



*Mennonite Brethren*  
*Historical Society*  
*Newsletter*

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

—Conclusion—

by Peggy Regehr

Editor's Note: The first part of this biographical sketch appeared in Vol. VI, No. 2 of the Newsletter. It contained brief highlights of Abram and Tina's life. This concluding article focuses on the personalities of the Unruh's. As a granddaughter, Peggy Regehr gives us a rare glimpse into the family life of this important couple who contributed so very much to the Mennonite Brethren Church in Canada.

My grandfather was a kindly person, a man of power, yet of gentleness. His impressive physique and stately bearing were tempered with a warm smile and twinkling eyes. He had a wonderful mix of seriousness and jest. His humor, witty sayings and practical illustrations brought smiles to the lives of those he touched and were remembered long after he was gone. He was an enjoyable person to be with.

He was a man of the Word—both the written word of books and the word of God. Books were an inseparable part of his life. He would always be found in his study. For me, the photograph of him with a copy of his History of the M.B. Church in his hands, is an appropriate picture of his life. Whether it was his Bible or his vast collection of other books, he was always reading and studying.

As grandchildren we always felt that he was truly interested in us. When he asked, "Nah, Gredel, wie gehts?", I knew it was not just polite conversation, but a desire to touch my life.

He had a love for young people, and an understanding for them, and would often come to their defence. I remember one time, in the late 40's, while living at their place during the summer, I came home from some activity wearing slacks, at a time when it was still frowned upon within the community. Rev. and Mrs. H.P. Toews were visiting and Rev. Toews raised his eyebrows at me. But grandfather quickly defused the situation by remarking on the practicality of wearing slacks for the activities I had been engaged in. Though he had strong moral and ethical principles that he expected Christians to live by, he understood which issues were peripheral.

Grandfather had a dynamic preaching voice and could, without difficulty, fill a large Conference tent without a mike. His concern in preaching, however, was always with communicating the message, and he spoke profound truths simply. After our return from India, where our knowledge and understanding of German was very limited, he would ask us after church, when he had preached, whether we had been able to follow and understand him. To his credit I must say that he was easier to understand than most other preachers we heard.

Grandfather had a love for correct and well-spoken German—yet he encouraged our stumbling efforts to speak—much of which must have been painful to his ears—and only occasionally, in a kindly way, corrected some blatant grammatical error. He was just grateful that we were making the effort.

He was not a practical man and left the practical side of life entirely to grandmother. He was also rather clumsy in his movements and often stumbled or hurt himself. Frequently it was because his mind was elsewhere, rather than on the immediate circumstances surrounding him.

It is impossible, in these few minutes, to give those of you who never met him any sense of the depth of my grandfather. His memory will always be special to me. I am proud of the legacy he has left me.

My grandmother was a very different person. She was a small wiry person. She was always busy—always active—energetic. She had obviously grown up knowing how to work—and that she did all her life. It was she who kept the household together and running smoothly.

Her life with grandfather was marked with the constant struggle to make ends meet. She provided, through gardening and keeping cows, pigs and chickens, the physical needs of a growing family. In Winkler, their home on the edge of town, resembled a small farm. After our return from India in 1942 we stayed with them briefly. One day she took me to the backyard to help provide for the supper. With the deftness that comes from experience, she caught a chicken—a blow of the axe and it had lost its head. Hot water—and then the feathers were plucked. It was promptly singed, drawn and went into the soup pot—and I had lost my appetite for grandmother's delicious noodle soup. I much preferred helping with the currants, gooseberries or freshly shelled peas. The tastes that came from her kitchen were always special.

But her practicality went beyond the traditional roles women usually assumed. She was as comfortable with hammer and nails as with pots and pans. Whether it was making furniture or fixing the pig pen, it was all part of her life. In Winnipeg, even in old age, grandmother could be seen up on the ladder repairing, painting, or cleaning and installing storm windows. To give her a sense of security grandfather would stand at the bottom, ostensibly to hold the ladder. One of their neighbours once remarked that he would not mind a wife like that.

In better times in Russia she had raised silkworms, reeled and spun the silk and used it to knit stockings for herself and her daughter. In difficult times she sewed everything her family needed, often remaking the clothes from other people's cast-offs. Nothing was wasted. Scraps were used for patchwork blankets, sewn together with decorative stitches. Grandmother was the epitome of two well-known German words—sparsamkeit and fliez.

