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# Roots and Branches

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

See back cover for description
Photo: Heike Pirngruber


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# Editorial

By Robert Martens

*Little House in the Wildwood*. The H.C. and Esther Born residence in Volendam, Paraguay, village # 12, built on land cleared from the jungle. Drawing by H. Peters. Photo credit: Julia M. Toews

In the 1920s, Canadian Mennonites departed their country in large numbers for Mexico and Paraguay. They were angered by, among other things, the government's broken promise of an independent educational system, and were stubbornly determined to hold on to the fundamental values of their community. Since then, traditionalist Mennonites have continued the "tradition" of moving on when assimilationist pressures are too great. As Cameron Dueck points out in his travel memoir, *Menno Moto*, fiercely independent traditionalist Mennonites are still migrating, often to ever more isolated areas, in order to maintain their way of life.

In the past, impoverished governments such as those in Mexico, Paraguay, and Belize were happy to welcome hardworking Mennonites to settle their lands and boost national economies. That may be changing. When Mennonites, apparently from Bolivia, bought up land and settled in the Peruvian rainforest in 2016, government authorities were not pleased. "We have filed a deforestation complaint and an investigation has been opened," said an environment ministry official. "We have proof that before the presence of the Mennonites there was a forest and, after their arrival, these forests were converted into crops" (qtd. in Sierra Praeli).

According to reports, Mennonites had no permission to clear this land. "This deforestation is advancing at an accelerated rate," declared an official. The actions are subject to criminal charges, said another (Sierra Praeli). Denials were forthcoming. A lawyer hired by the Peruvian Mennonites maintained that "deforestation in the areas adjacent to the properties of the Mennonite neighbourhood have been caused by land invaders" (Sierra Praeli). This argument does not ring at all true, and Mennonites may be in for a tough legal fight. Nevertheless, the *Canadian Mennonite* reported that six families from the Shipyard Colony in Belize moved into the Peruvian rainforest in January 2021.

Traditionalist Mennonites, of course, are exceedingly diverse. In this issue, that variety is examined in a few sketches of "non-progressive" Mennonites. Old Colony Mennonites move to northern BC, fail, try again. Holdeman (perhaps better defined as "conservative") women find ways to change their manner of dress ever so slightly, and when the men aren't looking. In Belize, the various Mennonite communities, mostly traditionalist, live in a sometimes uneasy relationship with each other, while at the same time trying to keep out the "world." And Glen Klassen's essay on the Spanish flu pandemic of a century ago points out the danger of contagion inherent in the traditional communal lifestyle.

Mainstream Mennonites, some thoroughly assimilated to current cultural values, may sometimes tend to smugness when confronted with their "conservative" or "traditionalist" cousins. Perhaps they might question what they have lost: community, self-help, security from cradle to grave. And in this age of environmental degradation, they may also wish to concede that traditionalist Mennonites, with their simple lifestyle, may be more in accord with the sustainability of our earth.


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# Belize Journeys: Mennonites in Central America

By Maryann Tjart Jantzen
All photos courtesy of the author

*The Journey Begins*

Jungle sounds day and night. Birds singing, insects chirping, geckos barking in our cabana at night. Army ants on the march and howler monkeys in the trees. But also, Mennonite names on signs in Belmopan, the capital city of Belize, advertising businesses such as Plett's Builders. And a delightful procession of horse-drawn buggies carrying Old Order Mennonites from their small community of Springfield to the highway. These were some of the highlights of the small group "Tourmagination Beauty, Birds, and Culture Tour to Belize" that my husband and I enjoyed in January 2020, with a special emphasis on birdwatching.

Half of our stay was at Jaguar Creek Ecolodge, a faith-based resort in a jungle setting about a four-hour drive from Belize City and thirty minutes from the capital city of Belmopan. We also visited beautiful Crooked Tree Lodge, set in the midst of a paradisiacal wildlife sanctuary on the shores of a large lagoon, and quirky Caye Caulker, a small offshore tourist-destination island with golf carts for transportation, nestled within the second largest ocean barrier reef in the world.

In addition, we also visited several Mennonite communities, something I was eagerly anticipating, since I had long wanted to know more about how and why Mennonite groups had settled in Belize and how they had fared in their relationship with the surrounding culture.

*Overview of Mennonites in Belize*

Bordering Mexico and Guatemala and the Caribbean Sea, Belize is a multiethnic country. While Mestizo Belizeans make up the majority of the population, Creole, Maya, Garifuna, East Indian, and Mennonite are significant minority groups ("Belize"). As of 2020, of a population of about 400,000, Mennonites are estimated to number about twelve thousand, with total church membership about 5,200 (Gingerich et al.). Mennonite congregations, numbering at least fifty, range from the ultra-conservative Old Order Noah Hoover Mennonites and traditionalist Old Colony Mennonites to the more progressive Kleine Gemeinde and Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference congregations. Some non-affiliated Mennonite congregations have also emerged, sometimes established by former members of more conservative groups. In addition, outreach efforts by some Mennonite congregations have resulted in the formation of the Belize Evangelical Mennonite Church (Iglesia Evangélica Menonita de Belice), with worship in English, Spanish, and Garifuna (the language of an ethnic group descended from African slaves who intermarried with indigenous peoples), and about 525 members and three congregations (Gingerich et al.).

The majority of Mennonites in Belize have origins in the conservative Old Colony, Kleine Gemeinde, and Sommerfelder groups that left Canada between 1922 and 1935 to settle in northern Mexi-

...some contemporary scholars consider the Mennonite clearing of large swaths of jungle as unsustainable and harmful.

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-Jennifer Martens, office and volunteer coordinator, MHSBC

co. Starting in 1958, more than 1,700 Mexican Mennonites moved to what was then British Honduras and in 1981 became the independent country of Belize. Desire for more productive farmland and freedom from government imposition on their way of life were important motivations. In exchange for land grants contingent on the Mennonites using their agricultural expertise to benefit the country, the Mennonites were promised freedom from government interference and exemption from military service. In 1957, these Mennonite groups and the Colonial Government of Belize signed a "Privilegium" exempting "the Mennonites from participation in any Social Security System" and allowing them to create "their own education system" (Smith). The settlers were required to create their own infrastructure independent of government funding, resulting in "large, independent enclaves with an internal system of governance and schooling" (Roessingh & Bovenberg 113).

Maryann Tjart Jantzen standing in front of the Springfield Noah Hoover Mennonite Church

Not surprisingly, divisions soon emerged. For example, Dutch academics Roessingh and Bovenberg explain that "[the] Old Colony soon split into a group in Blue Creek, which became the more lenient Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference (EMMC), and a stricter group in Shipyard, still Old Colony" (102). And later in the 1960s, some Pennsylvania Dutch-speaking Old Order Mennonites came from the USA and Canada to settle in Upper Barton Creek and later, its daughter settlements. Over time, they were joined by other conservative groups to form a new community (Gingerich et al.).

Roessingh and Boersma report that "[there]are currently three main streams to which the different church communities in Belize belong, namely the conservative Amish Mennonite communities, the traditional Old Colony or Altkolonier Mennonites and the more progressive church communities like the Kleine Gemeinde (the largest Mennonite denomination in Belize) and the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Church (EMMC). The distinction between these three main streams is based on the level of restrictions on the use of technological innovation in the agricultural machinery" (179). (Even now, sectarianism creates divisions. Roessingh and Boersma write "that [a] deacon in Springfield [an Old Order group] … did not recognize the Kleine Gemeinde of Spanish Lookout as Mennonites because they were too worldly in the eyes of the Springfield community members" (180).)

Belize has a tropical climate, with temperatures varying only a little between seasons, but with a pronounced wet season. This type of climate proved a challenge for settlers accustomed to a more seasonal and/or dryland climate in Canada and Mexico. After a harsh beginning, in which the Mennonite settlers had to clear land, learn to grow different crops, build houses, and develop their own roads and community infrastructure, they began to prosper.

Despite their relatively small numbers and self-sufficiency, Mennonites have become influential in the country's economy, especially in agriculture, furniture building, house construction and light manufacturing: "Because of their strong entrepreneurial position, the Mennonites are commonly regarded as the economic motor of Belize. Mennonites symbolize soundness and reliability and therefore Belizeans are eager to do business with them" (Roessingh and Schoonderwoerd 66). However, some contemporary scholars consider the Mennonite clearing of large swaths of jungle as unsustainable and harmful. For example, Jesann Gonzalez Cruz writes that "the Spanish Lookout Trust Corporation (SPLC) has actively deforested and plowed the South Block, a plot of land in Yalbac, Belize, which contains

Maya cultural heritage at risk of destruction by these land practices." And others have observed that not all fellow countrymen appreciate the Mennonites' economic clout and insular nature.

Most of the chicken consumed in Belize is produced by Mennonite farmers, with Quality Poultry Products being the country's largest producer. (Tasty as it was, after being served chicken every day at the ecolodge, some of our tour group began good humouredly groaning, "here comes Mennonite chicken again!") Western Dairies is Belize's only source of national dairy products, with four branches in various parts of the country. Both businesses are headquartered in Spanish Outlook. Another well-known Mennonite business is Koop's Sheet Metal, "the country's largest supplier of metal roofing and other metal works" ("Mennonite Businesses"). And as of 2006, Spanish Lookout has the only commercial oilfield in Belize ("Spanish Lookout").

The diversity of Mennonites in Belize makes it difficult to present a general characterization, since Mennonite groups vary from those who embrace the latest technology to Old Order groups who prohibit electricity and use only horse-drawn carriages. For many Mennonites in Belize, Plautdietsch (Low German) or Pennsylvania Dutch remain the main language of home, and High German, of church, while English and Belizean Spanish are also important languages for business matters and communication with the surrounding culture. Some EMMC churches in Spanish Lookout now have services in English rather than German, reflecting changing dynamics within the community.


Map of Mennonite settlements in Belize with year of founding and major cities of Belize
Image: Roessingh & Bovenberg

*Spanish Lookout*

Spanish Lookout and Springfield, the two communities our tour group visited, are at opposite ends of a spectrum of diversity. Spanish Lookout is one of the most progressive and technologically advanced Mennonite communities in Belize. Located in the Cayo District of Eastern Belize, a twenty-minute car ride from the Guatemalan border, the colony consists of farms and scattered settlements. Not only does Spanish Lookout have "large producers of dairy products, poultry products, eggs, vegetables and cattle produce," it also has light industry specializing in "auto parts, … tire hardware and steel imports" ("Spanish Lookout"). As of 2018, Spanish Lookout had a population of 2,253 people in 482 households and is the third largest Mennonite settlement in Belize ("Mennonites in Belize"), with both Kleine Gemeinde and EMMC churches.

After leaving Jaguar Creek and driving east for some hours through jungle-filled, hilly country with few settlements, we began to see patches of agricultural land with neatly tended farms. Located in a beautiful valley, with cropped fields as well as fields of livestock, Spanish Lookout "gives an impression of an area, which one associates with the Midwest of Northern America. The wooden houses are in a good state and nice looking. Around the houses one can see short cleaned gardens, large sheds for farming machinery, big chicken-farms, fields with corn, red kidney beans and sorghum. On the paved road tractors, pickups and four-wheel driven land rovers are passing by" (Roessingh & Boersma 183).

Our first stop was the sprawling Farmers Trading Center, a bustling retail and wholesale store located in the heart of Spanish Lookout. It began operations in 1962 and has grown to carry a wide variety of products. An online profile states that "FTC carries a wide range of hardware and grocery items. From textiles to hardware supplies and building materials, we have it all! We carry a range of gardening and agricultural tools, motorcycle, hand and power tools, and general merchandise, and footwear" ("Farmers Trading Center").

The large parking lot revealed a microcosm of trans-

portation modes, ranging from horse-drawn buggies to late model pickup trucks and sedans. The attire of customers in the store also varied from contemporary (but modest) clothing styles that would not be out of place in Canadian urban centres to the long dresses and prayer caps/bonnets worn by women from conservative groups. Men's apparel also reflected community of origin. Signs on the bulletin boards outside the store featured various agricultural items for sale but also notices for church services in "alternate" Mennonite congregations.

Next, we enjoyed delicious ice cream at a popular Western Dairies outlet (Western Dairies supplies all the nationally produced dairy products in Belize). Along with generic fast-food choices like hot dogs, the café menu also featured cottage cheese cakes (*Glums Kuchen*), adding a distinctive Mennonite flavour.

