



# 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



The Marien-Taubstummenanstalt as it once was. Painting by G. Newintschana, 2016. See story on page 12.

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# Editorial

By Maryann Tjart Janzen

It's been a long twelve months since the COVID pandemic invaded our lives. Protective health measures have meant many restrictions and changes to our daily lives. The Museum which closed in March has still not reopened for in-person visits, although the coffee shop was open during the summer and is now offering take out orders. Historical Society staff and volunteers have adapted to working at home or social distancing in the building. Many challenges have arisen for all of us and sadly some have lost friends and family, but life – and the work of the Historical Society – goes on. I am very thankful for the medical and scientific guidance that has shaped our measured provincial response to the pandemic. I know we are all hoping life will return to some semblance of normality later this year once most BC residents are vaccinated,

Fortunately, our work on *Roots and Branches* which is mostly done at home has continued with little disruption – although the editorial team can't meet in person at the moment. Along with our usual collection of announcements, book reviews and genealogy articles, etc., this issue features articles on Mennonites and health issues, a timely focus given our current global crisis. These include several articles on non-Mennonite doctors who made a significant contribution to the Ukraine Mennonite communities they lived and worked in. Also featured are articles about the development of the Marien-Taubstummenanstalt (the Maria School for the Deaf) and the Morija Deaconess Home, revealing the growing health infrastructure of these Mennonite colonies in the early twentieth century.

In another article, Arnold Neufeldt-Fast explores the 1830 response of Mennonite civic leader Johann Cornies to the Asian Cholera epidemic sweeping through nearby Ukrainian villages. Neufeldt-Fast points out some striking similarities between our current health crisis and the 1830 situation, asserting, "perhaps there is something to learn from the spirituality of the time as well." In letters to friends, "Cornies praised the state's self-distancing measures: 'All roads are blocked and no one is allowed through without undergoing quarantine. It is impossible to thank God enough for His fatherly guardianship of our administration, which protects us through its wise

measures.... If we follow these regulations scrupulously, the only thing left for us to do is to pray honestly and to submit to God's Will.'"

For me, Cornies' words are a reminder of our responsibilities as both citizens of earth and heaven: to follow mandated health guidelines and then ultimately to place our trust in God.

## *Letters to the editors*

Dear Editors,

The COVID-19 life buried the February 2020 issue of *Roots and Branches* under a pile of files and mail and I read the periodical just this morning. Since it was such a good read, with its stimulating variety of articles (including a kind review of my own little Clearbrook Road book), I thought to write and thank you. The magazine is not only excellently produced, but is true to its stated purpose of opening the past to the next generation. We wish you well as you continue under unusual circumstances of what I say to Harvey is "the plague."

Sincerely,

Anne Konrad

Kudos to all who put the *Roots and Branches* together. Always an interesting and intriguing read.

Janette Thiessen (email)



Richard Thiessen and Evan Kreider.

See press release about the Anabaptist Foundation.

Photo: courtesy of Richard Thiessen



## Press Release

### The Mennonite Historical Society of BC seeks input for collaborative 2020 Anabaptist storytelling project

The Mennonite Historical Society of BC (MHSBC) is calling on local Anabaptists to share their experiences in relation to COVID-19 during the remarkable historical, biological and social events of 2020 as part of Anabaptist History Today (AHT), a groundbreaking collaborative storytelling project.

Created by Mennonite Church USA (MC USA) Archives and Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society, AHT is the first large-scale, collaborative digital project of its kind in the Anabaptist community. The Mennonite Historical Society of BC is one of 16 participating Anabaptist archives and history organizations.

MHSBC invites individuals, congregations, schools and organizations to tell their stories of living during these changing times. Contributors may share their experiences through a variety of media, including videos, audio recordings, photos, journal entries, artwork, poetry and personal reflections. An online form guides contributors through the process. Alternatively, contributors can submit stories of their experiences to [info@mennonitemuseum.com](mailto:info@mennonitemuseum.com) and they will be uploaded to AHT's website.

To learn more about the AHT project, visit <https://aht.libraryhost.com/s/archive/page/Welcome>

## Press Release

### Anabaptist Foundation and Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia

The Anabaptist Foundation was founded in Vancouver, B.C. in 1998 and received approval to be a Charity in 1999. William (Bill) J.J. Riediger was the Foundation's primary driving force. Although there were various donors, Bill's estate gave the Foundation important additional funding, which enabled the Foundation to finance projects of interest to Anabaptist history, thinking, culture, and faith for more than two decades.



Rose Shenk reflects on Ethiopia as part of the AHT project. Stories on AHT website.

Photo: courtesy Rose Shenk

Scholarships were provided for work in former Soviet archives as well as in North American universities and seminaries, travel grants assisted in charitable work and research, and informative historical markers were erected in the Ukraine. But the Foundation's primary activity was financing the publication of books on topics of interest to Anabaptists. One of the most popular was the two-volume *Take our Moments and our Days* (Arthur Paul Boers et al., published by the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary both in hard copy and more recently in digital form, now available at no cost). Other publications focused on aspects of Anabaptist history in the Ukraine and on making key Anabaptist books available in French and Italian.

Shortly before the Foundation closed in December of 2020, its remaining assets were given to the Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia in support of a proposed new publication on the history of Mennonites in British Columbia, which will include not only the two larger denominations but also the province's smaller groups of Mennonites. Since Bill Riediger had been both President of the Mennonite Historical Society and a founding Director of the Anabaptist Foundation, the Foundation's directors were pleased that its final project embodies Bill's life-long interests.

A publication committee composed of David Giesbrecht, Bruce Guenther, Robert Martens, Ruth Derksen Siemens, and Richard Thiessen is at the initial stages of its work on the proposed history of Mennonites in British Columbia.

# Volunteer Appreciation 2020: Sip & Snack

Humbly submitted by Jennifer Martens, Office and Volunteer Manager for the Mennonite Heritage Museum and Mennonite Historical Society of BC

This past fall, volunteers from both the MHM and MHSBC were invited to a celebration that spanned a week in September from Monday, September 28, to Friday, October 2. Due to the turn of unforeseen events that tilted our world in 2020, we were unable to hold our volunteer appreciation event last spring as we normally do. Since we didn't want to miss out on seeing our volunteers and have a visiting time, along with a short presentation and complimentary light refreshments, we knew we would have to do something quite different. We converted the seasonal art gallery area on the main floor of the Museum into a large meeting area so that we could have small, safely distanced gatherings following the outlined COVID protocols of our provincial government.

Hosting such small groups meant that we needed to have separate groups come on separate days. Volunteers could register for spots on a day that best suited them. We called this event a "Sip & Snack"; everyone was served coffee or tea along with piroshky. While the wearing of masks made it difficult for some attendees to hear in a room that echoes so much, everyone did their best. We thank Julia Toews for installing a beautiful, impactful photo exhibit for volunteers to enjoy during the event, and also Richard and the Health and Safety Task Force for their fabulous idea of using the gallery for a refreshment venue during the pandemic.

Several themes ran through this year's event. With Thanksgiving so near, it seemed appropriate to be celebrating thankfulness for our volunteers! The Volunteer Canada national themes for this year were "We applaud our Volunteers for all they do"; "It's time to applaud Canada's Volunteers"; and "Let's cheer for all of Canada's Volunteers" – certainly themes that we can get behind! Our in-house theme was "Volunteer Vision 2020" – an

allusion to "20/20 vision" being a "clear vision" – "as we reflect on the past, we face the future with a 20/20 vision for our volunteers in 2020." Each year, the Volunteer Appreciation Team (Jennifer Martens, Jenny Bergen, Elma Pauls and Mary Ann Quiring ex officio) designs an exclusive collector's lapel pin for our volunteers to commemorate their contributions to the Mennonite Heritage Museum and the Mennonite Historical Society of BC.

This fall four volunteers received significant recognition for 2020 – 5 Years: Irene Adkin (Digitizing Periodicals & Documents), \$25.00; 10 Years: Hildegard Baerg (MAID Team), \$50.00; 10 Years: Wilf Penner

(Translations), \$50.00; and 15 Years: Helen Nickel (MAID Team), \$75.00. We congratulate these recipients of the Long-Term Service Awards! Gift cards were generously provided by Blue Continent Transportation from Surrey, BC. We particularly appreciate having sponsorship for these recognition gifts so that our volunteers can enjoy them without feeling that they've taken something away from the Society.

It was also a time to acknowledge a fare-thee-well to volunteers who have moved on to other endeavours or have passed away. Richard and Jennifer each expressed a few words of affirmation and appreciation for our volunteers and staff. Richard recognized those continuing to come on-site to

fulfill shifts as well as those who work on projects from home. As he shared, MHSBC has "continued to grow and flourish because of your faithful dedication to the tasks you have undertaken year after year. We are continuing to be considered a first-class organization with resources for the novice researcher and the seasoned scholar." Jennifer quoted from a presentation given by David Giesbrecht in his 2005 Salute to Volunteers: "Volunteers are the most important assets of small community organizations. They supply much of the institutional energy." Our volunteers keep our services and programs buoyant, thriving and effective and are truly appreciated. Jenny closed in prayer for each group.

The Sip & Snack events also coincided with "National Thank Your Custodian Week," and while we thank Ernie Thiessen often, we wish to formally express our gratitude for the magnitude of work he and his assistant Jon-



Hildegard Baerg has volunteered for 10 years helping with MAID.



athan do to ensure that the Museum looks better than new and is always photo-ready from any angle, inside and out. His role has been significantly impacted by the new COVID-19 protocols and we appreciate his agility in adding the needed extra sanitization and cleaning.

One of the hard things about 2020 was not being able to give or receive hugs from volunteers who connect with us this way. We have all missed that affirming human contact, and at times the distance has left us feeling so inexorably saddened. We are overjoyed and so thankful that forty volunteers were able to attend the Sip & Snacks, along with our regular staff. Those who opted to stay home or were unable to attend received their appreciation package through the mail.

If you would like to join our volunteer team or sponsor meaningful events such as these, please let our office know, or email [jennifer.martens@mhsbc.com](mailto:jennifer.martens@mhsbc.com).



Irene Atkin has volunteered with digitizing for 5 years.

## A Mennonite Pandemic Spirituality

By Arnold Neufeldt-Fast

Reprinted with permission of the author

Asiatic Cholera broke out across Russia in 1829 and '30, and further into Europe in 1831. It began with an infected battalion in Orenburg (Davis 40), and by early Fall 1830 the disease had reached Moscow and the capital. Russia imposed drastic quarantine measures. Much like today, infected regions were cut off and domestic trade was restricted.

The disease reached the Molotschna River district in Fall 1830, and by mid-December hundreds of Nogai deaths were recorded in the villages adjacent to the Mennonite colony, leading state authorities to impose a strict quarantine.

When the Mennonite Johann Cornies – a state-appointed agricultural supervisor and civic leader – first became aware of the nearby cholera-related deaths, he recommended to the Mennonite District Office on December 6, 1830, to stop traffic and prevent random

contacts with Nogais. For Cornies it was important that the Mennonite community do all it can to keep from carrying the disease into the community, though “only God knows our destiny” (Cornies, “Molotschna” 198).

On December 30, 1830, Cornies reported the situation to his Mennonite friend Johann Wiebe in Tiege, West Prussia. He noted the actions they had taken, but also offered a theological framework for understanding their crisis:



Johann Cornies. Source: [Openlibrary .org/books/OL20729720M/Johann\\_Cornies](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL20729720M/Johann_Cornies).

