



The MHSA Chronicle

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Connecting Our Mutual Past, Poland and the Mennonites

By Brent Wiebe

As a Russian Mennonite, I look back at Ukraine as my ancestral home. The time my fore-parents spent in the Black Sea Mennon-



Brent Wiebe

ite colonies of southern Ukraine left a deep and permanent imprint on them, but Poland, their original home, was the place where much of our culture was forged. The Anabaptist group known as Mennonites traces its roots to the 16th century Netherlands, but many had already fled to modern-day Poland by the

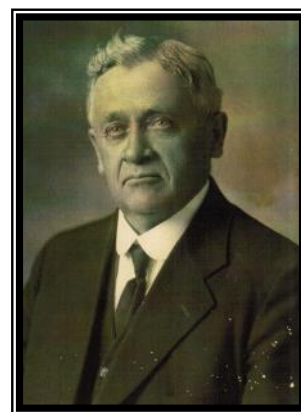
(See Poland on page 11)

Bishop David Toews and the Russlaender Emigration from Ukraine (xv)

By Gary Friesen

Bishop David Toews is known primarily for his contribution to the transportation and settlement of close to 21,000 Russian Mennonite immigrants and refugees from Soviet Russia to Canada between 1923 and 1927. But David Toews was also a loving father and husband, an excellent teacher, a devoted church minister, a defender of the Mennonite reputation, a conference chairman, a determined and unselfish leader, a promoter of peace, a fundraiser, and a humanitarian relief coordinator.

During the 1920s, one hundred years ago, Mennonite refugees and immigrants from Russia found new homes in Canada. They were suffering great hardships resulting from the Bolshevik Revolution and the aftermath of WW1. David Toews helped persuade Prime Minister Mackenzie King to facilitate the political process and secure a loan from the CPR to allow entry into Canada of these thousands of Mennonites. Toews had strong opinions and didn't hesitate to promote them, but he also believed in community ownership and mutual accountability. His colleagues at the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization looked to him for encouragement and counsel. C.F. Klassen,



David Toews,
photo credit Louise
Friesen collection.

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Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta invites you to the

2022 Virtual Spring Conference

Date: Saturday May 14, 2022

Time: 2 PM

I Am a Mennonite directed by Paul Plett - 59 min film

Commentary and Q & A to follow with Paul Plett

See back page for more details

2022 Virtual AGM

Date: May 21, 2022

more details to follow by email

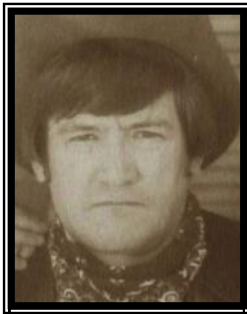
Editorial Reflections

by Dave Toews

American historian Studs Turkel once said, *"People are hungry for stories. It's part of our very being. Story-telling is a form of history, of immortality too. It goes from one generation to the another."*

Everyone has a story, and they are all worthwhile telling. Storytelling and stories are indeed part history, that is why we here at the MHSA ask people to write their stories for publication in the Chronicle. The authors are then encouraged to pass their issue of the Chronicle on to their close friends, family, children and grandchildren. This keeps the stories of people's history alive and passes them down to future generations.

Gary Friesen tells the story of his hero, his grandfather Bishop David Toews and of the many sac-



Dave Toews

rifices Toews made to bring 21,000 Mennonites to Canada in the 1920s. Gary and I were fellow graduates from Rosthern Junior College in 1964. The story is told in anticipation of the Russlaender 100 Tour in July 2023.

Brent Wiebe has done a masterful job of paralleling his sojourn through Prussia/Poland with the diarized 1719 trip of Groeningen Old Flemish Mennonite Minister Hendrik Berents as he visited Poland from his home in the Netherlands. Wiebe's Facebook friends and his knowledge of Polish and Russian opened many doors. Brent and his group also stopped at Tiegenhagen, where my Toews family left from for Russia in 1793. Brent and I serve on the MHSA board together.

Elsie (Balzer) Linning narrates the account of her Balzer and Wedel family stories as they came to Canada in the 1920s from the Neu-Samara, Siberian villages of Podolsk and Ischalka. Elsie also talks of her 2008 trip with her brother George and his wife Linda to visit the long-lost cousins still living well in the village of Krassikowo, Siberia. Elsie, several years my senior, George and I all grew up together and attended the same Mennonite country church at

Mayfair, Saskatchewan.

Phyllis Ratzlaff and Ted Regehr disclose the history of the Loewen family one-handed Mandtler clock sold to raise funds for the arriving Russlaender in the 1920s.

As always, I would like to thank all the authors and contributors to this issue. Your articles are always appreciated. It is a pleasure to work with you. The MHSA welcomes your feedback, emails, letters to the editor, and articles. Contact Dave Toews at dmtows@gmail.com with any questions or comments. ❖

Chairman's Corner

by Ken Matis

Summary of the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada Annual General Meeting - Saturday, January 15, 2022

Conrad Stoesz opened the meeting after a devotional based on Matthew 19, informal chatter and introductions. Conrad pointed out that many centenary commemorations are coming up that the provincial historical societies need to be aware of.

We then broke out into breakout groups dealing with various topics and discussions:

People are becoming more accustomed to technology. Group one reported that the pandemic had forced people to have virtual meetings which have limitations,

(See Chairman on page 3)



Ken Matis

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Ernie Wiens, Sherwood Park

(Chairman from page 2)

but they work well for participants from far-flung geographical areas. In some provinces bringing together a broad range of different communities is a real challenge and recruiting young members is difficult.

Group two dealt with museums and archives. Archives were able to do public events with Tourmagination. The pandemic has forced collaboration, and GAMEO and MAID have benefited from virtual platforms. Museums have suffered from a loss of visitors and rentals, forcing them to come up with new ideas. Our archives have seen a decrease in the connection between the archives and congregations, including the loss of printed bulletins.

Group three included academic institutions, genealogy and GAMEO projects. The pandemic influenced lectures and research projects, and some projects stalled due to an inability to travel or do personal visits. Virtual events online make them available to more people.

The following discussion went as such: The pandemic has forced us to spend time and resources on technology and infrastructure. We are not only collecting material but also speaking to contemporary issues. Different kinds of Mennonites have responded differently regarding vaccinations. Is anyone

compiling or researching this story? We must be careful about documenting this kind of social movement not to commodify people's responses or experiences. When the pandemic is over, and we can meet in person, will everyone take the trouble to do so, or will they expect a mix of in-person and virtual?

Mennonite Heritage Archives has seen a significant increase in requests for digital content. A new platform is being developed to host content, starting with digitizing community newspapers. Mennonite Heritage Village is working on an online program of collections management software for museums in Manitoba. The pandemic has encouraged web-based records. MHSBC is digitizing obituaries. Fewer people publish obituaries in local papers due to significant expense, but MHSBC is mining funeral home websites from across Canada for obituaries and saving them as PDF documents.

A People of Diversity Committee has been created to assist in the publication of *Mennonites in Canada: A People of Diversity 1970-2000*. Themes and sub-themes have been identified, and research begins with work on Indigenous relations.

A new website has been set up just in time to promote the Russlander Centenary Train Trip webinars. Registrations are coming in, and it is hoped that a minimum of forty people will show up for each of the three segments. The highlight of the first segment is a gala dinner in Montreal where Aileen and Peter Harder will speak. There are plans to have lectures and singing on the train and a possible wine made to remember the Russlaender migration. The MHSC will promote this event.

The Canadian Mennonite Emigration Centenary Committee has developed a display/exhibit to begin at the Mennonite Historical Village and travel to various locations. The exhibition has three themes: Leaving Canada to Mexico, Why they Left, Life in Mexico. Migrations back to Canada will also be covered to make it relevant to all parts of Canada. The target audience is small to medium-sized facilities linked to the Low German story.

The Archives Committee is a support group for archivists across the country. Jon Isaak has suggested a simple way to digitize cassette tapes, and many archives have worked at that.

The genealogy committee is becoming global, which has implications for working with other organizations and changing technology. Progress has slowed due to the pandemic. There is a discussion about having a stand-alone website.

MAID welcomed its fifteenth partner, an archive in Paraguay. A committee is working to harmonize the metadata. It will be interesting to see how MAID adapts to having German material.

MHSC GAMEO has concerns about updating topical records and keeping congregational information up to date. Therefore, the GAMEO committee is proposing that the Canadian arm of GAMEO be connected to an institution that might help provide relevant content.

At the end of the year, the operating fund stands at over \$23,000. Annual meeting expenses have been less than anticipated due to lack of travel. ❖

Publications for Sale:

- Letters of a Mennonite Couple- Nicolai & Katharina Rempel \$25.00
- On the Zweiback Trail \$30.00
- Kenn Jie Noch Plautdietsch \$18.00
- Through Fire and Water \$25.00

(Bishop from page 1)

a member of the Board of Colonization who worked closely with Toews, spoke of him as a humble, dedicated man, a true patriarch of the Mennonite Brotherhood.

Lawrence Klippenstein writes, "Toews was there – at the turn of the century, in the teens, the twenties, thirties, and forties – positioned among all of those who shared the Canadian Mennonite experience with him. It is important to recognize this and to ponder the significance of his efforts." (i)

David Toews made the difficult decisions that needed to be made during the development of the 20s immigration plan. The rescue of the Russian Mennonites had become a personal mission for him. In his capacity as Elder of the Rosenort Church, Toews negotiated with numerous people outside the Mennonite world, including holders of high public office. He developed a respectful working relationship with Prime Minister McKenzie King and Colonel John Stoughton Dennis of the CPR, both of whom considered Toews the Mennonite Bishop of Canada with "lived experience" and the Mennonites' trusted spokesman. The involvement with Mackenzie King and Colonel Dennis was crucial in expediting the immigration process.

David Toews faced opposition throughout his Eldership in the Rosenort Church. Winning the support of the churches and their members proved to be a significant part of his struggle to push the immigration project to completion, particularly when it came to signing a promissory note agreeing to pay off the transportation costs of all those refugees.

Before David Toews reached adolescence, his parents uprooted from

their home in the Russian Mennonite colony of Am-Tract to join others on a dangerous spiritual journey into the unknown territory of Turkestan. Promises by Turkestan that they would be welcome and that there would be an exemption from military service, proved hollow.

This disastrous "Great Trek" resulted in horrendous suffering during its four years of desert heat, extreme thirst, scarcity of food, disease and death, breakdowns of wagons, and raids by bandits. Along the way, 15 to 20% of the total group perished.

In 1884, the Jacob Toews family seized the opportunity to emigrate to the USA, where they settled with relatives' help in Newton, Kansas. David enrolled in the local school at 14 years of age. His first task was to learn the strange new English language. After a year in elementary school and a summer or two as a farmhand, he enrolled in the Halstead Fortbildungsschule in the teacher training stream, graduating in 1888. (ii)

After eight years in Kansas, David Toews boarded a train to Gretna, Manitoba, joining his mentor, Heinrich H. Ewert. Here Toews taught for five years and served on education committees, presented teaching principles and methods, and led discussion groups. He completed another 2-year teaching course at United College, which eventually became the University of Winnipeg.

After five years in Manitoba, David Toews, perhaps lured by homesteading possibilities on the western frontier, trekked further west to Saskatchewan. At 28 years of age, David arrived in Tiefengrund in the summer of 1898,

(See Bishop on page 5)



Halstead (Kansas) Seminary Graduates (1893), David Toews - front row, second from left, photo credit MAID

(Bishop from page 4)

where he found a welcome reception, the chance to acquire some good farmland, the opportunity to continue his teaching career and much more, including his dedicated life partner, Margarete Friesen.

On August 18, 1901, David Toews was ordained as one of the ministers of the Rosenorter Mennoniten Gemeinde. The Gemeinde had its centre in the Eigenheim area where the first meeting place had been constructed, and where home meeting places in about 10 locales in and around Rosthern were established. On top of ministerial responsibilities, David was chosen to be Chairman of the Conference of Mennonites in Central Canada in 1914.

The Mennonite community eventually decided to establish its own school near Rosthern, Saskatchewan. Toews would promote the idea of the school and collect funds for the start-up operation. The purpose of the school would be to preserve Mennonite values and the German language as well as preparing teachers for the many public schools being established. Classes began in rented facilities in 1905. The German-English Academy was constructed in 1910, forerunner to the present RJC High School. Toews was so actively involved with the school's affairs as a teacher, principal, secretary-treasurer, and Chairman of the Board that the school's very existence seemed to depend primarily on his continuing involvement.

In the meantime, the Mennonite communities in Canada began hearing reports of gruesome murders, rapes, burning of villages, the slaughter of entire families, of Mennonites either murdered or

sent fleeing by bandits and harassment by agents of the Bolshevik regime. On top of the chaos and loss, letters to families in Canada reported widespread food shortage.

This suffering made a deep impression on David and others in Canada and the US, and the question of what they could do to help became ever more pressing. At a meeting of the Rosenort Mennonite congregation, Toews indicated, "We must bear in mind that these our brothers and sisters, stripped of all resources, will want to immigrate, and we should begin to gather resources to expedite their rescue from this slavery." (iii) Toews traveled to congregations far and wide to present the need and organized MCC collections delivered to Russia.

The task of delivering food in Russia was monumental. Food supplies were stored in American Relief Administration warehouses, often as far as fifty miles from the starving villagers, making their trips to receive relief rations dangerous. Still, the food supplies made the difference between life and death. (iv) Relief workers prepared tens of thousands of meals in soup kitchens for both Mennonites and Russians.

Back in Canada, a general election was scheduled for the fall of 1921. The leader of the opposition Liberal party, William Lyon Mackenzie King, gave guarantees to a Mennonite delegation that the order in council to keep Mennonites out of Canada would be rescinded should the Liberals win. King was the MP for Prince Albert, Saskatchewan constituency and knew about David Toews and the Mennonites. The delegation also consulted with CPR railway officials in Montreal.

Upon their return, the delegation decided that an immigration commission should be formed, and on May 17, 1922, the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization chaired by David Toews was formed. Board member B.B. Janz

worked tirelessly in Russia and risked his own safety in negotiating with the Communist government to allow exit visas for Mennonites. (v)

The Liberals won the election in 1921, and Mackenzie King became prime minister. David

Toews' duty as Chairman of the Board of Colonization was to take the initiative—and to act quickly. He arranged a delegation to Ottawa to meet with



Executives of the
Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization 1935,
Rear L-R J. Harder, C.A. DeFehr, J. Derksen,
J. Gerbrandt .
Front L-R B.B. Janz, David Toews, C.F. Klassen,
J.J. Thiessen, credit MAID.

