

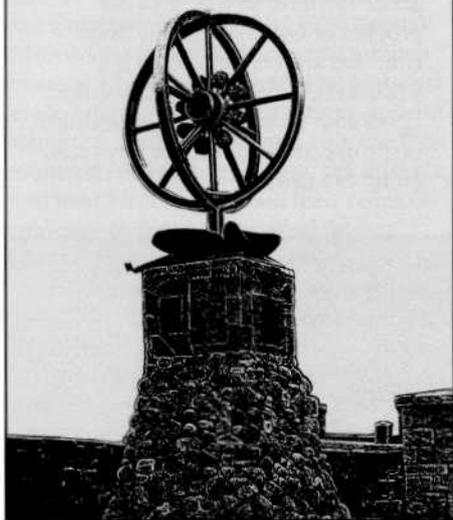
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The Reunification of Russian Mennonites in Post-World War II Canada*

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** Pseudonyms will be used to identify all interviewees from the Leamington area.*



Krista Taves with her brother Gerhard Taves.

When discussing the Russian Mennonite Canadian experience, Mennonite historians have generally acknowledged that there have been fundamental differences between the Mennonites who emigrated to Canada in the 1870's and those who emigrated in the 1920s. They stress that the groups' differing experiences changed the general outlook and priorities of each to the extent that congregational amalgamation was not possible. The same is not true of Russian Mennonites who entered Canada after World War II. These Mennonites immediately joined congregations established by the 1920s Mennonites, and thus it is often assumed that these two groups are relatively similar and that generalizations can be made of the group as a whole. Yet, when one looks at the differing historical experiences of these two groups, I find it startling that no one has seriously questioned the validity of such generalizations. Second-migration Mennonites established themselves in Canada during the 1920s, where they experienced the Depression and viewed World War II from a North American perspective. Third-migration Mennonites

endured Stalin's Five Year Plans and the Great Purges, experienced a war-front first-hand, spent years in refugee camps in Germany and viewed World War II from a European perspective. Despite these varied life experiences, upon entering Canada, the third migrants immediately accepted membership in churches established by the second migrants. Therefore, Canadian Mennonites generally view the arrival of the last group as uneventful and little, if any, study has been conducted on the reunification of the last two migrant groups, or to determine whether or not the third migrant group possessed a distinct identity. According to Henry Paetkau, an Ontario Mennonite historian, "Their reception...was like a big family reunion."¹

While I believe that Paetkau's statement possesses some merit, it mistakenly leads to an exaggerated picture of familial bliss. Given the differing historical experiences of these two groups, I suspect that there must have been a transition period, and transitions are never trouble-free. There must have been some differences between the two groups that each perceived and had to deal with in order to co-exist. In

fact, there are indicators suggesting some discord between the two groups. For instance, in 1952 J.J. Thiessen, a high-ranking Canadian official who directed most of his efforts towards helping Mennonite refugees, suggested that there was an adjustment between the old and the new:

Undeniably, some misunderstandings will stand between new and old members. This is understandable, considering that in the last 25 years the Russian Mennonites (of the third migration) have had no congregational life ... (trans)²

Similarly, in 1957, F. Dick of Kitchener wrote of his concern for Christian tolerance within congregation and conference:

We want to build Christian bridges between man and man, between one generation and the next, between the different immigration groups, etc. (trans)³

Given these suggestive, albeit sporadic references, this appears to be a topic worth investigating. In fact, I believe that problematic topics like these are important because they promote a reassessment of Canadian Russian Mennonite society and the way it chooses to represent itself.

In this essay, I will examine the relations between the second and third migrant groups from several angles because the material I found was originally directed at audiences ranging from the larger international Mennonite community, the Canadian Mennonite community and then local Mennonite congregations. Many references to the refugees are found in the Mennonite World Conference reports as well as Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) reports. These reports would have been heard by Canadian Mennonite delegates. Furthermore, Canadian Mennonite publications also dealt considerably with the refugee situation. Thirdly, I am looking at Ontario with an emphasis on Leamington, a small community close to Windsor, to provide a case-study of the experiences of the two migrant groups at a local level. Interviews

used in this essay are based in Leamington, Ontario. These three levels, international, national and congregational, can, I believe, be tied together to form a well-rounded picture because each level influences the other. What happened in the international level influenced Canadian Mennonites who transferred what they had heard to their localities, thus influencing the daily relations between second and third migrants.

Based on this methodology, two areas of tension emerge—religiosity and German nationalism. These two issues can be studied from all the angles mentioned above although there is more clarity about them at the upper levels. The issues tend to become harder to locate at the local level, where sources are basically limited to interviews. What the local level provides is insight into the perceived relationships between second and third migrants.

These perceptions are very different, as the essay will show. In fact, many of the issues discussed here can only be examined through individual perceptions which were, of course, heavily influenced by the differing life experiences of the two migrant groups.

In order to understand why religiosity created misunderstandings between the two groups, one has to understand religiosity from a Mennonite point of view. For Mennonites, religion was more than a set of beliefs; it was life itself. Therefore, the structure within which one lived was a testament to one's strength in the faith. Especially for the 1920s Mennonites, the congregation, or *Gemeinde*, formed the centre of Mennonite life and the source of everything that defined a Mennonite. To be Mennonite meant accepting membership in a church and actively involving oneself in the affairs of that church.

Frank H. Epp, a prominent Canadian Mennonite historian, provides an excellent description of the congregation as viewed by Canadian Mennonites:

The widely scattered settlements of the (second) immigrants...reinforced their traditional dependence on the **Gemeinde**, the local congregation, as the ongoing source of that faith and culture without which they saw no meaningful future for themselves or

for their children. In the 1920s...the congregations stood at the centre of Mennonite identity, activity, and history...because they represented to the people the spiritual salvation and social security to be found nowhere else. Where there was no local congregation there was no Mennonite identity.⁴

Therefore, if being a true Mennonite meant active membership in a *Gemeinde*, what would the reaction of the second migrants have been upon hearing that Stalin had closed all churches in the Soviet Union? For those third-migration Mennonites interviewed, 1933 to 1935 seem to be the key years when churches closed and after which no one was allowed to attend a service or admit to being a Christian. To do so would have identified one as an enemy of the people and meant sentencing oneself or a loved one to Siberia. As one woman said, "People probably would hold it against us that in Russia we said we did not believe in God. But people were losing their fathers."⁵ To gain some insight into this issue, we need to know what impression the second migrants retained about Russia upon their departure for Canada. If they left to preserve their faith, did they fear for the faith of the Mennonites they left behind?

In 1948, B.B. Janz, a second migrant and MCC official, presented a speech to the Fourth Mennonite World conference delegates entitled "Mennonite Institutions in Eastern-Europe-Russia." He described a panorama of Mennonite institutions ranging from schools, health institutions and churches up to 1910. He then concluded that

... as a result of the world ills created by communism in Russia, the great Mennonite settlements are no more. All of our blessed institutions are gone! We have to wait with the prophet in Isaiah 64:10, 'thy holy cities are a wilderness, Zion is a wilderness, Jerusalem is a desolation.' ... Without such Christian institutions no progressive church, nor any racial group can exist.⁶

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Two themes become clear through Janz's presentation. Firstly, Mennonitism is dependent on its institutions. Secondly, he sees an end to those institutions in 1910, thereby suggesting that he perceived a decline of Mennonitism in Russia at about that time. Unfortunately, Janz never clarified why he chose 1910. But, if he saw the decline beginning that early, then he certainly perceived irreparable damage within the Mennonite community in the 1920s when he left. Yet, many Mennonites remained in Russia and, until 1929, maintained at least a skeletal structure of what had existed in the Golden Years. Did other Canadian Mennonites ascribe to Janz's perceptions?

There is a strong possibility that at least some did. In the late 1970s, Stan Dueck interviewed a series of Mennonites who came to the Leamington area in the 1920s. One such interview involved a man who described the psychological effects of the Civil War on Mennonite youth in the Ukrainian colonies. When the Bolsheviks won the war, all old traditions were supposed to disappear and Soviet citizens were to disregard the past and look forward to a brand new lifestyle with new ideologies. This is how John Fast defines the Mennonite youth of the time:

We had a hippie generation and there was absolute freedom all the way through - morally, sexually—in the 1920s. After the revolution everything you had been taught was sacrosanct was being laughed at ...Everything collapsed around our ears. Authority went out the window—church as well...The youth were told they were part of a new generation...⁷

The Mennonites who came to Canada in the 1920s may very well have left with this image of Russian Mennonites. They had no way of knowing that even though the churches closed in the 1930s, Russian Mennonites still met in secret to worship because all contact between east and west ceased during the Stalinist purges. Second-migration Mennonites could only use their memories of war-torn Russia, the little they had heard from letters and their religious priorities to ascertain what might be happening to their co-religionists.

