

Peter Penner. *A Time to Be Born: Memoir of a Canadian Mennonite*. Victoria: Friesen Press, 2016. 277 pp.

Reviewed by Robert Martens

Though historian and writer Peter Penner spent much of his life outside the Mennonite community, he never abandoned his roots. He makes this point forcefully in the introduction to his memoir, *A Time to Be Born*: “In the mid-sixties, by moving to New Brunswick, we joined that large group of Mennonites who live outside the organized Mennonite churches to which they once belonged, perhaps only as children or young people. In my case, as these pages will show, I never got away from them completely” (xii). Penner’s memoir is an articulate description of his role within a transitional and assimilative generation of Mennonites.

Peter Penner was born in 1925 in Siberia and immigrated to Canada with his family in the following year. Sponsorship by Bergthaler Mennonites enabled the Penners to make that move. The family settled initially on the West Reserve but soon moved to Ontario, where young Peter received much of his education. He attended Prairie Bible Institute, where he formulated a life-long interest in mission work. Peter married Justina Janzen in 1949, and then attended Mennonite Brethren Bible College in the 1950s.

Penner’s adult career began in ministry, leading several churches, teaching briefly at East Chilliwack Bible School and Mennonite Educational Institute, and serving with the West Coast Children’s Mission. In the 1960s, though, he felt that his passions were moving towards academia. Peter earned a B.A. at the University of Waterloo, and his M.A. and Ph.D. at McMaster University in Hamilton. He landed a job at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick in 1964. Penner taught there for twenty-seven years while researching, writing, and publishing a myriad of papers as well as eight books. His best-known publications are probably *No Longer at Arm’s Length: Mennonite Brethren Church Planting in Canada and Russians, North Americans, and Telugus: The MB Mission in India, 1885-1975*. The latter results from Penner’s long-standing interest in India and the British presence there.

But these are the barest bones of Peter Penner’s life. His character is far more clearly expressed in his own words, and some excerpts from his memoir follow:

*His first move*: “During the spring or early summer of 1931 we left the rented place in Manitoba behind and headed by car for Niagara Peninsula. Taking our trusty Chevrolet we set out and had uneventful travelling once we had replaced all the tires! Erna and I sat on a trunk, I believe, filled with food, probably *Geroestetes* (roasted *Zwiebach*, two-decker buns), and cookies. As it turned out, this was the first of many long trips across the Canadian and American landscapes by car” (7).

*Early schooling*: “I completed my elementary school schooling at Rittenhouse School with good grades in 1939. It was because I felt well liked at Rittenhouse by these friends whose families hailed from the British Isles that I took an early and intense interest in all things British and I learned to appreciate the strong Canadian identity within the British Empire” (16).

*Conscientious objection*: “Late in life I learned that I belonged to the silent generation, those born between 1925 and 1942. ... That silent generation includes thousands upon thousands who tried to stay out of fighting by seeking deferment. ... Official attitude of dislike for me was indicated by being sent a ticket to proceed to Green Timbers, BC, leaving home two days before Christmas, 1943” (22).

*Fundamentalism:* “I was shaken when in 1952 some Saskatchewan MB congregations lobbied our faculty to take a stand against the new *Revised Standard Version* (RSV) of the Bible. ... The Christian anti-Communists of the day wrote the translators off as ‘pinkies’ (near Communists). As a result of this intellectual upheaval, in the midst of my full year in Waterloo College, I journalized that I was ‘no longer a fundamentalist, but an evangelical.’”

*East Chilliwack Bible School:* “When one of my fellow graduates from MB Bible College wrote to ask about ECBS in April 1959, I told him that East Chilliwack represented a ‘one-church affair,’ whose board expected two to do the work of three on the salary of one! I also told him that ‘I am actually quite proud of my role in helping close down ECBS in 1959 because it was better for the young people’” (54). “Quite a number of young people now decided to go the MB Bible Institute, Abbotsford, as this was a much better situation for them in every way” (54).

*Change of career:* “I was coming back with a nagging question: did I want to be a minister or historian? Why was I daring to consider a change?” (59)

*New career as a university teacher:* “For many people life begins at forty. For me, this was the beginning of my second generation. Everything in Sackville was new and much to our liking” (80).

*Full professorship:* “When it came to applying for a full professorship, as one had to do, I needed five references, four from outside the University. One of my referees was able to show how productive I had been in that world outside the University. This work in another sphere which was part of our Anabaptist witness impressed the relevant committee. My hyperactivity began with the 1974 series on ‘Mennonites in the Maritimes’ published in the *Mennonite Reporter*, based in Waterloo, Ontario. These and other pieces were readily accepted by the editors and appreciated by the readers” (131).

*What’s in a name?* “Already in 1965 when we moved to the Maritimes, there was growing concern among many that the Mennonite Brethren were losing what they called their ‘distinctives,’ but also any Anabaptist persuasion they may have had. After 1970 these were shunted aside in favour of transforming MB congregations into community churches without the Mennonite name. For some time John H. Redekop tried hard to convince MBs to adopt the name ‘Anabaptist Mennonite,’ but without success. Other people began to take notice and one writer in the *Mennonite Mirror* in 1990 wrote that the MBs were getting set ‘to jettison their embarrassing name’” (153).

*On writing the story of MB missions in India:* “When I became distressed again by what I was discovering in the missionary correspondence, I was quite determined to do what Paul [Toews] wanted: ‘demythologize’ the Mission. This I did by letting all the human interest aspects of life and death, word and work, and the rhythm of life between the plains and the hills, unfold, or unravel. ... The missionaries provided a great human interest story in line with Shakespeare’s maxim: ‘All the world’s a stage and all the men and women merely players.’ No one of us would have done any better. My interviews with those that lasted only one term convinced me that to have ‘failed’ in India was not a disgrace. Of course I could not leave this work without a ‘legacy’ chapter to end the manuscript. While I could not end without pointing to the colonial remnants in the struggle for property and institutions, I could write of the positive legacy of the India MB church with its enormous potential where and when the Spirit of God is in control” (248-9).

*This book is available in the MHSBC library.*