She was never idle. If she sat down she would always pick up handwork—there was always something needed for the family. Later in life—when the demands of the family were no longer there—she turned those skills to sewing blankets and knitting mittens for relief.

Grandmother knew what hospitality meant, and she loved to make a meal or serve a cup of tea. In fact she missed her husband's ordination because she was at home preparing food for all the guests that had come. Several of the grandchildren spent various periods of time living with them, and we were loved, accepted and made to feel welcome. By this time they were both over 70, but there was no generation gap. My grandmother was an incurable matchmaker and she always took credit for my marriage. Fortunately her intervention was in the quiet power of prayer and not in meddling. At one point she felt constrained to give me some advice, informing me that it was not seemly for a woman to run after a man, but it was certainly proper to stand still and allow the man to catch her.

According to my father she never got angry at her husband. She was, however, by no means a doormat. She could express herself quite forcefully. She was sometimes frustrated at grandfather's impracticality or carelessness, but not angry. She did, however, find it necessary to get after the boys and to push them to do what needed to be done. I suspect they probably approached physical work more after the pattern of their father than their mother.

She was a woman of strength. Recently my daughter, after looking at a picture of her great-grandmother, alluded to the strength she saw there and expressed the wish that she might have learned to know her.

That strength came from God, for grandmother was a woman of faith. It was the source of her strength throughout the many difficulties she faced. She prayed much. Her bedroom door was always open and we often saw her, kneeling at her bed, praying out loud, with tears, for her husband and his work, her family, my parents in India and their work, her grandchildren and missions. According to my father she felt uncomfortable praying in public because tears always accompanied her prayers. She was a spiritually sensitive person, and would ask forgiveness of her children before she could take communion at church. An added strength for her was her love of music, for whenever she was working she would also be singing or humming—usually the hymns of faith that she had learned to treasure.

Grandmother was a family and "at-home" person. During the many absences and travels that grandfather undertook, she cheerfully stayed home to do what needed to be done. As such the full responsibility of the household rested on her. Though times were often difficult for her—bringing up six children and providing for her family, often in extreme poverty—she never complained. She supported grandfather wholeheartedly in what he did. She once said, "I know that Papa is doing an important work. That is why I have left him to his work, and have looked after the house." It was her way of participating in his work. My father said last week

that he had come to the conclusion that the impact of his father's ministry was due, in large measure, to the behind-the-scenes support, work and prayers of grandmother. Both of them developed and used their particular gifts fully, and together made a tremendous contribution to the kingdom of God.

I was reminded of two passages of Scripture. The one, from Hebrews, which closes off David Ewert's book on grandfather and is particularly fitting, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the work of God; consider the outcome of their life and imitate their faith".

The other comes from Proverbs 31. Two verses were significant to me. The first, vs. 23, says, "Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land." That is what grandmother made possible for grandfather. But then the chapter concludes by saying, "Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate"—that same city gate where her husband sat with the elders is to acknowledge her work. Today, at the city gate of the M.B. Church we want to give my grandmother the honor and esteem and praise that she has earned.

#### KOOP AND BUA FINALLY ON FILM

One of Arnold Dyck's most beloved set of infamous creations, Koop and Bua, has finally made it to the "big time". Who would have ever thought that Koop and Bua would some day be seen on film.

Dueck Film Productions has been working on this project over the past months and the premier of this first film will be held November 29, 1984 in the Centennial Concert Hall in Winnipeg. Some 15 minutes in length, the film is entitled "Koop 'n Bua enn Dietschlaund." Tickets will be available in early November.

In addition to the film premier, Bill Baerg will be conducting the Mennonite Singers in performing the hymns of faith which were the basis of the Mennonite Piano Concerto.

Also being premiered that evening will be a two-piano version of the Mennonite Piano Concerto, especially arranged by the composer Victor Davies.

#### MORE ON ERDMAN H. NIKKEL

In our last issue a biographical article on the Mission work of Erdman Nikkel in Winnipeg was included. Since that time Dr. Peter Penner, the author, has informed the editor that he had left out a very vital point of information. It has to do with Brother Nikkel's significant contribution in the development of church music in Canada. The following postscript comes from material Ben Horch has prepared on the musical beginnings of the M.B. Mission Work in Winnipeg:

The Reverend Erdman Nikkel made a significant contribution to the City Mission in Winnipeg (1921-1925). In addition to his role of pastor and evangelist, he was also the choir conductor, and an amateur violinist. Right from the outset of his tenure in the Winnipeg Mission he organized a small church orchestra with himself as a player member and leader. The idea of a church orchestra and its intermittent continuance has prevailed to the present.