After this stop, we drove on to explore Mayan ruins located on the border with Guatemala, leaving with the impression of a resilient forward-looking community. Despite its many contemporary features, the community still seems to retain a sense of separation due to its isolated rural location and its self-sufficiency: the community has its own credit union, electricity plant, schools, health clinic, ambulance and fire trucks and also maintains its own road system. Nonetheless, it seems destined to become increasingly modernized. Roessingh and Schoonderwoerd assert that "through their linkages [both familial and economic] with communities throughout the world, the Mennonites in Spanish Lookout are constantly under the influence of (global) processes of modernization. Their lives and traditions will inevitably evolve under such external influences, whether they consciously adapt these changes or not" (66).

*Springfield*

Springfield, the second Mennonite community we visited, is much smaller than Spanish Lookout. It originated as a daughter colony of the Upper Barton Creek settlement of conservative Old Order Mennonites, some who came from other Mennonite settlements in Belize seeking a stricter way of life and others who immigrated mainly from the United States in the 1960s ("Springfield"), looking for a more separatist life style. This group is currently known as the Noah Hoover Mennonites (named after its founder) and is sometimes mistaken for an Old Order Amish group. Springfield was established in 1996.

Roessingh and Bovenberg observe that "[u]nlike other Mennonite settlements, with up 600 families, the Hoover Mennonites live in small settlements of no more than 30 families. Moreover, their settlements are located more than half a day's buggy ride apart from each other" (101). The distance between these communities is due to the conditions of their immigration agreement with the government, which prevented them from purchasing large tracts of land reserved only for Mennonite settlers, as had been the case for earlier Mennonite immigrants.

In contrast to the well-kept, paved road leading to Spanish Lookout, as soon as we turned off the Hummingbird Highway to travel the approximately five miles to Springfield, we were on a bumpy gravel road that dwindled into a narrow lane as we reached the community. Just a few minutes down the road, we were surprised by a progression of horse-drawn buggies, with occupants in "plain dress" (women: bonnets, long modest dresses in subdued colours; men: beards, hats and trousers with plain shirts, or overalls for everyday use). On our way back we saw the same horses and buggies parked in a

Shoppers at the Farmers Trading Center in Spanish Lookout

shady area near the highway. We were told most members of the community had travelled to a funeral at the sister colony of Birdwalk, approximately forty-five kilometres away; at the highway they would have taken a bus or hired transportation to take them the rest of the way. (While these conservative groups are prohibited from owning modern technology such as cars or computers, they can access them from outsiders if necessary; i.e., they can ride in someone else's car but can't own one.)

Greeting us at the entrance to the community was a sign reminding visitors to dress decently and also that business transactions were prohibited on Sundays. Set against the backdrop of the rolling foothills of the Maya Mountains was a peaceful, pastoral community of plain and tidy small-scale farmsteads spread over about two thousand acres, with a population of about three hundred (Roessingh & Bovenberg 111). The community of Springfield does "not allow the use of modern technology or electricity. Horsepower drives the sawmill and water powers a turbine in Upper Barton Creek and Springfield, which is owned by the people of the community. Work on the fields is done with an oxen team or horses. All transportation is done by horse-drawn wagons" (111).

Menu at Western Dairies Restaurant. Note the cottage cheese cookies.

Our first stop was the impressive Harder family's All Fruits Nursery, one of the largest horticultural businesses in Belize, that draws customers from far and near. While no adults of the family were present, having left for the funeral, we interacted with several young family members left to look after the business. The nursery featured an impressive variety of fruit trees and landscape plants. It has an online site listing its plant selection and mailing address, but the site lacks any interactive features. In addition to the nursery, the community also features a horse-drawn sawmill and specializes in growing fresh produce to be sold in the surrounding area. On biweekly market days, "the usually isolated community bustles with activity" (Roessingh & Bovenberg 112).

...how challenging this environment must be for those who are unable or unwilling to meet community expectations and restrictions.

After enjoying our interaction with the young people – one barefoot young woman's face lit up as she expressed her love of working with plants – and being amazed by the variety and quality of plants for sale, we walked down the lane to the community's very plain, one-storey church building, with its outdoor hitching posts for horse-drawn buggies. We sat quietly in the pews for a while, savouring the peaceful atmosphere and admiring the wagon wheel chandeliers that would provide candle light for evening services. The backs of the pews were filled with hymnals and German Bibles belonging to individual families, left in place for the next worship service.

My most lasting impression of Springfield was its simplicity and tranquility, with no intrusive vehicle or power tool noises. It was truly a beautiful place to visit.

*A Meaningful Conversation and Further Reflections*

Several dynamics stood out to me as I visited and learned more about Belizean Mennonite communities. First was the resilience, resourcefulness and determination, not only of the settlers who had built self-sufficient communities from scratch in the middle of the Belizean Jungle, but also of the current communities who continue to carve out an important economic role for themselves in Belize. Also apparent was the centuries-old Mennonite tension between assimilation/adaptation to the surrounding culture and continued separation/isolation. (In the last few years, a number of Old Colony Mennonite families from Belize are on the move again, this time to isolated wilderness areas of the Peruvian Amazon rainforest, seeking better agricultural opportunities and greater geographic isolation; see the DW documentary, *The Mennonites – a trip back in time*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pt_XU4W4DBA)

I also found myself thinking about how secure and satisfying this kind of insular community life could be for those who are content to live within the system, but how also how challenging this environment must be for those who are unable or unwilling to meet community expectations and restrictions.

This tension was highlighted for me in my final Belizean Mennonite experience, in many ways the most en-

lightening. A young Mennonite man in his forties happened to be in the seat beside me on our flight back from Belize City to Toronto. He did not look particularly "Mennonite," but my chance glance at his iPhone screen revealed a typical Russian-Mennonite name. When I asked if he was Mennonite, he looked at me with apprehension, but learning that I too had a Mennonite background, he relaxed and we began to chat.

During a lengthy conversation, I learned about his personal and not atypical Mennonite experience of being neither wholly "in" nor "out" of his community of origin. Currently living and working in Northern Alberta, Johann Peters (not his real name) travels back and forth between Belize and Canada, and his family (spouse and three children) has moved between the two countries several times. He and his wife became Canadian citizens under a prior law that granted citizenship under certain conditions, including a period of residency in Canada, to descendants of Mennonite Canadian citizens who had left the country. He currently holds three citizenships, Belizean, Mexican and Canadian, providing him with considerable opportunities for mobility.

Springfield church lighting

While some of Johann's immediate family still lives in Belize, his wife's siblings reside in Canada, as do some of his siblings. He mentioned that his father had just travelled from Belize to Mexico for medical treatment. He still has many ties to Belize, including business connections and links to an independent *Mennonitische Gemeinde*. One of the originating members of this church, he shared that tensions had quickly emerged as the new group began to negotiate its theological and cultural identity, since attendees from differing Mennonite backgrounds had contrasting expectations.

Johann grew up in an Old Colony community, where motorized tractors with steel tires are allowed, but not automobiles.

While Johann struck me as progressive and worldly-wise, given his experience of moving between cultures, he still seemed to have a fairly conservative framework for faith and lifestyle (not so different from that of many Canadian Mennonites). When I shared that my Mennonite congregation had had a female co-pastor for a number of years, he was silent, but I could sense that this was outside his comfort zone. He and his family attend a Plymouth Brethren-type church in their Alberta community, where there are few Mennonites. He emphasized the importance of passing on his Christian values to his children.

Johann grew up in an Old Colony community, where motorized tractors with steel tires are allowed, but not automobiles. He described himself as formerly "backslidden," having run away from the community as a young man. But eventually he came back and embraced a life of faith ("I got saved," he told me), albeit outside the strict parameters of his church of origin. When I asked him whether he had been shunned because he had been a "runaway" from his church, he indicated that because he had never been baptized in the Old Colony Church (and thus not excommunicated when he left), he could still visit with his parents and siblings, although he did not participate in extended family gatherings. Still owning land close to where he grew up, he indicated that Mennonites who are no longer part of the traditional churches often buy land on the outskirts of the community. He also told me of wanting to invest with partners in a local business, only to be informed his name could not be publicly attached to the venture due to his lack of traditional church membership and, I assume, his past history of leaving. But despite what must have been painful past experiences, when I asked him where he would like to eventually settle, he said, Belize, "that's my home country."

I very much enjoyed my conversation with Johann, feeling we still had commonalities as fellow Mennonites, despite our disparate background. But his story and that of the communities we visited also reminded me of the age-old Mennonite push-and-pull of isolation and assimilation, of leaving and returning, of separation and desire for rootedness. Perhaps this reality is destined to continue, at least for some Mennonite groups, even in this globalized, technologically driven world with fewer and fewer remote places to which separatist groups can withdraw.

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# Mennonite Churches in Prespatou

By Robert Martens, with input from Wilf Penner

In the province of British Columbia, Mennonites have commonly been assimilationist to the point that they are often virtually indistinguishable from the mainstream population. Traditionalist Mennonites, however, live in this part of the world as well; for example, currently there are seven Church of God in Christ, Mennonite (Holdeman) congregations in BC with a total membership of about 450 (Giesbrecht 4). Less well known are the traditionalist Mennonites living in the area surrounding Prespatou, a tiny village located eighty-four kilometres north of Fort St. John. The brief and awkwardly written *Wikipedia* entry on Prespatou seems almost gently mocking: "It is a community with the majority of the residents being German-speaking mennonites [sic]. It has a convenience store and gas station and a public school with a [sic] out house [sic] that has both elementary grades and secondary grades" ("Prespatou").

Canadian geography, with its vast expanses of wilderness, is conducive to the settlement of isolationist "conservative" communities such as that at Prespatou – conducive, that is, when land is available. And land did become available north of Fort St. John in the 1960s to Old Colony Mennonites who were seeking to preserve the religiously based culture they had so long maintained and treasured.

*Old Colony Mennonites*

In 1875 the first of over three thousand Mennonites from the Russian colony of Chortitza immigrated to Manitoba. They were fleeing new Russian government measures that enforced increased integration of Mennonites into the wider Russian world; the guarantees of self-sufficiency they had once received from the tsars were gradually being broken. Once in Canada, these Mennonites were registered as the *Rheinlaender Mennoniten Gemeinde* but were popularly known as Old Colony Mennonites; the colony of Chortitza had been the first established by Mennonites in Russia and was hence known as the Old Colony (*Altkolonie*).

The Canadian government accommodated these newcomers by establishing the East Reserve (east of the Red River) in Manitoba; here Mennonites were free, according to official promises, to maintain their cherished customs and religious beliefs in peace. When the West Reserve opened, many relocated there, but not all. It took a decade before the various Mennonite factions got sorted out. In the Reserves, Old Colony Mennonites built villages modelled on the ones they had left behind in Russia. The old ways based on agriculture, limited education, church authority, and relative isolation of the community from the outside world were rigorously maintained on the Canadian prairies. And then the *Altkolonist* (Old Colonist) way of life was once again threatened.

*Moving on*

Government promises were once again being strained or broken. Already in 1880, the Manitoba Municipal Act provided for local secular government, thus putting in jeopardy the large degree of self-government that the Old Colony Mennonites had enjoyed. More importantly, homesteading regulations under the Dominion Lands Act were based on individualistic norms regarding property, and the communalist life practised by Old Colony Mennonites was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain.

Not only government was to blame for the fracturing of community. Bergthal Mennonites, less traditionalist than the *Altkolonisten*, were relocating from the East Reserve (east of the Red River) into the more fertile farmland of the West Reserve, bringing more "liberal" ideas with them and puncturing the solidarity of the Old Colony. Then the Mennonite Brethren moved in, having decided to evangelize their Old Colony brothers and sisters. In order to escape these threats to their traditional existence, Old Colony Mennonites were moving out by the hundreds into the area now known as Saskatchewan (it became a province in 1905), and by 1910 comprised the largest Mennonite denomination in the province. For many, however, the sojourn in Saskatchewan did not last long. During the First World War, the Canadian authorities were clamping down on these "Germanic" citizens in both Manitoba and Saskatchewan, enforcing compulsory education in public schools, and threatening to impose military conscription. In addition, it was becoming increasingly difficult for Old Colony elders and preachers to enforce discipline. Once again, Mennonites would move on.

