



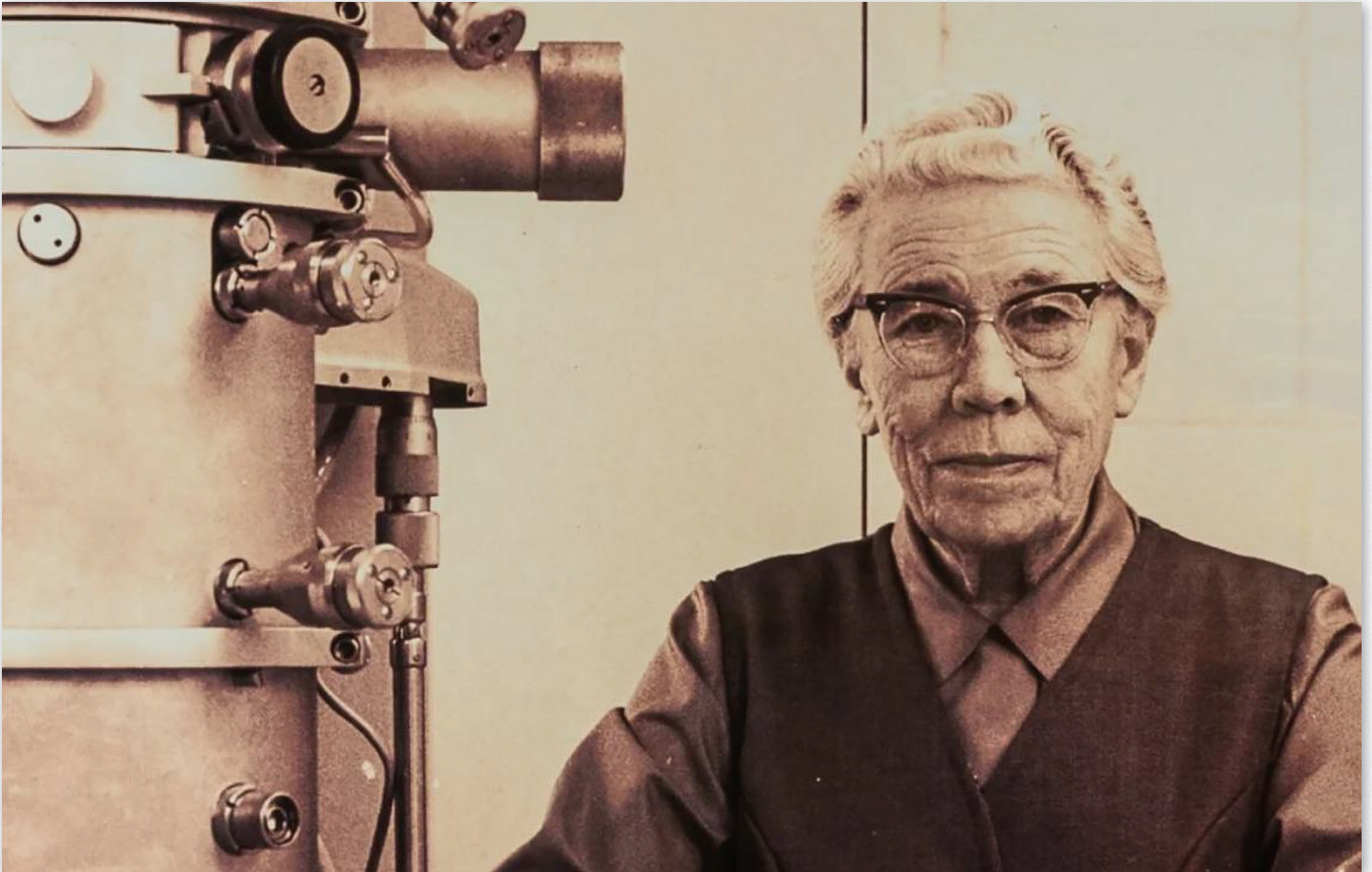
Roots & Branches

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

PSALM 78



Dr. Katherine Esau, seen here with an electron microscope, University of California, Davis Campus, dominated the field of plant anatomy and morphology for several decades. See article on p. 8.

Photo source: https://biology.ucdavis.edu/news/gift-grows-legacy-katherine_esau

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Editorial

■ By Robert Martens

The Mennonites who fled the nascent Soviet Union in the 1920s—who were lucky enough to get out—unsurprisingly suffered psychological damage from the experience, and in some cases, extreme trauma. It was entirely natural that they clung together for support. And in fact it was their sense of community that enabled them to adjust to the “brave new world” in North America.

These refugees also frequently built ethnic and religious walls around their new villages. Some of us who grew up in such a way—as I did in Yarrow—often felt that these strictures were regressive. However, this is a fairly common experience for either refugees or immigrants who, when confronted by an alien society, revert to older norms and beliefs that might have been already on the wane in the “old country.” Before the Bolshevik Revolution, Russian Mennonites were already adapting, and in some cases integrating, into the greater Russian society. They were urbanizing, travelling, seeking education, getting



The Red Gate stood on the border between the USSR and Latvia, near the town of Szebezsh. For the refugees, passing through this gate meant that they had finally reached freedom.
Mennonite Heritage Centre, Winnipeg, MB

involved in politics. That this was not the case in the village of Yarrow is entirely understandable. A damaged people closes ranks against the outside world.

Russian Mennonite refugees in Canada may not have replicated the more “liberal” lifestyle they left behind, and may sometimes have erred in their need for cohesiveness and control. Their bravery, however, can’t be denied.



Thank you to **Columbia Cabinets** for their sponsorship of the Sunday July 23, 2023 concert: *Along the Journey. Memories of Migration: Russlaender Tour 100.*

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Shirley Showalter, 2 pm, May 7, 2024

■ Reported by Robert Martens

From an early age, said Shirley Showalter, she wanted to be someone special, and that contradicted what she had been taught as an American Swiss Mennonite. It's the Mennonite duty to display *Demut*, humility, she said, and to want to show off is *Hochmut*, pride. The humility/pride conflict within her has been enduring, so much so that clinical depression could be a problem.

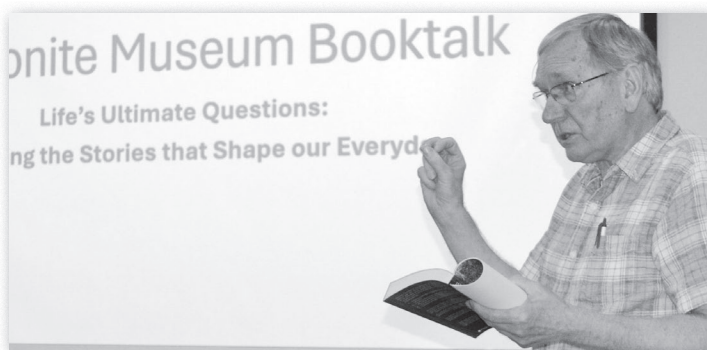
Showalter read first from her memoir, *Blush: A Mennonite Girl Meets a Glittering World*. "It's just one life," she explained, "but it's connected." She grew up on a farm, lived simply, dressed plainly as Swiss Mennonites were taught to do, but she wanted more. Eventually, she taught at Goshen College in Indiana and then became its president. "*Demut* doesn't come naturally to me," she said. Even simple living can manifest

as its opposite—we can be "proud of the oldest car, of the thinnest wallet, proud of our humility."

Showalter then spoke about her most recent book, which she co-authored with Marilyn McEntyre, *The Mindful Grandparent: The Art of Loving Our Children's Children*. "We have made our family central," she said, and lived for a while as a "granny nannie." What kind of world are we leaving our grandkids? she asked. Americans are not generally optimistic these days, she said, about the future. Grandparents should form a circle around their grandchildren, she contended; "elders should be menders and weavers in the community."



Books & Borscht Summer Session



Jake Wiens reading from his book *Life's Ultimate Questions*.

Photo credit: Julia M. Toews.

June 6: Host Lorraine Isaak introduced Jake Wiens, former teacher in Prince George and author of *Life's Ultimate Questions: Exploring the Stories that Shape Our Everyday*. Wiens used his considerable rhetorical skills to argue that religion is a constant even when unrecognized, and that secular atheism is the religion that shapes our everyday.

June 27: Janet Boldt talked about her book *The Diary of Emma Möllmann 1914-1923*, as a follow-up conversation to her previous book launch. The translation from German of these often hard-to-read pages was



Janet Boldt & Lorraine Isaak (right) holding Janet's book *Diary of Emma Möllmann*.

Photo source: MHSBC files.

difficult, and came about through the help of family and friends. Emma Möllmann, a remarkable figure who lived through difficult times, remains a "soul-mate" for Boldt.

July 18: Novelist Elma Schemenauer, in an animated presentation of her two novels, told stories of her

upbringing and Mennonite background. She had originally intended, she said, to write a memoir but came up against privacy objections, and so incorporated her experiences in her novels *Consider the Sunflowers* and *Song for Susie Epp*.

July 25: *A Sense of Presiding Goodness* is the third in a family story trilogy written by Bellingham author Loretta Willems. The first two deal with previous generations; the final volume portrays her own life-journey, including her marriage in Japan to a military man when she was seventeen. Willems quickly caught the attention of her audience with

her intellect and wit, and the Q&A session evoked repeated laughter.

August 15: Retired UBC Geography professor Alfred Siemens spoke to a full house about his memoir, *unsettled skies: my 1960s and their reverberations*. In his own words, the book “is an account of an adventurous but also a spiritually perturbed life. It sketches out realizations about my Mennonite background and outlines a rigorous academic formation in human geography.” His accomplishments include research in the tropical lowlands of Mexico and his collection of folkloric Latin American dancers’ masks lodged in the UBC Museum of Anthropology.

MB Historical Commission Grants 2024

On June 21–22, 2024, the Mennonite Brethren (MB) Historical Commission gathered in Wichita, Kansas, for its annual meeting. The Commission awarded four research grants.

An MB studies \$2,500 USD project grant was awarded to Abidon Malebe Mubwayel, instructor at the Christian University in Kinshasa, D.R. Congo. This grant is to support the editing and completion of his dissertation. His project title is *Symbolic Practices and Religious Language Specific to the Confessional Identity of Mennonite Brethren in D.R. Congo*.

An Alfred Neufeld \$2,000 USD global church history grant was awarded to Anicka Fast, secretary of the Mennonite World Conference Faith & Life Commission, based in Bussum, Netherlands. She is

co-editing a book that aims to reshape the story of the global Anabaptist church through biography, in this case, biographies of Congolese Mennonites.

A \$2,000 USD publication grant was awarded to Arnold Neufeldt-Fast, professor at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto. Arnold is completing a manuscript on the history of the Fürstenland Mennonite settlement in Ukraine to be published by the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society.

A Katie Funk Wiebe \$1,000 USD research grant was awarded to Jean-Claude Saki Kavula, director of a Christian peacemaking organization in Kinshasa, D.R. Congo. He aims to make a church resource book that tells the stories of people resolving conflicts non-violently.

An Urban Mennonite: Mayor Johann Esau

■ By Robert Martens

The quiet in the land. A *Bauernvolk*—a farming people. Mennonites traditionally described themselves in these terms, and justifiably so. Cities, though, have often provided homes for them, from the urban artisans of the early Anabaptists to the entrepreneurs in Holland’s golden age, and of course the thoroughly cosmopolitan Mennonites in North America today. Even in Russia, a small percentage of bright and ambitious Mennonites migrated to the cities. In fact, their Prussian-Polish forebears were already well-acquainted with city life, and before the Mennonite emigration to

Russia in 1789, they petitioned tsarist authorities for the right “to build factories and other necessary enterprises in the cities and villages of the Ekaterinoslav and Taurida provinces” (qtd. in Epp 240).

Eventually, Mennonite entrepreneurs would live and work in nearly all the Russian urban centres, but even early on, cities proved to be magnets in a growing industrial economy. In Berdiansk, when a government invitation to work on gardening plots as an urban project went unheeded by the locals, Mennonites moved in, eventually forming a suburb of the city. The village of Schoenwiese, the only Chortitza settlement east of the Dnipro River, was built so close to the city

of Aleksandrovsk (later Zaporizhzhia) that it was naturally absorbed into the city as another suburb. Ekaterinoslav, today Dnipro, was a rather special case. As early as 1805, Heinrich Thiessen set up shop in the city, operating a treadmill and a vinegar processing business. Ekaterinoslav eventually accommodated a small but vigorous Mennonite community. One among them would be elected mayor of the city.

The profits and losses of city life

Migration to the city seems to have been inevitable for Russian Mennonites. As their skilled and successful agricultural base flourished, mills were built; and mills required sophisticated machinery, which required factories to build it; and mills and factories further demanded educated personnel to direct them. “Agriculture, industry and education went hand in hand” (Epp 242). Hundreds of Mennonite youth were sent to *Gymnasiums* (secondary schools) and universities, and some studied abroad. Before long, Mennonites were manufacturing ten percent of the total production of agricultural machinery in Ukraine, and 6.5 percent of the Russian total. Mennonites were eventually working in cities, even in remote locales such as Siberia.

Mennonites who left the countryside could apparently do so without fear of being ostracized. Separation from the community, though, could be corrosive, as in the following example. A Mennonite miller and his wife established an operation in southern Ukraine, intending to raise a family and then return to their colony. “Before the parents were ready to move back ... one son married a girl of Greek background, one married a Russian girl, one married a Jewish girl and the daughter married a Ukrainian. Only one of these couples found its way into the Mennonite community, was baptized and established a positive relationship with the Mennonite church” (Epp 243). It is understandable that warnings about the ways of the world were issued from the rural Mennonite elite. The exodus continued, however, though only on a small scale.

In 1869, Count Kotzebue called together



John Esau – an image taken at the National Historical Museum of Dnipro from a collection of photos displaying the mayors of the city.

Photo credit: Louise Price, 2012.

German-speaking Russians to Odessa to discuss educational reforms. Standards would be tightened and use of the Russian tongue mandated. These “reforms,” among others, would motivate many Russian Mennonites to leave their country. Thousands sold their property and moved to North America. The more “progressive” stayed, and adapted, in some instances, with ease. Such was the case for Johann Esau.