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(Bishop from page 5)

the Prime Minister, the Minister of Immigration and the Minister of Agriculture, who were all well informed about the plight of the Mennonites.

On June 2, 1922, the Order in Council was repealed, and the door was open for the Mennonites to enter Canada. The Mennonites had to promise that the immigrants would have sponsors in Canada until they could support themselves. They also pledged that the immigrants would not become a public charge for five years.

The first order of business for the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization was to find a way of financing the immigration project, which would require an immense financial commitment. David Toews' first duty as director was to send a telegram to Col. Dennis of the CPR in Montreal asking him to send a draft of a transportation contract to Rosthern. Col. Dennis informed Toews that the CPR was prepared to proceed with the contract. The agreement was sent and presented during an annual session of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada in Winkler, Manitoba. But who would take responsibility to sign it? Toews put this question before the delegates of the Conference, and everything was quiet. No one would answer the question, no one stepped up to take on the responsibility of signing. He asked the question a second time, and there was no response. He asked a third time with no response. (vi)

A good leader will act when decisive action needs to be taken. This was one of those times when a decision had to be made. At that moment, the CPR was putting pressure on Toews to get the contract signed without delay. The CPR, which had offices in Moscow, knew what was happening to the Mennonites in Russia.

With the CPR putting pressure on David Toews to sign the contract, Toews stated that for the time being, he would sign the contract with the backing of the Rosenort Church until the other churches could join in. (vii) Some detractors asked Toews how he could sleep at night after being known as the million-dollar man with a contract with Col. Dennis of the CPR. Toews replied that he would not have slept at night had he not signed the contract knowing what was happening to the Mennonites in Russia.

Despite the opposition, David Toews offered a hand of reconciliation to everyone who, in sincerity, wished to work together for the rescue and well-being of their brothers abroad. It was not a matter of changing their minds but convincing the opposition to come on side. Toews reiterated,



Kaethe Hooze filing
Board of Coloniza-
tion correspondence,
Rosthern,
credit MAID



David Toews at Immi-
gration Office, Rosthern
1920, credit MAID

"The rising generation of Russia is being lost. There is yet a chance to save many, if only there were a united effort to utilize the opportunities offered, the possibilities for effective work would be unlimited. I doubt if ever in Mennonite history such opportunities were offered. The door of refuge is open, the means of conveyance is furnished, the way to get out of Russia is found; the only indifference is many of our people in America and the open hostility of others." (viii)

Early in July of 1923, approximately 750 immigrants boarded the train at Chortitza (present day Zaporizhia, Ukraine) and set their faces and hearts in the direction of Canada. The immigrant ship that carried them docked in Quebec City on July 17, 1923. While there would be other possibilities, such as Kitchener or Winnipeg or Saskatoon, it made good sense to bring the first travelers to Rosthern. This town housed the offices of the Colonization Board and its executive staff. Toews and his staff prepared for their reception in Rosthern.

At five o'clock in the afternoon of July 21, the first immigrant train, comprised of ten passenger cars and three baggage cars, pulled into the Rosthern station where Mennonites from near and far had been gathering. They came in cars, buggies, wagons, and hay-racks, prepared to take their assigned families back to their homes.

Gerald Brown, a reporter for the Saskatoon Star Phoenix, described the gathering: "A great hush fell upon the assembled thousands and to the ears of the Canadians attending the event

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(Bishop from page 6)

came a soft, slow chant, "Lobe den Herren, den mächtigen König der Ehren, (Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, King of creation.) Softly the chant arose and fell, seeming to be a musical expression of the great tragedy and heartbreak of the Mennonites in Russia. Then the Canadian Mennonites took up the song, and the tone increased in volume, growing deeper and fuller until the melody was pouring forth from several thousand voices. When the song's first note burst upon the air, the Mennonites removed their hats, and the others paid like tribute. Many in the crowd sprang from other ethnicities, but the significance of the song was manifest to them when they saw their Mennonite friends bare their heads and when they saw grown men, whom they had known for years, burst into tears.' (ix)

Frank Epp describes the event: "There was crying, and there was hearty rejoicing." He reports that it seemed as though public opinion among Canadians and the Canadian Mennonite population had undergone a remarkable change. Almost all the former resentment was gone. Among those who stood in tears were prominent non-Mennonite citizens and former soldiers. The reception was beyond the expectations of Bishop Toews and his colleagues. The same was true in succeeding years, and until 1928 almost no opposition was heard from Anglo Saxon Canadians.(x)

A sense of success for what happened in 1923 and a sense of urgency on the part of the Mennonites in the Soviet Union motivated the Board to enter further

negotiations with the CPR for a second wave of immigrants in 1924. The contract specified the transport of 5,000 credit passengers and 2,000 passengers who would pay their way. Toews planned a meeting in 1924 with S.F. Coffman of Vineland, Ontario, to accept 1,340 Russian Mennonites. Mennonites and Old Order Mennonites took these Russländer into their homes in the Waterloo, Welland and Vineland areas of Ontario.

Meanwhile, repayment of the debt, known as the Reiseschuld, was becoming increasingly difficult as it grew: immigrant families were struggling to meet their daily financial needs. Toews and his colleagues knew very well that to bring in more immigrants depended entirely on how the Board lived up to its financial commitments to the CPR in the early phases of the movement.

A disastrous night occurred in Rosthern in the early morning of December 13,

1926. The home of David Toews with seven people in the house burned to the ground with the temperature hovering around -30 F. Several injuries occurred within the family. David Toews was hospitalized for several weeks, and the youngest child, Irene, died from her burns. The fire and Irene's death were a terrible blow to the family. News of the December fire spread quickly across Canada and the Mennonite world. Major newspapers in Canada carried the story, and letters



The arrival of the Russlaender in Rosthern, July 1923, photo credit Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies



David Toews and Family 1917

Rear L-R Maria, Benno
Front L-R Elsie, David with Louise, Dorothy(Dora),
Elma on Margarete's lap, Margaret,
Louise Friesen collection

(See Bishop on page 8)

(Bishop from page 7)

expressed sympathy and encouragement. Monetary contributions poured in from Canada, the US, and Europe, including Russia.

1926 was the last year for significant numbers of Mennonite immigrants to arrive on Canada's shores since the obstacles to further immigration were becoming formidable. If it had been up to the Canadian Board of Colonization and its visionary leader, David Toews, the immigrant flow would have continued. The CPR was willing to continue its cooperation, even though it had already advanced \$1,500,000 in travel credit, of which only \$500,000 had been paid back. (xi)

In Canada, the citizenry was increasingly raising its voice against the immigration policies of the Liberal government. The biggest obstacle preventing the mass movement of Mennonite refugees to Canada was Canadian Immigration Law. Immigration policy was geared toward reinforcing an Anglo-Canadian norm and preventing entry to people at odds with that norm.

By 1930, hope for the movement of large numbers of Mennonites from Russia to Canada was all but abandoned. In the Soviet Union, the situation was becoming urgent as the economic and social conditions worsened. The government had substantially increased the cost of exit permits and the sentiments of the Soviet government and the Russian people were turning against the exit of Mennonites. B.B. Janz and C.F. Klassen barely escaped the Russian authorities. They managed to arrive in Canada and assumed further responsibilities for the welfare of their Mennonite brothers and sisters in Western Canada.

Within four months, January to April 1933, the Rosthern office of the Board of Colonization received over 7,000 letters from persons in Russia begging for help. Many more letters went to immigrant friends and relatives. The response was an extensive relief program through food parcels.

Life for the Soviet people during the 1930s was tragic. That the world at large turned deaf ears and indifferent hearts to cries for help coming from the Soviet Union compounded the tragedy. Toews traveled within Canada, the USA, and Europe, appealing to government officials in London, Washington, and Ottawa. He wrote letters to Ramsay MacDonald of Great Britain, President Herbert Hoover of the US, and Mackenzie King on behalf of the Board of Colonization and the church. One wonders how he found the physical and emotional strength to continue in all his roles during the '30s and early '40s.

In 1946, David Toews resigned for health reasons as Chairman of the Board of Colonization. As 1946 slipped away, Toews gradually weakened

physically. Eventually, he became confined to his home, where he was cared for by his daughters. His thoughts moved away from concern with the outside world. He turned inward, and because of pain, spoke little, was restless and had trouble sleeping.

One bright spot among others in David Toews' diminishing world of comprehension and awareness was his relationship with a fellow member of the Board of Colonization, J.J. Thiessen, who took over the Board chairmanship from Toews. Just as Thiessen had cultivated a relationship with Toews in their working years, so now he de-



David Toews and JJ Thiessen, Thiessen provided a lot of support for Toews, especially during Toews declining years, credit MAID



David Toews outside his home in Rosthern 1946, credit MAID

voted himself to Toews in his final days. Thiessen knew that Toews was preoccupied with the past, so he focused on pleasant memories and relationships gone by. (xii)

(See Bishop on page 9)

(Bishop from page 8)

On November 19, 1946, Thiessen reported to Toews that the Reiseschuld was finally all paid off—\$1,947,398.68 (including the principal of \$1,767,398.68 and interest of 180,000 that was settled before 1930). Close to \$1,000,000 in interest payments was forgiven by the CPR.

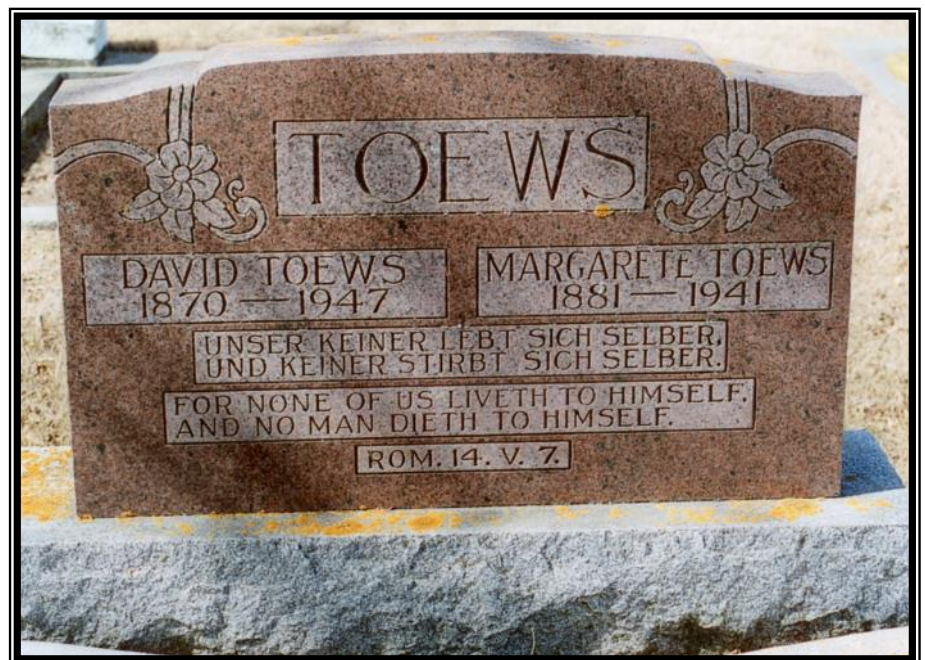
Thiessen writes: "Toews stares back with a wide-eyed gaze. I look straight back at him and repeat loudly and clearly: Brother Toews, it has happened; you have not been disgraced with your guarantees. Malice has not won the day. This important chapter of our history has come to a satisfying conclusion." J.J. Thiessen reported, "His eyes were fixed on me. He was thinking of the difficult unfounded accusations, of heartless criticism. I called out loudly to him: "Es reut mich nicht" (I have no regrets). He continued to look at me, but then he broke down and wept. He had borne the burden of the unpaid Reiseschuld as a heavy weight for many years. We pray to God. His face becomes mild and soft. He rejoices. God be praised! Faith is the victory." (xiii)

In February 1947, 3 months later, David Toews suffered a massive stroke, and on Tuesday, February 25, he died peacefully at his home in Rosthern. The memorial service was held on February 28th, with J.J. Thiessen giving the main funeral sermon. The many guest speakers included the chief commissioner of the CPR. Thiessen emphasized that leaders do not become great overnight. Toews' pathway to maturity consisted of the arduous journey to America via central Asia, the pioneer years in Kansas, his service as Elder of the

Rosenorter Gemeinde, the 26 years of leadership in the Conference, the 35 years of service on the Mission Board, his 24 years of leadership in the inter-Mennonite work of immigration and settlement, and the 23 years of wrestling with the transportation debt. (xiv)

David Toews was buried in the Rosthern cemetery next to Margarete and their daughter Irene. The inscription on the headstone is Toews' favourite passage from Romans 14:7. "For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

To this day, there are signs in abundance to tell future generations that "David Toews Was Here." This tribute wouldn't be complete without the addition of a few anecdotes:



The Tombstone of David and Margarete Toews Rosthern Cemetery

- In December of 1937, David Toews received an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Bethel College in Newton, Kansas.
- On June 3, 1939, David and Margarete were introduced to King George VI and Queen Elizabeth during their tour of Canada.
- In 1957, a new administration and classroom building on the campus of Rosthern Junior College was dedicated to the memory of Rev. David Toews.
- In 1964, a body of water in northern Saskatchewan was named Toews Lake in honour of Bishop David Toews, "who gave dedicated service to his fellow citizens."
- In 1973, on the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the 1920s migration of Mennonites from Russia, immigrants and their descendants erected a cairn on the grounds of Rosthern Mennonite Church in memory of David Toews and B.B. Janz.
- A month-long David Toews Memorial Festival of Sacred Music was

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organized in association with the University of Saskatchewan in the summer of 1976.

- In 1988, the Rosthern community recognized the historical legacy of David Toews by commissioning a bronze bust of his likeness and giving it a place of prominence in the Mennonite Heritage Museum, now the Rosthern Museum and Mennonite Interpretive Centre.
- In 1991, a plaque was mounted in his honour to a cairn on the grounds of CMU in Winnipeg "in memory of a dedicated Christian teacher, minister and conference servant."
- In 2005 and 2006, Blake and Louise Friesen spearheaded a book about David Toews, *David Toews Was Here*, by Dr. Helmut Harder.

