

MENNONITE BRETHREN HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF CANADA

NEWSLETTER

JAKOB VETTER (1872-1918)

Jakob Vetter was one of the many pietist leaders who had a significant influence on a variety of Mennonite communities. He is one whose impact has probably not been adequately recognized. Standard reference books such as the Mennonite Encyclopedia and Mennonitisches Lexicon contain only very brief references to his work and influence among Mennonites. Both refer only to his influence among the Swiss Mennonites and the Mennonites of South Germany. None of the major works relating to the Mennonite Brethren in Russia refer to Vetter's influence on the Mennonites of southern Russia. There is evidence, however, that his impact there was considerable. The two major sources containing information relating to this are the Friedensstimme and a recently procured biography of Jakob Vetter which is now located in the Archives of the Mennonite Brethren Church.¹

Vetter was born in Worms in southern Germany on 23 November, 1872, into a poor but aristocratic family. He was baptized as an infant, although Vetter says that his parents had no real religious understanding. He refers to the local "Pfarrer" as a rationalist who, instead of baptizing in the name of the triune God, may very well have baptized him in the name of "the true, the beautiful, and the good" ("des Wahren, Schoenen, und Guten"). This troubled him and created such doubts in his later life that he was rebaptized 28 years later.² This rebaptism, however, does not seem to have implied a rejection of infant baptism as such, and his concept of the church remained very much like that of other pietists who remained in the state church.

Vetter lived a rather rebellious and scandalous life during his early youth. His mother had died when he was only three years old, and although his father remarried, Vetter never established a close relationship with his stepmother. A serious flood which devastated their neighborhood in 1883 brought the family to a spiritual crisis. At the same time, contacts were established with Baptists and other pietist sects. Vetter's father was converted and somewhat later, at seventeen years of age, Jakob Vetter himself experienced a profound conversion. By then his father had already passed away, uttering the prophetic words at his death bed that Jacob would become a "servant of the Most High".³

After his conversion Vetter gradually became involved in a ministry of evangelism, first in association with other prominent evangelists. He realized his need for further preparation, however, and soon enrolled in a program of studies at St. Crischna

near Basel where he graduated in 1897. Thereafter he quickly developed into a well-known and respected evangelist. In 1902 he founded the German Tent Mission which carried on evangelistic work in many areas.⁴ Apparently the American revivalist, Charles Finney, became his model and some of the methods Vetter used were borrowed from Finney. As already indicated, many Mennonites in Switzerland and southern Germany were influenced by his work. Vetter was severely handicapped in his work by a pulmonary disease and died at the early age of 46.

Vetter's major influence on the Mennonites of southern Russia came as a result of a visit to the area late in 1906 and early in 1907. The exact circumstances which led to the invitation are unclear, although certainly Mennonites from Russia must have had contact with him in places like St. Crischona.

The Friedensstimme of 30 December, 1906, gives a detailed itinerary of Vetter's visit in the Mennonite villages between 27 December and 11 January.⁵ Included are the following villages: Alexandertal, Steinbach, Waldheim, Rueckenau, Ohrloff, Schoensee, Halbstadt, Alexanderkrone, Lichtfelde, Alexanderwohl, Apenlee, Schoenwiese, and Einlage. In the biography various hosts and contact people are mentioned. Among them are a certain Professor Friesen, Peter Schmidt (a leading elder in the Molotschna M.B. Church), J. Sudermann, and a Dick couple. The churches are said to have been filled with hungry people. Later the Friedensstimme reported that the ministry of Vetter had been a tremendous blessing to the churches.⁶ Vetter also wrote a farewell letter which was published in the periodical and in which he admonished the Mennonites not to disturb the Holy Spirit's presence through empty form and spiritless singing, praying, and preaching. He also warned them to avoid a sectarian spirit and live in closer harmony with each other.⁷

More research needs to be done on Vetter's theology and the extent and nature of his influence, particularly on the Mennonite Brethren. The accession of materials such as the Vetter biography can be a significant help in that respect.

