



# The MHSA Chronicle

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## Migration from Ukraine to China (part 3 of 3)

By the late Lena (Wiens) Sawatzky  
Translated from German by nephew  
Hartmut Wiens

### Crossing the Amur – The Christmas Miracle

The leading men of Shumanovka set December 15, 1930 as the departure date for the escape from Russia through China. The inhabitants of Shumanovka were informed. Whoever had close relatives in the neighbouring villages was allowed to invite them to participate in the escape. Our family arrived in Shumanovka just in time to join in with the escaping group. Everything was prepared for the escape. The sleds were packed, except for the food and a few other objects, which the people could hardly bear to leave behind. The leadership had



Hart Wiens

(See China on page 9)

### In this Issue

1. Hanjenome: Jessie's Story
1. Migration from Ukraine
2. Editorial Reflections
2. Chairman's Corner
12. Mennonite Transfer
16. Abram Peter Willms
19. Cross Canada Russlaender
21. MHSA Fall Conference
23. Leaving Canada
24. Schools and Bridges
26. A Visit to Low German

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## Hanjenome (Adopted): Jessie's Story

By Melissa Friesen

My grandmother, Justina Friesen, was born on March 24, 1910, in Sparrau, Molotschna Colony, into a landless household on the edge of the village. She was the second youngest of seven children born to Peter and Maria (Huebert) Friesen. Jessie, as she preferred to be called, had four older half-brothers from Peter's two previous marriages. Jessie didn't remember her father as he died when she was very young, and despite her mother having to work very hard for others to support the remaining children, Jessie had a happy early childhood.



Melissa Friesen

At age seven, Jessie insisted on attending school where she learned to read, write, and do math. She went to school the first year and enjoyed it very much but could only attend sporadically after that for several reasons. The teacher's wages were paid for by the students and that, of course, was a hardship for Jessie's family. Jessie could also not attend in winter because she didn't have shoes and they were too poor to buy warm clothing. In the spring and fall she was compelled to stay home to help with seeding and harvesting of the garden. In her second year, the students were often sent home when the violence of war escalated. When the shooting would start, the teacher yelled, "Children, children, quick, run home!" They ran.

Although her combined formal schooling totalled no more than one and-a-half years, Jessie learned to read and write three languages. She took the initiative to learn whatever she could on her own.

Jessie remembered playing with her younger sister, Margaret. They would tie a string tightly around the end of a pillow, put a kerchief on the "head" and pretend it was their doll. They would also rummage through the ash heap where the neighbours discarded their garbage. Sometimes they would find broken pieces of dishes. They would take them down to the creek nearby, wash them and use them as a tea set. A piece of glass with flowers painted on it was an especially treasured find.

On the morning of April 4, 1920, shortly after her tenth birthday, Jessie woke up and was informed by her brother and sister that their mother had passed away during the night. Maria had been sick with smallpox for two weeks, but Jessie had not anticipated that her mother would actually die. "Oh, I cried!", said Jessie with emotion. They were now all orphans, and this was a terrible shock to the children. Jessie's oldest half-brother, Cornelius, who was around thirty years old, built the coffin for his stepmother and attended her burial (there was no service). Jessie and her siblings, who were still at home, were quarantined and therefore not allowed to attend,

(See Jessie on page 4)

## Editorial Reflections

by *Bill Franz, Assistant Editor*

First of all, I'd like to say what an absolute privilege it is to work with Dave Toews, long-standing



Bill Franz

editor of the Chronicle, and current Vice-Chair of the MHSA. He is a man of much energy and enthusiasm for Mennonite history, which is reflected in this publication and also in other various endeavours of the MHSA. Dave and his wife Marion are on holidays currently, and so I've been asked to step into Dave's shoes for steering this October issue.

It is also a tremendous privilege to work with people that send us articles. They perhaps might not think of themselves as writers, but the stories submitted are usually poignant, often humorous, and worth the telling. We also receive the occasional academic article,

well-researched, complete with endnotes for further study.

The common theme in all of these, I think, is migration. This past summer we had opportunity to partake in the reenactment of the Russlaender migration of one hundred years ago. Concurrently, Mennonites in Canada were moving to Mexico, and subsequently to other countries in Central and South America. In our own family stories, migration is the key element.

It really is the human experience. From ancient times, humans have migrated, out of Africa, across the Middle East, into Europe and Asia. It's also very much in the news today. People migrate in search of a better life. They flee in the face of war, hoping to protect their families from death and destruction. Across the street from us, we have a family recently arrived in Canada from Ukraine.

In this issue, you will find stories of people fleeing from war and persecution, people on the move in search of the freedom to live and raise their families in accordance with their beliefs. I hope these stories of our ancestors inspire us to

view others with understanding and compassion. Our people have been there too.

As always, we would like to thank the authors and contributors to this issue, as well as those on the Chronicle team who get this publication into your hands. We welcome your feedback, emails, letters to the editor, and articles. Contact Dave Toews at [dmttoews@gmail.com](mailto:dmttoews@gmail.com) or 780-218-7411 (cell) with any questions, suggestions or comments. ❖

## Chairman's Corner

by *Katie Harder*

This past summer saw the culmination of three years of planning for the centenary "Memories of Migration: Russlaender Tour", commemorating the 1923-1930 his-



Katie Harder

toric migration of 21,000 Mennonites from Russia to Canada. Your Alberta Russlaender Committee, Ted Regehr, Ken Matis, Gary Friesen, Brian Hildebrandt, Dave Toews, and Katie Harder worked diligently to make the Alberta portion of the tour memorable, a tour that local Albertans and the sixty participants from TourMagination would find informative, interesting, and that would celebrate the stories of the Russlaender coming in the 1920s to the various already-established Mennonite communities in Alberta. My husband Dennis

(See Chairman on page 3)

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Dave Toews, Editor  
([dmttoews@gmail.com](mailto:dmttoews@gmail.com))

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To join, send payment to:

MHSA  
210 - 2946 32 Street NE  
Calgary, AB T1Y 6J7

**Editor:** Dave Toews  
(780) 218-7411

**Assistant Editor:** Bill Franz

**Layout:** Harvey Wiehler

**Distribution:** Bill Janzen

**Membership List:** Ellie Janz

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(Chairman from page 2)

and I were fortunate to be able to participate in the third leg of the TourMagination journey. This third leg included people from Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia, an American Mennonite from Pennsylvania, and an 84-year-old professor from Japan, Iyo Kumamoto, who joined the tour to learn “why religion is so important to Mennonites”. She mentioned that she was a secular Buddhist but didn’t attend the temple. Nataliya Venger, a professor who fled from Ukraine in June of 2022, and who is now doing a stint at the DF Plett Foundation in Winnipeg, was also present. Nataliya’s trip was sponsored by the Plett Foundation. Nataliya’s daughter is currently living in the United States, and her husband is still fighting in Ukraine. A total of thirty individuals were sponsored, of which sixteen were young people, it was a very eclectic group, but all were excited to be part of this memorable and commemorative tour.

Highlights for Dennis and myself were the Mennonite Piano Concerto in Saskatoon, played by Godwin Friesen and Jerry Ho, and of course the Alberta venues, and meeting fellow Mennonites on the journey. We were fortunate to connect with a number of the sponsored young adults. On Friday night, we were supposed to meet the train at 12:00 pm, in Edmonton; instead, it arrived closer to 3:00 am. All sixty of us stayed at the train station and visited. This was a wonderful opportunity to interact with the youth. Dennis and I connected with two young men that evening, Derek Froese, and Jason Ho, who were helpful with suitcases and internet advice. We

often visited with youth over coffee and meals in the dining car. One young gal, Alana Regier, said that after sharing with her mom by phone about the program in Bergthal, her mother mentioned that their family had relatives there. We realized who they were; they were friends of ours who had now passed on. The youth brought enthusiasm and energy to the tour and were always a delight to be around. One of the goals of the tour was to pass on to the young people the story of the Russlaender sojourn in Russia and their migration to Canada, and the history of the Mennonite colonies in Russia.

When meeting fellow tour participants, who, of course, knew we were Albertans, they often commented on the event at the Bergthal Mennonite Church in Didsbury. They frequently mentioned how they identified with the story shared at Bergthal, how the Kanadier Mennonites had reached out with compassion and generosity to the Russlaender Mennonites and had tried to make the Russlaender feel welcome and at home in their churches and communities. The congregational singing at the Bergthal Church was remarked upon repeatedly by tour participants. No, it was not a concert like in Winnipeg with two hundred singers in the choir, nor the famous Mariachi Band brought in from Mexico to Abbotsford. It was ordinary people of faith, singing their hearts out, in praise to God, in beautiful four-part congregational singing that resonated with them. They commented on the wonderful acoustics at the Bergthal Church, a rarity in most churches today. The musical ensemble with their balanced harmony was seen as delightful and refreshing.

Another plus for Alberta is its natural beauty. The weather that day was phenomenal. The beautiful clear blue skies, in contrast to the yellow canola fields on the horizon, made for a beautiful background for those sitting outside to enjoy the cowboy poet at the CC Toews Farm, and later that evening, the bus trip to Edmonton.

The focal point for us in B.C. was the Mennonite Heritage Museum. What a delightful place, with its café, in-house theatre, the archival rooms, and offices on the second floor, plus the traditional Russian house-barn. The museum’s permanent exhibit illustrates the story of the Mennonites spanning five hundred years, beginning with the Anabaptists of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This is an educational Mennonite Museum, and well worth visiting.

This is a very abbreviated review of our participation in the Russlaender Tour. There are so many more stories to tell, stories of families being torn apart, starvation, killings, being dispossessed of their land by the newly-formed Communist government at the time, and the list goes on. In Canada, the new immigrants faced challenges. They had arrived just prior to the Great Depression; life was difficult, but the Mennonites embraced life in a new country, celebrated their faith in God, and built on that foundation.

Today we want to acknowledge the sacrifices of our forebears, their resilience to start afresh in a new land, their many accomplishments and their determination to keep and nurture their faith in God, but also their ability to forgive their transgressors. May we remember to continue to tell their story to our children and grandchildren. ❖

(Jessie from page 1)

although two children followed the procession from a distance. They were astounded to learn that almost the entire village had come to the cemetery. Their mother was well liked by everyone, and this was especially meaningful to Jessie.

Shortly after her mother's internment, Jessie was told by the village official to go to the "house with the big windmill", which was in the neighbouring village of Konteniusfeld. Although she recognized the house, she didn't know the occupants. This was the home of Benjamin and Helena Janz, parents of B.B. Janz. They were in their late 60s at this point and only their youngest daughter, Helen, was still at home, but she would soon be married.

Jessie's younger sister, Margaret, age eight, was sent to live with relatives in Hierschau, and the rest of the children were left to survive on their own. Margaret later emigrated to Canada and was the only other sibling to do so. Margaret married Abram Bergman in 1929 in Manitoba and moved to Leamington, Ontario, where she lived the rest of her life, passing away in 2008.

Jessie helped with domestic and farm chores at the Janzes, who she called *Grossvater* and *Grossmutter*. Over the next six years, life became increasingly difficult and dangerous, and so the Janzes decided to emigrate under the advice of their son, B.B. Janz. Although there wasn't an official document to prove Jessie was their adopted daughter, she travelled to Canada under the Janz name. Officials questioned why the elderly couple had such a young daughter, but the explanation that she was adopted seemed to satisfy them, and she was allowed to proceed.

Jessie, along with Benjamin and Helena Janz, their daughter Helen and her husband Abram Toews with five children, which included Abram's two daughters from his first marriage, Abram's two nephews whose parents had been killed in a bomb blast, plus their first child together, left Konteniusfeld on September 15, 1926. They arrived in England, where, upon inspection, it was discovered that Benjamin and Jessie had Trachoma, even though they had received a Medical Certificate of good health earlier. The rest of the family made the difficult decision to carry on to Canada, while Benjamin and Jessie remained behind at Atlantic Park Hostel in Southampton. They made two visits to the doctor each week to get their eyes checked and receive the "blue stone" treatment. This was a painful procedure which



Benjamin and Helena Janz's windmill in Konteniusfeld, Molotschna Colony



Passport photo of Jessie (standing) with Helena and Benjamin Janz (seated), ca. 1925 or early 1926

left them unable to see for about an hour.

