



# A GENERATION OF VIGILANCE

The lives & work of Johannes and Tina Harder

T.D. REGEHR

## *A Generation of Vigilance*



Johannes and Tina Harder, 1957.

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*The Lives and Work of Johannes and Tina  
Harder*

T. D. Regehr

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To Jacob and Anne Loewen





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## *Foreword*

When memory summons those early, immigrant days of Yarrow, British Columbia, Johannes A. and Tina Harder appear prominently among images served up. Simply and ascetically dressed, Tina Harder is seen near the women's entrance to the church, greeting women, encouraging them up the steps or through the foyer into the main aisle on the women's side. Or, during the service, she is jotting a note to be passed forward to a supposedly inappropriately dressed young woman in the choir. Her husband, Johannes, known for his sincerity, sanctity, intelligence, and toughness, rises from his chair in that lofty imperium near the rear of the chancel, mounts another step higher, and, straight and robust as a storied leader, places his hands on the sides of a large pulpit that for some of us youngsters brought to mind a ship's prow. Since he is the one delivering the third of three sermons this Sunday morning, everyone seems pleased; he is the most gifted speaker in this large congregation, which includes many ordained ministers. Unlike too many of these other ministers, he always concludes his sermons on time or a few minutes early. His homilies seem to have been written out in full, then polished and memorized. One can think of arguments in reply to some of his points, but few argue with his tone. He never seems to doubt his version of Biblicism or his vision for the new Mennonite community of Yarrow that in large measure he has helped to organize, stabilize, and regulate.

During his almost two decades as pastor of early Yarrow's principal institution, its Mennonite Brethren Church, Harder was recognized as an authoritarian leader who was also remarkably generous and totally committed to what he regarded as his calling. His wife honoured his talents, commitment,

and authoritarianism. From its founding in 1929 until a decade beyond the Second World War, the Yarrow congregation grew to be the largest Mennonite Brethren church in British Columbia and one of the largest in North America. In the 1930s and 1940s, when Harder served as pastor, it was a church of immigrants in which tensions with the surrounding communities, the economic stresses of its pioneering members, and dissimilar interests and aspirations of a number of its members (including generational differences) pushed strong leadership to the top of the list of priorities in Yarrow's Mennonite Brethren community. Johannes and Tina Harder provided that leadership, which in some respects fostered the economic and cultural leap forward that one often observes in immigrant communities. Yet in many respects the Harders were bent on perpetuating major aspects of Russian colonial Mennonite culture and Russian Mennonite Brethren pietism, cultural and social separatism, and spiritual zeal.

The Harders we as youngsters knew and observed first-hand were easier to define at that time than now in retrospection, which weaves together a webwork of information we were not privy to then or ready to recognize. Tina Harder was known to many of us as a pastor's wife zealous about proper dress codes, public demeanour, private spiritual exercises, and total obedience to the church and its leader. Only later did we learn of the nurture and affection she offered women.<sup>1</sup> We also learned of her difficult past as well as the pangs of doubt that visited her lifelong about her acceptability in the eyes of God. Her husband was known as someone who was ready to give his small savings, even borrowed money some claimed, much time, and his last reserves of energy to people and causes in the church and community that advanced what he saw as God's work. As pastor he refused to accept a regular salary. But he was very much in charge, and he did not suffer opposition gladly. Those who openly challenged the views and policies of the church (Harder's, that is, and the church council's), were often threatened with excommunication, a threat real because of the number of instances in which it was carried out.

This was the experience of Gerhard Loewen, for instance, a member of the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church. In 1935 he was called on the carpet for

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<sup>1</sup> See for examples, Leonard Neufeldt, ed., *Village of Unsettled Yearnings*, vol. 2 of *Yarrow, British Columbia: Mennonite Promise* (Victoria, BC: TouchWood Editions, 2002), 68, 234.

questioning the inerrancy and some traditional interpretations of the Old Testament. When he rejected the counsel and reprimands of the leaders of the church, he was excommunicated, and the congregation was ordered to shun him to the point of not speaking to him. Indeed, no one was permitted to refer to him as “brother,” the customary form of address within the church for a male member. Shortly thereafter Loewen died in an accident. The funeral service was conducted in the church sanctuary, but the coffin was not allowed inside. The sermon was largely a sombre warning to those in attendance.<sup>2</sup> In this episode we witness Harder and other leading ministers of the Yarrow church, and perhaps other immigrant Mennonite Brethren churches in Canada at that time, in their most authoritarian and vigilant role. They represented a generation of vigilance, austerity, self-denial, strict rules of conduct, and Spartan discipline, all in the name of a pure and godly walk that begins with an individual conversion experience and that manifests itself in personal piety and obedience to the local church and its teachings.

Thus the shock of the congregation is understandable when nine years later the oldest son of Pastor Harder appeared in church in a Canadian military uniform prior to boot-camp training as a member of the Royal Canadian Medical Corps. A year earlier, in the summer of 1943, John Harder, Jr., had entered alternative service as a conscientious objector to war but, after what for him was an unhappy and pointless service, he decided, without notifying his boss or parents, to enlist as a member of the armed forces. Harder and his wife, both ardent believers in peaceful non-resistance to war, were shocked along with the others. Harder’s son had gone against one of the key teachings of Mennonites’ understanding of “godly walk.” When John Harder, Jr., was discharged from the military in 1946, he enrolled in the Sharon Mennonite Collegiate Institute, a new Mennonite high school in Yarrow conceived as a Canadian version of the Russian Mennonite *Zentralschule* that would protect Mennonite young people from the worldly influences of public high schools. John Harder, Jr., graduated after a year and a half of studies, a time long enough to demonstrate traits his father had shown decades earlier in Russia: scholastic excellence and athleticism. A brief interlude of studies at the University of British Columbia followed. University

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Aron Rempel, *Journal of Dietrich Aron Rempel*, trans. Helen Rempel Klassen (typescript, n.d.), 60-61.

studies for young people of Yarrow were unusual in those days. But much more unusual was this oldest son's decision in 1950 to join the Royal Canadian Air Force, where he made his career for the next 36 years. "Both decisions," John Harder, Jr., has written, "the brief wartime service followed by a 32-year, post-war career in the military were to some extent a rebellious reaction to the strictly controlled family environment in my parental home."<sup>3</sup> (His son Ronald, a senior military officer, has served in the NATO Command in Europe.) Johannes and Tina Harder never fully accepted their son's career decision, yet Harder urged his son to keep the faith and wished him well. Here we see another side of Harder.

In a similar archival vein is retired attorney William J. Nickel's recollection of meeting Harder on Yarrow Central Road in 1945 before moving to Vancouver for university studies: "On questioning me about my intended courses . . . he expressed regret that I was planning to take law eventually. Recourse to law was not the Mennonite way as I knew, he indicated, but added that whatever I ended up taking in college, he expected me to do well because, after all, I was from Yarrow."<sup>4</sup> These vignettes suggest characters of complexity and add up to a complicated record, but they also illustrate how mindful the Harders were of a dangerous cultural world surrounding Yarrow that was threatening to insinuate itself into the sentiments of its people as they began to acculturate. Hence the call for vigilance.

Attempting to write life narratives is, as Anna Lathrop has stated, a "lesson in epistemological and methodological humility."<sup>5</sup> Her observation is particularly apt for subjects as complex as Johannes and Tina Harder. Yet their story deserves to be told for all the compelling reasons evident in the narrative that follows. This biography has been written by T.D. Regehr, distinguished historian in Canadian and Mennonite studies, member of the Canadian Historical Association, and Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Saskatchewan. While focussing attention largely on the public

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<sup>3</sup> John Harder, Jr., "The Johannes Harder Family" (typescript photocopy, 1999), 4.

<sup>4</sup> William J. Nickel, *Passing Thoughts II* (Abbotsford BC: William J. Nickel, 2003), 296.

<sup>5</sup> Anna H. Lathrop, "Revisioning Life History: The Intersection of Interview and Autobiography in the Life Narrative of Elizabeth Pitt Barron (1904-1998)," *Vitae Scholasticae* 18 (Spring 1999): 49.

lives of the Harders (principally Johannes Harder's life), Ted Regehr's examination also offers significant glimpses of their private lives. Their story furnishes him with a passport into the life of early Mennonite Yarrow and the congregation Harder pastored, and it provides some daylight vision of the ways and means of the Mennonite Brethren (MB) church in British Columbia as well as the Canadian and North American conferences of MB churches in those years. *A Generation of Vigilance* balances historical data, description, and examples with analysis that is even-handed and genuinely respectful of the subjects.

A biography of Johannes and Tina Harder, the last of four major projects of the Yarrow Research Committee, has been no afterthought. Early on this research group recognized that the story of Yarrow's early immigrant community would be incomplete without a major study of the life of these two pioneers. Consequently the Harders were set aside for a larger study and not included in the brief profiles and sketches in *Village of Unsettled Yearnings*, the second volume of *Yarrow British Columbia: Mennonite Promise*. As Regehr points out, for three decades Johannes Harder was probably the best known leader within British Columbia MB churches. His influence extended well beyond Yarrow or British Columbia, however, and it continued on in the Canadian and North American MB constituencies more than a decade after his resignation in 1948 as pastor in Yarrow. Recognizing the importance of the Harders as historical subjects in Mennonite studies, Jacob A. Loewen, founder of the Yarrow Research Committee, set out to write their story, but with his unfortunate incapacitation, Regehr, a member of the Yarrow Research Committee from its inception, acceded to the Committee's request to write this volume.

The Harders' life narrative is a bitter-sweet story. What emerges is a portrait of two gifted individuals passionately committed to establishing God's kingdom in an immigrant land as best they could. As such, their story is part of the larger North American immigrant story of the 19th and 20th centuries. The cultural and religious issues they fought for and the pure church they sought to establish and maintain were more often than not viewed through the lenses of their particular Russian Mennonite heritage, family background, and immigrant experience. Consequently, a church without "spot or wrinkle" and a true personal godliness were inevitably defined in largely ethnic terms that focussed on a particular kind of sub-cultural ethos with its codes of

behaviour, social relations, and doctrines. As Regehr's study underscores, there is much about the life and work of the Harders that is both admirable and laudable—their integrity, noble goals and total sacrifice on behalf of those goals—but their story is also one of failure, and this failure is hardly unique to the Mennonite immigrants of Yarrow or elsewhere caught in Old World-New World tensions. In the long run the cultural (ethnic) separatism, true church ideal, individual ascetic purity, obedient, church-centred life, and traditional ways of proselytizing that they worked and prayed for so assiduously were largely doomed despite some early signs to the contrary. Their children recognized this as they struggled to recast their parents' faith and *Weltanschauung* into a usable legacy. But for the first generation of desperately poor and marginalized immigrants in Yarrow, the Harders provided the leadership that sustained them and enabled them to survive with a sense of dignity in what seemed to many a culturally alien, dangerous, and often hostile Anglo Canadian society. Presenting this bitter-sweet story is no easy task, but Regehr shows admirable sensitivity in describing and analyzing the Harders' successes and failures.

With this study of Johannes and Tina Harder, the work of the Yarrow Research Committee has come to a close. In signing off on the final volume, the Committee expresses its deep appreciation to Ted Regehr for consenting to write this life narrative, to the late Jacob A. Loewen for organizing the Yarrow Research Committee and its mission, and to Jacob and Anne Loewen for their extraordinary human and financial support. Most of the members of the Yarrow Research Committee have roots in Yarrow and knew the Harders personally. Indeed, Jacob Loewen knew him as a personal mentor, spiritual counsellor, and father figure. Thus, despite the cultural assimilation and professional careers of the Committee members, the story Ted Regehr has written walks hand in hand with them.

Harvey Neufeldt  
Leonard Neufeldt

## *Preface*

The writing of this work was inspired and begun by Jacob Loewen who gathered a large collection of relevant documents. When explaining his objective Loewen wrote, "I don't feel I have ever expressed forcefully enough to Johannes Harder during his lifetime my personal gratitude for his help to me as a developing person. So I now want to thank him publicly, even if posthumously, by compiling this account of his life and service for his children and for his memory in the annals of the MB Church and the Mennonite church community in general."

Loewen became my friend and informant when I was working on *Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970*. He initiated and provided financial support for the establishment of the Yarrow Research Committee (YRC), and then invited me, a Mennonite historian but a Yarrow outsider, to join the YRC. When it became evident that ill health would make it impossible for Loewen to complete the Harder manuscript, the YRC entrusted me with the work. I was encouraged to expand the focus of the work to include information on the life, work, and influence of Tina (Rempel) Harder-Johannes's wife. More attention has also been given to the broader context and history of the organizations and institutions in which Johannes Harder provided leadership. Harvey Neufeldt, chairperson, and all members of the YRC have provided steadfast support and much encouragement in these enlargements of Jacob Loewens' work. And they have helped me to understand many aspects of the Yarrow and Harder story. Their contributions are gratefully acknowledged.

The documents collected by Jacob Loewen were extensively supplemented by interviews and by research in the Archives of the Mennonite



Historical Society of British Columbia in Abbotsford, the Centres for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Winnipeg, Fresno, and Hillsboro. It would not have been possible to complete this work without the valuable contributions of those interviewed and the well-informed and generous assistance of the archivists and supporting staff. I was granted unrestricted access to all material requested. Ruth Derksen, Abe Dueck, David Giesbrecht, Maryann Tjart Jantzen, Harry Loewen, Robert Martens, Harvey Neufeldt, and Len Neufeldt read the manuscript and made many helpful comments and helped me to correct numerous errors. In addition, Maryann Tjart Jantzen and Leonard Neufeldt provided extensive and very much appreciated professional copy-editing. They helped to make the manuscript more readable, polished, factually, and grammatically correct. Any and all remaining errors are, of course, my sole responsibility.

My final words of thanks go to my wife, Sylvia, who proofread successive drafts of the manuscript. She also patiently (most of the time) put up with the many hours I spent at my desk. But she always felt well-compensated by our numerous trips to British Columbia for YRC meetings, work on this manuscript, and visits with close friends.

T.D. Regehr  
Calgary, Alberta  
March 2009

## Introduction

Three men were walking home from a very difficult meeting of the *Vorberat*<sup>1</sup> (church council) of the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren church. One of them was Johannes Harder<sup>2</sup> who, only months earlier, in December of 1930, had been elected as leader of the church. The three men were troubled by allegations that one of their members, an ordained lay-preacher, was guilty of inappropriate sexual behaviour. Harder was convinced of the man's guilt. But the accused had vehemently declared his innocence. Other members of the *Vorberat* were uncertain, and therefore reluctant to take disciplinary action.

Suddenly Harder stopped and declared, "I cannot go against the truth." He then went directly to confront the alleged offender in his home.<sup>3</sup> The confrontation led neither to a confession of guilt nor the immediate

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<sup>1</sup> Mennonite Brethren church governance structures were democratic. All major decisions were to be decided at membership meetings. But the *Vorberat* (literally, a pre-deliberative body) determined which issues should be brought to the membership, how they should be presented, and which matters were best dealt with pastorally and in confidence. It consisted of elected leaders, all ordained lay-preachers, and those elected or appointed to key positions such as the Sunday School Superintendent and the Treasurer. The *Vorberat* kept no known minutes of its deliberations.

<sup>2</sup> Harder is variously referred to as Johannes, John, and John A. His patronymic (middle) name was Abraham. That name is variously referred to as Abraham or Abram. In the interests of consistency the names Johannes and Abraham will be used throughout this manuscript. In the footnotes, however, the names used in the primary sources will be given.

<sup>3</sup> "P. D. Loewen Reminisces about his Relationship with John A. Harder at the request of Leland Harder for the Harder Family Review," *Harder Family Review* iv, 19b.

“silencing” of the accused preacher.<sup>4</sup> But it was a clear indication of Harder’s sense of his responsibilities as leader of the church. He was an idealist who believed all members of a Mennonite Brethren church must, without equivocation, live in accordance with all the teachings of the Scriptures. Anyone who transgressed must repent, confess his or her sins, and seek forgiveness from God, fellow church members, and anyone they had harmed. Those who failed to do so must be confronted and expelled if they did not respond appropriately.

Since not all church members or even all ordained lay-preachers had the same understanding of what constituted appropriate Christian living, church leaders devoted considerable time and attention to the formulation of codes of Christian conduct. They did so in accordance with their understanding of the Scriptures, but did not realize that some of their expectations and interpretations were rooted not only in the Scriptures, but also in the way they had been interpreted in the past. Almost all members of the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church in the early decades of its history were immigrants who had come from the Soviet Union to Canada in the 1920s. Many wanted to preserve not only religious but also familiar cultural, linguistic, and social traditions.

### **Leadership positions**

Johannes Harder, with the vigorous support of his wife Tina, led the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church from 1930 until 1948 and remained active in that church for many more years. He was also a leader in the establishment and ongoing programs and activities of the Mennonite Brethren Conference of British Columbia (hereafter referred to as the BC Conference). These included special efforts to meet the spiritual needs of many Mennonites who were living scattered in remote communities or in Vancouver.

Harder was also active in the Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America (hereafter referred to as the Canadian (MB) Conference) where he served for almost 20 years on the very influential *Fuersorgekomitee* (literally, Guardians’ Committee). That committee, renamed the Board of Reference and Council after the language change from German

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with P. D. Loewen in 1994.

to English, had a broad mandate to watch over the spiritual and material welfare of the Conference and its member churches.

Foreign Missions were of great and ongoing interest and concern for Harder. He served for nearly 20 years on the Board of Foreign Missions of the General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church(es) of North America (hereafter referred to as the General (MB) Conference). During that time missionary activity increased dramatically, but changing policies and strategies were controversial.

During World War II Harder served as the foremost British Columbia spokesperson on behalf of young Mennonite conscientious objectors. After the war, he promoted a very ambitious but short-lived private Mennonite high school in Yarrow. Tina Harder supported her husband and provided strong leadership in the family and in the church.

### **Mixed reputations**

Today the work of the Harders is mostly forgotten. Those who do remember have significantly differing recollections. Supporters speak affirmatively about the vast amount of work Johannes did in the church as a preacher, leader, and pastor. His clear, well-organized, and scripturally-based sermons were appreciated by many. Colleagues and associates who worked with him on Conference boards and committees described him as a man capable of an enormous amount of work and a person of exceptional honesty and integrity. Tina is remembered for her hospitality and the generosity she extended to widows and mothers struggling with illnesses and other problems. She also hosted numerous visiting preachers and conference leaders.

Critics are inclined to point to the rigid and sometimes harshly legalistic manner in which the Harders tried to impose and maintain strict codes of Christian conduct. Some church members and young people growing up in the church were hurt and became resentful of their authoritarian and austere enforcement of church discipline. Conference leaders recognized Harder's concerns and asked him to draw up special guidelines and standards of appropriate Christian conduct for church members in Canada and for missionaries on furlough.

Peter D. Loewen, a neighbour, close friend, and co-worker in the church, described Johannes Harder as a person with a strict conscience but an open

heart.<sup>5</sup> The same description can be applied to Tina Harder. They served their family, church, community, and conferences with selfless dedication. They were also exceptionally vigilant in the pursuit of radical Christian discipleship in personal, family, church, and community life. Like Ezekiel, one of the Old Testament prophets, the Harders believed God had called them to be “a watchman unto the house of Israel” telling God’s people to “hear the word of my mouth and give them warning.”<sup>6</sup>

Some have suggested that both the strengths and weaknesses of the Harders were rooted in their efforts to recreate in British Columbia a church and community modelled on the Russian Mennonite Brethren experience.<sup>7</sup> The Harders’ very difficult personal experiences in Russia no doubt influenced their leadership. It is therefore necessary to delve in some detail into the Russian Mennonite heritage of the Harder family.

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<sup>5</sup> Peter D. Loewen, “Johannes Harder,” in Jacob A. Loewen, comp., *Loewen Manuscript*, 164.

<sup>6</sup> Ezekiel 3:17.

<sup>7</sup> This interpretation has been given particular emphasis by Jacob A. Loewen in deliberations of the Yarrow Research Committee.

# Chapter 1

## Russian Mennonite Roots

Johannes Abraham Harder was born into a family that for generations had provided strong but every now and then controversial leadership in the Mennonite churches and communities of southern Russia. Their legacy in the Russian Mennonite milieu informed and shaped Johannes Harder's perspectives and beliefs as he provided leadership in Yarrow and in provincial, Canadian, and world-wide Mennonite Brethren programs.

Tina Rempel, who became Johannes Harder's wife, was born in the Crimea but her family had its roots in the Gnadenfeld Mennonite community. The family left the Crimea and returned to the Molotschna Colony when Tina was only six months old. They settled in the village of Marienthal, where her father had been born and where he died in 1906. Tina's mother, Sara (Lange) Rempel, was born in Gnadenfeld. She was the granddaughter of Aeltester Friedrich Wilhelm Lange, an influential but also controversial leader in the Gnadenfeld Mennonite Church.

### **The Blumstein pioneers**

The Harder family traced its Russian ancestry to Johann Harder and Helena Stoes who left West Prussia and arrived in Russia in 1803. The following year they took up a vacant lot in the newly established village of Blumstein in the Molotschna Colony. In 1826, the farm passed to the oldest son, also named Johann, and his wife Elizabeth (Plett) Harder.

Their pioneer years were very difficult, but Johann and Elizabeth were able to establish themselves as fairly progressive farmers. Johann benefited from cordial relations with Johann Cornies, the influential Mennonite leader and reformer.<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth had a reputation for great generosity, based in part on a report that on one occasion a poor woman came to the door of the Harder home complaining about her lack of clothing. Elizabeth promptly gave the woman some of her clothing.<sup>2</sup> Her son, the third Johann Harder on the Blumstein farm, attributed much of his success as a farmer and prominent church leader to the religious and practical influence of his mother.

One of the initiatives of Johann Cornies was the establishment of the first Russian Mennonite *Zentralschule* (Central School) that offered a three-year program of instruction beyond the six- or seven-year curriculum of the village elementary schools. The new school, built in Orloff, only about 10 kilometres (6.214 miles) from Blumstein, quickly became a symbol of progressive but, on occasions, controversial reforms.

### **The leadership and influence of the third generation Johann Harder**

The third Johann Harder on the Blumstein farm was able to attend the Ohrloff *Zentralschule* and later became a preacher and then an *Aeltester*<sup>3</sup> in the Ohrloff Mennonite Church. In the *Zentralschule* he came under the influence of Tobias Voth, the school's first teacher. Voth had been born and educated in Brandenburg-Prussia, and had served as teacher in Graudenz in West Prussia. In Graudenz he had experienced an intense religious conversion

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<sup>1</sup> Leland D. and Samuel W. Harder, *The Blumstein Legacy: A Six Generation Family Saga*, [2nd ed.], (n.p., n.d) (hereafter referred to as *Blumstein Legacy*). Much of the information in the *Blumstein Legacy* is a compilation of information previously published in *The Harder Family Review* (hereafter referred to as *HFR*). The primary source of information on the Harder pioneers is *Loewen Collection*; Abraham Harder, *Biographie unseres lieben Grossvaters* (hereafter referred to as Abraham J. Harder, *Biographie*). Most of that manuscript is published in *HFR iv*.

<sup>2</sup> *HFR* 4, 13-14.

<sup>3</sup> The office of *Aeltester* was somewhat unique in the Russian Mennonite Church. The larger churches had multiple meeting places and numerous ordained lay-preachers. One of these was elected to coordinate the work of the church. In most congregations only the *Aeltester* served communion and officiated at baptisms, weddings, and the ordination of preachers.

after reading the writings of Jung-Stilling and other Lutheran pietists. As a result, he brought a strong evangelical-pietist influence to the Orloff Zentralschule, where he organized religious reading societies and mission circles.<sup>4</sup> These became controversial, and Voth was eventually forced to leave the school. But while there he exerted great influence on his students.

Johann Harder responded enthusiastically to Voth's often intense instruction and pietistic zeal. While he did not have a dramatic life-changing conversion similar to Voth's, Harder shared his teacher's reform-minded pietism. His son later wrote: "I believe that the Christian education of my father became a great blessing to him in his later life, especially in the execution of his [ministerial] office. Because of the ethical foundations formed in him, he was prepared to take a decisive stand against immoral living."<sup>5</sup>

Johann Harder married Justina Schulz in 1834. She had grown up in Graudenz in a Lutheran church strongly influenced by pietism. Her family had, however, joined the Mennonite church and migrated to the Molotschna Colony in 1823. She further strengthened her husband's commitments to the teachings of his beloved teacher."

In due course, Johann and Justina inherited the family farm where they adopted many of the innovations promoted by Johann Cornies. As a result, Johann Harder "was able to transform the entire farming enterprise within five years."<sup>6</sup> He gained a reputation as a talented, gentle, and kindly person who served for a time as an assistant to the village *Schultze* (mayor). Justina served the community as midwife and also as a herbalist who prepared a variety of medicines for sick persons. But both she and her husband suffered serious bouts of ill health. Johann overcame his afflictions, but Justina died at the age of 42 after giving birth to 11 children. Two died in infancy or early childhood. The youngest was still breast feeding when Justina died.

Justina left a very strong and lasting spiritual legacy. Her son wrote: "She always endeavoured to point her children to the Saviour."<sup>7</sup> He also noted that she struggled for years with doubts because she realized "that her inclinations

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<sup>4</sup> "Voth, Tobias," in *Mennonite Encyclopedia IV*, 859.

<sup>5</sup> *HFR* 6: 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*



were not unswervingly directed to Jesus. As a result, she lacked assurance of salvation until she was able to renew her faith through the affliction of ill health.”<sup>8</sup>

Justina had rejoiced when her oldest son, yet another Johann,<sup>9</sup> experienced a life-changing conversion early in life after an intense spiritual struggle. When he spoke enthusiastically about that experience, young Johann incurred ridicule from others in the village. But his parents, although they had not had similar experiences, supported their son. On her deathbed, Justina called the children to her bedside and then, referring to her son’s conversion and with tears rolling down her cheeks, declared, “Children, if only all of you would become like that.”<sup>10</sup> Johann Harder married a second time, but it was his first wife and mother of their children who left an exceptionally strong spiritual imprint on the family.

In 1855, at the age of 44, Johann Harder was ordained as a minister or preacher in the Orloff-Halbstadt Mennonite Church. It was not an office he sought. His son later wrote: “At first he definitely did not want to accept the call and actually refused when two preachers visited him about it. Later, however, when Elder (*Aeltester*) Bernhard Fast . . . came to our place for a conversation with my parents, father could not refuse.”<sup>11</sup>

Election as a minister was a life-altering experience for Johann Harder. He had grown up in the Mennonite church, been taught and accepted the catechism, and was baptised on his confession of faith. But, according to his son, election as a minister “gave him a whole new direction. Earlier, with his humorous as well as modest and serious character, he also had a worldly mind and occasionally smoked tobacco and read magazines, despite the disapproval of our mother. Now he threw all that overboard and considered smoking and magazines as sinful. He said that by reading magazines one would gradually neglect the Word of God and a sprout of disbelief would begin to grow.”<sup>12</sup>

Harder’s sermons were described by his son as “somewhat on the serious side, and he often chastised the sins of the people; but he also lovingly invited

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> This Johann Harder emigrated to the United States in the 1870s.

<sup>10</sup> *HFR* 6: 2.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

them to come to the Saviour of sins, who had given his blood and life for the sins of the world.”<sup>13</sup> Initially, as was the custom, he wrote out and then read his sermons. Later he preached more freely, advising his sons, “If any of you are elected to the preaching office, do not start by writing out your sermons.”<sup>14</sup> He recognized and lamented the moral and spiritual failings of some church members and worked hard to achieve reform of the Mennonite church and to foster greater piety among its members.



Aeltester Johann Harder, 1811-1875.  
Johannes Harder's great-grandfather.

Johann Harder's responsibilities increased greatly in 1860 when he was ordained as an *Aeltester*. He accepted ordination very reluctantly. His son recalled: "Before the election he had definitely made up his mind to reject the Elder (*Aeltester*) office, should he be chosen; but after the election he was so downcast that he could not say a word."<sup>15</sup>

The Russian Mennonite churches were in great turmoil when Johann Harder was ordained as *Aeltester*. His predecessor, Aeltester Bernhard Fast, was exhausted and sick. He had become involved in several disputes, including a leadership crisis in the Gnadenfeld Mennonite Church in 1849 after the forced resignation of Aeltester Friedrich Wilhelm Lange and the removal from office by Aeltester Fast of ministers who had supported Lange.<sup>16</sup> And only months before Harder's ordination a group of reform-minded believers sent a letter of secession to the leaders of the Russian Mennonite churches. The dissident reformers then organized themselves as the Mennonite Brethren

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>16</sup> P. M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)* (Fresno, CA: General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1978) (hereafter Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*), 101-105, provides details on the Gnadenfeld difficulties and the removal of Aeltester Friedrich Wilhelm Lange. Lange was Tina (Rempel) Harder's great-grandfather.

Church, creating an immediate crisis for the soon-to-retire Aeltester Fast and his successor, Johann Harder. Both were sincere and pious Christians who shared much of the pietistic zeal of the reformers and acknowledged and lamented the failings and shortcomings of the Mennonite churches in Russia. But they rejected secession, working instead for reform from within the churches.

The matter was debated by the 14 members of the Council of Elders (*Aeltestenrat*), which dealt with ecclesiastic but not civil disputes in Mennonite churches and communities. Most members of the *Aeltestenrat* had little or no sympathy for the dissidents. They advocated an appeal to the civil authorities after other efforts to dissuade the dissidents failed. Some demanded coercive action and, if that failed, banishment of the dissidents. Only Aeltester Bernhard Fast, Aeltester Johann Friesen of the *Kleine Gemeinde*, and a little later Aeltester Johann Harder, opposed involvement by the civil authorities.

Fast and Harder initiated conversations with key Mennonite Brethren leaders. On the basis of this information, they concluded that the theological orientation of the Mennonite Brethren was consistent with Mennonite teachings and that secession need not pose a serious threat to the stability of the community. Consequently, in 1862, Harder recommended official recognition of the Mennonite Brethren Church by the appropriate civil authorities. His assessment proved decisive. Later a senior government official informed a Mennonite Brethren leader, "For your deliverance you are indebted to Elder Harder."<sup>17</sup>

Later in life, Aeltester Harder found it increasingly difficult to accept some of the new, unique, lively, and innovative aspects of Mennonite Brethren faith and life. He feared that in some respects they were departing from sound Mennonite, Anabaptist, and scriptural principles. He became especially critical of what became known as the *Froehliche Richtung* (Movement of Exuberance).<sup>18</sup> Some who had experienced an emotional life-altering conversion insisted that they now had full assurance of salvation. Some even

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<sup>17</sup> As cited in John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Fresno, CA: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church, 1975), 48-49.

<sup>18</sup> Harry Loewen, "Echoes of Drumbeats: The Movement of Exuberance among the Mennonite Brethren," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* (hereafter *JMS*) 3 (1985): 118-127.

went so far as to suggest that a born-again person could no longer sin. These beliefs led to exuberant expressions of joy in worship services and also some serious moral transgressions. Mennonite Brethren leaders soon took effective action to curb such excesses, but the exuberant movement left a residue of suspicion of emotionally-charged religious manifestations.

A second foreign and non-Mennonite doctrine caused Aeltester Harder greater sorrow and anxiety. Millennialism, or Chiliasm, was the belief that Christ would return to earth and establish a thousand-year reign of peace. Christians were exhorted to prepare for the building of the future Kingdom of God on earth. This doctrine, in various forms, gained considerable acceptance and, in 1863, resulted in a split in the large Gnadenfeld Mennonite Church. Franz Isaac, Aeltester Harder's long-time close associate and fellow preacher, gave the doctrine some affirmation. Harder disagreed, but, because those supporting the doctrine were his most intimate friends, "it was more difficult for him to find his way; and this took all of his courage and dulled the joyfulness in the administration of his office, so that he often talked of resigning."<sup>19</sup>

The burdens of office exhausted Aeltester Harder, often filling his life with worry and sorrow. He achieved only modest reforms in his church and was disappointed when reform-minded members fell into excesses and embraced non-Mennonite and, in his view, unscriptural doctrines. He died in 1875 of a stroke at the age of 63. Shortly before his death he told a colleague, "I am totally exhausted. I long to go home."<sup>20</sup>

### **Johannes Harder's grandparents**

Johannes Harder's grandparents were Abraham Johann Harder (1840-1925) and Anna (Fast) Harder (1841-1898). Abraham Johann Harder, Aeltester Johann Harder's son, was the first person baptised by his father. He was born in the Blumstein family home and, from childhood on, had great faith in the power of prayer.<sup>21</sup> He was very strongly influenced by the simple, deeply-rooted piety of his mother and greatly moved by her death when he was only 15 years old.

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<sup>19</sup> *HFR* 6: 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

At the age of 19 Abraham had an emotional, life-changing conversion experience. He later wrote, "I came to true peace with the Lord by virtue of the mercy of God. When I poured out my heart to my dear father [Aeltester Johann Harder] he helped me by his counsel and consolation to overcome the temptations which I was experiencing so that I found peace for my soul. Oh, how happy my heart then became! How I could pour out my soul, so childlike in prayer before the Lord and Saviour with confidence—you are mine and I am yours. Abraham was baptised by his father the following year."<sup>22</sup>

Abraham's father also officiated at Abraham's wedding to Anna Fast, daughter of Aeltester Bernhard Fast. Anna had not had a conversion experience similar to Abraham's. Instead, as was often the case in the home of pious parents, "She grew gradually into a conscious grace and love of Christ without being able to cite a specific time when she had a conversion or rebirth. At times in certain circles of believing souls, when she heard one or the other citing the time and hour when they had come to peace, she got the feeling they doubted whether she was converted because she could not state a time and hour."<sup>23</sup>

Abraham and Anna's acceptance of different ways in which people came to faith extended to the form of baptism. Both were baptised by Abraham's father, and Abraham later wrote that he never "had any disquiet about whether my baptism was sufficient before God because I had not been baptised in the river."<sup>24</sup> This statement was made, however, shortly after Anna's death in 1898. (Later Abraham and his third wife worshipped with the Mennonite Brethren and may have been re-baptised and joined this church.)

Abraham had not attended a *Zentralschule* but, after some private tutoring, became a school teacher in Hierschau. He left the teaching profession when the Russian government made some instruction in the Russian language mandatory. He purchased a small farm in Tiege, supplementing his income with work as a carpenter. Then, in 1873, when many farmers in the village of Alexanderwohl left for America, he purchased one of their farms. There the family lived and prospered for the next 25 years.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

And there Abraham was ordained as a minister in the Neukirch church, which was affiliated with the Orloff church.

Abraham and Anna Harder had 11 children, but Anna, like Abraham's mother, suffered debilitating health problems. She died in 1898 at the age of 47. Abraham described her illness and death as "the hardest trial of all that I encountered in life."<sup>25</sup> He left Alexanderwohl shortly after her death, settling at Busav-Akatchi, a small Mennonite village on the western shores of the Crimea, five kilometres from the seacoast village of Yevpatoriya. There he married Anna Warkentin, but after only seven months and 12 days she became seriously ill and died. Heartbroken, Abraham lamented, "Why, Lord do you do it like this?" He found no answer other than Jesus' words in John 13:7: "What I do now, you do not know, but one day you will find out!"<sup>26</sup> He married Maria Pauls, his third wife, and served as a minister in the Busav-Akatchi Mennonite Church. One source states that he later joined the Mennonite Brethren.<sup>27</sup> If that in fact was the case, leadership problems in the Busav-Akatchi Mennonite Church<sup>28</sup> probably influenced his decision.

In old age Abraham Harder became increasingly critical of some new social and cultural developments among his people. He was appalled when one of the Mennonite schools staged dramatic presentations of Bible stories, complaining that "in their preparations they use historical and biblical material with curtains, ugly disguises, (like mummies), wigs, and swearing words. Teachers and preachers participate in this under the pretence of giving the children a classic education. . . . The sad thing about this whole situation is that many of our congregations also see this as useful; and thus Satan has free range, like wild hogs, to destroy the vineyard of the Lord."<sup>29</sup>

He also complained that "at weddings there is much pomp and presumption and all sorts of 'tingle-tangle' is engaged in by the young in the presence of parents—all of which is worldliness. . . . People no longer want to let themselves be punished by God's spirit because they are of the flesh. To be

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, 902.

<sup>28</sup> H. Goerz, *Mennonite Settlements in Crimea* (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications, 1992), 33-34.

<sup>29</sup> *HFR* 6: 11.

worldly minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.”<sup>30</sup> These and other pessimistic assessments of the church and the culture at large led him to conclude that “the end of the world is coming rapidly. . . . Christendom has become a herd and is ready for judgement.”<sup>31</sup>

### **Tina (Rempel) Harder’s ancestors**

The available information on Tina (Rempel) Harder’s ancestors seems to be incomplete. Her paternal great-grandfather, Dietrich Rempel, and her grandfather, Johannes Rempel, were born in Prussia. The family migrated to Gnadenfeld in the Molotschna Colony shortly after that village was established in 1835. The family subsequently moved to Marienthal, and from there to the Crimea where Tina was born. She was still a baby when the family moved back to Marienthal where her father died in 1906. While Tina and several other family members immigrated to Canada in the 1920s, the mother remained in Marienthal where she died in 1931.

Tina (Rempel) Harder’s maternal ancestry is also incomplete. Her mother was Sara Lange who had been born in 1855 in Gnadenfeld, the daughter of Julius Lange. Tina’s own writing contains information about her mother, but a search of various genealogical sources had provided very little information about her grandfather, Julius Lange,<sup>32</sup> and none about her maternal grandmother. However, the controversial life and work of Friedrich Wilhelm Lange, Tina’s maternal great-grandfather, is extensively documented in several Mennonite historical works.

The Lange family came from the Marienburg area of East Prussia. They were members of the Lutheran church but strongly influenced by Lutheran Pietism. In 1790, Wilhelm Lange, an older relative of Friedrich Wilhelm Lange, sought sanctuary in a Mennonite church to avoid being forcibly drafted. He was ordained a Mennonite preacher and then, in 1812, an *Aeltester*. In 1835, he, together with several others, led a group of Prussian Mennonite emigrants who established the village of Gnadenfeld in the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Lange Family Genealogical Forum, <http://www.genealogy.com/>. Information on Friedrich Wilhelm Lange posted by Barbara Krol, 7 June 1999; and Lange in Kreis Goldap, East Prussia, posted by Barbara Krol on 19 August 2000.

Molotshna Colony. He served as that church's *Aeltester* until his death in 1841.

Wilhelm Lange was succeeded by his younger relative, Friedrich Wilhelm Lange, who had been ordained as a Lutheran minister at the age of 21. He had joined the group which emigrated from Prussia and established the village of Gnadenfeld. While on the way to Russia, he was baptised and became a member of the Mennonite church. In 1841 he was elected as the *Aeltester* of the Gnadenfeld Mennonite Church.

Friedrich Lange has been described as "brilliantly endowed [and] . . . a thoroughly educated school teacher. . . . His influence upon his own and the sister congregations was perhaps even greater than that of his predecessor. He was regarded as a brother and shepherd of the flock among the believers (the 'brethren') whose enthusiastic and reverential love he enjoyed."<sup>33</sup> He was also a gifted evangelist who preached in many Mennonite communities and also officiated at the wedding of Eduard Wuest and Pauline Liesching. Lange's evangelistic preaching and pietistic theology prepared the way for Wuest and the stirring revivals in Russian Mennonite churches which culminated in the formation of the Mennonite Brethren church.

Sadly, there were serious moral lapses in Friedrich Wilhelm Lange's personal life. These were, for a time, vehemently denied by Lange and his supporters, but in October of 1849 Lange resigned as *Aeltester* of the Gnadenfeld Mennonite Church. Lange, despite continued support by many church members, left Gnadenfeld, and returned to the Lutheran church. The resulting leadership crisis in the Gnadenfeld Mennonite Church precipitated a drastic intervention by Aeltester Bernhard Fast, the influential leader of the Orloff-Halbstadt Mennonite Church and leader of the Molotschna Mennonite *Aeltestenrat*. Fast deposed all the Gnadenfeld church's ministers, and subsequently presided at the ordination of new ministers.<sup>34</sup> P. M. Friesen lamented that "no other incident had a more damaging impact upon the development of Christianity in the Molotschna area than Lange's moral-spiritual misfortune."<sup>35</sup>

Spiritual revival and the upheavals in the leadership of the Gnadenfeld Mennonite Church contributed to the formation of the Mennonite Brethren

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<sup>33</sup> Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, 101-102.

<sup>34</sup> P. M. Friesen is harshly critical of this action by Aeltester Bernhard Fast. Ibid., 102-103.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 102.



Church. It also provided an environment in which the “Friends of Jerusalem” (Templars)<sup>36</sup> gained considerable influence. But in 1863 the Mennonite Brethren and the Templars parted ways. Johannes Lange, a younger member of the family, became a spokesperson in defence of the Mennonite Brethren in their quest for official recognition. Other members of the Lange family joined the Templars. Aeltester Bernhard Fast who had deposed the supporters of Friedrich Wilhelm Lange, and Fast’s successor, Aeltester Johann Harder, became protectors of the Mennonite Brethren in the 1860s, but firm critics of the Templars and of those involved in the Movement of Exuberance.

Friedrich Wilhelm Lange’s eldest son, Julius, apparently joined neither the Mennonite Brethren nor the Templars. While little is known about Julius’ own or his daughter Sara’s church affiliation, Julius’ granddaughter, Tina, was baptised and accepted as a member of the Mennonite Church in Gnadenfeld. She makes no mention, in her own writing, of her illustrious but controversial great-grandfather.

### **Legacy of the ancestors**

The first four generations of the Harder family in Russia left a rich legacy. In many respects they were progressives who welcomed and supported Johann Cornies’ economic, agricultural, and educational reforms. They, like Tina (Rempel) Harder’s maternal ancestors welcomed, embraced, and sought to incorporate into their own lives and into their churches new and innovative evangelical and pietist teachings and practices.

Three of Johannes Harder’s direct ancestors, and an impressive number of other members of the extended Harder family, were ordained preachers. Two, Johann Harder and Bernhard Fast, also served as *Aelteste* in times of exceptional turbulence in the Russian Mennonite churches. Two members of the Lange family served as *Aelteste* in the Gnadenfeld Mennonite Church.

Consistent with their pietist perspectives, these ancestors, although not immune to personal failings, grieved and denounced the immorality and sins of church members. Their understanding of what constituted sinful behaviour was sometimes narrow. Some Harder ancestors renounced not only major sins, but also the reading of magazines, smoking, the dramatic presentation of Bible stories, and frivolous behaviour at weddings. The Harder

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<sup>36</sup> Victor G. Doerksen, “Mennonite Templars in Russia,” *JMS* 3 (1985): 128-137; Heinrich Sawatzky, *Mennonite Templars* (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications, 1990); Friedrich Lange, *Geschichte des Tempels* (Jerusalem, 1899).

ancestors strongly supported reform, but rejected secession, at least until Abraham Harder's possible disillusionment with the Mennonite Church leadership in Busav-Akatchi. Some of the Lange ancestors opted for secession from the larger Russian Mennonite Church. Support of reforms did not, however, blind the Harder ancestors to the threats posed by non-Anabaptist and non-Mennonite doctrines and practices. Those external threats were of less concern to the Langes.

A dramatic life-changing conversion experience was of utmost importance to some of the ancestors, but others grew into the faith without such experiences. It was understood that people came to faith in various ways. That, in turn, resulted in ambiguous attitudes toward the form of baptism. Few questioned Aeltester Fast's and Aeltester Harder's sincere commitment to Christian living, and members of the next generation accepted as valid the form of baptism of their fathers. Some, notably Aeltester Johann Harder's eldest son who emigrated to America, strongly advocated re-baptism by immersion and engaged in some heated discussions in that regard with his siblings. However, most of Johannes and Tina (Rempel) Harder's ancestors worked for reform from within rather than secession from the larger Russian Mennonite churches.

Women were exceptionally influential in the Harder families, especially in the spiritual nurture of their children. The men who rose to positions of leadership were profoundly affected by what their mothers taught them and exemplified in their lives as well as the pious influence of their wives. The first wives of Aeltester Johann Harder and of his son, Abraham Harder, died while still in their 40s. This indelibly marked their impressionable children. These wives and mothers personified a cherished form of piety. While the details of their lives are not as fully documented as those of their husbands, surviving memoirs indicate that their legacy was of equal, if not greater, importance than that of the men whose work is more fully covered in this chapter. Tina (Rempel) Harder's description of her mother, Sara (Lange) Rempel, attests to her strong spiritual influence.

The fifth Russian Mennonite Harder generation left an equally strong, but somewhat different legacy to the next generation.

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## Chapter 2

### Faith of the Parents, 1866-1941

Johannes Harder's parents were Abraham Abraham Harder (1866-1941) and Justina (Epp) Harder (1871-1936). They were tenant farmers on an estate at Neu Toksoba in the Crimea. There Johannes spent the first nine years of his life. In 1906, his parents sold what they had in the Crimea and moved to the Molotschna settlement to start an orphanage that eventually accommodated up to 80 orphans. It was in this setting that Johannes spent his adolescent and early adult years. All associated with the orphanage experienced many seemingly miraculous answers to prayer. Johannes' parents were remarkable persons who ran the orphanage as an extraordinary venture of faith.<sup>1</sup>

#### **The Crimean sojourn and a changed church affiliation**

Abraham Abraham Harder had been born in Hierschau, where his father was the village teacher. The family moved to Tiege when he was only two years

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<sup>1</sup> The most extensive source of information about the life and work of Abraham Abraham Harder is his *Tagebuch*, which was published in serialized form in the *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 9, 16, 23, 30 June and 7, 14, 21 July, 1965. An *Anhang* (postscript) by Johannes Harder was published in the *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 4 August 1965. (hereafter referred to as *MR*). A shorter account of the work of the orphanage, also written by Abraham Harder and entitled, "Kurzer Bericht ueber die Gruendung, Entwicklung, und den gegenwaertigen Stand der Waisenanstalt in Grossweide, gegeben am 13 Juni 1922" (hereafter "Kurzer Bericht"), is published in John B. Toews, *The Mennonites in Russia from 1917 to 1930: Selected Documents* (Winnipeg, MB: Christian Press, 1975), 388-391. Portions of the *Tagebuch* were translated and published, together with other material, in the *HFR* 7(July 1989).

old. A few years later his parents purchased a larger farm in Alexanderwohl, where, after catechetical instruction, Abraham was baptised at the age of 21 in the Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church, where his father was a minister. The family subsequently moved to Crimea; here his father served as a preacher in the Busav-Aktachi Mennonite Church and later in the Karassan Mennonite Brethren Church.

In 1891 Abraham married Justina Epp of Rosenort, Molotschna Colony. She was the daughter of Abraham and Katharina (Fast) Epp, who were active in various benevolent and missionary ventures and served from 1895 to 1899 as house parents of the *Marien-Taubstummenschule* (Deaf and Dumb Institute) in Tiege.



Abraham A. and Justina Harder,  
Johannes Harder's parents, c. 1922

The dream or call to establish an orphanage for homeless, impoverished orphans who were sometimes exploited and mistreated came to Abraham Harder early in life. His wife, schooled in her family's benevolent activities, fully shared the dream. However, Abraham did not have the advantage of schooling beyond the elementary village school level. And at the time of their marriage, he and Justina were virtually penniless. So the couple became tenant farmers on a Crimean farm or estate, hoping to save enough

money to establish an orphanage. They settled at Neu-Toksaba, about 43 kilometres from the seaport of Yevpatoriya, not far from the railway linking Sevastopol and Simferopol to the mainland. Neu-Toksaba, one of many small and widely-scattered Mennonite settlements in the Crimea, was located about 15 kilometres from the larger Mennonite community at Spat.<sup>2</sup>

Abraham Harder had been baptised and become a member of the Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church while the family still lived there. At Spat Abraham and Justina apparently found conditions in the local Mennonite

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<sup>2</sup> H. Goerz, *Mennonitische Siedlungen der Krim* (Winnipeg, MB: Echo Verlag, 1957).

Church less satisfactory than those in the Mennonite Brethren Church. So they became members of the Mennonite Brethren Church.

The Harders earned an adequate livelihood at Neu-Toksaba; thus they were ready in 1906 to begin their ambitious efforts to establish an orphanage in the Molotschna Colony. After liquidating their Crimean assets they had 5,000 rubles. They also had a large family of six children, not including two who had died in infancy or early childhood. Johannes, the fourth child and second son, was nine years old at this time.<sup>3</sup>

### **Establishing the orphanage**

The Harder family first lived in Rosenort with Justina's family while searching for an appropriate facility for their orphanage. After some difficulties and intense prayer, Abraham became aware of a large old market building at Grossweide. It had several ancillary buildings and was located on 12 *desjatinnen* (32.4 acres or 11.04 hectares) of land. That was enough land for a small farm to raise produce for the orphanage. The owner had gone bankrupt and the buildings, which had stood empty for five years, were seriously neglected. The entire establishment was available for only 7,000 rubles. With the Harders' 5,000 rubles and a loan from a generous benefactor, the property was purchased.<sup>4</sup>

The weed-infested yard and badly-neglected buildings provided useful work for everyone, including Johannes and his siblings once they completed their school year in Rosenort. Necessary repairs and improvements to existing buildings and construction of new buildings were made possible through much hard work and private donations of money, material, and labour by backers of the project.

Early on, a group of supporters offered to create a society which would raise funds and provide guidance in the operation of the orphanage. The Harders declined the offer, wanting to look only to God for help and guidance. The orphanage was to be a real venture of faith. But work had scarcely begun on the repair to old buildings when the Harders faced the first of many crises. In his *Tagebuch* (day book or diary), Abraham Harder described the incident: "My dear wife told me that we were out of flour. I went

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<sup>3</sup> *HFR* 7: 1.

<sup>4</sup> Abraham A. Harder, *Tagebuch*, *MR*, 9 June 1965, 2.

to our neighbour who had a small store, and bought two sacks of flour. When paying for it I noticed that I had spent all the money I had. When I got home I went into the attic, fell on my knees, and told God of my sorrow: If it was His will that we establish the orphanage, He should now help us. Our money was gone, and we expected no help from other people. If it was not His will that we should continue in the work we had started, we were willing to move to Siberia where a new settlement was being established. When I rose from my prayer and went outside, I lifted my eyes heavenward and said, 'Well, God, how will you answer now?' About an hour later a man came into our yard with a postal money order for 25 rubles, made out in my name. I went into the house, called my dear wife, and showed her the money order and wept because God had answered so soon."<sup>5</sup> This donation made it possible to begin construction, but workers were still repairing the foundation when another crisis arose. Abraham Harder described it thus:

"One evening the builder told me that they would need more lime [ground limestone for mortar and cement] the next morning. That night we talked to the Lord about it and asked Him to send us the lime, and also the money to pay for it. Early the next morning, before we arose, I was told that two loads of lime had arrived. I got up and went to the neighbour and borrowed 36 rubles to pay for the lime. That was the cost of the two loads, and I bought them. Right after breakfast a man came and told me he had ordered some cedar trees from the Crimea. But he had asked the gardener if he could instead donate the 10-ruble cost of the trees to the orphanage. So he handed me the 10 rubles, but instead of 10 he gave me 11 rubles. I wanted to give back the ruble, but he said I should let it be since there would also have been some shipping and other costs. After an hour I was given 25 rubles by another person. 'So,' I said, 'now I understand why the extra ruble was needed. It had to be 36, not 35 rubles, so I could repay the neighbour.' The Lord knows everything and also helped with money and lime."<sup>6</sup>

Construction and rehabilitation of the buildings proceeded to the point where the orphanage could be officially dedicated in September of 1906. Two orphan children had already been received, however, prior to the official opening. Others soon arrived, and it became necessary to improve and expand

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 16 June 1965, 14.

the available facilities and build new ones. The strategy, as Abraham Harder described it, was consistent: "Not once, when we contemplated an expansion, did we wait until the Lord had filled our treasury. We usually began to build when we considered it necessary, even if our treasury was empty. We trusted the Lord that, since it was His work, he would endorse each building. And we were never put to shame; his accounts always balanced."<sup>7</sup>

Miracles seemed to be a part of everyday life at the orphanage and extended to Justina's domestic affairs. Abraham writes, "One Saturday night my wife told me that she had used the last lard, draining a remnant from the pan into a saucer. I said that the Lord would provide. Before we went to bed that night, we told God about it. On the next day, Sunday morning, two brethren came to the orphanage to conduct the worship service. After we had unhitched the horses, one brother said there was a crock of lard on the wagon. His wife had not been able to sleep during the night. She had repeatedly felt compelled to send the Harders a crock of lard."<sup>8</sup>

Prayer and divine intervention also extended to the handling of troubled children. "One day an orphan boy was brought to us. When the guardian who had brought the boy left, the child started to scream because he wanted to go back with the guardian. We tried our best to quiet him, but to no avail. The words of our Lord flashed through my mind: 'Without me ye can do nothing.' I went to the attic to pray, asking the Lord to help us quiet the child. When I came out the child greeted me with a smile and told me that he wanted to go out and play. Oh, how loving and kind is our Lord."<sup>9</sup>

The *Tagebuch* recounts numerous other seemingly miraculous incidents, but says little about what must have been major family crises. Three of Abraham and Justina Harder's children died. Four-year-old Bernhard and two-year-old David died in 1904. Their deaths predated the *Tagebuch*. But the third, three-year-old Gerhard, died in 1909.<sup>10</sup> And there were ongoing health problems with the oldest daughter, Anna, who was a hydrocephalic child. While there must have been anxious and fervent prayers for these children, they are not mentioned in the published version of the *Tagebuch*. Such

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 9 June 1965, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 16 June 1965, 14-15.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> *HFR* 7: 1.

tragedies were accepted with quiet submission to the sometimes inscrutable will of God. *Gelassenheit* (forbearance, trust, composure, and sedateness) and *Ergebenheit* (surrender) characterized the response of the Harders in such situations. Most of the *Tagebuch*, however, focuses on bright, often seemingly miraculous, experiences and events.

### **The orphanage in operation**

Initially the number of orphans was small and included almost exclusively German-speaking, mainly Mennonite, children. Almost all members of the small staff were Mennonites. More persons were needed, of course, as the number of children increased, but the institution retained a strong Mennonite identity. By 1910, four years after it opened its doors, 27 orphans were receiving care.<sup>11</sup> A few years later that number rose to about 50, and by 1921 the Harders provided care for 80 orphans.<sup>12</sup> In 1922 Abraham Harder reported that the Grossweide orphanage had received 133 orphans from the time of its inception. Of those, two had died and 63 had left or been placed elsewhere, usually with families or relatives willing to provide care and/or employment. In 1921-1922, 107 children and staff lived and worked in the orphanage.

Abraham and Justina's oldest son, another Abraham, served briefly in the orphanage as its teacher as well as its farm manager. During the First World War he served in the *Sanitaetsdienst* (medical support staff on ambulance trains and in hospitals). When he returned, and following his marriage to Helena Janzen, Abraham started an affiliate orphanage in Halbstadt, specifically for Russian orphans, that admitted 39 orphans.

Life in the Grossweide orphanage was, of necessity, more carefully regulated and controlled than the smaller one in Halbstadt. The orphans had all suffered the loss of parents, and a number arrived after enduring further traumatic experiences.<sup>13</sup> Life on the streets or in desperate situations had left some with serious behavioural problems that made their integration into the life of the orphanage difficult. Some stayed for long periods of time; others left

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<sup>11</sup> Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, 825-826.

<sup>12</sup> Abraham A. Harder, "Kurzer Bericht," 388-390.

<sup>13</sup> H. M. B. Dueck, *An Orphan's Song* (Winnipeg, MB: Windflower Publications, 1993).



after shorter stays. Children were expected to leave in their mid-to-late teens once they were in a position to earn a living.

Living arrangements were unique. Sleeping quarters (obviously separate for the boys and the girls) and facilities for cooking, eating, recreation, and education were crude. The arrangements naturally changed as the number of children and the range of activities increased. A large new two-, in part three-storey building was erected in 1912-1913. Like the earlier construction projects, it was started without funds. But donations were sufficient to cover the costs. It was therefore fitting that a placard above the entrance proudly proclaimed EBENEZER, meaning, "Hitherto has the Lord helped us." Another placed above the door to the dining room read, "Our hope comes from the Lord, who has made heaven and earth."<sup>14</sup>

The primary concern of the Harders was the spiritual welfare and salvation of the children. They sought to bring them all to a conversion experience. Their understanding of such an experience was firmly rooted in pietistic and Mennonite Brethren theology and practice. It was typically conceptualized as a quite emotional crossroads experience in which the person involved turned from his or her old sinful ways and embraced new, more spiritual priorities. It also involved acceptance of Jesus as personal Saviour and establishment of a personal prayer relationship with Him.

The limited available evidence suggests that staff members were generally friendly and supportive but maintained strict discipline, which was sometimes enforced by corporal punishment. The institution had its own gardens, farm animals, and field crops, all of which made the orphanage relatively self-sufficient. All the residents were expected to help as best they could with the farm work, domestic chores, and the operation and maintenance of the home.

The training and education of the children was, from the beginning, an important aspect of life in the orphanage. In the first year the orphans, together with the Harder children, attended the local village school, but in the second year a government-approved school was opened at the orphanage. A teacher was hired and assigned quite primitive living quarters. Initially classes were held in a large multi-purpose room. But in 1912 the construction of the new building added needed classroom space.

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<sup>14</sup> Abraham A. Harder, "Kurzer Bericht."

In addition to the basic academic subjects, the boys were taught woodworking, blacksmithing, harness-making, tailoring, and other practical skills. The girls learned to knit, cook, crochet, quilt, sew, weave, and provide care for the younger orphans. In this practical training, and many other aspects of life in the orphanage, traditional Mennonite gender roles were inculcated. The objective was to nurture and train the children so they would become committed Christians and useful citizens with the skills needed to earn their livelihood.



The Grossweide Orphanage, 1913.

Operation of the school, like all other aspects of the orphanage, was always financially precarious. In 1909, when Johannes Harder was a student in his next-to-last year at the school, there were no funds to pay the teacher the salary due to him at the end of the school year. The closing exercises were scheduled for 12 May. These consisted of what was called a *Pruefung* (testing) in which children had to recite memorized material and respond in a public forum to quizzes and questions. The children did well. The teacher had done a good job. But it was only at the last moment that God, no doubt through a sympathetic supporter, provided the exact amount needed to pay the teacher his salary.

The Harder children lived, worked, studied, ate, and slept together with the orphans. They had to share their parents' love and attention with the others, and were expected to assist with the work on the farm and in the home. All the children had regular devotions and said prayers at meal and bedtime. When special needs arose, the children were encouraged to pray and to give God thanks when the needs were met. Johannes and his siblings thus shared in the experiences of a lively institution rich in a confident, unquestioning faith, despite numerous financial crises.

In 1913, a supporter, perhaps concerned about the shaky financial and administrative affairs of the institution, offered to pay the costs if Abraham Harder would go to Germany to observe operations of various orphanages there. Harder found the trip informative and subsequently noted that, "I think the institution benefited from the things I saw there. The information that I gained on this trip will help me to run our institution more efficiently."<sup>15</sup> The experience did not, however, result in fundamental changes in the difficult financial conditions of the institution.

### **Troubled times**

The outbreak of World War I did not immediately have a major impact on life in the Grossweide orphanage. Several key staff members, including the teacher and some of the older boys, were conscripted or enlisted voluntarily in the Russian army. At least two were killed while in military service.<sup>16</sup> Some supplies, equipment, and livestock were requisitioned by the Russian government or were unavailable due to increased military requirements. However, the impact of food shortages was considerably reduced when, just before the outbreak of the war, the Harders acquired a fairly large farm or estate at Kuruschan near the centre of the Molotschna Colony. Located 42.68 kilometres (26.4 miles) from Grossweide, the farm had some buildings and 48 *desiatinnen* (130 acres or 44 hectares) of land. It met some of the orphanage's food requirements but otherwise remained somewhat peripheral to its operations.

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<sup>15</sup> Abraham A. Harder, *Tagebuch*, MR, 30 June 1965, 15.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, MR, 14 July 1965, 14-15.

The revolution, civil war, and even the terror that occurred when Nestor Makhno and his militia bands raided, harassed, and robbed the orphanage, did not result in any beatings or murders. The institution was also spared the worst ravages of the typhus epidemic which swept through the Mennonite villages after the war. It did, however, suffer the negative effects of famine in 1921-1922. Abraham Harder wrote of that time, "Often we had little or no bread at all. Meals from one day to the next consisted of a thin millet soup. As a result, the bodies of many of the children began to swell. They ate whatever they could find."<sup>17</sup> Some boys, for example, caught, fried, and ate a cat.



The Abraham and Justina (Epp) Harder family, from left to right, Johannes, Abraham (father), Justina, Katharina, Abraham, Justina (mother), Marie, and Anna.

Another ate poisonous weeds, which left him confused and disoriented. The staff had to work through the night to get the poison out of his system. Happily he survived, and none of the children starved to death. Much needed help arrived when relief supplies sent by North American Mennonites were distributed in the villages. Initially there were some difficulties in getting the food to the orphanage, but great rejoicing occurred as the children gathered

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., *MR* , 21 July 1965, 14-15.

around the vehicle and admired the sacks, cartons, and other supplies that had been sent. A prayer of thanks was offered before everyone partook of the food.<sup>18</sup>

In 1922 disaster overtook the Harders and the orphanage. Once the new Soviet government was more or less securely in power, it sought control over the various educational and social institutions. In February the government appointed a new administrator of the orphanage and issued instructions requiring everyone in the institution, and particularly the teachers, to follow the Communist and atheist curriculum. The Harders were repeatedly summoned by local Bolshevik officials. For a time they said little, hoping silence might be interpreted as acquiescence, all the while continuing in their accustomed ways. But they found this pretence difficult. One version of the ensuing events has Johannes telling his wife, "My dear Tina, I cannot continue this charade any longer. I have to go and tell the Communist officials exactly what we stand for here at the orphanage. I must tell them that we cannot stop the Christian nurture of these children."<sup>19</sup> Tina, however, later attributed the confrontation with the Bolshevik Communist officials to Johannes' father.<sup>20</sup> Abraham Harder's recollection was that, "We could not comply with these instructions. When, bound by the Word of God and our consciences, we declared openly that we would not cease to provide the children with Christian education, the government sent out a political agent as administrator."<sup>21</sup> After that it was only a matter of time before the Harders were removed from their positions.

A similar fate had already befallen the institution for Russian orphans established in Halbstadt by Abraham and Helene Harder, the Grossweide directors' eldest son and his wife. That orphanage had been relocated to Schoenau in 1921, apparently to escape growing political unrest in Halbstadt. This tactic failed, and in 1922 the government took over the facility. Abraham and Helene Harder returned to Grossweide and found accommodation in the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Hugo Jantz, "John Harder, Valiant for the Truth," *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, 24 January 1969, 6-8.

<sup>20</sup> Tina Harder, *Lebensgeschichte*, in the *Loewen Manuscript*, 17.

<sup>21</sup> Johannes Harder, "Anhang," *MR*, 4 August 1965, 14-15.

small teacherage left vacant when the teacher was dismissed.<sup>22</sup> A few months later the senior Harders were dismissed from their positions and they also moved into the former teacherage. Meanwhile, as most of the staff was replaced, efforts were made to place as many children as possible with host families. The 22 children that remained were transferred to another orphanage, and ethnic Russian orphans were placed in the Grossweide institution.

Abraham Harder describes the feelings of the Harder family when they had to leave the orphanage: "The institution now stands for us as a beloved grave in which we have buried our cherished work and our love. With a heavy and bleeding heart we try to say with Job [the Old Testament patriarch], 'The Lord has given, the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.' In eternity we will understand everything clearly, and all that we cannot understand now will be revealed."<sup>23</sup>

Beginning in late 1921 or early 1922, the Harders became interested in the possibility of immigrating to North America. They wanted to leave together with all the remaining orphans, but the government turned down that request. When they applied to have the extended family immigrate to Canada, they discovered that medical examinations were mandatory. Three family members failed: Anna, the oldest daughter, a handicapped hydrocephalic who had trachoma, and Abraham, Johannes' older brother, and his sister Marie who also had trachoma. The parents refused to leave Anna behind, but other family members were able to emigrate a little later.

In the autumn of 1924, Abraham and Justina Harder moved from Grossweide to Kuruschan, where they accepted a position as house parents in a senior citizens' home. The people there had suffered great hardship during World War I, the revolution, and the civil war. The Harders were able to make some improvements there, but after two years their religious commitments resulted in their removal from this position. They then moved to Rueckenau, where Abraham was ordained as a deacon in the Mennonite Brethren Church. This increased his and Justina's vulnerability to arrest by Soviet officials who were intent on promoting Bolshevism.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Abraham A. Harder, *Tagebuch*, MR, 21 July 1965, 14-15.

**Faithful until their tragic deaths<sup>24</sup>**

In September of 1931, Communist officials called Abraham and Justina Harder out of a Sunday morning service in the Rueckenau Mennonite Brethren Church. All but their most essential possessions were confiscated. Fearing that they would be jailed or banished to Siberia, Abraham and Justina fled to Spat in the Crimea, where their daughter (Helene) Janzen and her family lived. After the Harders had spent only four months there, the Janzens were arrested and sent into Siberian exile. Abraham and Justina were forced to go along, but after three days they were released and allowed to return to Spat. However, they could find no housing. So they, together with their two unmarried daughters, Anna and Berta, moved into a small wooden structure, the back of which was dug into a hill. It had been used as a chicken coop. Justina died there in July 1936.



The shelter in the Crimea where the Harders lived in the 1930s, left to right Berta, Anna, Justina, and Abraham Harder.

Shortly after Justina's death, her daughter Berta married Kornelius Harder. The newlyweds, Berta's father Abraham, her sister Anna, and two of Kornelius' siblings all lived together in a small house until Kornelius was also arrested and sent into exile. The family never heard from him again. Berta

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<sup>24</sup> Johannes Harder, "Anhang," *MR*, 4 August 1965, 14-15.

worked at the collective farm, whereas Abraham tried to earn a little money making various things such as chicken crates for the local hatchery, tooth brushes sold in a local store, and some leather products. Yet, even in these dire circumstances, he wrote to his son Johannes and his daughters in Canada of numerous answers to prayer in various minor aspects of his daily life.<sup>25</sup>

In March 1941 Berta and her little son, as well as Abraham and Anna, were banished to Kazakhstan, Siberia. Abraham Harder died there on 19 October 1941 as a result of blood poisoning of the hand.<sup>26</sup>

### **A unique legacy of faith**

The tragic end of lives marked by numerous seemingly miraculous answers to prayer did not shatter Abraham and Justina Harder's faith. But the tragedies that befell them left perplexing questions to which family members could find no answers other than that God's will be done. Johannes expressed the response of the family to the life and death of their parents when he wrote, "To me personally, our father was not only a parent but also a friend and guide. We know that he is in God's hands as well as the rest of our loved ones. Some day in eternity God will resolve all the riddles that confound us in this world. Through his infinite wisdom God will reveal why all these problems were permitted to be. Meanwhile, may the faithful Lord (a favourite expression of our father's) help us all to gain entrance to the Kingdom of Heaven."<sup>27</sup>

Throughout the rest of their lives, Johannes and his wife Tina, drew much strength from the example set by Johannes' parents. Like Job of the Old Testament, Abraham and Justina Harder remained strong in their faith even though they could not fathom their difficult experiences.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> *HFR* 7: 9, and Anna Epp Ens, *The House of Heinrich* (Winnipeg, MB: Epp Book Committee, 1980).

<sup>27</sup> *HFR* 7: 9.



## Chapter 3

### Early Adulthood and Marriage, 1906-1922

Johannes Harder left his parents' orphanage at age 13 to attend the *Zentralschule* in Halbstadt. He then went on for further studies, but soon returned to assist his parents in Grossweide. There he had a dramatic religious conversion experience. It was also at the orphanage where he met and married Tina Rempel, one of the matrons. The young couple left Russia not long after they were driven out of the orphanage.

It was while working at the orphanage that Johannes faced an especially traumatic experience. He was, in his own words, "taken out to be shot." His rescue seemed as miraculous as the many events described by his father.

#### Education

Johannes Harder's elementary school education began while the family still lived in Neu-Toksaba. Next he briefly attended the village school in Rosenort while the family lived there, and followed this by a year in the Grossweide village school, then three years in the orphanage school.

Much of the learning in Mennonite elementary schools was by memorization. It also focussed on practical applications in rural and agricultural settings.<sup>1</sup> That education shaped many of Johannes' responses to

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<sup>1</sup> More detailed information and an extensive bibliography on the Russian Mennonite educational system is available in T. D. Regehr, *For Everything a Season: A*

opportunities and challenges in later life. The religious instruction, learned by rote like the rules of grammar and arithmetic, was rarely questioned. Fundamental religious values, ideals, and practices were accepted without seriously rebellious, youthful behaviour.

Johannes Harder's father often lamented his own limited village school education and was determined to send his sons to a *Zentralschule*, that offered three or four years of training beyond the six-year elementary school curriculum. Johannes' older brother, Abraham, attended the *Zentralschule* in Alexanderkrone, probably living with close relatives in the neighbouring village of Lichtfelde.<sup>2</sup> Abraham wanted to become a teacher. After completing his studies in the *Zentralschule* he attended the *Lehrerseminar* affiliated with the Halbstadt *Zentralschule*. By that time Johannes was ready to attend a *Zentralschule* and the brothers went together to study in Halbstadt. Since the *Lehrerseminar* had only a two-year curriculum, Johannes remained for his third year at the *Zentralschule* while Abraham returned to Grossweide to serve as the teacher in the orphanage. Both Abraham and Johannes received at least some financial assistance from relatives and supporters of the orphanage while at school.

Johannes Harder was an assiduous student. Instruction at the *Zentralschulen* still depended to a considerable extent on rote learning of basic subjects, although some teachers with advanced training brought in more modern methods of instruction. Penmanship, grammar, spelling, essay writing, arithmetic, instruction in the Russian language, Bible stories, music, and physical training were the main subjects of instruction.

Students in the Russian Mennonite *Zentralschulen* came from all the different Mennonite churches and also from neighbouring non-Mennonite families. The schools promoted Mennonite beliefs and practices, but not the distinctive theology or practices of different Mennonite churches. Short daily devotions and basic religious instruction classes did not pressure students to come to specific religious experiences. Evangelization was viewed quite differently from church to church and was regarded as the responsibility of

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*History of the Alexanderkrone Zentralschule* (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Two of Abraham and Johannes' aunts, Liese and Mariechen Harder, had married the brothers Johann and Jacob Dick, who, with their families, were living in Lichtfelde.

individual churches, not of the schools. When Johannes Harder attended the Halbstadt school, not only was there instruction in the Russian language and literature, but at least one of the teachers, often the principal, was an ethnic Russian. The influence of these Russian teachers, who were usually affiliated with the Orthodox Russian Church, varied. Johannes Harder apparently gained little understanding or appreciation of the different non-Mennonite perspectives of such teachers.



Abraham and Johannes  
Harder as students.

He particularly enjoyed and excelled in the physical-athletic training which was part of the school curriculum. Gymnastics textbooks, used in German or Russian schools and also in some military training institutions, were carefully followed. Throughout his life, Johannes treasured and maintained enthusiasm for the skills thus developed, and for the benefits of rigorous physical exercise.

Johannes followed his older brother's example and enrolled in the *Lehrerseminar* after completing the three-year curriculum of the *Zentralschule*. But, according to Abraham, Johannes "quickly realized that he would never become a teacher. He was drawn to helping suffering humankind and went to Simferopol to attend the medical faculty there."<sup>3</sup> The money needed for that training was borrowed from a rich benefactor.<sup>4</sup> However, urgent needs at the orphanage prompted him to return to help his parents.

