



*Mennonite Brethren
Historical Society
Newsletter*

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A MENNONITE MOSES: B.B. JANZ (1877-1964)

When Benjamin Janz was born in 1877, pharaoh still knew Moses. Janz's people were not oppressed - in fact, they possessed a charter of privileges signed by Catharine II which guaranteed them civil and religious rights. There was no need to hide the first born amid the reeds, no need for God to intervene and have the child raised at Pharaoh's court. His childhood and youth passed unnoticed in a rural village far from the seat of power.

Two years before his birth Janz's parents Benjamin and Helene, had purchased a small farm (Halbwirtschaft consisting of 32.5 dessiatines) with a windmill on the eastern end of Conteniusfeld in the Molotschna. It was an ordinary village with no special claim to fame or distinction.

The Janz household was also very ordinary. Father Benjamin crafted most of the essential household and farming inventory - bowls, chairs, tables, barrels, harnesses, a plow and a wagon.

It was also a generous household. Father Janz was never beset by a consuming passion for earthly riches. More frequently than his wife approved he forgave the debts of poor villagers and never demanded retribution from employees who occasionally stole grain from the mill.

It was a strict household. Mother Helene believed that God demanded strict obedience to His moral laws. He was righteous and just and demanded the same of mankind. Within the home the religious guidelines were narrow and severe.

It was a worshipping household. Since church was five miles distant Sundays usually meant a simple religious service in the Janz home. Traditionally a lengthy portion from the printed sermons of the German pietist Ludwig Hofacker was read and one or two hymns from the Dreiband sung. The melody, "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing," had a special appeal for father Janz, perhaps because he had difficulty keeping any other tune. Most of the hymns in the Dreiband, he felt were suitable for its melody. (2) The situation became singularly distressing to Benjamin, now accustomed to singing chorales at school. One Sunday he refused to join in the family hymn.

"Benjamin, sing with us?"

But Benjamin sullenly ignored his father's plea. More admonishment, but still no response. When family worship ended, father conducted his son to the silo, a traditional site for dealing with disobedience. Expecting the worst the boy burst into tears, but to his astonishment he saw his father weeping, then unexpectedly kneeling on the straw. A loud prayer informed God of Benjamin's obstinance. The rod was spared. Henceforth he sang all songs to his father's favorite melody.

A young assertive Moses killed the Egyptian. As heir to a nonresistant tradition and later as a convinced pacifist Janz would never have done that. Yet he was assertive. A classmate at the Gnadefeld High School and later Mennonite elder recalled a snowball fight in which the losers expediently retired to safer territory - except for Janz who stood his ground, undaunted by the volley directed towards him.

Young Janz was also honest. Quarrels at the Gnadefeld High School were usually resolved when

someone shouted: "Go ask little Janz, he'll tell you the truth!"

Janz's desert experience differed from that of Moses. There was no burning bush, but there was a burning quest for God - a deep, persistent search for faith which culminated after months of repentance, doubt and prayer. Once Janz found his God, however, he clung tenaciously to Him for the next 67 years.

There was another occasion of persistence and assertiveness. Contrary to his mother's wishes he decided to join the Mennonite Brethren, which in those days meant immersion baptism. As they walked towards the water someone asked his mother if she was happy about Benjamin's baptism. "Bringing him to the cemetery would not be as difficult as this!" she retorted.(3)

Janz was a moral and respectable young man. Thanks to his personal new life experience he became convinced that every Mennonite needed conversion but that conversion still left him a Mennonite. The Christian forms which traditional Mennonitism tried to uphold did not, from his own experience, guarantee genuine new life.

In later years his personal ethics always remained demanding - yet he never withdrew from service in a Mennonite world whose standards may have appeared less rigorous than his own.

Meanwhile the training for the confrontation with Pharoah continued.

-There was Janz the thorough, exacting school teacher.

-Janz the treasurer of the Molotschna Teachers Federation.

