

Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta Newsletter

Second Series, Volume V, #1

June 2002

A Mennonite-Christian View of Suffering: The Case of World War II Mennonites

by Harry Loewen

Russian-Mennonites Suffering

Shakespeare's King Lear, rejected by his family and exposed to the natural elements, cries out in near-despair: "I am a man more sinned against than sinning." King Lear had sinned against his daughters, but on balance the sin of his daughters against him was greater than his sin against his family. (Loewen/Nolt, 263 f.)

Similarly, the Russian Mennonites in the 1930's and 40's endured great hardships and intense suffering. Some of them believed that they were in part guilty of sins against their Russian neighbours and other failings. On balance, however, the sins against them by others, particularly the Soviets, were no doubt greater than their sins against the Russian people.

The Mennonite historian C. Henry Smith was no doubt correct when he wrote that since the 16th century Anabaptist martyrs, no Mennonite group suffered as much as the Russian Mennonites in the 20th century (Smith, 340). Some 4,000 Anabaptists were martyred during the 16th century. In the 20th century many more thousands of Russian Mennonites suffered and died directly and indirectly at the hands of the Soviets.

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This is not to say that earlier Russian Mennonites did not suffer much. The 18,000 Mennonites who left Russia in

the 1870's and 80's endured many hardships: they lost their homes, they were dislocated, they embarked on hazardous journeys across the ocean, and they endured difficult pioneering years in Canada and the United States. They were the first to leave Russia, escaping the fate endured by later Soviet Mennonites.

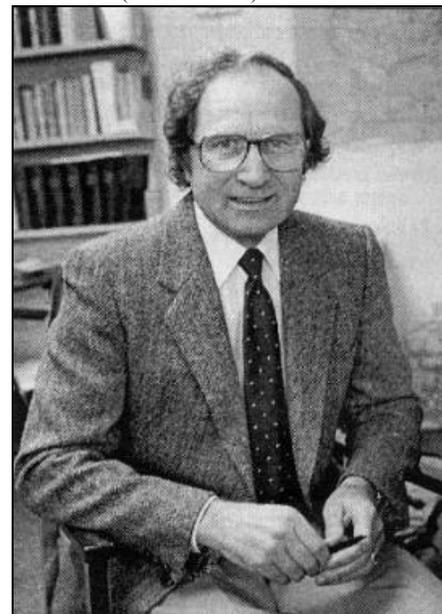
The 22,000 Mennonites, who left Soviet Russia in the 1920's, suffered more than the early emigrants. They experienced the Communist Revolution of 1917 and the Civil War that followed. They suffered at the hands of Nestor Makhno and other anarchists. Many were slaughtered by the bandits and their homes were destroyed; lost their farms and possessions to the Soviet state; were forced into collectivization and in the end fled the "Soviet paradise" to make a new beginning in Canada, Brazil and Paraguay.¹

Fortunately however, both of these groups came to Canada and South America with their families more or less intact and with their faith and culture generally preserved. In the Americas they were able to reorganize their lives which had been disrupted in the Soviet Union. They also brought their spiritual and cultural leaders with them and were thus able to rebuild their faith communities in their new homeland (Loewen 2000, 26-27)

The Mennonites who remained in the Soviet Union were exposed to unprecedented hardships and suffering. Their spiritual and cultural leaders were liquidated and many men husbands and fathers were either banished, imprisoned or executed. Most lost their possessions, their homes, the right to vote and Soviet citizenship. Many even lost the right to work for a living. They were considered traitors and enemies of the state. Their church buildings were pulled down or converted into barns and granaries, and the practice of

¹ Ed Note: These Mennonite families' names, birthdates, places and the nodes of their journey are captured on the CMBoc records on the MNSA website (<http://www.rootsweb.com/~abmhsa/cmboc/>).

religion, including prayer and reading the Bible in their homes, so important to Mennonites, was forbidden. In school the children were taught a new and foreign ideology, including atheism. They were told that their former way of life and beliefs were not only useless but also evil. (Neufeldt 2001)



Here is just one story among many other such stories. I remember it well.

On a September night in 1937 there was a knock on our window. I, a six-year-old boy, heard my mother whisper to Father, "Now they have come to take you." Father got up, lighted a lamp, and went to open the door. Two or three men, NKVD policemen in civilian clothes, entered the house. They searched all drawers for documents such as letters and other incriminating materials. They stuffed what they found into briefcases, took Father by his arms and prepared to leave. Mother cried her heart out and pleaded with the policemen not to take her husband and father of three young children. As the men approached the door, Mother, bathed in tears, called after father: "Kolya, you have forgotten your galoshes". Father came back, embraced Mother once more and then came to my bedside. "Harry, you are the oldest," he said, "be good to Mother and help her as much as you can. We may never see each other again." With that he left. I heard the "black raven" truck outside

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The Mennonite Historical Society

Publishes this newsletter twice a year. Subscription is through membership in the Society. Cost of membership is \$15 per year or \$25 per couple.

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Editorial

by D. P. Neufeld

A new surge of interest is evident in AMHSA as more and more people begin to participate in the Society. Attendance records seem to be broken at every meeting as word gets out that Alberta Mennonites are remembering and reflecting on the meaning of their history.

Not only are we talking about our history but increasingly that history is being examined and recorded in user-friendly format. As chairman Jake points out, the Society is now ready to move into permanent space with modern equipment to ensure professional and safe yet accessible storage of our documentation.

Your response to requests for material for this edition is evidence that the Newsletter is being read. Keep it up.

Harry Loewen reflects on the extreme suffering endured by Mennonites who remained in Russia and the Ukraine until after WWII.

The “Coup” report might well serve as a challenge to undertake a major fundraising venture in Alberta. Let’s hear suggestions!

Our ventures into interpreting and recording Alberta’s Mennonite experience fits in well with the timing of the Global project. We look forward to reading about church life as represented in the four continents.

Don’t forget to respond to the call for papers about Fraser Valley migration if your family has that experience.

I expect that the review of Rudy Wiebe’s *Sweeter than all the World* should help me to follow what I find to be a rather sophisticated, complex plot.

Thank you for your supportive memberships, which help us to realize the significant growth we have experienced recently. Have a good summer, and “happy reading” on the occasional welcome rainy day.

Chairman Jake’s Corner

by J D Harder

Background

History tells the story of the past - and that’s what we are about. To make it easier for people to learn about their story, Societies such as ours need to **encourage people to write the story, and make it accessible to those interested.**

We are grateful to Henry and Erna Goerzen for initiating the gathering of our people, church, and institution’s histories. It has taken many years to bring MHSA to where it is today.

We now have:

1. A constitution and by-laws
2. Status as a registered charity
3. A Board of six elected members and seven appointed representatives.
4. A Newsletter Editor
5. Three standing committees:
 - ▶ Editorial
 - ▶ Archives/Library
 - ▶ Nominating
6. Two ad hoc committees:
 - ▶ Annual General Meeting Program
 - ▶ Annual Workshop Committee
7. Annual memberships with dues renewable January 1 of each year
8. A Newsletter published twice a year
9. A storage room and meeting area at the MCCA building
10. A beginning stock of historical materials and records
11. A computer
12. Many enthusiastic supporters.

Projects

In the past year the Society has published one church history; *The Vauxhall Mennonite Church*, by Anne Harder. This history went on sale last October.

We moved to publishing two Newsletters, rather than three. The last Newsletter was a 12 page document. It was professionally done and well received.

Several projects are in the planning stage. One is a book of biographies of Alberta Mennonite leaders being compiled by Irene Klassen. The other is a picture book on Mennonite Life In Alberta. This is in the preliminary planning stage with Judith Rempel providing leadership for this endeavor. We are soliciting pictures with concise associated stories.

Finances

Last October I e-mailed/wrote a letter to 35 Alberta churches outlining the objectives of MHSA and inviting their support on an annual basis. We are

pleased to have had some response. Our objective is to build a steady funding base so that more extensive writing projects can be sponsored.

The Mennonite Foundation of Canada responded to our application for a grant by giving us \$686.56 to help with the costs of publishing the Vauxhall history.

Accommodations

When we moved our materials from the steel granary on Henry's farm to the MCCA building in Calgary last spring we thought the accommodation problem was solved. Shelves were built for the room assigned and the material catalogued. Soon the room was full and there were still more files and books. MHSA has now rented space in the Northeast Calgary MCC Thrift Store. This will provide us with room to grow and a permanent address.

Workshops

In the past four years, I don't know about earlier, we have had an excellent series of workshops and lectures. In all frankness we have not had the attendance these excellent presentations warranted. These programs are open to every one, members or not. One objective of MHSA is to tell the story of Alberta Mennonites. We embrace all denominations of Mennonites. To this end we invite your participation in our functions, projects, and use of our library/archives.

On May 10-11 we had as speaker, Dr. Harry Loewen, the author of *Road To Freedom*, as well as several books of biographies. It was for his expertise in writing biographies that he was invited as we were planning such a project. He did an excellent job relating the how and why, and the importance of such stories.