1869: A fateful year for the Esau family

Johann’s grandfather had travelled by foot from the Danzig area to Russia in 1804, settled down in Molotschna, and married Elisabet Hübert. Fortune did not smile on him; Johann writes that his grandfather “could not leave any financial means to his large family” (qtd. in Esau 87). Johann’s father, Jakob,

married Katherine Neufeld, who came from a wealthy family, and the family’s fortunes seemed to be on the upswing. Jakob moved into grain export. The business boomed. He was chosen as *Oberschulze* in Molotschna. Then, in 1869, one of his ships sank in the Black Sea. As his fortunes faltered, he lacked the means to put his sons Johann and Jakob through higher education. It was in that same year that Count Kotzebue entered the picture.

Under an agreement between Mennonite delegates and future tsar Alexander, Mennonite boys were to be educated in Russian schools. Johann Esau later wrote in his memoirs that Mennonite adaptation to the wider society was feared by the Mennonites but promoted by Russian bureaucrats: “The government employees complained that the Mennonite youth avoided Russian schools and had too little communication with the Russian people” (qtd. in Esau 88). The social gap between Russians and Mennonites needed to be addressed.

A small but significant step was taken. Count Kotzebue instituted three annual scholarships for Mennonites: two for residents of Molotschna, and one for Chortitza. That first year, Wilhelm Penner was the Chortitza selection. The two from Molotschna were brothers Jakob and Johann Esau. All three were deserving individuals, “although, as Johann Esau relates in

a brief autobiographical sketch, the selection process was simple because there were so few candidates” (Epp 244). The Esau brothers left immediately to attend the *Gymnasium* in Ekaterinoslav. “We were the first Mennonites to attend a Russian school,” Esau later wrote (qtd. in Esau 88).

After completing secondary school, both brothers went on to higher education. Jakob graduated as a physician from a medical school in Kyiv; and Johann, as an engineer from the Polytechnical Institute in Riga, Latvia. Both by that time spoke flawless Russian. Johann sharpened his language and social skills by working in a shipyard in Sevastopol and in the oilfields at Baku, never revealing to his coworkers that he was a product of higher education.

The brothers reported back to Molotschna in 1884 but were unable to find employment there that matched their skills. They moved to the Chortitza area, where Jakob served as chief physician, and Johann started in 1887 as chief engineer at the Lepp & Wallmann factory where farm machinery was manufactured. Two years later, in 1889, Johann married Margarethe Toews of Ekaterinoslav. The two would have four children, of whom only Paul and Katherine survived to adulthood. Marriage and family did not slow Johann down at all, and in 1890 the married couple moved to Ekaterinoslav, Margarethe’s home town, where they joined a growing Mennonite church community.

The remarkable Mennonite community in Ekaterinoslav

The Esau brothers were no longer colony-bound. By 1894, Jakob opened an eye clinic in Ekaterinoslav. Johann took an enormous risk when he left Lepp & Wallmann to venture out on his own. In 1895, he borrowed money from brother Jakob and his wife’s uncle Heinrich Heese III to open a farming implement factory in the city. Johann was consistently short of cash, however, and frequently bothered his lenders for further loans. “My capital was too small,” he later wrote, “and ... my partners had little understanding of this kind of business” (qtd. in Esau 90).

The lack of vision and business acumen from his business partners may have motivated Esau to leave the enterprise. Within a year, Johann sold the factory, presumably for a very good price, to a large Belgian firm, although he stayed on as a director. The facility

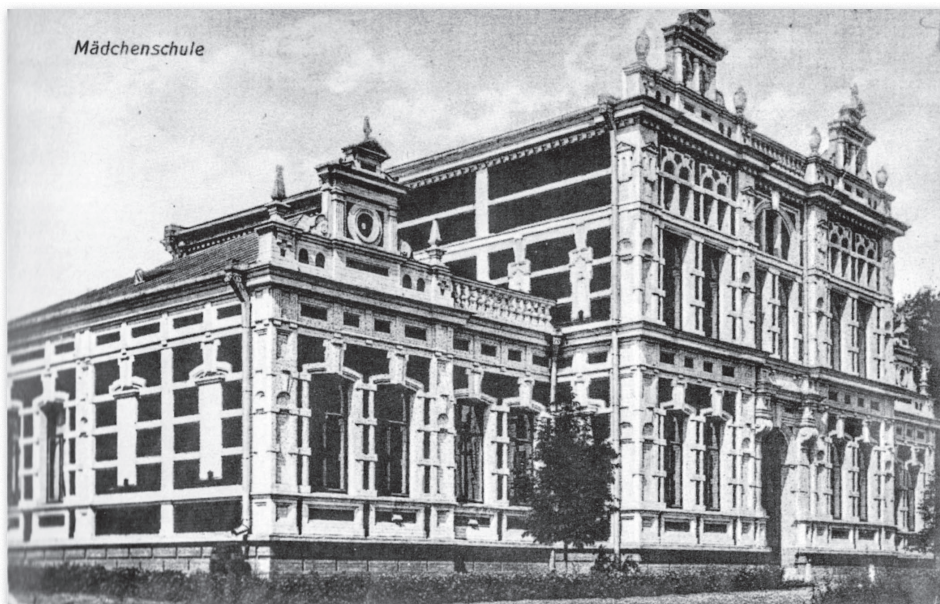
primarily poured forms for Siemens-Martin-Stahl. It also manufactured steel machine parts for Russian warships—certainly a step—or leap—away from Johann’s pacifist upbringing.

And yet, he was an integral part of a strong Mennonite community in the city. A school-church was built, and three teachers hired. The money flowed. Mennonite mills were flourishing. “Soon [the Mennonite community] would also become an intellectual centre in the true sense of the word,” writes historian George Epp (255). Two major ideas were conceived here: a mental health centre, that eventually was realized as Bethania; and the *Mädchenschule*, a girls’ secondary school, that came to fruition in Chortitza. Johann Esau’s fertile mind and ceaseless energy were at the very centre of all this activity. And he was unafraid to step out into the secular Russian world.

A dazzling political career

In 1903, Esau received the Honorary Hereditary Citizenship award, the first of a series of accolades. He served in the Ekaterinoslav city council (*duma*) from 1901 to 1905, and apparently remained as city representative between 1909 and 1917 (Vogt 2). He was also a part of the public works department: “I was elected a city councillor and left my position in the Belgian steel factory. The city had many technical problems to be solved. I was put in charge of the city ‘housekeeping’” (qtd. in Esau 91). His engineering and city planning skills drew the attention of the city and in fact South Russia in general. The limelight shone the brightest, though, during his term as mayor.

After the city’s mayor died in 1904, Esau, having won the most votes in city council elections, was appointed to take his place. A year later he was officially elected into office as mayor. A man of ambitious plans, Esau travelled to Paris and secured a five-million ruble loan in gold. His first major achievement was the construction of a new water supply system for Ekaterinoslav. The previous system had been built downriver, and consequently was the source of infection, particularly typhus. Esau oversaw the building of a new system upriver, and the city finally had clean drinking water. This was only the beginning. Esau’s term in office saw the construction of a new sewer system, a new streetcar line, a new market hall, and several new girls’ *Gymnasiums*. Ekaterinoslav was being renewed through massive



Maedchenschule in Chortitza. Designed in the Art Nouveau style, it was added to the Register of Immovable Monuments of Ukraine in 2021.

Photo credit: Peter G. Renpel. Photo source: Lohrenz, *Heritage Remembered*, p. 187.

borrowing, and the city budget rose five-fold during Esau's administration. But the standard of living in the city grew along with it.

The rebellion of 1905, a precursor to the revolutions of 1917, brought turmoil to the streets of Ekaterinoslav. "A revolt of the common people started," wrote Esau, "and ended with an attack upon the Jews.... One evening, a group of Jewish women and children came into my house to seek safety.... The governor of the district promised peace and quiet, but it took several days until war was declared and permission to shoot was given." Esau travelled to St. Petersburg to negotiate with the authorities on government reform. "We were presented to Czar Nicholas II as representatives of the people. But he was not enthusiastic about the democratic move" (qtd. in Esau 92).

No longer mayor, still in demand

In 1909, Esau lost his position as mayor to a member of the First National Duma. Anti-"German" sentiment had intensified. How strong could the antagonism have been, though, when three different cities—Charkov, Baku, and Yalta—at various times asked him to act as their mayor? For various reasons, he turned down all three. Whatever the case, Esau's relentless activity resumed; he went back to engineering and sat on several school boards. He also continued his entrepreneurial activities, building a sandstone factory and taking part in a coke enterprise.

Another position fell in his lap in 1910 when Prince Urusov invited Esau to direct the South Russian Exhibition of Agriculture, Industry and Crafts. Esau accepted, and the exhibition was a dramatic success, so much so that he was honoured with another Order. The start of World War I in 1914 brought with it another invitation from Prince Urusov, this time to administer the operations of the Red Cross for the southern army. The area of operations was huge, comprising the Black Sea and Caucasus areas, Ukraine, and Romania. Esau accepted the challenge, as well as the request from Urusov that two thousand

Mennonite medics be placed under Esau's direct command.

In his memoirs, Esau described the situation as challenging. "We had to put together 60 transport units and 10 to 20 hospital trains, get 3,000 horses from Siberia, material from Moscow and some from Japan.... We had to equip new hospitals and supply depots." All this while directing a contingent of two thousand Mennonites "who had become second class citizens" in Russia (qtd. in Epp 257). The Mennonite tradition of hard work and honesty was highlighted during these years. Esau wrote of his Mennonite medics in his memoirs, "A general complaint was that it was impossible to find good workers. Also there was a lot of disorder, stealing, and squandering of material. I did not have to list such things in my reports" (qtd. in Esau 94).

The aftermath

In 1917, after Russia withdrew from the war, Esau returned to Ekaterinoslav. The following year, Ukraine was governed for a few months by an anti-socialist dictatorship under Pavlo Skoropadskyi, who asked Esau to resume his role as mayor. Esau did so, and was even involved, in those chaotic times, in trying to open a new university in Ekaterinoslav. The Ukrainian State, or Hetmanate, under Skoropadskyi, lasted only from April to December 1918, when leftist workers and soldiers took over Ekaterinoslav. Esau's administration, according to accounts, concluded peacefully, but bizarrely: "One

day an armed band came into his office and demanded the surrender of the city accounts. The end was not dramatic. Esau presented the bandits with a document which laid out the facts and should thus be signed. He put on his hat and went home” (*“Mennoniten”* 2; trans. RM).

Esau was no longer safe in Russia. The commanding general of the German troops, General Knörzer, who was living in the Esau home, warned, “When we leave, it will be bad news. My advice is to leave the country” (qtd. in Esau 95). The Esau family took the opportunity to withdraw on a train with German troops, a ride punctuated with extortion and gunfire; son Paul was travelling with them but wearing a German army uniform and working as an interpreter. The Esaus found a temporary home in Berlin in 1918. Food was scarce, and Johann and Margarethe moved to Switzerland for half a year.

Even so, the family continued to be busy. Paul studied in Charlottenburg, and Katherine, in Berlin. Then, a study commission, *Studienkommission*, consisting of three Russian Mennonites, was appointed in 1919 to investigate the possibilities of emigration for beleaguered Russian Mennonites to North America. The commission consisted of A. A. Friesen and B. H. Unruh, both teachers, and C. A. Warkentin, an entrepreneur. Esau—he seemed to be a man who simply had to be busy—offered to join the commission and was accepted.

He travelled to North America and negotiated with government officials on behalf of aspiring Mennonite immigrants. In 1922, he, his wife Margarethe, and daughter Katherine moved to Reedley, California. The Mennonite community in Reedley attracted Johann, and of course the warm climate must have played a role. Perhaps he was feeling a little world-weary, though, and

the family later relocated to Davis, California, “where they maintained only minimal contact with other Mennonites” (Susan Huebert 1). It was a rather sad life for Esau. “I have very little opportunity to be useful here,” he wrote. “At my age, one cannot wish for too much and I am glad that my children can work with joy and success” (qtd. in Esau 97). Johann Esau died of a sudden heart attack in 1940.

But the Esau legacy continued. Son Paul had continued his education in Germany before joining his family in Reedley in 1924 and pursuing a career. It was Katherine, however, who may have left the greater mark.

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Katherine Esau: A Modest Genius

[Katherine Esau] absolutely dominated the field of plant anatomy and morphology for several decades. She set the stage for all kinds of modern advances in plant physiology and molecular biology. (Peter Raven, director of Missouri Botanical Garden)

Katherine Esau had completed her first year of study at the Golitsin Women’s Agricultural College in Moscow. When she and her family fled to Germany, she wasted no time in furthering her education in the sciences, this time studying in German at the Berlin Landwirtschaftliche Hochschule (Agricultural College), and then spent two semesters at the university in Hohenheim, near Stuttgart. Two semesters and an examination later, she received the title of



Katherine Esau.

Photo source: Wikipedia.

“*Landwirtschaftslehrerin*” (agricultural sciences professor). Her astonishingly rapid advancement continued when she studied under the esteemed geneticist Erwin Bauer. Bauer made a terrible mistake when he advised Esau to return to Russia because, he argued, her country needed her. Fortunately, she ignored his suggestion.

Soon she left with her family for America and its promise of safety. Like most immigrants, Esau had to start at the bottom. She did so apparently without complaint, working as a housekeeper and childcare worker, becoming proficient in the English language, adapting to the strange new life in California. She then found employment with the Sloan Seed Company, and slowly edged into a life devoted to the sciences. Her next step was to work with the Spreckles Sugar Company. Here she commenced some serious work in agricultural sciences, breeding strains of sugar beets that were resistant to curly-top disease. A bit of luck was to change her life as well. A professor from the University of California, Davis, visited the facility and scrutinized her project. Esau inquired about doing post-doctoral work at Davis. Soon, she was invited to do her graduate work there. She jumped at the chance—in 1927 she registered at the Davis College of Agriculture.

