

# Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian

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## **Letters from the Gulag: Ruth Derksen Siemens**

At right, Ruth Derksen Siemens, speaking at Bethany Manor on the occasion of the meeting of the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada in Saskatoon, January 21–22, 2011. See the story and more pictures, beginning on page 4.



## **Annual General Meeting of MHSS, March 4–5, 2011**

The 2011 annual general meeting of MHSS was held at Bethany Manor on Friday, March 4th and Saturday, March 5th. The weekend's theme was "Social Well-Being in the Mennonite Context". Friday evening featured a talk by Dr. John Elias entitled "Love and Work: A Perspective on the Well-Being of Mennonites in the Americas". After the annual business meeting on Saturday morning, the assembly heard a second

presentation on the weekend's theme, "One Family's Experience with Schizophrenia", presented by Dr. Jake Ens and Barbara Ens. The afternoon was devoted to a "Talk-back", in which audience members shared their stories, with John Elias, Jake Ens, and Barbara Ens responding. See pages 6 and 7 for MHSS president Jake Buhler's 2010 report and a report on the business meeting.

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## ***Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian***

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### **ERRATUM**

In the article “A Summer of Celebration and  
Thanks” in the October, 2010 issue, page 16, second  
column, the Laird Mennonite Church plaque in-  
scription, third line, should read, “1892 brought the  
first Mennonites...” not “1802”. (The date is correct  
on the plaque itself.) *SMH* regrets the error.

## ***From the Editor's Desk***

***By Victoria Neufeldt***



We have been overwhelmed with material for this issue — a wonderful problem to have! Some difficult decisions had to be made about what to include in this issue and what to hold over for the summer issue. The good part of all this is that we already have some good stories for the next issue. I will not spoil the surprise.

### **Help needed**

We are interested in publishing an article in the near future on Mennonite architecture in Saskatchewan. Anyone with information on this subject, including stories of notable buildings and even just ideas for where to start researching, would be much appreciated. For example: did your family ever build or occupy a house barn, such as are still found in parts of the province? If so, send me the story! The ceiling of the Horse Lake church (originally Tiefengrund Rosenort Church) has a distinctive form and structure. Are there other stories of a similar sort? The buildings may be houses or barns — even granaries or outhouses may illustrate a particularly Mennonite approach to structure or design. We know Mennonites are creative!

Another subject that I would like to pursue is horticulture. Mennonites in Saskatchewan have been known for memorable gardens and orchards. Is there a distinctive Mennonite style?

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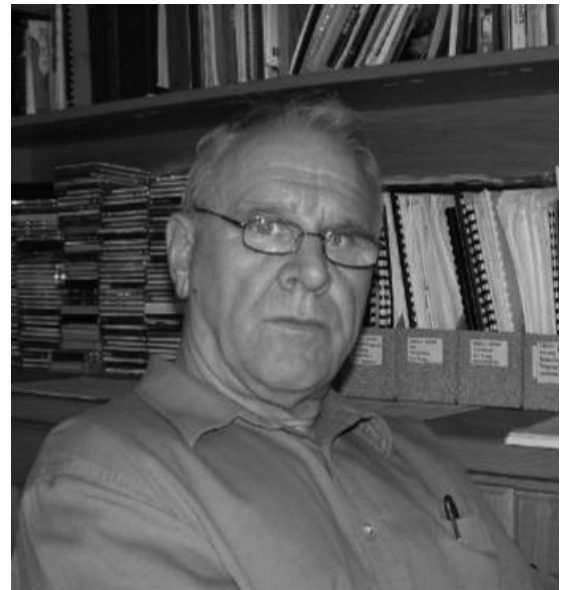
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## ***MHSS President's Corner***

***By Jake Buhler***



Mennonites have long been a part of the political landscape of Saskatchewan. The first was Gerhard Ens, the first member of the Legislative Assembly who was neither Anglo-Saxon nor Canadian-born to serve in Regina. From 1905 to 1913 he represented the Liberals. Credited with being the founder of Rosthern, Ens came to Canada from Russia in 1891 and became an agent to bring in hundreds of settlers to Saskatchewan. Ens was much involved behind the scenes to lift the ban on Mennonites entering Canada after the First World War. Born Mennonite, Ens later joined the Swedenborgian Church.

Dave Boldt also served as a Liberal MLA representing Rosthern from 1961 to 1975. His grandfather Jacob Boldt homesteaded near Osler in the late 1890s. Boldt, as minister of highways, is best remembered for building the Saskatoon–Prince Albert Highway.

Ray Funk, an NDP member of parliament representing Prince Albert–Churchill River from 1988 to 1993, is remembered for his attempts to establish a peace fund for those who did not wish to have their taxes go for military purposes.

The current premier of Saskatchewan, Brad Wall, is of Mennonite Brethren background. First elected in 1999, he became premier in 2007. He represents the Saskatchewan Party in the constituency of Swift Current.

The *Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian* would be pleased to receive feature articles on Mennonites who served in municipal, provincial, or federal politics. Are you or someone you know interested in such a writing project?

# ***Mennonite Historical Society of Canada Meets in Saskatoon***

## ***Report by Victor G. Wiebe***

On January 21 and 22, 2011 the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada (MHSC) held its annual meeting in Saskatoon, hosted by our Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan. This is only the second time that MHSC has met in Saskatchewan and now members had an opportunity to view our facilities and archives. The MHSC usually meets in Manitoba, which is central to most members, but in the last few years has held half its meetings in the different provinces.

The Mennonite Historical Society of Canada is unlike most historical societies in that it has no individuals as members. Its membership is composed of the six provincial Mennonite historical societies,

MCC Canada, five Mennonite Church conferences, and the chair of Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg. In this way it can sponsor national projects and share and coordinate information among the different historically minded Mennonite organizations across Canada. It has a board of about 16 to 20 members; about 25 to 30 individuals attend the annual meetings. MHSC has been very effective in bringing unity and enthusiasm to many aspects of Canadian Mennonite history. The MHSC was established in 1966 and its first project was sponsoring the writing and publication of the popular three-volume history *Mennonites in Canada*, by Frank H. Epp and Ted D. Regehr.



Mennonite Historical Society of Canada Board for 2011: *Front (L-R)*: Royden Loewen, vice-president (chair of Mennonite Studies, U. of Winnipeg), Lucille Marr, secretary (Société d'histoire mennonite du Québec); Sam Steiner, president (Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario), Alf Redekopp, executive (Mennonite Church Canada), Richard Thiessen, treasurer (Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia) *Back*: Jake Buhler (Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan); Victor Wiebe (Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan); Conrad Stoesz (Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society); Richard Lougheed (Société d'histoire mennonite du Québec); Wesley Berg (Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta); Bert Friesen (Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society); John Van Dyck, Jr. (Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia); Maurice Martin (Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario); Robert Goertzen (Evangelical Mennonite Conference); Laureen Harder-Gissing (Mennonite Church Eastern Canada); Ralph Dahl (Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta) Photo courtesy of MHSC

Funding for MHSC is through modest fees paid by each of its member organizations. For example, we in Saskatchewan contribute seven hundred dollars per year. Its major expense is the annual travel and accommodation costs of board members. For our 2011 Saskatoon meeting, most board members were billeted and meals were at Bethany Manor, so costs for this meeting were quite low. For the major projects that MHSC sponsors, special donations and outside funding are sought.

Its annual meetings are open to everyone and anyone can participate in the discussion, which usually focuses on special projects. These projects include the ongoing Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia online (GAMEO) and the multi-year *Divergent Voices of Canadian Mennonites*, which in October, 2012 will hold a conference on Mennonites and Human Rights.

At the Saskatoon meeting, MHSC approved two new multi-year initiatives. One is the commissioning of Esther Epp-Tiessen to help MCC Canada celebrate its 50th anniversary by writing the history of Mennonite Central Committee Canada, to be published in 2013. (See p. 6 for more information from Epp-Tiessen.) In its second initiative, MHSC gave tentative approval to beginning the development of a national Mennonite genealogical web site. This site is to give particular attention to holding high-resolution images of source documents, digitizing them, and transcribing and translating them into an easily searchable database. Our Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan and other provincial Mennonite historical societies have endorsed the project. The first step is fundraising for creation of the necessary software.

Another of its projects, established in 2004, is the recognition of individuals with the MHSC Award of Excellence. The description of this award asserts that it "is given to a person who has made a significant contribution to the advancement of Canadian Mennonite history by way of research, writing, organization or the dissemination of Mennonite historical knowledge." At this meeting, the MHSC Award of Excellence was given to two of our own members: Esther Patkau and the late Dick Epp. The citation of their awards and accompany-



Betty Epp and son Donald receive Dick Epp's MHSC Award of Excellence from MHSC president Sam Steiner.