ENDNOTES

1 Maria Vetter, Evangelist Jakob Vetter: Ein Lebensbild (Verlagshaus der Deutschen Zeltmission, 1922).

Note: The above biography and several yearbooks of the German Tent Mission were donated by Vetter's daughter, Maria. The author of the biography was Vetter's wife, Maria, although the first several chapters were written by Jakob Vetter himself. I wish to acknowledge particularly the work of one of my students, Johannes Stolz, through whose efforts these materials were obtained and who also located references to Vetter in the Friedensstimme.

2 Ibid., p. 4.

3 Ibid., p. 14.

4 Ibid., pp. 66ff.

5 Friedensstimme 30 December 1906, p. 590.

6 Friedensstimme 13 January 1907, p. 20.

7 Friedensstimme 20 January 1907, p. 27.

Dr. Abe Dueck
Associate Professor of Mennonite Studies
Mennonite Brethren Bible College

GENERAL RUMYANTZEV

Peter Alexandrovich Rumyantzev was born in Moscow on January 4, 1725. He entered the military service at a very early age. When he was fifteen years old he attained the rank of lieutenant, and at the age of thirty he became a major general.

During the Seven Year War (1756-63), Rumyantzev distinguished himself in several military campaigns along the Baltic coast. In 1761 he directed the siege and eventual attack on the fortress of Kohlberg which is located about two hundred fifty kilometres west of Danzig. For some time his unit was stationed in the Vistula Delta, and it was there Rumyantzev learned to admire and respect the Mennonite farmers. He also discovered that these industrious people felt that they were being oppressed and that they would be ready to emigrate to another country if they were assured religious freedom.

During the reign of Katherine II, Rumyantzev commanded the Russian army against the Turks (1768-74) and served as the first governor of the Ukraine. In this capacity he recommended the Mennonites as prospective settlers for the newly acquired territory. As a result of this recommendation Katherine sent Georg von Trappe as a special envoy to the Mennonites in Danzig.

The Mennonites responded to this special invitation by sending their delegates, Hoepfner and Bartsch, to investigate the "promised land."

However, in 1789 Katherine's affection shifted to Potemkin who then became governor of the Ukraine and Rumyantzev was recalled to St. Petersburg. Rumyantzev died on Dec. 8, 1796. A tall obelisk was erected in his honour in a small park among the University buildings on the left side of the Neva River in St. Petersburg.

William Schroeder
Winnipeg School Teacher

STUDENTS BEGIN INDEXING RUNDSCHAU

Researchers have often commented that the contents of the Mennonitische Rundschau, founded in 1878, should be more accessible through a systematic index. The costs, both in terms of time and finances, have been a major barrier to developing such an index.

For the past year the Center for M.B. Studies has been looking for ways of financing such a project. This spring the Center applied for and received a federal grant under the Summer Student Employment Program. This grant provides the Center with the services of three students to work for 15 weeks each on a special project - in this case indexing the Rundschau.

The three students: Carolyn Hamm (Winnipeg), Charlotte Rempel (Winnipeg), and Hilda Dyck (Grunthal), began indexing on May 20, 1980. The project is being supervised by Ken Reddig, Associate Archivist, with Herb Giesbrecht, Head Archivist, assisting in outlining procedures and developing an appropriate list of Subject Headings. The students are beginning with the year 1920 and it is hoped that between 10 - 15 years of the Rundschau can be completed by the end of August.

It is noteworthy that other Mennonite Brethren Study Centers are also involved in

indexing projects. At the Hillsboro Center they are indexing the Christian Leader and the Fresno Center is indexing the Zionsbote.

These indexing projects, when completed, should prove to be an invaluable resource for students, historians, and genealogists.

ARCHIVES COURSE - 1980

It was a privilege to attend the 1980 Archives Course (March 10 - April 3) at the Public Archives Canada in Ottawa. Being new to the archival profession it was helpful to receive sound instruction at this time. Much of the information acquired will prove to be invaluable in the years to come.

