



Mennonite Brethren
Historical Society
Newsletter

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ABRAM H. AND TINA UNRUH:
A GRANDDAUGHTER'S BIOGRAPHY

by Peggy Regehr

It is a great privilege for me to talk about the lives of my grandparents. They were very special people in my life and I had a high regard and a great deal of love for them. Though my grandfather was an important person in the life and history of the M.B. Church and its educational institutions, to me he was always, first and foremost, my grandfather. I was always very pleased that he had such a large and important public role, for he was indeed a great man. Yet, it was because of who he was, not what he did, that I was proud that he was my grandfather. His stature in the Conference was never a matter of pride for him and he always remained very human and grandfatherly. It is from that perspective that I will deal with my grandparents' lives.

Because the wives of our church leaders are so often ignored on these public occasions when we remember the work of our church leaders; I have been asked to concentrate on the life of my grandmother. That created problems in preparation. The life and work of my grandfather is fairly well documented. I discovered, in doing some research, how easily and quickly the history of their wives is lost to future generations. That is unfortunate. I could find practically nothing about her childhood. My father told me that neither grandfather or grandmother spoke much of their early years, and so he too had little to add to my meagre gleanings. I will, first of all, touch on the flow of history in their lives, and later (following issue) speak more personally about them. Since their history centered around the teaching ministry of my grandfather it might seem at first rather one-sided. Hopefully later on a more balanced view will be presented.

My grandparents were married in 1900 in a shed in the village of Menlertschik where my grandfather was a school teacher. My grandmother lived in the nearby village of Spat. Because there was no M.B. Church in Menlertschik my grandfather had been baptized in Spat. There, on one occasion, he was attracted to a young woman in the choir who sang the solo part, and was invited to their home for a meal. Later on, when he asked her to marry him, she at first declined because she did not feel she was educated enough to be the wife of a school teacher. However, eventually she accepted his proposal.

Who were these two people who started life together that day in 1900? Katherina (Tina) Toews was born in October 1876 in Klippenfeld, South Russia. She grew up in Spat in the Crimea, in a fairly well-to-do family with three brothers and a sister. Her father, not a Christian, owned a mill, and it was in the workshop of the mill that grandmother learned the many practical woodworking and machine skills that would stand her in such good stead later on in life. Her mother was a devoutly Christian woman and a member of the M.B. Church. We can only guess at the influence she had on her daughter, for grandmother became a Christian early in life and was baptized in Spat at age 18. Life was not easy for her, for when she was but 11 her mother passed away, and 7 years later, when she was 18 her father also died.

My grandfather, Abraham Heinrich Unruh, grew up under different circumstances. He was born two years later in 1878 in the village of Timir-bulat in the Crimea and was the third youngest of ten children. His parents were Heinrich and Elizabeth Unruh, and his father was an ordained minister in the Mennonite Church. He passed away when my grandfather was only five years old, leaving a widow and ten children struggling for their existence. As a result three children were placed in foster homes. My grandfather was one of them. At age five he went to live with his uncle Cornelius in the Molotschna. This was not an easy experience for him, and though he had opportunities for education that would probably not have come to him under other circumstances, the pain of loneliness, rejection and the loss of parents remained with him for life.

His uncle was good to him, however, and he learned much from him. He attended schools at Tiede and Ohrloff, and entered teacher's college at Halbstadt at 15. At 17, in 1895, he was ready to move out on his own to his first teaching position at Menlertschik. Here his mother, from whom he had been separated for so long, moved in with him to look after him. It was also possible now to develop family ties with his brothers and sisters. At 18, much to the joy of his mother, he finally made his commitment to God and was baptized. Shortly afterwards he preached his first sermon. It lasted five minutes.

After his marriage his mother continued to live with them some 18 to 20 years. Grandfather gives tremendous credit to his Tina for the wonderful way she treated his aging mother; for love and harmony ruled their relationship.

In 1903 they moved to Barwenkovo, a Russian village, where grandfather taught, first in the elementary school and later, for nine years, in the Kommerzschule. These were eventful years in their lives. In 1904, at 26, grandfather was ordained to the ministry. It was during this time that most of their children

were born. Here too the tragedy of loss struck in the death of their two year old eldest daughter Elizabeth, and later their four year old son Cornelius. Grandmother's illness with tuberculosis was a blow to the family, and they praised God for her complete recovery. In 1915—the second year of World War I—grandfather spent two years in the Russian Red Cross.

And then the revolution broke out, and they were caught in the crossfire of the Red and White Armies. In Barwenkovo anti-German feeling made life difficult, so they decided to move back to the Crimea in 1918 where grandfather accepted the position of principal at the Zentralschule in Karassan. Here their youngest daughter was born and their family was now complete—four sons, Abram, John, Victor and Henry, and two daughters, Katherine and Lydia.

