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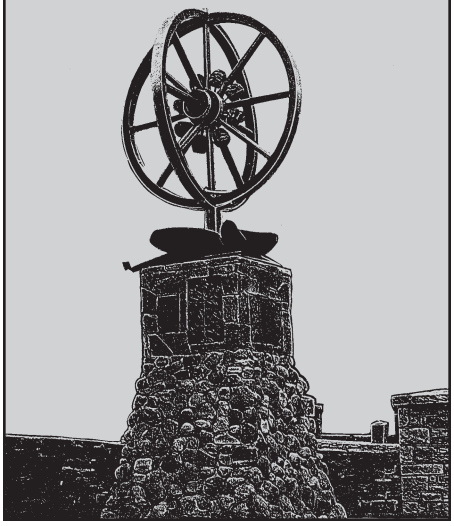


Memories of Migration: Russlaender 100

By Barb Draper

The choir prepares for the concert at Knox Presbyterian Church on July 10. About 20 people watched the event online from an overflow area. (Photo courtesy of Henry Paetkau)

This past summer, 126 people travelled on a three-segment tour from Quebec City to Abbotsford, B.C. to commemorate 100 years since thousands of Mennonites began migrating to Canada from the Soviet Union. Sponsored by the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada and organized with TourMagination and provincial Mennonite historical societies, the train trip and events along the way celebrated the faith of these Mennonites who left violence and tragedy behind them to face the challenges of adapting to a new country.

Tour participants for the first segment of this Memories of Migration train trip met in Quebec City on July 6. Before getting on the train, they visited Grosse Ile, a medical inspection and quarantine location where ships anchored before immigrants could be processed. At a stop in Montreal, Aileen Friesen described the role of Canadian Pacific Railway in this migration. The CPR loaned the Mennonites $1,767,368.68 to make the journey possible between 1923 and 1930.

The first leg of the train journey ended in Waterloo where the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario organized opportunities to learn about the story of Mennonite immigrants who came to Ontario in 1924. Monday July 10 was a full day with a bus tour past points of interest where early worship services were held and stopping at Woodside National Historic Site, the Brubacher House Museum and the library and archives at Conrad Grebel University College.

In the evening, the public was invited to join "The Place of Memory: Reflections on the Russlaender Centenary," held at Knox Presbyterian Church in Waterloo. This very popular event involved music and readings, featuring the premiere performance of "The Place of Memory," composed by Leonard Enns and commissioned for the event by the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario. The music, conducted by Enns, was performed by the DaCapo chamber choir with cellist Miriam Stewart-Kroeker.

The choral cycle, inspired by poems by Audrey Poetker, Sarah Klassen, Connie Braun and Yehoshua November, moved from a kind of nostalgia of the past, to dreams of the future, to memories of those left behind, and finally feeling at home in a new place. Readings by Marlene Epp, Hildi Froese Tiessen and David Y. Neufeld were interspersed and also reflected those themes.

The following day, Memories of Migration participants were offered bus tours to the Niagara area, led by Alf Redekopp, or a local tour of "Mennonite country" led by Marlene Epp and Ed Janzen. This tour stopped for lunch at Poole Mennonite Church, where pastor Fred Redekop talked about being a "Russian" Mennonite in a church from the Amish tradition.

On July 12 the Memories of Migration tour left Waterloo to resume the journey across Canada. In all there were four concerts throughout the journey: in Waterloo (July 10); Winnipeg (July 15); Saskatoon (July 17,18); and Abbotsford, B.C. (July 23). The largest was the *saengerfest* in Winnipeg where over 2,000 people filled the Centennial Concert Hall.

An academic conference in Winnipeg, The Russlaender Mennonites: The War, Dislocation and New Beginnings, hosted by the Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg provided many stories about the Russlaender experience.

