

Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian

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Aron Sawatzky: Mennonite Musician and Composer

By Reg Krahn



There have been many names that have come to be synonymous with Mennonite music. One of the men who contributed much to the composing, teaching, and advancement of music in Mennonite circles was Aron G. Sawatzky. With only one week of formal training, he used his considerable musical talent and dedication to provide new music, conduct choirs, and provide leadership and instruction for other choir conductors in Russia, Canada, and the United States. He also began his career in ministry in 1912

and was eventually elected leader and ordained as a minister in Winton, California.

Aron Gerhard Sawatzky was born on May 24, 1871 in Andreasfeld, a village just east and slightly to the north of the Chortitza colony in Russia. His father was Gerhard J. Sawatzky (born August 28, 1837). Gerhard's first wife was Aganetha Fast (1836 – 1869). They had seven children: Gerhard, Jacob, Johann, Aganetha, Peter, Abraham, and Kornelius. Gerhard's second wife was Aron's mother, Maria Lepp (born November 15,

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From the Editor's Desk


By Victoria Neufeldt



Another issue under my belt and I must say it has been as interesting for me as its predecessors. I have learned so much about our people and their history, in the “old country” and here, from all the articles I have dealt with.

I appreciate getting to know the writers through their articles; some I have got to know personally, even if only over the phone or via e-mail. So many, many stories, and each has its own unique value.

One thing that is important for producing a good magazine is high-quality graphics. Photos that look fine on the Web do not necessarily translate well into print. What we need are either high-quality scans of original photos or the original photos themselves, which we will scan and return to you (our pictures editor, Helen Fast, has very sophisticated scanning equipment).

Verner Friesen has retired from his highly valued position as story scout for the *Historian*, so we need more help in that area. Verner knows everyone in Saskatchewan (well, it seems that way) and did an excellent job of finding the rich lodes of Mennonite history just waiting to be recorded. We are grateful for all his help and all his patience with the process of getting to print. 

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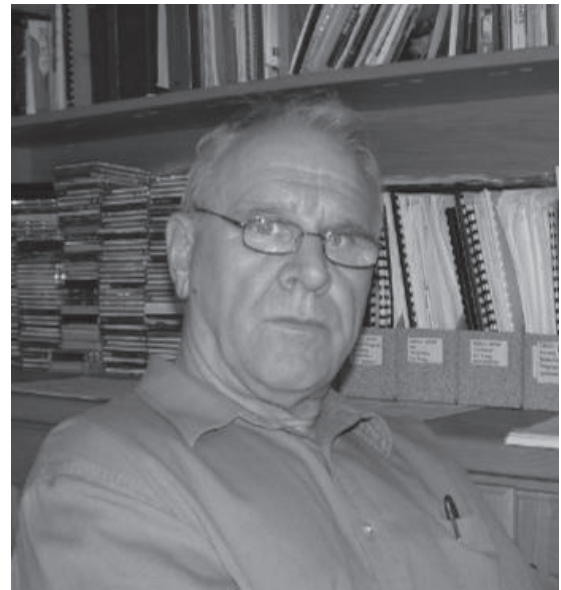
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MHSS President's Corner

By Jake Buhler



When Small is not Less

In July I attended a Peace Mennonite Church celebration in Regina. That little house church has been worshipping and serving God for 25 years. Its overhead is low but its impact in Regina and beyond is rather great. It has a revolving membership as students and newcomers come and go. Their interpretation of Jesus Christ is one of redemption and action. Sex offenders and Somalian refugees have been helped and continue to be helped. The story of Peace Mennonite is almost unbelievable.

Do you have a narrative describing a church community that has done and possibly still is doing exciting things in the community? Write your story and send it to the *Historian*. Small is not necessarily less! 



Continued from page 1

1850), daughter of Ältester Aron Lepp. Maria had nine children, of whom four died very young, three of them within a single year. Aron was the eldest; his four brothers were Heinrich, Bernhard, David, and Franz. Altogether Aron Sawatzky had six step-brothers, one stepsister, and four brothers.



Photo above: the five Sawatzky brothers: *from left:* Henry (Heinrich), Frank (Franz), Aron, David, Ben (Bernhard)

Photo on facing page, top: Sawatzky family *circa* 1894; Aron is in the back row, third from left

Photo on facing page, bottom: a hymn written by Aron Sawatzky using the *Ziffern* system of writing music
All photos in this article courtesy of Reg Krahn

Aron Sawatzky was a man of deep faith, strong conviction, and a great love for his Lord and Saviour. Faith came early to Aron, as is documented by his own words; “On one occasion, at about five years, the ladies had gathered at my grandmother’s house to do needlework. My sister and aunt talked about their baptism which was either just past or in the near future. Listening to the conversation for a while, firm faith overcame me and I had the courage to speak the big words, ‘I also believe.’ The women began to question me but I was not to be shaken. ‘I am saved.’”

When he was eight years old, Aron had a conversion experience as a result of a serious illness. He writes; “When I was eight years old, I had a serious fever [perhaps scarlet fever]. I was afraid I would die. My mother prayed with me and peace came through the blood of Christ.” Girded with his unwavering faith and strong conversion experience, Aron was bap-

tized when he was twelve years old, in 1883. The baptism took place on May 26 in the Dnieper River near the village of Einlage. He was baptized by Johann Friesen and received into the fellowship of the Mennonite Brethren Church by his grandfather Aron Lepp.

Aron Sawatzky was married on September 19, 1891, when he was twenty years old. He married Elizabeth Niessen, daughter of Wilhelm Niessen, Kronstadt, Ignatyev Colony. His grandfather, Ältester Aron Lepp, married them and Herman Neufeld preached. Aron and Elizabeth had twelve children: Maria, George, Heinrich, Katherina, Aron, Elisabeth, Anna, Franz, Elsie, Hilda, Franz, and Martha. In a sombre parallel to his father’s family, they also lost three sons within one year, 1912–13: George, Franz, and the second Franz. Daughter Elisabeth died in 1918.

It is believed that Aron and his wife must have settled in Andreasfeld, because two years later, at age twenty-two, he was elected as the conductor of the local Mennonite Brethren choir. Aron writes: “Music came easy for me and since I had been active in band music for eight years, I was elected choir director at the age of 22. There was much to learn. How to unlock the soul of the songs we were singing. The whole choir was composed of unsaved people. But the Lord of the harvest was faithful and the whole choir accepted Christ.”

It should be mentioned that, although by the end of the 19th century, the Mennonites had a strong tradition of music and song, music was not always embraced in the Anabaptist tradition. Although Anabaptists must have been singing at worship from the beginning (the earliest account of this is the singing of a Communion song in 1527), in 1534 Conrad Grebel expressed his opposition to singing, arguing that nothing was needed in worship but the Word. Peter Riedemann, an early Hutterite leader, admonished that “singing for carnal pleasure or the beauty of the sound is a carnal sin. Singing spiritual songs is pleasing to God only if people sing attentively, in the fear of God, and as inspired by the spirit of Christ.”

The publication of a great number of hymnals, first in the Dutch language, then in German in Prussia



and Russia, gives evidence that singing became a very important part of the church life of Dutch-Prussian-Russian Mennonites. In the eighteenth century a hymnal used by the Mennonites in Prussia was *Geistreiches Gesangbuch* (1767). When the Mennonites left for Russia in 1788, they took with them two hymnals containing both the older Lutheran chorales and the newer Pietist hymns. One account of a worship service in Chortitza in 1840 describes the unaccompanied unison singing of a congregation of 50 people led by a *Vorsänger* (cantor); it was described

as having been so energetic and strong that it seemed as if they wanted to topple the walls of Jericho.

By the end of the 19th century all but the conservative branches of the Mennonite churches had developed and refined the art of four-part singing. This was brought about in part by the teaching of Heinrich Franz Sr. As early as 1837, Franz, a Prussian school teacher, selected hymns from the Mennonite *Gesangbuch* and used numbers (*Ziffern*) to represent the musical scale. This enabled school children to learn four-part singing. As young adults they eventually passed their skills on to their parents. All Mennonites benefited from Franz's *Choralbuch*, first published in 1860.

By 1885 the Christian Choral Association was 500 choirs strong from countries such as Germany, France, Sweden, England, and Russia. The organization defined itself as a Christian choral society using music for Christian inspiration and evangelism. Its Russian affiliate was organized by Friedrich Schweiger around the Baptist church in Zyrardov, near Warsaw, Poland. This was the musical stage to which Aron Sawatzky had arrived when he began conducting the choir in Andreasfeld in 1893.

— 27 —

der Herr hin u ber Nach dem Land voll Zu-bel-Mang.

u ber, Bald fahrt uns der Herr hin u ber Nach dem Land voll Zu-bel-Mang, voll Zu-bel-Mang.

E dur, a=4. **20. Zur Trauung.** Ar. Saw.

Mäßig.

mf

mf

decesc.