### Grossweide and Kuruschan

The orphanage at Grossweide had acquired a *khutor* (farm or estate) at Kuruschan shortly before the outbreak of World War I. The purchase price was 21,500 rubles, and the Harders had to scramble to raise even the 500 ruble down payment. But, as before, they trusted God, and Abraham Harder later

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<sup>3</sup> Abraham Harder, "Es war einmal." This is an undated clipping from the *Mennonitische Rundschau*. The various sources disagree on where Johannes began his medical training: Berdjansk, Karkov, or Simferopol. His brother Abraham was probably better informed in that regard than the other sources. The family also had relatives in the Crimea.

<sup>4</sup> *HFR* xxiv: 5.

wrote, "The rest of the money God provided so that not long afterward the farm was debt-free."<sup>5</sup> Some very generous supporters and donors, not identified by Abraham, helped God and the Harders in this matter.

Acquisition of the farm significantly increased the work to be done. Coordination and management of the Kuruschan farm was entrusted to Abraham, Johannes' older brother. When Abraham was conscripted and joined the *Sanitaetsdienst* (medical support staff on ambulance trains and in hospitals),<sup>6</sup> it became more necessary for Johannes to help at home. Wartime exigencies, including military enlistments of some of the older male orphans and the requisition of the farm's best horses, added to the problem so Johannes was persuaded to leave his medical studies and return to Grossweide. One of his responsibilities at the orphanage was to transport supplies, equipment, and sometimes some of the orphans to Kuruschan and then bring farm produce back to Grossweide.

Operations at the farm were as financially precarious as affairs in the orphanage. The first crop was planted even though there was no binder, threshing machine, or motor to harvest whatever grain was grown. But, as the harvest season approached, money and opportunities to purchase the necessary machinery materialized in seemingly miraculous ways, but only after fervent prayer.<sup>7</sup>

### **Johannes Harder's conversion and baptism**

After his return to Grossweide, Johannes Harder reassessed the priorities of his life. He had abandoned his medical studies, returned to the farm and orphanage, and accepted significantly increased responsibilities. The long trips between Grossweide and Kuruschan provided much time for reflection as Johannes thought about what life held for him while struggling with an increased sense of personal sinfulness. Fortunately, his religious training at home, in the orphanage, and in the Mennonite Brethren Church provided guidance. As a result, on New Year's Eve of 1917, he experienced a dramatic religious conversion. His wife later wrote, "My husband had been faithful in Bible reading and prayer since childhood, but it wasn't until New Year's Eve

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<sup>5</sup> Abraham A. Harder, *Tagebuch*, MR, 30 June 1965, 15.

<sup>6</sup> *HFR* xxiv: 1.

<sup>7</sup> Abraham A. Harder, *Tagebuch*, MR, 14 July 1965, 14-15.

1917 that he fully accepted the Lord as his personal Saviour. He was baptised in 1919 and joined the Mennonite Brethren Church in Grossweide.”<sup>8</sup>

In the church, at the orphanage, and on the Kuruschan farm Johannes tried hard to demonstrate his religious commitments in daily life. He led Bible studies and devotional and prayer meetings. He also demonstrated considerable oratorical abilities. He was soon called upon, as a lay person, to preach in the nearby Mennonite Brethren church and in worship services at the orphanage. But one of the orphans who came to the orphanage when he was five years old described Johannes as a harsh, somewhat vain and arrogant disciplinarian with a volatile temper. Later in life, family and church members also experienced occasional outbursts of temper by Johannes when he was frustrated by what he regarded as disobedient, misguided, or obstructive behaviour. But such outbursts were usually followed by remorse and requests for forgiveness. At the orphanage, at least the orphan who has left an account of his experiences regarded the house father with greater affection than the son.<sup>9</sup> Few questioned Johannes’ firm Christian commitments and hard work, and he did not hesitate to offer apologies if unfortunate incidents occurred.

### **A narrow escape**

Johannes made his peace with God in a time of war and a revolution that threatened and eventually destroyed both the orphanage and its farm at Kuruschan. Threats of violence drew ever closer as the civil war and marauding bands loosely associated with Nestor Makhno terrorized the region. Civilian transportation was seriously disrupted as the rival Red and White armies fought to gain control of regions and settlements. As a result, the front changed frequently and the hauling of supplies and farm products between Grossweide and Kuruschan became increasingly dangerous. Nonetheless the need at the orphanage was great, and Johannes continued his trips in spite of the danger.

The situation became particularly difficult in the summer of 1920. That summer the Red Army gained control of the region in and around Grossweide, while the area around Kuruschan was still occupied by the White Army. People moving food and additional supplies sometimes crossed the

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<sup>8</sup> Tina Harder, “The Johannes Harder Obituary,” in the *Loewen Manuscript*, 118.

<sup>9</sup> H. M. R. Dueck, *An Orphan’s Song*, 117, 124.

front lines and there were suspicions that some were assisting and providing food for those fighting on the other side. Horses, wagons, and supplies might also be requisitioned or stolen by the combatants.

Johannes noted that the sentries on the outskirts of Grossweide usually left their posts at 3:45 in the morning and were not replaced until 4:00 in the morning. Attempting to avoid questioning, he timed his departures and return trips accordingly. However, on one of his trips he encountered a detail of the Red Army cavalry. Initially the military men seemed interested only in one of the horses. Johannes made the mistake of arguing that the horse was exhausted since he had travelled a long distance and therefore it would not be of much use to the cavalry. His reference to the distance he had travelled and the direction in which he was going indicated that he had probably come from an area still controlled by the White Army. The cavalry men let him go, but reported the incident to their local Commandant. He concluded that Johannes had crossed enemy lines and might be a spy. So Johannes was arrested, interrogated, and subjected to a one-man summary trial. Although Johannes carefully explained the nature of his work, he was convicted as a spy and sentenced to death. Armed guards then escorted him out of the village, presumably to carry out the sentence. But before they could do so, horsemen galloped up and ordered the guards to return Johannes to the village. Johannes regarded this abrupt turn of events as a miraculous answer to his desperate prayers.

There was an explanation for this turn of events. During his interrogation Johannes had explained his links to the orphanage and the nature of his travels. The trial judge did not believe him. But the Commandant mentioned the case to the woman who served him supper in the house where he was staying. She immediately corroborated Johannes' account and assured the Commandant that the entire village could vouch for the accuracy of his statements. So, after further hurried inquiries, the execution squad was called back. Johannes was asked further questions and then set free. However, the incident marked the end of hauling supplies and produce to and from Kuruschan, and before long the Harders were no longer in control of the orphanage.

A lengthy obituary written after Johannes' death in 1964 refers to another serious incident, also attributed to the year 1920. It states that he tried to return to Berdjansk to continue his medical studies but was arrested and

imprisoned by the Communists. Following his release from prison, he and a companion allegedly went to Caucasia to preach the Gospel among the Russians, returning to Grossweide only in the late fall of 1920. This journey allegedly marked the beginning of his preaching career.<sup>10</sup> However, circumstantial evidence casts doubt on the accuracy of this otherwise unsubstantiated report.

### **Tina Rempel**

During this time of distress Johannes Harder married Tina Rempel, one of the matrons at the orphanage. Tina had been born at Togus-Tobe, Crimea, on 21 August 1890. She was the second youngest of nine children, seven boys and two girls, in the Abraham and Sara (Lange) Rempel family.<sup>11</sup> She was only six months old when the family moved from the Crimea to Mariental in the southeastern part of the Molotschna Colony, not far from Grossweide. This move was prompted by her parents' desire to provide further educational opportunities for their sons. Tina, however, was denied the possibility of study beyond the village school level. In fact, she had to spend almost half of her last school year helping her mother at home.

In her *Lebensgeschichte* (life story or autobiography), Tina noted that from the time when she was a small child she was often very anxious about her sins and about possible misfortunes which might befall her and the family. She apparently suffered a serious emotional-spiritual crisis at the age of five. Intense personal anxieties increased when her father and then her only sister died. She was 16 when her father died. After that, perhaps because of her emotional state, her mother and brothers adopted a highly protective attitude toward her. She later wrote: "I was never allowed to go out alone in the evening. One of my brothers always accompanied me. If my friends visited

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<sup>10</sup> Hugo W. Jantz, "John Harder: Valiant for the Truth," 6-8. I have found no reference to this story in any of the other documentation. As noted earlier, Johannes' brother Abraham said he studied in Simferopol. Why Johannes would resume his medical studies in Berdjansk in 1920 when the needs of the orphanage were even greater than they had been when he returned in 1914 to help his parents is not explained. As for Johannes' preaching, he had led Bible studies, devotionals, and spoken to or admonished the younger orphans on many occasions. He had also been active in a variety of church activities, including public speaking.

<sup>11</sup> Tina Rempel, *Lebensgeschichte*, 1.

and wanted to go into the woods where young people, boys and girls, gathered, I was not allowed to go along. My friends went, but I stayed behind. My mother often said: 'You will thank us some day that you are being spared many things.'"<sup>12</sup>

Tina's anxieties were rooted in the Mennonite Brethren culture of the day in which sinfulness and the need for a conversion experience were emphasized. After the death of her father and sister she feared that she might never see them again because they were in heaven but she was sinful and had not yet been converted. Later that year a visiting evangelist held meetings in one of the nearby villages. Members of the Rempel family attended, but Tina resisted the altar call at the end of the service. Late one evening, however, her older brother read a Scripture passage (Matthew 12:30) emphasizing that one was either for or against Christ. Appalled that she might be against Christ, and after much weeping and prayer, Tina sought God's forgiveness of her sins. She expressed great joy and loud thanks to God when she believed God answered her prayer. Earlier fears were dispelled. The next spring she received catechism instruction and was baptised in the Gnadenfeld Mennonite Church.<sup>13</sup>

This conversion experience did not end Tina's emotional struggles. In her *Lebensgeschichte* she noted that after her father's death her mother (who was 51 years old when Tina's father died) received three proposals of marriage. These became a matter of very great concern to Tina. She later wrote: "I was very much afraid that she [her mother] might do that [accept a proposal of marriage]. We had a large pear tree in our garden under which there was a bench. That became my prayer chamber. There I prayed earnestly that God would not permit that to happen. I told the Lord of my many struggles in my life of faith. And He heard my prayers. And my brothers also told me that if mother did that, then our home would no longer be the same. Mother rejected all her suitors and remained single. Oh, how thankful we all were for that."<sup>14</sup>

In this respect Tina later wrote about a notable, perhaps strange, coming-of-age experience: "Bible studies were held, together with people from a nearby village. There I got to know a young man, and noticed for the first time

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 4.



that I was interested in young men. That, for me, was a great sin, and I prayed to God that He would deliver me from these feelings. We met often, and I got to know him better. My friend said to me: 'Don't you see that he is in love with you?' and I thought I could also love him. If God had not quickly intervened we probably would have become man and wife. He was a member of the Mennonite Brethren Church, and I certainly wanted a believer." She concluded that part of her *Lebensgeschichte* with a reference to the less than happy subsequent life of this young man, and that she had "repeatedly experienced how the Lord closed doors where I wanted to go. I cannot thank him enough for that. The Lord closed that door."<sup>15</sup>

Tina worked at home after completing her elementary school training, but also went briefly to Berdjansk to learn to become a seamstress. Thereafter, in addition to her work at home, she did much sewing for others and also conducted sewing classes in several Mennonite villages. When the war broke out she wanted to become a field nurse, but when several of her brothers were conscripted and joined the *Sanitaetsdienst*, she was needed at home to help her mother with domestic and farm work. One of her brothers in the *Sanitaetsdienst* contracted typhus and died. After the war another brother brought some of his friends to the house. Several became interested in Tina, but when she told one of them what kind of a husband she wanted he told her she would never find such a man and that she would remain single.

After the war Tina sought work in which she could serve the Lord. She decided to take training as a nurse in Halbstadt, but this institution suspended operations due to financial difficulties. While in Halbstadt, she met the seriously-ill matron of the orphanage in Grossweide. The matron talked about the urgent needs at the orphanage and persuaded Tina to help there. Apparently knowing nothing about the institution, Tina had not contemplated this kind of work. When she agreed, the sick matron and the Harders regarded her agreement as another answer to prayer. Tina was informed, however, that she must be prepared to do all kinds of work. The sick matron also warned her that the clothes she was wearing were too modern for Mrs. Harder's tastes. Tina began work at the orphanage in the spring of 1918 for a one-month probationary period.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

After that month of service Tina returned home. Her mother and brothers were strongly opposed to her doing further work at the orphanage. Instead they tried to arrange a marriage with a young man whom Tina found very attractive. She was, however, convinced that she should return to the orphanage. So, after a period of considerable family tension, she got her mother's reluctant consent to go back. The family, however, began to cast her in the role traditionally assigned to older unmarried women. Such persons were expected to care for aging parents and help out as needed in their siblings' households, especially to assist sisters or sisters-in-law during the latter stages of pregnancy and childbirth. Thus, her brother Nikolai appeared at the orphanage one day demanding that Tina return immediately to take care of her ailing mother. She was also needed in Nikolai's home since his wife was ill and expecting another baby. She agreed, but when the family situation improved she returned to the orphanage despite continued opposition from other family members. When another family crisis arose a year later, she was again taken back home by one of her brothers. But she returned to the orphanage after dealing with problems at home, determined to follow her own calling rather than succumb to the typical cultural proscriptions for a single woman of her age.

Work in the orphanage, as described by Tina, was very strenuous. She regularly got up at 5:00 in the morning. Staff members were not allowed to return to their rooms until 9:00 in the evening. As many as 80 orphans were looked after by a staff of six or seven adults. The older children were, of course, expected to help with the food preparation, laundry, and other domestic chores. Tina also used her skills as a seamstress to sew new clothes and mend or darn old ones. She relished the structured lifestyle. She had her own room, but in the same house where the younger girls slept. She wrote of her work: "At five o'clock I woke the girls. They had to be combed and their long hair had to be braided. All had to be washed and dressed in clean clothes. At six o'clock the bell rang for breakfast. I was happy in my work."<sup>16</sup> She also looked after those who were sick. That became particularly difficult shortly before Christmas in 1920 when many of the children contracted measles, and again during the winter of 1921-1922 when there were very serious food shortages. She was obviously an efficient and strong-minded person!

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

Staff members were also expected to engage in games and physical activities with the children. Tina found these activities less satisfying than her other work. She later wrote: "We sisters had the responsibility to supervise, entertain and play with the children on Sunday. That was always a difficult time for me, and I was glad when it was over. One Sunday I was very tired, and my supervision time was over. But the girls asked the house mother if they could go to the Grossweide forest which was half a mile away. She said they could go if I would accompany them. Then the girls begged that I should go with them. I found that very hard, but could not refuse. Then I realized how selfish I was, thinking I would rather sit and read."<sup>17</sup>

According to her *Lebensgeschichte*, Tina often lacked self-confidence and was tormented by a sense of inadequacy and sinfulness. Strict adherence to the established routine and structures of the orphanage provided security and greater confidence. Some of her actions, nevertheless, suggest strength and a strong sense of self.

### **Courtship and marriage of Tina Rempel and Johannes Harder**

In 1921 one of the teachers at the orphanage sent Tina a letter proposing marriage. She prayed about it and then replied that she felt God had called her to the work in the orphanage and that she did not have "permission from the Lord" to leave that work. Early in 1922, however, her view changed in a way sufficiently unusual that Tina should tell the story, albeit in translated form.

"One evening, when all the others were already asleep, the house mother and I were discussing what to cook the next day. We always did that. I reminded her that I still had a bag of dried fruit in my room. She said: 'Go and bring down the bag of dried fruit.' When I came down, the house mother called me into her room. The house father was already in bed but got dressed and also came into the room. I did not know what that meant. It was already late. Then the house father said that their son, Johannes, had begged them for some time to ask her if she would be willing to become his wife. I was surprised. I had a high regard for Johannes, especially since he had once come into the room where we 'sisters' were to say that he had once spoken harshly to his mother in our presence. He had already asked the Lord and his mother to forgive him, but now also wanted to acknowledge and express his regret to

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 14.

them. Also, when the house mother gave me the large responsibility of supervising work during the laundry week after 'sister' Neta left to get married, and I thought I could not do it, I met their son Johannes in the yard. He said to me, 'Sister Tina, with my God I can leap over a wall and run through a troop.' This Johannes now asked me if I would be his wife. The parents said they could not wish for a better daughter-in-law, but were concerned that I was so much older [seven years] than their son. The house father asked: 'What do you say to this?' I replied: 'I cannot say anything today; please give me time to think it over.' I prayed very much. I was so afraid that I might go my own way. I told the Lord: 'Let me die rather than go my own way.' I realized that I loved him and could not say no. After a few days the parents said, 'Johannes would very much like an answer.' And I said, 'Yes, I love him,' and we were secretly engaged. No one knew except 'Sister' Annie, my confidante, who had helped me pray about it. My Johannes then walked the nine miles to Mariental to ask my mother if she would entrust her daughter to him."<sup>18</sup>



The last family picture, taken at the double wedding of sisters Justina Harder Dueck and Marie Harder Kaethler, and a farewell for Johannes and Tina Harder, 13 June 1922.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

Shortly after Johannes returned, there was a formal engagement celebration at the orphanage with members of the Harder and Rempel families. The celebration included devotionals, prayer, and opportunities for members of the two families to visit and get to know one another.

The wedding took place on 28 May 1922 at the orphanage and included sermons, numerous recitations, singing, prayer, and good wishes. The event occurred, however, during a time of great food shortages. Only members of the Harder family and Tina's mother and siblings were invited. The wedding meal consisted of one *Zwieback* (bun) for every guest and a meatless *Sommerborch* (a soup made from vegetable greens). At the time of the wedding Tina was almost 32 and Johannes 25 years old.

The young couple moved into a room in the orphanage, and continued their work. Johannes no longer made many trips, but accepted responsibility for the older boys while Tina continued with the laundry and many other chores. The joy and happiness of the newlyweds was, however, soon marred by the political and ideological consequences of revolution and civil war.

### **The beloved orphanage in Grossweide**

Johannes and Tina (Rempel) Harder's lifelong values, ideals, attitudes, and coping mechanisms were strongly influenced and shaped by their experiences in the orphanage. This work defied ordinary human planning and management strategies, relying instead on God to provide what was needed. The strategy worked for 16 years.

In later life, Johannes carried with him fond memories of his youthful experiences. "The beloved orphanage in Grossweide, South Russia, was a happy home for me. There I grew up, and saw how wonderfully God acknowledged our parents' work of faith and love, especially in the difficult war years, during the civil war, and during the famine year of 1921. There I was able to participate in the work and share the blessings with my dear parents. The work was often difficult, but at least we had a free hand—until the Bolsheviks formed the government and then interfered in the work in accordance with their principles."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Johannes Harder, *Story*, in *Loewen Manuscript*, 1.

## Chapter 4

### Migrants, 1922-1930

In November 1922, only months after their wedding, Johannes and Tina Harder were ordered by the orphanage's new administrator to vacate their room. This eviction marked the beginning of a more than seven-year pilgrimage that ended only when they arrived in Yarrow, British Columbia, in January 1930. These were very difficult years, fraught with serious illness, poverty, and the death in Winnipeg of new-born twins.<sup>1</sup>

#### Grossweide, 12 November 1922-23 June 1924

After their eviction from the orphanage, Johannes and Tina were allowed to move into the former teacher's residence, where they shared space with Johannes' older brother Abraham and his family. A few weeks later, Johannes' parents were also ordered to leave the orphanage and they also moved into this residence, as did several of the female caregivers. Probably the elder Harders' handicapped daughter and two of the younger daughters accompanied their parents. It was a very crowded facility. Tina later wrote that she and Johannes occupied a room smaller than the room in the Tabor Home in Abbotsford, the place where she wrote her *Lebensgeschichte*.

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<sup>1</sup> The information in this chapter is drawn from Johannes Harder, *Story*, Tina Harder, *Story*, and Tina Harder, *Lebensgeschichte*, supplemented by information from relevant secondary sources.

Family members eked out a subsistence living, working at whatever odd jobs they could find. They also remained active in the Grossweide Mennonite Brethren Church, and in 1923 Johannes was invited to accept ordination as a minister. He felt that God was calling him to serve in this capacity, and he was apparently willing to accept the invitation. But there was opposition. Tina, Johannes' wife, had not been baptised by immersion. In Grossweide, while she and Johannes were both active in the Mennonite Brethren Church, she was apparently not recognized as a member of the church, but was allowed to participate in communion services on the basis of her personal testimony of faith. His wife's status, nevertheless, prompted Johannes to decline ordination. That, however, did not prevent him from "serving with the Word" in Mennonite Brethren and also in other churches when he was invited to do so.

The entire Harder family, together with the remaining orphans, had submitted applications for exit visas. Their proposed destination was Canada, but several family members failed their medical examinations. Johannes and Tina, however, received their visas and passed the medical examinations. There was no reasonable prospect of a return to work in the orphanage, so emigration seemed their best option.

Shortly before Johannes and Tina's departure, the Harder family celebrated a double event. Two of Johannes' sisters, Marie and Justina, were married in a double wedding to Peter Kaethler and Henry Dueck respectively. At the same time, the family had a farewell for Johannes and Tina. Johannes' sister Helene with her husband, Jacob Janzen, and their children came from the Crimea for the occasion. It was the last time all members of the Harder family were together. Some other family members still hoped to follow to Canada, and the two newly married couples in fact also migrated to Canada. But everyone was keenly aware that some family members would probably not get the necessary medical clearance and would, therefore, remain in Russia.

A few days after the double wedding Johannes and Tina had an auction sale at which they sold whatever possessions they still had but could not take with them. After a few remaining debts were paid, they were left with 340 rubles. Then, in part because of delays in the scheduled departure date, they had several weeks of leave-taking. The Grossweide Mennonite Brethren Church had a special farewell and communion service. The couple made a trip to bid farewell to Tina's aging mother and to some of her siblings in Mariental. En route to the Lichtenau railway station, they visited with relatives

in Neukirch, Lichtfelde, Alexanderkrone, and Rosenort. Further delays allowed for a quick return trip to Grossweide; then on the Sunday before their departure, the Mennonite Church in Tiege held a formal farewell for all the departing emigrants.

By the middle of June the railway began assembling a long line of about 50 small box cars, assigning passengers to each car. Once Johannes and Tina had their assigned car they hired some women to wash it thoroughly. Three families, comprising 19 persons, were assigned to their car. Then, at sunset on 23 June, Johannes and Tina left for Canada as those assembled at the station and those in the railway cars sang the hymn, *So nimm denn meine Haende* (Take Thou my hands O Father). One of the stanzas ends with the words, *Lass ruh'n zu deinen Fuessen dein armes Kind. Es will die Augen schliessen, und folgen blind.* (Permit thy child to linger, here at thy feet. And blindly trust thy goodness, with faith complete.) Johannes and Tina Harder took this legacy of trust and faith in God's goodness with them.

### **The voyage to North America, 23 June-19 July 1924**

The Harders were pleased with their railway companions. Together they held regular morning and evening devotions and prayers. The train proceeded only at a low speed and made frequent stops. As a result, it did not reach the Latvian border until 30 June, a week after leaving Lichtenau. After inspections and delays at the border, clearance was given and at 4:00 a.m. on 1 July the train crossed the border. The next morning passengers and baggage had to be unloaded from the Russian rail cars onto the Latvian train that took the emigrants to Riga. In Riga another transfer was made to the narrow gauge railway which took them to the port of Libau. The passengers had to endure humiliating delousing and disinfecting procedures, further medical examinations, and passport controls, but the Harders encountered no unusual difficulties. They used a portion of the proceeds from their auction sale to pay the 29.55-ruble transportation costs from Lichtenau to their ocean embarkation point. From there they travelled on credit arranged by the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization with the Canadian Pacific Railway.

In Libau the emigrants boarded the "Marglen," a small Canadian Pacific Railway ship. It took them across the Baltic Sea, through the Kiel Canal, and across the North Sea to Antwerp, Belgium. The Baltic Sea was calm, but the



passage was marred by the dirty conditions on board and the refusal of service personnel to do anything unless they were paid. On the North Sea, storms tossed the small ship around so much that Tina, together with many other passengers, suffered from sea sickness. Johannes also became very sick, but he attributed his illness to malarial fever. He does not indicate in his *Story* where he had contracted malaria, but he regarded his health problem on board ship as a recurrence of a medical pre-condition.

At Antwerp the passengers boarded the much larger Canadian Pacific Railway ocean steamer "Minnedosa." It took them to Southampton, England, and from there, via Cherbourg, France, to Quebec City. Both Tina and Johannes suffered severe illness while crossing the Atlantic. Tina's illness was again described as sea sickness and Johannes's as malarial fever. Tina, however, was also three months pregnant, which may have contributed to her condition.

The ship arrived at Quebec City on 17 July. The Harders, like the other passengers awaiting immigration procedures, endured long queues but encountered no personal difficulties. Back on solid ground, Tina quickly regained her health, but Johannes' fever left him weak and feeling poorly.

He had hoped they could travel directly to an uncle living at Borden, Saskatchewan. Arrangements for temporary accommodation and employment of the Mennonite immigrants in Canada were, however, made by the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization. It had responsibility for the care of the immigrants and had decided that the Harders should go to Waterloo, Ontario. There, long-time Mennonite residents were willing to provide lodging and work. So, after clearing the necessary immigration procedures in Quebec City, the Harders, together with many others, boarded a Canadian Pacific Railway train bound for Waterloo. En route Johannes was amazed and a little intimidated by the vastness and diversity of the Canadian Shield. He also suffered another serious fever attack that left him physically drained.

### **Waterloo, Ontario, 19 July-3 February 1925**

The immigrant-laden train arrived in Waterloo at noon on a Saturday, July 19th. Prospective hosts and/or employers had gathered on the grounds of the Waterloo Mennonite Church. The immigrants and their hand luggage were, in Johannes Harder's words, "marched" the considerable distance (about two

miles or 3.2 kilometres) from the railway station to the church. Johannes, seriously weakened by his fever, had great difficulty walking that distance and eventually had to call for assistance. Tina also found the long walk very tiring.

Exhaustion probably contributed to the fact that the Harders did not gain a good first impression of Waterloo and their prospective hosts. On the church yard they heard comments that the local Mennonites had come to “pick up the Russians” who would work in their houses and on their farms. Such comments were humiliating, given the low esteem the Mennonite immigrants had for ethnic Russian servants in their old homeland.

Eventually, in the heat of the day, all the men were called to the middle of the church yard. Those who had not yet done so were asked to sign promissory notes covering their indebtedness for the transportation costs. Johannes Harder had already signed his note on the train. He found the current processing crass.

The immigrants were then served a light meal. After that they had to wait with their hand luggage in a large shed on the church yard. Lists and descriptions of the immigrants had been prepared beforehand, allowing prospective hosts to make their selections. The Harders were among the last to be chosen. Their hosts, the Noah M. Cressmans (referred to by Tina in her *Lebensgeschichte* as Kressmans) from New Hamburg arrived late in the afternoon and had to choose from among the few remaining immigrants.

It was dark when they arrived at the farm on which the Harders were expected to work. The Noah Cressman’s lived in town. The farm was managed by their son Melvin. Their reception seemed cold, and the Harders were very happy when they were finally shown to their small room upstairs in the house. On the next day, a Sunday, the Harders accompanied the Cressmans to a nearby Mennonite church. They were delighted when meeting a number of other recently arrived Russian Mennonites, but in his diary Harder makes no reference to the church service or the divisive conflict in the First Mennonite Church, Kitchener, over Christian dress codes.

On Monday morning Johannes was told to clean the manure out of the horse barn. Later in the day he went with Noah Cressman to pick up their larger pieces of luggage, which had been stored in a shed on the church yard. On the way back Johannes suffered another severe fever attack, resulting in a stop at the doctor’s office in New Hamburg. The doctor diagnosed the illness as typhus and ordered bed rest and minimal contact with all others. Johannes

tried unsuccessfully to convince the doctor that his ailment was malarial fever, not typhus. He asked but was refused medicine to treat malaria.

The highly infectious nature of typhus resulted in Johannes being quarantined in his upstairs room on the Cressman farm. Tina brought him his food, but she was not allowed to eat with the Cressmans or touch any of their food or dishes. She was assigned to do the laundry, scrub floors, clean rooms, and do other menial tasks.

Because Johannes' condition failed to improve, he went to see the doctor a second time. He again insisted that he had malarial fever, and was able to persuade the doctor to prescribe the requested medicine. Thereafter Johannes gradually improved, but it was only after two-and-a-half weeks that he was again able to work on the farm. His first assignment after recovering from his illness was hauling manure. He worked outside on the farm for four months. Tina worked indoors as a domestic servant. Together they earned \$30.00 per month plus room and board.

On 22 October Tina, now nearly seven months pregnant, suffered a serious mishap. While hanging laundry on an outside line, she fell from a three-foot high platform. She was not seriously injured, but the doctor ordered a week's bed rest as a precautionary measure.

The limited work Tina could do, and perhaps other considerations, resulted in a move from the farm to the home of the senior Cressmans in town on 19 November. Tina worked for two weeks in that home while Johannes walked several miles to the farm every morning and back to town in the evening. After two weeks the Cressmans offered the Harders room and board, but no salary, if they wished to stay for the winter months. They also offered an alternative. If the Harders promised to leave before the spring, they were willing to pay Johannes for the work he did on the farm during the winter months. The Harders had little choice but to accept, and they began looking for alternative spring lodging and employment.

On Christmas Eve Johannes worked on the farm in the Cressman barn until 7:30 in the evening while Tina helped in the kitchen of the senior Cressmans' home. Then, unexpectedly, at 5:20 on Christmas morning, their first son, named John after his father, was born. The Cressmans arranged for Tina to move to a warm room downstairs, and Johannes hired one of the immigrant Mennonite women to provide three weeks of nursing care. Tina regained her strength slowly; meanwhile, Johannes looked for another place of

employment and residence. The Harders thought the Cressmans would be relieved if they left.

At a meeting of the immigrants, Johannes obtained the address of the pastor of a German-speaking evangelical church and heard about prospects of employment in Mildmay, Ontario. He went to Mildmay to investigate, was warmly welcomed by the pastor and promised a week of work. So, on 3 February 1925 in the dead of winter, the family with their infant son moved from Waterloo to Mildmay. The Cressmans paid Johannes for the work he had done, and also sent along various items to sustain the family in their new home.

The Waterloo experience was obviously not a happy one for the Harders. Illness certainly contributed to the difficulties. They regarded some of the work they were asked to do humiliating. In addition, they apparently spent almost no money during the time they worked in Waterloo. One hundred dollars of their small joint \$30.00 per month salary was applied to the repayment of their transportation debt. They also faithfully gave 10 percent "to the Lord" for causes not identified in Johannes' *Story*.

The perspective of the Cressmans was obviously different from that of the Harders. Local leaders had strongly urged church members to help the immigrants. The *Harder Story* says nothing about the Cressman's financial situation. They had to cope with a man seriously ill with a possibly highly contagious disease and his pregnant wife. Under those circumstances the Cressmans could justify a meagre salary. Other Mennonite immigrants had much more positive experiences in Waterloo.

Apparently, the religious and perhaps linguistic differences between the Harders and their hosts were so great that the Harders had their own German devotions in their room upstairs rather than with the Cressmans. Johannes did not note any significant interactions with other members of the local Mennonite Church. Apparently the cultural differences were too great. The fellowship the Harders cherished was with other recently arrived Russian Mennonite immigrants.

### **Mildmay, Ontario, 3 February-28 October 1925**

Johannes had been promised a week of work cutting ice at Mildmay. Rev. Gertzman, the pastor of the Evangelical Church in which German was still the language of choice, had arranged suitable inexpensive accommodation. But

after eight days of cutting ice Johannes could find no other employment. He chopped wood and did other odd jobs, but earned almost nothing. And baby John was sick. After a month he weighed only seven pounds, one pound less than his birth weight. In her *Lebensgeschichte* Tina wrote that the baby, and presumably she and Johannes, almost starved to death during those very difficult winter months. The baby's health improved only after six months. Earning opportunities also increased in the spring and summer.

The people at Mildmay tried to assist the Harders, and Johannes was also invited to preach and teach a Sunday school class in German for the older women. He accepted those invitations, but he and Tina did not find the spiritual life in the Mildmay church entirely satisfactory. A particular irritant was their evaluation that the church admitted both believers and non-believers as members and partakers in the communion services. As a result the Harders refused to take communion.

On 25 August Johannes left Mildmay to assist in grain harvesting work on farms in the Borden, Saskatchewan, district where his uncle, John Harder, lived. Tina and the baby stayed in Mildmay. During that summer Johannes earned \$148.50, from which \$41.00 was deducted for the cost of the railway tickets. Most of the remaining money was used to pay off the last of the Harder's transportation debt.

Johannes enjoyed the farm work and the renewed contact with his uncle and with his sister Marie and her husband, Peter Kaethler, who had just arrived in Canada. He was very happy, however, to return to his wife and son in Mildmay on 5 November. Baby John had improved so much that Johannes said he hardly recognized him.

Steady, well-paid work during the winter months was still hard to find in Mildmay. Johannes did sporadic work cutting logs or working in nearby sawmills. In the spring there was more work in the sawmills, but he also found short-term employment on some construction projects. Unfortunately, cement dust triggered asthma attacks which caused him to miss work, reducing his earnings. Some of the work was so far from Mildmay that Johannes was away from Monday morning to Saturday evening. He did not find the sleeping accommodations in rough backwoods lumber camps congenial. During his absence Tina had to cope with all the childcare and household responsibilities. The house in which they lived was old, warmed only by a pot-belly stove. On one occasion Tina was very badly frightened

when a fire ignited the accumulated carbon in the stove pipes. While not physically injured, she needed medical attention to cope with the consequences of that fright. They also had serious concerns when their infant son again became ill.

As the winter of 1926 approached, Johannes feared further asthma attacks if he continued in the construction work. He and Tina also yearned for closer spiritual fellowship. Moreover, Tina was expecting another baby. Johannes' sister, Justina, and her husband, Henry Dueck, had come to Canada in 1925. They were living in Winnipeg, waiting for an opportunity to move onto a farm. Henry had found reasonably steady work and thought there were good employment prospects in Winnipeg. He encouraged the Harders to relocate. So, on 29 October 1926, they accepted the Dueck's invitation and joined them in Winnipeg.

### **Winnipeg, Manitoba, 30 October 1926-4 April 1927**

The Harders encountered difficulties and delays in finding a suitable place to live in Winnipeg. So they spent their first weeks in the city with the Duecks in very crowded quarters. Johannes found temporary employment in the Swift Canadian Company's slaughter and meat packing plant. But the exertions of the trip, the urgency to find their own accommodation, and their un-settled prospects in the city were too difficult for Tina. On 8 November 1926 she gave premature birth to twins. Heidi, the girl, died within ten hours. Abraham, the son, died on 26 November. Since it was winter and the ground frozen, the bodies of the infants were placed in the vault at the undertaker's. There is no indication whether the bodies were buried before or after the Harders left Winnipeg in early April of the next year.

The small Mennonite Brethren mission in the city proved a blessing for Johannes and Tina. After the birth of the twins, C. N. Hiebert, city missionary, and Anna Thiessen, who was in charge of a home for Mennonite young women working in the city as domestic servants, made arrangements for the registration of the births and deaths and the future burial of the infants. Temporary help for Tina was also arranged. But what the Harders appreciated most was the kindred spiritual atmosphere of the mission. Spiritually, as Johannes Harder put it, spring had come. They took part in the worship services, Bible discussions, and prayer meetings, and Johannes was repeatedly invited "to serve with the Word." The Harders were particularly happy



Johannes and Tina Harder with son John in  
Winnipeg, January 1927.

because they could once again participate in communion services. Whereas the entries in Johannes' *Story* about their time in Ontario are filled with references to their difficulties, those written in Winnipeg refer more often to the joy and happiness they felt among people with a shared spiritual and cultural heritage.

The work at the slaughter house and pack-

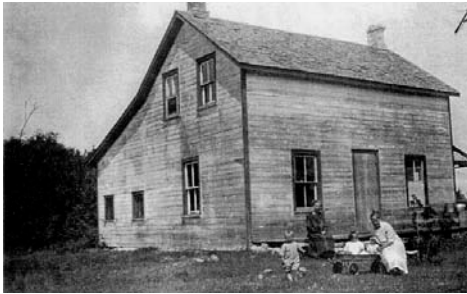
ing plant proved temporary and unpredictable. Johannes was laid off shortly before Christmas. Henry and Justina Dueck had, in the meantime, moved onto a farm near Steinbach. But they, too, had suffered a serious family tragedy when their infant daughter died. There was also great anxiety when Justina contracted and nearly succumbed to blood poisoning.

### **Fleming, Saskatchewan, 4 April 1927-26 February 1929**

The Harders, like many other recently arrived Mennonite immigrants, hoped to escape urban day labour and establish themselves in their own communities and on their own farms as soon as possible. Failure to find more than short-term work intensified Johannes' search for a suitable farm. In that search he, like many of the other Mennonite immigrants, was assisted by the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, which worked in close cooperation with the Canadian Pacific Railway's Canada Colonization and Immigration Agency.

The Harders were provided with information about a farmer near Fleming, Saskatchewan, close to the Manitoba border, who wanted to sell his large but seriously neglected farm. Johannes was told that the farm was too large for one person to manage. It required the labour of at least two men. Therefore the suggestion was made that he find another family to join him in the purchase and working of the farm. So Johannes contacted his brother-in-

law and sister, Peter and Marie Kaethler, who had come to Canada shortly after their wedding in Russia. The two families agreed to become partners, and in March of 1927 they purchased the farm near Fleming. The initial down payment was quite small, but there was a substantial mortgage with somewhat flexible repayment requirements. Since farm income fluctuated from year to year, mortgage repayment terms were linked to income. Annual payments



The farm house near Fleming, Saskatchewan, 1927.

were set at half the gross proceeds of all farm income.

The farm came with 320 acres (a half-section) of land. Two hundred acres (82 hectares) were under cultivation. It included a house, a barn and several smaller buildings, machinery, horses, cows, and chickens. But it was badly neglected.

Much work had to be done to make the house, shared by the two families, habitable. The other buildings also needed attention, and all the machinery was in poor mechanical condition. The land, badly infested with weeds, required considerable preparation before seeding.

Prices for farm products in 1927 were reasonable, but drought blighted the crops on the Harder-Kaethler farm. As a result, the income, half of which had to be paid to the mortgage holder, left the families in very difficult financial straits after paying basic operating costs. Day labour on neighbouring farms in the late fall and early winter provided limited but desperately needed funds. In order to earn a little more, Peter Kaethler returned to Winnipeg during the winter months in search of work, leaving his wife and child and the Harders to manage the farm. Johannes also tried to earn a little money by cutting wood in the bush.

At Fleming, on 23 December 1927, another son, Siegfried (Fred) Abraham, was born to the Harders. That birth was also premature. When Tina experienced complications with the birth, a doctor from Moosomin was called. He arrived after the child had been born, took his \$20.00 fee, and left. Only after several months did the infant gain strength and normal weight, and the medical expense greatly increased the family's financial difficulties.



Other Mennonite families also purchased farms in the Fleming area, but Johannes' *Story* made only guarded references to neighbours who were not Mennonite Brethren. For a time, the Harders and Kaethlers had devotions, Bible study, and worship services in their own home. When a few more Mennonites, including a "Conference" preacher, arrived, one of the neighbours took the initiative to arrange regular Sunday morning worship services. Johannes was invited and agreed to share in the preaching. But he lamented that real fellowship was lacking. In his assessment, these people did not have true spiritual life from God.

The second year that the Harders lived on the farm near Fleming was equally difficult. Insufficient rain resulted in a meagre crop. Even with the greatest care, the two families found it almost impossible to pay operating costs and live on half the small income of the farm. And the mortgage payment they made failed to cover even the interest charges for the year. It became clear that the farm could not support two families, at least not on the terms by which the Harders and Kaethlers had purchased it, so they decided to part. The Kaethlers chose to stay. On 26 February 1929, the Harders left for Alberta where two of Tina's brothers, Johann and Nikolai Rempel and their families, lived.

### **Drumheller and Swallowell, Alberta, 26 February 1929-23 January 1930**

The Harders travelled by train from Fleming, Saskatchewan, to Drumheller, Alberta, where they were met by Tina's brother Johann. He took them to his home, where they stayed for the next ten days. During that time they attended worship services in the house of a local family and Johannes was invited to preach. They also attended a small *Bibelbesprechung* (Bible study or conversation) in the nearby town of Rosedale, where they met Tina's brother Nikolai, who took them to his home near Swallowell.

The following Sunday the Rempels and Harders travelled some ten kilometres westward to attend the worship service of a group of believers not yet organized as a congregation. They met in the small, one-room Antler School near the present town of Linden. On the first Sunday there, Johannes was asked to preach. Nikolai Rempel, his brother-in-law, had been ordained as a minister in 1925. It seems likely that he was scheduled to preach that

Sunday, but invited Johannes to do so. The group had not been formally organized as a congregation.<sup>2</sup>

At Swalwell the Harders, together with another family, were able to rent a house less than a kilometre from the Nikolai Rempel farm. Johannes found work for the summer on a large farm about three kilometres from where they lived. Since he had to do farm chores in the morning and evening, he usually stayed at the farm during the week, returning home on the weekends. This schedule allowed for fairly regular attendance at the worship service in the Antler school. The Harders and Rempels usually travelled together, either in the Rempels' old Ford car or in a horse-drawn box wagon.

Shortly after their arrival in Alberta, Johannes Harder, together with Nikolai Rempel, was invited to participate in a special *Bibelbesprechung* with several Mennonite Brethren ministers from Namaka and Coaldale. Johannes was enthusiastic. These were people with whom he shared many spiritual bonds and religious convictions.

The worshippers in the Antler school came from various Mennonite church backgrounds: "*Kirchliche*," "*Allianz*," "*Bruderthaler*," and Mennonite Brethren. The Harders enjoyed the fellowship and rejoiced when a number of people had conversion experiences and then requested baptism. The baptismal candidates included Tina Harder. She had, after a prolonged personal struggle, requested baptism by immersion. It was a difficult decision for her because she had experienced a conversion before her first baptism and regarded it as valid. However, she felt that, for the sake of Jesus who had sacrificed so much, she should humble herself and step into the water. Visiting Mennonite Brethren preachers from Coaldale served at the baptism.

These were joyous occasions, and Johannes was happy to accept invitations to preach at worship services of Russian Mennonites on the Burns Ranch and in the Mennonite Brethren in Christ church in Didsbury. But efforts to organize the diverse Antler group as a church failed while the Harders were there. Organized in 1933, its subsequent application for membership in the Alberta Mennonite Brethren Conference created problems because not all members of the group had been baptised by immersion.

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<sup>2</sup> "Mennonite Brethren Church," in *Telling Our Story: Linden and District Heritage Project, 2003* (Linden, AB: Linden Heritage Project, 2003), 13.

Johannes and Tina Harder made no reference in their autobiographical writing to the large and well-established Church of God in Christ, Mennonite (Holdeman) church in the Sunnyslope-Linden district. These people provided substantial assistance, housing, and employment for the immigrants, and some of their leaders were disappointed when those they helped did not attend their church services. Mennonite Brethren reticence was apparently due, in part, to the fact that Nikolai Rempel, an ordained Mennonite Brethren preacher, was not invited to preach in the Holdeman church because he had not been baptised in a form approved by Holdeman leaders.

Johannes was not needed after the harvest on the farm where he had worked during the summer. Efforts to purchase a farm at a price and on terms the Harders could afford proved futile. But late in the fall Johannes attended a larger meeting of Russian Mennonite immigrants in Coaldale. Some talked enthusiastically about prospects in British Columbia, although the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization had serious concerns regarding settlement possibilities in the Fraser Valley.<sup>3</sup> Others offered mild encouragement. More significant were the decisions by Henry and Justina Dueck and Peter and Marie Kaethler to leave their farms near Steinbach and Fleming respectively and move to British Columbia. The Harders had lived with the Duecks in Winnipeg, and farmed with the Kaethlers at Fleming. While en route to British Columbia, the Kaethlers spent Christmas in 1929 with the Harders at Swalwell.

After Christmas the Harders also made preparations for yet another move further west. They left Swalwell on 23 January 1930. Experiencing several delays along the way, they arrived in Chilliwack on 30 January. They were met at the train station by the Duecks, who took them to a small house in Yarrow which the Duecks had rented for them. While the Harders were not yet aware of it, their long migration was over. They had arrived in the community which would become their home for many years.

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<sup>3</sup> The Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization worked closely with the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) when searching for land on which the immigrants could settle. The CPR had earned very large land grants on the prairies and was also interested in generating freight. Its main line in the Fraser Valley ran on the north side of the Fraser River and it had no land grant in that province. Colonization Board members had little familiarity with conditions in British Columbia, but worried about access to markets and transportation problems.

### **The long journey**

Johannes and Tina Harder had no really fixed home from the time they lost their position at the orphanage in 1922 until they arrived in Yarrow in January of 1930. For seven years Johannes scrambled to find whatever work he could, earning only a very meagre livelihood. They arrived in Yarrow virtually penniless, but they had paid off their \$264.04 transportation debt and consistently given a tenth of their income “to the Lord.”

They had done much physically difficult, sometimes emotionally humiliating, work. They had survived, but only through great frugality. Tina had given birth to four children, the twins dying shortly after their birth.

Spiritual matters were always of greatest interest and concern for the Harders. They attended worship services wherever they lived, but felt spiritually comfortable only in a few places. In Waterloo, fellowship with fellow Mennonite Brethren Russian immigrants seemed much more satisfying than attendance and participation in the services of the (Old) Mennonite churches. At Mildmay Johannes preached and taught Sunday school, but he and Tina did not participate in communion services because they did not think all who participated were true believers. They greatly appreciated and quickly felt at home with the small Mennonite Brethren group in Winnipeg, which consisted mainly of recently arrived immigrants from Russia. In Alberta they participated and enjoyed the fellowship of the Antler group near Swalwell, but the diverse Mennonite backgrounds of the members created problems. In Yarrow the Harders met and soon worked and worshipped with Russian Mennonite Brethren immigrants. Together they would create and build the kind of church and community with which they were comfortable.

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## Chapter 5

### Breadwinners, 1930-1952<sup>1</sup>

The Harders had no savings when they arrived in Yarrow after their five-and-a-half year sojourn across Canada, but they were thankful to God that they had been able to pay for the cost of their move from Alberta to Yarrow. Economic conditions in the newly established community, however, were discouraging. Employment opportunities were uncertain, scarce, and poorly remunerated. Land made available for farming after drainage of the Sumas lowlands attracted Mennonite settlers, but prices for agricultural products were low. Survival of the community was facilitated by the enlightened policies of settlement promoter Chauncey Eckert,<sup>2</sup> an exceptionally strong sense of community and mutual aid, hard work, and frugal living.

In Genesis chapter 41 we read of seven years of plenty, followed by seven years of dearth. Fortunately, Egypt first experienced the years of plenty that made it possible, under Joseph's wise administration, to prepare for the hard times. Families in Yarrow had no such reserve in the lean years of the 1930s.

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the detailed information in this chapter is drawn from Johannes Harder, *Story*; Tina Harder, *Story*; and Tina Harder, *Lebensgeschichte*. Only direct quotations from these sources will be footnoted.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Penner, "Chauncey Eckert, The CCA, and Early Settlement," in Leonard N. Neufeldt, *Before we were the Land's: Yarrow, British Columbia: Mennonite Promise* (Victoria, BC: TouchWood Editions, 2202), 129-141.

As for the Harder family, the lean years extended beyond the seven years of dearth in Egypt. Irregular, seasonal, and poorly remunerated work, compounded by health problems, barely kept the growing family alive in those very difficult years.

### **Shelter, 1930-1938**

On their arrival the Harder family found shelter, albeit rudimentary, in a small 14 x 20 foot (4.27 x 6.1 metre) shack or shed. It stood on the yard occupied by Johannes' sister and brother-in-law, Justina and Henry Dueck. The rent was only \$4.50 a month. Johann Derksen, owner of the local store, provided the Harders with credit for basic household furnishings and food.

Paying rent, even at the rate of \$4.50 a month, did not appeal to the Harders. So, after a few months, they negotiated purchase of the shack for \$100.00 and permission to remain on the property rent free, even after the Henry and Justina Dueck family left to settle on farmland in the Sardis-Greendale area. Johannes and Tina Harder, together with their sons John and Fred, lived in the small shack for almost two years, until November 1931. There, on 28 May 1930 their fifth (third surviving) child, Lilie-Anna, was born.

The Harders, together with Peter D. Loewen, purchased a small two-acre plot of land on Central Road in the fall of 1931. The shack which still served as their home was moved to this property, and a small barn was built. Some fruit trees were planted, a well was dug, and preparations were made for the planting of a garden the next spring. A few cows and chickens helped meet the basic food needs of the growing family. That, however, did not obviate the necessity for additional income from various jobs, which often paid very little. But the family now had their own home on land they owned, something that provided greater stability.

In 1934, hard work and very frugal living made it possible for the Harders to expand modestly their domestic arrangements. Selling the two-acre plot on Central Road, they purchased a new five-acre (2.02 hectare) piece of open land on Dyke Road. There the Harders built a small new home. The lumber was obtained, much of it on credit, from a local sawmill, and the hardware was purchased on credit from the Derksen store. Some of the men from the church assisted in the construction, which was, however, disrupted by harvest work in the fall. The interior doors had not yet been installed, and the inside

ceiling was not yet plastered when the family moved into the house in late fall. The house was therefore still quite “windy.”

Nevertheless, Christmas of 1934 became a very special occasion for the Harders. The Derksens, who greatly appreciated the work of the Harders in the Mennonite Brethren church and in the community, gave them their *Schuldbuch* (debt book) in which the materials and other merchandise purchased on credit had been entered. In other words, the Derksens cancelled the Harders’ entire debt at their store. Similarly, a small group of men banded together to pay the debt for lumber obtained at the sawmill.

On Christmas Day the Harder family was invited for dinner to the home of another family. The weather was inclement, and Johann Derksen came by with his car to take the Harder family home. When they entered the house, the Harders found, to their great surprise, delight, and comfort, that a new heater stove (as distinct from the kitchen stove or oven) had been installed. And a fire had been lit to warm the house. This generous and kind gift of the stove by the Derksens, and their manifest love as they lit the fire made the Christmas of 1934 especially memorable for the Harders. Cancellation by the Derksens of the debt owed by the Harders at the store, and payment by others of the debt at the sawmill addressed the Harders’ most urgent financial concerns. They were deeply appreciative and thankful for these expressions of love and support and lived on Dyke Road until the spring of 1938, when they rented a larger farm. A year later, they purchased an even larger dairy farm.

### **The lean years, 1930-1938**

Johannes Harder naturally looked for gainful employment immediately after the family’s arrival in Yarrow. However, he found only seasonal and irregular work in a local paper mill and then in several sawmills. But the work was interrupted whenever there was a shortage of logs. What’s more, not long after their arrival in Yarrow, he contracted blood-poisoning in his hand, which forced him to miss several weeks of work.

In the fall of 1930 the sawmill temporarily ceased operations. Johannes and many other Yarrow Mennonites then found work picking hops in one of the nearby large hop yards. His job was weigh-master, first at the Canadian and then at the Hulbert hop yard. He evidently impressed the manager as a person of unquestioned honesty and integrity in a difficult workplace. The weigh-master not only had to ensure exact weight, but also to dock weight for

wet or muddy sacks and demand removal of leaves, sticks, dirt, stones, and any other foreign objects.

Johannes left the rest of the family, including the recently born baby, at home during that first hop-picking season in 1930. Early on Monday mornings, he and many other Yarrowites rode the long distance of nine kilometres to the hop yards on their bicycles. They carried with them the food and provisions needed for the next several days. During the week they lived in small cabins provided by the employers. They came home on Wednesday evening, got more supplies, left again early Thursday morning, and returned home Saturday evening. For some the long bicycle rides and life in the cabins were social occasions. However, during his time away from home, Johannes was more inclined to recall, or commit to memory, cherished Bible passages or notes and outlines for his next sermon. Often on Wednesday and Saturday evenings, and sometimes also on Sunday, urgent church business or the need to resolve problems of members cut into the time he could spend with the family.<sup>3</sup>

Harder's close friend, Peter D. Loewen, says Johannes faced pressure to work on Sundays, but refused and did not get work in the hop harvest the next year.<sup>4</sup> Johannes, however, wrote that he picked hops in successive seasons in the early 1930s, but for different companies. He worked in the Canadian hop yards and then Hulbert's in 1930 and the John I. Haas Hop Company in 1931. Tina remained at home that first fall. But she agreed to milk the neighbour's cow in order to earn a little extra income. Sometimes she took the three small children along. The alternative was to leave them with friends or neighbours.

The family lived together again after the hop harvest, but Johannes scrambled to find piecework. Occasional work at more distant sawmills meant longer absences and short-term accommodation in sparse and overcrowded facilities. In the spring of 1931, again with others from the community, he obtained work planting hops. He again rode his bicycle to work, and shared a cabin with fellow Yarrowite, Jacob P. Neufeldt. During the summer months he

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<sup>3</sup> P. D. Loewen, "Johannes Harder," *Loewen Manuscript*, 159-160.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* Johannes Harder makes no reference to such an incident in his *Story*. Hops were not normally picked on Sundays, but kiln workers occasionally worked on Sundays. Peter Loewen may be mistaken, unless Harder worked for a time in the hop kilns.



had to look for work wherever he could find it, sometimes earning only 10 cents per hour.

In the fall of 1931, when it was time to pick hops again, the entire family moved into one of the company cabins. Johannes worked long days while Tina tried to balance picking hops with care for the children, food preparation, and other necessary family matters. She did so while expecting their fourth surviving child.

In the spring of 1932 Johannes was not able to get spring planting work in the hop yards. He found various small jobs which paid as little as \$1.00 for a ten-hour day. When Chauncey Eckert, the land and settlement promoter who had been instrumental in bringing many of the Mennonites to Yarrow, heard of the problem he offered Johannes work on his farm at 17½ cents per hour. Even with that compensation, Johannes only earned \$62.50 that summer.

The family suffered further strain when Tina had to go to Vancouver to have her teeth pulled and be fitted for dentures. That required a stay of several days in the city. She took along the two girls, Lilie, then a toddler, and Rose, an infant. The two boys stayed with Johannes, but also received some care and supervision from their neighbours, Peter and Anna Loewen. Then, while Tina was still in Vancouver, Johannes suffered a severe sciatica attack and was unable to work for a time. These combined misfortunes made the summer of 1932 the worst in the family's economic history. Fortunately, both Johannes and Tina recovered sufficiently to move with the entire family to a cabin at one of the hop yards for the 1932 picking season.

After the hop harvest Johannes, together with several others, contracted to harvest 40 acres of sugar beets. The beets had to be pulled out of the ground, the leaves chopped off with a machete-like knife, and then loaded for delivery. The beets were only ready for harvest in October, and that year there was much rain which made the work very difficult. But it was a way to earn a little more money with which to sustain a family that grew again on 17 January 1933 with the birth of another son, David. The challenges of providing even the most basic needs of a seven-member family, five of whom were small children, were immense in a time of massive unemployment. Only the church provided a limited and seriously over-extended social safety net.

In the spring of 1933 Johannes was unable to get work planting hops. He and several others decided to plant 40 acres of sugar beets on land rented and made available for that purpose by Johann Derksen, the local store owner and

community benefactor. Individual sugar beet seeds put out numerous sprouts. But beet plants growing in a cluster produced no sizable beets. The clusters had to be “thinned,” leaving only a single plant every eight to ten inches apart. But thinning and weeding involved hard work that was very trying for someone with back problems. Johannes agreed to work seven acres,<sup>5</sup> (2.83



The Harder family in the hop yards, c. 1933.

hectares) but found that this was more than he could handle. He had to hire others to help him complete the work.

Johannes and Tina found it difficult to balance their heavy physical workloads with ongoing family and church responsibilities. But in the summer of 1933 he was given a respite when the

church asked him to attend the sessions of the Northern District (Canadian) Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches in Dalmeny, Saskatchewan. The ever supportive and generous Johann Derksen offered to pay most of the costs of the trip. Conference sessions were held in mid-summer, between spring seeding, beet thinning, and the fall harvest.

In the early fall the entire family again moved into one of the cabins to pick hops. Toward the end of the picking season the weather was cool and wet, and during the move back to their home Johannes contracted a severe cold which turned into pneumonia and kept him in bed for several weeks. That illness came just as it was time to harvest the sugar beets. Johannes was unable to do any of the harvesting work. Other supportive men did all the work without charge. This kind of mutual aid when someone fell ill and needed help was not unusual in the community, but the help extended to the

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<sup>5</sup> Johannes Harder, in his *Story*, says he had seven acres. Peter Loewen says Johannes had five acres.

Harders was also based on appreciation and gratitude for the time and energy they devoted to work in the church.

Tina later recalled an incident illustrative of the family's economic plight that winter. C. F. Klassen, a highly respected Mennonite leader who was instrumental in the emigration of Mennonites from Russia, visited the Harders. Tina, who usually entertained generously, felt she could not invite Klassen to stay for a meal when he came to the house. The family had a cow, but Tina had used some of the milk to make and then sell butter. All she had left was the buttermilk with which she had cooked a buttermilk and bread soup for the family. It seemed inappropriate to invite the esteemed Mennonite leader to partake of such humble fare. (Perhaps she should not have worried. C. F. Klassen had seen, and would again see, far greater cases of distress in his work with Mennonite refugees from the Soviet Union.)

The years 1931 through 1933 marked the low points in the Harder family's economic circumstances. After 1934 the depression eased somewhat in British Columbia. Both commodity prices and wages showed modest improvements, and employment was a little easier to obtain. The garden, orchard, and a few domestic animals on their five-acre plot provided most of the food the family needed, and they were able to sell some of the surplus, including butter and eggs. Son John, who turned 10 in December of 1934, and to a lesser extent Fred, were able to help with some of the domestic chores, particularly when their father was working elsewhere. They could also help pick hops or look after their younger siblings so that Tina could do more picking. Financial resources, however, continued to be strained. Johannes' workdays, when paid work was available, were long and arduous. And there were more disruptions because of health problems. For Tina those became acute when, on 12 March 1936, at the age of 46, she gave birth in considerable discomfort to Berta, their sixth surviving child. Fortunately Tina was able to regain her strength relatively quickly, but throughout their first decade in Yarrow Johannes' earnings as a day labourer or in the hop yards were meagre. There were also multiple, although not long-term, disabling health problems. The 1930s were indeed lean years. But the family always had sufficient food. And their situation was much better than that of extended family members who had stayed in the Soviet Union. Indeed, they sent some funds desperately needed at home to their parents, close relatives, and others suffering even greater deprivation in the Soviet Union.

### **A rented farm, Spring of 1939-March 1940**

Slowly improving economic conditions and concerns about the welfare of the children as they grew older produced a new initiative in the spring of 1939. The growing children could help in the hop yards or with other menial and poorly paid work. But Johannes and Tina were concerned about some aspects of life in the hop yards and other work sites, particularly if young people lived in the company cabins or similar places away from home during the week. Young John was approaching the age when he would become a regular picker unless some alternative work became available. At the same time, Johannes and Tina found it difficult to meet the ongoing demands of Johannes' church work. Serving the church and needs of troubled members adequately, particularly when picking hops for six ten-hour days every week, was too demanding.

The Harders therefore decided in 1938 to sell their five-acre farm and house and to rent a larger farm. They hoped that income from the farm would not only cover the rent and operating costs but leave sufficient income to make work in the hop yards unnecessary. The farm would provide more wholesome work for the children and give Johannes greater flexibility as he juggled farm work with family and church responsibilities. The rental agreement called for the payment of a flat \$500.00, regardless of the success or failure of the farming operations or fluctuations in commodity prices. Johannes and Tina repeatedly described their decision to rent the larger farm as a step of faith.

The rented farm was well suited for dairying. The Harders moved their few cows, and acquired others, to operate a small dairy of up to 12 cows. The boys, and sometimes Tina, helped with the hand-milking and care of the livestock.

During that year on the rented farm, Johannes and Tina faced a problem. The annual sessions of the Northern District (Canadian) Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches were scheduled to be held in Coaldale, Alberta. Johannes very much enjoyed those conferences and the fellowship with other ministers, church and conference workers. The conference sessions were held between spring planting and fall harvesting seasons. But on the rented farm there was also a large hay crop. The harvesting of that crop coincided with the conference. It seemed irresponsible for Johannes to leave the farm in the midst of the hay harvest. After prayer and discussion the decision was made that he would not go to the conference that year. Tina, often beset by a sense

of guilt, inadequacy, selfishness, and sinfulness, thought Johannes would have gone if she had strongly encouraged him. But she was concerned about the hay harvest. As it turned out, it rained throughout the entire time of the conference and Johannes, instead of enjoying the blessings of participation in the conference sessions, had to sit at home awaiting better weather for the harvest. Tina ruefully concluded that she had been guided by earthly considerations in failing to provide the necessary encouragement and was convinced that the Lord had taught her a stern lesson: they should always put the work of the Kingdom of God ahead of earthly considerations.

### **The dairy farm on Boundary Road, March 1940-December 1952**

The farm rental arrangement lasted for only one year. Johann Peters, from whom the Harders had rented the farm, decided somewhat unexpectedly to return. Sale of the Harder's small home and the five acres of land on Dyke Road had yielded \$2,000.00. That was the only money they had to invest in a new farming venture. Efforts throughout the winter of 1939-1940 to find a suitable farm proved disappointing. Anxiety increased as the date approached when the Harders had to vacate the Peters' farm. They had nowhere to go.



The Harder dairy farm, taken shortly after the Harders sold their farm.

The situation worsened when Tina became seriously ill. There was fear that she had contracted tuberculosis, and she spent part of the winter with relatives in Alberta to escape the humidity of the Fraser Valley. Further medical examinations failed to detect evidence of tuberculosis. The illness was attributed to menopause, and Tina was able to return home.

In March of 1940 Johannes heard that the Aron Martens family, which owned a large dairy farm on Boundary Road, wanted to sell 20 acres of open land. Johannes made inquiries and learned that the Martens family was also considering the sale of their entire large and fully equipped dairy farm. (Mr. Martens had died in 1938.) Should the Harders consider buying the entire farm if the daunting financial requirements could be met?

Johannes and Tina considered the matter prayerfully and with great trepidation. They looked at their limited resources and the long-term

operating costs and potential earnings of the dairy farm, and finally decided they would purchase the farm if the Martens were willing to sell it for \$8,000.00 and accept \$2,000.00 as an immediate down payment. Tina was particularly concerned about incurring what seemed to her an insurmountable debt. When the Martens indicated a willingness to sell on terms the Harders had proposed, Johannes and Tina decided, after further sometimes anguished prayerful consideration, to proceed with the purchase. They did so without a careful inspection of the property. Tina later wrote: "My heart nearly stopped. We, the poorest in Yarrow, now suddenly wanted to buy the largest farm in Yarrow."<sup>6</sup> When the decision was made she said she could scarcely believe her ears, and her entire body was shaking. But the purchase arrangements were made, followed by preparations to move the cows the Harders had on the rented farm, as well as their household goods, furnishings, and equipment.

Almost immediately after signing the purchase agreement, and before the family moved, Johannes became seriously ill with rheumatism of the joints. All physical movement became intensely painful, and he was confined to bed rest. In that dire exigency Tina, the teenaged sons, friends, and neighbours looked after the entire move and all the necessary chores. Johannes, prone in his bed, was placed on a truck, taken to the farm, and carried into the family's new home. Others had to look after the many things involved in the move of an entire household. He remained incapacitated for eight weeks, but then gradually regained his health. Meanwhile, Tina and son John had to take over responsibilities for the work and management of the farm.

The new farm certainly provided more work opportunities for John and Fred, the two oldest sons, but it did not immediately terminate seasonal work in the hop yards. Alternative arrangements had been made, however, which allowed the Yarrow pickers to return home for the night. Local entrepreneurs purchased trucks and took pickers to the fields early in the morning and returned them home in the evening. John Harder described the new routine during the hop-picking season thus: "This whole routine was very difficult for our parents. Mother would rise about 4:00 or 4:30 every morning, prepare a lunch for eight people, make breakfast, and generally prepare the family for an early departure while Dad and I did the chores. After that we would all have

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<sup>6</sup> Tina Harder, *Story*, 47.

breakfast as a family, always preceded by a brief devotional reading, Dad's short teaching, and prayer. The "passenger truck" came by about 6:30 or 7:00 a.m. for the 30 or 40 minute pickup and travel to the hop yards. All family members who were old enough participated in the picking throughout the day. As the children got older, they would have their own baskets and a kind of competition would develop to see who could pick the most. Always, the picnic lunch was the highlight of the day. Potato salad, bread or buns, pickled cucumbers, fruit from our orchard (apples, pears, prune plums, etc., were standbys), and perhaps a cookie or two."<sup>7</sup> In most years Johannes worked as a "weigher" or "checker." The checker was the supervisor (boss) of a particular "section" of pickers, usually 200-300 individuals.

Dairy farming was very labour intensive, but farmers with inexpensive workers earned a good living during the war and post-war years. German occupation and a blockade of milk and dairy products from Holland and Denmark resulted in much higher British demands for Canadian dairy products. The increased demand might have driven up prices very sharply had it not been for the federal government's Wartime Prices and Trade Board. That Board, among other things, sought to prevent wartime profiteering. It set commodity prices by calculating production costs and a reasonable return on invested capital. Those like the Harders who were good managers and relied on family members to do much of the work achieved modest prosperity.

After the war, milk marketing boards introduced quotas designed to match the supply of dairy products with anticipated demand. These, like the wartime price controls, ensured reasonable, reliable, but not excessive returns. And it avoided the wild price fluctuations which dramatically inflated markets during the war and then wrecked them for Yarrow raspberries. The Harders, as dairy farmers, were able to make their regular mortgage payments, and they earned a reasonable livelihood. They attributed their improving economic circumstances to the providence and blessing of God.

Dairy farming involved strict work schedules seven days a week. The cows had to be milked early every morning, and again late in the afternoon. Feed

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<sup>7</sup> John Harder interview, 5 September 2005. See also Thelma Reimer Kauffman, "Hop Season," in Leonard N. Neufeldt, ed., *Village of Unsettled Yearnings: Yarrow, British Columbia: Mennonite Promise* (Victoria, BC: TouchWood Editions, 2002), 175-183.

had to be provided, the barn and equipment kept clean and in good repair, and calving carefully monitored. The bulk of the chores could be done before school, if the students got up early enough, and after school.<sup>8</sup> On many days there were also slower times, and most of the work, other than milking and feeding, was not necessarily tied to a strict schedule. There was also more free time in the evenings. That made it easier for Johannes to schedule and manage his church and conference meetings and responsibilities, and for the children to attend high school while also participating in the work of the farm.

The arrangement worked reasonably well as long as the boys were at home to help with the work. None, however, had a keen interest in taking over the farm. John, the oldest son, was conscripted for military or alternative wartime service in 1943 when he was 18½ years old. He was thus no longer able to help on the farm. Fred was interested in further studies after graduating from high school and David had the same goal. Both eventually became medical doctors. Lillie became a nurse; Rose and Berta chose teaching careers.

The labour-intensive dairy farm became a vital stepping stone, but not an entirely comfortable occupation, for members of the Harder family. It demanded more work than Johannes could do alone once the children left, and good hired help was not easy to find. In addition, Johannes accepted important responsibilities with both the Canadian and General Conferences of the Mennonite Brethren Churches. That entailed regular trips to Hillsboro, Kansas, Winnipeg, and other centres where annual conference sessions were held. As a member of the Mennonite Brethren Board of Foreign Missions, Johannes, together with senior head office staff, was also invited to make periodic inspection trips to various overseas mission fields. All of this was very difficult as long as he had the dairy farm.

The Harders sold the farm in 1952. With the proceeds they bought a house on a two-acre (0.81 hectare) plot on Stewart Road in Yarrow and moved there on 6 December 1952. They lived there until the fall of 1957, when they moved into a house built for them on Dahlstrom Road in Clearbrook. Then, in 1959, they accepted a call to serve the Mennonite Brethren Church in Black Creek on Vancouver Island.

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<sup>8</sup> The dreary routine on the dairy farm, after the Harders had sold it, is described in Edward R. Giesbrecht, "The Everydayness of a Dairy Farm," in Leonard N. Neufeldt, ed., *Village of Unsettled Yearnings*, 184-191.



**Breadwinners**

The years following the Harders' arrival in Yarrow were financially very trying. Johannes looked for any kind of work, wherever he could find it. He accepted a variety of often menial tasks, but for almost a decade he could not earn more than what was urgently needed to provide his family with the bare necessities of life. He and Tina often prayed as fervently as Johannes' parents had when running the orphanage in Grossweide. But Johannes made few references to the kind of miraculous divine interventions that dominate his father's writing. He and Tina certainly accepted both success, however limited, and health or illness and other setbacks as coming from the Lord. But their *Stories* also indicate reliance on much hard work, frugality, and prudent management. And, when economic conditions improved, they accepted their improving fortunes as gifts of God, to be used in His service.

The sale of the dairy farm provided the Harders with sufficient financial resources to allow Johannes to devote himself more single-mindedly to church and conference work. Johannes and Tina did not lay up large earthly treasures, but by the measure of their struggles in the 1930s, finances ceased to be a significant problem for them after 1952.

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## Chapter 6

### Family Matters, 1930-1947<sup>1</sup>

Family and church were the most basic and important institutions in the lives of Johannes and Tina Harder. They regarded both as holy and as gifts of God. While aware of human frailties and failings, they sought nothing less than personal perfection in the family and in the church. Their understanding of Christian perfection was strongly influenced by their somewhat restricted family and Mennonite Brethren heritage as well as by their contemporary British Columbia environment.

The Harder family served for years as a model for others. Celebration on 28 May 1947 of Johannes and Tina's twenty-fifth wedding anniversary probably marked the high point in the life of the family. It was celebrated in the church with all family members participating. Tina and Johannes were particularly grateful that all six of their surviving children had been converted and were seeking to live in accordance with the teachings of Jesus, the church, and their parents.

#### Marital relations

Family life is rooted in the relationship between husband and wife, or mother and father. Every relationship is, of course, unique and subject to changing

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the detailed information in this chapter is drawn from Johannes Harder, *Story*; Tina Harder, *Story*; and Tina Harder, *Lebensgeschichte*. Only direct quotations from these sources will be footnoted.

dynamics. A few impressions of the relationship between Johannes and Tina can, however, be gained from the diaries and memoirs they wrote and from correspondence and interviews with some of their children, friends, and associates.

Tina was almost seven years older than Johannes. She had worked for four years as a matron in the orphanage where Johannes grew up. At the orphanage she dealt mainly with the girls, and also helped with the laundry and in the kitchen. She began work there when Johannes was a youthful partner with his parents. Tina, when asked to assume greater responsibilities in the orphanage, had been fearful. She remembered clearly the few words of encouragement Johannes had offered at that time. And, throughout their married lives, Johannes' encouragement and affirmation, particularly when she was troubled by her latent sense of sinfulness, weakness, and inadequacy, became a fundamental element of their relationship. While Tina was a disciplinarian in the home and in the church, Johannes was her spiritual mentor and emotional support. In the household and on the farm each had his or her areas of responsibility. Major decisions were made jointly, but essentially by him after both had prayed and given the matter careful pragmatic consideration. Tina tended to be more timid and fearful about ventures involving considerable risk. Johannes, unlike his father, carefully considered financial needs and available resources before moving into a new venture. But he moved decisively when necessary. Tina trusted his judgement and supported him. There is no evidence of disagreements about the priority to be given to household and personal expenses, as opposed to farm expenses and church donations. Their age difference was a matter of some concern for Tina, but Johannes rarely mentioned it, except when Tina suffered bouts of ill health and physical weakness.

Johannes had attended the Halbstadt Zentralschule and begun medical studies. Tina, by contrast and to her continuing regret, had not even been able to complete the last year of her elementary school education. She had the greatest respect for and was fully supportive of the work Johannes did as church leader and of his spiritual and intellectual leadership as head of the family. He was the family's high priest.