Dick Epp died in June, 2009.

Photo by Henry Harms

ing photographs of the event are given in full at the MHSC web site (see back page for the URL); click on "projects" on the top yellow bar. Previous recipients of the award are Delbert Plett, Ted Friesen, Lorena Bergey, Gerhard Ens, David Schellenberg and Lorraine Roth.



MHSC president Sam Steiner presents the MHSC Award of Excellence to Rev. Esther Patkau

Photo by Henry Harms

Meeting in the different provinces in Canada also gives the MHSC board members the opportunity to experience more of the history and culture of the local Mennonites. On Friday, the day before the board meeting, a bus tour took members through the Hague-Osler Reserve. Even though there was considerable snow on the ground, visitors could



experience the prairie villages, farms, and church buildings. The tour included a visit to the 100-year-old heritage home of George and Lynette Janzen in the village of Blumenheim and an interesting discussion with Mr. Abram G. Janzen, the last of the Old Colony Mennonites' Waisenamt managers.

In the evening, the board were enthralled by Ruth Derksen Siemens' presentation of letters from the Soviet Union's Gulag that were received in the 1930s, mostly in the small Saskatchewan town of Carlyle, and described in her book, *Remember us: Letters from Stalin's Gulag (1930-37)*, Vancouver, 2008, as well as her film, *Through the Red Gate*.

Next year, 2012, the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada meets in Manitoba.

*Photos, clockwise from left: two views of the audience at the Friday evening event; Derksen Siemens signing copies of her book after her talk; a close-up of a few of the now-fragile letters from the gulag*


All four photos by Henry Harms



## Epp-Tiessen asks for submissions for History of MCC Canada

Photo courtesy of Esther Epp-Tiessen



As reported above, Esther Epp-Tiessen, pictured at left, has been commissioned by MHSC to write a history of MCC in Canada, to be published in 2012, in time for MCC Canada's 50th anniversary in 2013. Epp-Tiessen says that she intends to cover MCC's story from the 1920s to the present. She says she welcomes people sending her "any interesting MCC stories about their involvement with MCC, whether that relates to doing a service assignment, working in a thrift shop, hosting an international guest, being on the receiving end of MCC's help, or anything else." Stories can be sent to her at [eeptiessen@gmail.com](mailto:eeptiessen@gmail.com). Readers who have a story they would like to submit, but no easy access to the Internet, are invited to send them by regular mail to the editor of the *Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian* at the address given on page 2 of this publication. All such submissions will be forwarded to Epp-Tiessen. 

# 2010 Report of the Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan

By Jake Buhler, President

**Why we do what we do:** In part, we take our inspiration from Joshua who erected 12 stones as a memorial to what God had done for the Hebrew people. It was to be a history lesson for all Hebrew youth. Similarly, we are searching for the stories of the Mennonite people, both past and present, so that they can be a record of where we have been, how we have lived, and where we are going. Our task is to collect and document and archive the stories of our people.

**Vision and direction:** The Mennonite people of Saskatchewan are a hard-to-describe mix of faith, language, and culture. From their 16th-century non-creedal and martyrial beginnings, when they had little contact with the outside world, their liturgies and theologies are changing. Saskatchewan Mennonites are increasingly becoming urbanized. The challenge for MHSS is to record the change processes. We need to document how Saskatchewan Mennonites lived and worshipped upon arrival in the North West Territories, and how they live and worship today. Always we need the individual stories of families and churches and institutions to give us snapshots of how we looked when the picture was taken.

**MHSS board members:** Our board representation comes from three conferences: Mennonite Brethren, Swedenborgian, and Mennonite Church Saskatchewan. The ten board members for 2010 were Jake Buhler, president; George Dirks, vice president; Vera Falk, secretary; Elmer Regier, treasurer; and Kathy Boldt, Margaret Ewert, James Friesen, Erna Neufeld, Victor Wiebe, and Leonard Doell. Doell was appointed to the board during the year.

**Where we work:** Our work is done in our homes, in our various institutions, and in the MHSS archives located at Bethany Manor in Saskatoon. The board meets 10 times a year at the Bethany Manor location to conduct its business. More than twenty volunteers work under the guidance of the board at the archives

to respond to inquiries, file books, and archive historical documents. We purchased computers several years ago to allow us to do on-line work.

## What we worked at this past year:

*A Study of the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Church:* Martha Martens from Winkler, Manitoba was the main resource person who made presentations on various aspects of that conference. A good crowd filled the Warman Gospel Church (EMMC) in Warman on a Friday night in March, 2010, and again the next day.

*Honouring past leaders:* Ältester John D. Friesen and Deacon Abram M. Neudorf were honoured during a session at the last AGM of the MHSS. Victor Wiebe presented certificates to family members. Two historical biographies were written and published in an MHSS monograph.

*MHSS Archives:* Archivist Victor Wiebe reports that the archives continue to grow in resources both in books and archival papers. Among the past year's donations, we received several collections, large and small. For example, we received the collection of Reuben Epp who was one of Canada's leading experts on the Low German language. We also received the collection of a noted pastor, Henry Funk. We have now assembled a collection of over 200 local and congregational Saskatchewan histories. Alan Guenther processed several metres of archival records this past summer, but a significant number of collections are still unprocessed. These records are listed in our web site (see back page for URL). We continue to place a significant portion of information on our Society and its activities on this site and in addition use it to communicate with our members.

*Building projects:* As reported last year, we are working to expand our space at Bethany Manor and have received support and cooperation from its director and board. After a lengthy and often frustrating process, initial approval from the City of Saskatoon has been

received. This spring, we hope to start the physical renovation of the space, which will triple the size of the archives. Dick Braun and Werner Falk are co-chairs of the renovations committee.

*In-memoriam funds:* Two in-memoriam funds were established following the deaths of Reg Rempel and Dick Epp, two outstanding supporters of MHSS.

*Development of our web site:* This is an on-going project. The skills of Ruth Friesen as site manager have been very successfully employed in adding considerable text and graphics to our site. We are beginning to list descriptions of our archival and library holdings and to permanently store works written for and by MHSS members, such as our periodical publication *Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian*.


*Connecting with the community:* We continue to be an organization served entirely by volunteers who contribute hundreds of hours of their time and enthusiasm. Our archives are open Mondays and Wednesdays from 1:30–4 p.m. and Wednesday evenings from 7–9. Vera Falk represents MHSS at other Saskatchewan historical forums. She also promotes and sells books for us.

*Mennonite family DNA project:* More samples were collected and submitted to Dr. Tim Janzen.

*Prussian records:* Dr. Ernie Baergen, assisted by Ed Schmidt and others, continues to process old Prussian Mennonite church records spanning a time period from 1665 to 1945. The project involves the transliteration of the records of the churches in the Vistula Delta, changing them from Gothic to Latin script, and then transcribing (digitizing) them to “Brother’s Keeper”, the software used for the GRANDMA project.

*Publications:* Victoria Neufeldt is editor of our principal publication, the *Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian*. With the assistance of several volunteers, three fine issues were published over the past year. Circulation has increased to 350.

*Cemeteries:* The cemetery web site is managed by Al Mierau. Helen Fast is coordinating the Cemeteries Project.

*Hosting:* The MHSS invited the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada to conduct its annual general meeting at Bethany Manor in Saskatoon in January of 2011. 

## Notes from MHSS Annual General Meeting on March 5, 2011

The annual general business meeting of MHSS was held Saturday morning, March 5, 2011, at Bethany Manor in Saskatoon.

Three new board members were elected at the meeting. They are Susan Braun of Osler, Leonard Doell of Aberdeen, and Elizabeth Guenther of Saskatoon. Continuing in their positions for another term are Jake Buhler, president; George Dirks, vice president; Vera Falk, secretary; and Elmer Regier, treasurer; Victor G. Wiebe, archivist and book review editor; and Kathy Boldt, volunteer coordinator. Also continuing on the board are James Friesen and Erna Neufeld.

Margaret Ewert of Drake, whose term has expired, was thanked for six years of work on the board.

Peter Siemens of Saskatoon was thanked for his design of the new MHSS logo, which features a tree

with its branches reaching into the Prairie sky and its roots into the soil.

The assembled members approved a fundraising campaign to raise a total of \$100,000 over three years for a capital renovation project that will more than double the space for the archives in Bethany Manor, with new shelving, computer stations, working areas, and storage areas, as well as adding washrooms and a kitchenette.

The successful hosting in January of the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada (which consists of all the Canadian Mennonite historical societies) was noted. For the first time in 20 years, guests were billeted in private homes.

