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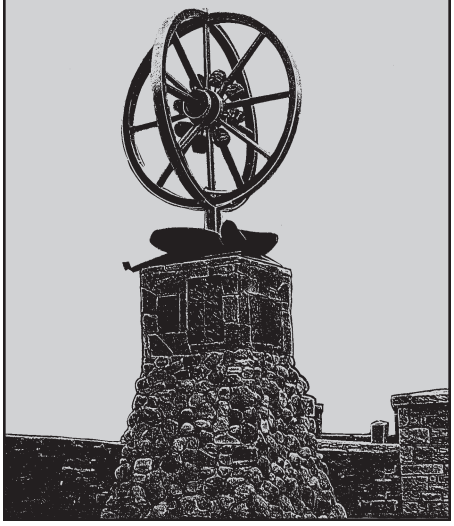

Leaving Russia 100 years ago

This article is reprinted from "Russian Mennonite Exodus to Canada, 1924" by J. J. Thiessen (1964) and translated by Herbert P. Enns (1981), published in Ontario Mennonite History*, Sept. 1994. It first appeared in the German language in* Der Bote*, July 14, 1964.*

In May 1924, I received a letter from the chairman of the Assembly of Citizens of Dutch origin, Rev. B. B. Janz, asking me to take charge and oversee, during the summer vacation, the transportation of emigrants through Russia, to the border station of Sebesh, in Latvia. It would be my duty to protect the emigrants from undue duress, and to promise the authorities that no illegalities on the part of the departing would be attempted. The reason for this safeguard, for either side, but especially for the emigrants' side, was that the emigrants did not possess individually prepared passports with accompanying photographs, but had received permission to leave as a group, bound for Canada. Following a thorough orientation process, I agreed to accept the assignment. My acceptance papers are dated June 5, 1924.

The chairman of the Assembly, Rev. B. B. Janz, had been successful in his negotiations with the Russian authorities that personal passports were not required. The Assembly had prepared a list of names, and these had been reviewed and scrutinized by the OGPU (Joint State Political Directorate). According to these reviewed and accepted lists, the visas were issued. Rev. Janz gave into my possession a list with 1,250 names, which I was to take to Moscow to obtain the necessary permission for departure.

I went to the shipping company, Ruskapa, and was introduced to the representative of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), Mr. Nikita Peschkow. He, in turn, introduced me to the director of the CPR Overseas Division, Mr. Ovens. Together with him we discussed in great detail the imminent departure of the group.

My next visit was to the Moscow Soviet. The chairman received me with a long face and angry eyes. I introduced myself as the authorized representative of the Assembly and asked for the necessary visas. He listened to me quietly but was obviously highly irritated. After I had completed my case, he yelled at me, "You come from that man Janz. Three years I have not crossed myself, but if I could free myself of him, I would cross myself three times." Finally, he took the list with the names, examined it, and dismissed me with, "Come back tomorrow!" When I got out onto the street, I realized how highly charged the atmosphere had been in the comrade's office.

J. J. Thiessen
(Mennonite Heritage Archives photo)

How wonderfully God helps

Next morning I accompanied Mr. Peschkow to the foreign department. Some passports for foreigners needed to be completed. In due time this was done, and we sought out a quiet place where we could talk undisturbed. We talked about the reasons why our people wanted to leave, and about the difficulties which the government officials placed in the way, thus preventing a smooth exit. He also made me aware, how in 1923 similar trains of emigrants had been detained, and the authorities had permitted personal encroachment on the lives of

the departing. He was of the opinion that the Departure Kommissariat ought to be informed of the occurrences in order to prevent them from happening again, and generally shield the unsuspecting and frightened group. I immediately set out to do just that.