-Janz the Sunday School teacher and eventually preacher in the Sparrau Mennonite Brethren Church.

Then quite suddenly in 1905 - thanks to the intervention of an elder colleague - Janz met and married Maria Rogalsky. After her death in 1953, Janz penned a terse but deeply felt tribute to his spouse.

Where does the road go from here or does it even go further? For forty-eight years of life's journey together. There were special difficulties for the wife because of the many absences of a husband involved in public ministry. First a five-year

separation in perilous Bolshevik Russia with the constant threat of deprivation at home and the daily danger to my life. In Canada public service brought absences from family and farm, including a year in South America...[it was] too heavy a burden for her, the wife.

But that, too, is at an end. Eternally free and at home. The great responsibilities are laid down; she has endured and overcome in all the deprivations and extremities. But there is another dimension above all this bearing, enduring, and struggle alone with family and farm. Without this quiet, patient, praying, concerned, active support in the poverty and life of those days it would have been simply impossible for the husband to endure...Humanly speaking, here would have been no emigration in the twenties.(4)

That was Maria Rogalsky, Moses' silent partner.

Not long before Janz confronted pharoah there was still another testing. Amid the worsening material circumstances after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 Janz became seriously ill and for a time it appeared he might not recover. Perhaps God meant for him to consolidate his inner resources.

After 1917 the new pharoah(s) knew neither Joseph nor the story of the Mennonite people. Revolution and Civil War brought chaos to the Ukraine and the Mennonite settlements. When it was all over the first great famine of the Soviet era struck the Ukraine late in 1920 and early in 1921.

Deep differences separated the Mennonites from their new rules. Economically their private enterprise clashed with socialism. Politically a long tradition of local autonomy was opposed to Bolshevik centralism. Nationally a strong sense of German language and culture collided with the slavic world in which they found themselves. Religiously their belief in God and peace conflicted with the atheism and militarism of the new regime.

Almost instinctively the Mennonites reached for a tactic which had worked in the past - their agrarian achievements. What if they could make a significant contribution to the economic reconstruction of the devastated Ukraine?

There was a serious problem. During the civil war an anarchist named Nestor Machno had burned, raped and

killed in various villages. The Mennonites decided to defend themselves and organized the Selbstschutz - (a self-defense unit). It became more than that and eventually fought against the Red Army. As far as the Bolsheviks were concerned, the Mennonites were no longer pacifists. They began to forcibly direct young Mennonites into the Red Army in large numbers. A special conference was called in Alexanderwell, Molotschna to deal with the problem. A new organization, the Union of South German Mennonites, elected Janz as chairman.

He was to free the young men from military service. As a staunch opponent of the Selbstschutz he demanded the floor.

This assembly gives us the task to go and intercede before the Soviet government and insist that all Mennonite young men are nonresistant. But all of us and the government know what has happened through the Selbstschutz. It will be extremely difficult to assert that we are nonresistant. Furthermore, we ourselves do not know if we really endorse this view. Perhaps we want to assume such an attitude now, but if another situation develops we will shoot again. If we really want to adhere to nonviolence in the future, then now is the occasion to confess. What has happened has unfortunately happened, but we are sorry that it did. This must be settled here today. (5)

If the delegates were not prepared to endorse pacifism he would not demand it. "But if this is the case," he continued, "I must resign from the leadership of the organization and request you to elect a new chairman." When the question was called for, the vote was unanimously affirmative. It was not the last time Janz demanded a decisive nonresistance.

How do you deal with a pharaoh who doesn't believe in the rod of Moses, a leprous hand, or water turning into blood? What do you do when God chooses not to send plagues. At what point can you call out "Let my people go!" if you can't even see pharaoh.

