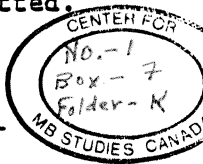


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Mennonite Brethren and General Conference Relations in Pre-WWI Russia.



Setting the Stage for Canada

Dr. John B. Toews

Mennonites in Russia quarrelled before 1860. They argued with their leaders during settlement and with each other afterwards. There were the Flemish and the Frisians and those in between. Elders offended congregations and were deposed. There were those with land and those without - and the shouts of the quarrel reached the highest levels of Russian government. In one sense the dispute of 1860 reaffirms continuity in the history of a rather contentious people. In another it resurrected forgotten religious values and so challenged existing ideas and practices considered sacrosanct. Somehow the very fabric of the Russian Mennonite soul was more deeply involved. Other disputes were forgotten in time. This one was not.

Each group probably formulated its "official view" of the split within a decade. The narrow confines of the mid-century village mindset easily retained the memories of angry words spoken or harsh actions taken. Some of these were factually correct, some error prone, others false. In later decades it proved difficult to re-examine these early images. Thanks to the historian P.M. Friesen some of the documents reflecting the early Brethren preceptions of the conflict re-emerged. They seem to have been concerned with the unyielding orthodoxy of the old system, its inability to separate the committed from the uncommitted, and with the resulting administration of sacred ordinances to both.

Fortunately, a few documents have recently emerged which inform us how some observers in the Old Church felt about the Brethren. Many of the issues associated with the split of 1860 were already manifest in the Neu-Kronsweide (Chortitza settlement) revivals of 1853-54. Jakob Hildebrandt (1795-1867),

long time elder in the district, was directly involved with these early religious stirrings. Thanks to the jottings of his son Cornelius¹ we now know more about the Kronsweide revival than the short paragraph P.M. Friesen wrote on the subject. The young man proved to be a keenly observant eyewitness, recording in authentic images the events and processes which transpired.

Cornelius' story is not complicated. A new life movement emerged amid the routinized economic, social and religious patterns of a closed community Elder Hildebrand approved:

Father especially rejoiced with the newly converted, who openly declared the assurance of forgiveness of sin in the blood of Jesus, and hoped that these people would become the salt of the church and be a great blessing to it. He even viewed their at first loudly expressed joy over sins forgiven as scriptural. Initially he was kindly disposed to the movement and extended every sympathy to it.²

Cornelius agreed with his father:

"At first they and their adherents counted as the most diligent church goers. Apparently they sought to translate their Christianity into practice and to prove with a new pure life that they were serious about a godly walk. It illumined the churches like the dawn of a new day. Those with believing, longing hearts saw and rejoiced over it and thanked God in anticipation of a great, glorious day."³

The term Frommen (pious ones), later used derisively of the Brethren, had positive connotations in 1853-54. It was not for long. The first fruits of revival--the joy of salvation, consistent living, a submissive searching of the scriptures--were soon sacrificed to a curious combination of emotional excesses and theological dogma. In the words of Cornelius:

A number of the so-called "pious ones" (Frommen) were not careful about several human weaknesses during their initial feelings of happiness. Some advanced the notion that the sins of the flesh were not imputed to a child of God. This gave rise to all sorts of exaggerations and gossip. Father paid little attention to this at first and defended the accused loyally and honestly. They still belonged to his church and were sheep of his flock searching for better pasture. He was happy to lead them to it."⁴

Initially both groups attended worship services in the same church.

Elder Jakob tried to

"unite, conciliate and hold together. He tried to interact with the movement as much as possible, to the chagrin of some of his church members who wanted the elder to be firmer and harsher and often made sharp accusations because of his yielding attitude. Father, however, allowed himself to be led by the heart rather than the mind and his Christian disposition was deeply afflicted by the split."⁵

In his account Cornelius lists the mounting tensions as he saw them. The leaders of the dissenting movement, especially Johann Loewen, left much to be desired. He urged his group to stay away from the services of the Old Church and "expressed their great unhappiness with the old order and its representatives."⁶ They were possibly too fervant in reading Revelations for they soon "called the [old] church a Hurenhaus (a brothel) and their watchword proclaimed 'Come out of her that you be not partakers of her sins and that you receive not of her plagues.' (Rev. 18:4)."⁷ The exclusion process became mutual. The dissenters were soon attacked at the local Bruederberatung. The elder's pleas for moderation were ignored and legislative measures passed which were designed to force their return. By

this time Hildebrand was already defending something called the "froehliche Richtung" (joyous movement). Robust, noisy worship services spawned new forces which widened the gap between the conservatives and radicals. Now rumors and exaggerations abounded. These were largely false for when the elder questioned people more closely about these, much of what was being said was not true.

