]. The Kirsch family name continued in the Molotschna colony and its daughter colonies. In the 1880s son David and his family emigrated to Kansas.

Johann Langemann (1782-1826; GM#45981). According to the 1835 census he was living with his father-in-law Cornelius Weiss in Muntau, Molotschna colony. The Weiss family came to the Molotschna colony in 1804 and Langemann married Margaretha Weiss shortly after that. Langemann was a German colonist who immigrated to Russia from West Prussia. His place of origin in Prussia and his immigration year are not known. His descendants either remained in Russia or are found in many locations in North America.

Andreas Martin Papke (b. 1819; GM#61700). According to the 1835 census he was living with the surviving sons of Peter Janzen of Franzthal. According to this census he was the illegitimate son of Katharina, the wife of Klaas Janzen. His origins are unknown. He had two known sons. Descendants of his son Peter are still part of the Mennonite community.

Peter Martin Perk (b. 1797; GM#51572). His origins are unknown. Sometime in the 1820s he married a Helena Loecker. By the time of the 1835 census he was already a Mennonite living in Friedensdorf with his wife and four children. At least one member of the Mennonite Perk family immigrated to Canada in the 1920s.

Daniel Schmidt (1759-1821; GM#46537). Daniel Schmidt was one of several German Schmidts who joined the Mennonites between 1700 and 1850. There is conflicting information about his origins. He seems to have been one of the few Germans joining the Mennonites in Russia who did not originate in West Prussia. Descendants of this family remained Mennonites for many generations and are found in Russia, Europe and North America.

Georg Johann Schultz (1768-1843; GM#51307). It should be noted that his wife's name was Maria Will, daughter of Adam Will, *not* Willms. This is a classic case of the Mennonitization of surnames. This, and several other major errors, can be found in the GRANDMA database and other genealogies of this family. Georg Schultz and Maria Will were Lutherans when they were married. However, they were clearly classified as Mennonites when they obtained their passports to move to Russia in 1823 [3]. Sometime between 1823 and 1835 Maria Will died and Georg Schultz married Katharina, the widow of Jacob Wiebe. At this time Schultz took over Wiebe's farm in Friedensdorf. Many of his descendants have remained in the Mennonite community until the present day.

David Sommerfeld (b. 1745; GM#269479). David Sommerfeld likely became a Mennonite when he married Maria Schroeder sometime around 1796 in the Culm area of West Prussia [7]. The current version of the GRANDMA database equates him with a totally unrelated David Sommerfeld who lived in the Tilsit region of Lithuania

and was not a Mennonite. This information is simply incorrect. In 1820 he, his wife Maria Schroeder, their daughters Anna (age 20), Catharina (16), Elisabeth (15), orphan grandson Heinrich (4), and a possibly illegitimate boy Johann Leonhard (4) left for Russia. Heinrich immigrated to Kansas in 1886. Johann Leonhard is mentioned in the correspondence of Johann Cornies in the 1830s as the secretary of the Forestry Society [8].

David Daniel Tesmann (b. 1777; GM#55014). This surname should not be confused with the unrelated surname Tesmer. In 1813 the Lutheran David Tesmann of the Stuhm area of West Prussia married the Mennonite Elisabeth Dahl [9]. This family was Lutheran until they left for Russia. In 1818 this family immigrated to the Molotschna colony as Mennonites [3]. Sons David and Heinrich immigrated to the US in the 1870s. Other descendants stayed in Russia, some moving to Canada during the 1923-30 immigration.

References

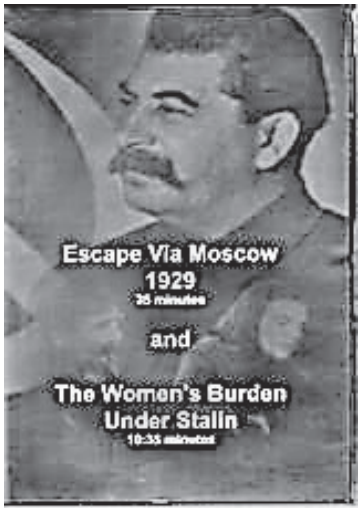
1. The 1835 Molotschna Census. For an index see: http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/1835cens.htm
2. More information on the GRANDMA database can be found at https://www.grandmaonline.org/gmolstore/pc/Overview-d1.htm
3. Peter Rempel, *Mennonite Migrations to Russia* (Winnipeg: Mennonite Historical Society, 2007).
4. Ingrid I. Epp, trans. Harvey L. Dyck, Ingrid I. Epp & John R. Staples, ed., *Transformation on the Southern Ukrainian Steppe: Letters and Papers of Johann Cornies, Vol I: 1812-1835* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2015), letter #140 (10 Oct. 1827).
5. Molotschna Colony Voters Lists. See: http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/Molotschna_1847_to_1862_Voters.pdf
6. 1814 Molotschna Colony Census, State Archives of Dnipro Region (DADO), Fonds 134, Opis 1, Delo 405.
7. Wilhelmsbruch Property Records, Torun Archives, Torun, Poland, Fonds 1647, File 6417.
8. Epp, *Transformation*.
9. Lutheran Marriage Records of Stuhm, West Prussia.

