



# Roots & Branches

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Periodical of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC

*“What we have heard and known we will tell the next generation.”*

PSALM 78



“Lion & Lamb” quilt, made by MCC quilters, and presented by MCC as a gift to the Semá:th people (Sumas First Nation).

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**Perogy Supper Fundraiser**  
 Wednesday, Sept. 27th, 2023

**Tickets \$25.00 per person**  
 Purchase tickets for 5:30pm Supper on our website  
 Or by calling 604-853-6177 by September 22nd, 2023

Meal includes cottage cheese perogies, farmer sausage, cream gravy, coleslaw, corn, platz, & coffee/tea.

The Mennonite Historical Society of BC  
 Perogy Supper Fundraiser takes place at:  
 Mennonite Heritage Museum Café  
 1818 Clearbrook Road, Abbotsford BC

[www.mhsbc.com](http://www.mhsbc.com)



Mennonite Historical Society of BC Presents:

**Holodomor Remembrance**  
*Voices of Survivors*

3:00pm  
 Saturday,  
**Nov 25**

Film | Presentations | Faspa


MHSBC Special Presentations by  
 Peter Rahn and Louise Bergen Price

Early Bird Tickets by:  
 November 9 \$15.00  
 Tickets November 10-17 \$20.00  
 For Tickets Call: 604-853-6177  
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November 25, 2023  
 Doors at 2:30pm;  
 Film/Presentations at 3:00pm;  
 Faspa at 4:00pm



Mennonite Heritage Museum  
 1818 Clearbrook Road, Abbotsford BC



Viewer Discretion Advised

Photo Credit: Tom Hauk, Unsplash



Thank you to **Columbia Cabinets** for their sponsorship of the Sunday July 23 evening concert: *Along the Journey. Memories of Migration: Russlaender Tour 100.*

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2017

# Editorial: Leaving and Staying

■ By Maryann Tjart Jantzen

This year marks the one hundredth anniversary of when some 21,000 Mennonites began leaving Russia and travelling to Canada (1923 to 1930). In addition to reports on the Memories of Migration Russlaender 100 tour, this issue features several articles on Mennonites who gathered in Moscow in 1929, desperate to flee the growing oppression of the Stalin regime, even though the door to leaving had seemingly closed in 1927. As a child whose father's family was fortunate enough to leave Moscow for Germany in 1929, and then Germany for Canada in 1930, I grew up hearing frequent expressions of gratitude and relief for the refuge of Canada. For my father's family, there had been sadness, of course, at leaving family and familiar surroundings behind, but also much joy at escaping the Soviet Union for the freedom of Canada. In my Aunt Neta's words, "When the train finally got through the Red Gate, we were so grateful to be out of Russia. Nobody can understand what joy it was for us to be free. There was so much thankfulness that we were out of hell." This event became a major part of the family narrative, an out-of-Egypt deliverance experience.

But for so many others, like the Driedger family David Loewen writes about, circumstances were very different. Rather than the joy of freedom and the

anticipation of a new, hopeful future, there was disappointment and often despair, as they suffered though "enforced deportation and 'relocation' to eastern Siberia or return home, resulting in family separations and the deaths of large numbers of children."

Why were my father's family among the fortunate ones able to leave Moscow to build new lives of opportunity in Canada, albeit during the hardships of the 1930s depression? Why were they among the few who ended up in Canada rather than South America? And why were others, like the Driedger family and my grandfather's brother, who were unable to leave Moscow for Germany, destined to remain subject to Soviet oppression? While some praised God as deliverer, others clung to their faith to help them survive; still others may even have lost their trust in a loving God. Of course, timing and location were crucial; and in my father's recollections, some bribery money may have changed hands. But surely my father's family who passed through the Red Gate to freedom were not more beloved of God than those who were "taken" and left behind. In the face of so many seemingly arbitrary circumstances, these questions have no answers.

But close to a century later, we remember and honour both those who left and those who stayed, as they lived according to the fate allotted them.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### Marlene Epp Book Launch

*Eating Like a Mennonite: Food and Community Across Borders*. Saturday, November 4, at the Museum

### The Memorial to Victims of Communism

Ottawa unveiling date has been set for Thursday, November 2nd, 2023. (See *Roots and Branches* June 2023 for more information)

## Remembering the Victims of Terror

About 800,000 people were shot during Stalin's Terror of 1937/38, among them many Mennonites. The Mennonite Heritage Museum is planning an exhibit honouring the memory of those in our families who died and we need your help. Please send names of those among your family and friends who were disappeared or executed in the Soviet Union during this time to

[lbergenprice@gmail.com](mailto:lbergenprice@gmail.com) with as much of the following information as available: 1. Full name 2. Father's name 3. Village 4. Date of birth 5. Date arrested (and/or executed) 6. Date rehabilitated 7. GMOL number. Photos and short bios appreciated. We will be collecting information through December 2023 for an exhibit in March.

## Books & Borscht

*The Books and Borscht series continued into the summer.*

**June 1:** Walter Wiens, pastor of care at Clearbrook MB Church, presented his book, *Preparing to Cross the Finish Line*. The book offers both a “how-to” manual on conducting funerals and a guide to authentic living and dying.

**June 8:** Contributors to *A Diverse Tapestry*, a book on the history and evolution of Abbotsford, led a discussion on the coming together of ethnic and cultural groups in the Fraser Valley. The energetic conversation turned around Mennonite, Indigenous, Japanese-Canadian, and South Asian stories.

**June 15:** Hugo Unger presented his family history, *Recollections: As It Happened*. The book tells the dramatic story of a Russian Mennonite family who escaped the Soviet Union during World War II. A lively Q&A followed the readings.

**June 22:** The spring book launch of *Follow the Black Lines*, the life-story of Henry Braun’s parents, took place before a packed house. That was reason enough for an encore presentation. Henry and Velma Braun read from the book and led an energetic Q&A session.

## Memories of Migration: Russlaender (Russian Mennonites) Tour 100

*Cross-country train trip marks 100th anniversary of Mennonites coming to Canada from Soviet Union*

One hundred years ago, the first of over 21,000 Mennonites who left the Soviet Union boarded a train in Quebec City for new lives across the country. On July 6 some of their descendants and others replicated that journey when they boarded a train for a trip that went all the way from Quebec City to Abbotsford, BC as part of *Memories of Migration: Russlaender (Russian Mennonites) Tour 100*. Through the tour, which was in BC in the Abbotsford area from July 23-25, participants reenacted the historic migration of the thousands of Mennonites who left communities decimated by violence and tragedy in the Soviet Union to come to Canada between 1923 and 1930. For Richard Thiessen, chair of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC, “The anniversary celebrates the persistence, sacrifice, and faith of Mennonites both in the Soviet Union and Canada that allowed for so many to be able to call Canada their new home.” In addition to the train trip, which found participants enjoying lectures, presentations and music along the way, the tour included a gala sponsored by the Canadian Pacific Kansas City Railway in Montreal. In BC they visited Yarrow, Greendale and Arnold, the three earliest Mennonite settlements in the Fraser Valley, toured the Mennonite Heritage Museum and finished with a free public concert on the evening of July 23 at South Abbotsford Church. They also had

opportunities to learn about interactions between the Mennonite immigrants and Indigenous people, including the impact of their migration on Indigenous communities in western Canada. Altogether, about 123 people signed up for one or all three segments of the tour (Quebec City to Kitchener, Toronto to Saskatoon, and Saskatoon to Abbotsford). Organized under the auspices of the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada, together with Canadian Mennonite scholars and heritage enthusiasts, the tour celebrated the faith of those newcomers 100 years ago, memorialized the challenges they faced as new settlers in Canada, and acknowledged their impact on Indigenous people.

### **Russlaender Tour 100: The First Leg.**

■ By Jenny Bergen

The first leg of the Russlaender Tour 100 from Quebec City to Kitchener, Ontario, was a whirlwind of community, history, events, and, most importantly, reflection on and celebration of the answered prayers of 21,000 of our Mennonite forefathers and mothers.

Working at the Mennonite Heritage Museum in Abbotsford, I am very familiar with the story of the 1923-1930 Mennonite migration from what was then Russia (now Ukraine) to Canada, but it was another thing entirely to see the Grosse Île quarantine station, to board the train at the historic station in Quebec, and to travel to Kitchener, Ontario, and see the church parking



Jenny displaying her disinfection card at the Grosse Île disinfection station.



A teacher/interpreter teaching tour group how to sing, on the lawn near the Grosse Île chapel.

lot where hundreds of Mennonite refugees were welcomed with open arms into the homes of Mennonite relatives and strangers. Together, the tour group imagined the scene: weary women and children filled with hope and trepidation at their journey's long end, horses and buggies clogging the streets, feeling so much gratitude at God's provision that their hearts could burst. My experiences were moving and inspiring: hearing the firsthand accounts of a generation collectively dealing with PTSD yet having the courage to trust God and step into a new land and start over; joining with Mennonite brothers and sisters for a concert at Knox Presbyterian Church; and connecting with family in the area. Interacting with different Mennonite groups in the Waterloo area was eye-opening in a new way, revealing the diversity of those who share our Anabaptist roots. Overarching all of this was the attention to detail and care of the TourMagination team and all those who partnered with them to make this tour a success. This experience, shared with family and new friends, will forever stay with me.

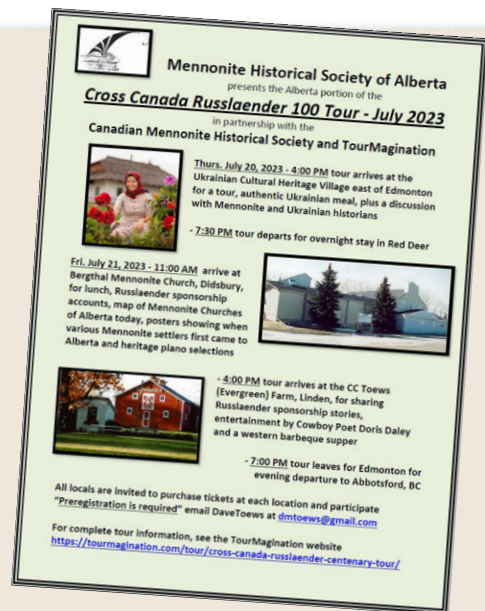
### Russlaender Tour 100: The Third Leg

■ By Helen Rose Pauls

Landing in Saskatoon to showers and sun on July 18, we looked forward to two days of exploring the area before the five-day excursion of discovering our Mennonite history in the area began. We had also heard of an amazing concert featuring *Kernlieder* (core songs: hymns traditionally beloved of Mennonites) and the Mennonite

Piano Concerto scheduled for that evening at the University of Saskatchewan.

The flat and rolling fields of canola, wheat and flax stretched to the horizon although few farmsteads appeared on the cropland. Are the farms really this big or do Saskatchewan farmers live in villages as many did in Russia a hundred years ago? Now and then a familiar chicken or dairy farm appeared, some of them, we were told, owned by Mennonite and Dutch farmers from BC. The hamlets of Martensville and Dalmeny have grown into full-fledged towns since we saw them twenty years ago, and a feeling of prosperity pervades.



MHSA poster listing activities for the Alberta portion of the Cross Canada Russlaender 100 tour.

Image source: MHSA website.

Martha Penner and Mariachi Los Dorados performing music from Mexico at the concert near the end of the Russlaender 100 Tour, in South Abbotsford MB Church, July 23, 2023.

Photo credit: Julia M. Toews.



We headed for Rosthern where my immigrant parents, teenagers at the time, would both have stopped before arriving at their family homesteads. Back then, Rosthern was the headquarters of the Mennonite Board of Colonization, which helped the Russlaender find their various new homes. The local museum had significant photographs enlarged for the occasion—a picture is worth a thousand words. Relocating 21,000 pilgrims was no easy task.

The Mennonite Piano Concerto that evening was expertly rendered by Godwin Friesen and Jerry Hui, two young men studying piano in Toronto. It was as if their two pianos were duelling, and there was magic in their back and forth. One could hear violence and terror, joy and carefree laughter, deep sadness and pain, all intertwined with the familiar *Kernlieder* we have grown to love from childhood.