When the Germans surrendered in 1945, Canadian Mennonites finally had the opportunity to gain some answers because many Russian Mennonites who had escaped the Soviet Union with the retreating German army surfaced as displaced persons throughout Europe. MCC immediately began searching them out and trying to find ways to bring them

to North America. Peter and Elfrieda Dyck, a Canadian Mennonite second-migration couple, spent considerable time in refugee camps and through their efforts many Russian Mennonites settled in Paraguay when Canada appeared reluctant to accept refugees. Their book "Up From The Rubble," describes their activities in Europe. It becomes clear through their writings that they were concerned about the faith of Russian Mennonites. For instance, after meeting with the first Mennonite refugees at the Dutch border, Peter Dyck asked them about their faith:

Before we left, though, we wanted to know one more thing: What about their faith? Had they lost that, too? Did they still believe? Perhaps we shouldn't have asked. It was very personal, and we had just met.⁸

In their book the refugees quickly respond by saying that despite the incredible hardships suffered by Mennonites under Stalin, many became strengthened in their faith. That is the last we hear of any doubts on their part in the book. Yet, in reality, MCC representatives remained very concerned about their colleagues' faith. In 1946 Peter Dyck wrote this letter to Orie O. Miller, another MCC official:

Concerning the Russian Mennonites themselves it is a regrettable (sic) fact that they will have to be as one. Mr. Fast said today, "Von grund auf umgeschult und erzogen" (They must be brought from the ground up.) Their yes and their no does not always mean what it did to the older generation. Such are the fruits of a life spent two decades divorced from the Bible...Even on the spiritual plane things are not as they should be.⁹

MCC Chairman P.C. Hiebert delivered the following address at the Annual Meeting in 1948/49:

If we keep in mind the fact that all ministerial service has been kept away, and religious teaching in the schools and churches forbidden, even the private instructions in the home were hampered, we can have but a faint idea how these people, of our household of faith originally, have been spiritually starved and ethically impoverished. One is surprised at what they have salvaged of religion and ethical standards under the more than 20 years of abnormal life.¹⁰

Two of the highest ranking MCC officials involved with refugees, C.F. Klassen and J.J. Thiessen also mention in their writings the spiritual state of their brethren. Klassen said in 1950, "...all these years did not pass over our people without leaving noticeable traces."¹¹ J.J. Thiessen wrote, "... a number of immigrants are spiritually indifferent and some even opposed to religion. Here is a challenge for our churches."¹²

MCC did view their refugees as a challenge and became determined to strengthen their Mennonite refugees' faith. One such way was through missionary work. The first ministers sent to Europe were H.H. Janzen and Johann Wichert, both second-migration Mennonites from Ontario. These men travelled through Europe for several months where they visited refugee camps, met with Mennonite displaced persons, preached, and, of course, regularly reported back to Canadian Mennonites. Janzen presented incredibly favourable reports of the refugees, in *Der Bote*, the Canadian Mennonite newspaper based in Rosthern. He described in detail their hardships and their lives in the refugee camps. He had a great deal of optimism about their ability to adjust after what they had experienced. Of negative aspects, he provides only passing mention. "There are also some dark sides, but I will kept silent about them. Where are there not dark sides? I often wonder that there are so many bright sides."¹³

Johann Wichert, a minister from Vineland, Ontario, seems more ambiguous because he wrote incredibly little about his experiences with the refugees, considering his prolonged work among them. His reports in *Der Bote* described his time in Holland, visits to MCC warehouses, discussions with MCC workers he encountered, a visit to the Kaiser's palace and his travels by car. He provided only vague references about the people he ministered.¹⁴ Yet, he had much to tell upon returning home. According to one third-migrant interviewee, he considered the refugees lost to the Mennonite faith because they drank, danced, smoked and visited theatres.¹⁵ One must understand that in Canada, many Mennonites refrained from these activities, so to Wichert they posed a religious problem. He had quite an impact on the Ontario Mennonite community. Two interviewees recounted the story of their arrival as refugees in Windsor. A Canadian Mennonite man they did not know approached them and asked if they believed in God. Shocked at the simplicity of the question, they said yes, of course they did. Relieved, the man returned to his car and left. At the time of the interview, they believed the man felt compelled to ask that question because of what he had heard from Wichert.¹⁶

When interviewing second-migration Mennonites, questions about Johann Wichert led to vague responses which could not definitively substantiate the above claims. One woman simply stated that Wichert was a very strict, conservative man, moreso than his contemporaries, and that he made many people, especially the young, uncomfortable.¹⁷ These vague answers suggest that Wichert did have an impact on the community and perhaps now, questions about the incident create embarrassment. The interviewees who related the above story conceded that the misunderstanding happened, not because people wanted to think badly about the new immigrants; they were simply misinformed. "They did not know any better," said one man. "So we had to explain it to them."¹⁸

Did the religiosity issue create tension between the groups? Most people interviewed said no. They realized the concern was there, but it created no open conflict. The religiosity issue does indicate something about the mindset of the Canadian Mennonites, however. They became incredibly paternalistic towards "their poor refugees." (unsere arme Fluechtlinge) and created quite a cause out of their plight. Refugee relief became the center of mission work and was often equated with God's work. As C.F. Klassen wrote in 1946, "God help us, to make ourselves worthy of this task, that he may entrust us with more."¹⁹

Once most refugees had been settled into their new homeland, Canadian Mennonites began evaluating the success of their mission. If we consider that they measured initial refugee religiosity by church membership and attendance, they would have measured success that way as well. Therefore, many follow up reports about Russian Mennonite immigrants deal with the rates at which they became members of the closest congregation. One such report appeared in the 1949 Ontario United Mennonite Yearbook. In it, Jacob A. Neufeld, himself a new arrival, expressed his appreciation at the warmth he felt from the congregations and his expectation that, upon arrival in Canada, all the refugees would be more than happy to seek membership in existing churches.²⁰ Henry Winter, a third migrant and minister in the Leamington United Mennonite Church, wrote the following passage in his father's biography:

During the five years of refugee life, we had conducted our church services and prayed to God in barns, in crowded rooms, in barracks and in refugee shelters...In Leamington we now found ourselves in a church

with a pulpit!...(Everyone) was individually introduced and welcomed. Then the congregation stood and sang a hymn of greeting. This greeting by the congregation deeply moved us, and awakened in us a longing to belong to and become a member in a congregation.²¹

No doubt, the second migrants were happy to know that the new arrivals wanted to join in their congregations and as such, could consider their mission accomplished. However, this says very little about the daily relations between individuals. I believe that enough evidence has been presented to prove that the second migrants had considerable misgivings about the religious faith of the refugees. It remains to be seen if those misgivings manifested themselves in any way once the refugees came to Canada and joined existing congregations. But, before that can be discussed, we need to explore a second issue, and that is the German nationalism espoused by many of the new arrivals.

Most third migrants viewed Germany as the saviour that helped them escape communism. As one woman so clearly stated it:

To this day I love Germany for saving us. We were patriotic Germans. We were on the way to Siberia and the German army rescued us. They took us to our villages and then they brought us to Germany. We were never hungry and we could open our churches.²²

Another said, "In Russia we were called only "die schlechte Deutsche," (the bad Germans). Germany took us in, gave us citizenship and made us feel as if we belonged."²³

How did the Canadian Mennonite community respond to such passionate pro-German fervour? After all, they had been bombarded with anti-German propaganda throughout the war. Leamington in particular is an interesting case because Mennonites there experienced considerable tension with the English community which suspected them of Fifth Column activities. Unlike Waterloo, which had experienced influxes of Mennonites since the late 1700s, Leamington only welcomed Mennonite settlement in the 1920s. Over 1000 Mennonites came to Leamington after 1925 and their newness threatened the English community.²⁴ During the 1930s, according to a second migrant, the Mennonites were generally pro-German because Hitler opposed communism and they hoped he

would somehow liberate their remaining relatives in Russia. Some young men even returned to Germany to join the German army in the hopes of doing so. When the war started, though, and people heard of Hitler's domestic policies, most became anti-German, or at least suppressed their pro-German sentiments.²⁵ But, the fact remained that Mennonites openly spoke German, and coupled with their stance of non-resistance towards the war, the English community resented them.²⁶ After an incident in which some English youth broke into and vandalized the church, Leamington Mennonites took great care to avoid any actions that might provoke further antagonisms. For example, marriages were now performed during the Sunday morning service to avoid gathering during the week and people spoke English in public.²⁷

There were also tensions within the Mennonite Church itself over its pacifist stance. The official line was non-involvement in the war effort but many young Mennonite men felt incredible outside pressure to join the war effort.²⁸ In Leamington, for instance, some enlisted while others maintained their conscience objector status and this worried many who saw potential for disunity. Five years after World War II ended, in an attempt to reinstate one uniform stance, the Mennonite conferences adopted the Peace Principle, part of which reads:

The disagreements in our church also tend to make our faith seem ambiguous. People of our own ranks fail to see alike because they have been instructed improperly and differently...One way to wipe out this misunderstanding is to link together our faith with practice at all times.²⁹

So, in light of World War II anti-German tension and concern about pacifism, one has to wonder about the second migration response to a people who were incredibly proud of their ties to Germany, especially considering the fact that some of the third migrants had actually served in the German army.