In the end the radical few spoiled it for the moderate many, "but the leaders belonged to these few and that cast a bad light upon the entire movement."⁸ Elder Hildebrand attended a Sunday afternoon house meeting in the fall of 1855. There was much discussion and much singing - still from the traditional Mennonite hymnal. Finally coffee was served. Hildebrand noticed that Johann Loewen spent much time in the kitchen and "exchanged the 'sister kiss' with the single sisters working there. Naturally father, who was very strict in ethical questions, could not relate this to the new life, and his enthusiasm for the movement dampened considerably."⁹

Matters became more painful in 1859-60. One Sunday the Kronsweide church had no Vorsaenger (song leader). There was more. "Father's assistant and oldest fellow preacher did not come to the communion table."¹⁰ There were apologies and regrets later on, but the scarring remained. Then came rumors of immersing new members in the river, but Cornelius does not indicate when this occurred.

Hildebrand speaks of another process also reported in H. Epp's booklet on Abraham Unger.¹¹ "They abolished everything which symbolized the old ecclesiastical custom and order: the song books; Friedrich Starck's prayer book, beloved in many homes; Hofacker's sermons and Arndt's Wahres Christentum (True Christianity). These were condemned to be burned with fire."¹² Again the action of the radicals generated a negative image for the dissenters.

Radical leadership encouraged the sister kiss, loud hallelujahs, lively rhythms beat on pots and pans during worship and the symbolic destruction of everything associated with the old piety. It also became vindictive and bombastic. When Gerhard Wieler and Heinrich Epp met with elder Hildebrand on one occasion the youthful Wieler exclaimed: "You, Ohm Jakob, have preached many a soul to hell." The conversation continued in spite of this bombshell. The topic turned to missions. Foreign languages were apparently no barrier: Epp explained that whoever was "born again possesses the Holy Spirit and can speak in all tongues and languages."¹³ In 1866 Gerhard Wieler applied for readmission into the Old Church. He appeared before the congregation and was questioned as to why he wished to return. Wieler replied "that he had not found the pure church for which he had been searching among the separatists either."¹⁴

Other mid-century documents tend to reiterate the events and happenings documented by Cornelius Hildebrandt. The minister Jakob Epp living in the Hebrew colonies but in frequent contact with the Chortitza church during and after 1860 speaks of the sharp criticism which the dissidents levied, but at the same time expressed concern about the reaction instigated by some of the leaders of the Old Church.¹⁵ In his Erinnerungen (reminiscences) Heinrich Janzen speaks of his boyhood interaction with the Flusstaeufer.¹⁶ Initially they merited the term Fromnen but later on terms like Froehliche (the happy ones), Huepfer (jumpers) and Springer (springers) seemed more appropriate.

There was another side. Young Janzen participated in the children's services where he not only learned to understand the Scriptures but "the art of prayer which . . . has blessed my life to the present day."¹⁷ Several practices of the dissidents eventually repulsed him. The first was their individualistic and literalistic method of Scripture interpretation.

What both struck and angered me about the Bible Studies was the caprice with which a number of participants interpreted certain Scripture passages. For example in the opinion of one of Kl.'s grown sons, horses of all the animals on earth would probably get to heaven because some Scriptures indicate there were horses in heaven. Another view held by the majority of Bible study participants was that all non-Christians, including small innocent children went to hell because they lacked the saving faith in Jesus. I was not pleased that horses went to heaven and small children to hell. . . . "¹⁸

In Janzen's view James 5:16 with its admonition to mutual confession of sin also misled the early Brethern. In his experience the indiscriminate confessions of men and women, young and old, "became so unpalatable that they no longer appeared as an unfettering of sin, but as sin itself."¹⁹ Janzen also found it difficult to participate in the lively celebration of God's grace.

S. and K. junior sat astride on a bench facing each other. Then, in order to express the joy of their heart for being pardoned, they began to sing a spiritual song according to the melody of a street song to which one could have easily danced and rode their wooden horse (the bench) back and forth across the floor to a lively rythm. I began to feel very uneasy. [I felt the same] when Mrs. Kl., thinking of the future bliss in heaven, slapped Mrs. I. on the shoulder and shouted Listen I. when we will finally be there then juchhe! (hurrah) or when P. rejoiced "over the wonderful melodies which we stole from the devil."²⁰

The "official image" of the Brethren emerged early in the life of the movement. The process was not complicated. From the very onset they were suspect in the eyes of the closed society which they left. The religious ideas advanced by the Brethren and their unorthodox worship practices further intensified the antagonism. Because they remained within the community socially and economically, an enduring portrait of "the Brethren" engraved itself in the popular mind. Unfortunately the spiritual dimensions of this image became associated with the excessive and the spectacular and ignored the quietistic, contemplative elements in the renewal movement. The memory of relatively few extremists celebrating free grace lingered in the public mind until early in the twentieth century. Added to this portrait was the remembrance of their fervant condemnation of the old church. For the

Brethren immersion baptism based on experiential faith became an indispensable symbol of the new life, while for many in the other camp it signified the final rejection of the old church.