*God alone knows what will befall us in this sad time. Our villages exist like an island in an ocean of cholera, and there is evil all around. ... We have taken the following precautionary measures.*

*In every village, two men visit each house daily to check on the family's health. To separate the sick from the healthy, one house has been emptied for use as a hospital. A large bathtub, etc., stands beside each Village Office.*

*We do not know what the future holds. Only the Eternal can see it. We must build on His grace and plead with Him to turn this scourge away from our empire and our villages.*

*With complete faith in the wisdom of our government, we await the Al-*

*mighty's ordinances without fear.*

*May every Christian, every thinking person harbour the personal conviction that whatever comes from God will serve our well-being. May this supreme wisdom divinely illumine man's immortal spirit, created in His image, and cast light into the darkness of our earthly path.*

*We do not strive against God's will by using our minds in taking precautions against disease and in battling disruptive natural forces. We are using our talents from on high, submitting them to His wise counsels and thereby praising His holy name. As you know, some people here consider precautionary measures to be sinful.*

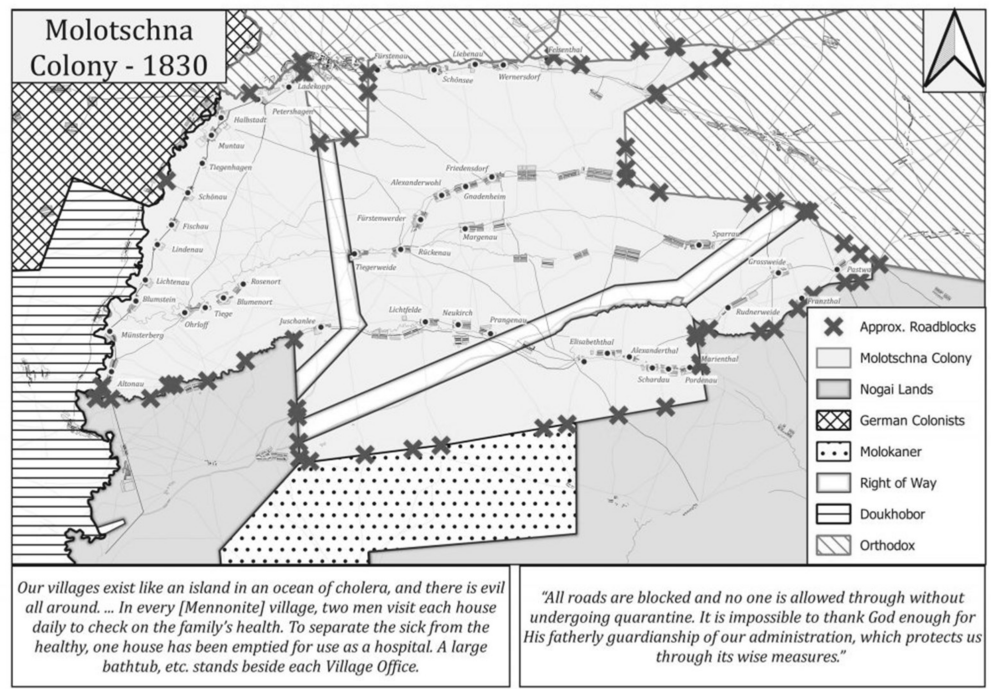
*Others continue to indulge in frivolity, even in this depressed, discouraging time* (Cornies, "Wiebe" 202).

Cornies praised the state's self-distancing measures: "All roads are blocked and no one is allowed through without undergoing quarantine. It is impossible to thank God enough for His fatherly guardianship of our administration, which protects us through its wise measures" (Cornies, "Blueher" 200). ... If we follow these regulations scrupulously, the only thing left for us to do is to pray honestly and to submit to God's Will" (Cornies, "Fadeev" 201).

Within a few months, the pandemic broke out in the city of Danzig as well, despite a 20-day quarantine on individuals and goods coming from Russia. On June 16, 1831, Prussia began to treat vessels proceeding from Danzig "as if coming from Russia" (*History*). In total, the pandemic took some 250,000 lives in Russia, with a 50% mortality rate among those infected (Davis 42).

The Mennonite and German colonies of the region were spared a cholera outbreak. September 18, 1831: "Until now our community has been spared, although we have felt ourselves under siege since May ... I consider no doctor to be God and no medicine as Saviour, but I firmly believe that if God does not give His blessing to our daily bread or our medications, they will neither nourish us nor heal us" (Cornies, "van der Smisen" 239).

The global dimensions of the pandemic, the large numbers of deaths, the state enforced quarantines, the



Map of Molotschna quarantine areas by Brent Wiebe. Used with permission.

crippling economic consequences, the existential fear of death – all of these aspects bear a striking resemblance to our own times. Perhaps there is something to learn from the spirituality of the time as well.

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*Dr. Arnold Neufeldt-Fast is Vice President Academic and Dean of the Seminary at Tyndale University and is also an ordained minister in the Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada.*



# “Mennonite” Physician Theodor Hottmann

By Robert Martens

Dr. Erich Tavonius, born of a German mother and Swedish father, was nonetheless a celebrated figure in the Russian Mennonite colonies of Ukraine. After he died of a heart attack in 1927, five thousand people attended his burial service, and his funeral procession lasted for two and a half hours. The adulation for the physician was such that he may have been considered an honorary Mennonite. Actual Mennonite doctors were, in fact, relatively rare.

Russian Mennonites had practised folk medicine for many years, and their bonesetters and midwives achieved a high degree of skill. However, educated physicians were a late development in the Russian Mennonite story. John B. Toews points out that, although Mennonites possessed an acute social conscience, “somewhat ironically, actual hospitals and resident doctors seemed rather late in coming” (3). The first Mennonite doctor was probably Jakob Esau, who received his education at the University of Kiev and was installed as chief Chortitza physician around 1880. In the Old Colony, Chortitza, a hospital was first built in 1870; in Molotschna colony that happened even later, in 1889. Meanwhile, the occasional Mennonite seems to have trained in medicine, but the more celebrated physicians remained “honorary Mennonites,” much loved but not “one of their own.” After Tavonius, the star among “near-Mennonite” doctors was a most remarkable man, Theodor Hottmann, originally a member of the Evangelische Brüdergemeinde, an offshoot of the Lutheran Church.

Hottmann was born in 1871 in Schönbrunn, Crimea. When Theodor was still very young, his father died, and the little boy apparently clung to his mother. This was, though, no indication of a lack of independent spirit. After graduation from high school, Theodor studied medicine in Charkov and Moscow, then travelled to Berlin to improve his skills. Hottmann returned to Russia when he was called up to the military. This apparently did not tarnish his record in Mennonite eyes, because in 1902 the Chortitza *volost* (district) invited him to take the po-

...the more celebrated physicians remained “honorary Mennonites,” much loved but not “one of their own.”

sition of chief medical officer for Chortitza, an enormous area that included sixteen Mennonite and four Russian villages. Hottmann accepted. The local administration procured him a house in Rosenthal. Hottmann, possibly anticipating the ridiculous medical workload ahead of him, threw himself into gardening at his new house. Those quiet hours among his flowers and vegetables must have been rare.

His first medical call was urgent: a difficult birth. Everything went well, however, and Dr. Theodor Hottmann settled into his new routine. He soon befriended local teachers, as well as physicians such as the above-mentioned Jakob Esau. Over time, staff were appointed to assist Hottmann: Dr. David A. Hamm, maternity ward worker Margaret Wieler, and trained subordinates. The waiting room was always full, and the hospital, packed. Hottmann worked at his office four days a week, as well as travelling through local villages for two days a week. Besides that, the overworked man had hospital duty.

His medical career was interrupted by military service during the Russo-Japanese War of 1905. Hottmann was taken prisoner and apparently maltreated by Japanese forces, but was eventually released. His career was interrupted a second time when he married Maria Böttcher, a teacher at the Chortitza *Mädchenschule*, or girls' school. The couple enjoyed a six-week honeymoon in Germany, four weeks of which were devoted to study – the other two were spent on the Rhine. The couple bore two children: a son, Valentin, born in 1909, and a daughter, Renate, in 1919. Both would become physicians.

Meanwhile, the Chortitza administration worked on improving medical services. A new hospital was built, and a maternity ward attached. Physicians were sent to Moscow, St. Petersburg, Germany, Austria, or France for upgrades in training. Midwives received a better education in their field. On a personal level, Hottmann found a jovial companion and assistant in Ivan Knisch, a hefty local Ukrainian. Ivan worked as a caregiver, assisted in surgery, and functioned in the pharmacy. He had a way with words. When patients would eat the salve and rub in the oral medication, Ivan sighed, “People in darkness” (*Menschen in der Finsternis*). After a few years, Ivan returned to “his own people,” to work there as a doctor. Hottmann visited him, asking him what he was doing. Ivan smiled. “My routine is simple. I tap their



Dr. Hottman and nurses at the Red Cross Hospital. Source: Kroeker, N.J. *First Mennonite Villages*, p. 133.

chest, listen to their heartbeat (if they want that), and give them water with peppermint or *Hoffmannstropfen* [a patent medicine], and from time to time an aspirin.” Hottmann asked if that always helped. “They say yes,” said Ivan. “But if it doesn’t help, I recommend that they see you” (M. Hottman 142) (trans. author).

At the onset of World War I, a Red Cross hospital with seventy-five to one hundred beds was set up in Chortitza. In addition to his monumental workload, Hottmann was assigned to direct the new facility. The wounded poured in but the local Mennonite community was up to the task. The Red Cross hospital was built by Mennonite men, and the bedding, sewn by Mennonite women. Twenty-five male nurses, mostly from Chortitza and Rosenthal, worked with patients.

The chaos in Ukraine associated with the First World War was dwarfed by the confusion and bloodshed following the Revolution in 1917. The year 1919 was marked by civil war, rape and plunder. A typhus epidemic ensued. Medications ran out, and replacements were unavailable. In the absence of proper medical care, villagers took in the ill and cared for them; the result was countless deaths. Theodor Hottman still made his

rounds, travelling from street to street, finding at times entire families sick and lying on the floor without access even to water. He would arrive home at day’s end “*totmüde*” – dead tired (M. Hottmann 143). Then Hottmann’s brother in medicine, Dr. Hamm, contracted typhus and took refuge in the hospital. Hamm’s wife bore a child and died the next day. Finally, Hottmann himself caught the virus; his wife Maria cared for him. Remarkably, in Hottmann’s absence, a “Makhno doctor” filled in for him, making the same medical rounds.

Hottmann recovered, and continued his work. In 1927, the twenty-fifth anniversary of his service in Chortitza was celebrated, although festivities were muted – many Mennonites had fled for North America. And then, as it is said, “No good deed goes unpunished” – on September 7, 1937, during the monstrosities of Stalin’s Great Purge, Theodor Hottmann was arrested for espionage. He was one of many. Hundreds of women waited at the doors of the prison, hoping to bring their incarcerated men food and clothing. All was to no avail. Government statements were issued on the condition of the prisoners, but each document contained only a greeting and a signature; the remainder was rendered illegible. Maria



managed to catch a glimpse of her husband on three occasions. “He walked with a bowed head, trembling knees, his hands tied behind his back, and a guard behind him holding a revolver at his back” (M. Hottmann 143). It was reported that a minister, Hans Rempel, consoled Hottmann before the doctor was taken out and shot on September 11, 1938.

Recently opened Russian archives, however, present a differing account. Theodor’s son, Valentin, had lived in Germany since 1925, and father and son had corresponded. In the eyes of the Soviet state, that was grounds for suspicion of espionage. Theodor Johann, or Fyodor Ivanovich, was interrogated – tortured – multiple times. Finally, during an interrogation on July 25, 1938, he signed a forced confession: “convinced of the futility of further struggle, I decided to embark on the path of sincere remorse” (Shtatsky 3). He admitted to espionage and involvement in a plot to poison the population with cholera. On September 11, 1938, unable to hold out any longer, Theodor Hottmann committed suicide. He was thrown into a mass grave near the prison. Years later, during the German occupation of Ukraine during World War II, Hottmann’s remains were exhumed and laid to rest in the village cemetery where he had lived.



