



# Roots and Branches

Periodical of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC

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

Psalm 78

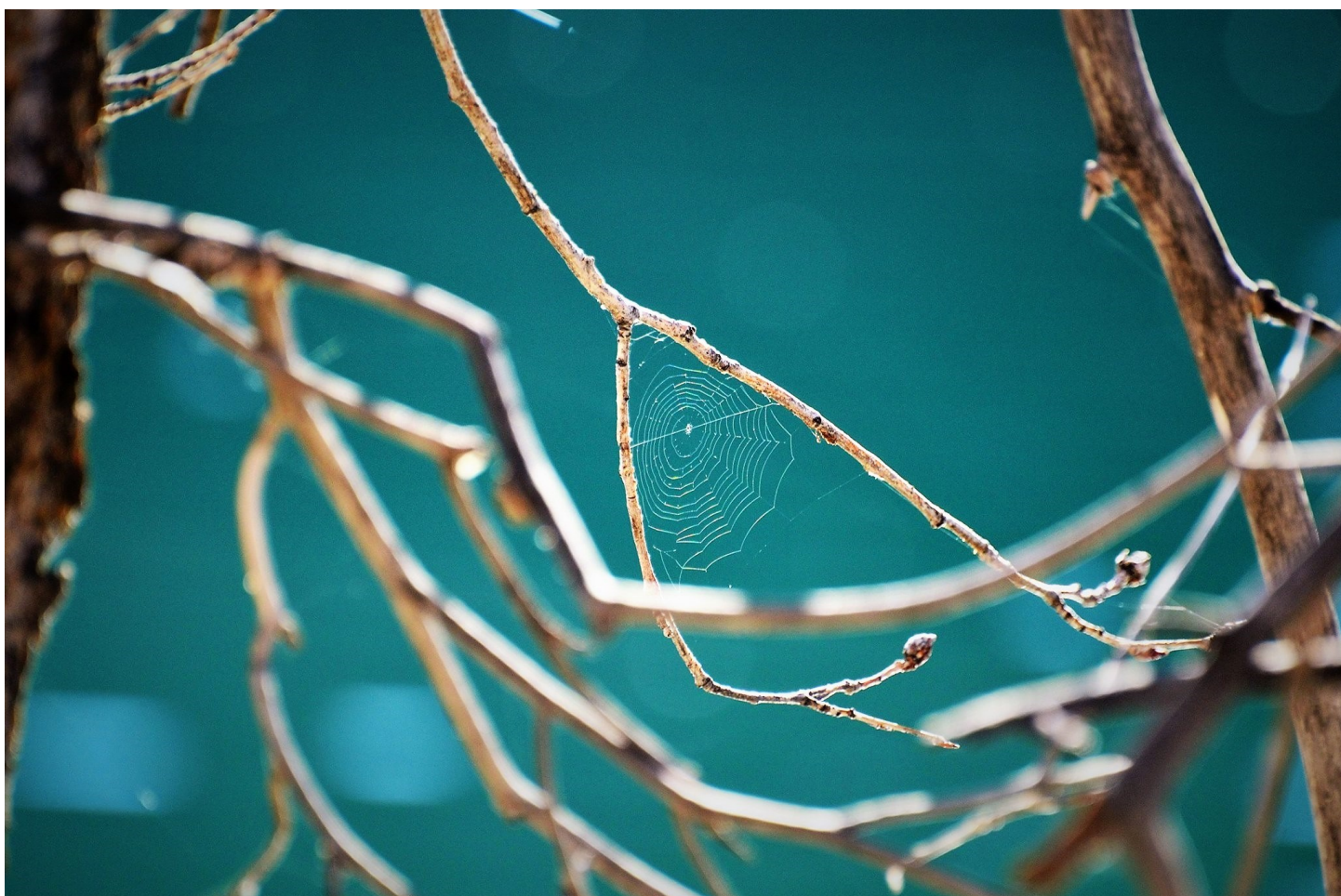


Photo: Elsie K. Neufeld

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# Editorial

By Maryann Tjart Jantzen

It's September again. And although COVID is still with us, so in the first weeks of September have been the delights of early fall in the Fraser Valley: warm sunny days of balmy breezes and cool nights; a harvest cornucopia of local produce that dazzles the senses; the mustiness of turning leaves; the aroma of apples, pears and plums randomly ripening around the house; tomatoes bubbling on the stove waiting to be turned into sauce or canned for winter.

It's these kinds of sensory nudges that awaken my memories of growing up on a farm in the Chilliwack area, when I was often outside in all weathers, observing the rhythms of the changing seasons, and of the small acreage of my early adulthood where my children had free rein to roam the neighbourhood and I gardened to my heart's content.

I recognize that these kinds of memories are often romanticized, as we recollect the best aspects of the past and forget its challenges and dark times. But for me, these memories can provide grounding and solace, especially at times of uncertainty and stress. Memory can be a powerful motivating force that can rejuvenate – or at times hold us captive in the past.

This issue highlights several articles about unique individuals, often out of step with the Mennonite mainstream, who seem to have been strongly influenced by memories of a lost, more secure past. In the case of Jacob J. Hildebrandt and poet Fritz Senn, the displacement of leaving their homeland and the uncertainties of immigration to Canada facilitated a “longing for a lost age, a time of prosperity and security when *Men novolk* had lived a simple, separate existence under their own control” (Urry 75, qtd. in Bergen Price). For Hildebrandt, this longing grew into a utopian vision, influenced both by his experiences in Russia and by Germany's embrace of “a powerful leader capable of creating a strong sense of nationhood” (Martens), of establishing an insular self-governed Mennonite community in a faraway land. Senn's poetic idealization of “the simple life of a Mennonite village in Russia during the “Golden Years”” (Bergen Price) shifted to poetic lament for a lost homeland and eventually to a vision of Hitler's Germany as a model of solidity and security against the ravages of communism that had destroyed his homeland. Bergen

Price writes that Senn's poem, “*Der Führer*,” “echoed this messianic theme: “*Seht, es kam zur Zeit der Führer / Gottgesandt und auserwählt*”: “Behold, the Führer comes, sent and chosen by God” to a *Volk* plagued by sorrow. This “hero of Germany” has taken a splintered land and woven it into a unified nation (Senn 64).

In this issue we read also of Mennonite novelist Ingrid Rimland, who after the trauma of fleeing Ukraine during the Great Trek of World War II and resettling in South America rejected the confines of her insular Paraguayan Mennonite community to build a professional life in the United States, eventually however unabashedly espousing white supremacist ideologies. And in David Giesbrecht's review of *European Mennonites and the Holocaust*, we are again confronted by accounts of Mennonite complicity with Nazism and its horrors.

Of course, as we read of how these individuals were seduced by fascist ideas, we tend to see ourselves as wiser and more discerning, more readily able to see the “truth.” Surely, we in their place would have known better. But in his essay in *European Mennonites*, Arnold Neufeldt-Fast asks this significant question: “What ... can the facts of Mennonite complicity in the Holocaust tell us about the hidden capacities of present-day life, and about the hidden capacities of present-day Mennonite theology?” (138 qtd. in Giesbrecht)

## Letter to the editor

***We welcome letters to the editor. Letters may be edited for length and/or content. Please email archives@mhsbc.com.***

With response to your articles on Burns Lake & Prespatou, thank you. I did not know many of the details leading up to settlements in both of those places, but was keenly aware of others. I do feel the need to make a few clarifying points for your records.

First, while correctly stated earlier in the article, Cheslatta is located about 65 miles south, not north of Burns Lake as reported in the second paragraph, second column, on page 13. It ought to be noted that the area of settlement was not totally desolate, as settlers from the US, some of them war dodgers, had been moving and settling in the area for years already. My Dad was 4 years old in 1948 when his family was part of the later waves and made the move from Warman, SK, to Cheslatta. He grew up there, went to school there, and had his first jobs over there, mostly in the forest industry, as many who had been farmers in Saskatchewan added logging

and sawmilling to their way of life. Farming was still vital, but forestry was needed too.

Second, in the 1960s, when many families left Cheslatta, some simply moved north, “across the lake” (Francois Lake) “into town” (Burns Lake). Many descendants of those families, of which I am one, still live in the Burns Lake area and are very active in everyday life there. The Bible verse, “in the world but not of it,” no longer means isolationism, but integration and influence for the cause of the cross. The final paragraph of the article on Burns Lake states that there are congregations affiliated with Mennonite Church Canada, Sommerfelder Mennonite, and Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite. Sadly, this is no longer accurate.

The Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite churches arrived in Burns Lake in the mid to late 1970s and have been quite active since, influencing many who were part of the Old Colony Mennonite tradition. (If you want an historical rabbit trail to follow, research the coexistence of Old Colony, Sommerfelder, and Bergthaler traditions in this area. All the best. (Lol.))

In the late 1950s, there was some revival momentum happening in Burns Lake among the Mennonite people. First Mennonite Church, a Mennonites in BC congregation at the time, began in 1954. The Evangelical Mennonite Church also founded a congregation here in 1959. The EMC church, now known as Island Gospel Fellowship, is a growing body of believers to this day. In the first decade of the 2000s, First Mennonite went through 2 painful splits, led primarily by former pastors. In 2004, what was to become the Burns Lake Community Church said goodbye, followed in 2008 by what is known as Old Landmarks Christian Fellowship. In 2019, First Mennonite filed registration under the Independent Societies Act in BC, withdrew from Mennonite Church Canada & Mennonite Church British Columbia because of differences of theology, primarily due to the “Being Faithful Church” process and recommendations adopted by the conferences. That fall, First Mennonite Church (FMC) amalgamated with the Burns Lake Community Church (BLCC). FMC as a congregation no longer exists, but its members have found a home at BLCC. The only other MC BC/MC Canada congregation in the area, Church of The Way, Granisle, left the Mennonite conferences in 2019 and is now a member congregation of the Evangelical Free Church. The Old Colony Church has not had a presence in the area for decades.

On a much more personal note, not correctional at all, with regards to your article on Prespatou: the 2 men

mentioned, John Harder & Dan Wiebe, bring a small tear to my eye. John & Dan were brothers-in-law. John was married to Dan’s sister, Anne. I was thrilled to call all of them Uncle and Aunt. Dan was my Dad’s big brother. Anne is Dad’s oldest sister. I remember Uncle John leaving Prespatou on Sunday afternoon after preaching Sunday morning, travelling to Sexsmith, Alberta, to attend Bible School, and then coming home Friday evening for the weekend, only to do it all again, week after week. He did this for 2 years until he finished Bible School. Then he took up driving school bus during the week, and pastoring the folks of Prespatou as his time allowed. Uncle John went to be with the Lord in 1982 or 1983 after a lengthy battle with stomach cancer, serving the Lord literally with his last breath.

My Uncle Dan went where he felt God calling him. He was a millwright by trade. When they left the area north of Fort St. John, they moved to Vanderhoof. His family was one of the core families in establishing the EMC congregation in Vanderhoof. From there they moved to High Level, Alberta, where again, they helped get the EMC ministry off the ground. They moved all over Alberta, ministering, serving the people in a variety of ways, not only helping to plant churches. Uncle Dan passed away peacefully in his sleep about 5 years ago. He was almost 80 years young, and loved Jesus dearly.

These men are some of many of my role models, pointing the way to knowing, loving and serving Jesus. I thank God for all of them. Today, my wife Tammy & I live in Decker Lake, 5 miles west of Burns Lake. I work fulltime at a sawmill. No, not the one that blew up. That was my brother. On Saturday mornings, we load up our Bibles, computers, suitcases and whatever other things we might need, like supper, and drive 60 miles northwest to Granisle. We sleep & eat in the church building. On Sunday, I preach, Tammy looks after the recording of the message for YouTube, and our son Nathan plays with the worship team. When times are more healthy, we run a Youth ministry on Saturdays, a Jesus Camp VBS ministry one week each summer, and Adult Bible Study/ Sunday School before worship celebration on Sundays. We do it because we love Jesus and we take inspiration from our families gone before, two of whom are John Harder & Dan Wiebe.

In Christ,  
Rob Wiebe  
Pastor, Church of The Way, Granisle, BC



## Announcements

### Mennonite Historical Society of BC:

- Renew your MHSBC membership by December! Worried you'll miss renewal time? MHSBC Lifetime Memberships are available for \$750.00.
- Give the gift of membership! With Christmas coming, remember your family and friends with a gift membership.
- Haven't received any emails lately? Make sure the MHSBC office has your current email address. Call 604-853-6177 or email [archives@mhsbc.com](mailto:archives@mhsbc.com) to update yours.
- Pier 21 Musical, February 12, 2022, at Matsqui Centennial Auditorium. Save the date! Ticket information to follow.

### Mennonite Heritage Museum:

- Museum Re-opening!
  - ◇ Increment 1: Bookstore, Gallery and Main Exhibit open to the public starting September 20, 2021; tentative hours 10am to 3pm Monday to Friday; refer to the website [mennonitemuseum.org](https://mennonitemuseum.org) for the most current updates.
  - ◇ Increments 2 to 4: Café Dine In, MHSBC Research Centre, Housebarn Exhibit (dates to be announced).

- A new MHM Gallery Exhibit runs September 20 – October 29, 2021: "Heinz Klassen: A Visual Diary: pen and ink, watercolour on paper."
- MHM Christmas At the Museum Christmas Market dates: November 15 - 20, 2021
- Would you or someone you know be interested in joining our Volunteer Team? Volunteers are needed in the following areas: the café, bookstore, Gallery Attendant, Welcome Desk, Health & Safety Coordinator and at least two gardeners. Call 604-758-5667, email [info@mennonitemuseum.org](mailto:info@mennonitemuseum.org), or fill out the application form on the website <https://mennonitemuseum.org/volunteer/>
- MHSBC is also looking for volunteers to help with IT, with on- and off-site roles available. We also need help for Reference Desks and Switchboard/Office Support once we reopen. See the website [www.mhsbc.com](http://www.mhsbc.com) for the application form today.

### Mennonite Heritage Museum Job Postings:

We have a number of openings currently; three cooks/bakers are needed; full- and part-time positions. Details are available at <https://mennonitemuseum.org/jobs/>

## Mennonite Maids Daughters in the City

From 1931 to 1961, young Mennonite women were sent to Vancouver seeking work as domestic servants by their families, many of whom were indebted to the Canadian Pacific Railway for their passage. Most had come to Canada as refugees from Stalinist Russia.

These young single women were pioneers in their ethnic and religious community who broke through the barriers of the "evil city", finding their independence through learning the English language and experiencing a new culture. They shaped settlement patterns of not only Vancouver but also of western Canada.

Two Girls' Homes were established during three decades:

*Bethel Home - 6363 Windsor St (1931-1943) and 545 East 49th Ave (1943-1961)*

*Mary Martha Home - 6460 St. George St (1935-1956) and 605 East 49th Ave (1956-1960)*

Supported by the Mennonite Museum Society



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## Event Reports

### Online event: Places that Matter: Mennonite Maids Virtual Plaque Presentation

Reported by Robert Martens

On a June 17, 2021, webinar event, the Vancouver Heritage Foundation (VHF) presented the eighty-ninth in a series of plaques honouring “places that matter” in Vancouver. The plaque in this case acknowledged the arduous services rendered by young Mennonite immigrant women who were connected with one of the two “girls’ homes” in the city – the *Mädchenheime*. Young indeed, some barely teenagers, and often traumatized by their experiences in Russia/USSR and by the utter strangeness of North American life.