It was announced that the keynote speaker at the 2012 annual meeting of MHSS will be Rudy Wiebe. 

# Abram Richert: A Story of Perseverance and Dedication

By George Richert



Abram Richert in his retirement

Abram Richert was born on February 22, 1896, in the village of Nickolaifeld, in the Mennonite Colony of Zagradovka, Ukraine; the colony was several hundred kilometres west of the city of Zaporozhye. He was the seventh child of Cornelius and Sara (nee Wall); there were twelve children, although two boys died of diphtheria in their childhood. Cornelius was the village cowherd and part-time miller.

Abram was very attached to his mother, helping with household duties while listening to her tell stories; he was also very fond of the outdoors, playing in the village meadows and walking along the board fences, knocking off the fruit from overhanging branches; during the winter he enjoyed skating and sliding. His schooling did not start well: he began at the age of eight and broke his arm after just three weeks of attendance.

The family emigrated to Canada in 1904, arriving on the *S.S. Carpathia*. They moved to Eigenheim, where Cornelius found work on a farm, and then to a homestead near Watrous (between Watrous and

Lake Manitou). Abram writes about the work that had to be done to prepare for winter: breaking land with a walking plow; hauling logs for buildings from a “forest” 12 miles away. His father hauled logs and broke the land while he and his mother plastered the log walls. Older brothers and sisters were working in the Rosthern area. The nearest post office at that time was Humboldt.

A school was erected after the Grand Trunk Pacific railway was built and more settlers came to the area. The school was four and a half miles from home, but Abram was determined to go to school. He decided that he would walk, but his father objected, and so one day he got up very early, packed a lunch, left the house quietly and walked to school. That seemed to convince the parents and they allowed him to go to school. Sometime over the previous years he had learned English, because during the second week he was promoted to grade two; the next week to grade three and after two months he was in grade five — and there his public school education ended. Abram was now old enough to find a job, but the thought of continuing his education and someday becoming a teacher never left his mind. (In the brief memoirs which he wrote, dates and years were not always easy to discern.)



Abram as a student at the German-English Academy

In 1916, a friend told him about the German–English Academy in Rosthern and, although he received little encouragement from his family, he was determined to attend. He entered the Academy in the fall of 1916, but had to discontinue one month before Christmas due to family financial difficulties. However, in the fall of 1917 he was back and enrolled

in what he referred to as “Third Class”, which was probably grade 10. He passed all subjects, except spelling! As near as can be determined, Abram worked near Dalmeny for a cousin, Frank Fleming, whose mother was a sister of his mother. In August of 1917 he was baptized by Rev. Peter Schultz in Langham. The documentation does not indicate which church, but it is assumed that it was Evangelical Mennonite Brethren.

During the summer of 1918, he again worked for his cousin. He had taken all his books and clothes along in the expectation that he would go directly to Rosthern from the farm. However, he had a serious setback when the bunkhouse in which he kept all of his belongings went up in flames. Someone had set fire to the building. This was a disaster for Abram; it meant that he needed to work an extra month, and so was a month late getting to Rosthern. He enrolled in the Second Class (probably grade 11). This was the year of the Spanish flu and all schools were closed for three weeks.

Financial difficulties again forced him to leave school during the month of May to work on a farm, but he took all his books with him and studied hard during the evenings. He returned to the Academy for a review and passed all exams — again, except for spelling. In his words: “that was the bad one for me!”

During the fall of 1919 he applied for Normal School and was accepted. At that time, persons with a grade 11 education could attend Normal School and receive a teaching certificate. Sometime in December the school board of New Home, near Mennon, contacted Abram and he signed a contract with the board. In his words:

How proud I was the first morning I rang the bell! Students rushed to their seats — stared at me (expecting much from a big man, maybe). I was ready for them — my timetable was up — my lesson plans on my desk — and all my work well prepared.

We are not sure exactly how he met the lady who became his wife, Mathilda Schultz. The wedding took place on May 23, 1920 (one record says it was May 24), on the yard of the Schultz family near the North Saskatchewan River northwest of Waldheim.

At the end of the school term, the young couple moved to Mennon, probably because of a better residence and/or salary. A daughter, Selma, was born in September of 1921.

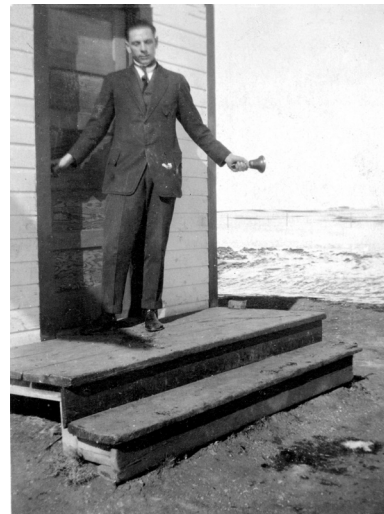
Abram also realized that at some point he would have to return to Normal School to complete the second term because he had left after the first term to take over the school at New Home. So after the 1923-24 school year, Abram and Mathilda moved to Saskatoon, where he was reminded that he would have to write a spelling exam.

... the words were dictated by a Mr. Hedley. Here are some of the words in the list — chauffeur, chautauqua. Sometime later I asked Mr. Hedley: “Have you corrected my spelling?” “No,” he said, “and I’m not going to either.”

At one point he was also asked to teach a spelling lesson and soon after was informed that he had

passed his spelling! As he said: “That was a load off my mind!”

His next teaching location was at Hoffnungsfeld School District, fifteen miles from the town of Borden, where they remained for an eight-year term. Abram spoke very fondly of his time at this school, of the great students and excellent cooperation from the parents and community. While at Hoffnungsfeld, two sons, Ruben (1926) and Elmer, (1930) were born.



Abram ringing the school bell at his first school, the New Home country school in the Hepburn, Saskatchewan area

In 1932, the family moved to Carmen School District, three miles north of Waldheim, just as the Depression was in full swing. His salary went from \$135 a month at Hoffnungsfeld, to \$70 a month at Carmen. While at Carmen, he also took a job during the vacation months of July and August with

The Mennonite Mutual Hail Insurance Company, and made nearly as much money as he did during a year of teaching! The number of students in Carmen was somewhat less than in Hoffnungsfeld, and he was able to complete his grade 12 by correspon-



The Waldheim School staff, 1941-42

*From left to right:* George Thiessen, Olga Epp, Abe Richert, Gertrude Friesen, Helen Dyck, Abram Neufeldt

dence. During the Carmen years, George, another son, was born.

In the summer of 1940, the family moved to Waldheim where Abram taught grades six, seven, and eight until his retirement in 1953. The move to Waldheim was made, according to Abram, so that



Abram and Mathilda Richert family, ca. 1943

*From left to right:* Abram, Mathilda, George, Elmer, Selma, Reuben

the children would have access to high school. His salary was still around \$75 per month, but as he writes: "... not too bad when the principal of Waldheim, a man with an M.Ed. degree, was drawing \$120 a month."



Abram and Mathilda Richert, in the 1940s

All photos in this article courtesy of George Richert

He bought a house in town for \$400 and a quarter section of land south of Waldheim for \$1,200. This price included 70 acres of crop.

In 1953, Abram decided to retire from teaching; his age plus years of teaching totalled ninety, which made him eligible for a pension. He had also been asked to take on greater responsibilities with the Mennonite Mutual Hail Insurance Company. Also, thirty-five years in a classroom was probably sufficient for him!

Throughout all his years of teaching he was always involved in coaching some sports activities, which he enjoyed very much.

During his retirement years, he also served on the Waldheim Village Council, and worked for several years for the Prairie Farm Assistance Program, mostly in the Prince Albert area.

All of Abram and Mathilda's children had him for a teacher, and it is a certainty to say that no one could ever accuse him of being soft on them!

Mathilda died in 1969, and Abram remained in the family home in Waldheim for a number of years before moving to Pioneer Lodge, and then, later, to Central Haven Nursing Home in Saskatoon. He passed away on December 26, 1984, at the age of 88 years, 10 months, and four days.

*George Richert is Abram Richert's son — Ed* 

# When Tongue Screws Come Off

## Book review by George Epp

Beachy, Kirsten Eve, editor. *Tongue Screws and Testimonies: Poems, Stories and Essays Inspired by the Martyrs Mirror*. Scottdale: Herald Press, 2010. 300 pages. Price: \$19.99. ISBN:978-08361-9519-4

In *Tongue Screws and Testimonies*, Beachy has gathered a creditable body of work from 47 authors and poets, each entry inspired by or making reference to Thieleman J. van Braght's *Martyrs Mirror*<sup>1</sup>. The offerings represent a wide range of responses to this monumental body of work; from Ann Hostetler's "... people are not martyred, they are murdered (p.129)" to John L. Ruth's "... there are people in the world who will use a sword on human flesh ... and then there are people who won't do such things for any reason (248)." Taken as a whole, Beachy's collection reflects appropriately our ambivalence regarding the meaning of martyrdom in our history.