End Notes:

- (i) Lawrence Klippenstein, Retired Archivist, Mennonite Heritage Centre, Winnipeg, Manitoba
- (ii) Harder, Helmut. *David Toews was Here—1870-1947*, p32
- (iii) Harder, p.109
- (iv) Epp, Frank H. *Mennonite Exodus*, (Published for Canadian Mennonite Relief and Immigration Council), D.W. Friesen and Sons Ltd., Altona, 1962, p64
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- (vi) Harder, 116-117
- (vii) Ibid
- (viii) Epp, p156
- (ix) Gerald M. Brown, Reporter for Saskatoon Star Phoenix, July 1923
- (x) Epp, p146
- (xi) Harder, p166
- (xii) Ibid, p289
- (xiii) Ibid, p290
- (xiv) Ibid, p293
- (xv) Occupied at the time of immigration by the Soviet Union

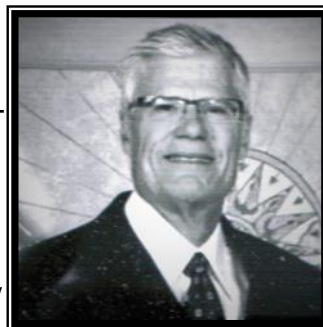
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Appreciation is given to George Epp for his assistance in editing the text. This article also appears in the March 2022 issue of the Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian.

Gary Friesen is recently retired from a 35-year career as an Industrial and Office Ergonomist. He lives in Edmonton and enjoys travel, history, cycling, golfing, and spending time with his two granddaughters. Gary and his wife Anne worship at Lendrum Mennonite Church in Edmonton, Alberta. Gary is a strong supporter of MCC, as was his grandfather, David Toews. Gary has been a volunteer with MCC Relief Sales in Edmonton and has participated in Go 100 activities. He has made significant and continuing contributions to Syrian Refugee resettlement since 2015. Over the years, Gary has served on various church committees. ❖



Gary Friesen, Grandson of David Toews

(Poland from page 1)

end of the same century. Travel with me as I share my thoughts and impressions from a recent trip to this ancestral homeland.

I will tell you of this trip from the point of view of a Holdeman Mennonite, pondering the past (1719) and reflecting on the present (2022). Often, stories of trips to the old country are told, focusing on our Mennonite relatives' tragic wars and moral failures. This focus has its place and can be important. However, I tried to think about the lifestyles and religious practices that our foreparents chose on this trip. They tried in various ways to live out their beliefs in the 17th and 18th centuries in the territory of modern Poland. Then, as now, Mennonites were not a homogenous group with identical religious practices. Most of my ancestors belonged to a rather strict group known as the Old-Flemish Mennonites, sometimes called "hard-headed."

Poland is a place of great historical significance for many members of the Holdeman Mennonite church (Church of God in Christ, Mennonite). Although biologically it was initially of Swiss background, the Holdeman group, organized by John Holdeman of Ohio in the 1850s, had sought to organize itself much along the lines of Menno Simons and Flemish minister Dietrich Philips. They led a congregation at Danzig for many years. In the 1880s in Kansas, the membership of John Holdeman's little group was significantly increased with the addition of many Vohlynian Mennonites from Karolswalde and Antonowka, Ukraine. Nearly all of these had their roots in Przechowka, Poland.

Meanwhile, in Manitoba, a large segment of the Kleine Gemeinde, together with their Bishop Peter Toews, also joined the Holdeman group. These Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites had many of their historical roots near Danzig and Elbing. Thus, the current Holdeman church embraces many of the practices that distinguished the Old Flemish groups from some of the other groups.

The family names of the Holdeman congregations in Manitoba and Kansas still almost perfectly reflect their respective backgrounds, while in Linden, Alberta, the names show the confluence of both family lines. My own roots are in Manitoba and thus extend back to the Molotschna colony and further to Danzig and Elbing areas. In addition to Manitoba Kleine Gemeinde connections, my wife has many roots in Linden, Alberta, and further back in Lone Tree, Kansas. Her Kansas branch is from Volhynia, Ukraine but originally from Przechowka, Poland, one of the main destinations of our trip.

My knowledge of Russian and Eastern European travel was supposed to be an asset to our trip, which was to be an exploratory trip for future guided tours John will be leading there. And so, in September 2021, John

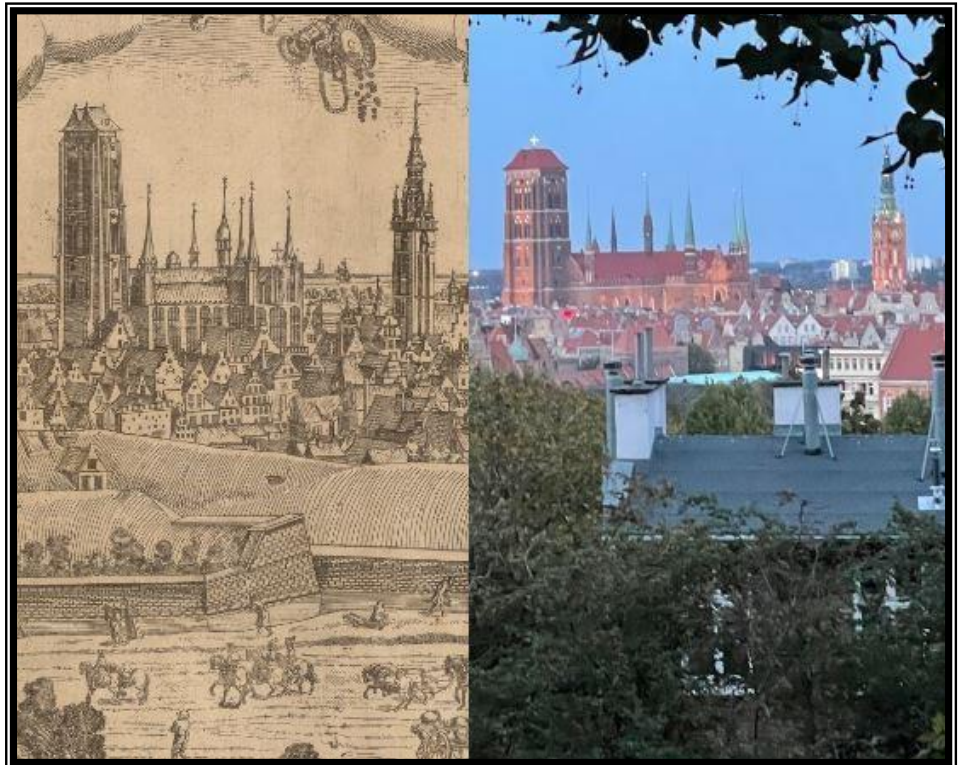


Figure One- Danzig (Gdansk) from the Bishop's Mount 1600's (left) and 2021(right)

Ensz, a friend and tour organizer from Inman, Kansas, and I met in Amsterdam and took a flight to Warsaw to explore our mutual past. Our trip had two segments, Poland and Ukraine. This article focuses on the Polish part. Parallel with my visit, I am sharing some impressions from Hendrik Berent's 1719 diary from a trip similar to mine.

The 1719 Diary of Groeningen Old Flemish Mennonite Minister Hendrik Berents (1664-1745) visited Poland from his Netherlands home.

(See Poland on page 12)

(Poland from page 11)

1719- "Danzig. Then we came into the city around 6 o'clock, continued onwards to Van Hoek's...house, who welcomed us and treated us amicably and for everything, which we needed him presented himself with servitude. If we needed money, he would grant us credit and wanted to reserve for us lodging with good folk; but because we had letters and something else to order from several friends in Schotland...[Southern suburb of Danzig], so we sought but a guide to end up straight there, whom was ordered at once. Then he also said that he recently received a letter from Alle Derks, which belonged to me, which made us joyful, all the more, since we hoped, that there would be one from my wife, agreeably there was, which pleased us because we had not yet received tidings from our folk, since we left home."

2022- Upon arriving in Poland with John Ens, my bank card didn't work, and like Berent, credit became an issue. Thankfully, I also had someone who lent me money, and I relied on John for cash throughout our trip. Unlike Berent, we had no local Mennonite community to visit but made ourselves very much at home with Polish locals whom I had been friends with on Facebook for some time.

The well-known 17th century Harlingen engineer Adam Wiebe played a key role in designing the city's defence system. Gdansk's modern maps still show the name "Wiebego" (Wiebe's) at several historical locations. One of them was Wiebe Bastion, one of 14 original defence towers. (i) With a

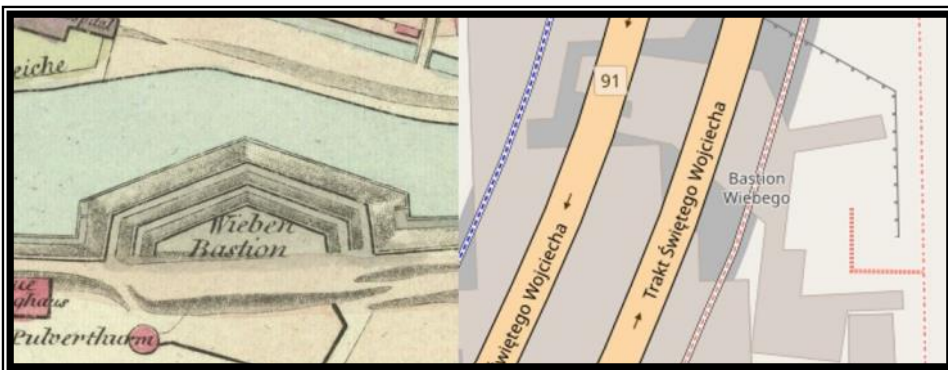


Figure Two- Wiebe Bastion Danzig Map 1807 and Modern Map.

little difficulty, we found the site. I had been expecting nothing but a label on a wall indicating the location. Still, I was surprised and thrilled to see the ruins well preserved and developed into a permanent memorial to the Wiebe Bastion and Adam Wiebe.

The bastion tower was destroyed over a hundred years ago, and the ru-



Figure Three-17th Century Wiebe Bastion and as it appears today.

ins were only discovered in 2018 during the construction of a massive highway and bridge. Major excavations around that time also revealed the 15-century tower foundations. (ii) On June 12, 2018, Polish news site Wyborcza discussed the question, "What should the city do with the newly discovered ruins?" Ultimately the decision was made to keep the ruins and preserve them. The size of the planned parking lot was reduced by approximately 100 spaces, and the road design was shifted slightly. (iii)

This means that probably not many Mennonites had visited the site yet in late 2021 due to the travel bans associated with COVID-19. Today, the broken brick walls are accessible by a lovely stairway and the whole area, much of which is located under the raised highway is surrounded by a stacked rock wall with a railing. We stood in the cool autumn air, and I reflected on the history here. Someone was preserving my story as well as theirs... This archeological preservation bearing my own family name made me feel like telling people around me, "My relative built this! Thanks for choosing to save it!"

1719-"Schotland. Then we arrived in the evening at Schotland at Anthonij Jansen's house, him being one of the oldest Mennonite friends who lived there. That man has received us in an extraordinarily friendly manner and welcomed us, and would not allow us to seek shelter elsewhere but had to stay with him. In general, these friends show us extraordinarily great amicability; the men are very like us in clothing and beards, but the women are dressed differently; they agree quite well with us in religious

(See Poland on page 13)

(Poland from page 12)

beliefs and order." (iv)

2022-The little suburb of Schottland, where my Old-Flemish forebearers settled, is now primarily integrated into Gdansk. (Danzig). This is where Dutch Anabaptists settled as early as the mid-1500s, just outside the city gates at that time, because Mennonites were forbidden residence inside the walls. It was a small village with Jews, Mennonites, and Scottish settlers. (v) Schottland was likely where Dietrich Philips led his congregation and possibly where Menno Simons visited them on his trip to Prussia (vi). Minister Berents mentions the Mennonites' lifestyle and how beards were worn here like they were in his own Groeningen Old Flemish church. (1) One issue the Mennonites in the Netherlands and Danzig were facing was the wearing of wigs. While acceptable to many in the Netherlands, this was considered worldly by the more conservative Old Flemish branches. (vii) Berents would have appreciated that such "worldly" fashion was less common in Danzig and may have been referring to this in his observations.

Elbing (Elblag)- The warm autumn sun shone down Garbary street in Elbing, a city located about 60 km southeast of Danzig, on the Elblag river. It was Sunday, and we were walking the street; the Elbing Mennonites had walked to their Sunday services for hundreds of years. From 1590 to 1900, this building served as the meeting place for the local Mennonite congregation. Many of my own foreparents had met in this very building, one of the few to have survived the war, mostly intact. (viii)

The street was empty this Sun-



Figure Four-17th Century Schottland and Petershagen

day morning, and in my mind's eye, I saw the Anabaptists assemble. They, too, experienced political uncertainties, wars, epidemics. What would their response be today? How did they understand their role in society and separation from the world?

The five-story brick building seemed to link the Dutch past and the Russian future of the Prussian Mennonites. It was standing already in the 1500s when the Men-

nonites were newcomers. It was here when the Hutterites had a brief presence in Elbing in the early 1600s. (ix) It watched the transitions and immigrations of the 1700s. It served as the worship house for the well-known



Figure Five- Elbing (Elblag)
Former Mennonite Church

(See Poland on page 14)

(Poland from page 13)

Elder Gerhard Wiebe's congregation there in the 1780s. Before the Mennonite migration to Russia, Aeltester Wiebe was visited by Hutterites from Russia, who described in glowing terms their home in the empire. Though no longer a church by the time of the Second World War, this building watched the transformation of the Mennonites in the 1900s. It had seen the plain, bearded Mennonite weavers of the 1500s. Later in the 1930s, it saw them "in great numbers" begin to wear "with pride the brown shirt" of the Nazi party. (x) Today, it stands watch while a wide variety of Mennonite tourists step up to it and try to find the remaining letters of the words on the wall that identified it as a Mennonite church for many years.

The Polish population, too frequently not mentioned in our stories, is now and always was present. A Polish family walks by... three generations, a mother, grandmother, and daughter. I'm reminded how, now as always, we are visitors to this country.

Fuerstenwerder – Between Elbing and Danzig, the country is flat and lined with canals and many bridges. It's easy to see how our Dutch fathers felt at home here. Modern roads and houses spread across the lush countryside but not infrequently, an old arcade-style Hollander home meets the eye. We travelled to the town of Zulawki (Fuerstenwerder), once a village bustling with a large Low German population. Some of my forefathers had lived here. To give some temporal perspective, let me give an example.