The course literally surveyed all aspects of archival mediums, technology, methods, and services. While specific training in procedures was not given, due to the lack of time available, the theory of accessioning and description was discussed. Additional information on procedures was available, and obtained, from the various departments of the P.A.C.

One question that I had in relation to this course was how much of the content would relate to a small religious archives such as ours. In most cases I was pleased that the course content did relate to our archival program. In fact with the recent upsurge of interest in history across Canada, many new archival programs have been initiated in community and university settings. Therefore, there is a greater awareness on the part of the P.A.C. of the importance of these small archives.

The contacts and discussions with archivists from across Canada was especially stimulating. The information imparted by specialists in various medium (for example micro-filming) was of particular importance to our present needs and interests. I now know where to go for information when I face specific problems in this area. These resources, for future reference, will be important as our archives increases its holdings and services.

Ken Reddig - Associate Archivist

NEW EQUIPMENT FOR THE CENTER

The Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Canada recently acquired two new pieces of equipment - a microfilmer and a microfilm reader/printer. This equipment was purchased through the generous donations of several Winnipeg business men and professionals.

The microfilmer will be utilized in adding materials from our churches across Canada to those already microfilmed by Dr. J.B. Toews several years ago. The reader/printer enables the reading of microfilms and also can produce a paper copy of the specific page a researcher is viewing.

Both pieces of equipment have been needed for the past few years. The Center is grateful that the purchase of this equipment has been made possible. They will be of benefit to researchers utilizing the facilities of the Center for years to come.

ONTARIO M.B. HISTORICAL SOCIETY FORMED

In mid-May the Ontario M.B. Conference convened an organizational meeting at which time the conference formed an historical society. Approximately 40 people from 9 different churches were in attendance.

The Provincial Conference has given its Society a two-fold mandate. Since the Conference will soon be celebrating its Fiftieth Anniversary the Society is to prepare and publish a book related to this event, and produce a special program and display.

The executive elected for this Society are: Ed Boldt, Chairman; Henry Hubert, Secretary-Treasurer; Anne Wiebe, Member-at-large.

RECENT ACCESSIONS OF

THE CENTER FOR M.B. STUDIES IN CANADA

Below are listed a few of the recent accessions to the archival holdings of the Center. It is not our purpose to list all items received but rather to indicate the range and scope of accessions recently donated to the Archives.

1. Books and periodicals (5) related to the ministry of Jacob Vetter (see Abe Dueck article); Donated by Maria Vetter, Switzerland.
2. Alle Propheten nach Hebraische Sprach, by Hans Denk and Ludwig Haetzer. One of the first translations into German, from Hebrew, of the prophetic books (microfilm copy of this book).
3. Various issues of the Zionsbote, Jugendfreund, and Saskatchewan Yearbooks. Donated by Mrs. Katie Speiser.
4. Conference booklets and publications as well as a photograph of the 44th Canadian Conference, 1954. Donated by John Wiebe.
5. Complete transcriptions of the Eldorado Environmental Assessment Panel on the proposed uranium hexoflouride refinery near Warman, Saskatchewan. 22 volumes.
6. Fourteen books related to Mennonite History by Wedel, Reimer and Unruh. Donated by Kay Peters.
7. Conference Executive minutes and correspondence (6 linear inches), donated by Rev. H.H. Voth.

8. MCC Reports and related materials (5 linear feet), donated by Len Siemens.
9. Nine reels of microfilm of Captured German Documents relating to the Chortiza colony in Russia. An article relating to these documents will appear in the next issue of this Newsletter.
10. Twenty-three tapes of Dr. A.H. Unruh. Covers the years 1947-1952. Copies made available by A.A. Unruh, Saskatchewan.