Escape Via Moscow 1929 and *The Women's Burden Under Stalin*

Videos directed by Otto Klassen. Winnipeg: Otto Klassen Productions, 2011.

Reviewed by Caroline Thurley

I have been interested in the Mennonite narrative for as long as I can remember. Hearing stories of my mother's experience in Russia and her subsequent immigration to Canada in 1929 with her aunt and uncle increased my curiosity and desire to know what life was like for her. Then, an excerpt from the story *Henry's Red Sea* appeared in the take-home Sunday school paper. [Barbara Smucker, a Mennonite author, wrote the thoughtful and impressive *Henry's Red Sea* (Scottdale, 1955), relating the escape of a group of Russian Mennonite refugees from Berlin in 1948 on their way to final settlement in Paraguay. It was meant for children (GAMEO).] This well-written feature made me interested in knowing more of my mother's early life, of which she had said very little.



Recently, I enrolled in the Mennonite Studies Certificate program at the University of the Fraser Valley. I spent time at the Mennonite Historical Society and the Mennonite Heritage Museum, taking the opportunity to view several videos about Mennonites.

Two videos that impressed me greatly were *Escape Via Moscow 1929* and its companion video, *The Women's Burden Under Stalin*. Otto Klassen Productions produced this DVD in 2011 and Charlotte (Klassen) de Fehr narrates it. As I viewed this double feature video, I again became aware that, because of their strong faith and their resolve not to deny the God they loved, the Mennonites were able to endure inexplicable hardship and persecution. These experiences profoundly influenced them for the rest of their lives, but they rarely spoke of them. Instead, many determined to talk of the strength and comfort God gave them.

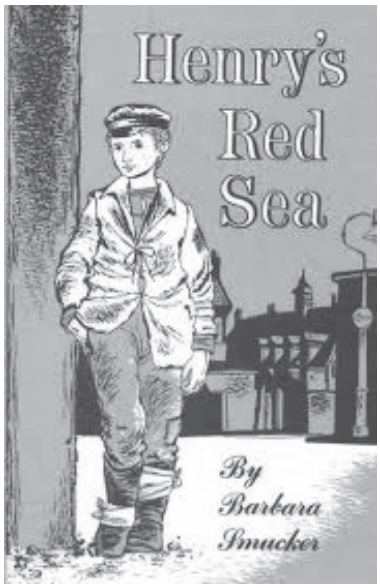
Synopsis of Escape via Moscow 1929

Escape Via Moscow 1929 begins with the implementation of Stalin's First Five-Year Plan in October 1928. Mennonites, with their strong sense of family, need for independence, unconditional demand for freedom of conscience, and strong sense of private

ownership found it difficult to believe that freedom was no longer allowed. With churches and schools closed, religious education banned, removal of control over their charitable organizations, the vote taken away, and government expropriation of land, horses, and implements, Mennonites felt a sense of loss and hopelessness.

In desperation, sixty to seventy families fled from Siberia to Moscow in the spring of 1929. Because they were successful in securing exit visas, others became hopeful, and more than 13,000 Mennonites, Lutherans, and Catholics descended on Moscow, believing they would perish if they remained in Russia. But, because of negative publicity, the Stalinist government banned train tickets to Moscow and denied visas to those already in Moscow, dashing all hope for emigration. Though Mennonites lost hope in the government, they looked to the Lord for help: "Only a divine miracle could make it possible for these families to leave Soviet Russia" (Klassen *Escape*). Few signed a forced declaration of voluntary return. Most were exiled to the Ural Mountains and to Siberia, where many died of starvation, illness, or cold.