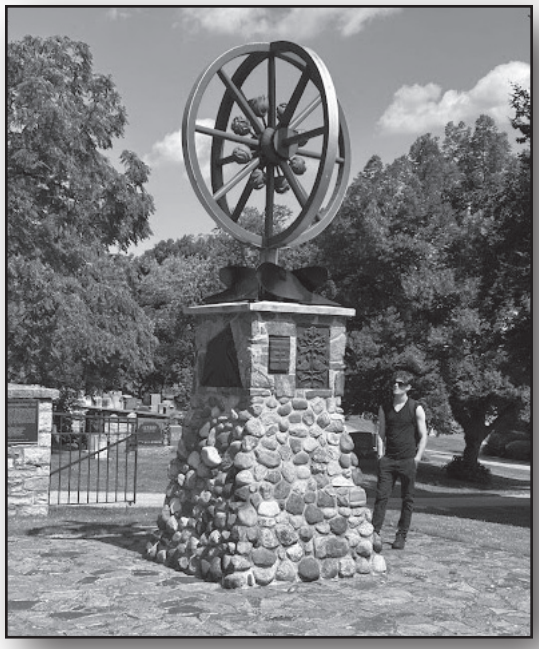
In Abbotsford, Richard Thiessen, president of the Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia, apologized on behalf of the society to representatives of the Semá:th First Nation. This was one of the ways in which the tour participants were reminded that when their ancestors settled in Canada it was sometimes at the expense of Indigenous people.

Throughout the train trip, tour participants and concert attendees were encouraged to express gratitude to God by making a donation to Mennonite Central Committee Canada to support the Indigenous Neighbours program, MCC Ukraine or international refugee settlement. The tour was very please to raise $103,048 for this cause.

Much more information about this tour is available at www.canadianmennonite.org/blog.

Archival displays relating to the Russlaender migration were on display for tour participants at Conrad Grebel University College on July 10. (Conrad Grebel University College photo)

The Memories of Migration: Russlaender 100 tour participants enjoyed a Faspa *buffet at Waterloo-Kitchener Mennonite Church. (Photos courtesy of Henry Paetkau)*



The Niagara bus tour included a stop at the cairn at The First Mennonite Church in Vineland commemorating the first Mennonites who came to Canada in 1786. (Photo courtesy of Henry Paetkau)

My name is Abraham Beam.

By Sam Steiner

Sam Steiner wrote this essay from the voice of Abraham Beam, an early Mennonite immigrant to Canada from Pennsylvania and presented it at the fall meeting of MHSO in 2014. It is set in 1798.

My name is Abraham Beam. You probably don't know me, though some of you might have heard of my brother, Martin. I've lived here in Upper Canada about ten years. I am 78 years old and know that my time on this earth is short.[1]

I came to this country in 1788, crossing the Niagara River above the Falls and settling on land at the mouth of the Black Creek where it runs into the Niagara River. My father, Jacob Boehm, was born in the Palatinate where he was a farmer and also a blacksmith. He came as a young man in his mid-20s to Pennsylvania in 1717 along with many other Mennonites of that period in search of better opportunity. They heard of the economic possibilities from others who came to Pennsylvania, including the man who became his father-in-law, Martin Kendig, a wealthy land developer in Pennsylvania. Soon after arriving Jacob married my mother, Barbara Kendig.[2]

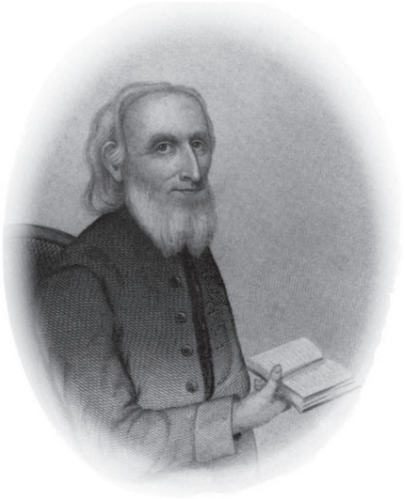
My parents settled in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and took up farming in Conestoga Township. They had a family of four sons and seven daughters, so you can imagine it was a hectic and busy life. I'm the third of the four sons.