The event was sponsored by the Mennonite Museum Society and hosted by VHF Special Projects Manager Jessica Quan. First, however, two city spokespersons made introductory remarks. Deputy Mayor Melissa De Genova remarked that “the city was built on the backs of many, including Mennonite maids.” The second city representative was Councillor Michael Wiebe who, though he has family ties to Mennonite maids and to the Mennonite Educational Institute, admitted that he had been uninformed on this remarkable story.

Saying that he did not know who was in the audience, Mennonite Heritage Museum Director Richard Thiessen provided an elementary outline of Russian Mennonite history for those who might be unaware of the story. But it was Ruth Derksen Siemens who was at the heart of the event. She told, in moving detail, an account of the women who were affiliated with the girls’ homes, the young women who worked so hard to build a new life, and did so faithfully. Mennonite ministers had warned their congregations of the dangers of urban life – “do not go to the city.” Mennonite families, however, learning about higher wages in Vancouver, made the difficult decision to send their daughters there. Most of the hard-earned income went back to the family.

The girls’ homes provided community, security, language training, and guidance, among other things, to these new immigrants. The Bethel Home, Mennonite Brethren-based, was founded in 1931. The working girls pooled their finances to keep it open. It closed with a mere one-month notice in 1961. The Mary Martha

Home, established in 1935, was General Conference-supported, and support in this case meant money. Tina Lehn, “a gem,” said Derksen Siemens, was the matron there. Next door to Mary Martha was a Mennonite church, today a Buddhist temple. The Home was sold and shut down in 1960.

A tender moment followed in the online event when two former Mennonite maids appeared on camera. Then Ruth Fast, director on the board of VHF, made a few remarks before introducing the plaque. Housecleaning may be considered demeaning today, she said, but for Mennonite maids, “a clean house was a source of pride.” These girls also held the idea of family close to their hearts, she added. Ruth Derksen Siemens followed up by presenting the “virtual plaque,” virtual because the pandemic prohibited in-person gatherings. A “real plaque,” though, will be mounted on a lamp post near the original sites of the homes.

Remarkably, the four girls’ homes – both Bethel and Mary Martha moved into better facilities after the originals became clearly inadequate – are still standing and in good shape.

#### Online Book Launch, June 18, 2021.

**Abe Dueck, *Mennonite Brethren Bible College: A History of Competing Visions*. Kindred Productions: Winnipeg, 2021.**

Reported by Robert Martens

Abe Dueck’s recently published history of the Mennonite Brethren Bible College (MBBC) might be as much a study in conflict as the story of an institution of higher learning. Jon Isaak, director of the Centre for MB Studies, started the book launch with the comment that the title, *A History of Competing Visions*, is apt: “It sums up the push-and-pull, back-and-forth struggle.” The Mennonite Brethren, founders of the College, he said, are “a blended community of evangelism and Anabaptism,” and the two “don’t always mix.” MBBC seemed to be a magnet for those tensions.

In 2016, Abe Dueck received a research grant from the Mennonite Historical Commission to fund the writing of the MBBC story. Dueck taught at the College for several decades, serving as academic dean for fifteen years. His history is consequently an “inside view,” he said, which might be a liability. On the other hand, he was particularly well placed to capture this narrative of

“competition between vision models.”

From its very beginnings in 1944, MBBC was fraught with controversy. Initially, it was envisioned as a “higher Bible school,” said Dueck, but that did not last long. The College turned into a “tiered structure”: it was at various times, and often simultaneously, a Bible school, a Bible college, a seminary, and a liberal arts institution. The seminary component lasted for a relatively brief time, though pastoral training continued. The liberal arts aspect was likely the most controversial: “It was never supported by the MB constituency.” Mennonite Brethren, said Dueck, have a long history of a conflicted attitude towards education, especially the liberal arts. Practical education has been regarded as far more acceptable.

Conflict, Dueck remarked, was many-faceted at MBBC. The long list of issues included nationalism (Canadian Mennonite Brethren were quite different from their American counterparts, having arrived much later than in the US, where MBs freely committed to schools such as Tabor College), provincialism, regionalism, theological views, attitudes towards music, interdenominationalism (some cross-denominational endeavors

included non-Mennonite churches such as the Alliance), and, of course, financial concerns.

Paul Tiessen, professor emeritus at Wilfrid Laurier University, responded to Abe Dueck’s talk by asking some pointed questions. The book, he remarked, is “a history of shifting ground.” The final speaker, Cheryl Pauls, president of Canadian Mennonite University, called Dueck’s book “refreshingly honest.” She observed that, though scholars at MBBC were well aware of conflict at the school, “they didn’t wear that on their sleeves,” and treasured their students. Pauls also commented on the positive aspects of conflict, on living with ambiguity.

In the ten-minute Q&A session that followed, Abe Dueck admitted to feeling nostalgic for a time when church conferences acted with some unity and spoke with passionate voices.

## A Mennonite State: The Utopian Dreams of J. J. Hildebrand

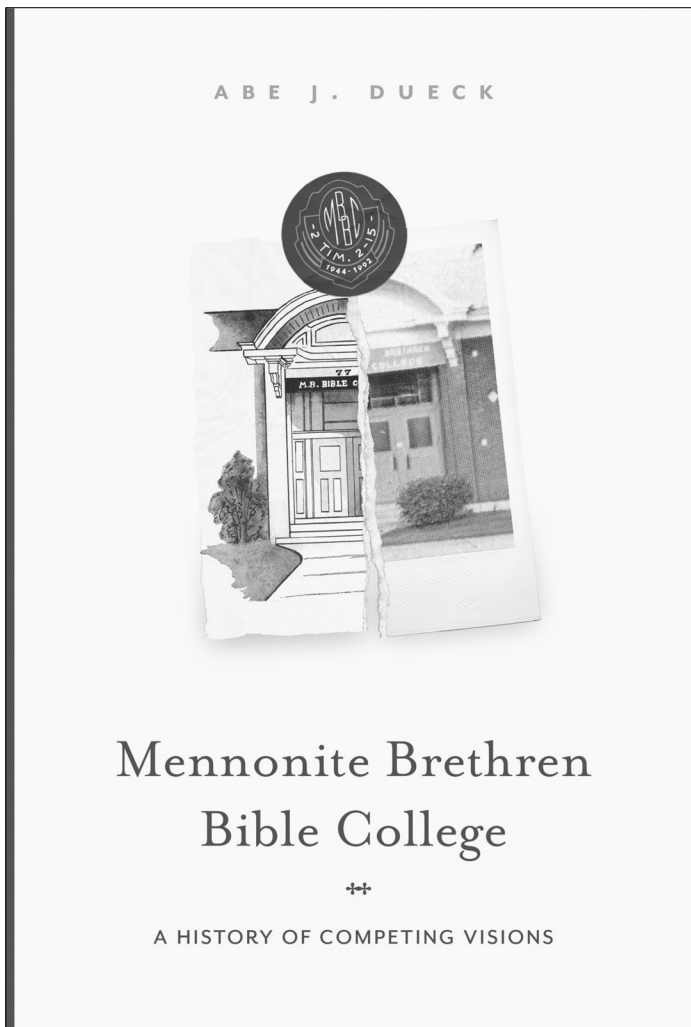
By Robert Martens

In 1933, Jacob J. Hildebrand wrote a letter to governing officials in Australia. It must have left the Aussies scratching their heads, or, perhaps, snickering. Hildebrand had read in the *Winnipeg Free Press* that Australia was attempting to settle its Northern Territory. Now he was inquiring on the possibility of “an independent white settlement of a religious group of about 400,000 souls, including women and children, now scattered all over the world.” He added that this group would have the “exclusive right to legislate in all matters concerning this territory” (qtd. in Urry 65). Not once did Hildebrand mention that the people he referred to were Mennonites.

The Australians responded that the idea was “quite impossible” (qtd. in Urry 65).

For years, in articles and letters, Hildebrand had been advancing the concept of a *Mennostaat*, an independent Mennonite state. It would consist of a distinct territory, a political and economic community; its official languages would be High and Low German; churches would be united in a *Bundeskonferenz*, a general conference; the *Menno Gulden* would be its currency; and the new nation’s flag of blue, green, and white would contain an emblem of a dove carrying the olive branch.

How popular were these and similar ideas among Mennonites of the time? Hildebrand was an eccentric



who fiercely quarrelled with his contemporaries in Canada. Still, his concepts, stained by fascism and anti-Semitism, did find a following in the Dirty Thirties.

#### *A restless personality*

Jacob J. Hildebrand, the eldest of four children, was born in 1880 in the Molotschna Colony, South Russia, to Jacob and Agatha (Wiebe). He took teacher's training but, perhaps too irascible to be confined to the classroom, turned his attention to business. Hildebrand travelled extensively, visiting Europe, North America, Japan, Korea, and Siberia. He returned to his home village but decided to move to the new Mennonite settlement in Siberia, a pioneering colony that seems to have later fuelled his concept of a Mennonite state. In Omsk, he met Katherina Wiens; the two married in 1912, and the following year their only child, Justina, was born.

Talented and confident, Hildebrand assisted new settlers as they arrived in Siberia and, following the Revolution, negotiated for Mennonite rights with military leaders during the civil war. Life in Siberia, he then decided, had no future. In 1924 he and his family immigrated to Canada, ending up on a farm in Manitoba. He may well have felt his talents were wasted in rural Manitoba. The Hildebrand family moved to Winnipeg in 1926, and Jacob settled into a new flurry of activity: aiding Mennonite newcomers.

#### *The outsider*

Despite his skills, Hildebrand was excluded from major Mennonite immigration agencies. One reason for this was his Siberian origins, considered inferior by Mennonites from the older colonies in Ukraine. A second was his relative disinterest in religion. A third must have been his aggressive and querulous nature; he seemed to be perpetually swimming upstream.

Hildebrand became involved with an organization called Mennonite Immigration Aid (MIA), which was more of a business venture than other Mennonite immigration institutions. Its intent was

to compete directly with the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, as well as with the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), which had financed and organized the flight of Mennonite refugees from Russia. Hence MIA became involved in business dealings with the Canadian National Railway (CNR) and Cunard Steamship Line. MIA's top leadership included two secular Mennonites who belonged to no congregation. The organization's aim was to create compact Mennonite settlements, such as those in pre-Revolutionary Russia. It also indulged in anti-Bolshevik and anti-Semitic rhetoric.

It was a time of crisis for Mennonites, and some of them responded to the comparatively belligerent ideology of MIA. In Russia, they had been crushed by the Soviets. In Canada, they were at risk of assimilation into the Canadian mainstream; compact ethnic settlements were a failed concept, since so many were forced to buy up

individual farms to pay off travel debts. The Board of Colonization was under attack as well. Its leadership, men such as David Toews and B. B. Janz, were accused of incompetence for leaving Mennonites behind in Russia; of being in league with big business; and of being too focused on religious values, when ethnicity was perceived as crumbling.

And so, J. J. Hildebrand proposed an alternative in which state and church were clearly separated. He argued that Mennonites should "found a *Menno-Bund* – a Union of Mennonites – to pursue the idea of establishing a separated *Mennostaat* on *Mennonoland*" (Urry 69).

#### *Why fascism?*

In the 1930s, Hildebrand was becoming increasingly involved in the *Führerprinzip*: the ideology of a powerful leader capable of creating a strong sense of nationhood. He became a member of the Nazi *Deutsche Bund Kanada* in 1934, and received an award originating in Berlin. Brushing off claims by evangelicals that many Africans and Asians, for example, were Mennonite as well, Hildebrand de-



J. J. Hildebrand  
Photo source: MAID



Wedding photo of Katherina Wiebe and J. Hildebrand, 1912  
Photo source: MAID



clared that true Mennonite distinctiveness consisted in its descent from a “German ‘spiritual culture’ [ *Geisteskultur* ] which had existed for over 400 years, and Mennonites had been ‘nurtured from German root-stock in German soil’” (Urry 71).

What was so enticing about fascism for some Canadian Mennonites prior to World War II? Historian Ben Goossen describes Hildebrand’s ideology as “a strange but surprisingly popular brand of *pacifist* fascism” – which is surely an oxymoron. New Zealand scholar James Urry presents a far more nuanced analysis. After the devastation of their homes in Russia, Canadian Mennonites remained grateful for the assistance received from the German government. This reinforced a sense of Germanness among them. Then, having lost nearly everything in a Communist revolution, Mennonites identified with the perceived humiliation of the German nation after World War I. They admired Hitler’s anti-Bolshevik stance and his ability to resurrect a solid sense of nationhood. And they needed to find some kind of justice in their dispossession and trauma: “The strongly anti-Bolshevik stance of the Nazis which identified the Soviet leadership as Jewish and Communism as a Zionist conspiracy for world domination, also appealed to some immigrants. Suddenly Mennonite suffering made sense: Mennonites were the victims of a Jewish-inspired Communism” (Urry 71).

But no “one size fits all” version of fascism existed. Hildebrand, Urry points out, had no direct experience of German fascism. More significant, perhaps, was the form of government he envisioned in a new *Mennostaat*: it was based on the local governing model he had witnessed in Russia: “In the early 1930s his plans for a *Mennostaat*, while incorporating Nazi concepts, still owed as much to an idealised vision for a lost Mennonite world in Russia, as to the emergent Nazi racial-state” (Urry 72).

### *Colleagues and enemies*

Meanwhile, debate, both public and behind the scenes, raged among Mennonites on the nature of fascism. Articles on the topic appeared by the hundreds in Mennonite newspapers. Heinrich Schroeder, living in Germany, and perhaps the most vicious and intransigent of Mennonite Hitlerites, advocated for the establishment of one hundred Russian-German settlements within Germany itself. Walter Quiring, born Jacob – perhaps the birth name sounded too Jewish, since in 1934 he legally changed it – construed the achievements of Paraguayan Mennonites in the Chaco as a model of Germanic resilience.

And there was resistance: “One Canadian Mennonite, a descendant of the 1870s Mennonite settlers, suggested that as a new immigrant Hildebrand did not know what he was talking about” (Urry 75). Established leaders such as David Toews argued that Mennonite pro-German ideologies cast a shadow on the hard-earned reputation of Russian Mennonite immigrants. G. G. Wiens harshly criticized anti-Semitism, and “mocked Hitler’s style of oratory, comparing him to the notorious American evangelical preacher Billy Sunday” (Urry 74). (Schroeder was livid.) Hildebrand’s most articulate opposition may have come from Elder Jacob H. Janzen, who critiqued the impossible dream of a nonresistant nation.

Ultimately, very few Canadian Mennonites joined pro-fascist organizations: “Most Mennonite immigrants took a pragmatic approach to the flood of propaganda and the debates over Mennonite identity, preferring to wait and keep their options open” (Urry 75).