First things first - the Mennonites were starving and had to be fed. Yet the brothers in America knew little of their plight for almost no letters left Russia following the end of the civil war. Through a German friend reports and letters were sent via the German diplomatic mail. It was a tactical masterstroke. The future of many Russian Mennonites depended on the arrangement - all correspondence pertaining to eventual emigration now flowed

unhindered. Meanwhile the newly formed MCC (American Mennonite Relief) sent its first representative, Alvin J. Miller, to Russia. Before long Miller at Janz's prompting signed a relief contract by which the American Mennonites promised to aid in - all economic reconstruction of the Ukraine by supplying tractors and food stuffs. Meanwhile a year would pass before the first relief supplies arrived.

In the interim Janz bombarded Dutch and American Mennonites with graphic letters depicting the plight of his fellow Mennonites:

A chasm has opened with unbelievable rapidity. It is so incredibly deep and wide it engulfs the great mass of Russians and our people. It is so tragic and hopeless. We are entering the depths of the night of death with such furious speed that it has happened before one really become aware of it.

Please forget about condensed milk, chocolate or similar things - just bread, bread, bread! - In the name of all our starving ones send a shipment of flour as quickly as possible.

By March, 1922 Janz spoke of the waves engulfing the Mennonites of the Ukraine - of a time dying of rotting cadavers. With incredible speed they were moving into the night, towards ruination and catastrophe.

Bread finally arrived in April, 1922. For the moment his people were saved. But what now?

For Janz, and not all agreed with him, there was only one solution - emigration. Everything he did as chairman of the Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage was related to that one goal.

This conviction that emigration was the only viable solution for the Russian Mennonites became the sustaining ideology undergirding Janz the diplomat. Something about his quiet dignity exerted an unusual influence on an officialdom often more impressed by brazenness and emotional appeal. Though he represented one of the smallest minorities in Russia, he established repeated contacts with the highest levels of government in both Kharkov and Moscow.

As a Moses, Janz had several excellent qualities. His analytical mind quickly penetrated complex issues. If convinced of the honesty and necessity of a given tactic, he pressed his view with a persistence bordering on stubbornness. In a critical encounter he instinctively pressed his advantage just short of the

breaking point. Frequently he confronted the same officials again and again until he obtained the desired terms.

A reaction illustrating this trait came from the chairman of the Passport Department of the Moscow GPU when one of the emigrant echelon leaders, J.J. Thiessen, sought to complete arrangements for transit to Latvia. Waiting until Thiessen had explained that he sought approval for emigration to the west, he shouted, "So you come from Janz. For three years I have not crossed myself, but if I could ever free myself of Janz, I would cross myself three times." (6)

Janz's diplomatic strategy was simple: remain unobtrusive; deal only with the highest levels of government; if necessary wait days for a high-level interview; negotiate with as many government departments as possible, allowing the ones favoring you to convince your opponents; if Kharkov disagrees get Moscow to overrule; don't tell your colleagues too much, in their eagerness to help they may disrupt carefully laid plans. Referring to a Mennonite service in Ekaterinoslav which Janz attended, a participant reported: "After the meeting we asked him (Janz) many questions but he told us nothing. It was probably better that way since it was unsafe at that time. You know how it is with us Mennonites - the information may not have remained confidential if he had told us." (7)

It was now time to cross the Red Sea - In this instance God decided not to send a mighty wind. The pathway out of Russia proved a narrow one with many areas of quicksand on either side.

American Mennonite aid had not yet reached the Ukraine when Janz petitioned the Central Executive Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party for permission for the refugee and landless Mennonites to emigrate (Dec. 17, 1921). Economic reconstruction, at least so Janz argued, was not possible unless the surplus population could leave - deep down he wished all could leave and he felt most wanted to - "The emigration has become an elemental tumult - the dams are bursting. The people have made up their minds and are ready to struggle with life and death." (8)

Eventually Soviet authorities agreed with the argument. Perhaps they were convinced by the arrival of MCC foodstuffs, seed grain and above all, 50 Fordson tractors. In March, 1923 the Foreign Commissariat in Moscow sanctioned the departure of the

first 3,000 emigrants. They left Chortitza on June 22, 1923 and crossed into Latvia on July 1. Other groups soon followed.

