



# Roots & Branches

Vol. 28 No. 3  
September 2022

Periodical of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC

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

PSALM 78



Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Mennonite Historical Society of B.C.

Photo montage: Julia M. Toews

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# Editorial

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC. It's a remarkable achievement for a non-profit to last that long, especially one that's community-funded and volunteer-driven. The anniversary is a testament to the determination and selflessness of the Society's progenitors.

And it may have been founded against the misgivings of some Mennonite leaders. An earlier attempt to erect a Mennonite museum had failed. The opponents perhaps felt – of course, this is speculation – that such a project

was too secular, that the church's mission is profoundly spiritual. But the creators of the Society persevered all the same, feeling that there is indeed something "spiritual" about a common heritage. The motto of MHSBC is drawn from Psalm 78: "What we have heard and known we will tell the next generation."

The cluster of articles in the following pages pays tribute to some of these MHSBC initiators.

Let us tell the next generation.

## MHSBC Annual Fall Fundraiser! Don't miss it.

*"Music that Shaped Our Mennonite Souls"*

Featuring Dean Wedel and the MEI Concert Choir, with a special performance by Julia Toews.

Sunday, October 2, at South Abbotsford MB Church, 32424 Huntingdon Road.

Doors at 1:30, presentation at 2:30, Faspa at 4 pm.

Music has long been a passion for Mennonites – come help us celebrate that tradition!

For tickets call 604-853-6177; or online at [www.mhsbc.com](http://www.mhsbc.com).

Members early bird price by Sep. 16: \$30.00. Future members early bird price by Sep. 16: \$35.00. Tickets by Sep. 23: \$40.00.

## **"Faspa: What Is Its Origin?"**—Eleanor Hildebrand Chornoboy

■ Introduced by Robert Martens

On October 2 at 2:30 pm, MHSBC presents its annual fundraiser. The occasion should be a good one. Still, some of us will be anticipating what happens afterwards, at 4 pm that afternoon: *Faspa*! Most Mennonites are familiar with that term, but to the "Engländer" world, it may be a mystery.

So perhaps it's time to absorb some insights from Eleanor Hildebrand Chornoboy, author of *Katarina: Mennonite Girl from Russia*, *Snow Angels*, and (here we're getting to the core of the matter) *Faspa with Jast: A Snack of Mennonite Stories Told by Family and Guests*. *Faspa*, it seems, is of some interest to her. In a 2013 issue of *Preservings*, Hildebrand Chornoboy wrote an article entitled "Faspa: What Is Its Origin?" This charming article wanders discursively around the question, and perhaps there are no firm answers, but the author knows her topic. Some excerpts follow. (All citations are from this article.)

Near the article's beginning, Hildebrand Chornoboy



A Sunday afternoon repast—"Faspa."

Photos credit: Julia M. Toews

cites Victoria Hayward, a travel writer who is credited with coining the term, “Canadian mosaic.” Hayward wrote, in her travel book of 1922, *Romantic Canada*, of her visit to Morden, Manitoba, where she encountered a Mennonite custom entirely unknown to her – *Faspa* – though she didn’t use that term.

“The Mennonite women in all the villages lend a hand with the horses, grooming them and getting them harnessed, ready to go in the wagon or to draw plough or harvester. We had not noted this work so much among foreign women. The women work very capably and easily with the horses and it doesn’t seem hard work to them. They are at their best, however, in the little kitchen, before the door of which the wind was strewing the golden leaves when we went for afternoon – no, not tea – coffee! It is a Mennonite custom to have coffee and bread-and-butter and perhaps jam, every afternoon at four o’clock. The men leave off ploughing and come in from the fields for their cup of this refreshing hot drink. Mr. de Fehr said the Mennonites think coffee is very stimulating and good for a man that works. I fear that all our Canadian farmers are not so well looked after by their wives in the cold autumn afternoons at the ploughing! The coffee is ground fresh in the little mill over the stove at every making – a pointer for any who wish to adopt this custom” (92-93).

Hayward’s account is a little naïve, perhaps, but that can be forgiven, coming from a rank outsider. It’s gratifying to learn, though, that Mennonites were so far ahead of their time: imbibing coffee in a then British-influenced tea-drinking nation.

Hildebrand Chornoboy goes on to ask whether the word “*Faspa*” derives from “Vespers,” referring to a service of either the evening or late afternoon. Any such derivation, though, seems tenuous. She then writes that *Faspa* probably finds its origins in agricultural routine.

“One theory espoused by Jack Penner, farmer in southern Manitoba, is that the times meals were taken during the busy farming season, correlated with the horses’ need for water and sustenance to keep up their hard work throughout the day. It was especially during the spring, summer and autumn months, when farmers

and their horses worked from sunrise to sunset. The working men had breakfast before the day’s work began, a second breakfast around 10:30, dinner at noon, *faspa* around 4:00, and supper at the end of the work day” (93). This farming routine eventually evolved into a light afternoon meal on Sunday afternoons.

Sunday was a day of rest, writes Hildebrand Chornoboy, as commanded in Deuteronomy 5. “In order to obey this commandment, Mennonite women did all their baking for Sunday *Faspa*, on Saturdays.

Traditionally, *Faspa* was served every day of the week, and often Sunday *Faspa* was more elaborate than the regular *Faspa* of weekdays. Women baked fresh bread, cakes, cookies, and other sweet things on Saturday in preparation

for their families and for company that would come to visit on Sundays. Having all the food prepared meant that on Sunday the women only needed to prepare coffee, set the table, and clean up after *Faspa*” (93).

The custom evolved further, writes Hildebrand Chornoboy. “In *Faspa with Jast*, I note that ‘traditionally Mennonites had *Faspa* every day, but over time, with people working at sedentary jobs and often employed off the farm, *Faspa* has come to be reserved for Sundays and holidays when *Jast* [guest] comes to visit. *Faspa* feeds the body and nourishes the soul. It is a time of telling stories and sharing experiences” (93).

Sadly, she writes, *Faspa* today is more of a fond memory than a daily or weekly routine. “The tradition of bringing *Faspa* to the fields gradually diminished with the advent of high-powered machinery, farmers stopping by local restaurants for ‘take-out,’ and farm women working at regular jobs or being actively involved in the farming operation as opposed to cooking and taking care of the children” (94).

So – another Mennonite tradition that lives on mostly in nostalgia. At 4 pm on October 2, though, *Faspa* – good food and lots of conversation – will take shape once again.

#### Source

Hildebrand Chornoboy, Eleanor. “*Faspa: What Is Its Origin?*” *Preservings*, No. 33, 2013, pp. 92-94.

“Mennonites think coffee is very stimulating and good for a man that works.”

# MHSBC Celebrates Fifty Years

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

■ By Louise Bergen Price

Mennonites have lived in British Columbia since the early 1900s, but it wasn't until 1972 that a growing interest in Mennonite history led to the founding of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC (MHSBC). Early visionaries included Vernon Reimer, George I. Peters, George Groening, Nick J. Kroeker, Jacob P. Goertzen, Hermann Janzen, Abram A. Olfert, and Waldemar "Wally" Kroeker.

After becoming incorporated in 1980, the MHSBC opened a small museum in Clearbrook Community Centre (now the site of Garden Park Tower). By 1986, they had amassed about 860 artifacts and three hundred photographs and had published the book, *Remember Your Leaders*. But the dream of the group was much larger. The Mennonite Village Museum in Steinbach, Manitoba, which had opened in 1967, was proving to be a great success; it seemed logical that a similar project would also have support in the Fraser Valley. The City of Chilliwack was onside in what it considered to be a valuable tourist attraction and offered the cost-free lease of an eight-acre property adjacent to the freeway. Now the Society enthusiastically drew up plans which included a replica of a housebarn, a machine shed that would house the museum, as well as a sod hut and a windmill/coffee shop. However, when the plans were presented to the Mennonite community, it became obvious that the group did not have the support they needed for the project. When several church leaders voiced opposition, the project was abandoned.

While the museum society struggled to gain a foothold, others saw the need to preserve important historical documents, books, photographs and memoirs. The BC Golden Age Society, headed by Abe Olfert, began storing archival materials at the Clearbrook Community Centre. A second group, the BC Mennonite Archival Society, formed in 1987 by members David Giesbrecht, Dave Loewen, Esther Born and Hugo Friesen, found storage space at Columbia Bible College (CBC). By the early 1990s, the archives collections of the two groups

were combined and held at CBC.

In 1997, members of the MHSBC made the

decision to switch their focus away from a museum and to merge their interests with those of the Archival Society, renting office and archival storage space at Garden Park Tower, a location convenient to the many volunteers who lived in the surrounding area. Many of the artifacts were now returned to their donors as the focus turned away from museum display items.

The guiding purpose of MHSBC was to tell the story of BC Mennonites within the context of the broader Mennonite community. The Society flourished

during these years, with up to 1,500 people attending yearly fundraising banquets. The Society's newsletter, at first a page or two advertising upcoming events, grew into the current periodical, *Roots and Branches*. Two major projects involved indexing Society holdings using the InMagic database program, led by Erica Suderman, and working on EWZ files (see below). Interest from the Ed Hildebrand Endowment Fund, established in 2000, put the Society on a secure

financial foundation.

In November 2015, the MHSBC moved to its permanent location on the second floor of the Mennonite Heritage Museum, with offices and a large research area. The Society's extensive library includes a large family history collection as well as reference books and includes the personal collections of Dr. John B. Toews and Dr. Harry Loewen. Archival items are stored in a climate-controlled space in the basement.

On most days, visitors to the research centre will find, in addition to staff, a number of trained volunteers entering data, indexing Mennonite periodicals, sifting through boxes of donated materials, cataloguing books, scanning and indexing photographs.

Volunteers are available to help visitors research



Logo design by Jennifer Martens



Abram A. Olfert.

Photo source: GAMEO

family roots through programs such as GRANDMA (Genealogical Registry and Database of Mennonite Ancestry) which contains information on about 1.4 million individuals. For those whose ancestors fled from Soviet bloc countries to Germany following War World II, MHSBC has access to the EWZ (*Einwandererzentralstelle*) files. The 110,000 files list names, birth dates, marriage dates, camps the applicants were registered in, and genealogical records going back several generations.

Although the Historical Society has found a home with the Mennonite Heritage Museum, the two societies

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

# B.C. Archival Association Launched (Mennonite)

■ By Hilda Born

*The following double-spaced typewritten report was written by Hilda Born in the late 1980s. It is now filed with the Mennonite Historical Society of BC fonds 150 at the MHSBC archives. The idealism, optimism, and sense of purpose in the document are palpable. A big thank you to those who helped launch MHSBC.*

Remembering our roots contributes to our self understanding and how we fit into God's plan. The Biblical records are oriented to history. Our theology holds strongly to the idea of incarnation. "God is continuing to work among His people and I am a part of that," Dr. Lawrence Klippenstein stated as he addressed the newly formed B.C. Archival Association.

It came into being for the collection and preservation of the history of Mennonites in B.C.. Many homes are presently storing historical objects, music, books and written accounts. Small steps were taken in the past to save some of these valuables for the future. However, neither the Clearbrook Community Centre, nor Columbia Bible College had the space or manpower to organize them for usefulness.

Just as the C.B.C. library itself was first sorted and labelled on library shelves in 1953, so now 35 years later, the research data pertaining to B.C. Mennonite history is finally catalogued for useful reference.

The Archival executive consists of concerned individuals who each represent a segment of the Mennonite

are separate entities that complement each other. Fifty years after the founding of MHSBC, the dreams of early visionaries are about to be fulfilled: the Museum is soon to open its doors to its newly built replica of a traditional Mennonite village housebarn that will also function as a museum.

Born, Esther. "A Permanent place for B.C. Mennonite Archives." *Mennonite Historian*, June 1993, 7.

Thiessen, Richard D. "Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. Jan. 2022. Web 15 Mar. 2022. [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite\\_Historical\\_Society\\_of\\_British\\_Columbia&oldid=172909](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite_Historical_Society_of_British_Columbia&oldid=172909)



B.C. Mennonite Archival Society, 1986. Left to right: Hugo Friesen, Waldo Neufeld, David Giesbrecht, Esther Born, Dave Loewen, and Lois Harder. From MHSBC archives.



Esther Born (left) and Hilda Born working on research for MCC in the basement of Columbia Bible College. This photo appeared in the MSA News, March 15, 1989.

Photo source: MHSBC archives.

community. Dave Giesbrecht of C.B.C. is the chairman. Mabel Paetkau represents M.C.C. and Lois Harder the M.B. denomination. Dave Loewen is there on behalf of the General Conference, Hugo Friesen for the M.E.I., Abe Olfert for the Golden Agers and Esther Born, the local archivist, represents the historical society.