### *Hildebrand’s Zeittafel*

With the advent of World War II, all talk of a *Mennostaat* subsided, then disappeared. Jacob Hildebrand’s wife, Katherina, died in 1936. Jacob subsequently moved with his daughter to North Kildonan. He wrote several books, including *Aus der Vorgeschichte der Einwanderung der Mennoniten aus Rußland nach Manitoba* [Concerning the History Previous to the Mennonite Immigration from Russia to Manitoba], written to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Mennonites’ arrival in Canada. Hildebrand died in 1976.

Today, his best-known book is the strange historical work, published in 1945, entitled *Hildebrand’s Zeittafel* [Hildebrand’s Timeline/Chronological Table]. It had been Hildebrand’s intention to write a Mennonite history but that, he writes in his foreword, is unfeasible, and might remain so for the few short years left in his life. The result is a chronological listing of global events but focusing on the Mennonite story. He adds, “History is the foundation of all knowledge ( *Wissenschaft* ), if you believe that or not! ... And a people that neglects its own history, thereby dispensing with its past: however intensely it works to live in the present, it loses its future as surely as the certainty of death and taxes” (Hildebrand 5, trans. RM).

This well-researched but very odd book opens with two documents that extend privileges to Mennonites: a Latin text dating from the Mennonite sojourn in Poland; and the German-language invitation from Tsarina Catherine the Great to Mennonites to settle in the Russian

## Hildebrand's Zeittafel

empire. Hildebrand's biases are immediately clear – Mennonites, a separate people, living together in compact settlements.

And then the timeline, beginning in the year 32 and the advent of John the Baptist. The long history of persecution begins. Hildebrand's model is the classic Mennonite work, *Martyrs Mirror*. In this world, the good are abused but will ultimately triumph. The *Zeittafel* then makes a sudden leap from year 425 to 1310, when the new reformers appear and persecution is renewed.

With regard to Mennonite history, the book is quite comprehensive, including the Swiss Mennonite story alongside the Russian. For example, Hildebrand recounts the American Quaker-Mennonite alliance

against slavery in the New World. Several themes and prejudices run through the book. Persecution of the saints, as mentioned, is one. Anti-Semitism, though not particularly overt, springs up occasionally and seemingly randomly. A note of consistent pacifism runs throughout. And though Hildebrand personally did not live off the land, the book is replete with stories of agriculture and photos of farming implements. Even the burning down and reconstruction of the McCormick's factory in Chicago is notated.

Near the book's end, Hildebrand inserts a long letter of his own, written in elegant English (with assistance?) in 1938, to a CBC broadcast by Robert England. The letter is a defence against what Hildebrand perceives as an elitist attack on an immigrant people: "...[T]he faults found with the schools of the Mennonites of the toilsome pioneering years and the mockery, the poisonous derision and the biting criticism so lavishly accorded them in

Lehre hätten.  
24. August 1555. Versammlung der Taufgesinnten in Straßburg.



25. Oktober 1555. Karl V., Kaiser des „Heiligen Römischen Reiches“ und König von Spanien, gezwungen von den Generalstaaten der Niederlande, entsagt sich des Thrones zu Gunsten seines Sohnes Philipp II.

13. November 1555. Menno's Brief an die Gemeinde zu Franeker in der Provinz Friesland, Niederlande.

23. November 1555. Digna Pieterß, eine gottesfürchtige Mennonitin, wird ihres festen Glaubens wegen zu Dordrecht im Patorturm in einen Sad gesteckt und ertränkt.

27. Dezember 1555. Johann Nendt wird geboren.

1555. Dirk Philipps fest einer Schrift des Bernhard Rothmann seine Schrift: „Verklarung des Tabernakels ofte Hutten Mose“ entgegen.

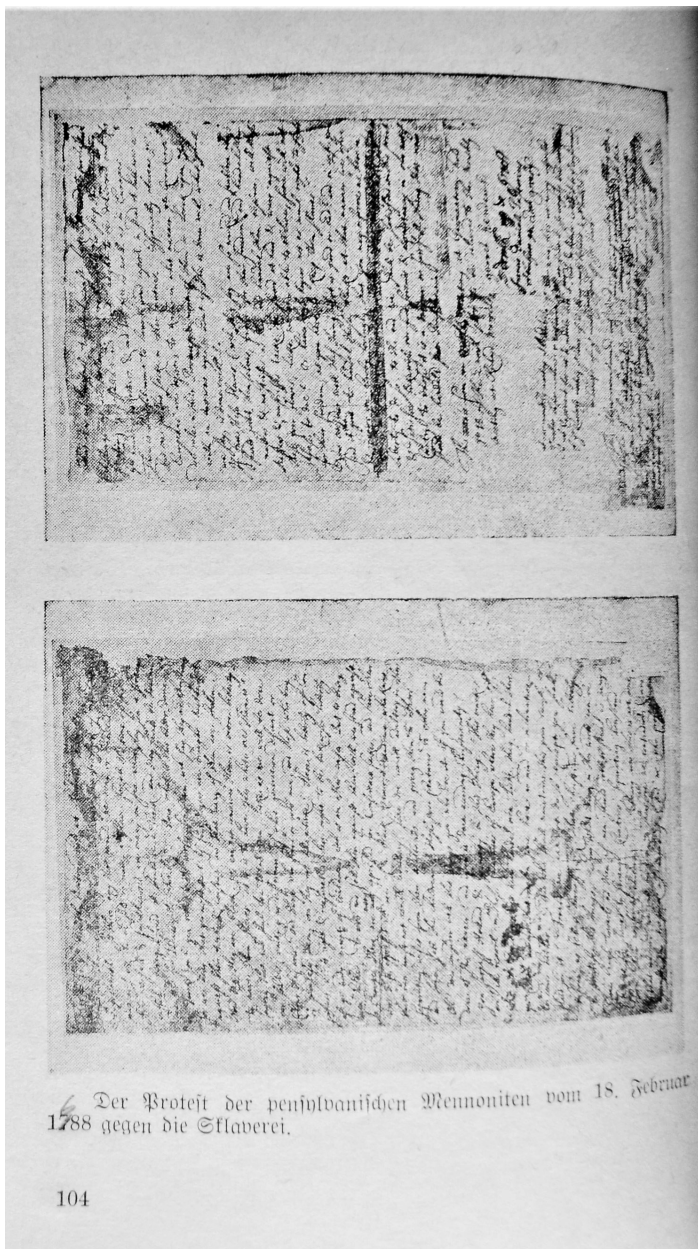
1555. Menno Simons verläßt sicherheitshalber Wismar (siehe 21. Dez. 1553, die englischen Reformierten) und begibt sich zum Grafen Bartholomäus von Ahlefeldt auf dessen Landgut Friesenburg (auf Stellen auch Friesenburg geschrieben) bei Odersloe. Dieser Graf war ein grundsätzlicher Gegner der Reher, hatte aber in den Niederlanden an mehreren Scheiterhaufen gestanden und zugeesehen, wie die Taufgesinnten lebendig verbrannt wurden, und diese Schaulplätze hatten seine menschlichen Gefühle soviel gerührt, daß er Menno zeitweilig duldete. Von 1544 bis 1546 war Menno unter der milderen Regierung des reformatorischgesinnten Erzbischofs von Köln geduldet worden. Nach der Abdankung des Kurfürsten mußte Menno weichen und hielt sich bis 1553 auf Missionsreisen in den Ostseeländern bis nach Lett-  
54

P. 54 of the *Zeittafel*, documenting events from the 1550s

a certain press and from certain platforms do not appear justified.” And he champions German culture: “With the years to come the knowledge of the German language will become more important for Canada than ever before.... The Jewish boycott is no profitable substitute for Canadian grain export, and the suppression of the German language remains a serious grievance” (342).

The appendix to the *Zeittafel* might be the oddest feature of the book: it is a vitriolic defence by Hildebrand against personal charges made against him. He notes that, at a Canadian Mennonite Board of Immigration meeting, members of the board accused him and others of making irresponsible statements. Hildebrand vociferates that he has been victimized “by not only plutocratic





P. 104 - copy of documents showing the protest of the Pennsylvania Mennonites against slavery in 1688

political charlatans but also by several of the 'pious' brethren, who, as elitist climbers, play the part of Pharisees in the church" (405, trans. RM).

Hildebrand's articles and letters landed him in hot water. His quarrels with the community did not help. He notes in the appendix that his home was visited eight times by Canadian intelligence officers, who rifled through his papers and possessions. At one point during a raid, he notices that the sheet of charges states that he is not an intelligent man. Hildebrand "converses" with one of the police officers, who morosely admits that, yes, Hildebrand is an intelligent man. And is it a crime in Canada to be an intelligent man? asks Hildebrand. Two associate police officers break out in laughter (405).

An investigating officer eventually informs Hildebrand that the searches are over, "if nothing else turns up" (406). J. J. Hildebrand lived for many more years; one can only hope that he eventually discovered a more peaceable way of living.

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## Looking for a Home: The Life and Work of Fritz Senn (Gerhard Johann Friesen), 1894-1983

(See also on page 28 the book review of *Panzer Gunner: A Canadian in the German 7th Panzer Division, 1944-45*, authored by Bruno Friesen, the son of Gerhard J. Friesen.)

By Louise Bergen Price (all translations by the author)

In June 1937, Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King travelled to Germany to judge Hitler for himself. Later he would write in his diary that Hitler "truly loved his fellow man" and that his eyes had a "liquid quality about them which indicated keen perception and profound sympathy..." (Gillmor 174).

King – who would later change his mind – was not alone in his admiration. Charles Lindberg and Henry Ford, as well as prominent Mennonites from Benjamin Unruh to Walter Quiring, felt Hitler's attraction. Perhaps it is not surprising that "Russian Mennonites" who had escaped the Soviet Union with help from Germany in the 1920s and were having a hard time adjusting to life in Canada took a keen interest in the Führer and the new Germany. One of these was poet Fritz Senn (the pseudonym of Gerhard Johann Friesen).

Born in Halbstadt, Molotoschna, in 1894, Senn was the youngest of nine in a prosperous family. His father, a "strong man with a hard, calloused fist" (Senn 182), died



when Senn was fourteen. After graduating from *Zentraltschule* [secondary school], Senn studied as a teacher but was unable to complete his credentials when Russia joined the war. He then volunteered to serve his country as a Red Cross orderly before being drafted to alternative service duty in the *Forstei*, the forestry service. After returning home, he joined his village's self-defence unit against civil war bandits. According to Senn, the local movement was small, and soon collapsed.

By 1924, Senn had married Olga Schellenberg, and the couple emigrated to Waterloo, Ontario, where he worked on a Pennsylvania Dutch farm. Since neither the culture nor the work expected of him were to his liking, he and nine other families, with the help of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, bought acreage around Portage la Prairie the following winter. When the snow melted, the property turned out to be swamp-land, unsuitable for farming. On top of that, prices for produce crashed. Unable to make a living on the land, the family, now with four young children, moved back in 1931 to the Kitchener area, where Senn found work in a factory.

Unable to find his niche in Canada, Senn poured his longing and homesickness for *die alte Heimat* – the old homeland – into poems celebrating the simple life of a Mennonite village in Russia during the “Golden Years” before the horror of the civil war. The home village at dusk is a familiar theme – scent of thyme in the steppes, crickets chirping, farmers heading home from fields, Russian workers harmonizing in melancholy songs. Senn's poems, published in *Der Bote* and Arnold Dyck's *Warte*, resonated with recent immigrants, many of whom viewed the past with rather rose-coloured lenses: “a lost age, a time of prosperity and security when *Mennonovolk* had lived a simple, separate existence under their own control” (Urry 75).

Senn's most accomplished work, according to Victor G. Doerksen, editor of *Fritz Senn: Gesammelte Gedichte und Prosa* [Fritz Senn: Collected Poems and Prose], is the poem cycle *Hinter dem Pflug* [Following the Plough]. Here Senn tries to find meaning in the apocalypse that hit Mennonite villages in Ukraine during the civil war. Is it because his people have become too greedy that God, a farmer, rams his plough through the earth, slicing furrows so deep that the very life of the soil is ravished? Why are these children of God dispersed to various countries to suffocate and collapse as slaves in factories [*O weh, wir knicken und ersticken / als Sklavenseelen in Fabriken*] when they are meant to be tillers of the earth?

(29) Is this people, this *Volk*, meant to be perpetually wandering without a country they can call home? The poem cycle offers no answers, but Senn's poems will persist in describing Mennonites as a people without a home.

Like Senn, over half of those living in Kitchener were of German-speaking background (Coschi 2) and many attended events held by long-established German clubs such as Concordia. For German-speaking immigrants who were finding life in Canada difficult, these clubs offered a place to feel at home among like-minded people. Senn's poetry would now take on a more political slant.

In 1936, the Concordia Club promoted Hans Grimm's 1926 novel, *Volk ohne Raum* [A People Without Room/Space]. In Grimm's world, a German, unlike lesser beings, “needs space around him, the sun shining on him, and freedom within” (Grimm 10). Nazi ideology used this idea of *Lebensraum* to rationalize Germany's drive to conquer more land. Senn was impressed by Grimm's book. In *Heimat: beim lesen Hans Grimms* [Homeland: While Reading Hans Grimm], he expresses a wish to



Photo of Fritz Senn with his signature, from the title page of his book.

drink of his “Motherland’s” cup of sorrows and offers Germany his love without conditions (Senn 68).

Another club, the Deutscher Bund, or Confederation of Germans, a Third-Reich propagandist organization established in 1934, sponsored the annual *Deutscher Tag* [German Day] celebrations which attracted visitors from Kitchener’s broader community. At the 1937 celebrations, with Nazi flags still flying, German Consul Hans-Ulrich Granow proclaimed that Hitler was “sent by God” in Germany’s time of great need (Coschi 216). That same year, the *Warte* published Senn’s poem, “*Der Führer*,” which echoed this messianic theme: “*Seht, es kam zur Zeit der Führer / Gottgesandt und auserwählt*”: “Behold, the Führer comes, sent and chosen by God” to a *Volck* plagued by sorrow. This “hero of Germany” has taken a splintered land and woven it into a unified nation (Senn 64).

By late 1938, Hitler’s actions, especially the attacks of *Kristallnacht*, had turned Canadian opinion against Nazi Germany to such an extent that the local branch of the German-Canadian People’s Society held an assembly in November denouncing Nazism. German Canadians were loyal citizens and “entirely opposed to the present wave of bestiality sweeping Germany,” one speaker emphasized (Coschi 231).

Meanwhile, Senn was still trying to come to terms with life in Canada. His 1938 poem “*Farmabend*” [Farm Evening] pictures what seems a cozy scene, parents sitting by the fire, the mother dozing, father reading the newspaper about events in Russia, when son Peter, full of excitement, arrives home from the city:

*Bald schon sitzen sie beim Abendessen; Vater zeigt  
ein trauriges Gesicht.*

*Denkt an Russland – and ein Dorf – indessen Peter  
dauernd von der Reise spricht.*

[Soon they sit at supper; a sad expression on Father’s face.

He thinks of Russia – and a village – while Peter chats  
endlessly about his journey]

(Senn 71).

By 1939, Senn came to a decision that stunned the Kitchener community. On March 16, the headline in the *Kitchener Daily Record* ran as follows: “Kitchener lads induced to go to Germany; given attractive offers to labour in Reich ....” (Bruno Friesen 198). This first article did not name the children, but on March 24, two of the children were identified as Senn’s sons, Bruno and Oscar, thirteen and twelve years old, the others being the children of known Nazi sympathizer George Esau.