I daresay most Mennonites of both more and less conservative stripes have grown up with the knowledge that the chronicle we call *Martyrs Mirror* (hereafter: *MM*) exists, even though I'm hard pressed to find anyone who is actually familiar with its contents, beyond the general. The Mennonite Church I attend has an English copy of *MM*, but at the moment, we are not sure where it's stored.

You would have to go a long way further still to find someone familiar with the historical context of *MM*. What is the significance, for instance, of the fact that van Braght's book is a pastiche — right down to the woodcut illustrations — of John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, published fully 100 years earlier? How important is it that a major declaration against Anabaptism was issued in Zurich almost simultaneously with the brutal suppression of the Peasant Revolt of 1524-25 in Germany? (*MM*, 414) What convulsions were occurring in the Dutch Mennonite (*Doopsgezinde*) communities in the mid 1600s to compel van Braght to publish his tome when he did?<sup>2</sup> And what

does the early history of Anabaptism owe to the followers of Peter Waldo, the Waldenses, who had taken a strong stand against the abuses of Catholicism as early as 1160 (*MM*, 412)?

My childhood experience with *MM* was mainly a wide-eyed fascination with the 56 macabre woodcut illustrations of Jan Luyken, the most famous of which is probably the image of Dirk Willems saving his pursuer from a watery death, an act of love that wouldn't save him from martyrdom. *Tongue Screws and Testimonies* is built on this consciousness about *Martyrs Mirror*: the grotesque murder of helpless Anabaptists and their dogged faithfulness to the doctrines they had adopted in the face of unimaginable cruelty. Studying or even reading *Martyrs Mirror* in our current Mennonite context has become a rarity, I think, but there are story tellers among us who do read it, who do allow the feelings it arouses to wash over them and to give these emotions words for us.

That horror we now call "martyrdom" was not unique to Anabaptists, of course. But it is known to us most poignantly through the executions of those we hold up as our spiritual ancestors: Felix Mantz, Michael Sattler, George Blaurock and John Hut, just to name a few. That their murders would somewhat shape our faith, our culture, and our literature comes as no surprise, even though the details might not be clear without embarking on a rigorous overview of the intervening history.

*Tongue Screws and Testimonies* purports to be a literary, as opposed to a historical, anthology, and so must stand or fall on the basis of its quality as literature. I had to get past one hurdle before embarking on the literature itself, namely the confession of self-censorship included in the introduction as a caveat.

As an editor, I [Beachy] have balanced sensitivity to the expectation of Herald Press's regular audience with an attempt to truly represent the material, par-

ticularly previously published work. In some cases, I worked with authors to minimize the use of language and images that might not be suitable for Sunday school and did not seem integral to the narrative. In others I let the language stand in respect for the literary nature of the material" (p.16).

It's difficult enough to gather together a credible anthology on a narrow subject without adding the restriction that that literature must conform to Sunday school expectations, I thought. And what genuine, maybe even great, piece of writing was omitted because it possibly contained non-Sunday-school-appropriate language? I got past that in the reading, however, where I found the range of selections to be broad in the honest, "uncensored" inclusion of everything from admiration to scepticism regarding the part of our history documented in *Martyrs Mirror*.

We Mennonites were driven into silence and ghettoized by persecution and it's taking us centuries of acceptance in society to loosen the tongue screws. To this day we are somewhat haunted by that ghost that says: "Think it if you must, but don't say it! You'll bring us all into disrepute ... or worse." Julia Spicher Kasdorf, in her essay, "Writing Like a Mennonite (165)," observes that before the days of individual authorship and copyrights, "Writing was regarded as an act fraught with risk, enacted on a field defined by the opposing poles of sacred or profane, lawful or unlawful." There was a time in our history when speaking, worshipping, believing were all fraught with tremendous risk.

Robert Frost said, "Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words."<sup>3</sup> The best work in *Tongue Screws* has that passionate, emotional underpinning, like Maurice Mierau's short poem, "The difference between a martyr and a suicide (105)"

... this man like a frog falling heavily  
Into stagnant water, I pity you,  
The sack bursting open \_

or Barbara Nickel's "Maria of Monjou, 1552 (97)":

I see her pressed under the river's braiding  
Currents, the shawls of leech and silt across her back.

It's in the poems in *Tongue Screws* that the pity and the rage we are justified in feeling over the brutality de-

scribed in *Martyrs Mirror* are given some rein. Take Robert Martens' "lilies and onions (72)":

it's  
not a matter of courage: the city  
of this world is a dunghheap, naked  
lords on thrones of shit.

Emotion ... thought ... word. If this is the sequence for the birth of art, how does a community schooled over centuries in the dangers of expressed emotion create a literature? How does their pain and sadness find expression? In other words, what happens to a culture in which oppression was turned to repression, repression to emotional silence: *Die Stillen im Lande*? And how does such a culture recover when the tongue screws come out?

In stages, one supposes. In "Writing like a Mennonite," Julia Speicher Kasdorf asserts,

A serious work of literature by a Mennonite critiquing Mennonite experience was not published for broad distribution in a language that could be understood by the dominant culture until Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (166).

If that's true, we've barely started on the road to the free expression of the emotions generated by our history. We all know about the reverberations surrounding Wiebe's novel; it wasn't an easy hurdle to jump.

And there are still so many emotions waiting to coagulate into thought, let alone find the words to express them. Two poems by Di Brandt ("children like us" and "scapegoat," 127 and 146, respectively) may qualify as a second step (after *Peace Shall Destroy Many*) in the loosening of our tongues:

... children like us whose skin  
is not their own whose flesh  
remembers the generations  
& their tears who are filled  
with the world's longing &  
call it love

These are hard poems to read; they remind us that the price of repression/suppression is very high, that on our saddest days, despair has driven some of us to "eat our young", figuratively.

*Tongue Screws* contains a balance — more or less — of poetry and prose. The range is broad. In Chad Gusler's short story, "OMG!! Geleijn Cornelus Is

Hott,” two teenaged girls send text messages back and forth about the pictures in *MM*, in particular about the Luyken woodcut on page 930 in which Gelijn Cornelus is hanging by one arm from the ceiling beams with a weight attached to a foot, dressed only in a loincloth. They speculate on his having been a weight lifter; his rock-hard pecs. A short story by Omar Eby follows the thoughts of young Peter Martin upon the death of his grandfather who is not burned at the stake like Dirk Willems, but is “asleep in Jesus” after he’s felled by a third stroke. Before dying, he admonishes Peter to keep the faith of his Anabaptist forbears, but then speculates that Jesus was no Mennonite, the title of the story. Rudy Wiebe’s retelling (from *Sweeter Than All the World*) of the martyrdom of Maeyken Wens (*MM*, 979) through the eyes of her son, Jan Mattheus Wens, is reprinted as another short story.

The stories in *Tongue Screws* catch a bit of what it feels like to be part of a community that springs from episodes of martyrdom, to remember that it was for reasons of religious conviction that our ancestors were willing to go to the rack and the pillar. Many will find the essays most appealing; the “coming out” from a culture of silence seems safest when it can be seen as objective, scholarly, factual. I appreciated Jeremy Nafziger’s personal essay “Singing in the Mirror,” in which he relates his experience acting the part of George and Catherina Blaurock’s son in the opera, *The Martyrs’ Mirror* by Alice Parker and John Ruth (ca. 1971). No one could undergo the experience of watching his stage parents being executed every night of the opera’s run without questioning the meaning of martyrdom. He lets us in on some of his thoughts:

But the real ones [martyrs] aren’t nearly so calculating [as those who accept execution as a pathological reward]. I question whether they even have causes, as we usually consider causes.... What they have are convictions. Pair those with a justice system that doesn’t concern itself over niceties like evidence and intent and proportional punishment, and their only way out is to play nice with the state and the church, tell them what they want to hear (87).

Does this suggest a springboard for a discussion we should be having, here in the 21st century?

Of the 4,011 martyrs whose stories are told in *MM*, one third are women. The flagship essay in *Tongue Screws* is by Julia Speicher Kasdorf, and among the many issues she raises — provocatively, at times — is the possibility that:

For illiterate people, martyrdom itself became a kind of writing with the body, because the martyrs’ words and actions were converted into textural form.... For Anabaptist sisters, martyrdom represented a choice to enact the ultimate sacrifice that placed them on equal ground with their brethren (173).