Planning Ahead

At our annual general meeting on May 11, a number of decisions were made that will advance the activities of MHSA considerably.

► It has been a slow process to catalogue the archival materials for ready access. We agreed to hire a

professional to do this during the summer. Fortunately we have such expertise in our midst.

► As our space at the MCCA offices was crowded we have reached an agreement to rent a large room at the MCC Thrift Store which will meet our needs for many years.

► In this age of electronic communication and the need to make our archive materials more accessible to the public we agreed to purchase a new computer and the accessories to achieve this

► The MHSA Board remains the same for 2002-03. At the next Annual General Meeting there will be an adjustment to the length of term for the individual members

► Our Budget last year was about \$4500. We had expenses of just over \$4400. However we had a surplus from the previous year which we carried over into this year. So with a tidy balance in hand we agreed to a budget of \$10,175 for the year 2002.

What a Coup!

by Peter Penner

This heading refers to the successful "venture" by the Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia when they staged the "Celebration of Yesterday's Music Makers" in Abbotsford. The event drew more than a thousand people to Central Height's church to celebrate the musical heritage of Mennonites in the Fraser Valley.

The life and contributions of eight local musicians were emphasized. Included were conductors George Reimer, Henry P. Neufeldt, Franz C. Thiessen and Cornelius D. Toews; violin maker Heinrich Friesen and music teachers Menno and Walter Neufeld. Only Menno and Walter are still alive and thankfully able to attend this auspicious happening.

This crowd, with an enduring historical appreciation for great church music, was there to hear or to participate in the 180-voice mass choir. Tony Funk narrated the program, which

lasted two and one-half hours. The vast audience had opportunity to participate directly by singing some of the great hymns commonly used in the Mennonite church. Reminiscing included reference to *Vorsaenger* (Precentor) and to the use of *Ziphern* (numbers instead of notes).

While featuring George Reimer, his musical family, formerly in Yarrow, was there to help the choir sing some of the old choir favourites, eg "*Selig Sind Die...*" (Blessed are they). Bill Reimer who had come from Hanover, Germany, sang the bass solo for this piece. Holda (Reimer) Fast Redekopp and other children of those being honoured, participated by conducting or singing some of the great historical musical selections.

Each of the persons honoured made significant contributions to the British Columbia churches. Many of them had begun their careers in churches and schools in Russia but brought their talents and their dedication to our Canadian scene. More could have been said about the role of women in yesterday's music making, but Holda paid suitable tribute to them when she led a women's ensemble made up of daughters and grand-daughters of those being honoured. They sang "Lift Thine Eyes" from Mendelssohn's "Elijah".

A most unique feature of the evening was the appearance of nine persons holding high their violins, which had been made by Henry Friesen formerly of Yarrow. They formed an ensemble and played "Fairest Lord Jesus" in an arrangement by Walter Neufeld.

Before all was said and sung, the entire congregation of over a thousand persons joined in the singing of the "Hallelujah Chorus". We all went away from this awesome event with gratitude for our musical heritage. While Tony Funk came close to saying to all in attendance, "just think about what we seem to be losing in our circles with the introduction of electronics", he did not rub it in, though he might have been justified in doing so.

In closing, let me emphasize, dear friends in and of the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta, that this celebration was an event sponsored by a

historical society, not by a conference or church. It was a *coup* of historical proportions!

Peter Penner is an MHSA member & semi-retired Historian living in Calgary.

West Zion Mennonite Church - Centennial

by Richard Harder

The theme of the centennial was *Celebrating God's Faithfulness* as expressed in Psalm 117:2(b) ... "the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever"

The celebration took place in the recently completed, beautiful new 200-seat auditorium attached to the existing church building, on Saturday and Sunday August 18 and 19, 2001.

Many hours were spent reminiscing in the "Upper Room" (former auditorium) where displays were tastefully laid out by themes, e.g. Sunday School, Daily Vacation Bible School (DVBS), old minutes and records, photographs and memorabilia from early members.

Some of the highlights of the program included:

- ▶ A guided tour of the cemetery
- ▶ A cappella singing
- ▶ A dramatic presentation: "West Zion Begins"
- ▶ Historical materials for the drama had been collected from S. F. Coffman's diary dated February to November 1901. It portrayed the events leading up to his organizing of the Mennonite settlers near Carstairs, Alberta, into a Mennonite congregation, which they named The West Zion Mennonite Church. The presentation was very well done and drew comments such as "it was just like actually being there" from several persons in the enthusiastic crowd. Coffee and donut time provided opportunity to process what they had relived.

A capacity crowd Sunday morning was treated to a short music lesson on reading shaped notes and singing four-part harmony.

Descendents of each of the former pastors gave tributes and one former pastor was there personally to give greetings.

The North West Conference Pastor, Ray Landis, brought a challenging message on trusting God's faithfulness for the future. The morning concluded with a period of worship with the contemporary music band consisting of West Zion youth.

One of the highlights of the afternoon session was singing by a choir that had toured Northern Alberta Mission stations and Voluntary Service locations in the 1960's.

Paul Voegtlin, former chairman of the North West Conference Board, gave an interesting look at the past in his "Reflections". A slide presentation concluded with photos of the latest building project.

The whole weekend climaxed with a look at the future church as perceived by the Sunday school children. Their grand finale, a march around the auditorium to the strains of "May Those Who Come Behind Us Find Us Faithful," filled the congregation with emotion.

Richard Harder is MHSA's Carstairs-Didsbury Representative to the Board. Video tapes of each session and The West Zion Mennonite Church Centennial Scrapbook (\$20) can be obtained from Richard and Alice Harder, RR2 Carstairs, AB T0M 0W0 (403) 337 3834 or e-mail: raharder@telusplanet.net

Scenes From a Child's Journey to Canada

By Margaret Riediger

The following account is a companion to the journey diary entries made by Margaret's father, Peter A. Riediger about the journey in 1926. Both accounts are found in the Margaret Riediger Fonds recently deposited in the MHSA Archives and printed in full on the MHSA website.

From time to time someone asks me, "Do you remember anything about the trip?" Yes, a few things, although I was only six years old. Here are some of the scenes that have stayed fresh and clear in my memory all these years

Scene 1: We left Klinock on a beautiful July morning. The wagons loaded high with boxes, crates and straw suitcases and some of us seated on top of all this. While the wagons moved slowly down the street, a lady came hurrying after us, crying. When she reached our wagon she laid both arms on the end of the wagon, put her head on her arms and cried and cried as she slowly kept in step with our wagon.

Scene 2: Now we are in a city. Mother and I were walking down the sidewalk when we saw a man lying in the gutter close to the sidewalk. I was frightened. Somewhere I had heard that when a person drinks alcohol he burns up inside. I was sure I could see smoke coming from his swollen face. Quickly I scurried around to mother's left side and hid in the folds of her skirt. Quietly she said, "*Mosted nich chiche.*" (You mustn't look).

Scene 3: The next scene is on a ship. Another little girl and I were skipping and running around merrily on the deck until I fell and scraped my knee. I must have cried for the other little girl got scared and ran away. As I stood there crying I saw two ladies sitting on deck chairs or benches not far away with their knees covered with plaid blankets. The one was smiling and beckoning with her finger for me to come. As I slowly came closer, she handed me a box. I hurried downstairs to our cabin and when we opened the box, we saw it was full of little chocolates. What a surprise!

Sometime later a small group of us children were debating whether the ship was moving or not.

There was water all around us. It seemed we weren't going anywhere. So we took the box, which was empty now, and we made an experiment. We decided to throw the box overboard, and

if it stayed behind us, then we would know if the ship was moving. So we threw the box as far as we could and watched - and chattered. It's moving! No, it's not! The box was riding the waves right alongside the ship, so it wasn't moving. We had watched the box so intently that we didn't notice that it was slowly getting smaller - and finally it disappeared altogether. Hurray! The ship was moving!

Scene 4: The time came when we left the ship. We walked down miles and miles of long corridors, sat on long benches, waiting and squirming. Suddenly we were in a train. I was sitting, or rather wiggling around on Mother's lap, looking out the window. There were crowds of people near the train, but all at once two of them caught my attention. They were my two friends from the ship, the ladies who gave me the chocolates. Now they were waving to me. As they came closer to the train, the one held up a brown paper bag for me. I reached out the window and took it. Surprise! In the bag were six beautiful, golden ripe pears! How I've often wished in later years that I had known who those ladies were. I would have liked to write and thank them for their wonderful kindness.

Scene 5: Acme, the final stop. All the other immigrant families had left the train long ago; our family of eighteen was the only family left. When we stepped out of the train we were greeted by people in black - black clothes, black hats, black beards, ladies with long dark clothing, and cars which were black. All I remember was dark, dark everything and so again I tried to hide in the folds of Mother's skirt. I'm sure it was dark, too, but it was Mother!