#### PIANO CONCERTO TOPS CHARTS

As Mennonite musical recordings go, the Mennonite Piano Concerto may be said safely to top the Mennonite musical charts. Dave Dueck of Dueck Film Productions recently indicated that of the 12,000 copies pressed only 3,000 copies remain. At the same time some 1,000 tapes of the concerto have also been distributed.

Over-shadowed somewhat by the film, "And When They Shall Ask," the concerto, completed in 1975 by composer Victor Davies, stands on its own as a singularly fine piece of music, incorporating some of the favored songs of Mennonite faith. Copies are available in selected bookstores and may also be ordered from: Dueck Film Productions, 202-1695 Henderson Highway, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R2G 1P1.

#### REPORT AND MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE M.B. HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF CANADA JULY 8, 1984

##### Report of the General Meeting

The first portion of the meeting, conducted in the Bakerview M.B. Church in Clearbrook, B.C., was the premier showing of the film, THE HUTTERITES: TO CARE OR NOT TO CARE. Burton Buller, who produced this film, was present. The Church was filled with approximately 450 persons. Since some were unable to get into the sanctuary to see the film a second showing to some 100 people was conducted on Monday evening, July 9, following the convention. Positive feedback was received from the viewers.

##### Minutes of the Business Meeting

Present: Approximately 10 persons.

1. Historical Society Chairman, Dr. Helmut Huebert, welcomed those in attendance.
2. The Chairman reviewed the minutes of the previous annual meeting, conducted in St. Catharines, Ontario. The minutes were accepted as read.
3. The question was raised regarding the status of the Newsletter and it was generally felt that it met the need for information regarding Historical activities in Canada.

4. Notice was given that the Conference of Mennonites in Canada is interested in working together in publishing the Mennonite Historian. In other words, merging our newsletter with their paper.

The executive of the Society will check into this possibility. The executive will also check to see whether a newsletter together with the other two U.S. Centers would also be feasible. A report will be prepared for next year's annual meeting.

5. It was noted that Dave Dueck, of Dueck Films, has thanked the Society for its endorsement of the film, "And When They Shall Ask." Dave has given the Society a copy of the recording, which will be deposited in the Archives.
6. The Executive Committee of the Society reported that it has approved the idea of initiating an essay contest. The contest would have two categories, one for High School and one for post-High School entries. Prizes of \$100, \$50 and \$25 would be given to the top three entries in each category.  
  
An essay contest was held for one year in 1978. However, the lack of entries caused the annual meeting to dispense from continuing the contest. Therefore, the executive requested of the membership meeting whether or not to continue with a contest. It was moved and accepted that a contest be initiated for 1984-1985. Specific details will be available later.
7. Velma Mierau has resigned her position on the executive. To replace her nominations were requested. Accepted by acclamation was Neoma Jantz.
8. Ken Reddig, archivist, reported briefly on the activities of the Archives.
  - 8.1 Rundschau indexing progressing with three people.
  - 8.2 Music project may come through but the researcher may not be available due to teaching schedule.
9. A three-part film series entitled, The Mennonite Brethren Church: A Missionary Movement, featuring J.B. Toews of Fresno as historian and narrator, is being made by Daystar, an inter-Mennonite Film and production agency. Daystar would like the endorsement of this film by the Society. This in no way commits us to any funding of the project. It was moved and seconded that the Society endorses this project.
10. A concern was raised that we encourage our senior citizens to write their memoirs. An important generation, who came to Canada in the 1920s is now passing away. The Society will endeavor to encourage the writing of memoirs.
11. Several research projects were reported upon:
  - 11.1 Herb Klassen is researching and writing the C.F. Klassen story.
  - 11.2 Anne Wiebe is working on the Ontario M.B. History.
  - 11.3 Helmut Huebert is researching a book on the village of Hierschau.
  - 11.4 William Schroeder and Helmut Huebert are putting together a book of Mennonite maps.
12. Meeting was adjourned with prayer.

Recorded by Ken Reddig.

NEW PUBLICATION BY CENTRE

Just released by the Centre for M.B. Studies is a new book on one of the most influential of Mennonite Brethren "Reiseprediger" (Itinerant Ministers) in both Russia and Canada, Rev. Herman A. Neufeld. Written by his son, Dr. Abram H. Neufeld of London, Ontario, the book spans the years of 1880-1931.