When in 1920 grandfather was asked to join the newly founded Bible Seminary in Tschongraw he gladly accepted, for he had for some time been feeling the call from general education to Bible teaching. Because of the uncertainties of the time, however, this school was closed in 1924.

Though he had resisted the thought of leaving Russia, because he still felt the situation would improve, by 1924 he had changed his mind. Their oldest son Abram, my father, was of military age and considering leaving alone, and so the family decided to emigrate to Canada. Documents were hard to come by, and they were delayed at Riga, but eventually they boarded the Minnedosa, landing in St. John, New Brunswick in January 1925. Again they experienced a set back, for immigration officials refused to allow my father to land because of his eye. Eventually, however, they received permission, as a family, to proceed, and settled down in the community of Winkler.

In the fall grandfather began a new work in this community, a work that was closest to his heart. He rented several rooms and began a Bible School. His first class was very small and included my father and the woman he was later to marry. My mother spoke often of the impact of that experience on her life. Within the next two years he was joined by two of his former colleagues from the school in Tschongraw. The story of the school is a story in its own right. Suffice it to say that Winkler Bible School was a vital part of my grandparents' life for 19 years.

Then in 1944—at 66 years—a call came for them to move to Winnipeg where the Mennonite Brethren Bible College was to be opened. He was asked to be its first President. He relinquished that position after only one year feeling that a person with a better command of the English language was needed. However he stayed on as a teacher until 1954 when, at age 76, he entered a period of semi-retirement.

During the years in Winnipeg there were some significant incidents in their lives. In 1950 they celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary. On that same day, in the evening, the 55th anniversary of the beginning of grandfather's teaching ministry was also celebrated.

During these years they were also not spared illness and tragedy. They had both enjoyed good health (except for grandmother's tuberculosis) but now both

of them were ill and in the hospital several times. Most difficult of these was grandmother's bout with meningitis when she was not expected to live. Her complete recovery was definitely a miracle and an answer to grandfather's fervent prayers. He accepted this as a special gift from God. The accidental death of their son-in-law, Nick Friesen, Lydia's husband, was a heavy blow to them, for she was left with a two year old child and a six week baby. Also the death of their daughter Katie's husband, A.H. Redekop was a keen loss. Now both daughters were widowed. Yet most painful of all was the death of their son Victor, a navigator in the RCAF, in a flying mission over Germany during World War II.

What affected their old age more than anything else was grandfather's diabetes and increasing vision loss. In the end he became totally blind. For a man who loved books as he had, this was difficult to accept and adjust to.

In 1959 when living alone became more difficult, and they longed to be closer to their children, they moved to B.C. The next year they made their last appearance at a Canadian Conference in Ontario. On their way back to B.C. they celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary in Winnipeg in the Elmwood church where they had been members for sixteen years. For many of us this would be the last time we would see them.

On January 6, 1961, at 82, grandfather, while preaching seated on a chair, went into a coma and passed away nine days later. For grandmother that was a tremendous loss and she missed him terribly, for they had shared 61 years together. In the spring of 1962 cancer was discovered and a year and a half later, a month after she celebrated her 87th birthday she too passed away. So ended an era.

Editor's note: Peggy Regehr of Winnipeg, granddaughter of A.H. and Tina Unruh, reflected upon the lives of her grandparents at a special celebration held in their memory on April 6, 1984. Sponsored by the M.B. Historical Society of Canada this celebration included a presentation on Brother Unruh's teaching ministry, by David Ewert; and on his humor, by Harry Loewen. Our next issue will contain the conclusion to this presentation.

NIAGARA MENNONITES CELEBRATE 50 YEAR JUBILEE

by C. Alfred Friesen

Fifty years ago Mennonite immigrants from Russia discovered the attractive farmlands of Niagara Township, now known as Niagara-on-the-Lake. In the fall of 1934 the first Mennonite family, the William Andres, moved from Vineland to Virgil. Several more followed shortly thereafter and the Mennonite settlement of Niagara was born.

The group of believers, from both United Mennonite (G.C.) and Mennonite Brethren denominations, held joint Bible studies in homes and had visiting preachers such as C.K. Neufeld and D.J. Klassen from Vineland address the assembly. As numbers grew, they rented facilities in fruit sheds, barns and

the town hall. Church buildings were constructed several years later (U.M. 1937, and M.B. 1940).

Most of the Mennonites settled on small farms of 10-15 acres, and planted orchards of cherries, peaches, pears and plums as well as vineyards. Cash crops such as tomatoes, strawberries, and asparagus helped them get established until the tree and vine crops became the main income. A great influx of settlers from the West in the late thirties and early forties ensured the success of the fledgling settlement.