1. Sei ge-grüßt, du Wei-he-stun-de, Wo zum heil'-gen Ge-he-bun-de Zwei sich rei-sen Herz und Land, Sich in
 2. All ihr Wün-schen, Seh-nen, Hof-fen liegt vor dem All-güt-ge-n of-fen, Sei-her Hei-len heil't hin-auf, Laß die
 3. Off-ne heut' des Him-mels Thü-ren, Laß sie Le-bens-fäß-te spü-ren Aus dem o-bern Hei-lig-tum! Nach' ihr
 4. Sei-te auf dei-nen We-gen, Set-ze sie der Welt zum Se-gen Und zum Licht in der Ge-mein! Laß sie

dir, Herr, zu ver-mäh-len, Söling um die-se teu-ren See-len Dei-ner heil'-gen Hei-de Land, Dei-ner heil'-gen Hei-de Land!
 Herr, in Him-mels-hal-len, Dies ihr Räuch-wert wohl-ge-sal-len Krön' mit Gna-de ih-ren Lauf, Krön' mit Gna-de ih-ren Lauf!
 Gaus zur Frie-dens-hüt-te Und zum Dent-mahl ih-rer Gü-te Weh-re dei-ner Treu-e Ruhm, Weh-re dei-ner Treu-e Ruhm.
 in den schwe-ßen Stun-den Stelt in dei-ner Lieb-ver-bun-den Und einst e-wig bei dir sein, Und einst e-wig bei dir sein.



Covers of two hymn books published by Aron Sawatzky: left: *Sänger-Bote: Weihnachts-Nummer*, published November 1916; right: *Sänger-Bote: Ein Liederbuch für Kirche und Haus*, published circa 1917

The Russian Choral Association held its first public festival in Zyrardov in 1886. On May 30, 1893 the Brethren sponsored a *Sängerfest* (choral festival) in Rueckenau, Molotschna. Seven choirs and several speakers ministered to an audience of two thousand. One of the choirs that attended was the Andreasfeld choir led by the young Aron Sawatzky. According to reports, the young choir didn't attempt any difficult anthems on their own but chose to sing three simple gospel songs. Despite some degree of apprehension, the first *Sängerfest* was deemed a success and a harbinger of more and better things to come.

In 1894, while conducting his choir in Rueckenau for the second *Sängerfest*, Aron met Friedrich Schweiger. Aron's congregation must have thought a lot of him, for later that year, they sent him to a conductor's workshop led by Schweiger in Zyrardov, Poland. Upon the conclusion of the seminar, Aron spent a few days in Lodz, a province of Germany, for further training. The purpose of the trip was to gain knowledge about

singing so as to be able to educate singers. Much effort was taken to learn proper conducting, to learn to understand the underlying meaning of songs, and techniques to teach the choir proper diction and phrasing. Later that year, Aron and Bernhard B. Dueck organized the first conductors' workshop for Russian Mennonite conductors. Aron remained active as a conductor and workshop leader and also as one of the first composers in the Russian Mennonite community until his departure for Canada in 1903.

Aron realized there was an ongoing need for an appropriate yet simple repertoire for his and other Mennonite choirs. As a result he began composing songs to fill that need. The seven compositions known to have been written by him in Russia are found in volumes four and five of *Liederperlen*. Many more of his compositions are found in two songbooks: *Sänger-Bote*, published in 1915 by Mennonite Brethren Press in Hillsboro, Kansas, and *Lieder-Quelle*, published in California in 1930.

1. Der Boten Gruß.

A. G. S. Aron G. Sawatzky.

1. Zi: ons = lie = der laßt er = schaf = len Durch die Lan = de weit und breit,
 2. Zi: ons = lie = der sol = len drin = gen, Durch die Dun = sel, wun = der = bar;
 3. Zi: ons = lie = der sol = len rau = schen, Auf dem wei = ten Er = den = rund;
 4. Zi: ons = lie = der, o, wie lieb = lich, Gott zum Preis in Wort und Dant;

Laßt es zu = beind wie = der = hal = len Von dem Herrn der Herr = lich = teit.
 Je = zu Lie = be zu be = sin = gen Ist das Ziel der Vo = ten = schar.
 Das be = weg = te Her = gen lau = schen, Her = zens = sang vom Sän = ger = bund.
 Preist dem Herrn ihr Hun = des = chö = re, Stim = met an den Leb = ge = sang!

Chor.
 Tragt hin = aus die fro = he Kun = de; Lieb = lich ist der Vo = ten Fuß:

„Je = sus kam die Welt zu ret = ten,“ Daß sei un = ser Vo = ten Gruß!

Most of Aron's songs fall into either the *Chorlied* or gospel hymn category. The latter are distinguished from the *Chorlieder* by their use of marked dotted rhythms, the refrain, and the echo technique in the refrain (having the tenor and bass voices echo the soprano and alto voices) — characteristics common to the American gospel song. About half of his songs fall into the gospel category.

Aron had a good working knowledge of both the *Ziffern* system and the staff notation systems of music. About 1900, Aron published an instructional booklet entitled *Gesangschule in Noten und Ziffern für christliche Sänger und Dirigenten*. It provided Mennonite singers and conductors with a brief but comprehen-

Aron Sawatzky's hymn "Der Boten Gruß," published in one of the *Sänger-Bote* books

sive comparison of the *Ziffern* system with staff notation. Such a comparison was needed to assist them in transcribing choral music from notes to *Ziffern*.

The booklet also provided instructions on conducting patterns and choral training techniques.

In 1903 the Sawatzky family decided to leave Russia and start a new life in Canada. Aron, his wife, and six children, along with his parents and most of his siblings, crossed Europe by train, then crossed the Atlantic on the ship *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse*, landing in New York. They travelled via Chicago and St. Paul, Minnesota to Rosthern, Saskatchewan. The Sawatzkys eventually homesteaded in Aberdeen, Saskatchewan. At first times were rough: "Our visitors were mosquitoes at night and deer and field mice in the daytime." Despite the hard work on the homestead, Aron continued to pursue his musical interests. He was the choir leader for the newly founded Aberdeen Mennonite Brethren church for sixteen years. His reputation as a workshop leader followed him across the Atlantic. Within two years of arriving in Aberdeen, he received an invitation from the churches to begin a study of church music. For the next two decades, Aron was instrumental in organizing and leading choral festivals and conductors' workshops in Mennonite communities throughout western Canada and the American Midwest.

Just as Aron had participated in the first *Sängerfest* in Russia in 1893, in 1905 he helped to organize the first *Sängerfest* in Saskatchewan. In 1906, under Aron's guidance, Mennonite Brethren choirs and conductors in western Canada organized the North Choral Association of the Mennonite Brethren Church in North America. This association sponsored annual conductors' workshops and choral festivals which provided inspiration and instruction for amateur Mennonite Brethren choir directors in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Many felt more regular instruction would be beneficial, so the association members asked if Aron would publish a monthly choral journal to provide instruction, inspiration, and an ongoing supply of new choral repertoire.

The first instalment of the *Sänger-Bote* appeared on April 15, 1911 and continued monthly for almost seven years until late 1918.

The songs that appeared in this journal were later collected in a songbook with the same name: *Sänger-bote: Ein Liederbuch für Kirche und Haus*, first published in 1915. The book went through several editions between 1915 and 1920 with the last edition (ca. 1920) containing 172 songs with notes, plus seventy additional texts. Of these 172 songs, seventy were written by Aron. Another twenty-six were written by other Mennonite composers with names such as Barkmann, Barga, Dyck, Enns, Klassen, Loewen, Siemens, Schroeder, and Thiessen.

At the fifteenth annual meeting of the Northern Choral Association held in Hepburn, Saskatchewan on 25 June 1919, Aron reported that the *Sänger-Bote* journal had not appeared since the New Year because it had been forbidden by the Canadian government censor. The journal was written in German and Canada was at war with Germany.

This was to be his last meeting with the members of the Northern District Choral Association. In 1920, Aron and his family moved to Lodi, California. The reason for this move is not known, but most likely it was to get away from the harsh climate of north-central Saskatchewan. Over the first several years, they moved often, but always within California. A year after first arriving in the state, they moved to Livingston and two years later (1923) to Shafter, where they lived for only four months; then back to Lodi for two years (1923-1925) and then to Winton (1925-1933). In 1928, when the leader of the church in Winton, Brother J. M. Enns moved away, Aron was elected leader. Aron had begun his preaching ministry years earlier, in 1912, in Aberdeen. He was ordained to the ministry in 1930, with R.P. Rempel and H.W. Lohrenz officiating. In 1933 there seemed to be trouble in the Winton church so Aron withdrew from the leadership. The Sawatzkys then moved to Shafter, where he continued to preach and compose music.

When he came to California, Aron was already well known to Mennonite choir leaders and choirs there through the monthly *Sänger-Bote*. He soon became

involved in leading workshops and song festivals. Numerous articles in the *Zionsbote* attest to his ongoing musical and spiritual ministry.

In 1929 Aron undertook the publication of another quarterly journal entitled *Lieder-Quelle*, again in response to the constant need of Mennonite Brethren choirs for new songs. By the end of 1930 he had published eight booklets containing sixty-five mostly new songs with notes (fifteen were reprinted from the earlier *Sänger-Bote*), about as many song texts without notes, and several dozen dramatic readings for use in worship services. About half the songs in this collection were written by Aron himself.

His last known song “*Ich weiss von einem Heim so schön*” (I know of a heavenly home so dear) was written on July 11, 1935, just months before his death.

This is what Aron’s wife Elizabeth wrote regarding his last song: “O how glorious! O how glorious! These were the words that woke me in the middle of

MEIN HEIM

Words and Music by
A. G. SAWATZKY.
July 11, 1935.

1. Ich weiss von ein - em Heim so schön, in Je - ner neu - en Welt.
2. Ich weiss von ein - em Heim so schön, wo - von uns Je - sus sagt.
3. Ich weiss von ein - em Heim so schön, dort schwei - get Je - sus Leid.