Suddenly the difficulties emerged:

-Canadian medical examiners rejected over 600 of the 1923 emigrants as medically unfit for Canada. What was to be done with them?

-On July 7, 1923 Moscow ordered all further emigration to stop.

-While in Moscow during December 1923 Janz received an invitation from a man in black leather jacket.

It ordered him to come to Lubyanka 2 - the headquarters of the feared GPU (State Political Administration) on December 23. He spent the night in prayer. As he entered the building he noticed a large statue of a hovering angel on top of the front gable. How ironic. An angel hovering over a labyrinth of death! He presented his summons to the guards - only when the reverse side was signed would he be free to leave. A long interrogation about the emigration followed. Fortunately he was released.

There were more troubles in 1924. Though Canada had promised to receive 5,000 emigrants in 1924 as well as additional colonists able to pay their own way, the German consul in Moscow, convinced that the exodus was not in the future interests of Germany, sought an injunction against mass migration. No further exit permits or emigration lists were considered. Janz daringly telephoned the GPU passport department and a member of the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party. The emigration continued. Now the Ukrainian Government in Kharkov protested further emigration. In Canada the Board reduced its 1924 immigration contract to 3,000 persons. The C.P.R. no longer wanted to accept immigrants on credit. Persistent, pleading telegrams to Canada and Germany kept the emigration moving. 5,048 people left in 1924.

The problems continued in 1925. Departure deadlines were met with difficulty. Officials withheld exit permits. The Canadian Board of Colonization was strapped by a shortage of funds.

One of Janz's letters to the Board contained a grim warning: "Next year [exit] pass difficulties can be anticipated as never before... Whatever may happen it

is certain that I will no longer remain at my post..." His pessimism was well-founded. Henceforth the Verband was not only forbidden to act in emigration matters but forced to transfer its central administration from Ohrloff to Kharkov.

On March 5, 1926, a man in a leather jacket again appeared at the door of his residence - this time in Kharkov. Again he appeared before the GPU, again a long interrogation, again he left a free man. Janz resigned as Verband chairman a few days later. He knew it was time to leave. On March 9 he had applied for an exit permit. Miraculously it was granted at the end of April.

On May 24, 1926 he delivered his farewell address to the Mennonite Brethren Church in Tiege, Molotschna. It was a touching moment. For Janz there was only one thing which could sustain the Mennonites through any adversity - an inner spiritual vitality. The economic decline of the colonies was not the greatest loss. It had, in fact, restored the much greater treasure of personal religion.

In 1924 a new period began in the history of our people. Mothers, fathers and teachers - all have acknowledged one thing. All of us were struck down; some were led into prison. But thanks to God the Mennonites can pray in the last great crisis. Where others curse and rant and damn their fate, the Mennonite prays. The past years have shown this.(9)

Janz pointed to the material abundance that had characterized the pre-1914 era. There had been large wheat reserves.

But this is no longer true. Previously barns were torn down and larger ones built; today they are torn down and smaller ones built. But this is not the greatest misfortune. A question, have we not been happier and more blessed with the small barns and the small wheat piles? Be content with what there is...God was able to use a wealthy Mennonite society less effectively than a poor one. A certain deportment is essential. It is not serious that we are all poor. The results will be beneficial. The greatest misfortune is to lose hold on God. Our churches have cooperated as best they could. Prior to 1914 a difference existed between them. During the time of troubles we were all unified - one calamity, one God; despite various teachings - unified! Between 1914 and 1922 a decline; from 1922 till now a rise. And during

the most difficult time, down in the valley, individually how they folded their hands - they were unified. A common searching after the Way of Life. That was lovely. (10)

He had taken his leave. There was one last visit to familiar Kharkov. How frequently this locale had meant disappointment, anxiety and fear. There was still fear. Did the GPU know of his intent to leave Russia? Would he be allowed to leave Kharkov? Arrangements for the departure were carefully made. Special agents purchased the railway tickets for Janz, carried his baggage into a train compartment, and aided him in boarding the train without being recognized. The train carrying Janz left Kharkov on May 28.