[p. 2] Dusty cartons of old papers, and [inserted in cursive] *various* Mennonite periodicals were formerly stored in a basement corner room at C.B.C.. Into this dungeon-like cell Esther faithfully entered began to sort and file. Tina Klaassen of Clearbrook and Hilda Born of Matsqui were recruited as volunteer helpers. All donations of precious clippings, old letters, church and missionary notes are now welcome. Each fragile item is carefully handled and placed in a controlled environment for safe keeping.

The first public forum for the new organization were the March 9th dual lectures by Dr. Lawrence Klippenstein of Winnipeg. He is an expert on Mennonite matters, presently archivist at the Heritage Centre and has been working there since 1974.

The first lecture dealt with writing family stories and the second listed valuable pointers in writing congregational histories. Both need persistent research and proof of accuracy. But statistics without interpretation remain dry bones. In family histories it helps to find “the tie that binds” and congregations want to know what really was important. What happened at a deeper level?

When dealing with issues, there is always the decision making about what to do with the parts of the story that do not sound too pleasant. Can we tell the painful truth kindly, just as we see it today? The Bible would be a

much thinner book if only the good were told. However, there are plenty of heroic stories that would make excellent sermon illustrations and Sunday School teaching materials.

[p. 3] Celebrating family or congregational milestones by recording their history is worthwhile. Often that is the first time the records are collected. In the same way, the newly formed Archival Association of B.C. is proposing to hold a future workshop of church record management. This is to help the next generation remember “the stones” of our present history.

**Also from fonds 150: a few excerpts from a report by Dave Loewen, secretary, c. 1989**

Our part-time archivist, Esther Born, has been very busy bringing some order to the collection of materials already in our possession....

It has already been impressed upon us this past year that without the blessing of the two major Mennonite Conferences in B.C., the success of the archives initiative would be limited. Two major concerns, voiced by one of the conferences, were those of accountability and ownership. We could certainly empathize with those concerns and have therefore taken steps to attach ourselves to C.B.C. [Columbia Bible College] ...

We have a vision for our Archival Centre. We see it as a valuable research centre for the Mennonite constituency of B.C., and especially for C.B.C. We still struggle with the problem of reluctant donors of materials. Still others need to be informed that this centre exists and is becoming the legitimate depository of archival materials. Esther reports that the space is overcrowded and therefore part of our vision is the acquisition of more space....

## Mary Ann Quiring, Memory Keeper

■ By Helen Rose Pauls

Her office is on the main floor of the Museum, tucked in behind the temporary display. From there, she monitors the activities of the Museum and the Historical Society, employed half-time by each entity. Mary Ann’s involvement began twenty-four years ago when she volunteered for the Mennonite Historical Society in 1998 when it was still located in the Garden Park Tower. Four years later, she was hired to run the office three days a week and, before long, she was there full-time.

Whatever landed on her desk, she did. Organizing volunteers and finding space for them to do their work was paramount. Soon, every day had a different focus: Mondays were for archives with Erika Suderman in charge; Hugo Friesen on Tuesday;



Mary Ann Quiring, 2018.  
Photo credit: Julia M. Toews

Wednesday was dedicated to genealogy and it took off due to a band of friends, Dolores Harder, Don Fehr and Sandy Massie, who enjoyed their time together. Jean Neufeld came Thursday to help with whatever needed doing. Mary Ann ordered and sold books; tracked memberships and donations; paid the bills and issued receipts; and, although bookkeeping was not her favorite thing, she learned the ropes.

Mary Ann worked closely with the events committee to organize banquets, refreshments, fundraisers, song-fests and book launches. She designed CD covers with husband Ernie; got the newsletters printed and stuffed and labelled and sorted by postal code to get a better postal rate. Artifacts were accepted and displayed in cases in the hallway.

She remembers the very successful “The Abbotsford 3 Tenors” fundraising event which netted \$8,000.00 together with ticket sales and pre-purchased CDs. Banquets used to seat four hundred to five hundred

people and were organizational nightmares, but Mary Ann sold the tickets, kept the seating arrangements structured, and made sure that the sightlines were advantageous for all.

A satisfying and serendipitous incident occurred when she came to the office on a long weekend, and found a man with his family waiting by the door. It happened to be Tim Janzen, who has been coming in since then to do genealogy conferences for the Society, as well as being a generous benefactor. Another memorable day she showed a man his documents connecting him with his birth family and a host of relatives he had.

Mary Ann has observed boards and committees working well together through the years, and has enjoyed working with a variety of skilled volunteers, dedicated and willing. She now has the distinction of being the memory keeper of the Mennonite Historical Society and the Mennonite Heritage Museum.

## “For the love of family stories”:

### *Remembering Esther Born – Mennonite History Archivist*

■ By Julia M. Born Toews

“**Y**ou’ve done what?” My mind had wandered a bit during a conversation with my mother, but then she said something that made me sit up. “Yes,” she repeated, “I’ve applied for a grant from the government for the work being done at the Mennonite Historical Archives.” I knew she had recently joined this organization and that she was relishing the work. Applying for grants was something I knew about as a result of my work with the Fraser Valley Symphony. We often made grant applications to various organizations. But for Mennonite historical research? What a wonderful idea.

Delving into Mennonite history or her own family’s stories was not something she had always been excited about. A newspaper article in 1989 quotes her saying that “when we were growing up we couldn’t care less about our forefathers,” even though her parents were very family-minded and kept in contact with a lot of extended family.

My mother, Esther Brandt Born, was born in 1923 in

the little town of Melba, Manitoba, third in a lively family of twelve children and the oldest daughter. Her dad, John K. Brandt, was a schoolteacher and dedicated choir leader, and often served as secretary for various organizations. Both he and his wife, Anna (Thiessen) Brandt, were involved in a lot of community and church activities. During World War II, Esther took her teacher training and taught for several years in Manitoba. In 1945 she married Henry C. Born and together they were involved in various kinds of church work in many countries. Besides making a home for her family, Esther often had the opportunity to exercise her teaching career. She taught in Paraguay, Ecuador, Brazil, and Austria. When they settled in the Fraser Valley, she was a TOC (teacher on call) in the Abbotsford and Mission school districts. In time she also taught courses at Fraser Valley College (now UFV). When she retired,



Esther Born, around 2000.

Photo source: Henry C. & Esther Born photo archives.

she joined the Historical Archival Society that had been formed as part of the B.C. Mennonite Historical Society in 1986 and that focused specifically on archival research and preservation. Previously, she had worked with A. E. Janzen in the archival library at Tabor College when she lived in Kansas.

Her excitement grew as the Mennonite Archival Association received grants. First there was a Canada Council grant of \$1,000. This, plus the opportunity to move the archives to the Columbia Bible College (CBC) basement where they had three rooms to spread out in, and with the help of many volunteers were able to expand the work. A little while later, when a grant of \$10,000 from the federal New Horizons program became available, she noted, in another newspaper report, that “we are getting a computer, a photocopy machine, a reader, and other materials so we can properly store all the material we have and are receiving” (“Archives”).

Esther was not only interested in storing archival work, but was active in collecting local family histories. She used her teaching ability when speaking to ladies groups in various churches to explain how to go about writing family genealogies and histories. The minutes of one such group at Bakerview MB church reports:

*“Esther Born, who works with the archives, got us interested in writing our own family histories. She explained how to go about it, what is involved, and that she got a federal government grant for the work she is doing in the archives. Then she handed out sheets for each one to fill out. The sheets contained an outline for listing family genealogy, the first step in beginning a family history. She said ‘if we all finish ours she could soon be receiving at least 20 new family stories into the archives’” (Bakerview).*

Esther realized that a lot of valuable information on Mennonite families was being destroyed. Materials and photographs were often thrown out or burned when middle-aged children cleaned out their parents’ houses after moving them into a nursing home or an apartment. Whenever she would hear that a pioneer family had sold their house, she would rush over, but “then I’m too late,” she lamented in the article in the *Abbotsford-Clearbrook Times* in 1989 (“Digging”).

For many years she worked with a dedicated group

E. Born		WRITING YOUR LIFE HISTORY			JAN. 1988
Time Line	Time Periods	Stages	Events	Source s	
1910	Childhood	↓	a baby story	photos	
	School		first spanking	certificates	
1920	Hi School	↓	a lost pet	letters	
	College		a close friend	records	
1930	Marriage (Career)	↓	my teacher	deeds	
	Family		favorite activity	diaries	
1940	Settling in (balding bifocals)	↓	a good time	journals	
	Grandchildren		a difficult time	tapes	
1950		↓	my wedding	obituaries	
	Retirement		a trip	cemeteries	
1960		↓	illness	newspapers	
	Parents		death	interviews	
1970		↓	a victory	family	
			the empty nest	stories	
1980		↓	a difficult choice		
			a crises	sketches	
1990		↓	a turning point	ship lists	
			an accident	Bibles	
		↓		address bks	

Folders labelled according to the time periods can be used for the collected source material.

Handout used by Esther Born to help others start writing their family stories. Source: Esther Born private papers.

of volunteers, itemizing the many donations that were coming in from family, church, and community sources. From 1986 to 1991 they worked in the three basement rooms at CBC, but this space eventually became too crowded. In the *Mennonite Historian*, she notes with relief that, when the college underwent a renovation in 1991, “The British Columbia Mennonite Archives have finally found a permanent home. They are safely settled in Columbia Bible College’s new Resource and Administration Centre ... in an environmentally controlled atmosphere to preserve information for posterity” (“A permanent”).

Besides working in the archives and getting others to begin writing their family histories, she spent many years researching her own family story, collecting information on both the Thiessen and the Brandt families. Her research into the Brandt family resulted in a large book she captioned *The Centennial Edition* as it was printed in time to celebrate the centennial year of her family’s sojourn in Canada – 1903 to 2003. For this event we rented the foyer of the Matsqui Centennial Auditorium in Abbotsford, and, with several other families who also were celebrating their arrival in Canada





“Proud authors of their family histories gathered at Clearbrook Community Centre last week to display their works. The Mennonite authors are (left to right), Selma Hooge, Cornelia Lehn, Coordinator Esther Born, Hans Wiens, Abram Friesen, John Friesen, Andreas Schroeder, and Nicholas Friesen (front).” From the *Abbotsford Times* December 5, 1990.

Photo credit: Iam Robbins. Photo source: The Reach Archives

one hundred years ago, hosted a party that included readings from various immigration travel diaries, greetings from local government officials, and a display of many family history books.

Even after she retired from archival work, Esther

## The More of Less

■ By Sharon Loewen Shepherd and Gladys Loewen

Long before conservationists recommended “recycle, reuse, repurpose,” our Grandma Loewen, Katherine Quiring Isaac Loewen did more with less. Her Mennonite Brethren culture expected women to be frugal, self-sufficient homemakers by gardening, cooking, canning, baking, and sewing for their families. But the overlay of poverty after her refugee journey from Russia to Canada in 1929-1930 was particularly arduous, forcing Katherine to make do in order to survive first in Manitoba, then in Yarrow, BC.

Unable to afford new shirts for her husband when the shirt cuffs or collars frayed, Katherine painstakingly took out the stitches on the cuffs and collars, turned them inside out to the unworn side, and sewed them back on. She opened the seams of her husband’s old work pants, and repurposed the panels to make everyday skirts for herself. Overnight she even remade one of her husband’s white shirts into a girl’s blouse with pearl buttons, when

stayed in contact with many extended family members via *Facebook*, emails, and letters, always on the look-out for information of people who had been lost to history, or for new information about the people she knew.

Esther passed away in Abbotsford in 2014, two months after her ninety-first birthday. Hers was a life well-lived, always curious, expressing a deep appreciation for her family, and caring about its historical roots.

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Katherine Loewen with her son and two daughters in Russia before they became refugees, 1929. Family collection

her granddaughter needed it for school (G. Loewen 125; G. Loewen et al. 220). Her thriftiness extended to plucking and storing chicken feathers to make her own pillows.



The mass gravestone in Prenzlau, Germany, where Katherine's two daughters were buried in 1910.

Photo credit: Jacob A. Loewen, circa 1991, family collection.

Katherine made weekly trips to the Yarrow garbage dump to scavenge supplies (G. Loewen 126) for sewing. Anything she could reuse as a sewing notion – buttons, fabric scraps and pieces, discarded clothing, rickrack and trim – was worth keeping, washing, and sorting (G. Loewen et al. 220). Her stash was organized into



Katherine's granddaughters and their dolls wearing pyjamas and dresses sewn by Grandma Loewen.

Photo credit: Jacob Loewen, Columbia, 1956, slide, family

a wall-high stack of recycled cardboard boxes with handwritten German labels in her sewing room, a small lean-to off the garage, built primarily by Katherine using scrap lumber and material.