My great-aunt Kay Isaac, b. 1920, still lives near Abbotsford, B.C... Her great-grandmother (my ancestor also) lived here in Fuerstenwerder before migrating to the Molotschna colony. That little connection made this town feel much closer in time.

We visited Marius Wisniewski, who lives in a beautiful Mennonite house that he has been restoring for some years. The arcade house is being professionally refur-



Figure Six—Arcade House, Fuerstenwerder—
Built for the Mennonite Peter Epp
-photo courtesy of Marius Wisniewski



Figure Seven- Restored
Hardware – Fuerstenwerder
(Zulawki)

bished using original components from surrounding Mennonite homes or by hiring specialized tradespeople to recreate unavailable items. Marius graciously guided us through his private residence, and we were privileged to meet his wife and three daughters.

After showing us the elegant furniture, stoves, and other house features, Marius left for a minute to get one more original piece. He returned with a neatly folded Nazi uniform with a red armband and swastika. The uniform had been discovered in the house some years earlier and belonged to the Mennonite owners from the time of World War II. Sadly, this was not unusual. The life of the house



Figure Eight- Nazi Uniform-
Fuerstenwerder (Zulawki)

spans important eras of Mennonite history, and it was here that we were brought up short by the dark connection with the fascist regime of Hitler. It was unsettling to think that this scar on the world's history was closely linked to my people in my ancestral village.

Marius's project is a noble one, and I applaud him for using so many of his resources to help bring our past to life. It was humbling to see how interested the lo-

(See Poland on page 15)

(Poland from page 14)

cal Polish population is in the history of the Mennonite settlers who joined them for several hundred years.

We also visited the cemetery in Fuerstenwerder, where a group of students and researchers studied the layout of the yard and various graves. In the corner stood a little [chapel, crypt] which we were told was the Wiebe chapel. Researchers were exploring the contents of the graves inside with a special camera. They showed us pictures of bones they said belonged to a Wiebe! Much of the preservation work



Figure Nine- "Wiebe" bones – Fuerstenwerder (Zulawki)

done to Polish Mennonite cemeteries is thanks to volunteer work. Why would they care about our cemeteries and our unmarked dead?... It gave me pause to consider my response to the unmarked graves recently discovered in our own country.

Rosenort – The story of our time in Poland would be incomplete without mentioning Przemek, a young, ambitious Polish researcher who devotes much of his time to studying Mennonite cemeteries

and uploading the information to www.findagrave.com. We met him in Tiegenhagen, and he brought us around the countryside, starting with Rosenort. His perspective as an amateur researcher was exciting, and his friendly companionship was enjoyable. Past discussions on Facebook now opened the door for meeting him in person. We visited several cemeteries, but a highlight was an old Mennonite house in the former village of Rosenort. Access was along a small road that ran on top of a dike beside a small stream. The tragic story of the last Mennonite owners of the house by now seemed familiar. The son had served in the German army, and the en-



Figure Ten- Przechowko Cemetery and Main Street

tire remaining family committed suicide near the end of the war to avoid the retribution of the Russian military. When the son came back after war and prison camp, he learned the story of his family, and some years later, he too committed suicide.

1719 Berent's diary – Przechowka - "At friends in... [Przechowka]: About 1 o'clock we came upon Pschighofke ... at our friends, at uncle... Benjamin Wedels' house, who received us with uncommon love and affection; just as that afternoon came many friends, who welcomed us with tears and showed us, such love."

2022 My wife's ancestors and a large portion of the ancestry of the Holdeman church membership lived here nearly 400 years ago. Koehns, Nightengales, Boeses and others were common family names. Przechowka was a bustling center of the Groeningen Old Flemish congregation, a satellite group of the Netherlands home church. They were somewhat separate from the more liberal body of Mennonites and held to deeply conservative practices. The 1659 conference held in Groeningen, Friesland, gave direction on wearing beards, house decorations, and clothing. The Przechowka congregation kept in close communication with the home church back in the Netherlands and followed the same strict guidelines.

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(Poland from page 15)

Today, under the blue sky of the former Royal Prussia, we bumped along a grassy trail, searching for some trace of their community. Michael Targowski, a historian from Torun who I had met on Facebook, was our very qualified guide. He had been here before, but still, it was hard to find. A stop at a local's house set us on the right trail, and soon a clearing opened up in the trees on the right-hand side of the road, and we stopped the car. A few scattered rocks marked the graves of the Mennonites, but nothing else indicated that this was the downtown of former Przechowka... My map showed where the school had stood across the central street where we had arrived. How could the homes so wholly disappear? How could a village, an entire community, be gone with hardly a trace?

Today, even the name has disappeared from our vocabulary as we practiced the strange pronunciation. Prze-chow-ka P(sh)eh-CHOFF-kah.... P(sh)eh-CHOFF-kah. ...Later settlers of the village of Franzthal, Molotschna colony had also originally wanted to call their new village by the same name of Przechowka but were required instead to give it a German name. (xi)

But the faith, though transplanted, hasn't died out. Neither have the family names from there. One surprise for me was to see so very many gravestones in the nearby region with my wife's maiden name, "Bartel." It seemed to be one of the most common names on the remaining tombstones.

Chrystkowo (Christfelde) Mennonites lived in this little village in the territory of Schwetz at least since the mid-1600s. (xii) An 18th-century house maintained by a local group of interested people was our destination



Figure Eleven- Restored Polish Mennonite Village Farm –
Gross Nessau (Wielka Nieszawka)

with Michael. A Polish Mennonite enthusiast met us there with a pan of freshly baked Tweebuck. They had learned the recipe and now baked it in honour of the village's former residents. Once again, I was struck by the locals' respect for our past and our ethnic practices.

This house was beautifully preserved but not fully restored like Marius's house at Fuerstenwerder. The visit here was also memorable. The host of the house (a local volunteer) didn't speak English, and it was only after some time we both discovered that we could communicate in Russian. Michael and the host spoke Polish. The host and I spoke Russian. John, Michael and I communicated in English. These kinds of multi-lingual conver-

sations are something I miss from our time as missionaries in Russia. It was very enjoyable drinking coffee and eating Tweebuck in this historic community.

It's essential for us to make a distinction between Mennonite villages in Poland and those in the Molotschna or Chortitza colonies. In Ukraine, they were genuinely Mennonite villages in a Mennonite world. In Poland, in these villages' "Mennonite" life sometimes spanned up to four centuries. It could vary significantly from century to century, but at no time were the Mennonites buying tracts of land like they later did in Ukraine and settling them en masse. There were always other neighbours, Lutherans, Catholics, or other Dutch. Sometimes the Mennonites were a majority, but generally, they were a minority in the villages. They should be thought of as villages with Mennonites, not Mennonite villages like in Ukraine. As we focus on our own history, it's easy to forget about the many other stories written parallel to our own.

Village museum at Gross Nessau (Wielka Nieszawka) The end of our day with Michel brought us to another amazing place. Several Mennonite houses had been brought together near the site of one of the oldest Mennonite congregations in Poland. Here they form a unique outdoor and indoor Polish Mennonite village museum. State funding and local efforts combined to recreate this world where we could view the grandeur of the village farm sites of our forefathers. Massive farmhouses, barns, gardens, ditches, and orchards were all there and kept up throughout the summer months.

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(Poland from page 16)

We often think back to Johann Cornies and his strict rules for the Mennonites in the Russian villages. He prescribed the exact layout for trees, houses, ditches, barns, etc. After visiting the Polish Mennonite villages with Michael, I realized that these villages also had specific layouts and requirements for a building code. Michael has published one such village guide. Of particular interest was the written code that fines could be paid in beer instead of money! (xiii) Upon reviewing these rules, it becomes evident that many points of strict village order enforced in later years in Ukraine would have already been familiar here in Poland. Maybe we can discover more ways the later Mennonite colonies and our own culture were influenced by our foreparents' time here in Poland.

Conclusions. An overwhelming impression was Polish people's efforts at all levels are doing to keep connected with our mutual past. We saw volunteers cleaning cemeteries. We saw the Wiebe bastion, doomed by commercial development plans but rather preserved at significant cost. Yes, windmills are decaying, and old houses are falling, but people are also working hard to keep others standing. What about the traditional foods we ate? They are not forgotten either. I left pondering my views of the cultural monuments in my country. Perhaps a little more of the respect I saw in Poland would be helpful at home, as we dig into our own sometimes painful past.

mainly designing churches and schools for various Mennonite groups. Recently this has included Hutterite colony design. Brent serves on the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta (MHSA) board. He lives on an acreage near Stettler with his wife, Gail, and their four children. They attend the Lakeview Mennonite Church near Stettler.



Figure Twelve- Restored Polish Mennonite House – Gross Nessau (Wielka Nieszawka)

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- (1) [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Alt_Schottland_\(Pomeranian_Voivodeship,_Poland\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Alt_Schottland_(Pomeranian_Voivodeship,_Poland))
 - (i) https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bastion_Wiebego
 - (ii) <https://trojmiasto.wyborcza.pl/trojmiasto/7,35612,23530382,co-dalej-z-fortyfikacjami-bastionu-wiebego-na-terenie-budowy.htm>
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 - (vii) <https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Wigs>
 - (viii) [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Elbing_\(Warmian-Masurian_Voivodeship,_Poland\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Elbing_(Warmian-Masurian_Voivodeship,_Poland))
 - (ix) Das Klein-Geschichtsbuch der Hutterischen Brüder, pg. 352, <https://archive.org/details/daskleingeschich0000hutt/page/352>
 - (x) Mennonitsche Blaetter, September, 1933, Number 9.
 - (xi) Molotschna Historical Atlas, pg.????
 - (xii) [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Christfelde_\(Kuyavian-Pomeranian_Voivodeship,_Poland\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Christfelde_(Kuyavian-Pomeranian_Voivodeship,_Poland))
 - (xiii) WILKIERZ wsi Kosowo | Chrystkowo z Pierwszej Polowy XVIII Wieku



Brent Wiebe is a draftsman working with his father at Railside Design Inc in Stettler, Alberta. He enjoys his work,

A Visit to the Homeland of Our Parents

By Elsie (Balzer) Linning

Through deepest need and deadly dangers, our fathers and mothers have never wavered in their trust in God's gracious guidance. They had only their peaceful industry and their abiding faith in God to counter the attacks of bands of robbers and the violent acts of blinded political authorities. (Opening sentences of "Neu-Samara am Tock" by Jacob H. Brucks and Henry P Hooge, 1964)

Many of my childhood Sunday afternoons, we spent eavesdropping on my parents and their Faspa guests as they shared the stories of their youth in the close-knit Russian Mennonite villages. These stories sparked a yearning to learn more about our family history.

My parents were Justina Wedel (1905-1977) and John Balzer (1904-1963), both born in the Russian Mennonite colony of Neu Samara, Russia; my mother in Ischalka, the westernmost village, and father in Podolsk on the eastern end. Although both were from the same area, they met after arriving in Saskatchewan.

My mother's Wedel family history fell nicely into place as I grew up surrounded by many from that half of the family, but what little Balzer family history I learned from my father left many unanswered questions.

My father's parents were Johann Balzer (1878-1955), born in Groszweide, Molotschna, and Elisabeth Dueck (1880-1913), born in the Caucasus. The Balzer and Dueck families settled in Neu Samara, a daughter colony of Molotschna, shortly after it was founded in 1891. This settlement initially

showed great promise, but by the mid-1920s, our Balzer family had lost their mother, experienced the 1917 Russian Revolution, the 1921/22 drought and famine, and lost many neighbours to emigration. By 1926, Grandfather Balzer's thoughts had turned to relocate to Canada, where his younger brother, Heinrich,



Elsie (Balzer) Linning



Peter and Johann Balzer 3 years after their arrival in Canada, Apr 1929



Johann Balzer's sisters Liese and Tina embroidered a pillowcase with the Russian words for 'With loving memories' prior to his departure for Canada, 1926

and family had immigrated in 1924. Sadly, he waited too long to acquire the necessary documentation to emigrate for the entire family (a second wife and eight children). Only his two older sons, Peter and Johann (my father), made it to Canada!

In 1929 my father's sister, Elisabeth, and husband, Johann Kroeker, obtained documentation to follow but were delayed in Germany by the birth of their daughter. When it came time to continue their journey, Canada's immigrant quota had been filled, leaving them stranded in Germany. They chose Brazil for their new home. The Balzer family now had two sons in Canada, a daughter in Brazil and the remaining six siblings with



Hands of the author's father Johann Balzer were rarely idle, reading, playing accordion, or using his tools, he crafted this trunk in preparation for his trip to Canada in 1926

their parents in Russia.

From 1930 onward, communication between the family members became complex as mail entering and exiting Russia was screened, increasing the danger of persecution of the Russian family members. During WWII, Dad, yearning to keep up with news of his Russian home, pinned a map of Europe to the wall. After that, he

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(Visit from page 18)

placed stickpins to trace the little relevant war movements made available on the daily news broadcasts. I don't recall any contact with Dad's family in Russia from then on.

Aunt Eliesabeth's letters expressed a constant longing for her family, and, in autumn of 1947, Dad arranged for the Kroeker family to come to live with us in Mayfair, Saskatchewan. It was a joyous but, sadly, short-lived reunion! The Kroekers had difficulty adjusting to the cold Saskatchewan winter and our Canadian way of life, and they returned to Brazil within a year. However, the short stay in Canada must have positively affected the two younger daughters, Erika and Edith, as they and their families returned to make their permanent homes in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. Here we were able to renew our family ties.

The introduction of the computer brought about a renewed interest in family history. The 1964 publication of *Neu Samara am Tock* ultimately provided the information I was looking for when, becoming impatient with my slow comprehension of my German copy, I googled the title in search of an English translation. I found John Isaak's 2002 translation and a web page by the same name. Upon submitting an inquiry, I received a reply stating that I had an aunt and cousins living in Germany! These cousins further provided information about Dad's brother, our Uncle Willi Balzer, and more cousins still in Russia.

With the first hint of an invitation in 2008, I extended my previously booked visit to Kiel and enlisted brother George and sister-in-

law Linda to join me in Germany to meet with the cousins there before continuing on to Russia. The visit with the Germany cousins showed that, regardless of time and distance, family similarities still survived: a common interest in our family's history, handicrafts, music, mannerisms and, thankfully, communication in Plautdietsch. Although our neglected use of the German language slowed us down, it didn't hinder the bonding with these long-lost cousins.