All the older sisters and brothers were whisked away to various farm homes to help with the housework and farming. Mother, Dad, Susie and I were invited to come to the home of Mr. & Mrs. Wiebe, an elderly couple with grown up children. After a good meal they made a bed for Susie and me on the floor. Instead of going to sleep, we started singing the familiar Sunday

School choruses such as "*Goldne Abend Sonne*", "*Gott ist die Liebe*", "*Der Himmel ist Blau*", etc. in two part harmony. I sang soprano and Susie, three years older, sang the alto. Now these good folks belonged to the Holdeman church, and they did not sing in harmony like we were singing now. Pretty soon we had an audience; the ladies stood around us listening, some of them crying.

This was our introduction to Canada - a warm welcome, jobs for everyone and the freedom to worship as we wanted to.

Thank You, Canada!

BOOK REVIEWS

Bernhard Peters and Gerhard H. Baergen

by Ernest H. Baergen
Reviewed by Henry Goerzen

The Mennonite Archives of Alberta has just received these two volumes covering the maternal and paternal side of the author's family history and genealogy.

These books treat us to a concise trip in Mennonite history from 1516 to the present day. The writings allow us to enjoy the watermelons of the Russian Steppes and the feel of stacking freshly cut sod against a pioneer shack to ward off the chill of Canadian prairie blizzards.

The earliest records of the Peters family begin in mid 1700's in the Vistula Delta of Prussia, through the Molotschna of 1800's and to the western prairies of Canada in the mid 1920's. The Baergen family is traced from the early 1700's in Poland and the same long route into Canada.

Not only the family lineage but also valuable notations of geography are presented, in map form. These writings allow us to visit some of the out-back settlements of Alberta. The town of Irma rarely appears in reports or in conversation. These books place that community clearly into the Mennonite settlement map of Alberta.

Stories and photos enhance the genealogy portion. We commend the listing and logging helps which allow the reader to follow the lineage with greater ease. The books have great potential for sociological study. The data notes the transition of the clan from the isolationist mode of European Mennonite settlements to geographical dispersion in the West. It also draws attention to ethnic, religious, and professional acculturation.

We thank the author for taking us, among other places, to the best silk worm farms of Russia and to his kindred folk on the prairies.

Lead Kindly Light

by Helen Grace Lescheid

Helen Grace Lescheid has experienced near starvation, the ravages of war and the heartbreak of losing a home. Now, more than 50 years later, she is sharing those experiences through the eyes of her mother.

Lead, Kindly Light is the true story of Neta Loewen and her family. Neta's life began in the Ukraine before the Russian Revolution. She experienced the terror of bandits plundering their home and the ravages of typhus and famine. "If help hadn't come from America we wouldn't have made it," she says.

Neta's marriage to Isaac Loewen in June 1935, was the last service permitted in the Neuendorf Mennonite church. The following day the pews and pulpit were taken out and the church became a Soviet granary. It was also forbidden to sing hymns or to say prayers. In time four children were born to this couple: Lena (who wrote the book), Agnes, Fred, and Katie.

During the second World War the German army entered the Ukraine without firing a shot.

During the German occupation (1941-1943), Isaac, who spoke German, Ukrainian, and Russian fluently, was drafted by the Germans to be their interpreter and chauffeur. Soon he was far away from his family keeping in touch with them by the occasional letter.

Then an official letter came announcing that he was missing.

As the front moved west, frequent air raids sent the family scurrying for cover. An evacuation order came and Neta hurriedly stuffed some bedding, dishes, and bread and dried beans into a sack. For two years she fled across Europe with her four small children always just ahead of the fighting front. Eventually she arrived in northern Austria. During this time she had become separated from all her loved ones and other Mennonites. She would walk from refugee camp to refugee camp looking for them but she never found anyone.

Food was scarce but Neta worked hard to provide for her family. When an order came for her to return to Russia, she and her children hid in a forest. She knew if she went back, she would be sent to Siberia and her children would end up in a Soviet orphanage. An American officer, learning of her plight, intervened and prevented her from being sent back to Russia.

After years of desperate wandering, a young American man who worked with The Mennonite Central Committee, helped her find some of her relatives again. The MCC staff also moved her to a refugee camp, which housed other Mennonites, in Germany where she was reunited with some of her loved ones. They made it possible for her to immigrate to Canada in the fall of 1949.

Neta, who is now 89, lives in Abbotsford, British Columbia. Lena and Fred live nearby, Katie lives in Vancouver, and Agnes resides in Corvallis, Oregon.

"When we were destitute and I didn't know how we would manage, God always made a way for us," she says. She hopes the book will be an encouragement to other parents who are struggling.

Lead, Kindly Light can be purchased from MHS for \$15.00

The Russlander

by Sandra Birdsell

We've received two sets of comments on Sandra Birdsell's book and offer them here. We suspect that most readers found themselves reflecting on their own family's experiences as they read through The Russlander. We welcome these kinds of contributions on all new book focused on Mennonites and their history.

Rita Dahl agreed to reflect on and share her impressions of how this book expressed her understanding of Mennonite life in Russia as related to her by her parents' experience.

Why did so many Mennonites leave Russia during and after the revolution of 1917? Sandra Birdsell's book provides some of the answers to this question. She describes the tyranny of political powers and various terrorist groups, and details the persecution and systemic annihilation of the Mennonite communities and their way of life.

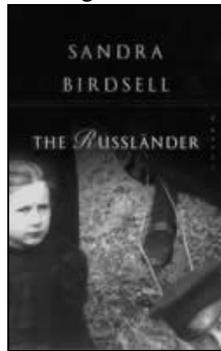
The story begins in about 1911, describing the Mennonite communities as they were at that time. Those who were wealthy, and thus privileged, traveled to America where they bought fashionable clothing and luxury items. They toured industrial complexes and bought machines to improve their own enterprises.

The story is told through the eyes of young Katya whose father is the overseer of the Suderman estate at Privol'noye. She led a sheltered life, which isolated her from the dangers and the freedoms of the greater non-Mennonite society. The Mennonites worked hard, were frugal and in time

many of them had become wealthy. This wealth led some to a sense of superiority and even arrogance. It gave them power and the temptation to use or even abuse less fortunate. It also made them vulnerable and victims during the civil unrest that culminated in the revolution. "Those who have much to lose also have much to fear." (116) This stage is being set for the coming tragedy.

Not only wealth separated the Mennonites from those around them. They were defined by their religion and their faith. Their faith was central to their lives. Religion created a natural barrier between the Mennonites and all the various non-Mennonite communities around them. Religious services were conducted in the German language and this tended to keep them separate. Pacifism and non-resistance, a basic tenets of the Mennonite religion, also identified them as being different. Like religious freedom, exemption from military service was a promise they had from the Czar and was something they accepted as their reward for being loyal citizens. "Katya's father would never know the weight of a gun." (38) Yet some seemed to question their pacifism. "If you ask me, the real reason why we hold onto our creed of non-resistance is because it gives us privileges other people do not have". (72) "Some of us still believe we're to be messengers of peace. We have come to think that being separate from the world means we can ignore the plight of the people who are not of our kind." All of these reasons to be different created in the Mennonites a certain sense of superiority, while to the rest of the people they were looked upon as "the other" and they presented an obvious target when the troubles came. Some brought this sense of superiority with them when they came to Canada.

Most of what Birdsell writes is very similar to the stories I heard from my parents. The pre-war lifestyle she describes in the beginning of the book sounds very familiar. My parents' families seemed to be wealthy and live on estates that employed many servants. While they had many Russian servants,



their social lives did not include non-Mennonites.

The time during the war and before the revolution is described in the book very much as I remember my parents talking about those times. Many of the young men went to serve in the alternative services and there were shortages of some goods.

The stories I heard about the revolution were very similar to what I read. I heard about the Red and White armies moving in and out of their area and later the groups of roving bandits who stole virtually everything the Mennonites had and destroyed what they couldn't take. I heard about the beatings and the brutality and the murders leaving widows and orphans. There were stories of starvation followed by tuberculosis and typhus epidemic. I heard about the *Selbstschutz*.

What I did not hear from my parents were the stories of the women who had been raped. It seems these were things they could not bring themselves to talk about to their children. Even though we were not told, we got some of this information when we overheard them talking of it to their friends. Birdsell tells us that the Mennonite community considered those women who had been raped as "damaged goods" and though this was never actually said to me I had the sense this attitude was there. When they talked about these times I always had a sense that there was a darkness in their lives related to this experience which would never leave them.

Perhaps the two things that impressed me most about my parents' attitude toward this experience was that they seldom complained about having lost their possessions and that they were forever grateful to be in Canada.

Here's Karin Bock's reaction to the Russlander..