The lingering images of early excesses were not the only barriers to co-operation between the dissidents and the Old Church. In the later decades of the nineteenth century the Brethren concept of conversion (Bekehrung) became increasingly precise. Conversion accounts from this period reflect an amazing uniformity. For the majority the experience was very much an intensely personal adult affair. A sense of inadequacy and shortcoming coupled with a deep sense of sinfulness led to a protracted crisis experience lasting days, weeks and even months. There was doubt and despondency, the reading of the Scripture, attempts at prayer and at times counselling from those who were "bekehrt" (converted). In the end a successful spiritual quest expressed itself in a deep, inner joy. There was a process of "froh werden" (becoming happy). Subsequent to this experience it was important to thank God for salvation in a public worship service. Baptism usually followed within a few weeks.

In most of the adult conversion accounts the old religious system was cited as being clearly inadequate. The crucial step in leaving it involved rebaptism. In submitting to this ordinance the convert deliberately moved out of what he or she considered a conventional, formalized Christianity into a personalized, intimate "brother-sister" setting. Family and societal crises were among the expected consequences of such a transfer. In a sense one joined the persecuted and despised. But there was another dimension. The new piety was theologically sure of its salvation. It seemed equally sure of what standards the Christian walk demanded. There was a strong temptation to demand that family and friends duplicate the form of one

particular religious experience and demonstrate a circumspect piety. In such a setting the price of a continued relationship for family and friends was a high one and few were able to sustain it.

Meanwhile another development in the evolution of the Brethren added to the relational crisis. The scenario was a bit complicated. The early decades of the Brethren movement coincided with the establishment of new Mennonite settlements throughout European Russia. As part of the larger Mennonite community the young church was naturally involved in this dispersion process. New frontiers threatened cohesiveness. The Brethren developed a very effective strategy designed to preserve unity and even promote growth through evangelism - the itinerate ministry. The first Brethren Conference held in 1872 already elected five itinerant preachers. Carefully arranged schedules ensured annual contact with virtually all of the scattered Brethren adherents. Congregational growth among the Brethren was largely based on this kind of activity. Except for occasional revivals the increase was gradual. Evangelism among the Russians was not yet practiced and so most converts came from the Old Church. Such a situation, lasting right into the twentieth century, hardly promoted good-will between the two groups. David Epp, writing in Der Botschafter in 1910, observed "The Mennonite Brethren as before, are still concerned with making proselytes among the Mennonites."²¹

The itinerate ministry created an operational piety which not only ensured stability and continuity but possibly even created a new sense of religious peoplehood. Its agenda was rather straightforward and

included home visitation, Bible studies, edificatory meetings in village schools, and large assemblies at mission and thanksgiving festivals.²² Such dedication to the cultivation of personal and public religion generated a steady reaffirmation of a distinct Brethren identity. Here were Russian Mennonites with a different religious style. That style not only included a different conversion theology and baptismal mode, but also distinct forms of Christian nurture. A common religious outlook and liturgy transcended the dispersing effect of Brethren migration to new frontiers and produced a strong sense of belonging, even in small, remote communities. In such a setting intimacy with members of the Old Church gradually became less urgent.

The Brethren flirtation with the Baptists was a contentious issue for the Old Church from the onset. This is somewhat mystifying in the light of the diverse foreign influences which penetrated segments of the Russian Mennonite community at least two decades prior to the secession. These were personified by British and Foreign Bible Society representatives like John Melville²³ or Quakers like William Allen and Stephen Grellet who in 1819 preached to Mennonite gatherings up to 500 people, or their co-religionist John Yeardley who appears to have been in contact with the Mennonites in 1853.²⁴ Periodical and pamphlet literature, largely devotional in

character and already in circulation during the 1840s, helped to broaden the awareness of the serious pilgrim. Preaching ministries like those carried on by the Wurttemberg pietist Eduard Wuest during the 1850s or the Hamburg Baptist elder Johann Oncken during the 1860s were comparatively late additions to the Russian Mennonite religious scene.

