

# SASKATCHEWAN MENNONITE HISTORIAN

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## *Isaaks: A Summer Evening of Stories*

*By Ruth Marlene Friesen and Ed Schmidt*

Helmut and Eve Isaak, both born in Paraguay, but having lived in Canada and now working in Mexico, were travelling in Canada this summer. The Historical Society of Saskatchewan was able to set up an evening for them to share at Bethany Manor on July 12, 2008. Helmut has studied and written a small, unique book titled, *Menno Simons and the New Jerusalem*. Helmut is a pastor and Eve is a social worker and chaplain at a 60-bed hospital in Cuauhtemoc, Mexico, the only Low German addictions centre in the world. The centre has been very successful with three-month residency treatment and is drawing in people with addictions problems from outside of Mexico (Bolivia, Paraguay, Canada, United States, and Belize).

At the age of 30 Helmut was invited to Holland to study at the University of Amsterdam in the



Mennonite Seminary. Thus began a three-decade journey of research, sponsored by Dutch Mennonite Conference (ADS), into the original writings of Menno Simons. Between the study times in Europe he taught and ministered first in Paraguay, then came to Canada as a pastor.

Helmut explained, in story form, what happened in sixteenth century Europe. While still a Catholic, in 1526, only a year after the first Anabaptist baptisms, Menno Simons already doubted the act of transubstantiation in the Latin Orthodox mass; in the following period he wrote a tract saying there was no transubstantiation, which is a main Catholic tenet.

The printing press enabled ordinary trades people to read the Bible; they came together to read Scripture and taught each other. There was lots of unrest. Fifty percent of the people were not farmers anymore; many worked in textile mills. When England stopped ordering textiles, many hundreds were unemployed. In 1534 there was an election of the

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# Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian

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*Editor:* Victoria Neufeldt

*Story Scout & Contributing Editor:*  
Verner Friesen

*Advisory Committee:* Esther Patkau, Jake Buhler

*Pictures editor:* Helen Fast

*Typists:* Mary Martens, Hilda Voth

*Proofreaders:* Ernie Baergen, Verner Friesen

## Columns:

Victor Wiebe: Book Page and Archives Page  
(contact info: 934-8125 victor.wiebe@usask.ca)

Rosemary Slater: Genealogy Page  
(contact info: 955-3759 r.slater@sasktel.net)

*Distribution:* Verner Friesen

Readers are invited to send in news items, stories, articles, photographs, church histories, etc. to mhss@sasktel.net or to the MHSS address below.

## MHSS Office and Archives:

110 La Ronge Road, Room 900  
Saskatoon, SK S7K 7H8

Membership: \$25 a year. Donations welcome.

## Archive hours:

Monday: 1:30–4 p.m.

Wednesday: 1:30–4 p.m.; 7–9 p.m.

## From the Editor's Desk

By Victoria Neufeldt



This being my inaugural issue of the *Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian*, I should introduce myself. The photo above shows me at my computer, a wonderful iMac, actually working on a page spread of this very issue. Notice that I'm still smiling. I expect that this state of mind will continue, for I am honoured to be taking over from longtime editor par excellence, Dick Epp. Verner Friesen has served ably as interim editor for a number of issues after Dick Epp's retirement and we are fortunate that he has agreed to continue to offer us his experience and knowledge. In addition, there are a number of other people (see names at left) who, I am happy to say, are available to assist with the various aspects of the production of this journal.

Although I have had experience in editing newsletters, using desktop publishing programs (first QuarkXPress and now Adobe InDesign, which I'm still learning!), this is my first attempt to edit a full-fledged journal such as the *Historian*. However, my professional career has been in publishing, so I am familiar with the editorial and production processes. My career goes back about 35 years, with most of that time spent in the discipline of lexicography. The creation of dictionaries is still dear to my heart and I love all things connected with words and their use. Another strong interest of mine is heritage, so working for MHSS does seem like a good fit. I look forward to honing my skills with every issue to bring you the best *Historians* I can. Please feel free to contact me (955-8910) to let me know what you would like to see in your magazine.



## **MHSS Board of Directors, 2008**

Jake Buhler, President

836 Main Street

Saskatoon, SK S7H 0K3

Tel.: 244-1392 jakelouisebuhler@sasktel.net

Abe Buhler, Vice-President

Box 1074, Warman, SK S0K 4S0

Tel: 931-2512 geobuh@sasktel.net

Vera Falk, Secretary/MC Sask Archivist

Box 251, Dundurn, SK S0K 1K0

Tel: 492-4731 Fax: 492-4731

Margaret Snider, Treasurer

Box 35, Guernsey, SK S0K 1W0

Tel: (306) 365-4274 sniderwm@sasktel.net

George Dirks

Box 235, Hepburn, SK S0K 1Z0

Tel: 947-2158 gtdirks@yourlink.ca

Verner Friesen

641-120 LaRonge Road

Saskatoon, SK S7K 7Z9

Tel: 382-2970 vafriesen@sasktel.net

Kathy Boldt, Archives

Box 152, RR #4, Saskatoon, SK S7K 3J7

Tel: 239-4742

Margaret Ewert

Box 127, Drake, SK S0K 0H0

Tel: 363-2077 m-ewert@hotmail.com

Henry Penner

Box 625, Hague, SK S0K 1X0

Tel: 225-4568

Ed Schmidt, Genealogy

Box 28, Waldheim, SK S0K 4R0

Tel: (306) 945-2217 ewschmidt@sasktel.net

Victor G. Wiebe, Archivist

11 Kindrachuk Cres., Saskatoon, SK S7K 6J1

Tel: 934-8125 victor.wiebe@usask.ca

Other Positions

Cemeteries Project—Helen Fast

Tel: 242-5448 rhfastlane@shaw.ca

Cemetery Web-site—Al Mierau, Webmaster

<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~skmhss/>

## **MHSS President's Corner**

*By Jake Buhler*



If you live long enough, they say, you get a second chance to tell your story!

Klaas Epp did not live long enough. Neither did most of his followers who left the Ukraine for a trek that took them east to Tajikistan. Klaas Epp died in Am Trechet in 1884 and those who took responsibility to tell that story did so using ethno-centric glasses. He was called a misguided prophet, and has been much maligned. Most recently, other story tellers have found original diaries and manuscripts that shed new light on a very interesting chapter in Mennonite history. What happened in the 50 years after Epp's death has not been told adequately. We invite you to hear that story on November 14–15 at Bethany Manor in Saskatoon.

Master storyteller Thomas Green wrote "The Truth About Stories" to remind us that when we tell our stories, we should keep the essence of the story and not worry about the details. He writes: "There is a story I know. It's about the earth and how it floats on the back of the turtle. I've heard this story many times, and each time someone tells the story, it changes," he says. But then he adds, "In all the telling of the tellers, the world never leaves the turtle's back".

The essence of Klaas Epp's may have been changed; let's listen again to get it "righter".





Continued from page 1

city council in Muenster, and people from the new Anabaptist movement won many of the seats. Non-Anabaptists were kicked out and more Anabaptists were invited to come to the city to be safe from persecution. Princes of Germany put Muenster under siege and in 1535 it fell into the hands of a bishop.

Menno's significance lies in the fact that he assumed the responsibilities of leadership in 1534, at a crucial time in the Anabaptist movement, when it was in danger of losing its original identity under the influence of chiliastic and revolutionary leaders. Menno maintained the original peaceful concepts while he conceded that "our dear brothers" had "misbehaved a little against the Lord since they wanted to defend their faith with arms". Despite the confidence of his writings, however, Menno in those early years experienced severe religious agony. By the time he wrote the "Meditation on the Twenty-fifth Psalm", Menno had abandoned the priesthood. Menno writes in this meditation about his new-found Christian faith, and exuberantly describes the New Jerusalem not only as an individualistic redemption but also as a living community of God.

Menno edited and rewrote his materials and as Helmut Isaak followed this trail he caught the uniqueness, as over time the focus moved from the death of Jesus to that of the living presence of the

risen Lamb. Menno's specific ideology on the incarnation was somewhat subtle and confusing — he was a better organizer than a writer — but his intent was clear. He was not interested in a future apocalyptic incarnation: the New Jerusalem, he wrote, "is already here, in the hearts of believers". Thus a movement that has spanned five centuries was begun and it continues to challenge the Church in her journey from now through eternity.

Besides these stories, Helmut told us of his brother Kornelius, ten years older than himself, and how he became a missionary to the Ayoreos tribe in the Chaco. At age 19 Kornelius was elected as a minister in his home congregation. Two years later he declared his interest in doing missionary work among the Indians of Paraguay. In 1958 a newly formed mission board issued an invitation to go to the Ayoreos tribe who were resisting encroachments by an oil company. They needed a peacemaker and the gospel. Kornelius went with two companions to make contact with that tribe. As they entered the village, Kornelius was fatally wounded with a spear and died the next day. He died praying for his family and for this tribe. Kornelius Isaak was the first Mennonite martyr in Latin America: he was only 31.