Dr. John B. Toews
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ENDNOTES

1. The material for this paper is mainly taken from my book, With Courage to Spare: The Life of B.B. Janz (1877-1964).
2. Three hymnals, Frohe Botschaft, Glaubensstimme and Heimatklaenge comprised the so-called Dreiband.
3. B.B. Janz Papers (Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Canada, Winnipeg, Manitoba), Meine Heimkehr, 2-3.
4. Jacob B. Janz papers (in possession of the family). B.B. Janz, "Heimgang der Schwester B.B. Janz."
5. B.B. Janz Papers, I.C. "Die Gruendung des Verbandes in Alexanderwhol," 3-4.
6. J.J. Thiessen, "Vor 40 Jahren," Saskatoon, Sask., June, 1964 (manuscript in possession of J.J. Thiessen), 1,2.
7. Minutes of the "Gedenk-Feier am 23. Januar 1945 in Bethause der Coaldale Mennoniten Bruedergemeinde."
8. A.A. Friesen Collection (Mennonite Library and Archives, N. Newton, Kansas), B.B. Janz to the Studienkommission. December 16, 1922, 7.

9. From original notes compiled by Jacob Hein of Tiege and published in A.A. Toews, Mennonitische Maertyrer (Winnipeg, 1954, II, 494-87.

10. Ibid.

This paper was first presented as an address at the special evening commemorating B.B. Janz, held on March 29, 1985 in the Coaldale Mennonite Brethren Church. The evening was sponsored by the Coaldale M.B. Church and the Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of Canada.

ZIFFERN IN RUSSIAN?

Recently the Centre for MB Studies received the books of Rev. David B. Wiens, pastor and teacher, but probably bestknown as the Russian radio speaker for MB Communications. Within his collection of books was an unusual music book. It is a Russian hymn book utilizing numbers (ziffern) for notes. It was printed by "Raduga Press" in Halbstadt, Molotschna.

The book is a compilation of various hymns by Ivan S. Prochanov, leader of the Russian Evangelical Baptists. Prochanov, together with H. J. Braun and A. J. Kroeker, purchased and reorganized the Neufeld print shop in Halbstadt, in 1909, as the Raduga (Rainbow) Press. In addition to the many Mennonite and German works which this press published were tracts and devotional literature in the Russian language. This press made a substantial contribution to the spread of the evangelical movement in Russia.

The hymn book is entitled "Psalter" and contains 507 hymns. It was published in 1911. If any of our readers would know more about the history and use of this hymn book the Centre would appreciate hearing from you.

HELP! COPIES OF OLD PERIODICAL NEEDED

The Centre for MB Studies is looking for copies of an early Mennonite Brethren Missions publication known as Das Erntefeld. It was produced by Abram Friesen, first MB Missionary to India. It was published monthly from 1900-1915(we think). Copies or photo-copies of issues should be sent to the Centre. Address is listed elsewhere in this newsletter.

GEORGE VON TRAPPE LETTER

George von Trappe was a Russian government official who under Grigory Alexandrovitch Potenken (1739-1791), the Governor of Taurida, was charged with responsibility of inviting German settlers to the Ukraine. The letter reprinted below is from von Trappe to Potenken. In it he mentions the Mennonites around Danzig who he believes would make good settlers in the newly acquired territory to the south of Russia. The letter was written on February 17, 1787 and was brought to our attention by Bill Schroeder of Winnipeg.