I walked into the office of the Departure Kommissariat and presented the concerns to a woman whose responsibility it was to provide safe conduct for passengers. When she learned that it was Mennonites we represented, she listened intently, and repeated the name "Mennonites" over and over again, as if in deep thought. She gave the impression that she was trying to recall something out of her past which had to do with Mennonites. Now she had it. She related to me how, during the time of the First World War, she had worked together with Mennonites in the Red Cross, and how a certain individual had left an indelible impression on her. I was able to help her to complete her recollection, that she was thinking of a man by the name of Boschman, who had been a teacher in Halbstadt. She also inquired about his brother. At the time I had my conversation with her he had been killed by bandits, but this I did not reveal to her. She promised that her influence and instructions would bring forth the letter of protection I asked for.

It took hardly an hour until she returned with a copy of a telegram which was directed to the stationmasters from Moscow to Lichtenau—the latter being the departure point—through which the emigration train would pass. The telegram, in Russian, translates:

> Jekaterinoslav, Charkov, Southrail, Kursk, Orjol, Moscow, White-Baltic Rail, Smoljensk, Moscow Ruskapa.
>
> Supplementary to telegram #22/70928 of May 28 in Lichtenau, ordering 50 railway cars to be at the disposal for 1,250 Mennonites. Departure of the Eschalon on June 23, as a military train, over Fjodorowka, Charcov, Kursk, Orjol, Brjansk, Smoljensk, Witjibsk, Polotz, Sebesh. Eschalon must arrive in Sebesh June 28, consistent with agreement and arrival of ship at Libau. Junction stations will provide, on time, necessary locomotives to avoid unnecessary delays. Departure and arrival of train, surrender from one rail-line to the next, and arrival in Sebesh to be confirmed by telegram.

With the telegram safely deposited in my briefcase, I hurried back to the office of the Soviet to see what progress had been made in readying the necessary departure permission of the emigrants. Here too I discovered no hindrances. The comrade had kept his word and confirmed permission to leave. With a glad heart I made my journey home.

Departing Lichtenau

Arriving home, I made my way to the stationmaster at Lichtenau. Was I surprised when I discovered that the telegram had already been received by him. He informed me that the train cars had been ordered and should arrive shortly.

"Hurry and get the emigrants to the station; the train must leave Lichtenau on June 23," he said, visibly excited.

Notices were sent out into the villages, notifying the people of the date of departure. The day of departure was a busy day, beginning soon after breakfast. Some people arrived on hay wagons, on which they had loaded their packed belongings, some came on foot and still others arrived on horseback. Some came to leave Russia, others came to bid farewell, and still others came out of curiosity. To say it was a colourful crowd, somewhat disorganized, which gathered at the Lichtenau station, is perhaps an understatement.

The practicality of the people soon became evident. First, all the train cars (freight cars) received a thorough cleaning to make them comfortable for travel. Then groups were formed and assigned to cars and the baggage stowed. Inwardly, people prepared to take their leave of loved ones who would stay behind, and the time for the final goodbye came. The shadows of the day were getting longer, the sun was setting.

The time came to say farewell to native soil, the villages, to friends and relatives. Even the strong and the brave wept and sobbed openly. Perhaps not all realized the finality of their leaving. An almost holy gravity was visible on the faces of the people. The parting hurt! One part of the people were leaving, the other part remained.

Suddenly the bell sounded once and then again. Everyone knew that only a few more minutes were left before the final parting. The throng of people became visibly restless. Now all those leaving had to board their cars and those remaining had to leave. One more firm handshake, a last embrace, tears flowed.

Three sounds from the bell, the train began to move out of the station. "Auf Wiedersehen! Follow us!"

Preparing to say good-bye at the Lichtenau train station in 1924. (Mennonite Archival Image Database photo NP012-01-41)

"Auf Wiedersehen in eternity!" one traveller called out. I looked out once more at the crowd that remained: Elder Abram Klassen; teacher Kornelius Wiens; teacher Peter Giesbrecht; teacher Philipp Cornies, the vice-chairman of the Assembly; Heinrich Bartel, the treasurer. Finally I saw only a great mass of people with prospects of an uncertain future.