The New Tribes Mission later sent missionaries to work among the same tribe and now, many years later, there are many Christians in that tribe,



including the man who stabbed Kornelius Isaak. Five Christian members of the same clan who killed Kornelius also became martyrs while trying to reach out to their own. The death of Kornelius had a part in Helmut's call to Christ, which sent him to Europe, North America and Mexico.



Ed Schmidt at lectern.

A request came from Latin American Evangelicals to provide a place to study Anabaptist peace theology. In 2006 a Study Centre for Anabaptist and Peace Theology was established at the Evangelical University in Asuncion, Paraguay. It was meaningful to Helmut that his brother was held up as an example of a peacemaker, and that the Study Centre has been named after Kornelius.

As a third part of the evening, Eve Isaak came to the podium to share her story. She was also born in Paraguay, but her parents, the Giesbrechts, came back to Manitoba while she was still young, so she grew up in Canada. She had a real desire to learn, but that was not her parents' tradition; she was supposed to cook and work at home. She married a man who could not read and was sickly. She cared for her husband for many years. Finally she had to



A question from the audience — Victor Wiebe.

place him in a care home. He died in 2001. She is thankful that through those difficult times, she learned a lot about life.

In the 1980s Eve applied to work with victim services with the police, and was involved in the church. Despite the many challenges, she chose to pursue education. She took chaplaincy training and worked mostly in palliative care facilities. Sometimes she was called upon to officiate at funerals of people who had no church or faith. She also worked at a child-abuse clinic and took pastoral clinical training. She attended Hesston College in Kansas, graduating in 1995. She asked to work in a prison with offenders, but when there were no opportunities for women in this area, she went to Alberta to work with Mennonites who had returned from Mexico.




Eve and Helmut married two and a half years ago, and are now able to work together in the Addictions Rehabili-



Top photo: Joan Harms (left) and Eve Isaaks. Lower photo: Verner Friesen talking to Jacob and Susie Wiebe of Laird, afterwards. All photos for this article by Henry Harms.

tation Centre in Mexico. Their difficult times have shaped them for the work they do today.

The evening concluded with a time of questions and answers. The Isaaks had pamphlets and a CD and also a DVD in Low German available. They do their work and teaching in Low German, High German, Spanish, and English. 



## Honouring Our Leaders and Volunteers

By Verner Friesen

The Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan has a tradition of honouring people who have made an outstanding contribution towards preserving Mennonite history, heritage or faith in our province. On August 10, 2008 we continued in that tradition by honouring two leaders from the past. The special event was held at Bethany Manor in Saskatoon and was well attended.

Rev. Jacob H. Epp (1910 - 1993), originally from the Salem community near Waldheim, Sask. was a Bible teacher and pastor for many years. He was best known as a teacher and, for twenty years, the principal of the Bethany Bible Institute in Hepburn. The daughter of Jacob and Alvena (Kruger) Epp, Carol Baerg, shared on behalf of the Epp family. Carol began by saying that they all thought that



Carol Baerg

their father was a very important man because, after all, in Sunday School they sang, "We are climbing Jake Epp's ladder". She emphasized that her dad had a great love for young people, as evidenced by a long career in teaching, always welcoming opportunities to teach the youth Sunday school class and serve as a mentor to youth, and keeping in touch with issues relevant to the younger set.



Elmer Andres

Elmer Andres, Hepburn, then shared with appreciation from the perspective of having been both a former student and teaching colleague of J. H. Epp at Bethany Bible Institute.

Rev. John G. Rempel (1890 - 1963) was a teacher and minister in Ukraine before coming to Canada in 1923 with the first group of 1920s immigrants. In Canada he served first as a minister in Langham, Saskatchewan, then for many years as teacher and later principal of the Rosthern Bible School. He also became very involved in numerous other ways, serving as secretary-treasurer of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, writing children's Bible stories for *Der Bote*, and serving the Rosenort group of churches in the Rosthern area as minister and elder. A daughter of John G. and Susan (Epp) Rempel, Laura Wiens, represented the Rempel family. She gave a brief historical outline of Rev. Rempel's life, as gleaned from his memoirs, and also shared some personal memories, such as their dad entertaining them by reading poetry and their mother turning his torn shirt collar before he was off on another train trip or to another conference. Helen Kornelsen, Watrous, then spoke with appreciation about John G. Rempel from her perspective of having been his student (1940 - 42) at the Rosthern

Bible School. Rev. Rempel, she said, could be very serious, but he also had a great sense of humour. The students loved and respected him. He was also present for a “very holy moment” in her life when he assisted Rev. J.J. Thiessen with her ordination to missionary service in India.



Photos on this page, clockwise from above: Helen Kornelsen, speaking at the event; display of documents from the archives of MHSS; a section of the audience present at the event; visiting time at the reception afterwards; Laura Wiens, daughter of Rev. Rempel, at the reception. All photos for this article, including those on p. 8, by Henry Harms.





The members of the families of Rev. Epp and Rev. Rempel who were able to attend were recognized at the event.

Shown in the photo at right are, from left: Jake and Hilda (Rempel) Klassen, Janet Wiens (daughter of Laura Wiens), Laura (Rempel) Wiens.

Shown in the photo below, from left: Russ and Kathy (Epp) Isaak, Cliff and Carol (Epp) Baerg, Paige Isaak, granddaughter of Russ and Kathy.



## Celebrating Our Volunteers

The work of the Historical Society could not go on without the help of a host of volunteers who give generously of their time and abilities. A number of them work in the archives and others help with the production of the *Saskatchewan Mennonite*

*Historian*. Part of the afternoon's program focussed on the volunteers, who were all given certificates of appreciation for their important contribution to the Society.



Volunteer award recipients are shown above. From left to right, back row: Ray Fast, Helen Fast, Dick Braun, Werner Falk, Elmer Neufeld, Jake Wiebe; front row: Victor Wiebe (presenter), Ruth Friesen, Margaret Mair, Mary Loeppky, Erna Neufeld, Viola Schmidt, Rosemary Slater, Hilda Voth, Esther Patkau. *Missing:* Ernie Baergen, Hilda Braun, Susan Braun, Helen Dyck, Helen Janzen, Alan Guenther, Deanna Krahn, and Mary Martens.





## Arelee Mennonite Brethren Church Centennial Celebration 1908 – 2008

By David Bergen



*The Mennonite Brethren Church at Arelee (formerly Eagle Creek), Sask. was one of three early church planting initiatives of the Mennonite Brethren among Russian immigrants in the West. The other two were near Blaine Lake, Sask. and Kief, North Dakota. These Russian-speaking people had come to Saskatchewan and North Dakota between 1893 and 1903.*

*The congregation at Arelee was established in 1908 as the Arelee Russian Mennonite Brethren Church. It was only in the 1960s that the word Russian was dropped from the name. The first permanent church building was typically Mennonite in design. The second building had a hint of the Greek Orthodox tradition with its multiple towers and central dome. The first pastors were Luka Krowchenko and Apollon Melashenko, both ordained in 1908.*

— Eds.

### *The Planning:*

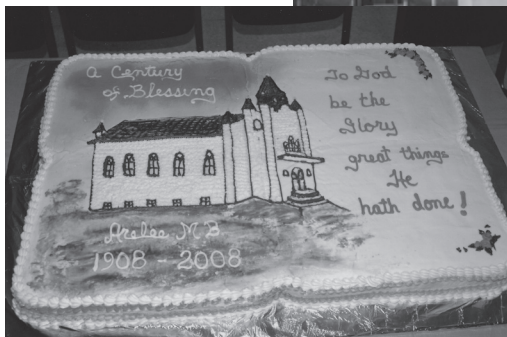
The planning for this centennial celebration was initiated by the Arelee M.B. Church group in 2006. I received an e-mail dated June 23, 2006 from Archie Jantzen, the pastor, saying that the congregation had made a decision to recognize the centennial. Archie

wrote, "We [the present congregation] look ahead to the occasion with a certain amount of anxiety, because we are few and mostly 'past our prime'." He then gave by name the 17 whom they considered to be regular attenders. The first organizational meeting took place on Saturday March 31, 2007 in the Arelee M.B. Church basement, with 22 people listed as present. The committees established were Publicity and Registration, Program, History Book, Food, and Grounds and Building. Archie Jantzen was elected as chair for the meetings and MC for the celebration, Pat Fisher, the church treasurer, would do the finances, and Marlene Matiko was the secretary. The theme for the celebration would be "A Century of God's Blessing 1908–2008". The date for the event was set for June 27–29, 2008. This date coincided with the annual Bible and Mission conference traditionally held with the three churches: Kief, Blaine Lake, and Arelee M.B. and later only Arelee M.B.