Dort werd - e ich auch einst ein - geh'n, wanns mal - dem Herrn ge - fällt.
Das Er be - reit - et selbst für mich; dort schwin - det Je - de Nacht.
Und von uns flie - het Schmerz und Not und Je - de Trau - rig - keit.

Hil - fe - den ist das Trau - en - tal, doch drob - en ist der Freud - en - saal. Schon
Dort werd ich Je - su Ant - litz seh'n und mein - e Lieb - en wie - der - seh'n. O,
Das ist der Ort, wo Je - sus wohnt; das Heim, da - mit Er drob - en lohnt. Dies

win - ken Him - mels Lied - er hier, von dies - er Heim - at mir.
welch ein Trost in dies - er Zeit, es naht die E - wig - keit.
steig - ert mein - e Seh - sucht hier, Bald, bald, bin ich bei dir.

The last hymn composed by Aron Sawatzky

Aron Swatzky's last hymn, "Mein Heim," written July 11, 1935

the night (July 11, 1935). When I asked what is so glorious, he answered, ‘Quickly give me pen and paper so as not to disturb my thoughts.’ So then with clear thoughts he began to write the melody and words for this song, ‘My Home’. At heaven’s gate he saw the Lord, whom he loved, and behind Him a chorus of radiant singers who were singing this song in heavenly harmony. Again and again during the night and in the morning he repeated these words ‘O how glorious’; and O how quickly he reached his glorious home. We may still be here on earth but our eyes are turned heavenward. May this song remind us that we will someday enter this heavenly home.”


On Sunday, November 10, 1935, Aron preached his last sermon in the Shafter church. The following Tuesday a banquet was held to honor Aron, their choir conductor, and any new choir members. A quartet sang some of Aron’s songs at this occasion. Aron had had heart problems since about 1932 and was advised not to exert himself. But his attitude was, “It would be nice if He called me while I am working.” He was unloading furniture when he suddenly cried out. He fell gently, and died on November 18, 1935. He was 64 years old.

Aron’s funeral was at the Shafter church on November 24, 1935. Rev. K.G. Neufeld used Revelation 5:9, “And they sang a new song,” as his text. The choir sang Aron’s last song “*Mein Heim*”. Rev. N.N. Hiebert preached on Revelation 15: 1-3 “....and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the

song of the Lamb...” William Bestvater read the obituary in English and German, and conducted the graveside service.

Aron Sawatzky had a deep-rooted faith in his Lord and Saviour, which came to him early in his life. As a result Aron used his many talents to glorify his Lord. He started his preaching ministry in 1912 and continued until his death. Aron Sawatzky made a considerable impact on the musical development of the Mennonite Brethren in Russia and later in both Canada and the United States. This is particularly remarkable in that as far as can be ascertained, he had only one week of formal workshop training. He was certainly a talented musician and considered to be the most prolific of all Mennonite composers both in Russia and North America, with over 100 songs to his credit. He tirelessly provided musical instruction to many conductors and choirs through his compositions, publications, and workshops, thereby bringing innumerable blessings to the many people who enjoyed his music.

Principal sources:

- Aron Sawatzky’s autobiography, unpublished
- *Events and People: Events in Russian Mennonite History and the People That Made Them Happen*, by Helmut T. Huebert, 1999 



In My Family's Footsteps

By Dave Toews

The following article is the author's adaptation of a presentation he gave at the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta's 2010 fall conference —Ed.

My yearning to go on a pilgrimage, to see the place of my parents' birth, began a long time ago. I wanted to walk where they had grown to young adulthood and to breathe the air of their native land. This yearning was finally satisfied last year. In the summer of 2010, my wife Marion and I were able to spend five weeks on vacation in Europe and after that, I took the Mennonite Heritage Cruise in Ukraine.

Europe

In Paris, I took the opportunity to visit the Père-Lachaise Cemetery, on Mount Louis. That's where more than a million famous, infamous, and some ordinary people's remains are buried or housed in the columbarium. Two of the best known people interred there are Polish composer Frédéric Chopin and American rocker Jim Morrison. I was there to see the niche in the columbarium where the cremated remains of the anarchist bandit, the marauding mass murderer, Nestor Makhno are encased. I had looked it up on the Internet and knew exactly where to go. I was apprehensive as I approached the vault. I had difficulty looking directly at the compartment. Waves of mixed emotion swept over me. There I was, all alone with remains of the perpetrator of some of the most horrific events of our Mennonite people. I thought, should I forgive this fellow human being? I concluded I could not; it was not my place to do so.

Later I was asked if I had done something to desecrate the site. This had not entered my thoughts.



Nestor Makhno columbarium vault in the Père-Lachaise Cemetery
All photos courtesy of the author

On the way down from the columbarium, I met an interesting young man who was doing research for a client. As we spoke, he asked where I was from and whose grave I had come to seek out and why. "Nestor Makhno!" he repeated after me. "You are the second person in two weeks to come and see the vault of the only Ukrainian national interred here." The last, he said, was a young lady coming on behalf of her aged Ukrainian mother; she loved Makhno and considered him a hero. Not an uncommon sentiment among Ukrainian people today, and one that is encouraged by historical revisionists. We will come across Makhno again later in this journey.

In Prague, I knew of the Czech Christian martyr, Jan Hus. A fellow Anabaptist perhaps? In vain, I looked on Wenceslas Square for his monument, built in 1915, the 500th anniversary of his death. I finally found the monument in the Old Town Square, not more than 500 metres from our hotel. Hus, born in 1374, was burned at the stake in 1415 in Constance, in present-day Germany, for his work as a reformer of the church of Rome. As we toured the nearby St. Nicholas Church, originally a Benedictine Monastery, completed in 1735, I noticed it is now



Jan Hus monument with St. Nicolas Church in the rear at left, in Prague

a Czech Hussite Church. Posted on a display were the Hussite Articles of Faith: 1) communion of both bread & wine; 2) preaching & reading the scriptures in Czech without interference by the authorities; and 3) the universal priesthood of all believers. While

not an Anabaptist, Hus was a precursor to the reformers who would come almost a century later.

During the tour of Prague, I had a chance to engage Emanuel Votiphar as he was selling tickets to the nightly concert. As a member of that congregation, he related how difficult it was to keep the church alive, as only a few older people attended regularly. The

Czech Republic is one of the most atheistic countries in Europe. As our conversation continued, I learned that Emanuel was also a world class athlete for his age group. In 2007, in Chile, he had placed third in table tennis. His target was the gold medal in Beijing in 2011, in the over-70 category.

Background

The reason I first became interested in history in general and Mennonite history in particular was because my father did not make small talk. In order to have an intelligent conversation with him I had to find his level. He had two main interests, the Bible and Mennonite history. He spoke often of his convictions and beliefs, all intertwined in Russian Mennonite history. These subjects were inseparable.

My parents immigrated to Canada in the 1920s with their respective families; my mother in 1923 and my father in 1926. They were some of the more fortunate ones; of the 100,000 Mennonites in Russia in 1920, only about 20,000 were able to get out.

Some, like my father's brother Isaak and my mother's brother Jakob and their families, stayed back by choice. The reason they didn't leave was that their wives' families weren't going or there was debt remaining on the farm and not everyone could leave. And for a period of time it appeared as though Stalin was not going to enforce complete collectivization of the farms. Due to considerable



The Toews family in 1950: from left to right: Anna Marie, Helen, Rudy, David, Peter, Ernie; Rudy died June 23 that year

resistance in Ukraine, collectivization wasn't achieved there until the early 1930s. For their decision to stay they all suffered grievously, through forced collectivization, loss of property and possessions, fleeing to Germany with the German Army and forced repatriation to Stalin's gulags after the Second World War.

Here we can see the catastrophic effect that the Yalta Agreement of

Feb 1945, between Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin, had on the Mennonites from Russia who had managed to get out. Of the 35,000 Mennonites who fled to Germany only 12,000 escaped to the West. And we should not forget that the Mennonites were only a small fraction of the 2,000,000 people from Russia trying to evade Stalin's grasp.

My uncle Isaak and aunt Tina Toews were disenfranchised; they were accused of being Kulaks. A Kulak was anyone who had owned land and hired workers or was a church and community leader. They were considered exploiters, profiteers, and a threat to the state. They were forced to move four times between 1928 and 1943; in effect, they lived "below the radar". In spite of this they managed to stay in Osterwick until 1943, when they retreated with the German army through Poland to Jena, Germany.

From there the Toews family was grabbed by the Soviet Army in 1945 and sent in boxcars to a forced-labour logging camp. The gulag was in the Vologda region far north and east of Moscow. Here they were forced to stay for 15 years. Some years were particularly difficult, as in 1947, when many people starved to death. There were no guards or barbed wire; the extreme temperatures and vast isolation kept almost everyone from escaping. The Toews managed to survive largely because they became

very necessary to the productivity of the camp because of their mechanical and electrical talents. Isaak always managed to keep a Bible with him and led house church services through all the years of turmoil and displacement. Isaak was a man of great faith and firm convictions. Stalin died in 1953 and life became a bit easier. In 1960 the now extended family moved to Kyrgyzstan. Between 1975 and 1980, the families moved to Espelkamp and Lage in Germany, where most of them now live.