On the train all was silent, each one absorbed in their own thoughts. It was evening now, and someone began to sing, "Wer nur den lieben Gott laest walten (If thou but suffer God to guide thee)." Soon everyone sang. "Befiehl du deine Wege (Commit though all thy griefs)." More songs were sung. How wonderful that in times of joy and in times of sadness one could sing the songs of the church which suited the occasion, songs from memory sung with fervor. Slowly the singing faded. They had sung themselves to sleep. I listened to the rhythmic clanging of the wheels and allowed my own thoughts to wander.

Journey to the border

The railway officials adhered to the instructions from Moscow and the train travelled at speeds as if possessed, without stopping. We had not expected such precise acceptance of instruction by the officials. Arriving in Alexandrowsk, a friend of mine, Diedrich Walde, confronted me: "Man, can't you do anything with that engineer? He drives the train like a madman and without stopping. Grandmother fell off the board-bench onto the chest and broke the lid." (This sentence loses its humour when translated from *Plattdeutsch*, Low German.)

What could I say in reply? We had hoped to make good headway. I was glad when the conductor signalled "All aboard." Stops were made only at large cities such as Sinjelnjikowo, Losowaja, Charkow, Kursk, Orjol, etc. The passengers tired of the continuing speed, without stops, and were glad whenever the train was shunted onto a siding where cooking, roasting, eating, resting and washing could be attended to.

I think it was in Orjol when the train had barely stopped that the stationmaster approached me and asked where we had come from and where we were going. The question was superfluous as he knew the answer. I quietly answered him, "The people are emigrants and are on their way to Canada."

The man stood before me as though stunned. "Three years I have run my head against the wall of bureaucratic red tape in order to get a visa to leave this country, always without success. And here you come with 1,250 people, with permission to leave!" He was not the only one who marvelled at the possibility of such a large group leaving the country. It was a miracle of God's doing in the eyes of the world.

The trip through the glorious forests of west Russia was beautiful and at times even enchanting. Most of the travellers had never before seen such vast forests and whenever the train would make an unexpected stop along the way, the passengers would leave the train and quickly pick flowers and cut evergreen branches along the railway right-of-way to decorate the cars. Such stops also afforded the opportunity to do some visiting in other cars and compare experiences along the way. No doubt many remembered the saying, "Shared joys increase to double joys, and shared griefs decrease to half the grief."

The long train also had a special car staffed with a nurse to provide aid for the sick. Only one child became seriously ill and eventually died. The body was buried at Sebesh. Rev. Jacob Reimer, Rueckenau, spoke words of comfort at the graveside. Several children were born during the trip. This medical car proved to be very practical and a wise arrangement.

Usually on arrival at a station, I would seek out the stationmaster to determine what length of time the train was scheduled to stop and whether it was worthwhile for passengers to leave. On one such occasion, the stationmaster asked, "Who is holding you up? It is annoying having to wait here at the station until midnight for a military train, and then discover it is a train filled with women."

In Smoljensk I had to telegraph the Riga authorities of the arrival of the train as well as impending departure for Riga. I drove into the city in a horse-drawn carriage (taxi) to send the telegram, when suddenly the driver turned around and asked, "Will there be war?" I asked him what made him ask such a question and he answered, "The War Commandant and his staff left yesterday for the border and today a military train equipped with mine-laying devices is coming through." I realized that our train of emigrants, registered as a military train, was creating uneasiness among the populace.

At the border

As we came closer to the border, the atmosphere became more tense. The question was asked over and over, is everything in order? Suppose someone was discovered by the border authorities who was an illegal passenger, not entered on the official list. Suppose these authorities discovered something in

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the papers which was not according to the agreements I had made in Moscow. How would I look in the eyes of the authorities, the representative of the Assembly and the Assembly itself? What bad image would I create for future groups wishing to leave?