At Samara (Russia) airport, we were met by our cousin, Jakob Balzer, who took us on the five-hour drive to his home in Krassikowo, Neu Samara, where his wife, Susanna, their nine children, and his father (our Uncle Willi) warmly welcomed us into their home. Uncle Willi immediately expressed how happy he was to see us and how much our grandfather had yearned for such a meeting. Grandfather, he related, had worried a great deal about the wisdom of having sent his two young sons so far away. We assured him that our Dad had been thankful to have been given the opportunity to emigrate and become a proud Canadian citizen, using the education, agricultural and building skills he had been taught to make a successful home for his family and pass his many talents on to us.

Uncle Willi provided as much Balzer information as he was able. Our great-grandparents, Eliesabeth Buller

(1853-1913) and Heinrich Balzer (1844-1881) were both born in Groszweide, Molotschna. As their family outgrew the available land, they sent their sons to Neu Samara. In 1902, our grandfather, Johann, built a home for himself and his new wife in the village of Podolsk according to the strict stipulations of the designers of the new settlement. This village consisted of one very wide street running east and west near the River Tock, with 22 homes on each side of the street. Each lot was 1.5 hectares upon which a two-storey building of 9m.x22m. was constructed near the street with the gardens towards the back. Each of the forty-four dwellings was of identical 17th century Netherlands design with living quarters facing the street, a large kitchen/dining room beyond that and a barn attached – all under the same



Willi Balzer playing his Stradavarius violin 2008

(See Visit on page 20)

(Visit from page 19)



Podolsk home of the Johann Balzer family built in 1902, (note the TV satellite dish) photo 2008

roof. The village elders decreed each home to be precisely the same with the front and back doors precisely opposite one another in such a way that if the doors of all twenty-two houses were opened, one could see through the open doors of all 22 houses from the east end of the village through to the west. The Mennonite elders were very strict that the exteriors of the homes were exactly alike, and any attempt to outdo a neighbour was frowned upon. The village, now a century later, still shows traces of its orig-

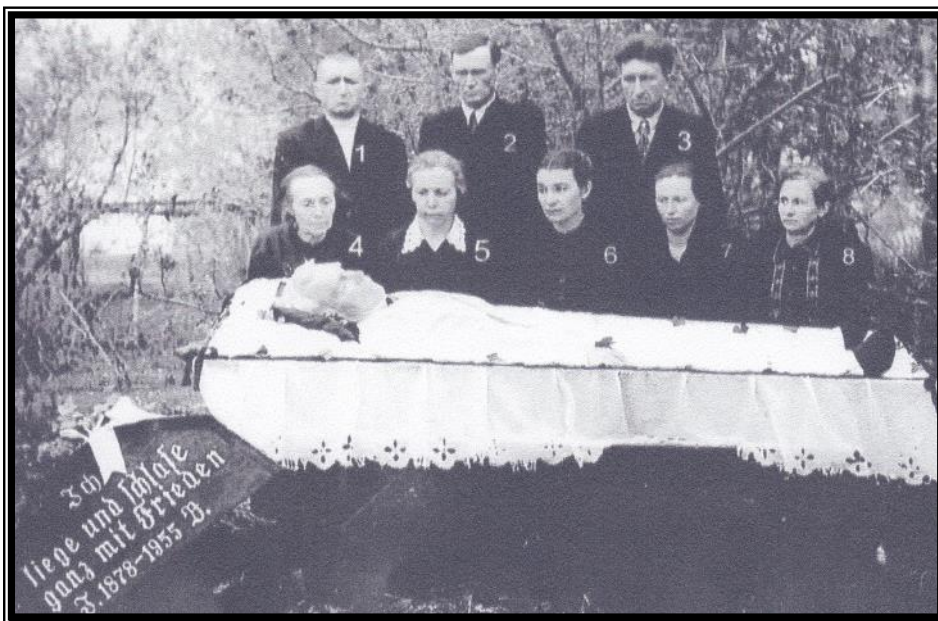
inal plan.

In this home, my father, Uncle Peter, and three younger sisters were born and where their mother died by the time Dad was nine. From 1913 to 1917, our grandfather had to leave his children in the care of a housekeeper and nanny because he was inducted into the army. Upon his return, he married Aganetha Franz, and the Balzer home was witness to four more children.

Uncle Willi told of the changes that had taken place after Dad's departure in 1926. Life after that became increasingly difficult: raids on the villages with confiscation of food and valuables were frequent; Mennonite families buried all articles that were an indication of wealth (paintings, photos, china, religious literature) for safekeeping; all properties were under the collective farm organization of the USSR. WWII affected the Balzer family drastically. Dad's brothers, Willi and Jakob, were consigned to the Trudarmee [work army] where Jacob starved to death and Willi, having been abandoned as dead, managed to survive the struggle home. Sisters Katherina and Aganetha also survived the difficult service in the forest gulag and eventually found their way home. The two sisters married and established their own homes while Uncle Willi remained in the Podolsk family home to raise his family and, in 2005, moved in with his son, Jakob, in Krassikowo. I was thankful to be able to visit this century-old family home in Podolsk before its planned demolishing and to tread the ground of our father's youth thoughtfully.

Grandfather Johann Balzer was laid to rest in 1955. I asked to

(See Visit on page 21)



Funeral of Johann Balzer (author's grandfather) Rear L-R Heinrich Balzer, John Fast, Willi Balzer Front L-R Katherina (Goerzen) Balzer (3rd wife of deceased), Katherina (Balzer) Fast, Agnes (Balzer) Dueck, Kathe Balzer (wife of Willi), Agata Dueck, 1955

(Visit from page 20)

visit his grave, and cousin Katherina took me to a meadow beyond the Pleschanowo church cemetery, where a willow tree had been planted to mark and disguise the gravesite. A secret burial had taken place there at night because all religious ceremonies were forbidden at that time.

The Balzer children activities were enthusiastically shared with us: nine-year-old Toni spoke of her English lessons; 16-year-old Olga plans to study bookkeeping; little four-year-old Peter never demanded, "Give me that!" but politely said, 'mie jankat doat' (I would like that); 11-year-old Victor became my guide and guardian. On one occasion, when I realized I was short of roubles and, in my haste, darted across the parking lot in a beeline for the ATM, it was Victor who came running after me, shouting, "Nein. Nein, Tante, dasz musz Du nicht!" [no, no Auntie, you must not do that], took my arm and led me back to the driveway, across the street at the intersection and around to the bank. He seemed rather frightened, having seen a uniformed person across the street! It was he who showed us the dammed river, which had become a swimming hole and pond for irrigation purposes, fields of sunflowers, and beehives beginning to fill for the honey harvest. Cousin Jakob's large hog barns (originally the village Kolkhoz [collective farm]) employed the adult males of the village while the older girls were employed at Jakob's village bakery. I couldn't help but notice that all machinery in the fields looked like it might belong in a museum.

We were pleased to participate

in daily activities with our cousins' families. At Katharina's, we experienced the relaxing Russian 'banya' [spa] and the best tea ever, made with herbs she had gathered in the meadow. Each home had a piano and other musical instruments. Uncle Willi played his Stradivarius violin for us. He told how it had been given to our grandfather by a German couple in appreciation for being sheltered by him during WWII. We attended the Sunday evening church service in the small Krassikowo church, where cousin Jakob Balzer is the pastor and David Nachtigal (cousin Katherina's husband) is the choir



Johann Heinrich Balzer family L-R Eliesabeth, Katherina, father Johann, Johann (author's father), and Peter, funeral of mother Eliesabeth (Dueck) Balzer Nov 15, 1913

leader. After the service, we went up the mountain for a picnic where, even after 9 PM, the June night was bright as day, providing a view of the Neu Samara villages and flames from the gas wells on the distant southern horizon. I saw no television or radio. What a tale this mountain might tell: the arrival of the 500 Mennonite families in 1891-2, the population growth to 3,670 by 1917, the drought and persecution that caused the population decline, the 1920s emigration and again during the 1990 immigration to Germany, leaving only a few remaining Mennonite families. The reply to my question regarding the reason for Uncle Willi and his family staying behind while the many others immigrated to Germany was, "We felt it our mission to stay with our people here."

Information regarding my grandmother, Elisabeth (Dueck) Balzer, was scant, and it wasn't until I received a phone call from Germany in 2012 that I could fill in some blanks. The caller introduced herself as Katherina Penner, my father's cousin and daughter of Heinrich Dueck, my grandmother's brother. The following is my translation of one of the sad Dueck family

(See Visit on page 22)

(Visit from page 21)

stories she provided.

In Memory of Our Father,
Heinrich Dueck (1890-1942)
by Katherina Penner

It was a bitterly cold Saturday evening, Feb 28, 1942. Our father had just returned, exhausted and frozen, from a long journey to Sorowchinsk when the state police arrived to arrest him and take him away. Our home was searched, almost everything confiscated, and all spiritual literature torn up and burned. We were entirely dispossessed.

Our father was imprisoned and shot on Nov 16, 1942. Where he was buried, only God knows.

Our mother's prayers were answered, and she, with children Katharina (17) and Peter (12), were allowed to live on in our bare home but were always known as 'enemies of the country.' An older son, Johann (21), was wounded at the front and sent to Siberia, where he died on Nov 13, 1943.

Our mother died on Feb 28, 1949, precisely seven years after our father's arrest.

Our father was free of blame!! Throughout the long years between 1942 and 1989, our father continued to be considered guilty simply because no one would take responsibility for the great wrong done him. It wasn't until Gorbachew acquitted the many prisoners that we received notification, dated Mar 30, 1989, from the authorities that proclaimed our father, Heinrich Dueck, "Re rehabilitated – acquitted."

Katherina (Dueck) Penner provided photos and as much information as possible of my great grandparents, Elisabeth Kliever (1857-1933) & Peter Dueck (1852-1917), their daughter Elisabeth (my grandmother) and their four sons: Johann (1885-1930); Peter (1887-1933) (Elisabeth Isaak); Heinrich (1890-1942) (& Maria Isaak); Kornelius (1898-1934). Katherina's



Wedel family passport photo, Rear L-R John, Maria, Justina (author's mother), Jacob
Centre L-R George, Grandmother Maria (Kroeker) Wedel, Luise Friesen (on her grandmother's knee), Grandfather Johann Wedel, Elisabeth Friesen (widowed daughter), Agatha Friesen (on her mother's knee), Nicolai, Front L-R Peter, Henry, 1924

family photo and the story of Peter and Elisabeth (Isaak) Dueck are the same as that in Tena (Isaak) Wiebe's *Tracing my Russian Mennonite Family* in John Isaak's translation of *Neu-Samara*, which added more information to the Dueck family history. 'Tante Katherina' concluded by saying that they were only subjected to this horrific treatment because they were 'wealthy foreigners.'

The visit to Ischalka, my mother's birthplace, showed little related to her childhood stories: all the Mennonite population has gone, and the old Wedel home is no more. The tall reeds beside the Ischalka River had me picturing Mom's stories of their childhood games and the children's hiding places when the 'Reds' came to search their homes. As my mother fondly described, I was pleased to see a tall 'Easter' swing, and my father mentioned it in "Neu Samara am Tock." I now understand how the two looped ropes attached to the top beam held the board (safely holding several children) were strung perpendicular to the top beam.

My mother's parents, Johann Wedel (1872-1943) and Maria (Kroeker) Wedel (1877-1954), ten children and two granddaughters immigrated to Canada in 1924. They, too, had experienced the 1920-22 famine, the raids by the 'Reds,' etc., thus foreshadowing what their future held for them. My visits with my grandmother on her farm near Osler, Saskatchewan, are remembered for the stories of her pleasant childhood home in Crimea. In contrast, she later begged the 'Reds' in Ischalka to leave a wee bit of coffee and sugar (which helped her severe

(See Visit on page 23)

(Visit from page 22)

migraines) and enough food to feed her large family. There were stories of the detailed planning upon their decision to emigrate: the disposal of property, clothing and bedding carefully chosen, baking and roasting Zwieback (buns) and then packed into pillowcases, each member selecting a small personal keepsake (I still have the two Christmas cards and ear-rings Mom chose). All went well until they reached Southampton's medical examinations. Grandma failed her medical and fearfully saw her family sail away without her. At the same time, she sought medical treatment for glaucoma before being permitted to continue on to her family in Saskatchewan.

The Wedel family history is documented in the Alexanderwohl Church Book brought to America in 1874 and has now found a home in the Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas archives. It describes how a church fellowship, the Groningen Society of the Netherlands, began in 1660 with Berent P. Ratzlaff, a wealthy landowner, as the first leader. His substantial financial support to the government was rewarded, as was customary at the time, with the name of nobility, "Wedel." Berent P. Ratzlaff and his family became the Wedel family of Holland and, as records have established, the forebears of all the descendants by the Wedel name.

In 1695, because of their non-resistant faith and the papal unrest, our Wedel family fled to Prussia. They joined the Alexanderwohl church, moving from Prussia to Molotschna in 1820, Neu Samara, and Canada.

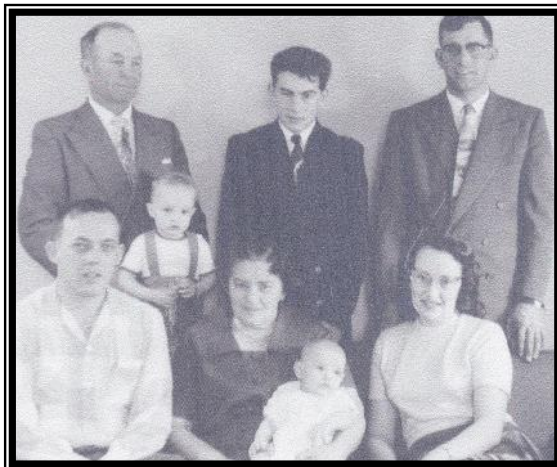
My great great grandfather, Johann Wedel (1786-1880), and his

family were members of the Waldheim Prussia/Molotschna group during the unrest of the 1870s when the Wedel family, like many others, began searching for another home. Great great grandfather joined the 1880 chileastic Great Trek to Asia with other family members. During their stop in Perowsk, Turkestan wandered away from the caravan, got lost and froze to death. Of his seven children:

two emigrated from Molotschna to America in 1876: four accompanied their father on the 1880 trek, and following his death, two returned to Russia and immigrated to America, one continued to Asia while the fourth emigrated from Asia to Brazil; the last, my great grandfather, Jacob Wedel (1845-1920) remained in Molotschna until 1900 when he and his family made their home in Ischalka, Neu Samara. Jacob's son, Johann Wedel (my grandfather) and family were the only Wedels to make Canada their home.