July 20 saw the sixty of us leave the Bessborough Hotel, one of the original CPR hotels, for a trip to Vegreville and the Ukrainian museum (the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village). Many aspects of the museum were familiar. There is so much room to spread out in Alberta that it took all afternoon to visit half of the museum village and the exhibits, most of them in relocated original buildings. We travelled onward to Red Deer for the night, and then enjoyed a half day in Didsbury to enjoy lunch, singing, and a historic program prepared by the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta. The highlight of the day was a visit to the C.C. Toews farm near Linden, a Holdeman community. The home farm was frozen in time with furnishings, tools and implements from the 1940s and 1950s and a huge kitchen where the local women prepared a delicious supper in a converted chicken barn with room for singers, speakers and the featured cowboy poet, Doris Daly, who brought some of us to tears and laughter. Off

to Edmonton to catch the train for Vancouver, we heard we'd have four-hour wait.

In former times, organizers would have called a local church for the use of their facilities until the train arrived. We were offered a bus ride to the casino as it stays open all night. None of us took up this offer, staying instead on the hard seats of the Via station and chatting the night away. Perhaps we should have spread our luggage on the station platform as the immigrants did in Russia and napped with bundles and suitcases as pillows, waiting for the train whistle.

Soon we were rocked to sleep cradled in tiny cots, much more comfortable than the hard wooden seats our grandparents would have had one hundred years ago. At first light some of us grabbed snacks and coffee from the hospitality centre and found seats in the dome car, not wanting to miss a moment of mountain splendour. Rivers, lakes, waterfalls flashed by. Later we gathered for history talks by Dr. Aileen Friesen, Mennonite historian from Winnipeg, readings by Armin Wiebe of *The Salvation of Jasch Siemens* fame, and a bit of Fraser Valley history and readings from the book *Berry Flats* by Helen Rose Pauls. There is no large gathering place on a train and although we wore headsets, communication was less than stellar, especially the singing together.

After one day and two nights on the train, we arrived in Vancouver and were bused to the Mennonite Heritage Museum to spend the day exploring the main exhibit and the housebarn, and being served a delicious lunch and *fasha* by the kitchen staff. Off to the concert at South Abbotsford Church we went, and thoroughly enjoyed an unusual and amazing concert planned by Calvin Dyck, featuring music from many lands where Mennonites have settled. A venue twice as large might have held all those who hoped to attend.

Monday was set aside to visit the first Mennonite

villages in the Fraser Valley: Arnold, Greendale and Yarrow, which all lie on the periphery of the former Sumas Lake. The Mennonite churches there warmly welcomed us, providing historical talks and pictures. After the lake was drained by the BC government in 1924, the reclaimed land was offered at \$150.00 an acre, while stump farms in Abbotsford were \$10.00 an acre. No one could afford this price, so wealthy Americans like the Ord and Haas families purchased thousands of acres and planted hops. Soon Mennonites fresh from Russia, living on homestead plots in Alberta and Saskatchewan, heard that they could buy small plots in Yarrow and work at the adjoining hopyards. These once wealthy farmers from the Russian steppe who had employed maids and farmworkers ended up picking hops from dawn to dusk, their wee children on blankets at the end of the row. It was a start in a new land. They soon realized that they could grow raspberries on their little plots. Cooperatives, canneries, and a retail store soon flourished, and Yarrow MB Church apparently once had 970 members. But the berry industry floundered after World War II and Mennonites moved to towns and cities to seek other work. Most of these Mennonites integrated very quickly into this wonderful new country called Canada, eventually enjoying a good life of safety and prosperity.

On Monday evening we were invited to dinner at the Sumas First Nation longhouse, but after six church visits and a cemetery walk, I had faded by 5 pm and opted

out, so others will tell that story. My husband says that the next Mennonite conference he wants to attend is “The Future of Mennonites.”



Presentation of the MCC quilt in Sumas First Nations longhouse. Wayne Bremner interacting with Chief Dalton Silver.  
Photo credit: Jennifer Martens.

■ By Robert Martens

The Sumas First Nation longhouse is a spectacular structure: wooden benches, intricate rafters, packed dirt floor. Participants from the 100-Year tour as well as numerous guests from the community were served a wonderful dinner, after which Councillor Chris Silver told stories of his ancient Stó:lō First Nation. A series of “witnesses” were asked to respond. Apologies were delivered for the fact that Mennonite settlers in the Fraser Valley largely ignored the plight of the Indigenous. The evening was a long one, but deeply rewarding for an attentive, hushed audience.

## Russian-German Refugees in Mölln 1929 to 1933

■ Translated by Marvin Rempel/Edited by Robert Martens

*This document is an English translation prepared by Marvin Rempel of a lecture document authored by Christian Lopau, City Archivist at the City Archives of Mölln, Germany. According to Mr. Lopau, the original document was used to deliver a lecture in Mölln about the Russian-German refugee stay in Mölln between 1929 and 1933. Christian Lopau provided a copy of the lecture to Marvin Rempel in an email dated 10 Feb. 2022.*

In the years 1929 and 1930, i.e., at the beginning of the Great Depression, the city of Mölln was confronted with a task that required considerable effort from local authorities. The *Unteroffiziersvorschule* (officer training school), built during the First World War,

and then barely used during the years of the Weimar Republic, when its imperial army was limited to 100,000 men, was selected to serve as a refugee camp for several thousand Russian-Germans, who were to make preparations in Mölln for their departure overseas. At that time, the town had about 6,500 inhabitants, most of them involved in trade and commerce. Even today, one can still find reminders in the town of the after-effects and circumstances of the Russian-German refugees, and the City Archives frequently receives inquiries on this topic (p 1).

The German Reich was initially reluctant to allow the refugees to enter. Economic difficulties were a factor,



Mölln refugee centre.

Photo source: Mennonite Heritage Archives.

as well as the fear that German-Soviet relations might deteriorate as a result.

To understand the full situation, it is absolutely necessary to point out the policy of the Weimar Republic regarding individuals of German descent residing in other countries. At the heart of the matter was the 1913 *Reichs- und Staatsangehörigkeitsgesetz* (Reich and Nationality Law), which was being applied in a relatively restrictive manner at the time. This greatly impeded the immigration and protracted settlement of people of German descent living abroad. This practice was in clear violation of the policy of the Federal Republic of Germany regarding *Aussiedler* and *Spätaussiedler* (*Aussiedler*: German-speaking immigrants; *Spätaussiedler*: German-speaking immigrants after 1993).

During the Weimar Republic, the legal equality of *Volksdeutsche*, people of German ethnic origin, with citizens of the Reich was rejected, as was the rapid naturalization of “ethnic Germans.” The *Volksdeutsche* were not to be withdrawn from their homelands, so as not to weaken the position of *Volksdeutsche* minority groups living abroad.

Only after long negotiations, and due to growing pressure from Soviet authorities, who in mid-November began using coercion to transport refugees back to their original homes, did the Reich government finally agree to allow the refugees to stay temporarily in Germany until they could leave for overseas (3-4).

In autumn of 1929, the buildings of the former *Unteroffiziersvorschule* in Mölln were essentially unused. One section served as a youth hostel; some of the rooms were utilized as residences; a classroom was leased to the *Karstadt* (a German department store) company; and the commandant’s house was leased to the city of Mölln for

educational purposes. The *Rendantenhaus* (accountant’s quarters) was utilized by the building’s administrator, the tax inspector Adolf Thoret, who lived in it. Thoret described the establishment of the refugee camp in his 1933 written report, *Schicksale der Unteroffiziersvorschule Mölln* (The Fate of the Officer Training School in Mölln).

According to his account, he learned of the planned establishment of a camp in Mölln through a local report in the *Möllner Zeitung* (Mölln Newspaper). He immediately approached his superior authority, the tax office in Kiel, with recommendations that preparations to receive the refugees must be started immediately, if this newspaper report was true, “because there are only about one hundred beds remaining from previously; mattresses or straw beds, blankets, bedclothes, towels and room furnishings . . . were completely missing.” Furthermore, food, heating fuel, and straw had to be procured immediately. The heating system and the light and water pipes had to be overhauled.

At that time, the Kiel tax office had not yet received any instructions concerning the accommodation of the Russian-German refugees. On December 4, 1929, however, a delegation arrived at the former *Unteroffiziersvorschule*, including representatives of the Reich Ministry of Finance, the State Finance Office in Kiel, the Reich Construction Office in Altona, the District of the Duchy of Lauenburg, and the City of Mölln. The result of the inspection of the buildings is recorded in a report specifying the necessary measures to be carried out before the arrival of the refugees. The report assumes that a total of one thousand people could be accommodated. A medical clinic with a maternity ward, infirmary and infection ward was to be set up in the former officers’ dining rooms.



The Kiel State Tax Office made the premises available free of charge to the yet-to-be-appointed warehouse building management. A few days later, on December 9, 1929, the State Ministry of Finance issued instructions by telephone to implement the agreed-upon measures. Work began under severe time constraints, since the first refugee transport was expected before Christmas.

Initially, Adolf Thoret, as administrator of the *Unteroffiziersvorschule*, took over management of the work. Traffic Superintendent Dold, who was responsible for setting up the camp, arrived on December 14. He later managed the department of provisions within the camp administration. Two days after Dold arrived, Major of the Reserves Kirstein came to Mölln. He had been put in charge of camp administration.

Camp equipment and room furnishings were primarily obtained from the recently vacated barracks of the Allied Occupation Forces in the Rhineland. A total of about forty railroad cars carrying material arrived in Mölln. On a single day, sixteen cars had to be unloaded. All trucks in the town were deployed to handle the transport. Adolf Thoret describes further difficulties and delays in his report: “The boiler facilities in the large crew kitchen will have to be rebuilt and enlarged to accommodate the number of refugees to be housed; outdated boilers will be removed. The double boilers taken from the occupied barracks of the Rhineland and sent as urgent freight have been rendered unusable because their cast-iron heating bottles were not emptied during a frost and consequently burst. They are consigned to scrap iron. Replacements were ordered by telegraph from vacant barracks in North Schleswig and were brought in on trucks just in time for the first refugee transport.”

The necessary conversions, repairs and installations were pushed forward with a sense of urgency. Working hours were set from six am to midnight. In two shifts, the workers—including many who had been unemployed until then—were put to work. Two commercial employees were also employed in setting up the warehouse. While one of them was responsible for checking deliveries, the other was responsible for the payrolls and activity lists of the workers. Aside from centrally organized aid, numerous donations of money and goods-in-kind arrived in Mölln from all over Germany.

In spite of the short available preparation time and the countless difficulties, the arrangements were essentially complete when the first transport of refugees

arrived at the Mölln train station on December 21, 1929 (6-7).

Mölln Mayor Dr. Gerd Wolff played a major role in the care of the refugees through his position as local chair of the DRK (*Deutsches Rotes Kreuz*; German Red Cross), as did Mölln’s head minister Paul Bruns, as representative of the *Zentral Ausschuss für Innere Mission* (Central Committee for Home Missions). During the first weeks of the camp’s existence, there were apparently disputes over authority between Bruns and Dr. Wolff. Bruns wrote in a report dated 9 January 1930 that he was completely cut off from disbursements, since he had received no communication of any kind other than the notification from Kiel that he was to represent the church on the committee. The mayor had responded that he was not thinking of forming a committee, but rather was working solely as a representative of the Red Cross: “It is easier to work without a committee.”

At the beginning of February 1930, Bruns and Dr. Wolff laid down their respective responsibilities in such a way that Dr. Wolff would be in charge of the administration of incoming donations and the material care of the refugees, while Bruns would be responsible for “spiritual and intellectual oversight in all areas of concern.”

The relationships between the camp directorate and the organizations involved in refugee support were not free of tension. In a joint letter concerning “Cooperation of the Three Authorities in the German-Russian Camp Mölln,” Helene Tessmann, a kindergarten teacher, and Heinrich Warring, a youth care worker, both of whom were employed by the church, clearly criticized the camp management. It showed “little understanding and appreciation” of the activities of the kindergarten teacher and youth worker, and accorded them “merely the feeling of being tolerated.” The letter goes on to say, “We are convinced that every single person here wishes to play a special role and to merit the personal gratitude of the refugees for their good deeds.”

The formation of the welfare committee, to which the kindergarten teacher Helene Tessmann, the youth care worker Heinrich Warring, Pastor Bruns, as well as Mayor Dr. Wolff and his wife belonged, helped to resolve possible conflict at an early stage. The increasing routine of refugee care may have contributed to the fact that there is no evidence of internal conflict in the later period of the refugee camp.



Kindergarten in Mölln.

Photo source: Mennonite Heritage Archives.

As for the refugees, the camp management was supported by a Refugee Committee, whose chair was H. Martins. This committee was responsible, among other things, for the maintenance of the camp, the selection of essential labour teams, the tabulation of names, and the scheduling of transport overseas.

Most of the work in the camp was done by the refugees themselves. For the kitchen, for example, only one professional cook was employed. The rest of the kitchen staff was provided by the refugees themselves.