After having no contact with our family in Russia for over 10 years, one day in the fall of 1955, we received a letter from the Toews. What a huge celebration that was; they were alive and reasonably well. The letter, dated August 9, 1955, had been addressed to Peter Toews, Winnipeg, Canada. The letter was forwarded from one Peter Toews to the next in Winnipeg until the third one knew the letter should go to Peter Toews at Mayfair, Saskatchewan. Aunt Tina wrote almost casually, without emotion, as though she had been writing every two weeks or so. Strange. I'll paraphrase briefly from the German.

Dear Mother and Siblings:

A heartfelt greeting of love. Thanks be to God we are all together and in good health. We had five sons, (one, Bernhard, died of natural causes) and we have three daughters.

She goes on to list that husband Isaak is a finishing carpenter, the four surviving sons — Isaak, Abram, Hans, and Heinrich — are all electro-mechanical technicians, and the three daughters — Tina, Maria, and Elizabeth are still in school.

Is my mother-in-law still alive? [My grandfather had died of typhus in 1918, before our family left for Canada.] A reply would give us great joy. God be with you, till we meet again.

The return address was in Russian. What a joy this letter brought to the extended Toews family and friends in Canada.

The story of my Uncle Jacob and Aunt Anna Kroeger's family largely mirrors that of the Isaak Toews family, with some exceptions. They made a last-ditch effort to escape to the west from Moscow in 1929, along with 30,000 other Mennonites. Re-

grettably, almost all were turned back. While still in Neu-Chortitza, Uncle Jacob was arrested and then taken at gunpoint from prison. He was ordered to repair the generator that supplied electricity to the hospital, mill, and cinema. He found out after he was released that there was a daily quota of prisoners who were taken out and shot! A fellow Mennonite was given their passports and papers and had to fabricate reasons for their death and record them.

The Kroegers' highly valued electrical and mechanical abilities no doubt saved their lives. The family went to Germany for employment during the Second World War, were brought back and then sent to Siberia. After Stalin died they moved to Riga, Latvia and later to Hanover, Germany. All our cousins are now somewhat reluctant to talk about their experiences.



Left to right: Anna Kroeger, friend with child, and Jacob Kroeger, beside a Soviet-era truck, in front of the Kroeger house, Neu-Chortitza, ca. 1943

It is remarkable that in all the letters, interviews, and visits, our relatives have not once complained about or named their accusers, the people who turned them in as kulaks to the village soviets, betrayed them to the Russians in Germany after the Second World War, and denounced them to the commandants in the labour camps. Most of these things did not happen by chance; someone turned them in. We cannot forget that in many cases these were fellow Mennonites, doing it for material gain or, perhaps, to save their own lives. The Kroegers are well aware of who the Mennonite Judases were, but they have not named them.

It is a miracle that in both grandparent families, not a single person was lost to violence, through all the wars, forced labour camps, and upheaval. Other than grandfather Isaak and cousin Bernhard, no one had died.

My parents visited both the Toews and Kroegers in Russia in 1970 and again in Germany in 1980. Marion and I have also visited both sides of the family in Germany and some have been here to see us.

My parents were born during the Golden Age of Mennonites in Czarist Russia. Life had been very good for the last 50 years. My father Peter was born in 1902 to Johann and Maria Toews, prosperous farmers in Osterwick. My Mother Helen was born in 1905 into the farm family of Abram and Maria Kroeger of Neu-Chortitza. She was a relative of the clock-making Kroegers. Her father Abram, orphaned at an early age, had been separated from the rest of the family and was not in the clock-building trade.

My father told raw objective stories of Mennonite life, village businesses, people, church issues, and growing up in a middle-class, landowning family. An indelible wartime memory for him was when he and several other young men had to transport a platoon of Bolshevik soldiers to the next village with a tripod machine gun on the back of his box wagon. Life hung in delicate balance, in the middle of an inky black night where they couldn't tell friend from foe. My mother, on the other hand, told emotional, often tearful, stories of growing up. The horrible accidental death of a sibling, who suffered a pitchfork through the stomach, and of family, church, and village controversies. She also experienced dreadful fear during the Russian Revolution, as when running from the anarchist bandits to hide in the cornfields at night.

My parents were married in 1942. Mother was 37 and Father was 40. This union was blessed with four offspring in rapid succession: first, my sister Anna Marie, then me, and then two younger brothers, Ernie and Rudy. Mayfair was not an easy place to make a living; poor soil, rocks, and stumps that could deter even the hardest pioneers. Of the 40 Mennonite families who started there, only seven remained from the time I could remember. The others had moved on to greener pastures.

Together with my uncles and cousins, my parents cleared the land. They broke the tough prairie sod and planted and harvested their first crops. Through years of drought, frosts, grasshoppers, and poor harvests, they persevered. Eventually they man-

aged to earn a decent livelihood. But income was meagre. All this was meticulously journalized in my father's income and expense ledger. The scribbler consists of forty-two pages, written alternately in German and English. One can see that Father's English improves as the years progress. Cream, eggs, and family allowance provided the only regular income. Noteworthy is the regularity of donations, to the church, Bible schools, and missions. One day, catastrophe struck, when youngest brother Rudy fell into the stock-watering trough and drowned. The whole community mourned his passing. He lies buried under the fragrant flowers and trembling aspens in the cemetery of the Mayfair Mennonite Church. Mother was never quite the same.



The author at his brother's graveside
June 26, 1950, the day after the funeral

As children and teenagers, we were very involved with the farm work, which included milking cows, picking rocks and roots from the fields, repairing fences, and carrying firewood. In 1964 my parents sold the farm and moved to Rosthern. In 1984 they moved to Bethany Manor in Saskatoon. They have both passed away, Father in 1992 and Mother 1994.

As I have said, my yearning for a pilgrimage began a long time ago. During my teenage years, I had become quite resentful of the constant talk of the old homeland. Russia, Russia, Russia! What was the big deal? We are here now and should be happy and content. However, as I read and studied Mennonite history I grew to appreciate where my parents were coming from. My quest actually began with a picture of a house.

We had in our family a picture said to be of the house in Osterwick, where the Johann Isaak Toews family had lived. On the back, my father had written in

German: “our house in Osterwick, purchased in the fall of 1911. Photographed in the summer of 1974, by J.J. Neudorf.” With the help of Winnipeg architect Rudy P. Friesen, I was able to confirm that the house



The house in Osterwick

was still standing. Friesen, author of *Building on the Past* (2004), has in this book a treasure of architectural photographs of many Mennonite buildings, with information and new insights about the Russian Mennonite story.

The Pilgrimage

On October 9, 2010, a group of pilgrims, including Dave Dyck, cousins Mary, Peter, and Irene, siblings Anna Marie and Ernie with his wife Shirley, and I went in search of Neu-Chortitza. My mother’s home village was in the Baratov Schlachtin Colony. The beginning of this day proved to be very frustrating, as our driver and tour guide became completely disorientated; we had to double back four times and ask for directions numerous times! Five hours to reach our first destination. After stopping at a number of villages for other people on our private tour to seek out the former homes of their parents or grandparents, we reached Neu-Chortitza.

We knew from previous Kroeger family visits here that very little was left. The former Kroeger home, the church, the school, all had been demolished. We found two buildings or, rather, parts of two. The mortar has failed, but the bricks are of excellent quality and will be reused. In my mind’s eye, I walk with my mother down this peaceful village street. I also envision my mother, having slept with her clothes on, running terrified through the garden, into the cornfields, at the sound of horses and riders at the far end of the village. The Makhnovtsi bandits are on a raid again!

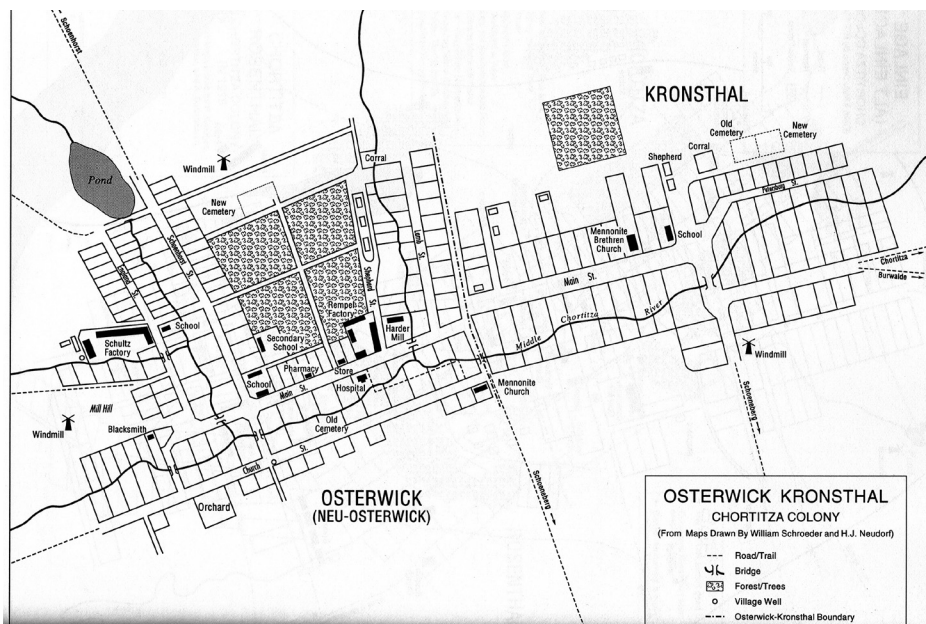
October 11, 2010 dawned cool, overcast, and rainy, but the weather could not dampen my spirits. This was the day for which I had waited many years. We hoped to see the house where my Toews grandparents had lived and our father had grown up.