Six thousand refugees in Moscow, however, received permission to leave Russia after Germany voted to resettle them, utilizing the German Red Cross and other relief organizations. These asylum seekers wept tears of joy as they journeyed by train, hoping to reach freedom, yet very aware that freedom might not be achievable. The Mennonites really learned to pray, cried to God, and had their prayers answered. After passing through the Red Gate into Latvia and beyond Soviet control, they burst into song, thanking and praising God for their miraculous escape. Once inside Latvia, these refugees journeyed on to Riga, where Germans welcomed and cared for them. The Mennonites had suffered much.



In Germany, the refugees were housed in Camp Hammerstein, Prenzlau, and Mölln. According to the video, "In the Soviet Union, these refugees had been slaves without rights; yet, here in Germany, they were fully accepted as countrymen." The Red Cross provided food, money, and work for the refugees. While the refugees waited for processing, the camps allowed religious services, Biblical instruction, education, and medical work.

Although most intended to immigrate to Canada, Paraguay offered to accept refugees without medical screening, extended exemption from military service, and accorded freedom of religion, education and language. Alternately, the German government offered free transport to Brazil; the Dutch Mennonites helped the Mennonite refugees resettle there.

The refugees expressed thanks to God and the German government for the care and help they received. These émigrés were only too happy to accept Paraguay's and Brazil's offers. This immigration resettlement was a miracle, a real answer to their cry for help to the Lord. They were now able to begin a life of freedom in a new country.

Synopsis of The Women's Burden Under Stalin

Klassen's companion video*, The Women's Burden Under Stalin,* is a ten-minute narration of the lives of women in Stalinist Russia. Lenin wanted to improve and enlighten the position of women. Stalin, Lenin's successor, proposed that Russia change from an agrarian society to an industrial nation. Farmers resisting forced collectivization were arrested and exiled to Siberia or Northern Russia. Punishments for crimes were severe.

Since the collectives required much labour, women had to work there as well. They, however, also had domestic obligations: looking after their children, making meals, and taking their children to school. When working in the fields, mothers were expected to keep pace with young girls. With March 8 as Mother's Day, or the Day of the Woman, workers listened to speeches about the rights and privileges extended to women "in their workers' paradise" (Klassen *Women's*). Families were exiled to Siberia, children died enroute, and parents were not given enough time to bury them. Women cried in anguish, "God, are you still there?" These homeless, distressed, and unprotected women had no more tears to shed.

Women were not exempt from arrest, torture, and exile to Siberia or Northern Russia. They were loaded into boxcars with their children and sent into exile. The women were expected to work all day at their assigned jobs, whether that be on the collective, in gypsum camps, in the forests, or gold panning. They first prepared breakfast for their family and sent their children to school. Women and children were raped. They were placed on food rations. Many succumbed to death. Be-

cause of arrests and exile of the men, women were often the sole wage earners for their families. In spite of the harsh treatment, most women remained faithful to their husbands, hoping one day to be reunited. The video emphasizes that "The Soviet citizen had only obligations, but no rights." Despite the extreme suffering, hardship, and labour of women, Stalin's message to the world was that women were happier and had a better life than before. With Stalin controlling the press, no one dared contradict the media. Mennonite women could not trust the government but relied on their strong faith in God.

Reflections

As I reflected on this double feature DVD, I marvelled at the ability of the Mennonites to endure such suffering. Their life in Russia just prior to the escape and exile had not prepared them to endure such hardship. As I looked at the video footage, I saw fear, sadness, terror, and hopelessness in their faces. The women, especially, suffered extreme anguish at the arrest and interrogation of their husbands, as well as the uncertainty of their own fate. They were also concerned about their children. Now they were alone in this struggle for survival. Stalin's method of improving the status of women must have seemed strange to Mennonite women, who were used to farm work alongside their husbands, as well as looking after the house and their children. For a woman to do "heavy man's work" must have seemed impossible. Yet they were incapable of protest because protest only reaped arrest, terror, and severe punishment. Because Mennonites had a strong faith in God, along with their sense of family, community, and work, they were able to endure and survive. They relied on God to give them strength.

In spite of the women's faith, many of the faces in the video lack emotion. The terror and suffering inflicted on families was so great that, in order to survive, the women had to stop feeling. That was the only way they could cope and look after their families.

Those were able to leave Russia as refugees experienced uncertainty of a different kind. They first suffered the stress of not knowing if they were able to escape. By far the most fortunate were those first sixty or seventy families who were able to secure exit visas. There was a great deal of apprehension in the minds of all the refugees, knowing that emigration was uncertain until they were safely past the Red Gate into Latvia and out of the control of the Soviets.