In the home, Tina adhered closely to traditional maternal gender roles. In her own realm she was fully in control. She had an important part in some of the religious instruction of the children and many aspects of child rearing.

Domestic chores, particularly the work and management of the kitchen and the laundry room, were her responsibility. She worked very hard, was well organized, and graciously hosted many visiting ministers and church leaders. She also had particular concern for the plight of widows in the church, and she exhibited a generosity similar to that of Johannes' great-great-grandmother, Elizabeth (Plett) Harder, who had given some of her wardrobe to a beggar woman.

The Harders, and many others of their generation, did not show affection in public. Each was greatly concerned and supportive when the other was ill. In their writing both expressed warm affection and thanks to God for bringing them together. Tina habitually referred to Johannes as "*mein Johannes*" (my Johannes). Often she then added, "*den Gott mir gegeben hat*" (whom God has given to me). That possessive tone was, however, significantly muted by the great respect she had for Johannes' spiritual, intellectual, and financial abilities and leadership. Popular romantic and sexual aspects of married life were not important components of Johannes and Tina's relationship. Sex was necessary for procreation. Their love was rooted in mutual respect and support.

### **Child rearing**

The Harders had eight children. John was born 25 December 1924 at New Hamburg, Ontario, in the Cressman home. Twins, Abraham and Heidi, were born prematurely in Winnipeg on 8 November 1926 and died shortly after their birth. Siegfried (Fred) Abraham was born 23 December 1927 on a farm near Fleming, Saskatchewan. In Yarrow four more children, three girls and a boy, were added to the family. Lilie-Anna was born on 28 May 1930, Rose Mary on 26 December 1931, David Herman on 17 January 1933, and Berta Naomi on 12 March 1936.

Johannes and Tina both regarded their children as a special gift of God, entrusted to their care to be raised and trained for His service and glory. They both worked very hard to meet the physical needs of the children. But they were much more concerned about the children's spiritual nurture, growth, and welfare. Tina wrote and spoke a number of times about laying them on the altar or, in other words, offering them to God.

It was not unusual for Tina, when checking on a sleeping child, to kneel beside the bed and quietly say a prayer thanking God and seeking His guidance. At their regular morning and evening devotions each child was often



The Harder family, c. 1937. Back row, Tina and Johannes; middle row Lilie, John, Fred. Front row, Rose, Berta, David.

mentioned in prayer. When the children were small, they were taught short German prayers. Some were recited while the child knelt at his or her bed before being tucked in. Table graces before each meal were part of everyday life.

Morning devotions were usually held before breakfast, but after necessary household and farmyard chores had been done. Bible stories or Scripture passages were read, supplemented with Johannes' stories and comments which made the material interesting and relevant to circumstances in family, school, or community life. Johannes was also very fond of poetry and the lyrics of pietistic hymns and gospel songs. He had memorized many hymns and

songs and could recite them on suitable occasions, including family devotions. The arts, at least in that limited sense, were an important tool in the way Christian perspectives and biblical truths were communicated. But the devotions were also serious learning occasions. The children were quizzed to ensure that they had understood and remembered the story or lesson of previous devotions. Tina tended to be more didactic and coercive in her approach. Johannes was not averse to using humour and to admit some of the ambiguities inherent in most realistic stories.

Once the children were old enough, they were also expected to participate in the evening devotions before family members went to bed. As before, Scripture passages were read and everyone was expected to join in the prayers.

Opportunities were provided to discuss events of the day and, when necessary, resolve unsettled matters.

Everyday routines were quite structured and firmly enforced by Tina who loved order and decorum. Both rewards and punishments such as the granting or loss of specific privileges were used to encourage compliance. Corporal punishment, usually administered by Johannes, was common in cases of serious transgressions such as disobedience or telling lies. Such punishment, however, was used less frequently with the younger than with the older children. The children were taught that inappropriate behaviour had negative consequences, but that the real objective was to encourage them to choose, of their own free will, what was good. However, in some disciplinary situations Johannes' volatile temper became problematic.

The religious instruction at home was carefully coordinated with that in Sunday school and in the many other programs of the church. In due course, the children were encouraged and helped to make their own religious commitments. A key objective was to bring each child to a conversion experience (*Bekehrung*).

Every conversion experience was, of course, unique. But the experiences of children who had grown up in Christian families and in sheltered communities such as Yarrow sometimes differed significantly from those of the founders of Mennonite Brethren churches and from the experiences of their parents in Russia. For the first generation, conversion had often been a single, radical and life-changing experience of informed adults. Delbert Wiens, a thoughtful Mennonite Brethren teacher writing in the 1960s, described those experiences thus: "For the great-grandfather this [conversion] had a quite specific meaning. He was a mature person with a formed character. But this was a self-centered, and therefore sinful character. He had probably frequented the saloons, gambled, and cheated in one way or another. Conversion meant a new way of life, a turning around. He ceased to live one kind of life and began another."<sup>2</sup>

That was not the experience of children growing up in Christian homes and affirming, on the basis of their understanding, the faith of their parents, Sunday school teachers, and preachers. In Mennonite Brethren churches children were

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<sup>2</sup> Delbert Wiens, *New Wineskins for Old Wine: A Study of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1965), 5.

strongly encouraged, often at a very young age while their hearts were still “tender,” to ask Jesus to come into their hearts and to forgive them their sins. All the Harder children, obviously with some variation, had such experiences. For that their parents sincerely thanked God.

Contrasting the conversion of a six-year-old child with that of a mature adult, Delbert Wiens suggests that “basically he [the six-year-old child] has affirmed, at whatever level is possible for him, that he has placed himself in the only way of life that he has ever really known. He also knows that he has sinned, that he has not always lived up to the expectations of our Mennonite Brethren-Christian way. And so the other meaning of his conversion and subsequent baptism is that his lapses have been forgiven. Unlike his great-grandfather, he has never really known a different way of life.”<sup>3</sup>

The limited understanding of persons converted as children had to be renewed, strengthened, and made relevant to new challenges and insights as the child grew to maturity. Conversion thus became an ongoing rather than a single radical life-altering experience. The testimonies of baptismal candidates in Yarrow often made reference to childhood conversion experiences. But many also reported a period of “back-sliding,” followed by renewed commitments and affirmations as teenagers and, in some cases, as adults, followed by baptism and membership in the church. Church membership required adherence to expectations and rules of Christian conduct formulated by the church leaders. Some of the rules and expectations were, however, rooted in the limited Russian Mennonite cultural and theological convictions of the leaders and did not adequately address rapidly changing cultural circumstances.

The personal stories of the Harder children are beyond the scope of this biography of their parents. What they have said and written about their parents in recollections and tributes is, however, relevant.

### **Childhood recollections and tributes**

In interviews and written recollections several of Johannes and Tina’s children have noted a considerable difference between their family experiences and

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

perceptions of their parents by outsiders. John, the oldest son, noted that, "At times his [Johannes'] manner seemed severe but there was another quality which wasn't as easily recognized by outsiders. He could be quite playful, 'letting his hair down,' when the occasion permitted."<sup>4</sup> David, the youngest son, noted, "One of the qualities that made me particularly fond of him [his father] was that, in spite of the sometimes rather misinterpreted feelings of others, he had an open mind."<sup>5</sup> Rose recalled that in very difficult financial circumstances her father carved wooden dolls for them, and their mother drew faces on the dolls and made clothes, scrap blankets, and pillows for them.<sup>6</sup>

John has happy memories of his father. "I remember sitting on his lap and experiencing the thrill of a simulated 'horsey ride' by being bounced up and down on his knee or on his foot. He would then chant the German rhyme, '*Hop, hop, hop, Pferdchen lauf gallop, ueber Stock und ueber Steine, aber brich dir nicht die Beine, hop, hop, hop, Pferdchen lauf gallop.*' Often he would romp around on the floor with me, pretending to be a bear or some other large animal. He could and would laugh heartily with me and, of course, I was thoroughly delighted."<sup>7</sup>

Rose, one of the younger children, recalls that: "In between the hard work ethic early instilled in us, there were the fun times planned by him [her father]. He built us beautiful swings and chinning bars and showed us how to walk on stilts. He loved to show off his skills to us. With his encouragement and guidance we would have impromptu meals under the trees or run for a quick swim in the Vedder Canal, and when we were a little older, he took us up Vedder or Sumas Mountain. Even before we had our own car, he would borrow or rent a car and driver and take his family to places like Cultus Lake, Harrison Lake, and another lake near Hope for one day outings."<sup>8</sup> But they did not go to public beaches at these lakes. That was strictly forbidden. Nor were males and females allowed to swim together. The beauties of nature were to be enjoyed

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<sup>4</sup> John Harder, "My Father," *Loewen Manuscript*, 119.

<sup>5</sup> David Harder, "My Father," *ibid.*, 137.

<sup>6</sup> Rose (Harder) Braun to Ted Regehr, 20 September 2006.

<sup>7</sup> John Harder, "My Father," *Loewen Manuscript*, 119.

<sup>8</sup> Rose (Harder) Braun, "A Tribute to my Dad—Johannes A. Harder," *Loewen Manuscript*, 134.



without sexual overtones. Tina recalled how much Johannes enjoyed following various country roads, just to see where they led, and what mysteries and beautiful places there were along the way.<sup>9</sup>

Rose remembers a traumatic childhood incident when her first doll, with a China head and eyes which opened and closed, fell off a hay wagon. The head was smashed beyond repair, but “mother carefully picked up all the pieces and spent many hours trying desperately to glue them all together. Of course she couldn’t, and so she finally wrapped the whole doll up like a mummy and stored it in the attic. She knew I needed to see that caring.”<sup>10</sup>

Tina also set firm guidelines and limits. Thus, when Johannes once took the family to the circus, Tina was sufficiently offended by the scantily and suggestively dressed young female performers that she insisted on leaving immediately with the younger children.<sup>11</sup> Tina did what she thought was right for the children, even when they did not appreciate it. Johannes never openly challenged the strict ways in which Tina dealt with the children.

In her recollections, Rose expressed great appreciation of her father’s storytelling and conversational skills. “Once on a Sunday School excursion where Dad was one of the chaperons, I recall one of the older teens saying, ‘Let’s go with Mr. Harder. He always has some interesting stories to tell.’ That made a great impression on me.”<sup>12</sup> Many of Johannes’ stories were told in poetic form. Rose recalled: “Another memory I have of him is of all the funny and descriptive poems he produced of anything and everything in our daily life, whether it was Mom’s cooking, or my brother’s system of trapping rabbits. While he worked, he’d describe incidents in poetic form and later recite them to us.”<sup>13</sup>

Another aspect of Johannes Harder was his strong affirmation and support of his children. Rose recalled that: “Although he expected hard work from us, he was fair, and praise was freely given. I remember hoeing potatoes for hours on end and then coming in for lunch and Dad saying to mother, ‘You should have seen these children work today! I could hardly keep up with them. They

<sup>9</sup> Tina Harder, *Story*, 53.

<sup>10</sup> Rose (Harder) Braun to Ted Regehr, 20 September 2006.

<sup>11</sup> John Harder interview, 5 September 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Rose (Harder) Braun, “A Tribute to my Dad,” *Loewen Manuscript*, 135.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

all deserve a long lunch break and none of them needs to help us with the dishes!’ The same thing happened after a good day’s work in the raspberry patch. Again, his story telling ability and interesting conversation often shortened those days and helped keep complaints to a minimum.”<sup>14</sup>

John, the oldest son, also remembers the affirmation he received regularly from his father, and tells an interesting story. “Another example of my father’s trust and confidence in me was when we acquired our first automobile, a Model A Ford. I was permitted to obtain my drivers license at age 16 so I could drive it solo. On one occasion when we were picking hops in the Canadian Hop Yards on the Sumas Prairie on a Saturday, my Dad suddenly realized that there was no wine available for Sunday’s Communion Service. Usually he or some other older person would purchase such wine in the government liquor store. I now volunteered to drive to Chilliwack to make the purchase. To my great surprise and delight Dad agreed. I was so impressed that he trusted me and had enough confidence in my driving ability to permit me to drive a distance of about 20 miles one way, along a busy highway, even though I had so little driving experience.”<sup>15</sup>

John also recalled spontaneous expressions of love and affection. He and his father had gone to a small lake in Saskatchewan, where Johannes had cut a hole in the ice to obtain water for the home. John recalled: “I wandered too close to the hole, slipped and fell into the hole up to my armpits. Just as quick as lightening my Dad came to my rescue, pulled me out, took his parka off, wrapped it around me, carried me to the sled and together we rushed back home as fast as the team of horses could get us there. In my child’s eye my Dad could do anything and on that occasion he even was willing to overlook that I had been disobedient by wandering too close to the hole in the ice against warnings. Obviously he understood and loved me.”<sup>16</sup>

Affirmation, however, came with high expectations and punishment if these were not met. In that regard John probably experienced harsher treatment from his father than his siblings. John recalls: “Like most fathers in that era he was fond of the strap, believing it to be a God-given instrument to be used

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 135-136.

<sup>15</sup> John Harder, “My Father,” *Loewen Manuscript*, 121-122.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

frequently.”<sup>17</sup> While not questioning the appropriateness of such forms of punishment, John mentions several unfortunate incidents. What happened was probably the result of the fact that at times his father struggled with a short temper. Children in the orphanage, and several of his own children, noted that weakness, and the contrition their father felt after such outbursts. Here are two of John’s unfortunate experiences of being disciplined. “I remember playing with a piece of glass, apparently against my parents’ instructions. To their mind this infraction necessitated a physical spanking. This was then carried out while the glass was still in my hand and cut my left index finger to the bone thus severing the main tendon leaving the finger malformed and almost useless for life. Later on I could never quite understand why my parents did not get medical help. However, I did learn the importance of obeying my father, because he was usually the one to use the strap when the need for it was felt.”<sup>18</sup> And a later incident: “Some years passed, and we were now living in Yarrow. Our one room shack was situated next to the school ground where I came into contact with boys and girls my age and older. . . . On one occasion I was lured or rather forced into the men’s outdoor toilet by two older boys where they encouraged me to smoke a cigarette by forcing it into my mouth. Just then my father entered the door. He didn’t believe my story. But since he firmly believed in corporal punishment—spare the rod and spoil the child—I received the first of many spankings while growing up in Yarrow.”<sup>19</sup>

John then goes on to say when and how this kind of punishment stopped. “The last one [spanking] was at the age of 14. I don’t recall the occasion for the spanking anymore, but I do recall that I succeeded in my determination not to cry, even though I sensed my father didn’t give up easily. After that, it seems to me, I took a significant leap forward in my parents’ acceptance of me as a maturing young adult. From that point on the disciplinary measures used changed to more appropriately adult methods.”<sup>20</sup>

John graduated somewhat unexpectedly to full adult responsibilities when the family purchased the dairy farm and his father was suddenly incapacitated

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 121-122.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 122.

by illness. Fifteen-year-old John had to take charge, which included direction and supervision of some of the men hired to help on the farm. After that, until his departure three years later, he was a full working partner in the dairy.

The corporal punishment suffered by the oldest son was not visited in equal measure on his younger siblings. Berta could recall only one incident when she received corporal punishment at the hands of her father,<sup>21</sup> and David, the youngest son, told an entirely different story.

“He [the father] was nothing if not tolerant of my errors. He had finally purchased a new car (as opposed to the recycled vehicles from the Raleigh man



The Harder family, 1943.

who happened to have a Bible on the back shelf). This was a 1951 Pontiac. My sister Lilie was coming home from the nursing school at the Vancouver General Hospital to spend a few days with us in Yarrow. I was entrusted with the new car to pick her up. I parked the car at the side of the road at the Yarrow turn-off from the highway, facing down hill. When the Greyhound bus

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<sup>21</sup> Berta (Harder) Dueck, “My Memories,” *Loewen Manuscript*, 144.

delivered her, I gallantly ran up to the highway to help deliver her suitcase. Suddenly the whisper of turning wheels arrested my attention and I spun around, only to be horrified by the spectre of the car moving ever so slowly, yet inexorably, down the hill. I dashed as quickly as I could and only managed a fleeting touch of the rear bumper before it quietly rolled into the slough, where it turned, in surreal fashion, onto its roof. Now the slowly turning wheels were the only remaining evidence of the car's existence!

"While father was saying good night to all the parishioners of the church, he looked out onto Main Street to witness a car he recognized only too well being towed, dripping with slough water and catfish as it passed by. He forgave me that time as well."<sup>22</sup>

David thought older brother John often ran interference for his younger siblings. And he recounts several other instances in which his father's tolerance overcame what must have been initial outbursts of anger. David recalls no instances of corporal punishment.

Tina, when dealing with the children tended, in Rose's words, "to be very strict and very firm."<sup>23</sup> A relative of the family, who, as a child, often played with the Harder children, tells of the father playing with the children on the floor. In his experience Tina was "the stern legalist and the enforcer of family rules."<sup>24</sup> Tina had definite convictions regarding appropriate behaviour of girls and young women. She held women to a very strict dress code. She regarded bare arms as sinful and disgraceful. If a young man and woman walked together on the street, they were reprimanded. The intention of Tina and other church leaders setting codes of Christian conduct may have been loving but they were rooted in a psychologically dysfunctional sense of personal guilt and sinfulness. As a result, church rules came to be viewed very differently by those who made them and those disciplined for disregarding them. Tina was determined, however, that her children, and particularly her daughters, adhere strictly to the church's codes of conduct.

David recalled that his older brother John "received rebukes, mostly from mother."<sup>25</sup> Both Rose and Berta also tell of incidents where Tina, like Johannes,

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<sup>22</sup> David Harder, "My Father," *Loewen Manuscript*, 139.

<sup>23</sup> Rose (Harder) Braun to Ted Regehr, 20 September 2006.

<sup>24</sup> "What Others Remember about Johannes A. Harder," *Loewen Manuscript*, 179.

<sup>25</sup> David Harder, "My Father," *Loewen Manuscript*, 142.

had a softer side than that perceived by outsiders. A telling example pertained to the fairly disciplined way in which the Harder children had to sit around the table to do their homework. That was perceived by at least one observer as excessive regimentation. Rose, however, wrote: "I always had that [homework around the kitchen table] as a memory unique to our family and a fun family time, where Dad would occasionally pop in and share something of interest from his reading and Mom would be working at something nearby."<sup>26</sup> But sometimes Tina's firmness was hurtful, as happened when a son brought home an unapproved girlfriend. Tina refused to let the girl into the house.<sup>27</sup>

Children, of course, devise strategies to ignore or circumvent rules they regard as silly. Son David recalled: "Mother was so determined that we should not lose our German that she developed the most nefarious strategy of all. While father and I happily spoke whichever language seemed appropriate at the time, my mother determined that we should only speak German when we were on the property, but we could speak English when we were on public property or neutral ground. This, for me, a compulsive type A personality, was all the direction I needed. We had a row of raspberries that was precisely on our property line. Hence, when I was on the inside I would speak only German while Lilie on the outside could answer me in English."<sup>28</sup>

As teenagers the girls found some of Tina's inflexible insistence on specific hairstyles, clothing, and personal adornments (or lack thereof) difficult to accept. They could not keep up with popular trends, and there were sometimes serious tensions when Tina tried to monitor and regulate her children's contacts or relationships with young people of the opposite sex. Johannes tended to be somewhat more permissive, yet he supported Tina. He also insisted, very emphatically, that the children always obey and treat their mother with respect. He was aware of Tina's concerns about her own inadequacies and affirmed and supported her, even when her firmness was resented by the children.

Perhaps because of frequent health problems, combined with a busy schedule and the grind of ongoing household work, Tina found less joy and happiness in leisure and playtime family activities. She preferred to spend her

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<sup>26</sup> Rose (Harder) Braun to Ted Regehr, 20 September 2006.

<sup>27</sup> David Harder, "My Father," *Loewen Manuscript*, 140.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

time reading or engaging the children in useful and constructive activities. The vigorous physical activity in which Johannes excelled, and in which he encouraged his children, had little appeal for Tina.

### **John Harder's wartime service**

John Harder was conscripted for wartime service in the summer of 1943 and was recognized as a conscientious objector. His forced departure from home and the family was traumatic, particularly for Tina. She later described what transpired the last night before his departure. "During World War II, when John was 18½ years old, he had to serve as a conscientious objector. It tore at our hearts. Our eldest, completely inexperienced now had to go out into the world. The last night that he was home I could only pray. When he was asleep I knelt down beside his bed and entrusted my child to the Lord. How helpless parents feel when children leave the home and no longer live nearby. Then one prays even more earnestly for the children. Then the time came when our son was sent overseas. How will he come back? Will he remain faithful as a child of God? Oh, I was so worried. Lord, preserve his childlike faith."<sup>29</sup>

John Harder's experiences as a conscientious objector were not good. Since Yarrow only offered instruction in grades 1 to 7 he went to school in Chilliwack for grade 8. He started there in 1939, just after the outbreak of the war, and later wrote: "Our German-speaking young people were not treated with much affection in a predominantly English-speaking school community. Consequently my schooling was not the attraction it should have been for a young 14 year old."<sup>30</sup> John's father was one of the main spokespersons who defended the young men who opted for service as conscientious objectors. That did not make the situation easier for the son. There was further embarrassment when some of the Mennonite leaders, including Johannes Harder, sought exemption for Mennonite students from some physical education exercises in which female students were expected to wear shorts or pants. Some in the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church regarded that as a transgression against scriptural instructions by the Apostle Paul.

John Harder knew that during World War I Russian Mennonite young men, including three of his uncles, had rendered excellent and much

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<sup>29</sup> Tina Harder, *Story*, 50, and Tina Harder, *Lebensgeschichte*, 25.

<sup>30</sup> John Harder, "My Father," *Loewen Manuscript*, 124.

appreciated wartime service as orderlies in veteran's hospitals and on medical ambulance trains. One of his uncles [Tina's brother] had contracted typhus and died while active in this wartime service. Leaders like Johannes Harder hoped Mennonites could again render similar non-combatant service. But other Mennonite leaders disagreed, and Canadian military leaders disliked restrictions which exempted any recruits from combatant service. Eventually, when the military manpower situation became desperate, a non-combatant medical corps was created. John Harder enlisted before that option was available.

John, coming from a dairy farm, was assigned to work as a conscientious objector on the Hat Creek Ranch near Ashcroft, British Columbia. His treatment there was unfriendly and humiliating. His father became worried and displeased and wrote to a friend: "Our son had to go while some others were able to keep their sons at home to work on smaller farms and businesses. I can do nothing about that. We have told it to the Lord so it will probably be good for our and his benefit. We are worried about him because he is on a ranch 200 miles from here in the mountains, alone among godless people and no like-minded friends. May God protect him."<sup>31</sup>

John became disillusioned and exasperated with his assignment. Despite some of the taunting he endured, he was not a coward or a person who did not love his country. Like many other Mennonites who had come to Canada from the Soviet Union, he was deeply appreciative of his adopted country. He wanted to make a significant and meaningful contribution in the country's hour of need. So, entirely on his own and totally unannounced, he left the ranch, went to Vancouver, and enlisted in the Canadian armed forces. His younger brother, David, accompanied him when he returned to Ashcroft to retrieve his personal belongings. David later wrote that: "The train trip was an eye-opener. It was full of troops singing ribald songs throughout the night, songs that I have never forgotten since."<sup>32</sup>

John's action was a great shock to the entire family, and particularly to his mother. But he was not alone. Mennonite leaders who had come from the Soviet Union had warned repeatedly that their young men would enlist unless they were given the opportunity to contribute in a meaningful way, consistent

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<sup>31</sup> B. B. Janz Correspondence, Johannes Harder to B. B. Janz, 9 March 1944.

<sup>32</sup> David Harder, "My Father," *Loewen Manuscript*, 137.



with their religious principles, to the war effort. In retrospect, John was convinced that his father understood why he had enlisted in the military. He even felt that, given the poor choices available, his father might have made the same decision. And it is significant that the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church under Johannes Harder's leadership, unlike many other Canadian Mennonite churches, did not expel members who enlisted in the military. Most, nevertheless, found a return to their home churches very difficult. John eventually joined the Presbyterians.

John knew that his parents prayed regularly and fervently for his safety and well-being during the time he served overseas. But his mother never understood or accepted the fact that he had enlisted in the military. She wrote that John's enlistment "gave us many struggles. We had after all laid our children on the altar of the Lord."<sup>33</sup>

Fortunately, John returned safe and sound and was honourably discharged in April 1946. His military service, nevertheless, was regarded by some as a serious blemish on the Harder family's record. On his return, John enrolled in the new Mennonite high school in Yarrow, completing grades 11, 12 and 13 in a year and a half. He went on to further studies at the University of British Columbia, but then, in 1950, joined the Royal Canadian Air Force, where he remained until retirement. His parents, and particularly his mother, could not understand how their son could serve the Lord in the Air Force.

### **Johannes and Tina's silver wedding on 28 May 1947**

On 28 May 1947 Johannes and Tina Harder enjoyed what was almost certainly the family's highest mountaintop experience. Admirers and supporters in the church informed the Harder children that the celebration of their parents' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary was to be a church-sponsored event, and that it was not expected that family members would do much of the planning or preparatory work. A big festive meal, followed by a lengthy program, was prepared. There were many tributes for the vast amount of work the Harders had done for the church and the community, all without financial remuneration. Despite some difficulties, things seemed to be going well in the church. Under the Harders' leadership the church had gained stability. Members

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<sup>33</sup> Tina Harder, *Story*, 51.

expressed pride and had confidence in what had grown to be one of the largest Mennonite Brethren churches in Canada.

The church expressed its gratitude, both in words and with cherished gifts. Johannes was presented with a highly prized 23-volume *Pulpit Commentary*, which he subsequently used very extensively and from which he gained much



Johannes and Tina Harder on their  
25th wedding anniversary.

information and inspiration. Tina received a complete 12piece dinner set together with a matching table cloth and serviettes. In addition, for everyday use there was a new Everware set of dishes. Johannes and Tina certainly cherished and appreciated the many expressions of love, respect, and support they received on that occasion.

All the children were present. John had only recently returned from overseas wartime service, and the four oldest children put on a short panel discussion on the significance of the day. They said, among other things, “When I think back about how carefully mother and father looked after and guarded our physical, our intellectual, and especially our spiritual welfare, then I cannot thank God enough for these our parents.”<sup>34</sup>

They concluded that they had learned from their parents “to trust and expect everything from God, and also that they should always be thankful for everything; thankful for joy and also for sorrow. They should thank God for everything in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ.”<sup>35</sup>

### A Christian family

Johannes and Tina raised their family in accordance with their understanding of Christian living. After the silver wedding Tina expressed her gratitude and thanked God for their many blessings. Chief among them was her conviction that all the children were converted (*bekehr*t) and seeking to serve the Lord. Those that were old enough had all attended the Sharon Mennonite High

<sup>34</sup> Johannes Harder, *Poetry book*, insert, *Loewen Manuscript*..

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

School, of which Johannes was one of the main organizers and strongest supporter. The family's financial situation had also improved significantly after the long years of economic depression and poverty, for which Johannes and Tina were grateful.

After an evening celebration with family members and close friends following the church celebration of their wedding anniversary, Tina wrote that it had been "a richly blessed day."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Tina Harder, *Lebensgeschichte*, 26, and *Story*, 49-50.

## Chapter 7

### Preacher and Teacher, 1930-1949

Johannes Harder loved to preach and to lead or participate in Bible studies or discussions (*Bibelbesprechungen*). He thought of himself merely as a channel of divine revelation. The Bible as the Word of God was central in all his preaching and he frequently described his preaching as serving with the Word (*Ich durfte mit dem Wort dienen*). He was neither a theologian nor a philosopher, and his sermons were not religious treatises or discourses.<sup>1</sup> He was vitally interested in learning and understanding what various specific Scripture passages meant; hence his strong commitment to Bible discussions in which those participating tested and discussed their understanding of specific Scripture passages. Above all, he was keenly interested in the practical application of “The Word” and challenged the sincerity of anyone who professed Christian beliefs which were not evident in that person’s everyday Christian living. Preaching apparently contributed not only to his spiritual but also his physical well-being. He suffered frequently from severe headaches, but never while preaching.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Johannes Harder’s call to ministry**

Harder’s public ministry as a preacher in Yarrow began quite dramatically. Shortly after arriving in Yarrow he attended a *Jugendverein* (youth

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<sup>1</sup> Peter D. Loewen, “Johannes Harder,” *Loewen Manuscript*, 164-166 describes Harder’s preaching style.

<sup>2</sup> Interview 4.

organization, later called Christian Endeavour). These meetings usually included some musical and literary material together with a short devotional or Bible study and prayer. On this particular occasion the speaker who was to lead the devotional did not show up, leaving the program chairperson in a difficult position. The church leader noticed that the newcomer, Harder, had something to say on the topic and reported it to the program chairperson. Harder was invited to speak and spoke effectively on the subject without advance notice or preparation time.<sup>3</sup> It was, however, his practice to memorize his sermon outlines and he had probably preached on that topic or a similar one elsewhere. But he greatly impressed his Yarrow listeners and was invited to preach in other church services.



The first Mennonite Brethren  
Church in Yarrow.

A proposal that Harder be ordained as a preacher was advanced in 1931. By that time he had also been elected as church leader. The problem of his wife's baptism, which had prevented his ordination in Russia, had been resolved and the ordination was held on 19 July 1931. In Russia this service was conducted by an

ordained *Aeltester*, but the office of *Aeltester* had been discontinued in most North American Mennonite Brethren churches. Thus the question of who could perform the ordination ceremony arose. The issue was resolved when arrangements were made for Abraham H. Unruh, the highly respected Mennonite Brethren preacher and Bible school teacher from Manitoba, to preside at Harder's ordination. The expenses incurred were justified, in part, because Unruh also agreed to conduct a series of *Bibelbesprechungen* in several British Columbia churches.

Ordination entitled Harder to officiate at weddings. The first of many weddings where he presided was that of his close friend and colleague, Peter D. Loewen, who married Anna Redekop.<sup>4</sup> But ordination did not immediately or significantly increase the number of times Johannes was invited to preach in the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church. One of the riches, at the same time a problem, was the number of men Yarrow attracted who had been ordained as preachers in various churches in Russia or in Canada. Since they

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 166.

all felt a call to preach, a rotation system had been set up, and Johannes shared the pulpit with other ordained preachers. Several, however, including Johannes, were asked to speak more often than others. Some of the preachers rambled, spoke indistinctly or in a monotone voice, and ran past the allotted time. Harder's sermons were substantive, cogently presented, and delivered within the designated time. Several of the people interviewed said they always looked forward to services when Johannes Harder would preach.<sup>5</sup>

There were, however, some Mennonite Brethren groups and churches in British Columbia without ordained preachers. Harder readily accepted invitations to preach in some of those churches and in worship services in private homes. Consequently, in the three decades following his ordination, he preached more sermons and conducted or participated in more Bible studies in Mennonite Brethren churches in British Columbia than anyone else. He also had the privilege of preaching in many Mennonite Brethren churches in the prairie provinces, Ontario, the United States, South America, and Europe. For Johannes Harder, preaching was a highly cherished God-given responsibility which he accepted with great devotion and diligence. It brought him a far greater sense of accomplishment and satisfaction than some of his other responsibilities.

### **The structure and style of Johannes Harder's sermons**

Harder was drawn into discussions and devotional services with some of the older boys at his parents' orphanage while still in his teens. Those services were often somewhat informal, but there was almost always a practical application to circumstances and challenges of the day. As a young man he had, in addition to the worship services in the orphanage, honed his speaking skills in school and in the small Mennonite Brethren group in Grossweide, which met for worship services in a private home. In Canada, he had preached in a number of churches before arriving in Yarrow.

The structure, style, and delivery of Harder's sermons owed much to his training in the *Zentralschule*.<sup>6</sup> Written school assignments had to be well

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<sup>5</sup> Interviews 2, 4, 6, and 7.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Braun, "The Educational System of the Mennonite Colonies in South Russia," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 3 (July 1929): 169-182; Heinrich Goertz, "Unsere Schulen in Canada und in Ruszland: Ein Vergleich," *Mennonitische Welt* (October

organized and logically linked, with all points encompassed in an effective introduction and conclusion. Harder consequently did not suffer gladly preachers who rambled on and on, expressing thoughts as they came to them while preaching. He was especially critical if those ramblings were lengthy and exceeded designated time limits.

Harder's preaching style resulted, perhaps inevitably, in what might be called single-strand thinking in which ambiguities, tangential considerations, and counter-arguments had little room. If counter-arguments were mentioned, they were usually set up as "straw-men" to be refuted by the speaker. Scripture passages, notably some from the Old Testament, with different perspectives were either ignored or reconciled, sometimes in quite ingenious ways, with the selected passages. Stated another way, Harder was a disciplined linear thinker and speaker, usually working from firmly established reference points. These included the fallen nature of humankind, atonement through Jesus' shed blood on the cross, a life-changing conversion experience confirmed in baptism by immersion, the absolute authority of the Bible as the inspired Word of God, clear distinctions between what was sacred, holy or of the soul, and what was profane, worldly or carnal, and the certainty of eternal bliss or damnation after death.

In catechism classes at school and in religious instruction in the Mennonite Brethren Church, uncritical acceptance of these reference points had been emphasized. In Russia memorization and then eloquent recitation (*mit Betonung*) of the written assignments, Scripture passages, and literary works were also promoted. These were all skills assiduously honed and effectively applied by Harder in the preparation and delivery of his sermons. However, this approach was, in some respects, inherently narrow. Students and listeners were not encouraged to question the accepted assumptions, values, ideals, and practices of their restricted Mennonite Brethren world. They were expected to accept and apply fundamental truths and values,

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1952), 4-6; J. Stach, "Die Zentralschulen in den deutschen Kolonien Suedruszlands mit besonderer Beruecksichtigung der Krim, *Deutsche Post aus dem Osten* (November 1937), 6; James Urry, "The Snares of Reason—Changing Mennonite Attitudes to Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Russia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (April 1983): 306-322; T. D. Regehr, *For Everything a Season: A History of the Alexanderkrone Zentralschule*.

without basic modification, to the circumstances and challenges of their lives. They should do so without regard to changing circumstances or when confronted with ambiguities or doubts.<sup>7</sup>

It was clear where Johannes Harder stood and what he believed and preached. His worldview, despite extensive reading and wide-ranging interests, was not very broad when it came to theological, social, or cultural matters. But he had great skill in fashioning clearly-focussed, well-structured, biblically-based sermons that were delivered in a firm, seemingly humble yet authoritative manner. The strength of his preaching lay in the integrity and coherence of what he preached and how he lived. He addressed issues clearly and directly. This skill was graphically illustrated on one occasion when a flower arrangement was placed in front of the pulpit. Harder asked that it be removed, referring to the German colloquial expression regarding flowery but insincere rhetoric: "*Ich will nicht durch die Blumen reden.*" (I do not want to talk through the flowers.)<sup>8</sup>

Those who heard Harder preach disagree about whether he used sermon notes. When engaged in routine and monotonous work, he tried to memorize and then recite from memory long scriptural or literary passages and sermon notes. This practice enabled him, even on very short notice, to deliver a coherent and well-thought-out sermon.

Harder's sermons included less anecdotal or personal information than those of some of the other preachers. He had little use for the more personalized preaching styles promoted in some Mennonite Brethren Bible schools, believing that the focus must always be on the biblical text and its application in the life of the believer. Even those who disagreed with him emphasized that he was a very effective preacher who drew the listeners' attention to key Bible teachings. The fact that he was better educated and more widely read than most of his listeners and other Yarrow preachers impressed many.

The *Pulpit Commentary* that Johannes received at his and Tina's silver wedding, broadened, informed, and inspired many of his sermons after that date. The commentary provided verse-by-verse exposition, with scriptural

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<sup>7</sup> Interview 5.

<sup>8</sup> Interview 7.



cross-references and relevant linguistic, historical, and geographical information. It was designed to meet the needs of evangelical preachers and Bible school teachers, and included sermon outlines with supporting information. It also had a homiletics section. The verse-by-verse approach was one Harder understood and appreciated.<sup>9</sup>

His sermons were not overtly emotional. From his perspective, conversion and Christian living were serious matters, to be entered into with sobriety (*Nuechternheit*) and true repentance (*Reue und Busse*). He was suspicious of both the theology and tactics of some English North American evangelists and particularly of some of the more emotional aspects of popular evangelistic campaigns. While clearly preaching the blessings of salvation and the horrors of damnation, he was not inclined to resort to blatant scare tactics, particularly where impressionable young children were involved. He believed in the doctrine of the rapture of the saints, but was less inclined to eschatological speculation than to the practicalities of everyday Christian living. The a-millennial eschatology of the *Pulpit Commentary* was consistent with Anabaptist theology. This view was challenged by some who believed that, after the rapture and a period of great tribulation, Jesus would return to this sinful old world to establish a thousand-year reign of peace. Harder firmly believed in the rapture of the saints and that Christ's second coming was imminent. But he thought it far more important that Christians be ready to meet Christ than to sort out subsequent events. He was sharply critical when eschatological speculation was used to justify reprehensible behaviour. One of the preachers, for example, was reprimanded when he asserted that Jesus would return before people could pay off their immigration transportation debt. They should therefore devote their energies to spiritual matters. Some in the congregation used that as an excuse not to repay their transportation debts as quickly as possible.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Information on the *Pulpit Commentary* was provided by David Giesbrecht, retired Librarian at Columbia Bible College after consultation with David Ewert, a long-time Mennonite Brethren preacher and Bible teacher.

<sup>10</sup> *Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church Minutes* (hereafter *YMBC Minutes*), 7 January 1934.

Descriptions most frequently heard regarding Harder's preaching were that his sermons were well organized and easy to understand. His delivery was calm, composed, earnest, and direct. Sinners were certainly made to feel uncomfortable by his straight-forward and direct preaching. The faithful were admonished and encouraged to strive for greater faith and holy living.

### Teaching

Teaching took second place to preaching in Johannes Harder's ministry. It was, nevertheless, much appreciated, particularly by participants in *Bibelbesprechungen* and by the students in his Bible school classes.

Within a year of the Harders' arrival in Yarrow, Peter D. Loewen, then a young single man who had just completed his studies at the Winkler Mennonite Brethren Bible School, was invited to teach some Bible school courses in the Yarrow church. The response was sufficiently encouraging that Loewen asked Harder to assist him.<sup>11</sup> Harder accepted this and subsequent invitations to teach occasional or special Bible school classes. In the early years he strongly supported the church's Bible school, but later became disillusioned with what he perceived as a weakening in the teaching of distinctive Anabaptist and Mennonite doctrines.<sup>12</sup>

The Bible School, named Elim in later years, offered practical, lay-oriented Bible instruction and classes in the German language. Its main objective was to increase knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures and to prepare future Sunday school teachers, choir singers, and other church workers. The instruction tended to be didactic and emphasized rote learning. Teachers were sometimes inclined to refer to specific passages as proof-texts to support their position on controversial issues. Free, open, and wide-ranging questioning of the fundamentals of the faith was not encouraged. Instruction about other religions, usually called "false cults," tended to focus mainly on their alleged errors. Missions and evangelism were strongly supported, but less attention was paid to the distinctive aspects of Anabaptist-Mennonite theology and history. Wartime enlistments of many Mennonite young men in Yarrow were

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<sup>11</sup> Peter D. Loewen, "Johannes Harder," *Loewen Manuscript*, 162.

<sup>12</sup> Jacob Loewen, "When Harder eventually became disillusioned with the Bible School," *Loewen Manuscript*, 194.

attributed, in part, to failure by the Bible schools to teach adequately the Anabaptist-Mennonite doctrine of non-resistance.

The quality of teaching in the Bible School was uneven. Harder's lessons were usually carefully prepared and well delivered, but the offerings of other teachers were less satisfactory. Frank C. Peters, a student who later became a university president, complained to his father about one teacher. The father suggested that, despite the inadequacies, there was surely a kernel of truth to be found. The son responded that one had to devour much chaff before finding that kernel. (*Da muss man aber viel Spreu fressen ehe man auf den Kern kommt.*)<sup>13</sup>

Harder was not as rigid in his teaching as some North American fundamentalists. He surprised at least one student when he said that, in his opinion, one book in the Bible—the Song of Solomon—had been included by mistake. He evidently felt considerable discomfort with such expressions of sexuality. His opinion was, nevertheless, at variance with the typical insistence that all books of the Bible had been inspired by God and that every word was literally the Word of God.<sup>14</sup> Similarly Harder, like many others, while believing in the divine inspiration of all Scripture, did not insist on a literal application of aspects of Old Testament precedents and laws. He believed that many of those old laws, and perhaps other troublesome Old Testament passages, were superseded by Jesus' teaching that "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. . . . Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."<sup>15</sup>

In the 1930s and early 1940s the Bible School filled an important gap in the lives of young people who had completed grade 8 or reached the mandatory school attendance age of 15. Those who lived on farms and did not go on to high school had time to attend during the winter months. Bible School offered preparation for adult Christian living and work in the church. It also provided social contacts and, despite a host of rules and restrictions, many students found their future spouses while studying in the Bible School.

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<sup>13</sup> Interview 3.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 22:37, 39.

Enrolments peaked during the war years and immediately after, resulting in the construction of a 3-storey Bible School building.<sup>16</sup> After the war, more young people went on to high school or found employment outside of the community. Harder, somewhat disillusioned with the Bible School, actively promoted a new Mennonite high school even though it cut into Bible School enrolments. The new high school was modelled, to a large extent, on the Russian Mennonite *Zentralschulen*. The Harders nevertheless insisted that all their children attend the Bible School for at least one year, usually after completing their high school studies. But significantly, when expressing gratitude to God at the 25th wedding anniversary for their many blessings, Tina mentioned the instruction their children had received in the private Mennonite high school but made no similar reference to their Bible School experiences.



The Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Sunday school, 1948.

Religious instruction did not, of course, begin only after a child completed his or her elementary school training. In Russia secular and religious training had been combined in Mennonite-controlled schools. It was different in Canada where children had to attend public elementary schools which did not offer religious instruction. Sunday schools, which seemed unnecessary in the Russian Mennonite context and therefore gained only gradual acceptance, were regarded as essential in Canada if children were to be provided with basic religious and cultural instruction. The same was the case with the Saturday German Religious School.

Several Mennonite Brethren Bible schools became very effective promoters of Sunday schools in the churches. Peter D. Loewen, after attending the

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Penner, "Glimpses of Elim Bible School, 1930-1955," in Leonard N Neufeldt, ed., *Village of Unsettled Yearning*, 80-86.

Winkler Bible School, became Yarrow's most effective promoter and served as Sunday school superintendent for more than 20 years. Initially there was no set Sunday school curriculum. Instruction in the early years was in German, and eventually the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Conference developed a German curriculum, complete with written assignment books.<sup>17</sup>

Johannes and Tina Harder strongly supported the Sunday school. Tina taught some of the classes for girls at various times. Johannes' participation was relatively limited, although he did lead special Bible classes and talked on specific selected topics when invited. He gave priority to his preaching, church leadership, and conference responsibilities. Family, health, and farming concerns further reduced the time and energy he could devote to Bible and Sunday school teaching.

### **Poetry and literature in Harder's ministry**

An appreciation of poetry and literature had been instilled early in Johannes Harder's life. Two notebooks and a number of loose pages with poems written by or for him have survived. The first is a collection of approximately 80 poems by various authors. These were copied into a special notebook which Johannes received as a Christmas present when he was ten years old.<sup>18</sup> It is not clearly indicated when, or by whom, the various poems were written into the notebook. It was common practice in the elementary schools, and also in the *Zentralschulen* in Russia and in some Mennonite Brethren German Saturday and religion schools in Canada, for teachers to assign poems and stories which the students were to memorize and then, as an exercise in penmanship as well as religious and artistic instruction, write out in their notebooks. Those with a creative or imaginative bent of mind could add sketches and drawings. *Calligraphy and Fraktur* art, often on seasonal greeting cards for parents (*Glueckwuensche*), were also favourites. Such assignments kept students in the small multi-grade village schools occupied when the teacher devoted his or her attention to other students at different grade levels. Embroidery and similar assignments for the girls and wood carving for the boys, often with an engraved Scripture verse, served a similar purpose.

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<sup>17</sup> Peter D. Loewen, *Memoirs of Peter Daniel Loewen: A Story of God's Grace and Faithfulness* (Abbotsford, BC: Fraser Valley Custom Printers, 1999), 86-90.

<sup>18</sup> *Loewen Collection*, folders titled: *To Johannes Harder, Christmas, 1907, from his parents Waisenheim, Grossweide; An 80-page Collection of Handwritten Christian Poems, 1907-1919; and Harder Book of Poetry # 2.*

For some, including Harder, the copy book stimulated appreciation of poetry and literature as an unusually effective means of communication. The poems were written in the Gothic script. Some were copied, but others are apparently originals composed either by Harder himself or by his father. The entire collection of poems in the first notebook was written between 1907 and 1919. Dominant themes are trust in and work for Jesus in good and in difficult times. Forgiveness of sins and a close relationship with Jesus were often emphasized. But there are also more secular items, such as a five-stanza poem in honour of the horse and the many ways in which it is used and serves humans. There are also nature poems, and poems dealing with the seasons. Some are paraphrases of biblical passages such as the 23rd Psalm.

The second notebook and loose papers include not only poetry but also some devotional-theological items, and even a few diary entries. Also notable in this collection are a number of poems or comments written for and then recited by one of the Harder children. One on the resurrection of Christ was written in 1939 to be recited at a *Jugendverein* (Christian Endeavour) meeting by son John. Included also are a number of poems written for and read at weddings and other special occasions, including a poem of welcome read at Johannes and Tina's own wedding in Russia in 1922. Others, apparently by Johannes Harder, were written for his children's weddings. There is also a poem read at the farewell service for the Harders when they left Black Creek. These materials, as is evident in different handwriting and sometimes by the identification of others, were written by various people. But the great majority are in Harder's handwriting. One of the long pieces is a typewritten copy of a public conversation by the four oldest Harder children at their parents' 25th wedding anniversary. It explores the significance of that celebration and the debt the children owed to their parents.

A few of Harder's poems were eventually published in one of the Mennonite Brethren periodicals. They were not a great literary success, but poems and literary passages provided him with another means to communicate Christian messages as well as the simple joys and sorrows of everyday life. Some were unobtrusively woven into his sermons. Writing and memorizing poetry and long literary passages increased his appreciation and skill in the effective use of language, and thus significantly enriched his preaching.

### Speaking the Word of God

Harder sought to “serve with the Word of God.” A passage in 1 Peter 4:11, particularly as rendered in Luther’s German translation, captured his understanding of his preaching and teaching ministry. “*So jemand rede, dass er rede als Gottes Wort.*” The King James translation seems to obscure the emphasis on the Word of God. It reads: “If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God,” and the New English Bible translates the passage thus: “Are you a speaker? Speak as if you uttered oracles of God.” Harder may not have known the meaning of “oracles,” and certainly would not have regarded his preaching as merely the words of “any person reputed to be uncommonly wise, and whose opinions have great weight.”<sup>19</sup> He believed he preached the Word of God, pure and simple. He sought to communicate to his listeners what God, through the Scriptures, had to say to them.

Those who heard Johannes Harder preach and teach learned much about the content and specific teachings and interpretations of the Scriptures. He spent much time in personal reading and study and at Bible discussion conferences and meetings. He greatly appreciated earnest discussions regarding the meaning and practical application of specific scriptural passages. The veracity and absolute authority of the Scriptures was not questioned.

Harder’s teaching and preaching informed, enlightened, and helped or persuaded many to make critically important decisions and life-long Christian commitments. Very many of the sober, committed, and resolute conversion experiences of members of the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church owed much to Johannes Harder’s preaching and teaching. It was his fervent hope to proclaim the pure and unadulterated Word of God. Unavoidably, given all human limitations, he proclaimed the Word as he understood it, and he sought to apply it in his own life and in the affairs of his family, the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church, and provincial, Canadian, and broader Mennonite Brethren conferences.

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<sup>19</sup> “Oracle” as defined in *The Consolidated-Webster Comprehensive Encyclopedic Dictionary* (Chicago, IL.: Webster, 1953), 502.

## Chapter 8

### Church Leaders, 1930-1949

Johannes Harder was elected leader of the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church within a year of the family's arrival. He occupied that post for more than 18 years.<sup>1</sup> Together he and Tina led a church that developed a rich array of programs and experienced phenomenal growth. It had only 96 members when it was first organized in 1929, and still fewer than 200 when Harder was elected as its leader in December of 1930.<sup>2</sup> By 1948 church membership had increased to 971,<sup>3</sup> making Yarrow the largest Mennonite Brethren church in Canada. By then, a spacious new sanctuary and several ancillary buildings had been erected.

The strong leadership provided by the Harders was, nevertheless, controversial. Both were perfectionists with strong and clear convictions regarding appropriate and holy living and church governance. They applied those convictions most vigorously in their own lives, but also worked hard to promote and enforce rigorous standards of conduct for all church members. Johannes and Tina's youngest son has suggested that his father "pursued

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<sup>1</sup> David Giesbrecht, "The Early Years of the Mennonite Brethren Church," in Leonard N. Neufeldt, ed., *Village of Unsettled Yearnings*, 38.

<sup>2</sup> The *Yearbook of the Northern District of Mennonite Brethren Churches of North America, 1931-32* reported a membership of 199.

<sup>3</sup> A. E. Klassen, *Yarrow: A Portrait in Mosaic*, 2nd ed. (Yarrow, BC: A. E. Klassen, 1976), 15.



relentlessly, for himself and for the church, a perfection which ultimately proved illusive.”<sup>4</sup> His mother’s efforts in that regard were, if anything, greater than her husband’s.

### **The call to leadership**

Yarrow was a small community when the Harders arrived. Most of its inhabitants were Mennonites who had come to Canada in the 1920s from the Soviet Union. Initially adherents of the two main Mennonite churches, the so-called *Kirchliche* (most of them affiliated in Canada with the Conference of Mennonites in Canada) and the Mennonite Brethren, had worshipped together, first in homes and then in local schools.<sup>5</sup> But on 3 February 1929 the Mennonite Brethren organized their own church, and in the fall they began construction of a small meeting house.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, on Christmas Eve, a month before the Harders arrived, a disastrous storm blew down the walls of the partially completed building. One of the men working on the project was seriously injured. The building was, however, completed and it was dedicated in the late fall of 1930.<sup>7</sup>

The Harders’ initial impressions of the congregation were not entirely favourable. Harder noted “a great deal of disunity among the brothers who had come together from various regions in Russia.”<sup>8</sup> Particularly troublesome disagreements existed among the preachers, who had been ordained elsewhere and come to Yarrow, with their differing experiences, education, and opinions regarding appropriate Christian conduct and church governance. While the Harders became critical of some of the ordained preachers with whom they disagreed, other members of the congregation were clearly impressed with the couple. Harder, unlike most of the lay preachers, had a good education and considerable rhetorical, literary, and administrative skills. As a result, in September of 1930, when the secretary of the church resigned for health reasons, Johannes was elected secretary.<sup>9</sup> He did not serve long in that

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<sup>4</sup> David Harder, “My Father,” *Loewen Manuscript*, 137.

<sup>5</sup> Klassen, *Yarrow*, 80.

<sup>6</sup> David Giesbrecht, “Early Years,” 34-35.

<sup>7</sup> Klassen, *Yarrow*, 81.

<sup>8</sup> Johannes Harder, *Story*, 37.

<sup>9</sup> YMBC Minutes, 20 July and 21 September 1930.

capacity. At the congregation's annual meeting in December of 1930 he was elected as leader of the congregation. He replaced a preacher regarded as a good man but not an effective leader. In the discussions prior to the election, some members critical of this man uttered harsh words for which they later had to apologize.<sup>10</sup> Aware that these beginnings were not auspicious, Harder later wrote: "Thus began the responsible and in many respects difficult work



The Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church, built in 1938.

for us. It was difficult mainly because of the unspiritual attitude of some of the preachers which resulted in much work."<sup>11</sup>

Although well aware of the likely sacrifices church leadership would require, Tina Harder endorsed without reservation her husband's call to Christian min-

istry and leadership. Over the ensuing decades she gave him her complete and unstinting support, respecting and believing uncritically in his efforts. Tina and Johannes worked as a team.

### **The *Vorberat* (Church Council)**

The organization and governance structures of the church made it necessary for the Harders to work closely with the preachers they regarded as "unspiritual." These governance structures were based on earlier Russian Mennonite Brethren practices. In the early years, Mennonite Brethren churches had no formal constitution. Their governmental structures were officially (though not always in practice) democratic, and were based on the assumption that the Word of God, as understood and prayerfully interpreted and applied by the entire membership, should be authoritative. Church leaders subscribed to the Anabaptist doctrine of the priesthood of all believers; however, some members clearly had more influence and authority than

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 27 December 1930 and 3 January 1931.

<sup>11</sup> Johannes Harder, *Story*, 39.

others. Women could attend “brotherhood” business meetings, but few did so and those who did had little influence.<sup>12</sup> In fact, much of the most difficult work was done by a “pre-deliberative” body called the *Vorberat* that prepared the agendas for congregational meetings, but also dealt confidentially with difficult issues. It sometimes did so in an elitist, authoritarian, and secretive manner. The *Vorberat* had no female members in the early years, but sometimes women who were concerned about specific issues persuaded their husbands or other sympathetic men to express their opinions. In the Northwest Mennonite Conference, reports had circulated that in the West Zion Mennonite Church at Carstairs, Alberta, the pastor, Henry Harder (no relation to Johannes Harder), stood at the front at church meetings, but Bernice (his wife) ran the church from the back.<sup>13</sup> This description was applicable to Johannes and Tina Harder at times; on issues that she was particularly concerned about, Tina Harder exerted considerable unofficial influence “from the back.”

In the early years the *Vorberat* consisted of the church leader, the church secretary, all ordained preachers and deacons, and the church trustees. The latter, thanks to efforts to apply phonetic German spelling to unfamiliar English words, are referred to in the early minutes as “Trosties.”<sup>14</sup> When important new positions such as Sunday school superintendent, music director, and youth leader were created, the men selected to fill those positions automatically also became members of the *Vorberat*. This governing body had become large and unwieldy, since Yarrow attracted more than 30 lay ministers

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<sup>12</sup> Female members were allowed to attend Mennonite Brethren “Brotherhood” meetings in Russia. When the General (MB) Conference, under pressure from American Evangelicals, decided to exclude women from church business meetings, B. B. Janz informed General (MB) Conference leaders that Canadian Mennonite Brethren churches would continue the well established Russian Mennonite Brethren practice of allowing women to attend and speak at membership meetings. This policy was followed in Yarrow, but some in the church did not think it appropriate for women to be involved in issues related to male leadership. So, in the early years, women were excluded from voting on issues pertaining directly to male leadership in the church..

<sup>13</sup> T. D. Regehr, *Faith, Life and Witness in the Northwest, 1903-2003: Centennial History of the Northwest Mennonite Conference* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2003), 326.

<sup>14</sup> *YMBC Minutes*, 10 February 1929.

who had been ordained elsewhere. Not all lived in Yarrow at the same time, but all, by virtue of their ordination, irrespective of their talents, theological orientation, or personal and family lifestyles, were members of the *Vorberat*.

No minutes of the *Vorberat* are available, and it is doubtful that any were kept. Much of its work, particularly in matters related to spiritual counselling and church discipline, was begun in confidence by a few designated members. Often a problem was referred to the congregation for action only after informal confidential “work” with individual members failed to achieve the desired results. Such “work” could involve not only spiritual matters but also social, cultural, mental health, and educational issues. The lay preachers did not always agree on what constituted Christian discipleship. The concerns of Harder and others about the attitudes, lifestyles, and spirituality of some of the preachers strained relations among members of the *Vorberat*. Typically, Harder’s approach to difficult issues was open and direct, with some limits. He could be quite open-minded about practical matters, but only if the proposed resolution was in harmony with his interpretation of biblical teachings. He rarely rushed to judgement without giving those involved an opportunity to speak.

Some issues, such as the unproven allegations of sexual misconduct by one of the lay-preachers or perceived erroneous theological beliefs, created much tension within the *Vorberat*. One of the preachers, for example, was reprimanded because he expressed doubts about the divine inspiration of some parts of the Old Testament.<sup>15</sup> The church minutes do not indicate, however, whether Harder confessed that, as reported by one of his Bible school students, he did not think the Song of Solomon belonged in the Bible.<sup>16</sup>

On a few rare occasions, Harder’s standing with the *Vorberat* and the membership became strained when he gave credence to unsubstantiated accusations that resulted in disciplinary action. One such case involved information, originating with people whom Harder trusted, about the allegedly inappropriate behaviour of a somewhat marginal church member. The accused member not only denied the charges but accused Harder of lying to the congregation. After further investigation, Harder found the accusation

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<sup>15</sup> YMBC Minutes, 7 and 24 February 1934.

<sup>16</sup> David Harder, “My Father,” *Loewen Manuscript*, 137.

was false. He admitted his error and apologized both privately and publicly. There was no apology, however, from either the *Vorberat* or the church membership.<sup>17</sup>

Jacob Loewen recalls another incident indicative of Johannes Harder's attitude toward personal and collective responsibility. Harder readily admitted and apologized for personal failings, but clung to a theology that did not allow for collective errors by the *Vorberat* or the congregation, if decisions had been prayerfully made after careful study of relevant scriptural passages. Thus, according to Loewen, "Once, the Yarrow MB Church excommunicated an individual unjustly. At home on furlough, I became aware of this. Harder was no longer church leader at the time. At some public gathering I was able to meet both Harder and Lenzmann (Harder's successor as church leader) together. I explained the facts of the case to them, and both agreed that the action had been unjust. Both then volunteered to apologize personally to the person excommunicated. But I balked and insisted on an official retraction and apology from the church. Here we ran into an impasse. Seemingly both men's theology of the church led by the Spirit of God was in conflict with their personal integrity. Individually and together they were willing to admit that an error had been made, but their theology did not allow them to go farther and admit that the church had made a mistake."<sup>18</sup>

Loewen also documents another incident. Two members of the church had gone to Vancouver to take voice lessons, an activity regarded by some members of the *Vorberat* as engaging in inappropriate contact with the outside world since the men might be trained to sing worldly music. Harder was therefore instructed to put a stop to this deviation from established church policies. But when confronted, the men explained that they were only interested in learning how to improve choir and congregational singing and worship. They asked why the church had not assisted them by providing qualified teachers who could help in the Yarrow environment.<sup>19</sup> At that point Harder realized the comments were valid and that he had not given the men an opportunity to explain their side of the story before delivering a *Vorberat*-

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<sup>17</sup> Jacob Loewen, "Harder and Integrity," *Loewen Manuscript*, 182.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>19</sup> Henry P. Neufeldt, *A Brief History of My Life*, 1996 (autograph manuscript, 4 notebooks, 2): 81-83.

approved rebuke. In this case he had not acted in accordance with his strong sense of integrity that demanded both sides be heard before judgement was passed.<sup>20</sup> He was usually more scrupulous in this regard than some other members of the *Vorberat*.

Some of the problems of the *Vorberat* could be attributed to its unwieldy size and the rigid, sometimes quarrelsome, tactics of some of the preachers. Complaints emerged that some members, presumably when they did not get their way in the *Vorberat*, “carried onto the street” sensitive and confidential decisions and actions. Other complaints concerned decisions made by the *Vorberat* that were not adequately explained to members of the congregation. In addition, there were somewhat vague charges that some members of the *Vorberat* were making the work of the leader too difficult.

Harder’s frustration with the dysfunctional nature of the *Vorberat*, together with his efforts to resolve serious church problems in Vancouver, resulted in his request to be released from his leadership responsibilities. However, the congregation asked that he continue and agreed to institute major changes in the composition and work of the *Vorberat*. Its membership was henceforth to be limited to 15, with a maximum of two preachers. The leader and the secretary were to be ex-officio members, and the rest, which could include additional preachers, were to be elected by the membership. The congregation also agreed that the *Vorberat* be empowered to deal with preachers who failed to live in accordance with the Scriptures or whose teaching was not biblical.<sup>21</sup>

Some of the preachers who were excluded from the *Vorberat* because of this decision were incensed. They believed that, since they had been called by God for a lifetime of spiritual leadership and nurture, it was not appropriate for the church membership to exclude them from leadership positions. One excluded preacher expressed his view with such vigour that he was obliged to apologize at the next congregational meeting for his intemperate language.<sup>22</sup> This preacher and another who objected to his exclusion were subsequently “elected” by the congregation as members of the *Vorberat*.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Jacob Loewen, “Harder and Integrity,” *Loewen Manuscript*, 182.

<sup>21</sup> *YMBC Minutes*, 14 and 16 August 1937.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, undated, but evidently September 1937.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 April 1939.

The readmission of these preachers, together with other concerns, resulted in Harder announcing, in 1940, that he was withdrawing from the leadership.<sup>24</sup> He was again persuaded to continue. Harder had become concerned about inadequate spiritual counselling in the church. In addition, there were continuing problems with one of the ousted and subsequently readmitted preacher members of the *Vorberat*. This preacher was accused of self-justification, striving for honours, and a lack of love toward the other preachers (*Selbstgerechtigkeit, Ehrgeiz, und Lieblosigkeit*). He was therefore expelled from the *Vorberat* and “silenced” as a preacher in the church.<sup>25</sup> A year later, the still allegedly unrepentant preacher was expelled from the church.<sup>26</sup> But after several months, he offered a sufficiently abject apology. After debating the matter in two successive meetings, the congregation agreed to readmit him to membership.<sup>27</sup> Another troublesome elderly preacher was informed in 1940 that his public work from the pulpit had been completed; because of his advanced age, he was no longer able to offer the church what it needed.<sup>28</sup>

The removal of these troublesome preachers resolved some of the *Vorberat*’s problems. It also alleviated congregational concerns of members of the congregation about the preponderant influence of the preachers. Many were elderly men who resisted new innovations and changes. Their influence threatened the balance between the allegedly more spiritual leadership provided by the older preachers and innovative and progressive policies advocated by younger members who were elected but not ordained. The latter included the youth leader, choir director, and those who were advocates of more use of the English language and other measures that would attract and serve people from the community.

The unwieldy size of and sometimes difficult personal relations among members of the entire *Vorberat* resulted in the formation of a much smaller group, who discussed issues and made recommendations. Harder sought and appreciated the recommendations of this unofficial group, who in later years would be termed the executive committee of the church council. Recom-

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 18, 26 and 28 September 1940.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 15 October 1940.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 25 October 1941.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 24 May 1942 (morning and evening membership meetings).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 15 October 1940.

mendations agreed upon by this small group were usually endorsed by the entire *Vorberat*. However, *Vorberat* members not included in this smaller group felt marginalized and alienated, especially if they were asked to support controversial recommendations about which they had reservations.

Insistence on the strict confidentiality of all *Vorberat* discussions and decisions also became problematic. The intention was to deal with unfortunate incidents privately and quietly, lest information about sinful behaviour by church members tarnish the image and witness of the church in the community. However, in a small, tightly-knit community, this sort of confidentiality was often impossible, particularly if aggrieved parties and their relatives believed they had been unfairly treated. As a result, rumours and gossip abounded. The official reasons given for decisions made and actions taken were sometimes vague, biased, and incomplete. But members of the *Vorberat* were not allowed to provide additional explanations. They were expected to endorse all decisions made by the *Vorberat*, regardless of their personal opinions regarding controversial issues.

Most difficult *Vorberat* and congregational decisions were buttressed by reference to specific Scripture verses. This approach, in effect, made disagreement with a controversial decision a challenge to Scripture. Harder, a skilled and persuasive speaker, probably knew the Scriptures much better than most other members and could readily cite passages which supported his position. So at times his opinions, based on specific Bible verses, were endorsed without opportunities for adequate consideration of different perspectives.

Despite the frequently dysfunctional nature of the *Vorberat*, Harder clearly provided the church with strong leadership. His rigorous personal discipline and integrity were only rarely questioned, and he readily admitted and sought forgiveness if he became convinced that he had made a mistake. But his discipline and integrity also contributed to a legalistic approach to problems. This became especially apparent in the collection of membership levies and church taxes.

### **The *Steuer* (church tax)**

In the early days of the congregation, the financial expenditures of the church were modest. Worship services were held in schools, the preachers and church workers all served without financial remuneration, and program expenses



were insignificant. Voluntary donations provided funds for missionaries and other charitable causes, while a modest membership levy paid for minor expenses.

Expenses increased significantly with the decision in 1938 to construct a new church and ancillary buildings. These increased costs were not problematic because church members, who provided almost all the necessary labour, strongly supported the decision to construct a new church building. Material costs were covered through voluntary donations and a modest increase in the membership levy. However, support for growing conference programs and new local initiatives increased the need for funds.

In the 1940s, financial tensions developed because of an unusual situation. During the war Mennonite leaders became increasingly concerned about the transportation debt (*Reiseschuld*) to the Canadian Pacific Railway. It had been incurred to make possible the Mennonite immigration of the 1920s. Each immigrant was responsible for the repayment of his or her transportation costs, but the debt as a whole had been underwritten by Canadian Mennonite leaders. Like many others, the Harder family had made exceptional efforts to repay their debt as quickly as possible. However, some of the immigrants were unable or unwilling to repay their debts. Mennonite leaders, including Harder, were convinced that the honour, integrity, and good reputation of all Mennonites would be damaged if the debts were not repaid in a timely fashion. Many immigrants still had close relatives in the Soviet Union who might get exit visas and permission to come to Canada. If that happened, more transportation credits would be needed. So strenuous efforts were made to maintain Mennonite credit worthiness.<sup>29</sup>

In an effort to resolve the problem, the *Vorberat* demanded that church members still owing money appear and provide a firm repayment schedule or, if they were unable to pay, a detailed accounting of their financial situation.<sup>30</sup> It was reported that Mennonite immigrants in British Columbia owed a total of \$8,000.00. Of that sum \$2,200.00 was deemed uncollectible. Renewed and intensified pressure was exerted on those who were able to but had not yet paid; the remaining balance was allocated to the churches on a per member

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 12 March 1941.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 24 May 1942.

basis.<sup>31</sup> An average contribution of \$1.00 per member was needed to pay the uncollectible debt. The Yarrow church decided to collect the needed money through a special church levy or *Steuer* (tax).<sup>32</sup> However, not all members were convinced that they should be “taxed” to pay off the debts of others. Some also argued that it was not fair to set levies or taxes at the same level for all members. Some found paying even a modest levy very difficult.

The church countered these concerns by introducing a crude church levy or tax (*Steuer*) based on income. It was designed to not only facilitate repayment of the transportation debt, but also to pay for other church expenses. In its earliest form, the levy called for payment of 2 percent of each member’s income, and ½ percent of each businessperson’s total turnover.<sup>33</sup> This ruling, however, created numerous new and very difficult problems. Those devising the scheme were almost all farmers. Any flat assessment of 2 percent on income or, in the case of a business, a tax on total monetary turnover, did not adequately account for wide variations in expenses. Farmers with mortgages faced far greater financial costs than those who owned their land. Business owners were incensed that the tax was being levied on gross rather than net income.

The 2 percent tax on total income also failed to acknowledge that employees had to pay for much of their food and other necessities out of their earnings. In contrast, farmers had no cash expenditures for the produce they grew on the farm and consumed. Disparities also existed between those who rented accommodations and farmers who owned their places of residence. These varied complaints resulted in considerable tinkering with the system. At one point a complicated formula requiring business people to pay ¾ percent of their gross turnover, chicken farmers 1 percent, dairy farmers 2 percent, truckers 2 percent, salaried employees 1 percent and berry farmers 3 percent was approved. These calculations created further confusion since the majority of members were not single-commodity producers.<sup>34</sup> The result was persisting perceptions that the tax was calculated and assessed unfairly. There were additional problems related to non-resident members, notably those living in

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 23 November 1942.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., undated, but clearly February 1944.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 10 October 1944.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 18 December 1945.

and worshipping with the Mennonite Brethren group in Vancouver. Eventually it was left to the conscience of each member to fill out his or her church-mandated report on income received and, hence, to decide what suitable payment should be. Resistance to the church tax increased greatly when controversial and very expensive projects, most notably a private Mennonite high school, were launched. Those not convinced of the merits of a particular project were understandably reluctant or simply refused to contribute.

There was also a growing feeling that donations to the Mennonite churches, unlike the taxes levied by state churches or secular governments, should be voluntary. While Harder and others emphatically rejected such arguments, they lacked effective collection measures if moral suasion failed. They could do little more than send out collectors, preach stern sermons, and embarrass those who would not or could not pay by publicizing their names. In cases of adamant recalcitrance, expulsion was also an option. But the social ostracism to which expelled members were subjected in the early days gradually weakened, especially if the issue was as controversial as the *Steuer*. Nonetheless, a fairly small number of members were excommunicated for objecting to the levy.

The *Steuer* based on income did not entirely replace special levies set at the same amount for all members. Thus, it was agreed in 1947 that every family should pay \$40.00 for post-war relief and aid to facilitate the immigration of Mennonite refugees from the Soviet Union.<sup>35</sup> At the height of the private high school crisis (to be discussed in a later chapter), members were asked to donate or pledge fixed amounts that were increased as costs increased. The *Vorberat's* stern collection tactics, combined with Harder's sometimes autocratic leadership style, increased the resentment of those who thought the assessments were unfair or used for expensive projects they did not support. Thus, when on one occasion, a member repeatedly and vigorously expressed his opposition, Harder lost his temper and told the dissenter in rather crude German language, "*Halt deinen Mund und setz dich*" (Shut your mouth and sit down.) On another occasion some members walked out when Harder made an impassioned appeal for support of the church and its decision. His

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 5 November 1947.

comment as they left was, “*Und sie gingen hinaus, von ihrem Gewissen ueberzeugt.*” (And they went out, convicted by their conscience.)<sup>36</sup>

The *Steuer* became increasingly unpopular and was eventually abandoned. But it did provide financial stability for ongoing church programs with broad support. It faltered because no widely accepted formula had been devised and because it was used to raise funds for expensive projects not supported by all members.

### **The burden of leadership**

Increasingly, church leaders found that financial and administrative problems interfered with spiritual counselling which Harder regarded as the church's primary responsibility. The Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization sent the names of immigrants moving to British Columbia who had not yet paid their transportation debts to church leaders in the province. The local leaders were then expected to exert whatever pressure they could to get the debts paid. Leaders found it difficult to provide needed spiritual counselling and support while at the same time admonishing the often desperately poor new arrivals about their transportation debts. Harder found it equally difficult to reconcile pastoral care with the enforcement of unpopular and, in the view of many, unfair church levies and taxes. The result was his sense of a basic contradiction (*Widerspruch*) in his ministry.

Harder believed that all church members should accept responsibility for the important work of *Seelsorge* (spiritual counselling). This work was, however, often regarded as the special responsibility of the church leader. But the pressure of other obligations made it impossible for the Harders to do as much spiritual counselling as was required. Johannes Harder received no financial remuneration for his work in the church. Although capable of an extraordinary amount of work, he also needed to earn a livelihood and to care for a growing family. At the same time, the multiple tasks of church leadership and conference work took up much of his time and energy. As a result, he repeatedly offered his resignation as church leader when he was confronted with onerous new assignments or serious problems in the *Vorberat*.

The 1937 restructuring of the *Vorberat* had alleviated some problems, but in 1940 Harder again sought release from church leadership and Bible School

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<sup>36</sup> Interview 2.

teaching so he could devote more time to spiritual counselling. He stated that he was finding it too difficult to accept responsibility before God for the spiritual welfare of church members when he was not able to provide the necessary counselling.<sup>37</sup>

The matter was referred to a special meeting of 14 preachers from the congregation. They recommended, among other things, that as leader Harder be paid a salary. He would then not need to spend as much of his time earning a livelihood. Harder rejected that recommendation, but was persuaded to continue to serve as leader of the church. Abram Nachtigal was asked and agreed to provide spiritual counselling on an interim basis.<sup>38</sup>

The issue of spiritual counselling, nevertheless, remained difficult. As a result, on 20 October 1942, the church asked Abram Nachtigal to devote more of his time to this work, agreeing to pay him \$40.00 per month.<sup>39</sup> But because the problem was still not resolved, on 13 December 1944, Harder yet again asked the congregation to relieve him of his leadership responsibilities. Once again, he referred to the difficulty of harmonizing his leadership responsibilities with providing pastoral care. As leader, he helped to formulate and enforce increasingly restrictive religious, linguistic, social, and cultural boundaries, but experienced a conflict between his enforcement of church rules and the need for supportive spiritual counselling.