Much depended on the honesty and thoroughness of this initial trek in order to accommodate future groups. Most of us on the train were anxious the closer the train came to the border. The time of proof soon arrived. The train had barely stopped when the assistant to the inspector of police stood in front of me. His greeting was friendly. I reported the exact number of passengers, and of the trip itself, when he suggested that we go to the staff quarters of the police. Here I again had to report in greater detail on registration, border-passage, etc. I was asked whether there was personnel onboard the train who could assist in recording the names of the emigrants into the border book. I reported there were 28 teachers (male), 9 female teachers, a number of post high school graduates. It did not take long, and 16 secretaries were busily registering every emigrant. This went on all night. The inspector was greatly surprised when I came forward with another 16 secretaries in order to relieve the first set. He could hardly contain himself and finally blurted out, "And you are leaving the country? Our land needs people like you desperately!"

The duty of the customs official in any country is to see that no prohibited goods or articles enter the county illegally and that no specified goods or articles are taken out of the country illegally. Such rules are well and good as long as the examining officials adhere to these rules. However, it is an unpleasant situation when customs officials intimidate helpless passengers with belaboured questioning. Some of the officials were friendly and their work progressed smoothly. Others were indifferent and hostile. They dug among the belongings of the emigrants who became scared of what might happen. Under such circumstances Mr. J. had his camera and equipment confiscated. He reported it to me. I begged the official to return the articles because Mr. J. was a photographer and hoped to earn his living with it in Canada.

"I will leave," said the official to me, "and then you can return the camera to the man."

"No," I replied, "I will not return the equipment behind your back, but here, in your presence I will give to Mr. J. what you confiscated." I had Mr. J. brought into our car and he received his camera and attachments and left happily. The checking continued without further incident.

At the Red Door

Crossing the border from Russia into Latvia, the train had to pass through a door, painted in red and decorated on top with a star. At this gate/door, border guards had treated the 1923 emigrants miserably. Expecting a repeat performance on this trip, I asked the customs inspector to accompany the train to the border. He agreed. The train had to stop prior to passing through the door and had barely stopped when a big fat "official" began ordering all wooden planks, which had served as beds and benches, to be removed from the train. I'm sure he was surprised and irritated when he saw his superior on board, who immediately ordered a stop to any further "enthusiastic" instructions his underling might have. The foresight to have the official come along to the border turned out to be a wise move.

With the last whistle from the train on Russian soil, the train slowly passed through the door onto Latvian soil. The emigrants wept and waved to me. Some, no doubt, were thankful that at last they were in a free country, others perhaps felt sorry for me that I had to return into a lion's den, as it were. I too was overcome with emotion and wept.

When the official noticed that I was crying, he said, "Well, well, even their leader weeps." When I was able to reply, I said, "Comrade, how can I remain without any sign of feeling and emotion, when over one hundred of my former students have left this country?" To this the customs official replied, "*Platschtje Towarisch*" (Cry Comrade).

That summer, 1924, I accompanied three emigrant groups to the border. I accepted these assignments as a privilege and as an opportunity of being able to serve the brotherhood in this way. Of the 2,526 persons who left Russia that summer, at least 90 percent were farmers, 113 had a high school education, 60 were teachers and two were university graduates. Aside from this, there were businessmen, labourers, office workers, nurses, photographers, land surveyors, engineers, accountants, etc. in this group as well.

My involvement in this work during that summer brought me in contact with officials of the CPR and officials of other shipping companies, who were

The Red Gate at the Russian border with Latvia.
(Mennonite Archival Image Database photo NP141-01)

associated with the Ruskapa. It was also my privilege to make contacts with other foreigners on these trips; foreigners who were visiting Russia. Under quite extraordinary circumstances, I established an acquaintance with Mr. and Mrs. Vincent Massey in Sebesh. We travelled together to Moscow, dined together, and talked about many things. I was able to provide some enlightenment on conditions in Russia, but as a result almost lost my life.

When, on my next trip, I entered the dining car, and being recognized by the waiter, he approached me and asked, "Are you alive?"

"Why not?" I asked.

He replied, "It was the intention of the G.P.U. Police, who were on the train, to have you removed from the train before arriving in Moscow." I surmised that it was not advisable to carry on lengthy discussions with foreigners.