Many businesses were initiated in the late forties and contractors began the building boom after the war. Both church buildings were enlarged to accommodate the surge of Mennonite immigrants from Europe and South America after the war. Four subdivisions were established in the village of Virgil with 90% Mennonite occupancy.

During the past 50 years, Mennonites in the Niagara area have grown in number until today they exceed 2000. Five flourishing Mennonite churches with full-time pastors provide fellowship for the believers. The majority of the thriving businesses in the community are owned and operated by Mennonites. The present mayor, Wilbert Dick, is a Mennonite. Several politicians, Jacob Froese (also a former mayor) and Bill Andres have been M.P.s in Ottawa representing the Niagara constituency.

Over one hundred fifty teachers, nearly one hundred nurses, several doctors, dentists, lawyers and many other professionals have their "roots" in Virgil. Many have gone out to serve the Lord in both short-term and life-long missionary ministries.

On October 13, 1984, the Niagara Mennonites will celebrate 50 years of residency in the community around Virgil. A program is being planned by a committee representing the five Mennonite churches. It will consist of a plaque unveiling, musical renditions by an old-timers' choir, a mass choir of present singers, and a youth choir, historical reminiscing, greetings from government officials and an address by historian Dr. Frank Epp. The afternoon and evening programs will be enhanced by refreshments and fellowship during the intermission. The historical celebration will take place on the grounds of Eden Christian College, which will celebrate 40 years of operation during the coming school year.

A 50 year history book depicting the beginning and progress of the Mennonite settlement is being prepared. It will contain hundreds of pictures and write-ups about the involvement of Mennonites in church and related ministries, business and professional pursuits, farming endeavours, as well as in voluntary community activities. Contributions of \$50 or more toward the Jubilee Fund will ensure a free copy of this memorable publication for the donor. Send donations to the committee treasurer, Jacob Froese, R.R. 3, Niven Road, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, L0S 1J0, and make cheques payable to "The Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario". A receipt for income tax purposes will be mailed to you. The book will also be available for purchase

at the October 13 celebration. The Jubilee Fund has been established to help defray some of the costs of writing and publication, of the historical plaque, and of the Jubilee festivities. Any surplus funds will be donated to the Pleasant Manor Retirement Village in Virgil where many of our Mennonite "pioneers" now reside.

Make plans to travel to the beautiful Niagara peninsula in the Indian summer days of October and to join in the great Thanksgiving Festival of the Virgil Mennonites. It will be a great home-coming and reunion of hundreds of former residents. Detailed programs will be available soon. For further information, contact the chairman, Alfred Friesen, 7 Chelmsford Court, St. Catharines, Ontario, L2M 6H4 (416-934-0931).

UPDATE ON RUSSIAN-MENNONITE MUSIC ORIGINS

A recent letter from doctoral student Peter Letkemann, of Toronto, summarizes his recent "research trip" to Europe. In his letter he notes the following concerning origins of early Mennonite Brethren church music:

Most of my time was spent in Wuppertal, in the archives of the Christlicher Saengerbund, a "free-church" choral association formed in 1879 which had the most profound influence on the choral development of Mennonites (especially MBs) in Russia. I was able to read through back-issues of their periodical entitled Saengergruss, to determine when the first Mennonite choirs joined this association—1881/2—, the extent of Mennonite involvement in the organization and the nature of the influence which this association had on Mennonites. I was able to ascertain that Isaak Born, editor of Liederperlen and Heimatklaenge, joined the Saengerbund together with his choir of 66 singers in Lichtfelde in October of 1886! I was also able to ascertain the date of the first Saengerfest among Russian Mennonites—in his dissertation, Wes Berg was only able to find information about the second Saengerfest—held in Rueckenau on 30. May 1893. The institutions of Saengerfeste, Dirigentenkurse and Gesanggottesdienste as they were known in Russia were borrowed completely from the Christlicher Saengerbund! Unfortunately, all of the correspondence between the association and its members was destroyed in a bombing attack on Stuttgart (the archives had been stored in the warehouse of the Christlicher Verlag) during WWII.

In my source study of Mennonite choral music—i.e. music published by Mennonites in Liederperlen, etc.—I have now located sources for about 1150, or 80% of the 1381 songs. These 1150 songs are taken from at least 83 different songbooks! I am not certain whether I will be able to locate sources for all of the songs, since many of the songbooks I was looking for in Germany might have been destroyed during the war. The total number of books which Mennonites might have used is probably at least 100. This indicates that their borrowing was even more extensive than I had anticipated. I had thought that with 80 books I would have been able to trace more sources.

CONVENTION PROGRAM

The annual meeting of the M.B. Historical Society of Canada will be held in conjunction with the 73rd Convention of the M.B. Churches of Canada. The meeting is scheduled for 9 p.m. Sunday evening, July 8, 1984 in the Baker-view M.B. Church.