Sandra Birdsell's book moved me in many ways. Much seemed familiar, having heard my parents speak of their early years in Rosenthal/Chortitza, Grigorievka and Einlage. However, there was also much that was

unfamiliar, e.g., "the adoption of Plautdietsch from the western Prussians". I never thought of myself as "offspring of the oasis-dwellers who had lived within the country of Tsars", nor had I realized the full impact of class distinctions. In some ways I had previously felt the Mennonites living in Russia were a simpler folk.

The spirit and unbridled curiosity of a trusting 8-year old Katya is evident early on in the telling of the four brass bells and the pleasure they bring her, the devastation experienced when they disappear, and the newfound peace from the manner in which they were returned. We witness her growing up in this period of 1910-20.

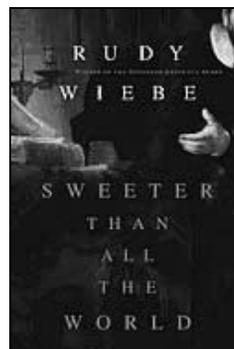
The author is well respected for her earlier novels and I continue to find her style of writing mesmerizing. We are told at the start of the book of the deaths to come, so there is a tension in the chapters leading to that particular event. When the gruesome details of November 15, 1917 are revealed, it seems, if that is possible, even more horrendous. It's a gripping and informative story and has given me a new understanding of what it was like there, and then.

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Sweeter Than All the World

by Rudy Wiebe
reviewed by Ed Friesen

Rudy Wiebe's *Sweeter Than All the World*, an ambitious undertaking spanning more than four centuries of Mennonite history, focuses on two Adam Wiebes. The first Adam



lived in the 17th century, building walls to protect Danzig from Swedish artillery; the second Adam, a 20th century ethnic Mennonite and medical doctor roams the earth in search of his roots and in search of a vanished, run-away daughter. This Adam spent his boyhood in the wilds of northern Alberta. He is able to escape that wilderness, but he can find no escape from the spiritual wilderness in which he wanders in the middle years of his life. His parents first called him Heinrich and then Adam; perhaps this outcast from the faith of his ancestors should have been called Ishmael.

But then, of course, the rich echo we hear in the very first chapter of the novel when his mother calls "A-a-da-am. . . . Where a-a-re you?"(7)² would be lost. And that is a question haunting the reader in much of the novel. The twentieth century Adam is representative of many ethnic Mennonite men and women who have chosen professions and who flounder in a secular Eden of material ease which has turned into a moral wilderness, but who cannot, or will not, look to the church of their ancestors for sanctuary. Wiebe's Adam, having searched out his Mennonite roots, knows his ancestors intimately but still he cannot accept, or be accepted by, the church which nurtured him in his childhood

We are introduced to the first Adam in Chapter 6. He lives at a time when the civic authorities no longer impose death sentences on Mennonites; persecution has moved inside the walls of the church. "We ourselves have learned to make the immense teachings of Jesus into small, sharp knives to slice ourselves apart," Jan Adriaenz tells Adam. "If someone does not agree with us, we hit them with the Scriptures" (85).

Wiebe covers the nearly three centuries that span the lives of the two Adams by leap-frogging across

²All page numbers refer to Rudy Wiebe, *Sweeter Than All the World* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001).

generations. The granddaughter of the first Adam, Trientje, who is part of that beautiful image that ends the book as she and her grandfather share slices of raw potato in “[their] laughing mouths” (434) is the left-handed woman of Chapter 8. It was she “who truly inherited the imagination” (116) of her famous grandfather and “dared to imagine that her husband need not be a farmer: that he could be . . . an artist” (116). This imagination, which gave birth to a family of inspired artists including the world famous portrait painter Enoch Seemann, cannot be tolerated by the Church, a church which Enoch’s father characterizes as a place where “there’s just Paul laying down law and Big Jesus pointing his finger, ‘You sheep right, you goat left!’ Judge, judge, judge, no human feeling, just Almighty Judge, right! left!” (121).³

A series of Wiebes and Loewens narrate chapters in the novel that see Mennonites migrate from Prussia to Russia, from Russia to eastern Asia⁴

³To a reader who grew up in Coaldale in the 1950’s the dispute between the Seemann artists and the church elders has familiar tones, and the reference to Enoch attending the first London performance of Handel’s *Messiah* is not without significance. One of the hot disputes that embroiled the Coaldale MB Church in the 1950’s, was caused by Peter Dyck’s conducting of a performance of Handel’s *Messiah* in a large non-Mennonite church in Lethbridge. The choir was composed from the youth of the Coaldale M.B. Church. Rudy was one of the soloists and in the front lines, absorbing the bitter attack of the elders who were convinced the singing reflected only *kunst* (art) and was, therefore, counter-productive to true worship and should be banned. Rudy Wiebe has scars from “the sharp knives” made with ore mined from the “immense teachings of Jesus” (85).

⁴In Chapter 12, Wiebe follows Claus Epp Jr. who leads his people into eastern Asia. This chapter is narrated by Bud Lyons, father of Susannah, wife of the twentieth century Adam. Bud was born Abraham Loewen but has so successfully erased his Mennonite past that when Adam marries Susannah he thinks he is marrying an English woman. Bud graphically illustrates the hemorrhaging of ethnic Mennonites from the church of their ancestors. He was raised in the household of his grandfather, a

and from the Ukraine to Germany at the end of World War II. A majority of the chapters in the novel, however (14 of 23), focus on the 20th century Adam Wiebe. The highly sensitive and highly intelligent Adam could not embrace his parents’ “bush piety;” it became for him “a swamp of sin-soaked boredom” (246) and he fled from it. “And having fled, he discovered he could offer his children only folk tales, paintings, classical music, ballet, hockey . . .” (246), in short, secular middle-class Canadian culture. He tries to rise above the “bush piety” of his parents; he tries to escape up. Mennonites are experts at escaping: at running away, as the novel clearly shows. The irony is inescapable when Karen, a non-Mennonite with whom Adam is committing adultery in a former nunnery, tells him as he is trapped high in the bell tower and needs her help in getting down, “You can’t run away up”. (178).

But it is possible to run away, as Adam, separated from a wife he loves and from the Church that should have

preacher “rigid as iron” (186) dehumanized by “the relentless, obsessed energy of a driven man who always knew he was absolutely right” (195). As Bud visits him in the hospital he wonders if “half dead” and “mind wandering” his grandfather will have “a plain human answer” for him (185). He does. He has more than an answer; he has a human story. The stroke has mellowed him, something his religion did not do.

While growing up Bud heard countless stories “about that enormous, stupid madness of a trek of Jesus-Second-Coming-crazy Mennonites to the Turkish Desert.” (184) These stories serving as examples of “how to avoid endless sins” (185) have lain over Bud “like a blanket trying to smother [him].” (184) Now his grandfather tells a story from that trek, a story he has never told before, perhaps because its moral content escaped him. It is a story about his sister Susannah, Bud’s great aunt, who wrapped in purple silk danced one afternoon in Samarkand beside Tamerlane’s tomb. This story does not smother Bud, it inspires him. So gripped is Bud by the beauty and pain of this truly human story that later he names his only daughter after this great aunt.

been his spiritual inheritance, clearly shows. Although as a child Adam determined never to “eat a snake’s apple” as did “that stupid First Adam,” (10) he bites into fruit forbidden in the Mennonite Eden and pays the price. Is there a Christ in the Mennonite Church who can atone for the sins of the Adam Wiebes of the world and with grace readmit them into the fold? Attempts by the church in the past have usually been clumsy as when Adam’s older brother John testifies to God’s goodness bragging about his children who “are all married . . . and serving the Lord” and about the “two . . . wonderful, loving women” God gave him to care for him (366-7). When John, prodded by his new wife, apologizes: “I’m sorry, I know the pain you’re feeling . . .” the rude response Adam “spits” into John’s hearing aid is predictable. (367). Significantly, the scene takes place in the Coaldale cemetery beside their father’s grave.

Wiebe addresses the problem inherent in any relationship between the traditional Mennonite Church and the highly educated children of its members when he observes that “most Mennonite parents” and, so, by extension the Church, “lived in blind, inexperienced hope . . . that no matter how many schools their child might attend, it would . . . continue to think in exactly the same way about its ‘soul’s salvation’ as it had when it heard only numberless repetitions of ‘born again’” in church or on the radio. “Parents hopeful but also confused and concerned. And then more and more silently, sometimes desperately, worried. But loving you, praying to love you enough to lift you by God’s inexplicable mercy to the heaven of life everlasting they knew awaited them, raise you to glory whether you knew enough to want to go there or not” (339-40).

Separation amidst love — that’s what Wiebe’s novel is about.⁵ It is about our

⁵In a heart wrenching scene Adam, while speaking to his wife, Susannah, “knows like a knife in his heart that they will never stop loving each other” (373) and the reader knows they will never again be reunited.

church and its problems of keeping its more creative, more imaginative, and often highly educated within the fold. The problem is an old one. When Jan Adriaenz in the early seventeenth century with his spirit lifted “beyond language into mystifying mystery” (82) preaches to the De Rijp congregation they are afraid to soar with him, rather they become uneasy and settle “themselves all the more firmly into a spiritual position of stubbornness” (82). We, the Church, have not yet overcome our fear of soaring; we feel safest when we are entrenched in “a spiritual position of stubbornness.”