Instead of complaining about her lot in life, Katherine chose to channel her losses, her hardships, into her adoring love for children (G. Loewen et al. 222). Children animated her whimsical creativity and playful spirit. She imaginatively pieced together scavenged material into patchwork dresses for little girls, the many seams decoratively covered with once-discarded velvet trim, lace or rickrack. These dresses were donated to MCC, often one hundred a year (G. Loewen 126; G. Loewen et al. 223), as a way of repaying MCC for helping her family during their trauma-filled refugee journey that included the burial of two young daughters in a German

refugee camp (G. Loewen et al. 214; W. Loewen et al. 129). Thelma Reimer Kauffman, who grew up in Yarrow, remembers her delight at receiving two dresses Katherine fashioned from empty flour sacks, cut with exacting precision so the flower design printed on the sack was centred in the bodice. She called Katherine, “*Tante Liebsche*,” recalling the warmth of her caring (G. Loewen et al. 221; W. Loewen et al. 130).

Sarah Enns Martens, our aunt and a Yarrow resident for decades, described Katherine as “a grandma for everyone” (W. Loewen et al. 130), noting her own children felt special affection for Katherine. Sarah's daughter, Dolly Martens Peters, and Katherine's three granddaughters each received a wardrobe of Katherine's handmade doll clothes. The granddaughters, sad that their doll clothes did not survive multiple moves overseas, were elated to learn that Dolly Martens Peters had kept hers for over six decades. In 2021, she donated the



Dolly Martens' dolls and their wardrobe sewn by Katherine Loewen.

Photo credit: Gladys Loewen, 2021.

dolls and clothes to the Mennonite Historical Museum in Abbotsford, as a visual record of Katherine's artistry and the joy it brought to children.

Poverty may have constricted the lens of Katherine's life, but the story of her adaptive ability to do abundantly more with less, always holding children close to her heart, is our tribute to her memory.

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*In dedication to Tina and Anna, Katherine's two daughters who died in a Prenzlau, Germany, refugee camp in 1930.*

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## Quarantined Three Times

■ By Hilda Born

(written in 2020, when COVID-19 made its appearance)

Printed in bold letters, the warning posted on the Borns' front door stated, "Do Not Enter. Scarlet Fever. Residents Must Remain on the Premises," and in finer print, more details were spelled out below. This was April 1942, when Jake, almost fifteen, succumbed to scarlet fever; the family was quarantined for six weeks. He probably caught the germs in Lindbrook School, because there were nineteen cases.

It was fortunate that Jake was the only one in the family that got the disease. Because their house was big, though draughty, he was able to have his own room upstairs. Of his two-week period with high fever, Jake remembers little. Care by his mother was given, though no doctor was consulted.

Amanda, his five-year-old sister, missed her big brother very much, but she was not permitted to go and check up on him. Instead, she went up the stairs and perched on the top step because that was as far as she was allowed, and began to sing. Lustily she voiced her whole repertoire, every day, faithfully, often more than once. Actually, it was good practice because she did a lot of public singing later in life. Right then it comforted Jake, as well as warmly bonded them, despite their decade difference in age.

After a month's recuperation, Jake's skin peeled. Thin

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*Gladys Loewen, daughter of the late Jacob A. and Anne Loewen, has lived in Colombia, Kansas, and BC. She is a retired educator who specialized in inclusive designs for disabled people, and in retirement, enjoys quilting, volunteer work, and spending time with her grandchildren.*

*Sharon Loewen Shepherd is a daughter of the late Jacob and Anne Loewen who both grew up in Yarrow, BC. She was born in Colombia where her parents were missionaries at the time. She currently lives and works as a marriage and family therapist in Fort Scott, Kansas.*



**DO NOT ENTER**  
**SCARLET FEVER**

layers like rubber gloves rolled off his palms and soles, but the rest of his body flaked like scales. On his first attempt to recommence helping with family chores, he walked to the pasture to bring the cows in for milking. He directed them toward the barn and then flopped down with exhaustion. The cows faithfully tromped to their usual stanchions, but Jake's dad noticed his son's absence. Quickly he hitched a horse to the stone boat and hurried to get him.

Not only had Jake lost his outer skin, but also considerable body weight, whereas his siblings became plump from the rich meals made with cream that the Borns could not ship. The first time the emaciated-looking Jake attended church, outspoken Mrs. Hiebert spotted him and remarked, "Young fellow, you look as if you have been pulled through a knothole!"

Jake evidenced no permanent damage, perhaps even got an immunity to other diseases like mumps, etc., and never entered hospital until age ninety. A classmate, Virginia Geneski, was not so lucky and lost much of her hearing. After her illness, she needed to sit at the front of the class to grasp what the teacher was saying.

The second quarantine hit us in 1960, when my 58-year-old father was hospitalized after several strokes. Because of the flu, hospitals were closed to visitors. A week after this separation, on March 8, our parents' thirty-second wedding anniversary, I offered to take Mom to see Dad. Mother put on her best coat, and we stopped at Rosebay Florists for a colourful bouquet to cheer him up. The hospital receptionist refused to give us permission to see Dad, and we were only allowed to leave the flowers with her.

Six days later, Mom could no longer stand the wait, and decided she would plead to see Dad first thing Monday morning, March 14. At five that very morning, a phone call gave me the grim news that Dad had died during the night. Ironically, permission was then granted to see him cold and waxen on a stretcher in the hall.

In 2020, we face another tiny virus, COVID-19, that

stalks the world. Cautiously we obey the directives from government and medical authorities. Young children are taught that you can't high-five or hug Grandma. In beautiful springtime, some live in fear, while others dare to enjoy life fully, because there is no guarantee of a future, safe or otherwise. For the first time in history, our communication is largely based on technology. Human voices over back fences are still heard from six feet apart, but handheld devices are more prevalent.

As children we were told that the 1918 pandemic called the Spanish Flu claimed Great-grandma Martens during the First World War. Great-grandpa Wilhelm followed her a little later. Now we wonder if our breathing will hold out until this pandemic, COVID-19, is over. Hopefully, we will lose no loved ones as we pray for a vaccine and a cure.

*PS: We are very grateful that we got our first vaccine shots on March 10, 2021.*

## The Old Cardboard Box

■ By Betty Wall

An unopened box with my name on it sat on my desk. Probably old college papers, concert programs, used airplane tickets, coasters and matchbooks from European pubs I had visited. It smelled musty and old, having sat in my mom's basement for thirty odd years, maybe even longer. Years ago, my father used to say to us, "You've still got boxes down here. Take them, please!" We all ignored his pleas.

I opened it and, inside, along with the concert programs and airplane tickets, there were bundles of letters addressed to me. Letters from my *Omas*, my mother, even from my father and siblings.

I knew so little of my *Omas'* lives, and here, in this box, was a little treasure trove of life, teeming with activity, hopes and dreams, of lost dreams, too, of love and loss.

I took the top bundle and recognized my maternal grandmother's handwriting, her address in the top left-hand corner of the envelope. The stamp read 1973; that would have been my first year away from home, at college. "Study hard," she wrote, "education is something no one can take from you. I loved learning, I wanted to study, but I guess it wasn't meant to be." I sat back and an image of her flooded my mind's eye.



The Oma's—taken at the Wall farm on Peardonville Road in 1961. Justine Sawatsky on the left and Maria Wall beside her.

Photo source: author.

*Oma* sitting in her living room, reading glasses perched on her nose, reading, reading. Anything she could get her hands on. Sometimes in German,

sometimes in Russian. If she wasn't reading, she was crocheting doilies, in any pattern she could find, always eager to learn something new. Her face crinkled like a furrowed field when she smiled. She was only seventy-nine at this time, but I think she had lived several lives by then. Born in Ukraine, journeying across Europe, finally reaching the west coast of Canada in 1955. Having hoards of grandchildren over for perogies and farmer sausage gave her immense pleasure. She divided the groups of grandchildren into ages. One week she invited high school kids; the next, elementary school-aged kids. We squeezed around her kitchen table, covered in a yellow floral oilcloth tablecloth. The gas stove sat opposite the table. Her house always smelled slightly of gas and I worried that one day that house would burn down with her in it. Miraculously, it didn't. We sat around that table and chatted amongst each other about goings on at school, in English. I don't know how much English she actually understood. Probably more than we thought. She sat quietly and took it all in, watching with joy as the platters of perogies and sausages disappeared as quickly as she placed them on the table. There were always peppermint cookies around Christmas time and iced and decorated Easter bread called *Paska* in the spring.

Oma's house on Birch Street was the place to be for the Easter egg hunt. With twenty-three grandchildren, the colourful eggs were hidden, found, and hidden again so that everyone had a chance to do the hunt. She didn't mess with chocolate. Farm-fresh eggs were hardboiled and dyed for the occasion and, once found, turned into egg and potato salad. The tall grasses and the weeping willow tree in her backyard made for terrific hiding places. *Oma* loved Easter.

I continued looking through the letters and found several Easter cards. In one of the cards she had written, "When you're old, you'll remember the Easter stories I told you as a child." My eyes welled up with tears. Peter and the Easter Bunny came to mind. He always wanted to find the Easter Bunny and watch him colouring the eggs and hiding them. She was softspoken and held our attention with her voice. And when she'd come to the end of the story, she would laugh until the tears rolled down her wrinkled cheeks. Perhaps laughing at her childhood self. I looked at the Easter letter again and read, "and here's one dollar from the Easter Bunny." I laughed.

Oma's house was headquarters for Halloween too, because she lived in town. She didn't care for "trick or treat," because it reminded her of the poverty she had suffered in Ukraine and it seemed like begging. "You don't have to beg in Canada," she'd say and this sentiment was echoed by our parents. But she loved to have us around, so it didn't matter. We dumped our things at her house. Donned old sheets with cut-outs for eyes and nose and we became ghosts, or dressed as farmers, and off we went around the few blocks near her house, to fill our flour sacks with treats. Back at her house, we sat and sorted and traded our treats. She always had traditional Halloween molasses candies in her pantry for us and welcomed the kids in the neighbourhood.

I grabbed another letter and out fell a one dollar bill. I laughed out loud. As I read the letter, this one dated October 1973, she writes, "and I'm sending you a dollar for *Holoven*." It took me a second to read the word phonetically and then realized it was "Halloween."

As I continued reading through the letters, now dated early November, there was talk of Christmas, buying presents, and preparations for the big gathering. *Oma* loved Santa and told stories of how utterly shattered she was when she realized that Santa wasn't real. She never spoke about her husband, my *Opa*, arrested by the Russians in 1938 for the second time, never to return. We knew the story of how he had returned just after Christmas, after the first time he was arrested, his moustache covered in winter frost. And every Christmas, to be reminded of his absence. *Oma's* house was the last stop on our caroling route. As we gathered on her front lawn, and starting singing, she came to the window, parted the curtains, and looked out, her black-rimmed glasses perched on her nose. "*Stille Nacht*" ended the evening.

As demure and quiet as my maternal grandmother was, my paternal grandmother was loud, boisterous, and quick to criticize. Both lost their husbands to the Russians in the same raids. Both traversed Europe and ended up in Canada. They all talked about the Great Trek from Russia ad nauseum and, as kids, we had had enough. Now, as I read the letters, I marvel at their strength.

There was only a handful of letters from *Oma* Wall. She died during my first year of college. I was almost finished that year and, in the last two letters, written at the end of March and early April 1974, she's asking if

I'm coming home soon, for Easter. Two weeks later, she died.

A couple of months later, I left for Europe for the first time, travelling with my mother. In Salzburg, I heard *Ein deutsches Requiem* by Brahms, for the first time, conducted by Herbert von Karajan. There we were, the two of us, my mother and I, both dressed in brightly coloured long summer dresses, while the rest of the audience was dressed in black, listening to these words:

*“Selig sind, die da Leid tragen,  
denn sie sollen getröstet werden... Tod, wo ist dein  
Stachel?”*

“Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted”... “Oh death, where is thy sting?”

## Honouring BC Mennonites

George H. Loewen: *From the Great Trek to Peace in the Valley* (1931-2021)

■ By Robert Martens

George Henry Loewen's early life was marked by difficulty from the very start. Ukraine was a place of poverty and hunger when he was born in Alexanderwohl, Ukraine, in 1931. “Mom did not have the necessary calcium so I was born with a cleft palate,” he writes. “A trained medical first-aid paramedic cut everything loose, raw, without any anesthetic, and sewed it back together temporarily” (2). And Loewen was born into one of the most murderous regimes in history, Stalin's Soviet Union, which would be invaded by another totalitarian regime, Hitler's Third Reich, when George was a mere ten years old.

George spent much of his childhood in a daycare on a collective farm, where his father Heinrich was head accountant and his mother Elisabeth (Wiens) worked in the dairy. He didn't often see his parents, though they both did their very best to care for their four children. George was the second oldest. In 1941, the German military mounted an attack on the USSR that caught Stalin by surprise. Male German-speaking Ukrainians, now considered potential collaborators, were evacuated eastward. Heinrich was among the villagers, all those aged eighteen and up, who were deported. “He gave us a hug and a kiss and we watched them all as they marched on.... Now in hindsight we know that they had to go into concentration camps in Siberia” (George Loewen 6).