Accommodation, food, medical care and transportation were defrayed by the camp directorate's funds, while the expenses for social needs were paid by Dr. Wolff and Pastor Bruns from the donations they received from the Red Cross and the Brothers in Need Foundation (*Brüder in Not*).

Throughout his term, Dr. Wolff was able to raise substantial funds, and himself looked after the families. He accompanied some of the departing emigrant groups until they disembarked. The mayor's participation resulted in a close connection with the city administration, which significantly enhanced the smooth running of the relief operation. Dr. Wolff and his wife were later honoured for their services to refugee wellbeing when the national association of the Prussian Red Cross awarded them the Cross of Merit.

Pastor Bruns devoted himself to refugee pastoral care and social assistance. He held regular church and devotional services in the camp, founded a kindergarten, and employed a kindergarten teacher and youth worker.

In two reports, the kindergarten teacher Helene Tessmann describes her work in the camp. The kindergarten for the three- to seven-year-olds was established on January 21, 1930. From fifty-seven children on the

first day, the number of children cared for grew rapidly to about 150. Five older girls from among the refugees supported the kindergarten teacher, at times entrusted with the care of up to two hundred children who were busy with needlework and woodwork, handicrafts, dancing, and singing folk songs.

There are also work reports by the youth care worker Warring, who had been working with the older children and young adults

since February 1, 1930. In addition to providing instruction in manual work, Warring focused his efforts on physical education. He describes a number of ball games, such as soccer and handball, that were completely unknown to some of the children. In addition, Warring worked with the young people to restore the tennis court on the camp grounds and offered excursions to the surrounding area of Mölln.

Lectures, on the other hand, were only possible to a limited extent because crowded conditions in the camp resulted in a shortage of rooms. In addition to the care provided by the youth care officer and the kindergarten teacher, four classes were taught by teachers drawn from the ranks of the refugees themselves. The magistrate of the city of Mölln had conveyed in a letter dated January 20, 1930 that "for fundamental considerations [it] had to reject the admission of refugee children to Mölln schools." The one hundred or so pupils were taught by four teachers drawn from among the refugees. In the first two groups, instruction took place in religious history, mathematics, reading, and writing. In the third group, dictation, singing and calligraphy were taught. The fourth group also received instruction in grammar, biology, and geography. Textbooks, writing materials and other teaching aids were procured through the *Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland* (Society for German Culture Abroad). During times when school was not in session, children were cared for in the kindergarten.

Pastor Bruns procured tools and work materials in hopes that employment opportunities might be created for the refugees. At the same time, equipment and clothing for emigration could be fashioned or, perhaps, repaired. In the camp's carpentry shop, transport crates,

furniture, and windows were constructed. Locksmiths and blacksmiths manufactured tools; a shoemaker's and tailor's workshop were also set up. Adult refugees were offered opportunities for administration training and further education. Pastor Bruns compiled a camp library and organized slide shows and occasional film screenings, as well as recitals (*Liederabende*) with the two Mölln singing societies. A listening room in the camp was set up for community radio broadcasts. A group of five refugees arranged the weekly program, which offered scholarly lectures, productions geared to children and women, language training, classical music, folk songs and news. Daily radio reception, with the exception of church services, was scheduled from 11 am to 1 pm and 3:30 pm to 10:30 pm.

In preparation for life overseas, refugees were also offered English classes. Since the vast majority of the refugees were Mennonites, at least one excursion was arranged for twenty elderly people to visit Menno Simons' tomb.

The camp went on in this way until January 31, 1931. On February 1, care and custody of the camp was reassigned from the Reich to the Mennonites. From that point, the refugee camp became known as the "Mennonite Home" (*Mennonitenheim*). With this, oversight by the welfare committee was terminated through a decision by the state committee of Brothers in Need. At the same time, the intention was to dissolve the camp as soon as possible, but some refugees stayed on until 1933. In a letter from the Foreign Office dated November 1931, proposals were considered to operate the Mölln camp as a permanent training centre for emigrant groups. However, these plans are no longer mentioned in later existing documents (8-13).

Questions about the reactions of the people of Mölln to the establishment of the refugee camp, and on the relationship between locals and refugees, are difficult to answer, since the most important source for possible answers, the *Möllner Zeitung*, is only available in a few editions. Individual

newspaper clippings on the history of the camp can be found in the [City Archives] files. Only a few references indicate any expectations or fears associated with the founding of the camp. In his reports, Adolf Thoret does mention concerns over "the introduction of epidemics," but they were dispelled by calling attention to medical examinations and quarantines.

The surviving newspaper reports speak of a very warm reception of the refugees by Mölln residents. For example, the *Hamburger Zeitung* (Hamburg Newspaper) wrote on July 28, 1930, "The whole camp, however, is enveloped by the love and German friendliness of the entire population of Mölln, with the mayoral couple at the head, and of the guilds and the women, who are almost competing to give the people from the east memories of the pretty Lauenburg lakeside town far into the distant future."

The numerous letters of gratitude from the refugees also speak of the great willingness of the people of Mölln to assist—as was expressed in a fund appeal—"despite the severe economic hardship in their own country." The appeals for donations to support the camp were apparently extremely successful. This is demonstrated by the influx of "love gifts" (*Liebesgaben*) from individuals all over Germany, as well as by collection drives in associations and schools. Pastor Bruns repeatedly drew attention to the plight of refugees through lectures and by articles in church publications.

In his statements, Bruns views the situation primarily



B.H. Unruh and Dr. G. Wolff, centre front, along with other administrators of refugees in Mölln.

Photo source: Mennonite Heritage Archives.

from the perspective of persecution of Christians. The refugees are for him first and foremost “brothers in need.” In the newspaper, *Der Nachbar: Lauenburgisches Sonntagsblatt* (The Neighbour: Lauenburg Sunday Edition), Bruns writes, “Those who are with us, whose escape from the Bolshevik hell was made possible through God’s miraculous intervention; and those who, with God’s help, will yet arrive; these are close to our hearts because they are Christians, purified by fire, strong in faith, our brothers and sisters, whether they be Lutherans, Mennonites or Catholics.” Also, the fact that they “were, are, and will be bearers and pioneers of German culture” is also significant for Bruns. This is stressed even more strongly in speeches by Mayor Dr. Wolff. In his welcoming address, Wolff underlines the ethnicity of the “German compatriots” (*deutsche Landsleute*) as the primary motivation for fleeing. “You have left behind all that was dear to you in order to follow the call of the people (voice of blood; *Stimme des Blutes*).” The newspaper’s report emphasizes this motivation as well. “Although the colonists may have taken on some Russian peculiarities, they are, as our mayor ... so aptly said, nevertheless of one stock and blood with us. They and their ancestors are among the best elements of our peoplehood, and in the midst of the Russian sea of nationalities, they have maintained their German character to the present day.”



Mölln. “Thanks to Germany” sign made by refugees. Photo source: Mennonite Heritage Archives.

Bruns and Wolff, from their respective points of view, both depict the refugees as role models, be it as in Wolff’s case, in their adherence to “Germanness,” or, as with Bruns, in their commitment to Christianity. Humility, discipline, and piety are especially mentioned in most of the newspaper accounts of the camp. “Even in their need, they embody a Christian front, which, after all, is what we have also aspired to in our country,” says the article in the *Hamburger Nachrichten* (Hamburg News) of July 28, 1930. The journalist writes further, “Will not the world speak of us that, after all, poor Germany, in its most bitter distress, mustered the will and strength to be a rod and staff for even poorer brothers who had

become homeless on the dark pathway of life? But these brave German-Russians have also given us something, even if only as an example: that profound devoutness and firm faith constitute a power that leads out of bondage into freedom.”

In a time of political conflict, economic hardship and social tension, there emerged a counter-model of community (*Gemeinschaft*) that might be exemplary for our own [German] society (18-20).

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The entire German document can be accessed at:  
<https://docplayer.org/106867680-Christian-lopau-das-fluechtlingslager-fuer-die-russlanddeutschen-in-Mölln.html>

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## The Last Years in Russia and Going to Germany

*From The Life Story of Aganetha Tjart Heidebrecht, 1996  
 (self-published and distributed to family)*

■ Abridged and edited by Maryann Tjart Jantzen

*Aganetha (Neta) Tjart Heidebrecht (1906-2000) writes of the last years her parents and their nine children spent on*

*their several hundred-acre farm in Kuban, Crimea, land inherited from her mother’s father (Kornelius Duerksen), as well as of their journey to Moscow and ultimately Germany in 1929/30. After struggling through the famine of 1921 when many died of starvation, the Tjarts had several years*

*of decent crops and relative freedom. But many Mennonites were leaving Russia as the news was spreading that the communists were increasingly collectivizing and limiting religious freedom. After Stalin took over in 1927, the situation became even more dire. Then the door to leaving Russia seemed to close.*

*According to Neta, "all at once the rich people were*

*sent north and never came back; mother's brother, a good quiet man who had done no wrong, was one of the first sent away and never heard from again." But Neta's mother Aganetha Duerksen Tjart did not want to leave their land, hoping the situation would improve. Then came the harvest of 1929 and a demand to give most of their grain to the government.*

The crop was poor and when we could not give them what they wanted, they put father in jail. Three weeks later he came home and cried because he had been treated so badly. Then my mother finally said we should go.

When we decided to leave Russia, we sold everything we had, cattle, horses, machines and anything we could not take along. Mother had inherited a cedar chest. We packed it full with things we would need. We went to the train station and were surprised by all the people who were trying to leave. Then someone bribed the conductor and begged him to keep the train until everybody was on board.

It took several days to come to Moscow. Some people told us to go north of the city; the train station there was called Klasma, and we found a place where three families already lived. We were lucky that we went further north, because the government started to send people back home or to Siberia on freight trains. We heard trucks go by every night. We were all afraid and prayed to the Good Lord to protect us. Some who had been waiting all summer did not get visas. Father's oldest brother whom he had not seen for a long time came there too and was sent back.

All the German people were put into groups. We were in group seven. Six groups had already been sent back and all at once we got notice to get ready to go to Germany. Then we were taken to the train. Many were thanking God for letting us go. Not far from the Latvian border, police

came into the train and searched us all to see if we had money and gold. They took one family off the train, for what reason we never heard. All our baggage had to be inspected. When the train finally got through the Red Gate, we were so grateful to be out of Russia. The Latvian police came aboard and welcomed us. Nobody can understand what joy it was for us to be free. There was so much thankfulness that we were out of hell. Soon we came to Riga, where many people were waiting to welcome us. Then we were on our way to Germany but we had to go through the Polish corridor. We were told to be quiet and the blinds were shut.

Eventually we got to Hammerstein, Germany. When the train stopped, there were doctors, nurses and many others to help unload us. Before we were allowed in the buildings, we all had to go through quarantine; we were sent into big baths, ladies and children in one and men in another. All our clothes were disinfected for lice and sickness. All the woolen coats were ruined and shrunk. We were with hundreds of women in a



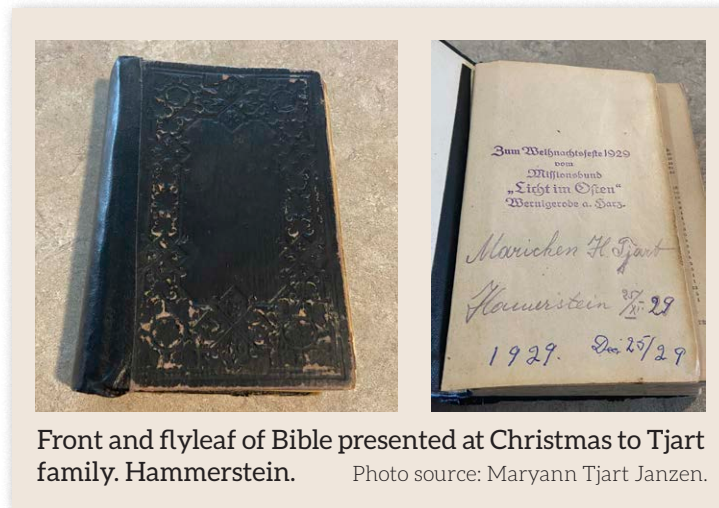
Tjart family in Mölln refugee centre (1930). Left to right back row: John, Mary, Henry, Katherine, Jacob. Neta Tjart Heidebrecht is at the far right, with her arm leaning on the shoulder of her brother Cornelius. Bottom row, left to right: Anna, mother Aganetha, Peter, father Heinrich, Cornelius.

warm room, naked and waiting for our clothes. I think it was December 5 when we arrived in Hammerstein, where we stayed for two months. I think Hammerstein must have been near the Polish border.