Theodor Hottmann. Source: Kroeker, N.J. *First Mennonite Villages*, p. 134.

### *Maria’s Story*

Maria Böttcher Hottmann played a vital role in the story of her husband, Theodor. Born in 1882, she was well-educated, graduating from high school and going on to higher instruction for one year in St. Petersburg. She taught at the *Mädchenschule* in Chortitza from 1905 to 1906. She writes, “I worked only briefly at the girls’ school, but my time there remains a lovely memory. I followed its story with great interest, deeply empathizing with its good times and ultimate sad fate” (23). (trans. author)

Boettcher Hottmann fled the USSR with retreating German forces in 1943, and lived in Germany with her daughter, Renate, for a number of years. In a 1948 issue of *Der Bote*, it was reported that she was “*ohne Heim, ohne Habe, ohne alles*” (without home, without possessions, without anything) (N.F.), and desperately wished to leave Germany. In 1949 she immigrated to the Mennonite community of Yarrow, BC, but quickly moved to the very un-Mennonite city of Vancouver to live with her daughter.

Her date of death is unknown.

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## Nothing Normal: Early Life and Wartime Experiences of Dr. Renate Hottmann

By Louise Bergen Price

*Forget everything you've learned in university – you won't be able to apply your knowledge here. We live in unusual times with nothing normal in our hospital.*  
(Dr. Holle to Renate Hottmann, 1941)

Even judged by the standards of her time, young Dr. Renate Hottmann's life had been anything but "normal." Her mother, Maria Böttcher, was a former teacher at Rosenthal's *Mädchenschule* (Girls' High School); her father had been Chortitza colony's respected doctor. Renate was born on February 24, 1919, at the height of the civil war. Her father, Theodor Hottmann, rundown from a heavy workload during the typhus epidemic that accompanied the war, came down with the disease himself that fall, and was nursed back to health by Renate's mother. At first, the family, which included Renate's older brother, Valentin, lived in the community-owned doctor's residence beside the hospital; later Dr. Hottmann bought a house in the centre of town.

In 1924, Renate's brother, Valentin, was sent to relatives in Germany to study. Their father would visit him two years later on a trip to a medical conference. The year 1926 also marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of Theodor Hottmann's service to the people of Chortitza Rosenthal – they responded with a celebration in his honour. By now, many of his friends had emigrated but Renate's father chose to remain, likely assuming, as many of his fellow colonists did, that the situation in Ukraine would remain stable.

But Stalin had other plans. In 1927, laws came into effect outlining punishment for "counter-revolutionary activities and treason against the homeland." Known as Article 54-10 in Ukraine (Article 58 in Russia), the laws were amended and broadened in 1934; the definition of treason so wide-ranging that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn would write, "Who among us has not experienced its all-encompassing embrace? In all truth, there is no step, thought, action, or lack of action under the heavens which could not be punished by the heavy hand of Article 58" (qtd in "Article 58").

Given that Renate's father had extensive contact with Germany, it is perhaps not surprising that in 1934 he was charged under the infamous Article 54-10 and spent seventy days in custody. For some reason, although he admitted to "counter-revolutionary actions," the case

was dropped, and he was allowed to return home and continue his work.

During the next two years, the number of arrests in Mennonite villages remained fairly low. Perhaps it even seemed as if Stalin's announcement in November 1935 that "Life has become easier, comrades, life has become happier," could become a reality.

The reprieve was short-lived.

By 1936, the tempo of arrests in Mennonite villages increased, most victims accused of espionage or sabotage. Very few were declared innocent. Those found guilty in the first part of the Terror were tried in court and sent to prison or the Gulag. They were usually allowed to send and receive mail. By 1937, the process had changed. A three-person panel, or troika, simply decided the fate of the individual. Arrests were so common that men kept a satchel with a change of clothing and a bit of bread on hand, just in case.

Renate was seventeen when her father was arrested and charged with being a ringleader of a circle of spies for Germany. Despite torture, he insisted on his innocence through six separate interrogations. Finally, on July 25, 1938, broken by torture, he signed a confession. Theodor Hottmann died in prison on September 11, 1938. NKVD files state he took his own life.

In spite of her father's imprisonment and death, and under what must have been difficult financial circumstances, Renate remained in school and finished her medical degree. Her first assignment was in the hospital in which her father had worked for so many years. The hospital's staff also included a pediatrician, an elderly doctor from Chortitza Island, and a female dentist. Renate was met by Dr. Holle, the hospital's only surgeon, who warned her to forget anything she had ever learned in medical school.

The young Dr. Hottmann began her medical career during the early days of Germany's occupation of Chortitza. Retreating Soviet soldiers had looted most of the hospital's medical supplies, including microscopes. Invading German forces scooped up hospital linens and took them along to the battlefield. Because of constant shelling from across the river, hospital staff moved patients to the basement.

Numerous Ukrainian troops, wounded on Chortitza Island and cut off from Soviet divisions, arrived at the hospital with maggot-infested wounds. Doctors and nurses tried to disinfect the wounds with a strong salt solution since neither iodine nor sulfa drugs were available, and bandaged the wounds with strips of cloth torn from old bed linen. Among those who needed treatment



were many with shell fragments in the back, neck and posterior. To lighten the mood, Dr. Holle invented stories as to how these “courageous” soldiers had received wounds in their backsides while defending the country from the enemy. “We needed some type of diversion into lighter vein to tide us over the tense and often disconsolate situations,” Dr. Hottmann noted (Heinrichs 137).

One night, not long after the retreating Soviets blew a hole in the power dam and disrupted the electrical system, Dr. Hottmann was called to the hospital to help a woman who was hemorrhaging. While the nurse lit one match after another, Dr. Hottmann, working mostly by touch, helped stabilize the patient.

Due to the lack of soap, many patients had bacterial skin infections. As well, the hospital treated numerous cases of gonorrhea with sulfa drugs; there were also a number of miscarriages, some self-induced.

Once the German Regional Commissariat took over the area, the situation became more stable, although medical supplies and resources were still lacking. The doctors had no way to do blood tests and had to set fractures without the use of x-rays. When an operation for a stomach ulcer took place, they had no way of knowing where it was, how large, or in what condition. No soap was available; doctors scrubbed down with a “soap-like substance extracted from cadavers of horses” (Heinrichs 138), then dipped their hands in ammonium hydroxide which was extremely hard on the skin. Surgical instruments were outdated, more modern ones hard to source. Still, Hottmann was thankful for medicines that now arrived, especially the serum to treat tetanus. And, in spite of less-than-ideal conditions, no typhus epidemic developed.

In 1942, Renate’s mother requested permission from the German authorities to exhume the body of her husband and give him a burial in the Chortitza cemetery. This was allowed, and friends and family were able to bid a fond farewell to the doctor who had served for so many years.

Renate Hottmann’s wartime hospital experience lasted for eighteen months. In 1943, as German forces retreated from the Caucasus, her brother, Valentin, now a surgeon in the Wehrmacht, helped his mother and sister pack up essential belongings and put them on a train to Germany.

Here, Renate’s medical training was not recognized, so she returned to university, earning her doctorate in Heidelberg in 1945. She then completed a one-year practicum working under the supervision of her brother, with special training in childbirth and gynecology.

In 1949, she and her mother received permission to emigrate to Canada. They arrived in Yarrow on March 8, 1949. Soon after, Renate moved to Vancouver where her mother joined her. In 1981, she wrote a description of her stint as a medical doctor in N. J. Kroeker’s *First Mennonite Villages in Russia 1789-1943* (also published in German the same year as *Erste Mennoniten Dörfer Russlands*), using her married name of Heinrichs, and indicating her place of residence as Kingston.

*On a personal note:*

*I would really appreciate any further information regarding Renate Hottmann Heinrichs’ later life. Theodor Hottmann was my grandmother’s gynecologist when she had a miscarriage in about 1926. Another connection: my grandfather was also imprisoned in Zaporizhia; his prison term overlapped with that of Hottmann. It is more than possible that Renate Hottmann and my mother both stood in the same line-up, waiting to deliver packages to their fathers. Hoping for good news that would never come.*

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Doctor’s residence, Chortitza.  
 Source: Friesen, R. *Building on the Past*, p. 128.

# Marien-Taubstummenanstalt: the story of the Maria School for the Deaf through the life experience of Heinrich Wilhelm Janzen (1898-1933)

By Louise Bergen Price

All translations from the German by Louise Bergen Price

When Tina and Wilhelm Janzen's toddler, Heinrich, tumbled out of his highchair, hitting his head on the tile floor, his life changed. So did the life of the whole family. Heinrich hit, bit, scratched, pulled his sister's hair and refused to listen to his parents or the Russian nursemaid. Loud noises no longer startled him. He was deaf.

He was a bright child, but no one understood how to reason with him, how to manage his fierce anger as he became older and stronger. Once, Heinrich found a special hiding place on their estate and remained there all day while his family frantically searched for him. After that incident, his father bought a puppy so that when they called, the pup would bark. Heinrich held the dog's mouth shut.

Tina and Wilhelm's hope lay in the Marien-Taubstummenanstalt, a Mennonite state-of-the-art boarding school for the deaf in Tiege, Molotschna colony. To his parents' relief, Heinrich was accepted into the school in 1905. For the little boy, as for other deaf students on their first arrival, the experience would

have been terrifying. "How incredibly difficult the separation between parents and their little boy or girl the first time they leave them at the school," W. Sudermann wrote in his report to the *Mennonitisches Jahrbuch (MJ)*. "The poor little ones don't understand how, in spite of their heartrending cries and tears, their parents can abandon them to total strangers." Yet within a few days, Sudermann said, the children would begin to understand that love still surrounded them, and that teachers would assume the role of parents (1911-1912, p. 110).

Heinrich thrived in the school. His sister Justine writes, "The first Christmas that Heinrich was there my

parents received a letter from him, that began, 'Dear Mama, dear Papa,' and Mother cried and cried. In the springtime, when he came home and greeted our parents, a miracle happened. For the first time we heard him speak. I have so much respect and honour for his teachers. After attending, the children could finally become a real part of their families" (Sawatzky). Heinrich would graduate from the school in 1914, an able and accomplished young man with a talent for drawing.

## *Deaf education in the early twentieth century*

Schools for deaf children had already been in existence in numerous countries for well over a century. In Russia, however, deaf education was in its infancy. According to W. Sudermann's report in the *Mennonitisches Jahrbuch*, of the 200,000 "deaf-mutes" in Russia, 195,000 remained

without schooling and suffered "intellectual and spiritual darkness" (1911-1912, p. 112).

Sources are not clear on how or why A. G. Ambartsumov, a Protestant Armenian who had studied in Switzerland, came in contact with Mennonites in the Molotschna, but Ambartsumov had a passion for teaching the deaf and proposed to set up a school



Heinrich Janzen with his younger brothers.

Photo: courtesy of Louise Bergen Price

there. Although the Halbstadt district took on the project, it was supported by the broader community and became the "first charitable institution of all the Mennonites of Russia" and a "priceless jewel for them" (P.M. Friesen 815).

Named the Marien-Taubstummenanstalt in honour of Empress Maria Alexandrovna on the anniversary of Tsar Alexander II's twenty-five-year reign, the school opened in 1885 in the home of Gerhardt Klassen, with Ambartsumov as the school's first principal. Five years later, the school moved into its own facility, a stately two-storey building. By 1910, the facility would have room for forty

students as well as a building for house parents and four teacherages, plus a spare house with garden and orchard.