In 1922 nearly seven thousand Old Colony Mennonites moved en masse to new colonies in Mexico. Only two of their ministers remained in Canada. In 1936, what was left of the *Altkolonisten* officially registered as the Old Colony Mennonite Church. Still, even though the Mexican colonies encountered enormous difficulties in the early years, Old Colony Mennonites continued to emigrate from Canada to remote regions where traditions could be preserved. In the 1970s an abortive attempt was made to establish colonies in Texas. Others left for Belize or Bolivia, as well as for wilderness areas of Canada, such as the Peace River area of Alberta. And in the early 1960s, land became available north of Fort St. John, British Columbia.

In 1922 nearly seven thousand Old Colony Mennonites moved en masse to new colonies in Mexico.

*Prespatou Old Colony Mennonite Church*

Already there had been two failed attempts by Old Colony Mennonites from the prairies to relocate to northern British Columbia. In 1940 some twenty-five Old Colony families fled their drought-plagued homes in Saskatchewan and settled near Burns Lake; they were assisted financially by provincial governments and the Canadian National Railway. Eventually, however, the church closed down, with the settlers moving to La Crete in the province of Alberta, emigrating to Bolivia, or returning to Saskatchewan. In 1955 another attempt was made when three Old Colony families moved from Saskatchewan to the Vanderhoof area, only to find that the land on which they had intended to settle was already occupied by others.

It was a case of "third time lucky." Between 1953 and 1961 the Saskatchewan Old Colony Mennonite Church negotiated a land lease near Prespatou, north of Fort St. John. Traditionalist Mennonites generally have a high birth rate, and there was a need to provide land for younger Old Colony members. In 1961, eighty-six *Altkolonisten* families from Saskatchewan moved to the Prespatou area; they were joined by other Mennonites living in northern BC and, over the next two years, by other Old Colony families from Saskatchewan. The Old Colony Mennonite Church in Prespatou was formally established in 1963. The congregation grew and a new church was built in 1986.

The church was led by a series of elders (*Ältester*), including Abram Loewen, Herman Bueckert and Johann Fehr. By 2000, the membership of the Old Colony Church totalled three hundred but the number of attendees, seven hundred, was much higher. By 2010 the membership seems to have fallen to about two hundred (Thiessen 2). If these figures are correct, they would indicate a shift that runs counter to the trend in most traditionalist Mennonite churches, where the birth rate is high and church membership generally grows. What may partially account for the levelling off in membership in the Old Colony Church in Prespatou is the establishment of another Mennonite denomination, the Chortitzer, that siphoned off members from the Old Colony and absorbed them into its own congregation.

Prespatou Mennonite Church
Source: www.cmconference.cachurchesprespatout

*The Chortitzer Mennonite Conference*

Rigorous traditionalism was an early marker of Chortitzer Mennonites. The denomination had its beginnings in the 1890s, when a conservative faction broke away from the Bergthal Mennonite Church in Manitoba's West Reserve. Because their first bishop resided in the village of Sommerfeld, the new Mennonite group was initially called the Sommerfelder. Subsequently, another Mennonite faction, under the leadership of a bishop living in Chortitz and therefore known as Chortitzer, decided to express solidarity with the Sommerfelder. The resulting association was called the Chortitz Mennonite Church.

Among the Chortitzer, Sunday schools, young people's groups, choirs, and the use of the English language in church services were forbidden. The bishop, or elder, exercised strict control over the community. In 1948, though, about 1,700 of the more conservative faction among the Chortitzer moved en masse to Paraguay, hoping that the increased isolation of its members there would ensure the preservation of their traditional ways. The more progressive Chortitzer remained in Canada and the result was that the church took a turn to greater integration with the Canadian mainstream. Youth groups, Sunday schools, Bible studies, and missions programs were introduced, as well as the use of the English language in services. In 1990 the Chortitzer Mennonite Conference consisted of about 2,400 members in eleven congregations, including a church in Prespatou. The latter was the only one to have a full-time paid pastor.

*The Prespatou Mennonite Church*

The Prespatou Mennonite Church was established through an outreach ministry to Old Colony Mennonites by Dan Wiebe and John Harder. When the congregation was formally organized in 1974, Harder was elected its first minister. Many from the Old Colony Mennonite Prespatou Church affiliated with the more "progressive" Chortitzer, and in 2010 the membership of the new church totalled about five hundred (Giesbrecht 4). Church services are conducted in both English and German.

*Lingering traditionalism*

The more progressive nature of the Chortitzer has altered the nature of Mennonites living in the Prespatou area. Chortitzer Mennonites are actively involved in mainstream society; for example, in 2008 the Prespatou Mennonite Church was awarded a certificate by MAX Canada (a faith-based insurance group) to honour the congregation's commitment to mutual aid. The Chortitzer Conference changed its name to Christian Mennonite Church in April 2015, in part to make itself more relatable to the non-Mennonite world.

Old Colony beliefs and traditions, however, persist. In 2009 Dave Pankratz, treasurer of the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta, described the Prespatou Mennonites as firmly committed to "the old ways": "Most of the people I have spoken to in Prespatou see themselves as Old Colony Mennonites…. Physically, the community is laid out much like 19th century Mennonite villages in Russia with farms on either side of the main road. Farms are long and narrow and front the main road. Livestock is kept in a community pasture during the summer months. Public infrastructure is minimal – a school, a store/gas station/post office, two churches, and a seniors complex. There are also numerous farms in the surrounding area. Plautdietsch is still in wide use in Prespatou. Children, for example, can often be heard speaking Plautdietsch while playing in the schoolyard during recess or at lunch time" (qtd. in Neufeldt 1).

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Burns Lake First Mennonite Church
Source: GAMEO

# From the Archives: Resettlement at Burns Lake

Introduced by Robert Martens

When historian and archivist Ted Regehr visited Abbotsford, attending a conference of Mennonite historical societies, he left behind a very special acquisition for MHSBC. His donation is a black folder containing two lengthy letters written in 1944 by a Canadian National Railway official; these letters report how CNR cooperated with government in relocating economically distressed Old Colony Mennonites from Saskatchewan to BC, specifically the Burns Lake and Vanderhoof areas. The folder also contains a long list of names of Mennonite settlers to "Central" BC; data on land, acreage, grain, water, housing, barns, terms of lease, proximity of farms to schools, and so on; as well as a treasure trove of archival black and white photographs documenting the trek to BC and the subsequent settlement.

Inserted into the folder is also a letter to David Toews, who played such a key role in the immigration of Russian Mennonite refugees to Canada. T. P. Devlin writes, "Under separate cover, I am forwarding you a booklet dealing with the settlement of Saskatchewan Mennonite families in Central British Columbia…. I thought you would be interested in seeing what was done with these families who, in their original locations in Saskatchewan, were unable to make a satisfactory living for their families and themselves." This letter is dated Feb. 14, 1946; David Toews would die one year later.

The following excerpts are from the first of the two letters contained in this document. The letter is signed T. P. Devlin (hand script), Western Superintendent, Colonization and Agriculture. The following shorter letter, reporting the resettlement of Mennonites to Cheslatta (in the Vanderhoof area), is unsigned but seems to be written by Devlin as well. Both letters are addressed to Mr. J. S. McGowan, Director, Dept. of Colonization & Agriculture, Canadian National Railways, Montreal, Que.

Dear Sir:

The settlement of Saskatchewan relief families on land in the territory south of Burns Lake, B.C. which commenced in 1940, has now been successfully com-

pleted. This, therefore, is a report summarizing the project from its inception in the spring of 1940 to the end of 1943, at which time the families included in this settlement had become firmly established on new land in Central B.C.

Early in 1940 our Department was consulted by the Hon. J. G. Taggart, Minister of Agriculture for Saskatchewan, for suggestions and assistance in removing distressed families in the Swift Current and Warman districts to territory offering opportunities for successful farm settlement. These families, largely as a result of the depression and the concurrent drought conditions which prevailed over large sections of southern Saskatchewan, had been forced on to the relief rolls. It was quite apparent that without assistance they would be unable to re-establish themselves, and they were in danger of becoming a permanent problem. It was also evident that it would be necessary to remove them to some other territory and perhaps place them outside the Province if they were to be established with a moderate cash outlay.

Two delegates nominated by the settlers proceeded to Central B.C. and examined the territory south of Burns Lake...

The families were well recommended, having experience, pioneering qualities, adequate livestock and machinery, and it seemed possible to arrange that each would be in possession of at least $100.00 in cash at time of departure. Our Department decided on, and recommended Central British Columbia as the most suitable territory, subject to the approval of the Province of British Columbia, which on behalf of the Province of Saskatchewan we then were authorized to solicit.

Two delegates nominated by the settlers proceeded to Central B.C. and examined the territory south of Burns Lake, more particularly some partially open areas in the Cheslatta Lake Region. This delegation continued on to Victoria where we introduced them and on their behalf negotiated with officials and members of the British Columbia Government for the use of Provincial lands, securing the consent of that Government to this assisted movement, and the assistance of all local officials in dealing with necessary work….

When preliminary arrangements had been completed a representative of our Saskatoon Office proceeded to Swift Current to select and inform families, and to compile particulars of their livestock, equipment and household effects. Ten families were selected from this territory, their livestock treated for disease prevention to comply with regulations for entry to British Columbia, seed and feed gathered, and all other details completed for their movement. Through the splendid co-operation of other departments of the Railway, special loading and transportation arrangements were made. At the railway siding of Toppingham, Sask., 17 carloads of livestock and effects were assembled and made ready to ship. Two colonist cars were attached for the 87 passengers and one box baggage car and a caboose completed the special train, which arrived at Burns Lake, B.C., on May 7th, 1940….

On arrival of the families at Burns Lake, the first group of 87 passengers and 17 carloads of settlers' effects had to be transported by road to the proposed settlement area, approximately 65 miles north. At that time, trucks could cover only the first 30 miles on account of the condition of the trails….

All of the settlers built houses of logs, plentifully supplied within the territory, [sic] the only outlay of cash was for building paper, window panes and nails; the average cost in money for each house being $15.00.

The food supply in the first year of such pioneer settlement is always the chief concern. Settlers previously established in the territory pretty well controlled available hay leases, but some of the new settlers were able to rent hay land on shares. Meadows were located east of the settlement and leased on behalf of the settlers, which provided considerable of the necessary roughage. Grain crops, sown on about 70 acres of land which had been broken in June, were too late to mature but provided a very heavy crop of green feed. There was some shortage of grain for poultry and livestock, but this was partly removed by the settlers brought in on October 8th, and by a special shipment from friends in Saskatchewan. The settlers produced about 800 sacks of potatoes and a fairly adequate supply of other vegetables. Several in the group obtained outside work for which they accepted payment in such items as vegetables, potatoes and meat….

The success attending this settlement, [sic] aroused considerable interest in Saskatchewan and some additional families have located using entirely their own resources….

Arrangements were completed by our Department with the Public Utilities Commission for permission to operate a truck service from the Settlement to Burns Lake, which enabled the settlers to deliver cream and

other products to the rail at Burns Lake in good condition. The steady production and marketing of cream aided materially in financing the families and became an important factor in building up the local creamery business. It is noteworthy that the 25 families, all large ones, which two years before had been completely on relief in Saskatchewan, were by the end of 1942 so firmly established that only $41.00 relief had been necessary for the year up to the end of August….

Responsible officials of both the Saskatchewan and B.C. Provincial Governments had expressed themselves as completely satisfied with the work done.

Ironically, this resettlement of Old Colony Mennonites, reported by T. P. Devlin as a resounding success, did not last long. The settlers had built churches in Cheslatta and Grassy Plains, and used these two buildings as schools during the week. When the government insisted upon enrolment of Old Colony children in public schools, most of the settlers moved on in exasperation to Fort St. John in 1958. Today, a variety of Mennonite churches are located in the Burns Lake area, including congregations affiliated with Mennonite Church Canada, Sommerfelder Mennonite, and Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite.