Mr. Massey wrote to me later, inviting me to come to Canada and teach in Mennonite schools where the English language was not accepted. In 1932 Mr. Massey and I met again, in Canada at Knox Church, where he and Mrs. Massey were reporting on a trip which they had made to China and from which they had just recently returned. Later he became Canada's High Commissioner to London, followed by the appointment as Canada's Governor General a few years after that.

Since 1924, 40 years have passed. In reminiscing on what has been, many events are vividly recalled, as though they just happened. Quite a number of those who came to Canada in 1924 are no longer with us. Our emigration from Russia and immigration to Canada remains a miracle in the thoughts of many people. Have we recognized, have we appreciated our rescue from a land of slavery in this light?

No doubt many an individual has written down experiences of the old homeland, as well as of the early pioneer years in our newly adopted homeland. It would be too bad if such accounts were to go unnoticed or even lost.

I send greetings to all immigrants who have come to Canada, especially remembering those who came in 1924 who, no doubt, will celebrate the anniversary of their coming to Canada with thanksgiving.

Previous articles in *Ontario Mennonite History* describing the 1924 arrival of the Russlaender

1. "Finding refuge among Mennonites in Waterloo" by Annie Dick Konrad, September 1992, p. 12

After describing the challenges of life in Russia in the early 1920s, Annie reflects on the Dick family's arrival in Waterloo. They stayed with the Aaron C. Bowman family of Mannheim for six months after which they moved to Manitoba.

2. "Abraham P. Nachtigal's experiences on a farm in Markham," translated by Herbert Enns, September 1992, p. 14.

The Nachtigal family arrived in Markham in September of 1924. He describes some of the surprises of how the host family did things. He goes into detail about his misunderstandings in learning how to plow the Canadian way.

3. "Henry B. Tiessen's experiences as a Russian Mennonite immigrant," translated by Herbert Enns, September, 1994, p. 13

In 1973, 50 years after his arrival, Henry B. Tiessen described his coming to Waterloo where he was hosted by a Burkhart family. He remembered in detail the Swiss Mennonite food they were offered and describes attending an Old Order Mennonite worship service.

4. "Reinterpreting the Old Mennonite/Russlaender encounter in 1924," by Krista Taves, March 1996, p. 6

Krista Taves goes into some depth explaining the situation of the Swiss Mennonite community and the experiences of the Russlaender Mennonites as a background to examining what happened when the two groups met in 1924. She points out that long-term friendships were rare. Because of the significant cultural differences between the two groups, she is not surprised that they could not find a common Mennonite identity.

5. "My first days in America," by Gerhard Wiens, March 1996, p. 14

At the age of 19, Gerhard Wiens came to Waterloo and went to work for a Pennsylvania Dutch Mennonite farmer. He was surprised the next morning to find the well-dressed driver of a Model-T milking the cows. Although things were done differently in Canada, he was not displeased.

6. "Nicholas Fehderau in Canada: My first impressions and experiences in an adopted land," translated by Herbert Enns, October 1999, p. 14

Nicholas Fehderau thought everyone had come out to stare at the immigrants as they walked from the train station to the Erb Street Mennonite Church. Having grown up on a large estate in Russia, he found it difficult to adjust to humble farm life and felt his host was not very considerate.

7. "Introduction to 1924 Ontario Mennonites first contact with Mennonite refugees from Russia," by Lorna Bergey and Linda Huebert Hecht, June 2000, p. 3.

When the first group came to Waterloo on July 19, 1924, the billeting committee had arranged for 600 billets, but there were 825 people on the train. They found places for everyone.

8. "Henry P. Hiebert" by Vic Hiebert, June 2000, p. 4

Vic describes his parents sitting in the horse sheds behind the Erb Street Church, fearing that they would not find a place to stay. They were hosted by Moses and Adeline Baer near New Dundee. The Baer and Hiebert families stayed in touch over the years.