This "Conestoga Wagon Trek" memorial marks the spot where it is believed Conestoga wagons like that of Abraham Beam crossed the Niagara River into Canada. It is at Black Creek, several kilometres above the falls, where Abraham Beam had his farm. (Sam Steiner photo)

My younger brother is Martin Boehm who was a Mennonite preacher and bishop in Lancaster County until he was excommunicated from the church in 1777 because his teachings were thought to be too radical. From his own experience he believes in the need for a clear conversion experience, and a warm relationship with Jesus Christ. He thinks Mennonites spend too much time focused on rules about plain dress and keeping a low profile in society. He believes we need to teach the good news of the gospel to all who will listen. He and his friend, William Otterbein, have become quite well known, and some people call their followers the United Brethren in Christ. He was also thought by the other Mennonite bishops to be too accommodating to those who wanted to throw off the British rulers, since he didn't protest the Test Act when it was passed in 1777 and used against us Mennonites and other peace-loving churches like the Quakers and the Dunkards.[3]

I have sympathy for my brother's religious views and have hosted his Methodist preacher friends in my home, but I've stayed with the old church, and have been a faithful member of the Mennonite Church my whole life.[4]

As part of a large family, I didn't have much time away from the farm for schooling. Although I can read some German, I can't really write, and have had to sign most English legal documents with an X.[5]



Martin Boehm, a pastor and bishop in Pennsylvania, was a brother to Abraham and a founder of the United Brethren in Christ denomination. (GAMEO photo)

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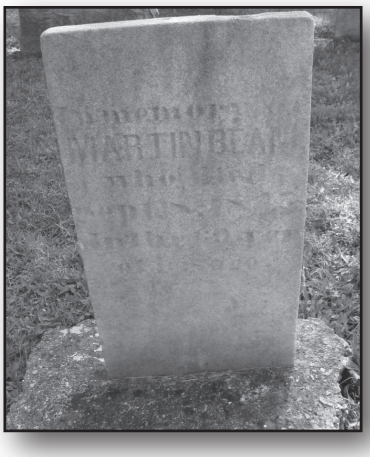
I also farmed in Lancaster County and remained single for quite a few years. My first farm was a hundred acres given to me by my father for a token payment. (This is why I received nothing from his estate when my father died almost 20 years ago.) Finally in 1764, when I was in my forties, I married my own beloved Barbara, who is about 10 years younger than me. She was born Barbara Herr but was a widow with a son and a daughter which she had borne with Jacob Nissley. They weren't teenagers yet when we married, and later we had a son of our own, Martin, who came along somewhat later in 1774 as a bit of a surprise. Our small family got along well. My step-daughter eventually married one of my brother, Martin's, sons, and we've kept a good relationship with them over the years.[6]



Abraham's son, Martin Beam (1774-1845), is buried at the Reformed Mennonite Church in Stevensville. (Allan Dettweiler photo)

A couple years after we married, we bought my brother John's farm after he moved to Virginia to explore new possibilities there. It was a decent farm, though not one to get rich on. He had had a mill on it, which we maintained, but we also focused on farming and developing an orchard. The orchard was Barbara's pride and joy; she worked hard to keep it healthy and developed a new apple variety known as the "Belmont" or sometimes just as the "Mama Beam." We built a new house on the property in 1770, so you can see life was pretty good.

Things went well until the Revolution broke out in 1776. I really didn't want to take sides and tried to do business and show hospitality to everyone. This was hard to do. The taxes became very heavy, and in 1777 the Pennsylvania Assembly passed the Test Act that demanded everyone give allegiance to the revolutionary government by renouncing the British King. That would reject a pledge we made years before and didn't seem right. Most Mennonites declined to give this assurance, which meant we Mennonites couldn't vote, hold office, take people who owed us money to court, or transfer property by deed even to family members. This made things difficult, and we had to sell produce and cattle where we could, in order to earn sufficient money to keep things together. We sold cattle to anyone with hard currency, their political position was of little consequence.[7]

The real trouble came near the end of 1780. We needed to butcher some pigs and hired a neighbour to help us out. He brought two fellows with him, that we didn't know, to help. They showed themselves to be good workers, so we kept them as hired hands for a time. We didn't know they were deserters from the Continental Army, and we had nothing to do with their efforts to join the British down at the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland.[8]

When those two fellows were caught sometime after they left our place, they said I had encouraged them in their flight. I think they said that just to try to help their own case. Our hired girl also told the authorities about some of our cattle sales and associations with persons who were sympathetic to the British. I was thrown into jail in Lancaster, and fined 750 pounds, a sum far beyond what I could pay—it was about the total value of my farm! Finally I had to borrow money from my friend, Jakob Morgenstern (Jacob Morningstar) to pay the fine and be released from jail. These events were hard on my health, since I was already 61 years old, and had to rely on my only son at home to carry on with the heavy work.[9]