"In Germany, and especially in Prussia, the desire to settle in provinces under your jurisdiction continues with enthusiasm, and has developed beyond my expectations. The malicious rumors published in newspapers, which I stopped in time, nor the intrigue of the officials in Prussia and Danzig could halt the emigration. If your Highness wishes, I could bring in five hundred or maybe more families. Actually now is the best time to attract a large number of colonists from Danzig because now more than ever before, a significant number of people in Danzig openly discuss their intention to abandon the Polish King and subordinate the city to Prussia. Peasants, especially the Mennonites, those kind farmers, fear that fatal catastrophe. They have an aversion for the Prussian yoke. That is the reason why they display such great desire to come and settle in your provinces. Also, within the boundaries of Mecklenburg there are many people who show a desire to settle in Taurida or in the area surrounding Kherson. They could be embarked aboard ships in the independent city of Lubeck. I have just received very pleasant news from the Rhein, to be exact from Frankfurt am Mein. A trip there would be all that's necessary for Your Highness to receive vine growers, peasants, artisans, tobacco growers and many more. Everything will depend on orders given by Your Highness to make arrangements to provide the colonists with good accommodations and on taking good care of them initially, which is very difficult to do. This is the essential point. However, M.G. your wisdom and might will conquer all obstacles."

ARCHIVES STAFF CHANGES

Since the fall of 1980 the Centre for MB Studies in Winnipeg has benefited from the services of Velma Mierau. Velma came to Winnipeg from Fresno, California. She had previously been employed at the Centre for MB Studies associated with the MB Biblical Seminary in Fresno. Her experience, interest and dedication made it natural for the Winnipeg Centre to officially hire her as part-time archivist in 1981.

Velma was involved with many major projects within the archives. She reorganized the periodical collection, catalogued the rare books collection and spent many hours creating registers of the provincial conference collections.

She and her husband Eric moved to Toronto in August where Eric is studying Theology at St. Michael's College.

Replacing Velma is Erica Fehr of Winnipeg. Erica is newly married (August 1985) and has a bachelors degree in Church Music from Steinbach Bible College where she graduated in 1983. For the past two years Erica has been employed as a secretary and has operated her own small business of raising chickens and ducks near Kleefeld, Manitoba.

REPORT OF MB HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL MEETING

Regina was the site of this year's annual meeting of the Mennonite Brethren Historical Society. Convened on the evening of July 5th., during the annual convention of the Canadian Conference of MB Churches, the meeting began with the showing of the film "A Path Which Few Take." This film is a documentary of the "Independent Evangelical Baptists" in the Soviet Union. The film featured several prominent Mennonite ministers. Some 200 people were in attendance

Following the showing of the film the society conducted a brief reorganization meeting.

The Newsletter of the Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of Canada is published four times a year by the Executive of the Society, at the Centre for MB Studies in Canada. All correspondence regarding the Society or the Newsletter should be addressed to: NEWSLETTER EDITOR, MB Historical Society of Canada, 1-169 Riverton Ave., WINNIPEG, Manitoba R2L 2E5. If you know of someone who would be interested in becoming a member of the Society please have them send their name and address, together with a \$5.00 membership fee, to the address indicated above.

BOOKS FOR SALE

Enclosed with this newsletter is a sheet offering a number of books for sale. Often the Centre for MB Studies obtains copies of books it already has in its collection. We offer them to the general public for a modest fee. They are used and mostly in good to fair condition. This list represents only a small number of the many titles available.

UNIQUE DONATION GIVEN TO THE CENTRE

A delightful collection of photographs, papers and personal letters of missionary to India, Helen Warkentin, was recently donated to the Centre by family members. The collection is an excellent, if brief, look into the life of this woman who dedicated herself to serving Christ under our Mission Board. The photographs are unusually good. Together with personal comments, with which Miss Warkentin describes each photograph, they comprise an excellent resource of missionary activity in this first mission field of the MB Church.

MENNONITE ARCHIVES NEWSLETTER

This past summer Dennis Stoesz (Mennonite Heritage Centre, Winnipeg) and Ken Reddig edited the third issue of the newsletter for the association of the North American Mennonite Libraries and Archives. This issue should be available very soon in most Mennonite schools.