Additional source
Pauls, Helen Rose. "First Mennonite Church (Burns Lake, British Columbia, Canada.)" *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 2014. https://gameo.org/index.php?title=First_Mennonite_Church_(Burns_Lake,_British_Columbia,_Canada)

# Holdeman Plain Dress: Anti-Fashion

By Robert Martens
(with thanks for comments by Lydia Hiebert, head of costumes at Vancouver Opera, retired)

Source: Bradley, Linda Arthur. "Anti-Fashion as a Social Boundary Marker among Holdeman Mennonite Women." *Journal of Mennonite Studies* Vol. 36 (2018): 259-277.

Though the Russian Mennonite village in which I grew up was not traditionalist – it was largely Mennonite Brethren – plain dress was encouraged, especially among women. Yet women often found ways to avert restrictions. Two examples from my own family come to mind: first, my grandmother. Women were required to wear hats in church, supposedly to signify respect for God; men were required to remove theirs. During the glory years of hat fashion in North America, my grandmother wore hats that would have rivalled those of Hollywood stars. She had found a way to abide by restrictions and yet be fashionable. A second example: when my mother was a young girl, she picked hops to support the family. While wearing jeans would have been far more comfortable, women were obliged to wear skirts while working. Some of them complained to church elders that male workers were looking up their skirts. Very quickly women were permitted to wear pants in the hop fields.

Quiet subversion. In a recent essay, Washington State University Professor Emeritus Linda Arthur Bradley argues that plain dress among Holdeman Mennonites has become increasingly fashionable as women make small changes that add up, in the long run, to notable differences. Holdeman men were required to dress plainly as well, but male attire never differed that much from the North American mainstream. Women in particular dressed distinctively to demonstrate their commitment to the kingdom of God. Bradley has a name for such distinctive dress: "anti-fashion."

Members of the Holdeman community – officially the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite – could have reacted to restraints in three different ways, writes Bradley: compliance with community rules; rejection, in which case expulsion was a possibility; or "agency," the subtle manipulation of dress codes, seemingly trifling adoptions of "worldly" fashions, eventually resulting in very different forms of apparel.

Consider the testimony of a Holdeman woman: "Then in my teenage years I fell in love with an outsider. I was expelled in 1988, and shunned, so we married and moved far away. About ten years later, we came home to visit and I was shocked at how different the women's dresses were. Back in the 80s, if I'd have worn any of the dresses my cousins were then wearing (1998), I'd have

Most common Holdeman dress styles in 2016
Source: *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, vol. 36, 2018, p. 271

been expelled just for that" (qtd. in Bradley 259).

Linda Arthur Bradley contends that women in traditionalist cultures may be more powerful than is apparent to outsiders. She bases her conclusions on an extensive research project: she studied two Holdeman publications; did fieldwork in Holdeman communities in California, Idaho, Washington state, Kansas, and Manitoba; and conducted a photo study. By 1980, writes Bradley, Holdeman men dressed simply but wore purchased clothing. They were distinguishable from outsiders mainly by beards grown after baptism. However, "women have consistently worn very simple, modest and long one-piece dresses based on the basic shirtwaist dress that was the style of their ancestors in the nineteenth century. They had high necklines, often with a collar, and with buttons down the front of the loosely fitting bodice…. The key function of plain dress was to identify the woman as Holdeman, but not to call attention to her as an individual" (261-2).

By the end of the twentieth century, some adaptation to the outside world was occurring. Farming had vanished as the primary occupation, and women were taking "side work," or even full-time work, in urban areas to supplement family income. An interviewee makes the comment that "Moms who work outside of the home are still expected to take care of all the family responsibilities. Women juggle home and work with efficiency" (qtd. in 266). As cultural routines changed, so did dress. Women were also working collectively on transforming their plain clothing. "In the 1980s the women asked ministers if they could sew the [mandatory] head coverings into shaped hats that looked like the pinned coverings. That was denied at the time but was allowed by the end of the century – originally for women with arthritis" (267).

In the 1990s Holdeman women used their collective ingenuity to dress more comfortably. A Canadian Holdeman woman designed an exceptionally long dress. This might seem like a step backward in time, but the side benefit was that the obligatory wearing of stockings to hide women's legs was cancelled. The cooler trend took off, writes Bradley.

Ironically, during the 1950s and early 1960s, the shirtwaist worn by Holdeman women became fashionable among outsiders. The trend worried Holdeman ministers, who implemented a panel system by which individuals were judged for their behaviour. Many were expelled from the church during the 1970s, a time that became known as the Purge. Women's clothing once again conformed to the standards of anti-fashion.

The Purge was a divisive time in the Church of God, Mennonite, and the conflict and injury involved induced men to act less legalistically. Women were once again quietly changing the rules, according to Bradley. Head coverings and plain dress are still worn but how those are constructed has changed, she writes. An interviewee remarks, "We spend less time sewing because dresses are now simple, but very long and tubular. Elastic waists and short sleeves are OK for daytime, but for church we still wear belts and long sleeves. Buttons are generally just for decoration now" (qtd. in 270). Another Holdeman woman observes, "I don't know anyone who's got much time to sew – we've all got other jobs to handle along with managing the family" (qtd. in 271). Sewing one's own garments has also diminished because store-bought dresses can be significantly cheaper.

Holdeman women are also sometimes adding fashionable accessories; this would not have been permitted thirty years ago. An interviewee states, "Well, we get tired of the same old thing. To keep dresses from being too boring, we find beautiful buttons or ways to sew them to be a bit more interesting. It's just fashion – it changes" (qtd. in 272). Holdeman men sometimes respond negatively to these innovations. One man comments that "Our boys have learned to avert their eyes around outsider girls, and now they have to do the same with our girls" (qtd. in 273). Another Holdeman male, expelled but still living in the community, has a different perspective: "[F]or the longest time, the test of loyalty for Holdeman women was to wear humble, less fashionable dresses compared to the world. This differentiation was less important after worldly women switched to wearing jeans a generation ago" (qtd. in 270).

Bradley concludes that, though the head covering and plain dress have remained mandatory, "how those are constructed has changed" (270). "Most dresses today are long (mid-calf length, or longer) with narrow skirts…. Buttons are merely decorative when found on the newer styles. The stiff belt is now worn only to church, and elastic at the waist is the norm…. The most significant changes are that the garments are now tubular, and fit much more closely to the body" (271). Current female dress styles are the result of small alterations made over time by women; unquestionably, men would not have initiated this process of change.

Linda Arthur Bradley posits that women often win in this male-female interplay and, paradoxically, may have been winning for a long time. "While on the surface it may seem that the patriarchal social control system is weakening, that is not the case. Women have always been empowered to effectively re-negotiate the norms that guide their lives…. By working collectively, they show unity and consistency while upholding the spirituality that underlies their religion" (274).

My grandmother, an independent take-charge woman who found a career in midwifery, might have agreed.

Ironically, during the 1950s and early 1960s, the shirtwaist worn by Holdeman women became fashionable among outsiders.

# Now It's Here

By Glenn R. Klassen, Steinbach

*Glen Klassen's article first appeared in* Mennonite Historian *46/2 (June 2020): 2, 4, 8, and is reprinted here with permission.*

Twelve years ago, we had an H1N1 flu scare. Not much came of it then, but there was a lot of talk about readiness: "It's not *if*, it's *when*."

Well, "when" is now.

COVID-19 is not the same as H1N1 in its pathology and in its high-risk targets. But both are air-borne and go for the lungs. Lungs fill with fluid and breathing becomes more and more difficult. H1N1 preferred young adults in their prime; COVID-19 kills the elderly.

In 2007, I was an adjunct professor at Canadian Mennonite University (CMU) teaching biology. While the H1N1 flu scare was looming, CMU decided to have a conference for church people about pandemic readiness. Gordon Friesen and I along with others organized the gathering at CMU. Because the potential pandemic had not reached Manitoba, we were not worried about "social distancing" at the conference itself. Officials from all faith traditions attended. Muslims were especially interested and seemed to be leading the effort in some ways. Jew participated fully. Mennonites from most denominations showed up. But many people in the community were still not concerned and many thought we were over-reacting. Press coverage was scant. However, we got federal government participation from Terry Duguid, who was then president of the International Centre for Infectious Diseases.

To boost awareness, I decided to do a study of the reaction of the religious community to the 1918 pandemic, especially in southern Manitoba, focusing on the "Mennonite" municipalities. My research assistant, Kimberly Penner, and I started to crunch the numbers and to gather stories from 1918, aided by a grant from the D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation. What we found was rather surprising.[1]

First, we found that the flu had exacted a high toll, directly and indirectly. There were close to 60 deaths related to the flu in Hanover alone and something like 300 Mennonite deaths in all of Manitoba. The Kleine Gemeinde (KG) *Ältester* in Steinbach, Peter R. Dueck, died prematurely at the age of 56, probably due to the

Dr. Glen R. Klassen visiting the Mennonite landing spot, 2020
Photo source: Steinbachonline.com

strain of looking after church members during the worst of the influenza outbreak.[2] In those days, the *Ältester* had to travel regularly to serve communion, to baptize, to marry couples, and to attend the interminable ministerial meetings. While he did not die of the flu, he had to deal with a high level of stress due to closed churches, minimal funerals, and families deprived of their breadwinners. Young adults under the age of 40 were most vulnerable.

However, the big surprise came when we examined the death data. Because this was supposed to be a study of religious response, we focused on the most easily identified religious group in southern Manitoba: the Mennonites. A study of Canadian census data for 1916 and 1921 gave us the demographics we needed to locate all the Mennonites in Manitoba. In those years, only about 400 of them had dispersed from the "Mennonite" centres: Hanover, Rhineland, Stanley, and Morris. The death data came from Manitoba Vital Statistics online. In the death data, we identified Mennonites by name and place of death. Doubtless a few were misidentified. Contemporary news reports were also taken into account. Teacher Heinrich Rempel had compiled a list of Hanover deaths for the *Steinbach Post* in 1919,[3] and this list was updated and published in the *Mennonitische Rundschau*.[4]

With all this data in hand, we started to calculate "excess death rates," a term meaning the death rate exceeding the normal expected death rate. The normal expected death rate could be established by comparing deaths from all causes for several years before and after the epidemic. This baseline rate was very uniform across all communities in southern Manitoba and indeed all of Canada. Sadly, the death of infants below the age of one accounted for 30 to 40% of all deaths. They died mostly from the bacterial diseases for which we now have vaccines and antibiotics: diphtheria, scarlet fever, measles, croup, meningitis, and whooping cough. Adults were prone to typhoid, influenza, hepatitis, meningitis, tuberculosis, and wound infections. Smallpox was a threat in Manitoba in the late 1800s that affected some communities such as the Icelandic immigrants around Gimli. Others were spared due to a *cordon sanitaire* around Winnipeg.[5]

Deaths in excess of the baseline were considered to be flu-related, since it was abundantly clear to everyone that flu was rampant at that time. There is no indication that some other disease occurred at epidemic levels at that time. The actual cause of flu-related death in many cases may have been pneumonia or underlying tuberculosis.

The startling finding, confirmed by Vanessa Quiring at the University of Winnipeg,[6] was that Mennonites had a death rate that was twice as high as non-Mennonites and twice as high as the Canadian average. We showed that this was true within municipalities and between municipalities.

It would be helpful if we could know the number of people who got sick with the flu and recovered, but this data is simply not available. It is believed that about 60% of adults became very sick so that they could not attend to their farming. The great majority recovered. This missing data limits the interpretation of the death data. We cannot know whether Mennonite mortality rates reflect the morbidity rates. In other words, did more Mennonites get sick and so more died; or did just as many non-Mennonites get sick but fewer of them died. We do not have the data to resolve this. If the attack rate of the virus was the same for all Canadians, then the elevated death rate for Mennonites is troubling. Why? Be-

cause it implies that there was something physiological or genetic about Mennonites that made the virus more life-threatening. If the attack rate for Mennonites was higher than the average – and that is why more of them died – then social and environmental factors would be implicated. The same applies to the very high death rates in Indigenous communities.[7]

How can we account for the elevated death rate among Mennonites? If it is related to social behaviour, then we must find something they do that other populations do not do. According to Maria R. Dueck of Grünfeld, who kept a detailed diary from 1917 to 1923,[8] it is clear that Mennonites had a very active social life that did not change much even though the epidemic was raging.