Then came Christmas in Germany and a big surprise awaited us. They took us to a big building and wonder of wonders, there were little Christmas trees by the hundreds. There were places at the tables for each family. Each of us got a present, a small Bible and other gifts such as candies. All the Christmas trees were full of lights. Germany had done such good work for us; we cannot thank them enough. Germany paid for our train tickets from Russia, gave us food, new blankets and clothes and never asked us to pay back a cent.

In February 1930 we were sent to Mölln, close to Hamburg, for three months. Every so often we had to be seen by the Canadian doctor. Only those with relatives there could go to Canada. And Canada accepted only the healthiest families. Others went to South America, Brazil and Paraguay. Those people had a much harder start than we did, even though in Canada the Depression had just started.

Mölln was a small town about 75 kilometres from Hamburg. It was very pretty; there were many trees and a nice cemetery. We often went for a walk. We did not shop because we had no money. The buildings were very nice with inside plumbing. We slept in beds, one set above the other. Our two-storey building was modern because it had been an officers' school. At first, we had



Front and flyleaf of Bible presented at Christmas to Tjart family. Hammerstein. Photo source: Maryann Tjart Janzen.

to live in a big room with two other families, but then more people left for Brazil so we got a room for ourselves.

In Mölln the food was better too. My older sister had to help in the kitchen and I worked in the kindergarten with the children. A lady from Germany was the head of it. I sure enjoyed that.

We had about 200 children every day, from age five and up. There were about twenty workers. We did not teach lessons but made many nice things from paper and also played games outside. This made the time pass faster for all of us.

Every time people left, we wished our time would come soon. And then one day we received the news that we could go to Canada. Germany gave us all a blanket as a remembrance. We will never forget all the kindness. Feeding and clothing so many people for five months and not demanding one cent from us.

On the day of departure, the train took us to Hamburg. That was a joyride. Father's eldest sister Anna Hamm and two children were in Alberta, Canada, and they had guaranteed for us. After a nice dinner, we were taken to the ship. Our baggage was loaded, then we were taken to our berths, I think down two storeys from the deck. We were four to a small cabin. We went up to the deck to see the departure; many people were waving us goodbye. Soon the shore was far away. We watched until they called us to the dining room. The meals were very good. We could not believe we were leaving Europe forever. We loved it in Germany but we wanted a home.

## The Paths of Fate: *Schicksalswege* 1929/1930

The refugee camp at Mölln housed at least one poet, Abram J. Loewen, who wrote about his experiences and those of his refugee Mennonite community during his stay there. His long poems were not to be published until the 1980s, when they appeared as *Schicksalswege* (Paths of Fate). The subtitle of this little book tells the story: "4 Gedichte, geschrieben im Jahre 1930 in Flüchtlingslager Mölln, Deutschland" (Four poems,

written in 1930 in the refugee camp in Mölln, Germany). On the title page, Abram Loewen adds that the book is self-published, belatedly, fifty-five years after the poems were written: "damit es nicht vergessen werde" (so it will not be forgotten).

The following is an excerpt from the second of the four, "Unser Dank" (Our Thanks).

Ach, die kanadische Regierung  
schloss vor uns ihre Türen zu.  
Wie grausam ist des Schicksals Führung!  
Wo nunmehr hin?—Wo winkt uns Ruh?—

Wir waren der Verzweiflung nahe.  
Schwarz wie die Nacht war's rings umher.  
Und was mit uns nun bald geschahe,  
das zu beschreiben—ach—ist schwer.

Gewaltsam wurden unsre Brüder  
nun haufenweis' zurückgeschickt.  
Viel Jammern gabs's, viel Klagelieder,  
und hoffnungslos man vor sich blickt.—

Es wurden die Familienväter  
verhaftet gar und eingesteckt,  
als wären's lauter Übeltäter  
und Mörder, die mit Blut gefleckt.  
Und Frau'n und Kinder, ohn' Erbarmen  
schickt man in Güterwagen fort,  
zurück nach Haus;—ach, dieser Armen  
harrt Not und bitt'res Elend dort!—

Doch unser Gott erhört Gebete.  
An Mitteln, Wegen, fehlt's ihm nicht.  
Als man von Herzen zu ihm flehte,  
da führt' er uns aus Nacht zum Licht.—

Er führt' uns aus mit mächt'gen Armen;  
befreit' uns aus dem schweren Joch.—  
Auf deutschem Boden gab's Erbarmen,  
denn deutsche Freundschaft lebt ja noch.

Das Deutsche Reich, die deutschen Brüder,  
willfahrten unsrer Einfahrt gern'.  
Drum sei'n geweiht des Dankes Lieder  
dem deutschen Volke nah und fern.—

Mit wieviel Treue, wieviel Güte,  
nahm man sich unser liebeich an!—  
Fromm, und mit kindlichem Gemüte,  
gab man viel Fleiss und Mühe dran  
uns unsern Aufenthalt in Deutschland  
zu richten ein so recht bequem,  
damit nach all der Trübsal weiland  
süß sei die Ruh' und angenehm.

Aus allen Orten, allen Enden,  
ob reich, ob arm, nach Möglichkeit  
Bracht' jeder deutsche Bürger Spenden.  
Man öffnet die Herzen weit.—

Oh, the Canadian government  
closed the doors to us.  
How dreadful the leading of fate!  
Where now? Where does peace await?

We were close to despair.  
Around us it was black as night.  
And how to tell what happened next,  
Oh, to describe that is so hard.

Our brothers were violently  
sent back in droves.  
So much misery, so many songs of sorrow,  
and we looked hopelessly into the future.

The fathers of our families  
were arrested and imprisoned,  
as though they were doers of evil  
or murderers splattered with blood.

And mercilessly, wives and children  
were shipped away in freight cars,  
sent back home—oh, for these victims  
only privation and misery loom.

But our God hears prayer.  
He doesn't lack ways and means.  
When we beseeched him from our hearts,  
he led us from darkness into light.

He led us out with his mighty arms,  
freed us of the heavy yoke.  
On German lands there was mercy,  
German friendship lives on.

The German state, the German brothers,  
gladly took us in.  
So let our songs of thanks  
be to the German people everywhere.

With what devotion, what goodness,  
they took us in so lovingly!  
Devoutly, and with childlike souls,  
they exerted all their powers

to arrange our stay in Germany  
in such wonderful comfort  
that after all our grief  
our rest there was pleasant and sweet.

From every spot, from every distance,  
whether rich, or poor, as they possibly could  
Every citizen brought aid.  
They opened wide their hearts.



Students participating in a pedagogy course in Slavgorod circa 1921. Abram J. Loewen recumbent in front row just ahead of instructor Mr. Franz Froese in white jacket.

Photo source: VOR VIELEN WIE EIN WUNDER by Abram J. Loewen, 1983, p. 81.

Für all das Gute sei gedanket  
dem deutschen Volk viel tausend mal,  
dess' Bruderliebe nimmer wanket!—  
Vergelt's Euch Gott, was Ihr getan!—

Heil sei dem Volk, das stets auf neue,  
all die Jahrhunderte hindurch,  
erfüllte Christenpflicht und Treue!—  
Hoch lebe Herr von Hindenburg!—

For all their goodness, let there be thanks  
a thousand times to the German people,  
whose brotherly love never wavered.  
God reward them for what they have done.

Praise to the people who again and again,  
throughout the centuries,  
fulfilled their Christian duty and loyalty!  
Praise to Herr von Hindenburg!

Loewen, Abram J. *Schicksalswege 1929/1930*. Steinbach, MB: Derksen Printers, 1985, pp. 18-20.

## A SURVIVAL STORY

# Abram & Margaretha (Eitzen) Driedger Family

■ By David F. Loewen

*The extended Eitzen family had been financially secure for most of their years in Russia, with few exceptions. This, most likely, played a role in delaying their decision to emigrate in the mid-1920s until it was too late. Of my grandmother's family, she was the only one of eight siblings who managed to emigrate; for the others, delay cost them that opportunity, resulting in a life of hardship and death. This is an account of my grandmother's youngest sister, Margaretha Eitzen Driedger, and her family. It is based on family memoirs, notes, correspondence received from them in the 1920s and 1930s, and current correspondence with grandchildren living in Germany, Alberta, and Ontario.*



Abram and Margaretha (Eitzen) Driedger, 1900.

**M**aria and Margaretha Eitzen were the youngest in the Eitzen family. Maria was married to Abraham J. Loewen and Margaretha, to Abram Driedger. The Driedgers and Loewens had both lived in the village of Pretoria, Orenburg Colony, in the Ural Mountains, from the first years of its establishment at

the turn of the century. In 1926, Abraham and Maria (Eitzen) Loewen joined the Dyck party and emigrated to Canada, encouraging Abram Driedger to emigrate with his family as well, but the latter was convinced that the situation in Russia would improve. He was wrong; conditions became increasingly worse. In



1929, after he had been arrested and released shortly thereafter, he informed his family, “It’s time!” They were farming a ninety-hectare piece of land and had a comfortable lifestyle that they walked away from—the house, the farm, and the livestock—and departed for Moscow, together with their children, Heinrich and Helena (Driedger) Vogt, Johann, Peter and Margaretha (Driedger) Sawatzky, Maria, Anna, Aganetha, Daniel, Peter, and Henry, to emigrate from there to Canada. Specific mention of their oldest daughter Sara (and Gerhard) Koslowsky and family of five is not included; however, a letter from the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization addressed to my grandfather, Abraham Loewen, in Alberta, includes them as well:

9 November 1929

Re: Abram Driedger, Peter Franz Sawatzky,  
Heinrich Peter Vogt, Gerhard Heinrich Koslowsky  
To: Abraham J. Loewen, Calgary, Alta.

Dear Sir:

*We have correctly received your letter on behalf of your relatives in Moscow. In response to the same, we would like to inform you of the following:*

*We have received news that the Soviet government would like to deport the refugees in Moscow from there as soon as possible. The question of whether these refugees can enter Canada has not yet been answered, as the Immigration Authorities in Canada have made new regulations that significantly complicate the immigration of destitute immigrants. Aelt. [Elder] Toews has travelled to Ottawa to obtain, if possible, the entry permit for the refugees. We hope that the matter can be settled in a good way.*

*For the time being, no steps are required on your part. We hope for your support in the accommodation of the people if it succeeds in bringing them over.*

Greetings,

Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization

### At the gates of Moscow

The Driedger family joined thousands of other hopeful Mennonite emigrants in Moscow. The 1929 attempted flight by several thousand Mennonites was in response to a successful application by some settlers from Siberia. Thousands had descended on the Moscow suburbs in a



Back: L-R: Johann, Maria, Aganetha, Anna. Front: Peter, Margaretha, Heinrich, Abram, Daniel, ca. 1929.

desperate attempt to gain permission to emigrate. Faced with international headlines that embarrassed the Soviet government, the authorities responded by trying to eliminate this source of embarrassment as quickly as possible. The result was an enforced deportation and “relocation” to eastern Siberia or return home, resulting in family separations and the deaths of large numbers of children.\* The suffering was compounded by the election of a new government in Canada and the Great Depression with its high unemployment level, such that emigration to Canada became very difficult, if not impossible.

In Moscow, the Driedger family members were all accommodated in one house, but after a short time, the Peter and Margaretha Sawatzky family moved to another house, due to the cramped quarters (a momentous decision). Shortly thereafter, Mr. Unger (name intentionally deleted), also from Pretoria, arrived in Moscow and reported the Vogt and Driedger families to the local militia as *kulaks* (rich landowners). Abram Driedger and Heinrich Vogt were immediately arrested. Heinrich Vogt was released after a short time; however, Abram Driedger was transferred to Orenburg and sentenced to death by firing squad. The case against him was reopened and the sentence replaced with a ten-year term of imprisonment. After sentencing, Abram was taken by train to Kotlas and from there transferred, on foot, to the camp at Tyla-Yu (Komi ASSR; Autonomous

\* See John B. Toews, *Lost Fatherland: The Story of the Mennonite Emigration from Soviet Russia: 1921-1927*, Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1967.

Soviet Socialist Republic), where, according to his death certificate, he died of pneumonia in 1933. Apart from his oldest son, Abram, who had visited him in Kotlas, the family never saw him again.

The Driedger and Vogt families, along with Margaretha and the other children, were repatriated to Pretoria in December 1929. Their children, Peter and Margaretha Sawatzky, with son, were fortunate to be among the few able to emigrate. Mr. Unger managed to emigrate to Canada and sometime later wrote a letter to Margaretha Driedger asking forgiveness for reporting her husband to the authorities.