After pushing the van out of a muddy spot and stopping at the Mennonite House Museum of Victor Dyck and several villages, we got to Osterwick. The roads in Ukraine, aren’t much worse than anywhere else in the Third World. If it’s been raining for days and you drive off the pavement, you get stuck! When we came to the cemetery, we could hardly contain our excitement while we looked for our grandfather Johann Toews’ tombstone. Disappointingly, the search was in vain. However, to our amazement, brother Ernie found the gravestone of our great-great-grandparents Peter and Elizabeth (Zacharias) Harms. Most of the Mennonite gravestones were missing, having been used for building foundations or sidewalk blocks. Next we came to the Schultz agricultural machine factory. We were fascinated by the sheer size of the compound.

All right, enough of all of that; we wanted to find the Toews house. Armed with the original map from Helmut Huebert’s atlas and the April 23, 2010 picture from Rudy Friesen, we set out. We stopped and asked a fellow; he thought it was “that way”, waving us to the right. He was correct, but unknown to us, the roads had been changed. No longer straight and square, they were crooked and winding, the trees and shrubs had a lot of leaves on them, and the property had a five foot fence around it. We stopped and asked a lady walking along the road. Polina our



The author by the remains of one of the two Mennonite homes found in Neu-Chortitza, Baratov Schlachtin Colony, the author’s mother’s former village
“The mortar has failed but the bricks will be reused.”



Osterwick, from *Mennonite Historical Atlas*, by Helmut T. Huebert, 2nd ed. 1996, p. 24. The Toews house is situated on the southwest corner of Main Street and Boundary Road and backs on to the Middle Chortitza River. It is the second lot North of the Mennonite Church location.

guide showed her my photo of the house. The lady stiffened; she eyed us suspiciously. "This is my house," she said. What luck! Polina asked, "Could we go there to take some pictures?" "Neyt," was the curt reply. "I just left my home and walked here, all the way to my sister's house to celebrate her 65th birthday."

We pleaded our case; she started to yield. Reluctantly she got into the van and we drove to her home. Nina was quickly warming to us. She showed us a Canadian flag keychain tag given to her by previous visitors. In spite of our efforts, we were unable to establish who those prior guests were. We knew the house had been sold to a Sawatsky clan when our family left for Canada. We took some pictures. She unlocked the gate to the compound; we took more pictures. We asked if we could go inside.

By now we were all quickly becoming friends. When we asked about the pictures on the walls, Nina proudly told us they were of her late husband, children, and grandchildren. We toured the house and took still more pictures. We noticed the house had been divided into two halves, lengthwise. Nina told us the man who had lived in the other half had died. She had purchased his share and was preparing to renovate the complete structure. We asked if we

could contribute. After a moment's hesitation, she accepted. Our gift was meant to help Nina replace the missing gable end windows. We now had a stake in the former Toews family home. It was an emotional time. It was a miracle that we happened to meet Nina and that she'd agreed to take us to the house. We drove her back to her sister's home. As we said our goodbyes, Nina was beaming, she hugged us, almost fiercely! In those 45 minutes we had established a special bond with this very fine Ukrainian lady.

Our tour leader Walter Unger admonished us to not only experience the pilgrimage, but also learn and express our feelings. Converse, read, research, and above all, write.

Write about your feelings, emotions, opinions, insights, interpretations. You are pilgrims, he said. Pass on the heritage and culture.

And so I have written this to share with you.

I had come to walk on the soil, breath the air, and feel the wind in my hair in the villages where my mother and father had been born and raised. My quest had been fulfilled. I have seen the Mennonite Holy Grail. My cup runneth over.



From left to right: Anna Marie, Nina, Dave, & Ernie in front of the former Toews family home. "We can't stop smiling!"

Dave Toews, retired from a career with General Electric, lives in St Albert, Alberta with his wife Marion. His interests include Mennonite history; he is co-editor of the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta Newsletter.

Pembroke School: an English School in an Old-Colony Mennonite village

By Rosemary Slater



In 2004, Bill Janzen, a retired school superintendent and a former student at Pembroke School in Neuanlage, wondered how an English school came to be established in Neuanlage, an Old Colony Mennonite village. He decided to do some research. The results of his research inspired him to initiate a project to record that story.

The story of Pembroke School, how and why the school was built in the village of Neuanlage in 1919, and the impact it had initially and over the years is recorded in the newly published book *The Pembroke Years: 1919-1968*.

The book documents the history of the school through five decades. Personal memories submitted by twenty-five former students and five former teachers bring the history of the school to life. They describe a culture and a way of life now vanished. The book includes a chapter on village life, setting the context for what children experienced in school. As an introduction to telling the story, a reunion of former Pembroke School students was held in August of 2005. At that time, a cairn was placed at the site of the former Pembroke School. One chapter tells this story.

The final sections of the book include village maps and floor plans of the school and of the teacherage. Names of former students and the families they belonged to are listed, as well as former teachers, local school board members, and school superintendents. The two hundred and some pages of the book are further enhanced by almost two hundred pictures.

The Pembroke Book Committee, with the assistance of the Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan, is holding a book launch on Saturday, October 1, in the Fellowship Centre at Bethany Manor in Saskatoon. A short program at 2 p.m. will be followed by coffee and visiting. There will also be an opportunity to purchase the book.

This is the story of one village, but a similar scenario played out in the other Old Colony Mennonite villages of the Hague/Osler Reserve. This resulted in the exodus of nine hundred Mennonites from the Hague area to Mexico in the 1920s. It also resulted in the eventual loss of a language and a culture for those who remained.

Also in this issue, see the story, beginning on page 24, of one of the central figures of the community of Neuanlage during this period, Rev. Johann H.



Janzen, who was the minister at Neuanlage for many years and also a school board member.

The photographs accompanying this article picture the school as it was. The photo on the preceding

page, of the school from the front, was taken about 1948. The other photo, above, was taken about 1930 and shows the back of the school.

Photos courtesy of Rosemary Slater — Ed. 

New Feature for GRANDMA: Photo-Sharing

By Ken Ratzlaff

The GRANDMA Low-German Mennonite genealogy database has been a wonderful resource for Low German Mennonite families. But often, we would like to know more about our families.

One way is through pictures.

Through GRANDMA Online, you may now share the pictures of your ancestry. In partnership with a respected photo management site, Flickr.com, a GRANDMA photo-sharing method has been implemented. Using Flickr.com, you can manage your historical photos on line and share them with others of your extended family through grandmaonline.org.

The procedure is this: store your photo, free, on Flickr.com and tag it according to the instructions


provided by GRANDMA. Then the thumbnail will show up on the individual pages for people in the photograph. (Click on the image at right to see the full-size rendition.)

Viewers will be able to click on the thumbnail and see a larger image through the Flickr web site.

If you have digitized copies of photos that include your grandparents, great-grandparents, and others in the GRANDMA collection, please think about sharing them with the rest of us.

For details, go to

<http://www.grandmaonline.org/gw-asp-2/flickrhelp/>.

Ken Ratzlaff is GRANDMA's window developer. You can reach him by e-mail at ken@theRatzlaffs.net — Ed. 

Reflections on the History of the Dunelm Sommerfeld Mennonite Church: 1906–1953

by Jacob M. Fehr

This is a brief, reflective history of the Sommerfeld Mennonite church that was led by Rev. Abram Peters and Rev. Peter J. Dyck. These two men homesteaded at about the same time south of Swift Current in the Dunelm area. Abram Peters settled on NW-13-14-14-W3, and Peter J. Dyck on the adjacent quarter, SE-24-14-14-W3. Abram Peters donated land for a cemetery and Peter Dyck donated land for a church. My mother Maria (nee Knelsen) Fehr cooked many meals for the ministers and other people when they would travel by horse and buggy or sleigh to attend church in all sorts of weather. My mother would say in Low German, this is the least we can do for these men, who must leave their families at home to bring God's message to others.

I remember Abram Peters better because before and during the war years he would come to preach at our church in Chortitz and stay to teach Sunday school in the afternoon. He was a hefty man with a powerful voice and had an interesting way of keeping our attention when teaching a lesson.

In 1946, I worked on the Simmie Railway Line. On the west side of the track near Duncairn lived a farmer named Wood. Every Thursday when the train came through, his wife would greet the train crew by waving a white tea towel at them and they would blow the whistle and wave back. I learned later that two of Abram Peters' boys married Wood daughters: Jake married Molly and Peter married Margaret. Later, Abram Peters moved to Vanderhoof, B.C. with his wife and two younger children.

Peter Derksen, grandson of Peter J. Dyck, supplied the following information. Peter Dyck was born in Manitoba on September 5, 1875. In 1906, he brought his bride and young family via CPR from Gretna, Manitoba, to homestead south of Swift Current. He was a member of the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church and therefore required to homestead outside the Old Colony Mennonite Reserve. He and

others were scattered just outside the reserve over a distance of twenty miles.

The Sommerfelder Mennonites decided to organize and build their own church. Peter was elected deacon and two years later he was elected minister, receiving no salary or other compensation. However, the demands on this young man were heavy. His flock was scattered over a huge area and travel was limited to horse-drawn vehicles. He and Abram Peters would take turns travelling to Rosenhof, Chortitz, Schoenfeld, Blumenort, and outlying areas. Peter Dyck had a growing family of eight children and homesteading required large inputs of labour to build a home and barns and break the Prairie sod. But his commitment to the church was total. The needs of the farm and the family were attended to only after church responsibilities had been completed.