Unlike many of the ethnic Mennonites who publish fiction in Canada today Rudy Wiebe remains in the Church. Although he sees the problem from within, and sees the problem clearly, he appears to despair of a solution. Some readers might perceive a ray of hope at the end of the novel, at least for the Adam Wiebe family, for it is reunited at the airport in the second last chapter, but one gets the eerie sensation that the reunion is only a temporary one. Part of the feeling is caused by phrases, practically whole sentences, with only a word changed here and there, that we’ve read before in the novel at another airport scene in which Susannah is leaving for Europe on her research trip.⁶ This trip marks the beginning of her and Adam’s separation. But a solution to the problem of the larger separation, the separation of a vast number of highly intelligent, highly creative ethnic Mennonites from the church of their ancestors is nowhere in sight.

But one must not end on so pessimistic a note, for there is much that is positive in Wiebe’s novel including the main character, Adam Wiebe. This *auffjollna Mennist* has obvious moral shortcomings and his lifestyle is hardly

The church, too, loves the Adam Wiebes who have left, or at least we profess to, and the Adam Wiebes sometimes cast longing glances at the church but Wiebe’s novel gives little hope of a reunion.

⁶Compare pages 110 and 420.

a model for imitation but there is much that is admirable in him, not least of which is his love for Mennonite history. Although his father-in-law, his wife, and his daughter, like so many Mennonites both inside and outside the church today, try to obliterate the memory of their ancestors, Adam searches diligently for his origins. And this recognition of the importance of the past gives him a moment of glory with which I will end this review. I refer, of course, to Helen’s funeral where Adam, like George Blaurock of old, usurps the pulpit and resurrects a memory of Helen who in Christ-like fashion consoled her dying sister a half century earlier (360-62). No Mennonite with soul intact can read that passage with dry eyes.

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The Mennonite Historian’s Bookshelf

WE have a several books available for purchase through Irene Klassen and the MHSA office.

- *Alternative Service for Peace In Canada during World War II, 1941-46* (A.J. Klassen) - \$25
- *Namaka* (Henry Goerzen) - \$8
- *Knowing and Interpreting our Past: Alberta’s Mennonite History* (Judith Rempel, ed.) - \$12
- *Vauxhall Mennonite Church History* (Anne Harder) - \$8

There is also a significant list of books we would like to add to our bookshelf in the archives. We would welcome anyone who has copies, or would like to purchase any of these books to place in our library.

- Friesen, Rudy - *Into the Past: Buildings of the Mennonite Commonwealth*
- Schapansky, Henry - *The Old Colony (Chortitza) of Russia: Early History and First Settlers in the Context of the Mennonite Migrations*

- Friesen, P.M. - *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia.*
- Urry, James - *None but Saints*
- Plett, Delbert F. - *Saints and Sinners*
- Friesen, J. - *Against the Wind*
- Hiebert, C. - *Brothers in Need – Brothers in Deed*
- Stump, Karl - *The Emigration from Germany to Russia In the Years 1763-1862*

We also welcome reviews of new books. Submit such reviews to Editor, D. P. Neufeld.

Harry Loewen (continued)

start and drive away. I never saw my father again. Father, a young veterinarian, was only 27 years old (Loewen 1998).

Some 25 years later in Canada, Mother received word from the Red Cross in Moscow that Father had died sometime in the 1940’s. We were left with the impression that he, like so many others, was exiled to some hard labour camp in Siberia where he died of hunger and hard work. This was, however not the case. Last year my sister Helen, who was a baby at the time of Father’s arrest, traveled to the Ukraine with her husband in the hope of finding some information about our father’s fate. They had access to the KGB records and found that both father and Grandfather were shot just a few months after their arrest in 1937. In 1989, as the Soviet Union came to an end, they were “rehabilitated”, pronounced innocent of the trumped up charges against them.

I don’t cry easily, but when my sister e-mailed me from the Ukraine what she had found, I broke down and wept.

The German attack against the Soviet Union began in the summer of 1941. Mennonites believed that with the coming of the Germans their suffering would come to an end and they would be able to rebuild their lives and material existence. This, too, was not to be. While the *Wehrmacht* (the German army) granted Mennonites some freedom to resume their former religious practices, Mennonites soon realized that

the Nazi ideology was opposed to Christian faith and practice. And when the tide turned in favour of the Red Army in 1942/43, Mennonites found that they were caught like grains of wheat between two millstones; on the one hand Stalin's communism in the east and on the other hand Hitler's National Socialism in the west.⁷

Mennonites, like many other people in the Soviet Union, had to choose between two evils. They chose the hope to live a better life in Germany, a country they didn't really know, rather than return to the old life under Stalin, a life they knew all too well. The Soviet Union was hell for them.

The Great Trek West

The Mennonites' flight west, known as the *Great Trek*, began in the fall of 1943 after the German forces were defeated at Stalingrad on the Volga River. Some Mennonites had the privilege of travelling by train, as our family did, but the majority embarked upon the hazardous journey by horse and wagon.

The flight consisted of a series of hardships: disasters of all kinds, sickness and death of children and older people, and in the end capture of thousands of Mennonites by the Red Army. The long wagon trains in cold, rain, mud and snow saw women leading, almost dragging, the tired horses, broken wagons in the ditches, and make shift night lodgings in barns of deserted villages. In the distance they heard the ominous rumble of bombs and cannons, and saw the night sky illuminated by burning towns and villages.

Some were able to reach Poland and Germany before the Red Army arrived, but many were not so fortunate. In the end the *Wehrmacht*, which had planned and organized the trek, abandoned the

refugees to their fate and fled. The Soviet tanks rolled mercilessly over fleeing men, women and children. Soviet soldiers raped young and old women at will. After the war, Mennonite women hesitated to talk about their horrid experiences. They were ashamed and didn't want to re-open old wounds (Epp 1998)

One evening in April 1945, while our family prepared for the night in a barn of a deserted farm, the door was thrown open and young woman came rushing in. With fear in her eyes she gasped, "Please help me, they're after me!" My mother calmly told us children to pretend to sleep and then helped the girl into the hayloft in the back of the barn and covered her up. Two armed Russian soldiers entered and said that they had seen a girl running into the barn. "Where is she?" they demanded. Mother was able to convince them that she had not seen anyone come here and so they left. The young woman was spared this time. Many other women were violated and often shot dead when they or their male protectors resisted.

At the end of the war, according to the Yalta agreement between Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt (1945), Soviet citizens were to be repatriated to the Soviet Union. Russian troops, with the assistance of the western allies, rounded up as many refugees as they were able, forced them into boxcars and sent them to labour camps in the eastern and northern regions of the Soviet Union. In exile, many Mennonites, mostly women and children suffered from hunger, hard labour, loneliness, separation from their loved ones and an uncertain future.

Anna Gunther, from Nieder-Chortitza and her three small children found themselves with other Mennonite refugees in Austria when the Soviet army overtook them and ordered them to return to the Soviet Union. Anna's old mother, sick, nearly blind and too tired to continue fleeing, decided to go back. Before she boarded the train she advised her daughter Anna not to return to Russia if at all possible, "for the sake of the children," she said.

When the collaborating Austrian police and American soldiers ordered Anna and her children to board the train as well, Anna placed her three children in a row in front of them and said, "You can shoot us all, but we are not going back!" Little Jascha folded his hands and with tears in his eyes pleaded, "Mama, I'll give you a hundred kisses, but don't let them kill us." The soldiers lowered their rifles and walked away. One of them was heard to say, "I can't do it." The Gunthers' life was spared. They fled into the forest nearby and later found their way west to Germany. With the help of MCC they were able to emigrate to Canada. (Loewen 2000)

Here is an excerpt from the story of Helene Woelk, who with her family was shipped east and eventually landed in Kazakhstan. Heinrich, her husband had been taken from his family. "At one station where our train was standing," Helene writes, "we heard that an adjacent train was filled with prisoners from the city of Stalino. That is where my husband Heinrich had been taken. I went out into the night. I soon found the train and saw the following: a car was open and armed soldiers stood around the door. A pail of soup was brought and passed inside. I looked and searched; thinking Heinrich might be among them. By lantern light the soldiers could not see me, but I could see everything. The pail did not come back for a long time. Then a soldier took off his coat and with his pistol at the ready jumped into the car. Soon I heard heart-rending sounds, the loud cries of a man and then the short, "*O Bozhe moi!*" (Oh My God!). Then all was quiet within. The soldier jumped out with the pail and the door was closed. By the light of the lantern the soldier showed his blood-covered hands with a devilish laugh. That was too much for me, for I thought of Heinrich being in the car..." Heinrich Woelk later came home to his wife and family. In 1978 the Woelk family moved to Germany where Helene died in 1994. (Road, 189)

Of the 35,000 Mennonites who fled west during the war, only some 12,000

⁷ Ed note: During this time the German army encouraged Germans in Russia to document their circumstances and the horrors under the post-revolutionary Russian rule. Slowly these documents are being translated and put online at Mennonites.ca/dorfbericht/villrpt.htm

were able to reach Canada and South America. The rest perished on the 'Great Trek' or were sent back – not to their former homes in the Ukraine, as they were promised, but to the northern and eastern regions of the Soviet Union. Much later, in the 1970's and 80's, through diplomatic efforts of the German Chancellor Willy Brandt, many of these former refugees were able to resettle in Germany as *Umsiedler* or *Aussiedler*, as they are now called.