### Back “home”

Margaretha and her children returned to a different Pretoria than the one they had left. A collective farm was established in early 1930, and the Driedger family was dispossessed of their land and not taken into the collective farm because of their designated status as former members of the *kulak* class.

Their situation appeared to be rather bleak, based on a letter of March 7, 1930, sent by Margaretha to her sister Maria Loewen in Canada:

*I thought that our situation would improve, because the kolkhoz promised that from March 1, bread allocations would be increased. And so we wait from one day to another and we do not know what to do. For January and February, there has been no pay; now we are told we will have to wait until April. We need to buy clothes for Daniel and Peter; they usually walk with wet feet and lack clothes. The wages amount to 40 rubles, and flour costs over 200 rubles. So we decided to appeal to you to inform our relatives.*

*If we had not had the 15 dollars you sent, we would have had to give our last, as many already have—sold the last blanket. And we would like to keep a few more blankets; we have nothing else; we are rid of everything.*

*The day is so long; the boys wanted to give up on work. In the morning a small piece of bread and then wait until evening, and then I take four small milk portions, mix in some flour, and cook soup—that is our daily food.*

*It is a hard life. And on top of that, there is still no news from Abram [her husband]; no sign of life for four months already. I am afraid that he has been*

*taken away from us. How hard it will be for me to be divorced without talking to him. If he is really going to be gone for another year, it will be the same as being buried alive.*

*Today is March 8; the letter will be sent today when Johann goes to buy something [food]. Anna received 58 rubles; our supplies are all gone. Today, if there is no bread, we will fast.*

(Over the years, Abraham and Maria Loewen sent many food parcels and cash to their siblings in the Soviet Union.)

The Driedger family and four other families from the village were allocated a total of ten hectares of land, along with four horses. These five families produced a better harvest in 1930, on their ten hectares of land, than the collective farm with all of its land (Peter Driedger’s memoirs). Of course, this was not congruent with the state image of the “successful” collective farm. Therefore, it was decided to banish these families from the village.

In the meantime, Johann Driedger had learned that he was to be arrested as the son of a *kulak*. He fled the village to Bulungar, District of Samarkand, to his cousin, Jacob Loewen. (Jacob, the son of Abraham and Maria Loewen, had voluntarily remained in the Soviet Union to complete his studies.) Johann eventually moved to Dnepropetrovsk, where he found work. In 1937, he fell victim to the infamous purge of 1937-38 and was sentenced to ten years in prison, allegedly for counter-revolutionary activities. He was released in 1948, and was reunited with his mother and siblings in Syktyvkar,



L-R: Heinrich Vogt, Margaretha Driedger & children: Heinrich, Anna, Johann, Daniel, & Peter, ca. 1933.

Komi ASSR, where he lived out the remainder of his life, and where he died in 1971.

### Another flight and a family breakup

Margaretha Driedger, with her youngest children (Aganetha, Daniel, Peter and Heinrich), ages seven to eighteen, were exiled in March 1931, following Abram's arrest, via Chelyabinsk, Munrich, and Sabolotnoe to the forest (Department 48), where they were employed in firewood production. Through correspondence with her daughter Helena Vogt, she described the difficult living situation in the labour camp. In response, her son-in-law Heinrich Vogt travelled to the camp and managed to get permission to take the minor children out of the camp. He forged the document, however, and in December 1931, he took Margaretha and her three youngest back to Pretoria. After a few days they had to flee again, as it became known that the family was to be returned to the labour camp. Heinrich Vogt took Margaretha Driedger and children to Samarkand, where they arrived at the end of December 1931. After another twelve days' travel, they arrived in Sovchos, Bulungar, where son Johann Driedger was already living. The Vogt family also joined them in Bulungar in 1932.

Aganetha Driedger fled the labour camp with Willi Reimer, who had come for her, following which they were married on July 11, 1931 (a signed document from a civic official formalized marriages). Following the marriage, they moved to Khortitsa, Ukraine. In May 1933, Aganetha and Willi Reimer travelled to Bulungar to visit Margaretha and the family. On their return, they took the two youngest brothers, Peter and Heinrich (Henry) Driedger with them. Conditions were very harsh and there was fear that the two young boys might not survive, since their mother could not support them. It was decided that their best hope was to live with their older sister Aganetha in Ukraine. It had been very difficult for their mother to see her two youngest boys leave, but they might have starved had they stayed with her.

The next we hear about Margaretha Driedger comes via a letter written to sister Maria (Eitzen) Loewen in Alberta, April 1935:

*He [son-in-law Heinrich Vogt] was home for one day and then he returned to the hospital. Ten days have passed since Lena wrote, and I've received no update. How I yearn to be there, but I can't travel there; I*

*too am not well. My body has ached; I am anemic, and nothing appears to help. I have now received some other medicine and if it does not help, I am to have an operation as well, and where will I leave the children?*

*Isn't that sad news? Oh, how difficult such news is for a mother's heart, and now also this sad news about Greta [daughter in Alberta]. I would love to visit everyone and help, but too far away. But I remember you daily in my prayers. That's why you do not fail either; everyone has their cross to carry. Who would have thought five years ago that we would experience such life? Often one was tired of all the worries and heavy thoughts. We don't need to worry ourselves any longer about father [her husband, Abram], but the deep pain will never heal.*

*I am constantly wondering each day, what day is it actually? And it always worries me that he [youngest son, Henry] had to be on his own so early in his life. My hair is becoming grey, and the children are far away and sick. I haven't seen Henry for two years; there he can satisfy his hunger which we could not offer him here. If it's the Lord's will, he will come for a visit this summer. There is a prospect of a good harvest if the Lord gives His blessing to it.*

*It is now 2 am. Johann will be going to town in the morning and this letter has to be ready. I had to be nimble, that's why it got so late. The night is long enough for me. When I lie down, my arm aches a lot more, and my body gets stiff, and my right hand loses feeling. When I wake up during the night, I have to rub my hand until the feeling returns. I am a worn-out creature. Often, yes often, I am tormented, but the children are at work, and I too want to earn my keep at their place.*

Shortly after sending this letter, she and all family members living in Bulungar moved to Khortitsa, where she was reunited with her two youngest sons. Time passed without further incidents, and marriages took place, and the individual families grew.



Daniel, Peter, Abram & Johann, ca. 1935.

## World War II: some make it out, others are turned back

In 1943, many Mennonites evacuated with the retreating German army. Among them were members of the extended Driedger family. Heinrich and Helena (Driedger) Vogt evacuated to Newitten. Following that, they lived in Litzmannstadt, Berlin, Hamburg, and finally Schleswig-Holstein. From here, they tried to emigrate to Canada. Unfortunately, they fell into the hands of the Russian army. They were arrested and sent back to Soviet Russia in August 1945. Heinrich died in Barnaul, Siberia, in 1949. Helena died in Barnaul, Siberia, in 1989. They had seven children, only two of whom lived into adulthood.

Anna Driedger married Abram Abrams in 1937, following the death of her first husband, Hans Friesen. In August 1941, Abram was drafted into the so-called *Trudarmii* (labour army) by the Soviet authorities and that was the last the family saw of him. He died in exile, in 1968, in Dzhambul, Kazakhstan. Immediately following Abram's "enlistment," Anna moved with her two sons, Heinrich and Willi, to Khortitsa, Zaporozhye, where her mother, Margaretha Eitzen Driedger, sister Aganetha Driedger Reimer, and her brother Peter Driedger also lived with their families. At that time

these areas were declared German territories and they were given German citizenship. On October 1, 1943, together with the retreating German army, they were evacuated to Germany.

Like their siblings the Vogts, they fell into the hands of the Russian army and were sent back to the Soviet Union. Willi Abrams, who was only five years old at the time, remembers very little; only fragments of memories linger, especially memories of the journey to Russia in cattle cars, a picture of a stay in a vegetable warehouse in Aikino, and an open fire at the end of the camp where people sat and threw lice from their shirts into the flames. They arrived in Syktyvkar, Komi ASSR, in the winter of 1946.

Here, he and his brother Heinrich attended school and learned the Russian language. Following completion of grade school, the two brothers were conscripted into the Soviet army, where they served for three years (1960-1963). Willi pursued further studies in Kyiv for the next five years. In 1968, he returned to Syktyvkar, where he met Margarete Holzmann one year later; they married, and added two sons to their family: Andreas (1970) and Eduard (1973).

Henry, the youngest of Abram and Margaretha

Driedger, was called up by the Germany army after they arrived in Khortitsa in 1941. In December 1943, he was sent to Berlin for training as an interpreter, and in 1944, he was assigned to a unit that was still in the Crimea. The unit was a mountain Caucasian regiment of Russians, and he was their interpreter. Following that, he was sent to the South of France, where he was taken prisoner by partisans on August 22, 1944, and found himself in Prison Camp 71 in Castres (Department of Tarn).

Henry was released in June 1946, and sent to Bad Kreuznach, Germany. He reported to the employment office and, because he was homeless, they sent him to Bayreuth. Near Bayreuth, in the village of Forkendorf, he found work with a farmer, with whom he maintained a life-long friendship.

His first objective had been to



Abram Abrams and Anna Driedger Wedding, 1937.

Standing, L-R: Aganetha Driedger Reimer, Willi Reimer, Helena Driedger Vogt, Heinrich Vogt, Johann Driedger, Sara Koslowsky Driedger, Daniel Driedger. Middle: Abram Driedger, Tassja Serdjuk Driedger, Margaretha Eitzen Driedger, Frida Reimer, Anna Driedger Abrams, Abram Abrams. Front: Erika Driedger, Katharina Koslowsky, Eduard Reimer, Heinrich Driedger, Isolda Driedger.

find his mother, Margaretha, who was supposed to be in the East Occupation Zone. He never did find her. Unknown to him, she, like the others, had fallen into the hands of the Russian forces and sent back to a work camp setting in eastern Soviet Union. Meanwhile, Heinrich found work for a timber company in Germany in 1947, and in 1948, crossed the border into the English Occupation Zone, where he found work at a furniture factory in Kumm, Westfalen.

In June 1948, Henry emigrated to Alberta, Canada, married in 1950, and moved to Leamington, Ontario, where he raised a family and lived out his life. He sponsored the emigration to Canada of his older sister, Anna Driedger Abrams, and her family in 1977. Henry died in 1996, at the age of seventy-one, and Susanna in 2023, in Leamington, Ontario.



Back: Anna Driedger Abrams, Helena Driedger Vogt, Willi Abrams, Henry Driedger. Front: Heinrich Abrams, Heinrich Vogt, Helene Vogt, Margaretha Eitzen Driedger, Heinrich Vogt, ca. 1944.

In 1946, Margaretha Driedger, Peter Driedger, wife Helene, son Helmut, and mother-in-law Anna Driedger Abrams, with children Heinrich and Willi, and Aganetha Driedger Reimer, with her children Frieda, Eduard, and Nina, all lived together in a house in Paris District, Syktyvkar.

At the end of that year, Anna Abrams moved into a flat in another part of Syktyvkar and lived there with her mother, Margaretha, and children. In 1948, Johann Driedger was released from prison, and came to live with his mother. Daniel Driedger joined them in

1955. They lived in one room until 1964, when Daniel Driedger married and moved in with Gerda Strasser and her daughter Emma. Margaretha Eitzen Driedger died here in 1967.

### A scattered family

Beginning in 1972, the Abrams family applied twice annually to emigrate to Canada; Germany was not an option at that time. According to Soviet regulations at that juncture, in exceptional cases, only those who had direct relatives were allowed to emigrate abroad (according to the so-called family reunification programme). They had no relatives in Germany, so their uncle in Canada (Henry) was allowed to apply for a visa for his sister and her children. For five years they applied for an exit visa every six months. Again and again they received refusals.

Then, in October 1977, they finally received permission to emigrate to Canada—Anna Driedger Abrams and her children and grandchildren, Willi's family and Heinrich's family. On December 17, 1977, they left Syktyvkar and on 23 December 1977, their uncle Henry Driedger picked them up at Windsor Airport, Ontario.