These ongoing tensions prompted Harder to inform the congregation in 1944 that he had received permission from the Lord to lay down his leadership responsibilities.<sup>40</sup> The congregation asked him to continue as leader and agreed to reorganize the counselling ministry. Each preacher and deacon was given responsibility to visit people living on a specific street or in a designated geographic area. The work was to be coordinated by the *Vorberat*. Spiritual counselling nevertheless remained problematic for Harder. Too often it focussed on the failures of individual members. He believed that calling sinners to repentance was an important aspect of counselling, but he also knew that many simply needed guidance, comfort, support, and friendship.

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<sup>37</sup> *YMBC Minutes*, 12 and 18 August and 1 September 1940.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, "Predigerberatung," 26-28 September 1940.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 October 1942.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 and 31 January 1944.

Support for Harders' leadership weakened significantly when he became a key promoter of a new Mennonite private high school in Yarrow. (Details of that initiative are given in a later chapter.) The school's failure led to his withdrawal from his leadership position in the church. In March of 1949, he notified members of the *Vorberat* of his intention to withdraw. The congregation was informed on 27 June 1949. At that meeting Harder once again declared that the task had become too difficult for him, and that he had failed in the important work entrusted to him.<sup>41</sup>

There was an interim period between the announcement of Harder's withdrawal from the leadership and the selection of a new leader. At a meeting on 25 July 1949, Harder offered to assist the church in the search for a new church leader, but was told that the process would be made easier if he withdrew entirely from the leadership. He immediately did so.<sup>42</sup> A new leader was not chosen until 10 January 1950. Three candidates were nominated. Harder was one of them, but declined the nomination. Someone in the congregation asked about an old rule barring female members from voting for the leader. The church decided to defer the question, which meant that female members could not vote at the meeting that elected Herman Lenzmann as Johannes Harder's successor.<sup>43</sup>

The legacy of Johannes and Tina Harder's leadership of the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church is mixed. They represented, and in many respects embodied, the faith and life of the Mennonite Brethren immigrants of the 1920s. The couple helped create a church community that provided meaningful and greatly cherished spiritual guidance for many. But at times they worked within dysfunctional administrative and financial structures. And the rigid, sometimes insensitive, manner in which they pursued their unrealistic vision of a pure and holy church, "without spot or wrinkle" became increasingly problematic in the later years of their leadership.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 27 June 1949.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 25 July 1949.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 10 January 1950.

## Chapter 9

### Spots and Wrinkles, 1930-1948

The Mennonites who broke away from the large Mennonite churches in Russia to form the Mennonite Brethren denounced their former church as decadent, fallen, tolerant of sinful behaviour by members, and incapable of spiritual reforms. These dissidents insisted that the new Mennonite Brethren churches must be different. They would take seriously the scriptural admonition in Ephesians 5:27 and build “a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.” To build and nurture such a church “all carnal and reprobate sinners must be banned from the fellowship of believers.”<sup>1</sup>

Building such a church with fallible human beings prone to sin was a daunting, if not impossible, challenge. But Johannes and Tina Harder, who sought perfection in their own lives, also worked hard to achieve it in their church. Their first and most important concern in building a holy church was to establish, inform, and strengthen the faith of members. Preaching and teaching were obviously important, but a healthy church also needed to develop spiritual counselling, music, mutual aid, and reconciliation programs; all of which were designed to inspire, encourage, and strengthen the faith and Christian life of members. Considerable time and attention also needed to be devoted to the formulation and enforcement of detailed codes of conduct. While the objective of these codes was to define ideal Christian living,

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<sup>1</sup> J. A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, 35.

enforcing them resulted in an emphasis on the prohibition of allegedly un-Christian attitudes, activities, and cultural practices and of alien outside influences. Enforcement included rigorous, sometimes counter-productive, cleansing strategies.

### **Strengthening the faith and commitments to holy living**

The Harders believed that a commitment to Christian living in accordance with the Scriptures was of utmost importance in building a holy church. While the preaching and teaching of the church was focussed on this goal, more resources were needed. Johannes Harder was convinced that without appropriate spiritual counselling (*Seelsorge*) the intended objective could not be achieved. In a special presentation to the delegates of the Northern District (Canadian) Mennonite Brethren Conference he outlined his convictions regarding *Seelsorge*.<sup>2</sup> Neglect of this important work, he believed, led to the disintegration (*Zerfall*) of the church. Elderly, sick, and suffering members had to be comforted, encouraged, and sustained through Scripture reading and prayer. Weak, indifferent, and erring members needed to be admonished and drawn into closer fellowship. Those inclined to indulge in carnal pleasures or greed had to be warned. And faithful members needed personal contact with their spiritual leaders so they would be encouraged and strengthened in the faith. The inability to devote sufficient time to this important work was cited repeatedly in Harder's requests to be relieved of his leadership responsibilities. However, after he resigned from the leadership of the church, he became engrossed in various conference programs and did not participate extensively in a coordinated church counselling program.

The recollections of individuals who received counselling and spiritual advice from the Harders differ significantly from person to person. Some experienced support, empathy, and concern when faced with spiritual and other struggles and difficulties.<sup>3</sup> Others recollected criticism. Tina Harder provided strong emotional and practical support for widows who had lost their husbands in the Stalinist terror and World War II. She visited and

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<sup>2</sup> J. A. Harder, "Wie verwirklichen wir die biblische Seelsorge in den Gemeinden," *Yearbook of the Northern District Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America*, 1944, 29.

<sup>3</sup> Interviews 2, 3, 7, and 9.



prayed with these women, bringing them into the fellowship of women's groups in the church. She also personally provided or arranged practical assistance in cases of great need. On the other hand, girls, teenagers, and young women often experienced Tina as a rigid and sometimes hypercritical disciplinarian. She was more likely to reprimand than to demonstrate empathetic understanding or to provide helpful advice in her contacts with young women.

Johannes had a somewhat gentler approach, at least with some of the younger people. One woman remembered sympathetic counselling and even helpful facilitation when she was considering marriage. She also reported other supportive encounters and called Johannes Harder a man of compassion.<sup>4</sup> Another recalled him playing games and going swimming in a local pond, thus befriending and gaining the confidence of a group of local boys.<sup>5</sup> Still others remembered how he had given them a special poem or a small gift or had praised a good recitation.<sup>6</sup> Some recalled how he had given them a ride when they were walking along the road, and had then told interesting stories or recited a poem or a passage of classical literature.<sup>7</sup> Several mentioned his care and concern for their well-being. A somewhat marginalized young man who had been preparing to go to university recalls Harder encouraging him to work and get better grades than anyone else. The young man, although not a church member, was, after all, from Yarrow.<sup>8</sup> This commendation illustrates the distinction Harder made between church members and those who were not yet church members. He seemed willing to offer assistance and support to non-church members without insisting that they adhere to church rules, but became far more demanding of church members. However, neither Johannes nor Tina tolerated behaviour contrary to the rules formulated collectively by church members.

Efforts by the church to inculcate appropriate behaviour began at a very young age. Monitors, called children's shepherds (*Kinderhirten*), were appointed to supervise and, if necessary, discipline children whose behaviour

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<sup>4</sup> Interview 2.

<sup>5</sup> Interview 7.

<sup>6</sup> Interview 8.

<sup>7</sup> Interviews 2, 3, 5 and confirmed by others.

<sup>8</sup> William J. Nickel, *A Majority of One*, 2nd ed. (Abbotsford, BC: William Nickel, 2007), 89.

in church or on the church yard was rambunctious, noisy, or disrespectful. Tina Harder served as one of the monitors for the girls.<sup>9</sup> In church the monitors, and sometimes also the Sunday school teachers, were asked to sit in the pews with the children. Misbehaving boys were on occasion taken out and subjected to corporal punishment. These actions upset not only the boys, but sometimes also their parents.

Monitors were also appointed to ensure orderliness on the church yard, and to discourage teenagers from loitering there. Since communion and some membership meetings were held after the Sunday morning worship service, non-members who were not allowed to participate or attend were left at loose ends. Those living close to the church were expected to walk home, but others had to wait until everyone in the family was ready to go home. Some, while waiting, got into mischief, for which they could be punished by vigilant monitors. Harder, albeit in a different context, thought spanking youngsters causing trouble was “entirely biblical” (*ganz biblisch*).<sup>10</sup>

Efforts to inculcate acceptable behaviour sometimes extended beyond the boundaries of the church. Yarrow had community monitors who acted as a vigilante police force when undesirable people, such as a woman alleged to be a prostitute, came to town. Individuals engaging in drunkenness, rowdiness, and other dubious behaviour also attracted the attention and corrective action of the vigilantes. These community monitors were not appointed by the church, although some were members and apparently had the tacit support of church leaders.<sup>11</sup>

On a more positive note, the ministry of the church was greatly enriched by music, which was treasured and lovingly nurtured. Participation in one of the choirs was a cherished privilege. It broadened the perspectives and religious experiences of singers and listeners alike, and enthusiastic reports abounded after major performances. There were, however, concerns when choirs, soloists, and instrumentalists turned to more difficult classical religious works. Some church members asserted that these performances, although

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<sup>9</sup> *YMBC Minutes*, 28 September and 5 December 1931 and 20 October 1940.

<sup>10</sup> *Loewen Collection*, file entitled “Harder Correspondence with His Wife and Children, J. A. Harder to Ihr lieben alle,” 19 May 1955.

<sup>11</sup> Harvey Neufeldt, “Creating the Brotherhood: Status and Control in the Yarrow Mennonite Community, 1928-1960,” in Donald H. Akensen, ed., *Canadian Papers in Rural History*, vol. 9 (Gananoque, ON: Langdale Press, 1964), 200.

ostensibly celebrating the glory of God, sometimes seemed to focus more on the achievements of the soloists, the conductor, and the choir. To them, the applause seemed to acknowledge human achievement rather than God's greatness and goodness. Thus, the Harders and other members of the *Vorberat* worried about the intent and consequences of professional voice and instrumental training. They were also uncertain whether those who had not



The senior choir of the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church, Conductor George Reimer, Pianist Martha Plett.

yet had a conversion experience could, with integrity, proclaim the Gospel message in song. Members of the *Vorberat* decided that only committed Christians should be allowed to sing in the church choirs. But enforcement of this ruling became controversial. The conductor of the youth choir said he could not discern the

commitments of individual singers and did not want to expel any choir members. Harder then met personally with several "unsaved" choir members to tell them that they would not be allowed to sing in church services.<sup>12</sup>

Even persons who had been converted could be excluded from participation in one of the choirs if they were deemed guilty of dubious or objectionable conduct. For example, a female choir member was allegedly guilty of inappropriate behaviour, although proof was lacking. Nonetheless, she was prohibited from singing in the choir. When her parents and brothers objected, they were told that she could only be readmitted if she, and also her parents and brothers, acknowledged their guilt and apologized for challenging a church membership decision. The relatives were told explicitly that explanations or self-justification would not be acceptable.<sup>13</sup> The simple fact

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<sup>12</sup> Jacob Loewen, "What Others Remember about Johannes A. Harder," *Loewen Manuscript*, 174.

<sup>13</sup> *YMBC Minutes*, undated [September 1937], and 28 September 1937.

that exclusion from one of the choirs became an instrument of church discipline attests to the popularity of the choirs.

Special family and community celebrations were also numerous. The Christmas Eve program and the special bags of treats handed out are fondly remembered, as are the rousing Easter salutation and response (both in Russian): "Christ is risen." "He is risen indeed." For Thanksgiving the sanctuary was adorned with harvested produce from the fields, orchards, and gardens. This celebration was combined with a special service focussing on missions, and the donations given at the morning and afternoon services were often very large. Proceeds usually went to missions, but in the early years some were sent to assist Mennonites still in Russia.<sup>14</sup>

When church members or others in the community suffered serious losses through fire, storms, floods, or other natural disasters, assistance was generously given.<sup>15</sup> The church was aware of the Christian responsibility to



Baptismal service by Yarrow Mennonite Brethren  
Church at Stewart Creek.

respond to special needs, and the Harders were both beneficiaries and practitioners of this practical form of Christian living.<sup>16</sup>

These diverse programs of the church, which included counselling, music, mutual aid, and hospitality, in addition to preaching and teaching, made it a spiritual

home in which hundreds made or renewed Christian commitments. Its embracing of a faith that was relevant to the circumstances of everyday life made the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church a vibrant community of believers. Thanks to the influence of the Harders and other church members, numerous individuals made life-changing commitments to the Christian faith and Christian discipleship during the years when the Harders were church leaders. Their guidance and instruction, given from an Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective, was much appreciated.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 19 October 1930.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 29 December 1929.

<sup>16</sup> Johannes Harder, *Story*, 43-44.

### **Dealing with imperfections**

Although the Harders were perfectionists, imperfections continued to be a reality for them and all members of their church. The Harders believed there were, however, acceptable ways of dealing with these imperfections. The sin and the sinner must be confronted. Confession and sincere repentance must follow. Forgiveness must be sought from God, from anyone who had been harmed or offended, and from the church. Doing so wiped the slate clean again. The spot was removed, and the wrinkles ironed out. Those who persisted in sinful behaviour must be expelled.

It was relatively easy to deal with obvious transgressions, for example, if someone had violated one of the Ten Commandments. It was much more difficult to deal in a redemptive way with lifestyle issues and practices about which members had differing opinions and convictions. Two broadly defined issues were particularly troublesome. The first pertained to control and suppression of various aspects of human sexuality; the second to an array of worldly or secular attitudes and activities.

### **The lusts of the flesh**

Harder and others took very seriously the admonitions in Galatians 5:16-17 and 24: "Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary one to the other. . . . And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts." Many other Scripture passages that conveyed the same message were cited. Sexual and other carnal desires were therefore regarded as being in conflict with spiritual aspirations and ideals. Sex was seen as God's gift for human procreation, but beyond that it was viewed as little more than a necessary but dangerous evil. Abstinence, except in marital relations, was very strongly emphasized. Church leaders sought to suppress or at least control sexual temptations and desires. In that regard, some of the recollections of those who were teenagers or young adults at the time are very harsh.

Some women were especially critical of Tina Harder. She feared that men were too weak to resist inadvertent or deliberately provocative female behaviour, attire, or personal adornments. Girls and young women must therefore exercise great care. Thus, Tina became one of the most vigilant guardians of appropriately demure female behaviour and apparel. A few

recollections, probably extreme, are indicative of the tone of some of these encounters. On one occasion at church Tina was critical of the dress of a young female and told the girl to “Go home and dress in something sensible.” (*Geh mal nach Hause und zieh dir was Vernuenftiges an.*)<sup>17</sup> A young mother bending over to change her infant’s diaper was admonished by Tina to keep her blouse buttoned to the top; and a former choir member reported that Tina sent notes if she thought a member’s skirt or sleeves were too short, or her legs not kept discreetly together in church. One member recalled getting into trouble when she had sewn a blouse for herself but did not have enough material for sleeves of the required length.<sup>18</sup> Tina insisted that she make the necessary alterations or add a wide cuff or ruffles. It mattered not at all whether the alterations matched the style of the dress. Low-cut necklines of dresses and blouses were not acceptable.

Tina’s earlier work as a matron in the Grossweide orphanage may have contributed to her efforts to regulate and control the behaviour of the girls and young women in the church. All those interviewed described her as very strict, authoritarian, and controlling.<sup>19</sup> She demanded more of herself and her daughters than of anyone else, but that did not significantly ameliorate the hurt and anger felt by those she reprimanded.

Other church leaders also focussed on issues of sexuality. Aron Rempel, the popular Sunday school teacher of a class of teenaged boys, was a very strong advocate of complete sexual abstinence outside of marriage. But he also explained to the boys that nocturnal emissions were normal and that they should not have misgivings about them. Although he emphasized self-control and restraint, he viewed sexual energy as normal.<sup>20</sup>

Those were not the views of Abram Nachtigal who did a great deal of spiritual counselling in the church. He subscribed to the pseudo-scientific writings of Dr. Sylvannus Stahl, Oscar Lowry, and John R. Rice. These writers insisted that all sexual activity—intercourse itself, masturbation, and nocturnal emissions—resulted in an outpouring of vital human physical, intellectual, and spiritual energy. Masturbation, it was alleged, often led to

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<sup>17</sup> Interview 5.

<sup>18</sup> Interview 6.

<sup>19</sup> Interviews 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 10.

<sup>20</sup> Information provided by Leonard Neufeldt who was a member of Rempel’s Sunday school class.

mental illness and criminal behaviour. This conclusion was based on the fact that closely supervised inmates of mental institutions and prisons were reportedly guilty of masturbation. The tone of this literature was blatantly anti-sexual.<sup>21</sup> But it fit the Mennonite Brethren concept of a conflict between the spiritual and carnal aspects of human life. Nachtigal eventually published a pamphlet advocating absolute sexual abstinence, except for purposes of procreation. He was particularly harsh in condemning masturbation (*Selbstbefleckung*).<sup>22</sup>

It is not clear how much of Nachtigal's interpretation of human sexuality Johannes Harder endorsed. His eldest son thinks that perhaps his father accepted some of those ideas, but he does not recollect his father ever expressing them to him.<sup>23</sup> Harder was, however, known to be very enthusiastic about his athletic prowess on the parallel bars, and had a set installed at his home in Yarrow. He learned those skills while at a *Zentralschule* in Russia. The athletic training in those schools was promoted because it fostered physical health, but also, in part, because it was thought to serve as an antidote to sexual impulses. It was more wholesome than the cold shower or avoidance of all red meat advocated by some of the above mentioned writers.

Harder's attitude regarding sex may have been less rigid than Tina's. One person interviewed recalled that Johannes Harder made critical comments about the rhythm method of birth control in Bible School. He allegedly said "*Frauen, die mit dem Kalender rechnen, dass ist nicht recht.*"<sup>24</sup> (Women who calculate by the calendar, that is not right). But he and the church refrained from enforcement of that view, and Harder encouraged at least one young woman to marry even though she wanted her husband to complete his studies before they had children.<sup>25</sup> Tina's attitude was less accommodating. She advised at least one young wife not to dress or undress in the presence of her husband lest that arouse him (*reitzen*).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Bliss, "Pure Books of Avoided Subjects: Pre-Freudian Sexual Ideas in Canada," *Canadian Historical Association Historical Papers, 1970* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1970), 89-108.

<sup>22</sup> A. Nachtigal, *Gesegnete Spatziergaenge eines Vaters mit seinem 14-jaerigen Sohn: Fuer Junglinge und reifere Knaben* (Yarrow, BC: Selbstverlag, 1947).

<sup>23</sup> John Harder interview.

<sup>24</sup> Interview 5.

<sup>25</sup> Interview 3.

<sup>26</sup> Interview 12.

Concerned about sexual temptations, the church leaders adopted numerous restrictive resolutions to regulate courtships. Dating and secret romances were denounced as contrary to the Word of God.<sup>27</sup> While the church did not overtly encourage arranged marriages, parental approval was emphasized. The Bible School, where students presumably concentrated on scriptural and spiritual matters, became a place where young people could get to know the appropriate virtues of members of the opposite sex. Choirs and youth activities provided other opportunities, as did visits in the homes. But church leaders thought there should be no public appearance of the couple together until their engagement was officially announced in church.

The church also set rigid standards for weddings in the church. It decreed that the bride must be dressed appropriately (*anstaendig*), that there be no bridesmaids, flower girls, ring bearers, best men, or maids of honour, and that at the reception after the wedding ceremony unmarried young people not sit as couples. The bridal couple must enter the sanctuary to the accompaniment of a hymn or anthem, not a “march.” Wedding ceremonies were to be conducted in an appropriate “spiritual” manner. No “fleshly elements” would be tolerated.<sup>28</sup> Prior inspection and approval or dictated alterations of the neck line or sleeve-lengths of the bridal gown, often by Tina, created resentment, but Johannes Harder refused to officiate if the gown was too revealing of features other than the spiritual virtues of the bride.<sup>29</sup>

Church leaders became particularly concerned if young people became involved in romantic relationships with persons who were not members of a church deemed truly Christian. Indeed, marriage with an “unsaved” person or a member of a church not practicing adult baptism by immersion became the single most frequent cause for expulsion from the church. In the early years of Harder’s leadership that policy was applied less rigidly than in subsequent years. A member who married a Baptist was usually placed on probation. In such cases, the church usually adopted a “wait and see” attitude, asking the person involved to absent him or herself for a time from communion and membership meetings.<sup>30</sup> Full membership privileges could be restored if the couple demonstrated an approved attitude and lifestyle. Those who married a

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<sup>27</sup> YMBC Minutes, 14 July 1935.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 12 March 1941.

<sup>29</sup> Interview 5.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., YMBC Minutes, 14 July 1935.



non-Christian, a Roman Catholic, or a member of any Protestant church not practicing adult baptism by immersion were expelled. They could be readmitted to membership some months later if they publicly apologized for having disregarded church rules. They were certainly not asked to disavow their marriage vows. It was not unusual for those subjected to this form of discipline to leave the church.

As for sexual conduct, the church's vigilance, unfortunately, did not prevent misconduct. Those guilty of sexual indiscretions, depending on the seriousness of the offence, were either expelled or denied access to communion and membership meetings for an unspecified period of time. Confession and genuine evidence of repentance had to occur before there could be a restoration to full membership. Thus, one young woman who had allegedly had sexual relations with two men was expelled despite expressions of sorrow and regret.<sup>31</sup> But nine months later, after a public and embarrassingly detailed apology before the congregation, and assurances by her parents and others that she had truly repented and changed her ways, she was readmitted.<sup>32</sup>

Another case, seemingly less serious, resulted in harsher treatment when the young woman and her parents resisted the disciplinary efforts of the church. In that case the young woman worked for a time in Vancouver, where she had allegedly lived in a dissolute manner (*in Unzucht gelebt*). Nothing could be proved, but she was subjected to church discipline because it was said that she had given a bad impression (*vom boesen Schein, den sie gegeben*). This ambiguous accusation upset not only the young woman but also her parents and extended family members. They were then also interrogated by church leaders, who insisted that all of them must apologize. They complied, but the young woman's apology was deemed perfunctory and therefore unsatisfactory. The church nevertheless agreed to forgive her, but with an "offer" to provide further "help" as needed.<sup>33</sup>

The case just mentioned stands in fairly sharp contrast to a seemingly more serious incident. One of the talented young men had dated an "unsaved" young woman and spent the night with her in a local hotel. He claimed the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 8 April 1934.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 27 January 1935.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., undated [September 1937], and 28 September, 10 October and 26 December 1937.

incident had not resulted in an ultimate consummation (*zum Aeussersten gekommen*), and was given an opportunity to appear before the membership. There he abjectly and humbly confessed his sin, claimed that he had found forgiveness from the Lord, and asked that the congregation also forgive him. The incident was first discussed at a special membership meeting held after a Sunday morning worship service. It was adjourned to a much longer evening meeting that same day at which doubts about the young man's sincerity were raised. There were to be further investigations of the affair. In the meantime, the offender was to absent himself from communion services and membership meetings. After the investigation and more appropriate expressions of repentance by the sinner, the congregation granted his request for restoration to full membership. This happened less than two months after the matter first came to the attention of the members.<sup>34</sup>

Pre- and extra-marital sex was unequivocally condemned. Those who transgressed had to apologize and, as a warning to others, explain to the congregation in considerable detail what had happened. The church also dealt with a number of couples who encountered marital problems. When dealing with such problems, Harder and other church leaders adopted a mixed approach. They believed and tried to impress on those in troubled marriages that it was their Christian duty to love one another, live together and, through the power of prayer and faith, overcome the problems. In difficult cases church leaders were often reluctant to leap immediately to judgement, choosing instead to adopt a waiting attitude while working with the couple. Usually expulsion came only if the person or persons involved became hostile or refused to cooperate and follow the advice of the church leaders. There was, however, no flexibility regarding the ultimate objective. Those with marital problems must learn to love and live with one another. Separation or divorce was not, under any circumstances, an acceptable option.<sup>35</sup>

This approach worked in some instances, but it created unusually serious problems in at least one case. A man whose marriage had failed had allegedly committed the sin of sodomy. He was visited a number of times, but

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 7 March 1943 (morning and evening) and 2 May 1943.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 9, 16 and 24 April and 9 July and 21 August 1932 document one difficult case. 29 September and 23 and 26 October 1935 deal with another case. A number of others could be cited.

eventually responded angrily, whereupon he was expelled on the basis of Romans 1:27, which condemns “men working with men that which is unseemly.” The wife, after rejecting reconciliation efforts, was also expelled. Expulsion, the resulting social isolation, and fear of eternal damnation led some months later to repentance, a public apology, another effort to live together, and readmission to church membership. But the effort failed. Husband and wife opted to live separately. The church leaders found this unacceptable. Sexual incompatibility was not justification for separation and certainly not for divorce. In such cases, particularly in view of an often confused understanding of human sexuality, celibacy was the prescribed solution. It therefore seemed appropriate to send preachers, no matter how old, who were themselves widowers to explain to the couple that celibate living was possible, albeit difficult. The couple’s failure to live together resulted in a second expulsion. Later the wife asked the church to forgive her and sought readmission as a church member. Living together with her husband seemed impossible, but she promised that she would nurse him if he became ill. Apparently the man was homosexual, although that was not a term used or a condition understood at the time. The church insisted that he live with his wife despite the serious incompatibilities. This demand created insurmountable problems for all concerned.<sup>36</sup>

### **Keeping out worldly intrusions**

Some Scripture passages, notably 1 John 2:15-16, warned not only against the lusts of the flesh but also about other physical and secular or worldly dangers: “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man loveth the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but of the world.” It seemed clear that the church could only remain pure and holy by keeping out so-called worldly intrusions. The church therefore formulated increasingly long lists of activities and places that members should avoid. The intent was to draw clear boundaries between sacred and worldly aspects of life.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 20 November and 10 December 1932, 1 October 1933, 25 October and 5 November 1939, 13 and 20 October 1940, 4 April 1943, 28 February 1944, and 14 April 1945.

Early Mennonite Brethren, like many other pietists and evangelicals, identified a number of specific activities, places, and attitudes as worldly. These included the consumption of alcoholic beverages, the use of tobacco, dancing, the reading of novels, attendance at movies and other places of public amusement, radio and later television dramas, bathing or swimming at public beaches, and membership in secret societies or in any organizations, including professional and labour unions, that resulted in “an unequal yoking of believers and unbelievers.”<sup>37</sup> Some other taboos in Yarrow in the 1940s and 1950s included roller skating, walking or driving in public with a person of the opposite sex, acting in “worldly” dramas or operettas, attending sports events on Sunday, reading comics, women wearing slacks, visiting hair dressers or protesting a husband’s physical/rhetorical abuse (unbiblical disobedience on her part), owning a TV, litigation, and any public show of affection between males and females, including husband and wife.

Enforcement of these taboos and prohibitions seemed feasible in the partially closed community of Yarrow, which had no liquor or tobacco stores, bars, theatres, or dance halls. But vigilance was required, especially when members ventured beyond the confines of their home, church, and community. Young people and some adults, in Yarrow as elsewhere, naturally tested the boundaries set by the church elders, especially if the prohibitions seemed rooted in past practices rather than contemporary realities. Surveillance became difficult, but church leaders resolutely set clear guidelines and rules for all church members. The Harders were reportedly exceptionally keen and perceptive observers of both specific actions and attitudes that might result in violations of church rules. One interviewee suggested that the Harders knew not only sins already committed but also those that members were about to commit.<sup>38</sup> Apparently Tina Harder was especially keen in discerning temptations to which teenaged girls might be vulnerable. Conclusive evidence that someone had violated church rules was, however, sometimes very difficult to obtain. Allegations that a young male church member had drunk a bottle of beer with others while laying sandbags during the 1948 flood, for example, could not be proved. It also became very difficult to substantiate allegations that some girls were applying barely detectable

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 19 February and 6 March, 1946.

<sup>38</sup> Interview 6

traces of lipstick or other cosmetics. It was even harder to distinguish between deodorants, scented deodorants, and perfumes. Legislating Christian behaviour obviously had its pitfalls.

During the time when the Harders led the church, there seemed little doubt that movie theatres and pool halls were places of worldly amusement. However, watching community baseball games seemed harmless to some, but was denounced as worldly entertainment by others. Some school activities, such as plays, concerts, and other performances that seemed harmless but conveyed no clear Christian message also posed problems.

Wartime patriotic exercises and fund-raising drives were regarded with great suspicion if they promoted military enlistments, but there was strong support for Victory bonds and other fund-raising efforts. In that regard, however, the Yarrow response was puzzling. The Canadian government, complying with requests by the Ontario-based Conference of Historic Peace Churches, created special non-interest-bearing bonds. Proceeds from the sale of these bonds would be used to support hospital, rehabilitation, and reconstruction projects. They would not be used to finance military operations. Yarrow residents, however, chose to purchase the interest-bearing war bonds, doing so in greater numbers on a per capita basis than members of most other communities in the province.

Mennonite church leaders in Yarrow believed separation from the outside world would be easier if they preserved the German language and a variety of cherished Mennonite cultural traits and practices. In his study of the language transition in Mennonite Brethren Churches in Canada, Gerald Ediger argues that “among the various challenges faced by the Mennonite Brethren Church in the middle of the twentieth century was the tension of faith and culture. In Canada, this issue was dominated by the language question. . . . Consistent with long established Mennonite practice, Mennonite Brethren felt the need to conserve and protect their historic heritage in a new, strange, and pluralistic society by hedging their congregations with strong boundaries.”<sup>39</sup> Harder’s attitude, at least in the early years, implied that the German language was an integral aspect of Mennonite Brethren faith and life.

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<sup>39</sup> Gerald Ediger, *Crossing the Divide: Language Transition among Canadian Mennonite Brethren, 1940-1970* (Winnipeg, MB: Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 2001), 1-2.

The language change, of course, took place in spite of the opposition of the Harders and other church leaders. Harder's resistance to language change was rooted in part on his misgivings about English evangelical theology and revivalist tactics. He rejected establishment of an English-language Mennonite Brethren church in Yarrow, even when asked to do so by leaders of the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church, who were under pressure to start an Alliance church in the community. And when he was warned that his own children might in time feel more at home in the English language than in the German he allegedly said, "If my children no longer want to speak German, then let them go."<sup>40</sup> Later in life, however, he occasionally preached in English.

### **Lesser blemishes**

Numerous minor disciplinary matters were dealt with quietly by the preachers or deacons. A few that came to the attention of the membership concerned personal or business disputes between members. In such cases, the church leaders generally tried to mediate. Recourse to lawyers or the courts was strongly discouraged.<sup>41</sup> But mediation efforts took up a good deal of Johannes Harder's time, as well as that of other preachers and deacons.<sup>42</sup> Harder admonished those involved in disputes and business practices that he regarded as contrary to the Word of God in no uncertain terms. But even irregular church attendance by some members was deemed worthy of counselling.<sup>43</sup> Repeated admonitions to attend mid-week prayer meetings and Bible studies failed to attract the desired number of participants.

In some matters, preachers and deacons were held to a higher standard than other members. Thus, when one preacher moved to the community and asked to be recognized as an active preacher by the church, he was told without the recording of any explanations in the church minutes that recognition would only be granted if he gave up work as a land agent.<sup>44</sup> On another occasion, when a member was ordained as a deacon, he resigned his position on the executive of the Mennonite-dominated Yarrow Growers Co-operative. He confessed to the church, without detailed explanation, that he

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<sup>40</sup> *Loewen Manuscript*, 183.

<sup>41</sup> *YMBC Minutes*, 13 November 1938.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 23 October 1935 and 28 November 1943.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 October, 1932, 18 February 1934, 5 January 1936, 4 September 1938.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 August 1931.

had participated in activities inappropriate for a deacon.<sup>45</sup> Another deacon resigned his position because of his wayward sons.<sup>46</sup>

Even very minor matters were sometimes taken up at congregational meetings. For example, it was alleged that a church member had put a used postage stamp on a letter. That matter was resolved when the member explained that the stamp had been pasted on an envelope which had not been mailed. He had removed and used it on another envelope.<sup>47</sup> In another case, a violation of one of the regulations of the Wartime Prices and Trade Board elicited a public confession, apology, and forgiveness, but with a promise from the individual that he would report the matter to the police. Another member illegally tapped into the electrical grid and had to apologize to the church and make restitution.<sup>48</sup> There was also a curious case in which a female member confessed, without going into any detail, that her behaviour had brought shame and dishonour to the church. The members, while noting that they were not familiar with her burdens, agreed to forgive her for whatever she had done.<sup>49</sup>

Church discipline was designed to help members walk in the narrow way of salvation, bring back members who strayed, and remove from the church those who were unwilling or unable to repent and seek forgiveness of their sins. The perfection sought by the Harders and other leaders in the church was not a church without sinners. All were sinners, but the church should be comprised entirely of forgiven sinners committed to a holy walk as understood by the church.

### **Resisting English evangelical wrinkles**

Mennonite Brethren leaders increasingly perceived another threat to the purity of their church and its separation from the world. North American English-preaching evangelists proclaimed a message similar but still somewhat different from that of the Mennonite Brethren. Mennonite Brethren had well-defined and strongly-held views regarding conversion and Christian discipleship. English non-Mennonite evangelists added some

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 13 December 1939

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 7 November 1936.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 1 and 19 March 1933.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 18 July 1937.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 13 February 1944.

unwelcome wrinkles. Harder and others thought English evangelistic services were shallow, emotional, and too reliant on popular styles of entertainment. Altar calls seemed to be staged and responses produced little more than an emotional high that could be repeated in subsequent altar calls. The lack of a strong emphasis on church membership was also troubling. Thus, already in 1937, reference was made at a membership meeting to the fact that the language transition of Mennonite Brethren in Oregon and California had resulted in increasingly shallow, superficial, and emotional Christian lifestyles.<sup>50</sup>

Concern increased when some members participated in services organized by inter-denominational evangelical organizations. Church leaders specifically denounced any organizations in which Pentecostals were active. Charismatic worship practices, particularly speaking in tongues, wild gesturing, and loud emotional expressions, were regarded as false doctrines (*Irrlehren*).<sup>51</sup> Unhappy memories of the excesses of the Movement of Exuberance (*Froehliche Richtung*) in early Russian Mennonite Brethren history probably accounted for some of the harsh criticism of Pentecostals.

North American English-language evangelistic services, while seeking to confront sinners, also seemed to resort to worldly styles of entertainment. A case in point was the piano playing, with its octave runs and improvisations, of Rudy Atwood on the Old Fashioned Revival Hour radio broadcasts and at evangelistic revival meetings. While the evangelical theology seemed sound, it was being proclaimed in a manner better suited to popular entertainment than true worship.

Both the format and the medium of evangelical radio broadcasts were also regarded with considerable suspicion. Many thought radios were instruments of worldly entertainment. Popular songs and radio dramas portrayed sinful or at least dubious lifestyles. Inserting the Gospel message into that mix challenged Mennonite concepts of separation from the world. This view gradually changed. In the 1950s Fred Harder participated and led early efforts by the Mennonite Brethren to produce their own radio broadcasts, and later Harder himself participated in radio broadcasts.

There were some very important issues on which North American evangelicals and Mennonite Brethren sharply disagreed. These pertained to

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 26 March 1937.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 6 and 20 March, and 2 April 1946.



distinctive Anabaptist and Mennonite doctrines. The evangelicals' support of war, military action, and patriotism, and their generally weak emphasis on baptism, church membership and discipline, and aspects of alleged worldliness were particularly troublesome. There were also cherished Russian Mennonite social and cultural practices, not promoted by North American evangelists, which some church members regarded as integral to a life of true Christian discipleship.

For all these reasons, the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church discouraged attendance at English-language evangelistic crusades and participation in organizations such as Youth for Christ and Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. When a number of young people ignored the warnings, Harder issued stern proscriptions expressing concern that the more rigorous and disciplined Bible studies and prayer meetings of the Yarrow church were not being well attended.<sup>52</sup>

### **Shifting boundaries**

Mennonite Brethren believed their church should be a pure and holy institution. They devised a rich array of programs designed to bring people to a conversion experience and then to guide and strengthen them in their subsequent Christian walk. Recognizing that members were fallible human beings, they set up a variety of rules and procedures designed to help members avoid sin and potentially sinful activities and places. If, despite these precautions, members fell into sin, there were ways to obtain forgiveness and thus remove the spots such failings might otherwise leave. Leaders and members also struggled with new and unfamiliar North American evangelical religious practices, seeking to preserve the purity and holiness of their church. Their rigid and legalistic strategies sometimes did considerable damage. The resulting religious legacy was spiritually rich, but in some respects also hurtful and controversial. The Harders provided leadership in a time of rapid change and held steadfastly to ideals that could only be imperfectly realized by any human institution.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 2 April 1946.

## Chapter 10

### Sharon Mennonite Collegiate Institute, 1945-1949<sup>1</sup>

The war had solved the problems of unemployment and the economic depression of the 1930s. However, as it drew to a close, Canadians, including Mennonites, began to think and worry about post-war economic instability and a relapse into depression. Some pinned their hopes on a return to farming. In that spirit the United States-based Mennonite Central Committee commissioned a special study to explore the possibilities of rural colonization in Canada.<sup>2</sup> But pioneering on marginal land held only limited appeal, particularly for Mennonite immigrants who had barely earned a living on blown-out prairie farms in the 1930s. In addition, the costs to start new farming operations were beyond the financial means of men returning from wartime alternative service. An effort by some Mennonites to raise funds to

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<sup>1</sup> The main sources for this chapter are the Minute Books of the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church (*YMBC Minutes*) and of the interchurch High School committee (*SMHSC Minutes*). There is some inconsistency in the financial and administrative information given in these two sources. The information also differs in some details from that given in other sources. These variations account for the detailed footnoting. The Minute Books were, of course, written in the German language. The translations of quoted passages are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Archives of the Mennonite Church, Goshen, IN., MCC Records, file IX-5-1, J. W. Fretz, "Report of My Trip to Canada to Study Mennonite Colonization," presented to the Executive Committee, 18 September 1943.

assist returning men failed miserably. Farming, therefore, was not a viable option for many.

Mennonites did not regard day labour, particularly if it involved working for non-Mennonite employers, as an attractive career choice either. Workers with conscientious scruples were sometimes pressured by their employers to make compromises. Thus, entering the professions or starting up independent businesses seemed better suited for those looking for remunerative work but wanting to retain a degree of independence and religious freedom. But professional work and business ventures required education beyond the elementary and junior high school level; as a result, young Mennonites were increasingly eager to go on to high school studies.

Johannes Harder and other immigrant Mennonite leaders had a very high regard for education. Many of them had benefited from education in one of the *Zentralschulen* in Russia and some, including Harder, had sought or been involved in professional work. Thus, they were not inclined to oppose secondary schooling for their young people. But they hoped to provide the needed opportunities within a Christian and Mennonite context.

Johannes Harder became the leader in efforts to establish a private Mennonite high school in Yarrow. Ambitious plans were made and expensive facilities were built. But adverse conditions resulted in the collapse of the project and, with it, Harder's pre-eminent place in the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church.

### **Dissatisfaction with the public high schools**

The Mennonite immigrants of the 1920s had accepted the fact that children of compulsory school attendance age must go to a public school. Locally-elected school boards in communities with a large Mennonite population had been able to exert considerable influence on elementary-level school programs. However, this was not possible in the case of the high schools, which were located in larger nearby communities where, particularly during the war, Mennonites were still regarded as outsiders. At the time, children were legally required to attend school only until the age of 14.

The high school closest to Yarrow during the war years was in Chilliwack, and some Mennonite students from Yarrow began to attend there in the early 1930s. But their experiences were not altogether happy, particularly during the war years. John Harder, who began his high school education in Chilliwack in

1939, recalls, "My teen years from 14-18 were deeply unsettling and disruptive for several reasons. My parents had decided to commence dairy farming in 1939 when I was completing Grade 8 in elementary school. That was also the year our Grade 8 class had been transferred from Yarrow to Chilliwack which necessitated riding the bus to school every day. It was also the year war broke out in Europe and our German-speaking young people were not treated with much affection in a predominantly English-speaking school community."<sup>3</sup>

Fred Harder, another son of Johannes and Tina Harder, writes somewhat vaguely about other undesirable aspects of school life in Chilliwack: "As living conditions changed and people became better off, some of the young people began to attend the Chilliwack High School. Very soon the spirit of that school became noticeable in the students' behaviour and outlook, and the leading Yarrow churchmen of the MB Church agreed that in order to develop Christian attitudes and character in their sons and daughters it was necessary to have a school which taught principles that were in accord with their faith."<sup>4</sup>

The dire economic problems of the pioneering and depression years lifted during the last years of the war. In the post-war era, increasing economic prosperity made it possible for Mennonites in several Canadian provinces to establish private high schools. Harder and other leaders in Yarrow hoped to establish such a school in their community. Other Mennonite church leaders in Abbotsford, Yarrow's rapidly growing rival, harboured similar hopes.

### **Establishment of a high school in South Abbotsford in 1944**

A small Mennonite delegation with representatives from several Fraser Valley Mennonite communities went to Victoria in 1943 to discuss the possibility of establishing their own private high school. The information they received was both encouraging and discouraging. The Department of Education would grant credit for high school classes taken in a private school if the teachers had prescribed qualifications and followed the provincial curriculum. The Department would not object if other non-credit classes were offered. But private high schools would not be eligible for public funding. Supporters of private schools would, however, still be required to pay public school taxes.

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<sup>3</sup> John Harder, "My Father," *Loewen Manuscript*, 124.

<sup>4</sup> Fred Harder, "Education in Yarrow," *ibid.*, 130.

The report of the delegates was followed quickly by the establishment of a planning committee with representatives from most of the Mennonite churches in the lower and central Fraser Valley. Early plans called for only grades 9 and 10 to be taught by F. C. Thiessen, an eminently qualified former *Zentralschule* teacher from Russia who had also taught in several Canadian Mennonite high schools.<sup>5</sup>

Yarrow leaders, coming from the largest Mennonite community in the valley, hoped the school would be built in their community. But Yarrow had no facility which could accommodate such a school, having only an overcrowded Bible School building adjacent to the church. In 1943, members had approved plans to build a 28 x 40 foot addition.<sup>6</sup> But it was not possible to proceed due to strict government wartime rationing of construction materials and supplies. Without the addition, it seemed impossible to accommodate even a small high school program in the fall of 1944.

The Mennonite Brethren Bible School in South Abbotsford had larger facilities. It seemed possible for a high school and Bible school to share those facilities and some suitable space in the nearby church building. Thus, after some renovations, high school instruction began in South Abbotsford in the fall of 1944.<sup>7</sup> (This initiative later became known as the Mennonite Educational Institute.) Students from all Mennonite communities were welcome, and all valley churches were asked to set a \$1.00 per member levy to cover the costs of the school.<sup>8</sup> The Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church paid its \$1.00 per member levy,<sup>9</sup> and 10 students from Yarrow enrolled in the South Abbotsford high school that first year.<sup>10</sup> Grades 9 and 10 and a few grade 11 courses were offered.

### **Yarrow initiatives in 1944-1945**

Yarrow promoters did not give up hope of having a private high school in their own community. A 10-acre plot of land was purchased in November of 1944 for \$5,000.00.<sup>11</sup> In December the church appointed its own high school

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<sup>5</sup> *Mennonite Encyclopedia IV*, 712.

<sup>6</sup> *YMBC Minutes*, March 1943.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 30 July 1944.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 August 1944.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 December 1944.

<sup>10</sup> Fred Harder, "Education in Yarrow," *Loewen Manuscript*, 130.

<sup>11</sup> *YMBC Minutes*, 13 December 1944.

committee, chaired by Harder,<sup>12</sup> and began a campaign to solicit donations and pledges.

Meanwhile, the church's Bible school committee altered its construction plans. Instead of proceeding with the original plan to build an addition to the existing building, it purchased a half-acre plot adjacent to the church and had the basement for a new Bible and Sunday school building excavated.<sup>13</sup> But because of shortages, cement and other essential building materials and supplies were still not available. As a result, neither the Bible school committee nor the high school committee could proceed with their construction plans in 1944 or early 1945.

The Yarrow high school committee nevertheless made plans to begin high school classes in September of 1945. The old Bible school building was moved to the back of the church property and two other old buildings were moved onto the site.<sup>14</sup> These three buildings, along with some of the facilities in the church, were to provide space for both the high school and the Bible school.

The high school committee had expected about 25 students<sup>15</sup> to apply, but was overwhelmed when, by September of 1945, 150 students had applied for admission to the high school and 59 wanted to take Bible school classes.<sup>16</sup> This enrolment, of course, greatly exceeded the capacity of all the available space. But by means of temporary arrangements, all classes were accommodated. The grade 12 classes began in a damp unfinished basement, but this site presented a serious health hazard. Somewhat better classroom space was provided when an old machine shed was purchased and moved onto the site.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the loft of an old barn on the 10-acre plot purchased for the high school was cleaned and its broken windows were replaced. It subsequently became a facility for indoor sports activities.

Recruiting qualified teachers for such a large student body posed very serious problems. Based on early projections, the committee had hired only

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> *YMBC Minutes*, 19 August 1944.

<sup>14</sup> Fred Harder, "Education in Yarrow," *Loewen Manuscript*, 131-132.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>16</sup> *YMBC Minutes*, 23 October 1945.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. See also Petrus Martens, "British Columbia, Yarrow," *Zionsbote*, 7 November 1945.

one qualified high school teacher, J. R. Friesen.<sup>18</sup> Two Bible school teachers, C. C. Peters and C. D. Toews, were expected to teach both their Bible school classes and the non-credit high school classes. Toews, who was certified to teach elementary and junior high classes, might be able to assist in the high school.

When it became obvious that original enrolment expectations would be significantly higher than expected, the high School committee began a desperate search for another qualified high school teacher. Fortunately, Peter and Ann Andres and their family were planning to move to British Columbia. Peter, a qualified teacher with a B. A. degree from the University of Saskatchewan, was quickly appointed to teach in the new Mennonite high school.<sup>19</sup> Then, only a week before classes started, J. Penner, a former teacher who had taken up farming near Chilliwack, accepted an appointment to teach in the new high school.<sup>20</sup> When, six weeks later, Bible School instruction began, Mr. J. Rogalsky from Los Angeles, California, was hired to assist Peters and Toews.

On 17 September 1945, a solemn dedication service of the new high school took place. Instruction began on 24 September. Despite the inadequate facilities, students and teachers were eager to make the school a success. A student council was elected, various activities were organized, and a small student paper was started. In addition to the high school courses, non-credit instruction was provided in choral music, Bible, German, Psychology, and Mennonite History.

The school suffered a serious disruption on 12 November 1945 when the old Bible school building caught fire and burned to the ground. The considerable financial loss was covered partly by insurance.<sup>21</sup> Government permission was obtained to buy the lumber and supplies needed to rebuild. The site was cleared, and reconstruction began immediately, proceeding with exceptional speed. One report stated that “at 7:30 one could only see the ashes. By 8:00 o’clock the place was cleaned up, and at 9:00 the walls were up and

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<sup>18</sup> Fred Harder, “Education in Yarrow,” *Loewen Manuscript*, 132.

<sup>19</sup> Maryann Tjart Jantzen, “Ann Vera Rempel Andres: Reinventing Mennonite Womanhood,” in Robert Martens, Maryann Tjart Jantzen, and Harvey Neufeldt, eds., *Windows to a Village: Life Studies of Yarrow Pioneers* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2007), 278.

<sup>20</sup> Fred Harder, “Education in Yarrow,” *Loewen Manuscript*, 132.

<sup>21</sup> *YMBC Minutes*, November and 9 December 1945.



The Bible school building was the temporary home of the high school.

half the rafters in place. By the evening of the second day the new house stood before us. Students were able to move into the new building in a few weeks.”<sup>22</sup>

Student achievements, particularly those of the seven grade 12 graduating students, earned high praise from the District Superintendent.<sup>23</sup>

Included in the student body were a number of highly motivated older students, some of whom had recently returned from alternative or other wartime service. Many of them enrolled in a special accelerated Grade 9X class. The private Mennonite high school in Yarrow, despite serious difficulties, was off to a good start.

### **Enlarging the support base, 1946**

The response of students and teachers to the opening of the new high school, and the remarkably prompt reconstruction of the Bible and Sunday school building, generated great enthusiasm in Yarrow for the construction of a large new high school building on the 10-acre site that had been purchased earlier. But since the construction and operation of an excellent high school would be very expensive, the Yarrow committee decided to contact leaders and members of nearby Mennonite Brethren churches, inviting them to participate. Specifically, the committee proposed a partnership between the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church and the churches at Sardis (known today as Greendale), East Chilliwack, and Arnold.<sup>24</sup> Members of those churches, however, pointed out that their students would only be able to attend the school in Yarrow if a bus system was provided. Consequently, bus transport became an integral part of the subsequent inter-church partnership.

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<sup>22</sup> Petrus Martens, “British Columbia, Yarrow,” *Zionsbote*, 12 December 1945. See also *YMBC Minutes*, 24 November and 9 December, 1945.

<sup>23</sup> Agatha E. Klassen, ed., *Yarrow: A Portrait in Mosaic* (Yarrow, BC: A. E. Klassen, 1980), 103.

<sup>24</sup> *YMBC Minutes*, 18 December 1945, SMHSC, 4 and 13 February 1946.



On 18 December 1945, the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church agreed to enter into the proposed partnership.<sup>25</sup> Representatives of the four churches met on 4 February 1946.<sup>26</sup> The Yarrow representatives offered to donate the ten acres of land and to share in the transportation costs of students from the other three communities. In return, the other participating churches would accept responsibility, proportional to their membership, for the construction and operation of the school. The Sardis (Greendale) church agreed immediately. East Chilliwack was fearful of the costs but agreed to join the partnership. Support in the Arnold church was divided. Some backed the Yarrow school; others, the one in South Abbotsford. As a result, the Arnold church eventually declined to join the partnership, although some families supported the Yarrow school and sent their students to it. A new High School committee, with five representatives from Yarrow, three from Sardis (Greendale) and two from East Chilliwack, was created. Johannes Harder was named as chairperson.<sup>27</sup>

The minutes make no reference to any efforts to include individuals or leaders from non-MB Mennonite churches in the partnership. Thus, the Yarrow school differed from the Russian Mennonite *Zentralschulen* and several other Canadian Mennonite private high schools. Even the Mennonite Educational Institute in South Abbotsford, while also a Mennonite Brethren initiative, attracted non-Mennonite Brethren support and student participation. That school's first principal, F. C. Thiessen, had taught in both Mennonite Brethren and Conference of Mennonites in Canada schools and thus enjoyed broad inter-Mennonite goodwill. In contrast, the Yarrow leaders opted for a partnership of three Mennonite Brethren churches. Later a second Mennonite Brethren church organized in Chilliwack joined the partnership.

### **Delays and interim arrangements in 1946-1947**

The inter-church High School committee hoped to begin construction as soon as possible in order to have a new building ready by the fall of 1946. On 13

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<sup>25</sup> *YMBC Minutes*, 18 December 1945.

<sup>26</sup> *SMHSC Minutes*, 4 February 1946.

<sup>27</sup> *YMBC Minutes*, 9 February 1946. Johannes Harder reported in considerable detail on the work of the High School committee at membership meetings of the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church. As a result, the *YMBC Minutes* sometimes contain more and sometimes slightly different detailed information than the *SMHSC Minutes*.

February 1946, the committee instructed Harder and others to visit and report on school buildings in Vancouver and Burnaby that might serve as models for the proposed Yarrow building.<sup>28</sup>

Early estimates called for a cost of between \$50,000.00 and \$60,000.00.<sup>29</sup> Those figures were however almost immediately increased to an amount not exceeding \$100,000.00 when it was decided to include instruction in grades 7 and 8.<sup>30</sup>

Financing was to be provided through voluntary donations and pledges. If additional funds were needed, the matter was to be resolved in a brotherly manner.<sup>31</sup> The amount to be raised by each church was to be proportional to its membership. Church leaders then calculated the average contributions needed from each member. They knew that some members lacked the necessary resources to make such payments. Others would have to pay more than the average which was initially set at approximately \$50.00 per member.<sup>32</sup> When grades 7 and 8 were added, this amount was increased to \$77.00 per member, and total expenditures of not more than \$100,000.00 were authorized.<sup>33</sup>

The plans, as eventually approved by the committee in consultation with the teachers, called for a new 14-classroom building. It would have a large gymnasium-auditorium with a stage, showers and change-rooms, science laboratories, a music room, some kitchen and home economics facilities, typing rooms, a library, an office, and storage facilities.<sup>34</sup>

The inter-church High School committee decided not to hire a general contractor, but to create a Building Committee comprised first of four, then later five, building supervisors (*Baumeister*). Two, and later three, of these were to be appointed by the Yarrow church and one each by the Sardis and East Chilliwack churches.<sup>35</sup> But the two Yarrow members resigned almost immediately, citing health problems.<sup>36</sup> They were quickly replaced, but having

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<sup>28</sup> *SMHSC Minutes*, 13 February 1946.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 February 1946.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 March, 1946, *YMBC Minutes*, 19 February and 6 March 1946.

<sup>31</sup> *YMBC Minutes*, 19 February 1946.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Agatha Klassen, *Yarrow*, 103 and 106.

<sup>35</sup> *YMBC Minutes*, 6 March and 2 April, 1946.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 March 1946.

five building supervisors caused considerable confusion, some cost increases, and, on occasion, serious disagreements.<sup>37</sup>

Committee members expected costs to be reduced if much of the labour was done by members of the three churches. Specifically, each designated labourer was expected to work at least three, and later five, days. Those unable or unwilling to work on the project were expected to contribute \$5.00 for each of their designated workdays. However, there was considerable confusion about the work assignments. Some members were not called when they were available. Others did not work the requested number of days or pay the \$5.00.<sup>38</sup> And more of the work than anticipated required professional trades people, which resulted in increased costs.

In early 1946, construction was stymied by the lack of sufficient building material and supplies. By July it was obvious that, due mainly to the shortage of cement needed for pouring the foundation, the High School building could not be completed in time for the start of the new school year in September. Prospects for the completion of the proposed new Bible School building were more encouraging, particularly if all the available lumber and other supplies were used for that building. Therefore, the inter-church High School committee and the Yarrow Bible School committee agreed to give priority to construction of the Yarrow church's new Bible and Sunday School building. Harder, as chair of the inter-church High School committee and the leader of the Yarrow church, represented both parties to the agreement. Materials and supplies intended for the High School building were loaned to the Yarrow church which erected a two-storey building to accommodate both the high school and Bible school classes until the new High School building could be constructed.<sup>39</sup> Additional space was provided in the two old houses, the machine shed, and the old barn used the previous year. The new Bible and Sunday School building was completed by the beginning of high school instruction in September of 1946.

The High School committee was again astounded and nearly overwhelmed when 327 students sought admission.<sup>40</sup> The committee's efforts to find

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<sup>37</sup> *SMHSC Minutes*, 8 April 1948.

<sup>38</sup> *YMBC Minutes*, 2 April 1946.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, July 1946 and *HSK Minutes*, undated but clearly also July 1946.

<sup>40</sup> *SMHSC Minutes*, 7 October 1946. Klassen, *Yarrow*, 103, gives an enrolment figure of 364 students.

qualified teachers were hurried and somewhat uncoordinated, and once again the available facilities were severely strained. The first priority was the hiring of teachers qualified to teach the accredited High School courses, after which teachers for the non-credit courses had to be found. Several Bible School teachers, appreciative of the longer high school term, agreed to teach non-credit courses in the high school. But this development created staffing problems for the Yarrow church's Bible School committee, which operated separately from the inter-church High School committee. Difficulties were exacerbated when the High School committee implemented the salary structure of the Chilliwack Public School Board for its High School teachers<sup>41</sup> while paying the other teachers a lower salary. In addition, one of the Bible School teachers, who had been recruited very late in 1945, encountered significant problems with class discipline and other issues that were attributed to his deafness. Harder, as chairperson of the High School committee and leader of the Yarrow church, handled the difficult termination proceedings.<sup>42</sup>

The introduction of a bussing system in the fall of 1946 created innumerable headaches. The inter-church High School committee had hoped that private entrepreneurs would provide the service on a non-profit or modest profit basis.<sup>43</sup> When this did not materialize, some committee members suggested that the teachers<sup>44</sup> or some of the older students could drive the buses. A few older students were recruited, but their sometimes uncertain and confused efforts did not solve the problems.

The committee had only one old bus in operation when the school term began. Within days a wheel fell off the bus.<sup>45</sup> There was no backup. Nor did the committee have a competent mechanic to keep the old bus in operation. A new bus was purchased, but three more buses were needed. A second old bus was obtained, but like the first it was not mechanically reliable. Students complained about the long wait times caused by the poor condition of the buses and the layout of the routes. Those using the service were expected to pay \$2.00 per month. The unsatisfactory service made collecting the fees difficult. Several of the older students, including John Harder, were asked to

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<sup>41</sup> YMBC Minutes, 28 August 1946.

<sup>42</sup> SMHSC Minutes, 27 December 1947 and 7 February 1947.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 5 and 28 March 1946.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 12 September 1946.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 26 September 1946.

help with the collection of bus fees.<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, poor service undermined the goodwill of the affected communities.

Initially, both the South Abbotsford and the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren high schools were referred to as the Mennonite Educational Institute. Such duplication posed problems. Thus, in the spring of 1947, a contest was held to find a new name for the Yarrow school. The name "Sharon Mennonite Collegiate Institute," submitted by a grade 10 student, was chosen.<sup>47</sup> The school was then incorporated, signifying government recognition and acceptance of the new private Mennonite high school. But the school was still operating in crowded and inadequate facilities. A new structure was urgently needed.

### **Construction, escalating costs, and financing, 1946-early 1948**

The High School committee held a series of preparatory and planning meetings in July and August of 1946; construction work began as soon as the necessary material and supplies became available. The first fund-raising drive was initiated before construction started, setting a target of \$40,000.00 in donations and pledges. This effort yielded between \$35,000.00 and \$40,000.00.<sup>48</sup> The committee also established a line of credit with a local bank.<sup>49</sup> These resources were sufficient for the limited construction work done in 1946. But once construction supplies and materials became available, committee members were dismayed to discover that prices had increased by roughly 25 percent.<sup>50</sup> These increased costs forced the committee to increase total donation and pledge targets to \$110.00 per member, \$10.00 of which was designated for anticipated operating deficits.<sup>51</sup> None of the supporting churches could raise the needed money as quickly as the committee had hoped.

Nevertheless, construction proceeded rapidly in 1947. However, by the late summer of 1947, the available funds were exhausted.<sup>52</sup> The High School committee was then faced with the question of whether to halt all further

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 15 November 1946.

<sup>47</sup> Agatha Klassen, *Yarrow*, 103.

<sup>48</sup> *SMHSC Minutes*, 19 March 1946; *YMBC Minutes*, 20 April 1946.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 5 March 1946.

<sup>50</sup> *YMBC Minutes*, October 1946.

<sup>51</sup> *SMHSC Minutes*, 7 October 1946.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 29 July 1947.

expenditures until more funds became available. But if that was done, it would not be possible to open the building for the 1947-1948 school year. So the committee urged the churches to redouble fund-raising efforts and to negotiate new short-term bank loans. Construction would continue, but expenditures would be kept as low as possible. For Harder, the chairperson of the High School committee, the project became a work of faith. However, he did not look for miraculous divine intervention, believing that if every church member would pay his or her fair share, there would be more than enough money.

Because the building was not quite ready for occupation in September, classes were held in the Bible School building for several weeks.<sup>53</sup> Much work still remained to be done when teachers and students moved into the new building. Carpenters still had to frame and hang windows and doors, build some tables and desks, and do the mill work.<sup>54</sup>



The Sharon Mennonite Collegiate Institute.

Moving the teachers and students into the new school building did not ameliorate the committee's financial difficulties. A crisis arose in November 1947 when several large short-term bank loans matured.<sup>55</sup> This situation resulted in the allocation of the total costs and all outstanding construction debts to the three supporting churches. Thereafter, each church would need to raise or borrow the money needed to cover its share of the costs. In November of 1947, total construction costs were reported to be \$129,330.00. Yarrow's share was \$85,325.00.<sup>56</sup> Substantial sums had been raised through voluntary donations and pledges, but each of the supporting churches also negotiated short-term bank loans. When the Yarrow church's bank loans matured, members were subjected to intense pressure to make additional donations, and also to sign personal promissory notes as collateral for an extension of the bank loan.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *YMBC Minutes*, 25 August 1947.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 November 1947.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 and 5 November 1947.

<sup>56</sup> *SMHSC Minutes*, 4 November 1947. Some of the churches had borrowed money earlier to pay their share of the construction costs. The Yarrow church, for example, had negotiated a bank loan in 1946 against the security of money pledged by members.

<sup>57</sup> *YMBC Minutes* 5 and 12 November 1947.

Massive cost overruns were partly to blame for the growing financial crisis. But the financial problems were also attributable to less than wholehearted support in the participating churches. The Yarrow MB church minutes of April 1946 state that 100 families in the Yarrow church had not made any contribution in the first fund-raising drive.<sup>58</sup> The reluctance of church members to participate in later fund-raising efforts was even more evident. Less than a third of the members were willing to sign the personal promissory notes requested in November of 1947.

Harder had little patience with those who could afford to pay but refused to do so. In his view, all members must honour all decisions made by the congregation, whether or not they were in agreement. Members of each supporting church had endorsed the project and subsequently voted to allocate costs on a per-member basis. It was therefore the responsibility of every member to make the required payments, and the church had not only the right but the duty to compel those who failed to comply. The church *Steuer* (tax) was designed to ensure that all members paid their fair share. But it became increasingly difficult to enforce the tax which some regarded as unfair. Others were unwilling to support financially the increasingly expensive high school project. The church responded by drawing up lists of those who had not paid their church taxes. Eventually, these names were read out to the membership. While this action persuaded some members to comply, it also roused considerable animosity.

At the height of the controversy, an agitated member launched a harsh personal attack on Harder. He accused the church leader and chairperson of the High School committee of beating him to death spiritually and of lying to the congregation. The specific charge was that Harder had stated that the Sardis (Greendale) church had raised and paid a specified sum of money. Apparently, the church had raised and approved the transfer of the funds, but the transfer had not yet taken place. Harder, in reply, said he knew of the Sardis church's approval to send the money, but had mistakenly reported that it had been received. The specific issue under debate was less serious than the underlying animosity.<sup>59</sup>

Construction, however, advanced sufficiently so that the teachers and students could move into the new building in the late fall of 1947. While some

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 20 April 1946.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 18 and 23 October and 2 November 1948.

supporters had been generous, others had contributed only grudgingly. Thus, large debts still remained. Harder was one of the most generous donors and guarantors. His son David later wrote that the annual income of the Harder dairy farm at that time was approximately \$6,000.00 and that, for several years, his father gave at least \$2,000.00. Harder's generosity resulted in delays in paying off the mortgage on the family farm.<sup>60</sup>

### **Operating deficits**

The financial woes of the school were aggravated by operational deficits, both by the school and by the bussing system. The committee had to strike a delicate balance when setting tuition fees. If the fees were too high, some parents would find it very difficult to send their children to the school. It soon became clear, however, that the fees set by the committee would result in a shortfall of about \$10.00 per student. Consequently, when the committee increased the estimated cost of construction to \$100.00 per member, it added a further \$10.00 per member to cover the operating deficit.<sup>61</sup> Then, in the school's first year, the committee "borrowed" \$4,500.00 from the building fund to cover the operating deficit. If all tuition fees were paid, the remaining deficit would be only \$3,000.00; therefore the committee became quite aggressive in its efforts to collect unpaid tuition fees.

In November of 1947, at the height of the construction financing crisis, the committee faced an even larger \$6,000.00 operating deficit. Cannibalizing building funds was, of course, no longer possible. So the committee retroactively added \$10.00 to the tuition fees of every student.<sup>62</sup> It was not easy to collect this money at a time when desperate fund-raising efforts were underway to cover construction costs. The following year, collecting some unpaid tuition fees became virtually impossible.

### **Staffing crisis in September of 1947**

Efforts to deal with the serious financial problems and other tensions precipitated a leadership crisis in the school just before the start of classes in September of 1947. The purchase of some equipment and supplies deemed essential by the teachers was deferred. In addition, the committee suggested

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<sup>60</sup> David Harder, "My Father," *Loewen Manuscript*, 141.

<sup>61</sup> *SMHSC Minutes*, 7 October 1946.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 November 1947.



that the teachers accept non-teaching responsibilities such as supervising the playground after school hours. J. H. Friesen, the Principal, had to make decisions based on suggestions and demands by the committee. The situation was made even more difficult because instruction would have to take place in the Bible and Sunday School building for at least three weeks. Major disruptions would occur when the teachers and students moved into the new school building. Construction activities would continue, and some essential facilities such as the science laboratories would not yet be available.

The teachers complained that Friesen did not consult them before making important decisions. They criticized him for not acting collegially, suggesting he was therefore not the right person for the position. The situation became so acrimonious that the High School committee instructed Harder to discuss the problems with Friesen. Harder did so, and the next day the Principal resigned, citing loss of confidence in him by the committee. The committee accepted the resignation, and appointed a teacher who had not yet arrived in Yarrow as Acting Principal. However, the committee also accepted the outgoing Principal's offer to continue as a teacher, asking him to assist the new Acting Principal in making the necessary preparations for the new school year.<sup>63</sup>

The move into the new school building was thus a time of considerable turmoil. Committee members and other school supporters were, nevertheless, confident that the school's operating, financial, and staffing problems would be ameliorated once construction was completed and teachers and students had settled into the new building. Harder struck an optimistic note in his 1947 year-end report to the church.<sup>64</sup> He cited Nehemiah 2:18: "And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work." Harder acknowledged continuing financial problems and the difficulties in finding academically qualified Christian teachers, but concluded the report with "*Wunderbar hat der Herr geholfen.*" (Wonderfully the Lord has helped.)

### **The economic disasters of 1948**

The optimism of late 1947 was short-lived. In the spring of 1948 the community and the school faced two unrelated economic disasters. The market for raspberries, which had become one of the most profitable export

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 26 August and 2 September 1947.

<sup>64</sup> YMBC Minutes, 18 December 1947.

crops grown by Yarrow farmers, collapsed.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, in June the community had to contend with a disastrous flood.<sup>66</sup> Some families and districts were hit harder than others. Dairy farmers such as the Harders were not seriously affected by the collapse of the raspberry market, and most of the village of Yarrow escaped the flood that inundated Sardis (Greendale) and many valley farms. But the impact on the Sharon Mennonite Collegiate Institute was immediate and very serious. During the flood, many of the older students, together with their parents and any other able-bodied people in the community, assisted with the work on the dykes. A significant number of students from families whose farms had been flooded stayed home after the flood to help with the necessary recovery and rehabilitation work. Parents of students who returned to school were preoccupied with pressing problems at home. Few were in a position or frame of mind to deal with outstanding school tuition fees and the problems associated with the large debts incurred in the construction of the new school building.

The school escaped serious flooding, but the high water table threatened the stability of the foundation. An expensive new drainage system had to be built to avert serious damage. Thus, additional money had to be spent even as the committee desperately looked for ways to reduce costs. The expensive bussing system was carefully reviewed, but it was difficult to achieve significant savings and still provide adequate service. Reduction or cancellation of the service would affect enrolments and financial support from the affected districts. So the bussing system was continued.

The opening of the new school building resulted in another, apparently unforeseen, expense. Municipal authorities assessed annual municipal taxes of somewhere between \$2,500.00 and \$2,800.00 on the new building. The committee's strenuous efforts to gain a tax exemption, including the hiring of legal counsel and appeals to the provincial government in Victoria, were unsuccessful.<sup>67</sup>

The committee also appealed to the provincial government to fund the cost of grade 7 and 8 students for whom school attendance was compulsory. This appeal was also rejected. But, perhaps in response to this request, the

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<sup>65</sup> T. D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970*, 109-116.

<sup>66</sup> Agatha Klassen, *Yarrow*, 63-68.

<sup>67</sup> *SMHSC Minutes*, 24 August, 18 November and 21 December 1948.

Municipality of Chilliwack announced plans to build a new junior high school on its western edge. Such a facility might well attract grade 7 and 8 students who would otherwise come to Sharon.<sup>68</sup> In an effort to raise money needed to pay the teachers at least a portion of their salaries for May and June, every parent was asked to pay, retroactively, an additional \$10.00 per student fee. The response was weak.

Planning for the 1948-1949 school year was fraught with great uncertainty. It was clear that enrolments would be significantly lower. Raspberry farmers and those who had suffered serious flood damage could not afford the tuition and bussing fees. The committee appealed, with moderate success, to the Mennonite Central Committee and the General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches in North America for funding to assist with the tuition payments of students whose homes and/or farms had been flooded.<sup>69</sup>

Anticipated enrolment declines meant that the teaching staff had to be reduced. Before the flood, Harder had contacted several experienced teachers who had become dissatisfied with their situation at the Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Gretna, Manitoba. The committee hoped to hire two of these teachers to replace others who were leaving. These new teachers would have strengthened the staff considerably, but shortly after the flood Harder had to advise them not to come to Yarrow, since the committee could no longer promise them employment.<sup>70</sup>

It was under these severely restrained circumstances that the committee decided to continue instruction with seven teachers rather than the previous ten. An operating deficit seemed inevitable and would have to be covered by the supporting churches. Initially 240 students registered for the 1948-1949 school year. Later, perhaps in response to tuition assistance programs, 28 more students registered.<sup>71</sup>

### **Closure and sale of the Sharon Mennonite Collegiate Institute**

In December of 1948 the school ran out of money and options. Despite new efforts to raise money it was no longer possible to pay all the operating costs.

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<sup>68</sup> *YMBC Minutes*, 25 January 1948.

<sup>69</sup> *SMHSC Minutes*, 15 September and 18 November 1948.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 June 1948.

<sup>71</sup> *YMBC Minutes*, 17 December 1948.

And so, on 12 January the High School committee suggested, and on 25 January 1949, the Yarrow congregation agreed by a vote of 137 to 34,<sup>72</sup> to sell the school. There was only one prospective purchaser: the Chilliwack Public School Board.

A few days after the vote by the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church, the High School committee set out terms under which it was willing to sell the school. The asking price of \$188,000.00 was apparently based on calculations showing that the cost of constructing the building had been \$167,878.85. Furniture and fixtures were valued at \$10,490.80, the buses at \$23,279.91, and the land at \$5,000. These figures came to a total of \$206,649.56, without allowing for depreciation of the building, furniture, fixtures, and the buses.<sup>73</sup> The committee also asked that the teachers be retained, that the building not be used for dances and school socials, and that Mennonite teachers be allowed to provide non-credit instruction in German and religious subjects.<sup>74</sup> The Chilliwack Board turned down all the suggested conditions and countered with an offer of \$78,000.00, or \$85,000.00 if the best bus was included.<sup>75</sup>

The Mennonite High School committee described this counter-offer as infuriating (*empoerend*). Nevertheless, after lengthy discussion, committee members realized that they had run out of options and so, very reluctantly, they agreed to sell the school for \$100,000.00.<sup>76</sup> The Chilliwack Board countered with an offer of \$95,000.00 which was accepted by the High School Committee under the conditions that the Chilliwack Board would take over the school on 1 April 1949 and pay the teachers' salaries for May and June.<sup>77</sup> The churches would accept responsibility for the February and March salaries.