Jessie and Benjamin had meals together every day until Benjamin became very ill. Jessie would get up very early in the morning while everyone was still asleep and sneak into the men's dorms. This way she could tend to Benjamin's needs and bring him drinks to prevent dehydration. She was fearful that he would die. His hands shook so severely that Jessie had to write letters to Helena, who was now living in Winnipeg. They "celebrated" several events during this time, including Christmas, Jessie's 17<sup>th</sup> birthday and Benjamin and Helena's fiftieth wedding anniversary.

The weather in England was quite mild that winter – no snow but a lot of rain. They were not allowed to work but had the freedom to go anywhere they wished. However, there was nothing to do. Jessie's debt was mounting and anything that would cost money added to it. Benjamin had swollen feet, so he wasn't able to walk far, but Jessie took lots of walks along the river and coastal dock with other people, also detained in Southampton. They watched boats coming and going and observed immigrants when they disembarked. It was here that Jessie unexpectedly spotted her sister Margaret, who unknown to Jessie, was also on her way to Canada with her foster parents, Gerhard and Maria Neufeld.

Jessie finally received a clean bill of health and was able to leave Southampton eight months later on May 14, 1927, on the *Empress of Scotland*. Benjamin left for Canada a month later.

(See Jessie on page 5)



(Jessie from page 4)

They were reunited in Winnipeg, where they spent the summer. Jessie moved in with a Jewish family, taking care of their baby. Her employers understood and spoke German. They were wonderful, helpful people who taught her as much as they could and Jessie was an eager learner, determined to make a life in Canada. Jessie taught herself to read English by reading the comics. The pictures helped her learn the words.

Jessie moved to Lethbridge with the Janz family in the fall as son B.B. had bought a farm and secured temporary housing for the winter.

Jessie found work in various domestic jobs in Lethbridge for three years to pay her travel debt, working for Dr. Louis Roy, and later the Ralph Thrall family, who owned the McIntyre Ranch in southern Alberta.

Jessie would get Thursday af-



Jessie taking care of unknown child in Lethbridge, late 1920s

ternoons off and a group of about twenty-five single girls would meet in downtown Lethbridge for a lunch of raisin bread and bologna sandwiches. From there, they

would all go to Mrs. Harder's home for Bible study and visit until 10:00 pm before going home.

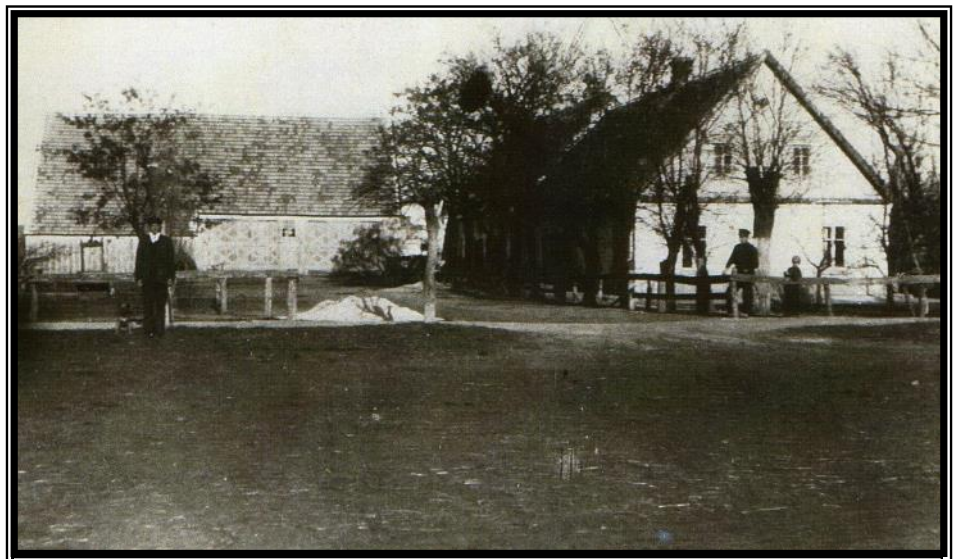
One day while the girls were in the downtown park, a young man named Ja-

cob Willms happened to be downtown too. He was talking to a man and somehow got into a conversation with the group of young ladies. Jessie didn't remember exactly how Jacob found out about her. About the same time that the Willms family had moved from Saskatchewan to Lethbridge (temporarily), the B.B. Janz family, who now had Benjamin and Helena living with him, moved across the street from the Willms household. Perhaps Jacob had first noticed Jessie there.

Jacob went to visit Benjamin and Helena to ask permission to marry



Emigrants in the Atlantic Park Hostel Choir under the direction of Kornelius Enns (sitting in the front row, 5th from left). Jessie sitting in the front row, 4th from left.  
Winter of 1926/1927



Jacob and Helena Willms Wirtschaft #6 in Hierschau, Molotschna Colony, ca. 1909-1926

Jessie. Then on July 17, 1930, Jacob showed up at the front door of the Thrall home where Jessie was working. Jessie asked Jacob to go to the workers' side door as he was not a guest of the Thralls. Jacob had to introduce himself since Jessie really didn't even know his first name. He wasted

(See Jessie on page 6)

(Jessie from page 5)

no time in asking her if she would be willing to get to know him and maybe love him. Jessie was so shocked; she didn't know what to say!

My grandfather, Jacob J. Willms, was born on July 2, 1905, in Lad-ekopp, Molotschna Colony. He was the second oldest child of Jacob and Helena (Janzen) Willms. Jacob's family moved in 1909 to Wirtschaft #6 in Hierschau and his father became the *Schulze* (Mayor) of the village for a



Jacob and Helena Willms family, prior to November 1925.  
Front L-R: Mary, Margaret, Helena, Jakob Sr, Abram, Jacob Jr.  
Back L-R: Aganeta, Frank, John, Aaron, Henry, Helen

time.

When Jacob was close to reaching the age when he would be conscripted into the Soviet Army, he looked for a way to avoid it. He found an old address of distant relatives in Nebraska lying in a drawer and secretly wrote to them, asking for help. About a month and a half later, he received a return letter, saying they had sent money on his behalf. The quota of immigrants to the United States was filled, but a relative in Saskatchewan would take him. Now he was committed!

Jacob set out on November 5, 1925, from the Lichtenau train station, only to be turned back once he reached Moscow due to an eye infection. Disappointed, he returned home, received treatment and once again set out on November 25, 1925, travelling through Moscow, Sebezh, Riga, and then boarding a small freight ship carrying butchered pigs to England. In Liverpool, he boarded the SS Montrose on December 18, 1925, and set out for a stormy voyage, where most passengers were sick, arriving in Saint John, New Brunswick on December 27, 1925.

Jacob travelled by train across Canada, arriving in Winnipeg on New Year's Eve, then to the Rosthern, Saskatchewan area. He worked for a time clearing trees and bush, then later with a threshing crew.

After holding an auction sale, Jacob's parents and nine siblings left Hierschau on April 10, 1926, headed for Moscow. When they appeared before the Commission, they were declared to Mexico, even though they didn't want to go there. The family had to spend five days in quarantine, with insects and rats, before leaving on a route that included Riga, Lithuania, Berlin, Rotterdam, France, Spain, then Cuba. They arrived in Veracruz, Mexico on May 25, continuing on to Mexico City, Irapuato-Guanajuato and San Juan. The family spent the summer working at the Enns farm while they awaited their paperwork for Canada. They left Mexico on October 4 by train, along with the Ewert and Siemens families, travelling north through El Paso, San Antonio, Dallas, Kansas City, St. Paul and crossing the border at Emerson, Manitoba. They eventually arrived in Rosthern on October 12 and were reunited with Jacob.

The family spent the winter in Waldheim, Saskatchewan with the Frank Kroeker family before buying a farm in Davidson, Saskatchewan without one cent down payment and while the land was covered with two feet of snow. They moved there in February 1927, and once the snow melted, they realized the soil was very sandy, resulting in a very poor crop. They could not make it financially, and Jacob said, "For us newcomers, everything was foreign – soil, culture, language, so it was very easy to make mistakes."

They packed up in February 1928, and moved to Lethbridge, Alberta for a few months before buying a farm near Cowley, Alberta.

(See Jessie on page 7)



(Jessie from page 6)

It was after Jacob and his family moved to Alberta that Jacob spotted Jessie, walked up to her employer's house and asked for her hand in marriage. Jessie made Jacob wait a while to answer his proposal, but in time, she replied with a yes.

Jacob and Jessie were married on November 2, 1930, in the Coaldale MB Church and spent that winter in Coaldale, Alberta while Jacob went to Bible School as employment was difficult to find. In the spring of 1931, Jacob and Jessie moved to the Cowley area where they lived with Jacob's parents and family.

The Jacob Willms Sr family, along with the Mrs. Peter Dyck family, farmed together for several years on either side of the South Fork River, later renamed Castle River. Peter Dyck had been murdered in Hierschau right after their auction. After burying Peter, his widow, Katharina, left for Canada with her children.

During this time, the Willmses temporarily sheltered two of Jacob Sr's brothers, Heinrich and Abram, and their families who had also emigrated. After several years, they realized the farm was not lucrative enough to support multiple families, so the Jacob Willms Sr family left and moved east of Pincher Creek, while searching for a farm in the Rosemary, Alberta area.

Shortly after Jacob and Jessie welcomed their first child, they were asked to move in with Helena Janz to help her following the tragic death of Benjamin Janz Sr, who was struck and killed by a drunk driver in Coaldale while walking to an evening prayer service on Janu-

ary 8, 1932. The family did not want to convict the driver; they only requested he attend the funeral.

On April 7, 1932, tragedy struck again when Jacob Willms Sr died unexpectedly of a stroke at the age of fifty-four. Helena Willms moved to the Nortondale area of Coaldale after her sons built her a house there. She remained in Coaldale until her death in 1951 at age seventy-four.

In Coaldale, Jacob and Jessie found jobs in the beet fields in summer and Jacob with the threshing crews in the fall. There was no work in winter. They had a garden, chickens and a cow, which helped to provide food in the winter. They had to buy flour, sugar and other staples.

On November 17, 1939, while Jessie was pregnant with her fourth child, they were out working in the beet fields. It was raining, but they wanted to finish a few rows. Jessie got very cold and wet. When they arrived home, she had a high temperature and was admitted to hospital with pneumonia. There, little Margaret was born prematurely at eight months and died after a few hours. Mrs. Aaron Goertzen took care of the body. Jacob's bother Frank made a coffin. Abraham Brauer had a Bible reading and prayer with Jacob and the older children. After that, they took the body, dressed as a bride, to the hospital so Jessie could see it. Baby Margaret was laid to rest in the Coaldale Mennonite Cemetery.

Jacob and Jessie prayed for a farm. In February 1940, they learned of a Mr. John Braniff who had a farm for rent near Pincher Creek. Jacob hitchhiked to Pincher Creek to meet with him. They struck a deal and in March 1940, Jacob and Jessie with their three children moved east of Pincher Creek.



Mennonite Brethren Church of Pincher Creek congregation, 1955.  
Rev. David Durksen, far right

In 1944, they were given the opportunity to buy a half section (320 acres) of land two miles to the east of Mr. Braniff's. They purchased the land; contact was maintained with Mr. Braniff, and they helped each other out. The house on the new farm had only two rooms and it was much too

(See Jessie on page 8)

(Jessie from page 7)

small for their growing family. There was also no water, so the cattle had to be herded across the road to the neighbour for watering. Domestic water was hauled in from other neighbours. Jacob did not want to build another house because of the water situation, so they prayed for another farm.

When Mrs. Mansfield passed away in 1946, Jacob worked the land for Mr. Mansfield. It was about four miles away. Jacob asked Mr. Mansfield if he could buy the farm (640 acres). It had only been two years since they bought their farm, so they borrowed from the bank, sold all their cattle except one cow and two calves in order to make the down payment on the purchase of the farm. Subsequent payments were made from the sale of grain produced on the farm. They initially lived in an old house on that property, since the construction of Mr. Mansfield's new house was not yet completed due to his wife's death.

The harvest was good the first year. Men were needed for stooking and Jacob was able to hire two German prisoners-of-war from the Lethbridge camp. Getting help presented no problems because Jessie always cooked good meals. A neighbour asked if his threshing could be done before Jacob's, but winter set in, leaving the crop in the field and spelling a big loss the first year.

Despite three years of crop failures, the twenty-eight years spent on this farm held some of their happiest memories.