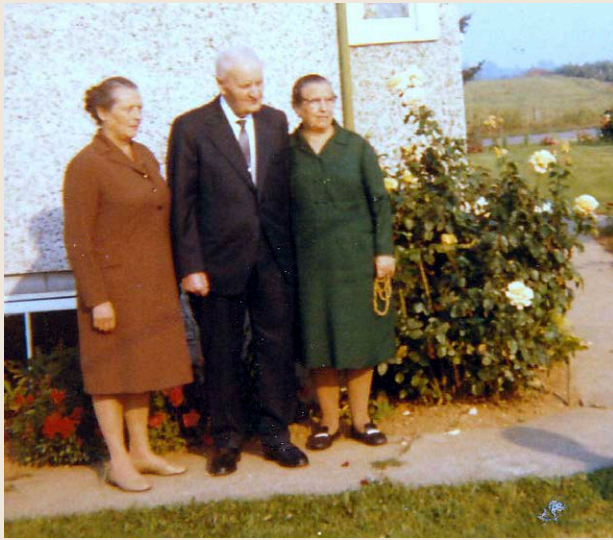
After three and a half months in Canada, the two sons and their spouses felt that Germany would be a better fit, due primarily to the language barrier. Anna would dearly have loved to stay, because two of her siblings lived in Canada, and the grandchildren were adapting well to their new school surroundings. Ultimately, Anna was unable to persuade her sons to stay longer, and since she had no interest in being separated from her family, on April 8, 1978, they left Canada, and arrived in

Germany as *Aussiedler*—repatriated Russian Germans. Henry was devastated to see them leave. Anna died in Hildesheim, Germany, in 1990.

Sara Driedger Koslowsky, the oldest in the family, and Gerhard Koslowsky were married in 1920. Gerhard died in a prison work camp at the age of forty-five in 1943. Sara died in 1983, at age eighty-one, in Issyk, USSR. They had five children; their second oldest, Elsa, born in 1923, is the only one to have emigrated to Canada, and is still living in Alberta (2021). She was working in Nikopol in 1943, and evacuated to Germany with



Margaretha Eitzen Driedger's funeral, 1967.



Anna Abrams & Anganetha Reimer visited their siblings, Margaretha and Henry in Canada in the mid-1970s. They also were able to see their Uncle Abraham J. Loewen, who by now had reached the age of 100.



Anna, Daniel, Abram, Peter, Aganetha, Johann Margaretha Eitzen Driedger, sitting, ca. 1965.

the retreating German army, from where she emigrated to Canada. Their youngest, Katharina, eventually emigrated to Germany, where she died in 2016, in the city of Stolzenau.

Abram Driedger lived most of his life in Karaganda, where he raised his family of two. When his cousin Martin Loewen (my father) visited his brother Jakob in Samarkand in 1967, Abram travelled to meet his cousin there. Abram died in Karaganda in 1990.

Peter and Margaretha Driedger Sawatzky managed to exit Moscow in 1929, and arrived in Alberta in February 1930, where their uncle and aunt, Abraham and Maria (Eitzen) Loewen and family were living, having arrived in 1926. Their decision to leave the other family members and move into another house in Moscow, while waiting for permission to emigrate in 1929, may have been the critical decision that spared them the same fate as their parents and siblings. Margaretha and Peter raised a family of six and celebrated their golden wedding in 1979; Margaretha died the next year and Peter, in 1994.

Maria Driedger married Kornelius Matthies in January 1931, and moved out of the parental home, thus escaping banishment. Little is known about them, other than that Kornelius and Maria died in Shdanovka, Orenburg: he in 1943, and she in 1954, having been struck by lightning. They had three children.

Aganetha Driedger Reimer was also relocated to Syktyvkar with the other family members following the war. Willi Reimer, who had been conscripted into the army, had died in battle in 1945. Aganetha and her three children managed to eventually emigrate to Germany, where she died in 2002.

Daniel Driedger and his young family, like so many others, evacuated Ukraine with the retreating German army in 1943. Daniel was forcibly taken by the Soviet army and sent to Siberia. Meanwhile, his wife and two children eventually managed to emigrate to Canada. Daniel joined his mother and family in Syktyvkar in 1955, where they lived in one room—Margaretha (mother), Johann, Daniel, and Anna with her two sons, Heinrich and Willi Abrams. Daniel's first wife, Maria, died in Winnipeg in 1963. Daniel married Gerda Strasser in Syktyvkar in 1964; she brought a daughter, Emma, into the marriage. In 1973, Daniel and Gerda emigrated to Winnipeg, Manitoba, where Daniel died the next year. Gerda moved to Germany to be closer to her family.

Peter Driedger had been employed as a lathe operator in Khortitsa during the German occupation. This shop supplied the Luftwaffe with spare parts. In 1943, he, his

wife, son, and mother, Margaretha Driedger, evacuated to Germany with the retreating Germany army. As the Soviet forces moved ever closer, his workshop and its employees were moved to Austria. At the end of 1945, Peter Driedger returned to Germany, where he learned that his mother and relatives had been deported to Russia, and, through friends, he learned of their location. He reported to the relevant authorities that he wanted to join his family. However, he was sent to Novosibirsk as a specialist. Approximately three months later, he received permission to join his family, arriving in Syktyvkar in 1946. Peter had three marriages and four children. He eventually managed to emigrate to Germany, from where he visited his brother Henry in Ontario on numerous occasions. He died in Hildesheim, Germany, in 2009.

Abram and Margaretha Driedger's decision not to emigrate in 1926 was a costly one for them, and for their

family. Nevertheless, their children and families persevered and, often against the odds, survived.

*Photos are from Willi Abrams' and Robert Driedger's personal collections.*

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## Mennonite Ethnic Foods: Summer Borscht

■ By Robert Martens

*Suaromp: eene Plaunt em Goaden met suare Blāde dee en Sommaborscht jebrukt woat* (a garden plant with sour leaves that is used in summer borscht: sorrel). (Plautdietsch Lexikon)

Summa Borscht: A borscht variant containing sorrel that is served in summer or by heathens in winter. (The Unger Review)

**S**orrel soup: not an invention of Mennonites, but they have made it their own. After a fashion, that is. “Green borscht,” as it is often called in Eastern Europe to distinguish it from reddish beet borscht, is also “known in Ashkenazi Jewish, Belarusian, Estonian, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Rumanian, Armenian, Polish, Russian, and [of course] Ukrainian cuisines” (“Sorrel soup” 1). It’s well known that Mennonites picked up a lot of recipes from their Ukrainian neighbours when they lived in “South Russia,” and invariably Mennonites would tweak what they were given and call it Mennonite cuisine.

Sorrel: the word is derived, probably, from the Old French words *surele* or *sur*, meaning “sour.” Then there are the Old English *sūre*, Icelandic *súra*, and Dutch *zuring*. (One might also connect the modern German



A bowl of *Sommaborscht* and some *Zwieback* from the MHM kitchen.

Photo credit: Julia M. Toews.

word, *sauer*.) Sour-soup? But Wikipedia points out that “the sorrel-sour taste may disappear when sour cream is added, as the oxalic acid reacts with calcium and casein” (“Sorrel soup”)—readers may look up those terms if they are curious.

Not everyone loves summer borscht. (How could they not?) Jost Voth writes, “Usually these tart, sometimes wild-tasting greens were loved by the adults and staunchly avoided (when possible) by the children” (185). There seems to be sharp disagreement on this. A writer on the website *Momsmish—Crazy easy cooking!*

swears that “Sorrel soup is loved by kids and adults alike. Our sons went to visit their grandmother recently and they begged her to make it for their lunch every day” (“Quick”).

But let’s go to the expert, Norma Jost Voth, who in 1990 published *Mennonite Foods and Folkways*, distributed by Good Books, located in the oddly named village of Intercourse, Pennsylvania. She knows her Mennonite cooking: “During pioneer days wild greens were considered a necessity in the spring diet. After the long winter, they were like a tonic” (185). No doubt. Even a sour weed would taste good after winter blizzards. Jost Voth also points out that summer borscht is known in Plautdietsch by many names: “*Süaromps*-(sorrel) *borscht* [notice the variation even in spelling]; *Jreen*-(green) *borscht*; *Somma*-(summer) *borscht* [now that’s sounding more familiar]; *Krüt*-(weed) *borscht*; and *Beetabläde*-(beet leaves) *borscht*” (186). One contributor to the book adds another twist: “We sometimes made *Blinja Sommaborscht* when mother didn’t have sorrel” (187). Blind soup—mock soup.

And then a testimony from someone oblivious to summer borscht—she’d never heard of it—but she quickly became a convert: “This borscht was described as ‘a soup by many names’ in the *Mennonite Foods and Folkways from South Russia* by Norma Jost Voth. Reading the recipes in this book, one old recipe reads ‘a grocery sackful of greens,’ so the amount of greens in this soup may vary. I grew up in a Mennonite home but I can’t remember ever having this soup. It was later on in life after moving to Winnipeg I got to taste this soup and thought it rather interesting. I mentioned it to Dad one day and he exclaimed, ‘Weed Soup?!’ I guess that is why we never had it at home” (Sharon).

## Chinese Mennonite Brethren Congregations in the Fraser Valley

■ By Robert Martens

*Although an increasingly large number of Chinese immigrants are starting to arrive in Canada as baptized Christians ... most Chinese newcomers have been converting to the Christian faith after settling in Metro. They often do so after experiencing “culture shock” and an “identity crisis” in their newly adopted country... (Todd, “Vancouver’s Chinese” 3)*

**Summer Borscht:** *Food.com* <https://mennonechiek-itchen.com/index.php/2017/11/15/sommer-borscht/>

Serves 10

A sour soup made with Farmer Sausage/Ham, Potatoes, and Sorel Leaves (*zurum*)

Ingredients

7 qt (28 cups) Water

8 cups Potatoes

1 ring Farmer Sausage/Ham (chopped)

2 Onions (chopped)

8 cups Sorel Leaves (*zurum*) (chopped)

2 cups Dill

1/4 cup Parsley

Salt and Pepper to taste

Sour Cream

Put water, ham bone, onions and 1 tsp of salt into a pot and boil for 2 hours. After 2 hours, remove the ham bone, add the farmer sausage or ham and continue to cook for another 30 minutes. During this time, peel and chop your potatoes. Add the potatoes and cook for about 10 minutes. Add the sorel leaves (*zurum*), dill and parsley and continue to cook until the potatoes are done. Taste your broth. Add salt and pepper to taste, and more sorel (*zurum*) if you feel like your soup needs it. Serve and add sour cream to individual bowls. Enjoy!

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Henry G. and Sara Classen.

Photo source: GAMEO.

**D**uring much of its history, Canada has been a hostile setting for Chinese immigrants. Chinese first arrived in British Columbia during the gold rush of the 1850s,



and were accepted as long as they seemed to benefit the new European settler economy. Chinese labour was also “welcomed” during the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway in the 1880s; seeming to their employers to be more dispensable than White workers, they often performed the more dangerous tasks like dynamiting, and many were killed on the job.

And then they became economically too successful in the eyes of the majority European population. The racist backlash struck suddenly and powerfully, and lasted for a long time. Already in 1875, Chinese-Canadians were denied the vote in British Columbia. A head tax was imposed on every Chinese immigrant in 1885. Then, in the early 1900s, the Asiatic Exclusion League was established to prevent Asian immigration. White race riots took place, most notably in Vancouver. In 1923 Ottawa passed the *Chinese Immigration Act*, which shut the door to immigration to any “persons of Chinese origin or descent” (Martens 306). The Act was not rescinded until 1947.

Meanwhile, Methodists and Presbyterians were reaching out to Chinese immigrants and planting new ethnic Chinese congregations. Methodists started a mission school in Victoria in 1876. In 1892, the Presbyterians founded the Victoria Chinese Presbyterian Church, which is still active today.

### **Mennonite Brethren outreach**

Mennonite church-planting started much later. In 1950 Henry G. Classen was authorized by the BC Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches to organize street meetings in Vancouver. Some fourteen years later Classen was involved in the establishment in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside of the Pacific Grace Mission Chapel. Services were held both in English and German. But since the Chapel was located near Chinatown, Chinese-Canadians began attending, and by 1973 the first Cantonese-language worship service was held there.

Henry Classen has been described as “a visionary with a generous mind and a loving heart” (Lam 46). He recommended dissolving the Pacific Grace English-speaking congregation and transferring the church property to their Chinese-Canadian counterparts for \$1.00. The proposal was enthusiastically received by the MB Conference. In 1977 the Cantonese-speaking Pacific Grace Mission Church was officially founded; its name

was later changed to Pacific Grace Mennonite Brethren Church. Though some English-language speakers stayed temporarily with the new congregation to help with tasks such as teaching Sunday school, Pacific Grace soon flourished on its own—despite several years of difficulty with finding permanent pastors.