MCC was certainly concerned. Because most Russian Mennonites had accepted German citizenship, MCC officials had difficulty convincing Canadian officials to accept them as refugees given the high levels of wartime anti-German sentiment. The aforementioned Peter Dyck feared that their citizenship and military involvement severely jeopardized any chance of leaving Europe. In 1945 he wrote in a memorandum:

...(Many) of our people have had to accept the Volksdeutsch Ansiedler Pass in 1943...(Our) friend Prof. Unruh insists all our people to be "gute Deutsche"... [I]f the military authorities happen to come to this same conclusion, which they have not, then we may as well pack our suitcases and go home because there will be no emigration for quite some time.³⁰

Given Dyck's perception on the topic one can understand the basis for a message he gave to the Leamington church in 1950: "How disastrous it was that you accepted citizenship in war-time Germany...Were there then no men among you to stand up against this foolishness?"³¹ Yet, one can also predict the reception of that message among the newly arrived Mennonites. They felt insulted. As Henry H. Winter writes, "From our perspective it appeared that the post-war 'German bashing' of the Allies was also in the wrong."³² The Sunday after Dyck's visit, Elder Heinrich Winter took the pulpit and said, "You are Germans like us and you must accept us...If you came to Germany the way we did, you would all have become citizens the way we did."³³

Several of the third migrants interviewed mentioned the differences in loyalty between the two groups. "They were all against the Germans and we were all for them. Yes, it made things difficult for a while."³⁴ Another woman said that she had been told not to speak German on the streets, which of course would have been difficult given that she knew no English upon her arrival.³⁵ Henry H. Winter also made references to the language question in his father's biography:

Before we stepped on the train (in Quebec City), we stood in the train station and sang the songs "Holy God, we praise thy name" and "Now thank we all our God". Then it was whispered in our ears that it might be better not to be so noticeable, especially since we used the German language. The intense post-war hatred of Germany had not quite calmed down yet.³⁶

Most of the second-wave immigrants interviewed did not identify the German question as an area of contention. "The people here understood why the young men served in the army," said one woman. "They were forced."³⁷ As per any warning given by second migrants against demonstrations of German nationalism, that could have been a result of anti-German sentiment or simply a caution remaining after World War II. The fact

remains that, like the religiosity question, interviews with second migrants provided little proof that the German national question created any difficulties. Most of the concern expressed came from the third migrants and any proof from second migrants is only found in period literature of the time.

So, we come again to an impasse. There is considerable evidence that religiosity and German nationalism could have created difficulties between the two groups, but we have scant, often one-sided proofs that they did. The two groups simply have different perceptions on the same issues. To try and gain greater clarity about relations between second and third migrants, the remainder of this essay deals specifically with the Leamington community, and depends mostly on interviews with people from that area.

Upon arriving in Leamington, all of the third migrants interviewed mentioned that they noticed a marked difference in priorities between the two groups. For the refugees, their entry into Canada meant more than just a better life; it often meant life itself. They had lived for years in the refugee camps in Germany in fear that they could at any moment be repatriated to the Soviet union, which meant probable death in Siberia. And yet, they greatly appreciated the fact that they managed to escape the Soviet Union at all. As one woman said:

We didn't care if they paid us. We were happy to have a room and enough to eat. When we walked to work, we sang. When we came home, we sang. If we hadn't we would have lost our minds and we would not have made it.³⁸

For the refugees, priorities were, out of necessity, simple. They wanted shelter, food and the freedom to worship. The refugees were also accustomed to being surrounded by people. In Russia they worked and lived in groups on the collective farms; they banded together in escaping the Soviet Union; then, they lived together in crowded German refugee camps for years. Not surprisingly, these people developed a very strong sense of community.

There is also no denying that Leamington Mennonites experienced a sense of community as well. They had, after all, managed to, despite the Depression, establish a very strong congregation, complete with a new church. But, their sense of community had been shaped by the Depression, just as the third migrants' community had been shaped by Stalinism and World War II. In many ways,

the Depression made the Mennonite community, not unlike the Canadian community at large, more anxious about material possessions. One second migrant stated, "The first immigrants didn't want to take too many risks. To be wealthy meant having to take risks."³⁹ Part of this mindset manifested itself in business practices. People did whatever they could to secure their financial position and this often created fierce competition. The refugees perceived this almost immediately. As one third migration woman pointed out, "We weren't interested in competing with the Joneses."⁴⁰ Another woman made the following comment:

The competition was completely foreign to us. People planted early to make more money. They never took their time. In collectives there was no competition. There wasn't supposed to be. So, we planted when it was warm.⁴¹

Yet, the established Mennonites felt as if the newcomers misunderstood their position. "Those that came in the 1940s came during the boom years," explained one man. "They couldn't understand why those who came earlier weren't better off. They had no idea of how the Depression changed us."⁴² None of the third migrants interviewed expressed such an opinion. Upon their arrival, most marvelled at what they perceived to be wealth. Even though many second migrants believed that they had barely recovered from the Depression, in comparison to the third migrants' accustomed standard of living, the former did live better from a material perspective. But, reality is not important here; perception is crucial. Many of the second migrants perceived that the newcomers had an easier time establishing themselves. For one, they owed their travel debt to relatives who had sponsored their journey, not to the CPR. Furthermore, the refugees entered Canada during the post-war boom. "Those who came in the 1940s always had prosperity. There was always work for them and that was a big difference."⁴³

The groups' different priorities transferred into the social fabric of the community. At first, it was not easy for the newcomers to meet simply because of the geographic distances. Most had been sponsored by relatives and lived with them on their farms. The refugees were unaccustomed to such separation, which is normal and both groups realized that the newcomers were bound to experience some alienation. The established Mennonites had, after all, experienced it themselves upon their arrival. "We knew exactly what it was like," said one woman.⁴⁴ But, if

the two groups expected to quickly amalgamate, they were in for a surprise. When the refugees first came to Canada, they were usually met by their sponsors and spent most of their time with them. But, as soon as they could afford vehicles, they actively searched out other newcomers and soon formed a very tightly-knit group. One third migrant explained her rationalization for the third migrants' actions:

What I found difficult (is that) we were so used to living together in bunches. We were on the seventh concession with no car. After we bought a car we couldn't wait to get together. We mostly visited with our people. We went through the same things. We were so happy to be together again.⁴⁵

Most of the interviewees, both from the third and second migrations, expressed an understanding of why the immigrant groups kept to themselves. There is definitely an acceptance that differing experiences generate different people who therefore create their own social groups. Yet, that answer is somehow too simple to explain the strong bonding among the third migrants. Commonality definitely influenced their social network; but, it is possible that they also felt excluded from the established Mennonite community.

Part of this could have reflected the fact that most newcomers found initial employment among the second migrants. This was bound to create some sort of hierarchy. One third migrant woman expressed benevolence about her situation:

They (second migrants) wanted us to stay below them but they took us into their homes. They were friendly to us but they wanted us to work for them on their farms, not to own our own. They always held us beneath them. We were the DP's but they took us in, and gave us work, and paid us and let us into their fellowship.⁴⁶

There are other indicators of this rather dubious aspect of Mennonite life. In 1948, Edith Annchen Berg, a newly-arrived adolescent, submitted an account of her experiences as a refugee to the Ontario United Mennonite youth newsletter, and her introduction indicates that she may have had some negative experiences upon her arrival in Leamington:

Sometimes we as people often forget the things upon which our fate and the fate of the person next to us depend. Sometimes we cannot

understand our neighbour, why? Because we do not have the same viewpoints and interests and believe ours to be right. One often walks obstinately by people and forgets that circumstances and conditions often dictate our differences. (trans)⁴⁷

In terms of the actual congregational life, there are examples of inclusion and exclusion. The Leamington church immediately accepted Aeltester Heinrich Winter as a minister upon his arrival and his son quickly rose through the ministerial ranks. Many women served in the Sunday School. Yet, one woman's story suggests that some exclusion happened:

For instance, our Vereins (women's groups) are all from after World War II. Some from Paraguay and some from Russia. We started these Vereins in the 1950s. I can't remember being invited to the Vereins so we started our own.⁴⁸

Another example arises out of marriage patterns. All the newcomers sent their children to the United Mennonite Educational Institute, the local Mennonite high school. Yet, there was initially little intermarriage or inter-courtship between the two groups. The table on Appendix A categorizes all marriages in Leamington within the Mennonite community from 1952-1962. Until 1956 there were very few marriages between the two groups. One must remember that only 20 per cent of members within the Leamington United Mennonite Church were of the third migration,⁴⁹ so it was more likely that Mennonite youth from second migrant families would marry each other. Then, in 1957 third-migration Mennonites were more likely to marry second-migration Mennonites than each other. Perhaps this reflects the fact that, because of sheer numbers, third-migration adolescents were more likely to meet second-migration adolescents in high school. As well, these adolescents had been in Canada for anywhere from 7 to 10 years and probably beginning to assimilate into the larger Mennonite community. In addition, in all but one case of a marriage with a non-Mennonite partner, the Mennonite partner came from a second-migration family. This also makes sense because second-migration adolescents were native-born Canadians and had begun to somewhat assimilate into the dominant Canadian culture. Third-migration adolescents had to assimilate not only into the dominant culture but also into the Canadian Mennonite culture.