In the early years, the family attended Blumenthaler Mennonite Church (later renamed Springridge) located east of the farm. When the Mennonite Brethren Church of Pincher Creek began, the family started attending there, first in town, then later in the country when a building was constructed. Rev. David Durksen was Pastor for as long as the church was located in the country. The building was moved to the town of Pincher Creek in 1969.

Jacob and Jessie lived and farmed near Pincher Creek until 1969, when they retired and moved to Lethbridge, Alberta.

In 1987, Jacob and Jessie had the privilege of travelling to Germany to visit Jessie's sister, Maria, who had relocated to Germany from Russia. They hadn't seen each other in sixty-one years!

Jessie's sister, Tina, joined Mary in Germany two years later and Jacob and Jessie made the trip to Germany again to see her and other extended family members. Jessie had not seen Tina in sixty-three years. It was not until this time that Jessie was finally able to piece together much of her past. She spent many hours questioning her sisters who she was getting reacquainted with. Tina said that Jessie was the sibling most like their mother.

In 1990, Jacob and Jessie celebrated their sixtieth wedding anniversary and many relatives, including her sister Tina, age eighty-five at the time, travelled from Germany to join in the celebrations. Jessie's sister, Margaret from Ontario also came, and she reunited with Tina whom she had not seen in sixty-four years!

Jacob passed away in 1995 and Jessie in 2005 after living a life of faithfulness to God and trusting Him every step of the way. Both are buried in the Mountain View Cemetery in Lethbridge, Alberta.

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*Melissa Friesen and her husband Russ live on a ranch near Pincher Creek about one mile from where her grandparents farmed for twenty-eight years. She works full-time off and part-time on the ranch and enjoys researching her family history in her spare time. ❖*



Reunion of sisters Tina, Jessie and Margaret at Jacob and Jessie's sixtieth wedding anniversary in Lethbridge, 1990



(China from page 1)

chosen the well-known Chinese peddler/smuggler, Alexander, as their guide. Already, he had taken two scouts from our village Shumanovka (Note from Hart: my Uncle Isaak and Mr. Fehderau) safely over the border and back to scout out the situation. They negotiated a deal. They made an agreement with the Chinese guide that every family would give him their best horse once he had brought them safely to the Chinese side of the river. If the escape would be successful, this would be a great business opportunity for one night of work. He gladly accepted this.

Now the much-anticipated day, December 15th, had arrived. In feverish excitement the father of every family saw to it that everything was ready and prepared for the escape. In great impatience and excitement, the people could hardly wait for the evening to come. As night fell, a number of men went to the village teacher, as well as to another farmer. These two were considered unreliable and seriously suspected of being compromised by the G.P.U. (secret police). To their utter astonishment, the whole undertaking was presented to them and they were urged to join in the escape across the border. The citizens of Shumanovka feared that they would refuse to go with them. If so, they would have been forcibly taken along. This seemed very necessary so that the whole group would not be betrayed to the G.P.U. by these two. But force was not needed. The teacher and the farmer promptly agreed to come along and they quickly got ready after they were given some clothes needed to join the group to escape across the border. But a young sev-

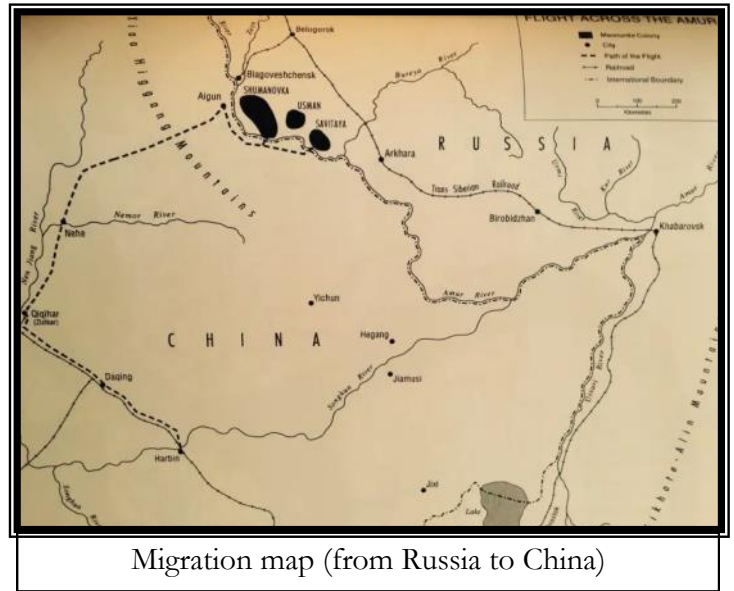
en or eight year-old boy from the neighbouring village had come to visit his uncle. To prevent betrayal, the poor boy also had to participate in the escape.

Now the much-anticipated evening was here. The plan was to set out around 9 p.m.

When the announcement was sent around: "Get ready," that would be the time to harness the horses and set out. Everyone was sitting and waiting with great excitement and with hearts thumping. They had no appetite for their supper, which had been prepared in a hurry, because they were too excited and agitated to eat. Now the message was suddenly passed from house to house that the plan wouldn't work for that day. What disappointment! So, what was going on? A delegation from the nearby village of Newjork had arrived at Mr. Jakob Siemens's place and had demanded that the departure be postponed for eight days, since Newjork had not yet finished their preparations for the escape. Mr. Siemens tried to make it clear to them that such a long delay was very dangerous. He explained that the whole plan could be betrayed and then they would all be lost. The men, however, stuck with their demand for a delay, and they couldn't be persuaded. "If you don't wait for us, we'll report you to the authorities," was their threat. It was big enough to intimidate Mr. Siemens and persuade him to give in to them. So, the escape was postponed for better or worse.

The people of Newjork were suspicious, so they were constantly watching the bustling of the people in Shumanovka with guards posted at the end of the village. Because the preparations had to remain very secret, everything in the house was put back in its place for the morning. My grandfather's big clock also had to be hung back on the wall. Should someone suddenly come to visit us, there should be nothing to make them suspicious. My uncle, Abram Wiens, from the village of Friedensfeld, was there that night to take part in the escape. Since it was now delayed, he had to go back home with his family and the children were back at school the next morning. So, my parents really got, should I say, unwanted visitors from the village Friedensfeld. They were there for lunch and supper.

During the day, that is now on December 16th, the leaders of Shumanovka held a secret meeting on how to proceed in this critical situation. Since postponement of the escape for eight days was too big a risk and almost a crime against their own lives and the lives of their families it was agreed, despite the promise they had made, that they would leave without the people of Newjork after all. The departure would be that night. The



Migration map (from Russia to China)

(See China on page 10)

*(China from page 9)*

announcement went from house to house again that they should be ready for that evening. The evening was approaching, again we were eagerly waiting for the announcement: "Get ready." Today, at around 10 p.m., it should happen. Again, we have lost our appetite at supper out of fear and anxiety. We look forward to the daring escape plan with heavy and fearful hearts. The spies from Newjork are back and are watching carefully up and down the street to see what is going on in the individual yards. We sat and waited.

There was a knock at the door. Was the announcement being made yet? No, it was our neighbour, Isaac Wiens. He'd been instructed by the leadership to take charge of the group's security. He asked if someone could go to the end of the village and listen to see whether there was anything that could be heard on the main road leading to the headquarters of the G.P.U. Twin brothers Abram and Gerhard Friesen willingly went out of the village and listened and peered attentively in the direction of Konstantinovka, where the headquarters of the G.P.U. was located. It was bitterly cold. The thermometer went down to 40 degrees below and lower. In the direction they were watching, it is very quiet, and they wanted to go back to the village. Suddenly they heard the crunch of snow from a great distance in the other direction. A great shock went through all their limbs, and they stood still as if they had been nailed to the ground. Who could still be out this late at night? Had they been betrayed? Was it perhaps the G.P.U. that wanted to thwart the plan? But no, it was just a sleigh from the neighbouring village of Friedensfeld that was driving at a brisk pace to join the escape.

With the shock of this late visit, it was now 12 o'clock midnight. Because it was so bitterly cold, the Newjork guards had left their stations and gone home. Now that the shock was over and everything was quiet again, the anticipated announcement comes: "Get ready." Now there was a mysterious running back and forth throughout the village. The cattle were released and driven out of the barns. They were now given complete freedom. The heart of everyone in the group was beating as if ready to burst. In our house, too, everyone was on their feet and getting ready in feverish haste. Everyone packed what they wanted to take with them in the sled in order to suppress their inner turmoil. Our cattle, too, were given the golden gift of liberty at father's command. The lamps were not to be extinguished, and the uneaten supper left on the table. Everything that was dear to us was left behind. A prearranged sign was given, and the line of sleds started moving. Through every courtyard gate the sleds drove out into the street. There was now a long row of sled after sled, around 60 sleds in all. The Chinese guide Alexander strode at the head of the line. All the other sleds followed one after the other. Several men were riding alone beside the caravan. They ensured that everything was orderly and saw that no-one was left behind. Many men walked next to the sleds to keep warm. Word was sent from sled-to-sled warning everyone to keep calm and to avoid breaking the silence so as not to cause a disturbance.

The group moved forward, and everyone was preoccupied with their thoughts. "Well, goodbye, my dear Homeland!" That was what was going through every heart, and everyone was experiencing more or less in the same way what it meant to leave their dear homeland in anticipation of

such an uncertain future. Some sent up a silent prayer. An entire village was on the way to the Amur River to escape across the border. And if we got across safely and if we didn't drive straight into disaster, what would be our destiny on the other side of the river? The sleigh caravan proceeded out of the village as silently as a funeral procession. We drove for a stretch on the straight road out of the village, but then we turned off the road and began to plow through knee-deep snow across the wide-open fields, to keep as far away as possible from the border guards.

The cold was still increasing and it was almost unbearable. The hard-frozen snow crunched so loudly under the sleds that we were afraid to be betrayed by this sound. The lead horses that had to break a trail in the knee-deep snow had a particularly difficult time pulling their sleds. It was about 18 to 20 kilometres to the Amur River. This put a heavy demand on the horses pulling the sleds across these pathless, snowy fields. After some distance, we came to a Russian village, the first base of the border guards. We made a detour around this village. There was fear of being discovered and that doom would overtake us from this village. But everything stayed calm and soon the village was far behind us.

The further we went now, the harder the journey became. There were deep ravines and steep hills. This was now very difficult for the rearmost sled, because the snow had been packed down solid into slippery ice. The horses then had to use all their strength to climb these hills. Often the sleds bumped into tree stumps. Some also tipped

*(See China on page 11)*

(China from page 10)

over, which was unpleasant and caused delays. My uncle David Friesen's horse suddenly became stubborn and didn't want to continue. Love didn't help, nor did blows. It bent over and broke the sled. It was close to where the border guards made their daily ride. What would happen now? Would the guard show up suddenly? We trembled all over with fear. And yet action had to be taken. The sled was quickly moved aside to be tinkered together as best as possible. The frost penetrated mercilessly, and we had to continually examine our limbs to see if there was still life in them, because all too quickly fingertips, nose, ears, or toes could become frozen. Then they must be aggressively rubbed with snow to bring life back into them again. In such circumstances the work moves forward very slowly. They managed to repair the damage to the sled, and the travel could continue again. The sled of our neighbour, P. Janzen, also broke. He had loaded his family, along with a whole butchered beef, onto his sled. The load was too heavy, and so the sled broke up and could no longer be repaired. The family members were quickly loaded onto other sleds, which was not that easy, because all the sleds were quite overcrowded. The broken sled was just dragged to the side and left behind with the beautiful, fresh beef.