The music penetrated my entire being, right from the first note. I cannot think of this *Requiem* without thinking of my *Oma* Wall. She had a big laugh, a big heart and big faith. She left a big void.

Two women, pillars of my life, as different as chalk and cheese, with hearts full of love for us all. There are so many untold stories. And I know that, if I know this much, there must be many more stories untold.

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Betty Wall was born in the Fraser Valley to Russian Mennonite immigrants. She is a graduate of CMBC and the University of Toronto. Apart from living and working in Vancouver as a translator, she also studies writing with Barbara Turner-Vesselago. Betty's recently published novella is titled, *No Way Out*.

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George Loewen

Photo source: Dignity Memorial obituary

Then the rest of Alexanderwohl and surrounding villages were ordered to evacuate. Thousands assembled at a train station, but after three days of waiting it was bombed and the villagers returned to their homes. The German military promptly arrived. Conditions improved greatly for German-speaking Ukrainians but the Germans were soon driven back by Soviet forces. In 1943, Elisabeth Loewen packed her belongings and her children onto a wagon and retreated westward with the Germans. The family joined an excruciating journey in what is now often called the Great Trek.

The sufferings endured on the Trek can't be overstated. Scrambling for food and shelter while being pursued by Soviet troops, many of the refugees died or were separated from family. “The front was always within 10-12 kilometres,” writes Loewen, “We could hear the activity of the military in the distance” (10). At one point, the trekkers travelled through part of the killing camps of Auschwitz. They managed to reach what the Germans called the Wartegau area in Poland. Here the Loewens were granted German citizenship. This brought no

guarantees, but would be a great help later when the Soviets were permitted by the Allies to “repatriate” all Russian citizens, most of whom, if not all, ended up in labour camps. “The beauty of all this,” writes Loewen, “was that we were German citizens and we had papers to prove it.... We dug a hole quite deep and we threw in all our papers from Russia, passports and all. Mom said that they were not going to find it on her” (23).

The German military and Red Cross treated the refugees with kindness: “they offered us soup and clothing and whatever we were in need of” (George Loewen 17). George’s brother Henry, however, was conscripted into the *Hitlerjugend* at the age of fourteen, and it would be some time before the family was reunited. George notes that he himself met Heinrich Himmler on three occasions, since an aunt was working as Himmler’s interpreter.

With the Soviets in hot pursuit, the German military and German-speaking refugees once again were compelled to flee westwards. Sheer survival once again became top of mind. The trekkers reached a bridge which the Germans intended to bomb behind them. “The German army warned us not to go on the bridge, but we ignored the warning,” writes Loewen. “My mother said to us, ‘Children, come, we’re going. I’d rather be blown up than have to go back to Russia’” (17). While the Soviet military were crossing the bridge behind the Loewen family, the bridge exploded.

The Loewen family managed, against great odds, to make it across the border into a Western-occupied zone. Along the way, they witnessed Soviet atrocities – rape was widespread – and saw the firebombing of Dresden. “The sky was lit up like a Christmas tree” (George Loewen 18). Mennonite refugees were assisted by Benjamin Unruh, a loyal fascist, but especially by C. F. Klassen, to whom George felt forever indebted. The Loewens spent months in a refugee camp in Gronau, and were about to immigrate to Paraguay when Klassen reported that Wiens relatives in Canada were willing to sponsor them.

The family sailed on the *Aquitania* to Halifax, then travelled, rested and well-fed, by train to Chilliwack, BC. Here George attended East Chilliwack Bible School. The gospel, he writes, was a relatively new thing to him. Religious teaching, prohibited by the Soviets, was communicated only in code when George was a boy. “Now I can clearly see that [Grandma Wiens] told us

about Abraham and others in the Bible, but with totally different names so we never knew it was a Bible story” (George Loewen 31). In 1948, Loewen was baptized in Broadway MB Church.

Meanwhile, he was busy forging a future, learning the plaster and stucco trade while attending Bible School, and by 1958 he started his own business. He was also discovering that he had an aptitude for numbers, a talent perhaps inherited from his father, and he began working in accounting. In 1959, he married Herta Thielmann, daughter of Gerhard (George) Thielmann, who was instructor and principal at the Bible School. The couple decided to settle in Clearbrook (Abbotsford) and raise a family there.

Herta and George had four children, and somehow, while supporting his household, George found time to support some major initiatives. In the 1950s, he helped found Tabor Home, now Tabor Village, as well as the Clearbrook District Mennonite Savings Credit Union, which rapidly grew, becoming First Heritage and then Envision Credit Union. Loewen sat on the Credit Union board for thirty-five years, and served some of that time as president. Herta and George served as “administrative couple” at the Tabor Home for twelve years. George also worked with numbers for the BC Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches and the Columbia Bible Institute (now College). He found particular pleasure in personal interaction with students. All this while Herta and George assisted in church work at Clearbrook, Lake Errock, and South Abbotsford MB churches.

And then, in the 1960s, a letter arrived from George’s long-lost father. Heinrich arrived in Canada to reunite with his wife Elisabeth, but the years of separation had been long and their personalities had changed. Heinrich returned to the Soviet Union, was interrogated, and died there in 1977.

In their retirement years, Herta and George travelled to Germany to meet up with relatives George had not seen for decades. In Herta’s words, returning to Germany was sometimes difficult for George, conjuring up “vivid shocks.” In 2021, he died after a long, unusual, and fruitful life. Perhaps it was his refugee experience that so awakened his empathy for others, his deep-seated willingness to help.

George Loewen’s story is now told in a new book, *Come, We’re Going West*, retold by Ruth Sherwood.

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# Refugee Ships: *Aquitania*, "The Ship Beautiful"

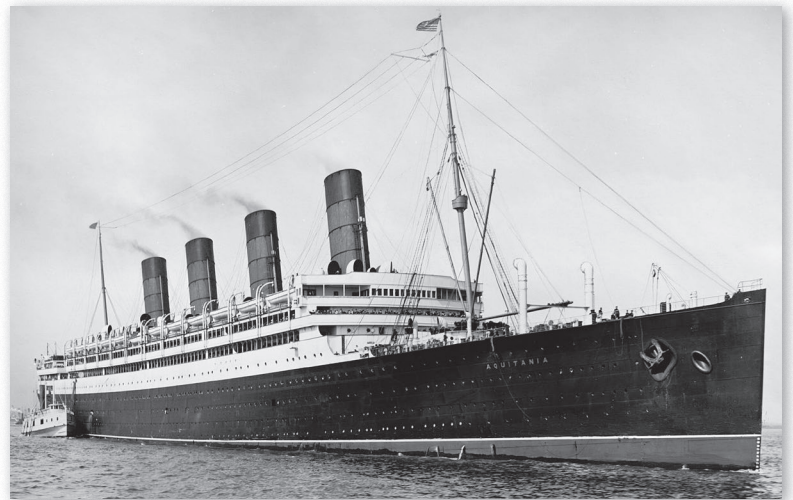
■ By Robert Martens

The Loewen family may have considered themselves fortunate to cross the Atlantic on the *Aquitania*. Its interior bore a resemblance to a first-class hotel, and in time it earned the nickname "The Ship Beautiful." If it was beautiful to the rich and pampered, it must have seemed positively Edenic to refugees on board.

Just as World War I was beginning, John Brown & Company launched the *Aquitania* on Scotland's Clyde River. It was the third in the Cunard Line's trio of great ocean liners, the others being the *Mauretania* and *Lusitania*. The ship was immediately pressed into wartime service. This elegant vessel served as a hospital ship and troop transport, operating primarily in the Dardanelles where some appallingly bloody battles took place. After the Great War ended in 1918, the *Aquitania* continued to transport Commonwealth troops, bringing them back home. It returned to active passenger service in 1920.

The *Aquitania* was more durable than most. While newer ships were being dismantled for scrap, "The Ship Beautiful" continued to make handsome profits for Cunard. During prohibition, it was used for "booze cruises." One can only imagine the drunken party scenes on board. During the 1930s, the *Aquitania* carried British ships to Palestine, twice, to quell a Palestinian uprising, incited by the flood of Jewish immigrants fleeing Hitler's Europe.

The ship would have been decommissioned in 1940 if it were not for the start of World War II. Once again, it was deployed as a troop transport, carrying about four hundred thousand men and women in uniform. The *Aquitania* was the only great liner to serve in both world wars.



*Aquitania*

Photo source: Wikipedia

"The Ship Beautiful," now showing signs of age, pivoted to a new role after the war: carrying war brides, immigrants, and refugees – including Elizabeth Loewen and her four children. Pier 21 in Halifax became well-acquainted with the ship, which became known as the "Grand Old Lady of the North Atlantic." But she was nearing the end of her remarkable life. In 1950, she was sold for scrap, having logged over three million miles.

Richard MacMichael, coordinator of visitor services at Halifax's Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, writes that he regards the "RMS *Aquitania* as the greatest ocean liner ever built for the North Atlantic Ocean" (1). The wheel from the *Aquitania* has found a home, among other of the ship's artifacts, at the museum.

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# Martin Loewen: A Kulak at the Wrong Time and Place

*“Kulak’ was the term which was used to describe peasants who owned over 8 acres (3.2 hectares) of land towards the end of the Russian Empire. In the early Soviet Union, particularly in Soviet Russia and Azerbaijan, ‘kulak’ became a vague reference to property ownership among peasants who were considered hesitant allies of the Bolshevik Revolution.”*  
Wikipedia.

*“Now, the expropriation of the kulaks is an integral part of the formation and development of the collective farms.... There is another question which seems no less ridiculous: whether the kulak should be permitted to join the collective farms. Of course not, for he is a sworn enemy of the collective-farm movement.” - Josef V. Stalin, “Problems of Agrarian Policy in the U.S.S.R.,” in Stalin, Problems of Leninism, 301–321 (Moscow: Foreign Languages, 1945)*

■ By David F. Loewen

Martin Loewen was the third youngest of eleven children. His father, Jacob Loewen (1829-1875), died when Martin was only five years old, and when he was thirteen, his mother, Katharina Harder Loewen (1834-1883), died. It is likely he went to live with an older sibling, as did his younger brother, my grandfather, Abraham J. Loewen.

At age twenty-four, Martin married Susanna Klassen in Schoendorf, and four years later, in 1898, they moved to Susanna’s home village, Gnadental, where they settled and farmed. They had two children at this time, Jacob and Anna. Susanna Klassen was sister to Jacob J. Klassen, the local minister and leader of the 1923 group that emigrated to Blumenort, Manitoba.

Martin Loewen purchased a farm for seven thousand rubles, and shortly thereafter, purchased another half-farm.<sup>1</sup> He became quite successful as a farmer and employed Russian labourers; inside the home, domestic chores were carried out by Russian female servants. In 1911, when the Orenburg colony experienced a devastating drought and crop failure, Martin sent a train carload of grain to his younger brother Abraham in the village of Pretoria. There had been enough grain for six other families and for seeding the next spring. In her memoirs, his granddaughter Katie Koslowsky described Martin as a righteous and generous man.

In 1922, Susanna Loewen died of typhus, leaving behind Martin and nine children, four of whom were teens or younger. Later that year, Martin remarried to Katharina (Hildebrandt) Froese, whose husband,



Martin & Susanna Klassen Loewen

Franz Froese, had been murdered in Felsenbach in 1919. Katharina brought six children into the marriage.

As collectivization of farming under Stalin began taking shape in the late 1920s, Martin found himself being “taxed” increasingly more because he was regarded as a wealthy “kulak.” Since he had a large family to support, he was forced to sell personal belongings to provide for his family. On his return from one of those dreaded visits to the city to make a payment, he was visibly upset. Noticing this, a neighbour asked about his appointment. He replied that they wanted him to join the *kolkhoz* [collective farm], to which his neighbour asked, why he wouldn’t, because refusing would only make matters worse. Martin replied, “Give Satan one small finger, he will take the whole hand, and later your body.”<sup>1</sup>

For Martin, the question of emigrating to Canada was something he had given some consideration, but in 1926, he was still optimistic about the future in Russia. Still, he raised the possibility of emigration in a letter to his brother Abraham, who had been living in Canada

with his family for only two months when they received this letter from Martin<sup>2</sup>:

“I often think about whether or not it is God’s will if we should leave Russia. Do we move because we want to serve God, or move because it’s in our own interest, pretending that it’s because of our faith? But does such faith exist in America that the love of Christ is evident? When reading your letters it is not evident to me but only that the dollar plays a large role. But I’m not saying that we wouldn’t want to move as well; far from it. But if I’m going to be truthful, I must say that these thoughts are often on my mind.

Harvest was very good. Wheat produced 68 pud [1 pud=16.38 kilos] per dessiatin [1 dessiatin=2.7 acres]; and barley and oats very similar. The price for wheat now is one ruble for 10 to 20 kg, barley 50 to 55 kg, and oats 90 kg. Butter one ruble for 80 kg. If only the cows produced a lot of butter; but it is very little.