Since the early pioneers had met in several locations prior to 1908 it was suggested that these places should be identified with a marker. Steve Matiko and David Bergen were put in charge of that. An information sheet concerning these places was put in the registration packet, so those who wanted to go to these sites could do so. The reason for two sites was that the settlers were widely spread throughout the region and travel was by oxen in those days. One site was in the south area of the settlement and one in the north. The north site was later changed to another site, but no reason for that is given. When the two groups amalgamated, the first church building was built on the present site of the cemetery. The land was donated by Mike J. Rabuka, the deacon ordained in 1908. The building erected there became too small and several additions were made. When this also became too small, an entirely new one was built, in 1917. In 1944 it was decided to dismantle the building and build

a completely new one just outside the village of Arelee. This is the building pictured on page 9.

On Monday, June 23, 2008, a work bee to prepare the building and grounds was held. There was a good turnout, with willing hands, equipment, and the spirit to work. The yard was mowed and some hedges trimmed, and the church sanctuary and basement were cleaned. The banner with the centennial celebration theme was put



Top photo: the front of the sanctuary, displaying the banner and the quilt given to Peter and Shirley Unrau as a parting gift by the Arelee ladies in 1958. Below it, the wonderful sheet cake made for the celebration. Opposite, the gathered congregants in front of the church for a celebration photo. All photos for this article by or courtesy of Marlene Matiko.

up, which put people in the mood for the celebration. Two tents were erected on Thursday afternoon, a smaller one on the east side of the church and a larger one on the south side of the town hall, where the meals were to be served. Gary Evjen was to install the sound system that evening. The tents arrived and were set up and then a storm blew in later that evening and flattened them both. That was disappointing, but as Robert Burns said, "The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men gang aft agley." The spirits were temporarily dampened, but the church tent was again erected Friday after the evening service and the larger one Saturday morning. Now all was ready for the celebration event.

### *The Celebration*

Friday, June 27th:

Registration began at 6:30 p.m. Since the tent was flat, Karen (Kowalenko) Evjen set up in the church

foyer, and coffee and sweets were served in the basement. There was much handshaking and hugging and lively chatter as the people greeted each other and exchanged family information. Many had not seen each other for a long time. In our case, a car pulled up behind us as we arrived. Did we know these people? Not really! And then, of course, we did: they were Nancy (Fertuck) and Nick Hawreschuk! After all, I had married them and Nick was still congratulating himself that Nancy was the best choice he had ever made. I asked Nancy if Nick ever told her

that and she said many times. Wow! Well, people had aged, but not many were using canes or walkers. The once young, very mobile Alex Martichenko was walking leaning heavily on a cane, yet his spirit was as young and optimistic as it once was. What a joy to greet person after person, all of whom had aged of course since 1958-64 when we were there, but the radiance of Jesus shone in their eyes and was expressed in their voices and words as we greeted each other.

At 8 p.m. we assembled for the first celebration service. Archie Jantzen gave words of welcome and opened with prayer. Homer Anderson led the congregation in singing, "To God be the Glory". (Darle Rabuka, program chair, had prepared a brochure with all the hymns that were to be sung on the weekend.) Then Lorne Rabuka led in a devotional. He greeted the congregation with the traditional greeting at festive occasions, "Mirwam dorgieje Bratje Sostre" (peace be to you, brothers and sisters). He then used the Lord's supper text about Jesus taking the bread, giving thanks, breaking it, and distributing it, and applied that to the Arelee church from 1908 to the present. We were chosen by Jesus and broken to be distributed in our world to be a witness to the salvation in Jesus. Next, Paul Wiens, son of David B. and Gertrude Wiens, who ministered in Arelee for 11 years, from 1943 to 1954, gave a short testimony. We then sang, "Great is Thy Faithfulness" and were dismissed in a



closing prayer by Lorne Rabuka. A group of men then went to erect the blown-down tent and visiting resumed.

Saturday, June 28, morning events:

There was more opportunity for registration, and the greeting, hugging, handshaking and visiting was resumed. Conference Pastor Ralph Gliege had set up a Sask. M.B. Conference display in the tent, and more coffee and sweets were available. At 10:30 we gathered for worship in the sanctuary. After the welcome and opening prayer, Levi Borisenko led the congregation in singing, "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee". Willa (Jasper) Edmunds read Scripture and prayed and reported on her spiritual roots in the Arelee M.B. Church and their mission work with Tecate Mission, "Children of Mexico Enterprises". (Willa's husband, Lavern Edmunds, has passed away.) She thanked the Lord for her spiritual roots in Arelee M.B. Church and the support in prayer, friendship, and finances received. Louella (Matiko) Dalman powerfully sang a solo, "Let there Be Praise". Then Alex Martichenko, commissioned to go to Ethiopia in 1964 and supported by the church, gave a inspiring report, on his work, first in Ethiopia and now in Vancouver and area. Reuben Andres then inspired the celebration congregation with a message on "The Unchanging God in a Changing World". The congregation then sang "Now Thank We All Our God" and sister Charlotte

(Matiko) Lutzer gave closing comments about her spiritual heritage in the church and closed in prayer. We all praised God for what we had heard and how we had been challenged by the various speakers.

Saturday afternoon:

The congregation made their way to the town hall, where a delicious beef on a bun and salad lunch with all the trimmings was served. Visiting continued. The afternoon was spent in various ways. Loretta (Melashenko) Matiko had the people in the tent play some creative games, which were greatly enjoyed by the celebration audience. Some went to rest and visiting continued.

Saturday evening service:

Archie Jantzen opened the service and made announcements. We sang "Holy God We Praise Thy Name". John Siemens, pastor from 1971-74, read the Scriptures, made comments, and prayed. Luella Dalman favored us with another beautiful solo, "You Are Faithful". David Bergen was then called to give the evening address. He chose to trace the historical reason why in 1908 the Arelee brethren decided to become a Russian Mennonite Brethren Church. He quoted his church history professor, the late J. A. Toews, who said, "History is not just what happened when and where, but why did it happen then and there?"

He probed the "why" of the Arelee congregation and found it led back to the Mennonite, mostly



Rev. David Dyck, presiding elder of the Mennonite Brethren Conference of Sask., who conducted the ordination of Luka Krowchenko and Apollon Melashenko, the first pastors, in 1908.



Mennonite Brethren, Naumenko Colony in the Karkov province of Ukraine, 200 km east of Dnepropetrovsk, at that time Ekaterinoslav. It was from the Karkov province that many Arelee people came. David Bergen had found, in his research, that it was in fact his great-grandfather Benjamin Redekop II who, with his brother Franz and other M.B.'s, founded the colony in the 1880s. Not only did they need land, but their objective was to be witnesses to the Russian peasants of their new-found faith in Jesus, which they had experienced through the Mennonite Brethren renewal movement, founded in 1860, in the Mennonite colonies in south Russia. They carried out their witnessing energetically, and Russian peasants were converted to Jesus kneeling at the kitchen chairs in M.B. homes, even though such witness was forbidden by law. J.F. Harms, in his history of the M.B.s, says the Arelee Brethren were Mennonite Brethren from the start because many had come to faith in Jesus through them.

A choir, assembled and practising at the event under the direction of Greg Dalman, sang their first selection, "Seeking The Lost". The meeting then opened for reminiscing and a good number participated. This was followed by a

The first permanent church, built in 1917 on the site of the present cemetery. It was dismantled in 1944, when the new church was built.

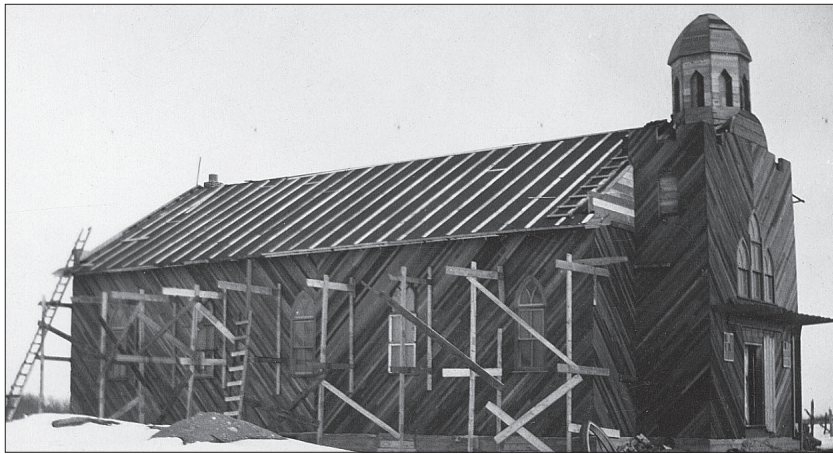
PowerPoint presentation by Marlene Matiko. The presentation featured the pictures in the history book with some additions. "Praise Him Praise Him", sung by the congregation, echoed through the sanctuary and Ralph Gliege made closing comments and dismissed the congregation with prayer. The MCC offering brought in \$1,100.