Once inside Latvia the refugees broke into song, thanking God for their safe passage. The song *Grosser Gott, wir loben dich* (Great God, we praise you) was sung in the German language, I remember singing it often as a girl; yet it has only been recently that I realized the significance of the song.

The refugees who left Russia scattered into different countries and made new lives. The lives of those who settled in Canada were very different from those who settled in Paraguay or Brazil. Yet, despite the different locations, the refugees knew that God had been with them and had helped them, and gave thanks to God. Despite knowing that God had cared for them – and they were thankful – the suffering and persecution the refugees endured profoundly influenced them for the rest of their lives. Many women fled alone with their children after their husbands were arrested and exiled. Many never saw their husbands again, although they never gave up hope.

There is a fair bit of overlap between the content of *Escape Via Moscow 1929* and *The Women's Burden Under Stalin*. The same photographs are used in both videos, almost as though there was not enough footage to create new scenes. The narration also revisited much of the same information which was presented in the same way. Yet, overall, I would recommend this double feature.

Sources

Klassen, Otto, dir. *Escape Via Moscow 1929.* Winnipeg: Otto Klassen Productions, 2011. DVD, 35 minutes.

Klassen, Otto, dir. *The Women's Burden Under Stalin.* Winnipeg: Otto Klassen Productions, 2011. DVD, 10:35 minutes.

Smucker, Barbara. *Henry's Red Sea.* Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1955.

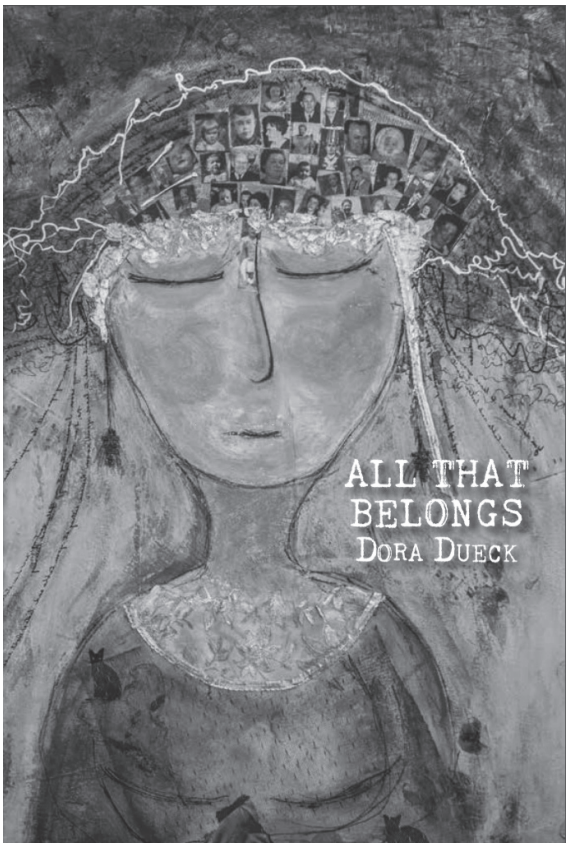
Dora Dueck, *All That Belongs*.

Turnstone Press: Winnipeg, 2019. 333 pp.

Reviewed by Robert Martens

Catherine has retired from her profession of archivist, but her husband Jim is still working on contract. She has time on her hands. As commonly happens with retirees, past events resurface with all their regrets and joys. She

feels a powerful compulsion to relive that past: "This is how it started, that year of preoccupation with the dead" (3).



Catherine is the protagonist and first-person narrator of Dora Dueck's meditative novel *All That Belongs*. A conflicted character, Catherine feels compelled both to investigate and disavow her family history. "Had I harboured shame for too long? Been too fearful – of empowerment?" (5) Jim, on the other hand, thinks she is taking herself too seriously. "You're an archivist, for pity's sake, Jim had remarked to me once, you ought to be at home with your past" (5). And so her search proceeds, in fits and starts, lurching between denial and fascination: "A strange excitement for remembrance, for welcome to all that belonged, stirred in me, nudged against my habitual resistance" (6).

Shame has played a central role in Catherine's life: "…[A]mong the components of all that belongs, there's ample opportunity for *ashamed* to take root" (161). Catherine, paradoxically broadminded and yet prim and demure, is easily mortified by the behaviour of family members. When her brother Darrell, for example, finds a home in "the Mental," she cannot admit it openly to her friends, cannot weep with him. She finds it difficult to acknowledge her own insight: "What looking to the past needs most, I thought, was not correction, not even reframing as much as a consoling hand, a hug, the soothing murmur of I know, I know, I know" (110).