These statistics could be explained by

simple demographics. But, perhaps there existed a class differentiation between the immigrant groups. One interviewee related an incident in which a young man from a second-migration family asked a newcomer on a date and his family severely discouraged him from pursuing the relationship. The interviewee expressed certainty that the family disapproved of their son's date because she was a newcomer.⁵⁰ This is only one incident, but it does demonstrate the possibility that for some reason, a hierarchy existed within the Leamington Mennonite community.

Once again, interviews with second migrants provided scant evidence of a hierarchical mentality. But there are a few hints of it in primary sources from the late 1940s. At the beginning of this paper, I quoted P.C. Hiebert of MCC when discussing concerns about refugee religiosity. In that quote, he said, "(We) can have but a faint idea how these people, **of our household of faith originally** (my emphasis), have been spiritually starved and ethically impoverished."⁵¹ By this statement Hiebert suggested that he no longer considered the Russian Mennonites true Mennonites. If others thought like him, did their perceptions manifest themselves in a class hierarchy within the second-migration Mennonite community?

In 1949 the Leamington United Mennonite Church included in the Ontario United Mennonite Yearbook its yearly update which discussed the expansion of the church building, a result mostly of the incoming immigrants:

It is pleasing to know that all **the classes** (my emphasis) equally participated in the building of our church...Each is giving to the best of his ability...Each gives what he can; **the large and the small** have given faithfully. (trans)⁵²

Here we have in a report from the Leamington church proof that the congregation recognized within itself a hierarchy. If it defined that hierarchy by migrant groups, then we have some basis upon which to conclude that third migrants bonded not only out of commonality but in reaction to the social fabric of the established community.

It would be relatively easy to conclude that Russian Mennonites arrived amongst a people ready to discriminate against them. Yet, this paper is laden with exploratory possibilities, not definitive conclusions. Second-migration Mennonites did worry about their counterparts' religiosity and German nationalism. These two issues

are important because the perceptions surrounding them provided the pre-conditions for social separation between the second and third migrant groups and could rationalize a hierarchical mentality. The two groups did remain separate for a long time and some people insist that differences persist to the present day.

The Mennonites in Leamington, Ontario still form a relatively quiet, peaceful community. However, the emotions revealed during the interviews with third-migration Mennonites show that the 1950s were very stressful for them. Granted, they had already been through more than most people experience in a lifetime and, like all immigrants, they experienced culture shock upon their arrival. They also had an intense need to belong to the community and they fulfilled that need by staying within their migrant group. Interviews with second-migration Mennonites showed a lack of understanding for what the newcomers felt. The second-migration Mennonites also felt somewhat misunderstood by the newcomers. Such feelings are not unique to the Mennonite community and in themselves do not reflect badly on the character of the second or third migrants. Any time two previously separated groups try to unite, their differing life experiences will create the need for accommodation and compromise.

The dilemma here is that the third migrants perceived more obstacles upon their arrival than their counterparts. Like the accepted Mennonite history books, second migrants do not question if the third migrants experienced difficulty adjusting to life in their community. But then, most of the Mennonite history books about that period are written from the 1920s perspective and thus reflect its perceptions. Unfortunately, this paper cannot hope to explore the full extent of relations between second and third migrants, but it has revealed many issues that need to be examined in greater detail. Hopefully Mennonite historians can take these issues and help us gain a clearer picture of what happened within Canadian Mennonite communities in the 1950s.

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REFUGEE PILGRIMAGE: A STORY OF GOD'S CARE

Lina (Heinrich) Wohlgemut: From Poland to Canada

by Gudrun L. (Wohlgemut) Mathies

Introduction

A recent visit to Germany and the United Kingdom provided many opportunities for reminiscing. In the case of the former it included visits with relatives and Russian "Umsiedler" (resettlers), walking along the remains of the Berlin Wall, and viewing many WWII memorials. In the case of the latter, it coincided with the celebrations of D-Day. Those experiences, strangely juxtaposed, prompted reflections that provided the impetus for the writing of this story of our family's escape from Poland to Canada, as recalled by my mother.



Photo 1 – Lina Heinrich (now Wohlgemut), left, with a friend before WWII, in Thorn, West Prussia, before she was married.

Mother married Heinrich Wohlgemuth June 29, 1938 in Thorn (now Torun), on the Weichsel (Wisla), the Vistula River.

(Since World War II many formerly German names in Poland have been changed to Polish names. The family name "Wohlgemuth" translated means someone who has a contented disposition. Since coming to Canada some members of the family have dropped the final letter, now spelling their name Wohlgemut.) Thorn, a medieval city founded in 1233, is the birthplace of the great astronomer Copernicus (photo 1). Mother recalls wistfully how she walked

around the town hall on Market Square when she and my father were courting. In front of the town hall stood the imposing Copernicus monument.

Our family (photo 2) was well established in Gombin (Gabin), a small town of about 6000 inhabitants which had a private Gymnasium (grammar school). My parents, together with my father's brother Corny, owned a "Kondeterei" (German bakery and café). We attended the Mennonite Brethren church in the village of Deutsch Wymyschle (Nowe Wymysle) which was 7 kilometres from Gombin. Settlers had built a church

and a school, but when in the 1850s fire destroyed the school, a new one was built. In 1864 a new church was dedicated and used as a place of worship until 1945. My grandfather Heinrich Wohlgemuth directed two of the three choirs and was also one of the three preachers who served the church. My great grandfather, also Heinrich Wohlgemuth, had been ordained as a deacon November 4, 1884 (Ratzlaff: 56). Prior to marrying my father and joining the M.B. church my mother was Baptist, as was her immediate family while her extended family was Lutheran.

From Reformation times until the end of World War II, the region along the Vistula River was home to numerous Mennonite communities who had originally come from the Netherlands. Depending on the changing political conditions, this area was under either Polish or Prussian rule. For more than two centuries, until the partitions of Poland among Russia, Austria and Prussia in the latter part of the 18th century, Mennonites lived under the protection of the Polish crown, enjoying a remarkable amount of religious freedom.

The first partition of Poland in 1772

brought some changes to the Mennonite communities. Eventually there were restrictions on land acquisition and Mennonites responded by accepting the invitation from Tsarina Catherine the Second to settle in the Ukraine. A further challenge for the Mennonites was the abolition of military exemption in 1867. Although service as non-combatants was an option, this emphasis waned and regular military

service became common.

With the Versailles Peace Treaty of 1919, Mennonite communities in Poland



Photo 2 – The only family picture with all five, taken in June 1943 while Heinrich Wohlgemuth was on leave. Horst is standing in front of Lina, Gudrun, Rainer and Heinrich Wohlgemuth.

and Prussia fell under three jurisdictions. The Danzig (now Gdansk) area and the Vistula-Nogat Delta, formed the Danzig Free State where the majority of the Mennonites lived. Settlements east of the Nogat River remained under Prussian (German) rule. Congregations along the Vistula River between the delta and Warsaw which included Schönsee, Montau, Gruppe, Torun, Deutsch Wymysle and Deutsch Kazun, were now in the new Polish state (figure 1). Until World War II there were relatively good relations between Mennonites and other Polish inhabitants. However, the start of the second World War (September 1, 1939) in the Danzig (Gdansk) territory, and occupation by the German troops, brought devastation to this area. By 1945 many Mennonite congregations no longer existed as people fled from the advancing Soviet army in the latter part of the war.

My mother has described the six and a half short years of marriage as very happy ones despite the disruptions and trauma of World War II which left her alone with three preschoolers, two sons and a daughter (Horst, Rainer and Gudrun), to care for. Mother speaks with much gratitude of the good years she enjoyed in the community.

However, World War II soon changed all that. Under Adolf Hitler, conscientious objection was not an option and so my father was conscripted into the German army in December 1941, soon after my oldest brother Horst's second birthday. He was sent to Russia where his first job was to look after horses, but being a chronic asthmatic he became so sick that he was discharged. He was then sent to serve in East Prussia in Goldap in the army office. Every three months he got a one week home leave to look after business affairs. He kept contact by regular letters in between leaves. The last time our family saw my father was the first week of December 1944 during a home leave. It is possible that my father was among those who died when the Russian army succeeded in piercing the German lines between the cities of Gumbinnen and Goldap to Nemmersdorf in East Prussia.