In the early 1920s, the Old Colony Mennonite Church made a huge decision and moved most of their people to Mexico. Not everyone moved, however. Those remaining requested the Sommerfelder ministers to serve them, since every Old Colony Church minister had left for Mexico. This added a huge responsibility at a time when Peter Dyck's farm and growing family desperately needed him. The drought in the 1930s and the faltering economy increased the burden.

Peter was a gentle man, but this did not apply when he was driving his horses. He had a team that was eager and tough. The reins were flinty when he was on the road. However, during the Dirty Thirties the horses tired quickly for lack of feed. One day a neighbour, an English neighbour, dropped in for a visit. It was more than a visit. He had a gift for the Dycks — a wagon filled with oats. It was for their horses. Minister Dyck was needed now more than ever before. He rarely accepted charity, but this was special.

During winter the distance dilemma became very tough. If the temperatures were extreme, he would make overnight visits. He would go to a hamlet, spend the night with a friend, and return home next day after the morning service.

The unheralded person who made it possible for Peter to serve his flock so faithfully was his wife, Maria (nee Heinrichs). She would remain at home with the family, feed them and the animals, and wait up for her husband. If he had not returned before dark, she would keep a light in the window to guide him home. To leave the farm unattended was unthinkable. To leave the children alone was unthinkable. Stand-ins were unavailable. All the homesteaders on the lonely Prairies were young families.

As Peter Dyck became older, the ministry became more difficult. His health deteriorated, particularly his digestive system. In the late thirties, he switched from horses to an automobile. He found it difficult to master the car and he did not get his driver's licence. Eventually he moved off the farm and into a small but comfortable house in the hamlet of Wymark. There was a garage in town and the owner was sympathetic and caring. The car was always ready Sunday morning and waiting for Peter.

Peter continued to serve his people from Wymark. During severe winter weather a neighbour would drive. However his health gradually deteriorated further and he was hospitalized. He died on May 13, 1948, with his wife by his bedside; they were a team.

The funeral was held in Schoenfeld on May 16th, officiated by Minister Henry Schulz of Goultdown and David Wall. David Wall, who was now the Ältester of the Sommerfeld Mennonite church, gave recognition to Peter Dyck's faithful commitment to the people he served. While he was never formally recognized, Peter brought a strong spiritual presence to the people he served for so long. He would never agree to a public display of affection or recognition, but his people showed their final appreciation at his funeral. The church was overflowing with ministers coming from all around Saskatchewan and Manitoba and the funeral cortège was well over a mile long. David Wall spoke from the back of a half-ton truck

at the grave site, admonishing the people where they could have better supported Mr. Dyck in his faithful years of service. I remember David Wall saying that Peter Dyck had been a father to him. He had served the Mennonite people for thirty-three years, first as deacon for two years for the Sommerfelder and then as minister.

There is another story I must mention. The Dycks' neighbours had a deep respect for him. On one occasion, ministers from Goultdown and south of Swift Current had gathered in a cafe for a special meeting. The Regal Cafe on Railway Street was crowded, but when it came to paying the bill, Jack Penelton, who had a habit of tipping the bottle, took care of it all. Peter had often preached and begged the men to quit smoking and drinking and telling them rather to love and care for their families. He would say there was a fine line between being concerned and gossiping when discussing people's habits and added, gossip is bad.

In 1950, an old house became the Sommerfeld Church building in Swift Current. It was moved onto Walker Street in Swift Current by Abram Knelsen, my mother's cousin (a farmer in the McMahon area with his boys). It was in good condition, but had sat vacant for many years six miles south of Swift Current on NE-20-14-13-W3 on the east side of Number 4 Highway where first the Peter Wiens family, and later, the Herman Dyck family used to live. The Dycks moved to Vanderhoof in 1942. This house was turned into a church building and is presently the only Sommerfeld church being attended in the Swift Current area.

As already mentioned, after the Old Colony ministers and most of their members left for Mexico in 1922, a number of men from several villages got together and approached the Sommerfelder ministers Abram Peters and Peter Dyck, to ask if they would come and minister in their churches. I grew up in Chortitz where my grandparents Jacob and Susanna Knelsen lived. My father Aaron Fehr was a song leader at the church for many years and he told me of Jacob Knelsen and Cornelius Froese having had a part in getting the Sommerfelder ministers to come and serve them in their churches. The church

at Chortitz started out as a teacherage. The first *Fäasenja* (song leaders) in Chortitz that I can recall were brothers Abram and Benjamin Enns; they came from Schoenfeld to sing. I remember that in 1939, once again, two brothers, Abram and David Giesbrecht, and my father Aron Fehr were chosen *Fäasenja* and they sang for many years. In the late 1960s, the Chortitz church was moved to Rosenhof and served as a kitchen for weddings and funerals, standing next to the Sommerfeld church that is still there, though no longer being used.

The Dirty Thirties were dreadful years. The land was still being plowed, harrowed, seeded, and harrowed again. You can imagine, with the Saskatchewan wind, we had horrible dust storms that lasted for days, with fences and machinery being covered. There was a layer of dust everywhere and we used lamps during the day so we could see. It was a depressing time. Some of the young horses were so weak for lack of good feed, they had to be helped up every morning. Minister Peter J. Dyck had a good sense of humour. Coming home late Sunday afternoon in a dust storm, he would muse and say, I have an advantage. With the clothes I wear, dirt doesn't really show.

Peter Derksen remembers going to Gramma and Grampa Dycks for Christmas:

"We lived in Wymark and my grandparents lived on a farm, eight miles northwest. Gramma insisted everyone come home for Christmas. The roads were blocked with snow. However my father had made arrangements. He had rented a team of horses and a sleigh. On Christmas morning we all packed into

the sleigh. There were foot warmers, horse blankets, gifts, and more blankets. The horses were willing and we were off.

"The first hour of travel was bearable; the second was bad. My brother and I were sitting on the floor of the sleigh, completely covered with a horse blanket. We needed air and we also needed to look and see what was happening. We tried every tactic known to us. Eventually we gave up and fell asleep. When the blanket was finally removed on arrival, we discovered a new world: people — lots of people — kids, moms and dads. All were excited. In the house it was bedlam.

"There was a huge table improvised to accommodate sixteen people. On the table there was food: turkey, pork, lemonade, bread, soup, potatoes, lots of potatoes, and much more. There were three settings. The men ate first and then the children followed. The women were last and cleaned up the leftovers.

"It was a happy time. The men visited, the children played and the women worked. After dinner when all was cleaned up, the children were required to perform. Gramma and Grampa sat together and the children performed for them. The preschoolers stole the show.

"At the end of the program the ladies were busy setting the table for faspa. The day was fast winding down. It was time to hitch the horses and head for home."

Jacob M. Fehr lives in Swift Current. He is a writer, the author of books in both Low German and English. 

Judith Rempel, 1952–2011

By Irene Klassen

The tribute below was spoken by Irene Klassen at a memorial service on June 4, 2011, in honour of Judith Rempel of Calgary, who died on May 24 of a massive heart attack. Leonard Doell says she will be remembered for “her incredible contribution to working with Mennonite genealogy, her leadership in the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta, and her work with organizing the Mennonite Colonization records.” — Ed.

Judith Rempel loved Mennonite history, the traditions and culture. The Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta was her passion and, typically, she gave it her all. Not only was she the coordinator of the organization, she drew the plans, the blueprint, for our facilities at 32 Street NE, she physically worked at its construction, and helped with the well-organized move from the previous location.

On June 24th — let me share in part what Bill Janzen, chairman of MHSA, said in an e-mail to all of us. “Life throws curve balls at us at unexpected times. This morning we heard that Judith Rempel had passed away in her sleep ... I believe Judith herself realized that she had not adequately prepared anyone at MHSA and had planned an in-service session next Thursday... Well, it won’t happen.”

The word went out and tributes came in:

“How devastating, I’m wordless...” — Mary

“Judii was a competent person to work for, energetic, motivated, eager to try any new tasks, even helping to put up drywall when we were doing the building...” — Dave

“I will certainly miss her in the field of genealogy. I hope you can start some sort of memorial...” — Frank

“I am so sorry to hear this news... she was so energized in her genealogical work for all to know, to absorb stories and facts about our ancestors...” — Eileen

Judii was brilliant and a walking encyclopedia of knowledge. What she didn’t know, she would diligently research. When queries came, and they came from many places like Germany, Japan, sometimes

poorly translated, it was often a challenge to find the answer. I would tell her “We don’t have to have all the answers.” “But we have to try,” she’d counter. I’m not sure whether it was her interest in genealogy that sparked it, but MHSA grew. She wasn’t trained as an archivist or even librarian, but here was a challenge to learn something new, and she set about to learn.

In the learning curve she (and we) made a few mistakes as we documented files, and had to redo some of them (luckily everything is written in pencil and we used good erasers). Sometimes I would object, “Oh Judii not again!” and she looked at me to see how upset I was, and might drop the subject. When I wasn’t looking she did it herself.

Visitors came into our place asking for information, sometimes as vague as, “My grandmother was a Mennonite — I think she came from Manitoba” and within minutes Judii would have a stack of reference books in front of them, or she would have them at the computer and be searching for ancestors on the GRANDMA program.