In a sense the Brethren contact with the Baptists was a continuation, if intensification, of an older religious practice. Their love affair in the 1860s was mainly a matter of timing. The Baptists were there when the secessionists needed them. They provided a new line of religious authority for a group which found itself in an organizational and theological vacuum. In this context the Baptist Johann Oncken not only ordained Abraham Unger as elder (1868) but a certain P.M. Friesen, who submitted to the ordination because "I wanted to prevent a division in our congregation."²⁵ Baptists like Carl Benzier and August Liebig introduced proper procedure and record keeping to the early business meetings.²⁶ Liebig even consented to live in Andreasfeld for a year (1871-72). "Since that time church business meetings and the Sunday School have regularly been conducted according to his model. He also introduced the prayer time on Sunday morning."²⁷ Liebig not only united Brethren factions, but seems to have appreciated their peoplehood for he "left the distinctly Mennonite confession of the Brethren Church untouched."²⁸ Co-operation even went further. In 1872-73 the

Einlage church appointed two Baptists, Eduard Leppke and Wilhelm Schutz as itinerant ministers.²⁹

The Baptist connection was not without its problems. The first Brethren Confession of Faith drafted in 1873 carefully specified that the Baptists and the Brethren were two distinct groups. On the other hand when the 1876 General Conference tried to clarify the Baptist-Brethren relationship, the item was postponed because it proved too contentious. From the very onset the Baptist liaison steadily compromised the Brethren search for identity. In one incident before the official Baptist recognition in 1879, Brethren elders and ministers faced the unenviable task of trying to convince a czarist official that they were different from both Baptists and the older Mennonite Church.³⁰

Why did the Baptist question become such a barrier to inter-Mennonite understanding, especially since many in the Old Church had also broadened the base of their spiritual quests by "going abroad." The answer is probably not too complex. The conservative majority had its customs and traditions, its ecclesiastical leadership and liturgical patterns. The dissenting minority by rejecting the old created a vacuum which had to be filled. Baptists with their theology, preaching styles and church polity intact were readily available in the 1860s and 1870s. Here was a big brother for the wilful but lonely orphan. The price of friendship meant tolerating Baptist militarism and tobacco smoke, but with it came a group capable of sound biblical teaching and preaching, committed to the believers' church and the

immersionist baptismal mode. Here was a mould into which the Brethren could fit much of their new life experience.

The Baptist connection was sustained by ongoing contacts during the 1880s and 1890s. The problems continued as well. Authorities frequently identified the Brethren as Baptists and appropriate petitions clarifying the relationship were periodically drawn up. It is difficult to determine whether this is the result of the continued fraternization between the two groups or if an occasional hostile act by isolated members of the old church fueled the fire. Several issues related to the Baptists still caused difficulties in inter-Mennonite relations as late as 1910. Baptists preachers were welcomed in Brethren meeting houses while Mennonite ministers generally were not. Brethren admitted Baptist believers to communion services on the basis of their immersion baptism but continued to debate the admisability of believing Mennonites baptized by sprinkling. Furthermore baptized Baptists were accepted in Brethren congregations without rebaptism while adults baptized on faith in the Old Church still had to be immersed.³¹

The Baptist connection, a separate peoplehood, a defined conversion, Frommen, Froehliche, Springer, Flusstaeufer - were the things that separated really stronger than those which united? What of the common life experience in the context of the village? What of the fact that they were all strangers and pilgrims in an alien land, that Russia tolerated them for their economic productivity and not out of respect for their nonconformity? Should not

external pressures generate a cohesiveness capable of overcoming internal religious differences?

The fact was that the prevailing structure of Mennonite peoplehood tolerated little novelty, even though it was sustained by a long egalitarian tradition. Economically and religiously village democracy allowed every propertied, adult male to speak to every issue. Leaders who tried to move towards more centralism could never fully ignore this vigorous democracy. Its operation, however, was based on a fixed system and upon time-honored values. A dissenting minority with a just cause simply could not win its case. Majority sanctions were easily imposed and the self-contained, self-regulating community naturally regarded its system as inviolable. Religious revisionism was simply an attack on the very fabric of Mennonitism. The orthodox many viewed the ideas of the Brethren as a threat to the existing, religious world. When the secessionists went beyond ideological dissent and proceeded to create a new ecclesiastical structure a harsh response was inevitable.

Russian Mennonites were in violent disagreement after 1860 though they still ate the same food, slept in similar houses and farmed in a uniform manner. Tensions only began to lessen when the community realized that different groups could function within the same socio-economic frame. There were fortunately a number of factors which conspired to break down barriers.