Years later, when Bruno described the course of events, the shock of what happened to him is still raw. He and his brother were “yanked” out of school in secret and warned to “maintain silence” (Bruno Friesen 1). Soon after, passports and free tickets in hand, they were put onto a ship to New York, and from there, to Germany. Friesen writes, “Gone for good, I knew, was the old neighbourhood gang back in Canada.... Gone, for good, was my childhood” (9). Although Bruno had attended Saturday morning German school, his knowledge of the language was so “unworldly” he didn’t know how to ask for directions to the toilet in polite language. Although he’d been promised an apprenticeship, he was sent to an isolated farm to do menial work and was ridiculed by local villagers as a “dumb American,” a humiliation he would never forget.

Several months later, just prior to the beginning of the war, Senn, his wife, and their three younger children boarded ship for Germany. They were not alone. By late August, fifty men and their families had departed for Germany, while another twenty were on the verge of leaving (Coschi 229). While many were Nazi sympathizers, Senn would later give economic rather than political reasons for emigrating: “It was a time of great unemployment and wages were miserable. Several families returned to Europe. We went to Wilhelmshafen where I became manager of an electrical firm...” (Senn 503). While unemployment certainly contributed to Senn’s desire to emigrate, his son Bruno states that his father was influenced in his decision by the propagandist Deutscher Bund association (6).

The family was issued a first-floor apartment with no bathroom – toilets were on a landing between floors. Once the war started, there were frequent bombing alerts. When Senn visited the farms where his sons were living and working, he was horrified. It took six months, but finally they were enrolled in proper apprenticeship programs near Wilhelmshafen. In 1940, another son, Gerhard, was born.

In mid-1941, Senn, already forty-seven, was drafted into the German army as an interpreter-translator and sent to the Russian front. During this time, he was able to visit his home village of Halbstadt once again. It was “an exorbitant price [to pay] for the thrill,” Bruno Friesen later remarked (16). Sons Bruno and Oscar would also be drafted as they came of age, Bruno conscripted to the Panzer division of the Wehrmacht when he was seventeen, and Oscar sent to Belgium where he would die in battle in December 1944. Towards the end of the war,

Senn was captured by the Russians, but released early because of his age, an unusual occurrence. Reunited with his family, he resumed his pre-war job as an accountant. Work and family left him little time to write until his retirement.

Although Senn is known mostly for his poetry, he also wrote a number of prose pieces. The longest was “*Auf der Strasse nach Osten*” [On the Road to the East], a series of vignettes which appeared in the *Mennonitische Welt* periodical between 1951 and 1952. Two main characters, the narrator (Senn) and “*der Klingeltaler*,” a fellow soldier from Klingeltal village, are Wehrmacht soldiers on their way to Moscow with their company: “Day after day, Russian dust envelops our vehicles like a dome of pale brown smoke. Under this dome, we head east. Under it, the sun rises huge and blood-red each morning and burns into our backs until it sinks at night. From the fields, the sickly-sweet odour of corpses. Steam rises from ruptured bellies of dead horses and mingles with the decayed breath of the fallen. Hot breezes carry the scent of camomile from meadow verges. Burned-out villages lie along the wayside. During our rest stops, we lie as the dead near our tanks, on motor vehicles, between wagons and machines” (Senn 270).

Each day they wonder, how much further? Feet are blistered, bleeding. Bellies hollow out. The canteen hangs heavy on the belt, but it’s filled with a ration of cartridges. When the rains come, vehicles bog in quagmire. And then the numbing cold. A Russian man fingers Senn’s uniform. Winter will arrive in a week, he tells him. Russian soldiers have warm clothes. Senn imagines the ghost of Napoleon nearby.

In a vignette set in autumn, German soldiers find shelter in a Russian village. One evening, five girls in peasant blouses and colourful skirts gather in the village square along with three young balalaika players. As the young people begin to dance, Senn is mesmerized: “O German farmers and soldiers, you tamed people! Now you see what dance is! In the middle of the war the *Krakoviat*

dance echoes through the village street – O, blessed world!” (280)

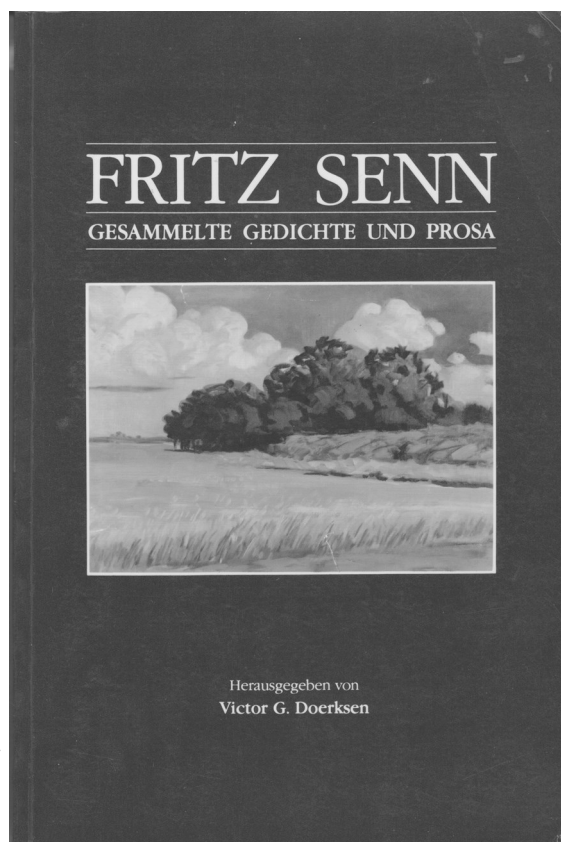
The *Klingeltaler* pulls out his harmonica, and a tune “soft as a wisp of clouds” floats on the air. German soldiers gather around to listen as the girls begin to sing. The words are foreign, but the magic of the evening draws the soldiers in. Soon they, in turn, sing with the girls: “In the village, music spun of light silvers blue-shadowed streets. A foreign player plays for dancing maids.... The moon glides over the countryside; dazzling starlight shimmers” (280–281). “*Auf der Strasse nach Osten*” contains graphic images of war and death – along with rare moments of beauty – but unlike most of Senn’s writing, it contains no longing for the olden days. Here, on the Russian steppe and in the midst of war, Senn’s soul seems at peace.

Senn’s post-war poems, on the other hand, confirm that life in Germany has not stilled the poet’s discontent or the longing he feels for the home of his childhood. In “*Auf ein Stiefelpaar*” [To a Pair of Boots], he writes, “I’d like to march with you towards the east as we once did, over rivers and bridges, deep into Russia’s heart. To rest on immense steppes at

sunset, with my comrades, but better yet, alone” (Senn 94).

A correspondence with Arnold Dyck reveals the longing both men felt for a world left behind. In March 1957, Dyck writes, “Our generation was born too early, we were too old to completely renounce Russia, too old to become Americanized, too old to identify with the new Germany that does not even know what to do with a Goethe” (Gerhard Friesen 127).

Many of Senn’s poems express deep love and knowledge of Russian literature: Dostoyevsky, Gogol, Bunin and Solzhenitsyn. Yet, references to Russian peasants are mostly in connection to workers’ melancholy songs at twilight. There is no attempt to acknowledge injustices faced by Russian/Ukrainian peasants, as Arnold Dyck does in his autobiographical novel *Verloren in der Steppe* [Lost in the Steppes]. In a conversation in that



Fritz Senn: Collected Poems and Prose



novel between Hans Toews and his Russian teacher, the teacher asks why she is treated with respect in other circles, but despised by Mennonites. Why do colonists' children inherit sixty-five dessiatins of land while Russians remain in poverty? After all, it is Germans who are the foreigners (Dyck 409). Although Hans is too young to provide answers, these questions remain for the reader to ponder.

And while Senn expresses longing for the Russian steppes and the melancholy songs of Russian peasants, this longing does not include empathy for its nomadic peoples who are depicted as brutal reincarnations of Genghis Khan, "Mongol hordes" who come pouring into villages like molten lava, burning, looting, raping women and girls (86, 88, 152, 156). An undated poem entitled "Johann Cornies" begins with

*Kein Mischvolk hebe Hand noch geilen Blick  
Nach euren Frauen und Mädchen, wehrt dem, wehrt.  
Denn dies Kalmückenvolk, halb Mensch, halb Pferd,  
Ist nicht gemacht zu würdigem Geschick.*

Roughly translated these lines read, "No mixed-race people shall lift hand nor lustful gaze / On your women and girls, resist them, resist. / For this Kalmyk race, half-man, half-horse / is not made for worthy deeds" (152).

After his retirement, Senn and his wife remained in Germany. Son Bruno lost no time in returning to Canada; his younger brother Gerhard later moved there as well. Senn visited Canada twice, remarking that conditions were much better than when he had left. He also spent a few months in South Africa: "exactly that spot on the globe where I would have liked to go with our Mennonites and to establish our own state in proximity to our ethnic cousins, the Boers," Arnold Dyck would write to him (Gerhard Friesen 130).

Arnold Dyck's death in 1970 was a severe blow to Senn, both as a friend and as his publisher. With Dyck's death, little chance remained to publish his poetry since *Der Bote* had become a denominational paper and was not interested in his work. Still, Senn continued to write, even as his eyesight began to fail. He died in 1983 at eighty-nine years of age, survived by his wife, Olga. A short tribute in *Der Bote* referred to him as "*Sänger seines Volkes*," or a "singer of his people" (*Bote* 6). His collected works were published in 1987.

Senn began his writing career in Canada almost a hundred years ago. Through his eyes we see how many Russian Mennonites viewed the world around them and how they were influenced by the politics of the day. In today's world, though, some of Senn's poems make for

uncomfortable reading, especially his wholesale condemnation of groups he labels as "descendants of Genghis Khan." This is especially disconcerting in that Senn must have become aware of Nazi atrocities, if not during the war, then certainly in the years following. Would the Nazi legacy not have brought him to the realization that murder, rape and carnage are not limited to any one group? If Senn ever wrestled with these thoughts, there is no mention in his poems. Nor is there any indication that editor Victor G. Doerksen paid much attention to the subject matter of some of Senn's poems, but stated that, both in his younger years and in his retirement, Senn wrote "*schöne und bedeutende Gedichte*" [lovely and significant poems] (Senn xx).

Senn was not alone in how he viewed other cultures, other races. A study of Mennonite literature of the past reminds us that our own history is imbued with colonialist values, and that some of the tenets we hold true today may be seen in a totally different light to future generations.

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...this longing does not include empathy for its nomadic peoples who are depicted as brutal reincarnations of Ghenghis Khan.

# The Strange Case of Ingrid Rimland

By Robert Martens

*She walked more slowly now along the village street, feeling sticky with perspiration, bloated with millions of unwept tears, feeling ugly, deserted, misunderstood, utterly alone in the universe, a pitch-black mutiny in her heart. She sat down on the tree stump opposite Ohm Wiebe's house and put a trembling hand to her face. And there she took the balance of her life, and this is what she said:*

*"By God, I am cheated."*

*She listened closely. Would she be stricken from above? She kept on: "I am cheated. I feel nothing. I feel absolutely nothing that has any meaning for me at all. Am I crazy? I must be out of my mind. I must be losing my sanity. Is that what it is? Oh, God Almighty! Listen to me! I am at my wit's end; that's all I can say"* (Rimland 300-301).

\*

In 1977, Californian Ingrid Rimland wrote a novel that created a sensation among Mennonite readers – and among the wider reading public. *The Wanderers: The Saga of Three Women Who Survived* tells the story of Russian Mennonites who endure the cruelty of anarchists, live through the Stalinist terror, welcome the invading German army in 1943, survive the Great Trek into Germany and the assaults of the victorious Soviets, and finally find sanctuary in Paraguay. This is not, however, a story with a peaceful or triumphalist ending. A leading character in the novel, Karin, feels stifled by what she interprets as the cultural rigidity of the Paraguayan Mennonite pioneers. She loves her Oma – grandmother – who has endured so much, but Karin herself is bursting with blank rage: "By God, I am cheated."

*The Wanderers* is a semi-autobiographical novel. Karin's pain and sense of alienation is very likely what Ingrid Rimland herself experienced as a young woman in the Paraguayan Mennonite colony of Volendam.

She was born in 1936 in Ukraine. Her father disappeared into the Gulag when she was a mere five years old. At the age of about seven, Ingrid's family was enduring the miseries of flight to Europe with the retreating German army, only to experience the final shockwaves

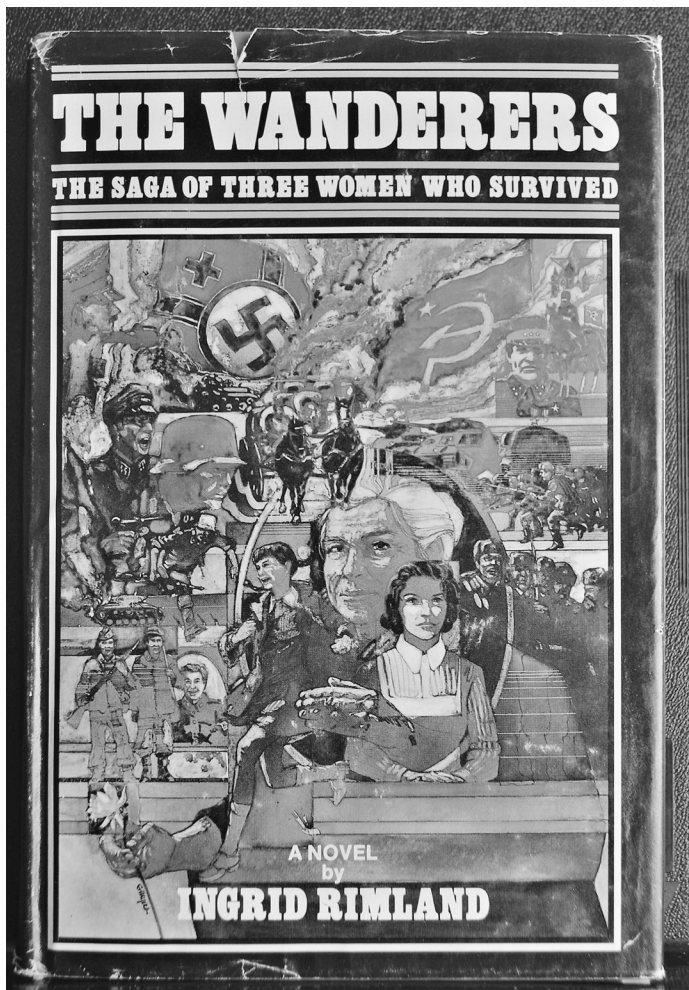


Ingrid Rimland, as pictured on the inside cover of her book *The Wanderers*

of the war as Germany collapsed. They lived as refugees for several years before the offer of shelter in Paraguay in 1948. How could a young girl suffer so much and not be severely traumatized?