Esau’s intent at Davis was to breed a variety of sugar beet that would be resistant to curly-top disease. This, however, would have meant releasing the beet leafhopper into sugar beet fields in order to infect the crop. Growers and researchers resisted. Adaptable as always, Esau turned to studying the transmission of the curly-top virus and its effect on sugar beet phloem (phloem is the vascular plant tissue that transmits foods made in the leaves to other parts of the plant). In 1932 Esau earned her PhD from Berkeley but remained at Davis, working first as an instructor and then as professor. It may have been during this time that her father Johann moved to Davis to join her.

Esau was thriving, and her career took off. With her dedication to hard work, her passion for plant anatomy, her simple lifestyle, and her natural genius, she eventually became known internationally. Esau published a number of books, but her best known was the classic textbook, *Plant Anatomy*, a 735-page volume that was, to students, anything but boring. Ray Evert, a pupil who went on to become chair of botany at the University of Wisconsin, writes, “The book *Plant Anatomy* brought to life what previously had seemed to me to be a rather

dull subject. I was not the only one so affected. *Plant Anatomy* had an enormous impact worldwide, literally bringing about a revivification of the discipline” (qtd. in Cleveland 2).

This remarkably gifted individual, conversant in French, English, Spanish, Russian, German and Portuguese, laboured in a former garage that had no air conditioning, and yet seemed happy to do so. She was a remarkable teacher. Esau had a great sense of humour, and with her passion for her discipline and genuine affection for her students, she was a popular figure on campus. She often began her lectures with “Once upon a time,” and on one occasion a graduate student joked, “Aha, another of Esau’s fables!” (Evert 8) She remained at Davis until 1963, then moved on to the University of California, Santa Barbara. She considered her years in Santa Barbara her most productive. Here, Esau was introduced to the electron microscope and continued her research for twenty-four more years.

Katherine Esau, born in 1898, died at the age of ninety-nine in 1997. She delivered her last lecture at the age of eighty-four. “Despite her numerous successes and many honors,” writes Ray Evert, “she remained modest and close to her Mennonite roots” (9). In 1959, after her election to the National Academy of Sciences, she remarked, “I never worried about being a woman. It never occurred to me that that was an important thing. I always thought that women could do just as well as men.... My surprise at being elected to the National Academy of Sciences was not because I was a woman, but because I didn’t think I had done enough to be elected” (qtd. in Evert 9).

Mennonite roots. Simplicity. Unpretentiousness. When she was asked what it was like to use the electron microscope for the first time, Esau said, “I’m not such an impressionable person. “I take matters step-by-step as they go. You expect me to be ‘Ahhh, Ooohhh.’ I’m not like that at all. I’m a very mundane person” (qtd. in Cleveland 3).

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Unser Blatt: The Last Russian Mennonite Newspaper

■ Introduced and translated by Robert Martens

In mid-1920s Russia, thousands of Mennonites were lining up to flee an increasingly authoritarian government. Still, others held out with faint hope—perhaps the Communist regime would moderate. An assembly was called, gathering together the various Mennonite factions in Moscow. One result of that meeting was a mandate for a new newspaper, *Unser Blatt* (Our Paper), which, it was hoped, would speak for Mennonites with a single voice.

Unser Blatt was published by the Kommission für Kirchenangelegenheiten (KfK: Committee for Church Affairs), and was printed monthly between November 1925 and June 1928, when it was shut down by Moscow. The editor was Alexander H. Ediger; the managing editor, Kornelius K. Martens. One can only imagine the pressure under which they worked. The paper published news, stories, devotional articles, reports, statistics, obituaries, and more.

Very few issues of *Unser Blatt* have survived. The Mennonite Historical Society of BC has in its possession a partial set of original copies, and some translation work on them has begun. The following excerpt is from the first issue. It is a travelogue (part 1) with no mention of politics, and its language seems that of an educated and experienced man. It's also well-written and intelligent—these newspaper men were a talented bunch. (Part 2 to follow)

Copies of *Unser Blatt* can be accessed in the archives room of MHSBC.*

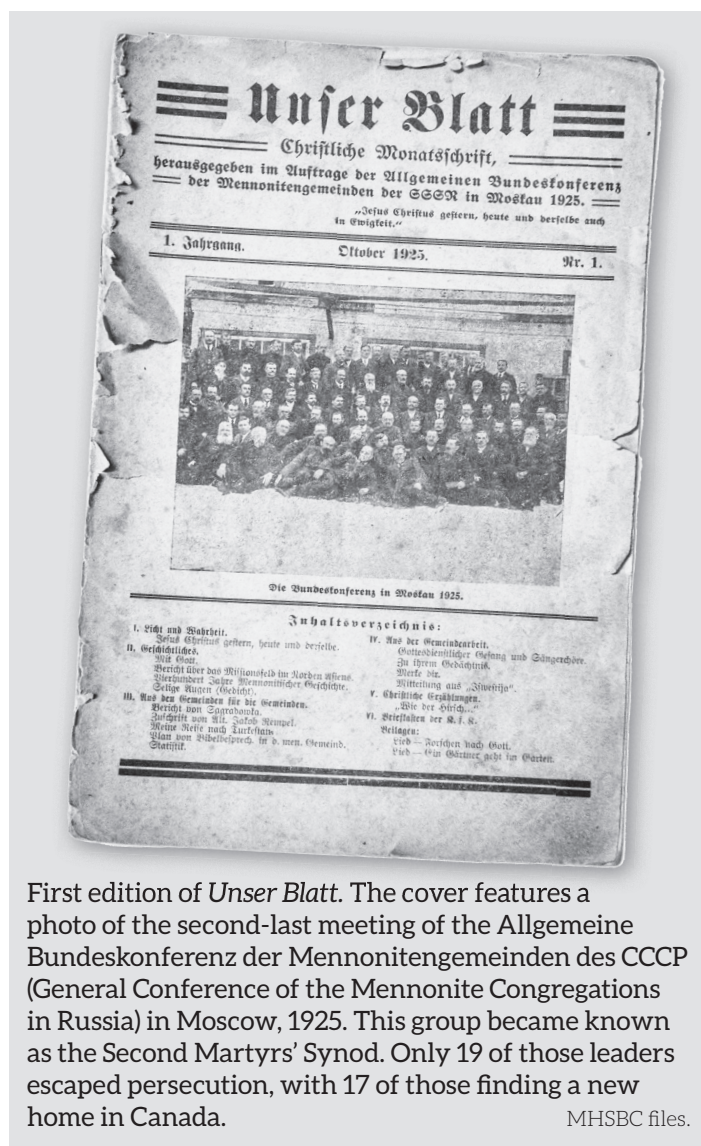
1925: Jan, Feb, Mar, Jun, Jul, Aug, Sep, Oct, Nov

1926: Feb, Mar, Jun, Jul, Aug, Sep, Nov, Dec

1927: Jan, Feb, Apr, May, Jun, Jul, Aug, Sep, Nov

My Journey to Turkestan (Part 1)

In mid-May I received a telegraph invitation from the chair of the KfK [Kommission für Kirchenangelegenheiten], Brother Ediger, to travel to Turkestan to look into questions regarding youth in state service as that relates to our doctrine of nonresistance. It was decided to travel immediately after Pentecost. On June 1, I set out on my journey by way of Charkov and Moscow, where there were several concerns to deal with.



First edition of *Unser Blatt*. The cover features a photo of the second-last meeting of the Allgemeine Bundeskonferenz der Mennonitengemeinden des CCCP (General Conference of the Mennonite Congregations in Russia) in Moscow, 1925. This group became known as the Second Martyrs' Synod. Only 19 of those leaders escaped persecution, with 17 of those finding a new home in Canada.

MHSBC files.

On June 9 we travelled from Moscow to Aulie-Ata. In Moscow I met with a travelling companion, H. Loewen.—The journey to Orenburg went well. Everything changed a few hundred versts beyond the city. The flat steppe country continued but the grasses were more sparse, and finally there was nothing but wormwood. The sun radiated its “goodness” more and more, until it was hot from morning on. One travels across endless plains here. Endless, immense, desolate plains, broken here and there by a hill. No villages, no cities, one sees only the occasional Kirghiz yurt. In small clusters of five to seven huts they eke out a meagre existence with their livestock.

The train stations here take on the character of oases in the wilderness. The earth grows ever sandier until we

*Source: Krahn, Cornelius. “Unser Blatt (1925-1928) (Periodical).” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1959. www.gameo.org

find ourselves in a sand desert, where no grasses grow, and far and wide only yellow sand and a colourless sky can be seen. The heat increases to the point where it is almost unbearable. The annoying sand blows in through windows and doors, but if these are closed, the train car becomes intolerable. Nothing for the eye. A burning wind from the south-east is barely moderated by the Aral Sea, on the shores of which we travel for a stretch. But there in the distance is a shimmer, there the eye has seen something that stands out in the monotonous grey-yellow. It is the Syr Darya, the wide, calm river after which this entire region is named. Calmly, sedately, it winds through the sand, providing water to train station and Kirghiz settlement. Only an occasional spot of green appears on its banks; mostly there is only sand. Its reeds conceal a host of mosquitoes threatening to plague us. The heat drops with the setting of the sun, but doesn't entirely disappear.

We arrived in Aroys at 9 am on June 13. This is the station which connects to the settlement. Here I was to learn about middle-Asian heat. We had to wait the entire day for the train to Aulie-Ata, so we had time to take in the surroundings. Aroys is a small, miserable oriental town which seems to have been thrown onto the flat, withered steppe. Without trees, without shadows, it lies exposed to the burning sun. Only by the station buildings are there several trees, which must be constantly watered if they are not to dry out. A temperature of 50 to 60 degrees is not unusual here. At the time when the day is at its hottest, I saw the inhabitants lie lazily on their beds in the shadows before their doors; in actuality, there is not much more that could be done. All life dwindles away during these times in the middle Asian cities, and only towards evening, when the temperature declines does [the city] spring into motion.

At 9 pm our train arrived and soon we were on our way to Aulie-Ata. Here the railroad curves eastward towards Pishpek, the capital city of the autonomous Kirghiz region of Kara. When I awoke in the morning we were already in the mountains. The train winds upwards through a valley, passing through two tunnels. Progress is slow. Towards evening one arrives at Aulie-Ata.



Choir of the MB church in Aulie Ata.

Photo source: Quiring & Bartel In *The Fullness of Time*, p. 154.

We left the station immediately by wagon, arriving at the so-called "model inn" where we rested a while before proceeding. By dawn we were at the "cap," the narrow pass that leads to the valley where the church branch had chosen to live. It can already be seen from a great distance. The passage is extremely narrow. A mountain river, the Talas, has here carved out its bed. The way steadily climbs; besides this, it is so narrow that at times two wagons cannot pass each other. In addition it is so precipitous that entire wagons have plunged from it. On the right is the steep cliff face with its diverse structures of rock; on the left rushes the river. At one spot in this narrow pass, the overhanging rock takes on the profile of a lion's head, and this is called the "Lion's Head" by the settlers as well. Once we have made it through the "cap," the valley broadens before us. At the entrance lie the ruins of an ancient fortress, which in its time is said to have protected this strip of land from the invasion of enemy hordes. Three crumbled towers speak to a long-vanished might; the broad moats now peacefully welcome cattle and children.

The valley ranges from seven to twenty versts wide and is approximately 180 versts long. It should not be visualized as a flat plain, since several low mountains cut through the valley and obstruct the line of sight, which is restricted on all sides. Wherever one looks, the gaze is impeded by mountains. On one side stand the Alatau with their snow-covered peaks; on the other, the Alexander range that boundaries the valley. About 150 versts beyond the Mennonite villages, these two mountain ranges merge. Two rivers flow through the

valley: Talas, the greater of the two, and the lesser, Urum Aral. These are proper mountain rivers and behave as such. They plunge ahead, foaming over obstacles in their path and overwhelming them. If [the obstacles] are too strong, the rivers simply roar around them and rush onwards. They are fed by countless sources, and in turn they nourish the settlements in the area, since these waters irrigate fields, forests, and gardens.

The area is crisscrossed by countless canals, and in their absence the vegetation is grey, colourless, or non-existent. Thirty-five versts into the valley lie the Mennonite villages. Four of them are grouped in a cluster: Gnadental, Gnadenfeld, Nikolaipol, and Köppental. Seven versts further lies Ohrloff, which has a mixed population of Mennonites, Lutherans and Adventists. Twenty-five versts from the first cluster lies a tiny Mennonite village—Hohendorf, whose walls shelter Mennonite expatriates from Khiva.

The roads in Turkestan are crude, even breakneck—covered with stones, big and small—and furthermore the bridges over the irrigation canals are rare and of such quality that the Turkestanis themselves prefer to ford the water beside the bridges. The settlers' houses are not as large or beautiful as ours are in the south, but they are arranged in the same way and the furnishings are no worse [than ours]. Most houses are built with adobe, since shortly before the war no brick manufacturers existed in the vicinity, but here and there are houses built with fired brick. A bridge leads to each farmyard, since the streets, protected on both sides by lofty poplars, extend down the edges of the irrigation canals. Trees flourish here. The two rows of poplars, up to twelve fathoms high, lend the villages a lovely, fresh appearance. Often the homes and commercial buildings nearly disappear into the green of the trees. From this luxurious green one only needs to look to the side—and no further—to see the glittering snow of mountain peaks.

The soil here is unimpressive: yellow dusty clay. Irrigation requires a lot of work. To maintain the canals; to establish the small trenches in the fields, through which one slogs continually forward through water and mud—this requires all of one's strength. Irrigation offers a kind of guarantee against failed harvests but it can't be completely relied on: in 1917 Turkestan suffered a famine that took the lives of some Kirghiz. During such times there are numerous opportunities to demonstrate

and practise Christianity. To the credit of the Turkestan communities it must be said that they have done this, since they not only came to the aid of their hungering compatriots but also to many Kirghiz.