Things continued to be very rough for the next few years. I had to sell half my property in order to make ends meet. Finally, we decided to leave for British territory. This would not have been our choice, but we continued to be harassed by the revolutionary Patriots, and the amount of the annual fines we needed to pay for my son to avoid militia service was just too high. [10]

In 1788 we sold the last 48 acres of land we owned to John Beam, one of my brother Martin's sons, for 600 pounds. We packed up everything we owned and headed north with a full Conestoga wagon and all the livestock and cattle we could take with us. This was a long journey of five weeks, following the Susquehanna River and later smaller waterways like Lycoming Creek, the Tioga River and the Chemung River as we were able. We crossed the Niagara River at Black Rock with a primitive ferry that had only recently begun to operate.[11]

We received a grant of 200 acres as a new settler. This was right on the Niagara River at the mouth of Black Creek. The land was not ready for farming, so we've been busy cutting trees and trying to get crops established around the stumps while building adequate shelter for our animals and for ourselves. Several years ago we made application for additional lands, partly based on the difficult experiences I had in the years before coming to Canada. Among other things in our petition, we said:

> that your petitioner was an inhabitant of Pennsylvania before the late rebellion in the Colonies. That during that period he experienced all the sufferings generally enumerated in the catalogue of Loyalists and at one time was fined 800 lbs Pennsylvania currency. In a word everything he possessed was sacrificed to the fury of an unnatural rebellion, except his life and integrity.[12]

Although we have not been acknowledged as Loyalists, the government has provided land at a good price. By the present time I have obtained about 1000 acres through purchases or additional grants. That has not made me a wealthy man. In fact, I still owe Jacob Morningstar 800 pounds for the assistance he gave me in Pennsylvania.

In the will I wrote several years ago, I made it very clear that two plots of land, totalling 200 acres, are to be transferred to Jacob Morningstar upon my death. The rest of my property will go to my son, Martin, who has married and is well established here in Upper Canada. I am grateful for this. I know that my wife misses Pennsylvania, and I expect her to return to Pennsylvania to live with her daughter after I am gone. One of my brother Martin's sons is thinking about moving to Upper Canada in the near future. This would be a blessing to me, as it is always good to have extended family nearby, especially in old age.[13]

We Mennonites have been well received in Upper Canada. In 1793 the government affirmed our rights as Mennonites not to bear arms, if we are willing to pay a militia tax. This is what we experienced in Pennsylvania and is not a serious hindrance.

A few Mennonites from Bucks County were already living here when I arrived in Canada, but they are living over thirty miles away on the shore of Lake Ontario. I don't believe they've established a church fellowship yet, nor have we here along the river. There are also some Mennonites over on the shore of Lake Erie. None of the Mennonite people who have come are ministers, so we feel somewhat at sea in our spiritual life. I miss the enthusiastic preaching of my brother, and even that of the more sedate Mennonite preachers back in Lancaster.

Occasionally a preacher from the United Brethren movement has visited near here, but no churches have been established. The Anglican and Presbyterian churches are strange to us, as are the Methodist circuit riders—they only speak English, so it is hard sometimes to follow along on what they're saying. Usually on Sundays we just stay at home. Occasionally we have participated in a service led by the Tunker minister, John Winger. He moved to Upper Canada not long after we did. He is almost one of us in faith, and lives not too far away. But my age prevents too much travel.

Abraham Beam died July 10, 1799. Family tradition says he was buried on his property, probably under what is now the Niagara Parkway. His wife returned to Pennsylvania to live with her daughter, but their son, Martin, remained in Canada and had many descendants. A number of them ended up in the Reformed Mennonite Church after it came to Canada in the 1830s. Abraham Beam is one of the few Mennonites who came to Canada with fairly evident sympathy for the British. Most others were simply looking for land that was cheaper than what was available in Pennsylvania.[14]

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[1] The original spelling would have been Boehm; it was anglicized in North America. D. Beahm, "Boehm Family of Lancaster County, PA," http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=dbhm2002&id=I2380 (accessed October 22, 2014); R. Robert Mutrie, "Abraham Beam: From Pennsylvania to Canada," *Beam Branches*, http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~boehm/data/biographies/1719_Beam_Abraham_bio.pdf (accessed November 3, 2009).