One solution coincided with the emergence of the Brethren. By the mid-nineteenth century rapid population growth had shattered the social and economic tranquility of the old settlements. The rapid absorption of reserve land created a group of landless Mennonites which at times comprised over half the population. In the late 1860s a systematic resettlement gradually provided a solution to the population surplus and the severe social tensions

it produced. This colonization within Russia generally improved inter-Mennonite relations. Economic co-operation was essential to survival on the new frontier, be it the Kuban, Zagradozka or Siberia. Droughts which withered crops; diseases that decimated livestock; nomadic people who resented the settlement of their grazing lands - such collective difficulties possibly made particular views on the nature of salvation or the mode of baptism seem less important. In the Kuban the early Brethren shared their house of worship with Mennonite Templars who not only rejected baptism and the Lord's Supper as "false sacred relics"³² but denied Christ's divinity as well. At times the frontier was almost too religiously liberating. One colonist, reporting on the status of four Mennonite villages in Siberia, observed that "Conference, Brethren, Alliance, Adventists and free thinkers (Templars?) are all represented here, yet all are good Mennonites."³³ It was nevertheless disconcerting when the Adventists shattered the Sunday calm by starting a threshing machine, "but what can be done if we want freedom of conscience."³⁴

Unfortunately such frontier diversity was often completely without religious leadership. Initially there was no minister in the ten villages of the Memrik settlement. Much the same problem prevailed in the initial eleven villages of the Pavlodar settlement in 1908.³⁵ In both these instances Brethren ministers at first served all groups. In some settlements these

circumstances laid the basis for long term co-operation. Joint worship services, Bible conferences, choirs and ministerial courses were commonplace in the Siberian settlements.³⁶ In the Zagradovka colony ministers from both the Brethren and the Old Church often served village congregations alternately. Thanksgiving festivals were carefully scheduled so that the members of both groups could attend all the services. Participation in common mission projects was the order of the day.³⁷ In Zagradovka this sense of co-operation and greater belonging even transcended a rather steady loss of Old Church members, including ministers, to the Brethren and in later years, to the Evangelical Mennonite Church.

After 1880 the practice of nonresistance--Russian Mennonite style--played a rather diverse role in inter-Mennonite relations. The ideal of nonviolence basically found expression in the operation of the forestry service with its defined obligations and procedures. Its support demanded a high level of co-operation from all Mennonite groups. Though a key issue of faith its expression was specifically defined and so nonresistance generated no common theological meeting ground capable of bringing the Old Church and the Brethren closer together. There was another divisive element, especially for the Brethren. Forestry service was demanded of all young Mennonite males, regardless of personal conviction. The resulting mix of believer and unbeliever combined with the relative youth of most recruits made it difficult to exercise effective social control in the camps. Some even considered the forestry service as "a primary station for our home

missions."³⁸ Ministerial consultations as well as All-Mennonite conferences frequently agonized about the lack of religious piety in the camps. It was difficult to create a common basis of faith in this setting, even with the help of forestry chaplains and itinerant ministers.

As an expression of nonviolence the forestry service had its limitations: its sense of compulsion; its isolation from the rest of society; its lack of active involvement with human suffering. There was nevertheless a compensating factor. Among its participants it created a sense of comradeship which transcended denominational lines. When a Russian Mennonite spoke of his Forestei Brueder it never mattered which church they belonged to. The many Forestei reunions of later decades speak eloquently to the unifying effect of a common life in the barracks. Here was a sense of peoplehood unattainable in the context of conventional religion.

A common forestry debt also united the two Mennonite groups in the early twentieth century. When Mennonite state service commenced in 1880 its cost was entirely borne by the Mennonites. At first the system was financed through a head tax as well as an assessment based land holdings. In time the revenue base was broadened to include businessmen and industrialists. Finally by 1909 a universal tax levied on all Mennonite property, private and corporate, came into effect. The new forestry tax was based on the individual's net worth. When the deficits continued, the tax was placed on the same footing as any other state levies and collectible by force if necessary. In this setting Mennonite leaders of all persuasions frequently

met to deal with the problems confronting the Forestry Commission. It was not, however, a platform for resolving doctrinal differences.