Most of Catherine's shame, however, is reserved for her Uncle Must, aka Gerhard/George Riediger. His behaviour is a constant presence in the novel, which swivels deftly between present and past. Uncle Must, who lives with her family for many years and then dies mysteriously at a lake, is damaged; he may be suffering from obsessive compulsive disorder, or he may be schizophrenic, or … perhaps there is something else, something unspoken.

This mystery stands at the heart of the novel and of Catherine's quest. She pursues answers with an unrelenting obsession, then stops short when uncomfortable truths threaten to emerge. Dueck's atmospheric telling is pitch perfect. Catherine's stories of adolescent insecurities, of her marital arguments, of the dreary care home in which her mother is housed, of coffee and conversation – all are so vividly drawn that the novel reads like a memoir. Dueck might be called a poet of the commonplace.

The mystery is eventually solved, at least in part. Dora Dueck skilfully increases the tension of the narrative until a climactic chapter where past family events crystallize, and a kind of understanding is achieved. Catherine's stiffness, her aloofness, perhaps reinforced by her decades of work as an archivist, must be overcome before empathy with others can be realized: "Seeing too how beset with moderation I'd always been, governed by fear" (287). Late in the novel, Catherine can finally embrace a character named Sharon Miller who has played a large and enigmatic role in her life, who seemed incapable of understanding social boundaries, who lacked the discipline – or moderation and fear – that had governed Catherine's soul.

Near the book's end, the titular phrase is repeated, emphasized, a third time: "What was this stage but a recognition of all I once knew and all that I didn't? An embrace that released. Aliveness to all that belongs" (331). The story ends quietly. It might be asked whether Dora Dueck herself is looking back in this novel and embracing the past – all of it – it all belongs.

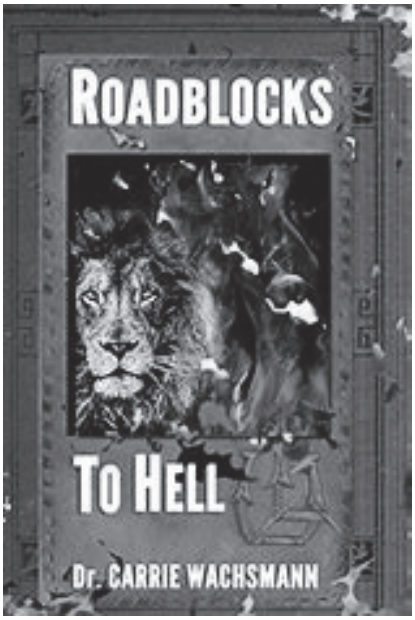
Carrie Wachsmann. *Roadblocks to Hell*.

Abbotsford: HeartBeat Productions, 2016. 264 pp.

Reviewed by Robert Martens

Sometimes, polar opposites attract. Cali Ginter, raised in a strict Mennonite environment in Steinbach, Manitoba. Walther Colt (not his real name), a troubled kid who hates any kind of authority. And yet, even in early childhood, Cali's heart sees something good in Walther when

no one else does. "I figured it was better to make a friend than an enemy, so I did – make a friend" (259). And so these two utterly different individuals achieve a camaraderie that will last a lifetime.



In Carrie Wachsmann's book of creative non-fiction, *Roadblocks to Hell*, the author tells that story in detail. While Cali and her husband Manfred go to school, raise children, and find careers, Walther is in and out of jail. In 1972 he is charged with attempted murder of the Steinbach chief of police. He is placed in an adult facility. Cali doesn't forget him, writes letters to him. "Perhaps, she still held hope for Walt because she had seen behind the hardened eyes and angry soul. She saw a young man who had something to offer to society, who was intelligent and bright, who needed something meaningful in his life to express it. 'You don't throw something away just because it's a little bit broken,' she could hear her father say" (69-70).

Cali also knows about Walt's upbringing: an abusive father, and a mother of low intelligence who is incapable of stopping the violence. She finds that prisoners often come from broken backgrounds, and that their imprisonment may make matters worse. When Walt is transferred to the infamous BC Pen, Cali makes it her mission to research the facility: "She was able to confirm that it was known for cruel and inhuman practices. Until 1972, flogging had been used as a form of corporal punishment, along with the chain gang, the limited bread and water diet, and solitary confinement…. Filled with unholy secrets, this prison was the last hellhole anyone would want to do time in" (115-116).