Emily Ralph’s essay, “Baptized Again,” takes us back to the “Heal our Land” conference in Switzerland in 2003, at which the Swiss Reformed Church and the Mennonites recalled the persecutions there and sought reconciliation and forgiveness. It’s a moving account, a powerful reminder of how much the world has changed since our 16th-century forebears were willing to die to free us all from the tyrannical marriage of church and state. The monumental changes that brought freedom of conscience and expression to our world and to Christ’s church were bought at a high price. As I finished the book, I pondered how the world might be different if Conrad Grebel, Maeyken Wens, Felix Mantz, Menno Simons and others had capitulated, had recanted and said, “It is, after all, not worth dying for.”

But they didn’t. And *Tongue Screws and Testimonies* should be a “must read” for every Mennonite history course because they didn’t. The reasons for that should never be glibly “explained”.

*Tongue Screws* adds to the body of historical evidence the artist’s insight that was needed, and it is therefore a collection long overdue.

<sup>1</sup>All references to *Martyrs Mirror* are to the Fifth English Edition, published in 1950 by Herald Press.

<sup>2</sup>The author’s preface to *MM* strongly suggests that affluence and the passage of time had brought some disturbing compromises into the church (*MM*: 14&15). Andrew Jenner, in *Tongue Screws and Testimonies* (p. 62), writes about *MM* that “... [it was] published to protest the recent backsliding of the Low Country [Netherlands] Mennonites.”

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in <http://thinkexist.com/quotation/thetruestpoetry-isthemostfeigning-andlovers/332182.html>; retrieved February 6, 2011. 

# ***The Story of Shekinah Retreat Centre***

***By Lorne Friesen***

Shekinah Retreat Centre is meant to be a setting where all who come have opportunity to experience the presence and glory of God through discovery, reflection, interaction, community, and nature.

Since 1979 Shekinah has developed into a year-round retreat centre that offers individuals and groups a variety of opportunities to experience the natural beauty of the North Saskatchewan River valley. For people everywhere, Shekinah has become a special space. Situated on the banks of the North Saskatchewan River, Shekinah, whose name comes from a Hebrew word meaning “in the presence and glory of God”, has become known as a place of peace and tranquility. It is a ministry of Mennonite Church Saskatchewan and it is shared by many other groups. Conferences, art camps, family reunions, weddings, church meetings, and schools are just a few of the organizations that enjoy this peaceful setting.

The year-round retreat centre evolved out of a camp at Pike Lake. The Conference of Mennonites of Saskatchewan appointed a group of people to look for a new location after it was found that the Pike Lake location no longer suited their needs. In 1979 the Shekinah property was acquired. In the first year, summer camp was held in tents with the camp cook preparing meals on a wood stove under a tarp. Gradually more facilities were added, beginning with an open concept chalet. However, the cooking was still done outside and kids still slept in tents until the mid 1980s.

The next few years saw a manager’s house built, as well as some cabins and shanty tents for the campers. Shanty tents have wooden walls and floor and a canvas roof. Once these facilities were in place, the camp board, together with the Shekinah staff, began developing outdoor education programs for school students. Team building activities, survival games, a zip line and wall climbing have all become an integral part of the program. Environmental education has been at the core of all of these activities.

In the year 2000, the Timber Lodge was added to the retreat complex. This timber frame building is one of the largest in Western Canada and has been the subject of documentaries and articles for the collaborative nature in which it was built as well as for its architectural excellence. This building was constructed mostly with volunteer labour in the tradition of an old-fashioned barn raising. It harkens back to the agrarian roots of our people as they came together for a community building event.



The raising of the timber frame beams, called bents, July, 1999

Photos by Mavis Nystrom

The striking architecture of this building blends rustic, artistic, and functional elements. One of its unique features is that much of its building material is recycled, including lumber from the Dundurn Wheat Pool grain elevator. Even some of the cross-bracing from that old elevator, which was worn to

a beautiful texture over many years by thousands of bushels of grain, has been utilized in the steps, chapel, and railings. The Timber Lodge sleeps up to 84 people, has a recreation room, conference room, library, and chapel. Food services include the use of locally raised livestock and other produce that is purchased from nearby farmers and the local store.



The dedication of the newly completed Timber Lodge, June 8, 2001

Photo by Mavis Nystrom

The vision of Shekinah is to engage hearts, inspire minds, transform lives, and influence the world. The people who come share the space with hundreds of species of birds, plants, and animals. It is a place that takes the environment seriously, and is conscious of its carbon footprint. It is in this spirit that Shekinah is now engaging in another new venture. This coming summer, the plan is to begin replacing the current shanty tents with new cabins. What is unique about these new structures is that they will be built using “natural building” techniques. Built with fieldstone, post and beam, straw bales, recycled tires, rammed earth, or recycled elevator wood, these buildings will add much to Shekinah and its goal of taking care of Creation.

Whether hiking up Quill Hill, sitting around a campfire, or taking part in a church service in the Timber Lodge, Shekinah offers all who come the chance to meet their God in the quiet, in the beauty, and in the openness of sky, spirit, and mind.

*Lorne Friesen is co-administrator, with his wife Lilian, of Shekinah Retreat Centre —Ed.*



*Photos this column, from top: the lodge, seen from the back; the base of the upper deck; beams, seen from inside the building*

Photos by Victoria Neufeldt, 2007



The two photos above show the wonderful landscape surrounding Shekinah, looking more or less northeast; the photo at left is a view from the ground of the large upper deck of the Timber Lodge  
Photos by Victoria Neufeldt, 2007



## Farm Costs in the Past

By Victor Wiebe

I didn't grow up on a Saskatchewan farm; in fact I am a city boy who grew up in Vancouver. However, I have been living in Saskatchewan since the mid 1970s and I have been studying Saskatchewan Mennonite history ever since I came to live in this province. It is obvious to all that a major component of all Saskatchewan Mennonite history is also farm history. I have always wondered about the economics of farming. Mennonites generally fared as well as any at farming, though all farmers had their troubles during the Great Depression. One book that gives wonderful historic data on farming is *Historical Statistics of Canada*, edited by M.C. Urquhart and published by Statistics Canada, Ottawa in 1984.

Recently I came upon a little pamphlet compiled by Frank Glass entitled, *Rosetown First 75 Years* (Rosetown Publ. Co. Ltd. 1984), which gives some interesting information on farming costs in the Rosetown area. The tables on the following page provide some information about a Rosetown farm in 1920. The top one gives an estimated average value of land, buildings, and general farm equipment on a 320-acre farm in the Rosetown area for 1920. In the lower table, the implements are listed in the order in which they are commonly used, commencing with preparing the field. The specifications of each implement include its size and normal daily performance. This assumes the power on the farm comes from horses. The standard work day for a horse was 10 hours in the field or 20 miles in distance, or 16 miles in hot weather. Also estimated is the time required to work one acre and probable value of the implement.

To the totals given one should add the time needed for hauling the grain to market with a wagon. In addition, no provision is made on this table for the need to produce oats and fodder for the feed for the horses. A threshing outfit would cost about an extra \$3,000 should one want his own unit. The cost of some inputs like seed, fertilizer, fencing, and chemicals is not given here.

During the growing season, farmers usually worked 15 hours per day. Farms with more than one quarter, or 160 acres, under cultivation would often hire extra help during the summer.

If the entire 320 acres were planted to wheat at 25 bushels per acre yield, the resulting crop would total 8,000 bushels. However, a significant amount of land was usually set aside for oats and fodder for farm animals. The year 1920 was the last of a five-year period of high wheat prices. Wheat sold for \$1.994 per bushel, oats for \$0.536 and barley for \$0.90. If our model Rosetown farmer did harvest 8,000 bushels and sold them all, his gross farm income before expenses would be \$15,952. The table does not give the annual farm expenses (horses and machinery are not replaced each year) but it may be reasonable to estimate this farmer's annual expenses in the \$2,000 – \$3,000 range. Thus the sale of a large wheat crop would yield a significant profit. This profit can be compared with the income of an urban worker at this time, whose wages would not be more than \$1,000 per year.