However, purchase of the school required approval by the Chilliwack ratepayers, who rejected the proposition in a vote held in July of 1949. But members of the Chilliwack Board remained interested, suggesting that the building in Yarrow be converted to accommodate the Chilliwack Board's proposed new Junior High School. But it would take time to obtain the

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<sup>72</sup> SMHSC Minutes, 12 January 1949; YMBC Minutes, 25 January 1949.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., loose page with the minutes of 28 January 1949.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 28 January 1949. At this meeting, cost of the building was set at \$174,000.00

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 22 March 1949; YMBC Minutes, 22 March 1949.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 22 March 1949.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 8 April 1949.

necessary approvals. In the meantime, the Mennonite High School committee members asked the Chilliwack Board to rent the facility on an interim basis and pay only what was needed to cover the municipal taxes. The Chilliwack Board declined, and the High School committee sold one of its buses to pay the taxes.

A desperate final effort to save the school led to the organization of a new committee. This new body obtained an agreement from the old committee to transfer the property if the new committee would maintain and operate the school. The churches, on the other hand, would accept responsibility for all the debts. The new committee was to be broadly inter-Mennonite, and ex-students under the leadership of Fred Harder offered their support. But the well had been poisoned. The proposal failed due to insufficient support.

Instruction at the Sharon Mennonite Collegiate Institute ceased at the end of the 1948-1949 school year. After that the still not quite completed building stood empty, subject to the ravages of wind and weather. But discussions with the Chilliwack School Board continued. At one point the Chilliwack negotiators demanded a promise by the Mennonites that they would never again try to start a rival private high school. Such a provision would have been difficult if not impossible to enforce, and thus the proposal was dropped. The final sale price agreed to by both sides, excluding separate arrangements for some of the furnishings and moveable assets, was \$60,000.00.

### **A failed venture**

Harder was the most prominent, enthusiastic, and generous promoter of the Sharon Mennonite Collegiate Institute. The closure of the school left him disillusioned and deeply discouraged. He was convinced that, even in the difficult financial circumstances after the flood and the collapse of the raspberry market, church members had the necessary resources to ensure the survival of the school. However, the financing of the school had not been based on a careful assessment of available funding. The project lacked united and consistent support, in part because of resentment related to the setting and collecting of church taxes and levies. In addition, construction costs had greatly exceeded early estimates, and attempting to raise funds through calculations on a per-member basis tended to be counterproductive. Increasingly aggressive collection and fund-raising initiatives had been met with antipathy or hostility.

Harder had a hard time understanding what had gone wrong. In his reports he repeatedly emphasized the blessings and benefits of the school. In September of 1948, for example, he pointed out that of the recent 59 baptismal candidates in the Yarrow church, many had been saved or had their faith strengthened while attending the Sharon Mennonite Collegiate Institute.<sup>78</sup> Later he told a friend: "My great dream for the Yarrow Church and further education of its youth just did not work, but I, for the life of me, don't really understand why not!"<sup>79</sup> The minutes of the last High School committee meeting he chaired conclude with the words: "Thus ends a work which was begun with great effort, worry and many consultations. What is the reason why our great God did not grant success? Did we rely too much on ourselves and not on the Lord? The school committee is deeply sad that a project begun with courage and energy is ending this way."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> *YMBC Minutes*, September 1948.

<sup>79</sup> Jacob Loewen, "The Pink High School, later Called 'Sharon High'," *Loewen Manuscript*, 187.

<sup>80</sup> *SMHSC Minutes*, 11 October 1951.

## Chapter 11

### Ministry to the Scattered and Unreached, 1930-1946

The Mennonite immigrants of the 1920s, unlike those who had come to Canada in earlier migrations, were not able to establish block settlements on land reserved or purchased for their exclusive occupation. Some of the 1920s immigrants were able to buy farms vacated by those moving to Mexico and Paraguay. Others settled in sufficiently large numbers in communities such as Yarrow and established strong churches. Still others, including for a time the Harders in their sojourn across Canada, found land and/or employment in various rural districts and scattered settlements. But many small groups of German-speaking Mennonite Brethren in remote settlements had no ordained preachers or spiritual advisors.

Harder and other preachers from the large churches established mission programs that they called the “*Randmission*” (the mission to those living on the periphery), later renamed Home Missions. These programs were designed to minister to scattered or peripheral Mennonites. During the war, Home Missions also included a ministry to young men working in conscientious objector camps. After the war, Home Missions workers extended their work to non-Mennonite and non-German-speaking people who had been “otherwise unreached” by the Gospel message as Mennonite Brethren understood it.

The ministry to scattered German-speaking Mennonite Brethren was strongly supported by Harder. He was also involved, together with Mennonite leaders from other churches and conferences, in the ministry to conscientious objectors; however, he was not directly involved in the ministry to the “otherwise unreached.”

### **The “*Randmission*” to scattered Mennonite Brethren**

Visiting small clusters of Mennonites and individual Mennonite families in remote areas of British Columbia took up much of Johannes Harder’s time and energy in the 1930s and 1940s. He enjoyed travelling, seeing new places, and meeting other Mennonite Brethren. The practice of rotating preaching assignments among the numerous preachers in the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church left him with many free Sundays when he could accept outside preaching or Bible study assignments. Some of the places visited in 1931 by Harder and other Yarrow preachers included Abbotsford, Pitt Meadows, Mission, Arnold, Strawberry Hill, Vancouver, Hatzic, Agassiz, Chilliwack, New Westminster, Port Haney, White Rock, Huntingdon, and Birch Bay in Washington State.<sup>1</sup> Harder visited most, if not all, of those places. He also accepted a number of pulpit exchanges with Mennonite Brethren groups that had an ordained minister.<sup>2</sup> These opportunities allowed him to preach more often and to conduct Bible studies and private family worship services in many locations. His participation was, however, limited by the need to earn a livelihood for himself and his family and by his church leadership responsibilities.

In some cases, the visits were a response to invitations. Church leaders also attempted to contact isolated and recently-arrived settlers. Initially, it was mainly the Yarrow church that responded to such requests. But in 1931, the three Mennonite Brethren churches by then organized in British Columbia—Yarrow, Sardis (Greendale), and Agassiz—decided to coordinate some of the visitations and other church programs of shared interest. So they established the British Columbia Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches (hereafter

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<sup>1</sup> *British Columbia Conference Minutes*, 21 November 1931. Other locations are mentioned in later reports.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 June 1931.



noted as BC Conference).<sup>3</sup> Harder, as leader of the largest Mennonite Brethren church in British Columbia (199 members and six ordained preachers in 1931-1932),<sup>4</sup> was elected as the first BC Conference leader. The Sardis (Greendale) church, led by Henry Dueck, Harder's brother-in-law, had less than 50 members, and the small Agassiz church closed shortly after their only preacher, C. C. Peters, moved to Yarrow in 1932. The leaders agreed to set a \$1.00 per member levy to cover Conference expenses.

The objectives of the new BC Conference were ambitious. In addition to organizing the visits to scattered Mennonites, it would also coordinate work related to Sunday schools, choirs, Bible conferences, youth programs, church discipline, the ordination of preachers, support for foreign missions, immigration issues, and the home in Vancouver for young women working as domestic servants. Harder was interested in all aspects of the work, but his primary interest in the early years was the *Randmission*. Thus, only months after the conference was organized, he became chairperson of the *Randmission* while his brother-in-law in Sardis took over responsibilities as BC Conference chairperson.<sup>5</sup>

"Mission stations" were established in at least half a dozen communities. School, church, or community facilities were rented for worship services if participants exceeded the number that could be accommodated in homes. Harder and other preachers visited these mission stations fairly regularly. In addition to sermons, devotional services, and Bible studies, they provided pastoral counselling. They also tried to identify and mentor prospective leaders.

As Harder envisioned it, the basic purpose of the mission to "scattered" Mennonite Brethren was to strengthen and expand the Mennonite Brethren church. The faithful were to be encouraged, and those who had strayed were to be called to repentance and spiritual renewal. Where numbers and leadership capabilities warranted, local groups should be organized as new Mennonite Brethren churches. Those living in remote places were also

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> *Northern District Conference Year Book, 1931-32*, 60. The Northern District Conference was renamed the Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America in 1945.

<sup>5</sup> *British Columbia Conference Minutes*, 25 October 1931.

encouraged to participate in special Bible study, youth, and choir events, as well as other activities arranged by the BC Conference or by the established churches.

New converts were encouraged to request baptism in one of the established churches. Baptisms were usually conducted by leaders of these churches, but in special cases, ministers sometimes baptised converts from distant areas in a river or lake near their homes. All converts were encouraged to become members of a Mennonite Brethren church. Interim attendance at a Baptist (preferably German-speaking) church was encouraged if there was no nearby Mennonite Brethren church. These individuals were encouraged, however, to retain their membership in a Mennonite Brethren church rather than becoming members of a Baptist church. Attendance in any Protestant church that did not practice adult baptism on confession of faith was discouraged, and membership in such a church was unacceptable.

Harder's role in the *Randmission* was sometimes similar to that of an *Aeltester* in Russian Mennonite churches. He assisted in the organization of new Mennonite Brethren churches, encouraged and mentored prospective preachers and leaders, conducted baptisms of converts, led communion services, and officiated at weddings and ordinations.

Although Harder was active in visiting Mennonite Brethren living in remote settlements, he could only devote a limited amount of his time and energy to such *Randmission* work. Nevertheless, the value of this service was strongly affirmed by the churches. Thus, when, at the 1936 BC Conference sessions, Cornelius Klassen, a lay person, offered to visit Mennonite families in lonely, outlying places, the Conference accepted the offer and agreed to pay his travel costs.<sup>6</sup> But illness and travel difficulties limited the number of families Klassen could visit. He continued the work in 1937 on a reduced scale, but with only minimal financial support.<sup>7</sup>

John Wiebe, a dedicated, single, young man, then volunteered to continue Klassen's work. Asking for only modest financial support, he spent the summer months travelling on his bicycle to many isolated Mennonite farms and worksites. He relied on those he visited for food and accommodation and, in return, did various chores and odd jobs. His report to the BC Conference

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 6 December 1936.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 26 February 1939.

described his work as consisting primarily of speaking to individuals about their soul's salvation and distributing tracts and other literature.<sup>8</sup> He mentioned almost nothing about the training of prospective leaders and the organization of new churches. He was more interested in the salvation of those he visited than in organizing them into new Mennonite Brethren churches. However, Harder and other members of the *Randmission* committee regarded conversion as being only the first critically important step of Christian discipleship that needed to be followed by baptism and membership in a Mennonite Brethren church.

In 1939, misgivings about Wiebe's work resulted in the termination of his financial support by the BC Conference.<sup>9</sup> The minutes mention several reasons for this action. Wiebe had not had sufficient success in contacting single people who moved frequently. In addition, he had scheduled meetings on weekdays rather than only on Sundays. While this arrangement had allowed some to attend Wiebe's meetings, it also meant they could attend Sunday worship services elsewhere. The Conference was also concerned because he had conducted some Bible studies, prayer meetings, and worship services in English rather than in German.

Harder was greatly concerned about the continued use of the German language in all Mennonite Brethren church services and programs. He strongly supported a resolution of the BC Conference's Missions Committee affirming "that German should be the predominant language used in our services, because most of our brothers and sisters are more fluent in German than in English. This thought is to be shared with visiting ministers, so that they will be asked to serve in the German language."<sup>10</sup> While this resolution pertained primarily to ministers visiting the established churches, Harder and other leaders were both aware and unhappy that much of the work of the *Randmission* was being conducted in English. A few years later one of the missionaries stated bluntly, "Naturally, we teach in English."<sup>11</sup> This reality was problematic for Harder.

The BC Conference minutes do not indicate how long John Wiebe ministered to families in outlying areas. But in 1943, two young men, Sylvester

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 28 November 1938.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 25 June 1939.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 27 June 1943.

Dirks and Abram Esau (both later served as missionaries outside Canada), volunteered and were appointed as home missionaries to scattered Mennonites. One was to work on the northern and the other on the southern side of the Fraser River. The material support given these workers, however, was very meagre. The introduction of a special \$1.00 per member levy exclusively for the *Randmission* failed to solve the problem.<sup>12</sup> Members were either not informed about or were unwilling to pay the additional levy, and churches were slow in forwarding whatever money was collected. The less-than-enthusiastic support for the *Randmission*'s work is evident in a story told by Abram Esau. He suggested to members of the Home Mission Committee that the work could be greatly expedited if he and Dirks had the use of a car. This request, however, elicited a false piety on the part of at least one Board member who himself owned a car. He pointed out that when Jesus sent out his disciples two by two (there just happened to be two Mennonite Brethren home missionaries at the time), he "commanded them that they should take nothing for their journey, save a staff only; no scrip, no bread, no money in their purse; but be shod in sandals; and not put on two coats."<sup>13</sup> Since there seemed to be no allowance for a car in these instructions, the scripture-observant Home Mission Board, while not insisting on the sandals, refused the request for a car. Not long afterward, however, Esau was making his way on foot along a muddy road when he encountered that same Board member, whose car was stuck in the mud. He helped the Board member get the car back on solid ground. A little later Esau was able to use a small \$200.00 inheritance to buy his own car, thereby increasing the scope and effectiveness of his work.<sup>14</sup>

The attitude of Board members and some Home Missions workers toward other churches was often harsh. One home missionary reported that at Pitt Meadows, "A man from the United Church is conducting Sunday school in a hall and has one meeting a month for adults. Very little true Gospel is preached to the people here."<sup>15</sup> However, the few Mennonite Brethren in the area who appreciated the United Church home mission efforts did not share this critical attitude.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 26 February and 25 June 1939.

<sup>13</sup> Mark 6:8-9, King James Version.

<sup>14</sup> Abram and Katie Esau interview, 17 November 2006.

<sup>15</sup> *British Columbia Conference Minutes*, 21 June 1942.

A Home Missions worker at Strawberry Hill (now Kennedy Heights, Delta) reported in 1942 that "I always try to arrange my message in such a way that it will be understandable and if possible captivating for the children. They are very attentive. These services are only in English."<sup>16</sup> After the forced evacuation of local Japanese people, the Home Missions Board acquired the Japanese cultural centre (renamed Kennedy Hall) from the Custodian of Enemy Property. The group was organized as a Mennonite Brethren congregation on 11 November 1944.

The Home Missions program was seriously disrupted late in 1943 when both Sylvester Dirks and Abram Esau were conscripted for wartime alternative service. Consequently, in November 1943, the BC Conference had no Home Mission workers.<sup>17</sup> But six months later the situation had changed: "It is a joy," the Home Missions committee reported, "that during recent months the brethren W. Reimke, S. Dirks, and since May also Br. H. Lenzmann were active in the field."<sup>18</sup>

Harder's participation in home missions decreased as the Yarrow church grew and he needed to devote more of his time to family, church, and other conference responsibilities. More to the point, his interest in home missions waned when the work was extended to non-Mennonite and non-German-speaking people.

### **Conscientious objectors**

The outbreak of the war in 1939 was followed a few years later by conscription which applied to all able-bodied Mennonite young men in designated age groups. Those performing work essential to the war effort were granted deferments while those who objected to active military service for reasons of conscience could be assigned to alternative wartime service. As leader of the largest Mennonite church in British Columbia, Harder became actively involved in discussions and negotiations with local alternative service administrators. But he was not a member of delegations that negotiated terms and conditions of alternative service with the federal government.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 21 November 1943.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 24 June 1944.

Members of the Mennonite delegations disagreed on their wartime obligations. Those who had come to Ontario early in the 19th century were prepared to do only alternative service work that had nothing to do with the military effort. Those who had come to Manitoba in the 1870s argued that they had no obligation to do any wartime service at all. In contrast, the leaders of the 1920s immigrants, including Harder, had good memories of the military ambulance and hospital services their young men had rendered in



Johannes Harder and other preachers visiting  
a conscientious objector camp.

Russia during World War I. Deeply appreciative of the religious freedom in Canada, they were willing to serve, if necessary, in a non-combatant role under military supervision. Unfortunately for them, Canadian military leaders opposed exclusively non-

combatant service for any members of the armed forces. Only desperate manpower shortages late in the war resulted in the establishment of restricted (non-combatant) medical and dental corps.

Harder strongly supported Mennonite young men who joined the medical and dental corps, particularly when non-combatant service in those units became an option. He periodically reported to the BC Conference on the situation regarding alternative wartime service. In 1942, he noted that “the privilege of our youth to perform alternative service should not be taken for granted. . . . In the Prairie Provinces it is not as easy to obtain conscientious objector status.” He point[ed] out the importance of early application to the Registrar to obtain a Mennonite identity card. In addition, he complained that the guidance and support given these men was often inadequate: “The youth are being served through the preaching ministry. Since this ministry is not from our conference, our brothers request visits from our churches as well.”<sup>19</sup> Two years later, he noted that “many of our young men have joined the medical corps. Our care of them has not yet been organized. It must be underlined that by far the majority have distinguished themselves by their

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 15 November 1942.

good conduct.”<sup>20</sup> Visits, worship services, and spiritual counselling for the conscientious objectors were organized on an inter-Mennonite basis. Harder participated along with other Mennonite Brethren. This work was, however, better suited to the talents of younger ministers.<sup>21</sup>

Conscientious objectors from British Columbia usually encountered less difficulty in gaining the desired status than those from the Prairie Provinces. As in Ontario, proof of membership in one of the historic peace churches was often sufficient. Achieving conscientious objector status became more difficult, however, as military and domestic manpower shortages increased. In addition, work assignments changed from forestry camps and farms or ranches to work in a great variety of industries and businesses.

The two Mennonite Brethren mission workers appointed in 1943 to visit scattered Mennonites also visited men working in nearby conscientious objector camps. In 1943 they reported that “the camps at Radium Hot Springs have been visited by home missionary Sylvester Dirks. These camps had not had any visitors, so the men were very happy to be remembered by their home churches.”<sup>22</sup> Home missionary Abram Esau reported, “We have visited two CO camps. One of these is approximately seven miles from us. Now and then several young men from there attend our meetings and Bible studies.”<sup>23</sup>

Visits to remote work camps by Mennonite Brethren ministers were not well coordinated, and Harder’s involvement was not extensive. This was probably due to other demands on his time and energy rather than a lack of interest in the spiritual welfare of Mennonite Brethren conscientious objectors.

Harder was more active in counselling young men seeking conscientious objector status. These men were expected to give a reasoned defence of their position when challenged by recruitment officials. Like many other Mennonite ministers and leaders, Harder was appalled at how little many of the young men knew or understood about the historic Anabaptist-Mennonite doctrine of non-resistance. The churches, and more specifically the Bible

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> J. A. Toews, *Alternative Service in Canada during World War II* (Winnipeg, MB: Publication Committee of the Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church, 1959).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 27 June 1943.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

schools, had not provided sufficient instruction. Harder found it particularly exasperating when young men who claimed to be conscientious objectors succumbed to public pressure or became disillusioned and joined the armed forces. His son's enlistment under such circumstances increased Harder's insistence that conscientious objector claims be made only if they were a genuine personal conviction. He understood the frustration of idealistic young men in some remote camps who were doing work that seemed to have no immediate demonstrable benefit for the country in its hour of need. Such assignments diminished as the war went on, and young Mennonite men were given productive work that seemed more relevant to the country's immediate requirements. However, this development raised awkward questions about the ethics of civilian work in shipyards, airports, and other industries linked directly or indirectly to the war effort.

Mennonite leaders were also concerned about the significant number of young men from the Yarrow church who, like Harder's oldest son, enlisted in the armed forces. Enlistment meant an almost inevitable separation from the church, which never devised a reconciliation strategy acceptable to most Mennonite soldiers returning after the war. But the Yarrow church, legalistic though it was in many respects, did not automatically expel members who enlisted. Under Harder's leadership, the Yarrow church demonstrated remorse for its failure to provide more adequate instruction and greater tolerance of those who enlisted.

### **Reaching the “otherwise unreached”**

Mission workers who visited scattered Mennonites came into contact with many non-churched individuals who, they believed, also needed to hear the Gospel message. This broadening of the missionary vision occurred for several reasons. Sunday school children in the churches were encouraged to invite their friends, especially to programs such as Daily Vacation Bible School. Peter D. Loewen, Harder's close friend and co-worker, was an especially strong promoter of Sunday schools. He regarded them as an effective means to bring the Gospel to children in the community, and through them also to their parents. He devoted himself to the work with “interest, courage, and great joy.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Peter Daniel Loewen, *Memoirs: A Story of God's Grace and Faithfulness* (P. D. Loewen: Fraser Valley Custom Printers, 1999), 86-90.



This enthusiasm was reinforced by a new program that originated in the Bethany Bible School in Hepburn, Saskatchewan. In 1935, students and staff there organized the Western Children's Mission. Its primary objective was "to reach the otherwise unreached," especially children, in western Canada. Several Bethany students from British Columbia initiated a similar venture in their home province in 1939. This mission initially offered Daily Vacation Bible School and other programs to children, often in remote communities, who were not directly affiliated with any church or conference.<sup>25</sup>

Key Mennonite Brethren leaders, including Harder, strongly supported mission work, but they increasingly became concerned about three interrelated results of the new initiatives: the language transition, the increased influence of some Anabaptist-unfriendly aspects of North American Evangelicalism, and the free-lance propensities of new ventures.

English was by necessity the language of the new Home Missions initiatives, since few of the "otherwise unreached" children or adults spoke or understood German. There was, of course, rejoicing when non-German-speaking children in the Sunday school or Daily Vacation Bible School, or adults at a mission station, embraced the Christian faith. These commitments affirmed the wider relevance and validity of the Gospel message. But they also created problems. How could such people be integrated into the life and work of Mennonite Brethren churches with numerous members for whom English was still a foreign language? Many members cherished the familiar German Scripture verses, music and worship services through which they had come to understand and embrace divine forgiveness and salvation. When expressed in English, these religious concepts and beliefs seemed strange, unfamiliar from cherished religious experiences and practices rooted in the German-language Mennonite Brethren heritage from Russia.<sup>26</sup>

Lack of familiarity and comfort was not the only concern. Mennonite Brethren placed strong emphasis on the importance of separation from the influences of the outside world. In the past, preservation of the German language had been an effective barrier to integration into Russian society.

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<sup>25</sup> Peter Penner, *Reaching the Otherwise Unreached: An Historical Account of the West Coast Children's Mission of B.C.* (Clearbrook, BC: West Coast Children's Mission, 1959), 11-15.

<sup>26</sup> Jacob Loewen, "The German language as a church and family issue," *Loewen Manuscript*, 182-183.

Harder believed that it could and should serve a similar function in Canada. But it was difficult to reconcile this view with missionary zeal. This dilemma is clearly defined by Gerald Ediger in his study of the language change among Mennonite Brethren in Canada: "Consistent with long established Mennonite practice, Mennonite Brethren felt the need to conserve and protect their historic identity in a new, strange and pluralistic society by hedging their congregations with strong boundaries. At the same time the creative and vital centre of Mennonite Brethren religious life, especially in the generation growing up in the new world, centred on a theology of missional activism. This core conviction of Mennonite Brethren could only be validated by reaching out beyond the boundaries of identity maintenance into their wider non-Mennonite communities. . . . The profound interconnection of religion, language and identity invested the course of language transition with deeply felt passion and anxiety."<sup>27</sup>

Harder resisted the language change during the time when he was the leader of the Yarrow church. Some members therefore thought of him as obstinate and narrow-minded. In fact, his attitude toward the language change was more ambivalent. He understood clearly the tension between the missionary mandate of the church and retention of the German language. Jacob Loewen recalls a conversation in which Harder allegedly stated, "Brother Loewen, I feel a real need to improve my English. I have been thinking of attending Prairie Bible Institute for a couple of years. A number of our good missionaries have attended there and all testify about what all they gained there. I feel I could improve my spoken English there, but I would also learn the English religious technical language there and have plenty of occasions to fellowship with believers from many other churches. I think this would improve my ministry and also acquaint me better with believers from other traditions."<sup>28</sup> Loewen goes on to say that Harder abandoned this intention when the issue became contentious as a result of community gossip.

This recollection suggests another reason that many of the older preachers resisted the language change. On the one hand, most were not fluent in the English language and thus would have fewer opportunities to preach if worship services were conducted in English. The prospect of hearing fewer

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<sup>27</sup> Gerald Ediger, *Crossing the Divide*, 1-2.

<sup>28</sup> Jacob Loewen, "The German Language," *Loewen Manuscript*, 195.

sermons by these men, on the other hand, provided impetus for the language change among those who felt the older preachers were too rigid in their enforcement of church rules that seemed better designed to preserve old world practices rather than to facilitate an effective proclamation of the Gospel.

As the language debate intensified there were growing concerns that it might split the church. Jacob Loewen recalled being told by friends that “the Christian and Missionary Alliance had sent representatives to Harder to plead that Yarrow should start an English-speaking MB church in town. The Alliance told Harder that they were under strong pressure to come to Yarrow to open just such a church there; but, they told him, that they felt that it would be much wiser if the MBs themselves started such a church.” Harder declined, explaining to Loewen, “*Lass sie nur kommen, dann wenigstens bin ich nicht verantwortlich wenn sich unsere Gemeinde hier spaltet.*” (Let them come. Then at least I will not be responsible if our local congregation here splits.)<sup>29</sup>

The ongoing missionary outreach to the otherwise unreached posed another problem. It brought those involved in the work into more intimate contact with other mission-minded North American Evangelicals whose doctrines and practices differed from some historic Mennonite and Anabaptist theology. These concerns were most clearly expressed in a report on the Youth for Christ Movement which Harder prepared in 1946. On the basis of that report church members were advised not to become involved in the organization.<sup>30</sup> But these warnings were ignored, particularly by those interested in missionary outreach.

Home Missions workers also manifested a disturbing propensity to initiate programs without the sanction or guidance of the churches and their leaders. This raised concerns regarding the relationships between the mission, the church, and the conference. The accountability of those involved in home missions initiatives, particularly when some individuals were perceived to have become “slightly extreme” in the promotion of their cause, was also questioned.<sup>31</sup> The supervision of independent mission programs had, in fact,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 196-197.

<sup>30</sup> YMBC Minutes, 6 and 20 March 1946.

<sup>31</sup> Penner, *Reaching the Otherwise Unreached*, 14; Peter Penner, *No Longer at Arms Length: Mennonite Brethren Church Planting in Canada* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Press, 1987), 18-20.

been a matter of concern for Mennonite Brethren conference leaders for some time. They found it difficult to respond to appeals for funds and other support if they knew little about an organization or its methods of operation. And they feared that appeals for funds by independent missions would reduce giving to church-sponsored programs. These kinds of situations had led to efforts as early as 1936 by the General (MB) Conference to clarify questions of accountability, management, and support. It was Harder who eventually brought the matter to the attention of BC Conference delegates. But the terms recommended by the General (MB) Conference were not followed when the Western Children's Mission of British Columbia was organized.<sup>32</sup> It was only in 1945 that the work of the BC Conference's Missions Committee and that of the Western Children's Mission were merged on somewhat ambiguous and uncertain terms. The reconstituted mission was renamed the West Coast Children's Mission.

Harder, who had been very active in the BC Conference's *Randmission* in the 1930s and early 1940s, did not play a prominent role in the work of the West Coast Children's Mission. Other leaders and members of the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church, however, enthusiastically participated and promoted the work of that Mission.<sup>33</sup>

### Support and concerns

Efforts to minister to "scattered" Mennonite Brethren in British Columbia seemed spectacularly successful between 1931 and 1950. Twelve new Mennonite Brethren churches were organized. Total membership in Mennonite Brethren churches in British Columbia increased sevenfold, from less than 300 to more than 2,200.<sup>34</sup> The increase was, of course, due in large measure to massive migrations of Mennonites to British Columbia. The major contribution of the *Randmission* was that it quickly established contact with these migrants and kept or brought thousands of them into the Mennonite

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<sup>32</sup> *British Columbia Conference Minutes*, 8 November 1936.

<sup>33</sup> David Giesbrecht, "The Life and Contributions of Peter P. Neufeldt," in Robert Martens, Maryann Tjart Jantzen, and Harvey Neufeldt, eds., *Windows to a Village*, 217-253 documents the enthusiastic support for the West Coast Children's Mission of a later senior pastor of the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church.

<sup>34</sup> *1950 Year Book of the Fortieth Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America* (Winnipeg, MB: Christian Press, 1950), 190-194.

Brethren fold. Working closely with other ordained ministers, Harder visited, preached, conducted Bible studies, mentored and ordained new ministers, and assisted in the organization of new churches.

Coordination of the multi-faceted programs of the British Columbia Conference established and strengthened close links between the older and newer churches. These links fostered a strong joint Mennonite Brethren sense of identity and common purpose. Harder provided key leadership both when the conference was organized in 1931 and also in its subsequent work.<sup>35</sup> During these years, Mennonite Brethren churches were still, to a large extent, modelled on Russian Mennonite structures and practices. German was the main language of worship, and membership was comprised chiefly of believers who regarded their churches as ethnic and religious enclaves separate from the outside world. This was certainly the model Harder knew, loved, and promoted. While the language transition was probably inevitable, it was hastened when Home Missions workers extended their efforts to include non-German-speaking and non-Mennonite Brethren people. The language issue became divisive in the Yarrow church, but major changes only came after Harder resigned as leader of the church.

Home Missions efforts also hastened the integration of Mennonite Brethren into mainstream North American English-language Evangelicalism. Harder was probably more keenly aware of the weaknesses of this movement than of its strengths. His concerns help to account for his gradual withdrawal from active leadership in the Home Missions Committee of the BC Conference. Equally important, however, was his increasingly active involvement in the work of the Canadian and General (North American) Mennonite Brethren conferences.

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<sup>35</sup> *British Columbia Conference Minutes*, 25 June 1939.

## **Chapter 12**

### **Ministries in Vancouver, 1930-1937**

**T**he Harder family had some familiarity with the urban scene, thanks to their short sojourn in Winnipeg during the winter of 1926-1927. They had participated in the small Mennonite Brethren fellowship led at that time by city mission worker C. N. Hiebert. In the time of the birth and death of their twins, they had also benefited from the assistance provided by one of the single women working in the city. Her assistance had been facilitated through the Mary-Martha Girls' Home, established in the city in 1925 as a centre of fellowship, spiritual ministry, and practical help for Mennonite young women working, mostly as domestic servants, in the city.

Nevertheless, as a day labourer in Winnipeg, Harder had experienced economic frustrations and spiritual affronts. He found the social and moral crudities of city workplaces such as the meat-packing plant where he worked repugnant. Like many other Mennonite Brethren leaders, he harboured grave concerns regarding the spiritual welfare of members who moved into urban centres. But, as he soon discovered in the Fraser Valley, necessity and/or opportunity prompted many immigrant Mennonites to seek temporary or more long-term work in Vancouver. In response, British Columbia leaders, including Harder, initiated three different ministries for those working and living in Vancouver.

The first focussed on the significant number of teenaged and young Mennonite women who sought work in the city as domestic help in homes of

relatively affluent families. Many did so only as a temporary expedient to cope with the poverty and desperate financial needs of their families and to assist in paying off the travel debt to the Canadian Pacific Railway for the voyage from Russia. But some young Mennonite women saw the need for domestic workers as a way to gain personal autonomy, pursue further education, and attain careers. Serving the practical, social, and spiritual needs of all these young women became the earliest urban “home missions” initiative of Mennonite Brethren preachers and leaders in British Columbia. It was work in which Johannes Harder was a very active participant.

Home Missions Board members also became concerned about and tried to address the religious needs of other Mennonite Brethren, including entire families who moved to the city in search of gainful employment. Some, like the young women in domestic service, regarded work in the city as a temporary measure to support their families and earn the necessary means to establish themselves on farms of their own. Others were convinced that the city offered more promising long-term prospects than agricultural or agriculture-related work in rural communities. They planned to stay in the city and wanted to establish a church which would meet their needs. The Home Missions Committee, while concerned about urban life, tried to minister to such families and individuals scattered across many districts of Vancouver. Harder became extensively involved in the contentious developments that led to the establishment of a Mennonite Brethren Church in Vancouver in 1937.

Many Mennonite Brethren immigrants of the 1920s were fluent in the Russian language. Some became aware of the desperate plight of impoverished Russians and other troubled people in the poorest districts of the city and initiated a small ministry to evangelize and assist these people. Harder’s involvement in this aspect of the work was quite limited. Although he had learned some Russian in the old country, his ability to preach in that language was limited. And while he supported missionary efforts to reach these people, he had concerns. It was clear to him that Russian and other skidrow converts would not fit into German-language Mennonite Brethren churches. Moreover, avoiding contacts between such converts and the young women working as domestic servants also seemed prudent.

### The Bethel Girls' Home in Vancouver<sup>1</sup>

Young women coming to work in the city faced great challenges. Most had at best a limited command of the English language and were not familiar with urban life or transportation and other services. The city was often a strange and frightening place, and many of the young women felt insecure and suffered great loneliness. Those arriving alone sometimes slept in bus depots, parks, and train stations until they moved into the home of an employer. Some also struggled with difficult, humiliating, inappropriate, or excessive



The "Bethel Maedchenheim"  
in Vancouver in the 1930s.

work assignments. The Bethel Home and a similar home established in Vancouver by the Conference of Mennonites in Canada provided help and support for these young women.

In Vancouver at that time, Thursday was designated as the "maid's day off." These were times when the women could establish contacts, meet, and visit. But they lacked a suitable meeting place. Initially, some of the young women who came to Vancouver met informally on their free afternoons in the spacious waiting room of the Canadian Pacific Railway. There they visited with one another and also welcomed new arrivals and provided limited guidance to them. But "loitering" in the waiting room was not appreciated by the company. As a result, some of the meetings were moved to a nearby cemetery.<sup>2</sup> There were also meetings on a beach but these probably raised concerns among conference leaders.<sup>3</sup>

Parents and preachers from the Fraser Valley churches were naturally concerned about the welfare of these young women. The need for a suitable

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Derksen Siemens, "Daughters in the City," *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, 27 October 1955); John G. Rempel, "Bethel Girls' Home (Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, <http://www.gameo.org/> (accessed 06 March 2008).

<sup>2</sup> "Stadtmission in Vancouver," *Northern District Conference Year Book, 1941* (Winnipeg: Christian Press, 1941), 40-41.

<sup>3</sup> Information provided by Leonard Neufeldt whose mother worked as a domestic servant in Vancouver.



meeting place and the availability of someone to whom the young women could turn in difficult situations were obvious. In one publicized case, a father brought his young daughter to the home of a German-speaking couple. But on arrival they found no one at home. The father had to leave to catch the last tram to get home that day. So the daughter, who knew almost no English, was left sitting on the street to await the return of the people who were to take her in and provide employment. She waited for hours, not knowing what might happen or where she should go if the prospective employers did not return before nightfall. There was also the possibility that they might reject her. What could or should she do then?<sup>4</sup> This incident ended well but indicated the difficulties some young women encountered.

In 1930 a small group of concerned women rented and later purchased a fairly large old house at 6363 Windsor Street in Vancouver.<sup>5</sup> They named it the Bethel Home. This initial transaction was a private venture, paid by the young women with the moral but limited financial support of Mennonite Brethren leaders in the province. "Sister" Rabsch, appointed as matron, was given room and board in the house and minimal funding. She served until 1932 and was succeeded, in fairly rapid order by Olga Berg, Tina Lepp, Mary Thieseen, Tina Goosen, Betty Esau, Susie Warkentin, Tina Krause, Elsa Isaac, and Sara Wiens.<sup>6</sup> Operating costs were initially covered through small fees paid by the young women, private donations, and special collections held in some of the churches.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to providing short-term accommodation, the Bethel Home served as a basic employment agency, thus facilitating contacts between newly arrived young women and prospective employers. Before long, an informal blacklist was also established of employers who made excessive or inappropriate demands. The most important function of the Home, however, was as a social and fellowship centre. It also became a place where visiting

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Derksen Siemens, "Quilt as Text and Text as Quilt: The Influence of Genre in the Mennonite Girls' Home of Vancouver, 1930-1960," *JMS* 17 (1999): 118-129; Agatha E. Klassen, *Yarrow: A Portrait in Mosaic*, 38; *British Columbia Conference Minutes*, 13 June 1937.

<sup>6</sup> *BC Conference Minutes*, 19 June 1932 and 2 June 1935.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 26 November 1933.

preachers could conduct worship services and Bible studies and provide spiritual counselling.<sup>8</sup>

Many of the young women working in Vancouver came from Yarrow. It was therefore not surprising that Yarrow preachers had a particular interest in the Bethel Home. Johannes Harder visited and met with the young women in Vancouver numerous times. He happily announced in June of 1931 that two of the young women had requested baptism. When, in 1935, the Conference sent an evangelist to hold meetings at the Home, a number of young women had conversion or spiritual renewal experiences. But their requests for baptism raised a thorny issue for Harder and other leaders of the BC Conference. Their affiliation with and participation in a church had to be clarified. Some had left Yarrow and were happy to be welcomed as new members of that church. Others had come directly from the prairies and had no links to Yarrow or another Mennonite Brethren Church in the Fraser Valley. There were also some who had had only limited ties to Yarrow or difficult experiences there. Few could attend more than occasional services in any of the valley churches. What could these churches offer? What were the obligations of domestics joining the Yarrow church? Should they pay Yarrow church levies?<sup>9</sup>

Harder supported the Bethel Home; he argued that it was a ministry deserving the support of the valley churches and the Mennonite Brethren BC Conference.<sup>10</sup> Conference leaders agreed, provided some financial support for the work and drew up schedules for ministerial visits to the Home.<sup>11</sup> Harder participated, but also had many other responsibilities. For a time C. C. Peters, a member of the Yarrow church, travelled regularly to Vancouver to visit and serve the young women at the Bethel Home. Harder appreciated Peters' enthusiastic sacrificial service but regarded him as a bit of a "loose canon"

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<sup>8</sup> Similar *Maedchenheime* (Girls' Homes) had already been established or were subsequently established by the Mennonite Brethren in Winnipeg and Saskatoon, and by the Conference of Mennonites in Canada in Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Vancouver, and Calgary. H.S. Bender, "Girls' Homes," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, <http://www.gameo.org/> (accessed 06 March 2008).

<sup>9</sup> *BC Conference Minutes*, 2 June 1935.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 June 1931.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 11 June 1933.

whose judgement was sometimes flawed.<sup>12</sup> Peters could advise Harder and other BC Conference leaders, but he was not expected to set policies.

Visits on Thursday and Sunday afternoons by preachers from the churches in the Fraser Valley were generally appreciated. But these visits did not meet all the spiritual needs of the young women. The matrons were strong, practical, and hardworking women, but they lacked training or experience in pastoral counselling. In 1936 Tina Lepp reported: "There are many opportunities for personal counselling. For example, I prayed and struggled for two weeks until I received the courage to visit a certain girl in order to talk to her about the salvation of her soul. In this area I have not always done my duty. I seem to lack wisdom and ability in this aspect of the work."<sup>13</sup> Visiting preachers, including Harder, tried to follow up leads by the matron or by concerned parents, but their time was limited. And visits by different preachers, most of whom had little familiarity with urban life, were not always helpful. Some of these men, while well-intentioned, lacked the knowledge and understanding of city living to address some of the sensitive personal problems faced by the young women. Many of these most serious problems were avoided or ignored. There was, in fact, a code of shame and silence by those who had been raped or had succumbed to sexual advances by males in their employers' households. Those were not experiences to be shared with older male preachers from the rural churches. The implication seemed to be that the female victims must share the blame if there were inappropriate sexual contacts.

Many of the preachers regarded the city as a dangerous and sinful place. They warned the young women about various allegedly sinful places and activities they should avoid rather than dealing with issues of more immediate concern to domestic workers in a strange new environment. A diatribe on the evils of dancing or worldly entertainment, for example, was of little interest to an exhausted and humiliated girl who had just endured the drudgery of washing diapers and cleaning toilets.

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<sup>12</sup> Harder and B. B. Janz occasionally found it necessary to correct what they regarded as errors made by C. C. Peters in the work of BC home missions, Canadian conference committees, and as a mission worker in South America.

<sup>13</sup> *BC Conference Minutes*, 14 June 1935.

Harder shared some of the negative views of urban life, but he also understood what it meant to be exhausted and humiliated by menial work assignments. As a result, he empathized with them and encouraged those who sought to serve as a Christian witness in their new environment. But he was critical of questionable conduct in Vancouver by young female church members and brought it to the attention of the *Vorberat* and membership of the Yarrow church.

The need for appropriate spiritual counselling prompted the matron to recommend in 1934 that the conference appoint a resident city missionary.<sup>14</sup> Such a person could lead worship services and Bible studies, provide spiritual counselling, and visit others who had not made contact with the Home. A resident city missionary could also serve other Mennonite Brethren living in the city.

An invitation was extended to the city missionary in Saskatoon to come to Vancouver, but he declined,<sup>15</sup> in part because the financial support offered by the BC Conference's Home Missions Committee was minimal. As a result, no suitable city missionary was found in 1934 or 1935. Instead the Home Missions Committee sent Harder and another preacher to conduct evangelistic meetings in Vancouver.<sup>16</sup> This, it was hoped, would provide some of the needed spiritual nurture for both the young women working as domestic servants and others living in the city. But these services did not obviate the need for more stable support of young Mennonite Brethren women and others working in Vancouver.

In 1935, in response to these needs, Franz Janzen of Abbotsford was appointed as Vancouver city missionary for a one-year term, with only very modest financial remuneration.<sup>17</sup> At the time Tina Lepp, the matron, reported that she had the addresses of 81 young women who had found work through the Home. Of these, 29 were members of a Mennonite Brethren church. Of the remaining 52, some had no church affiliation, although some were of Mennonite Brethren background but had not joined any church in British

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 25 November 1934.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 12 May and 25 November 1934.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 25 November 1934.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 10 November 1935.

Columbia. Between 30 and 60 young women regularly visited and participated in the activities of the Home.<sup>18</sup>

The appointment of a city missionary who held fairly regular worship service and Bible studies at the Bethel Home reduced the number of visits by Harder and other preachers from the Fraser Valley churches. But Janzen's tenure as city missionary was relatively brief for reasons not related to his work in the Bethel Home. His successor, appointed in 1938, was Jacob Thiessen of Dalmeny, Saskatchewan.<sup>19</sup>

In an effort to provide essential financial support, the BC Conference approached the Canadian Conference for help. The latter was providing limited financial support, raised through a special levy of 40 cents on all its members, for the Mennonite Brethren *Maedchenheime* (Girls' Homes) and city missions in Winnipeg and Saskatoon. The British Columbia request resulted in a decision whereby the Canadian conference dropped its special levy. In return, each provincial conference was to collect the funds necessary to support the homes and missions in their cities. Both the BC and Alberta conferences were to support the Bethel Home in Vancouver.<sup>20</sup> Financial instability nevertheless remained a serious problem for the Bethel Home and the Vancouver mission. Consequently in 1939 conference leaders recommended that the entire offering raised in the Thanksgiving and Missions celebrations that year be designated for the Vancouver mission and Girls' Home.<sup>21</sup>

Jacob Thiessen's assignment was broad. It included, among other things, worship services, Bible studies, and spiritual counselling in the Bethel Home. He was described by one writer as "fairly liberal" in some of his views on behavioural matters.<sup>22</sup> But his attitude regarding life in the city was decidedly pessimistic. He pleaded repeatedly with parents not to allow their daughters to come to the city unless it was absolutely necessary.<sup>23</sup> In one of his reports he

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 14 June 1936.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 12 June 1938; Jacob Block, "Thiessen, Jacob Gerhard (1876-1967)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, <http://www.gameo.org/> (accessed 31 October 2006).

<sup>20</sup> *Northern District Conference Year Book, 1939* (Hillsboro, KS.: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1939), 53.

<sup>21</sup> *BC Conference Minutes*, 13 August 1939.

<sup>22</sup> Jacob Block, "Thiessen, Jacob Gerhard (1876-1967)."

<sup>23</sup> *BC Conference Minutes*, 10 November 1940.

informed BC Conference delegates that he had visited one Mennonite young woman and found her reading a novel. She also admitted that she had gone to the cinema, which Thiessen described as “the filth hole of the city.” In another report he lamented that “two of our young friends have fallen as deep as a girl can fall.”<sup>24</sup> Thiessen’s appointment, nevertheless, reduced the number of visits by Harder and other preachers from the valley churches.

The matron of the Bethel Home established contact with and served as many as 100 young female domestic workers in the late 1930s. In 1943, responding to greater demand, the Conference supported the purchase of a new house at 595 East 49th Avenue. Domestic service, however, was never regarded as more than an interim effort in a time of exceptionally difficult financial conditions for Mennonite settlers in BC. Many of the young women left domestic service when economic conditions improved during and after the war. But after World War II Mennonite immigrant women again accepted domestic service work in the city.<sup>25</sup> As a result, at its zenith in 1956, the Bethel Home matched 350 Mennonite women with 1,700 employers. Thereafter numbers gradually declined, but even in 1961, when the Bethel Home was closed by the BC Conference, the matron, Betty Esau, reported that “we still had 600 employers to match with workers.”<sup>26</sup>

In its day, the Bethel Home provided vital assistance and support for young women working in Vancouver. Harder gave it strong support. In its early history he was one of a number of ministers who preached and conducted Bible studies there. He also provided leadership to secure modest financial support by the BC Conference. But his involvement decreased after the appointment of a city missionary. He was no longer actively involved in the Bethel Home’s affairs when it was closed by the BC Conference in 1961.

### **The “Vancouver Group”**

Young women working as domestic servants were Mennonite pioneers in Vancouver and other cities.<sup>27</sup> Following the initiative of the young women, men and entire families also looked for and eventually found work in Vancouver. Some came directly from the prairies, others from small

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 15 November 1942.

<sup>25</sup> John G. Rempel, “Bethel Girls’ Home (Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada).”

<sup>26</sup> Information provided by Ruth Derksen Siemens in response to an earlier draft of this chapter.

<sup>27</sup> Marlene Epp, “The Mennonite Girls’ Homes of Winnipeg: A Home Away From Home,” *JMS* 6 (1988): 100-114.

communities in the Fraser Valley after struggling for years to eke out a living. They looked for work wherever they could find it, and thus were scattered in many parts of the city.

Ministers from the valley churches, including Harder, tried to visit as many of these people as possible. The ministers were pleased when some Mennonite Brethren gathered in homes for fellowship, Bible study, and prayer, referring to them as the “Vancouver Group.” Beginning in 1933, there were regular reports on the activities of the group at BC Conference sessions. Over the next five years these reports often referred to disunity among members of the group. A 1944 report to the BC Conference (well after the difficulties had been resolved) summarized the problem as follows: “At that time [1933], besides our working girls, we thought only of our brothers and sisters who lived in isolation here in the big city. They had to be cared for in order not to suffer through the isolation. How much love and patience was required to gather the scattered and bind them into a unit! The Lord blessed the work and it succeeded. How we rejoiced when we could count on a church in Vancouver! But the soil was not firm. Many a couple, who had come from different circumstances with different concepts of church, church growth, and church work, did not feel the inner unity although they were church members. Many problems remained unsolved, which, when left alone, or if wrong decisions were made, could have had serious consequences. How could the whole be united and the image of Christ be better shaped. There was only one answer: if there was to be a church in Vancouver, a unified one, firmly founded on the rock—Jesus Christ—it would happen only through the Word.”<sup>28</sup>

Disagreement among members of the Vancouver group focussed on several issues. The first was simply whether a Mennonite Brethren church should be established in the city. Some were convinced that the urban environment was not conducive to healthy Christian living. Those who had taken up work in the city to address financial problems should move to or return to rural communities as soon as possible. That sentiment was clearly expressed as late as 1942 by Jacob Thiessen, the city missionary. “Allow me to express the concern of my heart: May the hour soon come when none of our people can be found in Vancouver, or in any other large city, except for a few

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<sup>28</sup> *BC Conference Minutes*, November 1943.

missionary companions. I become anxious at the thought of a Mennonite “proletariat” in the city. May the Lord guide us back into a quiet life, and help us to serve Him in Christian simplicity.”<sup>29</sup>

Despite these fears, efforts were made in 1933 to establish a Mennonite Brethren church in Vancouver. But there were disagreements regarding its character. Members of the group had come from different backgrounds and regions of Russia and had differing ideas regarding church governance, finances, and discipline. Some expressed concerns about the allegedly unspiritual attitudes and conduct of others and hence about the nature and leadership of the proposed church. These concerns were exacerbated by personality clashes and leadership rivalries.

The BC Conference hoped the difficulties could be resolved by the appointment of a city missionary,<sup>30</sup> but that effort failed.<sup>31</sup> Harder and another preacher were sent in 1935 to conduct German evangelistic services in the city for members of the Vancouver group and the young women at the Bethel Home. But the evangelists also failed to resolve the disagreements over establishing a church in the city.

Harder’s position was fairly clear. He was not opposed in principle to establishing a Mennonite Brethren church in Vancouver. But he was concerned about the spirituality of some group members, particularly one of its ordained preachers. He regarded the church organization and discipline of his home church as exemplars. Great efforts had been made to build the Yarrow church in accordance with the Word of God. Supporting Scripture passages had been cited when dealing with disagreements and difficult church policies. This was the model Harder believed should also be followed in Vancouver. There were those in Vancouver, however, who questioned the models of church organization, governance, and discipline adopted by Yarrow and other Mennonite Brethren churches in the Fraser Valley.

Failure in 1934-1935 to resolve disagreements among members of the Vancouver group led to a decision by leaders of the BC Conference to appoint a city missionary. Conference leaders hoped a worker residing in the city would be in a better position than preachers from the valley churches to visit

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 15 November 1942.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 12 May 1934.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 2 June 1935.



and work with members of the group. Harder was appointed to work out the necessary details with the members in Vancouver. The result was the appointment of Franz Janzen of Abbotsford as city missionary. He initiated an ambitious program which included "a worship service, Sunday school, Christian Endeavour, and a choir, the Lord willing." Janzen was disappointed, however, when the group named to leadership positions persons in whom he had little confidence. This situation resulted in numerous trips to Vancouver by Harder and other members of the Home Missions Committee to address the problem. But little was achieved by these visits.

Tensions mounted in 1936 when, with Janzen's knowledge but not at his initiative, the group expelled two members and warned two others whose influence had allegedly been divisive.<sup>32</sup> These actions raised the ire of Harder and other conference leaders who had been working privately with the four alleged troublemakers and others to resolve the disagreements. The expulsions were denounced, but so were the attitudes and activities of the expelled members. City missionary Janzen's role was also criticized; indeed, when conference delegates debated extension of his one-year term, the recommendation to extend failed by a vote of 39 for and 40 against re-appointment.<sup>33</sup> Janzen's "resignation" was announced at the ensuing conference sessions.

After Janzen's resignation, BC Conference leaders, and particularly Harder, travelled frequently to Vancouver. They pursued a three-fold objective. The group was told it must rescind the expulsions; the four alleged troublemakers must apologize and ask forgiveness for their behaviour; and leadership questions must be resolved. These objectives were eventually achieved, although Harder complained that, despite the apologies, there was still "a lack of true repentance."<sup>34</sup> A turning point was reached when Karl Pump, one of the expelled members, spoke at a BC Conference session on 23 February 1937. He stated "that both he and his family are in agreement that the Vancouver Group be organized into an independent church."<sup>35</sup> Conference members agreed not to stand in the way. Their view was based in part on agreement regarding the leadership of the new church.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 16 August 1936.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 30 December 1936.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 6 December 1936.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 23 February 1937.

The congregational group that emerged from these troubles was officially organized as a church and followed policies similar to those of rural Mennonite Brethren churches. The language of worship was German. Mennonite social, cultural, and religious traits were preserved, and the emphasis on separation from worldly activities remained very strong. These markers were reinforced when Jacob Thiessen was appointed city missionary in 1938. Six years later he still informed BC Conference members: "The more I become acquainted with the city and its temptations, the more I regret that our own people send their sons and daughters there, seemingly without concern, or even choosing to live there with their whole family. How will a father, as head of a family, give account to God for the fact that he has traded a quiet place where he can earn his daily bread for a place in the city, because of higher wages, and become established on the slippery ice of the big city?"<sup>36</sup>

Despite warnings by city missionary Thiessen and other Mennonite Brethren leaders, Mennonite Brethren continued to move to Vancouver. In 1938 the church had 110 members. The congregation initially rented a small meeting place and, in 1938, a hall with a seating capacity of 300.<sup>37</sup> Construction of a new building at 43rd Avenue and Prince Edwards Street began in 1941, when the basement was built. Apparently because of lack of financial resources and wartime shortages of construction materials, the sanctuary was not completed until 1945.<sup>38</sup>

The Vancouver Mennonite Brethren Church became a haven in a stormy and dangerous place. Its leaders carefully defined and maintained religious, cultural, and ethnic boundaries designed to protect members living in an alien and spiritually depraved urban environment. That seemed even more important in the city than in the more sheltered rural Mennonite communities. More time was needed before a Mennonite Brethren church conducting its worship services in the English language would seek to reach out and interact with outsiders and their problems in the urban environment. Some church members, when invited, sang or gave testimonies at the downtown services for Russians and other impoverished people, but the

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 25 November 1944.

<sup>37</sup> *Northern District Conference Year Book*, 1938, 52-53.

<sup>38</sup> John F. Redekop and Marlene Epp, "Vancouver Mennonite Brethren Church (Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, <http://www.gameo.org/> (accessed 06 March 2008).

relationship between the church and the mission was conducted “at arm’s length.”

### **Ministries in Vancouver**

Harder and his fellow ministers and leaders of the BC Conference provided extensive and much appreciated spiritual and also some financial support for the Bethel Home in Vancouver. They expected that ministry to be of a temporary nature, lasting only as long as Mennonite young women found it necessary to seek work as domestic servants in the city. For a time that ministry took up a good deal of Harder’s time and energy, but his direct involvement decreased after the appointment of Jacob Thiessen as city missionary in Vancouver.

The difficulties in the Vancouver group placed heavy burdens on Harder. He was an active participant in the protracted efforts to establish greater unity among members of this group and spent a great deal of time and energy working with the group and with individual members. Indeed, the demands on Harder’s time became so great that he asked to be relieved of his responsibilities as leader of the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church, citing the work in Vancouver as particularly demanding.<sup>39</sup> But in 1944 Harder and other BC Conference leaders were confident that they had achieved their objective to build a unified church in Vancouver, firmly founded on the rock: Jesus Christ. It was a church designed to meet the spiritual needs of its members while setting boundaries to shield them from a great variety of urban influences.

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<sup>39</sup> *YMBC Minutes*, 8 August 1937.

## Chapter 13

### Watchman, 1945-1963

In ancient times the prophet Ezekiel heard the Lord say: “Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word of my mouth and give them warning from me.”<sup>1</sup> Johannes Harder heard a similar call when he was elected as church leader and, again, when he was elected as a member of the *Fuersorgekomitee* (literally, Guardians’ Committee) of the Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America (hereafter referred to as the Canadian Conference). The primary responsibility of that committee was “to watch over the spiritual welfare of the churches and advise and aid them when serious questions arise concerning doctrine and church policy.” It was later called The Committee of Reference and Counsel, and, for a time, the Board of Spiritual and Social Concerns.<sup>2</sup> The provincial and North American Mennonite Brethren conferences had similar committees.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ezekiel 3:17.

<sup>2</sup> *Charter and By-Laws of the Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America* (Winnipeg: Christian Press, 1945), 19-21; *Constitution of the Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches of North America* (Winnipeg, MB: Christian Press, 1970), 23.

<sup>3</sup> The names of the conferences changed somewhat over the years. There was, for example, a long debate over and inconsistency in the name of the General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches (or Church) of North America.

Harder served as a member, and sometimes as chairperson, of the *Fuorsorgekomitee* from the time it was established in 1945 until 1963. In his opening remarks at an early session he read a favourite passage from Nehemiah 2:17-18. "Then said I unto them, Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach. Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me; as also the king's words that he had spoken unto me. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hand for this good work."<sup>4</sup> Harder watched, warned, and worked hard to preserve and strengthen the faith and life of church members. He sought to reinforce and maintain walls designed to separate the churches from the outside culture and its influences.

### **Establishment of the *Fuorsorgekomitee* of the Canadian Conference**

Anabaptists and Mennonites rejected the hierarchical structures of church governance, spiritual discernment, and guidance of the Roman Catholic Church and most Protestant churches. Mennonite Brethren also rejected the Council of Church Elders (*Aeltestenrat*) which Mennonites in Prussia and Russia had established to deal with serious questions pertaining to church polity and doctrine. Mennonite Brethren had learned early in their history, however, that preservation of the purity of doctrine, consistency in church governance, and cooperation in programs of shared interest required some centralized coordination. That led to the formation by various conferences of the *Fuorsorgekomitee*. The Northern District (Canadian) Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America did so in 1945. The conference president, vice-president, and secretary, and two elected members from each province were named as members. Harder was one of the British Columbia representatives.<sup>5</sup>

Mennonite Brethren were strongly committed to the autonomy of individual churches as well as of the provincial and regional conferences, but the *Fuorsorgekomitee* was given broad and inclusive power and authority to act "if conditions arise and establish themselves in churches, that are contrary

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<sup>4</sup> *Protokoll des Fuorsorgekomitees* (hereafter *Fuorsorgekomitee Minutes*), 9 May 1947.

<sup>5</sup> *Northern District Conference Year Book*, 1945, 37-38.

to the teaching of the Word of God, [and] are not in harmony with the principles of the Mennonite Brethren Church, and cause an evil report publicly.”<sup>6</sup> The committee dealt with a great variety of questions and issues. Some matters, however, were of particular concern to Harder. These will form the focus of this chapter.

### **Baptism by immersion as a requirement of membership**

One of the first issues addressed by the *Fuorsorgekomitee* was a matter of major concern to Harder. It was a church requirement that all members of a Mennonite Brethren church be baptised by immersion. This rule had, in his view, been compromised in early Mennonite Brethren history. Mennonite Brethren had baptised only by immersion. There were those, however, who wanted to join a Mennonite Brethren church but regarded as valid their baptism by another form. Harder’s illustrious ancestors, Aeltester Bernhard Fast and Aeltester Johann Harder, had baptised hundreds of members of their churches. Must all such baptisms be regarded as invalid? If not, why require re-baptism by immersion of persons who had, in good faith and after a genuine conversion experience, been baptised by sprinkling or pouring?

There was nothing to prevent sincere Christians not baptised by immersion from participation in Mennonite Brethren worship and communion services. But in most Mennonite Brethren churches membership rights and privileges were reserved for those who had been baptised, or re-baptised, by immersion.

Two churches in Russia, however, had opted for modified membership criteria. Although they practiced only baptism by immersion, they did not require re-baptism of those who regarded their baptism by another form as valid. These churches became known as the *Allianz Gemeinden*. In several Canadian communities, particularly in Ontario, Mennonite Brethren<sup>7</sup> had worshipped, worked, and formed congregations together with members of the *Allianz Gemeinden*. As a result, not all members of those joint congregations had been baptised by immersion.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Charter and By-Laws, 1945*, 19.

<sup>7</sup> Christian Neff, “Allianz Gemeinden,” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, <http://www.gameo.org/> (accessed 18 March 2008).

<sup>8</sup> The Mennonite Brethren churches in Namaka and Coaldale, both in Alberta, had members who, in Russia, had been members of an *Allianz Gemeinde* and had not been baptised by immersion.

The status of the Ontario churches was debated when they organized their own conference and applied for membership as a regional conference of the General Mennonite Brethren Conference. The application was accepted, subject to several conditions. All Ontario Mennonite Brethren churches must practice only baptism by immersion, not admit any new members who had not been baptised by immersion, and place restrictions on the rights and privileges of members who had not been baptised by immersion. The latter must not be allowed to represent their churches as conference delegates or occupy leadership positions in their churches.<sup>9</sup>

In 1945 the Ontario Conference applied for membership in the Northern District (Canadian) Conference. This application was prompted by shared Ontario and Northern District conference interests in two major programs. The Ontario conference had established the Bethesda Mental Hospital, in part because immigrants who became dependent on the state could be deported. Such a fate, of course, was a frightful prospect for the Mennonite immigrants of the 1920s. But operations and much needed expansion of the Ontario institution, which served patients from all the provinces, exceeded the resources of the Ontario conference. Ontario leaders therefore sought support from the Northern District (Canadian) Conference, which found itself in a parallel situation when it established the Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg. The college was also expected to serve all Canadian Mennonite Brethren, and therefore it needed a broader support base.<sup>10</sup>

The Ontario application again raised questions regarding Mennonite Brethren churches that included members (an admittedly fast diminishing number) not baptised by immersion. Harder believed Christians who wanted to join a Mennonite Brethren church must be baptised by immersion. Those who had been baptised by another form should be re-baptised. He readily acknowledged that there were truly converted Christians who had not been baptised by immersion. Tina, his wife, had been such a person before her re-baptism by immersion in 1929. Under his leadership the Yarrow church permitted other Christians who had not been baptised by immersion to participate in worship and communion services if they provided evidence of a genuine conversion experience and appropriate Christian discipleship. But

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<sup>9</sup> *Canadian Conference Year Book, 1946*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

such persons could not become members of the Yarrow church unless they were re-baptised.



The Krauses, former United Mennonite Church members, came to Yarrow in 1928. They attended the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church but were only rebaptised and admitted as church members in 1937.

The *Fuorsorgekomitee*, after careful deliberation, recommended that the Ontario conference be admitted as a member of the Northern District (Canadian) Conference, subject to the same conditions set earlier by the General (MB) Conference.<sup>11</sup> This recommendation was accepted in 1945 by conference delegates on a divided vote. After that the Ontario conference ceased to be a regional conference of the General (MB) Conference and became instead a provincial conference of the Northern District Conference, which then changed its name to the Canadian Conference of the

General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America.

The minutes of the *Fuorsorgekomitee* do not indicate the attitude or vote of individual members. Subsequent events, however, demonstrated clearly that Harder had great difficulty understanding why someone who had experienced a genuine conversion would be satisfied with any form of baptism other than immersion. For him this eventually became the most troublesome issue addressed by the *Fuorsorgekomitee*.

The problem of dealing with churches which had admitted members who had not been baptised by immersion surfaced again in 1948 when the congregation at Linden, Alberta, requested membership in the Alberta and Canadian conferences. This was the group with which the Harders and Rempels had worshipped when living in Alberta, and where Tina had been re-

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., *Fuorsorgekomitee Minutes*, 10 April 1946.



baptised by immersion. But it included some who had been members of other churches and had not been re-baptised by immersion. The *Fuorsorgekomitee* regarded the Ontario arrangement as precedent setting and recommended admission of the Linden church as a member church of the Alberta and Canadian conferences, subject to the same conditions.<sup>12</sup>

The matter did not end there. Some churches, first in the United States but later also in Canada, responded to local conditions as they saw fit. Marriages between Mennonite Brethren members and persons baptised by another form became a problem. Some churches, claiming local autonomy, admitted to membership persons who regarded their baptism by another form as valid. Short of expelling such churches from the conferences, there seemed to be little that could be done to compel compliance with conference policies regarding baptism.

A major debate on the issue took place in 1960 at the triennial sessions of the General (MB) Conference. The Committee of Reference and Council of this conference recommended that believers, upon their confession of faith and baptised by sprinkling or pouring, whose conscience did not permit them to be re-baptised, be accepted into membership. The resolution, which required a 2/3 majority to pass, garnered a 64% vote in favour. Thus the recommendation was officially rejected.<sup>13</sup> Subsequently, however, a growing number of churches acted as they saw fit. Their actions, in turn, raised a further awkward question. Must churches which still adhered to the official conference policy accept transfers of persons who had been accepted by another Mennonite Brethren church even though they had not been re-baptised by immersion. In 1963 the Canadian Conference supported a recommendation of its *Fuorsorgekomitee* "that non-immersed members who have been accepted into the fellowship of local churches be allowed to transfer to other M.B. churches, by letter."<sup>14</sup> The recommendation was carried by a vote of 325 to 120.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Fuorsorgekomitee Minutes*, 2 July 1948.

<sup>13</sup> Frank C. Peters, comp., *Resolutions and Recommendations of the Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church, 1961-1975* (n.p., n.p., 1975), 31.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>15</sup> *General (MB) Conference Year Book*, 1963, 38.

Harder found this unacceptable and confided to his friend J. B. Toews that if he were a younger man he would start a new church which would have only members who had been baptised by immersion.<sup>16</sup> The *Fuersorgekomitee* and conference sessions at which the, to him objectionable, recommendations were passed were the last ones attended by Harder. He died less than a year later.

The baptism issue also became contentious within the Harder family. Johannes' older brother, Abraham, failed his Canadian medical examination in 1924 but was able to immigrate to Germany with his family. There he became the pastor of four parish churches in the Pfalz district. He officiated wearing the formal long black coat, and he gained an excellent reputation with his parishioners. In 1935 Harold S. Bender, on behalf of the Mennonite Central Committee, invited Abraham Harder to come to Paraguay to serve the people there as teacher and preacher. He taught in *Zentralschulen* supported by the *Mennoniten- (Kirchliche)*, *Allianz-* and *Brueder-Gemeinden* and also preached in churches of all three groups. When called upon, he officiated at baptismal services, allowing candidates to choose their form of baptism. His ministry was appreciated, and the Mennonite Brethren invited him to become their *Aeltester*. But they set two conditions. He must henceforth baptise only by immersion, and his children must be re-baptised by immersion. Abraham Harder declined and shortly thereafter became an *Aeltester* of the *Mennoniten-Gemeinde*.

In 1951 the Abraham Harder family moved to Canada and settled in Abbotsford, where he taught for four years in the Bethel Bible Institute and later served as *Aeltester* of the East Chilliwack Mennonite church.<sup>17</sup> Relatives claimed Johannes Harder "had a hard time accepting the fact that his brother was a G[eneral] C[onference] minister."<sup>18</sup> A key point of disagreement between the brothers was the form of adult baptism, which Abraham regarded as a matter of individual conscience and conviction.

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<sup>16</sup> Information provided by John E. Toews, son of J. B. Toews, and David Dick, husband of J. B. Toews' niece.

<sup>17</sup> Gerhard I. Peters, *Remember Our Leader: Conference of Mennonites in Canada* (Clearbrook, BC: Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia, 1982), 158.

<sup>18</sup> Ernst Harder, "Memories of My Parents Abraham A. and Helene Janzen Harder," *HFR* 14: 1-2.

A different but related question arose when the *Fuorsorgekomitee* was asked to provide guidance regarding admission of persons who had been baptised by immersion in a non-Mennonite church. There was relatively little concern about persons transferring from a Baptist church. But in 1948 several persons who had been baptised by immersion in a Pentecostal church applied for membership. Harder and other Mennonite Brethren preachers had repeatedly stated that Pentecostals adhered to some wrong or false Christian doctrines (*Irrlehren*). But a second baptism by immersion seemed inappropriate if the individuals concerned had been truly converted at the time of their first baptism. So the *Fuorsorgekomitee* recommended that the Pentecostal baptism be recognized, but only if the person had been truly converted at the time of baptism and had subsequently come to understand and had denounced the false Pentecostal doctrines.<sup>19</sup>

### Conscientious objectors

The second major issue addressed by the Canadian *Fuorsorgekomitee* pertained to conscientious objections to military service. Mennonite Brethren leaders were distressed that many of their young men had enlisted for active military service during the war. They acknowledged their neglect in teaching the doctrine of non-resistance and commissioned the writing, publication and extensive circulation of an appropriate body of literature on non-resistance. In addition, speakers were to visit all Mennonite Brethren churches, Bible schools and other educational institutions.<sup>20</sup> The matter was regarded as sufficiently important that, in a revision of the by-laws, the *Fuorsorgekomitee* (then called the Board of Spiritual and Social Concerns), was given specific responsibility to provide "leadership in the clear and forceful teaching of the peace position within our Conference and its churches. Further, it shall be responsible for giving directives and structuring our peace witness in the country and in our constituencies."<sup>21</sup> On this issue Mennonite Brethren prepared some of their own material,<sup>22</sup> but they also supported the

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<sup>19</sup> *Fuorsorgekomitee Minutes*, 12 January 1948.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 April 1946.

<sup>21</sup> *Constitution of the Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches*, 23.

<sup>22</sup> J. A. Toews, *True Nonresistance through Christ: A Study of Biblical Principles* (Winnipeg, MB: Board of General Welfare and Public Relations of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America, 1955); J. A. Toews, *Alternative Service in Canada During World War II*.

educational efforts of the Mennonite Central Committee and other Mennonite conferences.

Immediately after the war, many churches were uncertain how to deal with members who had enlisted in the armed forces. In 1946 the *Fuorsorgekomitee* reported that two provincial conferences demanded that returning soldiers explain their actions, acknowledge that they had acted contrary to the Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith, and provide evidence of contrition and acceptance of the doctrine of non-resistance. The *Fuorsorgekomitee* endorsed this position. It also recommended that all baptismal candidates be required to pledge adherence to the doctrine of non-resistance, which would thus become a test of membership.<sup>23</sup> These decisions were difficult for Harder. He strongly supported the doctrine of non-resistance, but he did not invoke church discipline against those who had enlisted.

### **Resisting alien fire (*fremdes Feuer*)**

The promotion of distinctive Anabaptist and Mennonite doctrines was matched by efforts to keep some new influences and movements out of the churches. Some North American evangelistic influences seemed unfriendly to Anabaptist and Mennonite doctrines. Concern at the Canadian Conference level increased as a result of unfortunate events in Herbert, Saskatchewan, attributable, at least in part, to the influence of non-Mennonite evangelists.<sup>24</sup> In its report on the Herbert affair, the *Fuorsorgekomitee* reported: "It is not right to join with other groups, thus exposing members to foreign influences. This kind of action has already caused serious disruptions in the District, and it is not consistent with the rules and regulations of the conference."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Canadian Conference Year Book*, 1946, 158-159; *Fuorsorgekomitee Minutes*, 9 May 1947.

<sup>24</sup> Harder was not directly involved in the Herbert difficulties which involved members of the Mennonite Brethren Church who had been strongly influenced by visiting evangelists and wanted to build a "tabernacle" which was to serve as an evangelistic witness and outreach centre in Herbert. Details are available in T. D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970*, 301-302.

<sup>25</sup> *Canadian Conference Year Book*, 1946, 13 July 1946 and 9 May 1947, and notes on a meeting of the *Fuorsorgekomitee* with leaders of the Southern Saskatchewan Mennonite Brethren District, on 1 July 1947.

The deliberations of the *Fuersorgekomitee* regarding the problems in the Herbert church coincided with a question raised by the Ontario delegates with respect to the conference's attitude toward the Youth for Christ movement.<sup>26</sup> This request came only months after the Yarrow church had considered the same issue in March of 1946. Harder had prepared a detailed report on the subject for the Yarrow church.<sup>27</sup> In his report he had specifically warned the Yarrow congregation about the dangers of alien fire (*fremdes Feuer*).<sup>28</sup>

These warnings were not based on opposition to evangelistic efforts. The *Fuersorgekomitee* strongly supported greater evangelistic efforts but recommended that they be conducted by Mennonite Brethren preachers and evangelists in a manner consistent with Mennonite Brethren theology and religious practices. It became increasingly difficult, however, to dissuade Mennonite Brethren from attending services by evangelists with Mennonite roots, notably the Janz Quartet and the Brunk Team. Younger Mennonite Brethren also began to emulate English North American evangelists.

### **Conference finances and levies**

Establishment of the new Bible College in Winnipeg, acceptance of responsibility for the Bethesda Home in Ontario for the mentally ill, increased missionary activity, and administrative expenses increased the financial needs of the Canadian Conference. Before 1945, funds for various conference programs were obtained through small membership levies, special collections, and individual donations. As the financial needs increased, greater reliance was placed on membership levies. In 1946 the levy was set at \$3.00 per member. There were also smaller levies for the General (MB) Conference and the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization. The remainder of the transportation debt (*Reiseschuld*) had also been allocated to churches on a per member basis. Each church was to pay the designated amount but could decide how it wished to raise the money.<sup>29</sup>

There was not unanimous support for the major new conference initiatives or the setting of membership levies. The *Fuersorgekomitee* recommended and

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>27</sup> YMBC Minutes, 20 March 1946.