In her eighty-eighth year, Elsie Balzer was born on a farm near Mayfair, Saskatchewan, attended school in Mayfair and Rosthern Junior College. She and her husband, retired RCMP Supt. Tom Linning have enjoyed homes in each province, including British Columbia and Ontario, where Elsie pursued careers as a registered psychiatric nurse, occupational therapist, social worker, and school teacher. Retired in the Okanagan, the Linnings enjoy the visits of their daughter and two sons with their spouses, six grandchildren and one great-grandson.

So the knowledge of our past shall be a source of strength and the basis of a renewed confidence for us and our children. (Neu Samara am Tock) ❖



Three Generations
Rear L-R Johann Balzer,
Rob Linning (front of his grandfather),
George, Jack
Front L-R Tom Linning, Justina Balzer,
Ian Linning (on grandmother's knee),
Elsie (Balzer) Linning,
Mayfair, Saskatchewan 1962

Book Wanted

Book Wanted, for donation to the Lendrum Mennonite Church Library, Edmonton

With Courage to Spare: the Life of B.B. Janz

by John B. Toews

Contact Anne Friesen at gary.friesen@telus.net

Kroegers Welcomed to Alberta

By Dave Toews

The majority of the Abram and Maria (Wiebe) Kroeger extended family, nine people, came to Canada on board the Canadian Pacific Steamship, the S.S. Burton. This group included Abram Jr, his wife Elizabeth, daughter Beth, his mother Maria, brother John and his wife Mary and siblings Maria, Peter and Helen. Abram Sr and son Henry were detained in the Lechfeld refugee camp in Germany due to young Henry's trachoma eye infection. They arrived in Canada in Oct 1923.

After many tearful goodbyes in their home village of Neu-Chortitza, Baratow Colony, South Russia, the Kroegers caught the fifth immigrant train of the day out of the Village of Lichtenau train station and headed for Latvia and freedom beyond. According to the S.S. Burton log, it departed Southampton, England, on August 4th, 1923 and arrived in Quebec City on August 17th. The freighter was used for hauling lumber and cattle from Canada to Europe and passengers on the return trip. The ship had been poorly cleaned, and a combination of the stench and rough seas caused many people to become violently ill. At one point, Abram Jr wished the ship would sink and put them all out of their misery!

The family remained several days in a large dormitory before departing by train for western Canada, initially destined for Rosthern, Saskatchewan. However, along the way, alternative arrangements were



Simon Ratzlaff farm Swalwell, Alberta

made for the Kroegers to be hosted by the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite (Holdeman) people in the Swalwell, Acme and Linden area of Alberta.

The Kroegers were welcomed and hosted by the Loewen, Regier and Ratzlaff families, though it is unclear who stayed with whom and precisely for how long. Several other families from the village of Neu-Chortitza were hosted in this area, including the Klassen, Block, Epp and Giesbrecht families. The atmosphere among the people was pleasant and neighbourly.

The Kroeger men worked in the harvest fields for their hosts in the fall of 1923, and the women did housework and cared for the children. During the winter of 1923, the entire Kroeger family lived (farm-sat) at the home of Simon Ratzlaff while their host travelled to Kansas to visit his relatives.

(See Kroeger on page 25)

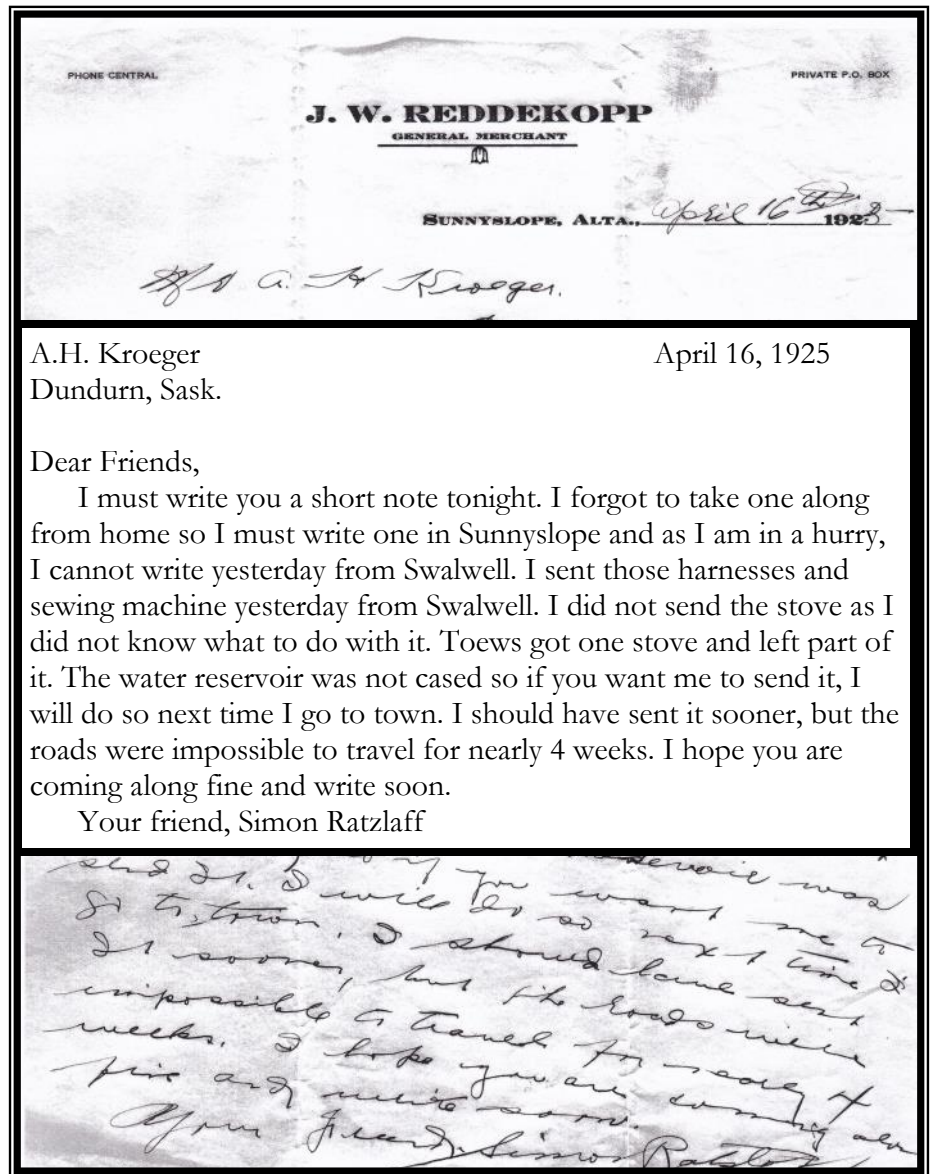


1. Abram Sr, 2. Abram Jr, 3. John, 4. Mary, 5. Maria Sr, 6. Maria Jr, 7. Helen Kroeger with the Swalwell group, Sunnyslope 1923 - 24

(Kroeger from page 24)

In the spring of 1924, John and Mary Kroeger went to work for the Jacob Loewen family, John did farm work, and Mary helped with the cooking, cleaning, sewing and taking care of the children as Mrs. Loewen was often ill. Saturday was bath night for the Loewen children, but young Jacob objected. He claimed the water was wet and that his mother had bathed him not that long ago. "when was your last bath"? Mary asked. "Hmm, it was the year before," replied Jacob thoughtfully. "In that case, it is time for another one," stated Mary in no uncertain terms!

After about a year in the Swalwell area, the entire Kroeger clan was looking to establish a permanent home on land of their own, so they moved to Clairmont, Alberta, not far from Grande Prairie. Here opinion in the Kroeger family became divided as to where to lay down immutable roots. Abram Sr and his wife Maria became aware that their former neighbours and friends from Neu-Chortitza were planning to buy the Schwager farm #1 in the Dundurn, Saskatchewan



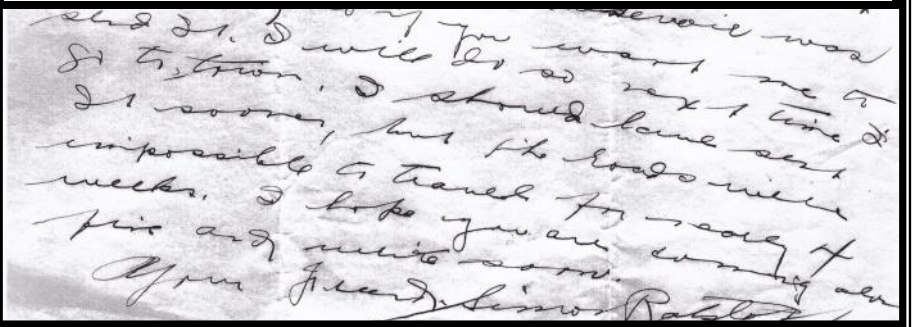
A.H. Kroeger
Dundurn, Sask.

April 16, 1925

Dear Friends,

I must write you a short note tonight. I forgot to take one along from home so I must write one in Sunnyslope and as I am in a hurry, I cannot write yesterday from Swalwell. I sent those harnesses and sewing machine yesterday from Swalwell. I did not send the stove as I did not know what to do with it. Toews got one stove and left part of it. The water reservoir was not cased so if you want me to send it, I will do so next time I go to town. I should have sent it sooner, but the roads were impossible to travel for nearly 4 weeks. I hope you are coming along fine and write soon.

Your friend, Simon Ratzlaff



Handwritten letter (with transcription) from
Simon Ratzlaff to Abram Kroeger Apr 16, 1925



Clairmont Alberta church group including the Kroeger family

area, and this appealed to them.

On April 16th, 1925, Simon Ratzlaff wrote to his friend Abram Sr who had by now moved to Dundurn, regarding the shipping of some harness, a sewing machine and the fact that the kitchen stove had not yet been shipped. Also, the roads have been impassable for the last four weeks!

By August 1925, all the Rev Abram and Maria Kroeger family members had moved to Dundurn, Saskatchewan, where they lived and farmed for the rest of their lives. Abram was the pastor of the Dundurn Nordheimer Mennonite Church until he passed away in 1940. Maria died on May

(See Kroeger on page 26)

(Kroeger from page 25)

10th, 1955. Both are buried in the Hillside Garden Cemetery at Dundurn.

As the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the Russlaender immigrants Abram and Maria, we are eternally grateful to the fine Men-



Abram, Henry, Maria, Peter, Helen, Maria Kroeger Sr (sitting), Dundurn 1938



Kroeger farmhouse Dundurn early 1930s

nonite families of Swalwell, Acme, Linden and Clairmont Alberta for hosting and welcoming our family to Canada.

Abram and Maria Kroeger are the maternal grandparents of Dave Toews; their daughter Helen is his mother. ❖

Adventures of Johannes Dietrich Dyck “the 49er”

By Dave Toews

Johannes Dietrich Dyck (1826-1898) was born in Poppau, West Prussia and would become a man of major legend in the Dyck family. Johannes was a prodigious writer, keeping diaries throughout his life span of 72 years; these diaries chronicled Johannes' life.

Probably as a result of leaving home at an early young age, wanderlust was in Johannes' blood. He left the grocery store employment of Frau Hamm and worked at similar jobs in Marienburg and Caldove (Caldowe) in the Vistula Delta. However, discontent with a storekeeper's life had set in.

In the winter of 1847-1848, he returned to the home of his father and stepmother. He spent his time hunting, no doubt, to supplement the family income and meat supply. This seems to



Johannes Dietrich Dyck (1826-1898)
Photo: A Pilgrim People

be a rather radical departure from the norm for Mennonites, to own a gun and use it for hunting in the Vistula Delta area. A prelude of things to come.

Johannes decided to go to America to seek his fortune, but he had a piece of serious business to attend to before leaving. While working in the village of Caldove, he fell in love with Helene Jantzen. They announced their engagement prior to Johannes' departure. Johannes left West Prussia on August 18, 1848, travelling by train to the port city of Hamburg. It would be a full two months before his ship reached New York, finally docking on November 2, 1848.

Johannes went up the Hudson River to Albany, New York, and from there to Buffalo and Niagara Falls. A lake steamship took them the rest of the way to Chicago. Johannes secured work as a bartender in the place where he lived and began learning English. One can imagine the language learned in a saloon in Chicago in 1848-1849. While working at this job, Johannes heard the first stories of gold being discovered in California.

Later, while working for the importing firm of Fullton supervising the unloading of one of their

(See Dyck on page 27)

(Dyck from page 26)

ships, Johannes saw a young girl suddenly fall 30 feet from a bridge over the bay. Quickly calculating how far the current would carry her while he removed shoes and clothes, he dove into the water at the spot he thought she would resurface. Johannes had guessed correctly and was close enough to grab the girl when he caught a glimpse of her in the murky water. A boat picked them up, and a doctor revived the young girl onshore. The next day the newspapers hailed the young German hero with headlines such as "*Young German Risks Life To Save Drowning American Girl.*" Johannes received an invitation to dine with his employers, the Fulltons, who were undoubtedly pleased with the recognition Johannes' heroics brought to their company. But a good salary and the afterglow of heroism were not enough for Johannes.

He had promised his betrothed Helene that he would return to West Prussia within 2-3 years, and Johannes had no intention of returning in the same financial condition he had left in. The lure of the gold rush to California finally overcame Johannes. He set off on the overland route, lacking the money it would take for the faster route by ship via Panama to San Francisco.