**Assets**

Land valued at \$27.50 per acre	\$8,800	
House, barn, two granaries, chicken house, pig pen, etc.	\$5,000	
TOTAL		\$13,800

**Costs**

	Acres per day	Time per acre	Cost	Total cost
10 horses with harness at \$600 per team			\$3,000	
7-foot disc	17	36 min	\$300	
18-foot harrows	44	14 min	\$100	
11-foot seeder	27	23 min	\$150	
7-foot binder	17	36 min	\$175	
Threshing at 10 cents per bushel for custom threshing, wheat 25 bushels/acre		15 min	\$800	
Wagon hauling grain to market 10 miles round trip, 25-bushel crop		1.5 hours	\$150	
Summerfallowing done in June, plowing 2-furrow plow 20 inches	4	2.5 hours	\$200	
Disc twice before harvest, once after (total of three passes)		1 hour 48 min		
Harrow twice (total of two passes)		28 min		
Mower			\$100	
Rake			\$100	
TOTAL		6 hours 50 min		\$5,075



## ***North Star Mennonite Church, from the Beginning***

***By Eunice Stobbe***

The year was 1903. The prospective settler and immigrant was Johann Gerbrandt. He had been a farmer as well as a preacher in the Johannestal Mennonite Church at Hillsboro, Kansas. As a father of six adult children, he and his wife had decided to investigate the possibility of finding more land in the North West Territories of Canada.

Now he was on a train that was taking him north into Canada. The rail line brought him to the emerging community of Rosthern, where he met an agent of the Saskatchewan Valley Land Company. This man was Peter Jansen, who had roots in Nebraska and, together with his brother John, was actively seeking homesteaders to settle the wide open Prairies in the north. A large tract of land lying west of the Quill Lakes and south of the surveyed Canadian Northern Railway had been set aside for new immigrants.

A group of Mennonites from Ontario had already taken up homesteads and purchased railway land in the area that later would become the village of Guernsey. Johann's plans to investigate this land were thwarted by heavy rains that would make the travelling with horse and buggy to an area about a hundred miles southeast of Rosthern almost impossible, so he returned to Kansas with plans of repeating his journey in the spring of 1904.

Together with his 20-year-old daughter, Agnes, he set out for Canada again. Taking the train north, they stopped in Gretna, Manitoba to see an old friend, H.H. Ewert. Ewert offered Agnes a teaching job near Gretna for the coming year, which she accepted. They then continued their trek into the North West Territories, this time taking the rail line as far as Humboldt. About 12 miles southeast of Guernsey, Johann found land to his liking. With the



The present North Star Church in Drake  
Photo taken in 2010 by Amy Wildeman

help of the land agent, Peter Jansen, he filed homesteads for himself, his eligible sons, and his friend and neighbour H.H. Bartel. The conditions of this deal were that he would buy 160 acres for 10 dollars, live there for at least six months every year, and break 10 acres of land per year. More land could be purchased at a later date for two dollars

per acre. Having accomplished his mission, Johann Gerbrandt returned to his family in Kansas while daughter Agnes stayed at Gretna to teach school for the coming school year.

In the spring of 1905, the Gerbrandts, together with their children and their livestock, as well as household effects and farm machinery, loaded a boxcar bound for Humboldt, Saskatchewan. Humboldt became the centre of trade for the settlers who started arriving in 1905 from Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Kansas. Johann Gerbrandt built a two-storey barn with living quarters on the south end. In the ensuing years of settlement, this barn became the shelter for many homesteaders until they could get their own quarters built.

With so many settlers arriving, the need of a church home was a common topic of conversation by the fall of 1905. On February 12 of 1906, a constitution was adopted. The Sunday school classes had already begun in January of 1906. Land for the church and cemetery was donated by John F. Bartel and Jacob Schroeder. Services were held in the hayloft of Johann Gerbrandt's barn until the church was completed. The location of the church was one half mile north of the Gerbrandt and Bartel homesteads and four miles west of what would become the village of Drake. The church was dedicated on March 24, 1907.

Some of the first festivals and celebrations included the first prayer week in the week before Easter, 1907; the first Thanksgiving and missions festival, October, 1909; the first Ladies Aid group, organized on July 23, 1915.

At a brotherhood meeting in 1928, it was decided to build an additional church in Drake to accommodate the members who lived in town, as well as the recently arrived Russian Mennonites who had settled east of town. North Star Mennonite Church now had two church buildings, but they continued to function as one congregation.

In 1926, a school building was bought and moved to the churchyard of the country church, where it was enlarged and placed on a full basement. It became the place where adult Bible school was taught in the winter months, children's Bible school in the summer, catechism during the church year on Sunday, and German school at times when other classes were not being offered. Most of these classes were discontinued in the 1940s, because of a dispute with our English-speaking neighbours. Our young people were also beginning to attend Bible school in Rosthern or Swift Current during the winter months, so the church membership decided the classes offered here were no longer necessary.

In 1945, a choir loft was added to the country church. The 40th anniversary of the North Star Church was celebrated on the completion of this addition. The membership now stood at 329 members, and the town church was becoming overcrowded. At a brotherhood meeting in 1951, the suggestion was made that more of the townspeople could drive the four miles west and attend the services in the country church. The suggestion went unheeded so, in 1954, a special meeting was called to discuss the problem of overcrowding in the town church. The outcome of this meeting was the decision to build a new church in the town of Drake, large enough to accommodate both congregations under one roof. In the fall of 1955, with a building contractor hired, the two congregations united, with hammers in hand, and began the building of the new church. All winter, the sound of hammers and camaraderie could be heard and on May 27, 1956, the 50th anniversary of North Star Church was cel-

ebrated with the dedication of this large new church building.


With the congregation now united under one roof, the question of language also arose. Services in English had been held on one Sunday each month since 1949, and now it seemed a good time to increase the use of the English language to dual language services. Gone was the *Gesangbuch Mit Noten*, and the English *Mennonite Hymnary* took its place. With the resignation of Paul Schroeder as elder in 1964, a new young pastor who had been teaching in the Swift Current Bible Institute was hired. His command of the German language was limited, so the use of the English language became the new way of doing church. Other changes also came.

For 63 years, congregational business meetings had been conducted for men only. Now the women were given equal voice! There was also a shift to being involved in more community activities such as Boys and Girls clubs, Youth For Christ and other Christian programs in the community. The North Star Mennonite Church became accessible to everyone in the community.

In 2006 the North Star Mennonite Church celebrated its 100th birthday. Many of the family names of the original settlers still appear on the church membership list, but there are new names listed as members, names such as Gibney, Balon, and Wildeman being some of the more common ones. The church remains true to its name, being a guiding light like the North Star, guiding seekers to the light of Jesus Christ.



The original North Star country church  
Photo courtesy of Eunice Stobbe

*Eunice Stobbe is a granddaughter of H.H. Bartel. Her late first husband, Eldon Gerbrandt, was a grandson of Johann Gerbrandt. — Ed.* 

# ***The Winds of Change: Relinquishing a Home in Siberia, 1925–1926***

***By Justina Wiens Peters***

Father closed the book, deep in thought. He had just finished reading *The Five Year Plan*. This book had been lent him by a young Communist. It described the restrictive measures that the communist government planned to instigate against the land and property owners in Russia.

Many of these plans were already adopted and put into practice. Father's own situation in Siberia was becoming increasingly difficult. He could see no hope for himself nor for a future for his children if they stayed in Russia. The flour mill that his late father had built on the banks of the Irtysh River at Nova Pokrovsk had been taken from him in 1922. He continued to manage the mill for another three years. Now, in 1925, he was notified by officials to relinquish all properties to the government.

Siberia had been father's home for many years. In 1901 he was just a lad of nine years when his family moved from southern Russia. His parents both died in 1919. That same year in August our father Johann J. Wiens married our mother, Helena J. Wiens at Slavgorod. Father felt fortunate to be able to buy two gold wedding rings on the black market.

The revolution was creating many uncertainties. Father and mother spent their honeymoon trying to avoid the military. They fled across the open steppes of Siberia, not always sure of direction. How thankful they were, after camping out and travelling a distance of 500 kilometres, to arrive safely at the mill and home.

Father tried to remain neutral when first the White Army front and then the Red Army front swept through their district. He milled flour for them both, aware of the command of Christ "to love your enemies".

As long as he managed the mill he tried to protect farmers from burdensome taxes imposed by the government for the milling of grain. He prayed that God would forgive him for juggling the books.

Then in 1925 mother and father and their three children were forced to leave their spacious home near the mill. They moved into a small log cabin in the nearby village of Nova Pokrovsk.

The suffering of the surrounding population was definitely escalating. Mother rose early each day to bake bread made from uncleaned grain. It still had weed seeds in it. Every day there were lines of hungry children who came to their door begging for food. She shared what she had to feed the starving.

Mother's parents and numerous Wiens relatives were preparing to emigrate to Canada. Father was also getting the necessary documents needed for leaving Russia.

Father was saddened that his own brothers and sisters were not interested. But his relatives gladly accepted furnishings and tools that father and mother left behind. They believed that if things got worse, they could go at a later date. But later, Russia closed its doors. It was too late. Father was the only one from his Wiens family to come to Canada.