I suspect, but cannot prove, that the higher death rates were due to social factors. There is very little evidence that the everyday lives of the neighbours of the Mennonites – whether Anglophone, Francophone, or Ukrainian – were much different from theirs. They ate the same diet, worked at the same jobs, had very large families, lived in small houses, had a similar attitude to sanitation, and were equally rich or poor. What could have been different for Mennonites?

I recently got access to the 1918 roster of church meetings for the Chortitzer Church in Manitoba.[9] There were nine officiating ministers who took turns at 14 assembly sites (not necessarily church buildings). The Kleine Gemeinde and the Holdeman (Church of God in Christ, Mennonite) churches followed the same practice.[10] Everyone had a printed copy of the church schedule and Maria Dueck of Grünfeld (KG) writes in her diary that people tended to follow their favourite ministers from site to site.

According to the church service schedule, Chortitzer members from the northern villages of the East Reserve (ER) met at the Chortitz church on October 20 for the communion preparation service (*Bereitung*) and on October 27 for the actual communion service (*Abendmahl*). Members from the southern villages met at Grünthal on October 13 and October 20 for the same purposes. These were relatively large gatherings because members were expected to attend both services and about half of them did. The venues must have been quite crowded over the lengthy service. And then there was the use of handkerchiefs. These were supposed to be freshly laundered, but they came out of pockets and purses that were not sterile and were used publicly for nose-blowing and reused as often as necessary. Before that, of course, they were used to wipe the common communion cup and to receive the bread from the bare hands of the minister or deacon. For the Chortitzer, these services took place twice a year, in May/June and in October. In Maria Dueck's diary, the first report of flu illness came from Chortitz. The first typical flu death, that of 21-year-old Peter L. Kehler, occurred in Blumengard(t), a village within the Chortitz orbit and also the site of one of the Chortitzer church buildings. The Chortitz and Grünthal all-church meetings may well be implicated in the early spread of the epidemic.

...it is clear that Mennonites had a very active social life that did not change much even though the epidemic was raging.

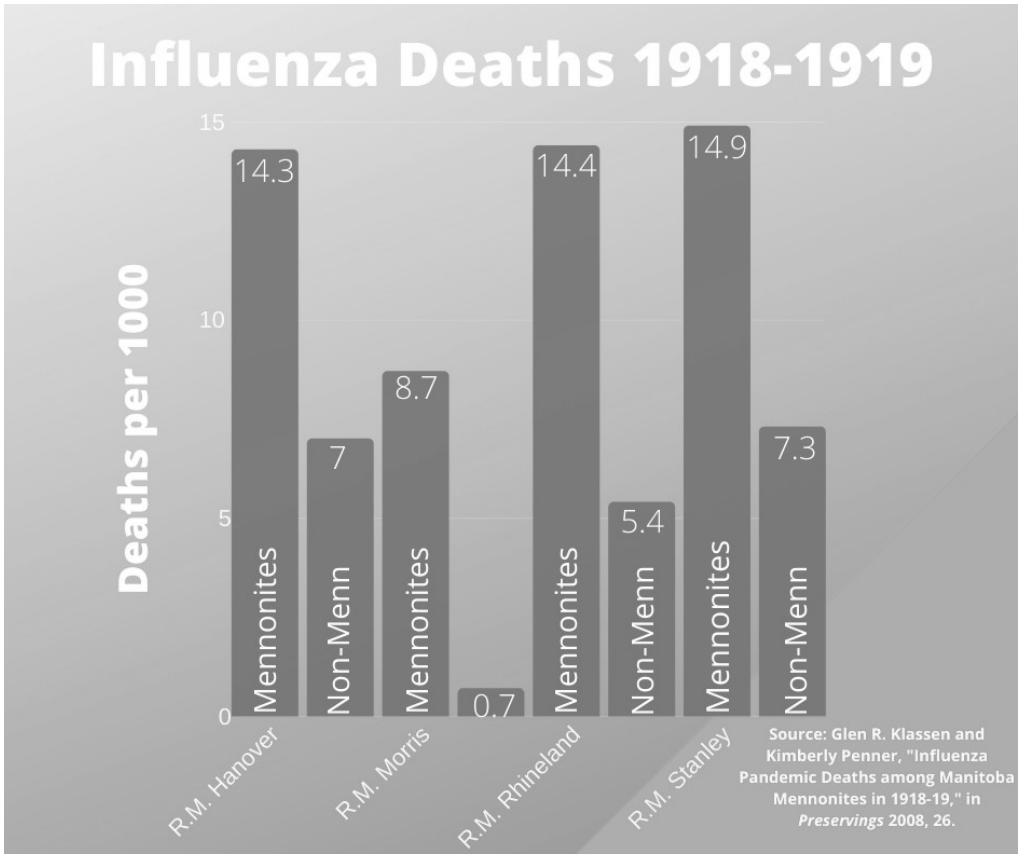
After the services, which Chortitzer churches held in the morning, most people took the opportunity to visit relatives for *Meddach* (lunch). And then other relatives or friends came for *Faspa*. By the time they hitched up their horses and got on their sleighs, there was only one degree of separation between anyone and anyone else in that part of the Reserve.

In Maria Dueck's diary, we find that in addition to church services (which were cancelled between October 17 and December 1 in the East Reserve) there was at least one wedding, a two-day pig slaughtering event, numerous funerals (when they were not illegal), a number of church *Bruderschaft* meetings, a well-attended Christmas concert in Hochstadt, and then a packed church for the burial service of *Ältester* Peter Dueck on January 22. He had died on January 7, but the coffin had not been covered to allow his brother Bernhard to see him before complete burial.[11] Bernhard R. Dueck was a minister in Rosenort and was probably delayed because the epidemic struck Rosenort in early January, a full month or two after its onset in Hanover.

On top of all these gatherings of different combinations of people, there was incessant and extreme social interaction. Maria's entry for Friday, December 27 reads: "Good weather. We had guests, namely: Jacob R. Duecks, Peter R. Duecks, Isaac W. Reimers, Klaas R. Friesen, Heinrich R. Reimers, Peter Kroekers, Aron Reimers, and Aunt Friesen. In the evening, Tina, Anna, and I went to Diedrich I. Duecks." Maria helped to entertain at least 15

adults and who knows how many children on a Friday, and then she went visiting herself! Often guests would stay overnight.

Dr. Ken Kliewer of Altona pointed out that in addition to this socializing, the epidemic itself precipitated another type of social contact: namely, farmers would go from farm to farm to help out their sick neighbours, and women would go from house to house to help out sick women and their families, providing another potential type of transmission.[12]




I suspect that this pattern of social interaction in a very close-knit community led to exponential spread of the virus and significantly raised the attack rate of the virus as compared with non-Mennonite communities. The higher attack rate led to an elevated death rate.

To prove this hypothesis, it would be necessary to analyse social interactions in other ethnic communities in Manitoba and Canada. The municipalities and communities surrounding the East Reserve (rural municipality of Hanover) were mostly Francophone, but there were also some Ukrainian and Anglophone communities. The communities around Rhineland (Altona area) and Stanley (Winkler area) were mostly Anglophone. In the rural municipality of Morris, Mennonites were a minority within a largely Anglophone community. Some of these communities contained small minorities of ethnic Germans and a few Jews.

The Francophone communities around Hanover are an interesting case in point. It appears that they had a very low death rate due to the flu – much lower than the Canadian average. Was their pattern of church attendance the cause? It is likely that those who attended church did so in the same venue week after week, meeting more or less the same combination of people. This may contrast with Mennonites whose church contacts would vary each week. And Catholics did not use the common communion cup. They probably socialized just as much as the Mennonites, but again, probably just within the same local group. More research needs to be done to confirm the very low death rates and the social interactions.

How was the 1918 epidemic different from COVID-19? First, the high-risk group was different. In 1918, it was mostly young adults; now it is the elderly, especially men. Second, COVID-19 seems to be more virulent, although we still do not know the actual death rates due to lack of random testing. H1N1 was often fatal due to secondary infections such as pneumonia or underlying tuberculosis. COVID seems to be able to destroy lung tissue without the help of these bacteria. Thus, our modern antibiotics may not help the severe cases of COVID. Third, we are much more sensitive to the death of our relatives since in our day it is so rare. Fourth, we are much more dependent on the supply chain for food and medicines than they were. Most of them were self-sufficient on the farm. Maria Dueck's diary shows that farming activity was largely unhindered by the flu, except in those cases where most of the family was too sick to care for farm animals. This was temporary and there were always neighbours to help. Fifth, the 1918 epidemic subsided relatively quickly because the majority became sick at about the same time. Thus, a large part of the population became immune and acted as a buffer for those who were still susceptible. In our case, we are sensibly "flattening the curve," but the consequence is that we are preserving susceptibility and preventing the development of "herd immunity." Sixth, we have a much more

robust health care system than they did.

What mistakes were made in the current crisis? Obviously, society was complacent and did not heed the warnings. Back in 2007, the Canadian Mennonite University community tried very hard to prepare for a viral catastrophe, but hardly anyone listened. Then we had the Ebola threat in 2014, but it more or less stayed in West Africa. There was also SARS in 2003, but we got on top of that, and MERS in 2012, and ZIKA in 2015, but none came too close to us to cause much alarm. We should be grateful for the scientists and politicians who dealt successfully with these potential disasters.

All these near misses gave us a false sense of security. Why were we so late in restricting travel, especially from the epicentre? We had also forgotten about two other viruses that got out of control earlier: polio in the 1950s and AIDS more recently. We did not realize that when scientists encounter a newly emerging disease, it takes time to identify the agent, to sequence its DNA or RNA, and to study its proteins as possible antigens for the production of a vaccine.

This lack of preparedness is most stark in our inability to test for the COVID virus quickly. Epidemiologists were essentially working in the dark for at least the first month. This is no one's fault because you cannot stockpile a test for an unknown threat. But we could have stockpiled personal protective equipment as well as intensive care machines. We also should always have the infrastructure and personnel at hand to communicate with the public effectively. Although this involves great cost, we now realize that it is a false economy not to do it. Travel restriction policies and laws should be in place for instant implementation. It is also important not to lay blame too quickly on public servants or to take revenge at the ballot box.

What lessons does the 1918 pandemic offer? First, it shows how quickly a respiratory virus can cause a disaster: i.e., within a week or two. Second, it shows that a tight-knit community with lots of socializing is at elevated risk. Third, it shows that public skepticism should not deter us from taking expensive measures to prepare for the future. Fourth, it shows us that caregivers within society, such as health care workers and pastors, can be easily exhausted by expectations. And fifth, it shows that a slow reaction by governments can cost a lot of lives and a lot of wealth. Thankfully, in our society, lives still matter most.

*Glen Klassen, PhD, is a retired microbiologist living in Steinbach. He has done research on epidemics of the past, especially those of the 1918 flu and diphtheria in southern Manitoba.*

[1] Glen R. Klassen and Kimberley Penner, "1918 Flu Epidemic," *Preservings* 28 (2008): 24.

[2] Glen R. Klassen and Kimberley Penner, "The Last Days of *Ältester* Peter R. Dueck," *Preservings* 27 (2007): 86.

[3] Heinrich Rempel, *Steinbach Post*, 29 Jan. 1919.

[4] *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 12 Feb. 1919.

[5] James Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* (University of Regina Press, 2013).

[6] Vanessa Quiring, "Mennonites, Community and Disease: Mennonite Diaspora and Responses to the 1918-1920 Influenza Pandemic in Hanover, Manitoba" (MA Thesis, University of Winnipeg, 2015).

[7] Ann Herring, "There Were Young People and Old People and Babies Dying Every Week: The 1918-1919 Influenza Pandemic at Norway House," *Ethnohistory* 41/1 (1994): 73-105.

[8] Translated by Henry Fast, originals in the possession of Levi Isaac.

[9] Ernest Braun, Tourond, Manitoba.

[10] Royden Loewen, *Blumenort: A Mennonite Community in Transition 1874-1982* (The Blumenort Mennonite Historical Society, 1990), 170.

[11] Bodies were sometimes kept for weeks or months if immediate burial was not desired or possible. They were either wrapped and kept outside in the cold, or they were buried in stored grain.

[12] Ernest Braun, Tourond, Manitoba.

**The Coffee is Shop is Open for Sit-in Service at the Mennonite Heritage Museum!**

Monday to Friday: 10am to 3pm
Lunch Served: 11:15am to 1:15pm

# Jacob (Loewen) Levin, 1903-2001

From: *Abraham Jacob & Maria Loewen Family: A Journey Under God's Providence*, by David F. Loewen. 2015.