I was warmly received by the Turkestan brothers and sisters and provided with the best accommodation. On the evening of my arrival, my work already began. The brethren from the village councils of all three communities gathered to organize the following task: thirteen young Mennonites were summoned by court verdict to join preliminary military exercises and were serving not far away in Dmitrovka. This was greatly unsettling for the communities. To make the necessary inquiries, it was decided to travel to Dmitrovka and speak to the military instructor. Brother P. Pauls, P. Dyck, and I were delegated to carry this out. The days on which assemblies would take place were also decided upon. Whenever possible, meetings were to occur in each assembly hall, but because the assembly hall in Nikolaipol was too small, its gathering was transferred to Gnadental. The problem of the [conscripted] youth could not be resolved here, nor later in the capital city of the region, Pishpek; the authority in the matter lay with Moscow. We were received most favourably by the military and the civil authorities but in each case we were referred to Moscow.

The life of the communities pleased me in every way. There are three communities here: the Köppental Mennonite church with 197 members, the Gnadental Brethren Church with 185 members, and the Nikopol Free Church with 155 members. The first two mentioned reorganized themselves several years ago; during this time the Köppental church introduced baptism by immersion and continues the practice today.

I have never seen the unity of God's children embodied so well as here in Turkestan. It also seemed to me, however, that things were being taken a step too far: a certain movement exists that has advocated for the merger of the three churches. Where brotherly love is so great that merger happens of its own accord, that should not be resisted. Where such [a merger] comes about through meetings and contrived measures, I find it questionable. The unity of God's children does not consist in everyone belonging to a single institution—that is, in belonging to the same church—but that they see and feel themselves as one and love each other. The unity of the church will not be established upon the grounds

of membership or of church buildings but only upon the foundation of Golgotha. Whoever stands upon this foundation, whoever has “put on the new man,” that person belongs to the church of the Lord, to his flock, even though his or her membership is registered in a

different church book. The large number of believers in Turkestan is a clear sign of that inner life. The devil does his work here too, but where does he not?

(to be continued)

Soccer in Einlage

Heinrich Bergen, writer and editor. *Einlage-Kitschkas 1789-1943: Auswahl aus Isaak Joh. Reimer's Sammlung* [A Selection from Isaak Johann Reimer's Collection]: 2009.

■ Translated and introduced by Robert Martens

Some of the material in Heinrich Bergen's selection of reports on life in the Ukrainian Mennonite village of Einlage (known as “Kichkas” in the Russian tongue) shows Mennonites integrating with the activities and economy of the surrounding area. Einlage was a village on the right bank of the Dnipro River in Chortitza. Mennonite boys there were playing soccer, and organizing a kind of “league,” before World War I. The “war to end all wars” and the vicious regime that followed shattered Russian Mennonite village life forever.

The following story was written by Isaak Reimer.

Until 1912, sports were a rare thing in Einlage. *Polak* (?) and *matka* (?)^{*} were played with rubber balls in schools. Even on Sundays, this game was played by the youth on the valley meadow. There were a few more such ball games.

K. Martens and P. Koop also had a croquet playing field. In 1910, a standard-sized bowling alley was built by P. Koop on his farmyard, and both young and old played here.

When the student train to Aleksandrovsk began operating, several Einlage villagers left the central school in Chortitza, and transferred to the middle school/commercial school and high school in Aleksandrovsk.

Isaak Reimer, who had shown little interest in games such as *polak*, and also seldom participated in games in the village school, was captivated on the very first day by European football—soccer. During the long break, he would stand and watch the game. This game was



possibly the only one that so fascinated Isaak. Soon he had inspired the same excitement in others of his own age. At first, with a rag ball on the Reimer and Braun farms. It did not take long to locate a football field near the cattle yard. Goalposts were set up, the pitch was measured off, money was found for the first ball, and practising began. Gradually, a “squad” was formed—in Canadian English, a “team.”

The first “squad,” or “team,” consisted of

- Goalie: Jakob Reimer
- Defence: Isaak Reimer, Wilhelm Walter
- Backs: Abram Peter Koop, K. P. Martens, Abram David Koop
- Forwards: Peter Derksen, Jakob K. Martens, Peter P. Koop, Johann Derksen, Jakob Braun

In the beginning, at the first real game, Peter Koop was absent. There was a Russian, Kiril Radshenko, also a student from Aleksandrovsk in the six-class city school, Gorodskoye. He lived on the left bank of the Dnipro near the bridge. His play wasn't bad but he was not a good man. One evening, during training, he told his friends on the left bank that not all the players were there. P. Derksen and Isaak Reimer were absent.

Radshenko kicked the ball in the direction of the woods, further and further, and there his friends took the ball and ran with the ball over the bridge. Later, the policeman Karandashov retrieved the ball.

Radshenko was kicked off the team. For that reason, Radshenko began a fight on the student train with Isaac Reimer—he was stronger—and had all the train

^{*} The two games with rubber balls: “Polak” could refer to the Polish game of *palant* (<https://culture.pl/en/article/did-baseball-come-to-the-us-from-poland>). “Matka” might refer to an Israeli game, *matkot*, though this seems unlikely. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matkot>). If any of our readers have any clues to this mystery, please let us know!

students on his side. And Isaak had only two Jewish boys with him. Isaak Reimer fell on his nose on a bench and was bloodied.

When Peter P. Koop became captain of the squad, the players didn't need to worry anymore about footballs. When we competed in Einlage, there were always onlookers. Peter Koop would take off his cap, hold it out, and in no time forty or fifty rubles were in the cap. A good football cost eight rubles. Except for Jakob P. Martens who had appropriate football shoes, so-called *Butze* [cleated shoes?], the others played in everyday shoes. During a match, if a shoe happened to split, one of the onlookers would take off a shoe and give it to the affected player. Long socks—actually, we all wore long black women's stockings. The players also concocted their own players' uniforms—ill-considered the first time—green, very tight pants. First of all, everything became green when they sweated; secondly, they were too tight. During a match, Peter Koop's pants split precisely at his behind, and he had to quickly run behind a rock so that he wouldn't be exposed to the entire public. There were no nets behind the goalposts.

The team had drafted well.

In Chortitza, a football team had also been established. There were the players, Heinrich Heese, and Anatoly Klein and his brother, who both attended the high school in Aleksandrovsk.

We often played against Chortitza. It gave the onlookers a special thrill when the lanky Heese assumed his broad-limbed position, and little Jakob Braun was so nimble, he sprang through his feet. In these games against Chortitza, the upper hand was always—at least nearly always—on the side of Einlage.

Much more difficult were our games against the Schönwiese team, more specifically, the "Klied" squad who belonged to the Railway Park South club. They had many proficient players such as Kornelius Janz, his brother Peter Janzen who was a very good player; one of their best was the striker Proskurnikov.

The first match that Einlage played was against the six-class city school in Aleksandrovsk. It was still disorderly, badly organized. Their second game, against Chortitza, was already much better organized.

Only later did we try our luck with the Klied squad. Before the game, Peter Koop spoke earnestly to the entire squad, that we should play according to rule, and not play dirty—rather barter the game away—but

people should have no cause to criticize the Einlage players as a simple village squad.

Peter and Kornelius Janzen from Schönwiese played very fairly, but Proskurnikov, who also played with the commercial school team, played extremely dirty. He and Isaak Reimer were constantly in position against each other. He on the right side, striker; Isaak Reimer on the left, back. There was lots of body contact, and when Proskurnikov's tackle triggered a countertackle, he no longer played dirty.

Their games ended 1-0 and 2-1, not bad at all, even good for the Einlage squad. Now and then, after a game with the Schönwiese squad, the women from Einlage provided tea or coffee and baking in the woods for both sides.

It was much more difficult when the Einlage squad played against the squad from the railway factory, Ekaterina II. These were very good players, workers. The Einlage team also made a good showing in this game.

The game with the football squad from Kronsweide had an undesirable result. They were all farmers' sons, still a young squad, barely trained, and hadn't played any games against other squads.

They invited the Einlage team to a game in Kronsweide. Their soccer pitch was on a rise near the church, and around the church a small woods had been planted.

At that time, the Peter Koop and Kornelius Martens families had cars. The Einlage boys drove together in these two cars to Kronsweide.

The Einlage team was far better trained, and it was natural that the Kronsweide team lost badly: 11-0.

There were also funny moments, especially when Jakob Braun, who was quite small, in position against his counterpart, a big man from Kronsweide, and the big guy was so clumsy that when Jakob Braun played around him, he fell. After the match, when the Einlage players had changed clothes, their laughter vanished. The big man stormed upon the Einlage players with his friends, cudgels in hand.

If it had come to a brawl, the Einlage boys were much stronger and faster, but what a shame, a brawl on the football pitch, and that with the well-mannered players from Einlage. The Einlage squad chose to avoid a fight, went to their cars and drove off.

The war from 1914 to 1917 thinned out the ranks of the players. As a German citizen, Walter was interned.

P. Koop and K. Martens were conscripted. The squad, however, had not only eleven players in reserve but twenty.

The youths who had “permission” between 1912 and 1914 to stand behind the goal and retrieve the ball were good players. They were called “*sadnei Pendel*.” [garden (садней) alternates?] From the reserve, Peter and Gerhard Thiessen; from the “*sadnei Pendel*,” Isaak and Dietrich Derksen. Later on, Franz Thiessen, Heinrich Rempel, among others. Isaak and Dietrich Derksen were particularly good players.

The year 1917 marked the end of soccer matches in Einlage. In 1923 and 1924, it was briefly revived but it no longer had the same attraction or standing. Later, however, Isaak Derksen played with the Z.M.M. squad until 1933.

Isaak Reimer, whom everyone knew as “Reimer the soccer player,” could now only figure as a spectator. But it was tricky for him to stand there. In his thoughts he was playing along, and might unconsciously put his foot forward. In 1933, he played a game when he was traveling with Isaak Derksen and a back was needed. It was difficult for him since he was overweight. The match was against an old opponent, the railway factory squad. Much later (1973), the most interesting thing on television for Isaak Reimer was soccer/football.

The fate of the Einlage players [the reader should note that this was written c. 1973]:

1. Peter Koop was a medic in the war, 1914-1917. During the civil war, he joined with the Whites. He died during the time of Wrangel. [commanding general of the White Army]
2. Jakob Johann Reimer took the side of the Whites during the civil war. He was killed in autumn 1919 on a bridge in Ekaterinoslav while engaged in combat with Makhno's [Ukrainian nationalist and anarchist] forces. Buried in the church cemetery in Schönwiese.
3. Wilhelm Walter, servant in the ... factory in Einlage, 1914. As a German citizen, exiled to the Urals. Further facts unknown.
4. Abram Peter Koop, emigrated in 1923 to Canada, lives 1973 in Ontario.
5. Abram David Koop, emigrated in 1923 to Canada, died in 1971 in BC, Canada.
6. Kornelius Peter Martens died of typhus in Einlage.

7. Isaak Johann Reimer, 1941, mayor of Zaporizhzhia; 1943, Neustadt, Westpreußen; December 1945-1955, in exile in Vorkuta, Russia; 1966, emigrated to Canada; 1973 in Saskatoon, Canada. (Wrote this book, *Einlage*, and the first part of the book, *Verbannung* [exile].)
8. Jakob Peter Braun emigrated to Canada, 1923, on the third train, lives in Winnipeg, 1973.
9. Johann Peter Derksen emigrated to Canada, 1923, on the third train, 1973 in Winnipeg, May 1973, very ill.
10. Peter Peter Derksen, exiled in 1941 by the Soviet regime, never returned.
11. Jakob Kornelius Martens, in September 1919 in Dnipropetrovsk joined the artillery company of the Whites along with his relative Abram Neustaeter, both killed in action.
12. Kiril Radshenko, conscripted into the Russian army 1914-1917, became a non-commissioned officer, joined the Communist Party, worked in the Soviet Chortitza volost (rayon) together with the Jew Geni as co-chairs. Arrested in 1937 by the GPU [secret police] and never returned.
13. Peter Peter Thiessen fled with people from Einlage to Germany in 1943, then Paraguay, and back to Germany where he died in 1972 at 74 years of age.
14. Gerhardt Peter Thiessen was arrested in 1941 along with Peter Derksen and never returned.
15. Franz Peter Thiessen suffered the same fate in 1941.
16. Isaak Peter Derksen went to Germany in 1942, in Winnipeg, Canada, 1973.
17. Dietrich Peter Derksen died before 1941 in Einlage.

Heinrich “Heinz” Bergen was born on 6 April 1927 in Kronsgarten, Chortitza, South Russia to Jakob Bergen (1895-1974) and Maria Wiens (1904-1952). In 1931 the family moved to Einlage. His father was arrested in 1935 and sentenced for 20 years, eventually coming to Karaganda in 1953 and to Canada in 1963. Heinrich and his mother moved to Germany with the retreating German forces in 1942 and eventually to Paraguay where his mother died in 1952. Heinrich moved to Canada later and was living in Regina when his father joined him in 1963. In his retirement years, Heinz Bergen pursued research into the history of Kronsgarten, Kronsweide, and Einlage. His efforts resulted in the publications of at least four books. They are Chortitza Colony Atlas: Altklonie = Mennonite Old Colony (2004); Verbannung: Unschuldig nach ‘Sibirien’ ins Verderben, 1935-1955 (2006); Einlage-Kitschkas 1789-1943: ein Denkmal (2008); and Einlage, Chronik des Dorfes: Kitschkas, 1789-1943 (2009). <https://www.mharchives.ca/holdings/papers/Bergen,%20Heinz%20collection.htm>

The Student Train

Heinrich Bergen, writer and editor. *Einlage-Kitschkas 1789-1943: Auswahl aus Isaak Joh. Reimer's Sammlung [A Selection from Isaak Johann Reimer's Collection]*: 2009.

■ By Isaak J. Reimer; introduced and translated by Robert Martens

Einlage, or Kichkas in the Russian tongue, was one of the largest of Russian Mennonite villages in the Chortitza colony. The following excerpt from Einlage-Kitschkas is another indication of the gradual adaptation of Mennonites to the wider Russian culture. Mennonites were attending Russian schools, working in Russian factories, and attaining proficiency in the Russian language. They were in many ways on the cusp of urbanization.