Likewise cooperation during W.W.I was not necessarily the result of a better theological understanding between Mennonite groups. Even the Mennonites were caught up in the wave of patriotism sweeping over Russia at the onset of the conflict. Everywhere villages and volosts collected food, clothing and monies for the needy families of Russian conscripts, use in field hospitals and general relief. Initially some young Mennonites volunteered for the Red Cross. Conscription soon placed others in the forestry or noncombatant medical service. This diaspora of unprecedented magnitude not only meant that Mennonites of every kind and description were thrown together, but that they were also scattered throughout the length and breadth of Russia. What happened to the impressionable young when they witnessed the carnage on Russia's western front or the plight of the peasant in rural Russia? Perhaps the religious differences which seemed so crucial at the village level lapsed into insignificance. A suffering world only asked for solace, not a specific brand of Mennonitism. The intense period of co-operation which followed war and revolution, though prompted by a concern with collective survival, was spiritually enhanced by the presence of men and women who experienced something of the larger world. Here was a further stretching of the Russian Mennonite mind-set which supplemented the cultural broadening of earlier decades.

As the nineteenth century drew to a close all Mennonites faced the crucial question of cultural survival. For several decades their sense of German identity was reinforced when a significant minority of future teachers travelled to Germany and Switzerland for pedagogical training. Others obtained their professional qualifications in Russian institutions. At times

it seemed there was a potential for a bilingual culture. In the end the pace of acculturation became unmanageable. With the accession of Alexander III nationalistic pressures demanded that Russian became the language of instruction in Mennonite schools. Increasingly local school boards lost their autonomy in setting the curriculum and appointing teachers. Only the liberal concessions granted by the October Manifesto in 1905 halted the erosion of this key link in the Russian Mennonite sense of identity.

Such threats of assimilation naturally forced greater inter-Mennonite co-operation. Certainly the almost frantic founding of new schools and the intense upgrading of teacher qualifications early in the twentieth century could be interpreted as an effort to block absorption into slavic culture. The majority of the religious and cultural ideas which provided a sense of Russian Mennonite peoplehood were sustained in the context of the German language. In such a setting religious differences might well become secondary to the common task of preserving traditional life patterns and piety. The school, the historic transmitter of Mennonite ideals and practices, was the obvious means of cultural and intellectual assertion and both Brethren and Old Church members were very much a part of its operation.

There was another less obvious dimension associated with the school which directly affected inter-Mennonite relations. While the Brethren were restricting their borders on such issues as open communion and the acceptance of immersed believers only, a different scenario was unfolding in the minds of many of their teachers. The ideas of Rousseau were reaching the Mennonite teacher on the Russian steppes. Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi had been profoundly influenced by Rousseau's Emil on the one hand and by his old

teacher Bodmer, a rabid Swiss patriot, on the other.³⁹ Thanks to these influences Pestalozzi not only praised the inherent virtue of the peasant but argued that his education was the only means of revitalizing a stagnant and stratified society. All men had natural gifts and powers provided the educator awakened them. It was not surprising that this interest in the life of the village struck a sympathetic cord on the Russian plains.

The educational fervor which emerged during the first decade of the 20th century created a new constituency among the Russian Mennonites which cut across denominational lines. While not unrelated to the religious ecumenicalism which characterized the Allianz movement, the new mood also exhibited secular overtones. Instruction in reading, writing, arithmetic and Bible history was sanctioned by long standing practice. But what about the business of adding the history of literature, poetry, and drawing to the curriculum?⁴⁰ The study of German and Russian was naturally imperative, but what of English and French? Heimatkunde naturally included the study of geography as well as local plant and animal life, but was it essential to know Russian and German fairy tales? Why did the Molochnaya Mennonite School Society affirm that "more light folk songs were needed" in the music curriculum at its 12th annual meeting in 1911?⁴¹ There was more. Young women should be sent to Germany in order to study Froebel Kindergartens and

as if the fervor of the revolutionary left knew no bounds, female teachers were to be allowed in the regular schools.⁴² Was it the subversive effect of the books which began to accumulate on the shelves of the teacher societies? Some of these naturally focused on weighty themes like pedagogy, history and literature. Others seemed more frivolous - adventure, travel and fiction. How does one explain the purchase of Katie Sturmfel's book, What is the Woman Allowed if She Loves? in an age of Victorian propriety?⁴³ According to some educators there was even a need for something more - "fresh air, plenty of light and reasonable physical exercise."⁴⁴

Were the Mennonite peasants of the Russian steppes to be transformed into renaissance men and women? Where was the orthodox piety of old, the precisely defined ethic, the exacting division between the secular and the sacred? The mind set of these new "humanists" frequently transcended the borders of their respective group, but because their reforms were gradual and transpired in the context of community they did not threaten the prevailing equilibrium. Tremendous advances had occurred in business and agriculture and it seemed fitting to extend this to learning as well.