We have the following livestock: five old horses, three mares, two geldings, one stallion, and one stallion foal. We have five old cows, and three 2-year-old heifers, three pigs and one butchered.

We have done some seeding and want to seed winter wheat of 25 dessiatin, rye 4 ½ dessiatin, oats 9 dessiatin, barley 3 dessiatin, and fallow 6 dessiatin. We don’t know yet what we are going to plant in that section. We harvested beautiful apples this year, and so we planted more, and we’ve also uprooted some. And if we’re going to stay here in Russia, we will plant still more, and look for ways to branch out into other activities.

If you should write again please describe your home life, the work you do, as well as church life; describe the surrounding countryside. We’ve heard that in certain areas the land is not good at all, so that working that land robs a man of his strength and his work.”

A little more than a year later, Martin had made the decision to emigrate. On March 22, 1928, Martin and son Johann travelled to Krivoy Rog to get emigration



Johann Loewen, 1925

papers.<sup>1</sup> Even though they paid ten percent, they received nothing – emigration to Canada would not be in their future. Martin’s son Jacob and daughter Maria had emigrated in 1925 and 1927 respectively.

Two years later, on March 10, 1930, Martin Loewen was visited by three men and ordered to vacate his house. He was stripped of his right to vote, work, or purchase necessities. No one was permitted to give them assistance.

As Martin’s son Johann and his family were in hiding ever since the failed attempt to emigrate, Martin and Katharina moved into their house. Six months later, on September 28, 1930, Martin and his large family were ordered to leave the village within twenty-four hours. They were directed to a location forty kilometres away, on the open prairie, on the other side of Sofievka.<sup>1</sup>

Martin and Katharina were accompanied by children Katharina, Martin, Isaak, Abram, Katja, Greta, and Liese. Franz had been conscripted into the army. The other children were either married or living in Canada at this time. Martin was allowed two horses and a wagon, and permitted to demolish their pig barn and summer kitchen built with bricks, which they would use to build their house on the open steppe. They dug a *zemlyanka* [dugout earth house], which resulted in the building being half underground. Their house included a false wall, behind which they hid extra possessions, protecting them from the regular police searches and seizures.

Martin managed to plant one to two acres of rye that same fall. The family gleaned fields and trapped gophers, the skins of which were sold. They had a few chickens, and the girls sewed for their Russian neighbours and the wives of local police. The boys made wooden slippers, baskets, and brooms.

According to daughter Katharina, a silver lining of their situation had been that they had time "...for singing, praying and having devotions. They had not had much time for this when they farmed in the villages." Son Martin got a job as a herdsman, for which he was paid one ruble per day, and received one meal per day.<sup>1</sup>

In June, before a year had passed, Martin and family, along with other families living in the vicinity, were rounded up and loaded onto train cars and sent to Lobva in the Ural Mountains. Life for Martin Loewen and family became increasingly difficult at this point. They lived in barracks and worked in the sawmills, but eventually were able to move into houses, with two families to a house. Their greatest challenge, however, would be access to adequate food.

On November 11, 1931, at the age of fifteen, son Abram died of starvation. One month later, son Isaak perished in the cold. He had been sent to fetch wood from a previous house they had lived in, but never returned. They found his frozen body nearby. One conclusion was that a frozen lock was to blame. Isaak was nineteen years old.

In a letter<sup>3</sup> written to her sister Marie Penner, in Canada, Katharina Loewen writes:

"Papa became sick in the beginning of November. He was very sick, the mouth open, high fever. We had only some bread and potatoes. We three took turns staying up all night. I prayed and cried a lot. He was unconscious. God did a miracle. He gave us our papa back. Thank you Lord! He said he had been in hell, and now he is still very weak. But he helps to bring wood in for our own use.

Our brother Abram did not eat. He waited so badly for a parcel which other families received. For us there was none. He wanted so very badly for some dry fruit or a biscuit or a candy for Christmas. Abram wanted four big potatoes with some kind of gravy. I went to the neighbours to put the bread in the oven and when I came back, Mama said, 'Look at Abram.' He



Katharina Loewen, 1928

was fifteen years old; his eyes did not see, and he lay this way for five hours, very peaceful. Papa unconscious; Abram dead.

Our house is four metres long and four metres wide, two doors, and four windows. We live together with another family. So far it was not too cold: -9 to -24 degrees. The snow is up to our knees. On our feet we have *laptje*, made from the bark of the linden tree. Sometimes I am so discouraged and in despair. I have no energy. Today I am happy, and I don't want to grumble, for there are people worse off. With the lighting, it is not very good; I am sitting in front of the oven to write. God will supply and I am hopeful. - Love Katharina"

That hope was not unfounded, as they did receive a food parcel from Martin's brother Abraham in Canada, in February 1932, shortly after sending the previous letter. Now it was Abraham's turn to support a brother in need. Unfortunately, that food package came too late for brother Martin and his son Abram. In a letter<sup>4</sup> written to Abraham and Maria Loewen in Canada, Katharina Loewen writes:

"Dear Uncle Abram, aunt and cousins in Canada, Today we received a parcel from you. Thank you very much. May the Lord bless you. It contained sugar, rice, oatmeal, flour, some ham, a flannelette shirt, and a blanket. It was very good. Just too bad that our dear papa didn't live long enough to see it.

Papa got sick the second time. He did not communicate and ate very little. When he came home from the hospital, he asked if there was a parcel. When he was still in Gnadental and farming, he had helped the Ukrainian widows with grain and other things. He had also helped his brother. He told his family to pray aloud, and we do. We have devotions every day. On February 9 in the morning, he started to have cramps. I was working that night. He became peaceful and his breath was slower, and he became weaker. At 9 pm he passed away.

I am the only one working right now. It's not bad. I bring wood with a horse to the heating room where I can warm myself. If we had not been so sick, we could have earned money and food, but now there is almost nothing to buy. But God can help us out, even if no men can help. I don't want to complain; I would like to be thankful because some are worse off than we.  
– Katharina”

grant us that here on earth, that we might see one another personally.”

Left to fend for themselves now were Katharina and Martin Loewen, the three youngest Froese sisters, Katharina, Greta, and Liese, and their mother, Katharina. Within the next year, the mood had changed, based on a letter<sup>6</sup> from Marie (Loewen) Penner to her uncle and aunt, Abraham and Maria Loewen, in Alberta.

Two months later, Katharina writes again to Abraham and Maria Loewen. Her letter<sup>7</sup> is filled with both hope and with despair – hope that God will provide, and despair over the lack of anything to eat. Her closing remarks foreshadow her own untimely and imminent death.

“And now I want to write you something that troubles me very much. Tina (Katharina Loewen) writes that she and Martin are so weak that they can hardly work, and their stepsisters (Froese girls) are ‘round’ and immediately eat everything. Tina serves the bread herself, but the Froese girls can hold out better. That's the way it was last winter as well.

“The first package we received on February 19. On the twentieth, I immediately sent a letter, dear uncle and aunt. We are still living here in the distant Ural district. We long to return to our home; we are very lonely since we are the only Mennonite family here.

So Tina has become envious and wishes that she and Martin would leave mother and depart, because Martin still earns more than a girl. I am very saddened, so please pray for her as well that she will have a change of mind. Martin does not want to leave his mother yet. I'm not surprised that it bothers Tina this way.

Papa is no longer with us to exhort us, so today, May 1, Sunday and also at Easter, we read a sermon which he would have liked. The text was from John 16:23-30. ‘Very truly I tell you, my father will give you anything you ask in my name.’ That is a good word of comfort for us so we pray that he will bring us back to be among fellow believers. It would be a great blessing for us rather than to be stuck here with these drunkards.

Tina writes they have very bad clothes; it is perhaps already too late. Tina asked that I request on her behalf. I don't have anything more to write today; I have a heavy heart; if Tina would only believe, and not despair, because that is not what awaits them in heaven.”

Wages are okay. In the month of February we five earned 198 rubles, in March we earned 266 rubles, and in April, 107; we will get paid later. But there is nothing to buy so it really doesn't help us any; otherwise we would have enough to eat.

One year later, Katharina died of starvation, and later that same year, on November 11, 1933, their mother, Katharina (Hildebrandt Froese) Loewen, also died.<sup>6</sup> Martin left the girls for a short time, but returned and later married his stepsister, Katje Froese, in May 1935. In 1937, they fled the area for Felsenbach, Ukraine, where they lived with Katje's brother Aaron Froese.

The material you sent I used for sewing trousers for my brothers. The shirt fits Martin just barely, in that it is too long.

On September 28, 1937, Martin was arrested<sup>7</sup> by the NKVD [Soviet secret police] and sent to East Khabarovsk and then to Lankaran, near Baku, Azerbaijan. He died October 15, 1941, in Azerbaijan. In October 1943, Katja joined a group of twenty, evacuating with the German army to Germany. On October 23, 1945, they were repatriated to Slobodskoy District, in Kirov Oblast [administrative region], Russia.

Dear uncle and aunt, please don't be angry; we want all the best even though I write that we are unable to satisfy our hunger. We have enough money. May God protect us all until we see each other again in heaven. Perhaps God will

Life for Katje and her daughter was “...very hard;

nothing to eat; the only thing they found in spring was stinging nettle. They poured boiling water to kill the sting and then ate it like a salad, or cut up as a vegetable. They were assigned to difficult work in the forests, and experienced a difficult existence.”<sup>1</sup>

Katje, daughter Maria and her husband, with five children, along with Katje’s sister, Liese Froese Ens and her families, emigrated to Neuwied, Germany on April 11, 1989.

### The Older Children:

#### *Jacob Loewen*

Martin and Susanna’s oldest son, Jacob, and Anna Redekopp emigrated to Canada in 1925, with three children. They settled and raised their family of eight children in Manitoba.



Jacob Loewen, 1916

#### *Anna Loewen*

Anna married Daniel Friesen in 1919. He was arrested on February 19, 1931 and sent to Arkhangelsk. Anna lost her property and all rights as a kulak; she and her children went into hiding. In 1932, Anna and three children returned to Gnadental from their hiding, although their prospects were dismal. Her children went door-to-door, begging for food, and they tried gleaning in the fields.<sup>1</sup> She and her brother Johann received \$4.10 from Canada, likely from her uncle Abraham Loewen. With that money, they were able to buy food in a “special” store (Torgsin). Unfortunately, this also tipped off the secret police as to who was getting help from overseas.

Anna’s younger sister, Marie Penner, in Canada, provides the following news about Anna in her letter<sup>6</sup> to Abraham and Maria Loewen:

“We also received a letter from sister Anna this week. Despite all her struggles, she appears to be brave; God is her strength. She received ten Deutschmarks from the Red Cross. She put some food aside – beans and corn and some milk from the cow. She writes: ‘We have no income; have been milking a fresh cow since February 1; also collect cream for shipping but what I’ll get for it I don’t know.’”

With that precious foreign currency, they were able to buy twenty kilograms millet porridge, four kilograms

flour, and two kilograms of sugar. In March 1934, Daniel returned, and they moved to Gruenfeld. Daniel was arrested a second time on June 21, 1938, and never heard from again.

Their oldest son, Martin, was arrested in 1941, and sent east with a tractor brigade, never to be heard from again. Their daughter Anna died in 1935, at the age of eleven. Anna lived in Gnadental until 1943, when she and five children evacuated westward with the retreating German troops. They spent almost two years in Germany; Daniel served with the Hitler Youth in the Agricultural Labour Service.<sup>7</sup> In 1945, they were repatriated to Kostroma, Siberia, by Soviet authorities. Here, Anna and her daughters Susanna and Katharina starved to death between 1947 and 1950. The two youngest, Anna and Margaretha, who were twins, were placed into an orphanage. Daniel, who was seventeen years old, was sent to work in the gold mines at River Lena, Siberia. In 1954, the twins were reunited with their older brother Daniel, and eventually all three emigrated to Germany with their respective families.<sup>1</sup>

#### *Johann Loewen*

Martin and Susanna’s third oldest, Johann, worked in the Bethania Mental Hospital, where he met his wife, Anna Sudermann. They were married in Gnadental in 1926, and November 1929 found them in Moscow, along with thousands of other Mennonites, anxious to emigrate. They failed. Johann had sold everything, so he and his family returned to Ukraine and went into hiding in larger cities but found little work.

Johann burned his passport because it identified him as a kulak. In its place, he obtained an official document



Johann & Anna Sudermann Loewen, 1925

with a church seal on it and returned to Gnadental from hiding. He was accepted into the *kolkhoz*, which had been encouraging, and they moved back into their house. Anna worked on the chicken farm and Johann did masonry work in Neu Chortitza. The \$4.10 received from Canada was of great assistance.