At Ft. Laramie, Johannes met a man who made a lifelong impression on him. His name was Louis Mellon; he had been a mountain man for over 25 years. Originally from Canada, Mellon had not seen civilization for the better part of the two and a half decades he spent ranging the Rocky Mountains hunting and trapping. In Ft. Bridger, Mellon met up with an old

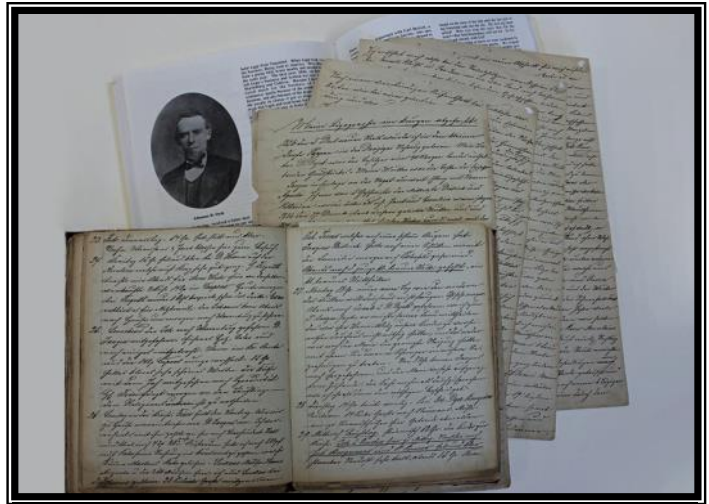
friend, the famous scout, Kit Carson. Carson warned the men not to take the southern route into California at that time of year because of the snowstorms in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. On this advice, the men travelled the northern route over the Cascade Mountains into Oregon. This route from Ft. Laramie, Wyoming, to Oregon follows the famed Oregon Trail.

Johannes remembered seeing as many as 30 graves a day along this route into Oregon Territory. Hostile natives and cholera took their toll on travellers heading for Oregon. On September 12, 1850, Johannes was involved in his first encounter with hostile natives after finding three scalped bodies along the trail.

Though indeed attacked, the small party of men all escaped and continued on

to Oregon. Johannes wrote to his Helene in West Prussia that he hoped to return to her in one year. It took that long for the letter to reach Helene, and Johannes was still in California. Helene's letter of response, closed with the words, "*Yours, even unto death,*" was saved by Johannes and no doubt it comforted him on many lonely nights yet to come. Johannes reached the goldfields of California sometime in 1850 and joined thousands of other miners from around the world that had come seeking their fortunes in the gleaming yellow metal. Stories of failure far exceed those of success. Johannes was one of the lucky ones.

After three years, he felt he had enough gold to return to West Prussia. Together with two companions and packhorses loaded with their treasure, Johannes began the return journey across America. The return route was through the desert Southwest, possibly headed for Santa Fe, New Mexico. From Santa Fe, they could use the well-travelled Santa Fe Trail that would



The original diaries of Johannes D. Dyck
Photo: Conrad Stoesz MHA



Kit Carson, American frontiersman, trapper, hunter and soldier Photo: Wikipedia

(See Dyck on page 28)

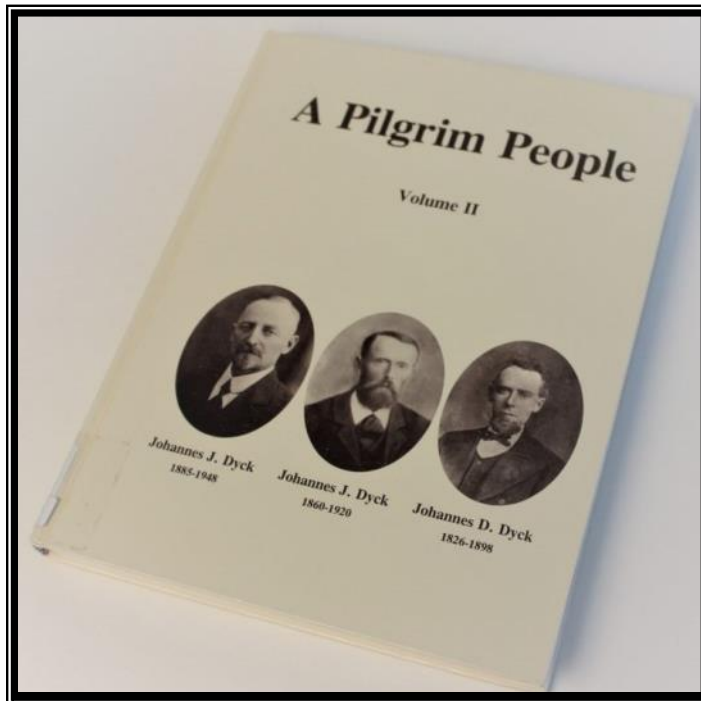
(Dyck from page 27)

take them in a northeasterly direction toward St. Joseph, Missouri. They never made it. They were attacked by hostile natives who quickly overcame one of Johannes' companions and then the second not far into the trip. Only Johannes' fast and durable white horse saved him from being captured and surely killed by the pursuing natives. Although Johannes escaped with his life, the fruit of three years' work in the goldfields was gone. With a heavy heart, he turned around and headed back to California. Johannes would spend an additional four years in California attempting to recover his losses. He would have at least one more close call with death.

Camped with a partner, Johannes awoke the following morning to find the man murdered in his sleep and all their possessions gone.

Eventually, Johannes had what he considered enough gold and made the return trip to West Prussia, no doubt taking the safest route available to him. When he arrived in the fall of

1858, after having been gone for ten years, Helene Jantzen was still waiting for him. What a reunion this must have been for these two remarkable people. Johannes and Helene were quickly married and spent the winter of 1858-1859 in West Prussia before joining their relatives in the Am Trakt Colony, Samara Province, Russia. In the village of Lysanderhoech, Johannes Dietrich Dyck established a farming operation that included a flour mill and 129 acres of land. He also served the community as fire marshal for 30 years and as mayor for 18 years.



A Pilgrim People, Volume II, the Dyck family history
Photo: Conrad Stoesz

Tribute to Diedrich (Dick) Neufeld

By Dave Toews

Former MHSA Newsletter editor Diedrich (Dick) Neufeld passed away in Ottawa at the age of 90 on Jan. 15,

2022; he was born on Aug. 23, 1931, on his family's farm east of Carstairs, Alberta. He was predeceased by his parents, Peter and Anna Neufeld. Dick is survived by his wife Anna, son Kenneth (Cheryl Anne Frankiewicz), son Philip (Leslie Ann Buckland), daughter Karen Anne, daughter Lynnette (Ricardo Rodriguez), six grandchildren and one great-granddaughter.

Dick is also survived by his brother Herman (Lola), sister Alma (Abe Hildebrandt), brother Eldon (Carol), brother Gordon, and many nieces and nephews.

Diedrich lived with dementia for more than twenty-five years. Dementia caused him a lot of anguish, as he progressively lost memories and the ability to engage in so many of the activities and relationships he had enjoyed. His family treasured those moments of connection when they could still share a laugh or smile, play a game of crokinole or sing together.

Diedrich met his wife, Anna, in Winnipeg while attending the Canadian Mennonite Bible College. They were married in 1955 and thus began their journey together, with many moves and careers. He taught public school and

(See Neufeld on page 29)



Diedrich Neufeld

Sources and credits: Conrad Stoesz MHA Still Speaking. Diaries translated by Alf Redekopp, Text: Yumpe.com and Kansasfolks.net ❖

(Neufeld from page 28)

Bible School in Alberta. In 1968 they moved to Ontario; Diedrich founded and directed Rockhaven, a home for recovering alcoholics in Sudbury. He worked for Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation; this position led to more moves, finally to Calgary in 1981. In 1985, Diedrich and Anna began a posting with the Mennonite Economic Development Associates in Kingston, Jamaica. Upon their return to Calgary in 1991, Dick assumed the role of Director of MCC Alberta, retiring in 1996.

Diedrich enjoyed hiking, skiing, bicycle rides, and canoe trips. He loved playing softball, curling and gardening. Music was a vital part of Diedrich's life; he enjoyed singing with the Corpus Christi Male Chorus in Calgary for several seasons. Dick and Anna attended Calgary Inter-Mennonite Church during their stay in Calgary.

In his leisure time, Diedrich volunteered for five years (2001-2006) as editor of the Newsletter (Chronicle) with the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta (MHSA). Dick also shared his knowledge and skills as a handyman when the MHSA renovated and moved into their new location in the Calgary MCC building.

Dick said, *"the job gets more complex and rewarding as the Society grows, expectations become more focused, and goals are clarified."* In his editorials, Dick often wrote of coming MHSA events and conferences. In the Oct 2001 issue, he wrote, *"this is my fifth edition. I started with three articles on hand in Sept 2001 with assurances from the board that more materials would be forthcoming from the next meeting. Now I am in the enviable position of having to choose six of twelve arti-*

cles recently submitted". The publication grew under Dick's leadership. Chairman Jake Harder and later chairman Colin Neufeldt praised Diedrich's work as editor, saying, *"Dick has devoted many hours to all of these tasks, and as a result, we are the beneficiaries of a first-class publication."*

A memorial service was held online Feb. 12, 2022.

Sources: Diedrich Neufeld obituary and MHSA Newsletter (Chronicle) articles and editorials. ❖

A Clock Story

By Phyllis Ratzlaff and Ted Regehr

In the mid-1920s, Abraham T. Loewen, then living near Linden, Alberta, sold to his younger sister an old Mandtler wall clock which had no minute hand. It had only an hour hand and was thus a simpler, less expensive version of the better known and equipped Kroeger clocks. Loewen's ancestors had brought the clock with them when they migrated from Russia to Manitoba in the 1870s.

Only one aspect of the sale was unusual - the reason why Abraham Loewen sold the clock. He wanted to use the proceeds to support Mennonites who had suffered greatly in the Soviet Union.

Since coming to Canada, the Loewen family had responded to evangelistic appeals by Church of God in Christ (Mennonite) preachers and become members of what was popularly known as the Holdeman Mennonite Church. That church was inclined to avoid formal contacts or shared endeavours with other Mennonite churches, conferences and organizations. However, during World War I, the Holdeman had joined other Mennonites in the United States to respond to wartime conscription issues. After the war, they had also supported inter-Mennonite relief efforts for the victims of war.

Then North American Mennonites learned of the severe problems facing their co-religionists in the Soviet Union, and in 1920 they formed a Mennonite Central Committee to coordinate efforts to help those in great need in the Soviet Union. In Canada, a parallel relief organization, with Holdeman's participation, was organized and in Linden, Abraham T. Loewen's actions were a measure of the success of those efforts.



The 1844 One-handed Mandtler Clock

(See Clock on page 30)

(Clock from page 29)

Many Mennonites who had come to North America in the 1870s, including the Loewens, still had relatives and friends in the Soviet Union and thus felt a close kinship with them. That may have motivated Abraham Loewen, a member of a separatist-inclined Mennonite church, to sell the Mandtler clock to raise money to support the relief and assistance efforts for the Mennonites in the Soviet Union.

The sale of the clock was felt most keenly by Abraham Loewen's youngest daughter, Margaret. At the age of 12, Margaret had contracted rheumatic fever and endured many weeks of bed rest. She often talked about her love of the clock and her sadness when it was sold. Often alone during the day, the only sound she heard was the comforting tick-tock of the clock.

In 1977 Margaret's son, Lloyd Ratzlaff, heard that the old Mandtler clock was for sale at an auction. There was a stiff bidding war, but, at considerable cost, Lloyd prevailed, and the clock was returned to tick-tock comfortably once again for Margaret. After she died, it passed to Lloyd and his family, and after Lloyd's death to his son Michael and his family. It now hangs in a special place of honour in their home, located on the original, the early 1900s, homestead of the Ratzlaff family.

In the 1920s, Simon Ratzlaff, then also a Holdeman who later married Margaret Loewen, was a bachelor living on the family homestead. His family had migrated from Volynia to Kansas in the 1870s and from there to Alberta early in the 1900s. He hosted some of the Russlaender Mennonite immigrants of the 1920s, including the maternal grandparents Abram and Maria (Wiebe) Kroeger and family of our Chronicle editor Dave Toews. Simon, like so many others, did not allow differing backgrounds, traditions and church affiliations to stand in the way of helping their distressed co-religionists.

The subsequent Ratzlaff family history includes several inter-marriages between those who helped the migrants and those who were helped. That included Lloyd, who married Ruth Toews, whose family came to Canada in the 1920s.

What lessons might the story of the one-handed Mandtler clock teach



Abram T. Loewen (1865–1944) and Helena Isaac (1858-1945) who brought the clock to Linden and sold it in the mid-1920s



Margaret (Loewen) Ratzlaff living in retirement with the clock

us? Its sale in the 1920s symbolizes, in a unique way, aspects of our Christian and Mennonite legacy of mutual aid and support despite generational, denominational and theological differences. In her more detailed illustrated history of the clock, Phyllis Ratzlaff notes that "The clock in its more than 175 years of existence has come to symbolize the courage, sacrifice faith and sense of community that has so characterized the Mennonite Journey from Prussia to Canada. It is difficult to know the acts of courage and sacrifices made by our distant forebears, but we do know about the ones nearer to us in time." Copies of the Loewen clock book have been donated. The story can be read in the libraries of the Mennonite Historical Societies of Alberta and the Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia. ♦

Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era

Benjamin W. Goossen. 2017.

Princeton University Press.

Reviewed by Henry T. Epp Calgary AB

Doing a review of this book differs from many other reviews because the book is five years old, or nearly so. Other reviews are available, and they require attention.

The reviews I read tend to concentrate on the validity of the data used and the interpretations thereof. While praised for its thoroughness, the book has been criticized for using skewed or error-laden data and for presenting biased interpretations of these data. The criticisms include: (1) too much emphasis on Nazi Mennonites, giving the impression that there were more of them than there really were (2) more emphasis on Mennonites embracing "Germanness" as their ethnicity than is justified by the historical information; (3) too much emphasis on Mennonite leaders of the time doing a flip-flop from German to Dutch ethnicity to suit the situation after World War 2 was over.

First, then, what sort of a book is this? Is it a self-righteous diatribe by someone criticizing others when not having experienced their trauma? Is it academic history, an attempt at objectivity, scholarly research, and insight? Yes, it is the latter, and the publisher's name, Princeton University Press, gives it away. The book, in fact, is so loaded with academic language and fashionable phraseology that it is easy for the non-academic reader to get side-tracked into gooey mental gymnastics while trying to understand what the author is saying.