<sup>28</sup> Canadian Conference Year Book, 1946, 162.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 1946, 131.

the Canadian Conference commissioned B. B. Janz to prepare a report on the merits of voluntary giving (*Freiwilliges Geben*) and of membership levies.<sup>30</sup> Janz, Harder, and other members of the *Fuorsorgekomitee* were concerned that some church members were making donations to outside agencies or directly to specific conference programs rather than to the conference's general fund. This mode of giving created potential shortfalls for some programs and financial instability which could be corrected if all churches paid the designated levy. Additional donations for specific programs were, of course, welcome. But in the interests of fairness and stability, conference delegates voted in 1947 to continue the \$3.00 per member levy.<sup>31</sup>

When some churches and districts failed to pay the assessed levy, the matter was referred to the *Fuorsorgekomitee*. Various reasons were given for the shortfalls; nevertheless, the *Fuorsorgekomitee* began to exert increased pressure on churches in arrears. But in Manitoba the issue became entangled with other concerns and frustrations. Heinrich S. Voth, pastor of the Mennonite Brethren church in Winkler, Manitoba, became the most outspoken critic of the levies.<sup>32</sup> He had come to Canada from the United States and had held various prominent positions in both the General (MB) Conference and the Northern District (Canadian) Conference. He resented the growing influence and some of the tactics of the 1920s (*Russlaender*) immigrant leaders.

Establishment of the Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg was an irritant for Voth and members of the Winkler church. It was a project most strongly promoted by the *Russlaender*. Winkler people had hoped that the proposed "higher Bible School" would be established by adding one or perhaps several classes to the curriculum of the Winkler Bible School. Consequently there was disappointment when the Conference decided to locate the new Bible College in Winnipeg and then lured A. H. Unruh, the popular principal of the Winkler Bible School, to serve as the Bible College's first president. The new school was a costly venture which, Voth and others in Winkler thought, should rely on voluntary contributions.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 1947, 126.

<sup>32</sup> Abraham Voth, "Voth, Heinrich S. (1878-1953)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, <http://www.gameo.org/> (accessed 18 March 2008).

Irritation increased when, in 1946, election of the conference chairperson resulted in a deadlock that the *Fuorsorgekomitee* was asked to resolve. A compromise was negotiated under which Voth would continue as chairperson but H. H. Janzen, an aggressive *Russlaender*, was elected as vice-chairperson. Relations between the two men were strained. In January of 1947 Janzen wrote: "I fear the brother [H. S. Voth] is expending himself in anger and . . . may God give him grace. It is difficult when someone has such a hostile attitude toward a group of brothers [the *Russlaender*]." <sup>33</sup> At the next conference sessions H. H. Janzen was elected as chairperson and J. B. Toews, the aggressive second president of the Mennonite Brethren Bible College, became vice-chairperson. <sup>34</sup> That left Voth and others in Winkler with little enthusiasm to pay the \$3.00 per member Canadian Conference levy.

A written request by the conference chairperson for payment of the levy was referred to the finance committee of the Winkler church. This committee sent a reply explaining that their church followed the principle of voluntary giving. It expressed general support for the Canadian Conference, but it also declared that every member should be free to determine which branch of work in the Kingdom of God he or she wanted to support financially. <sup>35</sup> The Winkler committee also complained that their church had on its membership list more than 100 persons who were no longer regularly attending their church. Wartime disruptions and migration to Winnipeg were blamed. But Winkler's assessed conference dues included these non-active members.

The dispute festered for several years and then, in 1951, took an unexpected turn. By that time Harder, another outspoken *Russlaender*, had been elected as vice-chairperson of the Canadian Conference. He now served as acting chairperson because H. H. Janzen, the chairperson, had accepted a European appointment. The difficulties arose after the Winkler church hosted the 1951 annual sessions of the General (MB) Conference. The Canadian Conference had agreed to cover the costs but, apparently due to an oversight, had not made the necessary budgetary provisions. After the General (MB)

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<sup>33</sup> *Fuorsorgekomitee Correspondence*, 1947. H. H. Janzen to C. C. Peters, 21 January 1947.

<sup>34</sup> *Canadian Conference Year Book*, 1947, 187.

<sup>35</sup> *Fuorsorgekomitee Correspondence*, 1950, "Vom Finanzkomitee der Winkler Menn. Brueder Gemeinde, [1950]."

Conference sessions, the Winkler church sent a bill to the Canadian Conference, whose leaders deemed it excessive.<sup>36</sup> This billing was particularly irritating since the Winkler church was in arrears in its payment of the Canadian Conference levy. But A. H. Unruh, the elderly statesman of the conference, suggested a possible solution rife with irony. The Winkler church should submit a detailed invoice, which would then be sent to all churches, indicating what was needed and calling for freewill offerings.<sup>37</sup> Winkler would get whatever was raised in this way and be left to cover any shortfall.

Members of the *Fuorsorgekomitee* carefully reviewed the Winkler statement of expenses and compared it with costs incurred by other churches which had hosted the General (MB) Conference. On that basis the claimed expenses seemed reasonable. And, since a commitment had been made, the *Fuorsorgekomitee* recommended that the bill be paid. This decision facilitated negotiations with the Winkler church to resolve the church levy dispute. It was agreed that the Canadian Conference would pay for the costs of hosting the sessions of the General (MB) Conference. In return, the Winkler church agreed to pay a portion of what it owed, and thereafter pay the full membership levy on the basis of an adjusted membership list.<sup>38</sup>

Harder found this situation very troubling. He was a member of the *Fuorsorgekomitee* and acting chairperson of the Canadian Conference. As conference chairperson he accepted personal responsibility for the failure to make adequate budgetary provision for the expenses of the General (MB) Conference sessions.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, he was, at this very time, embroiled in a bitter dispute over the Yarrow church's *Steuer*. But he remained convinced that neither the church nor the conference could support expensive programs without an equitable and stable financial system. Church levies and taxes were designed to achieve those objectives. Due to the flood and the collapse of the raspberry market, however, he had to report that some BC churches could not pay the Canadian Conference levies.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 1951, "An alle Glieder des F. S. Komitees der Kanad. Konferenz," 5 October 1951.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., A. H. Unruh to H. Regehr, 13 December 1951.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 1952, H. H. Janzen "An die Glieder des F. S. K. der Kanadischen M. B. Konf., 26 April 1952."

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 1951, J. A. Harder to H. Regehr, 6 November 1951.



The *Fuersorgekomitee* nevertheless strongly supported conference levies, which gradually increased and changed over the years. In 1963, for example, the conference levy was \$8.00 per member. In addition, there was a \$1.00 per member levy for the Bible College building fund and \$1.50 per member levy for the General (MB) Conference. It was left to the churches to determine how they would raise the money. With increased sensitivity and flexibility, the system became less contentious. But over the years the balance of freewill giving and membership levies shifted. By 1963 the \$8.00 per member conference levy yielded \$116,051.72 out of a total budget of \$624,238.51.<sup>40</sup> More than half the conference budget that year came from offerings and special donations for foreign missions.

### **Remarriage of persons separated during the Stalinist terror and war**

In 1949 and 1950, when serving as chairperson of the Canadian Conference and member of the *Fuersorgekomitee*, Harder was called upon to deal with another difficult issue. During the Stalinist era and the war, many Mennonites in the Soviet Union and other war-torn countries had been arrested, banished, or had simply disappeared. Couples had been separated. Many of the survivors did not know the fate of their missing spouses. The question then arose whether those who had no official word that their spouse was dead or alive could remarry.

The Canadian Conference sent its chairperson, H. H. Janzen, to minister to the refugees after the war. He quickly became aware of the marriage/remarriage problems faced by many of these people, but could find no Scripture references directly addressing the problem. So he asked the *Fuersorgekomitee* for advice, citing several complicated cases that had come to his attention. Members of the *Fuersorgekomitee* carefully searched the Scriptures, discussed the matter, expressed sympathy and love for those involved, and then, citing a lengthy list of Scripture passages, concluded that marriage vows were lifelong commitments. Those who did not know the fate of missing spouses could not, therefore, remarry until they had definite word of their spouse's death. The committee acknowledged that this decision placed very heavy burdens on those involved, but God could provide the necessary

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 1963, 63-64.

strength to bear what seemed to be humanly impossible trials.<sup>41</sup> A copy of the committee's resolution was then sent to the leaders of all Mennonite Brethren churches in Canada.

The remarriage issue became acute in South America. There the problem was brought to a special ministers' conference (*Predigerkonferenz*) with representatives from all the Mennonite denominations in South America and of two of the largest North American conferences. After prolonged discussion, the assembled ministers adopted a more moderate approach than that taken by the Canadian *Fuorsorgekomitee*. They agreed to sanction remarriage if no word of the missing spouse had been received for seven years, or if word had been received that the missing spouse had married someone else. Remarriage was not permissible for those whose spouses were known to be living elsewhere, perhaps in Siberia, and had not remarried.<sup>42</sup>

In November 1949, B. B. Janz informed Harder, the conference chairperson at the time, that there was considerable uncertainty in the Canadian churches regarding the remarriage issue. He asked that Harder send a copy of the *Fuorsorgekomitee* resolution to all church leaders.<sup>43</sup> Harder and other members of the committee knew there were sharply divided views regarding the issue. Specifically, the Southern Saskatchewan District Conference had passed a resolution stating that the position of the Canadian *Fuorsorgekomitee* was too harsh.<sup>44</sup> Harder therefore suggested a review of the problem. Privately he informed several members that he supported acceptance of the recommendations made at the South American conference.<sup>45</sup> But it seemed prudent to let the matter rest. Accordingly, the *Fuorsorgekomitee* declined involvement in individual cases. That allowed churches to act on the merits of widely differing situations.

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<sup>41</sup> *Fuorsorgekomitee Minutes*, 1-2 January 1948.

<sup>42</sup> *Fuorsorgekomitee Correspondence*, "Auszug aus dem Protokoll der Predigerkonferenz der Mennoniten von Sued-Amerika, abgehalten vom 14-17 Juli 1949 in Fernheim, Dorf Karlsruhe, Chaco, Paraguay."

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, B. B. Janz to J. A. Harder, 22 November 1949.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, H. Regehr to J. A. Harder, 24 November 1949; H. Regehr to B. B. Janz, 24 November 1949.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, J. A. Harder to H. Regehr, 29 November 1929.

The remarriage issue arose in uniquely tragic circumstances. In his handling of the issue Harder adopted a non-confrontational approach. But he had to deal with the issue again when he was sent to South America in 1955.

### **Drafting church rules and guidelines**

In the early 1950s, members of the *Fuorsorgekomitee* of both the General (MB) and Canadian conferences became increasingly concerned about the impact of rapidly changing social, economic, and cultural changes on the spiritual life of church members. This concern led to prolonged but inconclusive efforts by the *Fuorsorgekomitee* of the General (MB) Conference to provide member churches with consistent guidance and advice.<sup>46</sup>

In 1953, B. B. Janz warned Canadian Conference delegates of the dangers threatening the spiritual life of members. He complained about lack of effective church discipline and counselling, and the dangers of materialism, worldliness, and weak preaching. He also repeated warnings about the influence of organizations such as Youth for Christ.<sup>47</sup> The *Fuorsorgekomitee* responded by asking Janz to prepare a sermon to be delivered at a future conference session. This sermon, presented in 1954, was sent to all ministers and deacons in the conference.<sup>48</sup> The *Fuorsorgekomitee* then appointed a small sub-committee comprised of Harder, Janz, and Isaac Thiessen to review and update church rules, taking into account Janz's warnings. Harder served as leader of the sub-committee and drafted a new set of church rules. These sought to define the responsibilities of members for their own spiritual welfare and that of the church, as well as their responsibilities to the world.

Responsibilities of members for their own spiritual welfare included Bible reading, prayer, fellowship with other believers, family devotions, and non-conformity to the world. Worldly behaviour included the use of tobacco and alcoholic beverages, participation in places of worldly amusements such as theatres and dances, lack of simplicity of dress, the use of jewellery and cosmetics, and marriage with an unbeliever.

Responsibility to other church members was defined as mutual exhortation, edification, obedience to all church decisions, avoidance of adverse

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<sup>46</sup> *General (MB) Conference Year Book, 1951, 124-144.*

<sup>47</sup> *Fuorsorgekomitee Minutes, 27-28 November 1953.*

<sup>48</sup> *Canadian Conference Year Book, 1954, 10-15.*

public discussion of church problems, financial support of the church, and sanctification of the Sabbath.

The believer's responsibilities to the world were to witness, pray, and give of one's income so the Gospel message could be carried to the far corners of the world. When dealing with the outside world, believers should refrain from use of the oath, refuse military service, and leave no room for revenge but rather suffer wrong than do wrong.<sup>49</sup>

When Harder circulated his draft to the other two members of the sub-committee he received an interesting response. B. B. Janz complained that the draft, while helpful in many respects, failed to emphasize the most important and fundamental Christian obligation: Jesus' great commandment of love. Janz thought clearly stated church rules had served his home church in Coaldale well, but they always had to be administered in a spirit of love.<sup>50</sup> In response, Harder added a special short introductory section emphasizing the fundamental importance of love as the driving force in the believer's life.

The document underwent a further change. Harder, Janz, and Thiessen had been asked to revise the church rules (*Regeln*). But the title of the German version of the final document as approved and published by the conference referred only to guidelines (*Richtlinien*). Similarly, the English version spoke of principles, not rules, even though some sections, particularly those pertaining to worldliness, were quite legalistic.

This document, as drafted by Harder and then amended, was widely circulated, but observance or enforcement was left to each believer and each church. The *Fuorsorgekomitee* had no mandate to interfere with the actions and decisions of individual churches unless they posed a general threat to Mennonite Brethren doctrines or church polity. Thus it was possible for churches, if they so chose, to modify or even ignore legalistic enforcement of the rules, guidelines, or principles drafted by Harder.

In 1954 Harder was asked to draft another study paper. It warned members about the evils of television and denounced the crudity of many

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<sup>49</sup> *Biblische Richtlinien fuer den Christlichen Lebenswandel in der Mennoniten-Bruedergemeinde/Scriptural Principles for the Christian Life in the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Winnipeg: Das Fuorsorgekomitee der Kanadischen Konferenz der Mennoniten-Bruedergemeinde, 1957).

<sup>50</sup> *Fuorsorgekomitee Correspondence*, B. B. Janz to J. A. Harder, 24 October 1956.

programs, tobacco and beer advertisements, and portrayals of marital infidelities and of women not living according to their God-ordained place in life. Watching television, it was alleged, resulted in “the growth of worldly attitudes . . . which then lead to compromise and conformity to the world.”<sup>51</sup> References to the benefits of religious broadcasts were refuted. It was too difficult to monitor the theological soundness of such broadcasts, and the evils of television programs far outweighed the merits of religious broadcasts.

Some church leaders, including Harder, wanted to forbid the purchase of television sets. The Yarrow church and some others did so and also asked baptismal candidates to promise never to buy a television set. But such rigidity was not endorsed by the majority of members of the *Fuorsorgekomitee*. Instead, the committee issued stern warnings. But there was uncertainty when some churches disciplined members who purchased a television set while others did not. Consequently, in 1958, the Alberta Conference, at the request of the Coaldale church, asked for clarification. The *Fuorsorgekomitee*'s response was to reaffirm “in principle” its 1954 statement.<sup>52</sup> The issue continued to fester and, in 1963, at the last meeting attended by Harder, the *Fuorsorgekomitee* approved the printing and circulation of another pamphlet warning against the worldly influence of television.<sup>53</sup>

The *Fuorsorgekomitee* also dealt with a host of other issues. Harder participated in all the discussions. He had strong views on many matters, but he was less involved in aspects of Mennonite Brethren relations with the Bethesda Mental Hospital, the Mennonite Brethren Bible College, and inter-Mennonite organizations. He was still a member of the *Fuorsorgekomitee*, but not of the conference's publications committee, when Rudy Wiebe's appointment as the first editor of the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, was terminated. Suggestions that he may have been the “hatchet man” in that instance are probably overblown.

Harder's major concerns over the years when he was a member of the *Fuorsorgekomitee* were most clearly enunciated when, in 1958, this committee arranged a special ministers' and deacons' conference. There, participants

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<sup>51</sup> *Fuorsorgekomitee Minutes*, 2-8 July 1954; *Canadian Conference Year Book*, 1954, 84-85.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-9 July 1958.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14 March 1963.

warned about worldliness (*Verweltlichung*), the superficiality of conversions influenced by outside evangelists (*Verflachung*), and weak church leadership which failed to enforce church and conference rules, regulations and/or guidelines.<sup>54</sup>

### Watchman

The walls between the churches and the world that Harder had sought to strengthen crumbled. The gates he wanted to rebuild fell. Persons who had not been baptised by immersion could become members of Mennonite Brethren churches. The “alien fires” of North American evangelicalism swept across and changed Mennonite Brethren churches. Although conference levies remained in force, they covered a diminishing portion of conference expenditures, and a growing number of churches relied on voluntary giving rather than levies. Moreover, members participated in many activities and went to many places which had long been regarded as worldly and sinful. Little wonder that he went from one of his last *Fuorsorgekomitee* meetings in Winnipeg to his small guest bedroom at the Mennonite Brethren Bible College with a terrible headache and in deep despair, convinced that, if he were a younger man, he would start a new church.

At the 1963 Canadian Conference sessions, Harder was again a candidate for election as a member of the *Fuorsorgekomitee*. But he lost the election to David B. Wiens.<sup>55</sup> Terminating his 18 years of continuous service as a member of the *Fuorsorgekomitee* discouraged him. But he and other members of this committee provided counsel and advice in a time of rapid growth and far-reaching change. It had not been easy to distinguish clearly between essential and peripheral matters of faith and Christian discipleship. In this respect Harder’s judgement on some specific issues was later reassessed. But those who worked closely with him never questioned his faith, integrity, commitment, dedicated service, love of the church, and love of the conference.

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<sup>54</sup> *Biblische Wegweiser fuer rechten Gemeindebau* (Winnipeg, MB: Kanadische MBG-Konferenz, 1958).

<sup>55</sup> *Canadian Conference Year Book*, 1963, 129.

## Chapter 14

### Expansion of Foreign Missions, 1945-1955

Johannes Harder was elected a member of the Board of Foreign Missions of the General (MB) Conference in November of 1945. He joined the Board at an exceptionally important time. Mission work worldwide had suffered serious disruptions during the war. The immediate challenges were to rebuild what had been destroyed or seriously neglected. Missionaries who had been left stranded or held hostage during the war had to be brought home on furlough. Most of those who had returned home during the war were eager to return, and new missionaries had to be recruited, trained, and sent out. Negotiations were also underway for the Board to accept responsibility for several previously independent Mennonite Brethren missions.

The work of the Board was greatly facilitated by improved relations between Canadian Mennonite Brethren missionary supporters and the United States-based Board of Foreign Missions. Harder's election as one of the first Canadian members of that Board was evidence of the improved relations.<sup>1</sup> He served continuously, with only one short interruption, from 1945 until his death in 1964. Over this span of years Mennonite Brethren missions expanded at a phenomenal rate. In 1945, 47 missionaries were working in independent,

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<sup>1</sup> H. S. Voth, who had been born in Minnesota, served as a Mennonite Brethren evangelist before accepting the pastorate of the Winkler Mennonite Brethren Church in 1931. He had been elected to the Board of Foreign Missions in 1939. *General (MB) Conference Year Book*, 1939, 26.

semi-independent or Board-administered Mennonite Brethren missions in four overseas countries. This number had increased in 1963 to 220 missionaries working in 14 overseas countries.<sup>2</sup>

Harder provides little evidence of unconventional or innovative thinking and understanding of foreign missions in his various reports and articles.<sup>3</sup> But he brought to the Board a highly principled, pragmatic approach to the myriad major and minor matters that had to be addressed. He wanted mission work to be rooted in the Word of God, guided by the Holy Spirit, and organized in an orderly and structurally functional manner. His extensive contacts and compelling, well-organized presentations in numerous churches in both Canada and the United States garnered much support for the work of the Board.

### **Board and senior staff changes**

The Board of Foreign Missions was in a state of transition in 1945. Henry W. Lohrenz, from 1919 to 1936 the Board's chairperson and after that its Executive Secretary, died in March of 1945.<sup>4</sup> That year death also claimed a Board member and two of its financial officers.<sup>5</sup>

Abraham E. Janzen had been appointed the Board's new Executive Secretary shortly before Harder was elected as a Board member. Janzen was a former teacher who had served from 1935 to 1942 as president of Tabor College. He had completed all but the dissertation in a doctoral program in economics at the University of California in Berkeley and had taught at Friends University before coming to Tabor College.<sup>6</sup> He had also served for one year with the Mennonite Central Committee, providing economic

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 1963, 62. Slightly different figures, apparently including retired missionaries, are given in Wesley Prieb, "Janzen, Abraham Ewell (1892-1995)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, <http://www.gameo.org/> (accessed 15 January 2007).

<sup>3</sup> John A. Harder, "Mission—die Aufgabe der Gemeinde Jesu Christi," "Das Gebet der Gläubigen in der Mission," and "Der Dienst des Lebens in der Mission," in Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, California, *Board of Foreign Missions Records* (hereafter *Mission Board Records*)

<sup>4</sup> John H. Lohrenz, "Lohrenz, Henry W. (1878-1945)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, <http://www.gameo.org/> (accessed 1 April 2008).

<sup>5</sup> General (MB) Conference Year Book, 1945, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Wesley Prieb, "Janzen, Abraham Ewell (1892-1995)."



assistance and guidance in the Mennonite colonies of South America. He had no prior experience as a missionary or missions administrator.

Janzen quickly familiarized himself with the mission work in the various fields. This made it possible for him to present a detailed and informative report at the triennial conference session in November of 1945.<sup>7</sup> This report was published and copies were sent to all Mennonite Brethren churches in North America. Harder had a high regard for higher education and the orderly presentation of information, and he must have been impressed with Janzen's comprehensive report. But Harder and some other Board members with more limited educational credentials were also somewhat intimidated. In time, Janzen and Harder became close friends and co-workers. While managing a myriad of administrative matters, Janzen was also influential in the formulation of Board policies. But both Janzen's and Harder's involvement in policy formulation decreased after the appointment in 1953 of J. B. Toews as Field Secretary (sometimes also referred to as General Secretary) of the Board. Toews, like Janzen, had completed all but the dissertation in a doctoral program. Board members naturally discussed and sometimes questioned policy matters, but Janzen, and later Toews, drafted the major policy documents. Board members like Harder, by contrast, were more involved in local assessments, practical support, and itineration scheduling of missionaries on furlough. Harder also accepted numerous promotional speaking engagements in the churches.

### **Opportunities and strategies in the mid- and late-1940s**

When Harder joined the Board, it was directly responsible for only one overseas or foreign mission. This was in India where 15 missionaries were working at eight stations.<sup>8</sup> The Board also had a mission to the Comanche Indians and Mexicans in Oklahoma and a city mission in Minneapolis, and it was providing assistance for a Canadian Mission to Russians in Grand Forks, British Columbia. Agreement had been reached, however, for the Board to accept responsibility for formerly independent Mennonite Brethren missions in China, Africa, Brazil, and Paraguay. There were also plans for new missionary initiatives in Colombia. And the Board held substantial funds in

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<sup>7</sup> *General (MB) Conference Year Book, 1945, 9-27.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

reserve to staff, build, repair, or reconstruct the facilities on various mission compounds.<sup>9</sup>

Harder and other Canadian Mennonite Brethren were particularly interested in the Belgian Congo. Aaron and Martha Janzen, an American Mennonite Brethren couple, had established a mission at Kafumba in 1912. It was supported by a private missionary organization rather than by the Board of Foreign Missions.

In the 1930s, thanks in large measure to the influence of the Bible schools, Canadian Mennonite Brethren gained a greater interest in missions. But they were frustrated by the attitude and policies of the General (MB) Conference's Board of Foreign Missions. The Board wanted missionaries who had at least some college training, preferably at Tabor College. It rejected Canadian applicants who had completed only elementary and junior high school followed by several years of Bible school. Prospective Canadian missionaries had neither time nor money to attend college and did not think advanced training was needed by those going out to proclaim the Gospel to people they viewed as illiterate and backward. The resulting frustration led to the organization in 1934 of the *Afrika Missions Verein* (African Mission Society).<sup>10</sup> It supported missionaries, including several from Canada, who worked with the Janzens at Kafumba, and the several who subsequently established a new mission station at Bololo, all in the Belgian Congo. Beginning in 1943, negotiations between the *Afrika Missions Verein* and the Board of Foreign Missions resulted in an agreement, approved in 1945, under which the Board accepted responsibility for these African mission stations.<sup>11</sup> Conference delegates also approved the purchase of several orphaned African mission stations, "provided the work done on these stations has been reasonably within our Confession of Faith and provided the acquisition of such stations will strengthen the field as a whole."<sup>12</sup>

Developments in the African mission had become a matter of personal interest to Harder. In 1944, in anticipation of stronger Canadian involvement, Susie Brucks, a member of the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church who had

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>10</sup> Bernhard Derksen, "Mennonite Brethren Missions: Historical Development, Philosophy and Policies," D. Miss. dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1986.

<sup>11</sup> *General (MB) Conference Year Book*, 1945, 24.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

previously been rejected for missionary service, was accepted for service at Kafumba.<sup>13</sup> She did not have college training but spent some time prior to her departure at a Missionary Medical Institute in Toronto. Several others with Canadian and Yarrow connections had also been involved in pioneer work at Bololo and at a new station at Matende.

The agreement between the *Afrika Missions Verein* and the Board of Foreign Missions provided for Canadian representation on the Board. Harder was elected in 1945 as one of the Canadian representatives. As a Board member, he was naturally interested in all Mennonite Brethren missions, but he retained a special concern for the African missions.

Harder also had great interest in a proposed new mission in Colombia. In 1943, the Board had sponsored an exploratory trip. The objective was to establish a mission “in wild and neglected areas where up to this time no Protestant work has been done.”<sup>14</sup> The first missionaries were sent out in 1945 and Jacob and Anne Loewen, members of the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren church, had been accepted by the Board and were awaiting visas from the Colombian government. They wanted “to get a foothold on a vast area representing some 450,000 unevangelized souls.”<sup>15</sup> Harder’s relations with the Loewens informed and sometimes challenged his understanding of mission work.

Harder was familiar with and endorsed the foreign mission strategies of the Board. These were focussed on the building of stations or compounds which provided a base for evangelistic forays into adjacent areas. The compounds usually included a residence for the missionaries, a chapel, and facilities designed to meet both the spiritual and physical needs of the people. Schools, medical clinics, emergency food distribution facilities, water purification systems, and agricultural support systems were established. These services gained the goodwill of the people and made them more receptive to the missionaries’ message. Mission farms and other economic activities,

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<sup>13</sup> *Missionary Album*, 1951, 67. Susie Brucks Dyck, *Goetliches Wirken in der Afrika Mission* (Clearbrook, BC: Susie Brucks Dyck, 1983); Anna Bartsch, *The Hidden Hand in the Story of my Life* (Nelson, BC: Arthur Bartsch, 1987); J. B. Toews, *The Mennonite Brethren Church in Zaire* (Fresno, CA: General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church, 1978).

<sup>14</sup> *General (MB) Conference Year Book*, 1945, 24.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

sometimes quite extensive, provided work for local people and made the mission more self-sufficient. The mission stations and compounds became outposts of a western-style Christian witness in sharp contrast to what missionaries at the time referred to as “heathen” religious, cultural, and social practices. Missionary reports, for example, spoke of native children at the mission school dressed in western clothes, singing choruses and hymns, and reciting familiar Scripture verses in much the same way as children in North America, albeit in their own language.

Some of the compounds became very large and quite diverse. At Shamshabad, India, for example, the Mennonite Brethren mission in 1948-1949 included a church, the main residence of the missionary family, a sisters’ residence for unmarried female missionaries, a hospital, a residence for hospital workers, an elementary school, two middle schools, teachers’ quarters, separate girls and boys boarding buildings, servant quarters, separate kitchens for high school boys and for the single female missionaries, a well and water canal, several vehicles, a vehicle shed, and a barn.<sup>16</sup>

The primary object of the mission was to bring indigenous people to a conversion experience that would result in a decisive turning away from native beliefs and practices and the acceptance of an entirely new Christian way of life. Converts were taught to worship, think, pray, sing, read, and study the Scriptures and celebrate festive occasions in forms familiar to the missionaries. Unfamiliar local civic, cultural, and religious practices were regarded as manifestations of the old superstitious and sinful life which converts must leave when they became Christians. When native churches were organized, usually with guidance by the missionaries, it was expected that they would replicate as closely as possible churches in North America.

In 1945 and for most of the next decade, missionaries and members of the Board of Foreign Missions remained committed to the maintenance and, if possible, expansion of station- or compound-based strategies. The objective was to create unique, sheltered Christian communities which were clearly different and separate from the dark influences of the outside world.

Station- and compound-based mission strategies were strongly endorsed in 1948-1949 when A. E. Janzen, Executive Secretary of the Board, reported on

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<sup>16</sup> A. E. Janzen, *Survey of Five Mission Fields of the Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America . . . during December 1948 to June 10, 1949* (Hillsboro, KS: Board of Foreign Missions, 1950), 18 and appended pictures.

all the major Mennonite Brethren missions in India, Africa, Brazil, Paraguay, and Colombia. His major assessment was clear. "Without adequate facilities the spiritual ministry of evangelism, education, hospitalization, publication, touring and residence among the people to whom the ambassadors of Christ, our missionaries, have gone would be impossible."<sup>17</sup> His enthusiasm after visiting the mission compounds in India seemed unlimited. "Our mission compounds and their spacious land areas are ideally located. The selection of the site and place of the land area is beyond human wisdom. God must have directed our missionaries or they could not have exercised such strategy. Every station and field has so many unique features that each is the best and none duplicates the other."<sup>18</sup> His enthusiasm for compound-based mission strategies was shared by Board members. Harder, in a letter to Janzen, wrote that missionaries needed a "home" which would serve as the main point of support (*Stuetzpunkt*) for their work.<sup>19</sup>

Some missionaries were less enthusiastic. Jacob Loewen became uneasy and later wrote: "My first term on the field was an education in itself. I wanted to concentrate on reaching the tribal people—the Waunana—with the Gospel. . . . We were involved in supervising the endless construction of schools, a dispensary, a church, teachers' and nurses' residences, and housing for longer-term sick people. . . . At the four-year point in our first term, the Waunana began calling us liars—we were so busy with other things, we weren't really mastering the language. We pled with the mission authorities, and they finally gave us permission to concentrate on learning the tribal language."<sup>20</sup>

Concessions to meet the unique priorities in some fields did not alter the Board's commitment to the further expansion or new construction of its mission stations and compounds. The opportunities of the post-World War II era would be exploited, at least for a time, by using the old strategies developed in the decades before the war.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., ii.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>19</sup> *Mission Board Correspondence*, J. A. Harder to A. E. Janzen, 25 March 1946.

<sup>20</sup> Jacob A. Loewen, *Educating Tiger: My Spiritual and Intellectual Journey* (Hillsboro, KS: Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 2000), 296. See also, Jacob A. Loewen, *Culture and Human Values: Christian Intervention in Anthropological Perspective* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000); Jacob A. Loewen, *The Bible in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1975).

### **A rebuff in 1948**

When Harder joined the Board of Foreign Missions in 1945, he had little difficulty embracing its policies and strategies. He rejoiced when the facilities on existing fields were enlarged, the personnel increased, and numerous new fields opened. He respected and enjoyed good relations with A. E. Janzen and other staff members. But at the next triennial sessions of the General (MB) Conference in 1948, he suffered a serious rebuff. This was the year of the devastating British Columbia flood and the collapse of the raspberry market. The Sharon Mennonite Collegiate Institute faced financial disaster. In the midst of these troubles, Harder fell seriously ill. He was therefore unable to attend both the Board meetings and the Conference's triennial sessions. An address he was to present had to be cancelled. But it was a great shock when he was not re-elected for a second three-year term on the Board. After the conference, A. E. Janzen wrote him: "Your message which was to be delivered during the devotional program was definitely missed and it seems that an absence at the conference often has a baring [sic] on the election. Personally I wish to say, and I am sure the other brethren would share with me, the realization that the Board has lost a very valuable member."<sup>21</sup> Harder's response was magnanimous. He had worked willingly, and pledged continued prayerful support for the work of the Board.<sup>22</sup>

The Mission Board minutes and correspondence do not indicate clearly what happened next, but no later than September 1950 Harder was again attending meetings of the Board as a member. And in the 1951 triennial conference year book, he is listed as the Board's second vice-chairman. His election as chairperson of the Canadian Conference may have facilitated his return as a Mission Board member.

### **Harder's support of Yarrow and other Canadian missionaries**

All Board members were interested in and participated in discussions of broad policy issues. Board members were nominated by their district conferences, however, and took special interest in prospective and serving missionaries from their districts, in visits to their districts by missionaries on furlough, and in general promotion of the work in their home constituencies. Harder was

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<sup>21</sup> *Mission Board Correspondence*, A. E. Janzen to J. A. Harder, 6 September 1948.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, J. A. Harder to A. E. Janzen, 21 September 1948.

especially supportive of missionaries from British Columbia and Alberta, and more specifically those from Yarrow. His colleague on the Board, H. S. Voth, focussed more on promotion of the cause of missions in Manitoba.

Harder took particular interest in the work of Susie Brucks, Jacob and Anne Loewen, Henry and Anna Bartsch, and Henry and Elsie Brucks. Susie Brucks and Jacob Loewen were the first members of the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church accepted by the Board of Foreign Missions for overseas missionary service. Henry and Anna Bartsch had already linked up with the *Afrika Missions Verein* before the Board of Foreign Missions accepted full responsibility for the African missions.

Prior to Susie Brucks' departure for Africa, questions arose whether the local church or the Board should arrange a ceremony to "bless" Susie. At that time male missionaries were ordained. Until 1960, however, females were granted a laying on of hands in a ceremony of blessing. Harder successfully argued that Susie Brucks should be blessed by the local church, and then presided at the ceremony.<sup>23</sup> This ceremony was followed several weeks later by the ordination of Jacob Loewen, who was only 21 years old and still pursuing preparatory studies. Untypically for Mennonite Brethren, Loewen was ordained while he was still single.

Prior to Susie Brucks' departure, Harder helped negotiate an allowance as well as currency exchanges for her personal and travel expenses. Once in Africa, she reported that she needed a cook-stove. Such stoves were not available in Kafumba, and it was apparently not considered appropriate that missionaries abandon the use of familiar western domestic appliances. Instead, local people were to be taught to cook their food in allegedly cleaner and healthier western ways. The Yarrow church, prompted by Harder, paid for the stove and the cost of shipping it to Africa.<sup>24</sup>

Susie Brucks' brother Henry also became a missionary in Africa. He quickly became involved in the building of a new mission station at Matende. But he wrote his parents that he was getting very tired and had difficulty becoming acclimatized. Abe Kroeker, the senior missionary at Matende, was

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., J. A. Harder to Br. Lohrenz, 4 February 1944 and Lohrenz to J. A. Harder, 8 February 1944.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., J. A. Harder to A. E. Janzen, 27 August 1946 and A. E. Janzen to J. A. Harder, 2 September 1946.

aggressive in the construction work. He roused everyone at 5:00 a.m. and had them working in hot stifling conditions until the evening. Others confirmed Kroeker's rigorous regimen, and Harder became concerned that too much was being demanded of Brucks and others before they had adjusted to their new environment. He raised this matter with A. E. Janzen, and it was discussed at a Board meeting. Shortly thereafter the Kroekers were moved to Kikwit, and the work at Matende was arranged "to be more in line with the physical resources of our missionaries, especially the new ones."<sup>25</sup>

Harder was equally concerned when Clara Redekop, another missionary from British Columbia, became ill shortly before her scheduled departure for language studies in Belgium before going to the Belgian Congo. He consulted with her parents and doctors and carefully monitored her situation before she was allowed to go to Africa.<sup>26</sup>

Jacob Loewen, whose father had died while he was very young and for whom Harder became a kind of surrogate father and spiritual mentor, was the beneficiary of Harder's practical and moral support. Harder was, for example, instrumental in arranging the purchase of a jeep, and later other equipment, for the work in Colombia.<sup>27</sup> One incident, however, was particularly important. Loewen had an agreement with the Board that after four years he would return to North America, where he hoped to enter a graduate program in anthropology and linguistics that would allow him to develop what he had learned about the language and culture of the people with whom he had worked in Colombia. Other assignments, notably in the construction of mission buildings and other facilities, had not given him enough time to study the language and culture of the local people. Thus he asked for an extra year in the field to advance his primary objectives. The Board agreed, but serious difficulties arose. While in the midst of his work, Loewen was asked to substitute for an invited evangelist who was unable to serve. Loewen declined, citing his commitment to language studies. His refusal resulted in harsh criticism by his fellow missionaries and later by a Board member. He allegedly

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., J. A. Harder to A. E. Janzen, 8 January 1951 and A. E. Janzen to J. A. Harder, 13 January 1951.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., J. A. Harder to A. E. Janzen, 25 September 1950; 2, 8 and 13 February 1951; 10 March 1952, 7 August and 9 September 1953.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., J. A. Harder to A. E. Janzen, 10 February 1948.



was more interested in language study than evangelism. There was also criticism that he had not used the name Jesus in his preaching. And he had not denounced and fought the Roman Catholics with sufficient vigour.

These criticisms were voiced at a later Board meeting while Loewen was pursuing graduate studies at the University of Washington in Seattle. On the basis of these complaints, the Board suddenly cut off the salary allowance normally paid to missionaries on furlough. This action left the Loewens without resources, making it virtually impossible for him to continue his studies. On the way home from the difficult Board meeting in Hillsboro, Harder stopped off in Seattle to explain the situation to Loewen and his spouse, Anne. He listened to Loewen's explanations. The request to conduct evangelistic services had come while Loewen and his associates were busy working on a Waunana grammar. He admitted that he had not explicitly mentioned the name of Jesus, but he had not done so because many of the local people knew it only as a Spanish profanity. He had talked instead about the Saviour as the Son of God. That resonated much better with Waunana folklore. Loewen also explained his failure to become more combative in relations with the Roman Catholics by referring to historic Anabaptist peace principles.

Upon hearing these explanations, Harder agreed that Loewen should come to the next Board meeting "to clarify this misunderstanding soon and openly." He asked that Loewen be given a fair hearing, citing Jesus' words in John 7:51. "Does our law, he asked them, permit us to pass judgement on a man unless we have first given him a hearing and learned the facts?" Harder explained that "every issue has at least two sides, and at the meeting in October we did not have all the facts. I have now talked to the brother and sister in a brotherly fashion, very open and direct. They wish to restore their damaged relationship with the Board. What can they do to achieve that?"<sup>28</sup> When Loewen's explanations failed to satisfy a disgruntled Board member, Harder arranged for a direct confrontation which Loewen described thus:

"Johannes Harder told me the ground rules for our confrontation in the other Board member's presence. They were: we [the Board member and I] were to straighten out any disagreement between the two of us. Should we

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., J. A. Harder to A. E. Janzen, 7 January 1954 and *Loewen Manuscript*, 202-203.

reach an impasse at some point in the process, then I was to awaken the sleeping Johannes Harder in the next room and he would then serve as a referee between us. The latter commitment on Johannes Harder's part turned out to be the saving element in our confrontation, because with each accusation we discussed, I had to tell the Board member that I was ready to call referee Harder, before the Board member admitted that he had erred. I was deeply grateful that Johannes Harder had been so frankly honest with us and that he told us everything against us in full detail. This permitted me to have that frank face-to-face meeting with the Board member and to lay all the facts and issues on the table. The issue was eventually resolved during the night's five-hour confrontation"<sup>29</sup> Harder's decisive support was particularly appreciated by the Loewens because they sensed that Harder had "great difficulty accepting the validity of other diverse cultures and their multiple cultural differences."<sup>30</sup>

Harder also offered some perhaps surprising advice to his friend and ministerial colleague, Cornelius C. Peters, who had accepted a mission assignment in South America. While there, Anna Peters, Cornelius' wife, became seriously ill. The Peters were encouraged to return to Canada, but Cornelius refused. He said he had made a commitment to the Lord that he would not leave the field until a replacement had arrived. When Harder heard that, he wrote directly to J. B. Toews, the Board's Field Secretary, insisting that Peters give priority to the solemn commitments he had made to his wife on their wedding day rather than to his South American commitments.<sup>31</sup> Missionary or any other Christian service should not supplant fundamental principles of personal and domestic Christian discipleship. For Harder Christian witness abroad should be rooted in wholesome Christian living at home. He opposed sending anyone overseas if that person's domestic affairs were in disarray and supported the recall of those guilty of inappropriate behaviour on the mission field.

### **Assessments of missionary candidates**

Careful vetting of every person volunteering for missionary service was essential. The Board naturally looked to Harder for relevant information

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<sup>29</sup> *Loewen Manuscript*, 203.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Mission Board Correspondence*, J. A. Harder to J. B. Toews, 4 February 1957.

about candidates from British Columbia and others he met while visiting various churches. Very shortly after his election to the Board, he was asked for information about a couple from Vancouver. Since he did not know the people, he contacted the church leader and others in Vancouver to get the necessary information.<sup>32</sup> Some of his assessments were quite harsh, and occasionally based on rumours and gossip. Thus, he reported about one couple: "They say the sister especially cannot get along with anyone, and they fear for the mission field. I do not know these people, having met them for the first time in October. But those who have spoken to me are not the kind to talk negatively without reasons."<sup>33</sup> In this case, however, further investigation by senior mission board administrators resulted in the commissioning of the couple for overseas service.<sup>34</sup>

On one of his trips Harder stopped off in Saskatoon to interview a prospective missionary couple he had not previously met. The husband had completed medical studies, and Harder was pleased to note that there was no "scent of smoke" (evidence) which might suggest the husband's faith had somehow been "burned" (compromised) as a result of his university studies. But Harder was concerned about the wife. She was a member of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church and reluctant to give up her membership and join the Mennonite Brethren, at least until the couple was accepted for mission work with the Mennonite Brethren Board. Harder worried that the wife might not serve with totally undivided loyalties, but he was willing to accept a decision made by the Board.<sup>35</sup>

Another case elicited a harsher judgement. An older preacher and former member of the Canadian Conference's *Fuersorgekomitee* had seduced a young girl. This girl had become engaged, and the couple wished to go into mission work. The Canadian *Fuersorgekomitee* was the first to review the case. It decided, after much sighing, prayer, and evaluation (*Seufzen und Beten und Erwaegen*), that the couple should not be recommended for missionary service because of the young woman's past. This decision elicited a blunt response from J. B. Toews, who wrote to his uncle, B. B. Janz, that he did not agree with

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., J. A. Harder to A. E. Janzen, 28 December 1945.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., note in Johannes Harder's handwriting, c. December 1951.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., A. E. Janzen to J. A. Harder, 21 December 1953.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., J. A. Harder to A. E. Janzen, 9 March and 1 May 1952.

the decision of the Canadian *Fuorsorgekomitee*. Janz agreed with Toews that an impressionable young girl should not be blamed for the sins of an older preacher. Both cited supportive Scripture. A. E. Janzen also raised concerns, but Harder, a member of the Canadian *Fuorsorgekomitee*, supported its decision.<sup>36</sup>

The consequences of appointments of persons not well suited for Mennonite Brethren missionary work could be serious. One of the teachers sent out by the Board to India became discouraged and returned to Canada after her first term. When she expressed some of her concerns publicly, Harder responded harshly: "It is very much to be regretted if negative rumours about conditions in the Mission in India are circulated. . . . I can hardly think that anyone who has heard the missionary call of the Lord would cast a shadow on the work of the Lord."<sup>37</sup> Successes were widely publicized, as was opposition by native religious leaders. But failures, conflicts, and inadequacies of mission administrators and the missionaries were not to be discussed in public.

Another unusual case arose in 1954 when a missionary criticized the nomination of a person for election as a member of the General (MB) Conference's Committee of Reference and Counsel. The missionary's behaviour, J. B. Toews wrote in anger, "violated a very basic principle." Missionaries must never criticize Conference or Board decisions and actions. The missionary was obliged to make an abject apology. Toews then asked Harder if, in spite of this serious error, the missionary could still visit some of the churches in British Columbia.<sup>38</sup> Harder, after consulting with others, wrote back that, since the missionary had acknowledged and apologized for his serious error, he would still be welcome in British Columbia.<sup>39</sup> Harder also thanked Toews and other Board members for their efforts in disciplining the errant missionary.

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<sup>36</sup> *Fuorsorgekomitee Correspondence*, B. B. Janz to J. B. Toews; *Mission Board Correspondence*, J. A. Harder to J. B. Toews, 27 January 1954 and A. E. Janzen to J. A. Harder, 19 February 1954.

<sup>37</sup> *Mission Board Correspondence*, J. A. Harder to J. B. Toews, 22 November 1954; Peter Penner, *Russians, North Americans, and Telugus* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Press, 1997), 230.

<sup>38</sup> *Mission Board Correspondence*, J. B. Toews to J. A. Harder, 9 December 1954.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, J. A. Harder to J. B. Toews, 15 December 1954.

A specific problem Harder and others suppressed pertained to an unusual missionary couple. Karl and Annemarie Kramer were German nationals who worked at the Bololo station in the Belgian Congo. During the war they were interned. After the war, officials of the Congolese government invited the Board of Foreign Missions to apply for the release of the Kramers. But the Board declined, apparently because other missionaries and local converts thought the Kramers were too strict and dealt in less than loving ways with those who strayed. There were also lingering animosities between the Bololo and Kafumba missionaries. Failure by the Board to request the release of the Kramers, who were languishing in a Congolese internment camp, resulted in the matter being turned over to the United Nations. Heinrich Bartsch, who had started the mission at Bololo and was living in Yarrow at the time, issued an urgent appeal on behalf of the Kramers, as did Susie Brucks. Both appealed directly to Harder, who wrote to A. E. Janzen, the Executive Secretary of the Board. Janzen then wrote to a recently appointed African missionary couple to ask if they wished to have the help of the Kramers. The missionaries at Bololo opposed the return of the Kramers and no remedial action was taken by the Board. With the help of the Red Cross, the Kramers were eventually repatriated back to Germany and later immigrated to Canada.<sup>40</sup>

### **Formulating guidelines**

In 1952 Harder was asked by the Board of Foreign Missions to draft “a statement to be submitted to prospective missionaries regarding their convictions concerning the use of cosmetics, earrings, other personal adornments, non-resistance, and other similar principles of the Mennonite Brethren confession of faith.”<sup>41</sup> Harder prepared two papers. One dealt with non-resistance, the other focussed on jewellery and other personal adornments (*Schminke*). On both questions he advanced a two-kingdom theology, but he did so in an unusually restrictive manner. Christians, he argued, must not follow the practices or principles of the world in business, social, cultural, political, or military affairs. They must not belong to any union or political party or participate in military or other worldly pursuits. On

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<sup>40</sup> Bernhard Derksen, “Mennonite Brethren Missions: Historical Development, Philosophy, and Policies.”

<sup>41</sup> *Mission Board Correspondence*, A. E. Janzen to J. A. Harder, 28 November 1952.

the issue of non-resistance, he stated categorically that no Mennonite Brethren missionaries should be allowed to take a firearm onto the mission field for their own protection or to hunt for game. They must look to God for protection. He then referred to an unfortunate incident in which a Mennonite Brethren missionary had accidentally shot a local person.<sup>42</sup>

A similar argument was used in the statement pertaining to worldly methods of physical adornment (*weltliche Schoenheitsmittel*). He argued that through the new birth a Christian had become a part of the body of Christ. As such, it was imperative for him or her to nurture the body through moderate use of healthy food, drink, dress, and cleanliness. But the objective must never be self-glorification. Christians should not try to impress or seek the admiration of others. They should certainly not resort to physical adornments that become a visual meadow (*Augenweide*) for lustful people. Basing his arguments on several scripture verses, he insisted that Christians must not use jewellery, lipstick, facial make-up, or earrings. Mennonite Brethren missionaries, he stated, must agree and live in accordance with Mennonite Brethren principles of faith, presumably as he had defined them.<sup>43</sup>

These guidelines were probably used mainly to indicate to itinerating missionaries on furlough how to present themselves when visiting the churches. The guidelines could also be enforced within the sheltered confines of a mission station or compound in a foreign land. In indigenous churches in remote villages, such guidelines were less relevant.

### **Success and new responsibilities**

At the meeting of the Board of Foreign Missions in November of 1954, Harder was named as its chairperson. He took office following very rapid expansion and great expectations. In its report to conference delegates in October the Board reported: "In Foreign Missions the past conference interim of three years may be characterized as a period of a great turning to the Lord on the part of many people, a period of extending the school effort in order to reach more nationals, especially the youth, a period of new fields obtruding

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., J. A. Harder, "Prinzipien der Friedenswahrheit, oder Wehrlosigkeit," 1 January 1953.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., J. A. Harder, "Prinzipien ueber den Gebrauch von Schminke, u.s.w.," 1 January 1953.

themselves upon the Board and Conference, a period of great missionary movement to and from the fields, a period of unequalled building activity, and an expansion of the deputation services within the Conference.”<sup>44</sup> There had been, in A. E. Janzen’s words, “a magnificent thrust forward.” As incoming Board chairperson, Harder accepted major new responsibilities in carrying the work to even greater success. He accepted these added responsibilities in characteristic fashion. “The special responsibilities in the service of foreign mission which the Committee (Board) has entrusted to me . . . have driven me to much prayer. May the Lord, in his grace, be merciful to me and to the entire Committee (Board).”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *General (MB) Conference Year Book, 1954, 73-74.*

<sup>45</sup> *Mission Board Correspondence, J. A. Harder to A. E. Janzen, 12 November 1954.*

## Chapter 15

### Assignment in Colombia and Ecuador, 1955

Johannes Harder's involvement in the work of the Board of Foreign Missions increased significantly after the sale of the family's dairy farm. In 1954 he had the necessary time, energy, and enthusiasm to accept a major new assignment. He was asked to go with the Board's Executive Secretary, A. E. Janzen, on a major trip to visit the various mission fields in Colombia and Ecuador. The two were to prepare a comprehensive report on the three mission stations in Colombia, on other aspects of the work in Colombia, and on the recently opened ministry of radio station HCJB in Quito, Ecuador. It was an assignment which Harder accepted reluctantly. He feared that he would not be able to do the work in ways that would be a blessing for the mission.<sup>1</sup>

#### The assignment

The proposed trip was consistent with Board policies. Janzen had visited five major Mennonite Brethren mission fields in 1948-1949. Since then the number of fields and missionaries had increased dramatically. Missionaries reported regularly and provided much relevant information, but sometimes their perspectives and interests differed from those of Board members, North

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<sup>1</sup> *Mission Board Correspondence*, J. A. Harder to A. E. Janzen, 12 November 1954 and J. A. Harder to J. B. Toews, 22 November 1954.



American supporters, and indigenous<sup>2</sup> leaders. It therefore seemed appropriate for senior administrators and Board members to gain first-hand knowledge of conditions in the various fields.<sup>3</sup> They could explain Board policies to the missionaries, monitor the effectiveness of those policies and, on their return, report to the Board their observations as well as recommend actions to be taken by the Board. Visiting Board members and staff could also conduct worship services, lead Bible studies, and provide pastoral counselling and guidance.

Harder and Janzen were expected to work as a team, but each had his own interests and expertise. Harder's ministry focussed more strongly on spiritual and pastoral matters. As an ordained preacher and pastor, he provided leadership in numerous worship services, Bible studies, and extensive discussions pertaining to the spiritual life and welfare of the missionaries and their families. Janzen was also an ordained minister and led some of the religious services. But as the Board's senior administrator, he was keenly interested in and was expected to report on the administrative and financial affairs of the mission and its relations to the leaders of new indigenous churches. It was Janzen who later wrote the official report, which included numerous administrative, organizational, and financial recommendations.<sup>4</sup>

### **Familiarization and orientation**

The two Mission Board emissaries had decided to spend the first three weeks of their trip gathering information, meeting the missionaries and their families, and familiarizing themselves with the work at the three stations. That was to be followed by a week of devotional, recreational, planning, and

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<sup>2</sup> In his 1955 report Janzen usually referred to the people originating in the region or country as "Nationals." Sometimes they are also referred to as natives. Gradually the term indigenous people came into common usage to describe the aboriginal inhabitants of districts served by the missionaries. In the interests of consistency, this term will be used even though some of the other terms are used in various primary documents.

<sup>3</sup> *Canadian Conference Year Book*, 1955, 54.

<sup>4</sup> Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, *Mission Board Records*, A. E. Janzen, *Colombia Report: Visit to the Colombia and Ecuador M. B. Mission Fields, January 31 to March 10, 1955* (hereafter *Colombia and Ecuador Report*, 1955). Unless otherwise noted, information is drawn from Janzen's report, which is part of a larger file, pages 29-45. Quotations will be footnoted using those page numbers.

priority-setting meetings when all the missionaries and their families gathered at La Cumbre for their annual Missionary Council meetings.

Harder and Janzen's first stop after landing in Cali was at the La Cumbre station in the Vale District, about 40 kilometres northwest of Cali. This mission had been started by Anna Woof, a Plymouth Brethren missionary. Illness had forced her return to the United States, and in 1946 the Mennonite Brethren purchased the mission for \$3,000.00. Expansion in 1947-1948 had resulted in the purchase of additional land about one-fifth of a kilometre from the original compound.<sup>5</sup> A church building, a "National" school for indigenous children, school dormitories, and minimal medical facilities were located on the original site, while a school for missionary children and a residence for the missionaries and their families had been built on the new site. In 1955 the staff consisted of two missionary couples, two single women, an indigenous pastor, three indigenous teachers, house parents, cooks, and dormitory workers. A church with an indigenous preacher had been organized. It provided Sunday services, Sunday school, young people's meetings, midweek prayer meetings, and house visitations.

After a week at La Cumbre, Harder and Janzen travelled to Istmina in the Choco district near the junction of the San Pablo and San Juan Rivers. This trip involved a 25-mile mountain road drive, then a 10-mile bus ride, and finally a five- or six-mile ride by boat up the San Juan River. At Istmina they found a large multi-purpose building and a few smaller structures. One married couple and two single female missionaries were stationed there. The Istmina missionaries reported that the mission faced significant opposition from local priests and influential leaders of the Roman Catholic Church who resented outside intrusions into what they regarded as their ecclesiastical territory. The missionaries had started a small school for local Chocoana (black people) children. The Chocoana people, unlike the indigenous people, were not under Roman Catholic jurisdiction. Catholic leaders had nevertheless exerted sufficient pressure on the Colombian government to force the closure of the small mission school at Istmina. A rudimentary medical clinic at the mission station was not operating due to staff shortages.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Details on the early history of the Colombian mission are given in A. E. Janzen, *Survey*, 1950, 117-146.

<sup>6</sup> *Colombia and Ecuador Report*, 1955, 30-31.

The Mennonite Brethren missionaries had, nonetheless, gained some converts, and in 1955 a Chocoana pastor held church services in a nearby rented building. He also participated in evangelistic services in nearby villages. The mission needed more staff and funding for new buildings on land recently purchased.

The third station was at Noanama in territory where the people had hardly been touched by outside influences. This station sought to serve both the Choco Indians and the Chocoana people. The missionaries at Noanama included Jacob and Anne Loewen, who were trying to learn and codify the vocabulary and grammar of the local Indian language. A small school had been established, but its government permit had been withdrawn. There was a fairly busy medical clinic. The compound had two residential buildings for the missionaries, a house for indigenous workers, a small chapel, a dispensary, a wash house, a chicken barn, and a small *Tambo* (Indian hut).<sup>7</sup> At Noanama, as elsewhere, missionaries and indigenous preachers held evangelistic meetings at the station and in some of the villages.

The North American visitors led devotional and worship services at each of the stations. At Noanama, invitations were sent to people in the surrounding areas to come to the Sunday morning worship service and to meet the visitors. Janzen had visited the station in 1948 and had been encouraged by the impact of the Gospel in the lives of the converts. He had described the indigenous Colombians as people who “grope in total darkness, not knowing wither to turn for light.”<sup>8</sup> He then reported on the wholesome effect of the Gospel:

“Former practices, stealing, immorality, jealousy, and similar practices are conquered by a genuine conversion to the Christian way of life. At some of our stations in the Choco, missionaries call attention to some of the evidences of cultural changes, for instance in the mode of dress or amount of clothing worn. The change of appearing in public properly clad is not only applying to those who have become Christians. The change which the Christians have introduced is now being accepted also by non-Christians seeing the dignity and respect it adds to man in his social and ethical relations. In other words,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 31-33.

<sup>8</sup> A. E. Janzen, *Survey*, 1950, 117.

the saving influence of Biblical Christianity within the communities in the Choco especially is very evident.”<sup>9</sup>

This happy assessment did not prepare Harder and Janzen for the scene that confronted them when a large crowd of believers from Noanama and neighbouring villages gathered for the special church service with the North American visitors. The Waunana men wore only loin cloths while the women appeared, as was their custom, without any breast coverings. Harder had been asked to give a testimony but was intensely embarrassed when facing so many bare-breasted women. Jacob Loewen, the missionary at Noanama, later recalled: “So completely embarrassed and seemingly totally unnerved had Johannes Harder become, that he suddenly gave up on his testimony and just sat down with his back toward the audience.”<sup>10</sup>

After this church service, Harder and Janzen insisted that changes be made. Loewen explained that in the cultural context of that community only prostitutes covered their breasts. Covered breasts allegedly made the women



Trip by riverboat to remote village in Colombia in 1955.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>10</sup> *Loewen Manuscript*, 205.

more alluring to foreign male clients. This confounding cultural aspect of the work was completely unexpected and received no mention in any of the reports written by the visitors.

The visit to Noanama included a two-day trip upstream to a remote Indian village. In a letter to his children, Harder described that trip in considerable detail. Harder and Janzen travelled with another missionary and a staff member. The small heavily loaded boat was propelled by several indigenous men using poles and dressed only with a loin cloth. Harder suffered extensive insect bites which resulted in severe itching. It was raining heavily when the group reached their destination. They found shelter in a small native *Tambo* (Indian hut) which had a roof but no walls. It accommodated an entire native family, together with their dogs and some other domestic animals. The sleeping accommodation was a platform built on poles, about five feet above the floor. A notched tree trunk served as a ladder. Food preparation was primitive, and Harder was impressed when one of the missionaries accepted and ate, with evident pleasure, the food given him by their hosts. In the letter home Harder confessed that God had not given him the grace to do the same. He did not refer to the scriptural knowledge or understanding of the local people. He expressed support, however, for further evangelistic forays into remote villages, while acknowledging the unique challenges facing the missionaries.<sup>11</sup>

### **Meeting with the Missionary Council at La Cumbre**

Harder and Janzen returned to La Cumbre in time for a weeklong meeting of all the Colombian missionaries and their families. This was officially a meeting of the Missionary Council but, in addition to business sessions, it included rest, relaxation, recreation, worship, and devotional services.

Two hours were set aside each day for the adults to “fellowship around the Word of God.” One session every day was led by Harder, the other by Janzen. In the style of the cherished *Bibelbesprechungen* (Bible discussions), Harder focussed on 1 Thessalonians. His topics were: “The Church in Light of the Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ,” “The Servant of God,” “The Brother,” and finally on “The Walk of the Believer.” Janzen spoke about the missionary

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<sup>11</sup> *Loewen Collection*, file of “Harder Correspondence with his Sisters and Others,” J. A. Harder to “Thr lieben Kinder alle,” 26 February 1955.

challenge, consecration of workers to their task, a united staff, and the work and responsibilities of the Board and the constituency. In the evenings, special services were arranged for the children, led by the female missionaries and missionary wives. The business meetings of the Missionary Council were interspersed with the devotional services and other activities.

Eleven major and minor issues were identified. One of the most important concerns was the relationship between the Mission and indigenous leaders and churches and the responsibilities of each. Missionaries had been in Colombia for a decade. Indigenous people had been invited to come to the mission stations where they heard the Gospel and could avail themselves of the educational, medical, and other services offered. Missionaries had also made forays into outlying areas. Indigenous people who accepted the Gospel message and showed preaching and leadership abilities were trained in mission schools, given financial support, and sent into the villages as evangelists. The evangelists, with guidance and support from the missionaries, were encouraged to organize indigenous churches. Initially at least, the Mission provided financial assistance in paying the salaries of indigenous evangelists and pastors and most of the construction costs of church buildings. There were fears, however, that indigenous leaders had become too dependent on the rich Americans. They should be encouraged to become financially self-sufficient and independent.

The leaders of the indigenous churches had also been encouraged to join together to form a national church. But relations between the Mission, the national church, and individual indigenous leaders and churches had to be clarified and redefined. In the discussions, a series of recommendations were approved. Parts of the subsequent report, written by Janzen after the meetings, included instructions to the indigenous churches on the selection of delegates, voting rights, and procedures to be followed at conventions of the national church. There were guidelines for the salaries and qualifications of teachers in indigenous schools, allowances for indigenous evangelists, collections to be taken at evangelistic meetings, accounting procedures for funds received from the "Mission," and steps to be taken to achieve economic self-sufficiency. Some of the guidelines were helpful, others petty. Thus, it was agreed that the Mission could pay for the tin for the roof of a church building, and up to 25 pesos for nails, hinges, and locks, but the local church should accept responsibility for all the other costs. The report does not indicate the extent to

which Harder became involved in the discussion of detailed administrative matters. He evidently supported the recommendations, but Janzen was the prime mover in these discussions.

There was also much discussion regarding the proper weight of emphasis with respect to evangelism, the building of the stations, and the language studies of Jacob Loewen and his associates. It was agreed that priority should always be given to evangelism. Missionaries were still expected to conduct evangelistic meetings, both at the stations and in the villages. Jacob Loewen got into trouble when he declined an invitation to conduct evangelistic meetings because his action, while seriously disrupting his language studies, did not serve the evangelistic need.

The report recommended, however, that indigenous evangelists and pastors be entrusted with most, and eventually all, evangelism in the villages and in the hinterland. The indigenous evangelists, in the words of the report, had been “trained in our school, and Sunday schools, and indoctrinated in our churches.” They were expected to form “the future backbone of the M. B. Church of Jesus Christ in Colombia.”<sup>12</sup> The missionaries were told they must step more into the background. They were expected to continue their educational, health care, and other supportive work at the stations. Janzen’s report recommended maintaining the minimum number of workers necessary to keep all stations and its [sic] departments operating without having to close down any phase of it due to lack of personnel.”<sup>13</sup> It called for additional workers who, with one exception, were needed at the stations. Much of the training of indigenous personnel was to be offered in a proposed new Bible school in which students would study in their own environment and learn in the field of their future activity. Harder supported these recommendations, but looked to Janzen to spell out the details.

There was another matter that was of great concern to Harder. The La Cumbre mission had been started by a Plymouth Brethren missionary. That denomination, while practicing adult baptism, did not insist on a specific form. When the Mennonite Brethren purchased the mission, it had 55 converts, baptised in various forms. This raised the question whether converted persons not baptised by immersion could be accepted or could

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<sup>12</sup> *Colombia and Ecuador Report*, 44-45.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

continue as members of a Mennonite Brethren Church. The Missionary Council had referred the question to the Board of Foreign Missions, which, in turn, had referred it to the General (MB) Conference's Board of Reference and Counsel. That Board decided that the churches in Colombia must "abide by the practices of the Conference not to receive believers into church membership until they have also obeyed the Word of God in the act of baptism by immersion."<sup>14</sup> The Missionary Council, according to the report, simply "expressed its appreciation to the Board."<sup>15</sup> Several indigenous evangelists and pastors were thus disqualified from membership and leadership positions in the church unless they requested re-baptism.

One seemingly practical and straightforward issue had important ramifications. All three Colombian missions were located in impoverished and relatively isolated regions. Travel and transportation of goods and supplies were usually channelled through the nearest port in Cali. Thus establishment of a mission or at least an administrative office in Cali was considered. Janzen and Harder identified the various exigencies and suggested that this city could become a place for an indigenous church of believers who move to this city and who could form the nucleus around which to build an M. B. work. But a move to Cali might have other important consequences. Cali was attracting more middle class and professional people. A mission there had to appeal to such people. This consideration was mentioned but not discussed in the report.

The other recommendations in the report, notably purchase of a houseboat, length of missionary terms of services, and acclimatization allowances and furlough arrangements took less time. Remarkably, despite oblique references to hostility by Roman Catholic priests, the report contained no acknowledgement of the danger or fears for the physical safety of the missionaries which, a little later, resulted in the removal of the Loewens and their colleagues from Colombia to an area in Panama settled by people from the same linguistic group as those at Noanama.

At the end of the Missionary Council meetings there was a communion service at which, in Janzen's words, "a fine spirit of understanding and unity

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*



of the Holy Spirit prevailed throughout.”<sup>16</sup> In the discussions, the missionaries apparently had raised no major objections to the various recommendations. But Harder stayed in Colombia a little longer than Janzen. After Janzen’s departure, several missionaries expressed grave concerns regarding their future role if, sooner or later, effective control of the mission and its work passed to indigenous leaders. They also questioned the adequacy of the experience and competence of the indigenous leaders to accept the proposed additional responsibilities. And they found little comfort in Mission Board assurances that, “although the indigenous leaders may not seem ready, maturity in the work comes with responsibilities.”<sup>17</sup> These conversations with concerned missionaries shook Harder’s confidence in some of his and Janzen’s recommendations. Thus he wrote to Janzen: “My heart is heavy about the situation in Colombia. After I saw you at the airport I talked about the whole matter to Bro. Quiring. I think it is most unfortunate that the Brethren did not speak sooner. What can we do?”<sup>18</sup>

### **Quito, Ecuador**

The Ecuadorian portion of the trip was to be less strenuous than the Colombian visit. But it did not turn out that way for Harder. He and Janzen were both scheduled to fly from Cali, Colombia, to Quito, Ecuador, at the same time. But Harder was unable to obtain the necessary visa in time.<sup>19</sup> While he waited several days for travel clearance, Janzen completed his scheduled discussions in Quito and prepared to leave Ecuador. He was already at the Quito airport when Harder arrived. They had a mere 20 minutes for a meeting. It was not the kind of visit either had planned. The situation was made worse by the fact that just before his arrival in Quito, Harder became gravely ill. He suffered from the heat, debilitating headaches, and diarrhoea. At one point he seriously considered returning immediately to North America.

The focus of the Quito visit was the ministry at the HCJB radio broadcasting station. After two days he had recovered sufficiently to begin

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>17</sup> J. J. Toews, *The Mennonite Brethren Mission in Latin America* (Hillsboro, KS: Board of Christian Literature of the General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church, 1975), 104.

<sup>18</sup> *Mission Board Correspondence*, J. A. Harder to A. E. Janzen, 10 March 1955.

<sup>19</sup> *B. B. Janz Correspondence*, J. A. Harder to B. B. Janz, 10 March 1955.

recording for later broadcasts a series of messages on the epistle to the Romans. In a week he had completed 16 recordings and planned to do four more. His assessment of the work at the radio station was very positive, but he thought the missionary couple was seriously overworked and urgently needed help. This couple prepared three German half-hour broadcasts every weekday except Monday, and they also responded to the many letters and responses received from listeners. Harder was pleased by the fellowship and discussions with the missionary couple. Indeed, his visit became an exhilarating and rewarding experience once he recovered his health. Whereas he had been downcast when leaving Colombia, he was enthusiastic when leaving Quito.

The staff shortage at Quito worried Harder, but he was delighted when he learned that Hugo Jantz and his wife might be interested in an assignment at the radio station. Jantz was a teacher at the Chilliwack Bible School. After his return home, Harder met with the Jantzes and became convinced that the Lord had heard prayer requests for workers at HCJB.<sup>20</sup> A problem stood in the way, however. Jantz had agreed to teach in the Chilliwack Bible School for the 1955-1956 school term. Harder thought the need in Quito was sufficiently urgent that the Chilliwack people should seek a substitute teacher and release Jantz for immediate service in Quito. There was resistance but, at the urging of Harder and Herman Lenzmann, a former missionary and Harder's successor as leader of the Yarrow church, an arrangement was worked out which allowed the Jantzes to go to Ecuador early in 1956.<sup>21</sup>

### **A time of transition**

The years 1954 and 1955 were regarded by A. E. Janzen as a time of transition and reorientation. The Mission Board policies had long promoted the establishment of indigenous churches and installation of indigenous leaders. This process was accelerated in 1955, in part in accordance with recommendations following Janzen's and Harder's trip to Colombia. It is doubtful, however, that either man really anticipated the rapidity and the wide-ranging extent of changes that would permanently alter Mennonite Brethren foreign missionary work.

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<sup>20</sup> *Mission Board Correspondence*, J. A. Harder to A. E. Janzen, 31 October 1955.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, J. A. Harder to A. E. Janzen, 3 November 1955, 7 December 1955 and A. E. Janzen to J. A. Harder, 22 November 1955.

## Chapter 16

### Assignment in Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay, 1955

Harder accepted a second assignment in South America. After visiting the Mennonite Brethren missions in Colombia and the radio station in Ecuador with A. E. Janzen, he went alone to Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. On this part of his trip he travelled and worked on behalf of the General (MB) Conference's Board of General Welfare and Public Relations. They had asked him to visit, preach, and gain insight into the life and work, the joys, sorrows, and difficulties of all Mennonite Brethren churches in South America. In his sermons he was to comfort, support, and encourage the faithful and proclaim the Gospel of salvation to the unsaved. He was to meet with and provide counsel to all the leaders and seek to resolve problems in a God-pleasing way. He was urged, especially, to gain insights into the operation of all the Bible schools—both the bright and the darker aspects—and make recommendations for improvements. His assessment was to include the leadership qualities of the Bible school teachers and of students who had received assistance from the Board. Special meetings to explain and promote the doctrine of non-resistance and other distinctive Mennonite Brethren doctrines and practices were to be arranged.<sup>1</sup> And finally, he was to visit and report on projects initiated or supported by the Board of Foreign Missions.

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<sup>1</sup> B. B. Janz *Correspondence*, B. B. Janz to J. A. Harder, 29 January 1955.

Harder's mandate was broad, encompassing the life and work of nine churches: two in Brazil, five in Paraguay, and two in Uruguay. The Brazilian Mennonite Brethren churches near Curitiba and Bage had 340 and 261 members respectively. In Paraguay, the church in Fernheim had 449 members, while those in Auhagen (Fernheim Colony), Gnadental (Neuland Colony), Friesland, and Volendam totalled 124, 293, 236, and 143 members respectively. The El Ombu church in Uruguay had 51 members, and the one in Gartental 26.<sup>2</sup> A small group of 17 persons in Sao Paulo, Brazil, had also been unofficially organized as a Mennonite Brethren church.

In his reports, Harder devoted considerable attention to personality clashes and the faults and weaknesses of Mennonite Brethren leaders. Relations of Mennonite Brethren with Mennonite Church (*Kirchliche*) and civic Mennonite leaders were also of great interest and concern. Harder's principal prescriptions for solving the problems called for interim North American assistance, support and training of weak South American leaders, strengthening the four small and struggling Bible schools in Curitiba, Bage, Fernheim, and Volendam, and increased separation of Mennonite Brethren programs from those of the Mennonite Church. He also tried to promote the doctrine of non-resistance, usually with very limited success.

### **The historical background**

Harder's assignment was a follow-up to a 1947 trip by B. B. Janz, a highly respected Canadian Mennonite Brethren leader. Janz had been sent to address two main problems. He was to heal divisions and alleviate tensions which had arisen in all the Paraguayan and Brazilian Mennonite Brethren churches as a result of pro-Nazi agitations in the late 1930s and during the war. The problems were attributed, in part, to weak leadership. Janz had therefore also been asked to recommend ways and means whereby leadership in Mennonite Brethren churches could be strengthened.