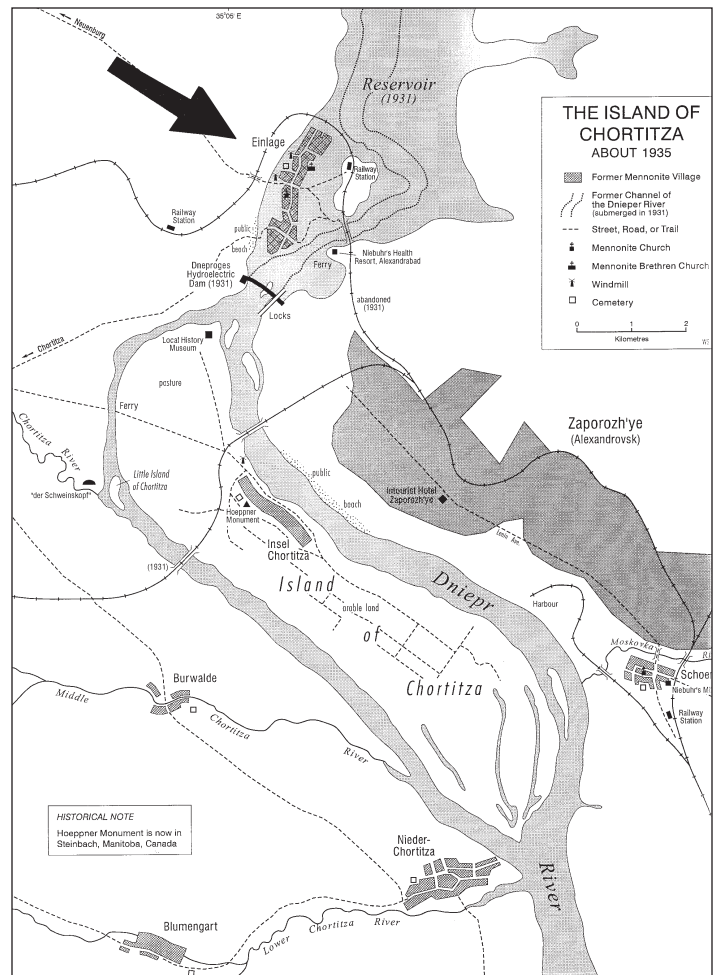
After the completion of the Einlage bridge in 1908, and of the train *Catherine II*, connections with the city of Aleksandrovsk became much more convenient. Also, there arose opportunities for Einlage residents, as well as those from the neighbouring Russian villages of Markusovo and Voznesensk, to find employment in Aleksandrovsk.

Since the factories of the railroad administration in Aleksandrovsk, especially the workshops, were constantly expanding, and workers were increasingly in demand, of whom many resided in the villages of Markusovo and Voznesensk, it was not difficult to arrange for a daily workers' train.

Already since 1910—or was it even 1909—[the train] left early so that workers might be at their places of employment in time; and returned late in the evening, after the conclusion of a ten-hour workday—twelve hours with breaks—that is, from 6 to 6; the workers' train between Einlage and Aleksandrovsk travelled the route twice a day. It was always fully occupied because tradeswomen, or barter women, travelled with this train to the market in Aleksandrovsk.

Room and board in Chortitza [the village] or Rosental was too expensive for many living in Einlage; and additionally, many residents of Einlage thought about making their children's progress in life easier by seeking their further education not in the central school [Mennonite secondary school] but in the Russian high schools, commercial schools, and middle schools.

A good school, the Railway Elementary School, was



Einlage and the railroad route through the area.

Map source: *Mennonite Historical Atlas*, Schroeder & Huebert, p. 26.

opened in Aleksandrovsk for the children of railway employees. However, it was not possible that such a small school [*budichnik*] might support their children in the city. Consequently, the Mennonites of Einlage, who dreamed of a better education for their children teamed up, under the leadership of Johann Reimer, with railway employees and most of the Jews from Einlage, and advocated for a special students' train from Einlage to Aleksandrovsk and back again. Like the workers' train, the students' train would have four or five stops between Einlage and Aleksandrovsk, and on the return as well.

Room and board for students was far more expensive in Aleksandrovsk than in Chortitza-Rosental; the cheapest accommodation was twenty-five rubles per month. In the beginning, very few Mennonites decided to pull their children out of the central school and send them to middle school in Aleksandrovsk. Among these [few] was Isaak J. Reimer.

The campaign for the students' train was not in vain. On September 1, 1911, the first students' train travelled

daily between Aleksandrovsk and back. It departed Einlage at 7:30 am, and Aleksandrovsk at 3 pm, so that passengers could be home by 4 pm. In the first year, Isaak J. Reimer was the only Mennonite student to attend the commercial school in Aleksandrovsk; the numerous railway employees' children; Radichenko from the left bank; the Jews, the two sons of Meirson, a son of the midwife Schaukstell, David Reichenstein, Maska Fleischer, David Plyatkovsky with his sister (she was later a famous artist in Moscow); children of factory employees, e.g., Miss Komnik; and so on. A monthly ticket cost 1.05 rubles. Many children from Markusovo, especially many from Voznesensk. The train soon proved itself profitable and continued the run during the summer months.

It was much more convenient than the workers' train, because it departed later. Many business people used this train; it was especially more convenient for the market women, particularly since there was an afternoon return trip.

The children of families from Schoenwiese had already for years not attended the central school, but rather the

commercial school and high school. Those who wished to be teachers had an easier time of it if they attended a Russian middle school. The learning received in the central school was in no way worse than in Russian schools; but the Russian language, the French language. Promptly, the next year, the villagers of Chortitza advocated [for a line extension] and in the following year the train went to Chortitza; the number of train cars was increased. A number of Mennonites from Chortitza travelled to the commercial school, the high school; in Isaak Reimer's class were Nikolai Nikkel, Abram Froese (son of Froese, the "model school" teacher) [a "progressive" high school?], Braun.

All three are no longer alive. Braun died young; N. Nikkel and Abram Froese were victims of 1936-1937 [Stalin's Great Terror]. The students' train and workers' train functioned until the Einlage bridge was dismantled in 1927. However, with regard to the journey over the island of Chortitza, these trains remained the only connection between Einlage and Aleksandrovsk (Zaporizhzhia).

Education in Orenburg

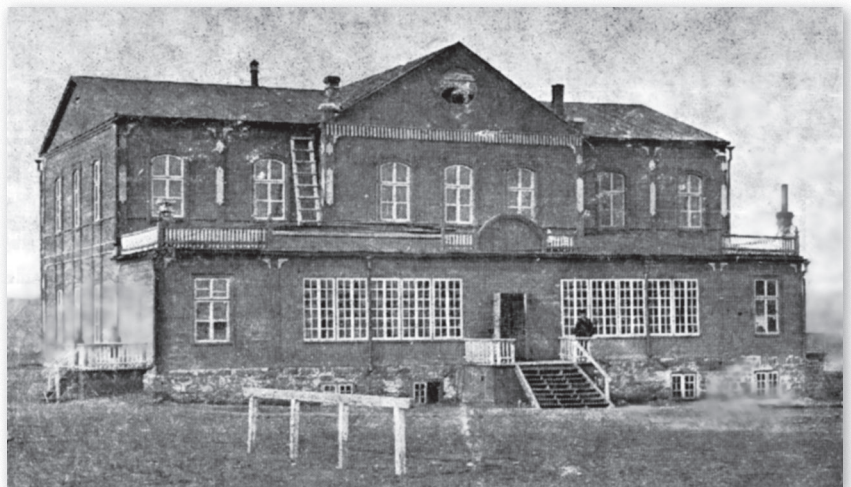
■ By David F. Loewen

Part I - The educational mandate

Chortitza colonists arriving in the newly-founded Orenburg colony in the late 1800s had already been exposed to a progressive educational philosophy, and they brought this with them. It was not unexpected therefore, that from the very first years of their arrival, these young, new settlers turned their attention to schools. Primary education was initially provided in private homes, but within years of arrival, school buildings were erected. There was a noticeable difference, however, between school structures built by Chortitza and Molotschna colonists, and according to author Peter Dyck, the Molotschna group never caught up.¹

School attendance was compulsory—ages seven to thirteen for girls and fourteen for boys. According to Dyck, Orenburg was fortunate in that high educational standards had been set and maintained from the start due to the leadership provided by several well-educated

teachers.² While teachers and the villages they worked for enjoyed a mutual trust for each other, a strain in their relationship did exist, caused by the method used for teacher appointments. By mutual consent, teachers entered into one-year contracts, which meant that at the end of each school year, teachers might be lured away by a neighbouring village simply through outbidding. Teachers with strong reputations were particularly subject to "bidding wars." Considering that the teacher supply was not always adequate, this system led to a



Zentralschule (Secondary School) in Pretoria.

All images in this article courtesy of the author.

precarious situation for both the host village community and the teacher.

Teacher salaries depended somewhat on student numbers, while a significant portion of the cost of education was carried by landowners. Their salaries³ were paid in cash and in kind (mostly wheat). In addition to teaching, teachers served as building caretakers.

During the first years of Orenburg's existence, few children were sent to higher education in the mother colony. The question of a secondary school (*Zentralschule*) had been a concern from the earliest years of the colony's existence, but only for a few men. Their concern was underlined when teacher recruitment occurred. Successful graduates of the teacher-training classes were only seldom willing to move to the hinterlands (Orenburg) when demand for teachers in the mother colony was also high.

The only remedy appeared to be the establishment of a secondary school in Orenburg. After planning for a modest first phase, the question of where to build the school became an issue. Not only did available land provide a challenge, but also the capacity of the host village to accommodate students. Deyevka, which was the geographical centre of the colony (and the obvious first choice), lacked both the land and capacity to accommodate—"... spacious houses with wooden floorboards were still scarce."⁴

Village #14, Pretoria, stepped forward, and even though it was situated at the south end of the colony, it had some advantages. It had the land, and the village of Karaguy, which was located 0.7 kilometres from Pretoria, had spacious houses for student accommodations. Perhaps of most significance, Pretoria, by municipal decree, committed not to charge more than six rubles per month per pupil for room and board for a period of ten years. In contrast to its neighbouring villages, which either remained silent on the issue of a school, or lacked interest, Pretoria left no doubt about its level of interest.

The mother colony had signalled from the start that it would not be supporting this project financially. It therefore fell to a few farsighted and optimistic leaders to initiate the project, anticipating that their fellow colonists, who were either silent or somewhat opposed, would join in once their doubts had been erased. On March 1, 1907, the Association for the Improvement of Education was registered in the Orenburg District Chancellery. The driving force of this Association

was Peter P. Dyck, merchant and preacher, whose financial contributions were not insignificant.

The school's initial year was modest in scope, but demand quickly scaled building plans upward as thirty boys sought admission in the fall of 1908. Apart from 1911/12, when the colony suffered a poor harvest and financial support was critical, the school thrived and grew.

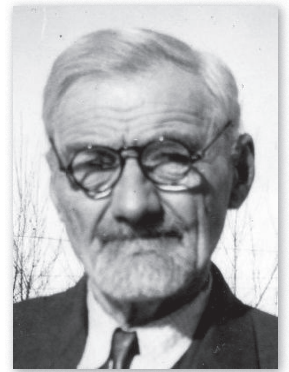
The Central School in Pretoria owed its existence mainly to the initiative of Rev. Peter P. Dyck. The school, which had about eighty to one hundred students in four classes, operated very successfully until the First World War, and had a strong influence on the spiritual and cultural life of the settlement.

In his memoirs, Aaron Pries writes,

The school, with its teachers and students, did much to spread progressive views among the people. Literary evenings were organized there, where plays by various poets were performed.

Everyone who was interested was invited to these evenings. There were also two evenings each week when the teachers gave scientific presentations. At these evenings, admission was free for everyone. These literature and lecture evenings aroused the interest of many people, especially young people, in political events in the world and in the country. It was an awakening to freer thinking. Books and newspapers were already plentiful. In the secondary school there was a library with beautiful books. The membership of the school society grew steadily. During these years it was decided to accept girls as students. Only four girls enrolled in the first year, but a start had been made; later the number increased.⁵

When World War I broke out, the school was ordered to close because it represented German interests. Significant early financing had been provided through a 2000-ruble German loan cosigned by Peter P. Dyck. As a result of this loan and personal contributions, Dyck became the main creditor, and everything was bequeathed to him. For the next three years, the school



Peter P. Dyck.

building was used as a prison for German civilians. In 1917, the building was sold to the local district, which allowed Dyck to satisfy the German creditors and to make the necessary repairs to the school building to allow classes to resume in the fall of 1918.⁶ Following the war, Dyck's involvement in the school ceased. He would become leader of the 1926 group of Orenburg emigrants to Canada, and he would find his way to Rosemary, Alberta, where he served as a minister in the Mennonite Church.

Part II - A student's perspective

Abraham J. and Maria (Eitzen) Loewen, along with four children, arrived in Pretoria in 1903. Here, nine more children would be added to their family. They lived across the street from the primary school that their children attended. Jacob Loewen, third oldest in the family, began school in the fall of 1910. In his memoirs, he describes his early educational experiences at some length, and for the most part, this account is based on his memoirs.

The primary school itself contained one big classroom as well as living quarters (three rooms with a kitchen) for the teacher. Kornelius Matthies was Jacob's teacher. There were six grades, all in one room, and since Pretoria was a small village, the classes were also small, with four to six children per grade. The children were seated systematically, with the youngest seated next to the teacher, and the oldest at the back of the room.

Tina, who was Jacob's junior by thirteen years, recalls,

I must have been 8 years old when I started. I finished grade two. There was strict discipline. If we were punished in school by standing in the corner or a strapping, we would also be punished at home. The lower grades did not have scribblers, but a slate and a slate pencil. This could be erased with a cloth and the slate could be used again. At recess time the children would play games like "Drop the Handkerchief," "Hopscotch," or "Klepky" [a game with a stick]. In the winter they were mostly inside or maybe skating on the ice. They used their wooden slippers [*Schlören*] as skates.