Judging from the minutes of the various teacher societies there is one thing they did not do - engage in serious religious dialogue. For that matter neither did the annual All-Mennonite conferences. Their agendas covered benevolent institutions, schools, missions and the forestry service,

but there were no study conferences dealing with mutual views on the nature of salvation or the concept of the church. Similarly the sermons published in Friedensstimme and Der Botschafter were piously devotional, but carefully avoided any discussion of key theological matters. If confrontation occurred at all, the issues were external and minor: closed communion; the Brethren flirtation with the Baptists; marriage across confessional lines; the reluctance of the Brethren to invite ministers from the Old Church.

Dialogue finally did take place. It began in Germany, not Russia. At first the Brethren were primarily involved. The matter related to their association with the Blankenburg Allianz conferences in Germany. Established in 1885 through the patronage of the Plymouth Brethren the annual Blankenburg assemblies reflected an interest in prophecy, the inner life and communion fellowship between all true believers. Mennonite Brethren already attended these conferences in the 1890s and by 1900 some aspects of this theological orientation emerged at the Brethren annual conferences. A dissenting minority raised questions concerning the Brethren insistence that only immersed believers were eligible to share in communion. The matter came to an actual vote at the 1903 Conference in Waldheim, Molochnaya: 13 delegates supported open communion, 52 remained opposed.⁴⁵ Two ministers, Jakob Reimer and Jakob Kroker, actually practiced open communion and on this account were not reappointed to the itinerant ministry in 1904.⁴⁶ Meanwhile Blankenburg Bible lecturers like Prof. Ernst Stroeter,⁴⁷ and Otto

Stockmayer frequently conducted two or three day Bible conferences on Mennonite estates like Apanlee or in various villages. The founding of the Molotschna Evangelical Mennonite Brotherhood in 1905 polarized the Brethren. Some of the liberal elements joined the Allianz or at least co-operated with it, and in the process transferred leadership to the more conservative and reactionary elements. The annual meetings in 1909 and 1910 witnessed severe criticism and expulsion of the Einlage and Rueckenau congregations because they did not observe the Brethren confession of faith in their practice of communion and baptism. As long as immersion continued to play such a critical role in Brethren theology, greater intimacy with believers in the Old Church remained problematical.

Generally speaking, the influence of the Allianz affected Brethren -Old Church relations positively. When a certain Hubert from Germany visited his coreligionists after a sixteen year absence he was impressed with the high level of Bible knowledge and deeper piety which characterized both groups. He observed that there were "only a few unconverted among the ministers" and that "much is expected and given in the preaching of the word, even though many ministers are lay brothers."⁴⁸ He attributed much of this religious vitality to "das Streben nach Allianz"⁴⁹ (the strivings towards Allianz) promoted by foreign religious workers. "Even if they have brought the Mennonites ideas which in my estimation do not agree with God's Word, the good they have brought far outweighs the undesirable."⁵⁰ It was the

Allianz concept of Gemeinschaft (fellowship) in its uniquely German connotation which helped to break down the barriers between the Russian Mennonites.

The Allianz, by stressing the inner life and minimizing external form allowed like-minded Mennonites to co-operate on many fronts. An awareness of the socially outcast not only came from F.W. Badeker's preaching tours and his ministry in Russia's northern exile camps and prisons but from the German models of old age homes, orphanages, deaf-mute schools and mental hospitals. In the new setting interested Mennonites joined together in the work of the Molotschna Tract Society, various relief committees, the support of evangelists in both Russian and Mennonite villages, tent missions and the distribution of broadranging devotional literature. After the Brethren joined the All-Mennonite Conference in 1906 they participated in discussions relating to support for foreign missions, Reiseprediger (itinerant preachers), forestry commando chaplaincies, and even a joint seminary to ensure better trained ministers.

In 1910 H.J. Braun of the Brethren observed that both groups had identical views on Scripture, divorce, the oath, congregational democracy, nonresistance and adult baptism.⁵¹ It was time to admit that a "true vital Christianity"⁵² now existed in the old church. When asked to explain Mennonite divisions to a representative of the Ministry of the Interior the Gnadenfeld elder and veteran missionary Heinrich Dirks explained that the GCs were Old Mennonites, the Brethren, Mennonites and the EMB, New Mennonites.