Janz had sharply condemned Mennonite Brethren who had supported the pro-German *voelkisch* (Nazi) movement. Those who had done so, Janz underscored, had joined with unsaved (*Unbekehrte*), godless (*Gottlose*) unbelievers (*Unglaeubige*). Janz successfully demanded public acknowledgement of past errors, deep repentance, and the purging of all Nazi

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<sup>2</sup> *General (MB) Conference Year Book, 1954, 220-222.*

influences from Mennonite Brethren churches. But he remained sharply critical of the failure of Mennonite Church leaders to take equally firm action. Some members of that church, Janz said, had not been converted. Therefore, Mennonite Brethren should withdraw from church-related inter-Mennonite programs lest they be unequally yoked with unbelievers.

During the very difficult pioneering years, members of the Mennonite Brethren (*Brueder Gemeinde*), Mennonite (*Mennoniten Gemeinde*), and Evangelical Mennonite (*Allianz Gemeinde*) churches had established cooperative economic, educational, and health care programs. Many of these ventures had received financial and staffing support from the Mennonite Central Committee. The two large North American Mennonite conferences had, at the same time, provided support for church leaders and pastors as well as for the construction of church buildings. The Mennonite Brethren agency providing aid for Mennonite Brethren pastors and churches was the General (MB) Conference's Board of General Welfare and Public Relations.

Janz supported many of the cooperative inter-Mennonite ventures, but he opposed Mennonite Brethren collaboration with other Mennonite conferences and institutions in church-related matters. He lamented instances where Mennonite Brethren and Mennonite Church worshippers shared the same building, jointly supported Bible schools, and in some instances offered joint Sunday school instruction.<sup>3</sup> The first Mennonite mission to the local indigenous people had also been established on an inter-Mennonite basis.<sup>4</sup> Janz believed that stronger Mennonite Brethren leadership was needed to build Mennonite Brethren churches with their own programs. He therefore recommended that the General (MB) Conference's Board of General Welfare and Public Relations provide more assistance for the construction of Mennonite Brethren churches, more support for church leaders, and increased help in building and staffing Mennonite Brethren Bible schools and other denominational church programs.

The overall effect of Janz's ministry in South America was to heal divisions and animosities in Mennonite Brethren churches, while undermining inter-

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<sup>3</sup> G. B. Giesbrecht, "Unsere Mennoniten-Brueder-Gemeinde in Sued-Amerika," *General (MB) Conference Year Book*, 1960, 82-88.

<sup>4</sup> Harold S. Bender, A. E. Janzen, and Ewald Goetz, "Licht den Indianern (Light to the Indians)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, <http://www.gam-eo.org/> (accessed 07 April 2008).

Mennonite cooperative church-related programs. He had hoped to return to South America, but illness and old age prevented him from doing so. When he heard of Harder's Mission Board-sponsored trip to Colombia and Ecuador, he suggested that Harder also visit Mennonite Brethren churches in Paraguay and Brazil on behalf of the General (MB) Mennonite Conference's Board of General Welfare and Public Relations. It was Janz who set Harder's terms of reference and provided him with much background information. The two men also exchanged numerous letters and reports before, during, and after the trip.

When he was first approached, Harder expressed concern that he might not have the abilities necessary for the task.<sup>5</sup> His apprehension increased when, after he had accepted the assignment, B. B. Janz wrote: "We are very thankful to our Lord that you are willing to be deeply humbled and broken. . . . It will involve an act of crucifixion."<sup>6</sup> With that sombre warning, Johannes Harder boarded a plane in Quito, Ecuador, on 22 March 1955, bound for Sao Paulo, Brazil.

### **Sao Paulo, Brazil**

On his arrival in Sao Paulo, Harder was met by the director of the Mennonite Central Committee centre in that city. They arrived at the centre on a Sunday during a worship service of about 50 participants from various Mennonite backgrounds. Harder was favourably impressed with the singing and the sermon and pleased when given the opportunity briefly to address the group.

The Mennonite Central Committee director had to maintain a neutral stance when dealing with members and leaders of various Mennonite groups. But he informed Harder that 17 persons in the city had met and organized themselves as a Mennonite Brethren church. This had happened at the initiative of Gerhard Rosenfeld,<sup>7</sup> the deposed former Mennonite Brethren *Aeltester* in the church on the Krauel River in Brazil.<sup>8</sup> The Board of General

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<sup>5</sup> B. B. Janz *Correspondence*, J. A. Harder to B. B. Janz, 21 December 1954.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, B. B. Janz to J. A. Harder, 18 January 1955.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, J. A. Harder to P. C. Hiebert and B. B. Janz, 19 March 1955.

<sup>8</sup> At Witmarsum in the valley of the upper Krauel River on the Stoltz Plateau, a strong Mennonite Church leader had undermined the authority and confidence of Mennonite Brethren in Aeltester Rosenberg, who suffered a nervous breakdown. Severe climatic and economic hardships had prompted most of the settlers on the

Welfare and Public Relations had provided Rosenberg with modest financial support to preach and provide spiritual counselling in several Mennonite settlements. It had not authorized organization of a new Mennonite Brethren church in Sao Paulo.

The number of Mennonites living in Sao Paulo was small, and Mennonite Church members outnumbered Mennonite Brethren in Sao Paulo. Many hoped a single inter-Mennonite church could be established there. Rosenfeld's unauthorized initiative elicited countermeasures by the Mennonite Church leaders. They pointed out that members of their churches had joined the Mennonite Brethren in several places and suggested that in Sao Paulo Mennonite Brethren might join their church.

Rosenfeld was not to be deterred and arranged for a Mennonite Brethren communion service at the Mennonite Central Committee centre. But that conflicted with a visit by the respected but controversial Dr. Johan Postma, a Dutch Mennonite pastor who had been sympathetic to the German *voelkisch* movement. After the war, Postma immigrated to South America under a false name and passport. There he reverted back to his Christian name and taught in Mennonite schools in Paraguay and Brazil.<sup>9</sup> A dynamic speaker, he had been asked to lead a communion service in Sao Paulo, open to both Mennonite Brethren and Mennonite Church members. This arrangement resulted in the cancellation of the separate Mennonite Brethren communion service planned by Rosenfeld, and Mennonite Brethren participated in the inter-Mennonite communion service. After this service, however, Rosenfeld harshly criticized the Mennonite Church leader.

Harder discussed the incident with Rosenfeld, the MCC director, and others at the centre and concluded that Rosenfeld was not consistent in his judgement and actions, and that he sometimes acted impulsively. Announcing and then cancelling a Mennonite Brethren communion service, participation in the joint service, and subsequent harsh criticism of the Mennonite Church were not helpful. Harder thought someone other than Rosenfeld was needed to provide consistent and stable leadership in Sao Paulo.<sup>10</sup> Other North

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Stoltz Plateau to relocate either to Neu Witmarsum or to Bage, a new Mennonite Brethren community in southern Brazil.

<sup>9</sup> John D. Thiesen, *Mennonite & Nazi: Attitudes among Mennonite Colonists in Latin America, 1933-1945* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1999), 206.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

American Mennonite Brethren leaders who knew Rosenfeld were equally critical of his leadership abilities.<sup>11</sup>

When B. B. Janz heard of the joint Mennonite Brethren and Mennonite Church communion services, he sent Rosenfeld a stern letter outlining the terms under which Mennonite Brethren could take communion with other “dear children of God.” Janz complained that in recent communion services, children of God, “and others far from it,” had participated.<sup>12</sup> In a lengthy response, Rosenfeld complained that Harder had criticized him but not provided any helpful advice. He thought Harder had not stayed long enough in Sao Paulo to gain a proper understanding of the situation.<sup>13</sup>

The director of the MCC centre informed Harder that a Mennonite Church preacher was giving baptismal instruction. He invited Harder to participate. Harder agreed and said he spoke with great inner freedom and joy about the forgiveness of sin. But he then complained that not all the baptismal candidates were converted Christians.

Rosenfeld, partly because of his age and increasing frailty, strongly advocated the ordination of another Mennonite Brethren adherent, referred to in the correspondence only as “Brother Binder.” Rosenfeld had gained the reluctant consent of other Mennonite Brethren leaders in Brazil to Binder’s appointment, but Harder, after meeting with Binder, found him to be too young and inexperienced in the faith.<sup>14</sup> Later Harder learned that leaders and members elsewhere shared his concern, and Rosenfeld, after receiving a fairly blunt letter from B. B. Janz, changed his tune and also spoke of Binder’s weaknesses.

Mennonites lived in widely scattered parts of the large city. Small numbers of Mennonite Brethren and Mennonite Church members in various districts often worshipped together. Harder preached or led Bible studies at four different locations, and was impressed with Mennonite Central Committee work, done on an inter-Mennonite basis. However, he was not optimistic that a viable Mennonite Brethren church could be established in the city, at least not under either Rosenfeld’s or Binder’s leadership.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *B. B. Janz Papers*, C. C. Peters to B. B. Janz, 11 March 1955.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, B. B. Janz to G. H. Rosenfeld, 5 April 1955.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, G. H. Rosenfeld to B. B. Janz, 28 April 1955.

<sup>14</sup> *B. B. Janz Correspondence*, J. A. Harder to P. C. Hiebert and B. B. Janz, 19 March 1955.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*



### **The orphanage near Curitiba (Boqueria), Brazil**

Harder next visited Mennonite Brethren living on the outskirts of the city of Curitiba. His assignments there were to report to the Board of Foreign Missions on the state of affairs at an orphanage near Curitiba, and to the Board of General Welfare and Public Relations on conditions in the church and the Bible school.



The orphanage at Boqueria, Brazil.

In 1947 an orphanage had been established at Boqueria, about eight miles (12.8 kilometres) from Curitiba in response to recommendations by John D. and Anna Unruh, who had served as independent missionaries in Brazil from 1940-1944. They returned in 1946 and,

with financial help from the Board of Foreign Missions, purchased a 50-acre tract of land near Boqueria, which included an on-site house and barn. Several new buildings were erected. The senior administrator was a North American mission worker.<sup>16</sup>

Having grown up in the orphanage established by his parents in Russia, Harder was uniquely qualified to report on this institution. During most of his time in Curitiba, he had lodging in the orphanage which, at the time, served 54 children. Most of them received their schooling in the home. The teachers were Roman Catholics. Harder did not comment further on this curious fact, but he stated that all staff members were working harmoniously together. There was pressure from the Brazilian government regarding the language of instruction. This probably influenced the decision to appoint teachers fluent in Portuguese. The Mennonite Brethren workers included three married couples, one widow, and three unmarried women. The senior administrators, Erven and Lorene Thiesen, provided Harder with much useful information. But they were preparing to leave for language study. Their assistant, Brazilian Peter Huebert, was to assume overall responsibility while the Thiesens were away. Harder gained a favourable impression of both the Thiesens and the Hueberts.

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<sup>16</sup> A. E. Janzen, *Survey*, 1950, 72.

Harder was critical, however, of some of the physical facilities of the orphanage. He noted that, among other things, the boys' bedroom was directly above the kitchen. The ceiling of the kitchen was not waterproof and accidental upsets of a chamber pot or wash stand resulted in leakages into the kitchen. He recommended various improvements of the facilities. He also offered favourable comments on the love, dedication, and hard work of the workers. But more workers were needed.

The orphanage had a farm which produced needed food and offered work and instruction, particularly for the boys. Harder did not examine the operations of the farm in detail but reported that he had not seen an equally well-equipped and well-run farm in any of the Brazilian Mennonite settlements.

Training and discipline were ongoing and sometimes presented serious problems. These, Harder reported, could not be dealt with in ways customary in North America. Since the Brazilian children did not respond well to corporal punishment, much patience was needed. It was encouraging, however, that six of the older boys had been converted and baptised. A small 18-member group of the older children and Brazilian Christians met for regular worship services in one of the rooms of the orphanage. They apparently did not worship with the German-speaking Mennonites of the Curitiba Mennonite Brethren Church.

The Board of Foreign Missions had asked Harder to comment on the readiness of the local Mennonite Brethren church to assume full responsibility for the administration of the orphanage. Related to that question were the responsibility and procedures for the appointment, and perhaps ordination, of Peter Huebert, who would have general charge of the program during the time the Thiesens were in language study. Harder reported that, due to leadership problems, the church was not ready to assume responsibility for the orphanage. Huebert should therefore be ordained and work under the general direction of the Board of Foreign Missions.<sup>17</sup>

In part because of internal dissention, the Curitiba Mennonite Brethren Church never assumed responsibility for the orphanage. It remained a project of the General (MB) Conference's Board of Foreign Missions. But staffing

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<sup>17</sup> B. B. Janz *Correspondence*, J. A. Harder to P. C. Hiebert and B. B. Janz, 19 March 1955.

became difficult when the Brazilian government demanded more use of Portuguese, and the Roman Catholic Church exerted increased religious pressure. As a result, in 1966, the Board of Foreign Missions decided to close the home and return the children to relatives and guardians.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Curitiba (Boqueria) Mennonite Brethren Church**

Harder's favourable impressions of the orphanage did not extend to the state of affairs in the Curitiba Mennonite Brethren Church, which had a membership of 340 in 1954. In his assessments, Harder was influenced by harshly critical information received from B. B. Janz just before he left Canada and again while en route to South America.<sup>19</sup>

Janz thought many problems in the Curitiba Mennonite Brethren Church could be attributed to the fact that the Mennonite Brethren and Mennonite Church shared a building for worship and other church services. Peter Hamm, the Mennonite Brethren Church leader, was a prosperous farmer and businessman who provided overall leadership in the church and community. The much smaller Mennonite Church had its own much less assertive or influential *Aeltester*. The two groups had separate worship services. Neither had the necessary resources to erect their own church building, and there was no agreement regarding use or disposition of the shared building. Since Mennonite Brethren outnumbered Mennonite Church members by a ratio of four to one, one member of the General (MB) Conference's Board of General Welfare and Public Relations, which had provided assistance in the construction of the shared building, suggested that the Mennonite Brethren simply take over the building and pay the Mennonite Church members for their share of it. That, however, would leave the Mennonite Church group without a meeting place. A division would also create serious problems in the case of inter-marriages. Moreover, Peter Hamm opposed the division and advocated continued inter-Mennonite cooperation.<sup>20</sup>

Harder requested, and Peter Hamm arranged, a special meeting of 24 key Mennonite Brethren and Mennonite Church leaders in the Curitiba area.

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<sup>18</sup> J. A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, 419.

<sup>19</sup> B. B. Janz *Correspondence*, B. B. Janz to J. A. Harder and A. E. Janzen, 23 February 1955 and B. B. Janz to J. A. Harder, 22 April and 24 April 1955.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., J. A. Harder to P. C. Hiebert and B. B. Janz, 8 April 1955 [mistakenly dated 8 March 1955].

Prior to the meeting, Harder prepared a number of questions on a variety of topics. Answers to questions regarding relationships between the two Mennonite groups were guarded, but key leaders of both churches indicated a desire to continue sharing the same building. Financial considerations were mentioned. A disappointed Harder noted that Mennonite Brethren leaders did not seem to realize that the spiritual values lost as a result of their close relations with the Mennonite Church could not be measured in dollars. But the assembled leaders supported continued working together.<sup>21</sup>

Shortly after his arrival in Curitiba, Harder was approached by Hans Legiehn, the local Bible school teacher and preacher, and Peter Huebert, the assistant administrator of the orphanage. They informed Harder that Peter Hamm was a successful businessman, but that he had a reputation for unscrupulous dealings. They mentioned several specific incidents. Hamm was, among other things, a horse trader. When the orphanage had needed a horse, he sold them one that was blind and difficult to handle. When Huebert complained, Hamm simply said he thought the horse was good enough for an orphanage. Hamm also insisted that North American funds to support the orphanage be channelled through him. He had exchanged American dollars for cruzeiros at a rate of 20 to 1 although the official exchange rate at the time was allegedly 28 to 1. This had caused considerable resentment in the orphanage and the church. After confronting Hamm directly, Harder described him as a highly skilled advocate in his own defence.<sup>22</sup>

A nasty rumour began to circulate in Curitiba after Harder left for Paraguay and Uruguay. It was alleged that Harder, the administrator Erven Thiesen, and other North American orphanage staff members had met secretly to make decisions regarding orphanage operations. Hamm, the church leader, and Peter Huebert, the local assistant administrator, had not been invited to the meeting. This controversy was particularly painful for Huebert. He reported that Hans Wiens, a preacher and occasional Bible school teacher, together with another church member, had been appointed to provide a communication link between the church and the orphanage. Wiens resigned in protest when informed of Harder's meeting with the North

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Americans. Huebert, as the prospective interim administrator, feared the church might withdraw its support of the orphanage.<sup>23</sup>

These difficulties necessitated a return trip by Harder to Curitiba after his visits in Paraguay and Uruguay. He insisted that nothing controversial had been discussed at the meeting of the North Americans, and he blamed Peter Hamm for the current difficulty. Hamm was resentful, Harder suggested, because credence had been given to Huebert's and Legiehn's criticism of Hamm's business dealings.<sup>24</sup>

This incident earned Huebert a reprimand by the church's Council (*Vorberat*), led by Hamm, and threatened plans for his ordination.<sup>25</sup> Huebert appealed to Harder, who recommended that, on the initiative of the Board of Foreign Missions, Huebert be ordained in Hillsboro, Kansas. That Board, with or without the support of the Curitiba church, should then appoint Huebert as interim administrator of the orphanage.

This proposal did not end the matter. Dissention continued in the church. In 1957 B. B. Janz sent Hamm an emotional grandfatherly letter in which he appealed for reconciliation. It was one of several letters from North American Mennonite Brethren leaders and resulted in Hamm's resignation as leader of the church.<sup>26</sup> A weak interim leader was chosen, pending free and open elections at the next congregational meeting.

### **The Curitiba Bible school**

A small Bible school had been established at Curitiba with support from Mennonite Brethren in North America. In 1955 it offered only evening classes, usually for three or four months every year, to students from both churches. Hans Legiehn was the only qualified teacher. He had studied theology at a Bible school in Wiedenest, Germany, and had compiled a textbook on Christian faith for use in secondary and Bible schools.<sup>27</sup> Legiehn<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., Peter Huebert to J. A. Harder, 22 April 1955.

<sup>24</sup> *B. B. Janz Papers*, C. C. Peters to B. B. Janz, 5 May 1955.

<sup>25</sup> *B. B. Janz Correspondence*, Peter Hamm to Peter Huebert, 21 April 1955.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., B. B. Janz to Peter Hamm, 25 February 1957 and Peter Hamm to B. B. Janz, 19 August 1957.

<sup>27</sup> Hans Legiehn, *Unser Glaube ist der Sieg: Kurtzgefasste Biblische Glaubenslehre* (Ponta Grossa, Brazil: Editora Luz E Vida, 1954).

was held in high esteem by North American Mennonites. He divided his time between teaching Bible school in Curitiba and elsewhere and evangelistic work. He was assisted by Abram Dick, an American, who had no specialized theological training. When challenged on Dick's lack of training, Legiehn assured Harder that Dick had been assigned only the easier subjects. A more serious matter was gossip Harder heard that Dick occasionally told students of romantic encounters in the United States. Dick had allegedly also made overtures to some of the females in the Bible school. Harder's precise words in that regard were: "[Er] baendelt bald mit diesem, bald mit jenem Maedchen an." (He readily establishes a liaison with one, then with another girl.)<sup>29</sup> Harder did not think Dick was an appropriate Bible school instructor. It was therefore fortunate that other North American Mennonite Brethren missionaries, evangelists, and teachers helped out for brief periods in the work of the Bible school. Harder hoped that some daytime instruction could be added, but this would be possible only if there was an additional instructor. Harder also recommended that financial support be provided for students identified as prospective leaders who could not afford full-time studies.

Mennonite Central Committee leaders hoped it would be possible to expand the course offerings of the Bible schools in Curitiba and Fernheim on an inter-Mennonite basis. The objective was to provide more advanced training for prospective preachers, church leaders, Sunday school teachers, and other church workers in various Mennonite churches. More qualified teachers would be needed, and it would be necessary to look to the North American conferences and churches for help. Harder supported strengthening all the Bible schools, but in Brazil a joint venture was problematic for several reasons. C. C. Peters, the North American Bible school teacher in Bage, wanted his school to provide the advanced classes. Since the Bage Mennonite community was comprised almost entirely of Mennonite Brethren, a Mennonite Church partnership was not an option. Harder was willing to consider limited participation of Mennonite Church people in the work of the Curitiba and Fernheim Bible schools, but only if this was done under

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<sup>28</sup> Hans Legiehn was Julius Legiehn's brother. Julius was one of the key Mennonite Brethren pre-war and wartime Nazi agitators.

<sup>29</sup> B. B. Janz *Correspondence*, J. A. Harder to P. C. Hiebert and B. B. Janz, 8 April 1955 [mistakenly dated 8 March 1955].

Mennonite Brethren auspices. He opposed a Bible school supported jointly by Mennonite Brethren and Mennonite Church or Mennonite Central Committee leaders. Eventually the program of the two Bible schools was expanded, but only long after Harder had returned to North America.<sup>30</sup>

In accordance with his instructions, Harder also raised questions regarding the Mennonite principle of non-resistance with Curitiba Mennonite Brethren church and civic leaders. They responded cautiously, pointing out that refusal to serve could result in the loss of civil rights. Harder had high praise for the one young man who had refused induction into the army, but the leaders resisted Harder's request that they take a firm stand on the matter. Like most European Mennonites, they preferred to make military participation a matter of conscience for each individual.<sup>31</sup>

In Harder's view, leadership in the Curitiba Mennonite Brethren Church was problematic. Much additional education, or a change of leadership, was needed before this church could become a powerful witness. Harder had high praise for Hans Legiehn's work as a preacher and Bible school teacher and for Peter Huebert, the prospective interim administrator of the orphanage. Beyond that he had little of a positive nature to say about the Curitiba church. He attributed the problems, at least in part, to the continuing close relations between Mennonite Brethren and Mennonite Church members and leaders.

### **Bage (Rio Grande Sul), Brazil**

Harder's visit to the Mennonite Brethren community of Rio Grande Sul near Bage in southern Brazil was much more satisfying than his experiences in Curitiba (Boqueria). Rio Grande Sul was about 25 miles (40 kilometres) southeast of Bage and about 40 miles or (64 kilometres) north of the Uruguayan border. The first families had moved there only in 1949. Most were severely impoverished people who had first settled in the Krauel, Stoltz Plateau and Witmarsum district.<sup>32</sup> Land had been purchased at Rio Grande Sul with financial aid from Mennonite Brethren in North America. There was a strong Mennonite Brethren church here, but no organized Mennonite

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<sup>30</sup> Harold S. Bender, Henrique Ens, and Peter Pauls, Jr., "Brazil," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, <http://www.gameo.org/> (accessed 07 April 2008).

<sup>31</sup> B. B. Janz *Correspondence*, J. A. Harder to P. C. Hiebert and B. B. Janz, 8 April 1955 [mistakenly dated 8 March 1955].

<sup>32</sup> Harold S. Bender, Henrique Ens, and Peter Pauls, Jr., "Brazil."

Church. Harder thought this fact allowed the Mennonite Brethren to become more independent, spiritually healthy, and mature.<sup>33</sup>

In 1955 the Mennonite settlement near Bage had basic medical facilities and services, its own elementary school, a Bible school, and a Gymnasium (secondary school). The Bible school and Gymnasium were accommodated in the same badly overcrowded and rather poorly equipped building. Harder's assessment of the Bage congregation was mixed. He described the leader as a good person but poverty stricken and in need of some financial support if he was to devote a significant portion of his time to work in the church. Members seemed to be sincere Christians but, in Harder's opinion, they lacked adequate understanding in the application of the Gospel to issues of faith and everyday life. He was pleased that the leaders and members of the church were trying to make it a true Mennonite Brethren church in doctrine and practice, but he complained that they did not exercise sufficient vigilance in detecting and dealing with drinking, greed, and other problems.

Harder was also concerned about the amount of debt members were incurring to purchase land, large tractors, combines, and other farm machinery and supplies for their farms, on which the main crop was grain. These outlays limited the amount of charitable giving for construction and staffing of a new Bible school building. Money was also needed for a small mission station established by the church. Harder was delighted to note, however, that there had been a number of conversions of indigenous individuals and that several had already been baptised.

C. C. Peters from Yarrow was the driving force and only full-time teacher in the Bage Bible school. Harder was pleased with the work Peters and the other teachers were doing. On the negative side, he noted that the short three-to-four-month terms made staffing arrangements difficult. In fact, several of the teachers at the various Bible schools moved from one location to the other to teach terms at different times of the year in different communities. Hans Legiehn, for example, taught not only in Curitiba but also occasionally in Bage. Several North American teachers and missionaries also provided instruction in the Bible school. Furthermore, Harder thought the curriculum was weak. More qualified North American teachers were urgently needed until local teachers were adequately trained. He recommended several

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<sup>33</sup> B. B. Janz *Correspondence*, J. A. Harder to B. B. Janz, 20 April 1955.



Canadians who, he thought, might consider a call to teach Bible school in South America.

The need for new teachers in Bage seemed particularly urgent because C. C. and Anna Peters were due to return to Canada later in the year. This loss, Harder felt, was unavoidable due to the failing health of both, but especially since it seemed likely that Anna Peters would need to have a leg amputated.<sup>34</sup> He worried about C. C. Peters' refusal to leave until a suitable replacement was found.

Harder had known C. C. Peters for many years. They spoke bluntly and plainly to one another, not mincing words when they disagreed. Harder's main concerns regarding Peters' work were related to his somewhat spendthrift practices, his love of travel (resulting in neglect of his teaching duties), and his sometimes controversial involvement in the affairs of troubled churches. Peters was, nonetheless, Harder's most trusted and best-informed confidant in South America. Harder was enormously impressed with the vast amount of work Peters had accomplished and with the Peters' positive influence in building the Bage church and Bible school.

In Bage, as elsewhere, Harder preached and held special study sessions on the topic of non-resistance. The difficulties under Brazilian laws of holding to conscientious objection were brought up once again, but Harder was pleased to report that the doctrine would be taught energetically in the Bible school and in the church. He contrasted this response with the much less satisfactory attitude of the Curitiba church.<sup>35</sup>

In Harder's assessment, the Bage church was moving in the right direction. The people still needed help, particularly in improving the physical facilities and staffing, and possibly expanding the Bible school. He was pleased to note the commitment and enthusiasm for mission work, especially as evidenced among young people attending the Bible school.<sup>36</sup>

### **El Ombu, Uruguay**

On two trips, Harder visited three Mennonite Brethren groups or churches in Uruguay. His assessments of conditions in the Uruguayan communities and

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., J. A. Harder to P. C. Hiebert and B. B. Janz, 20 April 1955; *B. B. Janz Papers*, B. B. Janz to C. C. Peters, 20 April 1955.

<sup>35</sup> *B. B. Janz Correspondence*, J. A. Harder to P. C. Hiebert and B. B. Janz, 20 April 1955.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

churches in Montevideo, Gartental, and El Ombu differed greatly. On his first visit to El Ombu, he participated in an inter-Mennonite service and also met separately with 14 Mennonite Brethren people. The group, with a total membership of 51 in 1954,<sup>37</sup> was led informally and on an interim basis by Hans Warkentin. Harder and members of the small group lamented that they had no one with church leadership experience.

The tone of a further report, written after a second visit, was more positive. Tobias Foth, a preacher and evangelist who travelled extensively and had not been present when Harder first visited El Ombu, seemed willing and able to provide the group with some pastoral care and leadership. Harder described Foth as a good shepherd for the little flock at El Ombu. Plans were well advanced for the construction, with financial assistance from North America, of a small meeting place. Prospects were good for establishing a viable Mennonite Brethren church. Harder did not meet Aeltester Regehr, the Mennonite Church leader. The two Mennonite groups, while small and dependent on outside help,<sup>38</sup> were not working together at El Ombu.<sup>39</sup>

### **Montevideo, Uruguay**

There was no organized or even clearly identifiable Mennonite Brethren group or church in Montevideo.<sup>40</sup> The Mennonite Central Committee had an administrative centre in the city which, according to Harder, was competently run. But he had concerns about the spiritual leadership provided by the administrator. He suggested that, if possible, a Mennonite Brethren worker be assigned to work in the city and perhaps also assist in resolving problems in the nearby Gartental settlement.

### **Gartental, Uruguay**

There was an organized Mennonite Brethren congregation of 26 members in Gartental. It was in crisis.<sup>41</sup> Jacob Warkentin, the long-time leader who had

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<sup>37</sup> *General (MB) Conference Year Book, 1954, 222.*

<sup>38</sup> J. Winfield Fretz and Milka Rindzinski, "Uruguay," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, <http://www.gameo.org/> (accessed 21 April 2008).

<sup>39</sup> *B. B. Janz Papers*, B. B. Janz to C. C. Peters, 13 February and 31 March 1955.

<sup>40</sup> Harold S. Bender, "Montevideo (Uruguay)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, <http://www.gameo.org/> (accessed 21 April 2008).

<sup>41</sup> Emma Schlichting, "Gartental (Uruguay)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. <http://www.gameo.org/> (accessed 21 April 2008).

emigrated from the Soviet Union, had become embroiled in political, moral, and financial scandals. There were allegations that he had been an agent of the Soviet Secret Police. It is not clear from the available correspondence how widely this was known or suspected in the community.<sup>42</sup> Years later he confessed to the truth of the rumour.

Warkentin was one of many separated from their spouses during the Stalinist terror and World War II and did not know their fate. He raised the question of remarriage of such persons in correspondence with B. B. Janz in 1954. Janz spelled out the Mennonite Brethren position, which called for strict celibacy in such circumstances. He acknowledged the terrible difficulties this created, particularly for comparatively young people, but insisted that celibacy was possible with prayer and faith in God.<sup>43</sup> Warkentin, however, succumbed to sexual temptations. When that became public knowledge, he was expelled from the church.

There were also financial problems. In the process of helping Mennonite immigrants settle, the Mennonite Central Committee had provided \$3,000.00 for the purchase of machinery, and the Mennonite Brethren Board of General Welfare and Public Relations had contributed \$900.00 for the construction of a Mennonite Brethren church building. Warkentin had also obtained funds from Swiss Mennonites, but he had not reported receipt of these funds to the North Americans. The Mennonite Central Committee money had been sent to Warkentin, and he had "borrowed" some of it to equip his own farm. He had also used some of the \$900.00 to begin construction of a church building on land he owned. A foundation had been poured but construction had been stopped when the financial irregularities became known.<sup>44</sup>

Warkentin's fall preceded Harder's arrival in Gartental. On his arrival, Harder met with some church members and then privately with Warkentin. In preparation for the latter meeting he prayed earnestly for much love and honesty for the fallen brother. The discussions, as described by Harder, were candid and open (*freimuetig*). Warkentin readily admitted his guilt but complained that some church members seemed pleased to see him humbled.

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<sup>42</sup> B. B. Janz Papers, C. C. Peters to B. B. Janz, 25 July 1955.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., B. B. Janz to Jacob Warkentin, 9 November 1954.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., B. B. Janz to C. C. Peters, 13 February 1955; *B. B. Janz Correspondence*, B. Janz to J. A. Harder, 23 February 1955 and J. A. Harder to P. C. Hiebert and B. B. Janz, 20 April 1955.

He promised to repay any funds he had “borrowed,” but expressed great distress at the behaviour of C. C. Peters, who had come from Bage to Gartental when the church first dealt with the issue. Warkentin was present at that meeting and was asked to state his position. His presentation had been followed by lengthy deliberations, some in Warkentin’s presence and others in sessions from which he had been excluded. The result had been his expulsion. But at a social gathering after that painful meeting, Peters had allegedly regaled the group with humorous stories eliciting much laughter. Warkentin, broken in spirit (*zerknirscht*), had been embarrassed in the presence of all the others and offended by Peters’ behaviour. But none had dared speak to Peters personally.<sup>45</sup> When Harder heard of this occurrence, he expressed his dismay to Peters. He also reported the incident to B. B. Janz, who immediately sent Peters a reprimand.<sup>46</sup> Peters replied that he had already apologized to Warkentin and sought his forgiveness.<sup>47</sup>

Peters and Harder both noted that Warkentin was repentant, but they adamantly insisted that he could never again be a Mennonite Brethren preacher or church leader. Warkentin did not challenge this ruling, but he almost desperately sought readmission to church membership. He feared for his salvation if he remained outside the church. Harder was not convinced that Warkentin’s change was altogether genuine. He had not yet seen true godly sorrow leading to real repentance (*keine goettliche Traurigkeit die zur Busse fuehren koennte*).<sup>48</sup> Consequently, he did not advocate Warkentin’s restoration to membership. He concluded his report with a prayer that “the Lord help the little herd in Gartental.” A possible solution, in his view, was the appointment of a Mennonite Brethren worker from North America who would work in Montevideo and also make fairly frequent visits to Gartental to provide leadership for the group there. In Harder’s opinion, such help was necessary because the North Americans had more money and their leaders were better educated than those in South America.

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<sup>45</sup> B. B. Janz Correspondence, J. A. Harder to P. C. Hiebert and B. B. Janz, 27 April 1955.

<sup>46</sup> B. B. Janz Papers, B. B. Janz to C. C. Peters, 16 May 1955.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., C. C. Peters to B. B. Janz, 2 July 1955.

<sup>48</sup> B. B. Janz Correspondence, J. A. Harder to P. C. Hiebert and B. B. Janz, 27 April 1955.

The assessment of the situation by other members of the Board of General Welfare and Public Relations was less charitable. Warkentin had violated their trust. They demanded that he repay all the money he had appropriated or transfer ownership of the land on which the foundation for the proposed church building had been poured. Construction could then proceed or, if that was impractical, the property should be sold with the proceeds used to support a worker in Montevideo. The Board felt that Warkentin should be readmitted only after these matters were settled and there was conclusive evidence of real repentance on his part.<sup>49</sup> B. B. Janz sent Warkentin a warm and sympathetic letter, however, encouraging him to keep the faith and, through repentance, regain the confidence of his church community. Janz cited Job 31:2, "I made a covenant with mine eyes; why then should I think upon a maid?"<sup>50</sup>

### **Fernheim, Paraguay**

Harder found the situation in Paraguay as diverse as that in Uruguay. The large Mennonite Brethren Church in Fernheim had stable leadership, and relations between the several Mennonite groups were cordial.<sup>51</sup> Shortly after his arrival Harder was asked to participate in special Bible study sessions. He readily agreed, even though they were held in the Mennonite Church. He regarded the leader of that church as a good and committed Christian who admitted only converted believers (*Bekehrte*) as members.

The issue dominating much of Harder's discussion in Fernheim pertained to the program, staffing, and administration of the Bible school. An inter-Mennonite institution dominated by Mennonite Brethren, it had a strong complement of four teachers. Two of them were Canadians, but one of these also taught part-time in the *Zentralschule*. Both schools served students from all three Mennonite groups.

Some leaders of the different churches, with the support of the Mennonite Central Committee, suggested the addition of two years of advanced Bible

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., P. C. Hiebert to J. A. Harder, 5 May 1955; B. B. Janz to J. A. Harder, 24 April 1955.

<sup>50</sup> B. B. Janz Papers, B. B. Janz to Jacob Warkentin, 25 May 1955.

<sup>51</sup> B. B. Janz Correspondence, B. B. Janz to J. A. Harder, 24 April 1955.

school instruction. They hoped that such instruction would serve students from all three Mennonite groups in the Chaco districts of Paraguay. It would be a “higher Bible school” designed to train church workers and community leaders. There were suggestions that the governance structures of the proposed school should provide for effective representation by all Mennonite groups. Harder and some of the Fernheim Mennonite Brethren wanted a Bible school under their control. Mennonite Church leaders, however, indicated that they might be compelled to start their own Bible school if the proposed initiative failed.

While insisting that Mennonite Brethren operate the Bible school, Harder suggested that it could accept converted Christian students from other churches. He recommended a firm but non-confrontational and non-offensive approach in dealing with Mennonite Church leaders and students. He also thought it might be possible to appoint one converted and academically qualified Mennonite Church teacher if the school was administered by Mennonite Brethren.<sup>52</sup>

Harder was also concerned about the close relations between the two churches in other programs. Such working together, he feared, might involve participation by Mennonite Church members who had not had a conversion experience. He happily reported that Mennonite Brethren leaders wanted to move to a clear Mennonite Brethren position, separate from the Mennonite Church in spiritual matters. He concluded his report: “So, brothers, if you in North America hear the bell ringing you will know that I helped strike the gong.”<sup>53</sup>

In his discussions regarding the faith and life of the Mennonite Brethren members, Harder was pleased to note their willingness to devote more attention to the teaching of non-resistance and acceptance of all aspects of the Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith. But he regretted that, despite efforts by the church leaders, there was still a drinking problem. He also expressed concern about “wild weddings” with mixed games and dances, which were becoming acceptable even among believers. But he was encouraged by the willingness of Mennonite Brethren leaders to deal with these problems. He

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., J. A. Harder to P. C. Hiebert and B. B. Janz, 27 April 1955.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

thought the church was slowly becoming more and more a real Mennonite Brethren Church in its teachings, in the conduct of its members, and in growing support for missionary work.<sup>54</sup>

Harder had nothing but praise for Mennonite Brethren missionary efforts among the Lengua and Chulupi people.<sup>55</sup> Converts had been settled in villages of their own with assistance from local and North American churches and conferences. He visited five such mission stations or colonies, but did not go north to the more recently opened mission to the Moros. He met with the missionaries individually and collectively and lauded the success of some converts in clearing land, planting gardens, and becoming settled in their own communities. These people had made fundamental religious commitments and now sang good Gospel songs in full voice. But Harder cautioned that ways must also be found to provide the Indians with land and to help and supervise them so they would become self-sufficient farmers. He made no mention of the fact that the Light to the Indians (*Licht den Indianern*) mission was a partnership between all three Mennonite churches in Philadelphia.<sup>56</sup>

### **Neuland, Paraguay**

The Fernheim situation differed significantly from that in the nearby Chaco colony of Neuland.<sup>57</sup> Harder found it in a state of serious economic and religious turmoil. There had been major crop failures and an infestation of ants. Many settlers had left. Harder referred to the particularly hard-hit Mennonite Brethren Church in the village of Steinfeld, whose membership had dropped from 46 to 14. Although Steinfeld was an extreme case, a significant migration was underway, and it was not clear whether even quite substantial aid from North America could salvage the situation in this region. Harder recommended that additional North American aid be provided, but also placed considerable hope in the construction of a new highway linking Neuland with the larger and better established Fernheim and Menno Mennonite colonies. He emphasized that Neuland had a fine hospital, a

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> *Mission Board Correspondence*, J. A. Harder to A. E. Janzen, 2 May 1955.

<sup>56</sup> Harold S. Bender, A. E. Janzen, and Ewald Goetz, "Licht den Indianern (Light to the Indians)."

<sup>57</sup> *B. B. Janz Correspondence*, B. B. Janz to J. A. Harder, 24 April 1955.

*Zentralschule* with four teachers and 40 students, but no Bible school. A small new church building had been erected by the Mennonite Brethren.<sup>58</sup>

The Mennonite Brethren Church was, nevertheless, in serious trouble. Their leading minister, Wilhelm Loewen, had “fallen” into sin, which Harder described as *Unsittlichkeit* (immorality). The matter had apparently festered for years.<sup>59</sup> Loewen, a refugee from the Soviet Union, lived in the somewhat remote village of Gnadental. His wife had been banished to Siberia for 25 years.<sup>60</sup> He began taking meals at the home of a nearby female neighbour. The woman also began to do Loewen’s laundry, and eventually the two merged their farming operations. When challenged, Loewen insisted that these were simply practical arrangements. C. C. Peters had gone to Neuland to investigate in spite of B. B. Janz’s warning that local members should deal with the issue. Intervention by a North American would likely be resented.<sup>61</sup>

Peters did not find conclusive evidence of wrongdoing, but he sternly warned Wilhelm Loewen regarding his close relations with the woman. The matter came to a head in February of 1955. Loewen again protested his innocence, but under more intense questioning the woman confessed that they had lived in adultery. Peters reported his findings to the *Vorberat* of the church, which then expelled Loewen.<sup>62</sup>

Jacob Loewen (no relative), then a missionary in Colombia, has a colourful but perhaps somewhat apocryphal story of how Wilhelm Loewen was caught. Wilhelm Loewen had allegedly denounced the sexual promiscuity of young people in his sermons. Fed up with him, they decided to bring his own clandestine affair to light. On a Saturday night, they surrounded the widow’s house singing hymns throughout the night until the preacher finally had to emerge to go to church for the Sunday morning service.<sup>63</sup>

Whatever happened had occurred before Harder visited the settlement. He met with Loewen, as he had with Warkentin in Gartental, Uruguay. Loewen

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<sup>58</sup> B. B. Janz Papers, J. A. Harder to P. C. Hiebert and B. B. Janz, 16 May 1955.

<sup>59</sup> Walter Regehr, *25 Jahre Kolonie Neuland, Chaco-Paraguay (1947-1972)* (Karlsruhe, Germany: Heinrich Schneider, 1972), 75.

<sup>60</sup> J. Winfield Fretz, *Pilgrims in Paraguay* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1952).

<sup>61</sup> B. B. Janz Papers, B. B. Janz to C. C. Peters, 16 May 1955.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., B. B. Janz to C. C. Peters, 16 May 1955 and C. C. Peters to B. B. Janz, 2 July 1955.

<sup>63</sup> *Loewen Manuscript*, 176.



acknowledged his failings and indicated a desire to be reconciled. One source suggests that he was planning to return to Germany and wanted to clear matters before leaving. He therefore asked church members for forgiveness and requested that he be readmitted as a member. There was considerable discussion, at first only between Harder and the church leaders, but then also with other church members. It was alleged that as a church leader Loewen had dealt harshly with other church members while he himself had been living in sin. He was accused of having used his office as church leader to intimidate and silence anyone who challenged his authority. There was also some concern about the way in which he had handled the financial affairs of the church. Members were therefore not prepared to readmit him as a member.<sup>64</sup> Heinrich Ediger, a minister in the church with only limited training and leadership experience, was then chosen as his successor.

### **East Paraguay**

The situation in the other Paraguayan colonies with Mennonite Brethren churches was less troublesome.<sup>65</sup> Harder was concerned, however, about the stability of the Bible school in Friesland, which also served Mennonite Brethren in the neighbouring colony of Volendam. The school had no permanent teachers, relying instead on itinerant teachers (*Wanderlehrer*). Some of these were regular Bible school teachers elsewhere who came to teach in Friesland during the time when there was no instruction in their own Bible school. Others were evangelists, missionaries, or MCC workers who might teach one or several courses. The names of several prospective teachers who could possibly be persuaded to teach in Friesland, including some from Canada, were given in Harder's report.<sup>66</sup>

The issue of non-resistance received less attention in Harder's Paraguayan reports than in those on Brazil. This was probably due to the more generous exemptions from military service granted by the Paraguayan government. His Uruguayan reports say almost nothing about non-resistance. Most of the Uruguayan settlers were refugees from Prussia, Danzig, and Poland. They were not eager to discuss non-resistance.

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<sup>64</sup> *B. B. Janz Papers*, J. A. Harder to P. C. Hiebert and B. B. Janz, 16 May 1955.

<sup>65</sup> *B. B. Janz Correspondence*, B. B. Janz to J. A. Harder, 24 April 1955.

<sup>66</sup> *Mission Board Correspondence*, J. A. Harder to A. E. Janzen, 2 May 1955; *B. B. Janz Correspondence*, B. B. Janz to J. A. Harder, 24 April 1955; P. C. Hiebert to J. A. Harder, 9 June 1955.

### **Building the Mennonite Brethren Church in South America**

Harder preached numerous sermons, led countless Bible studies, made many house calls, and provided pastoral counselling for many distressed and confused church members and leaders in South America. His spiritual and pastoral ministry was, on the whole, greatly appreciated. He made special efforts to meet with young people and persuaded many to consider Bible school studies and ministry in the church or on the mission field.

The most difficult situations he encountered related to leadership issues. In three of the larger Mennonite Brethren churches—Curitiba, Gartental, and Neuland—Harder encountered strong but autocratic and morally or economically flawed leaders. He aided in their removal from positions of leadership, but this action left those churches with weak leaders. His comments about the leader in Sao Paulo did nothing to strengthen the leadership there. The Bage church, which earned highest praise from Harder, had an impoverished and weak leader who deferred on all important issues to C. C. Peters, the energetic but not always politically sensitive Bible school teacher from North America.

North American meddling in South American leadership issues was resented, particularly by leaders who were criticized. But criticism was muted because the churches needed and relied on North American financial, pastoral, and instructional help.

Harder thought leadership problems in the South American churches could and should be solved by strengthening the four Bible schools and ensuring that they became Mennonite Brethren institutions where that was not the case. In the short term that would require more appropriately trained teachers and missionaries from North America, or South Americans trained in North American Bible colleges.

Harder and his mentor, B. B. Janz, supported civic and economic inter-Mennonite cooperation. Elementary and secondary schools, medical services, and a variety of economic activities served all Mennonites. Harder did not report on these, even though his brother had, for many years, been a secondary school teacher and Mennonite Church pastor in Paraguay. Harder was either very wary or critical of all joint Mennonite Brethren-Mennonite Church initiatives in church leadership training. His objective was the purification and strengthening of Mennonite Brethren churches. He was critical of some Mennonite Church practices and the willingness of some leaders to admit and tolerate members who were not converted.

Promotion of the doctrine of non-resistance was very difficult in South America. The Bage church in Brazil and some Paraguayan churches promised to give the doctrine more prominence, but there was resistance elsewhere, particularly in Brazil and Uruguay. Missionary initiatives in the local churches, often with North American support, were strongly endorsed, but there was no acknowledgement in Harder's reports that several of the most important missions were supported by all three Mennonite churches.

In 1956, Harder seriously considered returning to South America and continuing his ministry there. Those who appreciated and drew inspiration from his sermons, Bible studies, and counselling would have given strong support, but the church leaders probably would have had concerns if he had returned. He did, in fact, not go back. Nor did he remain intimately involved in the internal affairs of South American Mennonite Brethren churches and Bible schools.

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## Chapter 17

### Indigenization of Foreign Missions, 1957-1963

Johannes Harder served as chairperson of the Board of Foreign Missions from 1954 until 1960. During that time Mennonite Brethren foreign missions underwent fundamental changes. But Harder was not extensively involved in the drafting of key policy documents. The most controversial changes were approved in 1957 at sessions of the General (MB) Conference held in Yarrow. Due to illness, Harder was unable to attend and participate in the discussions. As chairperson of the Board he supported but probably did not understand the wide sweep of the new policies and strategies adopted.

J. B. Toews, the Board's Field or General Secretary, and Board members G. W. Peters and H. H. Janzen and to a lesser extent A. E. Janzen, the Board's Executive Secretary, were the main architects of the new policies. Peters had completed doctoral studies; Toews and A. E. Janzen had completed all but the dissertations of their doctoral programs. Harder, probably somewhat intimidated and sidelined by these more highly educated colleagues, supported the new policies. As chairperson, he was confident that the Board, the church, and the larger brotherhood would be guided by the Holy Spirit if decisions in challenging circumstances were based on earnest prayer and careful study of the Scriptures.

J. B. Toews drafted the key document. He assured everyone that he and the others had "prayed earnestly for the future of Mennonite Brethren missions" and that their document "projected the role of missionaries to conform to the

New Testament expansion of the Gospel.”<sup>1</sup> He referred to the missionary career of the Apostle Paul as a model for future Mennonite mission strategies. These assurances made it possible for Harder to accept and support the controversial new policies and strategies.

Indigenization became the watchword of the new strategies. This concept called for the abandonment of compound-based mission strategies and the transfer of leadership responsibilities to indigenous evangelists, pastors, and leaders as soon as possible.

### **Successes achieved**

Mennonite Brethren had achieved remarkable success in their compound-based missionary endeavours. In his sermons and reports, Harder always drew attention to these successes and the church’s continuing missionary mandate. He heartily endorsed the encouraging statistical information included in the Board’s 1957 report to delegates. In this year, the Board supported 184 missionaries in 11 countries or fields at 40 main stations or compounds and 144 preaching outposts. Ninety-eight indigenous pastors and 272 indigenous evangelists were actively involved, many with support from the Board. There were 14,627 Sunday school students in 439 Sunday schools, and 9,357 and 591 students respectively were attending elementary and middle schools. High school enrolment stood at 205 students, while 412 prospective pastors, leaders and evangelists were receiving instruction in mission-sponsored Bible schools. Four doctors, 30 nurses, and 70 other medical workers served 116,494 outpatients and 12,371 inpatients in one year.<sup>2</sup>

These were impressive figures for a conference of roughly 25,000 members—about 13,300 in Canada, 11,300 in the United States, and 1,875 in South America.<sup>3</sup> Collectively, Mennonite Brethren contributed \$654,795.01 to missions in 1957.<sup>4</sup> The 29,426 members of indigenous churches, and the 1,081 baptisms in the previous year provided even more impressive measures of missionary successes.<sup>5</sup> On the strength of these numbers, the Mission Board

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<sup>1</sup> J. B. Toews, *JB: The Autobiography of a Twentieth-Century Mennonite Pilgrim* (Fresno, CA: Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1995), 161-162.

<sup>2</sup> *General (MB) Conference Year Book, 1957*, 32-34.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-169.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

confidently assured delegates that “the promise of God regarding the effect of being witnesses for Christ is literally fulfilled in M. B. Foreign Missions.”<sup>6</sup> The report then went on to enumerate staffing and infrastructure needs in the various fields.

### **Cultural limitations**

There were, nevertheless, problems. Missionaries had gone to the far corners of the earth to proclaim the Gospel as they comprehended it. Few understood or appreciated the culture, values, and ideals or the religious and social systems of the people they sought to convert. It was not unusual for missionaries to describe indigenous people as ignorant, superstitious, and immoral “heathen” who lived under satanic powers in great spiritual darkness. Conversion, as most early Mennonite Brethren missionaries understood it, required rejection of all aspects of the old pagan practices and a commitment to new and fundamentally different Christian behaviour. Concepts of Christian living were often modelled on what the missionaries had learned, observed, and cherished in their home communities and churches. Most had difficulty separating faith from their own culture. “Religion,” according to one historian, “has always been an integral part of culture; and when the two elements have been together for hundreds of years it is virtually impossible to separate them. It would be as easy to extract the salt from the sea as to remove Christianity from western culture.”<sup>7</sup>

Within the mission compounds, Christianity and western culture usually prevailed with only limited accommodations to local conditions. Yet, in more remote indigenous villages, effective communication was impossible unless evangelists were able to link the Gospel message to the culture and circumstances of the people they wanted to reach. J. B. Toews, writing about Mennonite Brethren missions in Zaire, stated categorically that “the program of the church, developed in a framework foreign to the Zairian culture, cannot be absorbed in its existing forms by the national church. A revamping of our organizational and functional structures must precede genuine progress.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>7</sup> Herbert Kane, as quoted in J. B. Toews, *The Mennonite Brethren Church in Zaire*, 130.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 131.

Toews and other Mission Board members insisted that indigenous churches could not grow or become effective agents of evangelization unless their leaders were entrusted with primary leadership responsibilities. Missionaries must not impose their western ideas and practices on indigenous believers. They should instead defer to indigenous leaders, supporting their work as and when invited to do so.

When visiting Colombia in 1955, Harder had become aware of the need for and also some of the problems inherent in a transfer of leadership responsibilities to indigenous leaders. Recognizing the advisability for some accommodation to local conditions, he nevertheless believed that converts must be firmly grounded in the Scriptures before they could apply biblical teachings appropriately in their own culture. He therefore strongly supported expansion of the Bible schools at the mission compounds, not recognizing the full extent to which western culture permeated what was taught in those Bible schools.

### **Nationalist pressures**

Without historic changes in the world, it might have taken decades before missionaries and their supporting boards responded to the evident limitations of the old missionary-centred, compound-based methods, rooted as they were in western culture. The shift away from such methods was however greatly accelerated by nationalist independence movements in virtually all the former colonies of the great European imperial powers. In colonial societies, missionaries had often worked in close collaboration with the colonial governments. Their compounds, resembling imperial civil and military establishments, became islands of western civilization.<sup>9</sup>

Advocates of national independence in the former colonies were understandably critical of closely interlinked colonial military, political, diplomatic, economic, social, cultural, and religious programs and policies. They were intent on gaining control of all former imperial institutions and practices and demanded, among other things, that western missionaries transfer responsibility and authority to indigenous leaders. Failure to comply could result in the expulsion of the missionaries, sharply increased state regulation, or outright “nationalization” of the mission compounds.

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Penner, *Russians, North Americans, and Telugus*, ix.

Consequently, some missionary policies and procedures had to change, and in 1960 Harder warned Canadian Conference delegates that proclamation of the Gospel must not be based on worldly wisdom or western culture.<sup>10</sup> He believed the Gospel message must transcend culture. But he had only a limited understanding of the pervasiveness of western culture in the entire missionary enterprise and hence of the radical nature of the necessary changes.

### **The Yarrow Statement of 1957**

In 1957, the Board presented to General (MB) Conference delegates a document with the cumbersome title *Statement of the General Conference of the M. B. Church on the Effects of the Changes of our Age on the World Wide Missionary Assignment*. The document was later often referred to as the *Yarrow Statement* because it was approved in Yarrow, where the conference sessions were held that year.

The *Yarrow Statement*, while paying tribute to the past successes, services, and sacrifices of the missionaries, was frank in its assessment of future needs: "The time of a fixed routine station-centred mission program has outlived itself. The assignment of a missionary for a stationary ministry of evangelism with a lifetime to continue in the same place as the central figure of a perpetual program results in a reactionary protest of the nationalistic-conscious native of all lands. With the growing international rejection of all colonial imperialism there has also arisen a principal rejection of the 'missionary-centred' gospel ministry."<sup>11</sup> The long-term objective, not clearly spelled out, was either to give the compounds and stations to the indigenous leaders or to dismantle or sell them.

These changes required dramatic shifts in the roles and qualifications of missionaries. A later document explained that missionaries would have a continuing responsibility to bring the Gospel to people not yet reached, but that their role must be "a temporary aspect of a church-building program." They must "step more and more into the background as soon as there are national believers who are able to assume responsibility for their own people. . . . With the establishment of a national church the mission is considered an assisting agency and the missionary is on loan to the national church."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Canadian Conference Year Book*, 1960, 218.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>12</sup> *Guiding Principles and Policies of Mennonite Brethren Church Missions*, 2nd ed. (Hillsboro, KS: Board of Missions of the Mennonite Brethren Church, 1960), 8. This document was apparently printed in 1960, but the introduction carries a 1961 date.



The reaction of some of the furloughed missionaries attending the conference was swift and negative. After the conference sessions, missionary meetings were held in Greendale, BC. Two missionaries working in India presented reports. One ended his report with the declaration, "How the work in India will continue with the new direction accepted by the conference only God knows, and if it fails, J. B. Toews will have to accept the responsibility."<sup>13</sup>

Harder had little sympathy for such criticism. He believed that, in light of their collective prayerful search of Scriptures, Board members, staff, and conference delegates had been guided by the Holy Spirit. Consequently, it was not possible for them all to be in error, even if some of the old-style missionaries found it difficult to accept the proposed changes. He tried to help missionaries work out specific problems but condemned all public criticism of the Board's policies.

The message in 1957 was, in fact, mixed. While declaring the mission compounds obsolete, the Board's official report included a long list of recently constructed and projected missionary infrastructure projects. This list was matched by new missionary appointments for projected missionary staff, most of them for work at one of the mission compounds or stations.

### **Mission work after 1957**

After the 1957 conference, the Board issued two documents that seemed to convey contradictory messages and instructions about some important matters. The first was a 42-page revised version of the Board's *Guiding Principles and Policies*. Issued in 1960-1961, it set out the new policies and procedures for missionaries. It reaffirmed and provided details for implementing the new strategies for the organization of local self-governing indigenous churches. Missionaries were told to take utmost care "to avoid the influence of a foreign culture upon the development of the national church." This direction was based on an underlying assumption that "the Biblical pattern has proven sufficient for all times and places and does not prescribe any particular organizational form of operation."<sup>14</sup>

The 1960-1961 document also called for greater surveillance by the Board to ensure implementation of the new policies. There would be more field visits

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<sup>13</sup> J. B. Toews, *JB: The Autobiography of a Twentieth-Century Mennonite Pilgrim*, 162.

<sup>14</sup> *Guiding Principles and Policies*, 8.

by Board members and senior administrators. The authority of the old-style, compound-based missionaries was thus being undermined by greater surveillance by the Board, on the one hand, and on the other by demands that indigenous believers be entrusted with leadership responsibilities.

The policy changes upset not only many of the missionaries, but also some of their North American supporters. Consequently, in 1962, the Board issued a public relations document entitled, *Mennonite Brethren Missions Today: A Statement to the Brotherhood from the Board of Missions*. In it they reverted back to many of the older themes and more familiar language.

The *Statement* began on a sombre note, pointing to the influences of communism, Romanism, nationalism, and ancient pagan religions in China, Indo-China, the Arab world, Colombia, Cuba, the Congo, Spain, and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Much of the document was couched in cold-war anti-communist and traditional missionary rhetoric. The document referred to “lands of former total darkness [where] there is today a living Church.”<sup>15</sup> Non-Western pagan culture was described “as one complete, inter-dependent, integrated whole. Religion is not a compartment of life which may or may not be attached to culture. Religion is the unifying, under-girding factor, the cement of the ancient cultures. Any attack upon the ancient religions is thus considered an attack upon the ancient cultures, any deviation from religion a deviation from culture, society and their life and world view.”<sup>16</sup> The document further alleged that “the missionary is welcome for what cultural contributions he can make.” The document did not explain how, with such an affirmation of western culture and a comprehensively negative view of non-western culture and religion, the Gospel could be proclaimed and new churches established within indigenous cultures. It merely suggested that religious-cultural relationships should be worked out by the indigenous churches. Missionaries could provide advice, but leadership in that discernment process should be provided by indigenous Christians.

It was not easy for missionaries to reconcile instructions to avoid imposing western values on developing indigenous churches with the dire warnings that “anti-Christian cultures, anti-Christian philosophies are rising today and

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>16</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Missions Today: A Statement to the Brotherhood from the Board of Missions* (Hillsboro, KS: Board of Missions of the Mennonite Brethren Church, 1962), 4.

seeking to dominate the world. The missionary must assist the younger church to root herself in the Word.”<sup>17</sup>

Harder knew that missionaries had been guilty of preaching not only the Christian Gospel but also aspects of western culture. He knew this practice must stop, but it was difficult for him and many others to find anything good in indigenous religions and cultures and to separate their understanding of biblical teachings from important aspects of western culture.

The 1962 *Statement* also announced a significant shift in policy not mentioned in the *Yarrow Statement*. Traditionally, missionaries had tried to respond to calamities such as famine, disease, or other natural and human disasters. They had ministered mostly to poor, needy, helpless, and financially distressed people living in remote rural areas. The 1962 *Statement* stated that the primary focus of further missionary work should shift to “strategic population areas.” People in urban centres had already abandoned many aspects of rural pagan religions and cultures. The prospects were therefore better that urban churches could become “Christian lighthouses.” This focus on population centres necessitated a further shift from working with economically, socially, and religiously disadvantaged people to engaging with middle- and upper-class urban dwellers. Urban leaders, moreover, would set the course of a country’s development. It was therefore desirable to establish influential, self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting urban churches.<sup>18</sup> After their 1955 trip to Colombia, Harder and Janzen had voiced similar sentiments when discussing the feasibility of establishing a mission in Cali.

### **Applications of the new policies**

Two quite different examples help illustrate Harder’s attitude regarding religion and culture. A missionary approached him with a problem. A respected chief who had two wives had been converted and sought baptism and church membership. He loved both wives and was reluctant to divorce either because that would subject the divorced woman to a cruel future in the community. The missionary thought it was not appropriate to baptise and admit the chief as a member of the church as long as he had two wives.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 21.

Harder's advice was to baptise and admit the man as a member of the church. He regarded the marriage vows the man had made as binding. In this case, he accepted the customs of the indigenous culture. But he would certainly not permit church members, regardless of their cultural background, to enter bigamous marriages now or in the future.

A more difficult and ongoing problem involved financial matters. The Mission Board encouraged all indigenous churches to become financially self-sufficient as soon as possible, yet it provided substantial interim support. Understandably, Board members expected that all funds it provided would be spent as designated, with an accurate and complete accounting of all expenditures. This expectation differed significantly from attitudes toward material resources in indigenous cultures in which looking after the needs of family, clan or tribal members was of paramount importance. Harder had little tolerance for financial irregularities in the use of funds provided by the Board, but he supported virtually complete autonomy in the handling of funds if they had been raised by the members themselves.

The disposition of the mission compounds, and more generally of mission property, created difficult problems. The compounds and stations had been at the heart of the missionary enterprise and still provided much needed and greatly appreciated services. Missionaries had devoted much time and labour to building and improving these facilities, and North Americans had made generous donations over many years. Understandably, there was vigorous opposition to the dismantling or sale of the compounds. But, more to the point, transfer of ownership and authority to indigenous churches was problematic because very few indigenous churches had the necessary resources to maintain and staff the elaborate and expensive facilities. Financial support by the Board without accountability seemed irresponsible, yet paternalistic enforcement of rigorous "western" standards of financial accountability was inconsistent with the underlying principles of indigenization.

There was an alternative way, however, for indigenous leaders to secure funds for the operation of the mission compounds and account for the way the money was spent. Nationalist governments, like their colonial predecessors, recognized the benefits of the education, health care, and other services provided by the missionaries. Some governments were willing to subsidize institutions providing services that met national needs and

objectives. Government assistance, however, was contingent on financial accountability, acceptable standards of service, staff qualifications and, in the case of the schools, curricula set by the government. Board members were cautious about government subsidies, but in some instances in the past they had accepted limited government support for institutions such as the orphanage and school near Curitiba. And yet they realized that even if they took no government money, their schools, hospitals, and clinics would still have to meet government requirements.

In Zaire, government subsidies had become controversial as early as 1948. Missionaries there were prepared to accept government funds for medical work, but not for their schools. They argued that the primary focus of instruction should address spiritual development and understanding, whereas governments were primarily interested in intellectual instruction and might restrict religious and spiritual instruction.

Harder and most other Board members and senior administrators were willing to accept government funding for both health care and educational work. This was consistent with Harder's efforts to obtain some government funding for the embattled Sharon Mennonite Collegiate Institute. But the missionaries in Zaire had objected. At a special meeting of the Missionary Council in 1949, a vote was taken on whether to accept government funding for the schools. It resulted in a tie that was broken by the chairperson's vote to reject the subsidies. This outcome had been a disappointment to the Board and its senior administrators. They exerted sufficient pressure on the Missionary Council to cause it to relent in 1952, but only "with great reluctance."<sup>19</sup> After indigenization, the Board and missionaries could offer advice, but indigenous leaders made the decisions regarding government subsidies.

### Tragedies

When promoting missionary causes, Harder almost always spoke of the positive aspects of the work. While acknowledging the dismal spiritual, physical and material conditions of those who needed to be reached by the Gospel, he emphasized the importance and benefits of conversion and the salutary effects of mission work in general.<sup>20</sup> There were times, however, when

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<sup>19</sup> J. B. Toews, *The Mennonite Brethren Church in Zaire*, 105-106.

<sup>20</sup> J. A. Harder, "Die Aeussere Mission der M.B.-Gemeinde fuer die Zukunft," *Canadian Conference Year Book*, 1960, 218.

he, together with everyone else in the missionary community, faced threats and tragedies. Having visited the missionaries in Colombia, he took a personal interest when Jacob Loewen's life was threatened<sup>21</sup> and when contact was lost with John Dyck after he ventured into dangerous territory.<sup>22</sup> There was great dismay when, on 9 March 1957, John and Mary Dyck were killed in an airplane crash. The risks, however, had been taken to extend the Kingdom of God, and Board members responded as might be expected. They prayed earnestly for divine protection but also recognized the dangers of mission work.

The worst accident involving a Mennonite Brethren mission, at least in the number of lives lost, occurred in Mexico in 1955. It involved a bus with 15 members of a choir on their way to serve at an evangelistic meeting. Twelve persons, including one of the female mission workers and four of her children, were killed. When informed of the tragedy, conference delegates could do little more than affirm that the Lord's way is Holy but sometimes beyond human understanding. They had no rational explanation for why good people, active in the work of the Lord, should suffer such a disaster. The bereaved were comforted with a scriptural assurance: "Blessed are they who die in the Lord."<sup>23</sup> Unresolved questions in such cases seemed similar to those Harder had faced when trying to come to terms with the suffering and pitiful deaths of his parents and so many others in the Soviet Union: he would ask God for an explanation when he got to heaven.

Harder and other Board members found it much more difficult to come to terms with two very unusual cases. The first was the tragic death of J. N. C. Hiebert in July 1956. John Hiebert was a career missionary who had served in India from 1929 to 1951. The Board had called him from the mission field to deal with a serious crisis at Tabor College. Hiebert felt he was urgently needed in India and wanted to continue as a missionary there but reluctantly yielded to intense pressure by the Board. As President of Tabor College, he was not able to heal the strained relationships in the broader Tabor community and resigned. Apparently, his recall from the mission field, to which he firmly believed God had called him, and his inability to provide the needed leadership at Tabor, helped to trigger serious problems of mental illness. After

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<sup>21</sup> *Mission Board Correspondence*, A. E. Janzen to J. A. Harder, 5 June 1957.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, A. E. Janzen to J. A. Harder, 9 and 23 July 1956.

<sup>23</sup> *Canadian Conference Year Book*, 1955, 64.

shock treatments in Wichita, Kansas, he was taken to a care facility in Reedley, California. In 1956, there were suggestions that he be taken to a state institution in Topeka, Kansas. In Reedley, the Mission Board had provided modest support. However, because treatment in Topeka would be more expensive, much of the financial burden would fall on family members. The proposed transfer to a distant mental institution and the probable financial consequences for his family, contributed significantly to Hiebert's malaise, and he committed suicide on 20 July 1956.<sup>24</sup>

J. B. Toews informed Harder of Hiebert's death the following day. Expressing great shock and dismay, Toews then referred to the terrible darkness that can come into the life of one of God's servants, citing the passage from 1 Peter 5:8: "your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour." The implication seemed to be that the devil himself had devoured Hiebert. His tragic death, in Toews' opinion, was an admonition and a call for greater personal and collective spiritual vigilance, humility, and trust in God.<sup>25</sup>

Harder's response was similar: "For me the case of J. N. C. Hiebert is almost a riddle; to me he seemed in character to be an optimist. In addition, he was a child-like pious brother dedicated to the service of the Lord. Why must there be evidence of so much that is negative, even among children of God when their strength fails? May the Lord help us as individual children of God and as the church to walk in the light."<sup>26</sup> This response was sadly similar to the way members of the Canadian Conference's *Fuersorgekomitee* responded when a colleague "fell" into sin and seduced a young girl.

Anna Hiebert later wrote, "No official group of the conference ever came to see me during [my husband's] sickness or later offered personal condolences."<sup>27</sup> Harder and other Mission Board members did not know how to respond and remained aloof. Regardless of its causes, suicide apparently was unforgivable.

Neither Toews nor Harder publicly admitted that their action in recalling Hiebert from the mission field and placing him in what turned out to be an

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<sup>24</sup> Peter Penner, *Russians, North Americans, and Telugus*, 187-191.

<sup>25</sup> *Mission Board Correspondence*, J. B. Toews to J. A. Harder, 21 July 1956.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, J. A. Harder to J. B. Toews, 3 August 1956.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Penner, *Russians, North Americans, and Telugus*, 192.

impossible position as President of Tabor College might have been a factor in his suicide. The decision to recall Hiebert had been made jointly by three Conference Boards: Education, Foreign Missions, and Reference and Counsel. The board members had prayed earnestly and sought divine guidance. When three missionaries in India challenged this decision, A. E. Janzen replied that the Conference could not be wrong when the three Boards, after prayerfully seeking the guidance of the Lord, had all agreed that Hiebert should be recalled.<sup>28</sup> Harder shared that view. Peter Penner, historian of the Mennonite Brethren mission in India, disagrees: "One cannot escape from the conclusion that a terrible mistake was made to take this man from his very successful work in India and give him what proved an almost impossible task."<sup>29</sup>

A second tragedy, also attributable to mental illness, devastated the Mennonite Brethren missionary community a few weeks later. Jacob and Anna Dick had been missionaries in India for many years. Life had been difficult for their children who, particularly when in boarding school, suffered long periods of separation from their parents. When they came to study at American colleges, they had great difficulty accommodating to North American culture. Helga, the eldest daughter, married a physician, but in September of 1956 she became mentally disoriented. In this state, she killed the couple's two children.<sup>30</sup> In her case, Harder and Mission Board members and staff recognized the tragedy as the result of mental illness. But Harder still attributed it to the work of the devil and seemed as concerned about the effect the tragedy might have on the overall program of the Board as its impact on Helga and her extended family. His response to the devastating news was telling: "How dreadful. May the Lord keep us as Mennonite Brethren humbly close to him, because the might of the enemy is great. How can we find our way in these different set-backs? May the Lord have mercy and help us."<sup>31</sup>

This case, of course, involved court proceedings. Helga was charged with murder but found not guilty by reason of insanity. She was committed to a mental institution and recovered in a fairly short time. The Mission Board was

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<sup>28</sup> Peter Penner to Ted Regehr, 3 August 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Penner, *Russians, North Americans, and Telugus*, 193.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 182-184.

<sup>31</sup> *Mission Board Correspondence*, J. A. Harder to A. E. Janzen, 14 September 1956 and A. E. Janzen to J. A. Harder, 17 September 1956.



not involved in the court proceedings, but Helga's mother, Anna, suffered what Harder called "a nervous collapse" shortly after the tragic death of Helga's children.<sup>32</sup> Later Harder reported that, when a missionary couple on furlough had visited Helga, she had spoken freely, telling them that she knew nothing about the time of the tragedy. Harder apparently accepted the verdict of the court, adding only a prayer that the Lord in his grace would help Helga.<sup>33</sup>

During the Christmas holidays of 1963, the Mission Board had to deal with another tragedy. John A. Wiebe, a long-time missionary in India, drowned on the Bay of Bengal while on a family Christmas vacation. Caught in a rip current, he was swept out to sea. There had been disagreements between Wiebe, his fellow workers, the Missionary Council in India, and the Mission Board. These had resulted in Wiebe's reassignment to teach in the mission school at Ramapatnam. Nonetheless, he was extensively eulogized when he died.<sup>34</sup> This response stood in sharp contrast to the almost complete silence by Board members at the time of John Hiebert's death.

### **Missionary retirements**

Some of the missionaries who had begun their service before or shortly after the war retired in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The terms of service of others who lacked the necessary qualifications or had difficulty adjusting to the new Board policies were not renewed. Few had accumulated significant retirement funds, and some who returned early needed further training to earn an adequate livelihood.

Retirement provisions by the Board were minimal. Retired missionaries were to derive their income from Social Security or other government benefits. No further entitlement was in place, but the Board was allowed to provide a supplement on the basis of need and years of service.<sup>35</sup> It paid the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., J. A. Harder to A. E. Janzen, 14 September 1956.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., J. A. Harder to A. E. Janzen, 21 January 1957.

<sup>34</sup> J. H. Lohrenz, "In Memoriam: John A. Wiebe—In Service for Christ in India," *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, 24 January 1964, 10; Peter Penner, *Russians, North Americans and Telugus*, 181-182; Peter M. Hamm, "Wiebe, John A. (1900-1963)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, <http://www.gameo.org/> (accessed 07 May 2008).

<sup>35</sup> *Guiding Principles and Policies*, 22.