9. "Herbert Enns" by Ruth Klassen, June 2000, p. 6
Herbert Enns remembers the hot day they arrived in Waterloo and that near midnight they had still not found a home. Sometimes they attended the Lutheran Church where the service was in German, and they could hear the organ and sing chorales.

10. "Lorna L. (Shantz) Bergey, June 2000, p. 7
A child at the time, Lorna remembers that the guests stayed for several months, not a few weeks as had been expected. She was curious about the father's shirt, wondering why he didn't tuck in his shirt tail.

11. "Greta (Snider) Hunsberger," by Brent Bauman, June 2000, p. 8
Greta Snider was ten years old when her parents hosted a family in July 1924. They could communicate with their two versions of German, but their 12-year-old guest wanted to expand his English vocabulary.

12. "Nancy (Martin) Bauman," by Brent Bauman, June 2000, p. 8
The Warkentin family was first hosted by an Old Order Mennonite family, but when things didn't work out, they moved in with the Martin family. Nancy and Helena Warkentin remained friends for the rest of their lives.

13. "Remembrances of my life journey to Leamington" by Frank P. Tiessen, translated by Margaret E. Tiessen, October 2015, p. 4
Frank Tiessen writes, "They were all Old Mennonites and very fine people, but their ways were different from what we were used to."

14. "Journey from Russia to Canada, June 1924," by Maria Braun, June, 2022, p. 1
Maria describes in detail the journey from Russia to Waterloo, Ontario, and expresses appreciation for the Mennonites who gave her and her parents a warm welcome.

Memories of Swiss Mennonite and Russlaender interaction

Martin A. Frey wrote this short reflection in 2003 when he was 89 years old. He attended school at Macton, west of Wallenstein, Ont.

I recall that a committee had been set up to help the Russian immigrants of 1924 come to Canada. Uncle Eli Frey had a doddyhouse empty and they took in the family Jacob Heinrich with two children. It would seem to me they were not there all that long as I do not recall the boy, called Vonya (Jr.) going to school. Nor the girl, but I do not remember her name.

There was an old, dilapidated house on a 50-acre farm next west of where my brother Menno Frey lived (Line 86 west of Wallenstein) and here a family of a widow Toews with at least four boys and maybe a girl were housed. The two older boys worked out at farms, but the two I remember—John and Nicholas Toews—attended our school and taught us to count in Russian. (I think I could still get to 100.) Again, they were not there all that long, as some of these Russian families moved into areas where their kinfolk were. Some went to Manitoba, others to Leamington.

I well remember Mrs. Toews was a good knitter (by hand) and was given work by the neighbours to knit many a pair of mittens. I was given the task of taking yarn etc. to her on my way to school and probably pick up the finished work coming home when they were done. She could speak High German and I could manage to get along, even if I was only 10 years old at the time.

After John finished school, he worked at Aaron Weber's for a while as the junior hired hand. I do not know any details of that, but just remember he was there. I think the family eventually moved to Leamington.

Editor's Note: As a Swiss Mennonite, Martin would have seen it as natural for young John Toews to work as a hired farm hand after finishing elementary school. Martin once made the comment that his mother, who was an Old Order Mennonite, was bothered by the fact that the Mennonite immigrants didn't dress plainly.

When Martin Frey died at age 92, he still had in his possession this 100 Ruble note from 1910. The only explanation of its origin is that it was part of a trade with one of the Toews boys.

Mennonite Archives of Ontario *Russlaender* exhibits

By Laureen Harder-Gissing, Mennonite Archives of Ontario

In-person and online exhibits commemorating the centenary of the settlement of *Russlaender* in Ontario are now open.

The in-person exhibit at Conrad Grebel University College is called "What They Carried: The Archives of *Russlaender* Mennonite immigrants." From 1923-1930, 21,000 Mennonite immigrants from the Soviet Union ("*Russlaender*") arrived in Canada seeking respite from war and turmoil.