For those of you who don’t know, GRANDMA stands for Genealogical Registry and Database of Mennonite Ancestry.

“I never knew Judith personally ... but we became connected through our research for family lineages. She will be missed.” — Helen

“Although I met her only briefly, her online resources are important to my research. She has left a significant legacy...” — Leona

A longer tribute comes from Tim Janzen: “I have worked with her closely over the past 15 years... Judii did a huge amount of work as a webmaster for various organizations. She made the MHSA web site a major repository for Mennonite genealogical material. She compiled a large database of material for the GRANDMA program.... She was always someone I could look to for advice...”

Of course there were other interests and skills besides those that focused on genealogy. When Jake Balzer translated a book about Paraguay from

German into English, she typed up the translation and got it ready to send to the publisher in Paraguay. And Jake was quite flabbergasted to think that it could be done electronically. Closer to home, she also prepared my book of biographies, "Their Mark their Legacy," and readied it to send to the printer. Jake Harder a former chairman of MHSA, wrote, "I worked with Judii for four years. She was aggressive but always had the welfare of the Society in mind. She will be greatly missed as she was one of the main actors in the history of MHSA...."

Another challenge was working with photographs. Scanning old photos and trying to improve them, sorting, cataloguing, identifying, if possible, and filing photos in specific acid-proof boxes was an important job.

Sandra Lynn wrote, "corresponding with her was a pleasure. I asked her if she recognized anyone in some unidentified photos, and next day she had not only improved the photos, but started a photo query page online."

Judii was generous with her information, with what she knew. Granted, sadly, sometimes she dispensed it faster than we could absorb it.


"Judii was a giver.... I am so thankful I had the opportunity to be influenced by her incredible gifts

of passion and her immense knowledge of Mennonite history. Thank you Judii for being a mentor to me..." — Jim

Glenn wrote, "[this news] will take some time to sink in... I have been corresponding with Judii over my visit to Alberta this summer... she talked to me about giving a short informal genealogy related presentation... could someone contact me?"

In spite of a serious heart problem she had since childhood, she pushed herself hard. She was quick. If she wanted something done it was sometimes much easier to do it herself than to teach someone else to do it. She could skim over a printed page in a short time and know what it said. She would ask a question and expect an immediate answer... well, some of our minds don't work quite so fast.

Judith was Judii for most of us. Her unusual spelling? She explained that in high school there were three Judith's in her class, one Judith, one Judy and she became Judii.

The Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta will continue, a bit differently, without Judii, but it will go on. Frankly it would be an insult to Judii's memory to just give up on the work that she so passionately worked at, the legacy that she has left us. 

Peace Mennonite Church Regina: 25 Years

By Florence Driedger, with an introduction by Jake Buhler

Peace Mennonite Church, a house church of some 22 members, celebrated its 25th anniversary July 30-31, 2011 in Regina. On the Saturday evening, past and present members gathered at 3833 Montague Avenue for a waffle and ice cream celebration. On Sunday a more formal celebration took place at Grace Mennonite Church in Regina. Mennonite Church Saskatchewan Conference Pastor Jerry Buhler spoke and offered greetings on behalf of Mennonite Church Saskatchewan. Lay pastor Otto Driedger spoke of the many ways that God has blessed Peace Mennonite Church, especially with its focus on refugees, international students and international activities. Elfereda, a member from

Ethiopia, spoke of her journey with three sons from a war-stricken country to Regina. Peace Mennonite believes that a balance between local outreach and international outreach is necessary to live out the gospel of Jesus Christ. — *Jake Buhler*

Peace Mennonite began meeting September 1985 and formed on January 12, 1986. Under the leadership of Peter and Margaret Peters, we have had pastoral leadership teams: Harold Peters-Fransen for three years, from 1985 to 1988, Otto and Florence Driedger as lay pastors October 1992 to the present, and Hein and Mika Friesen for one year, sharing leadership and sabbaticals with the Driedgers.

The focus of Peace Church is Bible study, worship, fellowship, and prayer as the foundation for very active involvement in service at home and abroad. Currently we have one couple in Cambodia, one member in Ukraine, one in Thailand, and others serving in various locations in Canada.

Bible Study and Sunday school

Otto provides leadership to weekly Bible classes and Sunday School. Florence leads through visitation, counselling, hosting, and circulating the bulletin and *Peace News and Notes*, a newsletter binding persons in many countries around the world into a global peace community.

International Visitor Exchange Program

Peace has hosted, sponsored, and supported 33 young adults from the following countries: Brazil, Cambodia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Egypt, Germany, Guatemala, Holland, Indonesia, Kenya, South Africa, Switzerland, Thailand, Uganda, Ukraine, and Zambia.

Ten Thousand Villages

Margaret and Peter Peters have continued to take leadership and represent Peace in maintaining the valued outlet in Regina for handicrafts from many countries. In addition to Margaret volunteering in the store, Peter has been key in the store expansion and as a representative on the provincial committee.

Refugee Sponsorship

Peace has sponsored and/or provided social and practical support for more than 80 refugees from Burundi, Cambodia, China, Congo, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Rwanda, Sudan, and Vietnam. For example, we welcomed two young men who were separated from their mother for seven years, we have applications in for four young women, we have assisted one mother to bring her two young children to Canada, and we are working on about 10 family reunifications. Zahara Alli plays a vital role, through her work with families, in the refugee resettlement work

by the wisdom she shares with many New Canadians who come to Regina.

Partnering with Witness and other Mission Workers


Pat and Rad Houmphan are planting churches in Thailand, through the Witness program; Bonita and Eddie Mwunvaneza are developing a Peace Centre in Rwanda; Khang and Amy Nguyen are in Cambodia, serving the Vietnamese who have been living in Cambodia for many years; and Sergei & Leni Deynekin are pastoring a church in Kherson, Ukraine.

Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA)

Soon after we were established, our congregation became involved in welcoming persons who have spent time in prison. We are taking leadership in CoSA South Saskatchewan which has developed 14 circles since 2001 and currently has nine active circles. Chris Penner-Mayoh is coordinator, Otto is board chair, and a number of our members are volunteers in one or more of these circles.

Restorative Justice Ecumenical Initiatives

Peace participates in sponsoring annual events. In 2010 a national symposium in Regina focused on Aboriginal justice, youth services, victims, national and international themes, and other emerging topics. Healing and restoration into a caring community, rather than punishment, continues to be the focus for both victim and offender.

Other activities of Peace include hosting students from many parts of the world; Peter's leadership in Rotary, especially for its international work in education; Lucy Romanenkova's development of a multi-service centre in Zaporizhzhye, Ukraine; Brenda Stinson's employee assistance counselling to people in the Far North; the Driedgers' teaching and consultation in Ukraine in restorative justice and social service development. We are a small group, but we reach around the world in love, prayer, and service. God does miracles when we respond to his call. We praise God. 

The Family Tree

Rosemary Slater, Genealogy Editor

Making a Difference: Johann H. Janzen, 1891–1949

By Rosemary Slater

The 1920s were a difficult time in the village of Neuanlage, Saskatchewan. In 1919, the government had an English school built in the village of Neuanlage and insisted that all the children must attend the English school instead of the German school they had previously attended. The leaders of the Old Colony Mennonite church and those members who could afford to leave moved to Mexico.

Those who remained were impoverished by fines imposed for not sending their children to school. There was also bitterness about the loss of their church leaders. As well, there was grieving because of the separation from family and friends who had

gone to Mexico. It was into this environment that the Johann H. Janzen family arrived in 1924.

Johann H. Janzen was born in 1891 at Grünfeld, Schlactin-Baratov Colony in Russia, the son of Heinrich F. and Elizabeth (nee Dyck) Janzen. His mother, who was Heinrich's second wife, died when Johann was four, so Johann was brought up by a stepmother.

As the youngest surviving child in the family, Johann was privileged to receive both an elementary and secondary school education. By 1913, he had also qualified as a teacher. Johann taught for several years, until he was drafted into military service in 1916. He served as a secretary in the office, in the accounting department, and as the managing assistant on a Red Cross ship until 1918, when he returned home to Grünfeld. In Grünfeld he served as secretary of the church and of the village until he left Russia with his family, experience that stood him in good stead in his future home in Canada.

In 1921, Johann married twenty-year-old Katharina Lehn. The family arrived in Herbert, Saskatchewan in 1923, when their son Johann was six months old. In April, 1924, they moved to Morse, Saskatchewan

and in November, 1924, two months before son Jacob was born, the Janzens moved to Neuanlage.

Shortly after arriving in Neuanlage, Johann was once more actively involved in both church and community. In 1926, his name appears as one of the petitioners asking for a local school board for the Pembroke School. This was in



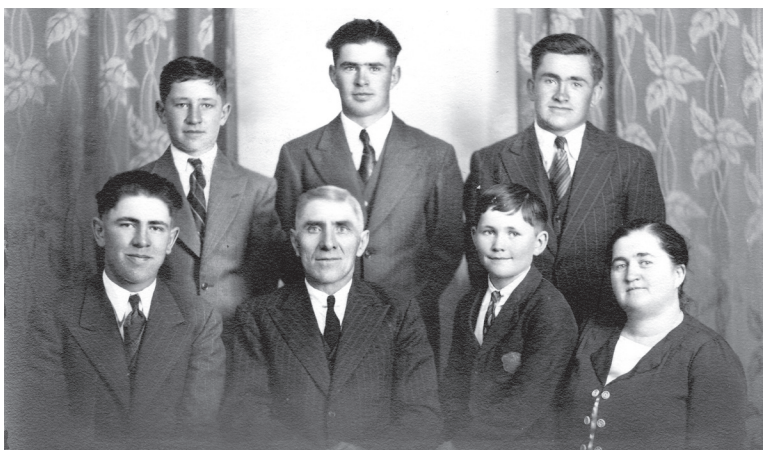
Two family pictures:

Top: the family, taken circa 1940

Left to right: Bill, Katharina, Henry, Frank, Johann H., Jake, Johann J.