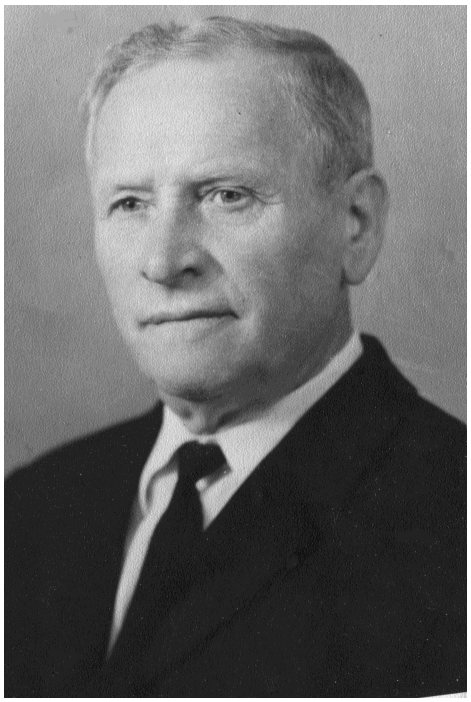
By David F. Loewen

*This story is the first of two parts.*
*All photographs courtesy of the author.*

When Abraham and Maria (Eitzen) Loewen emigrated to Canada from Orenburg, Russia, in 1926, one member of the family stayed behind by choice. His promise to follow later was never realized, and therefore he lived out his 99 years in the Soviet Union. This is his story, based on his autobiography and submissions from his son, Ernst.

*Academia over farming*

In the spring of 1922, Jacob Loewen, along with brother Abram, graduated from the school in Pretoria (a village in Orenburg Colony). Unlike Abram, Jacob wished desperately to continue his studies in the city, and he received encouragement from his Russian teachers, who saw promise in him. Unfortunately, his father did not share that sentiment; he needed his boys at home to help with farm work. In addition, the generally accepted opinion amongst Mennonite colonists was that city life was a godless life.



Jacob Levin, 1955

Despite these obstacles, and because of Jacob's insistence, Abraham relented, but only after Jacob made a solemn promise not to expect any financial support from his parents. With the help of his teachers, he gained admission to the third year at the Technicum Lenin in Samara; this included a scholarship and room and board (Samara stands at the confluence of the Volga and Samara Rivers). His mother packed a food parcel (some pastry and several kilograms of millet) and his father paid his third-class railway ticket. In Jacob's words, "I went out into a strange world 'to swim on an open ocean.'"

He writes, "Our scholarship consisted of getting 5 rubles worth of produce, which we would get monthly in the kitchen. Our food was 1 kilo. rye bread in the morning and evening; lunch was soup with some pieces of potatoes and a little fish tail in it. It was only enough that we would not starve. The millet from my mother helped me a lot and I managed to survive."

Jacob's student life was quite relaxed. He became involved in theatre and student life, and in fact, developed a reputation as a mediator; student issues were brought to him for arbitration. This caught the attention of Communist youth organizations, which invited him to become secretary of the local Communist Youth Organization which was only beginning to consolidate itself. His presence was noted: "We chase Loewen out one door and he appears in the other." School directors appreciated this effort and supported him.

In the spring of 1924, Jacob graduated from the Technicum Lenin in Samara. His success in school and his active participation in public affairs resulted in a recommendation for admittance to W.U.S. (Note: the acronym W.U.S. is unfamiliar to this writer.) Jacob arrived in Vladikavkaz with very little to live on. He was able to secure a job working in the school cafeteria, but only one day per week. "When serving in the kitchen, I usually had eaten enough for two days. Since there were many starving students who wanted work in the kitchen, I was only allowed to work one day per week. There were days when I had nothing to eat, but life was interesting."

By December, his financial challenges were resolved; he received his first scholarship – a stipend of 15 rubles which provided for his food and sufficient funds to purchase books. Jacob enjoyed living in the Caucasus region, next to the mountains and among the people that Pushkin had written about.

Jacob's life was turned upside down when the school was suddenly closed. With most students moving on to school in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), Jacob had difficulty deciding what to do because of the uncertainty of a scholarship. Additionally, he had lost his interest in history and made the decision to change to the physical sciences, even though he found the foundational courses – math, physics, and chemistry – more difficult. He applied himself to the challenge and, with the assistance of

Jacob with classmates, ca. 1926. Jacob in middle, back row, holding person on shoulders

fellow students, he succeeded in being accepted into the Faculty of Natural Sciences.

Jacob studied under the inspiring leadership of Professor Smirnov; this led him to the decision to become a geologist, and this pleased Smirnov, who supported him in various ways. Jacob became a technical assistant, which helped with the purchase of expensive textbooks. One book alone cost 7.50 rubles, half his stipend. Initially, students could order books from Germany, but that was soon forbidden. Since many teachers did not order any books, Jacob ordered books on their names. He developed a good German-language library on geology, which greatly assisted him in his academic research; from a practical point of view, however, it was a different matter. He was allowed to get involved in practical geology only by paying close attention to the work of his professor, Smirnov.

Jacob's lack of financial resources did not prevent him from travelling locally – to explore the Caucasus region he had come to appreciate. Jacob walked. "We never had money for travel but walking, you can stop anytime and get acquainted with anyone or anything that is interesting. Travelling by train or car, everything flies by like in a theatre. Besides, walking is very good for your body."

*A decision to "stay behind"*

In the summer of 1925, he was put in charge of a tourist bureau in the state of Kazbek (note: some of the spellings, sifted through the work of a translator, may not be accurate). The next year he was stationed in Gviletsk, near the Daryak Ravine. At the same time, he was also in charge of excursions to the Devdorotsky Glacier. At school, he was soon involved in student affairs; he was elected to student council in 1925. Given the extent to which Jacob had become involved in both his studies and in student life in general, it is no surprise that he had no

appetite to join his parents and siblings in leaving for Canada, with only the promise of farming and hard work to look forward to. Upon learning of his family's pending departure, he shared his thoughts in a letter to his parents:

"Dear parents: Your letter surprised me a little. I can see that your plans for departure are serious, and that you will soon be leaving. I want to heartily wish you a safe journey and a new and better home country. I, however, wish to remain here in my old home country. Why? Early on I set myself the goal of learning and seeing much. I was let go quite easily in 1922 when I travelled to Samara. In the subsequent three long years I starved myself, so to speak. I denied myself all pleasures to get an education. I lived like a beggar away from home, experienced hunger and stress, and now, suddenly, just as I've reached my goal, that point where I am beginning to learn significant material – to turn around and say that all that struggle was for nothing, to leave everything, and to travel to a strange land and be shackled to work I don't like for the rest of my life – I can't do it."

His last year in G.P.I. (meaning unknown), 1928, was an important milestone in Jacob's academic career. Shortly following an all-Russian meeting of geologists in Tashkent, Professor Smirnov returned home and was put in charge of the geology faculty in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, which had an opening for an assistant. Jacob was one of three candidates who wanted the position – all qualified. As Smirnov did not want to part with any of the three, it was decided that all three would live on one person's salary – 180 rubles. Officially, Jacob was identified as the assistant, because if he did not work, he would have had to join the army. The other two were exempted from service because of their qualifications. In the middle of January 1929, in the company of Smirnov, Jacob and his two colleagues set off for Samarkand.

*Transitions*

In 1932, Jacob was promoted from assistant to assistant professor; this improved his financial position. That same year, he married Lyuba Ivanovna Viktorova, a daughter of a factory worker and a student from the chemistry faculty. In 1933, Lyuba gave birth to twins – two sons. One died in infancy; the surviving twin was named Ernst. In 1935, a daughter was born: Eleonora Margareta. Both children pursued higher education: Ernst in geology, and Ella in music.

In 1936, Jacob's work lost the interest of local geologists, and therefore, after making application, he succeeded in being assigned to the Institute of Mineral Raw Materials in Moscow. The authorities were well-acquainted with his work in Samarkand, and particularly with his inquiry into Iceland spar (a nearly translucent calcite useful in the production of optical instruments) which was in great demand by Soviet industry. He was soon appointed as a "commander" in the Tadzhiko-Pamirskoy Expedition. Jacob writes, "To me it seemed as though I was in a fairytale." Jacob continued his search not only for Iceland spar, but in 1939 expanded his investigations to include optic fluorite. In 1941, however, his work was disrupted by World War II (known in the USSR as the Great Patriotic War).

*Soviet police on his tail*

Although Jacob's ethnic roots had initially caused him no concern, this changed dramatically during the 1930s and, later, during the war:

"I paid a lot of attention to the police. During the first year in Samara and in Vladikavkaz, I had nothing to do with them. As a German, I never felt threatened, but felt like a full Soviet citizen. I was not a member of the Communist Youth Organization, but my influence never suffered. This continued up to Samarkand. In 1935, the political climate in the country began to worsen. They started to watch everyone, especially Germans, who were treated as spies. In every organization there were men who worked for the police. They investigated everyone. Everyone had to be careful of what he said. An acquaintance of mine, a past chairman of a soviet, had been arrested and sentenced for a speech he had made. He had been declared an enemy of the people, which was grounds for arrest. It was evident that everyone was being watched. Everyone had to submit a biography which was checked by the police, and every little thing was investigated."

In the spring of 1937, while submitting his regular report to the authorities, one official questioned another regarding Jacob's trustworthiness. The other vouched for Jacob, saying that Jacob had been honest in admitting in his report that he had relatives outside the USSR, and that was good with him. Jacob was not reported. On another occasion, representatives of the university asked Jacob about his relatives in Canada, and if he had been corresponding with them. Jacob replied that he had, but that he had received no letters for a year. When he asked why not, Jacob had replied that he wanted to have no difficulties with the authorities – to which the official

smiled, and the matter was put to rest.

Life was difficult for German speakers during the war. Jacob's acquaintances who taught German were all arrested. Jacob's future was under constant threat: "I had often been called to discuss something in my biography. But from the start I had decided to tell them everything, especially what they were interested in. What had created trouble was that I had said that I had relatives outside of Russia and that I was corresponding with them."

Even though Jacob had begun to feel more positive about his relationship with the authorities, including the police, there was still one more challenge to come. He was often called by the police to give reports about the teaching staff. Despite all the questions, they could not get anything from him. The chief of police even summoned him to the city for questioning. He was accused of not wanting to help them against "enemies of the State." "I told them that I was not aware of any and I did not want to lie. He warned me and bounced the pistol on the table and said, 'If you will not help us, we will put you in jail.' I affirmed to him that my conscience does not allow me to give false accusations. If your conscience urges you to take me to the cellar, do as your conscience dictates. The conversation was terminated; I felt that my fate was sealed. I would be arrested shortly. Lyuba and I began to prepare for this event. We could not sleep at night. Any car that stopped close by scared us. But nothing happened."

On one occasion, in 1939, Jacob was sent by the rector of the university to Tashkent. Lyuba wanted to go along so that she could live at least a few days without dread. Returning home, they found Lyuba's parents in a state of fear. On the same day Jacob and Lyuba had left, good friends from out of town stayed overnight at their home. That night the police arrived and demanded entry. Their friends informed the police that Jacob and Lyuba were not home. Regardless of threats, their friends were not intimidated and refused them entry.

Had that been Jacob's turn? The police never returned. Then, in the year prior to the war, a more relaxed climate developed. Jacob writes that those were good years, more peaceful, and his influence and position

Jacob with professor Smirnov and classmates. Jacob in back row, 3rd from left, ca. 1928

Jacob and Ljuba, ca. 1932

in the university became "good."

Jacob's last encounter with the MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs) was in 1974 when his father, Abraham, reached his 100th birthday. Jacob was invited by his Canadian family to join them in the celebrations. He was prepared to travel with Lyuba but a permit from the MVD was required; this was denied, much to everyone's disappointment.

*World War II and the Labour Army*

Given the fact that Jacob was of "German" descent, it should not be a surprise that World War II changed his daily life significantly. He was removed from the work he had been doing and was prevented from settling anywhere. He did, however, find work at home related to the geological search with which he had been involved.