[2] John L. Ruth, *The Earth is the Lord's: A Narrative History of the Lancaster Mennonite Conference*, (Scottdale, Pa.; Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2001), 287-288; "Boehm Family of Lancaster Co., PA." Rootsweb http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=dbhm2002&id=I2380 (accessed October 22, 2014). It is not certain that Barbara Kendig is the daughter of Martin Kendig; Barbara Kendig is a common name.

[3] The children are identified by name in Jacob Boehm's will. "Miscellaneous Boehm/Beam/Beahm Family Will Transcriptions." Boehm's Chapel Society, http://www.boehmschapel.org.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/gene/.%5Cdata%5CMiscellaneous_Will_Transcriptions.PDF (accessed May 18, 2005); Ruth, *The Earth is the Lord's,* 333-334. The exact year of Martin Boehm's excommunication is uncertain.

[4] Richard MacMaster speculates Beam may have departed the Mennonite Church, but he was clearly Mennonite when he came to Canada. Richard Kerwin MacMaster, Samuel Horst and Robert F. Ulle, *Conscience in Crisis: Mennonites and Other Peace Churches in America, 1739-1789: Interpretation and Documents* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1979), 467.

[5] Mutrie, "Abraham Beam"

[6] Mutrie believes there was a first wife with whom Abraham had a least five children. However the woman's name is unknown, and the children are not mentioned in legal documents. Ibid.; "Miscellaneous Boehm/Beam/Beahm Family Will Transcriptions."

[7] MacMaster, Horst and Ulle, *Conscience in Crisis,* 395-399

[8] Ibid., 482-490.

[9] Ruth, *The Earth is the Lord's,* Mutrie, "Abraham Beam."

[10] Ibid.

[11] This is speculation based on Lorne Smith, *The Conestoga Trail*, Vol. 17 (Markham, Ont.: Pennsylvania German Folklore Society of Ontario, 2004).

[12] Quoted in Mutrie, "Abraham Beam."

[13] "Miscellaneous Boehm/Beam/Beahm Family Will Transcriptions"; Mutrie, "Abraham Beam."

[14] Ibid.

Ontario Old Colony Church loses beloved leader

By Bill Janzen, Ottawa

The Old Colony Mennonite Church of Ontario tends to avoid publicity, but the sudden death on June 30, 2022 of the widely beloved *Aeltester*, (Bishop) Rev. Herman Bergen, at 83, is noteworthy, even belatedly.

The funeral, held in Aylmer, Ont., was attended by nearly 1,500 people, including Old Colony ministers from Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and the U.S. Some 4,200 people came to the "viewings." He was described in terms of Daniel 12:3, "Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever."

The Ontario Old Colony church has grown to 14 congregations, spread out from Kingsville and Leamington in the southwest, to Virgil in the southeast, and Kitchener and Drayton in the north. Each of the three areas has its own *Aeltester*, but they form one church. Altogether it has more than 25 ministers as well as several ordained deacons. The ministers, sometimes called *Lehrer*, circulate from congregation to congregation. The church also has 13 day schools with a total enrollment of nearly 2,000 students.

Like most of the people in the church, Rev. Bergen had roots in Mexico. He moved to Ontario in the 1950s. In 1982, he was elected to the office of *Vorsteher*, in 1990 to that of minister, and in 2003 to that of *Aeltester.* With the warm support of his wife, Elisabeth, Rev. Bergen was soon appreciated for his wise and compassionate leadership and for being a caring pastor. He supported various activities for young people and readily involved himself in the extended preparatory classes for those seeking baptism. During his years as *Aeltester*, he baptized over 2,100 people.

Many of the Mennonites from Mexico who've come to Ontario attend other churches, including the Sommerfelder, Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference, Evangelical Mennonite Conference, New Reinlaender, Kleine Gemeinde, Bergthaler and a range of others. Most of these worship primarily in English. The Old Colony church uses German. However, its day schools are in English. There they use a curriculum developed by conservative Mennonites in the U.S. They receive no government funding for these schools and the church does not issue tax-deductible receipts for donations. A number of Old Colony families send their children to public schools.