Dr. Neufeld relied, for his research on his father's life, upon the vast diaries of his father. Altogether his father wrote some 23 volumes which included volumes of sermons, genealogy and financial accounts.

To date this material represents a most significant contribution to the study of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia, since Rev. Neufeld describes in detail his many visits to M.B. congregations throughout the Mennonite colonies.

Upon release of the publication, the Neufeld family will be transferring the original diaries to the Centre in Winnipeg where they may be used for further research. A reception, for this event, will be held on November 18, 1984 in the Mennonite Brethren Bible College Auditorium, at 2:30 P.M. The general public is invited to hear Dr. Neufeld make some comments regarding his father and his ministry, as well as to autograph copies of his book which will be made available.

Copies of the book entitled: Herman and Katharina: Their Story, are now available for purchase from the Centre for \$10.00. Please send a cheque or money order made payable to the Canadian Conference of M.B. Churches, and send to: Centre for M.B. Studies, 77 Henderson Highway, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R2L 1L1.

UPDATE ON MENNONITE MUSIC-MAKING PROJECT

Editor's Note: In July a grant was received enabling researcher Doreen Klassen to travel across Canada interviewing individuals involved in Mennonite Music-making. Here is a preliminary report of what she found.

As a graduate anthropology student, I often envied the researchers whose research interests took them to exotic places where they met fascinating people of other cultures. Little did I realize that those long, tedious hours in the university library were preparing me for travels across my own beautiful country where I too would meet interesting people, but people of my own cultural background who would tell me stories of another era which would help me to understand our Mennonite musical past.

Although I had envisioned the research project as 'interviewees' to whom I would present 'questionnaires', people's willingness to share of their musical memories and their warm gracious hospitality soon transformed the experience into one of visiting with newly-found friends—in Kitchener/Waterloo, St. Catharines, Winkler, Winnipeg, Herbert, Coaldale and Clearbrook/Abbotsford.

As I listened to dozens of stories, I gained new perspectives:

- of our forefathers who had brought a rich choral tradition, often in hand-notated 'ziffern', with them from Russia;
- of a people scattered across thousands of miles yet united in their love of a common choral tradition including such favorites as "Wer pflanzte die Blumen?", "Schaff in mir Gott", and "Der Friedensfuerst";
- of a people bonded together by their respect and appreciation for inspiring choral directors like K.H. Neufeld, Ben Horch and George Wiebe.

And most of all:

- of a people who had expressed their deepest joys and sorrows through music.

As I continued to listen, I heard notes of other common chords:

- "Father had several instruments at home. He played a violin, clarinet, trombone and ... I can't remember if he played another instrument, and we just learned to play them on our own. It was during the depression years and we couldn't afford lessons - besides we were out in the country and there weren't any teachers around."
- "In those days choir was like youth work."
- "One day at choir practise, there was no conductor. So the biggest guy in the back row took me by the shoulders, marched me in front of the choir, and said, "Neufeld, you're our new conductor!" I just stood there and told them what to sing. When we got home, my sister told me, 'If you don't use your hands to conduct, you can't be our choir conductor anymore.' After that I used my hands."
- "There used to be a Mr. Friesen. He'd copy out the songs and duplicate them—you know, with that jelly stuff that you baked in the oven—yes, hectograph. That was his donation to the church."
- "My father always emphasized the words. He wanted to get the message across. He'd often choose the last song while the minister was speaking so the song would fit his message."
- "At first we copied out songs from "Liederperlen", but later when we got songbooks we sang from "Saengerbote" and "Zionslieder".
- "Father was very musical, and he'd studied in the old country as a youth, but here in Canada he just took advantage of any training which was available through the 'dirigentenkurse'."
- "When you sing it, you can say exactly how you feel."

"Saying how you feel" through music has been a vital aspect of our Mennonite heritage. In fact, music has been the one art form universally endorsed by Mennonites, often in oblivion or opposition to its function as an art form, yet in response to the power of music to challenge, encourage, and re-create us.

Doreen Klassen, Winnipeg.

#### SEARCH NOTES

If anyone has knowledge of where copies of the following items can be located please notify the Center for M.B. Studies:

1. Golos, a Russian-language publication issued from Hillsboro, Kansas between the years of 1905-1912, primarily for Russian-speaking immigrants of the northern prairies.
2. Saenger-Gruess, an M.B. music periodical published for the M.B. Conference of B.C. by C.D. Toews between the years of 1956-1959.

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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:

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

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.