Bottom: from the late 1940s *Back row,* left to right: Henry, Jacob, Frank

Front row, left to right: John J., Johann H., Bill, and Katharina



spite of poor health and dealing with constant pain from stomach ulcers, brought on by the extreme stress and worry of past and present struggles to survive and look after his family. Several surgeries, including a brush with death in 1928, left Johann unable to do hard physical work. This didn't stop him from acting as local school board secretary from 1929 until his death in 1949.



Johann and Katharina Janzen on their 25th wedding anniversary, 1944

Nor did ill health, combined with farm and family responsibilities, prevent him from leading the church at Neuanlage, preaching, leading the choir, and serving as an ordained minister at Neuanlage and other places, unpaid, of course, until his death.

The horrors of Russia were not discussed, but they were not forgotten either. On a Sunday evening, after the chores were done, when the Janzens came to visit, as a child I would hide behind the living room door, listening to the adults' conversation. First my mother would bring out the postcards of their honeymoon trip to Yellowstone National Park in 1936. Then the voices became more hushed as talk turned to Russia, the Black Raven (*die schwarze Raabe*), and the knock on

the door after midnight. The words were few but the tone of the voices, the unspoken implications, and the silences sent shivers down my spine.

My father, John Pauls, also a teacher in Russia, arrived in Canada alone as a twenty-year-old in 1926. The rest of the family had been held back in England and in Russia and he never saw his parents again. For my father, Johann H. Janzen became dearest friend, mentor, and substitute family as well as employer.

When Rev. Janzen died in August of 1949, he was buried on a rainy, muddy day. The church was filled to overflowing, so a tent was set up outside the church building for the overflow crowd. I was deeply disappointed when my parents wouldn't allow me to attend the funeral. They said the church would be overcrowded, there wouldn't be room for children, and the weather was too unpleasant.

When I think back, I was only eleven years old. What sort of a man could inspire such devotion in an eleven-year-old child and in the hundreds who came out to mourn his passing in spite of the weather?

Rev. Janzen always had time to greet every child by name, with a friendly smile. His sermons were easy to understand and always biblically based. His personality, character, and leadership style are what stick in my mind. He led by example and encouraged each person to live up to his or her potential. Rev. Janzen also set the tone for a spirit of cooperation and working together with the Old Colony Church, forging bonds that remain to the present day.

Instead of resisting the English school, the local school board, of which Johann Janzen was an active member, took it over, introduced the teaching of German and religion, hired Mennonite teachers, and made it their school.

The church that Rev. Janzen helped to found grew and flourished, serving the whole community. Neuanlage Grace Mennonite Church now has a membership of 300, a congregation of 450, and an outreach to communities in a fifty-kilometre radius. Rev. Janzen has been gone for more than sixty years but his legacy lives on. 

Coincidence in the History of a Family Bible

By Erna and Elmer Neufeld

In September, 2000, our daughter Elaine and her husband Jim Hockley, from Indian Head, Saskatchewan, came to visit us at our cottage at Meeting Lake, Saskatchewan. Jim brought along a letter that he had received from a Norma Huber from Ontario. She is a third cousin to Jim. She was very excited in reporting a rare find — a family Bible dating back to the early 1800s. A certain David Epps from Didsbury, Alberta, had found this old Bible among other items in a trunk that had belonged to his grandfather.

We were certainly interested in this find because the name Epp is part of Elmer's family and Didsbury is his hometown. We promised Jim that we would check out what seemed to involve both our families.

When we arrived home, we very quickly happened upon the information that we needed and sent an e-mail to Elaine and Jim. We told them that we did not have to go very far in researching the "David Epps" (sic) mentioned in the letter from Norma Huber. We had just received the September 18, 2000, issue of the *Canadian Mennonite* and there we found the following article, reprinted from the *Didsbury Review* of July 5, 2000:

Family Bible Finds Its Way Home

When David Epp's mother and aunt went searching for a tea set recently, they found a family treasure, but it wasn't their family treasure.

In the bottom of a trunk in a chicken shed they found an old, leather-bound German Bible, printed in Reading, Pennsylvania in 1804. In the Bible was listed the marriage of Peter Huber and Veronica Sauder in 1807, and the names of their 10 children. There was also a German letter by Peter Huber from North Dumfries County in Upper Canada in 1837.

Epp, not a Huber relative, reported the find to Douglas Stobbes of Calgary, who was collecting data from cemeteries in Alberta. That call led to putting information about the Bible on the Internet. Keith Rutt in Calgary, who was researching

his genealogy, found the information intriguing, especially since a friend in Calgary would be hosting a Huber couple from Ancaster, Ontario, in May.

Grant and Mary Huber from Ancaster recognized that Peter Huber was Grant's great-great-grandfather who had migrated from Pennsylvania to Ontario in the early 1800s. Mary convinced David Epp of the authenticity of the relationship by reciting the names of Peter's wife and children.

Epp met the couple in a restaurant in Airdrie and turned over the precious Bible to them.

But how did the Bible get into Epp's possession? It was determined that before World War 1, Epp's grandfather, Gerhard Neufeld, bought the Bible for \$10 from a young visitor who needed money to get married. Neufeld put the Bible in a trunk which he willed to David Epp. How the Bible first got to Didsbury is still a mystery.

The Hubers will place the treasured Bible in the Grace Schmidt Room of the Kitchener Public Library where it will be preserved along with other artifacts from the first settlers of Waterloo County.

Now the coincidences start. The David Epp mentioned in the letter and in the article is a brother to Ernie(Elva) Epp of Saskatoon and to Hardy (Dorene) Epp of Langham — and also a cousin to Elmer. Gerhard Neufeld is David's, Ernie's, Hardy's, and Elmer's grandfather.

And a further coincidence: the Bible belonged to Peter Huber, Jim Hockley's great-great-grandfather. That Bible was purchased by Gerhard Neufeld, Elaine Neufeld Hockley's great-grandfather.

The Peter Huber Bible is now in the Kitchener Public Library. Another family Bible, that belonged to Peter Huber's son John (Jim Hockley's great-grandfather), is also in that special room at the same library.

Is this all just coincidence?.....We wonder!! 

Legal Land Description and Google Maps

By Victor Wiebe

Almost everyone in Saskatchewan and especially those from the farm know their home quarter or school location by the Legal Land Description. In the past, those born on a farm had their place of birth given on their birth certificate as: Quarter, Section, Township, Range, Meridian. An example: NEq-Sec22-Twn14-Rng20-W3. This means “North East Quarter – Section 22 – Township 14 – Range 20 – West of the Third Meridian.” This system of land descriptions is derived from the Federal Government’s Dominion Lands Act and the Prairie’s original land survey.

However, people not from the Prairies don’t know a thing about this legal land description system — and neither do most online map programs or our current GPS systems. Today most people are familiar with the mapping system that uses latitude and longitude coordinates, these given in degrees north and degrees west.

In much historical or genealogical research, one frequently goes to maps for information about where people lived, worshipped, worked, and died. Many researchers have a problem finding a map location if they only have the legal land description. One of the best sources of information on using these legal land descriptions and finding the precise location is any of the different rural municipal maps. However, these are often difficult to find, particularly if you are away from a good Prairie map library. Then you are stuck. For example, how does one find a location in Google Map if all you have is the legal land description?

To use Google Map, first convert from the legal land description to degrees latitude and longitude. Fortunately there is a good web site for making this conversion: <http://www.maptown.com/coordinates.html>

Just enter your legal land description data and “Convert.” You can also convert back to the other system.



Calendar

ARTISAN DAY

Come see paintings, quilts, pottery, woodwork, carvings, and more on display at Artisan Day, sponsored by the Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan.

Where: Bethany Manor Fellowship Centre
110 La Ronge Road, Saskatoon

When: Saturday, September 24, 2011
9:15 a.m.–3 p.m.

Two dollars admission at the door. Lunch may be purchased at noon.

All proceeds go towards the work of the Mennonite Historical Society.

PEMBROKE SCHOOL BOOK LAUNCH

Celebrate the publication of *The Pembroke Years: 1919–1968*, the book telling the story of the Neuan-

lage school. Compiled by Sally Kasdorf, Deanna Krahn, Rosemary Slater, and Dot Zens.

Where: Bethany Manor Fellowship Centre

When: Saturday, October 1, 2011, 2–4 p.m.

REMEMBERING THE PEACEMAKERS

Leonard Doell and other resource persons will lead a Remembrance-Day service.

Where: Bethany Manor Fellowship Centre

When: November 11, 2011, 7:30 p.m.

GENEALOGY DAY

Conrad Stoesz from the Winnipeg Heritage Centre will be the resource person. Bring along your family stories, records, and collections. Free event.

Where: Bethany Manor Fellowship Centre

When: November 12, 2011,
10 a.m.–12 noon and 1–3 p.m.



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. Fehr (†2000)
Jake Fehr
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

Electronic Bulletin Board

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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