In Paraguay Ingrid married and bore a son, but she was apparently never happy there. By 1960 she and her husband had immigrated to St. Catharines, Ontario, where she had a second son. In 1967 the family moved again, this time to California. Rimland earned a doctorate in education at the University of the Pacific, centred in Stockton. She was a driven individual, working as an educational consultant in school districts encompassing more than forty schools; at the same time, she ran a private practice in child psychology. In 1977 she published *The Wanderers*. The novel won the California Literature Medal Award for best fiction, and was distributed in hardcover as well as in a softcover mass-market paperback edition (Bantam Books).

Rimland never again achieved the same level of writing success. Her second book, *The Furies and the Flame* (1984), is an autobiography dealing with her struggles as an immigrant and the mother of a child with a disability. In her third book, *Demon Doctor*, Rimland seems to be drifting into emotionally unstable territory. The volume purports to tell the story of her hunt for the notorious German war criminal Josef Mengele. Rimland claims that Mengele had lived in the Paraguayan Mennonite colony of Volendam under an assumed name, but her evidence is sketchy and the book reportedly poorly written.



In the 1990s, Rimland met Holocaust denier Ernst Zündel, who was living in Canada. A friendship ensued, and then marriage. The couple moved to Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, where they continued agitating for the extreme right. Ingrid managed a website for her husband, the *Zundelsite*. Zündel was deported from the United States to Canada and then to Germany, where he was convicted of Holocaust denial and sentenced to five years in prison. A German arrest warrant was issued for Ingrid Rimland Zündel as well. The Mennonite connection continued, despite Rimland's rejection of her ethnic past: Bruce Leichty, a Californian Mennonite lawyer, helped in Zündel's defence. It might be noted that Holocaust denial is a crime in Germany but not in North America. Leichty based his defence on the right to free speech.

Perhaps the traumatized young woman, severed from community connections, had become, in later life, an individual profoundly in need of community affirmation. The extreme right may have provided Rimland with a substitute for her Mennonite past. Her final publication, a trilogy entitled *Lebensraum* (1998), was, according to one reviewer, "permeated with anti-Semitism and ro-

mantic German nationalism" (Juhnke 1).

Ingrid Rimland died October 12, 2017, a few months after her husband had passed away. The Canadian Association for Free Expression, known for its defence of "white nationalism," held a memorial for her in Toronto. Their website posted that "the memorial ended with one of the theme songs of the free speech movement, the old German folk song *Die Gedanken sind frei* [Thoughts Are Free]" (CAFE 2).

Despite her brilliant first novel, Mennonites have understandably been dismissive of Rimland. James Juhnke, professor emeritus at Bethel College, Kansas, condemns her harshly, writing, "There is no doubt what Rimland believes about the Mennonites, the people of her ethnic origin. She holds them in contempt. The North American Mennonites who brought the Russian-German refugees to Paraguay, she says, 'held us hostage in the bush for the sake of punishment and penitence.' The Mennonite Central Committee forced the refugees 'to kneel and pray in the MCC-approved way – or else we weren't fed'" (Juhnke 2).

It could be argued, though, that Rimland's views may hold some validity, and might have been disparaged because of her late-life extreme right affiliation. A disconnect did indeed exist between Paraguayan Mennonites and their North American sponsors, and the wealthier cousins must bear some responsibility for that reality. Whatever the truth of the matter, the profound trauma of Rimland's early life was not eased by the isolation of Paraguayan Mennonite colonies, nor by the vast gulf between prosperous North American Mennonites and the struggling pioneers.

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## Joining and Leaving the Mennonite Community

### A Genealogical Perspective

#### Part 4: The Old-Flemish and Frisian Mennonites of Poland and Volhynia

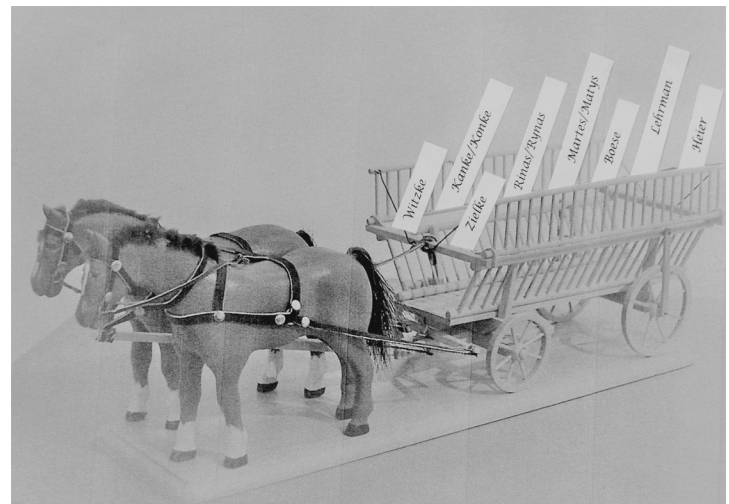
By Glenn H. Penner (gpenner@uoguelph.ca)

Mennonites from West Prussia began settling in the Mazovia region of Poland, near Warsaw, in the 1770s and 1780s. [1, 2, 3] The exact dates for the establishment of these communities are unknown. Prussian Mennonites first settled in the Polish province of Volhynia in 1791, establishing the village of Michalin. In 1795, as part of the Third Partition of Poland, this region became part of the Russian province of Volhynia.

The Old-Flemish Mennonites have their origins in the Przechovka congregation in what was once West Prussia. The entire Przechovka congregation moved to the Molotschna colony in 1818-1822 and established the village of Alexanderwohl. Before that, this congregation established three daughter communities: Brenkenhofswald in Brandenburg, Prussia, in 1765 (discussed in Part 3 of this series [4]); the Deutsch Wymyschle congregation in the Polish province of Mazovia, near Warsaw; and the Karolswald/Antonovka congregation in Volhynia. Between 1874 and 1906 nearly the entire Karolswald/Antonovka congregation(s) moved to the Kansas and the Dakota territories.

The Frisian Mennonites who settled in Mazovia and Volhynia came from the West Prussian congregations of Montau, Schönsee, Tragheimerweide and Thorn. In Mazovia, the Frisians established the congregation of Deutsch Kazun. In Volhynia the Old-Flemish originally lived in the Michalin area. By 1803 the Old-Flemish had moved to a new location and started the Karolswald/Antonovka congregation. They were replaced by Frisians from the Montau congregation in Prussia who stayed in Michalin until the 1870s, when the entire congregation immigrated to Kansas and formed the Gnadenburg congregation.

By the early 1900s there were essentially no Low-German Mennonites left in Volhynia. Those few who stayed behind joined the nearby Swiss Mennonite or German congregations. At the time that the Volhynian Mennonites were leaving for the US, a large part of the



Model of wagon and horses from the Mennonite Heritage Museum. Photo montage: Julia M. Toews

Mazovian Mennonite group also left. The Deutsch Wymyschle Old-Flemish and Deutsch Kazun Frisian congregations of Poland ceased to exist at the end of the Second World War as these people fled west, with most ending up in South America or Canada.

It did not take long before there was some intermarriage between these groups and local Germans.

**Karl Heier (b. ca. 1782; GM#29181).** His origin is unknown. He was likely one of the many Germans living in Mazovia. He married Maria Funk sometime between about 1802 and 1808. He then married Maria Schmidt sometime between 1812 and 1816. He died in the Deutsch Wymyschle area in 1841 at the age of fifty. [6] His son Karl went on to have at least a dozen children, some of whom immigrated to the US in the 1870s. One son, Franz, immigrated from Russia in 1930 and died in Steinbach, Manitoba. [5]

**Benjamin Kanke/Konke (1776-1853; GM#1119557).** He is said to have been born in the Mennonite village of Franzthal in Brandenburg. [5] That is unlikely, as he would not have been a Mennonite and there are no inhabitants of that surname in Franzthal during that time. He more likely was one of the local Germans who married into the Mennonite population, as discussed in Part 3 of this series. [4] Sometime around 1810 he married Katharina Ratzlaff. Sometime around 1814 the family moved from Brandenburg to the Deutsch Wymyschle Mennonite community in Poland. The births of several children, as well his death and that of his wife, are found in local Polish civil registers. [6] Several of his grandchildren moved to Russia. Their descendants seemed to have remained in Russia and some may still be living there.

**Jacob Lehrman (1797-1856; GM#42012).** In 1796 the Lutheran Johann Lehrmann married the Mennonite Trincke (Catharina) Ratzlaff of the Przechovka Old-Flemish congregation. [7] They had one son, Jacob, known to have survived to adulthood. Sometime around 1820 he married the Old-Flemish Mennonite Sara Schmidt. In the mid-1820s Jacob married the Frisian Mennonite Elisabeth Baltzer (1805-????). [6] Jacob and Sara's son Johann immigrated to Volhynia and his children later immigrated to the US. David, son of Jacob and Elisabeth's son David likewise immigrated to the US with a large group of Polish Mennonites.

**Jacob Rinas/Rynas (dates unknown-died before 1833; GM#420137).** Sometime in the early 1790s Jacob Rinas, a local German, married Sara Vogt, a member of the Frisian Mennonite congregation at Deutsch Kazun. They had several children who also later married Mennonites. Daughter Sara married Andreas Nickel in 1821 [6]; daughter Agnetha married Jacob Matis. [6] Son Paul married the German Christina Ochmann. [6] After this generation the Rinas name disappears from the Mennonite community.

**Peter Witzke (dates unknown; GM#860088).** He was born around 1805 and married Elisabeth Knels (Kornelsen) sometime between about 1826 and 1830. His origin is unknown, but it should be noted that there were others named Witzke in the area. He was still alive when his children Elisabeth and Samuel died in 1866. His sons Heinrich and Michael immigrated to the US in 1875. Grandson Peter (GM#35272) moved to the US in 1900 and great grandson Friedrich (GM#136687) immigrated to Canada in 1928 and ended up in Alberta. [5]

**Jacob Martes/Matys (dates unknown; GM#646796).** This family name has frequently been incorrectly given as Martens. Various records clearly show that the name was originally written as Martes and later as Matys, Mathies, etc. Polish civil records indicate that this family name existed in Mazovia from at least the late 1700s on and was not a "Mennonite" surname. Jacob Martes was born sometime before 1785 and died between 1814 and 1833. Around 1801 (give or take a year), he married the Mennonite Anna Pauls (1781-1833). Pauls was a common Frisian Mennonite surname. According to the 1776 census of West Prussia there were no Pauls families in the Montau, Schönsee or Thorn Mennonite congregations, from where the vast majority of Polish Frisian Menno-

nite originated. [8] Most Pauls families were in the Tiensdorf or Traghaimerweide congregations. When Anna (Pauls) Martes died in 1833 she was survived by her second husband, Samuel Winter (a non-Mennonite), and children Susanna (30 – b. ca. 1803), Jacob (26 – b. ca. 1807) and Peter (19 – b. ca. 1814). [6] Later records show that the children were all born in Poland. Son Jacob was married to Agnetha Rinas in 1833 and remarried to Eve Kasper in 1849. [6] His grandson Eduard Matis immigrated to Paraguay in 1948 and later moved to Canada. He died in Abbotsford, BC, in 1955. Members of this family still live in British Columbia. [5]

**Martin (born bef. 1785; GM#280519) and Gottlieb (bef. 1788 – 1832; GM#10921) Boese.** It seems likely that the Mennonite Boese (or Base) families are all descended from either Martin or Gottlieb Boese. There is essentially no information on these two. What little information that is available is sketchy and suspect. It is unknown if these two men were related. That could easily be answered by Y-DNA testing of Boese male descendants. At some point during the early years in Volhynia the Boeses joined the Mennonites. Nearly all Mennonite Boese families immigrated from Russia to the US and, although not a common name, it is well known in Kansas, Nebraska and Oklahoma.

**Jacob Zielke (ca. 1782 - ???; GM#81107).** On Nov. 5, 1808 Jacob Zilke married the pregnant Catharina Pankratz, daughter of Andreas Pankratz of Saade, Poland. [9] She is likely #43085 in the GRANDMA database. Two years later Samuel Cylka (age 2), son of Jakob Cylka (age 25) and Catharina Pankratz (age 27), dies. [6] Jacob and Catharina Zielke are certainly the Jacob (age 34) and Catharina (age 33) Zalke who were among the Mennonites on the Volinsky estate in Volhynia counted in the 1816 Russian census. [10] The census also indicates that Jacob was 30 years old in the 1812 census. This would mean that they immigrated from Poland to Volhynia around 1811, give or take a year. That census shows only a daughter Catharina, age 5. The GRANDMA database shows that they had a son, Jacob, born around 1816, who moved to the Molotschna colony sometime in the late 1830s or early 1840s. In 1875 Jacob immigrated to the US and died in Oklahoma in 1893. He seems to have been the ancestor of the Mennonite Zielke families living in North America. [5]

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3. [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Deutsch-Wymysle\\_\(Masovian\\_Voivodeship,\\_Poland\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Deutsch-Wymysle_(Masovian_Voivodeship,_Poland))
4. Penner, Glenn H. "Joining and Leaving the Mennonite Community: A Genealogical Perspective, Part 3: From Brandenburg, Prussia to Gnadenfeld, Russia." *Roots and Branches*, Vol. 27. No. 1, 20-21.
5. GM# refers to the person's number in the GRANDMA genealogical database. For more information on the GRANDMA database see <https://www.grandmaonline.org/gmolstore/pc/Overview-d1.htm>
6. This information comes from the various Polish Civil Registers available for the Mazovian province of Poland.

- For examples see Geneteka baza Polskiego Towarzystwa Genealogicznego ([genealodzy.pl](http://genealodzy.pl)), <https://metryki.genealodzy.pl/metryki.php> and <https://metryki.genbaza.pl/genbaza,list,159545,1>
7. [http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/Przechowka\\_Church\\_Register.html](http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/Przechowka_Church_Register.html)
  8. The 1776 census can be found at [http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/1776\\_West\\_Prussia\\_Census.pdf](http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/1776_West_Prussia_Census.pdf)
  9. Lutheran church records of Iłow, Poland. See [http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/poland/Ilow\\_Lutheran\\_Records.pdf](http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/poland/Ilow_Lutheran_Records.pdf)
  10. See [http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/Census\\_of\\_Mennonites\\_at\\_the\\_Volinsky\\_Estate\\_1816.pdf](http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/Census_of_Mennonites_at_the_Volinsky_Estate_1816.pdf)

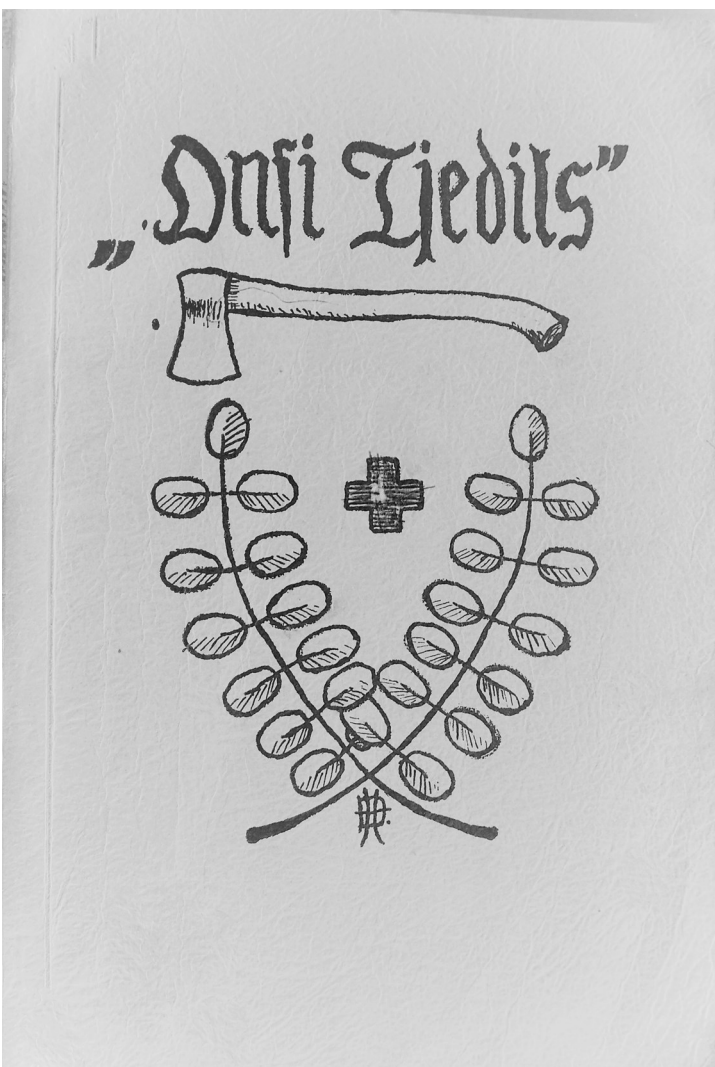
## Account of *Forstei* and *Sanitäter* experiences: Excerpt from *Onsi Tjedils*, by W. W. Schroeder.