When, in 1975, Walt finds himself in a more relaxed environment at Matsqui Institution, he agrees to a series of interviews with Cali, who is studying criminology and thinks that Walt would be an excellent case study for a paper. There is only one catch: his real name is not to be used. "And that's when he gave her the name, 'Walther Colt'. 'Two of my favourite pieces,' he said with a grin" (120).

Even as the friendship endures, with Walt spending some time with Cali and Manfred on a converted minesweeper on the Fraser River – they had refurbished it into a temporary home to save money on rent – Walt's journey is a rocky one. His difficulties culminate in a 1979 shootout with RCMP officers in Burnaby. At Walt's request, Cali acts as a character witness at his trial. As part of her testimony, Cali states, "At fifteen he's in adult prison where one can only imagine what he has to do to defend himself. So many experiences he's had with the law have not been good ones. So when he sees a uniform, it represents fear and it represents power. It represents something that is out to get him – to cause him pain in some way" (207).

The goal of Cali and Manfred is to set up "roadblocks to hell" for Walt. The troubled soul eventually achieves some kind of redemption, and realizes his unchangeable goal: "I will die free" (250). In this memoir/novel, Carrie Wachsmann uses fictitious names. One might wonder about the efficacy of this when the actual names are easily findable online. Nevertheless, the story, dotted with cliff-hangers and revelations, is well-told, and for many readers may well be a "page-turner."

Roadblocks to Hell can be ordered online, or accessed in the MHSBC library.

Roots and Branches

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Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Mennonite Heritage Museum and Mennonite Historical Society are closed until further notice. Staff remain at work and can be contacted by phone or email.

Artist Profile

Linda Nikkel Klippenstein grew up in Steinbach, Manitoba. She had a happy, and happily uneventful childhood, growing up in a family where honesty, generosity and wit were valued. She took these values to heart as she grew older, winning her many loyal friends. The home Linda grew up in was often filled with guests and laughter, also something that has impacted Linda's adult life. After attending college in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Linda and her husband chose to relocate to Abbotsford, British Columbia. Their home is always on the verge of chaos, but with intent.

Linda helps women feel connected to community by creating and facilitating inclusion-based art projects. The art sessions are designed to bring women together who might not otherwise have opportunity to meet. Although she is primarily a painter, her community pieces are cut-paper collages, and it's not unusual for a piece like the one shown, to have more than 10,000 pieces of paper in it. The designs are drawn out very much like a jigsaw puzzle so that when women arrive to the sessions, they receive papers and adhesive, and glue the papers into marked places. Working with papers rather than paint feels less intimidating for women who don't have any art experience, and the goal is for everyone to feel successful.

It's all about women gathering, working on a common project, while sharing their stories and making connections. Because the projects are sponsored by different organizations, the original artworks are not available for purchase, but prints are available in different sizes, on gallery quality wrapped canvas, or mounted on archival paper.

For more information, contact her at linda@nikkel.ca

Linda Klippenstein leading an art class. Photo courtesy of Linda Klippenstein.

Above: *Landscape near Witmarsum, Paraná State, Brazil.* Artist: Johann Janzen, 1963. Painting located in the Ens Heritage Homestead, Village of Reinland, Manitoba. Photo: Julia M. Toews on a visit to Reinland, 2015.

Gebet Der Einwanderer
R. Hirschfeld

Fremdes Volk und Fremder Strand,
Fremde Sitten, Fremde Erde,
Hilf uns, Herr, dass dieses Land
Uns bald neue Heimat werde.

Voller Glauben und Vetrau'n
Woll'n wir unter fremden Sternen
Unseren Kindern Häuser bau'n
Und Brasilien lieben lernen.

Peter Pauls Jr., ed. *Mennoniten in Brasilien*, 1980, p. 31. (selected stanzas)

Immigrant's Prayer
Trans. Julia Born Toews & Robert Martens

Foreign folk and foreign shores,
Foreign customs, foreign earth,
Help us, Lord, that soon this land
Will house the family hearth.

Filled with faith and filled with trust,
Under unfamiliar stars,
We will build our children's homes,
and learn to love Brazil.

Left: *Urwald - Ancient Forest in the Krauel Valley, S.C., Brazil*. Painting by Johann Janzen, 1946. Located at the Heimat Museum in Witmarsum, Paraná, Brazil. Photo: Julia M. Toews, 2009. See page 8 for artist bio.