Generally, the Old Colonists are cautious about relating to other churches, but Rev. Bergen supported inter-Mennonite work in the area, including that of Mennonite Central Committee, the local thrift store, the relief sale, a seniors' home, and other initiatives. He often expressed gratitude for how the larger Mennonite community extended assistance to newcomers.

Donated map now on display

This detailed map of Waterloo County, made by George Tremaine in 1861, has been donated to the Ontario Mennonite Archives by an Eby family. It has been restored and is now on display in the hallway to the library at Conrad Grebel University College. It is so detailed that most farms have the name of the owner/resident in 1861.

(Photo by Barb Draper)

Len Friesen speaks at MHSO spring meeting

By Barb Draper

Len Friesen reflected on writing his recent book, *Mennonites in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union: Through Much Tribulation* at the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario meeting held at W-K United Mennonite Church on June 14, 2023. With wry humour he said he ended up writing the book because he wanted to explore his own pilgrimage. The Mennonites who came to Canada in the 1920s have been able to tell their story, he said, implying that the story of those who came later should also be heard.

Len was born in Vineland in the 1950s and lived in a three-generation household that spoke German. But he felt that he lived in two kinds of reality.

"It was confusing," he said. "I knew I spoke German but was not German. We came from Russia but were not Russian." As a second-generation immigrant, he struggled to identify who he was. Adding to his confusion was the fact that his mother never shared her memories.

At university, Len specialized in Russian Soviet history at a time when Soviets were considered evil. "I have lived long enough to have Russia become evil again," he commented.

In the year 1987-88 he and his wife, Mary, and their children lived in Leningrad while he worked in the archives. They learned to speak Russian by sitting in the park with other parents, watching their children play.

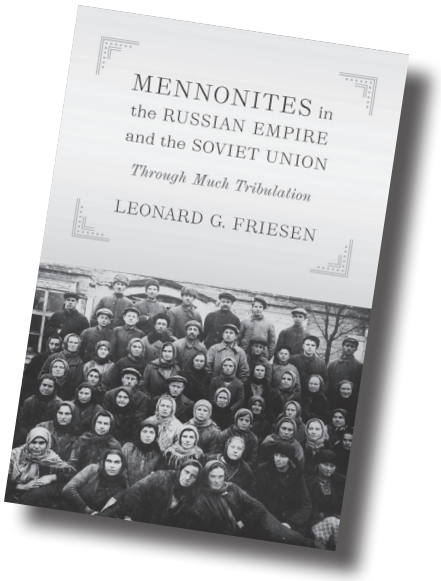
Wanting to understand his particular story and how the Mennonite experience fit into a larger history, Len researched and published his first book, *Rural Revolution in Southern Ukraine: Peasants, Nobles and Colonists, 1774-1905.* The book was criticized for not being Mennonite enough, but Len believes the larger context is important and insisted, "Every page was about Mennonites!"

Len went on to do teaching and research at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo in the 1990s which drew him away from Mennonite studies for a while. In the past decade he returned to Mennonite history, looking for a new way to think about what happened to Mennonites in what is now Ukraine in the twentieth century.

After the 1917 revolution in Russia, many terrible things happened to Mennonites and the classic understanding is that they deserved what they got because they had prospered and didn't share that prosperity with their Ukrainian neighbours. Len questions that interpretation.

"When I studied the peasants, their income increased after 1860, especially in areas where there were Mennonites," he said, insisting that today no one would say that the revolution was inevitable and so it was not inevitable that Mennonites got what they deserved.

Len Friesen and David Y. Neufeld chat after the MHSO meeting. (Photo by Barb Draper)



Several years ago, Len translated and edited works by Ukrainian scholars and *Minority Report: Mennonite Identities in Imperial Russia and Soviet Ukraine Reconsidered, 1789-1945* was published in 2018. While these scholars did not know Mennonites, the book provides good context for understanding the Mennonite story. Southern Ukraine is ethnically very diverse which makes its history very complex, and he found that this material fills in some blanks.