In 1936, Johann was instructed to report to the NKVD, and on June 1, 1936, he was formally arrested.<sup>7</sup> Anna was able to visit him a few times in prison. He was sent into exile to Maldyak, Magadanskaya Oblast, northern Siberia, known to be one of the coldest places on earth, where temperatures plunged as low as -50°. Here he worked in a gold mine; his accommodations were a tent. In a letter received by the family, Johann made the following observation: “If you work hard it is okay, but if work is slower, the frost gets through your clothes. I have no mittens, they are lost or stolen. The food is not very much. If you send me care packets, remember it will take six months until it gets here.”<sup>1</sup> The family was to learn many years later that he died of pneumonia on January 16, 1938, only fourteen months after his arrest.

Johann and Anna had four children, all of whom married. One daughter emigrated to Germany in 1990. Anna was thirty-two years old when her husband was taken from her. She spent many of her years thereafter milking cows on a *kolkhoz*. She died in Kazakhstan in 1988, at the age of eighty-four.

#### *Maria Loewen*

Daughter Maria and Heinrich Penner emigrated to Canada in 1927, initially landing in Saskatchewan, but soon settling in Yarrow, British Columbia, where they raised their family of eight.

#### *Susanna Loewen*

Susanna Loewen married Abram Bergen in 1924, in Gnadental. Abram’s parents had moved onto the Gnadental farm of Jacob Klassen, who had led a large contingent of emigrants to Canada the previous year. Jacob’s sister Susanna was married to Martin Loewen. Abram and Susanna Bergen lived with their parents for a short while and then purchased an older house.

The Bergens, like everyone else, worked on the *kolkhoz*. In 1938, Gnadental began receiving visits on numerous occasions by the NKVD, each time leaving with newly-arrested men. In anticipation of his arrest,



Abram & Susanna Loewen Bergen, with Katie.

Abram had given Susanna advice on a number of details. On June 10, 1938, they came for Abram. Their daughter, Katie, describes the event<sup>1</sup>:

“It was a nice evening; the windows were open (no screens). A knock at the door and a voice said, ‘Abram are you home?’ Dad went to the door. Mother was so shocked; she left the room and went to the barn. It was the police and Mr. Ruff; he was Dad’s friend from Chortitza. They opened all the drawers and threw all contents on the floor. Pictures and letters were looked at very closely. The Bible and the songbook were hidden in the attic for a long time already. They went to the attic but there was no light. They searched the barn and looked in the chicken nest as well as the big box where we kept some feed for our animals, but it was empty now. They did not find anything. My brother Abram was up now. Dad had to sign a paper.

Dad said goodbye to us. We had no money to give him. He wanted to take the old jacket, but Mother said, ‘Please take the better one.’ He took no change of clothes. He wanted to wake the other boys, but the police were angry. They took Dad and we never saw him again.”

Abram was sent to Dnepropetrovsk where he was executed three months later, on September 26, 1938.<sup>1</sup> It wasn’t until after Stalin’s death in 1953 that the family learned the details of Abram’s death, although Susanna continued to believe that he would return to her one day, saying that “the Russians have lied before.” Susanna continued to live in Gnadental until 1943, when she and her children evacuated Ukraine with the retreating German army. Unlike so many other Mennonites who evacuated with the retreating German army, the Bergens

family escaped the fate of being repatriated to Siberia. In October 1947, Susanna Bergen and her children set their feet on Canadian soil, settling in Manitoba.

#### *Susanna Froese*

Susanna married Johann Neufeld in Felsenbach, Borozenko colony, in 1921. They had eleven children. Johann died in Kazakhstan in 1973, followed by Susanna, twenty-two years later.

#### *Aaron Froese*

Aaron married Margaretha Ens in Felsenbach, Borozenko, in 1925. She died a month after giving birth to their fifth child in 1935. The next year, Aaron married Maria Froese, and one year later, in August, he was arrested. He died three weeks later, presumably executed.

#### **Postscript**

Martin Loewen's story is the story of countless other Mennonites, including his siblings, who suffered the same fate, due to the fact that they owned land and a few animals. In short, they were kulaks who were targeted for elimination by Stalin. In Martin's case, he and his wife lost both their land and their lives, and half of their children suffered a similar fate. Of Martin and Katharina's fifteen children, three emigrated to Canada, three emigrated to Germany in their later years, seven had their lives prematurely ended, either by starvation,



Martin & Katharina Hildebrandt/Froese Loewen Family, 1926

forced labour, or execution, and two lived out a normal, albeit hard life, in the Soviet Union.

#### **Sources**

1. Katie (Bergen) Koslowsky memoirs.
  2. Letter, 18 December 1926, from Martin Loewen to brother Abraham and Maria Loewen in Alberta.
  3. Letter, 4 January 1932, from Katharina Loewen (Martin Loewen's daughter) to Abraham and Maria Loewen in Alberta.
  4. Letter, 19 February 1932, from Katharina Loewen to Abraham and Maria Loewen in Alberta.
  5. Letter, 1 May 1932, from Katharina Loewen to Abraham and Maria Loewen in Alberta.
  6. Letter, 17 February 1933, from Marie (Loewen) Penner, in Saskatchewan, to Abraham and Maria Loewen in Alberta.
  7. EWZ50-B079-1738. (Einwandererzentralstelle, or German immigration centre, files).
- Correspondence with Jennifer Penner, 2022.  
*GRANDMA Online*.

## Joining and Leaving the Mennonite Community: A Genealogical Perspective\*

*Part 6: Leaving the Mennonite Church in Russia*

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

Leaving the Mennonite church in Prussia was relatively easy. There were no laws preventing a Mennonite from joining a Catholic church (the state church prior to 1772) or a Lutheran church (the state church after 1772). Over the centuries many thousands did so. This is reflected in the Mennonite population numbers in West Prussia, which remained steady at about ten to thirteen thousand from the mid-1700s

until the mid-1900s, despite high birth rates. The restrictions and financial pressure on Mennonites was so great that many left simply so that they could economically survive.

In New Russia (later called South Russia), the situation was quite different. Foreign settlers of different ethnic/religious groups lived in separate colonies. For example, there were separate German Catholic and Lutheran colonies. Some groups had separate privileges or arrangements of some kind with the Russian

government. Hence, changing religions usually involved relocating to another colony.

The first Mennonite known to have left the Mennonite church in Russia was **Peter Hoepfner**. He and brother Jacob were excommunicated from the Chortitza (Flemish) church, expelled from the colony and jailed around 1800. They were re-registered as non-Mennonites in the nearby city of Aleksandrovsk. Upon their release from jail in 1801, Jacob Hoepfner was able to join the Chortitza colony Frisian (Kronsweide) Mennonite church and moved back to his farmstead a few years later. Peter Hoepfner simply disappeared. We do not know what religion he joined or what happened to him. Either way, he was no longer a member of the Mennonite church.

As mentioned in Part 1, changing religion anytime between 1800 and 1871 required the permission of the Guardianship Committee. Since Mennonites had the most generous privileges, it was easier to leave the Mennonites and join a group with fewer privileges.

The following accounts for *some* of those known to have left the Russian Mennonites between 1800 and 1875:

1. **Jacob Janzen** of Burwalde, Chortitza. Became an Orthodox in 1835. Difficult to locate. He may have been the Jacob Janzen (b. 1807; GM#197362) who lived in Burwalde in 1816 [1].
2. **Gerhard Penner** (1825-60; GM#165149) of the Bergthal colony in 1853. He was referred to as a troublesome individual who joined the Lutheran Church and then the Catholic Church. He appears to have moved to the Jamburg German Catholic colony [2, 3].
3. Daughter of **Claas Krahn** (1799-1848; GM#196114) from Schoenthal in the Bergthal colony. She is certainly daughter Katharina (b. 30 Jun 1824). She became an Orthodox in 1841 after becoming pregnant by a local Russian [4a, 5]. See also my article on Mennonites and illegitimate births [6].
4. **Franz Siemens** (1817-56; GM#186901) of the Bergthal colony. He was expelled from the Bergthal colony sometime between 1846 and 1850. He had numerous encounters with the law. At one point he stole a horse in Kharkov and was flogged as a result [7, 8].

5. **Peter Heidebrecht** (b. 1796; GM#45461) of Lichtenau, Molotschna colony. He joined the Lutheran colonists in the Molotschna district (probably the Prischib colony) in 1822, likely in order to marry a Lutheran woman [9].
6. **David Reimer** (b. 1813; GM#102940) of Schoensee, Molotschna (actually the Felsenthal estate founded by his father). He married a woman named Praskovja and joined the Orthodox church in 1855. There is government correspondence in the St. Petersburg Archives on attempts of the early Mennonite Templers (Joh. Lange) and Mennonite Brethren Church (Heinr. Hiebert) to convert him back to the Mennonite faith, which was still illegal at the time. The documents make it clear that any request by Reimer to switch back would be denied. He appears to have joined the Mennonite settlement in the Kuban, but was there for only a short period of time.
7. **Jacob Penner** (not yet identified) of the Chortitza colony. According to the diary of David Epp [4], "In February [1843] the young man Jacob Penner, who had been living a dissolute life, joined the Russian Orthodox Church in Yekaterinoslav."
8. **Peter Regier** of Fuerstenau, Molotschna (b. 1805; GM#46353). He was a merchant who moved to Berdjansk sometime after 1841. His wife, Elisabeth Warkentin, died in 1848. In 1849-50 he requested permission to marry the widow Maria Freuthal [10]. Sometime between 1850 and 1854 his registration was changed, but the file description gives no details as to what religion he switched to [11].
9. **Bernhard Hiebert** of the Bergthal colony (b. 1854; GM#186968). He left the church and married a Russian woman [12]. The rest of the family moved to Manitoba in the 1870s.
10. **Abraham Penner** of Rosengart (1802-1852; GM#528261). He joined the Orthodox Church in 1836. The Jacob Wall diary mentions that he sold his cattle and household goods in an auction. Wall's diary also records his death with the statement that he had been "russified" [13].

The following is a list, compiled on 20 Dec 1867, of



those Molotschna Mennonites who had left the Mennonite religion [14]. It is uncertain as to just how far back this list goes. The # sign indicates the family number in the last census.

Name	Village	#	Switched to:	Comments
Johann Harder	Halbstadt	4	Catholic	Alexandrovsk region
David Reimer	Schoensee	42	Orthodox	In the Kuban
Tobias Voth	Ohrloff	29	Lutheran	Alexandrovsk region
Theodor Voth	Ohrloff	29	Lutheran	In Mariupol
Peter Reimer	Margenau	32	Orthodox	Disappeared
Jacob Dyck	Lichtfelde	32	Orthodox	Odessa
Johann Goertz	Schardau	4	Lutheran	Bachmut region
David Goertz	Schardau	4	Lutheran	Alexandrovsk region
Jacob Reimer	Fuerstenwerder	30	Orthodox	Unknown
Johann Doerksen	Sparrau	9	Orthodox	Bachmut region
Gottlieb Strauss	Gnadenfeld	37	Lutheran	Still in Gnadenfeld
Eduard Janzen	Gnadenfeld	54	Lutheran	In Tiflis
Claas Neufeld	Wernersdorf	15	Orthodox	Chorkov province, in a monastery
Heinrich Neufeld	Prangenu	31	Orthodox	Unknown
Cornelius Voth	Alexanderwohl	8	Orthodox	In Berdjansk

Another listing for those who left between 1868 and 1910 can be found in the St. Petersburg Archives. Unfortunately only a file description is available [15].

A document from 1867 with the title, “About joining the girls Helena and Anna Neufeld to the Orthodox Church,” is in the inventory of the Odessa Archives [16]. Unfortunately the document is missing – only the title is available. These girls were likely Mennonites.

There were three main reasons for Mennonites joining another religion during this time period: 1) marriage to a non-Mennonite. 2) living outside of the colony, among non-Mennonites. These people were usually non-agrarian and the more progressive among the Mennonite population. There were often no nearby Mennonite congregations and there were not enough Mennonites in the area to begin a congregation. It was easier for them to join other religions, in particular the Lutherans. Losing Mennonite privileges was not so important for this group. 3) Those who were either unhappy with the Mennonite church or were frequently in trouble with the church and the civil authorities.

*\*Note that this series covers only the situation in Russia prior to the big emigration of the 1870s and in Prussia prior to the big emigration of about 1818-20.*

1. Odessa State Archives, Fonds 6, Inventory 1, File 3792.
2. Odessa State Archives, Fonds 6, Inventory 2, File 16176.
3. Bergthal Colony Church Register A54.
4. *The Diaries of David Epp: 1837-1843*. John B. Toews, trans. a) entry for 15 Nov. 1841; b) entry for 7 Mar. 1843.
5. Bergthal Colony Church Register A69.
6. *Mennonite Historian*, Dec. 2021, p. 3.
7. Odessa State Archives, Fonds 6, Inventory 1, File 8643.
8. Bergthal Colony Church Register A70.
9. St. Peterburg State Archives (RGIA), Fonds 383, Opis 29, Delo 473.
10. Odessa State Archives, Fonds 6, Inventory 2, File 12785.
11. Odessa State Archives, Fonds 6, Inventory 2, File 13831.
12. Wohlgenuth, John. *The Peter Hiebert Genealogy 1818 – 1877*.
13. Odessa State Archives, Fonds 6, Inventory 1, File 4134.
14. St. Peterburg State Archives (RGIA), Fonds 381, Opis 44, Delo 20622.
15. St. Peterburg State Archives (RGIA), Fonds 821, Opis 10, Delo 507.
16. Odessa State Archives, Fonds 6, Inventory 4, File 22546.