In Waldemar Günther, David P. Heidebrecht, & Gerhard J. Peters, *Onsi Tjedils: Ersatzdienst der Mennoniten in Russland unter den Romanows* ["Our Fellows": Alternative Service in Russia under the Romanovs], Yarrow: Columbia Press, 1966. pp. 120-123.

Translation and commentary by Al Hiebert

*Looking up material about my maternal grandfather D. Goertzen, I read his brief but not very enlightening account of his Forstei and Sanitäter experiences in Onsi Tjedils (pp. 100-101). Intrigued by the personal accounts, I scanned the entire book. W. W. Schroeder's story certainly caught my eye. Have others investigated the account (other accounts) of the following incident? The "668" number seems unlikely.*

Between September 1915 and March 1917, 668 Mennonite men ranging in age from nineteen to forty-three were sent to the Kostroma-Shatka area in central Russia. Their assignment was to construct a factory. The product of the factory was to be methyl spirits. This product was shipped elsewhere and turned into poison gas for the war effort. Conditions at first were very difficult: the supervisor was a Pole, hostile to all things German; it was extremely cold [-34 is mentioned for 1916]; food was poor and served only twice daily; drink was snow; and



the work shift was twelve hours. Yet the health of the men did not suffer [*Keine Krankheit*]. By 1916, the situation was much improved – barracks had been completed, as well as a good kitchen. One could work using his own

“...what kind of people are these? They don’t swear; they don’t beat us with rifles when we are exhausted; and they have no guns.”

skills, including office work. The Polish supervisor left, as well as a contingent of the oldest workers, including Mennonites, although some of these “older ones” were deemed essential for the project and called back. There was some reorganization due to the political upheaval early in 1917.

Nearby the work camp was a huge prisoner of war camp: four thousand chiefly Slav soldiers who had served in the Austro-Hungarian army. They were guarded and put to work [cutting birch into cordwood] by Russian soldiers. The guards were very rough and there was frequent violence. Then someone by the name of Abr. Albrecht [no other information] suggested to the Russian soldiers that they should draw back, and that he himself, with twenty unarmed Mennonite men, would run and secure the POW camp. At first the officers only laughed – it was simply impossible that a few unarmed men guarding four thousand prisoners could keep any kind of order. [*Da erbot sich ein Abr. Albrecht bei der Verwaltung, dieses Lager zu übernehmen, wenn ihm erlaubt werde, zwanzig mennonitische Kerle, die er selbst aussuchen wolle, anzustellen, und die Soldaten dann entfernt wurden.*] But finally, they agreed to try it. [*Schließlich ging man auf den Versuch an*]. So, on a notable morning, the prisoners, identified only by a number, came under the control of twenty Mennonites with the armed Russian soldiers standing to one side. The situation remained calm, so after a

few days the soldiers left, and the Mennonites took charge of the entire POW camp. [*Wie ging es doch so ruhig zu! Nach etlichen Tagen verliessen die Soldaten – und wir übernahmen das ganze Lager.*] We soon discovered that boots, gloves and food ordered by the government had been withheld from the POWs by the soldiers. Probably a lot of the missing items disappeared into the pockets of chief officers. [*Jedenfalls ging vieles davon in die Taschen der Vorgesetzten.*]

When winter came, our prisoners, who worked in swampy conditions, were adequately dressed, with good boots and gloves. As a result, we won the trust and respect – and in some cases, even the love – of the POWs. We had no great difficulty in maintaining order, and that without weapons. [*Wir hatten daher auch keine Mühe, ohne Waffen Ordnung zu halten.*] Nor did work productivity suffer. Some German prisoners added to the camp were amazed by the situation and asked about the Mennonites: what kind of people are these? They don’t swear; they don’t beat us with rifles when we are exhausted; and they have no guns. [*Sie fluchen nicht; sie stoßen uns nicht mit Flintkolben wenn wir nicht weiter kommen – und überhaupt unbewaffnet.*]

*AH: An amazing story. Surely out of the 668 Mennonites referred to, some could confirm this account. Nineteen eighteen – the end of World War I – was not far off. How long were Mennonite guards kept on duty?*



The Red Cross building where Mennonite *Sanitaeter* were trained in Dnepropetrovsk (formerly Ekaterinoslav), now Dnipro  
Photo: Louise Price, 2012





Two sides of a medal minted in Imperial Russia to commemorate the inoculation of Catherine the Great and her son Paul against smallpox by Dr. Dimsdale in 1768. Photo source: *Catherine the Great; Life and Legend* by John T. Alexander, 1989, between pp. 178-179. Used with permission.

## From Mennonite Heritage Archives

By Julia Toews

Immunization against disease got a boost thanks to Russia's ruler, Catherine the Great. Smallpox killed hundreds of thousands of people every year including in Russia. Catherine heard about an experimental treatment and insisted on being used as a guinea pig in a trial procedure in 1768 that – if successful – would protect her from smallpox and signal to her subjects that it was safe. Doctor Thomas Dimsdale (1712-1800) of Britain performed the trial procedure, but he was afraid for his life and kept a horse and carriage waiting, so if the procedure went wrong, he could make a quick getaway. The experiment was a success and as a result, many in Russia were immunized, including Mennonites. In the archives are lists of Mennonite children between the ages of 6 months and 12 years who were immunized in 1809 and 1814 (transcribed list at <http://mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/1814c.htm>). The immunizations saved many lives and helped the Mennonite population flourish in Russia.

“...[he] kept a horse and carriage waiting, so if the procedure went wrong, he could make a quick getaway.”

## Here I Stand: Luther at Worms

By Robert Martens (all translations by the author)

I stood, a twenty-six-year-old backpacker, in the shadow of the Worms cathedral, overwhelmed by the moment. Nearby was a plaque stating that, on this spot, Martin Luther uttered those famous words: “*Hier stehe ich. Ich kann nicht anders. Gott helfe mir. Amen.*” [Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me. Amen.] The potency of that moment emanated partly from the majesty of the cathedral, St. Peter's, built in the stark Romanesque style with round arches and towers and dedicated in the 1200s. But Luther's words hit home as well. The strength with which he acted at Worms, crystallized in his closing words, brought me close to tears. I was reliving history.

This year marks the five hundredth anniversary of the famous 1521 Diet of Worms to which Luther was summoned to defend his contentious ideas. He had already written and posted his Ninety-Five Theses in Wittenberg in 1517, but it has been argued that the Protestant Reformation really began after the permanent rupture with the Catholic Church that followed Luther's defence at Worms. In 1520, Pope Leo X had issued a papal bull which summarized the errors, as he saw them, contained in Luther's Theses. Luther's skill with words, his pugnacious personality, and his accusations against the medieval Church shocked, and probably enraged, the pope, who was well aware that the churchly kingdom was cracking at the seams. And so, Charles V (Kaiser Karl), emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, whose power extended to Austria, Spain, and the Netherlands as well, called together the Diet of Worms, an assembly of the mighty who would pronounce the truth – or rather, almost certainly, the untruth – of Luther's accusations. Charles' power, however, was not unlimited, much as he might have wished it to be: Prince Frederick II, elector of Saxony, worked out an arrangement that, if Luther were to appear, he would be granted safe passage.

Luther arrived at Worms on April 16. His health was not the best; Luther suffered from chronic constipation. In Wittenberg he had written that God had “struck him with enormous pain in my rear. My bowel movements are so hard that I have to force myself with all my strength until I sweat to bring it out” (qtd. in Schade 2).

The stress alone would have been enough to make him ill. If he were to be found a heretic, burning at the stake might well be the outcome. Perhaps, though, he

had not quite yet faced the terrible consequences, because when he entered Worms, he still expected a disputation. The papal legate and the emperor had no such illusions: this assembly was called to refute his arguments.

Luther's illness and fear were obvious on April 17, the first day of his interrogation. He appeared so overcome by the experience that his voice could barely be heard. The assembly demanded that he recant what he had written in his books. Luther responded rather quietly, saying that he could not simply spontaneously recant, because the matter "involved God's Word, which is the highest thing in heaven and on earth" (qtd. in Schade 3). Charles V offered him a day to think it over. Privately, he mocked

Luther and his weak demeanour, remarking that this shy monk "will not make a heretic of me" (qtd. in Schade 3).

Overnight, everything changed. Luther was visited in his room by dozens of knights, the people in the streets celebrated his presence, and he finally realized that the Diet wanted only his recantation or his death. He reappeared at the assembly a transformed man. Luther began his presentation in German, then switched to Latin, a language Charles V barely understood. His books, he proclaimed, were in line with Scripture; his accusations against the papacy were grounded in the Holy Spirit; and he would be the first to throw himself into the flames if anyone could prove that his words were not biblical.

The presiding officer, Johann von Eck, replied coldly. "Martin," he said, "there is no one of the heresies which have torn the bosom of the church, which has not derived its origin from the various interpretations of the Scripture" (qtd. in "Diet" 3). Luther was undeterred. Back

**"Because my conscience is bound with the Word of God, I cannot, and will not, recant anything, since it is dangerous, and insupportable, to act against my conscience. God help me. Amen."**



Martin Luther, 1532. Photo source: Wikimedia Commons

in his quarters, he euphorically raised his arms in victory: "*Ich bin hindurch! Ich bin hindurch!*" [I've done it!] he exulted (qtd. in Schade 3). But Luther's life was now essentially forfeit. He left for his home in Wittenberg, but was waylaid in a fake attack by robbers, who were actually the men of Frederick III, and given safe haven in Wartburg Castle. On May 25, 1521, Charles V issued the famous Edict of Worms: "We forbid anyone from this time forward to dare, either by words or by deeds, to receive, defend, sustain, or favour the said Martin Luther. On the contrary, we want him to be apprehended and punished as a notorious heretic (qtd. in "Diet" 3).

Anabaptists must have been watching closely. Charles was their clear enemy, their persecutor, and "any enemy of my enemy is my friend," as they say. It did not work out that way. Luther turned against these people whom he regarded as revolutionary rabble. Anabaptists not only met death at the hands of Catholics, but Lutherans as well.

In 2010, a global Lutheran assembly in Stuttgart, Germany, officially asked forgiveness for their harassment of Anabaptists. "We remember," said Bishop Mark Hanson, "how some of our most honoured Reformation leaders defended this persecution in the name of faithfulness" (qtd. in Gordon 2). Mennonite delegates spoke graciously in response, perhaps aware that there exists no church without a shadow side. Danisa Ndlovu, then president of Mennonite World Conference (MWC), said, "I think it would be naïve to say that this is an end to it.... For me, it is a beginning. It is a process that all of us have to work on, all of us have to pass on to a new generation" (qtd. in Gordon 2-3). Larry Miller, at the time the general secretary of MWC, dug even deeper. "At times," he said, "we have claimed the martyr tradition as a badge of Christian superiority. We sometimes nurtured an identity in self-victimization that could foster a sense of self-righteousness and arrogance, blinding us to the frailties and failures that are also deeply woven into our tradition" (qtd. in Gordon 3).

And now to return to that young backpacker at Worms, who also had some illusions. Luther's famous words, inscribed on that plaque, were almost certainly never spoken, and there is no sign of them in the Diet transcripts. Nevertheless, they became a watchword, but a mythical one, to new generations of Lutherans and

other Protestants. Martin Luther's closing statement was, however, powerful enough on its own: "*Da mein Gewissen in den Worten Gottes gefangen ist, kann ich und will nichts widerrufen, weil es gefährlich und unmöglich ist, etwas gegen das Gewissen zu tun. Gott helfe mir. Amen.*" ["Because my conscience is bound with the Word of God, I cannot, and will not, recant anything, since it is dangerous, and insupportable, to act against my conscience. God help me. Amen."]

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## Convincing P. E. Trudeau to Change the Law

By Hilda J. Born

*Because we eat so well in Canada, few people are concerned about our food supply. Suddenly, at the beginning of COVID-19, some folks couldn't find flour and yeast on the grocery shelves because others hoarded. The regular abundance is due to the Lord's and people's provisions. Forty years ago, Canadian women helped maintain this stability by urging the government to implement equality laws for all, including female farmers and food producers.*

In the recent North America Free Trade talks, Canadian food, namely the dairy industry, played a pivotal part. Final acceptance hinged on this issue, showing the economic importance of food and its producers. Before food gets to their tables, Canadians rely on computers and giant machines to move tonnes of edible products.

But to get food products off the field or out of the barn needs many hands to plant, pick, pluck, package, direct and ship. A lot of this work is done by women. However, in Canada, equal agricultural male/female rights did not exist until 1980.

I went to Ottawa with a mission because I was angry with the status quo. It irked me to have to get a lawyer to explain and sign for me each time we applied for a farm loan – although my husband and son did not need to do so. Many other women felt the same, and spoke up about this discriminatory situation. In some areas of Canada, namely Quebec, married farm women's status resembled



Hilda J. Born, still vibrant. Photo: Julia M. Toews

that of chattel. Although most women in Canada could legally vote since around 1920, farm women could not get bank loans or contribute to the Canada Pension Plan. Only in 1972 were the inheritance laws changed so that a daughter could inherit the same as a son.

Many women, and quite a few men, believed that laws needed to change so that the immense input and knowledge of farm women would be recognized. As the lone BC dairy representative, I helped to change the law. Barbara Lawrence of the Cattlebells, Christine Dendy from the Fruit Growers Marketing Board, Kathy Floritto of the Egg Marketing Board, Jean Mitchell, a fruit and vegetable farmer, and Betty Pelly from the Princeton Women's Institute were the other BC delegates. On December 2, 1980, I met these ladies while waiting at the

Vancouver Airport. Betty voiced the purpose of this special December trip to Ottawa: "To get together to see if we can maintain a good relationship between food producers and consumers."