### **Astonishing years of growth**

A second church, Bethel Chinese Christian MB Church, was soon established in Vancouver. Both Pacific Grace and Bethel became active participants in a church-planting campaign launched by the MB Canadian Board of Evangelism in the 1980s. Pacific Grace commissioned their pastor and 150 members to found Burnaby Pacific Grace Church in 1990. Three years later, Port Moody Pacific Grace MB Church was started. Ethnic Chinese Mennonite Brethren church growth took off, seemingly organically. By 2018 there were sixteen Chinese-Canadian MB churches in the Greater Vancouver area. Even more remarkably, Pacific Grace MB Church sent missionaries to Venezuela in the late 1980s, establishing two congregations there in 1991: Iglesia Evangélica China Gracia de Dios (Evangelical Chinese Grace of God Church) in Caracas; and Iglesia Evangélica China La Cruz (Evangelical Chinese Church of the Cross) in Puerto la Cruz, east of Caracas.

The rapid growth in BC occurred for various reasons. Certainly, massive immigration was a primary cause. During the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, 166,000 individuals left Hong Kong to settle in Vancouver. A major incentive for leaving home was, first, mistrust of the authorities in Beijing after the massacre in Tiananmen Square in 1989; and second, the pending turnover from British colonial rule to mainland Chinese administration in 1997. Another wave of immigration into BC occurred after 1999, this time by Mandarin-speakers from the Chinese mainland—42,000 in 2005 alone.

Many of these immigrants, about thirty percent of them, converted to Christianity upon arrival. Journalist Douglas Todd suggests that ethnic Chinese congregations provided a sense of community in a strange land and was a way to protect Chinese identity. He also quotes Li Yu, an Asiatic studies instructor at Langara College: “It is very easy for Chinese Canadians to identify with such Protestant values as industry, frugality, patience, perseverance, emphasis on family and aspiration for success, because these values are ...

traditional Confucian values” (Todd, “Vancouver’s Chinese” 5).

All this, however, does not in the least diminish the hard and meticulous church-planting work accomplished by Chinese-Canadian Mennonite Brethren. Neighbours were contacted; invitations were offered; congregations ensured that newcomers were welcome.

### Shared challenges

Chinese-Canadian Mennonites have banded together for religious reasons, of course, but cultural forces play a major role: “they wish to strengthen their original Chinese identity” (Todd, qtd. in Lam 47). Pain and trauma are a major motivational factor in creating a safe group identity, as Russian Mennonite refugees well knew. Today, “White” North American Mennonites, whose churches originally were ethnic and exclusivist, occupy the vast spectrum from insular groups to near-total assimilation to the mainstream. Some might empathize (nostalgically?) with the Chinese MB fondness for churches determined by ethnicity. Some might admire congregations that stand like a fortress against assimilationist and secularist values. Most White Mennonites have long ago decided, however, on a balancing act: to stand firm on their Christian values while integrating with the mainstream. (It should be noted that Mennonite churches have become increasingly diverse in ethnicity, race, and culture.)

Professor Li Yu is quoted as saying, “Many Chinese churches in Vancouver are very much like living in a Chinese society.... The Chinese churches strengthen people’s original identity, not their Canadian identity. Whether that is good or not depends on how you see it” (Todd, “Vancouver’s Chinese” 6). Douglas Todd also observes that Chinese Christians possess an independent set of values that are important to them, and distinguish them from mainstream Canadians. “There are some things about the live-and-let-live West Coast culture that many Chinese Christians vehemently oppose. ‘Chinese Christians strongly criticize some socially liberal values in Canadian society, especially on such



South Vancouver Pacific MB church.  
Photo source: [www.svpgmbc.org](http://www.svpgmbc.org).

matters as family or marriage,’ Yu writes” (Todd, “Vancouver’s Chinese” 5). Many White Mennonites will feel the same affinity for these principles.

Chinese-Canadian Mennonite Brethren pastors, writes Paul Lam of Burnaby Pacific Grace Church, have only modest knowledge of Anabaptist-Mennonite values and history. An informal survey of Chinese-Canadian MB pastors in 2018 concluded that “a Mennonite identity was not very noticeable.” Strangely, “the Chinese-speaking pastors who were immigrants tended to rate higher [in their knowledge of the Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage] than their English-speaking counterparts who were mostly Canadian-born or Canadian-raised Chinese”

(Lam 48). Lam lists several reasons for this lack of a distinct Anabaptist-Mennonite identity: the issue was not emphasized when the church was joined to the MB Conference; Chinese-Canadian churches have not generally sent delegates to provincial or national Mennonite gatherings; and almost all Chinese-speaking pastors were trained in a different denomination. Pastors of Mennonite churches who come from different theological backgrounds are also not unusual in White churches. Once again, some degree of empathy might be possible.

Finally, retaining the young in Chinese-speaking churches, just as in other Mennonite churches, has become a demanding problem, at times urgent. In an effort to speak to the new generations, most Chinese MB congregations conduct services in two (or three)



Li Yu.

Photo source: Langara College website

languages: Cantonese/Mandarin and English. Lam writes, “The youth leave the church in substantial numbers when they enter university.... [They] do not feel obligated to continue the mission started by their parents’ generation” (49-50).

Nevertheless, Lam describes Chinese MB congregations as increasingly mature and active in the larger Mennonite community. “Today, the term ‘Chinese Mennonites’ is no longer an incongruous name. Rather, it is a term that proclaims the ‘Pacific Grace’ of God for a specific immigrant group; also, it is a term that expresses spiritual unity as well as cultural diversity of the Canadian MB family” (50).

## Honouring BC Mennonites

### Helen Grace Lescheid: Suffering and Faith (1936-2020)

■ By Robert Martens

Already as a young girl, Helen Lescheid had endured more than most. She was part of the Mennonite refugee stream that retreated with the German forces from Ukraine in 1943 to 1945, and was perhaps lastingly wounded by that experience. Her troubles did not stop after her family was able to immigrate to Canada. Helen, though, was a writer, and she learned in mid-life to expurgate her sufferings by writing them down, at the same time helping her readers who might be in pain.

Helen, the oldest of four children, was born to Isaak and Aganetha (Agnes) Dyck Loewen on 11 July 1936. All four children were born in Neuendorf, Chortitza, Ukraine, during a time in Soviet history marked by totalitarianism, hunger, and war. Isaak’s father was taken by the authorities and “disappeared.” In 1935, reportedly one day before churches were forcibly closed, Isaak and Aganetha married in Neuendorf. Then in 1941 the Germans invaded the USSR, and Isaak, who spoke Ukrainian, Russian and German, was compelled to work for the army of the Third Reich as an interpreter. (He was renamed “Fritz” by the Germans—“Isaak” surely sounded too Jewish.) Sometime in 1943 he went missing in action, leaving Aganetha alone with their four children.

Staying in the Soviet Union would have meant poverty, labour camps, or death. Mennonites gratefully retreated to Europe in 1943 under the protection of

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German forces, and Aganetha Loewen and her family were among them. They travelled in open wagons and, after an inexpressibly difficult time, arrived in the Warthegau, in German-occupied Poland, then fled from there to Germany itself.

In 1949, the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) helped the Loewen family immigrate to the Canadian prairies.

Canada was a haven to immigrants but life wasn’t easy. Daughter Elizabeth Lescheid Warnock writes, “Helen was only thirteen and just beginning the awkward teenage years when she began her life in Canada. She couldn’t speak English, looked very different than other girls with her braided, long blonde hair and unfashionable clothing.... It is possible she found solace in books which is probably why, years later, she became an accomplished author” (1). Helen finished high school and went on to study at Briercrest Bible College in Caronport, Saskatchewan, where she met William (Bill) Lescheid. The couple married in 1962.

Helen and Bill had their first two children, Esther



Helen Grace Lescheid.  
Photo source: GAMEO.

and David, while she was training as a nurse at Vancouver General Hospital. The Lescheids were living a life of dedication. They joined the Africa Inland Mission in 1966, and worked in Kenya, Helen as a nurse at a medical clinic, and Bill, as a schoolmaster. Daughter Elizabeth was born there. In 1969, they returned to Canada, choosing to live in Clearbrook, where Helen's mother had settled. Here Helen worked at Menno Home/Hospital, while bringing two more children, Catherine and Jonathan, into the world.

Bill Lescheid encouraged his wife to work with words, since that was clearly her passion. While the children were in school, Helen began writing inspirational accounts of people who faced down their difficulties with faith in God. Her first publication was appropriately dedicated to the MCC, which had so helped her family after World War II. Lescheid edited and contributed to *Footprints of Compassion: The Story of MCC-B.C. 1964-1989*; other writers included Hilda Born, Betty Klassen, Eleanore Klassen and Helen Rose Pauls.

A series of books and hundreds of articles followed. In 1999, Helen Lescheid published her first sole-authored book, *Lead, Kindly Light*, an account of her mother's experiences in the Soviet Union and her flight to the West. While Helen was pursuing a life as writer and inspirational speaker, Bill's life was taking a downward trajectory. Helen wrote about his mental breakdown in *Treasures of Darkness*. Bill Lescheid never fully recovered. The Lescheids divorced in 2001; Bill died in Burlington, Ontario, in 2019.

Helen, "an extremely driven person" (Warnock 2), joined Toastmasters in her seventies and entered a time of motivational speaking. She travelled and spoke to sell her books, was a guest on an episode of *100 Huntley Street*, and then, in 2011, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Even so, she published another book that same year: *Prayer: When Answers Aren't Enough*. She was also actively participating in the Fraser Valley Christian Writers, which she had helped found in the 1970s.

At the age of eighty, Lescheid was involved in a serious car accident and her health declined. She managed, though, to publish one more book, *Wonder*, in 2019. She died 1 November, 2020.

In his eulogy, son David Lescheid noted that Helen Lescheid could not be described as an accomplished

housekeeper; she was, perhaps, too much the writer. She did, however, love gardening and flowers, especially roses. He remarked that "Mom ... struggled throughout her life with fear, anxiety, a low self-image and even low self-worth, in spite of the fact that she had many documented accomplishments and boxes and boxes and boxes of fan mail." Yet, her "rich and varied life" was marked by "a deep unwavering Christian faith." She also passed on her Mennonite heritage by teaching "that working hard at humble work is honourable, that perseverance pays off, that the poor are weak and precious and that hating someone is not an option" (2). "My mother," he said, "was a survivor" (1).

Helen Lescheid might best be characterized by her own words. In an article titled "How to Respond in Suffering," she writes, "Expressing one's true feelings is not a lack of faith. It's being real, and you must be willing to face reality before you can expect to overcome it.... Don't suffer more than necessary by indulging in self-pity and bitterness. Some people get stuck in what if. If only. It isn't necessarily our pain that causes us to suffer so acutely but our tendency to put ourselves down, to view pain or tragedy as punishment, failure, or proof of our own inherent worthlessness.... Don't spend time and energy on asking why. It's not nearly as important to know the why in life, as it is to know the Who of life.... Now that this thing has happened, what can I do to make it better? How can I bring some relief to those who are suffering?" (Helen Lescheid 1-2)

In her middle years, Helen Lescheid gave herself the name of Grace, because "Helen found grace in the eyes of the Lord" (Gen.6:8).

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**Making Believe: Questions about Mennonites and Art.**  
**Magdalene Redekop. University of Manitoba Press,**  
**Winnipeg, 2020. 380 pp.**

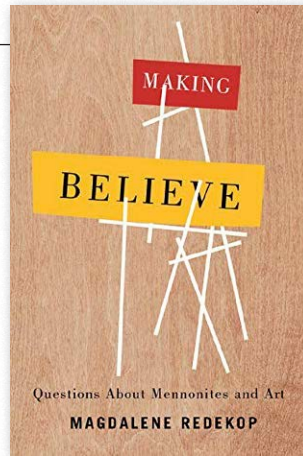
■ Reviewed by Maryann Tjart Jantzen

What cultural and/or theological influences inform the work of Mennonite artists? Is there such a thing as purely Mennonite art? What sparked the “Mennonite miracle” of literary creativity that emerged in Southern Manitoba during the 1980s?

Building on these kinds of questions, Magdalene Redekop’s complex book delves into the flourishing of literary, visual, and musical art by Mennonites during the last decades of the twentieth century and beyond. She employs a combination of critical analysis, case studies and personal reflections to not only celebrate the achievements of these artists, especially those from a Russian Mennonite background, but to expand our understanding of the causes and nature of this phenomenon. Her academic analysis is interspersed with examples from her own life of negotiating the tensions between her conservative Mennonite upbringing (her father was bishop of a Southern Manitoba Rudnerweider church) and her life outside traditional Mennonite circles.