A nursemaid for their three young children had been much needed to keep them safe from the river and the mill machinery. Nura stayed with the family until they were ready to leave. Six-year-old Mary and their beloved Nura spent the last day crying together. Mother paid her salary with flour. She also gave her some feather ticks, pillows, and linens. Nura had jumped for joy, exclaiming, "Now I have a dowry. Now some man will want to marry me!" The whole family had difficulty in saying goodbye to this loyal and faithful girl who had served them for many years.

Father found it hard to leave. He said, "I loved the Russian people, I appreciated their language, I enjoyed the natural beauty of the land."

Relocating their residence from Siberia to Canada was a big step for the family. Father, mother, and their children, Mary age six, John age four, and

Helen age two travelled to meet relatives in Moscow. Later they had a wonderful surprise when they boarded the *Empress of France* for the voyage to Canada to find mother's sisters and parents already on board. It was a grand reunion. There were 26 people on that ship with the surname Wiens; all were related to mother.

Later the only contact that father had with his family was through letters from Russia. These letters are preserved and published in book form. Many tears were shed at the suffering of his *Geschwister* (siblings).

Father knew that his children were unable to read the Gothic script, so he rewrote the letters into Latin script using the "hunt and peck" method on an antique portable typewriter. As he worked he often made his own editorial comments, explanations, or clarifications of what he considered important. Here is one of his notes:

Dear children and grandchildren.

Read these letters. Think about them and pay attention. The very same fate might have been ours if God in His grace and mercy hadn't guided our thought to Canada. Praise and thank Him that we can live a life of faith in this land of freedom. JJW

Father, Johann J. Wiens, died in Morden, Manitoba in 1971. Mother, Helena J. Wiens, died in Morden, Manitoba in 1984.

They left eight children, and 34 grandchildren. Over the years their children have continued communications with our Wiens–Wiens families.


The following Wiens family books can be found in the Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan Archives.

Peters, Justina, editor. *Our Wiens–Wiens Heritage*. Derksen Printers, Steinbach, Manitoba. Credit to Herbert Peters, Saskatoon for assembly and printing. 1986.

Peters, Justina, editor. *Wiens & Enns Genealogies*. 2nd Edition. Printed & Published by Herbert D. Peters Saskatoon, SK 1998.

Peters, Justina, editor and translator. *Letters from Russia*. Printed and Published by Herbert D. Peters, Saskatoon, SK 1993.

Peters, Justina, editor and collector. *Wiens Family Keepsakes*. Printed and published by Herbert D. Peters, Saskatoon, SK 1997.

Peters, Justina, editor. *The Descendants of the Bell Ringer Klass Wiens 1732-1794*. Printed by Herbert Peters Saskatoon, SK 2001 & 2003. 

# ***The MHSS Archives and How They Work***

***By Victor G. Wiebe***

The Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan (MHSS) Archives constitute a memory of the life and faith of Mennonite people in Saskatchewan. The MHSS Archives support research and education by acquiring, preserving, and making accessible records in any medium that have enduring historical value. The MHSS is blessed by members, patrons, churches, and supporters. All of these have made donations of various kinds to our archives and they have accumulated to form a significant collection.

Archives consist of collections of records that have been selected for permanent or long-term preservation on the grounds of their enduring historical value. Archival records are normally unpublished and almost always unique, unlike books or magazines, for which many identical copies exist. This makes archives different from libraries. The MHSS Archives has its own character for we have both an organized archives and a library.

Historical researchers have three institutions available as laboratories. There are libraries for books, newspapers, and journals; museums for physical artifacts like furniture, kitchen wares, art, etc.; and archives for almost everything else: paper documents, photographs, maps, and electronic documents. This latter format is proving to be a formidable source for archives for constant monitoring is needed for control and access.

## ***What is a fonds?***

Canadian archivists use a special word for a collection of documents. That word is 'fonds', which is pronounced in the French manner as if you were saying the English word "phone," with a silent "d" and "s." A fonds is all the records created by a person or organization during the course of their existence. An important structure of a fonds is to keep the records together as they were created. An expert in archives then describes the content of a fonds and we have these descriptions up on our web site. If you have never seen what a fonds description looks like please examine these on our web site:

<http://mhss.sk.ca/A/fonds/index.shtml>

One feature that surprises new researchers is finding that some sets of records seem out of order or incomplete. We make a separate fonds for each collection given to us and we don't combine any together. For example: if we receive documents from a person who served as the chair of a committee and his minutes are incomplete, why don't we just make some copies and fill in the missing minutes? Often we can find them in other places. We don't do this because this will damage the authenticity of the fonds organization. Missing minutes from a chair's file may mean that the chair never got the missing minutes and may have acted in a particular way because of this missing information. The missing minutes may tell us something about the committee chair's actions.

Thus there is considerable historic value in the way a person has organized and retained information and our archives strives to preserve this order. I have to confess that sometimes we get records given to us that are in a mess and we cannot see any basic structure to them. In such a case, we do reorganize them for the benefit of researchers.

As you examine our fonds you will notice that we have assigned a "volume number" to each of them. This is the order we use to shelve boxes of our documents. They are just for location and storage but in the olden days instead of putting records in special archival boxes, Archives actually had a book binder gather the records and sew them together to make book out of them. These books were then placed on shelves, so that archives looked a lot like libraries.

If we get a gift of some records and we designate a fonds for them and then much later we get more records from the same source they may have widely different volume numbers, but the description of the fonds brings all the information together.

To be an effective user of an archives one first goes carefully through the fonds description to note the information, in order to find what is wanted.

***Different types of collections***

There are two types of document collections in archives; one is a “created” collection and the other is a “collected” collection.

*Created collection:* A person, organization, or congregation in the course of its normal activities will cause papers, documents, letters, and reports to be created, organized, and hopefully kept. For example, a person writes a letter to a friend and keeps a copy and then receives a letter in reply. Over a lifetime, as the letters are saved, this person will develop a significant letters collection that will illustrate a portion of his life. The person will also do business and accumulate business papers; or travel and have travel photos; preach or serve on committees and have sermon texts or minutes of meetings, and so on. This “created” collection gives the history of the person.

*Collected collection:* These are papers, photos, and documents gathered, usually by an individual, from different sources to form a collection of interest. For example, a person may be interested in family history. He sets out to find information of his family, such as letters, church records, old photos, and so on,

and gathers these together. Since they are not created by the subject of the collection, but assembled by the collector, in the order specified by the collector, they form a special “collected” type of archival resource. Some of these may be of great value.

When our archives receives a collection we try to get background information on the collection and use this background information in the “administrative history” description of the collection. This is part of the fonds description.

***Access***

Some materials in archives are restricted, sometimes by law and other times by agreements. For example, we hold the Swift Current Bible Institute student records. Any student may have access to his or her own records but the Saskatchewan government limits access by others who do not have permission from the student. Our archives opens the large majority of its records to all researchers and encourages all serious historians to make effective use of the resources.

*Victor Wiebe is the MHSS Archivist — Ed* 

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## ***Marker for a Former Mennonite Church in Poland***

On June 26, 2010, friends from Poland, Germany, and the Netherlands gathered to unveil a marker at the former Mennonite city church in Elblag, built in 1590. Until a new church was built in 1900, this building served as the local Mennonite church. It is worth noting that Elblag (then Elbing) allowed a church to be built in the city, while other cities did not. Elbing also allowed Mennonites to become citizens, a privilege denied by other towns and cities. Today, a museum in the city depicts some of the Mennonite story.

*The above piece is from The Mennonite–Polish Friendship Association Newsletter, December, 2010. The Mennonite–Polish Friendship Association, founded in 1988, has members in Poland, the Netherlands, Germany, Canada, and the United States. Thanks to Ed Schmidt for sending the newsletter. For information, contact Peter J. Klasen, 1838 S. Bundy, Fresno, California 93727; tel: (559) 255-6335; e-mail: peterk@csufresno.edu — Ed* 

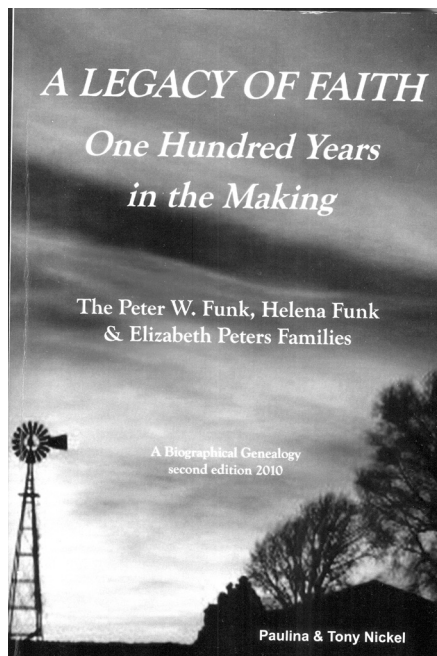


## Mostly about Books

**Victor G. Wiebe, Book Editor**

Nickel, Paulina and Tony. *A legacy of faith: one hundred years in the making: Peter W. Funk, Helen Funk & Elizabeth Peters families*. 2nd edition. [Regina, Saskatchewan, published by the authors] 2010. (7), 319pp. Soft cover. Available from Tony Nickel, 606 – 1610 College Ave. Regina, SK S4P 1B7. \$25.00.