In trying to understand his own history, Len used what he learned from these micro-studies as well as Mennonite memoirs to bring greater clarity to the story of the Mennonites who remained in the Soviet Union after the 1920s. The first third of the book deals with the time before imperial Russia, the second third is the Russian empire while the final third deals with the Soviet Union.

Endowment will fund archives activity

By Fred. W. Martin

Grebel alumnus Anita (Lehn) Tiessen (BA ’81) and her late husband Bob Tiessen (BMath ’74) have always supported Grebel programs and capital campaigns. While Bob was an actuary and loved numbers and spreadsheets, one of his favourite hobbies was history. He loved to expand his knowledge of world events and had an interest and respect for Mennonite history, particularly his own family’s history.

One of Bob’s retirement projects was to sort through all the photos and documents that had been left to him when his parents passed away. Some of these artifacts were donated to the Archives housed at Grebel and resulted in the Franz and Anna Tiessen fonds.

Bob passed away in 2022 at the age of 71. In February of 2023 Anita established the “Robert J Tiessen Archival Community Education Endowment Fund” in honour of Bob’s passion for Mennonite history.

The Mennonite Archives of Ontario, located at Grebel, will use the earnings from this fund to support community presentations, digitization projects, and the creation of archival exhibits.

“Community education is where archives come alive,” said Laureen Harder-Gissing, archivist-librarian. “We provide it in many ways—from in-person talks to uploading digitized content that could be seen anywhere. I’m excited that this gift will help us continue connecting people to the past.”

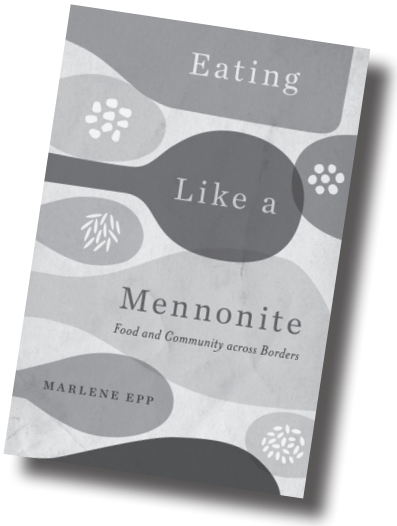
“We rely on donations from the community to operate the Mennonite Archives of Ontario, because they are not publicly funded,” explained President Marcus Shantz. “This generous gift will reliably contribute more than $10,000 each year to help us run the Archives, which are a vital part of Grebel’s service to the Mennonite community.”

Bob Tiessen

Anita feels that making a donation to Grebel in Bob’s memory honours both Bob and the place that Grebel had in his life. “Setting up an endowment to support the Grebel Archives will ensure that historical artifacts, and in particular Mennonite artifacts, will be preserved and live on to be available to teach future generations and scholars about this history,” she said. “I know that Grebel is well equipped to manage this endowment and to ensure that the earnings from it will be used for the purpose intended, as long as the Archives and Grebel will continue.”

NEW **BOOK**

Eating Like a Mennonite: Food and Community Across Borders.
Marlene Epp. McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2023, 304 pages.



At a book launch hosted by the Institute of Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies at Conrad Grebel University College on Oct. 5, Marlene Epp talked about her new book, *Eating Like a Mennonite: Food and Community Across Borders*. In explaining what prompted her to write on this subject, she said that as a social historian, food kept coming up in her research.

“Food comes up a lot when talking about Mennonites,” she quipped. Although the Mennonite denomination has become very diverse, she believes that religion and culture are deeply intertwined and so while we need to be careful not to be exclusive, ancestral foods can be related to our identity. Some folks are more interested in eating Mennonite food than going to church, she added ruefully.

The idea of Mennonite food has been expanding, and there is greater variety at the annual relief sale in New Hamburg. Marlene also described some food encounters when she visited Mennonites in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and in India. She noted the importance of potlucks, saying that gathering together to eat is an important way for churches to build community.

This is not a cookbook although it does contain four recipes, primarily because the publisher said it should contain at least some recipes. Marlene’s working title was “Sauerkraut, Zweiback and Spring Rolls,” but the publisher didn’t think that was catchy enough, so they finally agreed on “Eating Like a Mennonite.”