Social Security tax for the missionaries not yet 65 years old and withheld 2 percent of their allowance “to safeguard its ability in the future to pay the difference between the government or other pension allowance to missionaries and the maximum figure approved for each missionary by the Board.”<sup>36</sup> Only missionaries who had reached the age of 65 and had served for at least 20 years were entitled to any retirement benefits from the Board. In 1955, the Board put \$4,036.62 into its United States Treasury’s retirement allowance and \$745 into its Canadian Treasury. This amount was less than one tenth of one percent of the Board’s total receipts of \$494,290.91 that year.<sup>37</sup>

The inadequacies of the Board’s retirement policies became problematic for Harder in the late 1950s. In 1957, Jacob and Anna Dick were forced to leave their field of service in India. They were the parents of eight children. Tragedy had overwhelmed Helga, their oldest daughter, and this had led to Anna’s “nervous collapse.” After some delays, arrangements were made for the Dicks to relocate in Vancouver. Raising eight children on the allowances provided by the Mission Board had left them with virtually no financial resources. But the Fraserview Mennonite Brethren Church agreed to rent a house for them on an interim basis. Anna was too ill to undertake salaried work, and Jacob, then 53 years old, lacked the necessary qualifications for a job that would cover the rent and other household expenses. Consequently, the Fraserview Church provided interim support but appealed to the Mission Board for assistance. This petition created a problem for the Board, which had stopped paying the Dicks an allowance or salary when they left India. The Dicks were too young to qualify for Social Security, and there were criticisms that they had not managed their financial affairs prudently. The Mission Board suggested that this case would be better dealt with by the General (MB) Conference’s Board of Reference and Counsel. Eventually, however, the Board agreed to an interim arrangement under which it forwarded \$120.00 per month to the pastor of the Fraserview Church. He could use that money, supplemented by other donations made through the church, to help pay the rent.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> *Canadian Conference Year Book*, 1955, 58-59.

<sup>38</sup> *Mission Board Correspondence*, J. B. Toews to P. R. Toews, 3 June 1959; A. E. Janzen to J. A. Harder, 18 December 1959; J. A. Harder to A. E. Janzen, 7 January 1960.

As a Mission Board member from British Columbia, Harder became involved in the case since he was responsible for local problems. J. B. Toews insisted that the money be channelled through one of the churches because Toews was not confident that the Dicks would manage it responsibly. In India, the Dicks had relied on servants to do much of their household work. They were inclined, perhaps in consideration of Anna's illness, to seek paid help for work that Mission Board members thought the Dicks could and should do themselves. Toews wanted to cut the Board's ties and responsibilities and insisted that, if the Board provided some interim assistance, there should be no suggestion that the Dicks were still on the Board's payroll. He demanded, and Harder then had to implement, measures designed to force the Dicks into finding a solution to their long-term financial needs. Since this approach seemed unfeasible in Vancouver, the Dicks were persuaded and helped to move to a small farm near Abbotsford, where they could eke out a living until they qualified for the Canadian government's social security and old age pension payments.

The Board's parsimonious approach to salaries and benefits for missionaries was rooted in clearly enunciated policies: "The vocation of the missionary calls for sacrifices and seldom offers abundant rewards in monetary values."<sup>39</sup> Candidates had to clear all outstanding debts before their appointment and received allowances that covered little more than their immediate needs. However, they served at a time when most preachers and church leaders, including Harder, served without or with minimal financial remuneration. This fact, at least in part, explains the reluctance of Harder and others to provide more adequate support for Jacob and Anna Dick or to pay for the costs associated with the proposed transfer of John Hiebert to a state institution.

### **A European and African assignment**

In the late 1950s, members of the Mennonite Brethren Board of Missions became concerned about rising nationalist sentiments in the Congo. The Belgian government agreed in 1959 to grant that country its independence. It seemed clear that a new nationalist government would demand, among many other things, the transfer of responsibility for missionary work to national

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<sup>39</sup> *Guiding Principles and Policies*, 20.

church leaders. Anticipating such demands, mission and indigenous church leaders formulated “Points of Understanding” regarding the indigenization process. They envisioned a gradual transfer of all mission properties to the indigenous church with a commitment of continued financial support by the Mission Board. A new era in the relationship between the mission and the indigenous church was to be inaugurated.<sup>40</sup>

It was generally assumed that the new independent government would adopt a gradualist independence program. Belgian administrators stood ready to assist with the transition to self-government. The Mission Board, in a parallel strategy, asked J. B. Toews and Harder to travel to the Congo in 1959 to inform, assist, and provide guidance for the Congolese church in the practical details of the indigenization process.<sup>41</sup> Harder was apprehensive about this assignment, as he had been in 1955 just prior to his trip with A. E. Janzen to Colombia and Ecuador. But he agreed to go.<sup>42</sup> C. A. DeFehr volunteered to accompany Toews and Harder at his own expense.

Harder was asked to combine his trip to Africa with a visit to the Mennonite Brethren churches and missions in Europe. His preaching, Bible studies, personal counselling, and leadership advice in South America in 1955 had been appreciated by many. Now he was asked to serve the European Mennonite refugees in much the same way. This European trip was to precede the one to Africa. Since the Harders’ eldest son and wife were stationed on a military base in France at the time, it was decided that Tina would accompany Johannes on the European portion of the trip. They planned to spend time with their children, and Tina would then stay with them while Johannes was in Africa.<sup>43</sup>

The Harders left Canada on 15 October 1959, almost two months before J. B. Toews’ planned departure from North America. In Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, Harder systematically visited the various Mennonite Brethren churches as well as some other Mennonite churches. He spent about a week in each of the larger churches, preaching, conducting Bible studies and evangelistic services, making house visitations, and discussing a variety of

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<sup>40</sup> J. B. Toews, *The Mennonite Brethren Church in Zaire*, 131-134.

<sup>41</sup> *Mission Board Correspondence*, J. B. Toews to J. A. Harder, 3 August 1959.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, J. A. Harder to J. B. Toews, 8 August 1959.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, J. A. Harder to J. B. Toews, 11 August 1959 and J. B. Toews to J. A. Harder, 27 August 1959.

church problems and concerns with church leaders.<sup>44</sup> Early in December, the Harders left for Belgium and then Amsterdam, where Johannes was to meet Toews and DeFehr to travel with them to Africa. But political disturbances resulted in a Board decision to postpone the trip until January of 1960.<sup>45</sup> That left the Harders in a quandary. There was no assurance that the situation in the Congo would improve sufficiently to make a trip possible in January, and they had other commitments in Canada. So they returned to Vancouver on 13 December 1959. The indigenous Mennonite Brethren leaders in the Congo had to find their own way through the political crisis without Harder's support and advice. J. B. Toews was able to make the trip a little later, but by that time the Harders had taken up a new pastoral charge in Black Creek, British Columbia.



The last Mission Board meeting attended by Johannes Harder. He is seated at the far right.

### **The end of an era, 1960-1963**

A. E. Janzen, Harder's mentor, closest associate, and confidant in the work of the Mission Board, retired from his post as Executive Secretary in January of 1963.<sup>46</sup> Despite differences in background, education, and leadership styles, Janzen and Harder were kindred spirits and had worked well together for 18

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., J. A. Harder to J. B. Toews, 24 and 30 October and 2 November 1959; Tina Harder, *Story*, 52.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., J. B. Toews to J. A. Harder, 29 October 1959.

<sup>46</sup> *General (MB) Conference Year Book*, 1963, 58; Wesley Prieb, "Janzen, Abraham Ewell (1892-1995)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, <http://www.gameo.org/> (accessed 15 January 2007). Prieb seems to suggest, mistakenly, that Janzen served from 1945 to 1960.

years. Eight months later, on 1 September 1963, J. B. Toews resigned as well. John Ratzlaff, the assistant secretary, had resigned in February of 1962. These resignations were the consequence of an “unprecedented leadership crisis.”<sup>47</sup> Missionaries and constituents alike had grave concerns about the strategies adopted in 1957 and the manner in which J. B. Toews and others were implementing them. Board members were specifically warned that something should be done “about the Strong Man [J. B. Toews] in the Secretariat.”<sup>48</sup> The result was a major reorganization of the entire Board structure<sup>49</sup> and a comprehensive review and revision of the Board’s *Guiding Principles and Policies*. The time had come for a changing of the guard, a shift expedited by an important constitutional change. For many years a relatively small number of men had occupied key conference leadership positions. Efforts to open positions for other, often younger, persons led to the introduction of term limits for board members. In addition, no member could serve on more than one board. These changes marked the end of the dominance of the “old guard.” The question of Harder’s eligibility to serve an additional term had already arisen in 1960.<sup>50</sup> Only a decision not to make the constitutional changes retroactive made possible his re-election that year to a further six-year term. He wanted to complete 20 years of service on the Board, but his time on the Board was clearly running out.

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<sup>47</sup> Peter Penner, *Russians, North Americans, and Telugus*, 241.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> *General (MB) Conference Year Book*, 1966, 17-23.

<sup>50</sup> *Mission Board Correspondence*, J. A. Harder to A. E. Janzen, 18 May 1960.

## **Chapter 18**

### **Ministry in Black Creek, 1960-1962**

**I**n 1959, the Harders answered what many regarded as a surprising call. After candid discussions and prayerful consideration, they agreed to serve the Black Creek Mennonite Brethren Church as pastoral couple for a three-year term. During their tenure in Black Creek, the Harders sought to strengthen the spiritual ministries and governance structures of the church and to maintain what they regarded as biblical standards and rules. While they gained broader perspectives and perhaps greater freedom on several important issues, they also insisted on enforcing existing church rules and introducing several others. Some of these regulations, however, were significantly modified after the Harders' term of service ended.

#### **The call**

Black Creek, 11 miles (18 kilometres) north of Courtney on Vancouver Island, attracted a small number of Mennonite settlers in the 1930s. Initially Mennonite Brethren and Conference of Mennonites in Canada members worshipped together. However, in 1935 the Mennonite Brethren Church was organized under the name of the Merville Mennonite Brethren Church. This step, however, did not end friendly relations between the two groups. A small winter Bible school that attracted students from both Mennonite groups was started in 1939 by N. N. Friesen, a member of the Conference of Mennonites

in Canada. The school was greatly strengthened by the arrival of a Mennonite Brethren preacher and Bible school teacher in 1942.<sup>1</sup>

Because times were difficult, the membership of both churches grew slowly. The Mennonite Brethren Church had 34 members when it was organized in 1935. That number had risen to 67 in 1953, when a church sanctuary with a seating capacity of 150 was built. In 1959 there were 89 members.

In part because of its isolation, the Merville-Black Creek church was on the BC Conference's Home Missions Board circuit. It was a place Harder liked to visit, largely because of his close personal friendship with the church's pastor, Johann A. Goerz. Goerz's father had been an *Aeltester* of the Orloff Mennonite Church in Russia, the same church in which Harder's great-grandfathers, Johann Harder and Bernhard Fast, had served as *Aelteste*. Goerz had attended the Orloff *Zentralschule* and trained as a teacher in Kharkov. He had taught school in the Russian villages of Hochfeld, Spat, and Blumenort, and in Canada at Waldheim and Hierschau, and had also taught Bible school in Dalmeny, Saskatchewan, and Didsbury, Alberta.

In 1942 Goerz received a call to pastor the Black Creek Mennonite Brethren Church. There he also participated in the work of the Bible school. He has been described as "a scholar at heart [who] had a passion for Bible study."<sup>2</sup> He never asked his students to write any examinations; rather he emphasized the importance of memorizing long Scripture passages.

Goerz and Harder were kindred spirits. Goerz had visited Yarrow and other Fraser Valley churches numerous times, particularly for Bible study conferences (*Bibelbesprechungen*). When visiting in Yarrow, he usually stayed at the home of the Harders. Harder, in turn, had visited and preached in the Black Creek church on a number of occasions and had occasionally given presentations in the small Bible school.

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<sup>1</sup> John A. Goerz and Marlene Epp, "Black Creek Mennonite Brethren Church (Black Creek, British Columbia, Canada)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, <http://www.gameo.org/> (accessed 18 April 2007); David Giesbrecht, "Black Creek Bible School (Black Creek, British Columbia, Canada)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, <http://www.gameo.org/> (accessed 18 April 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Anne Falk, "Goerz, Johann A. (1883-1957)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, <http://www.gameo.org/> (accessed 18 April 2007).



When Goerz died in 1957, the Black Creek Mennonite Brethren Church suffered considerable difficulties, one of them being the lack of a preacher. While J. B. Falk had served the church for many years as its leader and deacon, he was not a preacher or pastor. A serious controversy involving a church member and significant ongoing conflicts about cultural differences highlighted the congregation's need for pastoral leadership and care. Goerz had preached only in German, and some of the older members wanted to retain the German language and other traditional Russian Mennonite practices in their church services. Others, including younger members as well as members from an influential family of non-Mennonite background, wanted to focus more on evangelizing outsiders and integrating them into the church. Thus, they regarded the continuing exclusive use of the German language and other traditional cultural practices as obstacles to effective evangelism. Some church members wanted to participate in inter-denominational radio broadcasts, while others still regarded all radio programs with suspicion.<sup>3</sup>

The sermons Harder had preached when visiting the church had impressed the members. They knew that he had provided strong leadership in the Yarrow church and in the BC, Canadian, and General (MB) conferences. He seemed to be the kind of strong, effective, experienced leader who could help the Black Creek church in its hour of need. So the church extended a call to the Harders, offering a salary of \$200.00 per month and suitable accommodation that would be arranged by a local committee.<sup>4</sup> Harder informed the church in August 1959 that he felt it was the Lord's leading that he accept the invitation.

Harder visited the church on 27 September 1959 to participate in a baptismal service and used the opportunity to discuss various issues with the members. The church minutes do not include a detailed account of those discussions. At the subsequent church meeting, however, a church committee was authorized to look for land on which to build a house for the pastor.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia Archives, *Protokollbuch der Mennoniten Bruedergemeinde zu Black Creek* (hereafter *Black Creek Church Minutes*), 16 May and 12 December 1960.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 April and 18 August 1959.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 October 1960.

Church members also approved a highly controversial policy that Harder had fought hard to enforce in Yarrow. Johann Goerz's strong musical leadership had attracted a variety of young people to the church choir. Some had made a profession of faith but had not yet been baptised and, therefore, were not members of the church. Others did not profess any conversion experience. Less than two weeks after Johannes Harder's visit on 27 September, the church met to discuss whether "unsaved" persons should be allowed to sing in the choir. At this time, the church adopted the policy of the Yarrow MB church that "unsaved" persons could attend choir practices, but would not be allowed to participate in public choir performances.<sup>6</sup> This decision, of course, was a disappointment to those directly affected and to those who regarded the choir as a means to attract and evangelize young people.

During Harder's visit, evangelization had also been discussed. Prior to his visit, the church had approved participation in radio programs in which preachers from different churches alternated as speakers. However, after Harder's visit, the congregation agreed that further discussions of this type of evangelization were needed.<sup>7</sup> In addition, only days before the Harders arrived in Black Creek, the church approved the imposition of a 5 percent church tax (*Steuer*).<sup>8</sup> Such a tax had become very controversial in Yarrow. In an effort to avoid some of the problems arising from this tax, the church later exempted members over the age of 70 and left it to the conscience of each member to determine what should be regarded as income.<sup>9</sup> The minutes do not indicate whether Harder advocated or supported this more flexible approach. But the revised policy avoided, at least during the time of Harders' pastorate, the kind of disputes about gross and net incomes of farmers and business people that had created much difficulty in Yarrow.

The Black Creek church wanted the Harders to begin their work as soon as possible. Harder had, however, been asked by the Board of Foreign Missions to visit Mennonite Brethren missions in Germany and Africa and wanted to honour that assignment. He and Tina also hoped to spend additional time in Germany and in France where their oldest son and his family were stationed.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 14 September and 6 October 1959.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 28 December 1959.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 5 March 1962.

So they requested a later starting date, to which the church agreed. But the cancellation of the Africa portion of the trip due to political unrest in the Congo made it possible for the Harders to begin their work in Black Creek on 1 January 1960.<sup>10</sup>

### **Getting started**

When the Harders arrived in Black Creek by car on 31 December 1959, they found that arrangements for their accommodation were not yet ready. This situation was due in part to their earlier than anticipated arrival after the cancellation of the Africa portion of Harder's mission trip. The committee had been able to rent space above one of the local stores,<sup>11</sup> but furnishings and other arrangements were still incomplete when the Harders arrived. Tina later wrote, "The accommodation question repeatedly robbed me of my sleep, until I had prayed through the issue and became completely compliant."<sup>12</sup>

When they arrived in the dead of winter, the Harders found that the stove in their assigned quarters did not work. As a result, they were chilled to the bone. Most of the other facilities were also woefully inadequate. But church members helped to make the rooms more comfortable, and Tina wrote that "once the oven warmed the room and many of the unexpected things regarding the accommodation had been settled we were happy in the service of the Lord."<sup>13</sup>

The Harders were welcomed as the new leaders of the church at a membership meeting on 1 January 1960. The congregation acknowledged the services of J. B. Falk, the church's long-time deacon and leader, and presented the Falks with a gift. Harder was named as the new leader of the church with Falk as the assistant leader. Harder, after thanking the members for their trust in him, promised to devote himself to visiting as many members of the congregation as possible. He would also assume major leadership and preaching responsibilities.

### **New initiatives**

Harder's work in the Black Creek Mennonite Brethren Church contributed to a softening of some of the harsher aspects of his previous leadership that had

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 24 November 1959.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Tina Harder, *Story*, 52.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

been exhibited in the Yarrow church. The church's involvement in radio work illustrated changing attitudes in Mennonite Brethren circles. In the early days, radio had been denounced as an instrument of worldliness. Even religious broadcasts had been viewed with suspicion, although some younger members of the church in Yarrow, including Fred Harder, had become involved in broadcasts prepared by Mennonite Brethren churches. Joint broadcasts with other churches were viewed with suspicion, especially if Pentecostals were involved. In Black Creek, however, Harder agreed to participate in a German-language broadcast on radio station KARI from Washington State. He also participated, albeit somewhat reluctantly, in some English language radio broadcasts involving ministers from various denominations.

Harder was also invited to attend breakfast meetings with other ministers. There, according to his son David, he was surprised to find that the other ministers had objectives similar to his own. This recognition obviously facilitated his further participation in the inter-church radio broadcasts. David has written, "I understand that his messages became much more geared toward people with a wide variety of needs and outlooks."<sup>14</sup>

There were limits, however, to such inter-denominational acceptance and co-operation. At the first church membership meeting attended by Harder (1 January 1960), members were informed that a couple living some distance from Black Creek was participating in an Anglican church. A resolution was passed that the couple not be permitted to participate in communion services at both their Mennonite Brethren church and the Anglican church.

Further significant accommodation to new circumstances became necessary when a number of recent English-speaking converts requested baptism and membership in the Black Creek church. A strong evangelistic outreach effort had brought these people to a conversion experience, but concern then arose about how the church, with its German-language services, could meet their spiritual needs. The members decided to baptise these new converts and asked the *Vorberat* to prepare a plan to meet their spiritual needs. This decision obviously reflected the realization that at least some of the church services must be conducted in the English language.<sup>15</sup> Harder's changing attitudes on the linguistic question prompted his son David to write, "We began to wonder if after all this time the God of the Mennonites had

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<sup>14</sup> David Harder, "My Father," *Loewen Manuscript*, 138

<sup>15</sup> *Black Creek Church Minutes*, 6 September 1960.

taken leave of His senses and had accepted those other people (usually referred to as ‘the English’) into the number of his acceptable children.”<sup>16</sup>

Those who knew Harder during the time he served in Black Creek speak of his mellow, tender, and caring attitudes and actions. He was able to do more spiritual counselling (*Seelsorge*) in Black Creek than he had been able to do in Yarrow. Thus he gained more insight into how some problems could not be solved by reliance on church rules. By this time, he had also become aware of and deeply concerned about the spiritual struggles of his own children.<sup>17</sup> He spoke more often about the paramount importance of love in the affairs of the church, including in cases of discipline. However, he continued to view disregard of clearly defined church rules as unacceptable.

A difficult case arose toward the end of Harder’s term as pastor of the Black Creek church. Erika Phillippsen, the daughter of the church janitor, a long-time member of the church, became engaged to a man who was allegedly a non-believer (*Unglaeubiger*). She asked to be released from membership in the Black Creek Mennonite Brethren Church so she could join an Anglican church. Mennonite Brethren church and conference rules and practices in such cases were clear. Those marrying an “unsaved” person were to be expelled. Harder chaired the church membership meeting, held on 14 January 1963, at which Phillippsen’s case was discussed, even though his pastoral term had officially expired at the end of 1962. He spoke first as a pastor and spiritual counsellor, advising members that as children of God they must not throw stones or be overly critical of the failings of others. Instead, it was the responsibility of Christians to remove stones from the paths of believers. Love must always prevail. There were boundaries, however. In the case of the marriage of a believer with an unbeliever, church and conference rules as well as scriptural instructions were clearly defined. So he read the passage from 2 Corinthians 6:14-15: “Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? Or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?” He then read 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15: “And if any man obey not our word by this epistle,

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<sup>16</sup> David Harder, “My Father,” *Loewen Manuscript*, 138.

<sup>17</sup> Abe and Katie Esau interview.

note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.” On the basis of these Scriptures, the young woman’s request for a release from membership in the Black Creek Mennonite Brethren Church was rejected and she was instead expelled. However, the church members made a commitment to continue praying for her.<sup>18</sup>

The matter became even murkier when, after the Harders had left Black Creek, the young woman asked if the wedding could take place in the Mennonite Brethren church sanctuary. She had planned a ceremony that would include a bridesmaid and best man. Bridal attendants had been forbidden, at least in the Yarrow church. However, conference rules were less emphatic, and members in Black Creek agreed that the Phillippsen wedding could take place in their church.<sup>19</sup> At a subsequent membership meeting, members decided to rescind all earlier church resolutions regarding rules for wedding ceremonies. Henceforth, it would be left to the presiding minister to determine what was appropriate at a Christian wedding.<sup>20</sup>

### **The 40th wedding anniversary celebrations**

A highlight of the Harders’ term of service in Black Creek came on 28 May 1962, when the church surprised them with a celebration marking their 40th wedding anniversary. The day, as described by Tina, reveals some aspects of their personal life. She and Johannes had left early in the morning for a refreshing trip into the great outdoors. He, Tina wrote, was always eager to follow various gravel roads into unfamiliar areas. On that day they followed one such road, stopping at a small roadside café for a relaxing meal. They returned to Black Creek in time for a congregational meeting scheduled for that evening. It was only when they arrived at the church that they realized members and friends had convened to celebrate their wedding anniversary. David B. Wiens, a personal friend and pastor of the Vancouver Mennonite Brethren Church, had been invited for the occasion.<sup>21</sup> The Harders very much appreciated this expression of appreciation and love by the congregation.

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<sup>18</sup> *Black Creek Church Minutes*, 14 January 1963.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 May 1963.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 October 1963.

<sup>21</sup> Tina Harder, *Story*, 53.

### **The Black Creek interlude**

Harder's appointment as pastor of the Black Creek Mennonite Brethren Church was for a three-year term. He did not seek reappointment or an extension of that term. However, before leaving, he recommended an important expansion of the church's hitherto quite small *Vorberat*. He suggested a format which was in some respects similar to the Yarrow model. It called for the leader, the assistant leader, the secretary, the treasurer, an elected deacon, the Sunday school, youth and choir leaders, and two additional elected members to serve as a council. The one important difference between the configuration of the *Vorberat* in the Black Creek church and the one in Yarrow was that in Black Creek it would include no ordained preachers other than the leader. Harder had learned from his experiences in Yarrow, and also in Vancouver, that having additional ordained preachers occupying positions of influence and leadership could easily become troublesome.

Tina Harder cited health concerns as the main reason that her husband was not able to continue his work in Black Creek. Nevertheless, the couple felt comfortable enough there, particularly after the wedding anniversary celebrations, to consider remaining there after Johannes relinquished his pastoral and leadership responsibilities in the church. Before making a decision, however, they put out a fleece. If people in the church encouraged them to purchase a lot and build a house in Black Creek they would stay. Tina later wrote, somewhat sorrowfully, that "all was silent."<sup>22</sup> So the Harders decided to leave Black Creek. However, they did not return to Yarrow. Instead, they purchased a new home in Clearbrook, where they joined the Clearbrook Mennonite Brethren Church, where Johannes was recognized as a congregational preacher. They moved on 22 December 1962, but Harder returned to Black Creek for the difficult membership meeting regarding Erika Phillippsen.

Those who knew Harder in both his earlier years and during the time when he served as pastor and leader of the Black Creek church have emphasized that he became much more mellow, sensitive, and caring in his later years. He seemed more receptive to the increased use of English in the churches and more willing to work with ministers from other evangelical

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 53.

churches in radio, Bible study, and evangelistic ministries. He had also come to view movies made by the Moody and Billy Graham organizations as an acceptable means to reach those without a working knowledge of German.<sup>23</sup> The Erika Phillippsen case, however, demonstrated his continuing rigidity in the application of church rules, even though there was ample evidence by that time that such rigidity was counter-productive.

Overall, Tina later wrote, in Black Creek they had rejoiced and been happy in the service of the Lord. She fondly remembered the love and appreciation expressed at the couple's 40th wedding anniversary and also at a special farewell celebration by the church shortly before their departure.

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<sup>23</sup> *Black Creek Church Minutes*, 31 March 1958.



## Chapter 19

### Going Home, 1964-1991

Johannes Harder found the Board of Missions meetings held 25-28 February 1964 very difficult. These meetings followed shortly after the resignations in 1963 of A. E. Janzen and J. B. Toews with whom Harder had worked for many years. He knew that their policies and strategies had roused much opposition, culminating in the leadership crisis of 1963. He also knew that some of the new Board members and administrators were not inclined to entrust major responsibilities to him because of his association with the policies of the departing leaders and administrators.

The recent tragic drowning of John A. Wiebe, missionary and educator in India, had cast a dark shadow over the deliberations. There had been tensions between Wiebe and the Board. His death added to the uncertainties regarding the future of the mission in India. In the Congo, hostile revolutionary nationalists had forced most of the missionaries to leave, and it was doubtful that indigenous leaders would be able to continue the work. The situation in other countries was more encouraging, but even in these the Board had initiated a major restructuring of its relations with indigenous churches and conferences. The previous Board had begun this work, but many of its proposals were being significantly modified by the new Board. The proposed organizational charts were sufficiently confusing to give anyone a headache.<sup>1</sup> They had a debilitating effect on headache-prone Johannes Harder.

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<sup>1</sup> *General (MB) Conference Year Book, 1963, 64.*

It was nevertheless both safe and proper for Board members to ask Harder, as their senior member, to close the meetings in prayer. He was still well respected, and he hoped to complete the six-year term to which he had been elected in 1960. However, Harder was no longer functioning in the role of a leader. So he returned home exhausted, ill, and discouraged.

### **A shrinking world**

Harder's reduced role in the Mission Board was especially painful because his work with the Canadian Conference had also been significantly reduced in 1963. For the first time in 18 years, he had not been elected as a member of that conference's *Fuersorgekomitee*. As a member of that committee, as well as in many Canadian and General (MB) conference deliberations, he had tenaciously opposed opening full membership in Mennonite Brethren churches to persons baptised as adults by sprinkling or pouring. This battle had been lost by 1963. Many of the activities and practices which Harder had steadfastly denounced as worldly and contrary to the Word of God—for example, owning a television set—had become acceptable. And the tactics of North American evangelists that he had criticized were gaining support in most Mennonite Brethren churches.

Health concerns were a factor in Harder's decision not to accept a second three-year term as pastor of the Black Creek church. Therefore, after 1962, he was no longer officially a church leader, or even a member of the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church which he had led for so many years. Retiring from all these positions and responsibilities was difficult for Harder, especially when he had such grave concerns about the positions the churches and conferences were adopting. At age 65, he found his sphere of influence and ministry shrinking rapidly.

Retirement did not provide a release from the Harders' mounting concerns about the spiritual welfare of their six children. At the time of their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, family affairs had seemed excellent. The children were, in their parents' perspective, all healthy in body, mind, and spirit. The older ones had experienced a conversion and been baptised, and the younger ones were following in their footsteps. Unfortunately for Johannes and Tina, that happy state of affairs did not continue. Tensions had arisen, particularly between John and his mother, when he had enlisted in the military. Fred became very active for a time in a church-sponsored radio

program; however, he had allegedly begun to ask too many questions, felt rebuffed, and subsequently had left the church. One of their daughters fell afoul of a church rule and was expelled. Her father's failure to provide the support she had needed left deep and lasting scars.

Thus, when Johannes and Tina tried to pass on their faith as they understood it to their children, it became clear that, like every new generation, the Harder children had to rediscover faith for themselves. Their circumstances, experiences, successes, and failures, and hence their paths to faith, differed significantly from those of their parents. Johannes, and especially Tina, had great difficulty accepting their children's departures from the straight and narrow Christian path as the parents understood it.

Those who knew Johannes Harder in his later years say he became "very tender" whenever he spoke about the spiritual welfare of his children. He attributed some of their difficulties to the strictness of the church and home during their childhood. Inevitably, he experienced some parental guilt. When he perceived that one son had apparently strayed, Harder told him, "If you are willing to confess, I am willing to stand with you and confess my failings."<sup>2</sup>

Some of these concerns became more sharply focussed at a family reunion on 21 June 1963. Johannes and Tina had moved from Black Creek into their new home in Clearbrook. There was much for which they were very grateful. They had a fine new home, all their children and grandchildren were healthy and thriving, and each of the children had an honourable profession and sufficient resources to meet their physical needs. Nevertheless, Tina ended her description of the family reunion on a sorrowful note: "None of our sons thanked the Lord for all that we have. None had a witness or thanked God for assurance of salvation. . . . Fred spoke not a word for Christ. O, how that hurts. Again and again I ask the question: What is the reason? Lord, remember not my sin. . . . How can we carry such a burden?"<sup>3</sup>

Johannes Harder shared Tina's concerns, but he apparently retained more of the confidence and respect of his children. David spoke of "a wonderful relationship that transcended the usual father-son paradigm."<sup>4</sup> John thought his father not only understood his decision to enlist in the military, but might

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<sup>2</sup> Interview 4.

<sup>3</sup> Tina Harder, *Story*, 54.

<sup>4</sup> David Harder, "My Father," *Loewen Manuscript*, 137.

have done so himself under similar circumstances. He added that while his father's expectations were very high, he was always very affirming.<sup>5</sup> Many years later, Berta wrote, "Dad, thank you for your sacrifice, dedication, strength of character, and your faith! Thank you for the many positive lessons that you taught me! Dad, I believe you are completely free in God's presence to rejoice in his unconditional love, grace and truth. Thank you for your many prayers while you were with us! Perhaps you are even now still praying and cheering us on!"<sup>6</sup> Rose wrote with affection of her father's willingness to drive her over rough roads to her northern teaching position and of his subsequent visits.<sup>7</sup>

These positive recollections of parental care and support could not obscure the Harders' growing concern when their children were unable to embrace fully all aspects of faith and conduct that their parents regarded as integral to Christian living. After Johannes' death, these concerns caused Tina even greater anxiety, distress, and guilt.

### **Two funeral sermons<sup>8</sup>**

While Harder's church and conference obligations decreased in 1963, there were still several urgent demands on his time and energy in Yarrow and Clearbrook. Although no longer the pastor of a church, he preached and provided spiritual counselling and guidance, particularly at times when persons he had pastored for many years faced terminal illness and death. In March of 1964, shortly after his return from the Mission Board meetings in Hillsboro, two older women died. Both had suffered ill health and other misfortunes, and both had received spiritual counselling and support from Harder who was their long-time pastor. It was therefore not surprising that Harder was asked to preach at their funerals. He accepted these invitations, not knowing that these funeral homilies would be the last sermons he would preach. Both provide insights into his approach to both life and death.

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<sup>5</sup> John Harder interview.

<sup>6</sup> Berta Harder Dueck, "My Memories," *Loewen Manuscript*, 147.

<sup>7</sup> Rose Harder Braun, "A Tribute to my Dad—Johannes A. Harder," *Loewen Manuscript*, 134.

<sup>8</sup> Cassette tapes of the two sermons were made available by the family and are now in the archives of the British Columbia Mennonite Historical Society.

The first of these messages, preached at Helen Peters's funeral, was particularly poignant. Harder chose as his text Revelations 21:3-7: "And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them and he shall be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more sorrow, nor crying; neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, write: for these words are true and faithful. And he said unto me, It is done. I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the foundation of the water of life freely. He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son."

Harder's sermon had two main points. The first was that former things have passed away. He emphasized that for the deceased all pain, suffering, frailties, temptations, and misfortunes had now ended. He mentioned that Helen Peters had asked him in her physical agony if he had ever suffered great pain, and he had told her about his excruciating headaches, from the last of which he was just recovering. For Helen Peters, all pain had ended forever. Harder's second point was that the deceased had now passed on to a glorious new life. As a child of God, she had now, in the words of the Scriptures, "inherited all things." Whereas her earthly sojourn had often been difficult, she was now assured of eternal bliss.

Johannes Harder preached his last sermon at the funeral of Mrs. Heinrich Hooge. (The obituary, unfortunately, referred to her only by her husband's rather than her own given name.) She had served for five years as a "sister" in the Grossweide orphanage and thus had exceptionally close ties to both Johannes and Tina Harder. In his sermon, Johannes Harder focussed on Philippians 1:21: "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." He referred to the Christian walk of the deceased, but focussed mainly on what she had gained through death. That gain was defined in three ways. First, she was now with the Christ whom she had sought to serve and with whom she had prayerfully communed in her lifetime. Now she was in the presence of the Saviour, enjoying humanly inexpressible joy and happiness, free from all pain, sorrow, disappointments, and failures. Hers was surely a great gain after the more limited experiences on earth.

The second theme Harder emphasized was that since a Christian's citizenship was in heaven, the departed had now entered her true homeland. On earth Christians were mere strangers and wayfarers, pilgrims in a barren land on the journey to their real home. Mrs. Hooge was no longer an alien in a sinful world. She had entered the place of her true citizenship. At the end of his sermon Harder raised the question: "Who will be the next one whom the Lord will call? Is it I? Is it you?"<sup>9</sup> As it turned out, he would be next.

### **Johannes Harder's death and funeral**

Harder did not fully recover from the debilitating headaches that had plagued him after his trip to the Mission Board meetings. He had experienced the usual respite when he preached at the two funerals, but he suffered a relapse shortly thereafter. He also experienced some abdominal pain, and consequently was admitted to the Matsqui, Sumas, and Abbotsford Hospital, where he had an EKG. David, the youngest son and a medical doctor, was called. He later recalled, "As no doctor in Abbotsford at that time was competent to interpret the EKG strip, it was mailed to Dr. Jack Graham in New Westminster. Meanwhile father was being investigated by means of bowel X-rays using barium—an awkward and trying procedure. The second day he had a further heart attack. He was given oxygen. He asked that I shave him, which I did. He then laid his head back and succumbed. A day later the EKG report arrived with the evidence of his first infarct."<sup>10</sup>

Johannes Harder died on his birthday, 22 March 1964, at the age of 67. His funeral service was held in the Clearbrook Mennonite Brethren Church on 26 March 1964. The first of three speakers was Henry G. Thielman, the pastor of the Clearbrook Mennonite Brethren Church, where the Harders had become members after leaving Black Creek. Thielman based his message on Isaiah 60:20: "The days of their mourning shall be ended." This sermon was followed, perhaps ironically for the funeral of someone who had fought very hard for the preservation of the German language in church worship services, with the singing of the English hymn, "I'll be home beyond the river." David B. Wiens, Harders' long-time friend and co-worker, based his sermon on Philippians 1:21. That was the same Scripture verse Harder had used at Mrs.

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<sup>9</sup> "Frau Heinr. Hooge," *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 15 April 1964, 11.

<sup>10</sup> David Harder, "My Father," *Loewen Manuscript*, 141.

Hooge's funeral. Henry Brucks, a former missionary in the Congo and at that time the pastor of the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church, was the third speaker. He represented the congregation Harder had led for so many years. All three speakers emphasized a Christian's assurance of eternal life in the presence of the Lord, where he or she would be free from all suffering and imperfections. Again, there were words of comfort to bereaved family members, friends, and coworkers.<sup>11</sup>

Short memorial services were also held at subsequent board meetings and conference sessions. One Harder would have cherished in a special way was the memorial service at the next Mission Board meeting. His old friend and fellow-traveller, A. E. Janzen, had been invited to lead a meditation. Janzen referred to Harder's many years of service and his hope, left unfulfilled, of completing 20 years of service on the Mission Board. He then referred to incidents the two had shared. On that basis, with illustrations for each characteristic, Janzen described his friend as a grateful, discerning, compassionate, resolute, generous, and humble man who delighted in the Word of God and pursued righteousness. Members of the Board and staff then stood to sing the familiar German homeland hymn, "*Dort ueber jenem Sternenmeer*."<sup>12</sup> Later longer tributes and articles in Mennonite Brethren papers provided more biographical information.<sup>13</sup>

### **Tina Harder's longer journey home**

The impact of Johannes' death on Tina Harder was devastating. She suffered a terrible spiritual crisis marked by overwhelming grief, doubt, and despair. In her *Lebensgeschichte* she later wrote of that time: "What I experienced then I cannot describe. It was so terrible, the thought to be separated forever and ever. Relatives and friends prayed often for me. At Easter time some relatives and friends from Yarrow came and sang at my window. 'Why do you despair? Be comforted, your Saviour lives. What do you fear? Your Saviour lives. Why do you cry? Your Saviour lives. Yes! He lives!' It got so difficult I called the Thielmanns [pastor and his wife]. I could not endure it any longer. Brother Thielmann read Isaiah 38:17: 'Behold, for peace I had great bitterness: but

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> *Mission Board Minutes*, 30 September 1964.

<sup>13</sup> Copies are available in the *Loewen Manuscript*, 148-172.

thou hast in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption: for thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back.' Then he gave me a song. 'Why do you cry, child of God, in doubt and sorrow? The father is waiting, ready to bless you. He will never remove the covenant of His faithfulness. Believe every promise. Take him at his Word. The path may run through testing and darkness. The water of tribulation may seem bottomless. But they will never tear you away from Him who holds you. Believe every promise. Take Him at His Word.' I took the shield of faith, wherewith we shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. They were terribly fiery. Then peace and joy came into my heart."<sup>14</sup>

In her *Story* Tina records how her children tried, as best they could, to offer their mother support and kindness. This was sometimes difficult because they had not only left home physically but also, in different ways, spiritually. They no longer shared their mother's particular faith journey, especially as it related to conduct of life and worldviews. Several no longer made the kind of



Tina Harder celebrating her 100th birthday with daughter Berta in the Tabor Home.

confession of faith she could understand. She feared that they were lost unless they embraced and maintained the faith as she understood it. On occasion, she wrote that she could not even rejoice at the thought of going to heaven because some of her children might not be there. She feared that she would stand empty-handed before her Saviour. In her

*Story* she affirms again and again how much she loved her children, their spouses, and grandchildren. Her text includes numerous prayers for forgiveness of sins that might have alienated them.

The children visited, provided support and care when Tina needed medical aid, and tried to include her in family celebrations. They also

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<sup>14</sup> Tina Harder, *Lebensgeschichte*, 27.



arranged visits on her birthday and other special days. But several were not willing to accept her rebukes about their religious, child-rearing, and social practices. She, in turn, found it virtually impossible to break the habits of a lifetime. She was told plainly by one of the sons that she should not preach at them any more, but when she tried to restrain herself she felt enormous guilt, fearing that she had denied her Lord by not providing a clear Christian witness. Like many other old and lonely people, she craved more visitors, and when some of the children had not visited for a while she attributed it to the religious gulf that separated them from her.

Tina's *Story* and *Lebensgeschichte* entries in later years became a curious mixture of great thankfulness and terrible worries and unresolved questions. She was very thankful for the fine home in which she and her husband had lived the last years of his life and in which she lived alone for eight more years. She was equally thankful for the fine care she received in the Tabor Home in Abbotsford after she was no longer able to manage in her own home. As someone who had been through very difficult economic times, she was sometimes overwhelmed by the fact that all her physical needs were met. She was also very thankful for visits and special care, including special arrangements made by son Fred, like David a medical doctor, in anticipation of a surgical procedure, and by John and Laura in arranging the details that allowed her to visit them.

There was, nevertheless, always a deep undercurrent of unrequited sorrow. She yearned for a kind of spiritual fellowship with her children that they apparently could not provide. She prayed constantly about how they lived their lives. She could not understand why some of her children joined non-Mennonite churches and why some of her grandchildren were baptised as infants. Visits without family devotions distressed her. Wine consumed at a Christmas dinner became a matter of great concern, as did the marital problems of some of her children. Indeed, the marriages of three of her children ended in divorce, something she had great difficulty accepting. In her *Lebensgeschichte*, written at the age of 90, she wrote, "Now I am thankful that Papa [Johannes] is with the Lord and did not have to witness all the difficult experiences in our family. I had never believed that such a thing was possible. What can the devil accomplish? But I believe and pray every day that the Lord Jesus will bring all of them to an understanding of the truth, and that all will pray for and find forgiveness for their sins—all the children and

grandchildren. The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin, if we ask in Jesus' name."

Tina died on 16 August 1991, five days short of her 101st birthday. At age 92 she had written her own obituary tracing the events of her life. In it she expressed gratitude for her six children, 21 grandchildren and [then] 19 great-grandchildren, praying that all would claim Jesus as their Saviour and Lord. She thanked God and the staff for the excellent care she was receiving in the Tabor Home.<sup>15</sup> Her son John, in an addendum to his mother's obituary, commented on her all-encompassing attitude of gratitude. He expressed thanks for his mother's long life, "for the joy she was able to spread, for her ongoing fervent prayers, and for her final departure. This is what she longed for—to be with her Lord. Her wish and prayers were finally granted. And we, as her children and grandchildren, rejoice with her."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> John Harder, *Mom Harder's Obituary*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter 20

### A Generation of Vigilance

Johannes and Tina Harder provided leadership in Canadian Mennonite Brethren churches, communities, conferences, and foreign missions at a time of transition. They were born and raised in pre-revolutionary Russian Mennonite communities and survived the vicissitudes of war, revolution, migration, and difficult pioneering years in Canada before achieving stability and security in their new homeland. When the Harders arrived in Yarrow, almost all Mennonite settlers there were recently arrived, impoverished, German-speaking people in an alien English-speaking world. Many were traumatised, struggling to recover from the shock of losing their beloved Russian homes and churches. They were barely surviving on their small farms and supplementing their income in low-paying day labour.

Historians of immigration history have suggested that immigrants pass through stages as they accommodate themselves to and are integrated into the society and way of life of their new homeland.<sup>1</sup> In the first phase survival is the

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Hartz, *The Founding of New Societies: Studies in the History of the United States, Latin America, South Africa, Canada and Australia* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & World, 1964). For some interesting parallel developments in Jewish Canadian history, see Gerald Tulchinsky, *Taking Root: The Origins of the Canadian Jewish Community* (Toronto, ON: Stoddart, 1992); and Gerald Tulchinsky, *Branching Out: The Transformation of the Canadian Jewish Community* (Toronto, ON: Stoddart, 1998).

uppermost concern. Immigrants must rely on all the strength and resources they have brought with them from their old homeland. Once survival seems assured, immigrants can enter a second phase in which they can give greater consideration to their place and role in their new host society. It becomes possible and advantageous to adopt what seems benign in the new-world culture and to jettison ill-fitting, old-world perspectives and practices. Inter-generational tensions often arise as second-generation immigrants turn away from old-world ways of doing things and embrace the institutions, practices, beliefs, values, and ideals of the host society. That often leads to a third phase in which one of two things is likely to happen. Some second-generation immigrants become assimilated. Others re-evaluate and rebalance inherited old and acquired new-world cultural and religious treasures. Such rebalancing makes possible participation in the life of their new homeland while preserving cherished aspects of their own unique heritage.

Johannes and Tina Harder provided strong leadership during the first phase of Mennonite Brethren immigrant experiences in their new homeland. They contributed much in the establishment of strong new communities, churches, and institutions which were, however, based to a large extent on old-world values and ideals. Some immediate practical accommodations were necessary, but the desperate struggle for survival left the newly arrived immigrants with little time, vision, and energy for significant cultural and religious adaptations and innovations. It was a time when the immigrants opened up and used the baggage—clothing, tools, skills, language, family, church, and community structures—they had brought with them from their old homeland.

Under the leadership of the Harders, the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren church brought people together, gave them a shared sense of identity and purpose, and provided spiritual shelter and nourishment. It was, in some quite fundamental ways, a transplant of a Russian Mennonite Brethren church community in a new Canadian environment. It resembled a greenhouse or other carefully sheltered environment in which uprooted and traumatized people, precariously clinging to remnants of their old-world soil, found shelter and nourishment while re-establishing and slowly adapting damaged root systems to the soil and environment of their new homes.

Restoration of damaged root systems was, for many, an essential precondition of significant new growth. The Harders provided unselfish,

seemingly unlimited service in building a carefully guarded and protected Mennonite Brethren church and supporting institutions. They sought to create and preserve perfect spiritual growing conditions within the confines of well-defined boundaries.

Some members found the greenhouse mentality of their church leaders too restrictive from the beginning. Others, as they became more strongly rooted in the soil of the new world, chafed at church rules which set boundaries and restricted a healthy branching out and blossoming of their talents and energies in their new environment. It was time to enter the second stage of accommodation. But there was resistance and obstruction by the Harders and other first-generation Mennonite Brethren immigrants. The resulting tensions were exacerbated because the Harders and their supporters looked to the Scriptures for guidance in cultural and social as well as in spiritual matters. They did not recognize the extent to which their interpretations of the Scriptures resulted in legalistic formulation and enforcement of religious, social, and cultural church rules which were rooted in their old-world cultural heritage and not necessarily in eternal and unchanging biblical truths.

The sheltered environment of the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church became increasingly restrictive, but in its day it produced an exceptionally long list of second-generation-immigrant members who made very significant social, cultural, and religious contributions. Almost all of these individuals, however, branched out and blossomed in the larger world. The Harders helped many to preserve cherished old-world religious values, ideals, and practices, but religious commitments had to be rebalanced to meet new-world conditions. In that regard the Harders were eventually reduced to fighting rear-guard battles to preserve elements of church and community life which most members had outgrown. As a result, the dominant memories and perceptions of those who knew and remember Johannes and Tina Harder are two-fold. They were and are widely respected for their integrity, self-discipline, and the consistency of their daily lives with all the sermons Johannes preached and all of Tina's admonitions. But they were and are also regarded as moralistic legalists *par excellence* whose super strict adherence to mainly old-world Mennonite Brethren church and community rules turned many people away from the church.

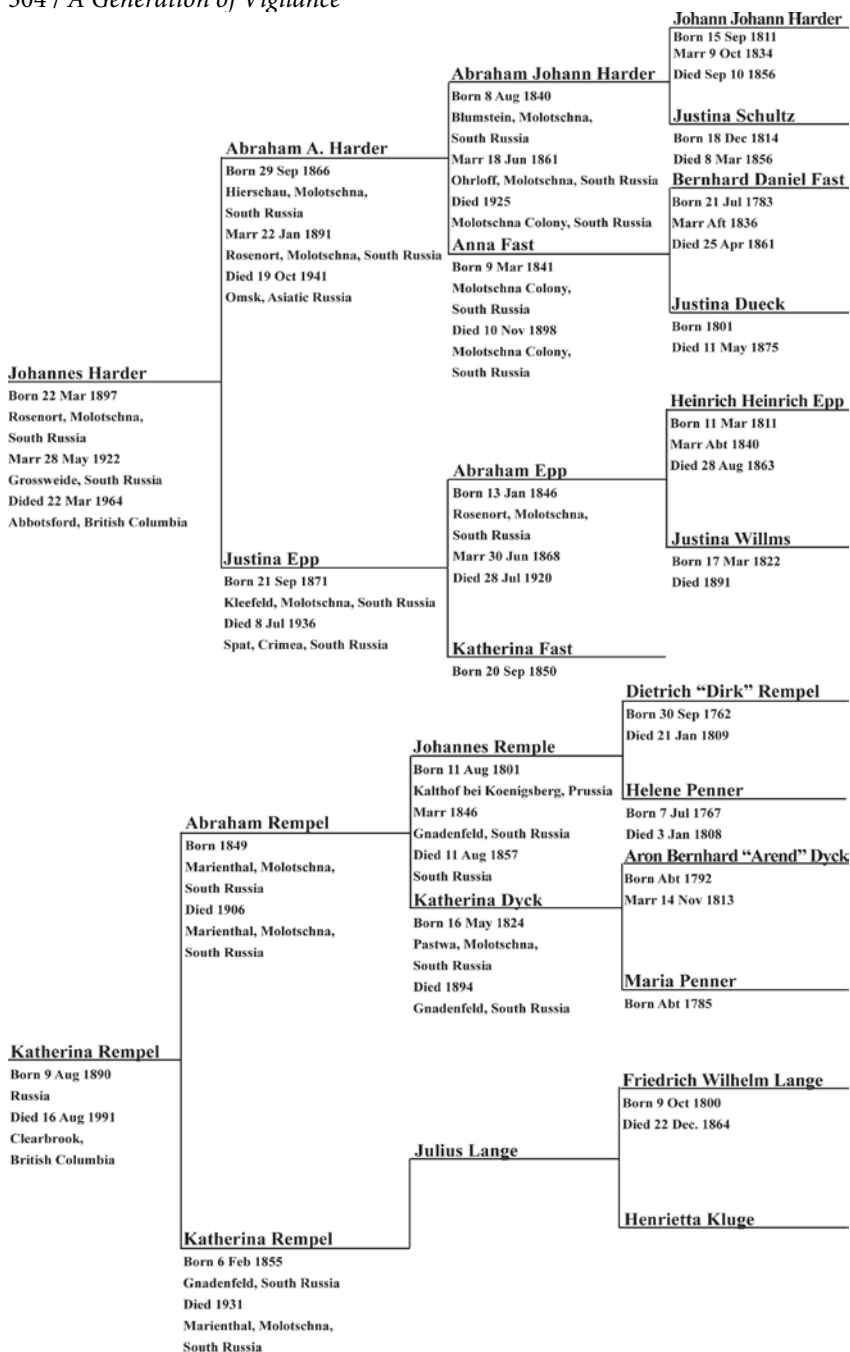
Thanks to the vigilance of their generation, Mennonite Brethren established and preserved their faith in a new land, but not necessarily in prescribed cultural, social, institutional, or even theological forms.

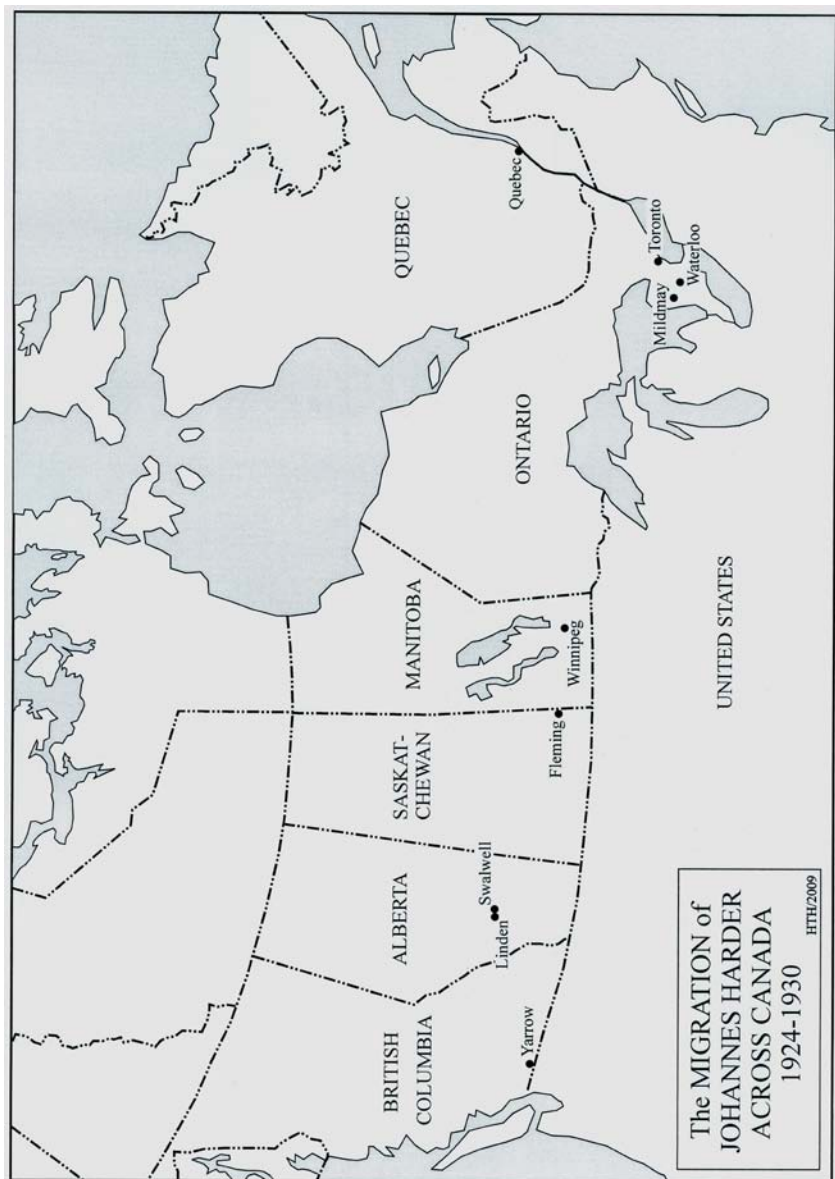
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# *Charts & Maps*









# Bibliography

## Primary Sources

### **Loewen Manuscript, deposited in the Archives of the Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia in Abbotsford, British Columbia**

Jacob A. Loewen compiled a 212-page document entitled, "The Johannes Harder Story in Original Documents with Editorial Introductions." The manuscript has been invaluable in the writing of the biographies of Johannes and Tina Harder. There are however some factual discrepancies in the various documents, most notably between documents written by the Harders and some of the editorial comments, obituaries, eulogies, and personal recollections of others. In such cases I relied mainly on the first-hand accounts. There is some overlap in the pagination. Footnote references pertain to the Loewen Manuscript, with the relevant page numbers, rather than to specific documents in the collection. The main sections and documents of the manuscript include the following:

Introduction, 1-2

Synopsis of Johannes A. Harder's Life, 3-7.

Section I – Documents by the Harder family

Introduction, 7-9

Document 1. The Abram and Justina Harder Journal concerning the Grossweide Waisenheim, 9-57

Document 2. Book of hand-written German religious poetry and other original Harder Writings, 58-78

Document 4. *Unsere Geschichte* by John and Tina Harder, 76-116

Document 5. The Johannes Harder obituary, 117-119

Document 6. Oldest Son John's Story: My father. 117-128

Document 7. Education in Yarrow, by Fred Harder, 128-133

Document 8. A Tribute to My Dad – Johannes A. Harder, by Rose Harder Braun, 134-136

Document 9. My Father: Youngest Son's Story, 136-142

Document 10. Youngest daughter Berta's Story: My memoirs, 142

Section II – Documents about Johannes A. Harder

Document 11. The Jantz Eulogy, 149-156

Document 12. The Peter D. Loewen Eulogy, 157-169

Document 13. Tribute to Johannes Harder by Frank C. Peters, 169-171

Document 14. What others remember, 172-208

**Loewen Collection, deposited in the Archives of the Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia in Abbotsford, British Columbia**

Jacob A. Loewen assembled a substantial collection of documents pertaining to the life and work of Johannes Harder. Footnotes refer to shortened titles of the various files since some of the file titles are quite long and do not necessarily describe accurately the entire content of the folders. They are listed here as cited in the footnotes, together with a description of their content and their sometimes quite misleading titles.

Johannes Harder, *Story*. In the Loewen Collection this file is entitled "Our Story by John A. Harder, Beginning with my Marriage May 22, 1922," but on the first page Johannes Harder gives it the misleading title, "Unsere Vorgeschichte und unsere Reise nach Canada." It is in fact an irregularly written diary covering the years 1922-1934.

Tina Harder, *Story*. In the Loewen Collection this file is entitled, "Continuing My Husband's Journal with Our Story. Mrs. Tina Harder. Beginning March 13, 1936 to August 22, 1974." It is also an irregularly written diary.

Abraham Harder, *Tagebuch*. In the Loewen Collection this file is entitled, "Autobiography of Abram Harder, Grossweide Orphanage (English and German)." Abraham Harder was Johannes Harder's father. The document is not an autobiography but an irregularly written diary. A lightly edited version was published in serialized form in the *Mennonitische Rundschau* in 1965, together with a short addition (*Anhang*) in which Johannes Harder documents the tragic experiences of

his parents after 1926. This file in the Loewen Collection contains the published version and a somewhat unevenly translated English version. Translations of quotations from this document are my own. The file also includes Abraham Harder, "Kurtzer Bericht" listed separately. Also listed separately but included in this file is Abraham Johann Harder's "Biographie unseres lieben Grossvaters und Uhrgrossvaters."

Abraham Harder, "Kurtzer Bericht ueber die Gruendung, Entwicklung und den gegenwaertigen Stand der Waisenanstalt in Grossweide, gegeben am 13 Juni 1922," as published in J. B Toews, ed., *Selected Documents: The Mennonites in Russia from 1917 to 1930* (Winnipeg, MB: Christian Press, 1975), 388-391.

Abraham Johann Harder, "Biographie unseres lieben Grossvaters und Uhrgrossvaters." Abraham Johann Harder was Johannes Harder's grandfather and Abraham Harder's father. His manuscript, written in 1899, is a history of the Harder family from the time of immigration to Russia in 1803. It was edited and published in the *Harder Family Review*. A transcribed copy of the original is available in the Johann and Liese Dick notebook entitled, "Familien Verzeichniz und der Vorfahren und Erinnerungsbuch, Johann u. Liese Dick, Coaldale, Alberta."

Johannes Harder, *Poetry*. Two files entitled, "To Johannes Harder Christmas 1907 from his Parents' Waisenheim, Grossweide: An 80-page Collection of Handwritten Christian Poems 1907-1919," and "Harder Book of Poetry # 2."

"Harder Correspondence with his Wife and Children" consists of eight letters written while Johannes Harder was in South America in 1955.

"Harder Correspondence with his Brothers and Sisters" consists of four letters written between 1933 and 1942 to relatives in the Soviet Union.

"Harder Correspondence with his Sister and Others, 1933 and 1955" consists of a copy of a letter to relatives in the Soviet Union which is also included in the previous file. The file also includes eight letters written to his family while in South America in 1955.

"Letter to Tina Harder from Her Family, 1977" consists of a letter from Susan Rempel seeking information about the Rempel family and providing information about her branch of the family.

"The Blumstein Legacy: A Six Generation Family Saga" by Leland D. Harder and Samuel W. Harder consists of early versions of information published in the *Harder Family Review*, and in Leland D. and Samuel W.

Harder, *The Blumstein Legacy: A Six Generation Family Saga* [2nd ed.], (n.p., n.p., n.d.).

P. D. Loewen, "Reminisces about his Relationship with John A. Harder at the request of Leland Harder for the Harder Family Review." This is a copy of information published in the *Harder Family Review* and also reproduced in full in the Loewen Manuscript.

*B. B. Janz Correspondence.* Many of the files of the B. B. Janz papers at the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Winnipeg, are arranged by correspondent. This is a copy of the 165-page file #96 containing correspondence between Harder and Janz from 1937 to 1957. It includes Harder's South American reports. Other files in the B. B. Janz papers also contain information about Harder's work. References to files other than file #96 are referred to in the footnotes as *B. B. Janz Papers*.

*Mission Board Correspondence.* These two files or volumes are entitled, "John Harder Correspondence with the Mission Board." They cover the period from 4 February 1944 to 5 March 1961 and contain copies of correspondence with Johannes Harder. They have been supplemented by information in the *Minutes and Correspondence of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Mennonite Brethren Conference of North America*.

### **Harder Family Papers**

*B. B. Janz Papers.* The extensive correspondence files of B. B. Janz include one file consisting entirely of correspondence with Johannes Harder. It was copied and is a part of the Loewen Collection. That file is referred to in the footnotes as *B. B. Janz Correspondence*. There are numerous additional letters and reports relevant to the life and work of Johannes Harder which are footnoted as *B. B. Janz Papers*.

British Columbia Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, *Minute Books, 1929-1964*.

Dick, Johann Johann (1891-1968) u. Liese (Regehr) Dick (1890-1992). *Unser Familien Verzeichniz u. der Vorfahren, und Erinerrungsbuch*. Johann Dick's mother, Liese (Harder) Dick (1868-1902), was Johannes Abraham Harder's aunt. The two notebooks contain genealogical information, mainly about the Dick and Harder families. It also includes a transcription of Abraham Johann Harder's "Biographie unseres lieben

Grossvaters und Uhrgrossvaters.” The original notebook and the translated work are in the possession of the author.

*Fuorsorgekomitee Minutes and Correspondence.* The records of the *Fuorsorgekomitee* (Board of Reference and Counsel) of the Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches of North America are arranged chronologically. Relevant correspondence is often filed with the Minutes.

Harder, Abraham Abraham (1893-1974), “Es war enimal.” In this short article with a supporting picture, Abraham Harder discusses the time he and his brother Johannes spent studying in Halbstadt.

Harder, John. *Mom Harder's Obituary.*

Harder, Tina. *Meine Lebensgeschichte.* This 32-page autobiography was written by Tina Harder for the occasion of the celebration of her 90th birthday. A copy was made available by John Harder, Johannes and Tina Harder's son.

*Minutes and Correspondence.* Board of Reference and Council, General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America.

*Mission Board Minutes and Correspondence.* The Board of Foreign Missions arranged some of its records by correspondents. Copies of the file containing correspondence with Johannes Harder are part of the Loewen Collection and referred to in the footnotes as *Mission Board Correspondence*. Additional minutes, correspondence, and reports relevant to the life and work of Johannes Harder are footnoted as *Mission Board Minutes and Correspondence*.

Papers and Records at the Archives of the Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia in Abbotsford.

Papers and Records at the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Fresno, California.

Papers and Records at the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

*Sharon Mennonite High School Committee Minute Book* (SMHSC Minutes). This minute book was kept in German as the *Protokollbuch des Hoch Schul Komitees*.

*Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church Membership Book.*

*Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church Minute Book* (YMBC Minutes) referred to in the footnotes as *YMBC Minutes*. This minute book was kept in



German as the *Protokollbuch der Mennoniten Brueder-Gemeinde zu Yarrow*.

### **Conference Year Books**

The titles of the Conference Year Books vary somewhat. There was, for example, inconsistency in naming the General Conference a conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church or a conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches. Sometimes Year Book appeared as two words, at other times as a single word. Usually the calendar year is given in the title, but sometimes the title indicates the anniversary or chronological conference year, e.g., 55th Conference.

*Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church(es) of North America, Yearbooks, 1945-1966*, referred to in the footnotes as the *Canadian Conference Yearbooks*.

*General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church(es) of North America Year Books, 1939-1966*, referred to in the footnotes as the *General (MB) Conference Year Books*.

*Northern District Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church(es) of North America, Year Books, 1925-1945*, referred to in the footnotes as the *Northern District Conference Year Books*.

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Braun, Rose  
Dahl, Anna  
Derksen, Susie  
Esau, Abe, and Katie (Siemens) Esau  
Epp, Henry  
Giesbrecht, David  
Harder, John  
Klassen, Agatha  
Loewen, Anne  
Loewen, Jake  
Pauls, Joan  
Regehr, Corny  
Sawatzky, Roland and Esther  
Toews, John E.

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*The Harder Family Review*  
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*Mennonite Brethren Herald*

*Mennonitische Rundschau*  
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### Key to Footnote Abbreviations

Abraham A. Harder, *Tagebuch* – refers to Loewen Collection file entitled, "Autobiography of Abram Harder, Grossweide Orphanage."



Abraham J. Harder, *Biographie* – refers to a second document, “Biographie unseres lieben Grossvaters und Uhrgrossvaters” which is included in the Loewen Collection file entitled, “Autobiographie of Abram Harder, Grossweide Orphanage.”

*B. B. Janz Correspondence* – refers to Loewen Collection file of correspondence between Johannes Harder and B. B. Janz.

*B. B. Janz Papers* – refers to correspondence and reports in the B. B. Janz papers which are not in the Loewen Collection.

*BC Conference Minutes* – refers to the *Minutes of the British Columbia Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches*.

*Black Creek Church Minutes* – refers to the *Protokollbuch der Mennoniten Brueder-Gemeinde zu Black Creek*.

*Blumstein Legacy* – refers to Leland D. Harder and Samuel W. Harder, *The Blumstein Legacy: A Six Generation Family Saga*, 2nd ed. (n.p., n.p., n.d.) .

Canadian Conference – refers to The Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America.

General (MB) Conference – refers to various sources and publications by The General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America, also called the General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches of North America. (It does not refer to the General Conference Mennonite Church with which most, but not all, member churches of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada were affiliated.) The Conference’s *Year Books* also carry slightly different titles, but are listed consistently in the footnotes.

*HFR* – refers to the *Harder Family Review*.

*JMS* – refers to the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*.

Johannes Harder, *Story* – refers to Loewen Collection file entitled, “Our Story by John A. Harder, Beginning with my Marriage May 22, 1922.”

Johannes Harder, *Anhang* – refers to an addendum by Johannes Harder to “Abraham A. Harder’s Tagebuch.”

*Mission Board Correspondence* – refers to the Loewen Collection file of the Board of Foreign Mission’s correspondence with Johannes Harder.

*Mission Board Records* – refers to minutes, correspondence, and reports of the Board of Foreign Missions not in the Loewen Collection.

*Missionary Album, 1951* – refers to *Missionary Album, July 1951, of Missionaries Serving under the Board of Foreign Missions, Mennonite Brethren Conference Inc.* (Hillsboro, KS: Board of Foreign Missions of the Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America, 1951).

*MR* – refers to *Mennonitische Rundschau*.

*SMHSC Minutes* – refers to the *Protokollbuch* of the *Hoch Schul Komitee* of the churches supporting the Sharon Mennonite High School.

Tina Harder, *Lebensgeschichte* – refers to Tina Harder's autobiography which she wrote when she was 90 years of age.

Tina Harder, *Story* – refers to the Loewen Collection file entitled, "Continuing My Husband's Journal with Our Story. Mrs. Tina Harder. Beginning March 13, 1936 to August 22, 1974)."

*YMBC Minutes* – refers to the *Protokollbuch der Mennoniten Brueder-Gemeinde zu Yarrow*.

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## *Illustration Credits*

Cover picture: The Harder family in the hop yards, c. 1933. Source: Laura Harder.

Frontispiece: Johannes and Tina Harder, 1957. Source: Esther Harder.

Dedication page: Jacob A. and Anne Loewen. Source: Robert Martens, Maryann Tjart Jantzen and Harvey Neufeldt, eds., *Windows to a Village: Life Studies of Yarrow Pioneers* (Waterloo, ON: Pandora Press, 2007).

Page 9: Aeltester Johann Harder. Source: Peter M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)* (Fresno, CA: Board of Christian Literature of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1978).

Page 19: Abraham A. and Justina Harder. Johannes Harder's parents, c. 1922. Source: T. D. Regehr.

Page 25: The Grossweide Orphanage, 1913. Source: T. D. Regehr.

Page 27: The Abraham and Justina (Epp) Harder family, from left to right, Johannes, Abraham (father), Justina, Katharina, Abraham, Justina (mother), Marie and Anna. Source: Esther Harder.

Page 30: The shelter in the Crimea where the Harders lived in the 1930s, left to right Berta, Anna, Justina and Abraham Harder. Source: Esther Harder.

Page 34: Abraham and Johannes Harder as students. Source: Jacob A. Loewen Collection.

Page 43: The last family picture, taken at the double wedding of sisters Justina Harder Dueck and Marie Harder Kaethler, and the farewell for Johannes and Tina Harder, 13 June 1922. Source: Anna Epp Ens.

Page 54: Johannes and Tina Harder with son John in Winnipeg, January 1927. Source: Laura Harder.

- Page 55: The farm house near Fleming, Saskatchewan, 1927. Source: Esther Harder.
- Page 65: The Harder family in the hop yards, c. 1933. Source: Laura Harder.
- Page 68: The Harder dairy farm on Boundary Road, taken shortly after the Harders sold the farm. Source: David P. Giesbrecht.
- Page 76: The Harder family, c. 1937. Back row, Tina and Johannes; middle row Lilie, John and Fred; front, Rose, Berta, David. Source: Laura Harder.
- Page 83: The Harder family, 1943. Source: Esther Harder.
- Page 89: Johannes and Tina Harder on their 25th wedding anniversary. Source: Laura Harder.
- Page 92: The first Mennonite Brethren Church in Yarrow. Source: Agatha Klassen.
- Page 99: The Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Sunday School, 1948. Source: Agatha Klassen.
- Page 105: The Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church, built in 1938. Source: Agatha Klassen.
- Page 122: The senior choir of the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church, Conductor George Reimer, Pianist Martha Plett. Source: Leonard N. Neufeldt.
- Page 123: Baptismal service by Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church at Stewart Creek. Source: Leonard N. Neufeldt.
- Page 143: The Bible school building was the temporary home of the high school. Source: Leonard N. Neufeldt.
- Page 149: The Sharon Mennonite Collegiate Institute. Source: Leonard Neufeldt.
- Page 165: Johannes Harder and other preachers visiting a conscientious objector camp. Source: Peter Penner.
- Page 175: The “Bethel Maedchenheim” in Vancouver in the 1930s. Source: Agatha Klassen.
- Page 191: The Krauses, former United Mennonite church members, came to Yarrow in 1928. They attended the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church but were only rebaptised and admitted as church members in 1937. Source: Esther Harder.
- Page 227: Trip by riverboat to a remote village in Colombia in 1955. Source: Laura Harder.

Page 240: The orphanage at Boqueria, Brazil. Source: A. E. Janzen, *Survey of Five Mission Fields of the Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America located in India, Africa, Brazil, Paraguay and Colombia* (Hillsboro, KS: n.p.,1950).

Page 276: The last Mission Board meeting attended by Johannes Harder. Source: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, California.

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Other Yarrow Research Committee studies:

*Before We Were the Land's. Yarrow, British Columbia: Mennonite Promise*, ed. Leonard Neufeldt, Lora Sawatsky and Robert Martens. Victoria BC: TouchWood Editions, 2002.

*Village of Unsettled Yearnings. Yarrow, British Columbia: Mennonite Promise*, ed. Leonard Neufeldt, Lora Sawatsky and Robert Martens. Victoria, BC: TouchWood Editions, 2002.

*First Nations and First Settlers in the Fraser Valley (1890-1960)*, ed. Harvey Neufeldt, Ruth Derksen Siemens and Robert Martens. Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2004.

*Windows to a Village: Life Studies of Yarrow Pioneers*, ed. Robert Martens, Maryann Tjart Jantzen and Harvey Neufeldt. Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2007.



# A GENERATION OF VIGILANCE

Johannes Harder, with the vigorous support of his wife Tina, led the Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church from 1930 until 1948 and remained active in that church for many more years.

Today the work of the Harders is mostly forgotten. Those who do remember have significantly differing recollections.

Critics are inclined to point to the rigid and sometimes harshly legalistic manner in which the Harders tried to impose and maintain strict codes of Christian conduct.

—from the *Introduction*

*“The book will be of interest not only to those who knew Harder and the Mennonite Brethren, but also to Mennonite historians more generally.”*

Harry Loewen, Professor Emeritus of History  
and Mennonite Studies, University of Winnipeg

*“Fair and balanced in the way it deals with various controversial and personal issues.”*

Abe Dueck, Academic Dean Emeritus,  
Canadian Mennonite University,  
Former Executive Secretary, Mennonite Brethren Church  
Historical Commission

T. D. Regehr, born in Coaldale, Alberta, and now living in Calgary, is Professor Emeritus of History, University of Saskatchewan. He is the author of several books including *Mennonites in Canada, 1939–1970: A People Transformed* and *Faith, Life and Witness in the Northwest, 1903–2003: Centennial History of the Northwest Mennonite Conference*.

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