A Mennonite View of Suffering

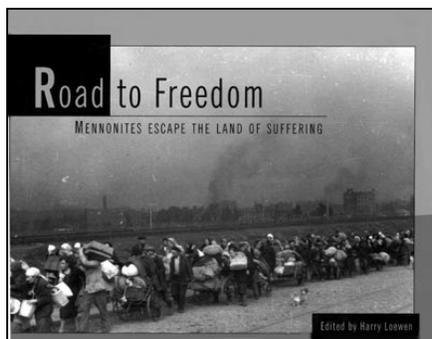
How did the Mennonite refugees view the suffering they had to endure? There were some, not many, who thirsted for revenge against the perpetrators of their misery. I remember one young man, now living in Ontario, who boasted after the war that he, as a soldier in the German army, had "avenged his father tenfold". He killed at least ten Soviet soldiers during the war, he told us proudly. Some Mennonite men joined the German forces voluntarily and gladly, or at least did not resist induction. They wished to help defeat communism, which had inflicted such suffering upon them and their people. We can understand their feeling.

The majority of Mennonites, however, were confused and did not know what to think about serving in the German military. On the one hand they hoped and prayed that the Soviet Union would be defeated. On the other they did not really hate the communists. They left that to the judgement by God. I remember how my mother in the fall of 1941 was asked by the German military to testify against two former Soviet officials in our village who were responsible for the arrest of my father and grandfather. She refused saying that she would not become responsible for the death of other human beings.

Mennonites also became witnesses to what the *Wehrmacht* did to Jews and other non-Germanic people. There were two Jewish families in our village. One Jewish schoolmate was a close friend of mine. One day late in 1941 however, he and the other Jews

disappeared from our village. Their houses and property were confiscated and they were taken a few kilometers from our village and shot into a mass grave. I remember my grandmother taking me aside and saying, "Harry, we are grateful that the Germans have liberated us from communism, but what they are doing to the Jews is terrible. This will come back to haunt them." There were other Mennonites who saw the evil face of the National Socialism even before the war ended. Having suffered themselves, there were at least some Mennonites who empathized with the suffering of other people. (Loewen 1993)

In all my reading and research of this dark chapter in Mennonite history, I have not come across any documents that express hatred of the Soviets – or the Nazis for that matter – only expressions of profound sadness. More importantly, while there are some documents suggesting that we "forgive and forget" what was done to our people, most stories in my recently published book, *Road to Freedom* (2000), speak of leaving the judgement to God. In interviewing older Mennonites, I heard time and again that while they reject the ideology and actions of the communists, they feel sorry for, even love, the Russian people and pray for them.



Here are just a few excerpts from some Mennonite voices shortly after their coming to Canada or the United States. Hans Wiebe of Toronto wrote: "I love Russia and the Russian people, but I always felt at deep sadness when I saw how Russians with their childlike souls and deep religious feelings were

led so unscrupulously into brutal political destruction. (Road 289) Gerhard Neufeld of Minneapolis, USA, wrote, "What is our attitude toward our persecutors, the Bolsheviks? Shall we hate them? The Bible says no, we ought to love them..." (Road 290). One Maria Fast wrote, "Perhaps most readers who suffered persecution will say with me, "I wouldn't want to give up those difficult years of my life for anything, for they have brought me closer to God." (Road 290)

Jacob Neufeld of Virgil, Ontario was severely disabled through abuse and torture in the Soviet Union. During the 'Great Trek' he described the flight of Mennonites from the Soviet Union and later published his book entitled *Tiefenwege*. He writes that in the hard-labour camps Mennonites suffered together with Russians, Ukrainians, Turkmen, Uzbeks, Kirgians and many other Soviet nationals. They supported each other, longed for freedom together and wept together for their loved ones far away. "Were all these unhappy people our enemies?" Neufeld asks. "No, certainly not!" Even though from their midst came party functionaries who caused us much suffering, we must regard them as misled people for whom we should pray, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." "The Russian people have never been our enemies," Neufeld concludes. (291)

Mennonite "Sins"

Some Mennonites have pointed accusing fingers at Russian Mennonite "sins" – for which they were presumably later punished. They say, for example, that Mennonites failed to evangelize the Russian masses. According to these critics Mennonites agreed and promised **not** to do mission work in Russia. This historical error has persisted in the minds of Mennonites for a long time. Even Sandra Birdsell, in her latest novel, *The Russlaender*, repeats this error (Birdsell, 72). The historical fact is that Mennonites never promised any such thing, nor were they ever asked to make such a promise. They simply knew that according to Empress Catherine's decree of 1763, which invited foreign settlers to

her country, newcomers were not allowed to proselytize among members of the Russian Orthodox Church. They were, however, permitted to do mission work among people of other faiths. Most Mennonites respected the government's law with regard to proselytizing, although in the second half of the 19th century, some Mennonites began to evangelize among the Orthodox as well, and they suffered the penalty for it (Loewen 2000, 12)

Others have accused Mennonites of mistreating their employees and of regarding their Russian and Ukrainian neighbours as inferior to them. The result was, according to this view, that the peasants hated the Mennonites and under the leadership of Makhno took terrible revenge against the Mennonite communities. When the Soviets came to power, they moved against the so-called kulaks, the rich farmers, estate owners and industrialists, who were accused of having exploited the Russian people and gotten wealthy at their worker's expense. A book entitled *Anti-Menno*, published in Moscow in 1930 by a Soviet Mennonite, David Penner, is a serious attack on the "sins" of Russian Mennonites. (Reinmarus)

While there is some truth to these charges, most Mennonites sought to maintain cordial relations with their Slavic neighbours, employees and servants. They were law-abiding, even patriotic Russian citizens and contributed to raising the economic social and cultural levels of society. There is even some evidence that Mennonites would have cooperated to a certain extent with the new political order, the Soviets, if only the new masters had allowed them to keep their religious and cultural institutions and their means of livelihood. (Toews, 395 ff) This was, however, not to be. Soviet ideology and politics and the Mennonite faith and way of life were diametrically opposed to each other.

There have been Mennonite voices suggesting that their people who suffered violence, destruction and death at the hands of lawless bands and criminals, may be in need of repentance and forgiveness. Thus, B. B. Janz, a

prominent Mennonite leader in the 1920's emigration, wrote in response to the Makhno terror, "What were the reasons for this tragedy?" he asked. His answer was, "We have sinned." (Toews 1995, 62) In a recent study, *Only the Sword of the Spirit*, by Jacob Loewen and Wesley Prieb, it is argued that Russian Mennonites sinned by straying from their Biblical principles, especially their peace position. (Loewen/Prieb) There is no doubt some validity to these voices of concern.

There are, on the other hand, those who find the idea of Mennonites repenting and asking for forgiveness troubling. "Must victims feel guilty and repent?" they ask. "Should it not be the other way around? Are victims responsible for the injury done to them? What should Mennonites repent of? That through hard work and thrift they had become well to do? That as settlers they were privileged by the tsars and held up by them as examples of success, as farmers, as business people and as educators? That they did not welcome the Soviet regime with open arms, but resisted at least passively, the new order with its godless ideology? That they did not give up willingly their land and property, nor support collectivization? That they wished to preserve their faith and way of life and to pass them on to their children? Or that they desired to migrate when their stay in the Soviet Union became unbearable? Should they repent and ask for forgiveness for all these things?" (Loewen 2000, 291-92)

It is no doubt true that the Mennonites were highly privileged under the tsars' rule and enjoyed a better life than their peasant neighbours. It is also true that some Mennonites, especially some land- and estate-owners, took advantage of the poorer members in their midst – especially the landless (Isaac, 55-65), mistreated their employees and held the peasants in contempt. (Loewen/Prieb) But to say that Mennonites had brought the calamity upon themselves and that they were punished for their "sins," is neither fair nor historically accurate.

Generally, Mennonites contributed positively to the regions and society in which they lived. Peasants who lived close to Mennonite communities were also economically and socially better off than those who lived farther away from Mennonite settlements. (Janzen, 20)

The Question of Forgiveness

The question of forgiveness is ethically and theologically problematical. It is generally agreed, however, that before there can be forgiveness, there ought to be an admission of wrongdoing on the part of those who caused the suffering of innocent people. The Soviets, in particular, have never repented of their inhumanity and crimes, nor have they ever asked their victims, be they Mennonites or others, for forgiveness. Conversely, if some Mennonites almost 100 years ago acted less than humanly against their Slavic neighbours, who today should or can ask the Russians for forgiveness?