Early on, Redekop establishes that, in her opinion, there is no such thing as purely Mennonite art (also applying this assertion to art by other Canadian minority groups). She emphasizes that many of these artists are not Mennonite by faith but by cultural heritage. She does, however, argue that “a Mennonite sensibility” (41) can sometimes be traced in their work, often emerging in conversation “with outside influences,” “as a part of cross-cultural dialogue” (a “borderline between identities”). Thus, their artistry goes beyond the restrictions that come with an essentialized concept of what might constitute a Mennonite artist. For Redekop, these traces of a Mennonite sensibility emerge from a “crisis of representation,” often with a focus on “Mennonite ways of dealing with that crisis” (4). Redekop also conceptualizes this emergence of creativity from artists with a Mennonite background as a “dramatic restaging, at the end of the twentieth century, of a crisis about art that was created by radical reformers in the sixteenth century” (4).

In addition, Redekop also views artists as trickster figures that disrupt the status quo by crossing boundaries (she writes of the irreverent nature of Low German as a trickster force that can disrupt the status quo requirement of rigid Mennonite religiosity (52)). Continuing in this vein, she asserts that the “best art by Mennonites does not come from inside the safety of an ethnic or religious community.... Rather [it] happens



## a brief bio

By Robert Martens

hunger is necessary for words,  
 for lament, as the past  
 filters away, vanishes  
 into fog, which is swirling  
 over the dykes today, on a  
 chilly january morning, snow  
 threatening, vedder mountain  
 as blue as that which  
 can't be spoken. the dykes,  
 strengthened after the great flood  
 of 1948, another traumatic  
 event in the lives of my  
 russian refugees, after the  
 holocaust of the bolshevik  
 revolution, after fleeing with  
 enough to survive the day,  
 and finding this valley,  
 rainy and warm, a river  
 ran through it, and they  
 built a village, a replica  
 of what they'd lost  
 in russia, their motherland.  
 my childhood was heavy  
 with their grief. with  
 their bitterness too, and the  
 control that tainted their souls,  
 one way, go this way, they said,  
 yet we were loved. they  
 were hungry. embrace found  
 a place there, and today  
 i'm walking the dyke  
 that's holding back that flood  
 of grief, and vedder mountain  
 with its stone silent gaze,  
 and all those people gone,

and memories of the west  
 wind that blew freedom,  
 and farmers in the damp,  
 and grandmothers with shawls,  
 and the minister saying,  
 go in peace, you are blessed.

From *finding home*, New Westminster:  
 Silver Bow Publishing, 2022. Available  
 at the Mennonite Heritage Museum and  
 online.

at the crossing places where tricksters are active and where different visions of community are contested” (153). These are contact zones where “sparks fly” (52). One needs to think only of the fiction of Miriam Toews and the poetry of Di Brandt, among others, to see the application of this theorizing. These “trickster” artists often challenge the master narrative, the normative *Weltanschauung* that has been shaped by history and tradition.

Redekop also explores how disruptive outside influences can create a crisis of identity. She gives as an example the response by *Kanadier* Mennonite authors to the movement from conservative Mennonitism to fundamentalist Christianity that was facilitated partly by the 1950s Brunk team revival meetings that took place in Southern Manitoba. Redekop suggests that these meetings were more traumatic for young people from conservative *Kanadier* Mennonite churches than those from more liberal churches (36) who likely had been exposed to more outside influences; she also cites scholar James Urry as having spoken of the “destruction . . . of the *Kanadier* community . . . by the influence of American fundamentalism (qtd. in Redekop 34).

She locates responses to this cultural trauma in the work of literary artists such as Patrick Friesen and Miriam Toews, citing Friesen’s 1998 recollection of his youthful experiences: “Revival meetings were my blast furnaces. Here I learned to control emotions . . . to play tough. . . . The frightening sermons, the tear-jerking hymns, altar call . . . Those voodoo evenings of spiritual violence. . . . How many survived with their spirits full



Magdalene Redekop.  
Photo source: openlibrary.org.

and rejoicing” (qtd. in Redekop 33-34). To Redekop, this is “a vivid picture of the beginning of the Mennonite renaissance . . . a belated recreation” of the “crisis of representation” (34) evoked by the 1950s revival movement. (I too have disturbing memories of the guilt I felt when the pressure of the altar calls at the Brunk crusade in the rural Fraser Valley seemed irresistible, but fear of public exposure kept me glued to my chair. Or the fear I felt if I came home from school and my parents were not nearby, fear that the rapture had happened and I had been left behind—

responses I later learned were connected to the influence of American fundamentalism on my Mennonite Brethren church.)

At her most complex when doing literary analysis (Redekop is a retired University of Toronto English professor), her case studies range from examining Paul Hiebert’s comic Sara Binks figure to the fiction of Rudy Wiebe and Miriam Toews and the poetry of Patrick Friesen, Di Brandt and David Waltner Toews, among others. Redekop also applies her theorizing to the work of visual artists such as Wanda Koop, Aganetha Dyck and Gathie Falk and the work of musical composers such as Carol Ann Weaver.

All in all, Redekop’s book is an impressive piece of critical analysis, but, as Rachel Epp Buller writes, it is also “a personal journey, an account of a lifetime of grappling with questions about Mennonites and art. [Redekop] concedes at one point that the book is, on one level, ‘an exercise in life writing,’ and later admits, ‘I am all too aware that some readers will consider me to be the central case study’” (qtd. in Buller).

Perhaps herself drawing on traces of an Anabaptist community hermeneutic, Redekop also asserts that art can provide a “space where we can deal with the crisis of representation by making believe together and participating in dialogue” (272), as we engage both with Mennonite history and tradition and the outside forces we inevitably encounter in our contemporary lives.

*Other source*

Buller, Rachel Epp. “Questions with No Clear Answers.” *Mennonite Life*, 2021, vol. 75. <https://ml.bethelks.edu/2021/06/30/questions-with-no-clear-answers/>

# MB Historical Commission awards four grants and one scholarship

**W**innipeg: On June 23-24, 2023, the Mennonite Brethren Historical Commission gathered in Abbotsford, BC, for its annual meeting. Besides hearing updates from the four archives in the Historical Commission network, the Commission engaged with the publication projects and research grant applications on its agenda. The Commission awarded two research grants and two publication grants.

1. An Alfred Neufeld \$2,000 USD global church history grant was awarded to Stephen Kapinde, a professor at Pwani University in Kifili, Kenya. His project explores the key actors and stakeholders in the Kenyan Mennonite peacebuilding story. The project title is *Mission as Transformation: A Theo-Historical Reflection of the Mennonite Development and Peacebuilding Mission in Kenya, 1960-2010*.
2. An MB studies \$2,500 USD project grant was awarded to Jeremy Rich, a professor at Marywood University in Scranton, Pennsylvania. His project probes the impacts of agricultural development initiated by Mennonite missionaries in the twentieth century. The project title is *Congolese Perspectives on Mennonite Brethren Missionary Development, 1960-1990*.
3. The first publication grant—a \$2,000 USD MB studies grant—went to Canadian Mennonite University Press to help with the production costs of a forthcoming publication. The CMU Press book features a collection of academic essays by field-defining author Hildi Froese Tiessen, professor emerita, Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, Ontario. The title is *On Mennonites Writing: Selected Essays by Hildi Froese Tiessen*, edited by Robert Zacharias.
4. The second publication grant—a \$2,000 USD Katie Funk Wiebe women's studies grant—also went to CMU Press to help with the production costs of another forthcoming publication. This CMU Press book features a collection of poetry from award-winning Mennonite poet Sarah Klassen. The title is *Sarah Klassen: New and Selected Poems*, edited by Nathan Dueck.
5. The Commission also awarded a \$750 USD JB Toews college scholarship to Olivia Chittick of Columbia Bible College in Abbotsford, BC.

## CANADIANA MUSICAL THEATRE CO. presents



with an added performance by **ANNA SAGALOVA**  
Internationally renowned  
Pianist from Ukraine

**Friday, October 20th, 2023**  
**7:30 pm**  
Doors open at 7:00 pm



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**Advance tickets \$30**  
**At the Door \$40**

Advance tickets online thru Eventbrite; Enter "Pier 21" in the search window or purchase in person at King's Music, 2669 Langdon St, Abbotsford

*A portion of proceeds will support reconstruction at Kharkiv National University of Arts, Ukraine*

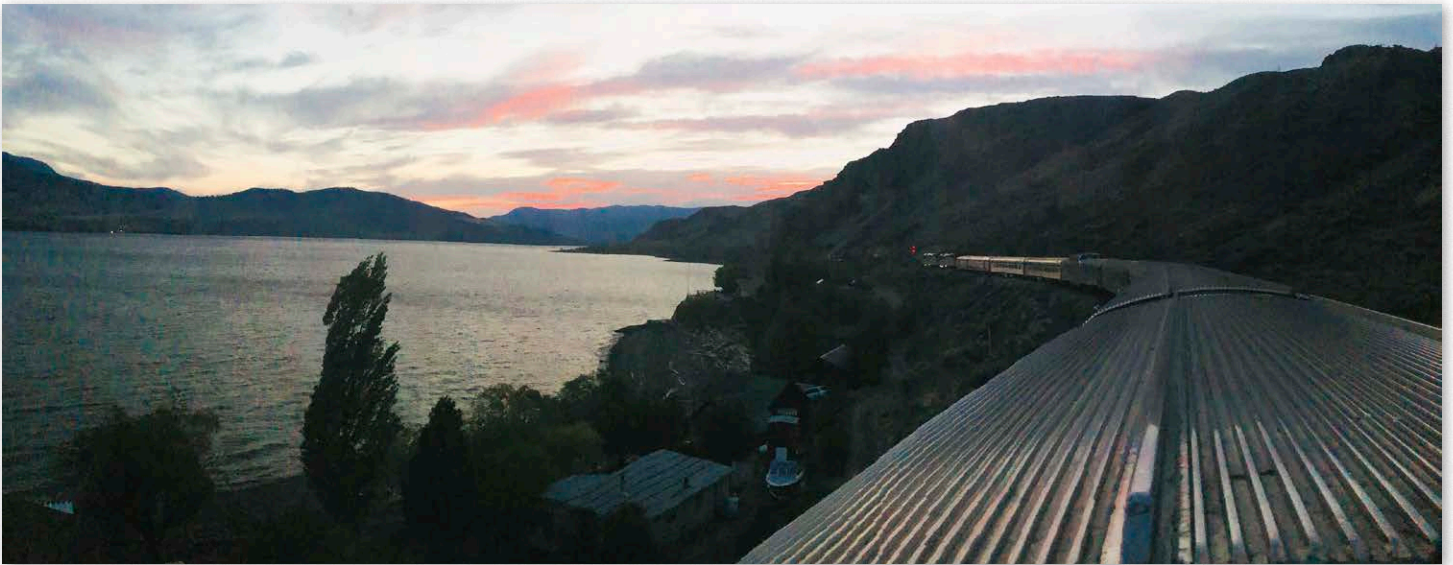
PACIFIC THEATRE CANADIANA MUSICAL

## Pier 21 musical returns to Abbotsford, October 20

After two years of Covid cancellations, our first performances of the musical *Pier 21* were at Matsqui Centennial Auditorium, hosted by MHSBC. Introduced by a descendant of Ukrainian immigrants, the show felt particularly resonant as the musical includes Ukrainian characters escaping the coming war in Poland. Twelve days after this performance, Putin invaded Ukraine. Since that time, *Pier 21* has been involved in fundraisers to support Ukrainian refugees, most recently in Winnipeg with the Oseredok Ukrainian Cultural and Educational Centre, raising money for English-language classes. *Pier 21* includes the story of a war bride who plays music as a way to overcome hardship.

This October, *Pier 21* returns to Matsqui Auditorium with Anna Sagalova, a world-class classical pianist from Ukraine, who will perform a short recital after our show. A portion of the proceeds will be directed to restore Kharkiv University of Arts, which was damaged by bombing.

Tickets are available online through Eventbrite (search Pier 21) or in person at King's Music: \$30 in advance or \$40 at the door.



Participants in the third leg of the **Memories of Migration Russlaender Tour 100** enjoying a lovely evening sky while travelling through the Rockies and the verdant Fraser Valley countryside. Photo credit: John Longhurst. Used by permission.

# Roots & Branches

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Your contributions are needed to further this work! All donations will be accepted for

tax purposes. Please note that, for reasons of legality, membership fees cannot be accepted for tax purposes. And please consider remembering us in your will.

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The Mennonite Heritage Museum has reopened. The Mennonite Historical Society is open by appointment.