Jacob writes,

As I grew older, I often had to think about the teaching methods. As I remember, the program

Notes

1. Dyck, Peter P. *Orenburg in The Urals: The Story of a Mennonite Settlement in the Urals*. Self-published, 1951. Originally *Orenburg im Ural: die Geschichte einer mennonitischen Ansiedlung in Russland*.
2. Dyck singles out three individuals: Isaak G. Krahn, Kantserovka; David H. Loewen, Deyevka; Johann B. Matthies, Karaguy.
3. 350-650 rubles per year, part of which was paid in kind (primarily wheat).
4. Dyck, Peter P., p. 71.
5. Aaron Pries. "Memoirs," p. 10.
6. Peter Dyck led the Orenburg group of emigrants to Canada in 1926. He settled in Rosemary, Alberta, where he served as one of the ministers, and in 1931 founded a Bible school in his home, which operated for 10 years.



Jacob Loewen, 1926.



Tina Loewen, 1926.

was planned right up to the minute. Just imagine, Monday - 8:00 to 8:20, 1st class; 8:20 to 8:40, 2nd class; 8:40 to 9:00, 3rd class; recess, 10 minutes, and so on. If the teacher was occupied with one class, all the others had to have a writing assignment. During this time it was very quiet in the class. Anyone who finished his lesson early would take it to the teacher, return to his seat and sit quietly. Anyone making a noise would be severely punished—at times with a stick. Sometimes they had to stay in the corner or near the oven. At times they would have to hold a Bible up high over their heads. But those punishments were not given very often. If a student misbehaved too often during the classes, the teacher would tell his parents about this behaviour, and then the parents would discipline the child. Sometimes they had to copy something from the Bible or from a book.

During recess, there was strict order in the class. Every day, someone from the upper class was in charge of keeping order. Upon arrival of the teacher, he would report that everything was orderly, or he would tell the teacher who had

not behaved, and the student would be punished as noted earlier. Outside, one could run and jump—nobody cared—but not in the class. I am convinced that if any teacher were asked today if such teaching methods could have positive results, they would surely all say that this is impossible. But I must say—we learned a lot. Attending other schools later, I was not behind in my knowledge. I did not feel poorly educated. For instance, I often noticed that adults, and later, students, did not understand important events in Russian history. My village teacher demanded that we should know the history of our emperors in Russia. I remembered them all my life. Grammatical rules, too, were expected to be known.

Until the Revolution, I was well-acquainted with the Bible. For instance, the teacher took the Bible and read a passage and then asked what text he had read, and who had written it. For the most part, we learned to know the Scripture quite well. A problem we had was that we had to know two languages, German and Russian. At home we spoke Low German; at school, we first learned German using the Gothic script. In the third year we learned Russian, and some of the subjects were taught in that language. In spite of everything, we were quite successful. I often think that our first teacher was a hero. I am sure that if I would ask any teacher today to take over a school like ours, he would refuse.

The teacher gave me early access to the school library, but there was not much to read—parts from Gogol, fables from Krylov, and poems from Nekrasov. Besides the school library, there was another private library at the Pries home. But there we had to pay, and I had no money. I arranged with Mr. Pries that I would give him a book I had received as a gift in exchange for access to his library. My last year in public school was the start of World War I.

After finishing public school, Jacob hoped to continue his education in the Central School (*Zentralschule*), but the war years dashed those hopes. For a short time, Jacob was tutored by their neighbour David Koslowsky, who focused primarily on geography.

In 1916, the parents in Pretoria and the surrounding

villages decided to organize to continue education for their children, so they approached a German intern and asked him to take on the task. They managed to get one classroom in the Central School. In the end, it appeared that this intern had never been a teacher. His attempts to teach anything of value was a failure and so the entire year (1917) was a waste of time.

Near the end of the war, the youth started to form youth groups. David Koslowsky organized a choir and the Pretoria string orchestra resumed activity. It was also a great event when the village received a library with a large collection of German, Russian, and other European classics, at least according to Jacob Loewen. The library was given to the youth groups, giving them the opportunity to get acquainted with European classics in the German and Russian languages.

Jacob writes,

Now we had a fight with our father. Between 9:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. we had to turn out our lights and go to sleep. Kerosene for the lamps was limited. So we three brothers went to bed as instructed and after the parents were asleep, we would get up, light the lamp, and start to read until morning. At times our father would catch us reading and we would receive a very severe admonition. I am convinced that in our village nobody read as much as we did. In our schools, nobody had such a library as we had. This had a very great influence on my education.

Regular school resumed following the war and finding qualified teachers could not be assumed, but very soon, nearby Samara appeared to have a supply of qualified teachers, who found the cost of living more manageable in the rural regions. Among the first teachers were two sisters, Helen and Mary Petrovna, related to the well-known diplomat, W. P. Potemkin. The quality of instruction exceeded Jacob's expectations by far. It was Helen Petrovna's history lessons that steered Jacob in that direction in his first years at university. Teachers received a modest wage and in addition, students paid tuition with produce. In Jacob's opinion, "Our teachers in Pretoria had prepared us quite well, so we did not fall behind those who had their education in the city."

Helen and Mary Petrovna took interest in Jacob's education and gave him the support and encouragement that set him on a path to a university education.



Mary Petrovna with her husband Wassilij Pavlovitsch Pankratjev, both teachers in the *Zentralschule*.

Ironically, it would also play a role in permanently separating him from his parents and siblings. When they emigrated in 1926, Jacob was not ready to leave, but within a few years, that choice was no longer his to exercise.

In the spring of 1922, Jacob graduated from the school in Pretoria. There was no question in his mind that further education would be his goal. The Petrovna sisters immediately helped Jacob make all the arrangements to enroll at the Technicum Lenin in Samara. They went to Samara themselves and arranged for Jacob to enter the third year in the Technicum Lenin, with a scholarship, and room and board. With their support and his solemn commitment not to ask for financial assistance, Abraham Loewen relented and allowed Jacob to enrol at the Technicum Lenin. He writes,

Father took me to Orenburg and paid my ticket, 3rd class, to Samara. Mother also gave me some pastry and also a few kilos of millet and I went out into a strange world “to swim on an open ocean.”

When the Loewens emigrated in 1926, Jacob elected to remain in order to complete his education. The opportunity to emigrate would not come again. Jacob would go on to conduct geological field research and become a geology professor at the University of Tashkent. After retirement, he moved closer to his children in Moscow and lived out a full life to age 98.

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A Practicum at the Society

■ By Natasha Kitos

In 2024, Natasha Kitos did a student practicum at MHSBC. The following paragraphs are excerpted from her report. Reprinted with permission.

I completed my practicum at the Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia under the supervision of Jennifer Martens, who is the office and volunteer manager for the Society....

Upon arrival I was met by Jennifer, who gave me a welcome packet. This included my name badge, key pass, and some important information about the Historical Society, as well as a basic training schedule for the first three days. I also met Andrea, another student, who would be completing her



Natasha Kitos.

Photo source: MHSBC files.

practicum along with me, as well as new staff member Donna and a fellow student, Alyssa, who was beginning as a Society volunteer. Jennifer gave us a quick tour of the building and discussed some of the things we would be learning over the first few days. She introduced us to several other staff and volunteers, including Mary Ann Quiring, who would be conducting our training.

At this point we joined the rest of the staff and volunteers for their scheduled “coffee time” which is an opportunity for everyone to connect and have some scheduled social time. I thought it was such a wonderful concept in a workplace, and we were welcomed into the group warmly. The other staff were very friendly and curious about what we were doing, and thankful that we would be doing it. At only about an hour into my first day, I already felt at ease and confident that I had chosen well for my practicum.

After coffee time, our training with Mary Ann began. She explained in further detail the mission of MHSBC as well as discussed its library system. We watched a training video about ResourceMate, the library software, and then did some practice in the program itself to gain some familiarity with it. Mary Ann spent a good deal of time showing us everything she could, because she was retiring after our third day of training and so wouldn't be there to guide us. Our training days were a balance of museum tours, instructional time, and hands-on work. I really appreciated the effort made by the staff to teach us about Mennonite history in order to deepen our understanding of the work the Society does and the reasons behind it.

While there were no explicit expectations outlined for us, once training was complete, we had a pretty good idea of what work needed to be done and how to go about doing it. I found it very helpful to have Andreah with me, as we were able to share ideas and discuss our thoughts. We were largely left on our own to work

but we were never actually “alone” in it. Jennifer and Richard Thiessen, executive director of the Museum and a librarian, were always readily available whenever a question arose. Andreah and I have a similar work ethic and style, so it felt like a good pairing. We were able to figure most things out for ourselves but, like I said, Jennifer and Richard were available to us when needed. We felt supported without being hovered over, which I appreciated.

Our training days were a balance of museum tours, instructional time, and hands-on work. I really appreciated the effort made by the staff to teach us about Mennonite history in order to deepen our understanding of the work the Society does and the reasons behind it.

The MHSBC's mission statement “shall be the collection, preservation and dissemination of knowledge of the historical heritage and the current life and times of Mennonites in BC.” There is a great focus on gathering histories of the Mennonite people, both family histories and more general accounts of the persecution and forced migrations endured by the Mennonite people throughout their history. Much work is done by Society volunteers to assist visitors with tracing their family genealogies and reconnecting people with information

and stories of the past. One thing that really stood out for me was the efforts made by the Mennonite people to keep their heritage alive, despite all they endured, and to maintain their way of life and belief system. I believe that is why they have such a strong community to this day.

I am thankful for the opportunity to learn and be a part of the LIBT [Library and Information Technology] program [at University of the Fraser Valley] over the last two years.... My practicum with MHSBC was most definitely the high point of the entire experience. I loved every moment of my time there and really felt like I made a valuable contribution. I learned a great deal and was also given the freedom to figure things out for myself. That isn't something that can be said about most places of employment and it gave me so much more confidence in my work as a whole. That is a rare gift indeed, and I'm grateful for it.

Vernon Herman Ratzlaff

(1937-2024)

■ Compiled and written by Peter Andres, with contributors:

Howard Dyck, staff colleague Sharon Mennonite

Collegiate (SMC)

Abe Dueck, colleague SMC and MBBC

Vic Neufeld, student SMC

Diane Wolfe Martens, student SMC

Wilfred Epp, student SMC

Linda Wiens, student SMC

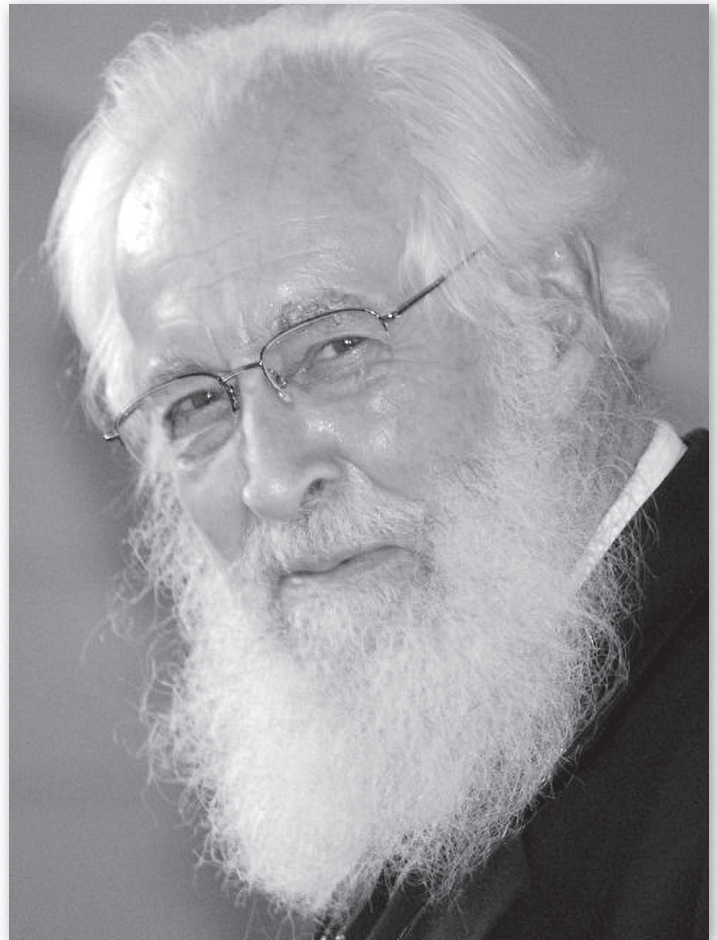
Robert Martens, student SMC

Patricia Ng, daughter

Peter Andres, student SMC, colleague MCC Manitoba

Born near Waldheim, Saskatchewan in 1937, Vernon Ratzlaff (Vern) received his early education in a small rural school, attended and was baptized in the Brotherfield Mennonite Brethren (MB) Church at the age of fourteen, and learned and enjoyed farm life as a child. The practical skills he acquired during those years were never forgotten and augmented his academic and professional life, especially as a teacher in a small private school. However, farming and Saskatchewan would soon be exchanged for much more academic pursuits following a move to Greater Vancouver. Like so many immigrant Mennonite families, he worked to help support his family while he pursued his education, and over seven years completed both a BA in Physics and Math and then a Bachelor in Social Work. He married Helen Koehn in 1958 and by the time they left Vancouver for his first teaching assignment, they had three children. Later the family grew to five: another birth, and the adoption of one of the many foster children they brought into their family. His Christmas Day family wiener roasts remain a family legend.

To nurture, and maybe preserve, his spiritual life at the University of BC, he participated in Intervarsity Christian Fellowship where he formed what became an ongoing relationship with Abe Dueck and Jack Dueck, who would also become his colleagues at Sharon Mennonite Collegiate (SMC) in Yarrow. Abe recalls that this trio became known in the small Yarrow community for their “antics.” Their students looked forward to the times when Vern, in particular, would preach at the MB



Vernon Ratzlaff.

Photo source: Dignity Memorial obituary.

church in Yarrow. As with so many things he did for his students, Vern’s sermons were thought-provoking, fresh, challenging and made theological sense—something not always present in the traditional pietistic sermons of the day. I first met Vern as a teacher and principal of Sharon Mennonite Collegiate, a private school sponsored entirely by the Yarrow MB Church. He, like so many of his colleagues at the school, taught everything—social studies, Bible, physics, history—whatever curriculum gap needed filling. A number of things stood out to us students: the complete sense of service he—and they—gave to their work, the quality of instruction we received, the exemplary leadership that Vern provided to the school, his ability to make subjects interesting, even when they weren’t a student’s favourite, Vern’s gentle concern for the individual, and his functional faith that helped prepare a cohort of students who lived in a sheltered and prescriptive religious community to live and function as Christians in Canada. One student remembers him as “brilliant.”