A brief meeting of the Society will be conducted, followed by a special "free" showing of the new film on Hutterites, "To Care or Not to Care". This one-hour documentary by Mennonite Brethren film-maker, Burton Buller, is described as "one of the first films which lets Hutterites speak for themselves on their faith, life and practice". Recent articles on this film have appeared in the M.B. Herald and Mennonite Reporter. Plan now to attend this special event.

ERDMAN HERMANN NIKKEL
(1893 -)

by Dr. Peter Penner
Mount Allison University
Sackville, New Brunswick

One of the forgotten men of Mennonite Brethren home missions in Canada is Erdman H. Nikkel who served as Winnipeg's city missionary from 1921 to 1925. He reported briefly to the 1924 session of the Northern District Conference (Yearbook, p. 21) and was paid \$1200. a year plus rent. Though he was paid in 1924-25, the 1925 report is otherwise silent about that year. Anna Thiessen in her Die Stadtmission in Winnipeg states only that the Rev. Nikkel left "for various reasons". (27)

Fortunately someone pointed out to me that his daughter (Mrs.) Albertine Speiser of Saskatoon might help me. From her I learned that Erdman is still living, at age 90, near his daughter, in the Central Haven Care Home in Saskatoon. He lost his eyesight in 1977. From Albertine I have the following biographical sketch:

"My father, Erdman Hermann Nikkel was born October 13, 1893 near Gretna, Manitoba, to Henry E. Nikkel and Agatha (nee Sawatsky). They moved to Saskatchewan in 1899 and homesteaded 18 miles west of Rosthern. There were no schools at the time, so he was 11 years old before he could begin to go to the first school built there 3½ miles away. He took his grades 9 & 10 at the Rosthern English and German Academy, and took Grades 11 & 12 by correspondence. His parents were Sommerfelders, and they went to church about twice a year—as the church was about seven miles east of Rosthern. When Dad was about 18, one of the teachers (a Christian) in the Springfield school (which was the one Dad had attended) got the young people in the area to come out Sunday afternoons to sing gospel hymns. Seeing the need of the "field" he, Jake Schultz, the teacher, invited his brother, George Schultz, an evangelist from Chicago, Illinois, to come and have meetings. It was in July 1912 that Dad accepted the Lord, in his heart and life. He was baptized later that year and joined the Salem Krimmer M.B. Church. George Schultz strongly advised Dad to get grounded in the Word—go to Bible School and recommended Moody Bible Institute. Dad took his advice and attended 1912-14 and then 1916-1917—when he graduated.

He was ordained soon after that. He was an evangelist before going to Winnipeg from 1921-25. Here he took evening classes in University, working towards his B.A., majoring in languages. Later he worked on his B.Div. and M.Div.

He was married to Agnes Schultz, June 4, 1914, born to Abram and Elizabeth (nee Unruh) Schultz, June 10, 1893 in Henderson, Nebraska. The Schultz's came to Canada and settled seven miles west of Waldheim, near the North Saskatchewan river. She attended the same Springfield school as Dad did. They had ten children, still all living. Mother died June 16, 1969. Dad has 40 grandchildren and 42 great grandchildren.

When he left Winnipeg he went back to farming, helping in the local schoolhouse service and in the Laird M.B. Church.

In 1947 he became pastor of the Southey Baptist Church in Southey, Saskatchewan. He was there till 1952 when he was called to the Temple Baptist Church, Swan River, Manitoba. In 1957 he was called to Grace Baptist Church in Kelowna, B.C. This was a bilingual work. In 1961 the church divided and Dad went along with the English group—which called themselves the Trinity Baptist Church—where he remained another 3 years—being 70 years. Then he filled in at various pulpits—in Okanagan Valley—some up to 3 months at a time till he lost his eyesight in 1977.

In 1979 he moved to Saskatoon to Central Haven Care Home. He reached the age of 90. In spite of his blindness, he has a weekly Bible study (has Bible on tape), says grace for meals, and has the morning devotions for the weekends, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday."

Given such a relatively full life, we need not concern ourselves too much what the "various reasons" of 1925 might have been. It is enough to know the Mission in the North End Chapel flourished during his brief ministry in Winnipeg.

This Newsletter of the Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of Canada is published four times a year, by the Executive of the Society, at the Center for Mennonite Studies in Canada, Winnipeg. All correspondence regarding the Society or the Newsletter should be addressed to:

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Executive of the Society: Helmut Huebert, Chairman; Abe Dueck, V. Chairman; William Schroeder, Secretary-Treasurer; Velma Mierau and Harry Loewen, Members-at-Large. Editor of the Newsletter, Ken Reddig.

If you know of someone who would be interested in becoming a member of the Society and receiving the Newsletter please have them fill out the following form:

Name: _____
Street Address: _____

Send form together with the yearly membership fee of \$5.00 to the Society Secretary in care of the above stated address.