Sunday June 29:

This was the "high" festival day with the sanctuary, balcony and choir loft filled. There were also some in the tent outside. The mood was celebrative as the congregation sang "Praise My Soul the King of Heaven". The Scripture and prayer were led by Wesley Karpow. Then Marion (Jasper) Tibberts shared about their work with New Tribes Mission in Colombia and Mexico and now with Child Evangelism in El Paso Texas. She also appreciated her roots in the Arelee Mennonite Brethren Church and their prayer and financial support. Lucy Greeb-Waldner then involved the congregation in the chorus of the song "Thank you Lord for Saving My Soul", which she followed with a solo, "My Tribute". Levi Borisenko then led the congregation in a Russian favourite at conferences, "Hpomko Ilote". The essence of this song is "Brethren Rejoice! Once we were strangers now we are friends". It was gratifying how energetic the Russian singing still was. I remember the hearty singing of that song at our annual conferences in Arelee when we were there. During the offering, which was taken to support expenses the church would have with the celebration, ongoing cemetery care, and the ladies' quilting, the choir sang, "O For A Thousand Tongues To Sing".







Construction of the present church in 1944.

The history book records that, “From 1996–2008 the ladies assembled 1,399 quilts, and their quilting is not done for this season.” The top and bottom of the quilts are donated but the batts inside are bought. Peter Unrau then brought a dynamic message of the Sovereignty of God. He reminded us that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ is in charge of history as well as our individual life.

The celebration was concluded with the Lord’s Supper, led by Archie Jantzen and David Bergen. During the communion the congregation sang, “Alas and did My Savior Bleed” and Lorne Rabuka filled in with appropriate songs on the piano. At the end, all held hands in a continuous circle, singing one verse of “Blessed Be the Tie That Binds”. Ralph Gliege made some acknowledgements and presented Archie Jantzen with a gazebo, to recognize their fifteen-year ministry in Arelee. The Sask. M.B. Conference recognizes the service of pastors every five years at a given location. This was Archie and Erna’s third recognition. Stephen Matiko spoke the closing benediction and grace for the noon meal. The congregation then sang “God Be with You Till We Meet Again”.

The noon meal was served at the town hall and tent with much visiting and celebration. At the meal, a call was made over the PA system for the participants to go back to the church for a picture. Some

had to leave to catch planes, etc., but many came and you can see them in the photo (p. 11).

### *A Sad Sequel*

Something that saddened the celebration was that, prior to the weekend event, the congregation had decided to disband. Three families were moving away and that left a very small group. They had decided that the celebration on Sunday, June 29, 2008 would be the last service. There are things like the library and church records that need taking care of. The building is up for sale, with the Sask M.B. Board of management in charge. The remaining group will meet from time to time and the annual “song celebration Sunday” in fall will be held. We were repeatedly reminded that the church is not a building but people. The testimony and work begun here and carried on for 100 years will continue in the lives of the people impacted by the ministry in Arelee M.B. Church, through God’s people scattered in so many places.

In conclusion, we give honour, glory, and praise to the Triune God, who was in charge for 100 years and who still is in charge, and we remember the words of Jesus, “I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matt 16:18).



## A Faith Story

By Anne Neufeld

The following article was originally published in the Bethany Manor Chronicle, April 1, 2008. It is reprinted here with permission. — Ed.

Some time ago I was asked to share my faith journey in a Sunday School class at First Mennonite Church; I thought I couldn't do it. But then I remembered all the times God had led me in just the right way. We are to be witnesses, with his sharing I want to praise God for all He has done in my life.

I grew up on a farm near Clavet; my father, Gerhard Zacharias, was the pastor of the Pleasant Point Mennonite Church; my mother was a quiet, gentle woman. I do not remember when I learned my first prayer, or when I accepted God as my Saviour. My



Christian faith came gradually and naturally, and it just grew. I was baptized by Rev. J.J. Thiessen at Pleasant Point Church, and years later when we moved to Saskatoon, we joined First Mennonite. I taught Sunday School there for 24 years.

I was the youngest in our family of seven, so after the others left home my parents depended on me

for many things. Their English was not very good so Dad depended on me for help with paperwork.

In 1950 Jake Neufeld and I were married; he came from Ontario and Mom was afraid her youngest child would move far away, but we not only stayed in Saskatoon, but moved in with Mom and Dad for several years. They were good years. We helped each other. Jake was Dad's chauffeur. In 1952 our son Richard was born; we thanked God for this precious gift. We had lots of dreams for him; we wanted him to have a good education so he wouldn't have to work as hard as his dad, but God led in a different way. We noticed that as a toddler he had trouble playing with other children; he was slow in developing in many ways. Four years later Donald was born; he was a sickly baby and cried a lot. I was sick for quite a while after his birth. If it hadn't been for God's help and the support of my parents, I don't know how we would have coped.

We've often struggled with why God gave us two handicapped sons. If we hadn't had our sons, Jake would not have been involved with helping the handicapped. He, together with several parents, worked to get a workshop started. It was a hard struggle but eventually we had a one-room sheltered workshop that became Cosmopolitan Industries. It began with about ten; but the facility was enlarged and by 1998, it had 400 clients. When Richard was 18 and finished school, he entered this workshop. Both Richard and Donald are happy to work at this facility. We worked in various ways which we would not have done if we hadn't had our sons. So we thank God for our sons. We have a compassionate Lord; having a handicapped child is not a punishment any more than having a normal child is a reward.

Church has always been an important part of our lives. When the boys were small, taking them to church was hard. Donald cried a lot; crowds bothered him so I could never stay in church very long.



When the boys became old enough, we enrolled them in Sunday School. Integration is good for some children, but our boys felt out of place. After a few years, we approached Church Council about starting a class for slow learners. We were given support to get this class started. One of the teachers started singing with her class of eight. One of the students even played the piano, so they started their own choir. They put on programs at church and at nursing homes. When the students turned middle age, the class was discontinued, but Richard and Donald continued attending church, and have been baptized. A friendly greeting goes a long way to make them feel welcome.

Richard had his first seizure when he was a few months old; he had a severe one when he was six. At that time, he was in hospital in isolation for a while. The medical staff looked for the cause of the seizures, but they found nothing. He was put on medication, at first two pills a day; now he is on two kinds — ten pills a day. They control the seizures, but there are many side effects; the hardest is his speech. He used to speak very well; of course, it was limited, but it was clear; now his speech is garbled and I can't understand. He has to repeat several times before I catch a word, and then we can go on from there. It's very hard on him. Some have asked why he is shy and won't talk; it's because he knows we can't understand. This is hard. It's not just because of the pills; it's also the retardation.

In 1964 chosen daughter Janet joined our family; she brought us lots of joy. We marvelled how the little girl stood up for her brothers when they were teased. God was good to us. Janet married and had two children, but then there was a divorce; that is hard on everyone, including parents. God helped us through and a few years later we were grateful that Jake and I could be at Janet's second wedding.

In 1992 we received a phone call from Elmwood Residences, a home for mentally challenged adults. They told us they had two beds and asked would we want them. We had had Richard and Donald's names on their list for many years, but only on file. Another difficult decision! We could still take care of them, but what about their future? Jake

and I prayed about it and we realized that two beds would probably not be available again at the same time. It's hard enough when normal children leave home of their own free will. Were we pushing our sons away? It was hard for all of us, but the boys have been very brave. We thank God for helping them adjust. Coming home weekends and going to church on Sunday is still very important. How wonderfully God led! We knew He was guiding us in the right way. It was a good move.

Jake had his first cancer surgery in 1983. He had seven cancer-related surgeries; he called them "miracles" because he was always fine for a few years until the cancer returned. Friends would say, "Why is this happening to you?" He would always answer, "Why not me?"



Donald (left) and Richard Neufeld.  
On previous page, Anne and Jake Neufeld.  
Both photos courtesy of Anne Neufeld.

When Bethany Tower was being built, we felt God nudging us to make a move. It was hard to sell and move from the house Jake had built, but God gave us peace and we moved in 2000. We shared over two years in our apartment; it was enough to get settled and make some memories.

In 2002 Jake and I were both in the hospital at the same time — he in St. Paul's and I in City. His one

kidney was not functioning at all so a shunt was put into the one that was partially working. I had colon cancer surgery. We thanked our Lord that I did not need treatments. That was a hard time, but God was very near. The doctors and nurses were extra kind, knowing our situation. Many friends were praying for us and God answered. To Him we give the glory! In ten days we both could come home.

Jake was getting weaker; the doctors told us they were running out of options. Richard and Donald came home about every third weekend, so when I was alone with them I started talking about their Dad's cancer and that he would not get well. They asked if he would die, and I said, yes, but only God knows when. With talk almost every time they came home, I wanted them to understand and get used to the fact that their father would die. I felt God wanted me to prepare them, and later I knew it had been the right way.