*The editors apologize for the omission of some footnotes from Glenn Penner’s article, “Joining and Leaving the Mennonite Community: A Genealogical Perspective,” Roots and Branches, Vol. 28, No. 2, June 2022. The complete footnotes follow.*

### Complete footnotes from Glen Penner’s Joining and Leaving .....

1. For historical information on this Mennonite community see: a) the GAMEO article <https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Lithuania> and b) Erwin Wittenberg and Manuel Janz, “Mennonite Settlers in Prussian Lithuania.” *Preservings*, 2020, No. 40, pp. 19-26.
2. Glenn H. Penner. “The Great Plague of 1709.” *Preservings*, 2020, No. 40, pp. 43-46.
3. For my transcription of the list of Mennonites expelled from Prussian Lithuania see: “Mennonites Expelled from Lithuania in 1724.” [mennonitegenealogy.com](https://mennonitegenealogy.com) b) also see [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Tragheimerweide\\_\(Pomeranian\\_Voivodeship,\\_Poland\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Tragheimerweide_(Pomeranian_Voivodeship,_Poland))
4. In 1722 the Prussian government investigated, and a report can be found in the Berlin archives: XX. HA; Abt. 7, EM 38d, Nr. 29. Detailed information on some of those who had joined the Mennonites or were planning to do so, appears in the report. I would like to thank Erwin Wittenberg and Manuel Janz, both from Germany, for a copy of the transcription of the report.
5. Thiensdorf, West Prussia. Mennonite church records.
6. 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)
7. For a transcription by Adalbert Goertz of the 1789 census of Mennonite Landowners see: “The 1789 Land Census/General-Nachweisung of West Prussian Mennonites.” [mennonitegenealogy.com](https://mennonitegenealogy.com)
8. Odessa (Ukraine) State Archives, Fonds 6, Opis 2, Delo 9471. For my translation of these immigration records see: [Molotschna\\_Immigration\\_1840-1851.pdf](https://mennonitegenealogy.com/Molotschna_Immigration_1840-1851.pdf) ([mennonitegenealogy.com](https://mennonitegenealogy.com))
9. This information comes from the GRANDMA genealogical database. 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>

10. Tiegenhagen Catholic Church records. Burials (including Mennonites) 1757-1770. For my extraction of the Mennonites in this register see: "Mennonites in the Catholic Burial Register of Tiegenhagen, West Prussia (1757-1770)." [mennonitegenealogy.com](http://mennonitegenealogy.com)
11. Orlofffeld, West Prussia, Mennonite church records. For my transcription of the church transfers for this congregation, see: "Orlofffelde, West Prussia Church Transfer Records (1772-1804)." [mennonitegenealogy.com](http://mennonitegenealogy.com)
12. Thiensdorf, West Prussia, Lutheran church records. I am deeply grateful to Manuel Janz of Germany for sharing this information with me.
13. He would have been born sometime between the expulsion from Lithuania and about 20 years before the birth of his oldest known child.
14. Peter Rempel. *Mennonite Migrations to Russia* (2007), p. 50.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 120, 156.
16. For various church records from this region see the section on "Culm" here: Prussian Mennonite Genealogical Resources ([mennonitegenealogy.com](http://mennonitegenealogy.com))
17. These church records can be found under the section "Plauschwarren" at: Prussian Mennonite Genealogical Resources ([mennonitegenealogy.com](http://mennonitegenealogy.com))

## BOOK LAUNCH

Dora Dueck, editor. *On Holy Ground: Stories by and about women in ministry leadership in the Mennonite Brethren Church*. Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2022. 7 pm, June 17, 2022, Mennonite Heritage Museum

### Reported by Robert Martens

In 1993, the Mennonite Brethren Board of Faith and Life moved that individual churches be permitted to choose whether to have women in leadership roles. It was a watershed moment – or could have been. The motion was defeated.

A new book of essays, *On Holy Ground*, edited by writer Dora Dueck, chronicles the struggles of MB women with the issue of women in leadership in the MB Conference. Jon Isaak, director of the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Winnipeg, started off the book launch at the Mennonite Heritage Museum by noting that some of the stories include "gut-wrenching wrestling" and can make for "painful reading."

It was an intense, emotional evening. Dora Dueck said that the fifteen contributors in the book had been specifically chosen, but many more could have added their voices. Their stories, she said, were told and published "to lift them into the historical record."

Four of the contributors were present at the book launch. Karen Heidebrecht Thiessen led off the evening. Her



*On Holy Ground* contributors present at the book launch at MHM: Dora Dueck, Bev Peters, Karen Heidebrecht Thiessen, Lorraine Dyck.

Photo credit: Jennifer Martens

upbringing had been positive: she had been encouraged by her pastor father to pursue church work. When she worked as pastor at River East MB in Winnipeg, though, she was the only female in leadership in the Conference.

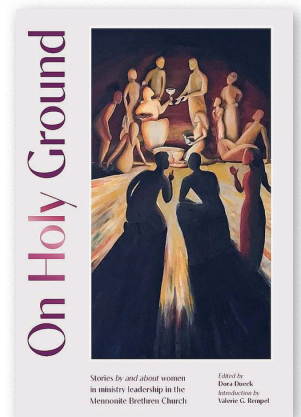
Controversy followed. River East, she said, was unable to protect her, and she reluctantly left the MB Conference.

Bev Peters, who spoke next, was one of the first women – the other was Grace Kim – to be ordained after the 1993 decision was reversed in 2006. She had hesitated, she said, when invited by Dueck to contribute to the book but seeing her story in print "helped make it valid." Male resistance had left her "paralyzed with doubt," doubt that "women hear from God." But whatever happens, she said, "Jesus and I are in this together."

Lorraine Dyck, on the brink of retirement, took the stage next. She said that, despite struggles, she had

pleasant memories of her involvement in the MB Conference. Dyck told her story of growing up in the faith, of her conversion being a process rather than a one-time experience. She entered missions, worked in Brazil, and "fell in love with the church."

Dora Dueck ended the evening. After the 1993 resolution was lost,



she said, she sensed “the glee of the winners.” With her own “personality of hesitation,” though, it took her some time to change her own mind on the gender issue.

A brief Q&A session ended the book launch. How do you sustain yourself in ministry among so many

detractors, was one question put to the contributors. Heidebrecht Thiessen pointed to “seeing the humanity in the opposition.” Peters said she found strength in the revelation that “God is OK with me.”

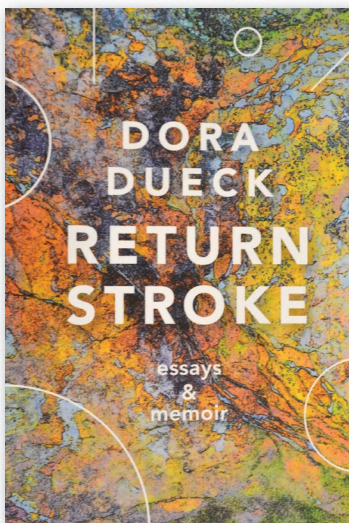
**Book Launch.** *Return Stroke: essays and memoir.* Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2022. 7 pm, 7 July 2022, Mennonite Heritage Museum

■ Reported by Robert Martens

**D**ora Dueck’s second book launch within a month still managed to draw a large, attentive crowd.

*Return Stroke* is a collection of essays and memoir written largely, said Dueck, in the 2000s. The memoir part of the book, she said, involves a two-and-a-half year stay in Paraguay with her husband and children some decades ago. In Paraguay, she was struck by a sense of “strangeness,” of trying to fit in with an unfamiliar culture. Still, said Dueck, “Paraguay was the most interesting place I’ve ever lived.” About half the book focuses on her stay there.

She read first from the memoir, a vivid, even visceral, look back at her younger self. Dueck followed that up with some comic relief: stories of cooking, including a failed attempt at bringing verenike to the table. This essay was inspired by the *Mennonite Girls Can Cook* series, and by a friend’s comment that “Mennonite girls can write, too.” Dueck went on to comment on her



husband’s death, and the disappointing hospice facility in which he was lodged.

In the Q&A session that followed, Dueck remarked that “I’m the kind of person who needs to write things down to hold them properly.” As for writing based on memory: “When I go back into the past, it always gives me something new – it’s not just memory.” *Return Stroke*, she said, is a departure from her writing of fiction. When writing stories or novels, her characters, in a sense, “show up,” and she has to “listen

to where they are taking the story.” Writing her own story brings on new challenges. For example, “the story of my daughter ‘coming out’ – I would never tell her story – it’s my story.”

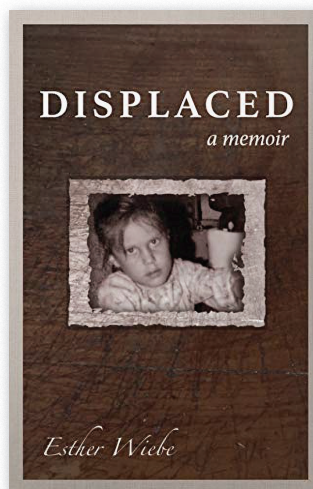
“Sometimes I wish,” concluded Dueck, “that I had lived a more exciting life.” Does memoir require an “exciting life?” Her readings at the launch, reflective, sometimes acerbic, might contradict that notion.

**BOOK REVIEWS**

**Esther Wiebe.** *Displaced: A Memoir.* Monee, IL: One Book Publishing, 2020. 282 pp.

■ Reviewed by David Giesbrecht

**I**n 1954, Mennonites from Paraguay began settling in Bolivia, and were subsequently joined by fellow believers from Mexico and Canada. According to GAMEO,\* in 2020 there were some 27,000 Mennonites in the country. Their way of believing and living is the subject of Royden Loewen’s 2016 publication, *Horse-and-Buggy Genius: Listening to Mennonites Contest the Modern World.*



In this account, Esther is the youngest of fourteen children in the Driedger family, and the one who “always had more questions than I dared to ask.” Born in in the Menno Colony, she describes her childhood experiences in this male-dominated community with a disarming candour. “Rules were embedded into every corner and aspect of our lives” (98). For her mother, such strictures meant that, after returning from an unsanctioned visit to relatives in Canada, she was ordered

to beg forgiveness from the elders and preachers in an environment where “the atmosphere of condemnation, intimidation and humiliation is difficult to describe” (81).

Colony leaders also are self-appointed enforcers of right living. When Esther’s brother Johnny, “who had an angry streak coupled with rebellion” (124), continued to violate community expectations, he was forcibly taken to a barn, hooded, tied down and given a brutal beating. Far from resulting in reformed behaviour, “When Johnny was finally dropped off [at home], he limped into the boy’s room in cold silence” (125). Embittered, he gave himself over to reckless use of alcohol and drugs.

Esther’s father was killed, pinned under his tractor while working a field late one night. A gruesome discovery next morning showed how desperately he had struggled to extricate himself. Sometime later, Esther’s mother and sister Nellie died as a result of an oven fire in their kitchen. The tragedies shattered Esther’s young life.

The arrival of black-suited colony leaders at the Driedger farm soon after the mother’s memorial was ominous. Assuming that parentless children were not capable of running the farm, the elders matter-of-factly informed the Driedger offspring that they would be distributed among various families, and their farm sold. Urgent action was required to avoid such a disagreeable fate, for it was known that Mr. Fehr, head of the family Esther was assigned to, was an abuser. The older siblings lost little time in reaching a resolution: “We are getting the kids out of here” (186).

The departure date, Sunday, May 5, 1985, is seared in Esther’s memory. To preserve a sense of normalcy, on returning from their church service that day, the siblings swept the floor, washed the dishes and walked about for the last time. Astutely they packed their travel bags “loaded in a single layer” (12) so as not to incur the suspicion of ever-inquisitive neighbours, and on a late Sunday afternoon, left for the Santa Cruz airport. Secrecy was essential, for in the opinion of Bolivian Mennonite bishops, moving to Canada “was a shameful thing, [tantamount to entering] a path to hell” (229).

After several stop-overs with relatives in Saskatchewan and Alberta, Esther and her brother Henry eventually arrived in La Crete, the birthplace of her parents, “where the roads didn’t end.” Contrasts with the life she had known could not have been greater. In winter, nights

seemed endless, as did the days of summer. Insightfully, Esther muses over this ancestral place, mind-mapping what had shaped her parents’ lives as she explores the intertwining strands of her Old Colony Mennonite past (53ff.).