He and his family were soon sent to the Samarkand region, where they had to become used to living in close quarters. Very shortly after arriving, Jacob received orders to appear at Samarkand to join German expatriates 50 years of age and younger. They were transferred to Chelyabinsk (a city in west-central Russia, close to the Ural Mountains) and turned over to the police, who took them to a camp surrounded by barbed wire and under guard. It was like a prison, Jacob writes, and they were placed in uncomfortably damp earthen huts that had recently been built.

Jacob found himself, and the others, working in a stone quarry. Jacob writes, "The work was just like in the book by Solzhenitsyn – *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. It was just like in a prison, perhaps worse. In the morning we would usually see the bodies of the dead, who had worked up to the last day until they collapsed from starvation. Shortly after waking up, and approaching the registration, we would see a list of names of those sentenced to be shot that day. In Solzhenitsyn's book, this had not taken place. They tried to keep us down and discouraged as much as possible."

As if this were not enough, Jacob and Lyuba's relationship was also tested. It had become apparent to Jacob that the Workers' Army did not accept their spouses, and that any children were sent to orphanages. [During World War II certain categories of population, primarily ethnic Germans, were conscripted into NKVD labor columns, in later literature informally referred to as "labour army." *Wikipedia*] "That almost killed me," writes Jacob. If Lyuba were to be taken into the Workers' Army, he feared his children would perish. In desperation, Jacob wrote Lyuba, asking her to join him, and promised that after the war they would again live a normal married life. Lyuba replied shortly that she had been beside him in the good years, and would not abandon him now, but endure the suffering with him too. "I never forgot this reply," writes Jacob.

Jacob soon realized that hard labour could be his ultimate undoing; thanks to a close friend, he was able to secure a job in the kitchen. He describes his kitchen assignment: "My work involved going to the bakery in the morning with a team of horses. There I would receive the necessary 60,000 loaves of brown bread for the camp. The number of loaves was strictly controlled. I signed for the bread in the bakery and upon my return, my three bread cutters and I cut the bread according to the office records. The bread was cut according to a set scale of .4, .5, .8 and 1 kilogram. In two hours we had to have 10,000 rations ready. I had to distribute the bread to the brigades."

Even this work had its dangers, as he found out when a discrepancy arose over rations distributed and remaining. The threats of jail and even execution were real. Recognizing another danger, Jacob successfully requested another transfer – this time to the building maintenance department, where he was put in charge. Jacob writes that he always had good memories of his superior at that camp, who was consistently a fair man.

In the summer of 1943, hunger stalked the camp, and Jacob realized he was losing weight rapidly. He asked Lyuba to sell anything possible to acquire food. She managed to send a parcel of "produce" which was very helpful. Again, Jacob managed to get himself transferred out of this camp to another and this time found himself doing what he enjoyed: geological research.

His new task was to locate sources of water, sand and

loam for construction purposes. No wages were paid; instead, rations were given based on work completed. This new assignment brought with it a sense of independence and freedom, as well as good relationships with those in authority. For several winter months he worked in a factory producing gun powder. The temperature dropped to -45 degrees, something Jacob had not previously experienced.

Even though a certain degree of freedom was evident, the labourers worked under the watchful eye of the police, and more than five prisoners were never allowed to congregate in one place. It was now 1944. The labourers' food consisted of dry rations, but since they enjoyed a degree of freedom, he and his work companions decided to venture into surrounding villages to trade for food with anything they could spare. They gleaned in fields already harvested, finding such things as potatoes and carrots. They even managed to build a house and obtain cash with which to buy their daily milk.

Jacob and Ljuba with children, Ernst and Ella, ca. 1937

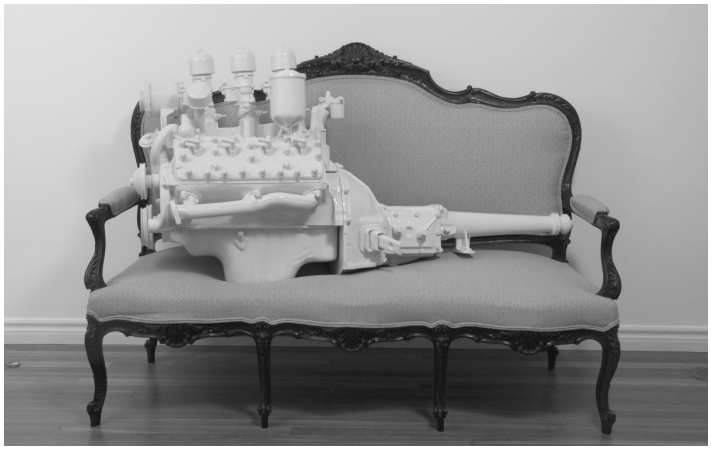
## Culture, Coffee and Cookies: Curatorial Tour

10:30 am, September 23, 2020, The Reach Gallery Museum, Abbotsford, BC

Reported by Robert Martens

From September 10, 2020, to January 9, 2021, The Reach Gallery Museum hosted an exhibition of works by artists who identify, in their various ways, with a Mennonite background. In late September 2020, curators Adrienne Fast and Diana Hiebert (former office and volunteer manager at the Mennonite Historical Society) introduced the collection to masked attendees at a "Culture, Coffee and Cookies" event, an ongoing Reach series of public offerings somewhat disrupted by COVID-19.

The pandemic also disrupted, to the disappointment of some, any service of coffee or cookies, but culture – with a Mennonite slant – was front and centre. The tour began, rather ironically, with a display of local Indigenous Semá:th art; Mennonites have not always, as Fast pointed out, acknowledged their responsibility for reconciliation. Additionally, Mennonites settled in the Upper Fraser Valley on drained lake bottom, formerly the fishing and hunting grounds of Native communities.



*Three Deuces* – Clint Neufeld
Photo: The Reach website

The title of the exhibition, *Ever Elsewhere*, referred to the long-established Mennonite history of movement either as immigrants or refugees. Some of the artwork playfully mocked Mennonite cultural characteristics, such as hard work, a fixation on agriculture, or a plain living style. In every instance, though, the featured artists seemed to be in a mood to celebrate their ethnic heritage. An affection for Plautdietsch was occasionally incorporated into the artwork. As a promotion, one artist was giving away plastic bags with the inscription, *Daut dintje daut helt* (the thing that holds).

Artists on display were Amalie Atkins, Clint Neufeld, Corinna Wolff, Emily Neufeld, Kandis Friesen, and Lois Klassen.

## *Voices Together*: Book Launch, December 13, 2020

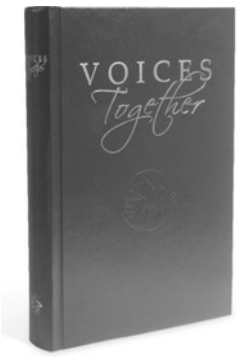
Reported by Robert Martens

As the COVID pandemic raged on, Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA dared to celebrate a new hymnary, *Voices Together*. The celebration did not take place in public, of course, but by way of a webinar. Despite the predictable online glitches, the occasion went well.

The webinar was described by speakers as a "service." Prayers, Scripture, a short homily (of sorts), and music filled the hour. Music was naturally the focus – sometimes even in four-part harmony – and it might be wondered if younger generations will warm to songs with more than one line, since choruses read from screens have been prevalent in many churches for some time now. A sense of joy and optimism, however, pervaded the service. Something had been fashioned here, by generous donors, good leadership, and above all, passionate volunteers.

The overall theme of the webinar was "unity in diversity," as the title *Voices Together* might suggest. French, Spanish, Black gospel, and African influences are upfront, as they should be – not a whisper of German, though, and it seems that train has left the station. Contemporary worship songs, described as "heart songs" by one speaker, are included as well. The songbook, then, certainly targets the young. Social issues, such as environmentalism, are included as themes, and *Voices Together* includes a tablet version. However, this new book of 757 songs and 310 worship resources is clearly intended to be cross-generational. The *Voices Together* website affirms, "As worship rhythms develop new currents, the language of a recent generation needs to expand too." The book was put together after a great number of churches were visited or surveyed on likes and preferences. Open submissions were also welcomed.

Twenty-eight years have passed between the publication of the previous Mennonite Church songbook, *Hymnal: A Worship Book,* in 1992, and the launch of *Voices Together* in 2020. Research on the new hymnary began in 2008 as a joint effort of MC Canada, MC USA, and Mennonite Publishing Network (now MennoMedia). In 2014, MennoMedia was commissioned by the two national churches to develop a new songbook, and fundraising began. Two years later, Brad Kauffman was hired as project director and a twelve-member volunteer committee was formed.




Peacemaking and bridge-building seem to be at the heart of this project. In a time when discord is rampant, the issuing of *Voices Together* might be an act of faith.

Other source

"History of the Project." *Voices Together*. n.d. http://voicestogetherhymnal.org/about/history-of-the-project/

## Greening project at the Mennonite Heritage Museum

Before Christmas 2020, the Mennonite Heritage Museum was visited by arborist Wyatt Sjodin about some trees to be planted on the property. This greening project was made possible through the City of Abbotsford by funding from a third party. The donors of the grant money wish to remain unnamed. Out of fifty sponsored trees, the Museum received six: three to be planted in the front, and three in the back. The tree variety, *Acer '*Autumn Blaze' maple, or Freeman maple, was selected by Museum Director Richard Thiessen, for its dramatic autumn colour which will complement the already existing landscaping.

Planting trees on the Mennonite Heritage Museum grounds
Photo credit: Richard Thiessen

## Book Launch: Zoom Webinar, March 20, 2021, 2 pm

Richard Toews. *The Confession*. Abbotsford: Self-published, 2020. 326 pp.

Mennonite Heritage Museum Director Richard Thiessen opened the book launch of Richard Toews' second novel with introductions and comments. Since the event was virtual, he commented, viewers were from as far away as Cornerbrook, Newfoundland, and parts of the United States. The story of *The Confession* revolves around the involvement of Ukrainian Mennonites with National Socialism after the German invasion of the Soviet Union

in 1941. The topic, said Thiessen, is "scary to talk about"; a member of his own family had joined the Hitler Youth. Nevertheless, this *is* being talked about rather relentlessly in recent years, Thiessen said, inspired by historians such as Gerhard Rempel and Ben Goossen.

Author Richard Toews alluded to a sense of exhaustion while conceiving and writing the story. "It's been a long time coming," he said; when he researched the subject matter, he was "overwhelmed with a sense of rage." The historical documents that he studied were factually correct, he remarked, but lacked context. "I wanted to put flesh and bones on it," he said.

After the release of his first novel, *The Quiet in the Land*, Toews had occasionally been accused of hating Mennonites. He was quick to deny the charge. Ukrainian Mennonites had been caught in the pincer between the Soviets and Germans, two of the most appalling totalitarian regimes in history. To choose between the two was no choice at all. "What would you have done?" Toews asked, and added, "I wrote a novel to find out what I would have done." The late Walter Unger, he said, had encouraged him to write the book; the truth needed telling.

"It was painful writing this novel," said Toews. That strain was evident during the book launch, with Toews breaking down at moments. However, the book is about hope, he said, and about grace.


After reading several sections from the novel, Toews responded to questions from the viewers. How do we maintain our spiritual integrity, asked a viewer. "Engage, seek out those who are systemically abused," Toews replied, and walk with them. As for laying judgment on those Ukrainian Mennonites who collaborated with the Nazis, "I am sidestepping that issue," he said, "I wish I could have an answer."

"What would you have done?" Toews asked, and added, "I wrote a novel to find out what I would have done."

## Cameron Dueck. *Menno Moto: A Journey Across the Americas in Search of My Mennonite Identity*.

Windsor, ON: Biblioasis, 2020. 302 pp.