After a long, arduous journey and many stops along the way, with extreme nervous tension over the danger of colliding with the border guards, we came close to the Amur River. We still had to pass the Russian village of Orlovka. The journey almost seemed like

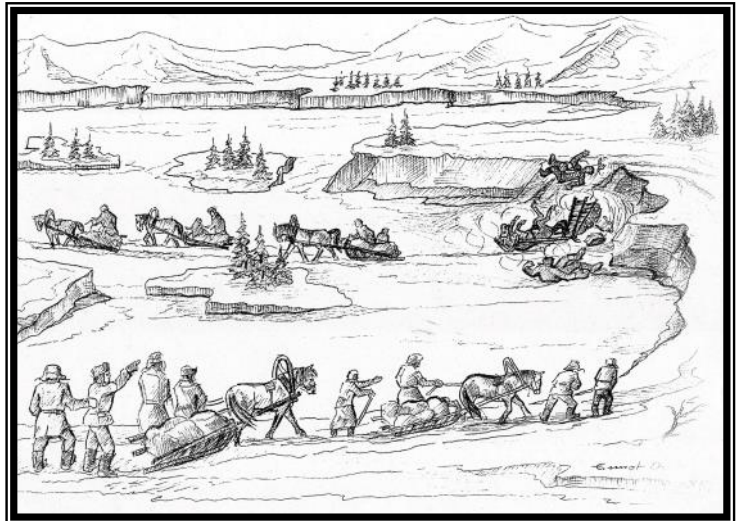
an eternity to us. And now the dangerous Orlovka, where a border patrol of 20 men with machine guns were guarding the border. It was already beginning to dawn and we could hear dogs barking and roosters crowing in the village. Would the machine gun suddenly rattle, mowing through our ranks? Here the road got worse and worse and more and more sleds broke down under the load and were then somehow patched together. It was not very far from that dangerous village to where the sleds had to be patched up. It was a miracle that the border guards seemed not to see or hear anything, as if their eyes were kept from seeing.

The front sleds finally arrived on the bank of the river. The bank dropped off steeply here about three meters high. It was very dangerous to jump down that high. The horses now became unwilling to move and they hung back. But they had to be forced to go down, because there was no other way out. So, the men were called together. While some helped at the top to push the sleds down the slope, the others picked them up at the bottom. It was arduous, hard work, and the men were sweating in spite of the bitter cold. Even

if the men below worked together to grab ahold of the falling sleds, several broke apart on the hard ice. The things packed on the sleds flew out and were all jumbled together. Women and children had to get out at the top and slide down the slope. The broken sleds

were quickly repaired again. Everyone was up and at it. Everyone had to somehow help along. Even so, it was a tedious and laborious job. It was getting lighter and there were still several sleds up on the bank.

The dangerous Orlovka village was only one kilometre away from us. How was it possible that the border guards were so mild and sluggish today? Would they suddenly ambush us due to the delay? There was no time to ponder. Everyone had to work as hard as possible and do their part so that we could leave this dangerous riverside as quickly as possible. Finally, the last sled was down on the ice and the foremost sleds were already far away on the Amur River. Our armed riders now formed the rear guard and looked back anxiously at Orlovka, wondering whether the border guards might suddenly rush up to attack us. But through a miracle of God, no guards appeared. Everyone was off at a full trot on the firm ice, which was covered with a light blanket of snow. Now the distance between us and the Russian bank kept growing. After going straight forward on the ice for a stretch, we then had to meander between islands and open spaces. The



Crossing the Amur River

(See China on page 12)



(China from page 11)

horses were urged to go faster. As my siblings Johann, Suse, and Abram were further forward on another sled, they were on Chinese soil sooner than we were. We were among the last and were still on the ice at sunrise. That was nerve wracking. Would the G.P.U. maybe catch us even now? But, thank God, we also reached the Chinese shore safely. Soon we were surrounded by curious Chinese. But the parents couldn't breathe a sigh of relief just yet, because the fear of the cruel G.P.U. was too great. Even now, they could not suppress the thought that we could still be sent back even from here.

We drove into the Chinese village of Kani-Fu, where we were given a friendly and accommodating welcome. With a deep sigh of relief, heartfelt thanksgiving prayers were sent up to heaven. Two hundred and seventeen people had escaped the communist land in a wonderful way, and under divine guidance. Of these, one hundred and seventy-five were from our village, Shumanovka. It was almost unbelievable that we were actually finally in freedom and no longer living in fear of the G.P.U. Or was all we went through that night just a dream? But no, it was not a dream. It was real. We were saved! Praise and thank God, and we cried tears of joy. ❖

## Transfer documents and Mennonite Genealogy

By Glenn H. Penner  
gpenner@uoguelph.ca

Mennonites have frequently been referred to as a “people on the move”. This expression, which is usually used to emphasize the many migrations undertaken by Mennonites over the centuries, describes only the tip of the iceberg. Mennonite movement between locations or congregations, often within a larger community and independent of migration was commonplace. One simply needs to read the letters in the early issues of the *Mennonitische Rundschau* to see how people had a hard time keeping up with the movements of their relatives. [ 1 ] This frequent movement of Mennonite ancestors has been the cause of much grief among genealogists. Reliably documenting the connection between two people with the same name, and who may be the same person, but lived in different communities at different times has always been a challenge. There are two potential sources for following transfers between locations: 1) church transfer documentation and 2) government documentation.

### Part 1 – The Church Attest

A longstanding Mennonite tradition is the *Attest* or Attestation. The *Attest* was a letter written by the *Ältester* of the congregation, attesting to member's good standing within the congregation, and was a requirement for transfer of a member from one *Gemeinde* to another. [ 2 ] The exceptions might be cases where the member was expelled from the congregation and was accepted by another willing to take them or where the member left a congregation in order to join another. The latter was usually the case for

the early Mennonite Brethren. In nearly all of these cases there was no change of location.

In 1581, the Waterlander congregations in the Netherlands (usually referred to as the Frisian congregation in Prussia) made the *Attestatie* a requirement for membership transfer. [ 3 ] When the *Attest* became a fixed tradition and a requirement in the Low-German Mennonite community is not known. Certainly, already during the early years of the Mennonite presence in Poland/Prussia, such letters were being requested by transferring members in order to ensure their acceptance in a new congregation or required of the incoming member by the *Ältester*. One of the earliest examples is the letter written in 1719 by the Frisian *Ältester* Heinrich van Dueren (Hinrich van Dieren) for Heinrich Penner (Hinrich Penner), who was moving from Danzig to Amsterdam (see Figure 1). [ 4 ]

Since many hundreds of Mennonites changed membership during the early years in Prussia and Russia, we should expect a significant number of these *Attesten* to have survived. The *Attest* was handed over to the *Ältester* of the new congregation upon transfer. After the new member was formally presented to the congregation there was little need to keep the *Attest*. Although many of the Prussian Mennonite church registers are still around, not one *attest* is known to have survived. [ 5 ] There are a few *Attesten* for those who moved from Prussia to the Netherlands and kept by the Dutch congregations. In Russia the situation is much worse, as only a small fraction of Mennonite church registers are known to have

(See *Transfer* on page 13)

(Transfer from page 12)

survived. [ 6 ] Some members of the church in Russia did receive Attesten to take along to Canada in the 1920s. Some of these do exist, but this is much later in the Russian Mennonite period.

Heinrich Donner, the Ältester of the Frisian Orloffersfelde congregation, included church transfers in the church register he started in 1772. I have translated and posted these [ 7 ]. Gerhard Wiebe, the Ältester of the Flemish congregation in Elbing-Ellerwald, made note in his diary of the Attesten he gave out and took in for the years 1778 to 1788. I have extracted and posted these, as well as those for the Danzig Flemish church (1802-1806). [ 8 ]

One problem with the attestation system was that it was completely under the control of the congregational Ältester. Personal animosity between an Ältester and member wanting to transfer or between the two Ältester often made transfers very difficult. The Donner diary mentions how people had a hard time transferring in and out of the Thiensdorf (Frisian) congregation due to the stubbornness of Ältester Jacob Siebert. [ 9 ]. During the Polish period (pre-1772) and the early Prussian period, Flemish congregations were reluctant to take in those transferring from the Frisian churches. Donner relates how, in 1782, Jacob Ketler of his congregation wanted to marry into the Flemish Ladekopp congregation. The Ladekopp ministry refused to accept his attest since he belonged to the Frisian church. On the other hand the Flemish Heubuden congregation was willing to do so. This was the original congregation of the family of the wife,

Anna Wall. The Ältester played a bit of a shell game, whereby Ketler transferred to Heubuden and then, as a member of the Flemish, was able to transfer to the Ladekopp congregation. [ 9 ] Donner mentions a rare case where a Flemish Mennonite transferred to the Thiensdorf Frisian church and was married in that church by Ältester Johann Siebert without an Attest. [ 9 ] This was Dirk Neufeld of Baalau, later Katznaserfeld, who married Sara Allert in 1784. [ 10 ]

In the mid-1800s many Mennonite congregations switched from keeping birth, marriage and death registers, to family registers. Many of these have information on where the family came from, if they originated in another congregation, or where they went, if they left the congregation. [ 11 ]

## Part 2: Government Records of Transfers

Essentially nothing exists for government or property transfer records from the former West Prussia. Although there are many property records of various kinds [ 12 ], these records tell us who the owners, previous owners and purchasers were, but not where they came from or where they moved to.

The situation in Russia was rather different. This is mostly due to the extensive record keeping of the Guardianship Committee for Foreign Settlers (GCFS) [ 13 ], who kept careful track of who moved where. Many of the GCFS documents have been transcribed or translated. [ 14 ]. Mennonites, like most other Imperial Russian subjects were required to pay the head tax. This required that everyone be registered to a location. This registration was kept track of through regular censuses. Each census resulted in a new, revised list of all those paying the head tax. Such a list is usually called a Revision List (RL) in both English and German, and Ревизионские сказки (Revizskie skazki) in Russian. Revision Lists relevant to Mennonites were conducted in 1795, 1808, 1811, 1816, 1835, 1850 and 1858. If someone moved from one location to another, that move was noted in the following RL, which noted the previous registration location and year of move. If the person immigrated to Russia, the year of immigration (but rarely location of origin) was noted. Very few of these lists, relevant to Mennonites, still exist. Most have been transcribed or translated. [ 15 ].

The GCFS kept particularly careful track of the movements of landowners. A landowner could not dispose of his property without the consent of the other landowners in that village and could not move to, and purchase land in another village without the consent of those landowners. The landowners of each village would have to sign a *Gemeindespruch*, which was a type of community proclamation. See figure 2. These documents were often accompanied by extracts for the family from the most recent revision list. The GCFS dissolved in 1871 and *Gemeindespruch* documents are not found after that. Local governments still kept track of movement within the colonies. The Russian government also kept track of internal movement within the country [ 16 ].

Of particular interest are the lists of property transfers within the Molotschna colony for most of the years between 1836 and 1862. These were part of the records of the Agricultural Association (*Verein zur fordereamen Verbreitung des Gebölz-, Garten-, Seiden- und Weinbaus* [Society for the Effective

(See Transfer on page 14)

(Transfer from page 13)

Promotion of Afforestation, Horticulture, Silk-Industry, and Vine-Culture)]. [ 17 ] I have recently transcribed this list [ 18 ].