The fee was 135 rubles per year – more for children from non-Mennonite homes – a fee that only covered about a third of the actual costs, with the remainder raised by the community, special sponsors, and fundraising events. Year-end *Prüfungen* (examinations) featuring the accomplishments of the students were held in different locations each year and served to raise money and awareness. The school was open to all deaf children of German-speaking parents regardless of denomination or religious backgrounds: of the thirty-four children enrolled in 1913, twenty-three were Mennonite, seven Baptist, three Lutheran and one Catholic. No Jewish children attended that year, although some had in the past (Janzen 164). Faculty included the principal and five teachers, four male and one female.

To qualify for entry, students had to be between seven and eight years old, in good health, and able to succeed academically. Many of the children came from poor and outlying areas where epidemics such as measles or scarlet fever persisted, or where there were no doctors to treat ill children, leading to a higher number of children who were deaf. No child was rejected because of inability to pay.

The curriculum was the same as that in local schools but because part of each day was devoted to intense speech training, it took nine years to cover the amount of subject matter other schools covered in six. As Minister H. Janzen stated in his 1903 report, from the first hour of instruction to the last, every syllable, every word, every sentence had to be formed painstakingly so that the students became *sattelfest* (saddle-proof) (91).

Intake of new students was every other year, and each teacher remained with the same group of students for the entire nine years. In addition to their regular subjects, girls learned homemaking skills while boys learned carpentry and basket weaving. Students were also expected to do their share of chores in the dormitory, kitchen and garden.

### ***To speak or sign: “Humans speak; animals don’t”***

Many of us have become more familiar with American Sign Language (ASL) while watching updates on COVID-19, but the acceptance of the various sign languages as a natural language of the deaf is a fairly recent advance, and has not been without controversy.

In ancient times, philosophers believed that it was not only the ability to use language but also the very *act of*

*speaking* that distinguishes humans from animals. In *The Talking Greeks*, John Heath writes that the ancient Greeks’ philosophy of what it means to be human was based on an “embarrassingly unsophisticated” thought: “humans speak; animals don’t” (Gera). Jewish law held that “deaf and dumb” persons, often listed along with “minors and idiots,” were “considered unable to enter into transactions requiring responsibility and independence of will” (Ginzberg).

It wasn’t until the eighteenth century that scholars took a serious interest in whether deaf persons actually had the ability to think rationally and form abstract thought (Murray). As more and more deaf people became educated, it became obvious that they had the same intellectual abilities as “normal” people. Yet, even in 1913, teacher Wilhelm Sudermann lamented the popular belief that “[t]he deaf are idiots. That perception still exists among a broad swath of our people until this very day” (*MJ* 1912-13, p. 163).

Early methods of teaching used both sign language and speech training/lip reading with their students. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, a teacher and advocate of the deaf in the United States, travelled to both Britain and France to study methods of teaching the deaf. In a sermon in 1824, he stated that, to his surprise, sign language “is sufficiently significant and copious to admit of an application even to the most abstract, intellectual, moral, and religious truth. On this point I was once skeptical; but doubt has yielded to actual observation....”

In Switzerland, too, where A. G. Ambartsumov took his training, schools for the deaf first used sign language based on the French system. By 1830, this policy changed, and the use of sign language was forbidden in favour of teaching children how to lipread and speak orally. “Sign language [in Switzerland] as in many other countries was devalued as a ‘monkey-language’ and is still stigmatized as such in broad circles today” (“Deutschenschweizer”).

At the International Congress on Education for the Deaf (ICED) in 1880, various reasons were given why sign language should be prohibited, including, “Apes do not talk about God” (Eichenberger). The Congress would pass eight resolutions, the first of which affirmed the “incontestable superiority of articulation over signs in restoring the deaf-mute to society and giving him a fuller knowledge of language...” (“Deutschenschweizer”). Assimilation in the “normal” world was one of the main aims of the oralist method of deaf education.

Alexander Graham Bell argued that allowing sign lan-



guage would lead to the formation of a “deaf race” with a “language as different from English as French or German or Russian” (“Through Deaf Eyes”). As a result of such beliefs, deaf persons were often discouraged from intermarrying. Some deaf people have labelled these beliefs and teachings as a form of eugenics.

The Marien-Taubstummenanstalt was established a year after the Congress of Milan, so it is not surprising that the philosophy of the school followed along similar lines. Accordingly, its students were not allowed to use sign language and were supervised during all moments of the day to make sure they obeyed.

### *Heinrich's later life*

Although it is unlikely that Heinrich would have known about the oralist versus sign language controversy, the attitude of society as a whole towards those who were deaf greatly influenced his future life. After graduating in 1914, he kept in touch with fellow student Agathe Wiebe. When the young couple wished to marry, Heinrich's father would not give permission.

In 1918, the family fled their modest estate, eventually moving to Neuendorf, but relentless taxation made life

difficult. Sensing the coming catastrophe, the Janzen family hoped to immigrate to Canada, but Canada's immigration policy at the time made it very difficult for a deaf person to be admitted. Not willing to leave anyone behind in the USSR, the family decided to remain. That, of course, had dire consequences. In 1931, the parents and their four sons were disenfranchised and exiled to Siberia where they were forced to work in the forest, felling trees. It was dangerous work, especially for Heinrich, who died there in January 1933.

The following year, Agathe Wiebe, the woman he'd wished to marry, married Heinrich Redekopp, who had attended the Marien-Taubstummenanstalt for six years. Agathe worked as a seamstress and also taught sewing while Heinrich received several awards for his work on the Third Brigade on the collective farm. The couple fled Ukraine with German forces (Thiessen 150). In 1948, they immigrated to Sardis, BC. Heinrich Janzen's sister, Justine, sometimes visited with them in their home.

### *A place of refuge and a killing field*

Four years after Heinrich graduated, the civil war put an end to the work of the Marien-Taubstummenanstalt. For



Students at the School for the Deaf. Photo: Chort.square7.



Memorial near Tiege. Photo: Louise Bergen Price

a time during this period of unrest, the school's kitchen and dormitories became a place of refuge for several displaced Mennonite families. Marylou Driedger writes, "It was while his parents were living at the School for the Deaf that Dave's Dad was born. Sadly, it is also where *Oma* and *Opa's* first little daughter died of pneumonia."

During the Soviet era, the school was once again used for deaf and/or disabled children. While Mennonites saw the German occupation of 1941 as a time of liberation from Soviet persecution, for the children of this institution it was a death sentence. Near Tiege, on a small knoll in an open field, stands a pillar. Sculpted near the top are children's faces. When the wind blows through star-shaped openings, it is said that the sound is like children's voices, murmuring. Below the pillar, a plaque with a simple message: *In this field in October 1941, the Nazi occupiers shot 131 students of a special boarding school in the village of Orlovo. Eternal memory to them.*

### *Deaf education today*

The Maria School of the Deaf building still stands, but age and years of neglect have robbed it of its former grandeur. The paint is faded, a number of windows are cracked. The centre cupola has been removed. Until recently, it was (and perhaps still is) used as an administrative centre (Rudy Friesen 373).

In the years since the school has closed, teaching methods in deaf education have changed dramatically. At the 2010 International Congress on the Education of the Deaf in Vancouver, delegates voted to reject all of the 1880 ICED resolutions that were the basis of oralist deaf education ("Second International"). Most deaf or hard-of-hearing children today receive teaching in whichever method is best suited to them. In spite of modern advances such as hearing aids, cochlear implants and closed captioning, for many deaf or hard-of-hearing North Americans, American Sign Language is considered their first and natural language.

Nigel Howard, who is deaf himself and who provides sign language for BC's COVID updates, states that "People are recognizing deaf people are not disabled, they've got a language and culture, that they're just like us – they just use a different language (Little)."

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School for the Deaf, 2010. Note icons in windows and Karl Marx bust on pedestal. Photo: Julia Born Toews

# Not a Profession, but a Calling: Moriya Deaconess Home

By Robert Martens

A few years before the Bolshevik Revolution would bring down the Russian Mennonite colonies, young Emma Möllmann had a clear vision about where her life would go. “When I was 18 I felt the calling to become a deaconess. I had felt that my life had not yet fulfilled its purpose.... Then it became so clear as if I heard the call just like old father Abraham, ‘Why don’t you become a deaconess? That’s how you can serve the Lord and the sick and the poor.’ And then I said yes to the Lord. And I’ve never regretted the call even when it was often difficult and full of sacrifice” (Möllmann 13).

Emma had decided to enrol in the Morija Deaconess Home, located in Neu-Halbstadt, Molotschna colony, Ukraine. Morija, established in 1909, offered a three-year course for women who wished to serve as nurses, or, rather, as deaconesses, who followed a higher calling than a mere profession. The Home’s mission was also to provide support for sick or aging deaconesses. Möllmann’s remark that the work there was often “full of sacrifice” was to the point: in the troubled era following World War I and the Revolution, Morija’s very existence was a constant challenge, and eventually was cut short.

Among Anabaptists, the deaconess vocation began early, though in a very different shape from the nursing work it would eventually become. The Dordrecht Confession of 1632 stated, “Also that honourable old widows be ordained and chosen as servants, who ... are to visit, comfort, and take care of the poor, the weak, the afflicted, and the needy, as also to visit, comfort, and take care of widows and orphans” (Neff & Smith 1). Deaconesses were prevalent in Dutch congregations until as late as the mid-nineteenth century. German Mennonites also followed this pattern, but ultimately with a crucial difference. In 1836 the first modern deaconess home, offering training in medicine, was established in Germany. It was not Mennonite in origin, but the idea caught on in Mennonite communities, which became active in deaconess homes outside their congregations.

Across the Atlantic, in 1890, David Goertz of Newton, Kansas, recommended deaconess work as a component of

home missions. Bethesda Hospital, established in 1898 in Goessel, Kansas, assumed deaconess work as part of its mission. Three years later, in 1901, Bethel College in Newton, Kansas, incorporated deaconess training into its curriculum. The Bethel Deaconess Hospital, also in Newton, was opened in 1908 and operated independently until 1988. Another Mennonite deaconess home was established in Beatrice, Nebraska, in 1911.

Back in Mennonite Russia, Muntau Hospital was founded in 1889, driven by the charity and passion of Franz Wall. When Wall died, his son Franz Wall Jr. assumed operation of the hospital, and well-known doctor Erich Tavonius served as chief of medical staff. The hospital included a small school of nursing, but it was clearly inadequate. Mennonite women had already graduated from deaconess homes in the Baltic states, and so the concept of Morija was born: a local school for women who wished to work as nurses. The new project was driven by Franz Wall, Dr. Tavonius, and wealthy landowner Peter Schmidt. The school would offer a three-year curriculum: Bible, German, mathematics, geography, history, anatomy, and the sciences in the first year; and practicums at Muntau in the final two. “Nursing was to be the vocational vehicle, but service to God by helping the sick and disabled was the primary focus” (Huebert 132).

In May 1909 construction began amid intense fundraising. The new Home, a beautiful structure in Jugendstil (or art nouveau) architectural style, and providing housing for twenty to twenty-five nurses, was “unofficially opened” on December 3 of that year. Dr.

**Nursing was to be the vocational vehicle, but service to God by helping the sick and disabled was the primary focus.**

Tavonius, the nurses, and selected guests attended a tea ceremony to inaugurate the enterprise, but because of winter weather, the official opening was postponed until spring 1910.