In April 2003 Jake went into palliative care; he was there nine weeks. Health Care rules wouldn't allow him to stay longer. Then he was in Central Haven Special Care Home for over a month. The cancer was in his bones; he had tumours in his throat so he had trouble swallowing; the last month he could not talk. It was a difficult time, but I had so much to be grateful for and I still thank God for giving me health. I could go every day to see him. I fed him breakfast and stayed until 8 p.m. I thanked God that it was summertime, no snowstorms; I could drive and had no car trouble — so much for which to be grateful!

In June, while Jake was in hospital, Janet gave birth to twins; she was in and out of hospital the first

month with complications. This was while Jake was in hospital and the care home, so I had no support from my children. It was a hard time, but I always felt God was near. When Jake died, I prayed that the children would be able to come to the funeral, and they did!

Some have asked whether the boys understood what happened to their dad; they thought the boys probably didn't know about death. How wrong they were! The boys had been at many family funerals. Richard had been pall bearer with his dad for several handicapped people. I was concerned how they would react to seeing their dad in a coffin, and would I be strong enough to help them. They were very brave and I was proud of them. I did wonder how they would be at the cemetery. Jake's body was laid to rest in the Pleasant Point Mennonite Church cemetery, and the family closed in the grave. Richard could not shovel dirt; I told him he didn't have to; but Donald took the shovel with dirt, dumped it and pointed to heaven, and said, "Jesus". He did this over and over. I was told that was a sermon on its own. How much they understand we don't know, but they know their dad is in heaven with Jesus.

We have accepted our children as they are and thank God for each one. We're all made in God's image. We've often struggled with the question, "Why did God give us two handicapped sons?" We may never know the answer, but God has helped us through the difficult times and we know that He will continue to be our strength.

Thanks for allowing me to share a little about my life and my struggles. I thank God for leading and guiding me throughout my life. 



## Pleasant Hill Church Celebrates 50 Years

*The following article is adapted from files in the archives of Pleasant Hill Mennonite Church.* — Eds.

It was eighty years ago that a Christian ministry was begun by First Mennonite Church in the Pleasant Hill area of Saskatoon. Benno Toews is considered to be the founding leader of PHMC. As a mission worker and university student, Benno began Sunday School classes for children on Sunday afternoons in the Anglican Church hall at Avenue T South and 19th Street. Most of the Sunday School students came from homes that did not have a Christian background. Sporadic attendance and a high illiteracy rate were challenges faced by those leading the classes. Several members from First Mennonite, including Henry W. Friesen, Gerhard Penner and his daughter Kaethe, took the street car to Pleasant Hill on Sunday afternoons. Some of the young women from First Mennonite Church also took turns going out to teach. For twenty-five years the Sunday School classes met in the Anglican Hall.



The Anglican church in which the Pleasant Hill Sunday school classes met for 25 years.

For a period of time Rev. J.J. Thiessen held evening Bible studies in private homes to help those whom he had contacted through house calls in the community and to draw the families together. Eventually these Bible studies were replaced by Sunday af-



Pleasant Hill Church as it is today.

ternoon worship services in the Hall, preceding the Sunday School classes. For fifteen years Rev. Thiessen went every Sunday to conduct these services. From 1930 until the formation of the congregation in 1958, J.J. Thiessen was an instrumental part of the leadership of PHMC.

In 1952 an unused recreation hall was purchased and relocated to 2133 22nd St. West. The lot on 22nd St. was donated by Bill and Barbara Bergen. With volunteer labour, the building was converted into a chapel. On January 18, 1953 the Pleasant Hill Mission Chapel was dedicated. Worship services were now held on Saturday evenings, with Sunday School classes continuing on Sunday afternoons. Christian Endeavour (young adults), choir and Bible Study were soon added to the schedule. In 1954 the women organized the Dorcas Mission



The church building built on Witney Ave. N. in 1962.

Circle and began to financially support the work of the mission church. The ladies, with an average of ten to twelve members, served many suppers and at many weddings. Isaac Ens was the leader of the congregation during 1953 - 1954. Until this time, the electricity for the lights in the Chapel was fed by an extension cord from Bill Bergen's house next door. Heat came from a wood and coal stove. Gas heating was installed in 1953.

In 1955 the group began to organize as a church. For the year 1955 - 56, Otto Driedger, a social worker, took over the leadership. The Pleasant Hill Mission held their first annual business meeting on February 3, 1958. Peter Reimer accepted the position of leader, and G. Klassen, William Bergen and Abe Friesen were elected as trustees. Local ministers served with messages. On April 20, 1958, the Pleasant Hill Mennonite Church was organized as an independent congregation with 21 charter members.

Peter Reimer's term of leadership was short. In July he handed in his resignation and in November of the same year he passed away. The congregation then called Ben Fast, a teacher, to be their minister. Under his leadership the work blossomed and a new building soon became a necessity. The property on 22nd Street was sold and a new building erected at 111 Witney Avenue North. The new building was dedicated on July 8, 1962. Ben Fast served as pastor till the fall of 1966.

Carl Ens, a guidance counsellor, took on the leadership on an interim basis till June of 1969. Next Dave Letkeman accepted the call and served as pastor from July, 1969 till he left for overseas mission service in 1975. In November of 1975 Peter E. Funk, originally from Saskatchewan but at that time a pastor in Kansas, came to be pastor of Pleasant Hill. Peter served for fourteen years till 1989.

The building was again getting too small to run the many weekly programs effectively. At the annual congregational meeting in January, 1980 a proposal to enlarge the church was approved. The Dedication Service for the expansion was held on May 31, 1981.

From 1982 till 1992 several associate pastors (Steve Teele, Tim Velacott, and Greg Goertzen) served in the area of Youth and Music Ministries. The present lead pastor, David W. Peters, began service here on September 1, 1989.



The church with its addition, completed in 1981.

In 1995, the Sunday School, pioneer Clubs and Bible Studies were amalgamated into one evening program called Family Night. The Sunday morning worship service was scheduled for an earlier time and included Children's Church. At the same time, the church called Keith and Karen Pankratz who were students at Briercrest Bible College. Keith was to head up the youth ministries and Karen the children's and music ministries. Keith now serves the church as full-time Associate Pastor.

Once again the expanding church ministries needed more space. A special congregational meeting in March of 2004 approved the proposal to expand church facilities. A new and renovated building was





David and Joanne Peters.


dedicated to the Lord in a special service on October 31, 2004. In 2006 and 2007 two adjacent properties were purchased in order to provide much needed additional parking space.



Keith and Karen Pankratz.

In November of 2001 Pastor Eduardo Guinnez began a Spanish ministry on Saturday evenings, and in the fall of 2006 the mission field came to their doors in the form of a couple of young men who were refugees from Burma. Through their influence other refugees from Burma began attending. Now the Burmese people have their own meetings on Sunday afternoons under the leadership of Pastor Paw Eh, although several Burmese families also continue to worship with the main congregation.

On the weekend of May 23 - 25, 2008 the congregation celebrated their golden jubilee. It was in 1958 that the Pleasant Hill church was organized as an independent congregation. The weekend featured special music, testimonies, and greetings from former pastors and government officials. Many former members came back to celebrate the special event.

Pastor David Peters says, "As we look to the future we recognize our responsibility to be faithful, and in our faithfulness we have the promise of our Lord Jesus that He will build His church. God is at work in our midst. We look with gratitude upon the past and with hope into the future". 

# Mennonite Plautdietsch — Language and History

By Christopher Cox

*Christopher Cox hails from Warman and is a graduate student in linguistics at the University of Alberta. The following article follows the contents of a major presentation Chris made at the MHSS Annual General Meeting in March of 2008.*

## Introduction

This article presents a brief outline of the development of Mennonite Plautdietsch, from its beginnings in the Vistula Delta in what is now Poland in the 16th and 17th centuries. The history of its words reflects the history of emigration and exile of Mennonite Plautdietsch speakers and thus presents a living record of the history of the Russian Mennonites.

Both this article and the presentation which preceded it have benefited immensely from the efforts of scholars who have devoted considerable time and effort in researching the etymology of Plautdietsch. They include Reuben Epp, Tjeerd de Graaf, Walther Quiring, Rogier Nieuweboer, and Jack Thiessen, among many others, upon whose collective work this article largely rests. Their contribution to the common understanding of the history and structure of Mennonite Plautdietsch is gratefully acknowledged here.