Sources:

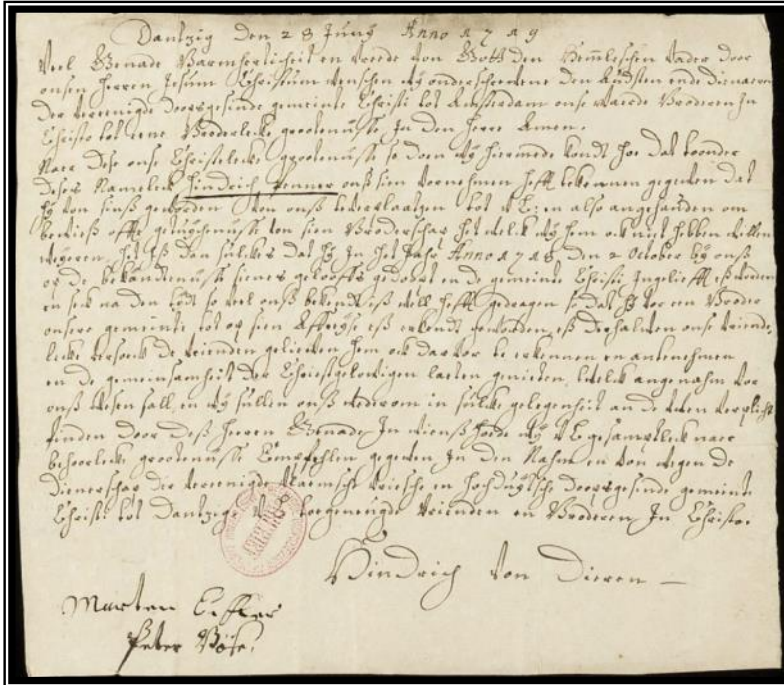
1. The Mennonitische Rundschau can be found online here: [https://archive.org/details/pub\\_die-mennonitische-rundschau](https://archive.org/details/pub_die-mennonitische-rundschau)
2. For an example from 1793 see <https://www.mharchives.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Item-1-Stadsarchief-Amsterdam1120-318OrlofAttest-Edit.pdf>
3. See the GAMEO article here: <https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Attestatie>
4. Amsterdam Stadsarchief. Fond 1120 File 254.
5. Goertz, Adalbert. *Genealogical Sources of the Prussian Mennonites*. Mennonite Quarterly Review, Oct. 1981 372-380.
6. Glenn Penner. *Russian Mennonite Church Records: What Has Survived and Where They Are Now*. Mennonite Historian, Mar. 2019, p. 3
7. See here: <https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/Orlofffelderfelden%20Transfers%201772-1804.htm>
8. See: <https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/Attesten%20Elbing%20Ellerwald%201779-1794.pdf> and <https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/Danzig%20Attesten%201802-1806.pdf>
9. Heinrich Donner Tagbuch (1774-1806). Translated by Tim Flaming and Glenn Penner. <https://www.mharchives.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Heinrich-Donner-Diary-12-Feb-2023.pdf> a) pages 38 & 39, b) page 52.
10. Thiensdorf, West Prussia, Mennonite church records. [https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/churchregisters/Oestliche%20preussische%20Provinzen%20und%20Polen%20\(Teil\)/Thiensdorf%20-%201776-1834.html](https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/churchregisters/Oestliche%20preussische%20Provinzen%20und%20Polen%20(Teil)/Thiensdorf%20-%201776-1834.html)
11. See, for example, the family registers of Heubuden ( [https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/churchregisters/Oestliche%20preussische%20Provinzen%20und%20Polen%20\(Teil\)/Heubuden%20-%20Familienbuch%20ab%201888.html](https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/churchregisters/Oestliche%20preussische%20Provinzen%20und%20Polen%20(Teil)/Heubuden%20-%20Familienbuch%20ab%201888.html) ), Ladekopp ( [https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/churchregisters/Oestliche%20preussische%20Provinzen%20und%20Polen%20\(Teil\)/Ladekopp%20-%20Familienbuch%20ab%201830.html](https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/churchregisters/Oestliche%20preussische%20Provinzen%20und%20Polen%20(Teil)/Ladekopp%20-%20Familienbuch%20ab%201830.html) ) and Rosenort ( [https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/churchregisters/Oestliche%20preussische%20Provinzen%20und%20Polen%20\(Teil\)/Rosenort%20-%20Familienbuch%20ab%201858.html](https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/churchregisters/Oestliche%20preussische%20Provinzen%20und%20Polen%20(Teil)/Rosenort%20-%20Familienbuch%20ab%201858.html) ).
12. See, for example: [https://mla.bethelks.edu/metadata/VI\\_53.html](https://mla.bethelks.edu/metadata/VI_53.html) , <https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/grlubin.htm> , <https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/KleinLubin.htm> , <https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/courts.htm> , <https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/lander.htm> , <https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/marienw.htm> , <https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/prussia/Schwetz%20Mennonite%20Properties%201788-1824.pdf>
13. See the corresponding GAMEO article: [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=F%C3%BCrsorge-Komitee\\_\(Guardians%27%20Committee\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=F%C3%BCrsorge-Komitee_(Guardians%27%20Committee)) .
14. See, for example: <https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/1835%20Molotschna%20Transfers.htm> , <https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/1852%20Chortitza%20Land%20Transfers.pdf> , <https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/1853%20Chortitza%20Land%20Transfers.html> ,
15. A very good example of this is the 1835 census of the Molotschna Mennonite colony. This census has never been published in English. A handwritten translation can be purchased from the Mennonite Heritage Archives. This census has been added to the GRANDMA database.
16. A recently translated example is for those moving to the Barnaul, or Slavgorod, settlement in Siberia in 1907-15. See <https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/Barnaul%20Region%20Settlement%20Documents.pdf> . The information from this document has been added to the GRANDMA database.
17. See: [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Agricultural%20Association%20\(South%20Russia\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Agricultural%20Association%20(South%20Russia)) .
18. <https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/Molotschna%20Property%20Transfers%201836-1862.pdf>



(See Transfer on page 15)



(Transfer from page 14)



**Figure 1:** The Attest for the transfer of Hinrich Penner to transfer from the Danzig-Neugarten (Frisian) congregation to the Zon (Waterlander) Mennonite congregation in the Netherlands

**Figure 1 Translation**

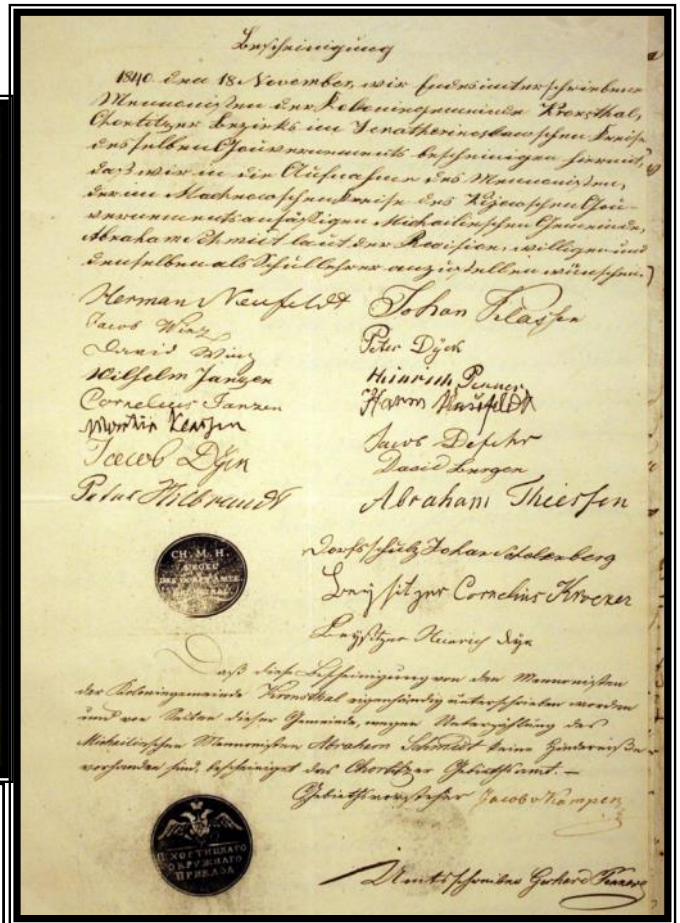
Translation by Lydia Penner: Danzig, June 28, 1719

We, the undersigned, wish the bishops and ministers of the United Mennonite congregation of Christ in Amsterdam, our worthy brothers in Christ, abundant grace, mercy, and peace from God the heavenly Father through our Lord Jesus Christ: a brotherly greeting in the Lord. Amen.

Having given our Christian greetings, we hereby let you know that the person showing this letter, namely Hindrich Penner, has announced from his Veenshamer Heim (?) that he wants to leave us and go to you. He has persisted in requesting a certificate or a testimony from his brotherhood. We did not want to refuse this, and on October 2, 1718, he showed us the old confession, which he believes, and on which he was baptized in the congregation of Christ's gospel. He then left for the city. As far as we know, his conduct has been good, and he has been recognized as a brother of our congregation until his departure. We therefore request the friends kindly to recognize him as such, and to accept him, and to allow him to enjoy the fellowship of the believers in Christ, which would please us.

Further, we take the opportunity of our writing to greet all of you of the Zon appropriately again, commending you to the goodness of His grace in His name, from the church council of the United Flemish, Frisian, and High German Doopsgezinde congregation of Christ in Danzig.

Your affectionate friends and brothers in Christ,  
 Hindrich van Dirren  
 Marten Ecker(?)  
 Peter Böse(?)



**Figure 2.** The 1840 transfer document for the move of Abraham Schmidt from the village of Michalin in Vohlynia to Kronsthal in the Chortitz colony. The document is signed by the Kronsthal landowners, including Heinrich Penner (GM#197449), my ancestor. Odessa State Archives, Ukraine. Fond 6 Opis 1 Delo 5370

## Abram Peter Willms (1882-1959) - Delegate #39 Second Martyrs' Synod<sup>1</sup> GM#426424<sup>2</sup> – Minister/Farmer/Poet

By Edward Krahn

Abram Peter Willms was born on April 11, 1882, in Rueckenau, Molotschna Colony, Ukraine, the middle child of Peter Willems (GM#316911) and Katharina Fast (GM#1029857). He was baptized in May, 1903 in Rueckenau, Molotschna. He married Anna Reimer (1882-1946) (GM#13114), the daughter of Aron Reimer (GM#10950) and Katharina Ens (GM#13107) on June 15, 1903, in Fuerstenwerder, Molotschna. Later in life he married the widow Helena (Penner) Funk (GM#621905) in 1947 in Coaldale, Alberta. His marriage to Anna Reimer resulted in the birth of four sons and six daughters, two of which died in early childhood. After a long illness, he died on November 19, 1959, in Coaldale. He is buried in the Coaldale Mennonite Cemetery in Coaldale, Alberta.<sup>3</sup>

He received his education at Fuerstenwerder and was also tutored and mentored by the evangelist Jacob G Thiessen<sup>4</sup> who had been impacted by exposure to

the German Alianz movement in Russia. In his early years, his lack of advanced education took away joy and his desire to be a minister, yet on February 11, 1913 he was called by the Mennonite Brethren Church to the ministry, previously having served as church secretary and Sunday School teacher. He was also a historian and the church accountant, keeping a record of the major events in the life of the church and community.

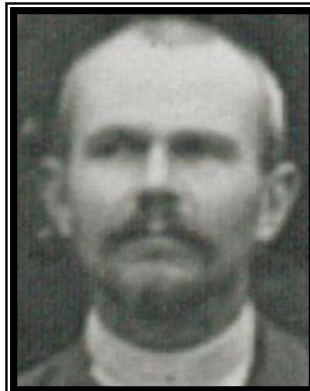
Besides farming he also worked as an assistant to the mayor, and his leadership role was noted when he was selected to attend the 1925 Second Martyrs' Synod in Moscow. In January of 1925, under the auspices of the *Kommission fuer Kirchenangelegenheiten* (KfK)<sup>5</sup> at a time of great tur-



Edward Krahn



1925 Second Martyrs' Synod delegates in Moscow



Close-up of Abram Peter Willms, from the 1925 Synod delegates photo in Moscow

moil, delegates across the Mennonite Commonwealth arrived to discuss future directions and to find ways to ensure basic human rights for the Mennonite community. In the previous May of 1924, the KfK had submitted a petition to the Soviets. They had gathered to hear the response to the petition and to plot further directions, as Mennonites were facing major changes following the revolution. In the end, the delegates had achieved only one of the items they had petitioned for which was the short-lived periodical *Unser Blatt*. They resubmitted the petition.

The resulting repression of the 77 by the State Political Directorate (GPU) led to the torture, imprisonment in the Gulags, and execution of most of the delegates who stayed behind<sup>6</sup>. Only a very few died of natural causes. By 1927 it was already too late for some as the arrests began. Only 20 of those leaders got out of which 18 ended up in Canada<sup>7</sup>. Aron A Toews, who in his two-volume publication *Mennonitische Märtyrer* recounted the story of many of the leaders, had termed the phrase Second Martyrs' Synod for this monumental meeting.

In October of 1926 there was a futile second final conference to lobby the government with the gathering of the All-Ukrainian Mennonite delegates in Melitopol<sup>8</sup>, with only a few observers from outside of the Ukraine allowed to attend due to strict travel restrictions. At this conference the two Soviet Government overseers played a stronger role than just observing as had been the norm since the time of the last Czar. It was to be the last gathering.

(See Willms on page 17)



(Willms from page 16)

The Moscow Synod had been a pivotal moment for the Russlaender with the decision to stay or to go coming to a head. There was a short window of opportunity to leave. Abram did not attend the Ukrainian meeting as he had already immigrated. It was shortly after the Moscow conference, when noting the precarious nature of Mennonites in the Soviet, the family left Fuerstenwerder on May 25, 1925 for Canada. They travelled on the ship SS Baltara arriving in Liverpool on June 9<sup>th</sup> and leaving for Quebec City on the SS Montcalm arriving on June 20<sup>th</sup><sup>9</sup>.