Opening day took place on May 23 and was a long and elaborate affair. The morning ceremonies were situated in the Halbstadt Mennonite Church, and one can assume the venue was packed. Elder Hein-

rich Unruh provided the opening remarks based on Ephesians 2:10: “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works” (Huebert 133). Two sermons followed, both based on images of blood: drinking Christ’s blood in communion, and redemption in Christ’s blood. The theme of blood must have been deemed appropriate for the inauguration of a nursing establishment.





Morija. Source: Chort.square7

After a break for lunch, a lengthy celebration service was held in the Halbstadt community hall. The first speaker dwelt on the story of Abraham's absolute faith when he was directed to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah – Morija in German. The following sermon, based on John 12, urged that young women sit at Jesus' feet, like Mary, before they begin practical work, like Martha. Then Dr. Erich Tavonius made some astute observations on the distinction between nurse and deaconess: "A nurse may choose her profession simply to make a living. With a deaconess, on the other hand, the material considerations are totally subservient to the desire to serve in the name of Christ" (Huebert 134). And yet, perhaps recognizing a secularizing Mennonite culture, Tavonius remarked that graduates from Morija were welcome to simply serve as nurses, rather than deaconesses; and that pay for nursing was quite high.

Bright beginnings. The Morija Deaconess Home started as a one-storey building accommodating, in the first year, nine nurses. Just before the First World War, the Home was moved to a much larger two-storey building, equally beautiful, that housed some forty students per year. The Revolution changed everything. The Home was plundered during the civil war. The work went on, with deaconesses performing heroically during times of

epidemic, but the religious aspects of the school were eventually disallowed by the Soviets. As late as January 1927, Dr. Erich Tavonius wrote a letter to Mennonite newspapers, in which he urged young women to consider entering the "professional medical school" – no mention of "deaconess." In the late 1920s, the last Mennonite head nurse was removed from Morija, and the Home was converted into a Communist-directed medical institute. Erich Tavonius died of a heart attack in April 1927.

In 1917, Emma Möllmann returned to Morija for respite from her work at the orphanage at Grossweide. Morija, so dear to her heart, was for her a symbol of God's infinite love. "Today I was in Morija. What precious hours I was given.... One can believe that one can move mountains, and give everything towards it, yet it can be in vain if it is not done out of love, out of real love, which has its source in Christ. God is love, and He offers it to us. We only have to receive it to love again" (Möllmann 30).

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## Erika Tavonius, Also a Doctor

By Robert Martens

Erich Tavonius, son of a Swedish doctor, is well-known in Mennonite circles, but his daughter Erika, who also practised medicine, is more than a footnote. In the aftermath of 1917, her career, and life, were anything but stable.

Margarethe (Baumann) and Erich Tavonius had four daughters, all of whom survived childhood – a marker in those days (Ingeborg 1904; Karin 1905; Siegrid 1907). Erika was born in 1908, during a time when her father must have been extraordinarily active as a doctor and as an organizer of the Morija Deaconess Home. She remained in Russia after the Revolution and graduated with a medical degree from a school in Simferopol in 1936, just as Stalin's Great Terror was about to be unleashed. Her first practice was in Alexanderhöhe on the Volga. She recalls, "I was responsible for the well-being of the inhabitants of the 25 villages, the little hospital, and the orphanage for 30 preschool children, plus a

cheese factory where I needed to examine the employees. There was no telephone in the hospital, nor in the village. To reach the village, one had to walk across the cemetery and through a deep ravine where wolves lived" (Koop 1).

Erika's life would be marked by great suffering. Her son, Rudolf, was

Father didn't want his children to become medical doctors. But much like children of today, we disregarded parental advice.

born in 1938, a year after the father, Peter Ruppel, had been exiled to Siberia in the last half of 1937. In 1943, as the German military retreated from the USSR, she fled with Rudy and four motherless children to Heidelberg, a Lutheran village near the Molotschna River. There she worked with the Red Cross.



Erika Tavonius Pankratz, 1966.

GAMEO

The stay in Heidelberg was brief. Erika joined the Great Trek westward, with the family arriving in the Warthegau, occupied Poland, in 1944, and travelling onwards to Berlin. Erika practised medicine there for three years. Again she moved on, settling in Paraguay, working in medicine in Fernheim colony for five years, and an additional year in the break-away Friesland colony.

Paraguay also would not be her long-term home. In 1954 Erika moved to Vineland, Ontario, where she met an old acquaintance from Molotschna colony, John A. Pankratz. They married, and moved to Reedley, California. Here Erika worked twenty-seven years as a registered nurse in a state hospital. After her husband died, Erika returned to Kitchener in 1985, where she joined her son, Rudolf (Rudy), who would predecease her. Erika Tavonius Pankratz died in 2006.

Erika's sister Karin also became a physician, and worked in Muntau hospital for a few years. When asked if her father would have been pleased with that outcome, Erika answered, with characteristic cheer, "Not at all! Father didn't want his children to become medical doctors. But much like children of today, we disregarded parental advice" (Koop 1-2).

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## The Genealogy Corner: The Ties that Bind

### Joining and Leaving the Mennonite Community: A Genealogical Perspective Part 3: From Brandenburg, Prussia to Gnadenfeld, Russia

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

In 1831 a crisis arose in the tiny Mennonite community in Brandenburg when they were informed by the Prussian government that they would no longer receive exemption from military service. In 1833 nearly the entire congregation applied to emigrate and by 1836 they were settled in the new Molotschna village of Gnadenfeld [1].

The Brandenburg Mennonite congregation, known as the Brenkenhofswalde Gemeinde, was a daughter colony of the Old Flemish church of Przechowka in West Prussia [2]. One group, having lease renewal problems with the nobleman who owned the village of Jeziorken [3], received permission from Frederick the Great to move to newly available land in the Netze River region of the so-called Neumark in 1765. They established the villages of Brenkenhofswalde, Franzthal and Neu Dessau [4]. During the latter period of their time in Brandenburg, the Mennonites saw a large influx of Lutheran converts. These former Lutherans joined in the immigration to Russia in 1833-36.

Unfortunately, finding information on these people before their conversion to the Mennonite faith and immigration to Russia has proven to be very difficult. Most church records from that region of Brandenburg did not survive. There were no census or civil registration records. Much of the information on these families comes from the emigration applications of 1833 [5] and some sparse records found in Russian sources. Unfortunately, this group arrived and was settled in Gnadenfeld after the 1835 census of the Molotschna colony was conducted (spring of 1835). The Mennonite church records, which would have been taken to Russia, are lost.

**Ludwig Boettcher** (b. 1779; GM#813080). He immigrated from Brenkenhofswalde with wife Anna Lang (also originally a Lutheran, the daughter of Johann Lang – see below) and their five daughters. There is no further information on him from Prussian or Russian sources.

**Karl Briss/Brues** (no dates; GM#802932). He immigrated

together with his widowed mother. By 1847 he owned #21 Gnadenfeld [8]. It is not known if he had any children.

**Johann Fenske** (b. 1778; GM#706277) [6]. He immigrated from Franzthal together with his wife, Katharina Becker, and children Johann and Florentina Juliana. However, he is not on the lists of Franzthal landowners for 1806 or 1826 [7]. He was a landowner in Gnadenfeld in 1847 and 1850 [8]. A document from 1849 shows that his children were receiving an inheritance from their mother back in Prussia [9]. This would imply that Fenske separated from an earlier wife before joining the Mennonites and marrying Katharina Becker. The document states that her heirs included two daughters who stayed in Prussia and married non-Mennonite men, a son, Johann Gottlieb Fenske, who was born on 12 Feb. 1819 and died in Russia on 3 Oct. 1839, and a daughter, Florentina Juliana, who was married to Peter Funk of Alexanderthal, Molotschna colony. This family name died with Johann Fenske and his son Johann Gottlieb.

**Michael Kant** (b. 1792; GM#502033). He immigrated from Franzthal with his wife, Maria Dirks, and their eight children. Records show that he was a landowner in Franzthal in 1826 [7]. He was also a landowner in Gnadenfeld in 1847. By 1850 his widow is found in the voters list. What became of his family is unknown.

**Karl Klat** (b. 3 May 1808; GM#669686). He immigrated from Brenkenhofswalde in 1836 [6] and married Karolina, daughter of Johann Preuss (see below). His descendants remained in Russia until World War II.

#### The Sons of Johann Lange:

**Wilhelm Lange** (1765-1841; GM#706327). He immigrated from Brenkenhofswalde, presumably as a widower. The Langes were already in Brenkenhofswalde before 1800. Sometime between 1778 and 1792, Wilhelm Lange purchased the property of Jacob Thomas (a Lutheran) in Brenkenhofswalde, and owned that property until leaving in the 1830s [9]. At some point he was joined by his brothers. Lange became a minister in the Mennonite Church around 1802 and the *Ältester* around 1810 [10]. Wilhelm Lange had no known children.

**Johannes Lange** (1769-1845; GM#350563). He immigrated from Franzthal together with his wife, Dorothea Luise

Segert (of Lutheran background). His son Friedrich, who was a teacher in Prussia, immigrated in 1837 [6]. His Lange descendants remained in Russia until World War II.

**Gottlieb Lange** (1772-1859; GM#350561). He immigrated from Alt Haferwiese with his wife, Anna Voth. His sons Benjamin and Wilhelm immigrated at the same time as separate families. He presumably settled in Gnadenfeld. By 1847 Benjamin and Wilhelm were landowners in Gnadenfeld [8]. Their Lange descendants remained in Russia until World War II.

**Hermann Lenzmann** (b. 1791; GM#706255). He immigrated from Franzthal together with his wife, Eva Rosina Hahn (also originally a Lutheran), and their three children. There is no further information on him from Prussian or Russian sources. His son August was a landowner in Gnadenfeld between 1847 and 1862 [8]. Grandson Hermann (GM#56609) immigrated to Canada in 1893 and died in Nelson, British Columbia, in 1911 [6]. Great grandson, and nephew to the previously named Hermann, immigrated to Canada in 1924 and died in Abbotsford, BC, in 1965 [6].

**Johann Preuss** (1788-1870; GM#803611). He and his family immigrated to Russia with his father-in-law Johann Lange, mentioned above. He owned property in Gnadenfeld in 1847 and 1850 [8]. By 1852 the property was owned by Aron Rempel. His two daughters married sons of other former Lutherans and his son Adolf died in 1835 [6]. This family should not be confused with the unrelated Mennonite surname, Pries (also called Preus in some records).

**Gottfried Raabe** (b. 1796; GM#106534). He and his family immigrated from Berkenwerder. This was not one of the three “Mennonite” villages in Brandenburg. His second wife was Hanna Charlotte Schmidt, of Lutheran background. He owned property #27 in Gnadenfeld in 1847 and 1850 [8]. This property was owned by his son August in 1857 and 1862. Members of this family also went by the surname Rabsch in Russia. This large family spread within Russia and later members immigrated to Canada. For example, great-grandson Wilhelm Raabe immigrated to Canada in 1926 and died in Clearbrook, BC, in 1981 [6].

The people mentioned were the male household heads who immigrated from Brandenburg, Prussia in 1834-37.



Fig. 5.70. J. Raubsch house, 1997

The name “Raubsch” (above) does not come up in searches; possibly a Plautdietsch variation of Rabsch. Both names appear in village maps. Photo: Friesen, R. *Building on the Past*, p. 276.