Adjusting to the expectations of relatives in this colony proved to be more difficult than awakening to life in Canada. Esther recalls a crisis moment when one evening she overheard her hosts venting over what they considered to be the rude and ungrateful behaviour of the Driedger children. “If you ask me, I predict they will make a disgrace of themselves” (190). With funds derived from the sale of their Bolivian property, Esther and Henry settled into a house trailer, which afforded some privacy. Nevertheless, since her older brothers Carl and Ernie lived in La Crete, an invasive surveillance hung over them like a persistent mist. Admonished yet again by her brothers to “live according to how you were taught,” Esther’s patience was exhausted. “What if what we were taught is a lie?” (204) Sadly, such visits inevitably ended in tears.

A very astute Esther easily picked up English and began mastering her school subjects. Some serious bumps notwithstanding, she eventually learned to find a comfortable stride in Canada. Always the free spirit, while visiting relatives in Lethbridge one summer, she decided not to return to La Crete. Esther presciently describes her journey to inner freedom. “In my teens and early twenties I worked tirelessly ... to put pain, poverty and suffering behind me ... and be the master of my emotions.... As time went on, there were many things I had to come to grips with” (250). She credits both her marriage to Wally Wiebe and a decade of service in Nicaragua as significant to her inner healing.

This well-told story merits wide attention. The first-hand accounts of Mennonite colony life, although measured, make for riveting reading. Notable is the author’s skill in tracing her growth towards independent thought and spiritual maturity. “God is perfect and just ... and one day He will make all things right” (260). Quite extraordinarily, contrary to some of her siblings, Esther did not allow bitterness to destroy her confidence nor deter her search for liberty. She continues comfortably to identify as a Mennonite believer.

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Esther Wiebe now lives with her husband in Langley, BC.

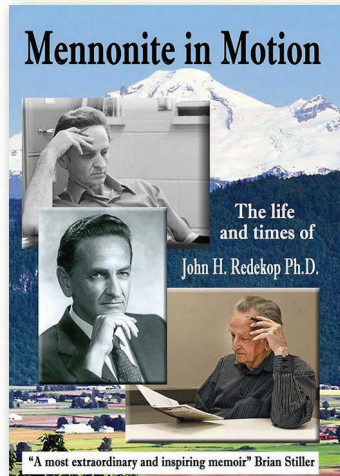
\* <https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Bolivia>

■ Reviewed by Robert Martens

The memoir of John H. Redekop is as detailed as might be expected from a meticulous educator and organizer. Occasionally, pages of minutiae appear that might overwhelm an archivist. But Redekop is a fine storyteller, and his inquisitiveness and energy predominate in this autobiography over the telling of facts. Consider the narrative of his birth. Born in 1932 in Herbert, Saskatchewan, to loving Russian-Mennonite immigrants, nevertheless there is a fly in the ointment. “One of my older sisters...told me that when my father had discovered that my mother was pregnant with me, he had cried. I was stunned! Who wants to be an unwanted child?” (12) This outburst of emotion soon resolves into the depiction, however, of a happy childhood – his father’s anxiety had been instigated by the family’s poverty.

Redekop’s early life is perhaps typical of that generation of Russian-Mennonite immigrants. John grew up on a farm and remains grateful for his communal and loving upbringing. Already as a boy, though, he was interested in alternate points of view and delighted in upsetting the proverbial applecart. On one occasion, after his family had moved to Abbotsford in 1945, John was asked to speak publicly to his high school audience on the rise of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), later the New Democratic Party. Mennonite icon Peter Dyck heard the speech, was not happy with it, and refused to surrender an inch of ground to this new upstart. “That day,” writes Redekop, “I lost some respect for prominent people who are not sensitive about what they say about lesser folk...” (60).

From a very early age, it was clear that Redekop was headed for some kind of position of leadership. His first choice, though, was not the academic he turned out to be. His preference was to go into law, but his parents would not hear of it and young Redekop altered his life’s trajectory to conform with their wishes. Regrets may have followed. “In retrospect I think I may have been too submissive to my parents’ wishes in making a career choice” (71). And so he went on to Bible school, and



then the University of British Columbia, where, naturally, this lover of controversy joined the debating club. At UBC, writes Redekop, his faith was challenged, but “What ... helped to stabilize and sustain me was the realization that the students and professors who challenged my spiritual convictions and way of life *had nothing of substance to put in their place*” [italics in the original] (82). At about this time, Redekop began his long writing career when Frank Epp asked him to jot down some columns for the *Canadian Mennonite*, which Epp was editing.

For a year, Redekop lived the invigorating life of a student in Heidelberg, Germany, even motorbiking around Europe and North Africa with a good friend, Harvey Dyck. Their experiences may surprise those who know Redekop only from later years: for example, one morning John and Harvey were wakened by Libyans who told them to move carefully, since they had tented overnight in an area of landmines. Upon returning to North America, Redekop married Doris Nickel and pursued an academic career. He earned a degree in history at the University of California, Berkeley, and then went on to his PhD at the University of Washington. Redekop’s doctoral thesis examined Billy James Hargis, an evangelist of the far right.

His thesis caused something of a splash in the Mennonite community, and caught the eye of Frank Peters, then academic dean at Waterloo Lutheran University. Peters invited Redekop to assume a teaching position at WLU, later Wilfrid Laurier University, and Redekop began a long academic career there beginning in 1968. These were the busiest years of his life. Beyond teaching, Redekop wrote and edited books, penned the *Personal Opinion* column for the *MB Herald* – that went on for decades – and became thoroughly involved in church work, eventually assuming the role of moderator for the Mennonite Brethren Conference of Canada. During his stint of work with the church, Redekop was pleased to be implicated in three apologies: to Japanese-Canadians for their internment at the time of World War II; to the Indigenous for church and

government failings; and to the General Conference of Mennonites, for excommunicating MB members who married someone from the GC. Church work was made more difficult, notes Redekop, by the profound changes taking place in Mennonite circles: for example, a decline in attendance, and urbanization. All these activities took place while John and Doris raised a family. Redekop even found time to conduct a series of debates – he seems to have been born for this – with Canadian Marxist leader Marvin Glass. “I felt that in my second rebuttal and final statement, God gave me the ability to counter all the main assertions and accusations that Dr. Glass had just made” (237). And Redekop travelled frequently, touring the Soviet Union several times. On one of his trips to the USSR, he met a former Mennonite, Heinrich Abramovich Unger, who had become a high-ranking Soviet bureaucrat. The two conversed in Plautdietsch.

In 1994, John and Doris Redekop retired to Abbotsford, where they were active in the Bakerview MB Church, a congregation privileged with a skilled choir and an astute group of scholars. Travel and family feature near the end of this memoir. However, two contentious controversies are strikingly outlined as

well. Redekop points out that, in 2004, most boards were eliminated by the Canadian MB Conference and power was placed in the hands of a single leader. John Redekop’s predictions that these changes would turn out to be dysfunctional seem to have been correct: “Many millions of dollars were mismanaged and misappropriated” (312). A second major controversy erupted when Redekop, who had raised significant sums toward the development of Stillwood Camp and Conference Centre situated above Cultus Lake, was dismissed from his role as fundraiser. He writes that the consequences were shock, insomnia, and medical issues. The disagreement has been partially resolved.

*Mennonite in Motion*, with its sharply-drawn narratives, is a document of a man who delights in debate. The book might represent even more Redekop’s gratitude for a rewarding life: The author writes, “I am a Canadian by citizenship; a Mennonite by birth; an Anabaptist Christian by choice and conviction; a professor by vocation; a fortunate husband by marital status; a privileged retiree by divine providence; and a happy and very grateful resident in a prosperous and free country by circumstance – all by the grace of God” (14).

*And from The Daily Bonnet, by Andrew Unger*

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**W**riter Andrew Unger became the first Mennonite ever to return to his home province of Manitoba after a visit to Abbotsford, BC.

Unger was in Abbotsford to read from his new book *The Best of the Bonnet* and, strangely, did not take up residence after the reading.

“That Unger fellow was weirder than I thought,” said Abbotsford man Peter Driedger, who attended the event. “I thought for sure he’d read a few articles and then settle down right here in the Fraser Valley.”

The book launch was held at the Mennonite Heritage Museum in Abbotsford and was attended by numerous eager real estate agents.

“I think we’ve got one!” said local realtor Sarah Barkman. “No one ever takes that return flight back to Manitoba.”

In his defence, Unger said he just needed to go home and check with his wife, plus he needed to pick up his vast stockpile of knackzoat.

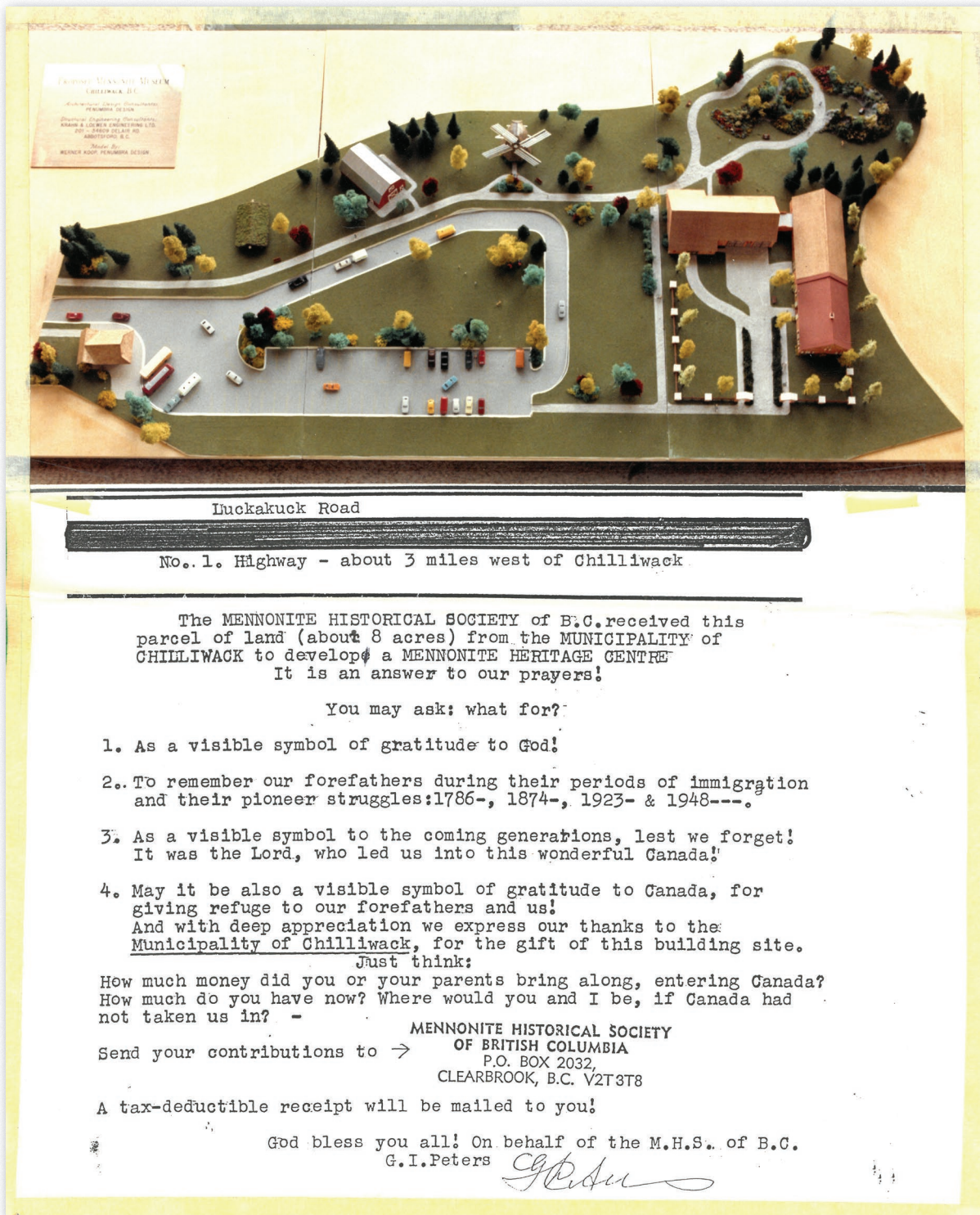
“I’ll be back. I promise,” said Unger, though he can’t



Andrew Unger enjoying some friendly B.C. conversation with Linda Funk while signing a book at the book launch at the Mennonite Heritage Museum. Photo credit: Wendie Nickel

figure out any scenario whereby he could afford to sell his house in Manitoba and purchase one in BC without venturing into crippling amounts of debt.





Scan of poster of diorama of Chilliwack plans for a Mennonite Museum and fund appeal

# Roots & Branches

is a publication of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC and is mailed three times per year to all members. An annual membership is \$35. Life memberships are available for \$750.

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The Mennonite Heritage Museum has reopened. The Mennonite Historical Society, due to the COVID pandemic, is open by appointment only.