The family travelled by train from here to Acme, Alberta, where they worked for awhile using the Swalwell and Namaka post offices. By 1926 they had establishing residence by Stirling near Coaldale. It is not a surprise that Willms ended up near Coaldale as his sister arriving about a month later in July of 1925 had settled near there.

The travel debt<sup>10</sup> incurred to travel to Canada, on June 20<sup>th</sup> was listed at \$1,057.90. For the first few years the family placed great efforts in erasing that debt and remarkably he had the debt cleared by November 7, 1928 well before the depression of the 1930s hit which limited many other new arrivals in their ability to pay off the debt well into the '40s!

The Mennonite Board of Colonization files record that most of his correspondence is related to the submission of payments for the family's travel debt. The Mennonite Heritage Archives collection holds the financial records and related correspondence in Vol 1263 of the Canadian Mennonite Board

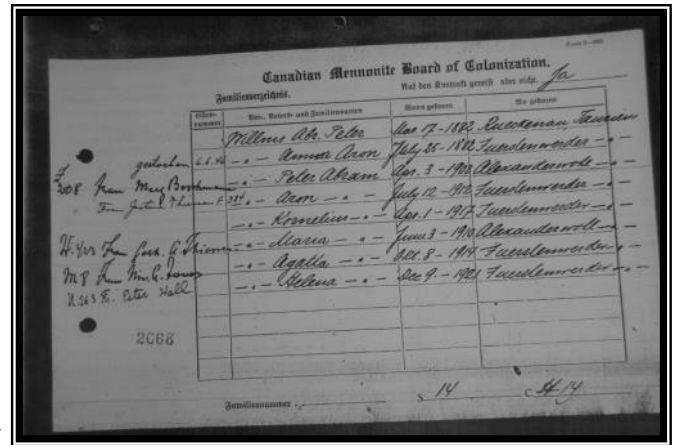
of Colonization fonds. But there were also other letters where he acted as an advocate for other newly arrived immigrants, continuing in his leadership role.

Soon after paying off his debt, his attention returned to the Ministry and he assisted Klaas Enns in the founding of the Coaldale Mennonite Brethren Church<sup>11</sup>, the first Mennonite Brethren Church in Alberta. The Coaldale church experienced rapid growth with the arrival of Russlaender immigrants to the area. It was the largest and most prominent of the churches, and established the Coaldale Bible School in 1929 and the Alberta Mennonite

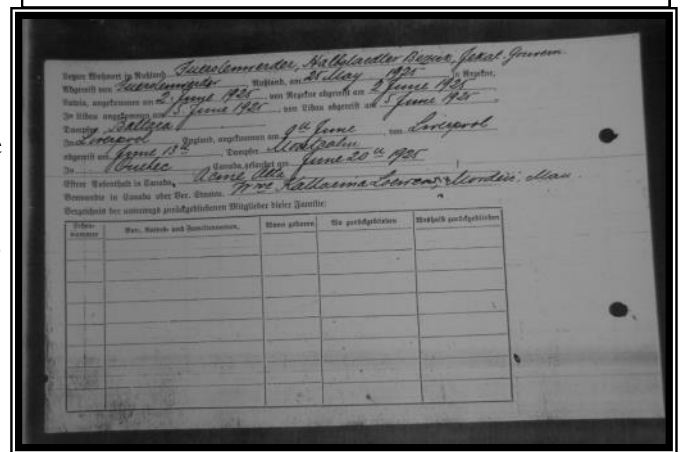
High School in 1946. The congregation was also instrumental in founding the Coaldale Hospital in 1934. The congregation in reaching out to the community sponsored the radio program called Gospel Bells.

Willms in his youth had enjoyed time spent in nature, and often wrote poetry about those experiences, and as he grew older his poetry efforts increased. The poems are collected in nine volumes which are housed in the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies (CMBS)<sup>12</sup>, along with photocopies of some of the poems from other missing volumes. Although it was never his intent to publish his works, more than three thousand poems did appear in the Mennonitische Rundschau before his death.

Abram Quiring in 1982 published "Ein Blick in des Dichters Leben und Schreiben" in **Mein Lohn**, Winnipeg, a reflection on Willms's poetry. The CMBS re-



Abr. Peter Willms's Board of Colonization record, page 1



Abr. Peter Willms's Board of Colonization record, page 2



Some of the A.P. Willms poetry books

(See Willms on page 18)

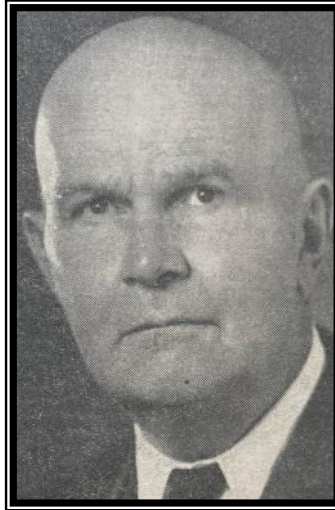


(Willms from page 17)

tains a microfilm of Willms's autobiography, *Etwas aus meinem Leben*, with the original in the collection of the Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia<sup>13</sup>.

While Abram Peter Willms did not die in the gulags like many of his fellow delegates to the Second Martyrs' Synod, "in spite of dungeon, fire, and sword" he like the others who arrived in Canada had survivor's guilt. Why had they survived while others had perished? But in his continued leadership with his service to his God and the congregation, he too would "be true to thee till death". May his memory be a blessing.

It is expected that more information on Abram Peter Willms will be found as the Second Martyrs' Synod project research continues. The author looks forward to any further leads on Willms or any of the other delegates<sup>14</sup> to this monumental conference in the snows of Moscow in 1925. Further updates will be provided as new information surfaces.



Abram P. Willms

(Coaldale, Alberta, Canada)", *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia*, November 2012.

12. Abram P Willms 1882-1959 fonds, Centre for Mennonite Studies, Winnipeg, Manitoba.
13. The original handwritten autobiography is held by the Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia.
14. Email address for the author: [edgkrah@gmail.com](mailto:edgkrah@gmail.com).

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*Edward "Ed" Krahn is a semi-retired cultural worker and Mennonite Historian, and a former Museums and Historic Sites Manager and researcher. In 2012 he was awarded the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal for his lifetime work of heritage preservation and museum development.*

*One of his current projects is to research, document, and preserve the history of the Second Martyrs' Synod. His personal research interests revolve around the Orenburg and Fuerstenland Colonies, where his grandparents had lived.*

*If you have further information on Abram Willms or one of the other delegates, Ed would be pleased to hear from you. [edgkrah@gmail.com](mailto:edgkrah@gmail.com)*



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Endnotes:

1. See also December 2022, *Mennonite Historian*, "The Second Martyrs' Synod, 1925: The Faithful 77.
2. Grandmaonline.org - # 426424.
3. Find A Grave – Coaldale, Alberta Mennonite Cemetery Memorial ID 105763934; also see obituary Die Mennonitische Rundschau December, 9, 1959, page 1.
4. Huebert, Susan. "Willms, Abram P. (1882-1959)" *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 2010.
5. John B. Toews ed, *The Mennonites in Russia from 1017-1930: Selected Documents*, "Minutes of the General Conference of Mennonites in Russia – Moscow Conference (January 13-18, 1925)", pp 428-439.
6. Willi Vogt. *Mennonitische Abnenforschung*, "Allgemeinen Mennoniten-Konferenz in Russland, <https://chortitza.org/Pht/Konf1.htm>.
7. An exciting recent discovery has led to new information of Minister/Teacher David Isaac Redekop attending the Synod in Moscow. He died shortly after arrival in Canada in a wagon accident near Davidson, Saskatchewan.
8. Epp, David H. "Ukrainian Mennonite General Conference". *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1959.
9. Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization Records for the Abram Peter Willms Family #2668, Mennonite Heritage Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba.
10. Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization Records, Correspondence Vol #1263.
11. Janz, J.B. and Epp, Marlene. "Coaldale Mennonite Brethren Church

**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

## Cross Canada Russlaender 100 Tour July 2023—Alberta events

*Observations by Bill Franz*

The Cross Canada Russlaender 100 Tour is now history, but for those who were able to travel part or all of the way from Québec City to Abbotsford, B.C. by train and by bus and take in the events, memories will live on. The Alberta events were arranged by the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta, in conjunction with local organizers. The tour was a reenactment of the journeys undertaken by the *Russlaender*, Mennonite immigrants from Russia who were able to come to Canada in the 1920s, starting in 1923. These immigrants were supported by the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, who arranged for credit with the Canadian Pacific Railway to transport the Russlaender by ship and rail to reach destinations in Canada. Awaiting them were the *Kanadier*, descendants of those Mennonites who had been the first to leave Russia for North America in 1874.

We greeted those on the third leg of the tour which began in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, arriving by bus at the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village (UCHV), east of Edmonton on July 21st. David Makowsky, the director, welcomed those on the tour and local attendees. We then had a couple of hours to explore this open-air museum, with its many historical buildings gathered from east central Alberta. Costumed interpreters were on hand in some of the locations to interact with the visitors. Of particular interest was the earthen hut, a replica of those constructed by Ukrainian settlers upon

first arriving. More information is available on the museum's website, <https://ukrainianvillage.ca/>.

The evening program and meal were held in the Silska Domiwka Friends Hospitality Centre (the red barn). Katie Harder, MHSA Chair, opened the program with a brief history of the Mennonites in present-day Ukraine and the subsequent migration waves to Canada. Her own family roots are Russlaender. She introduced the speakers for the program. Brent Wiebe, a director with the MHSA, presented a virtual trip through history, Mennonite Life on the Black Sea Steppe, using 3D modeling, 3D scanning, and Russian military maps from the 1850s. See Brent's website, <https://trailsofthepast.com/>, for further examples. Katie then asked the blessing for the meal. The authentic Ukrainian meal was catered through the Friends of the UCHV and was delicious. While we dined, we were entertained by a young woman playing the *tsymbaly*, also known as the Ukrainian dulcimer.

David Makowsky presented on the history of Ukrainian settlement in east central Alberta. Ted Regehr, MHSA voluntary archivist, drew comparisons between the Ukrainians and the Mennonites, and highlighted some of the differences in settlement patterns and experiences of the Mennonites in the three Prairie provinces, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. The evening was closed by Dave Toews, MHSA Vice-Chair, who briefly referred to his own family history of being Russlaenders. The buses then departed to Red Deer to overnight.

We reconvened at Bergthal Mennonite Church, east of Didsbury, the next day for lunch and a program of song, music, and presentation. The Bergthal congregation formed in 1901 and supported the Russlaender upon their arrival some twenty years later. We were greeted by a rousing rendition of "Alberta Bound". Katie welcomed us to her home church, and introduced the organizing committee and presenters. She encouraged us to take a look at the poster display in the foyer, created by Ernie Wiens, featuring some interesting facts (for example, the twenty most common Mennonite surnames). Katie asked the blessing for the meal, which was most enjoyed by the attendees. We then moved into the sanctuary for the program.

(See Cross on page 20)



David Makowsky welcomes us to the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village



A replica of an earthen hut, also known as a semlin or sod house



(Cross from page 19)

The program began with Phyllis Geddert on the piano, accompanied by Jeremy Wiebe on the violin. Phyllis also accompanied the Bergthal Singers, who sang beautifully with their well-balanced harmonies. Brian Hildebrandt spoke of the Neufeld family story. His uncle, the late John A. Neufeld, wrote a handwritten article, *Their Works Shall Follow Them*, transcribed by Dave Toews, who worked with Neufeld's niece, Margaret Froese, to publish it in the June 2022 issue of *The MHSA Chronicle* (see <https://mennonitehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/Chronicle-No.-2-June-2022.pdf>). Dave and Hildie Regehr of the Friends of the Mennonite Centre in Ukraine spoke of the humanitarian relief being undertaken currently. An offering was collected in support. The very humorous Abe Janzen presented on Low German Mennonites in Alberta today, of which there are many. Closing remarks were made by Katie, with Brian Hildebrandt. Pastor Lisa (Anna Lisa Salo) blessed us in prayer for the journey.