There were other Lutherans who married Mennonites in Brandenburg, but either did not immigrate, or their daughters immigrated together with their husbands. There was at least one German **Schmidt** family who remained. Single woman Beate **Hinze** (likely the daughter of Carl Ludwig Hinze, who was a Franzthal landowner in 1793 and 1806) joined the immigration, as well as a widow **Betke** (née Unruh), a widow **Grams** (née Maria Becker), a widow **Kahnke** (née Eva Becker), and Helena **Schultz**, widow of a Mennonite Voth. Ernestine Wil-

helmine **Mincke** immigrated together with her Mennonite husband, Tobias Schmidt. Maria **Glaser** immigrated with her Mennonite husband, Tobias Ratzlaff. Susanna **Pretschlag** immigrated together with her Mennonite husband, Benjamin Voth. And Dorothea **Schueler** immigrated together with her Mennonite husband, Heinrich Voth.

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# The New Mennonite Church in Ukraine

By Robert Martens

Albertan teacher and minister Frank Dyck had a vision: to restore an old Mennonite church building in Ukraine into a contemporary place of worship. Twice his efforts had failed. At that point, he turned his attention to the abandoned Mennonite church edifice in Kutuzovka, formerly Petershagen, Molotschna colony. The prospects were daunting. “The mayor called it a ‘heap of rubble’ he did not know how to clean up,” writes Dyck. “According to some Canadian visitors, it was ‘too far gone to be restored’” (1).

Frank and Nettie Dyck began overseas work in 1988, distributing Bibles, teaching, evangelizing, and eventually helping establish a Bible college and seminary in Zaporozhye, Ukraine. Frank was born in 1927 to a ministerial family in Felsenbach, Ukraine, and immigrated to Canada in 1948. He never lost his affection for “the old country.” In the 1990s, with Ukrainian authorities pledging financial support, Frank and Nettie began their labour of love: restoring the building at Kutuzovka. They gathered interested people in the local clubhouse, and formally established the Evangelical-Mennonite Church of Kutuzovka, since the government had promised to return the structure and property to an organized church congregation.

Renovations began in March 1999. First, the roof was restored; then, the walls were pressure washed. Locals helped out, though for some of them it was first and foremost a job opportunity – understandably, given the difficult economic conditions. Dyck writes, “Most of the people did not believe that the restoration was possible and those who came to work hoped for employment for the next two years” (4).

But renovations continued successfully and quickly. Funds for the project were donated by Frank and Nettie, as well as by Canadian George Schroeder, whose grandfather had preached in Petershagen. A local artist duplicated the original window façade. By October 1999, the beautiful brick Kutuzovka church building was restored. The dedication ceremony took place on October 17; members of the Zaporozhye Mennonite congregation were in attendance.

Due to Frank’s failing health, Frank and Nettie Dyck returned to their Calgary home in 2000. Frank Dyck died

in 2013.

Overseas workers still assist in Mennonite church work in Ukraine, but the thrust has changed: Ukrainians themselves are now in charge. Maxym Oliferovski is one of this new generation of church planners. In the interview below, he describes the current situation.

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**Answers by Maxym Oliferovski, November 2020**

**Questions by Robert Martens**

*Since nearly all of the original Mennonite population left Ukraine, how have new Mennonite congregations emerged? Did organizations such as MCC and FOMCU (Friends of Mennonites in Ukraine) have an influence? Have new congregations been formed and led by Ukrainian nationals, with the aid of foreigners?*

You are right, nearly all the original Mennonite population left Ukraine either voluntarily through immigration or got sent to Kazakhstan or Siberia. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, a few new Mennonite congregations emerged. Most of them were planted by foreigners and then passed to national leaders. I am aware of eight churches that were planted this way – two in Zaporozhye, one in Balkovoye, Kutuzovka, Nikolay Pole, Kherson, Feodocia and Kolodyazne (the last two in Crimea). As to various organizations, FOMCU was very instrumental in helping the Church in Kutuzovka (later Molochansk) to develop. MB Missions (currently Multiply) was directly involved in the Zaporozhye church plant.

*Could you describe the current church-planting in Ukraine? Who are the workers in the field – are they of North American, European, Ukrainian origin?*

Here we will talk mostly about Mennonite Brethren churches. After the church leadership was passed to local pastors and missionaries left, church planning became a





Kutuzovka (Petershagen) Mennonite Church, restored 2010. Photo: Julia Born Toews

national task. Larger churches began to plant new churches. For example, Zaporozhye Church planted another church in Berdyansk. Molochansk (former Kutuzovka) Church is planning a church in Dnipro. There have been church-planting efforts in the war zone, though it is hard to find workers for that area to stay there. Currently, all church-planters (MB) in Ukraine are nationals.

*Where are the Mennonite congregations in Ukraine?*

*What are the demographics? in other words, are congregation members young/old, prosperous/needy, etc.? Do they meet in church buildings, or are there house churches as well? Is there growth in numbers? Are there differing denominations, e.g., MB, Mennonite Church, etc.?*

About ten years ago an association of Mennonite Churches in Ukraine was formed. Since all churches that joined the association initially were MB, the Association became MB itself – Association of Mennonite Brethren Churches in Ukraine (AMBCU). Currently, AMBCU includes seven churches located in Zaporozhye, Molochansk, Nikolay Pole, Balkovoye, Berdyansk, Kherson and Novomoskovsk. There are several church plants happening in the war zone (eastern Ukraine), Zaporozhye, and Dnipro. Plus there is one church in occupied Crimea (Feodocia) that is part of AMBCU. All together – twelve locations with Mennonite presence in them.

The churches are different in terms of demographics. Some are very young – youth and young adults, some have more of old people, some churches consist of fami-

lies with kids. I would say that overall, there is a good mix of demographics. Economically, the churches are doing similar to their communities. In smaller towns, the churches have fewer resources, in larger towns and cities the churches have more resources. Overall, the churches are somewhat dependent on outside support (kindly provided by Multiply and other partner organizations).

Some churches meet in their own church buildings (mostly in small towns), other churches rent facilities to meet. There is positive growth in numbers, but not large. Every year

churches have baptism and people are baptized. Praise the Lord!

There is one Mennonite Church in Zaporozhye (in other areas of Ukraine I am not aware of); the rest are MB churches.

*Besides the call of the Gospel, what brings members of congregations together? Community building? social work? mutual aid and support? etc.*

Contemporary Mennonite churches in Ukraine inherited values from their ancestors – to care about one another and people in their communities. That is why there is a lot of social ministry done by Mennonite churches. There is a nursing home for the elderly women in Kutuzovka (Molochansk Church), there is a ministry to families in crisis in Zaporozhye (New Hope Centre), there are efforts to distribute humanitarian aid among the needy, including areas that suffered because of the war. Most churches have a social ministry as one of the elements of the church vision. It might not be written on paper but is definitely written on our hearts!

*What effects has the war had on Ukrainian Mennonites? How have they reached out to Ukrainians in need? And, also, the pandemic?*

We lost physical connection with one church located in Crimea. It is an area of Ukraine occupied by Russia. That church used to host retreats for pastors. Now it is not possible. We cannot go there and they cannot come to Ukraine. Though we support one another through digital

means, it is very sad not to be able to have physical fellowship.

The war that began six years ago in the east of Ukraine mobilized the Church in Ukraine. Not just Mennonites. So many churches began to collect and bring humanitarian aid to people in the war zone. Mennonite churches provided (and are still providing) physical and spiritual bread to the hungry in the war zone. Today, the military events in the war zone are not as intense as five years ago. Many large humanitarian organizations bring lots of aid. On the other hand, people need someone to support them, give them hope, pray with them. One of the Zaporozhye Churches still views this ministry as their main ministry focus. Other churches and Mennonite organizations, such as MCC, provide resources, assistance and prayer support.

*What does the future look like for Mennonites in Ukraine?*

Most Mennonite Church leaders agree that small towns and churches in them will become smaller and smaller. On the other hand, urban churches will grow with the cities. The larger the city, the larger will be the growth. That is one of the reasons why the last church plant was started in Dnipro, a city of 1.5 million people. Large cities are the places to direct church-planning efforts in the nearest future. We envision a strong church in each large city in Ukraine that ultimately will help still existing small churches in small towns.

*Would Ukrainians have a message for us in the West? that is, for North America or Europe?*

In light of the pandemic situation spread worldwide today, the churches in Ukraine are not very different from the rest of the world. Digital worship and messages on Sundays, small groups during the week. We see same change in Christian mentality – less desire to get together physically, let us do it online! But relationships cannot be developed online! Neither meals eaten together (there is something about meals, Ukrainian hospitality and relationships). While the culture (especially in the West) nowadays keeps the vector towards individualism and self-confinement/isolation, let's make intentional efforts to maintain our Christian fellowship standards and have open doors to invite others to experience good news of Jesus who is able to heal broken hearts.

*Maxym was born and grew up in Zaporozhye, Ukraine. He became a Christian right after the breakup of the Soviet Union and since that time has been actively involved in various Church ministries. Since 2010, Maxym and his wife Anya have been serving with MULTIPLY (former MB Missions) leading and directing New Hope Centre ministries to orphans and families in crisis (2010 - currently), and assisting church-planting efforts of MB Churches in Ukraine (2014 - currently). Since 2018, they've been leading a new church plant, God's Family Church, that grew out of ministry to families in crisis. Their passion is to see more broken hearts heal. Their dream is to develop a renewal ministry to help Christians and church leaders to reach God's potential in their lives.*



Maxym Oliferovski and his wife, Anya.  
Photo: courtesy of Maxym Oliferovski

## Grandpa and the Model T

By Wilf Penner

I don't know exactly when Grandfather acquired his one and only automobile, but it was a 1917 Model T Ford. Likely it was after he sold his farm in 1919, when Father went off to high school in Waldheim, having turned his back on a farming career. I imagine that, having left the farm to move to Hepburn, Grandfather had sold his horses, so felt that he needed a new conveyance of some sort, and therefore procured a three-year-old Model T. I, of course, don't remember the car, but do remember the pretty red and white car shed that stood up against the back fence of his yard in Hepburn, that once housed that car.

Family lore has it that Grandfather made a valiant attempt to master driving this vehicle but resigned from the venture after encountering two unfortunate incidents.

Now, Grandfather's automobile was a utilitarian vehicle and hardly the stuff of conspicuous and vain status. It was really not in the same class as the Gray-Dorts, REOs and Graham-Paiges that some Hepburn gentlemen drove, but I can imagine that Grandpa's chest swelled a little when he escorted Grandma to the car, opened the passenger door and ensconced her in the front passenger seat for a quick six-

mile jaunt for her first automobile ride to Ike and Susie's to see the latest grandchild.

After carefully retarding the "spark" and setting the hand throttle, Grandfather engaged the crank that was permanently installed in the front of the machine, and gave it a sharp upward pull. On the second attempt the engine roared into life like an animal possessed. He dashed to the driver's door, clambered into the cockpit, idled back the motor and advanced the spark. Ever so cautiously he released the hand-brake and depressed the reverse pedal. With a wheezing groan the car crept backwards. Grandfather reached for the throttle, meaning to ease it down just a little; backwards the possessed beast lurched. Grandpa jammed down on the brake. The car shuddered and stood still. Grandpa throttled back and the engine quieted in response. Grandfather pulled out his bandanna and wiped his sweating brow, but he was not about to be beaten by this machine. He went through the procedure again: set the throttle, ease in the reverse pedal, look over his shoulder and turn the steering wheel to the right. Now brake with the right foot. Good, the car now stood perpendicular to its previous orientation.

Releasing the handbrake, he eased down the low-speed pedal, turned right, and then proceeded down the driveway to the road where he again turned right. As he opened the throttle further the machine gained speed and he released the slow speed pedal. As the speed increased, the planetary transmission permitted him to ease back the throttle and still maintain his speed. Behind him the dust billowed; in the cockpit, wind, road, and engine noise made conversation impossible; but Grandpa grinned as his eyes met Grandma's. So, this was what riding a horseless carriage was like! Suddenly, out of nowhere, it seemed, there was a steer wandering across the road in front of them. Should he attempt to dodge the animal, or should he slow down, or should he do both? How did one stop this thing anyway? By the time he remembered what to do, it was too late! The dazed and wounded animal lay in front of them. Beyond a buckled fender there was no damage to the car. Further details of subsequent activity, the extent of damage to the animal, etc., I can only imagine, but the incident had shaken both Grandpa and Grandma, and they were slow to venture out again.