My idealized image of Father, in my mother's words, "the best and most loving

husband and father possible" came from stories heard over the years and not from personal recollections since I was just over two years old when I last saw him. I can only imagine the terror of the horrible atrocities and the accompanying heartache. He became one of the thousands who were listed as "vermißt" (missing). My mother spent many agonizing years in search of my father without receiving any confirmation of what had happened.

Little did she realize that the responsibility she had for running

"Die Flucht" (The Flight)

The night of January 18, 1945 we fled Gombin in a great panic as the Russian army attacked the German front. Mother still shudders when she recalls the fear of possible atrocities. She gathered the important documents from the business and emptied the cash register into a "Portemonnaie" (purse). Some essentials such as a few clothes, a bit of food, a Bible and a song book, were quickly packed in a suitcase. Everything including the documents were lost on the flight except

the purse which she had hidden in the front of her dress. Along with my mother's friend Frieda Ratzlaff and her two children we made our way by wagon to the train station at Gostynin. All night we waited anxiously for the train to take us to Bromberg.

At Bromberg we stayed two days with mother's sister, Frieda Hintz. When the shooting started my Aunt Frieda and her young twin daughters and we fled again. When the last train came my mother was almost left behind after having handed us three children to her sister on the overcrowded train. Separation was averted as she was pulled onto the already moving train through the window by some quick-thinking passengers on board. It took one week to get to Berlin by train due to the incessant bombing. The train was packed and we five children slept in the baggage net. One night was spent in a bunker in Berlin. The burnt out planes reminded us that we had been more fortunate than some.

From the end of January to April 1945 we stayed in Tiefen See, 20 kilometres north-west of Berlin. My aunt and cousins

stayed with her sister-in-law while we stayed in a small room in a hotel called "Waldschlöchen" (little castle in the woods). Ration cards enabled us to get some food. There were constant air raids. Several times a night the alarm would sound and the lights would go off signalling people to seek shelter in a basement. Then a horn would indicate the end of the raid. Numerous times our lives were spared. One time when we rushed inside to get shelter I left my doll outside and it was sprayed with machine gun bullets. On



Figure 1 – Map of Mennonite communities and congregations in West Prussia, East Prussia and Poland in the 1930s (Gerlach: 16).

the family business during those difficult years was preparation for a time when she would be the sole wage earner and care giver for her family. Life became increasingly traumatic as the war escalated. The imminent danger of the advancing Russian army prompted my mother to flee to West Germany where we had relatives. The immediate concern was to escape the bombing. The thinking was that this was a temporary measure and that we would eventually return to normal living.

another occasion a bomb which hit near the hotel shook two walls and cracked the ceiling. Sometime later during a bomb raid while my brothers and I were sleeping we were showered with glass from the window. Miraculously none of us received a cut.

As the bombing increased we left Tiefen See and continued westward with large numbers of refugees, usually on foot, but sometimes army trucks would take us short distances. We slept in the woods, sometimes spending days in the forest and begged for food at farms along the way. The majority were women and children who had been separated from husbands and fathers.

Mother was desperate to get to safety. Optimism and hope for a better future kept her going. Her faith was strong and she believed that God was with us in these desperate times. God reminded her of some former neighbours who lived in Roggen Hagen in "Kreis" (district of) Meklenburg and the address just came to her mind. When possible we took the train, but there was always much shoving as people vied for a place. We got a ride on a tank in the pouring rain. When we arrived in Roggen Hagen the former neighbours found the four of us a place to live.

After only two days the Russian army had caught up with us so we fled again into the forest. The fleeing families faced dreadful hardships and saw horrible atrocities. The Russians were ruthless at times, raping women and taking valuables. As the war ended there were rumours of people committing suicide. After a week we returned from the forest and got one room in a farm house. Mother and the three of us shared that one room with Frieda Zabel, her two children, and an unknown woman and her grown daughter. During that time the song "Wenn trübsals Hitze mich erschüttert" (when I am shaken by the heat of anguish) was sung frequently with much understanding. The farm provided accommodation for several soldiers who worked in the field as well as the farmer's own family of seven. Although the war was over life was also drastically changed and very difficult for the local people who were expected to take in the refugees.

At first Mother worked in the field. When the farmer's wife learned of her culinary skills she had to cook for the entire household of 28 persons. It demanded a fair amount of ingenuity to satisfy everyone with the meagre food that was available.



Photo 3 – The "Schloss" (castle or estate) in Ganzkow where Lina Wohlgemuth and children lived as part of a commune of 42 families.

The Russian occupiers heard that Mother was a seamstress and so she had to go to the army headquarters. She was required to sew underwear from white pure silk parachute material for two days. Mother asked if she could do the sewing at her place since she had us children to care for. This was allowed but, when the soldier came to collect the underwear, she had not completed the consignment. Quickly she jumped into bed and pretended she was sick, but the soldier threatened to get a doctor to see if she was really sick. A few days later the soldiers moved their headquarters and she was relieved of the sewing task.

Ganzkow May 1947-May 1949

When the farmer began to complain about having to feed all the people in his home mother decided to move elsewhere because she did not want to be beholden to anyone. Mother's brother and his family had fled earlier to Ganzkow, 20 kilometres from Roggen Hagen, where they were given one of the 42 rooms in the "Schloss" (castle) to live in. So for the next two years we became part of a commune with 42 families housed in an estate previously owned by one wealthy family and their workers (photo 3).

We were given one room, a small plot of land and a cow, but that was often insufficient to provide for our needs. Sometimes Mother filled her pockets with grain from the field secretly so she could grind it in a coffee mill and cook porridge to feed us. Wild berries were eaten and young "Brenessel" (nettles) were used to make soup. Sugar beets were cooked and

pressed to get the juice, which was then boiled and stirred for 6-8 hours to produce a syrup to spread on bread. The people in the community helped each other by sharing a press. But there were inequities since everyone had to give the same quota of grain, milk and meat to the government, regardless of their means. Men had accumulated some cash as wage earners which allowed them to buy extras such as a horse for plowing and harvesting. Women had to fend for themselves without that help. Mother's brother would help her with his horse but she would have to wait till others were done.

During this time an attempt was made by Mother and Frieda Zabel to clean up a wrecked Lutheran church so that it could be used as a place of worship. The song books and Bibles had been burned and the building had been used as a bathroom. This facility was used only for a short time, after which they met in a private home. On the way Mother's Bible had been lost so she traded a pound of butter for a used one. That Bible, which she still uses, is a tangible reminder of God's leading. Frieda Zabel taught Sunday School and a Baptist minister came once a month to preach in their home. It was an attempt to nurture the small group in their Christian faith.

Our experience has been one of God's goodness and faithfulness again and again in the most unexpected ways. Mother remembers how on one occasion she was humbled by the answer to prayer of her three young children. It was before Christmas and we children prayed innocently and earnestly for candles to

decorate a tree. It was customary to light a Christmas tree with wax candles. My brothers had already cut down a small tree in the forest. We had made paper decorations and all we needed were the candles. Mother was concerned that our faith would be shaken because she did not have the money, nor was it likely that there were candles to buy. It seemed impossible to her that this prayer would be answered. She thought she had to answer the prayer herself. But God answered the prayer with a parcel that arrived unexpectedly just before Christmas from an Aunt Betty and Uncle Fritz Glaesmann in Berlin, containing a package of wax candles.

There was little contact with the extended family during that time since some were in prison and others in labour camps. There had still been no word of my father despite many enquiries through organizations such as the Red Cross. In fact our family has never been reunited and we may never know just how it came to be that my father is "vermißt"(missing).

In the fall of 1948, through acquaintances via letter, Mother heard about the Mennonite Central Committee sponsored refugee camp in Gronau close to the Dutch border,

which was helping people emigrate to Canada. She took the train and then crossed "schwartz über die Grenze" (illegally) from the Russian to the British sector to get more information from our acquaintances. On her way back over the border Mother and 25 others were caught by the Russians and put in a cellar for several hours while more were caught. They were then marched about 20 kilometres away,

during the night, to a second place. Some of the women were

raped. Mother was spared by hiding when the soldiers came searching with flashlights to take the women away. Everyone was searched for identification and address contacts. They were released and ordered to report to the police. The only food during the two day ordeal was some raw turnips someone had taken from a field on the way. Instead of



Figure 2 – Postcard of ship "Samaria".

going to the police Mother went straight to the train station to return to Ganzkow because she was concerned about her children. The train arrived at night, but rather than wait till the morning she walked several hours to get home. She found the three of us children on our own because my aunt had gone to the next village. There was also a care package

on the table from the Elmwood Mennonite Brethren Church Women's Auxiliary in Winnipeg, who had been given Mother's name by a relative. The parcel contained some clothes, shoes and some food. Cocoa had spilled all over, but she shook out the clothes and scraped every bit of cocoa together because, in her words, "it was like gold". Soon thereafter a care package with food

items came from an unknown Baptist church in the United States. She is very thankful how God repeatedly provided food and protection.