The final event was held on the C.C. Toews farm (Evergreen Farm), near Linden. Participants were able to tour the farm house and yard, and the collection of antique farm machinery drew many. Katie welcomed us and gave an overview of the history of the community, comprised primarily of Church of God in Christ, Mennonite (Holdeman) and Mennonite Brethren. The Linden Mennonite Singers, a male chorus, sang *Remove Not The Landmarks*, based on Proverbs 22:28, as a tribute to our forefathers. Ken Matis, former MHSA Chair, gave the blessing for the delicious Western BBQ that followed. Ken Toews, a descendant of the original Toews that settled here, spoke movingly of their willingness to help others, for doing good things. An example of this was providing interest-free loans to those who asked for help, with a verbal agreement to "pay it back when you can." The loans were always paid off in due course. This family tradition of helping others continues today with most of the farm proceeds going to support the work of the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, started by Mennonite Central Committee (MCC).

Several people from the Linden area were then called to the microphone to talk about how their families had helped the Russlaenders. One



The Bergthal Singers

woman recounted how she had ridden to school in the covered wagon with many other children. The community is still hosting refugees today, including from Syria and Ukraine. Dave and Hildie Regehr spoke of the good work of the Friends of the Mennonite Centre in Ukraine today, and a free-will offering was collected. Brian Hildebrandt introduced Cowboy Poet Doris Daley, who entertained us with tales of the old west. Katie



Closing remarks at the C.C. Toews farm (Evergreen Farm) near Linden

closed the evening with thank-you's all around. Dave Toews grabbed the mic to thank Katie for her tremendous contributions. Pastor Gary Klassen of Sunnyslope Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, closed in prayer. The buses were loaded with those on the Russlaender 100 Tour to return to Edmonton, to catch the train taking them the rest of the way to Abbotsford for the conclusion of the tour. Everyone who attended the events in Alberta, no doubt, had much to reflect upon. ❖



The Linden Mennonite Singers

## “Bringing Deutsch Wymyschle, A Forgotten Mennonite Village Back to Memory”

MHSA Fall Conference at  
Lendrum Mennonite Church,  
Edmonton., September 23, 2023  
*Observations by Bill Franz*

Approximately eighty people gathered at Lendrum Mennonite Church in Edmonton for the MHSA Fall Conference, with additional people participating from afar by YouTube. The theme of the conference arose from Frieda Claassen’s personal connection to the village of Deutsch Wymyschle in Poland, where she was born prior to WW2, and from the research interests of Colin Neufeldt and Wojtek Marchlewski. Colin’s maternal family came from this area, and he has collaborated with Wojtek, a Polish historian interested in the Mennonite sojourn in Poland.



Registration tables at the fall conference

MHSA Chair, Katie Harder, welcomed us to the conference. Katie expressed gratitude for those that were able to participate in the Russlaender 100 tour events this past summer, and for those supporting the work of MHSA and the archives. She thanked Lendrum Mennonite Church for hosting the event, and, in particular, Dave

Toews and others at Lendrum for planning and helping at this conference. Katie reflected on the variety of human responses to war and suggested that we ponder how we might respond in such situations.

Lendrum pastor Sherri Guenther Trautwein welcomed us to Lendrum. She has appreciated learning more about Mennonite history. Master of Ceremonies Colin Neufeldt then introduced the speakers, Frieda, Wojtek, and himself.

Frieda and Wojtek presented on Frieda’s childhood growing up in Deutsch Wymyschle, with Wojtek asking questions to Frieda’s reminiscences. Her post-WW2 experiences were traumatic, to say the least. As an eleven-year-old girl, she was “farmed out” as farm labour to Polish farmers. Times were very difficult for everyone, and many of the Poles took out their revenge on those of German descent for the harms they had suffered under German occupation. She related how she, her siblings, and her mother were ordered to stand

against a wall to be shot. Her mother asked if she could pray with her children first, and after they prayed, the guard lifted his weapon and did not shoot. Rations were inadequate for everyone, and in particular, for the Germans. At the collective farm, Frieda could see that her sister was becoming very thin. She told her mother that she would run away and she did. She then would save small morsels of her own food so she could bring them to her sister. On one of her return visits, someone asked, “Isn’t this the girl who ran away?” Her mother told her to leave immediately. Frieda’s mother never despaired; she told Frieda that things would get better and she always prayed with Frieda before she left.

Frieda lamented about how inhuman war and suffering has become normalized. She said that suffering can become a path to love. In her case, it took a second conversion. “What makes it for people to become good?”, she asked. A Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) worker in post-war Poland found Frieda and her family and helped them move to the British Zone in Germany, where they were reunited with her father who had been



MHSA Chair Katie Harder welcomes all at Lendrum Mennonite Church



MC Colin Neufeldt introduces Frieda Claassen and Wojtek Marchlewski



(Village from page 21)

released from a POW camp. The family was able to come to Canada in late 1949 and settled in Coaldale, Alberta.

Wojtek and Colin then spoke of their research, based on a thorough analysis of historical evidence from many different sources, including archival records (in Poland, Germany, Canada, and the U.S.), personal interviews, church records, biographies, and academic books and articles. They always try to present people's individual stories within a broader historical perspective. Their first article, *Divided Loyalties: The Political Radicalization of Wymysle Niemieckie Mennonites in Interwar Poland (1918-39)*, was published in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* by Goshen College in October 2022. Their second article, *Escape to Freedom and Return to Bondage*, is an analysis of who could flee (and who could not) from Deutsch Wymyschle ahead of the Red Army offensive of January, 1945. It will be published in *The Polish Review* by University of Illinois Press. They are now starting their third article. As a Polish historian, Wojtek can open doors that Colin cannot.

They showed a variety of historical documents from WW2 and the pre- and post-war eras obtained from archives.

Wojtek was invited to present a poster display at the "Mennonites in Mazovia in 18th - 20th centuries" conference at Wionczemin Museum. The conference was held at the open-air museum in Wionczemin, near Deutsch Wymyschle, in November, 2022. He invited Frieda and Colin to participate as well. Colin was unable to get away, and Chris Friesen, the former pastor at Lendrum was invited. Chris, now in Toronto, is writing a novel based on Frieda's life and Wojtek has suggested it could be turned into a one-

act play in Polish. Frieda was presented with flowers at the conference, and she asked that the former Mennonite church in Deutsch Wymyschle be made into a place where people of different faiths and experiences can come together to talk and to promote peace. Wojtek announced that funding from the Polish government has just been committed to restore the building for this purpose.

Chris Friesen then read, by Zoom, from his novel, still a work in progress. He can be contacted by email if people are interested in receiving a copy. It will be a poignant read. Chris's email address is [friesenbiz@gmail.com](mailto:friesenbiz@gmail.com).

Dave Toews then closed the formal part of the conference with his reflection that he's drawn to people's stories. "The past is always with us." When Frieda returned from Poland, Dave thought her story and the research of Colin and Wojtek would be of interest to many. We should celebrate and commemorate that Frieda, her family, and our ancestors were able to come to Canada and live here in peace. He referred to several things he heard today, one from Frieda that "what makes us, shakes us, breaks us". Wojtek wrote a book about the Mennonites in Poland complete with recipes, as he reasoned that people like to eat and if the food is good, they will keep that book with recipes. Dave spoke of Colin's maternal family history in Deutsch Wymyschle, and how this has become a research focus to benefit others as well. Finally, Dave prayed for the work of MHSA and for the delicious Faspa that awaited us. ❖



Author Chris Friesen with Frieda in Poland



Former Mennonite church in Deutsch Wymyschle to be restored

## Leaving Canada: The Mennonite Migration to Mexico

By *Jeremy D. Wiebe*

This summer, the La Crete Mennonite Heritage Village had the pleasure of hosting “Leaving Canada: The Mennonite Migration to Mexico” a travelling exhibit produced by Mennonite Heritage Village, the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada, and the Plett Foundation.

The exhibit explores the historical context that led to the emigration, the challenges of settling in Mexico, and the lasting legacy of the migration. The organizers of the exhibit provide the following description:

“On March 1, 1922, a large group of Old Colony Mennonites gathered at the railway station in Plum Coulee, Manitoba, awaiting a train that would take them to Cuauhtémoc, a small town in northern Mexico. *Leaving Canada* tells the story of these Mennonites and the nearly eight thousand others who left Canada in the 1920s to start new lives in Mexico and Paraguay.

*Leaving Canada* explores the history of an ethnoreligious community’s determination to preserve its autonomy. It is a story about competing conceptions of religious freedom and of tensions between religious, linguistic, and educational rights on the one hand and the obligations of citizenship on the other.

Featuring artefacts from Mennonite Heritage Village’s collection, historical photographs from public archives and private collections, and original interpretative content, *Leaving Canada* draws on the most current research on the topic of the 1920s emigration from

Canada. This travelling exhibit is based on a larger exhibit that was on display at Mennonite Heritage Village in 2022. The exhibit is a partnership of Mennonite Heritage Village, the Plett Foundation, and the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada.”

The exhibit consists of four display cases containing artifacts with four accompanying banners containing text and photos. There are also four wall panels to provide additional context for the exhibit.

We greatly enjoyed “Leaving Canada” while it was with us. It was our



Promotional image of the exhibit

first experience hosting a travelling exhibit, and we are looking forward to doing it again when the opportunity presents itself.

“Leaving Canada” is continuing its journey around Canada. It is at the Mennonite Heritage Museum in Abbotsford, B.C. for September to October.



Display at the La Crete Mennonite Heritage Village

*Jeremy Wiebe is on staff with the La Crete Mennonite Heritage Village and also a board member with MHSA. ❖*



## Schools and bridges, in Bolivia

By Abe Janzen

So I travelled to Bolivia near the end of August ... about three weeks. The place where Kathy and I and later, our kids, once lived.

Someone asked, "Why? The pictures are great," he said, "but what's the appeal?" He hasn't been to Bolivia, so it's a fair question. And since he asked it of me near the beginning of my trip, I kept remembering the question. Just pure nostalgia maybe? The long, warm evenings? Friends who live there? The informality of the entire political and social and economic culture ... where everything is negotiable, as our friend Ona used to say? The feeling that when you are in Bolivia you live a little closer to the edge and a little farther from the securities we entitle ourselves to here in the north? The warmth of the people ... who make eye contact on the street and are almost always gracious? The colour ... everywhere, all the time? It can be a long list, none of which, perhaps by themselves, make a return compelling (they actually kind of do) ... but they add up. And there is the presence of 130,000 Low German-speaking Mennonites.

I went a week early before meeting up with a group, a learning tour (thirteen of us) hosted by Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Bolivia to visit several Mennonite Colonies and several program sites. During that week I reconnected with people at MCC (who were completely helpful), sat in the Central Plaza, had my shoes shined, hired a taxi for a day (\$100 USD) who took me well out into Mennonite Colony land to visit several cousins, visited an old MCC friend an hour north who had lost his leg to diabetes but who can still tell stories like any self-respecting Bolivian, ate with other Bolivian friends, wandered around Santa Cruz a little, visited a young Mennonite woman, a relative, who is a midwife and training to become a doctor ... it's not hard to fill up a week and it's a friendly place. Also, it's warm.

Conservative Mennonites first emerged in Bolivia from Paraguay back in the mid '50s. Not many years later, the Old Colony began to migrate also ... from Mexico, Manitoba, later from Belize, and then also from northern Alberta. In 2019, there were one hundred and six colonies. Today there are more than one hundred and twenty-four colonies all over Bolivia. Someone calculated they grow at least 5% a year.

Most of the colonies are of Old Colony church tradition. There's a history to that label, but in Bolivia that means (for most but not all) that the men wear overalls, and a black cap, or a hat. The women's dresses are dark, though often with some decorative designs. Their self-propelled farming equipment will be converted to steel wheels. Their mode of transport inside the colony is horse and buggy, but to town it is with lo-



A tractor converted to steel wheels

cal taxi companies or public bus services. In a very real way, they are heavily integrated into the Bolivian economy. They use local tax-



A horse and buggy with rubber tires - rides like a Cadillac!

is, buses, lawyers, realtors, doctors, and hospitals. But in another way, they manage to remain true to

(See *Schools* on page 25)



(Schools from page 24)

their commitment (from 2 Corinthians 6:17, *'come out from among them and be ye separate'*) to keep themselves apart. They have their own schools, their own colony structures, usually organized by villages, their own local government, and they work really hard to retain Low German as their primary language at home and High German in church and at school, even though they live surrounded by the Spanish language. There are less conservative Mennonites in Bolivia, who also live in colonies; some of them use rubber on their tractors, and others drive their own trucks and cars.