## The Prehistory of Plautdietsch

Plautdietsch belongs to the Indo-European language family. The Indo-European language family represents the largest portion of the languages spoken in Europe today. Many of the similarities observed between the words, sounds, and grammatical features of languages belonging to this family are thought to be primarily due not to borrowing, but rather to having a common linguistic ancestor. Historical linguistics has long insisted that all of the Indo-European languages can be demonstrated to have gradually branched off from a single proto-language over the course of several thousand years. As speakers of this common proto-language spread out from their homeland throughout Europe and northern Asia, the varieties of this language spoken by each migrant group continued to differ from one another — sounds gradually changed, and new words came to be adopted. The varieties spoken by these now geographically separated groups eventually became so different from one another as

to represent separate languages. On this view, all of the modern Indo-European languages are essentially siblings and cousins to one another. Some languages are more closely related, often sharing an immediate parent (e.g. French, Italian, and Spanish developed out of Vulgar Latin), while others (e.g. Russian, a member of the Slavic branch, or Hindi, of the Indic branch) are more distantly related, separated by a greater amount of time and more historical changes to their respective sound systems and vocabulary.

The branch of the Indo-European languages that concerns us is that of the Germanic languages, which are thought to have developed in the area of the North and Baltic seas, and spread over time throughout northern and central Europe. This group developed into three sub-branches: the North Germanic languages, including Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, and Icelandic; the West Germanic languages, including English, Dutch, German, Frisian, Afrikaans, and Yiddish; and the now-extinct East Germanic languages, including Gothic. While all three branches are related, the closest similarities between languages are found within each one: while Danish shows some similarity to German, for instance, it shares more features with its Scandinavian sister languages, with which it is more closely related. Plautdietsch falls into the West Germanic branch, being a variety of Low German (Niederdeutsch).

The relationship between Plautdietsch and the other West Germanic languages is thus one of siblings, not of parents to children: no one language from this group represents the 'original' or 'purest' form of the language, even where their names might be thought to suggest otherwise. Rather, the names of several of these languages, such as High German and Low German, reflect their historical geographical distribution: High German originally referred to the varieties spoken in the highlands of central Europe, close to the Alps; while Low German referred to the varieties spoken in the lowlands of northern continental Europe bordering on the North and Baltic seas. As sister languages, then, they are closely related, but have independent claims to long and distinct histories: modern



Low German is considered to have descended from Old Saxon in the north, while modern High German is descended from varieties of German spoken in the central and southern regions of what is now Germany. Importantly, both languages have long and largely independent histories as written languages, as well, with written records for each language dating back to at least the ninth century, if not earlier.

Indeed, Low German has a notable history of use in formal, written contexts. Low German once served as the official language of the Hanseatic League, an alliance of trading guilds which dominated maritime commerce in the North and Baltic Seas for several hundred years during the late Middle Ages, doing business in a region stretching from England to Finland and from Holland to Russia (cf. Epp, 1993). As the de facto language of northern European commerce during this time, Low German was a language of considerable prominence: trade agreements were written, negotiated, and signed in Low German in places as far away as Finland and Russia, serving as the common language between merchants of different nationalities. The important role played by Low German as a lingua franca during this period ultimately left its mark on the languages of northern Europe and Scandinavia, as well, where Low German borrowings were relatively common. The modern Swedish *Byxa* 'pants, trousers', can be traced back to the Middle Low German word *Buxe* (Plautdietsch: *Bexe(n)*); the Danish word for paying, *betale*, was borrowed from Middle Low German *betale(n)* (Plautdietsch: *betoble(n)*). Even Icelandic, the most distant of the Scandinavian languages from the Low German sphere of influence, shows signs of contact with Low German, with words such as *Edik*, coming from the Middle Low German *Etik*, still close in form and identical in meaning with the Plautdietsch *Ädikj*, 'vinegar'. Even Finnish, a language not belonging to the Indo-European family, contains borrowings from Low German, including *lakana* 'sheet, bedsheet', from the Low German *Lakan* (Plautdietsch: *Loake(n)*). Words such as these remain in active use in these languages even today, and all have their roots in the Low German of the Hanseatic League.

### The Emergence of Mennonite Plautdietsch

The gradual decline of the Hanseatic League throughout the 15th and 16th centuries, when its commercial,

political, and linguistic influence began to shift to the powerful kingdoms of central Europe, proceeded largely in parallel to the emergence of the Anabaptist movement in the early sixteenth century. As persecution of early Anabaptists in the northwestern lowlands of Europe grew increasingly severe, an eastward wave of migration began from these areas to parts of northern Germany and eventually to the Hansa city of Danzig (present-day Gdańsk), where freedom from violent persecution was at least temporarily assured. This sojourn in northern Poland, which would come to



last several centuries, brought Mennonite immigrants into sustained contact for the first time with the local varieties of Nether-Prussian Low German (Niederpreußisch), which they would eventually come to adopt as their own.

Importantly, however, this transition in languages did not take place without leaving its mark. Speakers from northwestern Europe did not give up their native languages wholesale, but rather introduced elements of their native Dutch and Frisian dialects into the local Plautdietsch, producing something new. Dutch words from this time period are common, and are still to be found in the core vocabulary of contemporary Plautdietsch: words such as *Oohm* 'minister, reverend' (Dutch *oom* 'pastor'), *Prell* 'junk, odds and ends' (Dutch *prel*), *Kollea* 'colour' (Dutch *kleur*), *Olbassem* 'currants' (Dutch *aalbesen*, literally 'ale berries') are commonly

cited as being derived from Dutch sources during this time period, as are *drock* 'busy' (Dutch *drok*), *ladig* 'empty' (Dutch *ledig*), *tachentig* 'eighty' (Dutch *tachten-tig*), and *vondoag* 'today' (Dutch *vandaag*) (cf. Thiessen, 1963, 2003, 2006). A slight influence from Frisian might even be perceived in a few modern Plautdietsch words: the word *Kjwiel* 'spit' might be related to the Frisian word *kwyl*, and the word for wedding, *Kjast*, might well be related to the Frisian word *kest*, meaning 'choice'. The latter etymology would explain the Plautdietsch word for a slaughtering bee, *Schwiensk-jast*, literally a "pig's wedding", but which would have originally meant the choice (*Kjast*, *Kest*) of a pig for butchering (cf. Nieuweboer & de Graaf, 1994). Mennonite Plautdietsch is thus a language which reflects considerable linguistic diversity from its very beginning, being at its core unmistakably Low German, but with notable influence from Dutch (and, to a lesser extent, Frisian) upon its basic vocabulary. Mennonites in northern Poland thus not only adopted Plautdietsch as their everyday spoken language, but also *adapted* it, incorporating elements into it which reflected their distinctive heritage.

### Mennonite Plautdietsch in Russia

The First and Second Partitions of Poland (1772, 1793) brought increasing numbers of Mennonites under Prussian political control, and marked the beginning of the end of the early Mennonite sojourn in the Vistula Delta. As political pressure grew for Mennonites to comply with mandatory military service, and facing widespread land shortages, many Polish Mennonites accepted the invitation of Catherine II to emigrate to lands in southern Russia (present-day Ukraine) recently acquired from the Ottoman Empire. These Mennonite settlers brought with them their now-familiar Plautdietsch as the language of home and community. This act of emigration effectively removed their Plautdietsch from its original context, setting them apart from their closest linguistic kin and continuing the process of development of a distinctively "Mennonite" Plautdietsch.

Emigration not only separated Plautdietsch-speaking Mennonites from other speakers of Low German, but also brought them into contact with other Slavic languages, namely Ukrainian and Russian. Early borrowings from Russian and Ukrainian into Plautdietsch might be taken to shed some light on the kinds of contact which occurred between Mennonites and

their new neighbours. Many such borrowings represent foods not prominent or generally familiar in Mennonite kitchens of previous generations: *Arbus*, *Rebus* 'watermelon' (Rus. *arbuз*), *Bockelzhonn* 'tomato' (Rus. *baklažan* 'eggplant', which belongs to the same biological classification as the tomato), and *Schessnikj* 'garlic' (Rus. / Ukr. *česnok*) all appear to be borrowings from these Slavic languages, and likewise *Bultje* 'white bread' (Rus. *bulka*), *Pastje* 'Easter bread' (Rus. / Ukr. *paska*), *Borscht* '(beet) soup' (Rus. / Ukr. *boršč*), and *W(a)renikje* 'perogies' (Rus. *vareniki*, which can be traced back further to the word *varit* 'to boil'). Cultural and commercial items feature prominently among early borrowings, as well: cf. *Poppaross* 'cigar, cigarette' (Rus. *poparos*), *Peklatjes* 'washers, thin pieces of metal' (Rus. *podkladka*), *Laufstje* 'general store' (Rus. *lavka*), and *Schemedaun* 'suitcase' (Rus. *čemodan*).