HENRY B. TIESSEN. THE MOLOTSCHNA COLONY: A HERITAGE REMEMBERED. Kitchener, Ont. Published by author, 1979. 112 pp. \$7.50.

Reviewed by Goldine Pankratz, Winnipeg.

In the book The Molotschna Colony Henry Tiessen, the author, states in his preface that he intends this book to be a concise topic-oriented, and richly illustrated, history of the Molotschna Colony.

This book covers many aspects of life in the colony with clear explanations and interesting sketches which help the reader to identify with each situation. In addition, Mr. Tiessen provides color and realism to his topics by giving personal explanations. There also are maps of the colony which help bring the geography of this colony into perspective.

This book is especially meaningful to me and I have come to regard it as a mini-encyclopedia of my past. As a first generation immigrant from Germany I have developed an interest in the history of my family.

My Mother Anna (Klassen) Nowak, who now resides in Kitchener, Ontario, and attends the same church as the author, was born in Gnadenheim in 1926 and lived there until 1944 before fleeing to Poland. She gave us this book as a gift and throughout the book she jotted down comments about her own experiences.

It was very interesting to discover that my father-in-law Jacob Pankratz, who was born in Waldheim, is mentioned in this book as a dear friend of the author.

Reading this book brought back fond memories of my own mother telling us her childhood stories as we sat around the dinner table on Sundays. Sometimes the stories stretched the dinner hour to mid-afternoon but I remember the fascination and deep sadness I felt as I listened and tried to imagine how life had been for her.

Under the topic childhood activities Mr. Tiessen describes the many fun times he had with his friends such as bartering in pigeons and cooling off in the Tomak River. He also mentions the hours of play in the orchard and on the haystacks. This brought to mind some experiences my mother told us about. Having six older brothers she spent much time defending herself and proving to them that she could do such things as climb fruit trees and jump on moving hay wagons.

In another chapter Mr. Tiessen discusses the rich land of the Molotschna in which gardening was very successful. He describes how they grew fabulous watermelons and

how the land was cultivated and prepared for this crop. On this particular page my Mother's penciled comment is that as an eight year old she had to ride the horse; which was attached to the cultivator, to keep it in the middle between the two rows. She also comments that the saddle was just a bag filled with straw. My eight year old daughter Carmen, who has also read parts of Mr. Tiessen's book was just fascinated by this particular picture. She couldn't believe that her Oma had to do such work. I began to realize by all the questions that were prompted from this picture and my Mother's comments, that it was very important for us to help our children understand and develop an appreciation for their heritage.

This book covers many other topics such as Springtime Seeding, The Making of Syrup, Visiting Nearby Relatives, Religious Life in the Colony and many more.

It ends with an excellent historical summary of the Molotschna colony. This chapter was a great help to me since Mr. Tiessen chronologically and clearly explained how the Molotschna colony "once the agricultural showcase of Russia", ceased to exist.

I wish to express my personal appreciation to Mr. Tiessen for writing such a book in which his purpose is "to attract the attention of the young generation, as well as the elderly." I also wish to thank my Mother for this gift which not only provides us with an historical knowledge of our heritage but a deeper love and respect for those aspects of her life which she holds as very important.

ISAAK P. KLASSEN. DIE INSEL CHORTITZA - STIMMUNGSBILDER, GEDANKEN, ERINNERUNGEN.
Steinbach, MB: Derksen Printers, 1979. 126 pp. \$9.00.

Reviewed by William Schroeder, Winnipeg.

If one were to choose a suitable geographical habitat for a group of pacifists such as anabaptist Mennonites, one would hardly choose the Island of Chortitza, a rocky island in the Dnieper River. The river serves as a natural moat and consequently the island has been utilized as a fortress over the millenia for whatever race or people inhabited the area at the time. However, when the first group of Mennonites emigrated to Russia in 1789 they were compelled to settle in the vicinity of the Chortitza Island because of a renewed conflict in the area of Chersson where they had hoped to establish their colony. One of the seventeen original villages in this settlement was located on the Island of Chortitza. The author lets the Ukrainian poet Schewtschenko say this in his own words:

Auf der Insel hat ein kluger Deutscher
Kartoffelchen gesetzt.....
Und wessen Blut hat hier
Das Land genetzt
Das die Kartoffeln naehrt?