From the Ottawa Airport our group of delegates took the same shuttle bus as parliamentary employees. Across the aisle from me, one of the women struck up a conversation with a civil servant. After a brief chat with her, he remarked, "You must be the only farm woman on this bus!" I couldn't let that pass and replied, "No sir, she is not. I am also a farmer, and these ladies beside me are similarly employed."

"Well, you sure don't look like it," was his rejoinder as he stepped off and joined the briefcase crowd. We were left to wonder what he expected us to look like. Did he think we would head to the Chateau Laurier in our barn boots?

Our convention was a co-operative meeting between industry and government. Economic and political issues affecting Canada's food research, education, water rights, taxation, trespass and urban-rural understanding were discussed. Farm women from each province were in attendance.

The Honourable Eugene Whelan, Minister of Agriculture (who liked to wear a green Stetson) opened the conference. He was urged to help put through legal changes:

- A. The Income Tax Act must allow salaries for farm women. The amount of remuneration should reflect equal partnership in farming.
- B. The Canada Pension Plan must be amended to allow participation of farm women.
- C. The Unemployment Insurance Act should be changed to grant eligibility to farm women.
- D. All financial institutions must be compelled to extend equal credit.
- E. Discrimination against married partnerships must end. Wives have the same rights as non-married partnerships.



Hilda Born at the conference. This photo appeared with a corresponding article in the January/February 1981 issue of *Butterfat*, the periodical for the Fraser Valley Milk Producers Association. Photo courtesy of the author.

It was heady and intimidating to hear and meet dignitaries like Senator Martha Bielish, Charlotte Whitton, former mayor of Ottawa, and other influential figures.

The intense sessions didn't give us much time to discover the city. In that first week in December, Ottawa glistened in its crisp frozen beauty. The snow crunched under our feet. Little white lights were sprinkled all over the trees on Sparks Street. Skaters skimmed along the Rideau Canal.

Heading home proved to be another challenge. Mechanical problems detoured our plane to Edmonton. From there I called home about the delay. Our daughter answered, "Dad went to the airport two hours ago. The boys and I are home because school is closed. We have lots of snow." I found this to be true on our late arrival in Vancouver. I had plenty of time to give my husband a full report of the conference on our slow ride home through the Arctic landscape.

It was an arduous trip, but when the news of the phenomenal success of the conference arrived a few days later, it made it all worthwhile. On December 14, 1980, the federal government under Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau took action on our first five resolutions, A to E, and passed them into law. They would also apply to the entire previous year!

That pre-Christmas change in law was not as widely promoted or publicized as the 2018 cannabis industry law change under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has been. However, it still affects most Canadians, including me, at almost every meal we eat.

*A Saskatchewan Mennonite grain producer was also active in the talks.*

"Did he think we would head to the Chateau Laurier in our barn boots?"



**Thomas Bergen. *Home Together: Student Ministry at the Menno Simons Centre. Victoria: Friesen Press, 2020.***

Reviewed by Robert Martens

In 1986, a convent belonging to the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, located in Vancouver's Point Grey area, was purchased and converted into a student residence. The building was now the Menno Simons Centre, popularly known as "Menno" by the two dozen University of British Columbia students who lived there while attending school. Menno was owned by the Pacific Centre for Discipleship Association (PCDA), a non-profit that relied largely on word-of-mouth for funding.

These are the dry bones, the facts, behind the story. In his book *Home Together*, Thomas Bergen writes that Menno meant much more, both to residents and the resident coordinators (he has been both). The Centre was a "sacred place of home" (viii), he writes, a focal point for community and growth, and was important for that reason, despite its smallness – one could easily drive by and not notice it.

"Home" is the key word in Bergen's book. In the first chapter, he argues that young adults have inherited a world where they are "alone together" (20) and are afflicted with an acute feeling of homelessness in a hostile world. "For my generation – experiencing relational disconnection, geographical transience, and existential homelessness – perhaps Jesus's words in John 14:23 hit closer to home: 'We will come to them and make our home with them'" (6). Premoderns, writes Bergen, created a sense of home in a sometimes-hostile world by founding communities of shared meaning. In our post-modern era, this sense has been lost. Emerging adults are told that meaning "is not to be found in the world as such but in their authoring minds, which impose mean-

ing onto the world where there is none. Is it any wonder that they report feelings of homelessness?" (23)

In the next chapters of this fine little book – part history, part sociology, part meditation – Bergen describes how Menno Simons Centre provided a genuine home for young adults. The chapter titles all describe "home" from a unique perspective.

*Spiritual Home:* Contemporary notions of spirituality feature "an uninvolved God, a live and let live moralism, and an instrumental view of religion as therapy for individuals" (32). At Menno, students were encouraged to practise spiritual discipline and to view genuine spirituality as seeing the divine image in each other. Living together can be chaotic and grinding, and always, argues Bergen, implies hard work.

*Supportive Home:* Menno residents were supported by such things as shared goods, common spaces, small group activities, and subsidized rents.

*Sabbatical Home:* The university, Bergen writes, is substantially a place of frenetic activity with little space for introspection. Menno provided quiet hours, games, and common

meals as buffers against hyperactivity.

*Safe Home:* Bergen draws a distinction between the safety of control, managing the environment, and the safety of commitment, learning how to live and feel secure in community. This involves the difficult task of active, purposive peacemaking among residents. This "runs counter to some of our most cherished Canadian cultural values, such as busyness, moral non-interference, surface niceness, and fear of confrontation" (123).

*Spurring Home:* At Menno, emerging adults, says Bergen, were guided through the difficult years of transition to full adulthood by learning the value of discipline. He refers to Mother Teresa, who taught that "growing in holiness has more to do with consistently extending small acts of charity to others and less to do with occasional epic acts of piety" (165).

*Sending Home:* Political involvement, writes Bergen, is fundamental to our lives. Menno hopefully stimulated students to social activism, but cautioned them to steer away from the extremes of excessive state reliance or



disproportionate individualism.

In a brief epilogue, Kevin Hiebert, a major force behind the institution, reports that the Menno Simons Centre has been shut down after thirty-four years. This, however, is really a new beginning. In partnership with the MCC Legacy Trust Fund, the proceeds from the sale of the Centre are being used to build a new residence near Regent College on the UBC campus. The new building will have room for seventy students, and include rental housing and space for institutional facilities.

Clearly, a genuine “home” for students on campus remains important to its organizers, and perhaps especially to members of the Point Grey Inter-Mennonite Fellowship, who have been consistently supportive. Thomas Bergen’s book is a claim for Menno’s importance, and for the principles it represents. “After experiencing how well Christian community living can work and learning about many of the bold Christian community experiments in the past, it was somewhat shocking for me to realize how rare and special communities like Menno are. I was left wondering why there aren’t intentional communities like Menno on every major university campus” (4).

***European Mennonites and the Holocaust.* Mark Jantzen and John D. Thiesen, editors. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. 337 pp.**

Reviewed by David Giesbrecht

When the Deuteronomist reminded his readers of the certainty that their sins would find them out, far from moralizing, he was teaching them an inescapable principle of history. Undoubtedly, the perpetrators who feature in this publication would be astounded over the details divulged by these authors, since the twelve chapters in this book collectively shine the spotlight on the infamy of those European and Russian Mennonites who gave themselves to the Nazi and NKVD (Soviet secret police) depredations during the 1930s and ’40s.

A striking characteristic of this publication is the fastidious research invested by each author. Thus, for instance, the very thoughtful introduction written by Doris Bergen, Mark Jantzen, and John Thiesen, which runs to twenty-two pages, is buttressed by sixty-six citations. And, not to be outdone, the first chapter is itself preceded

by a further introduction, also gilded with numerous footnotes. To enhance credibility, each chapter in this book reflects a thorough dependence on written and/or oral sources.

From the outset, the culpability of Mennonites is a central preoccupation of the writers. In “Mennonites, War Crimes, and the Holocaust,” David Gerhard Rempel (the outstanding historian of the Russian Mennonite past of his era, according to GAMEO) exposes a morbid barbarism, including that of the mass murderer, Heinrich Wiens, who ironically, described himself as “*gottgläubig*.” In 1937 he was transferred to Reinhard Heydrich’s internal party service. For his zealous work with the Nazi SS, Wiens was awarded several medals (58). In the summer of 1942 Wiens was again transferred, this time to Mobile Killing Squad D in Ukraine, “and given more leeway in organizing his own operations” (59). In a single area where Wiens committed his crimes, Soviet officers later claimed to have exhumed 6,300 skeletons.

Colin Neufeldt unleashes his well-honed research skills with a case study of the Deutsch Wymyschle Mennonite leaders during 1939 and 1940, in the immediate aftermath of the German invasion of Poland. Aspiring locals like Peter Ratzlaff, Peter Pauls, and Erich Ratzlaff wasted little time in clamouring for leadership positions, and enriching themselves with houses and lands confiscated from Jews bound for concentration camps. Particularly austere, according to this author, was Erich Ratzlaff (186 ff.), who became the mayor of Gąbin and in that role was feared and hated by those around him. Without doubt, for ordinary Mennonites, the options for saner choices were few. Minna Pauls would later recall, “If you were seen talking to a Jew, then the Germans would treat you like a Jew. Mennonites did not help Jews or hide Jews. It was too dangerous to be associated with the Jews” (qtd. in Neufeldt 184).

Dmytro Myeshkov, in “Mennonites in Ukraine before, during, and immediately after the Second World War,” is well aware of the soul-destroying cruelty waged by the NKVD on the citizenry, sometimes aided and abetted by Mennonite volunteers. For example, David Wiens was an NKVD secret police lieutenant “who expanded and led a network of agents among his own people” (205).

With the arrival of the “New Order” that came with the German invasion of the USSR, rank-and-file Mennonites welcomed their liberators and eagerly took on positions of civic responsibility offered by their German

military protectors. Ignominiously, some also became fulsome participants in Nazi atrocities. As other authors do in this volume, Myeshkov singles out Heinrich Wiens and Rudolf Federau (21 ff.) as efficient killers. Maria Harms moved into the well-stocked apartment of an evicted Jewish family. Maria Epp “enjoyed strutting her ‘Jewish plunder’.” Dr. Ivan Klassen became a willing foot-soldier for the Nazis, exterminating the handicapped (216-17).

Aileen Friesen’s portrait of Khortytsya and Zaporizhzhia includes accounts of Mennonites who risked their own safety, protecting Jewish victims. Nevertheless, when the German army took control of Ukraine in 1942, traumatized Mennonites had a mountain of scores to settle with their Communist oppressors. And since the Germans were seen as liberators, all too many young Mennonite men succumbed to Nazi ideology in blaming Jews for the terror they had lived with since the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917.

Summarily, the value of this book reaches well beyond telling tales of depraved Mennonites. Several chapters reflect on the thinking and rationalizations which emboldened Mennonites to reject historic Anabaptism. Stephen Schroeder explains how, by 1914, Polish Mennonites had jettisoned their traditional values, including pacifism, and synthesized “traditional Mennonite values with German nationalism” together with its strident antisemitism (308). There was then no anomaly for Mennonite families who lived near the Stutthof concentration camp to work as camp guards or use camp inmates as labourers on their own farms.

Arnold Neufeldt-Fast explicates how German Mennonites fashioned a theology which allowed them to escape the venom of Hitler while co-existing with rampant antisemitism. Although cautioned by some other European Mennonites, German leaders wilfully ignored the “the early warning signs” (127). Instead, content with Hitler’s embrace of “positive Christianity,” they

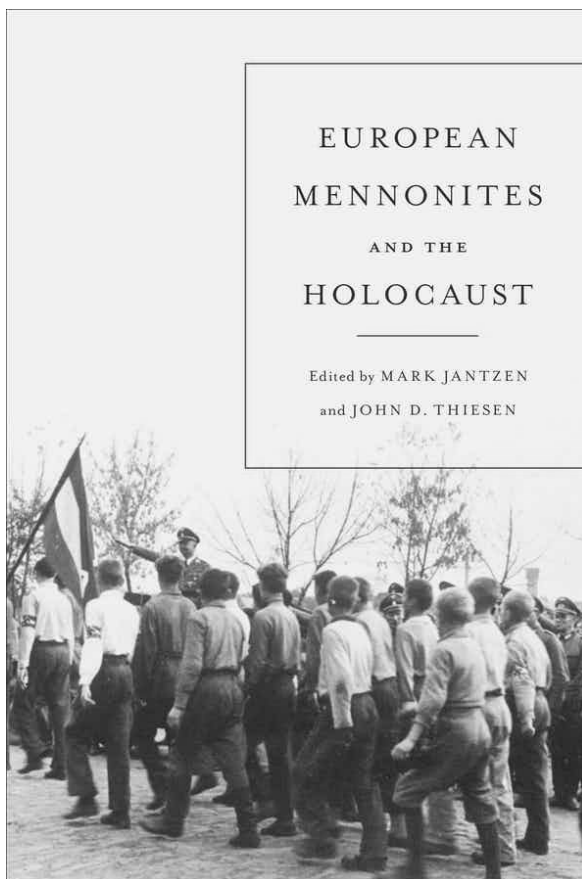
celebrated his rise to power and joined the party in large numbers. Gustav Kraemer wrote that “Jews like parasites had economically choked German farmers to death.” Since Jews “had sinned against the *Volks*” which had offered them hospitality, God was now punishing them (128). And if, in the wash of judgment, some good Jews

were undeservedly annihilated, such were the regrettable ways of restoring justice. Mennonite Elder Johann Enns took pride in the newly awakened German Reich. Incredibly, as Neufeldt-Fast observes, Mennonite leaders of the era managed to “delimit neighbourly love to make space for the most horrific crimes against humanity” (138).

This book will be the more difficult to read for anyone with a direct memory link to its chilling accounts. For all readers, the contents invite disturbing reflections. For instance, was the involvement of European and Ukrainian Mennonites so rampant as to justify the title chosen by the editors, which really indicts them as a group? It certainly appeared that centuries of an Anabaptist heritage were not equal to withstanding the invasive

lure of a charismatic Fuehrer. While choices for dissent were few, based on the evidence offered in this book, the Dietrich Bonhoeffers among Mennonites were largely AWOL. Does a peoplehood necessarily incur blame by their silence in the presence of such invidious evils? In concluding his chapter, Arnold Neufeldt-Fast asks this searing question: “What ... can the facts of Mennonite complicity in the Holocaust tell us about the hidden capacities of present-day life, and about the hidden capacities of present-day Mennonite theology?” (138)

Directly, and certainly implicitly, these writers challenge the prevailing historiography of earlier writers who let it be known that during those dark days, especially so in the Ukraine, Mennonites were “more sinned against than sinning.” Given the contentious nature of these exposures, it may well take additional reflection for a time-tested understanding to emerge on that era.





**Bruno Friesen. *Panzer Gunner: A Canadian in the German 7th Panzer Division, 1944-45*. Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2009. Originally published 2007.**

(See earlier article "Looking for a Home: The Life and Work of Fritz Senn (Gerhard Johann Friesen), 1894-1983," page 10.)