On one Saturday in June of 1966, Vern took a number of Grade 12 students on a trip to UBC for no

other apparent reason than to visit a university campus. Looking back, one can now understand that this was an attempt to help us visualize a world beyond graduation that might be an alternative to a year or two of Bible school, and then marriage. It must have worked—all of those who went with him graduated from one university or another. On other occasions, he would take students with musical skills to do church outreach work for smaller congregations such as in Rosedale, near Chilliwack, and Queensborough, near New Westminster.

Vern was universally known for having a *spaßig* side. One colleague characterized his sense of humour as “hardly fitting any standard pattern.” Another, as “corny.” He loved puns. On one occasion, while he was writing the word “psychology” on the board, he indicated that the “p” was silent ... as in “swimming.” One scholar duly noted that there was no “p” in swimming—whereupon the class broke up in laughter. Another happened during a Bible studies test which asked the students to relate the Christmas story found in the Gospel of Mark, for one mark. Students waxed eloquent on wise men and shepherds and much to their chagrin received no mark for their efforts. Sometimes Vern’s jokes soared over the heads of his pupils: a student remembers that she did not always “get it.” On only one occasion was he “bested” as a teacher, when a student wished to have a math problem revisited just in advance of a test. After being temporarily flummoxed, Vern went through the problem again, perhaps forgetting that it would appear in that exact form on the test, which the class then aced!

He was also a demanding teacher. One student remembers us Grade 12 pupils having to write monthly one thousand word book reports on British or American authors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and Canadian writers as well. I also remember a Grade 10 social studies class in which he briefly introduced us to

music history. It was the first time I heard Grieg’s *Peer Gynt Suite*, all on beautiful vinyl.

Following his high school teaching career, Vern moved to Winnipeg where, for the next ten years, he was an instructor at the MB Bible College and the University of Winnipeg. One colleague at MBBC noted that, while Vern was not formally educated nor trained in theology, he seemed to know as much, if not more, than most who were. This might have been partly due to Vern’s wide exposure to books, endless books. One school colleague noted that, anytime there were a few minutes between classes, he would read a few pages from a book on any topic—theology included. He “devoured” books.

He moved on from MBBC to become Executive Director of MCC Manitoba where my wife and I joined him as Voluntary Service Coordinators. Quite apart from leadership of a large program with a very involved constituency, his commitments included many initiatives,

including developing conversations with the Franco-Manitoban Society and the Canadian Foodgrains Bank. One particularly vexing theological question that still permeated my North American evangelical mind was the angst related to “divining” what God’s will was for my impressionable soul. In a brief encounter, he quickly identified Micah 6 and Matthew 25 as God’s will for me—and every other person who considered him or herself a Jesus-follower. After thinking about his response for a while, I laid that theological pursuit to rest. Communal. Anabaptist. Inclusive. Incisive.

Vern’s experience as the Country Representative for MCC in Egypt was both formative for him and for MCC in that country. It was here that he connected with the Coptic Orthodox Church where his sense of inclusivity was broadened by a weeklong contemplative stay at St. Catherine’s Monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai, and by his work with Orthodox Church social services staff. He was instrumental in giving long-term directional

One particularly vexing theological question that still permeated my North American evangelical mind was the angst related to “divining” what God’s will was for my impressionable soul. In a brief encounter, he quickly identified Micah 6 and Matthew 25 as God’s will for me—and every other person who considered him or herself a Jesus-follower.

change to MCC's Egypt program. When my wife Jane and I became country reps there almost thirty years later, Egyptians still fondly remembered Vern's presence. In correspondence that we had with him in the years following his time in Egypt, it was clear that his understandings of faith and ecumenism had deepened.

This ecumenism became evident on his return to Canada when he began pastoring churches in Saskatchewan but also became involved in the Lutheran Seminary on the campus of the University of Saskatchewan. As a pastor, he was remembered for his humility, his sharp mind, and his eloquent sermons at both Nutana Park Mennonite Church and Aberdeen Church. As a seminary instructor, he was also awarded

an honorary doctorate: *honoris causa*. As someone who witnessed the ceremony, I was struck by the enthusiastic cheering and the standing ovation offered to him by his students. After being an MA candidate for much of his academic life, this heavily bearded, hunched-over sage was finally rewarded for his earthly pilgrimage ... by Lutherans. That somehow seemed right.

It wasn't long afterwards that his health and age finally caught up with him. After the passing of Helen, he himself soon needed care, and after a few years of support, he died in 2024 in Saskatoon at the age of eighty-six. It was our good fortune to meet up with him on his earthly journey.

GENEALOGY CORNER: THE TIES THAT BIND

How to Write an Obituary

■ By Robert Martens

Jennifer Martens, office and volunteer manager at the Mennonite Historical Society, recently noted in an email that volunteer genealogists at the Society have expressed frustration with poorly written obituaries. One of the genealogy team, Jennifer wrote, complained that she “tracks obituaries that come in from the newspaper, service bulletins, etc. Oftentimes the pertinent information she is looking for is omitted.” Jennifer went on to acknowledge the difficulty of writing obituaries in a time of grief. “I just went through this process personally ... and I managed because I have resources, but I wondered how people do it with no help?”

Databases such as GRanDMA, the Genealogical Registry and Database of Mennonite Ancestry, are imperfect at the best of times. However, needless errors and omissions may appear because of inadequate obituaries; and obituaries, accurate or not, are often the primary source of information for genealogical records. Jennifer suggested, “Perhaps *Roots and Branches* could cover how to write an obituary for our readership?” She attached two online sources that were recommended by the above-mentioned volunteer genealogist. They are listed below.

“Writing is intimidating for most people,” begins one of the online articles. “Even those who write regularly get writer's block, lose motivation and procrastinate. It

can be even harder to write when announcing the death of a loved one.... Despite the feelings of grief that will arise, writing the obituary should be a positive, cathartic experience” (*Sun 1*). And so, both articles stress, it is important to organize, to proceed step by step.

- I. **Gather information.** Have it at your fingertips before you start writing. Include basic details in the obituary such as age upon death; birth date; birth place; names of surviving relatives; death date; location of death; full name; where the person lived; parents' names; names of spouse and children; church and job information; nickname; names of those who preceded in death; née, or unmarried name, if the deceased is female, and she changed her name upon marrying; details



of the memorial service, if there is one. These are the essentials—feel free to add whatever else might contribute to the telling of a life story. This might include childhood; education; honours and awards; extra-curricular activities; retirement; home life; pets.

2. **Look at obituaries in newspapers and magazines.** Use them as guidelines.
3. **Write.** That may seem obvious, but just getting started can be an issue. Write freely. If the obituary gets too long, it is easier to delete material, to cut back, than to add on. The obituary can be a first draft for a longer version, the eulogy, which might be read at the memorial service.
4. **Give the obituary a personal touch.** “Your loved one was unique. Think about the things that made them special, and include the touching details that your reader might like to know about your loved one.... Don’t be afraid to include humour” (*Sun* 3).
5. **Proofread and edit.** The obituary doesn’t need to be perfect, but should be up to grammatical standards. Have someone else look over your writing before you send it off to a newspaper or periodical.
6. **Ask for assistance if you feel overwhelmed.** “Don’t feel guilty about passing the task along if you are not up to it. Friends and family are glad to help in times of need” (*Sun* 4).
7. **Aside from all the detail, write as interestingly as you can.** “It’s very easy to find examples of obituaries that are worthy of attention. There are interesting obituaries for everyday folks that inspire us; maybe even make us cry or laugh. Obituaries which, when we’re done reading them, we say to

ourselves, ‘I wish I’d had a chance to get to know that person’” (Roadhouse 1).

8. **Submit the obituary.** Read it when it is printed, and scan for errors. If mistakes have been made, contact the printer of the obituary. Keep copies for yourself and friends and family.
9. Finally, avoid common mistakes:
 - Make the obituary about the deceased, not about the still living.
 - Avoid abbreviations and terms that may not be understood.
 - Write about the life of the deceased, not just about funeral details.
 - Write in the third person about the deceased; don’t refer to the deceased as Mom or Dad, or as son or daughter, for example.
 - Have a family member look over the obituary to confirm that no one has been left out.
 - Double-check the spelling of names.

Obituaries, notes one of the online sources, are a contribution to history, to the human story, both individually and collectively. “In writing an obituary for your loved one, you have the opportunity to serve future generations—not only of your immediate family but of the society as a whole. You are, in effect, recording history on an individual scale. It’s a humbling but inspiring thought...” (Roadhouse 1).

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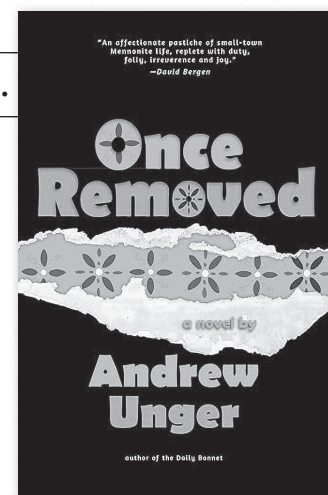
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REVIEWS

Andrew Unger. *Once Removed*. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2020. 271 pp.

Reviewed by Robert Martens

Before my ascension to power, Edenfeld had suffered through decades of poor leadership. We were a house built on sand.... We had gravel roads. We had not a single fast-food chain, nor the empty lots necessary to accommodate a big-box store—certainly not with sufficient room for parking. Just think of what visitors must have thought in those days to drive into Edenfeld only to find horses on every block and families speaking Plautdietsch. How can we expect people to come and do business here if they can’t even communicate with us? (133-4)



So pontificates villainous—haplessly villainous—Edenfeld Mayor BLT Wiens in Andrew Unger’s comic novel *Once Removed*. Tradition? It only gets in the way of the future. Struggling family history ghostwriter Timothy Heppner, his wife Katie, and the members of the Preservation Society of Edenfeld have to act fast if they want to save the last remaining artifacts of their Manitoba pioneer forebears.

In the early 2000s, when a group of us were collecting material for an anthology of west coast Mennonite literature, someone in our midst, a writer originally from the prairies—it may have been Patrick Friesen—remarked that we on the west coast seemed to lack the burning resentment of our counterparts in Manitoba. He was only partially correct. Prairie writers such as Arnold Dyck, Paul Hiebert and Armin Wiebe have been giving readers the gift of laughter for many years now, not to mention the centuries of Mennonites telling each other jokes in Plautdietsch.

Andrew Unger, writer of *The Daily Bonnet* (now *The Unger Review*), continues in that “tradition.” It’s safe to say that the Mennonite prairie milieu is strikingly different from that of the west coast, but the jokes should translate quite seamlessly for readers in “British California.” *Once Removed* is packed with eccentric small-town Mennonite characters who should have you laughing aloud. There’s Brenda from Loans, whose body is tattooed with historic Anabaptist-Mennonite personalities. Randall, who decides to travel to post-Soviet Russia to find—and hopefully rebuild—the last (there have been many) Edenfeld in the “old country.” Elsie Dyck, a now-famous Edenfeld writer—hello, Miriam Toews—who has left the town for the “city” to publish her novels free of the clutches of Mayor BLT Wiens (the mayor would like to expunge her from town memory). And of course the disputatious but loyal

members of the Preservation Society, meeting almost subversively to safeguard Edenfeld treasures such as the lone housebarn in the village, or the former home of Elsie Dyck, while watching films on VCR such as *The Earl Warkentin Story: Adventures of a Wandering Schekjbenjel*.

The hero of the story, Timothy Heppner, works for the mayor’s Parks and Rec—or “Parks and Wreck”—department. Timothy and Katie, who had each vowed never to marry a Mennonite but then found each other

and realized they had that vow in common, find themselves on the side of history. Whatever the flaws of their Mennonite past, some of it just might be worth preserving. Timothy, in the employ of the wrecking ball of local government, is decidedly conflicted in all this. Katie wholly makes up for his lack of commitment.

Things heat up when they are anonymously threatened by someone leaving loaves of stale bread at their door. It’s not the Mafia, but still... Who’s behind the threats? Who wants to see Timothy thrown out of his job as ghostwriter of family histories? Might BLT be the culprit?

So, while Katie works on her masters thesis, “The Phallogocentric Religio-Ethnic Culture of Edenfeld, Manitoba,” Timothy types away at a nine hundred-page history of the town. He appends a final chapter which openly mocks the town council’s vision of a fully-developed (exploited) Edenfeld. At that point, the plot thickens like a bowl of borscht with too much sour cream.

It helps to know a little Plautdietsch to read this book—its four sections are titled *Somma*, *Hoafst*, *Winta* and *Farjoah*—but it’s not essential. Perhaps a Plautdietsch translation of *Once Removed* will be published some day, but for now we have the original version, written in good Canadian Mennonite English.

It’s safe to say that the Mennonite prairie milieu is strikingly different from that of the west coast, but the jokes should translate quite seamlessly for readers in “British California.” Once Removed is packed with eccentric small-town Mennonite characters who should have you laughing aloud.

Royden Loewen. *Mennonite Farmers: A Global History of Place and Sustainability*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2021. 336 pp.

■ Reviewed by Robert Martens

What is distinctive about Anabaptist-Mennonites, and, particularly, the farmers among them? Winnipeg scholar Royden Loewen asks this question in the introduction to his book, *Mennonite Farmers*. The Anabaptist-Mennonite movement, he writes, has been marked from the start by traits such as simplicity, charity, humility, community, nonviolence, and also by a kind of “anticlericalism” that has defined them from the bottom up and resulted in inter-group squabbling. But Anabaptist-Mennonites are an incredibly diverse group as well, and while universal judgments might be useful, writes Loewen, a more accurate assessment of present-day Mennonites could result from looking at local situations, local living arrangements: “no one sweeping interpretive tool” is adequate for defining the way Anabaptist-Mennonites currently live, and have lived (148).