In time, however, Grandfather's determination was restored, and he was able to get Grandmother's consent to take a trip to visit friends across the river in the Borden area. Now, this entailed negotiating the "river hills," the curvy downgrade of the river escarpment; crossing the river on

the little current ferry; and negotiating the upgrade section of road from the river crossing up the escarpment to the level prairie on the other side. Again they turned right from their driveway and headed westward toward the river. The ride was uneventful on the dry, level road and even negotiating the one correction curve around Heindrichs' pond posed little difficulty. As they neared the river, however, their apprehensions grew. As the road swung northward at the edge of the scarp, Grandfather slowed the Model T to a crawl. As they descended the first slope he was able to prevent acceleration by keeping the engine at idle speed and energetically applying force to the brake pedal. In similar manner they wound their way down the remaining hills and arrived at the ferry slip safely. Thinking he had navigated the most hazardous part of the trip, Grandfather breathed a sigh of relief.

Soon the ferry arrived at the slip. The operator undid the restraining chain and signalled Grandfather to proceed onto the ferry. Grandfather adjusted the throttle, applied the slow speed pedal and released the brake. The Model T eased onto the ferry and stopped amidships. The ferry operator, however, was not satisfied. He motioned Grandfather to move right up to the restraining chain. This disconcerted Grandpa, and as he released the brake he nearly stalled the engine. In an effort to prevent this he accelerated, and forgetting that there were no horses in front of him, shouted, "Whoa!" at that moment hitting the chain, tearing it from its wooden supports. By the time Grandfather brought the car to a stop the front wheels were suspended over the edge of the ferry lip where the vehicle hung precariously. What embarrassment, what mortification, as the ferry operator drawled, "*Na Panna, so kemst nuch aun jant sied aun!*" (Well, Penner, you won't get across the river that way!) Once the car had been pulled back onto the ferry with the help of a team of horses that were to make the ferry crossing too, Grandma said, "*Na, Peta, schpetziere woa wie aul nuch, wie faure jlich no hoos.*" (Well, Peter, we won't visit today, we're going straight back home.)

After that adventure, Grandfather apparently decided that discretion was the better part of valour, and the Model T rested in the red and white car shed until their student son became a teacher and inherited the car as part of a deal also involving a quarter section of land for which he took over mortgage payments on the grandparent's new house in Hepburn. Father makes mention of that deal in his autobiography.



1910 Model T Ford. Photo: Wikipedia.

## Book Reviews

**Caran Jantzen. *Grow. Cook. Eat. Share.* Elbert, CO: Homestead Press, 2019. 300 pp.**

Reviewed by Christy Price

*Grow. Cook. Eat. Share.* is an honest, refreshing book on what homesteading looks like for a twenty-first century family in the Fraser Valley, BC. As I was reading this heartfelt description of one family's journey into farming animals, plants, and bees to supplement their livelihood as well as for producing their own food, I found many points of connection between my own life and that of author Caran Jantzen: we both live on acreages, we both have four school-age children, and we both farm to some extent with our families. While my husband and I don't raise pigs, goats, or bees, we do have cattle (for beef), chickens (mainly for eggs, but also for meat), large vegetable gardens, fruit trees, and berry bushes. The drive to be on the land and to eat sustainably and produce ethically raised meat, plus to have a bounty of fruits and vegetables for harvesting, pickling, canning, and freezing, in addition to eating them fresh from the garden – of course! – is something that immediately bonds us as being part of a shrinking class in our current day and age: small hobby farmers.

While both my parents and my husband's parents farmed in a very similar manner, so making the lifestyle more familiar to us both, Jantzen's parents didn't farm in this way, and while her grandparents did, they were "suburban homesteaders" by the time Caran was old enough to remember. Jantzen's motivation for becoming a homesteader, together with her husband (who oddly enough is only referred to as "Mr. GreenThumb" in her book), was what she calls a "peaceful rebellion" – deliberately choosing ethically raised meat and vegetables in a way that honours the land and the processes that are necessary to achieve this type of lifestyle.

The book travels through the different seasons of life on the farm: spring, summer, fall, and winter, although not necessarily in chronological order, as several springs or falls may overlap in one section of the book. Each section depicts the vegetation, animals, recipes, or activities (like canning or butchering) that accompany each season – whether it's hatching chicks in spring, preserving pickles and peppers in summer, harvesting rosehips in autumn, or creating homemade salves, infused oils and soaps in winter – the variety of chores and responsibili-



Caran Jantzen reading at a book launch, 2019.

Photo: Maryann Tjart Jantzen

ties are described lovingly, while the challenges are openly admitted: farming is hard work.

I appreciated Jantzen's candid and down-to-earth reflections on homesteading. The book is funny and insightful, and allows Jantzen, in a way, to process her journey thus far. She is courageous – taking risks and trying new things – yet open and vulnerable; she is able to admit mistakes they have made and the learning curve which is vital to adapting to this demanding lifestyle. It is a huge commitment, one which the vast majority of families would not seriously consider, let alone attempt! The animal husbandry know-how, the energy to persist with the daily obligations, and the resilience needed to bounce back when things go wrong are all critical elements in successfully operating a farm.

Jantzen also shares many of her recipes – including her Wild Spring Tonic Tisane (using stinging nettle, dandelion, and plantain leaves), Grape Jelly, 24-Hour Bread, Basic Sauerkraut, Roast Chicken, and All-Purpose Herbal Salve – which show how she uses all-natural ingredients grown or raised on her farm to utilize as much as possible from the harvest of plants and animals. Along with most of these recipes, and peppered throughout the book, are many attractive, vivid, or tasty-looking photographs of her cooking, canning, plants, animals, and family members.

While I really enjoyed reading her various recipes, I was left craving more – there were so many recipes or preserves mentioned that were not included that I felt a bit let down! I would have loved to see the recipes for her "succulent pork tenderloin," homemade pickles, or soap, just to name a few! Jantzen's breadth of experience (and experimentation) is much broader than my own – from beekeeping to fermenting vegetables, to making salves and soaps, or infused oils or elixirs – and I applaud her mettle and pluck in trying these new and challeng-

ing things which I have not had the courage, time, or even desire to attempt!

Jantzen has taken the time to share her heart with her readers – her victories and her failures, the challenges she has overcome and those she still faces, and the brutally honest realization that this lifestyle may not be sustainable, as it takes such a toll on a person, day after day, year after year. However, in spite of all of the struggles, there is still hope portrayed – not only in the land and the homesteading, but in God and his provision for her family during this time and choice of how to live. I would have liked to see a bit more of her faith journey shared, but the book is already so full of many different types of experiences – poignant moments of wonder at creation, grief at losing animals to coyotes or winter weather, pleasure and satisfaction in tasting the harvest, and sheer exhaustion at the enormity of the task they have endeavoured to fulfill. Finally, I was gratified to realize that the goal of all of this is not to show off their successes, but to share their harvest and their home by being relaxed, hospitable, and generous with what they have been given.

I truly relished reading *Grow. Cook. Eat. Share.* and found myself thinking that, in Caran Jantzen, I have met a kindred spirit. I wish her much joy and fulfilment as she ventures forth where many a less determined woman would not dare to tread.

*Christy (Neudorf) Price is a middle school teacher and mother of four who lives with her husband and children on 10 acres in Abbotsford. She attends and has been involved in leadership with Level Ground Mennonite Church (Abbotsford) and enjoys reading, cooking, and gardening in the summer.*

**John P. R. Eicher. *Exiled Among Nations: German and Mennonite Mythologies in a Transnational Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 337 pp.**

Book Notice by Robert Martens

In *Exiled Among Nations*, John Eicher, assistant professor of history at Pennsylvania State University-Altoona, has written a solidly academic work on the sociology of Menno and Fernheim colonies in Paraguay. He begins the book with theory. Social groupings, nations, and denominations are real entities, he argues, but they exist as mythologies that express themselves as stories. These mythologies are fluid, ever-changing, and result from argument as much as from agreement on historical memories – which may be literally true, or not. The nation

state, writes Eicher, has been a disastrous idea for many, in terms of war, control, and a constant stream of refugees of people who do not fit the nation's narrative. How do we understand nationalism, he asks, without ourselves being entrapped by them?

For Eicher, the answer to that question is to study substructures, or minority groups, that challenge the dominant narrative. *Exiled Among Nations* focuses on two groups that comprise a small minority even within the greater Mennonite subculture. And here the book, as history, becomes much more accessible to the casual reader.

In recent centuries, writes Eicher, Mennonites have generally broken down into two dominant groups: separatist and associative. Menno colony was established in the 1920s by Canadian Mennonites who profoundly felt the need for greater separation from the “world,” often described as Babylon. In Paraguay these “separatist” Mennonites found a new home. For decades, through economic crises, famine, drought, child deaths, the Chaco War, and World War II, Menno remained largely untouched by national and global events.

Fernheim colony was established, with the aid of Mennonite Central Committee, as a place of safety for refugees fleeing the Soviet Union. These Mennonites were “associative,” adaptive to the “world,” responsive to global movements. In the beginning, Paraguay, for Fernheim colonists, was not a home. Most would have preferred to immigrate to Canada, but the doors there had closed. When the rise of the Third Reich hinted that they might be repatriated to Germany or Ukraine as part of Hitler's transnationalist Germanist movement, many colonists opted for National Socialism. Fernheim was torn in two.

Enter Germany and MCC, each with their own narra-



Mennonite Museum in former Municipal Building, Filadelfia, Fernheim, 2009. Photo: Julia Born Toews



tive, each trying to seduce Menno and Fernheim away from their local communities into involvement in a greater mass movement. A leading associative spokesperson, Harold Bender, was preaching the Anabaptist vision in which Mennonites could unite globally under one banner. MCC, associative to the core, worked hard and spent vast resources in setting up Fernheim, but organization representatives were appalled when Fernheim and, of course, Menno were indifferent to the new “Anabaptist vision.” Meanwhile, German Nazi activists dreamed of a wider order in which *Auslandsdeutschen* (Germans abroad) would participate in the Third Reich. Yet German propagandists, upon actually visiting Paraguay, were often dismissive of Menno and Fernheim, dismissing the colonists as weak and degenerated. Both National Socialists and MCC, then, attempted to rewrite the colonists’ own unique and local vision into something that would “reflect their own reality” (293), either a trans-Germanic order, or a global Mennonite community.

Menno and Fernheim eventually created a new story and grew prosperous. Human beings do not exist as fixed identities, writes Eicher. The narratives that define them “give life to individuals and societies” and are always changing. “They are as gossamer as they are resilient – cobwebs that we spin and become entangled in” (295). Tomorrow we will be someone else.

**Helmut T. Huebert. *1937: Stalin's Year of Terror*. Winnipeg: Springfield Publishers, 2009.**

Reviewed by David Giesbrecht

How this author, who was a medical doctor by profession, found time to bring together his extensive research (his list of sources is impressive) with a myriad of details showing how Soviet Communism impacted Russian Mennonites is astounding. All of the children of that generation who suffered such unmitigated sorrow in Russia owe Helmut Huebert a huge debt of gratitude.

If any more evidence is needed, this book spells out in graphic detail the Stalinist brutalities. Even now it is stunning how so many Russians meekly submitted to and willingly became participants in such in-

human, vile barbarities. For Stalin, a cultivated fear became a potent political cudgel.