They afterall agreed on the basic Christian issues: the new life in Christ and baptism or faith. Minor questions need not hinder unification.⁵³

Dirk's plea for unity in the essentials reflects a rather vigorous discussion of several issues among members of the Old church. What of the formalism associated with baptism, at times practiced without faith and as a prerequisite to marriage in the church? Was baptism always a mass affair and did it always have to fall on one day?⁵⁴ It was important to stress the inner meaning of baptism, not the external form.⁵⁵ Faith not tradition was the true prerequisite for baptism. Old Church adherents also focused on the nature of the believer's church. Some tried to distinguish between a religious peoplehood in which most were eventually admitted to baptism and communion and the committed believers within that group. It was not easy. One discussant complained: "We are neither Volkskirche nor a church of believers."⁵⁶ The Gnadenfeld minister Jakob Janzen was more emphatic: "We are Volkskirche and want to be that."⁵⁷ The best one could do he argued, was to stay and work from within. In keeping with the existing structure it was perhaps even useful to dedicate children as Mennonites, then later baptize them on faith as Christians.⁵⁸

Allianz with its theology of essentials; a united social action on many fronts; a long-standing forestry service; a broad based commitment to home and foreign missions - the split persisted. Why? One is tempted to blame the Brethren, especially when sampling the documents of the early twentieth century. They insisted that only immersed believers share in their communion service; that every baptismal candidate be carefully scrutinized; that, as a rule, old church ministers not speak in their services; finally, there was an strong church discipline at times characterized by self-righteousness and legalism. Religious exactness and the occasional sense of moral superiority made the Brethren unapproachable.

Such an interpretation is probably too simplistic. Thanks to a broad ranging Mennonite institutionalism and the revivalistic theology of the Allianz the pre-W.W.I Russian Mennonites stood closer to one another than at any time since the split of 1860. They were certainly more tolerant of each other than their co-religionists in North America. What basic issue kept them apart?

An Old Church adherent writing in 1912⁵⁹ possibly provides an answer. Johann Janzen was extremely critical of his own group. It had, he argued, lost the concept of the believer's church and its essential component, the "pure church."

"Since we, as already has been said, have defected from the ideal of a relatively pure church (einer . . . reinen Gemeinde), it is little wonder that we are not exacting about instituting the same Why do the healthy remain with the sick? We want to take them all with us - all without exceptions. This idea that all Mennonites and their children have to be brought into the church of Christ - this idea weakens us. It has transformed our churches into hybrid churches; to a degree it has alienated us from the

original Mennonitism; it gives us the idea God wants Volkskirchen; it has made us forget that the Bible speaks of calling, election, choosen ones and saints."⁶⁰

The crisis confronting inter-Mennonite relations involved more than individuals and groups. It revolved about the classic problem confronting Christian sectarianism in any age. What happens after one obeys the Lord's injunctions to "come out from among them."? The Russian Mennonites were victims of a long historical process. In pursuit of the pure church they had, through the decades separated themselves from the state churches. Once apart they found that the Volkskirche tradition, to which they took exception, re-established itself in their midst. Once again the church accepted all who were born into its political and social order. In the 1860s both the Brethren and the Old Church clearly understood the dilemma. One argued that the new life could not be lived in the old setting, while the other feared that the exodus of the serious pilgrim might disrupt the existing community. Both views exacted consequences. The Brethren were tempted to make a pure church purer, and so generally defined the nature of the Christian walk rather precisely. The Old Church which remained co-extensive with society agonized about the difficulty of nurturing the serious believer when many others in the same group remained less committed. They in effect said: "This is what we are, lets make the best of it," to which the Brethren responded: "This is what we can be, lets strive to attain it." The Allianz wanted a middle way: unity amidst diversity.

Who were the truly righteous in the Russian Mennonite world of say, 1910? Surely the call for a theology of essentials, the increasing economic

affluence and the widespread contact with the outside world demanded changes in the definition of what constituted the pure church. Religious awakenings and the influence of Allianz piety gradually changed the character of the Old Church. There was a sincere agonizing about narrowing the prevailing definition of the believer's church, but the prevailing structures apparently dictated the continuation of the status quo. The conservatives among the Brethren instinctively restricted the circle of the elect. Immersion continued to be viewed as the only correct baptismal mode, the formula for Bekehrung remained tightly prescribed and communion services admitted immersed believers only. In protest many liberal Brethren joined the Allianz and the movement became something of a half-way house between the two opposing views on the nature of the believers' church.

In the end it was impossible to agree on a common definition of the "truly righteous" in the Russian setting. Historically each group had developed its own sense of religious peoplehood. One stressed it lay primarily in the Gemeinschaft (fellowship) practiced in the local Gemeinde (church). The other, while using the same terms, applied them to a more diffuse community. Each group was secure in its concept of the believers church. It was futile to argue who was right and who was wrong. Each instinctively understood its own perimeters. Each knew on what levels co-operation was possible and where it was not. By 1914 such a modus vivendi set the stage for widespread co-operation and goodwill, but not reunification.