Mother became very sick and so decided to wait till the following spring to obtain from Berlin the required permission to go to Gronau. For the second attempt in the spring of 1949 she made her way to Berlin.

She went to the police station in the French sector and explained her plan to go to Canada via the MCC refugee camp in Gronau. After several trips to Berlin to meet the bureaucratic requirements she was finally granted permission to fly out of Berlin, a flight designated especially for West Berliners.

Gronau

Mother's brother, Karl Heinrich, took our family to the train station on our way to Berlin. In Berlin we stayed one night with my mother's sister and brother-in-law, Fritz and Betty Glaesmann. After having the flight delayed all day due to inclement weather, it was finally cancelled and rescheduled for the next day. By the end of the day our cardboard suitcase was soaked and the handle was off. With our few belongings kept together with string we took the "U Bahn" (train) back to my aunt and uncle's. The next day, after tearful goodbyes again, we were able to fly out to Lübeck via the "Luftbrücke" (air bridge) on a small cargo plane that had brought coal into Berlin. In Lübeck, West Germany we felt a freer atmosphere. Mother bought each of us children an orange, something we had probably not seen before. One of our family traditions to this day is to have an orange in our Christmas stockings. With great anticipation we took the train from Lübeck to Gronau and the MCC refugee camp.

Upon arrival at the refugee camp, as we made our way through the maze of blankets, we came across a woman washing the small area in front of her "blanket" partition. Without looking up



Photo 4 – Lina (Heinrich) Wohlgemuth, with clockwise: Rainer, Horst, Gudrun, prior to leaving MCC refugee camp in Gronau.

she encouraged us to go on by. It was my mother who first recognized Minna Wohlgemuth, her mother-in-law, who did not know we were coming. The absolute joy when we were unexpectedly reunited with my grandmother and one of my uncles is difficult to describe. From May to November 1949 we lived there with about 200 other hopeful refugees in one of the four buildings.

On March 25, 1947, the British military authorities had requisitioned three buildings for the purposes of a Mennonite camp, which eventually included nine buildings with one of them serving as MCC headquarters and as a hospital. A laundry room and carpenter's shop was set up.

Besides a kindergarten and school, Sunday schools and regular services were introduced. Two times a day a hot meal of soup or other vegetables was served, and Sundays canned pork was offered. A weekly supply of bread, jam and butter was distributed.

Mother worked at a farmer's field which allowed her to earn some income. Eventually she was able to buy a sewing machine which a man in the camp rebuilt from a hand crank to a treadle machine. This enabled her to sew clothes and make some extra money.

She even sewed a white wedding dress for a couple who got married in the camp. Mother later dismantled the machine and packed it up to take to Canada.

During our stay I got the measles and was hospitalized. My brother's eyes got infected and he was isolated in hospital because they thought he had trachoma. Our dreams of a new home were temporarily shattered when we were denied permission to emigrate to Canada. During the interview with the official from the International Refugee Organization we were told that Wohlgemuth was not a Mennonite name. Mother was asked if my brother Horst was named after Horst Wessel, a youth leader under Hitler. No amount of denial and explanation

would change his mind and he responded, "Sie entsprechen nicht der Bestimmungen zur Auswanderung nach Kanada". In other words we did not meet the qualifications for IRO assistance. This was difficult to understand because the day before my grandmother Wohlgemuth and uncle had been given clearance to emigrate to Canada. My brother Horst, nine years old, tried to cheer my mother by saying that if we would go to Paraguay he would build us a little house to live in.

On July 23, the IRO Geneva office had issued an order: 1) that no Mennonite who had become a German citizen was entitled to IRO help, 2) that the processing of Mennonites, with the exception of those



Photo 5 – Some of the Wohlgemuth family reunited in Canada. Back row Frieda (Teske) and Corny Wohlgemuth, Lina (Heinrich) Wohlgemuth, Leonard and Anna (Wohlgemuth) Lugowski, Eugen Wohlgemuth, Irmagard (Lange) and Albert Wohlgemuth. Front Gudrun Wohlgemuth, Minna (Kliever) Wohlgemuth and Rita Wohlgemuth. Horst and Rainer, sons of Lina, are missing from the picture.

who had already obtained a Canadian visa, was to be halted immediately, and 3) that all Mennonites, who had already passed the IRO eligibility test, be processed again with special attention to their German naturalization and military service. Special prayer meetings were held and C.F. Klassen went to Geneva to negotiate on behalf of the refugees. On October 3, 1949 the July 23 IRO order was withdrawn.

In mid October Grandmother Wohlgemuth and Uncle Eugen left by train to Bremerhafen to board the ship to Canada. It was a sad farewell at the train station as those who had been left behind sang "Gott Mit Euch Bis Wir Uns Wieder Sehen" (God Be With You Till We Meet Again). One month later the IRO

commission came again and when Mother had a second interview she was granted permission without question to emigrate (photo 4). Mother understood it as an answer to prayer. Subsequently we left Gronau November 18, 1949 by train for Bremerhafen to take the Samaria, an English ship of the Cunard White Star line, to Canada (figure 2). During the train ride my brother Horst got his hand caught in the door and arrived on the boat with his arm in a sling.

On Board the Samaria

The journey across the Atlantic Ocean was a 12 day adventure, with one stop at LeHavre France. We children were often seasick. Horst and Rainer, almost 10 and 8 years old, had to be housed with the men in large berths. Mother and I, 7 years old, were together with the women in a different section. Leonard Lugowski, a friend from home who in Canada married my father's sister (Anna Wohlgemuth), helped to look after my brothers. A small amount of spending money, about 20 shillings, was given to each person to spend on the ship and so Mother bought a little children's book. As we tried to sound

out the unknown words, we wondered if we would ever learn this strange language. I remember being terrified that the life jacket drill on the deck was for real. On the last day a large birthday celebration for all the children, with coloured balloons, was held because it was Winston Churchill's birthday. It was also Horst's 10th birthday. What a gift to be arriving in a new country.

Arrival in Canada

We arrived in Halifax November 30, 1949. A Baptist women's mission group greeted us warmly with gifts of candy, peanuts, and a scrapbook at the harbour. The scrapbook was made up of colourful used Christmas cards and provided much enjoyment to us

children. Everyone had to go through the required exercise of being deloused; sprayed all over with a powder disinfectant and undergo a medical examination. We were scheduled to go to Manitoba, where the Neufeldt family in Lena, Manitoba were sponsors. Since Mother had requested a stopover in Kitchener to see relatives, we were encouraged by MCC personnel to stay in Ontario. They helped her make arrangements for our baggage to be sent to Kitchener. MCC provided the train tickets from Halifax to Kitchener with the understanding that each recipient would pay back the cost as soon as possible.

We were picked up in Galt by my uncle Corny Wohlgemuth and Nickolas Enns, a friend from church, and taken to our first residence in Kitchener. Abram and Anna Dick, the kind deacon couple from the Kitchener M.B. church who took us into their home for 2 weeks until we could find our own accommodation, are no longer living. My remark that first night as I was tucked into a warm cozy bed, "This is like an angel bed in heaven", brought tears to the eyes of our kind hosts. Yes, we were very thankful to God to be in Canada!

Support Systems While Adjusting to Canadian Life

It was wonderful to be reunited with other family members. Grandmother Wohlgemuth and my uncle Eugen, who had left the refugee camp one month before us and several aunts and uncles who had come as refugees one year earlier, were living in Kitchener (photo 5). They helped us become acclimatized to the new country which lessened our culture shock. The day after we arrived was Saturday and mother's sister-in-law Anna Wohlgemuth took her to buy a hat. It was very important for Mother, as a married woman, to conform to the church's expected dress code and have her head covered for church the next day.

It is remarkable how accepting and welcoming the people of Kitchener were to immigrants at that time. We found the neighbours to be very friendly. Our first Christmas in Canada was made memorable by the generosity of the local fire department. When we returned from church we were surprised to find a large box of used, repaired toys and books on our doorstep.

We experienced tangible expressions of love and practical support from the Kitchener Mennonite Brethren church. The hosts who took us in when we arrived

bought an outfit of clothes for my brothers and a piece of cloth, out of which mother sewed a dress for me. I recall that my brothers felt rather conspicuous in their new suits and hid under the dining table the first time they wore their new clothes. We were overwhelmed by the kindness of the "Tabea Verein", the women's sewing circle who demonstrated the admonition in James 1:27 to "help the orphans and widows in distress", by having a shower for us. Periodically, in the early years, through the deacon's assistance fund we were given \$10 which was a generous gift



Photo 6 – Lina (Heinrich) Wohlgemut at Fashion Lane, a bridal shop in Waterloo, where she worked as a bridal consultant.

and a great help. There was rarely extra money in the early years and every penny was spent carefully. One time Mother debated with herself before she gave the last quarter that she had, as an offering at church. That Sunday afternoon, we experienced God's care again, when someone came unexpectedly from church and gave Mother a Christmas card which contained \$5.