New Testament forgiveness is always personal. Peter, for example, asked Jesus how often he should forgive his brother who had sinned against him. (Matt. 18:21) As a Christian I can and must forgive an injury done to me personally, but I don't think I can forgive on someone else's behalf – not even on behalf of my father or grandfather, for example, who were arrested, tortured and shot by the NKVD.

The Jewish people, to draw a parallel, are no doubt correct when they say that they cannot forgive on behalf of the victims, what the Nazis did to their people half a century ago. Very few of the perpetrators of those "crimes against humanity," be they former communists or Nazis, are still alive today; those who are may not be inclined to repent, confess their crimes and ask for forgiveness.⁸

⁸ I might add: The Jewish Sol Litman of Toronto said some time ago at a Winnipeg conference on Ukrainians, Jews and Mennonites, that to this day not a single war criminal in Canada has confessed his guilt and asked for forgiveness. When I asked

Understanding God's Ways

Of greater significance than the question of forgiveness, it seems to me, is the question: *How do we, who came from the regions in which our fathers and mothers suffered, respond to that suffering and those who caused it?* In other words, what is our attitude toward the past suffering of our people and how do we act in the light of what happened? It is a question that relates to our history and to our understanding of God's ways. A chapter from the history of biblical Israel may help us here.

In Daniel chapter 9 we read of Israel's exile to Babylon and the prophet's response to his people's seventy years of captivity there. It is interesting to note that Daniel does not accuse the Babylonians of taking his people into captivity, although we know that the exiles often sat at the rivers of Babylon and wept when they remembered their homeland. Nor does the prophet demand that the Babylonians repent and ask the Jews for forgiveness. *But we do read in Daniel 9 that Daniel understood the time of Israel's captivity and suffering as God's way of drawing his people closer to God.* The word *understand* occurs several times in Daniel 9.

It is important that Daniel's *Understanding of his people's suffering* included repentance for Israel's unfaithfulness, and asking God to forgive them for straying from His Word and precepts. Daniel's repentance and prayer had little to do with the Babylonians, but it had everything to do with God and his People. Through their tragic history, the people of Israel examined their relationship to God, recognized where they had failed and resolved to build their faith communities after their exile.

Like the prophet Daniel, Mennonites may first need to

him whether it would make a difference in legal procedures against such person, Litman said, "I think so." But that is another very complex story.

understand their exile and suffering *within the context of their history.* They must understand the historical forces and factors which led to the overthrow of the Tsarist regime and the subsequent objectives and policies of the Soviets. The Revolution of 1917 was an event in history that transformed Russian society profoundly and affected and controlled that society for some 70 years. Soviet Mennonites were part of that society and the Tsarist Regime that preceded it. They suffered the hardships that the Soviet Regime imposed upon its people. To understand this history is not to justify what happened nor to forgive the crimes that were committed, but to *know the reality that Mennonites faced and to search for its meaning.* For a faith community to *understand* its historical reality, however painful and cruel it may have been, is to accept that reality as from God. It is to ask what God had in mind for his people when he allowed them to suffer.

My mother never talked about forgiving the communists but she often told us children that God wanted to tell us something through what we had experienced. Many individuals and families in exile asked themselves why God allowed them to suffer so much and what purpose he might have for them. The book *Road to Freedom* contains many such stories. Through their suffering and loss and through their experiences of God's presence in difficult times, many Mennonites came closer to God and to their own faith tradition, which many had lost or abandoned. Many former refugees living in the free world today express their gratitude to God not only for delivering them from the "land of terror", but also for their new understanding of their faith heritage. Some go so far as to say that they would not exchange their time of suffering for anything. Through their suffering they have come closer to God and to their people.

As Christians and people with a long peace tradition we now can and must show Ukrainians and Russians our love and readiness to help them, materially

and spiritually. Mennonite Central Committee was there in the 1920's and early 1930's when the material needs were so great and thousands, even millions of Ukrainians and Russians went hungry. Today our people and various organizations are there again to help "in the name of Christ." Mennonite-Christian love for others, even for their former enemies and oppressors must show itself in action. The Low-German "*Etch si di goot*" expresses this well. It's not just "I love you," a feeling of love but "I do you some good". Mennonite-Christian love is a practical love.

Many Mennonites who came from the *Land der Schrecken* (land of terror) to a land of freedom and plenty have expressed their experiences and gratitude to God in the words or sentiments of Psalm 66:10-12, "For You O God, have tested us; You have refined us as silver is refined. You brought us into [bondage]; You laid affliction on our backs. You have caused men to ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; but You have brought us out into a wealthy place." The "road to freedom" was long and difficult but it was God who led his people all the way.

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Lecture presented at the Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon (Nutana Park Mennonite Church) 01 Feb 1902 and at the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta, Coaldale, 10 May 2002). Harry Loewen is retired from the Chair of Mennonite Studies, University of Winnipeg

Call for Papers:

Settlers and Settlement in Yarrow and the Central Fraser Valley

An academic Conference examining the migration and integration of settlers in Yarrow and the Central Fraser Valley will be held at the University of the Central Fraser Valley in Abbotsford on 5–7 June 2003.

James Hill-Tout was an early church and community leader; Eva Siddall a faithful and long-time member of the Methodist church. Both were early pioneers of the Central Fraser Valley and witnessed the influx of Mennonite settlers in the late 1920's and 1930's. Elizabeth Harms was a Mennonite midwife who served the community for many years, while John Harder was the influential leader of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Yarrow. The Conference will focus on the settlement experiences of these and other settlers

in the Central Fraser Valley, but will also examine the broader contexts of those experiences. Sessions are planned on the following:

- ▶ the experiences of First Nations peoples;
- ▶ intellectual and spiritual pioneers;
- ▶ educational institutions;
- ▶ postwar resettlement patterns;
- ▶ changing statistical profiles;
- ▶ comparative settlement studies.

The organizing committee welcomes paper proposals in the length of approximately 100 words. These should be sent as soon as possible to: Ted Regehr, 39 Sierra Morena Circle SW Calgary, AB T3H 2W2; e-mail address – tregehr@ucalgary.ca. Papers accepted for presentation will also be considered for publication.

The Conference is sponsored by the Yarrow Research Committee with the support of the University College of the Fraser Valley, Columbia Bible College, the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada, the Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia, the Chilliwack Museum and Historical Society and the Quiring-Loewen Trust fund

Ancestry Corner

The Ancestry corner is dedicated to one or two direct ancestor lines of MHSA members who have supplied pedigree charts. It follows a format initiated by the *Journal of Mennonite Family History*. Submissions may be sent to the Editor.

NEUFELD

- I. Salomon Neufeld before 1720 Prussia
- II. Salomon Neufeld 1747–1800 Ellerswald Trift Prussia m. Helena ?, Schoenhorst Chortitza, S. Russia
- III. Johann Neufeld 1772 Ellerfeld, Prussia d 1837 Chortitza Colony S. Russia m. Susanna Sawatzky 1779–1823
- IV. Kornelius Neufeld 1818 Einlage, S. Russia d 1894 Rudnerweide W. Reserve, MB m. Maria Kauenhowen 1818 – 1852

m. Margaretha Funk 1833 – 1857
m. Elizabeth Neufeld 1837
Schoenfeld Berghthal Colony d 1909
Didsbury AB

- V. Abraham C. Neufeldt 1871 Marienpol S. Russia d 1934 Didsbury, AB m. Elizabeth Heinrichs 1872 d 1953 Didsbury, AB
- VI. Peter A. Neufeld 1905 Didsbury, AB d 1985 Didsbury, AB m. Anna Penner 1911 Gouldtown SK d 1996 Airdrie, AB
- VII. Diedrich P. Neufeld 1931 Didsbury, AB m. Anna Neufeld 1931 Olinda ON

MATERNAL ANCESTRY

- I. Unknown m. Martin Harms abt 1736 Prussia
- II. Sara Harms 1758 Ellerswald Prussia d 1837 Lichtenau Molotschna m. Bernhard Bernhard Fast 1758 – 1838
- III. Maria Fast abt 1784 m. Johann Johann Cornelius abt 1782
- IV. Sara Cornelius 1823 Lichtenau, Molotschna d 1879 Johannesheim Schoenfeld m. Johann Rogalsky 1820 Blumenort, Molotschna
- V. Anna Rogalsky 1868 – 1941 Alexanderhof m. Johann Warkentin
- VI. Agnes Warkentin 1889 Memrik Col. d 1975 Leamington ON m. Heinrich Jacob Neufeld d. 1980 Leamington ON
- VII. Anna Neufeld 1931 Olinda ON m. Diedrich P. Neufeld 1931 Didsbury, AB

Please submit a copy of your ancestry for use in future issues.