Reviewed by Robert Martens

"Thousands of times, I have been asked, 'What made you go *back* to Germany?' Thousands of times I have replied, 'I didn't go *back*; I was born in Canada and had never been to Germany'" (1). With these words begins Bruno Friesen's memoir on his time spent as a World War II tanker gunner in the German Wehrmacht. Friesen speaks the truth: he and his brother Oscar, both Canadian-born, were sent to Germany while still in their teens by their father, Gerhard Friesen. This is one of those memoirs where truth seems stranger than fiction. Gerhard Friesen, who had fled his home village of Halbstadt in the Ukraine in the 1920s, was well-known in Canada for his German-language poetry written under the pen name of Fritz Senn. In *Panzer Gunner*, Bruno Friesen claims to be still mystified by the motives of his father – to send two young boys to Germany, and in the year 1939!

*Panzer Gunner*, replete with blue language and sexual frankness, is not a book for tender ears. It hardly even qualifies as Mennonite, in fact: Bruno Friesen considers his ethnic group interesting but often speaks of them with bemusement and condescension. And perhaps the author was not as mystified by his father's motives as he claims: Gerhard Johann Friesen was notorious in the Kitchener-Waterloo area for his support of the Adolf Hitler regime. Hence Bruno and Oscar were sent off as a kind of test run, and Gerhard arrived in Germany with the entire family a few months after the boys were sent off from Canada. Gerhard Friesen's loyalty to Germany was such that he never returned to North America. Bruno, however, after years of combat, did return.

Reading *Panzer Gunner* is a disjointed experience: a

story by turns fascinating, disgusting, entertaining, boring, revealing, enigmatic. Bruno and his brother – Oscar was later killed in action in Belgium – arrived in Bremerhaven and were immediately hired out to German farmers as virtual slave labour. Friesen expresses nothing but contempt for his employers. In truth, in this book he displays contempt for nearly everyone; his comrades in the German service are a striking exception.

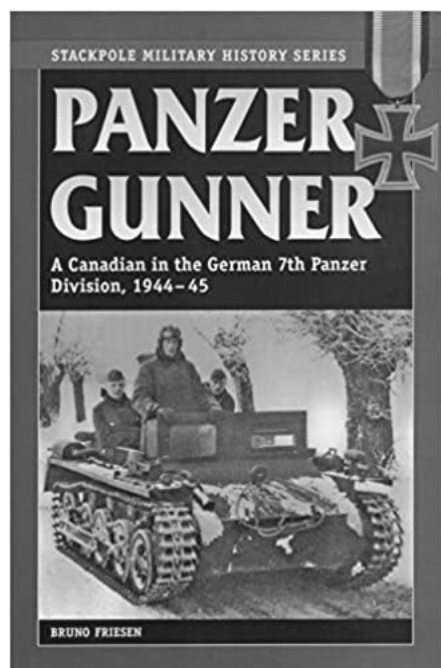
When Gerhard Friesen appeared in Germany and observed how his sons were being treated, he used his connections in the regime to free them from their servitude. Bruno was then able to obtain an electrician's certificate. In 1941, however, with air raids happening daily, Bruno was called to register for the military. He was seventeen. "Half a hundred unclothed young men hung around inside a pub," he writes, "each waiting to take his turn to standing at attention inside the white circle drawn with chalk on the hardwood floor of the bowling alley, part of the premises" (16).

The German equivalent of boot camp followed. Friesen does not mince his words: he loathed it. And well he might, since training consisted mainly of abusing men into abject subservience. Yet Friesen grew to love his "band of brothers," his young regiment of tankers. Before he saw action, though, illness and circumstance kept him from the dreaded eastern front in Russia. Friesen spent

time with his regiment in Italy, Romania and Poland; he tells stories of brothels, drunkenness, and go-by-the-book officers who were known among the men (boys) as *Soldatenklau* [literally, soldier's claw]. The Wehrmacht was a world unto itself: Friesen claims that no tears were shed among his comrades when an assassination attempt was made on Hitler.

In 1944 Friesen and his regiment finally saw action against the invading Russians. The action is described in exquisite detail such as only an insider could do. The stories are horrifying, too, though Friesen – even in the final pages of his book – seems to consider the enemy Russians simply as objects to be obliterated. His own tank had to

be destroyed after suffering a hit: "A damned shame," he writes (69). Friesen's devotion, typical of combatants, is reserved for his regimental comrades and especially for his own tanker squad: "We regretted the deaths of those



six Panzer grenadiers who, like the rest of them, had become dear to us. Those fellows were excellent soldiers, always ready to stand by their brothers, the Panzer men” (87).

After some fighting in Lithuania, Friesen was stationed, along with numerous “Panzer men,” in East Prussia. The land was flooded with refugees, and young German soldiers took advantage. He writes, “In East Prussia some of the guys would get in solid with female refugees, resulting in a --- frenzy at night” (113). *Esprit de corps* at its worst – but it must be remembered that death was just around the corner, waiting. In 1945 Friesen’s team was hit by a mortar. He remembers, “Right after Fehler [one of the eight men] had asked something like, ‘How are the shares doing?’ or ‘How’s the stock market?’ one – just one – unexpected violent explosion in our midst changed all our jollity into stark tragedy. Fehler suddenly lay face down, his cigar crumpled. Fehler looked dead. He was” (170). Three men died; the rest were wounded, including Friesen, who was hit by multiple shell fragments.

Remarkably, with the end of the war in 1945, Friesen never surrendered or served time as a prisoner of war. He worked as a translator/interpreter, made a living on the black market, and was finally granted permission – one wonders how and why – to return to Canada in 1950. Back in Ontario, he was married in the Waterloo-Kitchener United Mennonite Church in 1951 to Helga Meyer, a young woman from the district of Friesland in Germany. No immediate relatives on either side were present. This might have been his “last hurrah” as a Mennonite; his remarks on Mennonite involvement in his wedding are gracious but he seems to have found their ethnicity amusing.

Clearly a gifted individual, Friesen was soon certified as an engineering technologist. He worked for sixteen years at BF Goodrich; characteristically, perhaps, he describes his associate engineers as “lickspittles ... toadying shamelessly” (189). Friesen went on to attain a BA and MPhil in English, then taught for nineteen years at the Ontario College of Applied Arts and Technology.

In retirement, Bruno Friesen seemed to find his niche as a volunteer at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. He was happy there, but in the final pages of *Panzer Gunner*, he laments the fact that he, as a German war veteran, receives little or no public recognition. Friesen was an ardent anti-elitist: not many, in his estimation, deserved his respect. His military comrades, however, were his passion. Friesen references the lines in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, where the king refers to his troops as

“we happy few, we band of brothers.” He also quotes a poem allegedly found on a sentry box in Gibraltar: “God and the soldier / All men adore / In time of trouble / And no more; / For when war is over / And all things righted, / God is neglected – / The old soldier slighted” (193).

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## **Eva Daniel and Helmut Lemke. *Slipping the Noose: Two Escape Stories*. Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse, 2018. 124 pp.**

Reviewed by Robert Martens

In 1945 the Russians were invading Germany and bent on vengeance. Murder and mass rape were commonplace, and the families of first cousins Eva Wiehler and Helmut Lemke were grievously exposed to the Soviet advance. In recent years, accounts of Mennonite complicity in the crimes of the Third Reich have emerged. *Slipping the Noose: Two Escape Stories*, featuring memoirs by Eva Daniel and Helmut Lemke, tells the inverse narrative: that of Mennonite Germans in flight from Russian atrocities.

It should be noted at the top that European German Mennonites were very unlike the Russian Mennonites fleeing their homes in the Great Trek westwards. In Germany, Mennonites had already in the nineteenth century divested themselves of the principle of nonresistance; Eva Wiehler (now Daniel) in fact had three brothers in the service. The word “Mennonite” does not occur with any frequency in *Slipping the Noose*.

Helmut Lemke, the motivating force behind this book, was himself a teenage soldier in the German forces and witnessed the destruction of his country during the late stages of World War II. Lemke has distinct political views on the situation in Europe during and after the War. General Dwight Eisenhower, he writes, held back American troops from Berlin because he wished to see the Russians do the fighting. Appalled by the Holocaust,

Eisenhower, writes Lemke, was rather pleased to see German prisoners of war abused in Allied camps. Furthermore, Lemke contends, the Morgenthau Plan devised in Washington intended Germany “to be reduced to an agrarian country” (Lemke 115). British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, on the other hand, disliked the Germans but concluded that they would be needed as allies in any fight against Soviet encroachment. The British, Lemke writes, treated their German prisoners of war better than did their allies. American attitudes soon changed: the Marshall Plan was hatched to restore Germany to prosperity, and the Morgenthau Plan vanished into the dustbin of history.

The two memoirs in *Slipping the Noose* – the Russian noose – tell the fascinating stories of Mennonite families eluding the barbarities of the invading Soviets in 1945. In the first part of the book, Eva Wiehler’s family is still living on a farm in East Prussia. Though there is no mention of “Mennonite” early in the book, Eva writes, “Opa Wiehler, my grandfather, had a sincere relationship to God and a strong faith. This became evident in the way he brought up his family, to obey, honour and trust God and caring for people and helping where he saw a need.... And that was how my father lived” (8-9).

With the Russians breathing down their necks, the Wiehler family abandon their home in January 1945 and flee by wagon in the direction of Danzig. On the way, they face hunger, illness, and Russian bomber attacks. And German intransigence as well, when SS officers direct them to spend a night in Stutthof, a Jewish death camp: “Mother went up to the SS officers and complained about the diversion of our trek and told them ‘we are honest German citizens, I am the recipient of the highest medal for German mothers’” (19). The “dumbfounded” SS officer gives her permission to travel on.

The Wiehler family eventually find a safe haven in the town of Hillerse where, with typical German initiative, they forthwith begin rebuilding their lives. A surprise, however, awaits them – Helmut Lemke arrives with his mother. At this point, Helmut’s memoir begins.

The war has ended. Having been wounded in action with the Soviets, Helmut is recovering in a military hospital once held by the Russians but now situated in the British occupation zone. He is safe here, but worried about his mother who is still trapped in East Prussia where Russian troops are doing as they please. He recounts, “After some consideration and prayer together with my sister, I decided to go on a search for my moth-

er. I felt an inner voice telling me: ‘Your mother needs you!’ that determined my decision to undertake the daring, dangerous journey” (66).

Together with a fellow wounded soldier, Helmut travels by stealth to his home town. Every step of the way is dangerous. Lemke tells the story of a hometown neighbour, Frau Cornelsen, who had secretly baked three loaves of bread: “[A] Russian soldier stopped her and demanded to give him the bread. ‘OK, keep one and run home,’ he laughed. She had almost reached her house, when he raised his gun and shot her in the back. The life of a German is not worth much to the Russians” (91).

Helmut ultimately reaches home in East Prussia, scavenges potatoes for survival, then flees with his mother across a frozen river. The pair meet up with their relatives in Hillerse. “*Wenn die Not am grössten, ist Gottes Hilfe am nächsten*,” says Helmut’s mother. (“When the need is greatest, God’s help is nearest”) (85)

This slim volume might have benefited from more careful editing; the enthralling storytelling more than compensates.

*Slipping the Noose can be accessed in the MHSBC library or purchased at the Mennonite Heritage Museum.*

## Andrew Wall, director. *Volendam: A Refugee Story*. 1 hour 24 minutes.

Reviewed by Robert Martens

“Refugees want to get away from, where they are going is secondary.” These words are spoken over images of refugees in flight near the opening of Andrew Wall’s powerful new film, *Volendam: A Refugee Story*. The documentary’s reach may exceed its grasp. The Russian Mennonite history is a long and complicated one, and an hour-and-a-half film can only cover so much. Film, though, is a visual medium, and here director Wall delivers exactly what is needed. The historical footage, the photographs, the flickering emotions on the faces of interviewed eyewitnesses: all these have a life of their own.

*Volendam* tells the Russian Mennonite refugee story in vignette. World War I; the Bolshevik Revolution; the emergence of the brutal anarchist leader Nestor Makhno; the creation of Mennonite Central Committee to alleviate the subsequent famine; Stalin’s lengthy and brutal



# Roots and Branches

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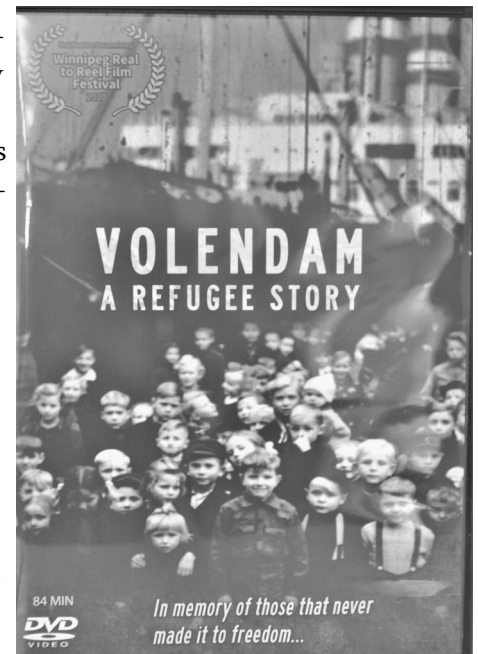
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reign – these are stories familiar to many Mennonites but intensified in the film’s graphic images. Photos taken during the Ukrainian *Holodomor*, a famine deliberately induced by Stalin’s regime, are particularly indescribable. The Great Terror of 1937-1938 follows, and thousands of Mennonites vanish into the white nights of the Gulag.

The suffering continues with World War II and Stalin’s expulsion of some Mennonite villages eastward into exile and death. Then the Germans invade the Soviet Union in 1941; as an interviewee puts it, Mennonites felt “a sense of tremendous relief.” The Germans are driven back, and desperate Mennonites flee with them in the Great Trek, beginning in 1943. “Generally we were not organized, we ran,” says an eyewitness. More Mennonites are apprehended by the Soviets and sent back – often to the labour camps – than successfully escape to Germany.

“We were always hungry,” says an eyewitness, nearly in tears. MCC, which had almost been disbanded after World War I but was maintained in case of another emergency, begins relief operations under the leadership of C.F. Klassen and Peter and Elfrieda (Klassen) Dyck. The dramatic rescue of Mennonite refugees trapped and hiding in the Russian zone of Berlin is now well-known, but the story, which made international headlines at the time, remains utterly compelling. The “Berlin Miracle” results in the procurement of the ship, the *Volendam*, which transports the refugees to a new home in Paraguay’s Chaco. Many of these are women and children, the men having been “disappeared” by the Soviets. “It was hard but we were free,” says an eyewitness.

The film contains some re-enactments without dialogue. These may seem less successful than the rest of the documentary, if only because the historical photos and film clips are so overwhelmingly poignant. And the interviews with eyewitnesses cut to the heart of the matter. *Volendam* works best when it goes to the source.





Elsie K Neufeld is a poet and personal historian who enjoys listening to life through the stories of others, as well as through the lens of her Nikon camera. She is the daughter of Waldemar and Susanna Klassen, who immigrated to Abbotsford in 1948 after surviving the Great Trek.



Top: Bee and fly on coreopsis.  
Bottom: Spider on sunflower leaf.  
Photos: Elsie K. Neufeld