**Reviewed by Victor G. Wiebe**



Paulina and Tony Nickel have compiled a detailed family history, genealogy, and photo album for descendents of Pauline's grandfather Peter W. Funk (1886-1934), who had married twice. The first wife was Helen (Wiebe) Funk (1886-1914) whom he married in 1905. She bore him six children, five who lived to maturity. His second wife was Elizabeth Peters (1886-1948), whom he married in 1914; she bore him 12 children of whom 10 lived to maturity. After a nice introductory poem, title page, and table of contents, and a preface in which the genealogical numbering system is explained, there follow 18 chapters. The first chapter gives the background history

of Mennonites in Russia and describes the immigration to Canada in the 1870s of the Funk family and their subsequent pioneering in the Main Centre area of Saskatchewan in the early 1900s. Chapter two is titled "Funk Family Albums" and is a collection of casual photos of different family members. Chapter three is titled "A Historical and Cultural Sketch of the Mennonite People" and that is what it is. The first part of chapter four is a very brief look at Peter W. Funk's parents, followed by information on Peter W. Funk and his two wives. The bulk of the book is then composed of chapters with each one devoted to one child and that child's descendents. Each person is placed in the family generational context, accompanied by a photograph and brief text giving their interests, occupations, home towns, and interesting identifiers. Several ancestor charts and a good index complete the book.

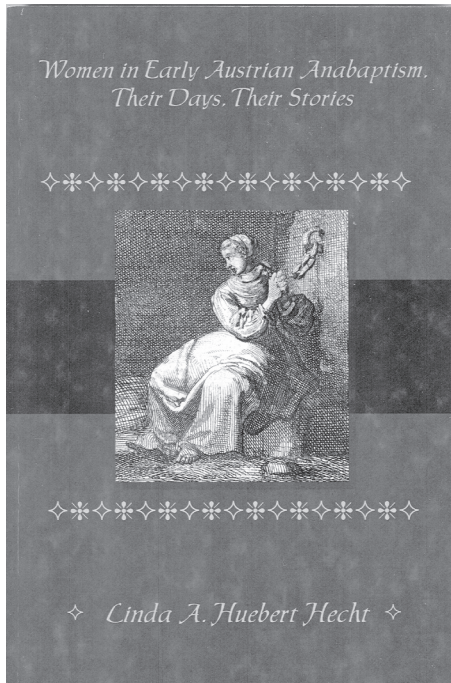
This is a professionally published book, with all the features found in a commercial publication. Though the authors composed the book as a private production they are to be commended for their attention to getting everything right.

Though some of the photos look a little "pixilated", the overall result is a wonderful, well captioned collection of photographs of almost every family member listed in the book. I found it easy to keep track of the generations because the Nickels used a conventional numbering system. The text is clear and well written, nicely organized, and commendably presented. Enough detail is provided to make for both interesting reading and reliable reference, but one is not overwhelmed by detail. Though the book will be of most interest to members of the extended Funk family, I am certain that many others will read and use this book in their family studies.



Linda A. Huebert Hecht . *Women in Early Austrian Anabaptism. Their Days, Their Stories*. Kitchener, Ontario, Pandora Press 2009, xix, 281 pages. Paper covers, Can \$32.50. ISBN: 978-1-926599-05-2.

**Reviewed by Margaret Ewert.**




In the early years of the Reformation, women played a significant role in the development of the Anabaptist movement. Linda Huebert Hecht has done an in-depth study of the early years of the movement in the Tirol area of Austria and has documented many cases of trials, imprisonments, and executions of women. She says: "Women formed the backbone of the Anabaptist movement, comprising ... forty-six percent or nearly half of the total Anabaptist membership in the first three years (1527–1529) with a total of 77 women martyrs in the five-year period 1527–1531.


Beginning in 1527, King Ferdinand instituted a policy of repression and severe persecution for anyone who became Anabaptist in the Austrian territory of Tirol. In spite of this, Anabaptism quickly became a widespread and popular grassroots movement. It gave women the opportunity to be extraordinary lay witnesses of the gospel. Between 1527 and 1531, one third of all the leaders were women. Anabaptism was radical in giving women new freedom and

a widened horizon of personal choice. Hecht quotes Ronald Bainton: "If women had boycotted religious reform, there wouldn't have been a Reformation." (p.11)

Numerous translations from court records are included in the book, and stories of a number of women are given in greater detail. At the end of each chapter (each representing one year, from 1527 to 1531) are notes on references. There is also a section of 27 pages of illustrations pertaining to the years mentioned. Lastly, an appendix includes the types of questions asked of prisoners, lists of the possessions of a former judge and his wife, translations of hymns written by prisoners, a 'confession' of Helena von Freyberg (1540), and an index of women's names.

Jacob Hutter and his travels are mentioned frequently. Hutter advocated the community of goods from early on in his ministry. Because of intense persecution in Tirol, many Anabaptist and Hutterites fled to Moravia. It is interesting to note that Hutterites had universal education in the sixteenth century when a large part of the world remained illiterate. In 1622 the Hutterites were forced to leave Moravia. In 1770 they found refuge near Kiev, Ukraine, and in the 1870s sought new opportunities in North America. The stories of the many women who were prepared to die for their faith makes one wonder how important our faith is to us, and whether we would be prepared to suffer. We need to be thankful for the example of these courageous women of the past. 

## Request for Help with a Research Project

Prof. Timothy Epp of Redeemer University College, Ancaster, Ontario is researching the topic of historical connections between Anabaptists and North American blacks. Currently he is focusing on the Waterloo area, but any information on this topic anywhere in Canada interests him. Please e-mail him with any comments, suggestions, or information. His e-mail address: [tepp@redeemer.ca](mailto:tepp@redeemer.ca) 

## The Back Page

### Honour List

This list recognizes persons who have made significant contributions towards preserving Mennonite history, heritage, or faith within our province. (The date in brackets is year of death.)

To add a name to the Honour List, nominate a person in writing.

For information on the members of the Honour List, see the web site: <http://mhss.sk.ca>

*Helen Bahnmann*  
*Abram J. Buhler* (†1982)  
*Helen Dyck* (†2007)  
*Dick H. Epp* (†2009)  
*Jacob H. Epp* (†1993)  
*Margaret Epp* (†2008)  
*Peter K. Epp* (†1985)  
*George K. Febr* (†2000)  
*Jake Febr*  
*Jacob E. Friesen* (†2007)  
*John D. Friesen* (†2004)  
*Jacob G. Guenter*  
*Gerhard J. Hiebert* (†1959)

*Katherine Hooge* (†2001)  
*Abram G. Janzen*  
*John J. Janzen* (†2004)  
*George Krahn* (†1999)  
*Ingrid Janzen-Lamp*  
*Abram M. Neudorf* (†1966)  
*J.J. Neudorf* (†1988)  
*J.C. Neufeld* (†1994)  
*John P. Nickel*  
*David Paetkau* (†1972)  
*Esther Patkau*  
*John D. Reddekopp*  
*Ted Regehr*

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

### Web Sites

*MHSS web site:* <http://www.mhss.sk.ca>

*Cemeteries web site:*

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

*Mennonite Encyclopedia Online:*

[GAMEO.org/news/mennonite-encyclopedia-online](http://GAMEO.org/news/mennonite-encyclopedia-online)

### Electronic Bulletin Board

[Mhss-E-Update@mhss.sk.ca](mailto:Mhss-E-Update@mhss.sk.ca)

Use this electronic bulletin board to post information on upcoming events, programs, and activities, and other information that will be useful to everyone interested in Mennonite history, culture, or religion.

### MHSS Membership

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

Please make cheques payable to: Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan or MHSS.

Memberships are \$30 for one year; \$55 for two years; \$75 for three years.

Gift subscriptions are available.

Membership fees and donations to the Society are eligible for tax receipts.

### Send Us Your Stories

Readers are invited to submit news items, stories, articles, photographs, church histories, etc., to be considered for publication. Send them to us at the e-mail or street address given at right.

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