Alberta Profile: John J. Sawatzky

by Irene Klassen & D. P. Neufeld

John J. Sawatzky was born in Russia on August 5, 1900. At the age of 21, he left his birth country unwittingly. Apparently a few friends "rescued" him from a hospital while he was seriously ill and unconscious. They were part of a group of 62 young men determined to

flee their turbulent homeland. When John came to, he was aboard a train in the company of these adventuresome young men enroute to Constantinople.



There they boarded a ship that eventually landed them on Ellis Island, New York. The Immigration department was threatening to deport the entire group back to Russia when rumors of their plight reached Orrie Miller in Akron, Pennsylvania. Orrie Miller, who was one of the founding members of Mennonite Central Committee, intervened and was able to get a temporary deferral for the men.

While waiting on Ellis Island the young men formed a male chorus, and later Miller took them to Pennsylvania to give a concert. The story goes that Miller told them there were 23 girls looking for husbands and they could have their pick. Brother Sawatzky was apparently not one of those fortunate enough to be accepted. So he went to Wismer, Nebraska where he discovered through the *Rundschau* that his family had immigrated to Didsbury, Alberta Canada. As soon as he was able, he went to visit them. What a reunion! His family had no idea what had become of their son and brother.

It was there that he met and on March 15, 1927 married Maria Neufeld. She was the third daughter of Abraham and Elizabeth Neufeld, original founding members of the Bergthal

Mennonite Church, east of Didsbury, Alberta.

In 1929 they purchased a farm. Farming in the years immediately before and during the depression was difficult. Increasingly, Rev. Sawatzky began to augment his income with installation and repair of telephones as well as electrical wiring. The farming eventually gave way to the new and more stable income from the electronic career. They did, however, continue to live on various farmsteads, including one owned by Maria's father and later in the back yard of a farm owned by three of John's single siblings.

In 1931 John was one of three men elected and ordained as ministers in the Bergthal Mennonite church.

John and Marie were blessed with six children, including two sets of twins (one of whom died in infancy).

For eighteen years John and his family lived on the several different farmsteads, including the one which Maria inherited in 1942. John continued to serve the church as one of several lay pastors while the family arrived and grew. He was a capable and well-liked pastor, sharing that role with several other lay leaders.

During the war years individuals and families began to move to the cities. Rev. Sawatzky was invited by the Alberta Conference, to gather and serve these persons and families in Calgary. For two years he made regular scheduled trips in his "Buddy Stewart" pick-up truck, to gather a small group for worship and fellowship. In 1945, at the end of World War II, they sold their farm and moved into the big city. The Conference of Mennonites in Alberta provided nominal financial support to his family. In Calgary he continued to gather the flock and thereby to begin regular church services.

In addition to holding church services, the Sawatzky family responded to the needs of single ladies, recently immigrated and working in the city as housemaids. They offered the basement of their home as a *Maedchenheim*, which was always fully occupied.

John's \$35 salary (allowance) was totally inadequate for the Sawatzky family's needs, so he became a carpenter and started to build houses. The Sawatzkys were a very hospitable family, so that many ministers, missionaries and newcomers over the years, spent a night or more in their home. The two daughters, Mary and Helen always had to give up their bedroom.

The Conference helped the group buy an existing church building. They named their newly formed church Scarboro Mennonite Church using the name of the district in which it was located. The church was formally a General Conference Mission Station. In the early years they also served Mennonite Brethren families. Many of the friendships formed by the Sawatzkys in those early years, have endured.

The Scarboro Mennonite Church became too small as new immigrants from Europe and Mennonite families from the countryside migrated to the city. The church building in Scarboro was sold, a new church built and renamed the First Mennonite Church.

First Mennonite grew rapidly, especially through the arrival of German Mennonite refugees following the first world war. The earlier tendency to introduce English into the service was reversed in this congregation, since most of the new families initially spoke only German.

Leadership issues among others, prompted considerable changes. Rev. Sawatzky was increasingly torn over competing priorities and preferences. The Lord provided an open door when in 1964 the Clearbrook Mennonite Church invited him to serve as their leading pastor.

The Alberta Conference owes much to "Rev. J.J." for the faithful work done at great personal and family sacrifice. During those difficult days, his family established strong commitments to the work of the church and to the broader Mennonite constituency.

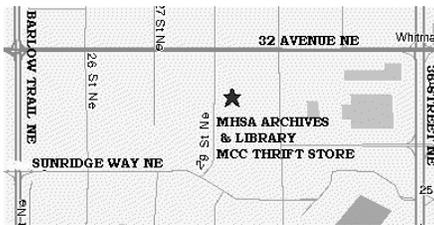
He helped the Bergthal church in its period of growth and adaptation from exclusively *Kanadier* to the integration with *Russlaender*; through the difficult

years of the depression and throughout the war years. He was a guiding light in the transition by the Mennonite church with its rural roots and values, to a gradual acceptance of city life and multicultural inclusion.

Rev. John J. Sawatzky continued pastoral leadership in British Columbia serving the Clearbrook church for about 20 years. His faithful service from 1931 to 1983, more than half a century, is testimony to his commitment to God and his people. He passed on to his reward, after a brief retirement, on November 11, 1986. (His first twins' birthday)

MHSA Archives/Library Invitation to Drop In

During July and August, Judith Rempel will be putting the library and archives in order at our new location. She'll be there every afternoon – so it's a perfect time to drop in and see how things are evolving. The reference library books will be accessible almost immediately. If you could offer an afternoon or two during this period, there will be plenty of light work to do on the archival materials as well.



We'll have a phone number soon, but for the interim, if you want to confirm that the Library/Archives will be open, you can call her at (403) 283-0143 or send an e-mail to mhsa@jrsolutions.net

Find us at 2946 - 32 Street NE, Calgary, AB T1Y 6J7

MHSA Library Additions

The following books are among those recently catalogued and are on hand:

Allert, Helmut, et al (2001) *The Mennonite Sojourn in the Peace River Area*

Anonymous (1980). *Mennonite Church Rosemary*

Bethel Mennonite Church (Winnipeg, MB) (1988) *Pioneering in Faith: 50 years: 1937-1987*

Dick, Henry J. (1994) *History of the Vauxhall Mennonite Church*

Elder, Linda (2002) *Germans from Russia on the Canadian Prairies: Then and Now* (video)

Epp, Elsie H. Friesen (1983) *Coaldale Mennonite Church: Coaldale AB – 1928-1978*

Froese, Margaret (Neufeld) *Call to Remembrance: Abraham C. Neufeld & Elisabeth Heinrichs – A Family History* Gem Historical Committee (1989) *Dreams and Ditchbanks*

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Klassen, Herbert & Maureen Klassen, (1990) *Ambassador to His People: C.F. Klassen and the Russian Mennonite Refugees*

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Unruh, A. H. (1955) *Die Geschichte der Mennoniten- Bruedergemeinde*

MHSA Archives Fonds Received

- Alberta Women in Mission
- Margaret Riediger
- Conference of Mennonites in Alberta – Missions Committee

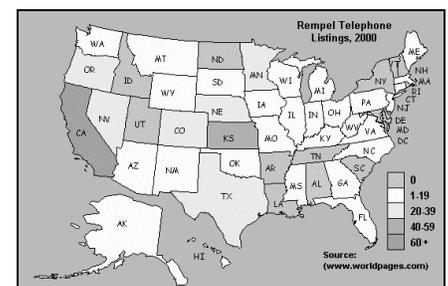
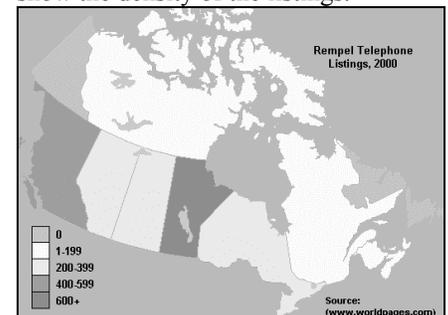
MHSA is collecting **biographies of Mennonite leaders** who have made an impact on the Mennonite history of Alberta. Irene Klassen would welcome suggestions of persons who should be included, and as much information as you can provide about that person.

Send your suggestions to:
Irene Klassen 151 MacEwen Ridge
Villas NW Calgary AB T3K 4G3
Ph. 403 275 9550 or e-mail
ihjp@telusplanet.net

Mennonite Trivia

Did you know that one person in every 50,000 Americans is named **Friesen**? In Calgary it is One in 800, Wow! Why Calgary?

Where in North America are **Rempels**? Using online telephone directories, find out the total number of telephone listings for a particular name. Basic graphics packages allow you to load up a map image and recolor the regions to show the density of the listings.



Not only do these maps show that Manitoba and California are the heart of Rempel households, but they show that Rempels are much more populous in Canada than in the United States, and they suggest that strategic family research might best be focused in Manitoba and California.