Ontario Mennonites received and billeted 1,340 of these immigrants in 1924. Many stayed in Ontario, moving between different communities, but others headed to western Canada. By 1927-1928, many who had gone west returned to Ontario. Meanwhile, still others were arriving from the Soviet Union, though this flow slowed significantly by the end of 1927. By 1939, 1,253 *Russlaender* families were counted in Ontario.

They carried what most immigrants carry: portable reminders of home and family, recipe books and other forms of practical knowledge, songbooks to sustain faith and culture. They carried painstakingly-acquired documents vital for the crossing of borders. Less tangibly, they carried experiences of grief and loss along with feelings of trepidation and anticipation, from which new stories would grow. The exhibit links stories with documents and objects donated to the Mennonite Archives of Ontario.

A companion piece is the online exhibit "*Russlaender* Immigrants to Ontario: Sources and Stories," found at https://russlaender.omeka.net. For the first time in digital form, this website makes available church registers of the 1920s and early 1930s for the Leamington, Vineland, Reesor and Waterloo-Kitchener areas. There was considerable movement by *Russlaender* in the 1920s and 1930s in and out of Ontario, and within Ontario. Therefore, families may appear in more than one register. In the early years, *Kirchliche* and Mennonite Brethren congregants often worshiped together, so Mennonite Brethren families may be noted in these otherwise *Kirchliche* (United Mennonite Churches of Ontario) registers.

Another fascinating set of documents on this site are the immigrant assistance lists. These lists were created by the Ontario Mennonite committee

which organized temporarily housing and employment for immigrants in southwestern Ontario and Niagara. These hosts and employers are primarily "Swiss Mennonite" individuals and congregations; descendants of Mennonite settlers who arrived from Pennsylvania in the late 1700s and early 1800s.

The website is being added to as new documents become available. An exciting addition will be transcripts of 82 interviews conducted with *Russlaender* in the 1970s.

Learn more about both exhibits at https://uwaterloo.ca/mennonite-archives-ontario/exhibits.

UPCOMING **EVENTS**

Montreal River plaque

The Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario has partnered with the Ontario Heritage Trust to install a commemorative plaque at the site of the Montreal River Alternative Service camp. More information about this camp can be found in *Ontario Mennonite History*, October, 2017. There will be a local unveiling of the plaque and then a bus trip to Montreal River Harbour, located north of Sault Ste. Marie. MHSO is soliciting donations for the cost of the plaque and related activities. For more information, visit mhso.org/events.

Thursday, September 26, 2024: Plaque unveiling at Conrad Grebel University College, tentatively from 4 to 5 p.m.
Friday, Sept. 27 – Saturday, Sept. 28: Two-day trip to Montreal River Harbour for the plaque installation.

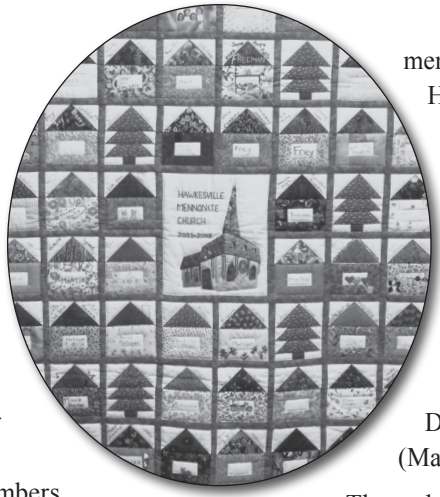
Russlaender Saengerfest

August 25: To commemorate 100 years since the first migration of Russlaender Mennonites to Ontario, a Saengerfest (singer festival) will be held at St. Matthew's Lutheran Church in Kitchener at 3 p.m.

Hawkesville Church closes after 74 years

By Barb Draper

In 2022, David T. Martin came to Hawkesville Mennonite Church as an interim pastor, to help the congregation steer a course for the future. David had previously retired as the executive minister of Mennonite Church Eastern Canada. After much discussion, Hawkesville made the difficult decision to close as a congregation as of June 2024. Their numbers had dwindled and there were no children. Facing the future with courage, the congregation decided to express gratitude for 74 years of ministry and disperse.