This book represents the first attempt to give readers a portrait of the small Mennonite community that occupied the island for one and a quarter centuries. The author attempts to create this image, not with one continuous story with a happy ending but through a series of short incidents that describe the everyday-life of the islanders. Many of these stories are at least in part the author's own experiences as a young boy in the village; eating watermelons, taking a canoe trip around the island, exploring a

Kurgany (an ancient Sychthian burial mound) etc. The reader soon discovers that the Mennonites on the island developed their own identity. They thought of themselves as "islanders", quite apart from the "mainlanders".

The story of the Mennonites on the island ended tragically in deportation and death.

The author has included several of his own paintings and photographs depicting various aspects of life on the island. Rev. Isaak Klassen has done his people a favour by recording for posterity what he remembers about the place of his birth, the Island of Chortitza.

The book is written in German and many sections of conversations are in Low German which unfortunately only a small number of our younger generation can read and understand.

Derksen Printers are to be commended for a fine technical job in the printing, layout and binding of the book.

HANS HARDER. NO STRANGERS IN EXILE. (A free translation of In Wologdas weissen Waelder first published in 1934. Translated by Al Reimer.) Winnipeg, MB: Hyperion Press, 1979. 123 pp. \$6.95.

Reviewed by Lora Sawatsky, instructor in English and Literature at the Mennonite Brethren Collegiate Institute, Winnipeg.

The main characters of this novel emerge from a long row of dark human forms huddled against the walls of a renovated cattle car. The exterior walls are labelled "voluntary resettlers." Singled out for observation, a few characters give some degree of individual and spiritual identity to the massive human cargo transported by innumerable trains to the logging camps along the Mezin River during the 1930's in Soviet Russia.

The narrative focuses more specifically on "German Mennonite colonists from the village of Mariental in the Alexandertal settlement in Samara Province." Alexander Harms, a teacher, William Penner, a carpenter, Hans Neufeld, a former district mayor, Waldemar Wolff, an adventurer, and Ohm Peters, a spiritual shepherd travel with Father Nikolai, an orthodox priest, along the same frozen road of suffering, isolation, and hopelessness. "In exile there are no strangers."

Each character's true personality emerges when he or she is forced to answer the questions: What have you got left? What are you? In what do you believe? Some answer by selling their souls for a sack of flour. Others find a congregation of Christians in exile. There are those who contribute an extra measure of common sense, stability, and an irrepressible spirit. All are warned against callousness toward fellow sufferers which eventually leads to indifference to one's own fate.

Al Reimer's translation of Hans Harder's In Wologdas weissen Waelder makes accessible to the English speaking public an integral part of our heritage which might otherwise be forgotten. Although circumstances have changed, all of us must still answer the same questions as did the exiles. Despite the fact that some exiles fell from despair to nothingness when answering these questions, this novel is a strong reminder that

there were those who struggled to be remembered as "people who lived and loved and hoped in the midst of despair - as long as they could."

Al Reimer regards No Strangers in Exile as a "free translation" in which he makes, not only stylistic changes, but also minor changes in plot, characterization, and point of view. To some extent he changes the author's original purpose. However, the word that best characterizes this translation is readability. This novel has the potential to introduce later generations to our spiritual heritage. Although present circumstances dictate that we can only share the experience of physical exile vicariously, we may all share the faith of the exiles in actual fact.

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

NEWSLETTER EDITOR
M.B. Historical Society of Canada
77 Henderson Highway
Winnipeg, Manitoba
R2L 1L1

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

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

NAME: _____
STREET ADDRESS: _____
CITY: _____ PROVINCE: _____
POSTAL CODE: _____

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