The preface includes a 1937 timeline of world events as the historical context in which Stalin unleashed his terror and a summary of how novelist and historian Andrei Solzhenitsyn portrayed this year in Russian history. Then follow four sections, the first offering brief biographies of “The Perpetrators”; these include the seminary-trained Joseph Stalin, Nikolai Ivanovich Yezhov, and Andrei Vyshinsky. There is also an overview of the operations of the Soviet secret police. Poignantly, Huebert ponders how Stalin “got away with it.” As is widely known, Stalinist evil knew no boundaries. In time, Yezhov fell afoul of the mercurial Stalin and was himself despatched. Before he was shot, Yezhov was ordered to undress. His body was dumped into a common grave. Vyshinsky somehow escaped the dragnet and died in New York in 1954.

The second chapter, “A Saving Grace,” provides a short biography of Nadezhda K. Krupskaya, Lenin’s wife. She may have urged some restraint to the ubiquitous evil unleashed by her husband and his successors. But I suspect history will not be kind to her. If at all, her behaviour represents little, if any, “saving grace.” Chapter Three, “Victims of the Purge,” zones in on the author’s primary purpose in writing this book: an unvarnished account of the purges which preceded the mass arrests in 1937. Huebert highlights the Mennonite districts most affected and provides an extensive list (150 pages) of individuals arrested. Starkly, for each person detained, the village of residence and date of arrest are provided, as well as, if known, the facts on where and how they died. Thus, for instance, Jacob Giesbrecht was a farmer who



Soviet citizens react to Wall of Sorrow at the first exhibition of the victims of Stalinism, 1988. Photo courtesy Dmitry Borko, via *Commons.wikimedia*.

lived in Sagra dovka and was arrested 28 December 1937: fate unknown.

Chapter Four, “Brief Biographies,” includes some sixty pages of succinct life stories of Mennonites who ultimately perished. Typical is the story of Kornelius K. Martens (1880-1940?), who had been a minister in the Rueckenau Mennonite Church and a teacher. When the Communists dismissed him from his principalship, he became a farmer. Arrested in 1937, he was given a ten-year sentence, his only crime being that “I served my Lord and Saviour.” Later persistent questioning revealed that he was shot shortly after being imprisoned. Another biography details the very impressive Gerhard Jacob Rempel (1885-1937) who trained as an engineer in Germany, and later was credited with designing the first fuel-powered tractor in the A. J. Koop factory, for which he was highly decorated by the Soviets. He was shot on 26 December 1937.

In a postscript, the author raises an existential question which in human terms is impossible to resolve: can Mennonite (and all) victims of Stalinism forgive these atrocities? Huebert notes that while several countries have engaged in acts of contrition (for instance, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa), Russian leaders have not done so. On the contrary, Russians have been attempting to re-write this part of their history, as if it were possible to airbrush out such an egregious past.

*Helmut Huebert was born in 1935 in Gem, Alberta, to Russian Mennonite immigrant parents. The family moved to Winnipeg, where Helmut graduated from Mennonite Brethren Collegiate Institute, then went on to higher studies at United College. His studies took a decided swerve, however, when he decided on a medical career, specializing in orthopedics. Helmut married Dorothy Rempel in 1957.*

*Huebert’s profession took him abroad to Zaire, Bangladesh, and Paraguay. He developed a passion for Mennonite history, publishing numerous works as an amateur historian. His enthusiasm for the Mennonite story is evident in the very language that he used, never dry, always luminous with detail. His best-known publication may be the Mennonite Historical Atlas.*

*Helmut Huebert was also dedicated to his church, attending the Portage Avenue Church in Winnipeg and serving for some years there as moderator. He died of a severe stroke in 2016.*

*Robert Martens*

## Tribute to Jean Wismer Friesen

By Robert Martens

On October 22, 2020, Jean Wismer Friesen died. She had volunteered at the Mennonite Historical Society of BC for years, often working alongside her husband, Hugo.

Jean’s marriage with Hugo was a genuine partnership. They met in Pennsylvania, where Hugo was waiting for a move to Germany to continue his work with Mennonite Central Committee. He proposed to Jean in Nuremberg. Their marriage lasted until Hugo’s death in 2019. Jean was very much her own person, intelligent and focused, but the strong marriage relationship resulted in years of collaborative voluntary service with MCC, for a time in Hong Kong. They were also committed members at South Abbotsford, where Jean was involved with Pioneer Girls and for a time served as Sunday school superintendent. While their volunteer lives were exceptionally full, they still managed to raise four children. As for paid work, Jean and Hugo taught at the Mennonite Educational Institute.

Jean was a presence at the Mennonite Historical Society. She and Hugo helped edit the Society newsletter in its early days; became known for their skills at translating and transcribing; and generally assisted wherever they were needed. As one long-time staff member put it, “They lived in the building.”

Due to declining health, Jean had recently been absent at MHSBC. She was always missed by staff and fellow volunteers. Her death leaves us with a permanent and unfillable void, but also with fond memories of a gracious and committed woman.

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Jean Wismer Friesen. Photo: *Abbotsford News*, Oct 22, 2020.

## In memory of Victor Penner 1956-2020: “Walking tour guide” to ancestral estates and villages in Ukraine

By George Dyck

Victor Penner’s great-grandfather, Mennonite minister Peter Johann Penner, applied and received permission in 1922 for his entire family, including married sons, to emigrate to Canada. Unfortunately, Peter died in December 1922 and plans to emigrate fell through; many mistakenly thought that Lenin’s New Economic Policy would improve their lot in life. Of the ten Penner children, only sons Jacob (in late 1923) and Rudolf (1927) left Chortitza to start a new life in Canada. Many of the remaining clan would perish in exile.

Son Nikolai, who was Victor Penner’s grandfather, was arrested and shot in 1937, leaving his young Ukrainian wife and their only son, Oleg, to fend for themselves. Unfortunately, officials saw Oleg as “guilty by association,” being the son of an “enemy of the state,” and this would limit his potential future. Recognizing this reality, he joined the orchestra as a means to gain acceptance into the medical university in Dnepropetrovsk, where he studied from 1948 to 1954. In 1953, he married his Ukrainian wife, Alexandra. Both were doctors. The stigma of his father’s arrest in 1937 forced Oleg and his wife to accept work in Kazakhstan. When the time came for their first child to be born, they decided that Alexandra

should go back to Ukraine for the birth. And so it followed that Victor Penner was born in Melitopol in 1956.

The family moved to Zaporizhzhia where Victor attended school and graduated in metallurgical engineering. Victor fell in love with Ludmila and they married in the spring of 1979. They had two sons: Nikolai, born in 1981, and Paul, in 1988. Meanwhile, Victor was working towards his second university degree in English language studies. This resulted in work as a translator of manuals involving machinery. Victor was obligated to serve in the military which he did as an artilleryist. Meanwhile he found it difficult to provide comfortable housing for his growing family as they were housed in one room in an apartment. Winter clothing was hard to get.

Work as an engineer did not pay well. Inflation after Ukrainian independence often meant that by the end of the week you could only buy a fraction of what you could have bought at the beginning of the week. At times they did not get paid for many weeks, and by then the pay did not amount to anything. Lines for purchases of food, etc., were exceptionally long and you bought whatever was on the shelf or you would get nothing. At this time, Victor’s entrepreneurial instincts led him and a friend to start their own business manufacturing aftermarket car parts. By 1991-92, he was melting metals in the kitchen oven, pouring them into moulds to eventually retail his products at the local open-air markets.

During 2001-02, Victor’s second cousin Paul Penner, who lived in Toronto, encouraged Victor to start a bed and breakfast in Zaporizhzhia; Victor and Ludmila took his advice. This enabled a growing number of Mennonites from overseas to enjoy a safe place to stay and to benefit from Victor’s ever-increasing knowledge of our Mennonite heritage in Ukraine. His wife, Ludmila, served incredibly tasty meals to many of us over the years. In addition, Victor took many pilgrims on the Unger Dnieper River Heritage Cruises on private tours of their ancestral villages and estates. He endlessly researched our past history and passionately shared it with anyone who would listen. He led weekly tours for Ukrainians in Zaporizhzhia who were eager to learn of their city’s past.

Victor was clearly someone with a good heart who was very interested in



Victor Penner explaining gravestones at the cemetery on the Schönhorst side of Neuendorf. September 2012. Photo: Louise Bergen Price

# Roots and Branches

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**Design:** Heather Pauls Murray

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

## **Mennonite Historical Society of BC**

1818 Clearbrook Rd.

Abbotsford, BC, V2T 5X4

Phone: 604-853-6177

Fax: 604-853-6246

Email: [archives@mhsbc.com](mailto:archives@mhsbc.com)

Website: [www.mhsbc.com](http://www.mhsbc.com)

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.

social justice issues. He participated in the Orange Revolution demonstrations in late 2004 and again in the Euro-maidan protests in 2014.

Ludmila is retired and continues to live in Zaporizhzhia. Their two sons emigrated to Canada as students. Presently Nikolai is a professor in the Language Department at McMaster University, Hamilton, and Paul is a mechanical engineer in Brampton.

Here is a quote from Olga Rubel of Zaporizhzhia: *Victor Penner passed away for a better world, but he left such a powerful footprint on this earth, that many people keep remembering him. And I am one of them. Recently I met with Victor's widow, Ludmila. We talked about Victor for more than two hours and we could not stop. As Ludmila put it, Victor was a multifaceted personality. Besides the well-known fact that Victor was an exceptionally good historian, he also planted trees and flowers; he baked bread and fed his owls; he fixed furniture and made people laugh. Ludmila mentioned that she married him because of his sense of humour. I will not even try to describe Victor in full, for it is a task beyond my abilities. I will share one episode from his life which speaks for itself and speaks very loudly. When the war started in Ukraine, there were many internally displaced people all over Ukraine. Some of them were fortunate to get a place to live in a dormitory. I will not describe those old Soviet dormitories. Whatever picture you have in your mind, the reality probably will be worse. So, the furniture there was falling apart. As soon as Victor learned about the problem, he was there with his tools to fix it. This is how he met an old grandma with two grandchildren – Tolik and Lena. The next two to three years, Victor was the one who supported the family in many ways. Tolik was very curious. He was always next to Victor, whatever he did. Two or three years passed and Tolik went to school. And when the teacher asked him what he wanted to become, Tolik answered, "I want to be a Victor Penner." Nothing more needs to be said.*

Many of us got to know Victor through the many tours he led in Zaporizhzhia and to the former Mennonite settlements in Ukraine. Over the years Victor researched the history and geography to become a walking encyclopedia of knowledge. He will be missed.

*George Dyck works with Friends of the Mennonite Centre in Ukraine (FOMCU). George's interest in genealogy led to a 2002 Ukraine visit to Victor and Ludmila Penner's bed & breakfast in Zaporizhzhia. Victor & George learned together as they visited most of the former Mennonite settlements in Ukraine. After 17 trips he finds it difficult to imagine a trip without Victor.*





### Artist's Statement

Jenny Bergen has always had a desire to create and experiment with different art mediums. Her mother was an ever-encouraging influence, teaching Jenny to paint when she was thirteen years old. Since then, she's deeply enjoyed exploring creative expression through acrylics, oils, watercolours, and even coffee. Jenny describes painting as valuable creative space in a busy schedule that allows her heart to breath and her mind to wonder as she processes her thoughts. It's a space where she often feels closest to God, marvelling at his creation and losing herself in a piece as she strives to understand and reflect on the work of his hands. Jenny works at the Mennonite Heritage Museum as museum educator.