The relatively clear classes into which these early Russian and Ukrainian borrowings fall, as well as the general absence of words indicating personal relationships (e.g. nicknames, kinship terms, words for clothing and the home, etc.), would seem worth noting. This might tentatively be taken to suggest that contact between early Mennonite settlers and their Slavic neighbours was not particularly close: if these borrowings can be taken as evidence, at least, the closest salient contact would appear to have been in the domains of commerce and unfamiliar foods and cultural products. These words represent the first unambiguous departure of Mennonite Plautdietsch from the path trodden by other kinds of Low German, distinguishing it from those varieties which remained primarily in Poland. These early borrowings are still to be found in many of the varieties of Mennonite Plautdietsch spoken by the descendants of Mennonites who emigrated from Russia in the 1870s and 1880s, albeit with heavy adaptation to fit the sound system of Low German.

For those Mennonites who remained in Russia after the educational reforms of the 1860s and the mass emigration to North America of the 1870s and 1880s, the degree of influence exerted by the Russian language upon Plautdietsch appears to have increased significantly. Slavic borrowings in the speech of later emigrants — those who left Russia in the 1920s and 1930s following the Bolshevik Revolution, for example — reveal not only kinship terms such as *Plemmenikj* 'nephew' (Rus. *plemjannik*) and nicknames such as *Wanja* 'Johnny' (Rus. *Vanja*, from *Ivan* 'John')



and *Ljolja* 'Helena' (Rus. *Ljolja*, from Olga), but also words from the domains of the home, such as *Kuchne* 'summer kitchen' (Rus. *kuxne*), and of clothing, such as *Paltoo* 'coat' (Rus. *pal'to*, itself borrowed from French *paletot*) (cf. Epp, 1993; Quiring, 1928; Thiessen, 1963). These later Russian borrowings suggest a different relationship with Slavic neighbours than was common in previous generations, demonstrating a greater familiarity with the dominant culture and further integration into Russian government and society — all areas which compulsory Russian-language education would have made increasingly familiar and accessible to Mennonites in Ukraine. Outside of borrowings, other words reflect the often tragic changes in circumstances which accompanied this period in Russian-Mennonite history: as Jack Thiessen (2003) points out, the word *buseare(n)*, once meaning simply 'to house', comes to take on a decidedly bitter flavour for many Mennonites who were forced to 'house' Machnow anarchists in their homes during the turbulent period after the Russian Revolution, turning what was once a neutral Plautdietsch word into one loaded with intensely negative historical connotations.

### Mennonite Plautdietsch Abroad

For those Mennonites who emigrated to North America, the situation surrounding early borrowings from English largely parallels that of early borrowings from Russian. Early English borrowings generally represent words from outside of the hearth and home, dealing primarily with commerce, cultural items, and technology. Thus, we find preserved in the speech of many Mexican and Paraguayan (Menno Colony) Plautdietsch speakers English-derived words such as *Stua* 'store', *Kottalöag* 'catalogue', *Zista* 'cistern', *Kjäkj* 'cake', *Koa* 'car', *Trock* 'truck', and *Pienatsbotta* 'peanut butter', despite active contact with an English-speaking majority having ended for these communities over seventy years ago (cf. Hedges, 1996; Rohkohl, 1993). With the introduction of compulsory English-language education and increased rates of bilingualism between Plautdietsch and English, borrowings gradually came to take on a more informal character, with English nouns and verbs being turned into Plautdietsch equivalents productively, and occasionally for humorous or ironic effect (e.g. *aunswitche(n)* 'to switch on', or *utstraightene(n)* 'to straighten out').

It should come as little surprise, then, to find simi-

lar patterns of borrowing from Spanish in Mexican and South American Plautdietsch outside of Brazil, beginning with cultural items and technologies either unfamiliar or uncommon in Mennonite communities — consider, for instance, *Wratschtjes* 'sandals' (Spanish *huaraches*), or *Burra* 'donkey' (Spanish *burro*), as well as any number of names for previously unfamiliar food and produce — again demonstrating the strongest influence in those areas of technology and commerce where contact with Spanish speakers has been most intense (cf. Hedges, 1996; Rohkohl, 1993).

Similarly, for those Mennonites who remained in Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution, compulsory education in Russian and the dissolution of the original Mennonite colonies through emigration and exile led to further changes to the language. Common Plautdietsch words were occasionally replaced — what was referred to as *Kjees* 'cheese' by previous generations of speakers is now called *Sir* by many such groups, adapting the Russian word *syr* — and more idiomatic phrases from Russian were translated into their direct, word-for-word equivalents in Plautdietsch without any apparent loss in meaning. Indeed, much as with English borrowings in North American Plautdietsch, some speakers of Plautdietsch in this Russian group are comfortable enough in both languages to permit on-the-spot conversion of native Russian words into Plautdietsch equivalents: Russian words like *guljat* 'to go for a walk' and *popadat* 'to get caught' can now be "translated" into Plautdietsch forms like *guljeie(n)* and *papadeie(n)*, and used like any other Plautdietsch word in conversation (cf. Nieuweboer & de Graaf, 1994; Nieuweboer, 1999).

### Conclusion

Throughout all of these Mennonite communities, it is remarkable to observe the tenacity with which Plautdietsch has been maintained, despite continual economic and social pressures favouring its abandonment. The miracle of its survival is no less noteworthy when one considers that the varieties of Nether-Prussian Plautdietsch out of which the Mennonite variety developed have now all but disappeared from the dialect landscape of the Vistula Delta. Mennonite Plautdietsch is, in effect, the last non-moribund representative of the dialects from which it originated and of an entire division of the Low German languages, remaining vital under what might reasonably

be considered highly unfavourable conditions for the retention of their language across generations.

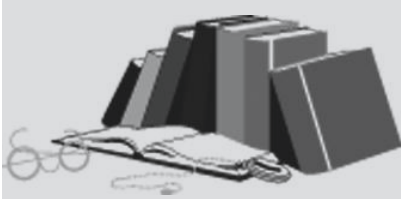
It might be suggested that Plautdietsch has remained vital where other, related languages have begun to fade away not merely as a consequence of its geographical isolation or the relatively strong coherence of Mennonite communities and colony-centred settlements, both factors mitigating against a wholesale migration to the dominant language; but rather as a result, at least in part, of its function within these communities as the language of hearth and home, a locus of community and of culture. Plautdietsch, the warm and familiar Muttasproak, serves for many not only as what Rohkohl (1993: 46) cites as the “Sprache des Herzens, der Seele” – the language of the heart, of the soul – but further as an integral part of sustained community, the central store and primary token of a shared history and cultural experience. When viewed in this light, the language might be seen to provide not only words and phrases, but also a means of common identification and sustained community, a home which could be picked up and transplanted, as often as necessary, to the Russian steppes or the Siberian tundra, to the Canadian prairies or the Paraguayan Chaco.

Thus is the gift of Low German: that it connects these dispersed Russian Mennonites into a single and vital linguistic community, bridging the deep rifts left by emigration, exile, and differences of confession (cf. Thiessen, 2000). Its current forms around the globe, however varied, reflect in living colour the collective experiences of its speakers, tracing back the unique history of this group, step for step as word for word, back from the Americas to Russia, from Russia to Prussia, from Prussia to the northwestern lowlands, and beyond – giving us all the more reason to appreciate the precious gift of this language in all of its detail.

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## Mostly about Books

By Victor G. Wiebe

Book Editor

Epp, Katherina. *Thanks for all good things: the diaries of Katherina (Janzen) Epp 1919-1944*. [Winnipeg, Manitoba. Published by Carl Epp]. 2008. vii, 782 pp. Cerlox binding. Price \$40.00. For books contact Carl Epp at: [eppenns@mts.ca](mailto:eppenns@mts.ca)

At nearly 800 pages, *Thanks for all good things: the diaries of Katherina (Janzen) Epp 1919-1944* is a large thick book with each of the 26 years covered in about 35 pages. It is a verbatim transcription of Katherina Epp's diary. Family members will read this book to get to know Katherina, other family members and historians will read it to get facts about the Eigenheim Mennonite community, and others to learn details of the now faded pioneer rural life of several generations past. When she started writing, Katherina Epp (1868-1944) was a 51-year-old widow of farmer and Eigenheim pastor Gerhard Epp who died in 1919. Katherina was also the mother of twelve children, ten of whom reached adulthood. The ten children married and had 57 grandchildren. Her children, several of whom were already married when she started her diary, were farmers or farm wives but one also became a Church Elder and another, a pastor's wife. Many of her grandchildren became very accomplished professionals, pastors, missionaries, teachers, and some remained farmers.

Katherina wrote her diary in German and the publication of this English translation took the efforts of several people over a number of years. Grandson Dennis Epp transcribed the handwriting into Roman type and then Henry Klaassen translated the text into English and finally great-grand daughter Maureen Epp edited the manuscript into a book with Maureen's father, grandson Carl Epp, publishing the book. About 100 copies were printed and released on 10 August 2008 at an Epp family

gathering. This is just enough copies for the extended family, and a few for Mennonite libraries and several for other interested readers.