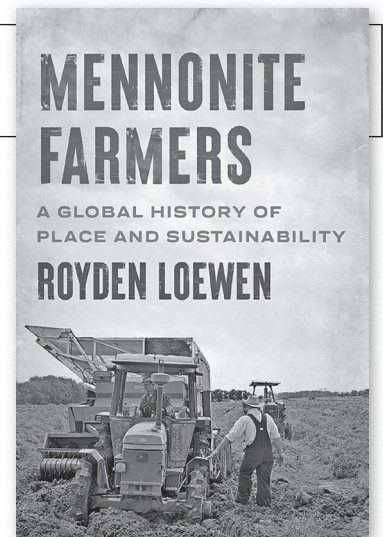
In *Mennonite Farmers*, Loewen examines seven strikingly different Mennonite farming communities, four in the Global North and three in the South. Among those north of the equator, Friesland is the oldest. It was part of a colonial state, the Netherlands, and Mennonite farmers there have modernized much as other Europeans have. In Iowa, Mennonite settlers created a disparate community, sometimes insular, sometimes deeply engaged with the global scene. Manitoban Mennonites learned to adapt to a harsh climate and eventually succeeded. Finally, in Siberia, Mennonite villages were fundamentally destroyed by Stalinist coercion but managed to survive.

Some readers may not be as familiar with the communities in the Global South that Loewen has chosen to study. In Java, Mennonite farming villages emerged at the instigation of Dutch missionary Pieter Jansz, who detested colonial values and strove to shelter Indonesians through a system of cooperative farming. The village of Matopo in Zimbabwe resulted from outreach by Brethren in Christ missionaries. Here, local lore often conflicted with church teachings. And, finally, in Bolivia, traditionalist Mennonites have done everything in their power to avoid engagement with the outer world. Loewen refers to horse-and-buggy Mennonites,

such as those in Bolivia, as “anticapitalist”—a term which, he claims, has some relevance to all seven communities analyzed in the book.

Loewen goes on to examine these “seven points on earth” through several lenses:

1. Modernization. Frisian, Manitoban and Iowan Mennonites have seamlessly adapted to changing techniques such as the use of fossil fuels, monoculture, deforestation and chemical fertilizers. In Bolivia, forests were rampantly cleared, something some Mennonites there now regret. Javanese and Matopo Mennonites resisted white control and frequently ignored modernizing Western directives.
2. Making peace. Mennonites may have no “theology of creation,” Loewen argues, but an “everyday theology of creation” *has* been part of their lives; farmers nurtured a connection to the earth that is deeply spiritual. In the North, Mennonite farmers regard the soil as an integral part of religion. Mennonite farmers in Java and Matabeleland in Zimbabwe have accepted church teachings but have merged them with their own vision of a living, communicating nature.
3. Gender. Bolivian Mennonite women, writes Loewen, wield a certain degree of power within the household. North American Mennonite women have engaged, knowledgeably, with global forces. In Siberia, women were forced for some years to survive on their own after men were exiled or executed. Race was an important factor in Java and Matabeleland, often overshadowing gender differences. Javanese Mennonite women own land and achieve a measure of equality in the church, while Ndebele Mennonite women still largely live under “old forms of male privilege” (154).
4. State power. As elsewhere, no overriding narrative exists here. Dutch Mennonites are frequently



annoyed with intrusive European Union regulations and with environmentalists who seek to dictate their ideology. Manitoban Mennonites have mostly cooperated with government. In Matabeleland, Mennonite Ndebele farmers grappled with white colonial oppression and then with the genocidal policies of the postcolonial Zimbabwe African National Union.

5. Climate change. While Iowan and Manitoban Mennonites frequently ignore the effects of climate change, or even deny that it exists, Mennonite farmers in the Global South are faced with extreme weather and must struggle to survive.
6. World scale history. Mennonite farmers have engaged with the global story but their activities must once again, says Loewen, be examined through a “local filter.” Contrary to popular myth, Bolivian Mennonites travel extensively, recently even to China, to trade and obtain farming equipment. In Siberia, many “ethnic Germans” have left for Germany, though some have become disillusioned with European secularism and returned home. Youth are leaving their villages in Matabeleland for the city in search of a better future. Javanese Mennonite farmers sometimes have only vague notions of global issues. And Loewen stresses that Mennonites in Manitoba, Iowa, Bolivia and Siberia encroached upon Indigenous land as part of state efforts to displace

the inhabitants who, from the state’s point of view, had little economic value.

In his fascinating conclusion, Royden Loewen argues that Mennonite farmers have resisted “capitalist encroachment” through “resistances of the everyday” (267). Though sustainability is a complex term, Mennonite farmers have been engaged in “place and sustainability” in their own unique ways. “For Mennonite farmers a commitment to community was an especially important aspect of sustainability. This particular aim was seen in the value given to circumscribed farm size and a celebration of restraint and contentment” (268). Of utmost importance to sustainable Mennonite community has been “that the *local* place served the central resource for community wholeness” (268); young families were assisted, for example, in obtaining their own land. These values of living together and sharing their bounty have contributed to “some form of social leveling” (269).

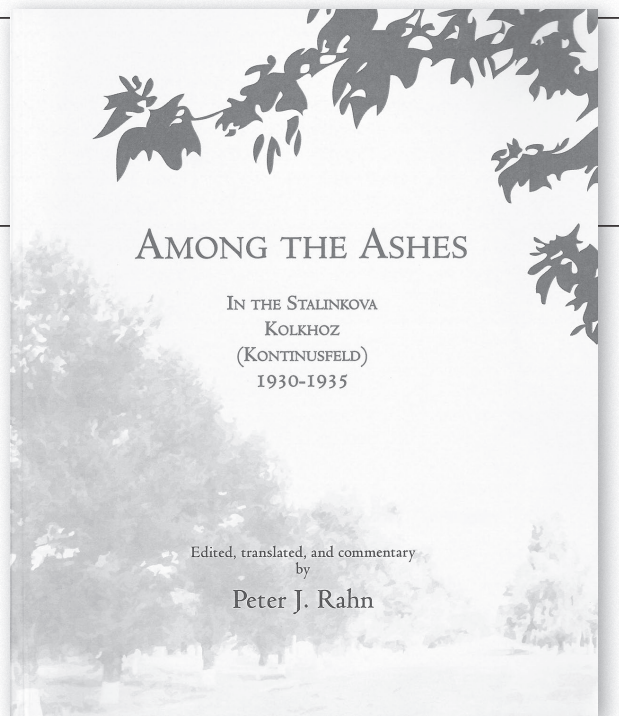
Royden Loewen, himself a farmer as well as a scholar, has a love for the land that is common, he writes, to Mennonite farmers: “A commitment to the idea of cultural sustainability also revealed itself when members spoke of a spiritual link with the local wonders of nature” (268). In this time of global crisis, the values of sustainability that Loewen describes may be essential to our physical and spiritual well-being, and perhaps to the very survival of life on earth.

Excerpt from *Among the Ashes: In the Stalinkov Kolkhoz (Kontinuisfeld) 1930-1935*. Edited, translated, and commentary by Peter J. Rahn. Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2011, pp. 160-164.

The letters translated (alongside German originals) in Peter Rahn’s book vividly depict the psychotic and genocidal nature of the Soviet regime that intentionally inflicted starvation upon the people of Ukraine. Millions died. These letters, sent by the author’s relatives, were written between 1930 and 1942. *Among the Ashes* can be purchased at the Mennonite Heritage Museum.

- Robert Martens

Letter from Peter Jacob Rahn (1883-1942) in Ukraine to Jacob Peter Rahn (1910-1991) in Canada; respectively, grandfather and father to Peter J. Rahn.



March 5, 1931

When you get this letter we will be without food.

Dear Jacob [his son], Am trying to send you a few lines. Received a letter from you during these last few days. We, thank God, are all well and heartily wish the same for you. We have already had a few days of nice weather here, but now there is frost again. This year we are having a lot of wind. For five weeks we had frightfully huge storms. Have you seen the sign in the moon? There is supposed to have been a cross in the moon and a rainbow around it. Quite a number have seen it. I myself did not see it but a faithful brother, Jordan, from M[un]tau has also seen it. Your uncles know him well. [B. B. Janz and J. B. Janz, who had emigrated to Coaldale, Alberta]. This phenomenon was widely reported among the Mennonite villages in the Molotschna, although the report in the *Rundschau*, 4 Aug. 1931, p. 6, gives the date as February 2.] Otherwise I wouldn't relate this, but now I believe it as well. Here it caused a lot of excitement. It occurred [on the night] of the 9th to the 10th of February. But afterward here we experience dreadful things. Many a one has also received a cross [to bear]. How many are without shelter? The number is large. Without shelter are Abr[am]'s [Kliewer, with whom Jacob Peter Rahn emigrated to Canada] parents, A. J. P., P. Is. P., M. M. W., P. J. Duerk., D. D. L., K. J. T., P. G. R., K. K. R., NF G. D., With greeting, the one who prays for you. Your sisters, namely the two smallest ones, are always singing this song together:

*From land to land, from house to house,
Through heat of sun and storm's onset,
Spattered with dirt and covered with dust,
We travel in and out [here and there].
You dear people, pious and good,
You do not know how deep it hurts
When one in need for strangers' bread
Must beg with flagging courage.
You, who ne'er forget your fathers,
Love and kiss still your mothers,
Come, children, great and small,
See how poor an orphan is.*

This is how many a one will fare this year. From us they have also taken the last of the flour, so that all we have now is the previously baked bread. I always said, they [the household] should just [keep on] baking, we would

surely eat it. [These confiscations of the last of the flour caused many people throughout the Molotschna who had heard of this occurring in other villages to try to bake everything into bread before it was seized.] So now we divide it. But how long will it last? When you receive this letter, we will already be without food. I am only surprised that more people are not going mad. For we have just learned of something else. More people than in the year [19]21 are in Abr.'s [Kliewer] parents' house in the big room [*die grosse Stube*]. Your grandfather [B. B. Janz, who had emigrated to Coaldale, Alberta. Obviously, this is a reference to the famine and suffering at the beginning of the previous decade, the 1920s, after the initial attempts at collectivization.] has a small inkling what that is like. Don't always add your signature underneath! Peter Jacob Rahn

Commentary by Peter Rahn

This letter was written with a very heavy heart. Peter Jacob Rahn's first line emphasizes that he is trying to write. Not only must he report the expulsion of many fellow villagers, but also the seizure of the last of their flour that was supposed to be their lifeline until new crops and vegetables could be grown. This was the aftermath of the earlier demand from Moscow for more grain and wheat referred to in letter Jan. 22, 1931. By setting the new procurement taxes so high that virtually no one could pay them, any and all villagers were now open to prosecution. Thus the Soviet regional and village councils had a free hand to prosecute whomever they wished.

The people referred to by their initials were mostly owners of *Grosswirtschaften*, all designated kulaks, or sons of kulaks, and hence the most well-to-do, who would be the first to suffer....

In the months of March and April many of the expropriated properties including the dwellings of some of these exiled people were turned into stables for cows, horses and pigs throughout the Molotschna. It is interesting to note that Peter Jacob Rahn finds refuge in a song by his daughters that he undoubtedly taught them. According to the surviving aunts, Lena Pauls Rahn and Ann Rahn Wiens, their father was a very musical person with good singing ability.

■ Reviewed by Dora Dueck

Compelling Conclusion to Heritage Trilogy

A Sense of Presiding Goodness by Loretta Willems concludes a family heritage trilogy about three generations. The first book, *The Gift of Laughter*, concerned her paternal grandparents, and the second, *Child Bride*, told the story of her mother. Now, in the third, she reflects on her own life, beginning with her childhood and ending—except for a last chapter about her late daughter Renee—in midlife when she resigned as an English teacher in Washington and drove to Berkeley, California in her VW Bug to do an MA and then a PhD in religion/theology and the arts. It's a memoir about a young marriage and about wrestling with her religious heritage.

"I loved being a child," she says. Her earliest priorities and dreams were the home and family she might have someday. She describes houses she resided in—some delightful, others less so—with salient details that bring the reader right inside their walls with her.

Loretta Willems' parents grew up in the Mennonite Brethren church but, except for Christmas and Easter attendance, had left it. She knew vaguely that she belonged to the Mennonites, but mostly in an ethnic sense. God was "a smiling presence" but unobtrusive. Then, in 1951, when Loretta was thirteen, her mother went forward in an MB evangelistic meeting and her parents returned to the church. If a homecoming for them, this was "an alien new universe" for her. Worse, "this new world brought Hell" into her life.

The family moved from California to Phoenix, Arizona, where Loretta's parents started a skid row rescue mission. Loretta rebuilt her life within her new religious reality. She loved the people and music of the church.



Dora Dueck, far right, with Loretta Willems (middle) and Janet Boldt at the book launch for Loretta's book *A Sense of Presiding Goodness*. July 25, 2024. Photo credit: Julia M. Toews.

After several weeks of dating Ben, a young Air Force man on his way to a posting in Japan, she agreed to be engaged, and upon graduation from high school at seventeen, flew to Japan and married him.

The story continues through the couple's various circumstances and locations back in United States, the addition of two daughters, Loretta's studies and profession as a teacher, and the course of the marriage. She continued to sort through her religious identity, confronting the "fear" and "vision of existence" she had entered when her mother went forward at the revival, and rebuilt it once again.

Loretta looks back at her younger self with "fondness and appreciation" for all the learning that life involves. There's laughter and "absurdity" here, one interesting story after the other, and an honest articulation of spiritual home-finding. *A Sense of Presiding Goodness* is a compelling book.

Roots & Branches

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Mennonite Historical Society of BC
1818 Clearbrook Rd, Abbotsford, BC, V2T 5X4
Phone: 604-853-6177 | Fax: 604-853-6246
Email: archives@mhsbc.com
Website: www.mhsbc.com



Many trees on the grounds of the Mennonite Heritage Museum in Abbotsford have special significance. One of them is a mulberry tree, seen here on the right of the photograph above. It was planted by the George Derksen family in 2017 in memory of their grandmother who raised silkworms in her home in Ukraine and fed them mulberry leaves.

Photo credit: Julia M. Toews.