Reviewed by Robert Martens

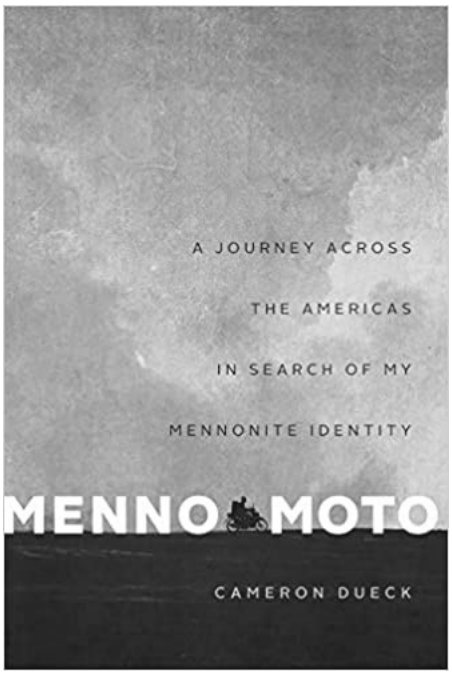
Working as a journalist in Hong Kong, far removed from his ethnic upbringing in Manitoba, Cameron Dueck still retained a quiet pride in his Mennonite traditions. His past gave him a story to tell in conversation with strangers. "I wasn't just another Anglo-Saxon male, I was a Mennonite.… [I]f a Mennonite travels far enough away from Manitoba he becomes exotic" (3). And yet, having left the Mennonite community two decades ago, he questioned his identity. "I called this my culture, but I'd lived outside its communities for most of my adult life.… How Mennonite was I, after all these years?" (3)

Dueck decided to answer that question by embarking on an "epic journey" by motorcycle through the Americas, from Manitoba's Red River to Argentina's Tierra del Fuego, and making major stops at Mennonite colonies on the way. His own background was conservative Mennonite; his ancestors had left Russia for Canada in the 1870s. Conservative Mennonites, then, would be his focus, despite his personal ambivalence, even skepticism that sometimes escalated to anger, about their traditions. Early in his book, he criticizes Mennonites for having left Russia in the 1870s out of fear of the "world" and self-righteous piety. Some chapters later, he contradicts this, writing that the Mennonites who had left were mostly landless and emigrated for economic reasons. Whatever the case, Dueck was single-minded in his physical and emotional journey to explore his heritage – that of a people who had the nerve to demand privileges from the Canadian government before they immigrated. "Imagine if today's immigrants asked for that – they're barely allowed in as it is" (7).

Dueck breezes through the United States and into Mexico, to which Canadian Mennonites had migrated some one hundred years ago in order to minimize contact with the world, or with the "*weltmensch*," a word Dueck had learned growing up. In Mexico he finds a community based on an ethic of hard work and mutual aid. Beyond that, though, Dueck is cruelly disappointed,

discovering a community riven by boredom, alcohol, drug smuggling. It is also engaged in conflict with the locals over dwindling water supplies while claiming to react non-violently. He writes, "Poor, righteous Mennonites. We're just innocent bystanders, who work so hard but don't fight for our rights" (44).

Dueck motors on into Belize, a largely English-speaking country and deeply impoverished. In the midst of societal dysfunction, Mennonites have organized colonies and prospered. Dueck makes friends with an "oddball" couple, Klaas and Greta Friesen, who exist on the fringe of Mennonite culture, yet are warmly accepted by the community. The Friesens strongly believe in education. "The Mennonites have gone through a sieve," says Klaas, "Those Mennonites that wanted to remain dumb fell through and moved away" (106). But conservative Belize is not conservative enough for some. A group has broken away, farming in the wilds. Dueck is impressed, admitting that the "urban hipster" in him is enticed, but ultimately he turns away with disgust: "They'd taken the self-righteousness of Mennonite separatism to a new level, and they wore it like a badge. It was an arrogance that was only possible when combined with a large dose of ignorance" (140).




Dueck's travels through Bolivia are a descent into an inferno. He spends most of his time investigating the "ghost rapes" that took place some years ago. Women, it was reported, had awakened in the morning to find that they had been violated. The case drew global scrutiny, and conclusions were that some kind of veterinary drug had been used by Mennonite rapists to sedate their victims. Dueck is deeply skeptical. The so-called perpetrators, now living in Palmasola Prison, a facility that more resembles an urban ghetto than a Western jail, were allegedly tortured into confessing by fellow-Mennonites. Dueck speculates whether they were scapegoats, arrested and imprisoned to divert attention from the sexual crimes of colony leaders. In his visit to the arrested Mennonites in Palmasola, he finds himself disturbingly unable to draw conclusions on guilt or innocence. Interestingly, even in prison, Mennonites separate themselves from the general population: they were "doomed to life behind bars for the next quarter century, but their Mennonite sense of otherness remained undiminished" (206).

After his hellish and exhausting experiences in Bolivia, Dueck is relieved to discover that Paraguay's Menno Colony, originally profoundly separatist, has modernized and adapted. He stays at a motel with WiFi, tours the colony with a group of affable men, and goes fishing with them in serene surroundings. Yet he remains consistently dissatisfied. Elsewhere, separatist conservatives have maintained their ancient principles at the cost of individual freedoms. Menno Colony is no longer separatist and has prospered, Dueck writes, but at what cost? "[A]fter a week on the colonies I couldn't see what that struggle had achieved beyond more land, more cattle, more wealth" (264).

Dueck's journey ends in a little-known Mennonite colony in Romecó, Argentina. It is a place of preternatural beauty, stillness, innocence – and numbing one-and-a-half hour sermons in which naps are officially sanctioned. Dueck is deeply drawn to this lifestyle: "My months of visiting tight-knit Mennonite families and communities had made me question my sole existence in a metropolis. I envied the strong community support Mennonites enjoyed. But I doubted I could ever go back to that kind of life and give up my personal preferences and freedoms…" (288).

Dueck's book ends with, "Yes, I am a Mennonite" (295). The conclusion sounds forced, a little ready-made, and Dueck's analyses are all over the map. But Cameron Dueck is not a sociologist or academic; he is a journalist and storyteller, and here he excels. His splendid storytelling ability provides dramatic images of a lifestyle North America has mostly forgotten. And his questions, however troubling, deserve to be asked.

Dueck speculates whether they were scapegoats, arrested and imprisoned to divert attention from the sexual crimes of colony leaders.

# Downsizing

By Julia Born Toews

The time has come. The time is here to move out of our house we've enjoyed for thirty-five years and start the process of downsizing. Some things are easy to decide: all those extra vases, don't need so many; books – pass them on to second-hand bookstores; music scores – younger teachers will find them useful, now that I'm no longer teaching. But what to do with some odd items, those artifacts my parents brought back from South America? I'm the one in the family who says, "I'll take it," when no one else wants items left behind by the previous generation. Now I'm the one who says, "Who wants it?" referring to some unusual "family heirlooms."

Sewing basket made from an armadillo
Photo: Julia B. Toews

For one, there is the stuffed snake. I think it's a rattlesnake. It's not too big, but nicely coiled, and would look great in a display of cacti and palm trees. My grandchildren thought it cool to hold in their hands, but I'm not so sure the greater public would appreciate coming across it by surprise. Then there are the bugs: the rhinoceros beetle, the scorpion, the bloodsucker, the cockroach, and some others that are unidentified and still have their vibrant colour, even though it's been over fifty years since they became part of the collection and were encapsulated in bottles filled with alcohol, or wrapped in cotton and placed in a small plastic container. And then there's the poor armadillo – transformed into a sewing basket! Very tidily done, but somehow I could never use it as such, and the older I get, the more bizarre it looks. But most evocative of all among the fauna heirlooms is the snakeskin from a boa constrictor. So reminiscent of the violin lesson I had with Mr. F. Weigel in Volendam, who, at my second lesson, rushed out into the bush to investigate a clamour in his henhouse. He reappeared with a dead chicken in one hand and a writhing boa constrictor in the other. It had slashes across its back about every foot to disable its squeeze muscles and thus render it harmless. After the lesson, a trail of ants smartly marching to the carcass indicated that it had finally succumbed to its wounds. Memories, memories.

Easier to tuck away and leave for the next generation to disburse are items made from plants. The baby sling made by Paraguayan First Nations peoples – woven from reeds or cactus fibres (my family used it for storing dust rags); the long blow tube for blowing arrows, and a quiver of small arrows with a small gourd attached – for holding a poison paste, I think, in which to dip the arrows when hunting small game; the Paraguayan cowboy pants called *bombachos*; cloth with the lovely Paraguayan embroidery already in the right places so one only has to cut it up and sew together – no pattern needed.

One thing that is not in this collection is my dad's Paraguayan butterfly collection. I remember that he had caught several of the large blue butterflies that regularly flew about our house and that we tried to catch along the one-kilometre walk through the jungle on the way to school from village No. 12 to No. 5. This collection was left with some other personal items in Volendam when we left, to be picked up at a later date. Unfortunately, the house was broken into and the collection was stolen along with some other items. Also the stuffed macaw, that for years took pride of place in every house they lived, that finally disintegrated and my sister gave away.

So now, with all these tangible items to attest to the reality of a truly unique childhood, where shall they go? Items not preserved in a scientific way, or as museum pieces, but strange treasures taken out of the cupboard now and then that made us marvel at the diversity of creation. They reflected the variety of human experience and the ability and adaptability of people to make their homes in challenging places and situations. Treasures that made my family what it was and me who I am.

*Note: In 1954 my parents, Henry C. & Esther Born, were asked by the MB Board of General Welfare (later Board of Missions and Services) to go to Volendam Colony, Paraguay, to teach in the high school and help with the MB Church. The people in this colony were Mennonites, European refugees from World War II. They were not accepted as immigrants by Canada and the USA, and had been "settled" with the help of MCC in this subtropical jungle.*

# 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
Website: 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.


## In Memoriam: Clara Thiessen (1938-2021)

By Ruth Thiessen

Clara was born in Abbotsford, BC, where she grew up across the street from the future site of Columbia Bible College when it was still a wide-open field. By the age of five she discovered that she could pick out simple tunes on the piano. Music became her passion throughout her life. She studied with Abbotsford music teacher Menno Neufeld, at Mennonite Brethren Bible College (MBBC) in Winnipeg, at Goshen College where she gained a BA, and in the School of Music at UBC. The highest marks in BC for her ARCT exam for piano performance and teaching gained her the Muriel Erskine Award in 1963. Many of her skills were honed by accompanying choirs and smaller groups at Mennonite Brethren Bible Institute (now CBC) and MBBC, and by teaching music theory and piano at MBBI. She particularly loved to accompany, either on piano or organ, choir performances of Handel's *Messiah*. In 1978 she moved to Vancouver, working first in the music library of Vancouver City College and then transferring to the Broadway campus where she worked for twenty years. Her music involvement continued with playing organ and piano at Killarney Park MB Church.

Clara loved to travel, going first to Europe with an MBBI choir, then twice to visit her sister Ruth and Ruth's husband Art in Botswana. The second time, she travelled with sister Edith, enjoying time in Gaborone, going on safari in northern Botswana, and visiting Victoria Falls. She also enjoyed a Baltic cruise with a friend.

On her retirement Clara moved back to Abbotsford, where her four siblings had also settled. Her musical contributions continued at Bakerview MB Church but a new volunteer involvement brought her to the Mennonite Historical Society of BC (MHSBC). At the request of nieces and nephews, she used much of her newfound knowledge and skills by researching and writing both of her parents' life stories, and publishing *The John and Helena Thiessen Story* in 2010.

Clara struggled with health issues all of her life and did so with determination and grace. Her strong faith in God carried her through major surgeries and medical crises. She moved from her condo to Tabor Manor and then to Tabor Court where her musical involvement continued in accompanying the Tabor Choir. A major health crisis caused her to quit her volunteer commitment at MHSBC in about 2014. She had enjoyed her time there immensely.

During the COVID epidemic, Clara developed several severe infections and shingles and was hospitalized. Fortunately, her sister Ruth was able to visit her every day for the first week. She passed away peacefully on February 22. We grieve her passing but rejoice in her freedom from her medical challenges and pain.

Above: “Jungle Friends” – Pets of sisters Julia (left), holding Muki the monkey, Naomi, and Rebecca Born on right. Identity of children in the centre unknown. Parrots Popka and Peter on chair. Volendam, Paraguay @ 1957
Photo credit: Henry C. Born

Left: Vintage rag doll from the late 1940s or early 1950s, now donated to the Mennonite Heritage Museum

Front cover: Heike Pirngruber is a German travel photographer who over the last seven years has cycled solo across several continents and through many countries, including Belize, where she visited several Mennonite communities in 2017. Currently, she and her dog are walking west to east across the United States to raise money for One Tree Planted, a non-profit group dedicated “to the reforestation, conservation and protection of forests around the world.” For more information and to see more of her fabulous photography see https://www.pushbikegirl.com