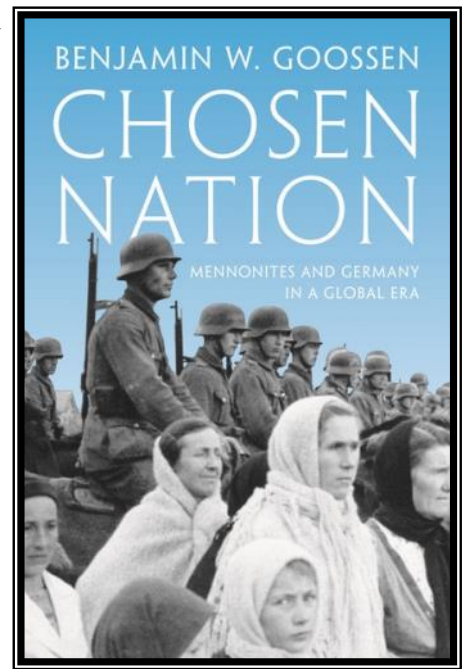
Here are three examples. Do you know what a "sea change" is? How about a "contestatory process"? And the term "collectivism" is numbingly over-used, albeit without discernible political motivation.

The purpose of this review is to examine the book as academic history. This means, simply: (1) Does the book have reasonable and do-able objectives? (2) Are the available data sufficient and reliable enough to meet the objectives? (3) Does the book meet these objectives?

Does the book, then, measure up as an academic history? Yes, and very well, in my estimation. For example, it passes with "flying colours" the first criterion of an academic review: Does the author meet their objectives? After some introduction, Goossen says: "My aim is neither to reify collective myths nor to normalize their patterns of claims-making, but instead to tell a history of religion without religions, of nationalism without nations." That sounds a bit jargonish, but the book grinds "exceeding fine" with many details that address how some Mennonites in Ukraine, confronted with the pressure to embrace German nationalism, related to being Germans and non-Germans at the same time. I believe that Goossen is less able to generalize the concept of "religion" without actual "religions" than he is able to show nationalism without being a nation.

As an academic exercise, I ask, is the book of the dated postmodernist ilk in which every personage and all deeds are evaluated in a Foucault-esque manner, all knowledge being used as a tool to attain dominance and control over hapless others? In other words, in this book, are history, science, and all other academic knowledge pursuits merely tools used by the author as part of the elite to control others, a form of power determinism? Within this dated paradigm, there are no truths, only truth claims. No. The author uses postmodernist language on occasion, which is simply common usage. Still, he does not relegate actual facts and knowledge to relativity and does not assume that all knowledge is a social construction based on the culture and peoples' political aspirations. Historians and social scientists have been revising postmodernism in this century so that they admit to an element of relativity in knowledge. Still, they are no longer throwing the "baby out with the bathwater." Goossen's book aligns with the new way of doing history, an important asset.

The core of the book details the sufferings of Mennonites under the Soviet system, their partial redemption by the German Wehrmacht or regular army, and their severe disappointment over harsh dictatorial treatment by the separate Einsatzgruppe (occupation forces), dominated by the racist and unimaginably self-important and cruel Schutz Staffel (Defence Bureau or SS). Such information provides perspective but is not the same as whitewashing nefarious deeds. Goossen mentions Mennonites guilty of partici-



(See *Chosen* on page 32)

(Chosen from page 31)

pating in murdering Jewish and other targeted populations in Ukraine. Perhaps he could have stressed more than other local populations also collaborated with the Einsatzgruppe and participated in the atrocities as well — Mennonites were not alone in this.

This central part of the book has received more criticism than other parts, undoubtedly because many Mennonites do not wish to be reminded of the questionable incidents, passing them off as necessary to survival. Well, not all were, and I have the personal word of my aunt, my father's oldest sister, Katharina Epp (now deceased), that it was possible to defy the Nazis, but only so far. She did confront a Nazi official about an atrocity. When the Nazi occupation began, Tina was a bookkeeper in Chortitza. Soon after the occupation, she saw a Jewish acquaintance, whom she had provided with food, hanging in the front doorway of the office building, quite dead. She approached the Nazi officer in charge in a dudgeon and asked him what this was all about. "No more questions Miss," he told her in German, "The next is you." Katherina was demoted for the deed. Her words are as fresh in my mind as when she told them to me, likely sometime in the 1980s. Later, in Dresden, she stepped out of a line-up of Nazi-controlled people from her village and elsewhere, who all disappeared completely. Back to the book — Goossen does not exaggerate the Nazi threat.

Finally, the reader should know that descriptions of the Nazi atrocities are essential as part of the database for this book. The book is an academic history explaining how a people became nationalistic without actually being a nation and how religious disunity did not prevent them from coalescing under the rubric of a religion. The author meets his objectives, and he does so using reasonably reliable data sources, analyzing and critiquing them where applicable. Yes, this is a book of genuinely excellent scholarship. It should be read as scholarly, not as another story about Mennonite suffering and nefariousness within the World War 2 backdrop. ❖

2021 Fall Conference Report

By Henry Wiebe

On November 6, at the start of the conference via Zoom, we had 33 participants, which increased to 58 during the meeting. Not having to travel to the conference cuts down on the overall cost but all would undoubtedly enjoy the refreshments and the visiting in person!

The MC for the afternoon was Katie Harder, David Neufeldt provided technical assistance.

Katie Harder opened the conference by reading a few lines of an old hymn by Isaac Watts:

*"Oh God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home."*

She presented a summary of the conditions of the Mennonite people in Southern Russia (present-day

Ukraine) at the turn of the 20th century. Economically the people had prospered since the emigration of 1774 and the following years. The people lived comfortably, having increased their landholdings, built better, bigger homes and had farm and house servants from the neighbouring villages.

Katie read Deuteronomy 6:7: *And you shall teach them diligently to your children and speak of them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.*

Dave Toews made two announcements:

- James Friesen, a recent addition to the MHSA board, passed away at age 70 on September 18, 2021, in Grande Prairie, Alberta.
- David Jeffares, a long-time board member, suffered a medical setback in June of 2021. He is currently in good spirits and enjoys a good visit, although he tires quickly.

The theme of the conference was **"Meet the Alberta Authors Day."**

Author Agnes Langemann Thibert read from her 2019 novel, *"Pathway Through Peril, A Journey of Hope."* She has a soon-to-be-published sequel, *"The Farewell Years."*

Agnes still remembers the stories that her mother told over the years. She chose to use fictional characters, but the story is based on family history.

She began reading of a photographer coming to their home on the steppes of South Russia in 1914. And she continued to a scene in 1918 when the White and Red armies and roving bandits

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Henry Wiebe

(Fall from page 32)

such as the one led by "Machno" alternately in control came to their home demanding food even though most families didn't have enough for themselves.

As Agnes read, we learned of many people leaving their country for North America in the mid to late 1920s only to arrive in time for the great depression.

Agnes graciously answered questions from the attendees.

The MC Katie Harder reminded the attendees about the planned trip from Quebec City to Abbotsford in 2023, celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Russian Mennonites' arrival in Canada. For information on the trip, go to the following link: <https://tourmagination.com/tour/cross-canada-russlaender-centenary-tour/>

Launch of **Author Bill Franz's** 2021 book, *"Mutti and Papa, A Love Story."*

Bill began by saying that he is working on a sequel to his first book. He thanked MHSA for the support along the way and the help in presenting his book to the public.

In the first 50 pages, Bill summarized his family's activities and the struggles and hardships they faced in South Russia, including the "Great Trek" and the retreating German army headed for Germany. Many did not make it to safety but were repatriated, not to their homes but to Siberia.



Agnes Lange-mann Thibert

The following section included Bill's parents' letters to each other while Johann and Ella were separated.

At the end of his presentation, Bill answered a few questions.

Katie Harder introduced **Historian Ted Regehr**, and he made some comments on the different styles of writing that these two authors used in writing their books; Agnes used the fictional method of presenting her the story while Bill used the historical method; however, they both stayed true to the historical facts.

He thanked them both for their work and for preserving the primary documents.

Ted also answered some questions.

At about 4:10 PM, Ken Matis made the closing comments and closed the conference with a word of prayer. ❖



Bill Franz

Book Notes

By Lawrence Klippenstein and Glen Klassen

Bill Franz, *Mutti and Papa: A Love Story* softcover, 188 pp. This is, according to its cover note, "a family history that traces the love story of the author's parents." It offers a new perspective on "the layered nuances of the Holocaust, Mennonite culture and love thriving through wartime." The letters written between the parents in their engagement form the primary resource for creating this narrative. Available from the author billfranz79@gmail.com

John and Aileen Toews have given us a somewhat related story in *Letters from Lena*, TB pp in Vol '1, with two more volumes, promised. This one covers the period from 1924 -to 1935 (Trying to leave the Caucasus), after which a period of silence follows and then the letters are continued. Well-illustrated. Contact Nita Wiebe at 1-204-32-9661 (the MHV gift shop) for more information.

Mark Reimer presents his first novel titled *The Four Horsemen: Portrait of a Family Crisis* (Altona, Friesens, 2021), softcover, 212 pp,

Hedy Wiebe, *There's a Place Deep inside Called Courage: A Memoir*, Word Alive Press, 2020. Recovery from serious injury with God's help.

Abe Dueck, *Mennonite Brethren Bible College: A History of Competing Visions*, The Mennonite Brethren Historical Commission, 2021.

David Elias *The Truth About The Barn: A Voyage of Discovery and Contemplation*, Great Plains Publications, 2020. The barn's place in culture and religion, art and literature.

Joanne Epp, *Cattail Skyline*, Turnstone Press, 2021. Poetry. The narrator returns to the landscape of her childhood, taking inventory of the ways it shaped her.

Miriam Toews, *Fight Night*, Knopf Canada, 2021. About someone who knows intimately what it costs to survive in this world, yet has found a

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(Notes from page 33)

way-painfully, joyously, ferociously-to love and fight to the end, on her own terms.

David Bergen, *Out of Mind*, Goose Lane Editions, 2021. A companion piece to his novel *The Matter with Morris*, a Scotiabank Giller Prize finalist from 2010. An inside look at a contemporary secular family.

Carla Funk, *Mennonite Valley Girl: A Wayward Coming of Age*, Graystone Books, 2021. Stories of 1980s adolescence in a traditional community.

S.L. Klassen, *Menno-Nightcaps*: cocktails inspired by that odd ethnoreligious group you keep mistaking for the Amish, Quakers or Mormons, Touchwood Editions, 2021. Satire from the author of the Drunken Mennonite Blog

Credit: Heritage Posting Oct 2021, used with permission ❖

Ready and Waiting

By Ernie Wiens

It is February 8, 2022. The Mennonite Heritage Farm is slumbering under a thick blanket of snow, waiting. Waiting for what? Change!

This Morning the sun peaked over the distant horizon at exactly 8:01, two minutes earlier than yesterday. It will set in the west at precisely 5:32 this evening, two minutes later than yesterday, a four-minute change for the day. Changes are coming. One can feel it even if you can't yet see it. Please just be patient!

Patience was not to be found in October. Some stragglers still had produce in the ground, and winter was on its way, but the fieldwork got done two days before freeze-up! The gardens are ready.

To Touch the Earth

On November 9, after almost two years of exploration and behind-the-scenes negotiating, a formal offer was extended to the County of Strathcona to purchase and operate the Mennonite Heritage Farm.

The presentation was well-received. Counsellor Corey-Ann Hartwick (Ward 6) moved that the Administration investigate the feasibility of buying and operating The Farm. The motion was carried 6-0. Even more memorable was Counselor Tonita's comment: "...what you presented is something that I think is just enchanting; the opportunity to touch the earth." Exactly!

Summer plans are now being finalized and will focus on four areas of activity:

Garden Plots

Twenty-four extra garden plots have been added to the 50 from last year, but most are spoken for already. Now, if it would only rain in July like it is supposed to.

Saturday Farm Markets and Activities

Saturday Market activities will commence in late May featuring available garden produce (hothouse tomatoes and cucumbers), fresh eggs, exhibits, creations and consumables, vendors are Society Members. Walking ex-



plorations and wagon tours will again be the highlights.

Concerts in the Barn

Seven different entertainment groups are waiting to be scheduled starting in May, depending on Covid-19 restrictions. Keep your fingers crossed. Concerts will take place on Sunday afternoons with lots of time to explore and tour The Farm.

Alberta Open Farm Days

On August 13 and 14, The Mennonite Heritage Farm will again participate in the province-wide celebration of rural life. It is fast becoming our focal point for the summer with a farm market, a concession stand, vintage car and tractor exhibits, garden and wagon tours and a Sunday afternoon concert.

The groundhog has come and gone back to his den, and Valentine's Day will come and go. Pussy Willows will appear again at the end of February, as they always do. Spring is coming to the Mennonite Farm. The calendar says so. We are ready and waiting, sometimes even patiently. ❖



Letters To the Editor

Nov 8, 2021

Greetings, David!

Thank you for including me on the "Virtual" mailing list. I look forward to reading the new additions on my reading list.

Great Churchill quote in your editorial! As I 'look back' into our family's history, I can't help but gain a greater understanding of our ancestors and how that relates to our lives today and could help to see 'further forward'. We have a rich history to 'look back' on!

Thank you for your very interesting issue of the Chronicle.

Thanks,

Elsie (Balzer) Linning

Penticton, BC

Membership Application, Renewal & Donation Form

- **Memberships are due at the beginning of each year (\$30.00/yr).**
- ***Lifetime memberships are now available for \$500***
- The Chronicle is published in Mar, June and Oct of each year.

Mail membership form and cheque to:

MHSA
223 - 2946 - 32 Street NE
Calgary, AB T1Y 6J7

Name: _____

Address: _____

_____ Postal Code _____

Email address: _____ Phone# _____

Enclosed is my contribution of:

[☐] \$20 [☐] \$50 [☐] \$100 [☐] \$500 [☐] other

- Tax receipts will be issued for donations for \$20.00 or more.
- Donations are especially required to continue archival cataloging of donated historical material.
- Information collected above is done within the rules of the Personal Information and Privacy Act of Alberta. Name and address is required for the purpose of communicating with members through correspondence or the MHSA newsletter. It will never be shared with others or used for other purposes.



Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta

invites you to the

2022 Virtual Spring Conference on Zoom

Date: Saturday May 14, 2022

Time: 2 PM

I Am a Mennonite directed by Paul Plett - 59 min film

A filmmaker explores his Mennonite roots and ancestry

Staring: Yulia Asraf, Candice Bergen, Tina Dyck and more

Commentary and Q & A to follow with Director Paul Plett

Your host for the afternoon will be: Katie Harder

ZOOM Link – no pre-registration required

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/87505398227?pwd=dVlWmg1RDBsUDA3SDRCODZKODBSUT>



Donations are welcome to help defray expenses