There is a one-page preface, and a short "Editor's Note" from which we learn that sometimes Katherina didn't write every day but occasionally went back and filled in her entries as best she could remember; however, there are some lengthy gaps in the diary. Each day's entry by Katherina was about five to seven lines of text. Daily activities of family and farm are the primary focus of the diary. Some events of the wider world were observed, such as changes in church practices, anxieties brought on by wars, and of course the twin tragedies of the Great Depression and drought. Many features of current society are missing; for example no mention is ever made of 1 July as Dominion Day.

Though married to a granddaughter of hers, I grew up outside of the Eigenheim community and reading the diary was hard work for me. One cannot read page after page like a novel to get the rhythm of the story. One must work at becoming acquainted with, or even be immersed in family, community, church, friends, and local geography before one fits the facts together. It is in carefully reading and often rereading entries and discerning people and places that important details are understood. Many people in the family and community have similar names, which make understanding difficult and it would have been much worse, but the editors, Maureen Epp and Henry Klaassen, have fortunately added many footnotes for clarity.

In Katherina's diary we learn a great deal about her character. She was not a complainer or a person who felt sorry for her self. She was a woman of faith. Her faith in God and his salvation shines through her words and deeds. Her life was not that


of a simple farm wife, but that of a farm manager and a leader of a large multi-faceted extended family. She never seems depressed or angry and only once does she ask God for forgiveness, probably for gossiping. Her life was hard and full of work. Yet it was also full of travel, as she went the 10 kilometres to Rosthern several times a week and hardly a day went by without visiting and visitors. Her entries are full of names of people, places, daily tasks, buying and selling, food and farm products, family joys and concerns, and events mostly in the community, but occasionally in the wider province or country. Weather was important as it impacted on farming success, health was often a concern, as people suffered with little in the way getting good care, and amusing occurrences are also recorded.

In reading the diary, there is no suspense but there are tragedies, as people die before their time and others make poor choices that are revealed over time. At first one is surprised at the absence of a simple convenience like electricity and at the same time the incongruity of the ever present telephone. Other technology, like the Fordson tractor with its frequent breakdowns, seems more like a curse than a help.

One grandson reading the diary commented to me that one purpose for such a detailed diary was to take the place of a farm and family account book.

Here in one place is recorded bills and receipts, names, and events, should details be needed in the future. If that is the case, then I think today we have lost something in keeping ledgers and bank books and stylized financial records, for this diary humanizes the business of farming and adds personality to work and daily life. Reading this diary is like spending time with Katherina Epp, a strong, competent mother and family leader. Then today we are really poorer with our neat, ordered record filings, for in the future no one will ever get a personal visit with us by looking at our financial statements.

*A footnote on the diary:* I noted to an older cousin that there are several comments in which the mother, Katherina Epp, chastises her sons for using bad language when their Fordson tractor broke down — and it broke down frequently.

At this the cousin made this observation. “Yes, tractor breakdowns often led to the development and use of very bad language. One would get extremely frustrated and angry at the breakdowns, but one could not hurt a tractor by banging or hitting it. Actually one could get injured by hitting the steel of the tractor. It was different with a horse; if the horse would not cooperate, one could whip it and get over one’s anger that way but one could not whip a tractor! So the frustration and use of bad language got much worse!” 



## Take Note

### The Great Trek to Turkistan Bethany Manor, Nov. 14–15, 2008

November 14, 2008, 7:30 p.m.

November 15, 2008, 9:30 a.m. – 3:30 p.m., with a break for lunch.

A two-day historiography session on the 1880 Mennonite Great Trek to Turkistan will be held November 14–15 at Bethany Manor Fellowship Centre, 110 LaRonge Road, Saskatoon. The event is sponsored by the Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan

Resources will include: Dr. John Sharp who teaches at Hesston College, Kansas and is a current tour leader; a documentary by Walter Ratliff, “Through the Desert Goes Our Journey”; author and Professor Dr. Walter Klaassen, now retired in Saskatoon; Edwin Unruh, who was three years old when his parents started on the trek; Albertine Speiser, who personally spent many hours with her aunt Elizabeth Unruh Schultz, whose diary was translated as “What a Heritage”.

“There’s something about a redemption story that resonates in the human spirit. Perhaps moments of redemption are what we hope for in the regular failings of our own lives. A story where the reader participates in the redemptive process is perhaps the most powerful of all. The Gospel is the perfect example of this kind of story.

“The Great Trek of Mennonites to Central Asia is a story in need of redemption. North American Mennonites almost always associate this story with the End Times errors of Claas Epp, Jr. and the hardships suffered by those who accompanied him to Central Asia in the 1880’s. However, newly discovered documents offer a fresh perspective on the community founded at the Great Trek’s ultimate destination. By considering this new evidence, we have the opportunity to reassess the story itself — to create a new song, if you will.”

These two paragraphs from an article by Walter Ratliff who is a Great Trek descendant, and Producer/Director of “Through the Desert Goes Our Journey” are quoted. The full article is the last one listed on the web announcement page of Coming Events at <http://mhss.sk.ca/events/index.shtml>



### Margaret Epp, 1913 – 2008

Well-known author Margaret Epp, formerly of Waldheim and more recently a resident of the Mennonite Nursing Home in Rosthern, passed away on September 7, 2008 at the age of 95.

In November of 1996 Margaret was honoured for her writing at a special Heritage Night sponsored by the Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan. In a tribute to Margaret at that time, her nephew Gerry Epp said, “Margaret’s writing has included stories and books for all ages. She has had thirty-nine books published by such publishers as Zondervan, Beacon Press, Moody Press, Victor Books, Kindred Press, and the Mennonite Brethren Conference. She has also written for about twenty Christian periodicals. Several of her books have been translated into German and Finnish” (p. 14, SMH, Vol II, No. 1, Sept. 97).

Since 1996, Margaret has written more books and articles. In 1994 she donated a number of boxes of her manuscripts to the MHSS. The list of the collection she donated is available online at the MHSS website.

Margaret went into full-time writing in 1949. What a tremendous literary legacy she has left for us!

— Verner Friesen

## The Back Page

### Honour List

Persons who have been recognized for making significant contributions towards preserving Mennonite history, heritage, or faith within our province. To add a name to the Honour List, nominate a person in writing. (Year of death is given in brackets.)

*Helen Bahnmann*  
*Helen Dyck* (2007)  
*Dick H. Epp*  
*Jacob H. Epp* (1993)  
*Margaret Epp* (2008)  
*Peter K. Epp* (1985)  
*George K. Fehr* (2000)  
*Jake Fehr*  
*Jacob E. Friesen* (2007)  
*Jacob G. Guenter*  
*Gerhard Hiebert* (1978)

*Katherine Hooge* (2001)  
*Abram G. Janzen*  
*Rev. John J. Janzen* (2004)  
*George Krahn* (1999)  
*Ingrid Janzen-Lamp*  
*J.J. Neudorf* (1988)  
*J.C. Neufeld* (1994)  
*John P. Nickel*  
*David Paetkau* (1972)  
*Esther Patkau*  
*Dr. Ted Regehr*

*John G. Rempel* (1963)  
*Ed Roth* (2008)  
*Wilmer Roth* (1982)  
*Arnold Schroeder* (2000)  
*Jacob Schroeder* (1993)  
*Katherine Thiessen* (1984)  
*Rev. J.J. Thiessen* (1977)  
*Rev. David Toews* (1947)  
*Toby Unruh* (1997)  
*Albert Wiens* (2002)  
*George Zacharias* (2000)

### Corrections

Corrections in "My Roots" by Melita (Krahn) Penner, SMH, June 2008. On page 26, "Jacob and Elizabeth with baby Liesel" should read "Jacob and Elizabeth with baby Magdalena and Liesel". On page 28, "Edith Helene, Feb. 7th 1937" should read "Edith Helena, Feb. 7th 1936".



### Send Us Your Stories

Readers are invited to send in news items, stories, articles, photographs, church histories, etc. to [mhss@sasktel.net](mailto:mhss@sasktel.net) or to the MHSS street address below.

*MHSS Office and Archives:*  
 110 La Ronge Road, Room 900  
 Saskatoon, SK S7K 7H8

### Call for Volunteers

Volunteers are needed for processing donated material at the Archives.

Come join a group of enthusiastic, friendly people who enjoy Mennonite History. Contact Victor Wiebe, Archivist, or Kathy Boldt, Archives Committee.

### Is Your Membership Due?

If your membership has expired, the date on your address label will be highlighted. To ensure that you will not miss the next issue of the *HISTORIAN*, please send your membership fee promptly to:

The Treasurer,  
 Room 900-110 La Ronge Road,  
 Saskatoon, SK S7K 7H8

Please make cheques payable to: Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan or MHSS. Memberships are \$25 per year; \$40 for a family membership. Gift subscriptions are available for friends and family members. All membership fees and donations to the Society are eligible for tax-deductible receipts.