When the Mennonite church began in the village of Hawkesville in 1950, the charter members were primarily from the St. Jacobs and Elmira Mennonite churches. In 1925, some Presbyterians merged with the Methodists and Congregationalists to form the United Church of Canada. In subsequent years, some churches closed. At the time the Presbyterian church in Hawkesville closed in 1946, local Mennonite churches were expanding and the following year a meeting was held at St. Jacobs Mennonite Church to discuss buying the church to start a new congregation. The response was positive and in April 1949 interested families in the Hawkeville area purchased this former Presbyterian church for $100.00. On Jan. 1, 1950, a dedication service was held for Hawkesville Mennonite Church.

On May 5, 2024, the congregation invited past members and friends to join them in a time of celebration to recognize and give thanks for the many years of Hawkesville Mennonite Church. The church was full once again as people shared memories of days gone by. Sunday School classes were mentioned a few times as a safe place to discuss and struggle together with issues of faith. Sharing time was specifically remembered as a time of community building. There was great affirmation of how warm and gracious the congregation has been, especially to its young people.

Laverne Martin, who led the Bible quiz teams for 30 years, remembered those times with fondness. “I learned as much as they did,” he said, about the teams of teenagers who studied specific books of the Bible and competed with teams from other churches. During those 30 years, the Hawkesville team did well, winning the competition many times.

The congregation also had a history of serving others. As well as highlighting the many volunteer service workers of the past, Ray and Kathy Bauman listed the refugee families supported by the congregation. Since 2020, sewists at Hawkesville made 1,450 pillows for the cardiac unit of a local hospital. The church is known for quilt-making and blanket-making. Over the years, one older lady from the congregation made 1,000 comforters for Mennonite Central Committee (MCC).

Another project of the congregation was mentioned only in passing. For many years Hawkesville Mennonite Church has made and sold cream buns at the New Hamburg Mennonite relief sale to raise money for MCC. To acknowledge this tradition, cream buns were provided for everyone after the service.

Among the people who attended on May 5 were four older members who came to Hawkesville as children when it opened in 1950: Gerald Frey, Ida (Martin) Brubacher, Dorothy (Wideman) Sittler and Delphine (Martin) Wideman.

Through the fellowship and reminisces there were undertones of great sadness, but the theme of the worship time was gratitude. Everyone who spoke expressed great appreciation for the past, but also a sense that God would continue to lead.

Some historical dates:

April 29, 1950: Oscar Snyder was chosen by lot and ordained as deacon.

May 1, 1950: Paul Martin ordained as the first pastor.

1963: Construction of the annex on the west side of the church.

June 1, 1969: The auditorium was reversed with the pulpit and balcony moved to opposite ends. A second floor was added to the annex with a new entrance on the north side.

Oct. 1976: A pastoral team was appointed to assist the deacon.

Sept. 1989: Extensive renovations were completed including a lift and Sunday School wing.

May 14, 2023: The decision was made to close the church.

June, 2024: A final service for the congregation.

Pastors:

Paul Martin	May 1950 – Aug. 1962
Clifford Snider Jr.	Aug. 1962 – July, 1965
Simeon Hurst	July 1965 – Aug. 1971
S. David Garber	Aug. 1972 – Sept. 1982
Gordon Martin (interim)	Sept. 1982 – Aug. 1983
Gary Knarr	Oct. 1983 – June 1990
Donald Penner	Aug. 1990 – July 2001
Herb & Shirley Schultz (interim)	Sept. 2001 – April 2003
Maurice Martin (interim)	May 2003 – Aug. 2003
Perry Bartel	May 2003 – Aug. 2013
Ervin Wiens (interim)	Sept. 2013 – Aug. 2015
Paul Dyck	Sept. 2015 – June 2022
David T. Martin (interim)	Sept. 2022 – June 2024

Above Picture: Hawkesville was known for its amazing needlecraft. This wallhanging was a gift for pastors Herb and Shirley Schultz in 2003. Each “house” square represents a family.