The church played a very significant role in our adjustment to a new society and way of life besides providing spiritual nurture. The fact that the worship services were in the German language, although the children's Sunday School was in English, made us feel at home. As a child I was perplexed why we were called the Russian Mennonite Church but I knew that some

church members spoke "Platt Deutsch" (low German) and prepared some food differently than my mother did.

The "Gabenverein" (the women's "Gift Circle", which started by collecting food items for the needy in the church), has played an important role in Mother's life. She identified readily with these women, some of whom had had similar experiences. They formed her primary friendship and support group. She chose to serve in practical ways, by using her flair for flower arranging and her culinary skills at the women's meetings and other church functions. She has also used her time to sew many baby layettes or quilts to support the work of MCC, the organization that had helped her in time of need. Mother has enjoyed extensive travel with some of these friends. On two occasions during the years while our family worked in Africa with MCC she visited us and took the opportunity to see and learn about the neighbouring countries as well. She has many albums of photographs interspersed with indigenous flowers that she has dried and pressed which catalogue her trips all over the world. A pressed flower tucked into a card or letter is a bit of a trade mark of hers.

One week after we arrived in Canada, Mrs. Anna Dick, wife of deacon Peter Dick, took Mother to the Kitchener-Waterloo Hospital to apply for work. A few days later, without a word of English, Mother began work in the housekeeping department earning \$85 a month. One year later she had completed her employment agreement, stipulated by the Canadian government, as a requirement of the immigration policy. Within a year she also managed to repay the train fare from Halifax to Kitchener, which had been prepaid by MCC for refugees. Mother eventually worked about 17 years at the hospital, much of the time as a nurse's aid. Although the work was demanding, she very much enjoyed it, particularly when she would circulate and check instruments and linens for the operating room. In our extended family she was the one whose advice was often sought if a cut or minor injury needed to be treated. "Tante" (aunt) Lina had earned the reputation of knowing what to do. When the work at the hospital became increasingly difficult, she worked for about 12 years as a bridal consultant at Fashion Lane, a former bridal shop in downtown Waterloo, before retiring at age 65 (photo 6).

I believe it was providential that Mother always had employment. As sole wage earner, she was a part of the small percentage of immigrant working women in the 1950s. Although a mother's allowance was available, she opted not to apply since she had committed herself to look after us on her own. She admitted that it was due to pride and to not liking the idea of the government checking up on how she would use the resources. However, when family allowance was introduced at \$5 a month she gratefully accepted the money. The management skills acquired from previously running our own business stood her in good stead.

Five days after arriving in Canada Mother enrolled for English language classes at Kitchener-Waterloo Collegiate, which she attended one night a week for two years. She was pleased to obtain her certificate of proficiency in two years instead of the possible three years because life was very demanding with three young children to care for. She was quite amazed that her Canadian colleagues at work did not laugh at her attempts to speak English but gave her much encouragement and affirmation. She does not recall ever being called "DP", the derogatory term for displaced persons.

In January 1949, despite my brother Horst's protestations that he would not go to school until he could speak English, we began elementary school. (It is interesting to note that the principal of the school suggested that life would be much easier if I used the more familiar name "Gertrude" instead of "Gudrun". Hence forth, all through elementary and high school I was known as Gertrude.) By this time we had moved into two rooms upstairs on Peter Street, in the home of one of the church families. Grandmother Wohlgermuth lived with us and while Mother went to work she looked after us and helped us with the cooking. A similar arrangement continued when, in the spring of 1950, we moved into the upstairs of a house on Weber Street. This time five adults and four children (Albert and Irmgard Wohlgermuth and daughter Rita, Eugen, Grandmother, Mother and we three children) shared 5 rooms as living quarters. Each family unit had a bedroom but shared bathroom and kitchen facilities. Grandmother Wohlgermuth stayed home to look after the children and the household while the adults went to work. During the next two years my aunt and uncle built

their first little house on Ottawa Street. This time four adults and four children shared the house and again Grandmother provided the home support.

During those years the extended family provided crucial social and economic support for us. The kinship ties had been strengthened through the separation and consequent bonding effects of the difficult war years. Celebrations have been an integral part of the extended family. Family birthdays have always been special events and it was simply taken for granted that one could come by for "Kaffee und Kuchen" (coffee and cake). There was also, particularly in the early years, a sad element to these celebrations because the missing family members were remembered. Prayers of gratitude for God's care and leading were accompanied by tears for the losses that had been experienced.

Some years later when we were in high school Mother was able to afford our own apartment on Olympic Drive. Money was at times scarce but with part time and summer jobs, from early teen years on, my brothers and I helped pay for clothes and school expenses. We never had a car till my brothers started university. Thanks to student factory jobs university fees could be paid. Mother's ingenuity and skill turned many used pieces of clothing into favourite outfits. She has always enjoyed projects like knitting, crocheting or needlepoint to keep her hands from being idle. Preparing food from scratch and preserving her own fruits and vegetables allowed us to live more frugally. Her creative touch could make the simplest meal look most appetizing and taste delectable. She does not define herself as a creative person but sees it as something a good homemaker would learn to do.

As a widow Mother had to face multiple personal and familial adjustments while trying to adapt to a new society and culture. Although the image of women has changed over the years, married women have been defined in terms of their husbands, and some people suggested that Mother would be better off to remarry. However, she was not at all interested, maintaining that God had helped her thus far and would continue to give her strength. My sense that subconsciously Mother never gave up hope for being reunited with my father, was substantiated when reminiscing at her 80th birthday celebration she remarked wistfully, "What if he were still alive". She

admits there were times of frustration and stress, particularly when we were teenagers and she had to cope on her own. She learned to be an independent person who managed very capably and never regretted staying single.

Conclusion

My mother has been a relatively healthy person with a positive and cheerful outlook on life. We had a verse on our wall that she tried to live by: "Ein Frohes Wort am fruhen Morgen erfreut das Herz den ganzen Tag" (a cheerful word in the early morning gladdens the heart all day long). She was not easily discouraged or afraid to take on new challenges. She has not allowed the losses, the grief and difficult experiences to overwhelm her. She attributes to God's goodness and faithfulness the ability to bounce back and reaffirm life. God's presence along the way sustained her when it seemed hopeless to carry on. The church was a very important support throughout the years. She never thought that she would have it so good in Canada, that it would turn out this way. Her words, "All I wanted was for my children to have a better life", have certainly come true. Her strong faith continues to be an inspiration to her family.

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- Gudrun L. (Wohlgermuth) Mathies is an elementary school teacher with the Waterloo County Board of Education. She chairs the MCC Ontario Women's Concerns Committee and is a member of the Mennonite Brethren Women's Network.*

People and Projects

Isaac Horst has translated twenty-five letters, written by **Elizabeth (Ziegler) (Kolb) Wenger** to Jacob Mensch, for the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario. Elizabeth Ziegler (1811-1896) was born in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, and moved to Waterloo County, Ontario in 1816. She married first to Abraham Kolb and second to Jonas Wenger, both of Waterloo Township. The translated letters were written between 1874 and 1895 to Jacob Mensch, a Mennonite preacher in the Franconia Mennonite Conference in Pennsylvania.

The 1994 winners of the Ontario Mennonite Historical Society's **J. Winfield Fretz Award** for studies in Ontario Mennonite history at the undergraduate/local history level are Lorraine Roth (first place) and Dianne Cleasby (second place). **Lorraine Roth**, a family and local historian from Waterloo, described "Many Strands, One Vision" among Amish Mennonites in Ontario. **Dianne Cleasby**, Conrad Grebel College, wrote about "'Horse and Buggy' vs. 'Black Bumper' Mennonites: Is the Difference also Apparent in Their Attitudes toward Marriage and Children?" **The J. Winfield Fretz Award** is available at three levels, but there were no applications at the graduate and high school levels this year. The annual deadline is May 31. Address submissions to the Editor, **Ontario Mennonite History**, Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo ON, N2L 3G6.

The Mennonite Historical of Canada held its annual meeting on Saturday, December 3, 1994, at Conrad Grebel College. The Society had the pleasure of receiving the full manuscript of Vol. III of **Mennonites in Canada**, by T.D. Regehr. This was a milestone in the project's three-decade life. Earlier volumes published in 1974 and 1982 were written by Frank Epp. Regehr's book will cover the years 1940-1970, a period of Canadian

Mennonite history that has not been examined systematically before. The Society also examined other proposed projects: a pamphlet useful for teachers, a binational conference on North American Mennonite history, and a finding aid for Mennonite women's archival sources.