Near the end of our visit, we were invited to visit an Old Colony school. The kids were on a break, but they had brought all fifty-seven of them back for us, and the teacher was well prepared to give us a glimpse into how things happen in a Low German Old Colony school. I had witnessed a class once before, also in Bolivia. The girls attend until they are twelve. The boys usually stay an extra year. The older ones are at the front of the class, girls on the right, boys on the left. The very youngest are at the back, and they seem to take their cues from the ones up ahead. They sang in unison ... a rich, vibrant chant-like singing with the older ones leading, just like their elders do in church on Sundays. After the Lord's Prayer, some math and grammar reciting, also in unison, a few respond to questions from the teacher. But mostly, it seemed, the kids knew exactly when to stand, when to recite, what to recite. It was both dazzling in how completely 'at one' they

seemed to be, and curious in that it seemed a classroom built around sameness.

They get six or seven years in school and then they become little adults in a world in which they expect to make a living, and to build and create within the traditions they have so long kept. About fifty hectares of land are allotted per family, to grow soybeans for cash and feed for their animals. Basic equipment. No electricity, except for generators in their machine shops where welders and other tools are needed. Most families have a few cows and a small barn. The milk is picked up in twenty litre cans and taken to their community cheese factory, every day. Almost every colony makes cheese, a cheese that is popular all over Bolivia. The Mennonite economy is built for modest living. One gentleman once told me, 'we have slowed life down'. And they have.

The rest of us could pay a little more attention. They are often accused of clearing massive amounts of land and being unkind to the environment. I'm not sure that is true. A dairy farmer in Saskatchewan these days has one thousand cows. That's better?

I'm curious about this, because at the same time, out of this world of apparent uniformity comes what seems to me, an unusual and amazing capacity to innovate. One example, of which there are many: A colony in Southern Bolivia purchased a block of land across a wide river. They, and also all the Indigenous neighbours, needed a bridge. The Indigenous leadership encouraged the Mennonites to build it, and so they did. It took four years of planning, placing the supporting pillars (during the dry season), and then a couple of years of further design and welding massive amounts of steel and iron into what then became 4 sections, each 30 meters long. They tested it before moving it to the river by driving two 30-tonne caterpillars over it. It bent less than a cm. They also designed and built the cranes to transport each section 100 km to the river, and then to move them, one by one, onto the supporting pillars. There were no professional engineers involved and in the end, the Mennonites paid a hefty fine for not having an official permit. If you ask a Bolivian about that bridge (which made national news) some will say, 'let the Mennonites build all the bridges'. That bridge helps a lot of people, and, as a taxi driver said to me, had they asked permission, the government would have buried the project with cost overruns



Milk cans arriving at a community cheese factory

(See Schools on page 26)

(Schools from page 25)

and endless environmental and other studies. The Mennonites built it for half a million dollars.

The Low German-speaking Mennonites are an industrious and hospitable people. Across South and Central America, they number about 350,000 people now, the very first of them moving from Manitoba to Mexico a hundred years ago. They have lots of problems among them, but wherever they settle, they seem to assume that they can figure out how to live. It doesn't always work for them either, but they demonstrate, despite what many would consider the most minimal education, a capacity to figure things out, amazing and complicated things. As my brother said, apparently no one has ever told them that there are things they can't do.

*Abe Janzen with his family, served three terms with MCC in Bolivia. Once in the '70s, again in the '80s, and five years as MCC Country leadership in the '90s. Abe has cousins in several of the colonies, and just before COVID-19, was privileged to visit about forty colonies, while on a short service assignment with MCC. It's important to note, in any conversation about the Low German-speaking Mennonites, that they are in many ways a hemispheric people. If there is a family in Alberta, they almost certainly have relatives in Mexico, or Belize, or Bolivia, or Colombia, or even now, in Suriname, and possibly, in all those places, all committed, even in their different surroundings, to living out their faith. ❖*

## A Visit to Low German Speaking Mennonites in Two Hills, Alberta

By Abe Janzen

In the middle of June, 2023, eighteen of us, mostly urban Mennonites from Edmonton and a couple from Calgary, traveled to Two Hills to visit with leaders of the Old Colony Mennonite Church, the Reinland Mennonite Church, and the Kleine Gemeinde Mennonite Church. It was simply a 'get to know each other' visit, perhaps a first between these groups.

Old Colony Mennonites first began to arrive in Two Hills in 2000, mostly from the Vauxhall and Taber region of Southern Alberta. They had been looking for a place to settle, and had explored options as far away as Bolivia. Bishop Wiebe told us that Two Hills at the time was losing young people who were moving to the city.

The public school was at the point of closing, and so, when seven Mennonite families committed to moving to Two Hills from Vauxhall, he agreed to

move with them to help in organizing a church. It was only a few years later that there were five hundred Low German Mennonite students in the school, and today, there is a Mennonite public school, built by Ed Stelmach, (former) Premier of Alberta. There is also a second public school in Two Hills. The Old Colony also have their own private school, though most of their students are in the public Mennonite school, and the Kleine Gemeinde and Reinlander also each have a private school.

Our group made five stops in the course of the visit to Two Hills: the three churches, the Mexican Family Store, and the Old Colony private school. In each of the church visits the visitors were invited to ask any questions they wished after a brief introduction by leaders of that group. We arrived at the Musidora Old Colony church at 10 a.m., and for an hour and a half the Old Colony Bishop (Rev. Henry Wiebe), the deacon (Jacob Wiebe), another minister (Jacob Klassen), and a local businessman (Abe Martens) responded to many questions. They hosted us graciously, responded to every question, however delicate, and



Old Colony School, west of Two Hills



Old Colony church and meeting hall, east of Two Hills

seemed genuinely pleased to have us. Probably the most often asked

(See Visit on page 27)



(Visit from page 26)

question had to do with education and their schools, but there were also questions about baptism, their history, how they came to Two Hills, how they elect their ministers, how they sing, and more. Early on, the ministers offered to sing a verse for us out of the *Gesangbuch* (song book), using the *anle viese* (traditional melody), beautiful singing, much slower than any of us are used to, normally led, in church, by a *Vorsänger* (lead singer).

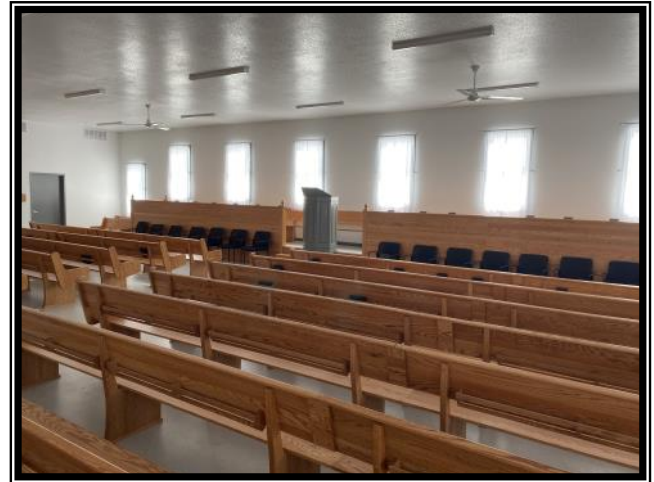
After our time in the church we crossed over the yard to their 'hall'. A large place that can seat one thousand people for a funeral or wedding, it also serves as a gym for volleyball and has basketball hoops at either end, and an extended pulpit and *Vorsänger* stage along one side. The building includes a large kitchen. For our visit, half a dozen women had prepared a feast of noodle soup, chicken salad sandwiches, *Roll Kuchen* with watermelon, and chocolate cream squares for dessert, all of this offered with abundant hospitality. Bishop Wiebe had us all sit down and he led in the German song ... *Oh Gott von dem ver alles haben*, #525 in the German song book ... (Oh God, from whom we have all things), followed by a silent prayer. After the lunch, the visitors sang 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow' for our hosts.

We stopped, next, for half an hour at the Mexican Family Store where everyone seemed to have bought something ... sausage, a catechism, cheese, Mexican chips ... they have a lot of things in those stores. A lot of cloth and clothing, a mostly German book corner, frozen meats and baking,

and every flavour of Mexican spice and Mennonite noodles that any of us could imagine.

The Reinland church is just east of Two Hills. Bishop John Klassen and another minister (Jacob Peters) hosted us, and, like most of the Low German Mennonites in Two Hills, they are a young community (old seems to be someone in their late 40s). They have a new building with soft chairs and a lot of the conversation with our hosts seemed to be about youth and worship music. They are learning to sing harmony, but they don't allow instruments yet, in the church services. Their services are still in German, but they acknowledged they may need to do some things in English soon. The two ministers who hosted us also asked our group about 'how do you keep your young people', etc. To which one answer from the group was ... well, we obviously don't. It was a lively discussion, one which could have continued had we not run into scheduling deadlines for our next two stops. There was also lots of conversation about baptism, membership, ordination, school ... and one of the guests asked about how to keep the church Christ-centred when, these days, in the 'modern, liberal, progressive Mennonite churches' (his words) we seem, sometimes, more preoccupied with issues like gender relations, climate change and other things than we are about Christ being anywhere in our centre. Our hosts agreed, and said they that while they do make changes to accommodate changing needs of people who are in their community, they also realize that there is a need for maturity and stability at the same time. Just because we change things that, we hope, young people will like better, doesn't mean that will keep the youth in our churches. Our community has to be about more than accommodating whatever trend seems to be important to people.

After a coffee and snack time, we hurried off to the Old Colony school near Hairy Hill. It's half way to Willingdon and the name comes, apparently, from a century ago when Indigenous people and others in the area noticed



Inside one of the Old Colony churches



Mexican Family Store

(See Visit on page 28)



(Visit from page 27)



Sunday school area in the Reinland Church

that the bison had a habit of resting on that particular hill, always leaving behind bunches of hair that came off their hides as they lay on the ground. So ... Hairy Hill.

The school has eighty-four students. Their last day of classes had been June 9th, so we missed the students, but the teachers were all there to welcome us. They use the Christian Lite Curriculum and a Mr. Pete Peters from Manitoba comes out once a year to do in-service training with the teachers. The Mennonite public school in the town of Two Hills follows the Provincial curriculum, their teachers are certified, but they also include German/religious teaching for each class, once a day, Kindergarten to Grade 12. Our provincial governments try hard to accommodate the wishes of religious groups like the Low German Mennonites, and the Mennonites don't take that for granted.

The Kleine Gemeinde in Willingdon were our last stop. They meet in a school they purchased, that had been vacated, so now they have their own, still quite small in numbers, private school, and a large gymnasium that also serves as their sanctuary. Abe Bueckert and his wife, Sylvia hosted us. Sylvia was born and raised in Belize. Abe was born in Bolivia and grew up in an Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference (EMMC) colony in Belize. They moved to Alberta after they were married and seem very happy to be in Canada. Like each of the leaders who hosted us, Abe has the most positive outlook on life and openly expressed how pleased he is to be in Two Hills. Also like the other ministers, he was kind, very careful to not offend, answered any question that was asked, and at the end, asked if he could say a prayer with us.

There are 50,000 Low German Mennonites in Alberta ... or more. I'm constantly amazed at how curious they are, but also how welcoming they

seem to be of the rest of us when we show them some interest. One of the visitors from Edmonton, at one point said 'I'm astounded at how little we know about the Low German Mennonites ... who are our neighbours.' The Low German Mennonites are not used to talking about themselves, not like the rest of us seem to be. But once the questions started, they were thoughtful, careful, sometimes funny, always gracious. Our group did not stop with the questions, until we ran out of time.

If there was a common theme in the three church visits, it might be education and their youth, but at the same time, they know a lot about starting over, innovating, and about stability. Some evangelical churches seem to distrust stability. Maybe it reminds us of too much tradition and not enough spirituality? I don't know. But the leaders of the churches in Two Hills all seem to know the importance of providing pillars around which their people can gather. Traditions. Buildings. Gatherings. Stores. Stories. Family. It was important that the church was there early on, to centre their new settlement. From there, in just over twenty years, there are between four thousand and five thousand Mennonites living in the area, with four churches, a fifth under way, several schools in operation, a bustling store and other businesses in downtown Two Hills, and an area now reenergized with its growing and innovative Mennonite population. ❖