James Urry, an anthropologist from Wellington, New Zealand, presented a lecture series at Conrad Grebel College on January 29-30, 1995. The series was entitled "**Peoplehood, Power and Politics: Aspects of the Russian Mennonite Experience 1880-1940.**" Urry is the author of *None but Saints*, a history of the Mennonite experience in Russia. He is currently researching the experience of Russian Mennonites in Canada.

Conrad Grebel College is the recipient of a well-known oil painting by **Agatha Schmidt**, of Kitchener, entitled "Exodus II." The painting has come to symbolize the gruelling "Great Trek" of German-speaking refugees who fled the Soviet Union in 1943. "Exodus II" has been reproduced many times, an earlier rendition appearing in Frank Epp's book, *Mennonite Exodus*, published in 1962, which chronicles the Russian Mennonite migrations of the past century.

John Ruth translated a letter written on 19 February 1815, by the Canadian Mennonite preacher Jacob Moyer, to friends and acquaintances in Pennsylvania. It was printed in the *MHEP Newsletter* 22(January 1995)1, p.8. The letter contains news from the congregation at The Twenty Mile Creek, Clinton Township, Upper Canada. So far as the writer was aware, the War of 1812 was still in progress. "However we still enjoy the freedom of conscience, which is the greatest grace, for which we can not be thankful enough to God. To be sure there is a lot of unrest, but with everyone we have a peaceful relation with the world, which relates to us more

and more with taxes, goods and business, just as before." The letter ends with a postscript that "we have (just) received the joyous news that there shall now be peace again. If this is so, we ought to thank God heartily, and should also forsake all strife and hate among us, and anew seek the peace of God. May God give this to us and you. Amen."

The Institute of Mennonite Studies (the research agency of the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries) and Mennonite Mutual Aid are sponsoring a **Research Project on Mutual Aid**. Eleven research-writers have been asked to participate in the project, which will result in an academic conference on 26-28 January 1996. **Reg Good** has been asked to prepare a paper on "Institutionalizing Mutual Aid among Ontario Mennonites." The goal of the project is to seek clarity on how to practice genuine mutual aid.

The seventh annual award from the Frank H. Epp Memorial Fund has been awarded to doctoral student **Carol Penner**. Penner received \$2500.00 toward the completion of her dissertation on "**Women Abuse: Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices**," at the Toronto School of Theology.

Gerald C. Ediger, a faculty member of Concord College in Winnipeg, completed his doctoral dissertation "**Deutsch und Religion: Ethnicity, Religion and Canadian Mennonite Brethren, 1940-1970**" (Emmanuel College of Victoria University and the University of Toronto, 1993).

Mennonite Central Committee has produced a 23-minute video, **Through New Eyes**, to commemorate its 75th Anniversary. It highlights five dramatic chapters in MCC's history—its inception in the 1920s, World War II, Teachers Abroad Program in Africa, and work in Vietnam and Central America.

Book Notes

Nicholas N. Fransen, in *My Pilgrimage* (Vineland: privately printed, 1994), 112 pp. narrates the story of his life in Russia and Canada. Fransen ministered in the Vineland United Mennonite congregation from 1934 to 1979.

Paul Berg Dick, Marie Giesbrecht-Stickel, Rudy Penner, Linda Redekop and Erwin Wiens, writers of *Ottawa Mennonite Church: 35th Anniversary* (Ottawa: Ottawa Mennonite Church, 1994), 64 pp. tell the 35-year story of Ottawa Mennonite Church in a popular and engaging style. Appendices include the congregational covenant; biographical

sketches of pastors; lists of baptisms, marriages and funerals.

Lorraine Roth and John Bradley Arthaud, compilers of *The Jacob Lebold and Magdalena Blank Family, 1800-1983, with Allied Families of Ebersol, Gascho, Neuhauser, Schwartzentruber and Zwalter* (Waterloo: Lorraine Roth and John Bradley Arthaud, 1994), 106 pp. trace the descendants of Jacob Lebold and Magdalena Blank.

The Historical Committee and Archives of the Mennonite Church have published a new guide for congregational historians entitled *The Task of the Congregational*

Historian (Goshen, Indiana: Historical Committee and Archives of the Mennonite Church, 1994), 20 pp. It includes notes on collection, preservation, and interpretation of records. The appendices list Mennonite-related archives, provide suggestions on writing congregational histories, and describe additional resources.

Elizabeth Wiens, author of *Schicksalsjahr 1945: Erlebnisse nach Tagebuchnotizen* (Niagara-on-the-Lake, ON: privately printed, 1993), 146 pp. describes the Prussian Mennonite flight to Germany in 1945. It is available from Linda Wiens, Box 1000, Atikokan, ON, POT 1C0.

Book Review

by Carol Penner

Pamela Klassen. *Going by the Moon and the Stars: Stories of Two Russian Mennonite Women*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University, 1994. 151 pp.

This is a book about the religious lives of two Mennonite women who emigrated to Canada from the Soviet Union. As the back cover explains, "Based on ethnographic interviews with the author the women recount, in their own words, their memories of their wartime struggle and flight, their resettlement in Canada, and their journey into old age..."

When I picked up the book for the first time I read this summary, and I was eagerly anticipating the stories. But when I flipped through the pages I was disappointed—it seemed that only 20 pages were devoted to the actual words of the women. The rest of the pages were filled with densely packed commentary. I resisted the temptation to read the stories first and reluctantly headed into the introduction. To my surprise, I read the book in almost one sitting; I couldn't put it down. It was fascinating.

Pamela describes her book as an "inquiry into memory" (p.3), and she uses the stories told by two women, given the pseudonyms Katja Enns and Agatha Janzen, to explore the significance of religion in their lives. Ultimately the book is not a simple recounting of the stories that Pamela heard. Rather it is an analysis of how the stories were told, and how the telling contributed to the meaning Pamela draws from them. Despite my first impression, the stories do take centre stage throughout the book, with pieces of narrative woven throughout the analysis which Pamela provides.

One of the topics which I found particularly interesting was Pamela's discussion of how to treat the women's war stories. She rejects the temptation to revere the women simply because they survived horrendous suffering. In this she follows the lead of Katja, who states "I don't want my story told as if I'm an important person because of my experience. Some people they make my story sensational. They say 'Oh I wish I had a story like that.' I don't like that. It's something I lived through" (p.74). Pamela discusses the tension between modern interpretations of the war which paint the Nazis as evil and the Allies as heroes: these women's experiences contradict that view. Pamela portrays these two women not as heroes but as complex people in a complex time.

Another area of interest was Pamela's analysis of Katja and Agatha's church



"Exodus II", an oil painting by Agatha Schmidt of Kitchener, Ontario. The painting depicts the gruelling "Great Trek" of German-speaking refugees who fled the Soviet Union in 1943.

experiences in Canada. Here as in other areas of the book, gender analysis is used to understand the obstacles and affirmations which these women faced. Pamela explores what religion means by looking at the women's everyday lives as revealed through their stories.

Throughout the book Pamela as the collector of the stories plays a prominent role. We hear of her nervousness when standing at Agatha's door for the first time (p.3). We see Pamela's indecision as to whether she should ask probing questions about painful subjects. We hear how her own emotional reaction to the stories at some points made it difficult for her to step back and analyze (p.73). She recounts how these women broke down her own stereotypes of what she thought they would say (p.111). She even speaks about how her relationship with these women grew and changed as she interviewed them. In short, she spoke of all of the things which are usually considered extraneous to writing an oral history.

Why did she include these observations? Part of Pamela's feminist analysis includes an open acknowledgement of her power as an interviewer (p.12). Traditionally, the oral historian is seen as a vague, shadowy, fairly unimportant figure whose main job was to hold the microphone. The end product of these traditional oral histories hardly mentions the interviewer, falsely suggesting that the story being

told is "pure" and "unadulterated" with commentary.

But Pamela would assert that every oral interviewer is in control of the material. They ask questions which shape the responses they get and they edit out that which they believe is unimportant. Interviewers also have an emotional reaction to the material and a connection to the interviewee; these all shape how the story is eventually published. Thus what Pamela is doing is no different than other historians, except insofar as she is open and up-front about her biases and about the methodology she is using.

The subtitle of the book, therefore, might more fruitfully be "The Stories of Two Russian Mennonite Women and the Story of How Another Woman Heard and Understood their Stories" (admittedly awkward, but more to the point!) It's a description with which Pamela would probably feel comfortable because in her concluding paragraph she writes that "we three have told stories..." (p.138).

This book is a good read for anyone interested in Mennonite history or feminist methodology. Pamela's self-conscious approach about the directive role of the interviewer makes this an important book for those interested in doing oral history.

Carol Penner is a doctoral student in theology at St. Michael's College, University of Toronto, and a sessional lecturer at Conrad Grebel College.